

TEARING DOWN YOUR BRICK WALLS

Removing Roadblocks in Genealogy Research

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Researching your family tree is fun but it can also be hard work, requiring patient, time-consuming research and careful documentation.

In this Internet world of instant access it can seem reasonable—even expected—that every fact will appear at the click of a mouse, and every detail of our ancestors' lives will instantly appear on the computer screen.

But of course it's not that simple.

Sometimes, despite your best efforts, you just can't find that missing ancestor or specific family detail you're looking for. Genealogists refer to this as hitting a "brick wall" in their research.

Your first step in overcoming your brick wall is to understand that there are no brick walls in genealogy. It's just that there are some facts that will take you a longer time to find than others.

Of course, if we had unlimited funds and time to travel and research, we could find and verify every fact about our families.

But, we live in the real world; we don't have unlimited funds and time. Fortunately, in today's world of millions of digitized genealogy records available online, all we need to break through our brick walls is patience, steady effort—and Internet access.

These days, online websites like <u>GenealogyBank</u> are putting up nearly one million genealogy records per day. With all that family history information available, it is possible to break through your genealogy brick walls.

Let me give you a real-life example of how I broke through one of my brick walls in my own family history research. This story will also show how much genealogy research has changed in the past 50 years. At the conclusion of my story, I'll show you five steps to help you tear down your own genealogy brick walls.

Finding Where in Ireland William Kemp Was Born

Fifty years ago, when I began researching my family tree, I knew the name of my emigrant ancestor William Kemp.

I also knew that:

- He was born on 31 October 1837 in Ireland and died in Stamford, Connecticut.
- He was one of four brothers: William & John were the two brothers who came to America, and Robert & James were the two brothers that went to Australia.
- His father's name was George Kemp.

I didn't know much more about my ancestor William Kemp—the details of his life in Ireland were a blank on my family tree, a brick wall I was determined to tear down.

I began by making a systematic search to find out where in Ireland William was born.

Hmm...let's see. He was born in 1837 in Ireland.

OK. Civil registration did not begin in Ireland that early, so there would be no birth certificate available for him.

What about **church records**?

What church did he attend? Family tradition told me that he was Scotch-Irish and a Presbyterian, but also that in the U.S. he attended the Methodist Church.

Could both traditions be correct?

Where could I find Irish church records?

According to the guide books available in the 1960s, church registers were mostly still in the local churches where they were created. Some church records had been gathered and stored in central repositories in Belfast and Dublin. Unfortunately, over time many original church record books had been lost.

In short: Irish church records for William would be difficult if not impossible to find, since 50 years ago these records were not on microfilm or online.

Where else could I find the name of the county or town in Ireland where he was born?

I searched the records at the Stamford, Connecticut, town hall and found William's **death certificate**.

Great, I thought—that should have his place of birth.

But the certificate only said that he was born in "Ireland"—nothing more specific than that.

While I was at the Stamford town hall I also checked with the **probate court**, since it was in the same building.

His probate case file gave me the date and place of his marriage in Darien, Connecticut—good information to know, but it did not include the place in Ireland where he was from.

The information about his marriage could have been the clue I needed to give me his place of birth.

A check of his **marriage certificate** did record where he was born—but it too only listed "Ireland" without any more specifics.

How about the **census**?

Fifty years ago there were no indexes for the census like we have today.

The only thing I could do was to carefully go through the microfilm reels of each census. Over months of detailed research I found him in the 1860, 1870, 1880, 1900 and 1910 census.

All those records told the same story—that he was born in "Ireland."

- William Kemp 1860 Census
- William Kemp 1870 Census
- William Kemp 1880 Census
- William Kemp 1900 Census
- William Kemp 1910 Census

I searched land records, probate records, and city directories.

Still no mention of the city or county in Ireland where William was born.

Our family has a letter written in 1856 that gave us an idea of when he came to America.

This is to certify that the Bearer I william Fremp has been in my Imployment more then Three years the employed as asistant in the experience of which he has been at clouth Oyster Bay Long chsland clown freely regression and routh good fundgement considering his age (lighten years) and the proper lance his very temperate in his habits and would be very useful on a farm or in a Tarden of the Steelester House, I selected the steely light on the steelester House,

Credit: Family papers, Thomas Jay Kemp

Apparently William arrived in America around the early part of 1853.

Passenger lists were not online 50 years ago, so I had to go to the National Archives Branch Archives, then located in Bayonne, New Jersey. I drove there for weeks examining the old passenger lists, looking for a reference to his arrival.

Nothing.

Where in Ireland was William born? For a very long time that remained one of the most stubborn brick walls in my family history research, and it took me years to find the answer.

I visited repositories or wrote letters for every document created about the life of William Kemp. I also searched for information about his brother John Kemp, who lived in New York City.

I discovered that John had been a policeman in New York City. William Kemp could have used the help of his policeman brother in 1877. According to this newspaper article I found on GenealogyBank.com, William's horse and wagon were stolen one evening while he was attending church. William offered a "suitable reward for the return of the property and thief."

Mr. Win. Remp, while attending a meeting at the Derien M. E. Church, on Monday evening last, had his horse and wagon,
which was standing in front of the church,
stolen. The horse is a bright bey, about
15 hands high, and was hitched to a newly
painted, two seated open wagon. Mr. Remp
offers a suitable reward for the return of
the property and thief.

Daily Advocate (Stamford, Connecticut), 14 September 1877, page 2

This is a great article—but still no information about where in Ireland William was born.

Here is a newspaper article about John Kemp that I found in GenealogyBank. It tells of an interesting way he helped someone find a lost set of keys that John discovered while making his police rounds: he simply attached them to a button on his police coat for all to see, in hopes that the owner would claim them.

And he was successful. The reporter wrote: "While I was talking to Policeman Kemp an excited individual ran up and claimed the keys dangling from his button."

KEMP USUALLY FINDS THE OWNER.

A Policeman Who Hangs Lost Articles on His Bultons, Where They Are Easily Seen.

Policeman John Kemp, of the West Thirtleth street station, who is specially detailed for duty at the crossing at Twenty-third street and Sixth avenue, attracted considerable attention yesterday afternoon as he patrolled his post. There was nothing strange about his uniform or about the little bamboo switch he carried in his hand, but what attracted the attention of the passerby was a large and heavy bunch of keys hanging from the second button of his dress coat. Everybody who passed stopped to look at the strange ornament, and not a few asked Kemp why he carried his keys in such a conspicuous place.

"They are not my keys," explained the policeman, "but a bunch which I have just picked up on the sidewalk. Somebody has lost them, and, of course, the chances are that he will come back to look for them. Few persons who lose things think to ask a policeman if he has found them, and cannot see the keys if they are hidden away in his pocket.

den away in his pocket.

"If I take the keys to the station the chances are that the owner will never think to go there to look for them. People are pretty honest about such things. Frequently somebody will find some article in the street and will at once hand it to me. If it is not too bulky I always affix it to my coat and then wait for the owner to claim it. I don't have to wait very long either, for he generally turns up. I have carried a bunch of keys on my button all day and just as I was about to go to the station had somebody to come up and claim them.

"There are many things lost on this corner. I have had pocketbooks, articles of jewelry and various things handed to me by pedestrians. Most of the articles belong to women who are

"There are many things lost on this corner. I have had pocketbooks, articles of jewelry and various things handed to me by pedestrians. Most of the articles belong to women who are shopping and who are not so careful as they might be." While I was talking to Policeman Kemp an excited individual ran up and claimed the keys dangling from his button.

New York Herald (New York, New York), 19 August 1894, section three, page 1

John's first wife died and he married again in 1900.

I sent for the <u>marriage certificate</u> for John Kemp's second marriage—and listed there, I found two important clues that might lead, at long last, to the answer I was searching for:

- The marriage certificate stated that John Kemp was born in "County Cavan, Ireland."
- And it told me the name of his mother: Elizabeth Johnston.

THE CITY OF NEW YORK OFFICE OF THE CITY CLERK No. 5047-1873 C 46038 MARRIAGE LICENSE BUREAU—BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN Optificate of Marriage Register No. 5047-1873 C Trtificate of Marriage Register Regist
This Is To Certify That John Kemp
residing at 128 Vince Street born (Age 26 years)
at Ireland, County Cavan and Annie Young
residing at 134 E 17th St, NEw YorkCity born (Age 22 years)
at County Tyrone, Ireland
Were Married
July 17,1873 at New York, by Hugh H Blair, Minister Ist marriage for both-witnessed-James Williams/Alice Montgomery Grooms parentsGeorge Kemp/Elizabeth Johnston Brides parentsRobert YoungMary Ann Kilpatrick
as shown by the duly registered license and certificate of marriage of said persons on file in this office.
Dated at the Municipal Building, Manhattan Way 7 19 71 VOID IF ALTERED OR SEAL NOT IMPRESSED RF-447 17M sets-320051(70)

Credit: Family papers, Thomas Jay Kemp

Wow! I now had a county where I could focus my research.

I continued to dig.

I went to the **funeral home** and to the **cemetery** where William Kemp was buried.

Their records only showed he was from "Ireland."

I wrote to the cemetery in Brooklyn, New York, where his brother John was buried.

I did the same for his son George Kemp, who was buried in a different cemetery in New York City in 1957.

After weeks of waiting the cemetery officials responded, giving me some details along with the basic information about other relatives buried there. They also sent me the name and address of the owner of John's plot.

Wow—a link, a relative!

I wrote them immediately. We exchanged letters and phone calls.

They didn't have any additional information to offer me. It turns out John was buried in the family plot of his wife. The owner of the plot was her cousin, so she was not a Kemp cousin but a relative on the wife's side of the family.

I called and spoke with her several times and in one of our phone calls I asked her if she ever met any members of the Kemp side of the family.

It turned out she had—in fact she still received Christmas cards from the niece of John Kemp, the policeman.

Another lead!

She gave me the niece's name and address and I exchanged more letters, this time with Mary Emily (Deane) Beattie of Catskill, New York.

It was now 1978. I had been researching this brick wall for 15 years. Surely Mary had the information and knew the name of the town in County Cavan the family was from.

She didn't know.

But in her third letter to me she wrote: "You always ask about my grandfather John Kemp—you never ask about his sister."

Sister?

Like Darth Vader, I never knew there was a sister.

With another flurry of letters I found out more about John's sister Margaret Kemp, who also lived in and around Catskill, New York.

A check of the vital, census and church records did not disclose the name of the Irish town they were from. In time I found that another Kemp sister, Matilda (Kemp) Henderson, had also migrated over to live in Catskill.

And that is when the magic happened.

That generation of my Kemp family was born in the 1830s and 1840s in Ireland and left by the 1840s or 1850s.

There are very few surviving records from that period.

But, a few pages from the 1841 census did survive, from a few townlands in County Cavan, Ireland.

By now I had multiple names to look for: George, Elizabeth, Matilda, Robert, William, Margaret, James and John.

Looking in the 1841 census index, I found a match:

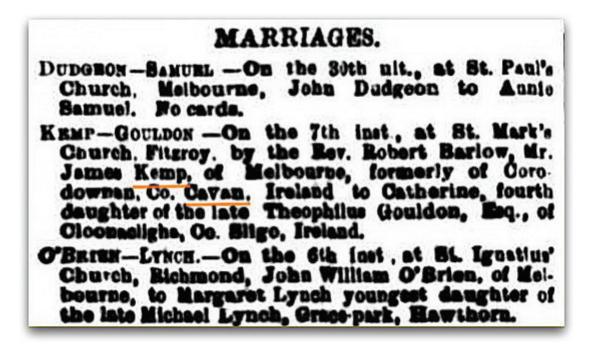
- Killeshandra Parish, Corradownan Kemp, George 43, farmer; wife Elizabeth 35, spinner
- Mary Ann 16, Elizabeth 14, Jane 12, Matty 10, Robt. 8, Wm. 4, Marg. 2, James 1 mo.

Could it really be them? Their father was George Kemp, their mother Elizabeth—so that part fit. This census listing also had the children I knew about (Matilda, Robert, William, Margaret and James) in the correct order. John was not listed because he wasn't born until 1846. The three older siblings listed (Mary Ann, Elizabeth and Jane) were three more sisters I did not know about.

It had to be them.

It would take me another ten years of searching before I found the definitive proof that this census listing was in fact the family of my ancestor William Kemp.

My breakthrough came thanks to an 1872 marriage announcement I found in an **online newspaper**.



Argus (Melbourne, Victoria, Australia), 13 November 1872, page 4

This notice announced the wedding of their brother James Kemp "of Melbourne, formerly of Corodownan, Co. Cavan, Ireland" to Catherine Gouldon.

I had found my answer at last: William Kemp was from Corradownan, County Cavan, Ireland.

My brick wall was officially down!

I am a firm believer in putting my family history online. I post my tree on the usual online family tree sites and I routinely publish research queries on the genealogy affinity lists on RootsWeb and similar sites. These postings served as online markers to alert any cousins that there is another cousin working on the same line.

So, it was great to hear from a cousin in Canada telling me that they were descendants of Mary Ann (Kemp) Williams, filling in more of the family details about the eldest sister in the family. I have never found any additional information about Elizabeth or Jane Kemp, or what became of them.

What You Want to Do to Tear Down Your Own Genealogy Brick Walls

So—what are the logical steps that you want to take to knock down your brick walls?

It had taken me over twenty years to find this information—and since I put everything I know about my family in my online family tree, today anyone can find this information in seconds.

The online information in my family tree would be the roadmap for knowing where William came from in Ireland. Without it, a genealogist starting today would be searching for years to find the answer—just as I did—because most of the records I needed to accomplish this are still not online.

Remember, genealogists all around the world are doing family history research and putting their discoveries online—research that may help you with your genealogy brick walls. You should do the same and put your information online.

With the work of all these fellow genealogists—plus the many genealogy websites currently available—millions more genealogy records are going online every day.

If the crucial document you need is not online today, it might be online tomorrow. Keep searching.

This will take time, but you will eventually find the answer to your family history puzzle.

Here's what you want to do to tear down your own genealogy brick walls:

Step One: Vital Records

Search the birth, marriage and death records from the state where your target ancestor lived. Be sure to search for these records in all of the areas where your person is known to have lived.

Search for these vital records in GenealogyBank's extensive <u>newspaper archives</u>:

- Click here to search birth records published in newspapers
- Click here to search marriage records published in newspapers
- Click here to search obituaries published in older newspapers
- Click here to search obituaries published in recently-published newspapers

You will also want to contact the state Department of Health, Vital Records Office in the state where your ancestor lived to obtain a copy of their birth, marriage or death certificates.

Step Two: Census Records

The federal census has been taken every 10 years beginning with the 1790 census. All of these census records and their indexes are online. Click here to search for your ancestors in the census.

Carefully search the census to find the clues about your family.

Census listings give you a snapshot of the family one day of their lives—every ten years—giving you their names, ages and where they were living.

Step Three: Newspapers

Family memories are special. Old family stories are the threads that tie us to the past.

Families often pass down a few stories, but the others are simply lost over time as the generations rise and fall.

Fortunately, many of our ancestors' family stories were recorded in the local newspapers of their day, where they can be searched and found today.

For example, Hannah (Clark) Lyman (1743-1832) was only 12 years old when the terrible earth-quake of 1755 struck Massachusetts—but her vivid memories of that frightening day stayed with her throughout her life, and were recorded in her obituary in 1832:

"It was between 4 and 5 in the morning, and the moon shone brightly. She and the rest of the family were suddenly awaked from sleep by a noise like that of the trampling of many horses; the house trembled and the pewter rattled on the shelves. They all sprang out of bed, and the affrighted children clung to their parents. 'I cannot help you dear children' said the good mother, 'we must look to God for help.""

In this town, March 20, Widow Hannah Lyman, relict of Mr. Abner Lyman, aged 88 years and 6 months—the oldest person in the town. She was a daughter of Mr. Ezra Clark, and was born Sept. 15, 1743, Old Style. She remembered distinctly the great earthquake of Nov. 18, 1755. She thus described it to us. It was between 4 and 5 in the morning, and the moon shone brightly. She and the rest of the family were suddenly awaked from sleep by a noise like that of the trampling of many horses; the house trembled and the pewter rattled on the shelves. They all sprang out of bed, and the affrighted children clung to their parents. "I cannot help you dear children," said the good mother, "we must look to God for help."

Hampshire Gazette (Northampton, Massachusetts), 21 March 1832, page 3

Is this story still told in the Lyman family? When her descendants see her name on the family tree, do they immediately think of this story?

Or, has it been lost within the family? It's certainly not lost in the digitized pages of the *Hampshire Gazette*.

Each of our relatives has many stories.

Census listings, marriage announcements and birth certificates record one day of each of our lives.

Newspapers do more—they recorded every day of the lives of our parents' grandparents back for 300 years.

<u>GenealogyBank</u> has more newspapers than any other online newspaper archive. Covering more than 300 years of American history contained in 1.5 billion articles and stories, this newspaper collection preserves the stories of our ancestors' lives.

Step Four: Mapping the Family—a Survey

When Steps One, Two and Three do not give you all the answers and clues you need to document your relatives, then you need to sift through other records to find them.

What you want to do is map out every occurrence of your surname in a given area.

If all you know is that your family was from New Hampshire, then you need to survey that state's records to see what the distribution was for all persons of your surname in that state.

Begin that process by looking at the census (see Step Two above).

For example, if you are looking for a person born in the 18th or 19th centuries, you want to research your family surname for the entire spread of 1790-1940 censuses.

Families did not move around much in earlier times, even if your ancestor did.

You are looking for clues in every household with your target family's surname.

Map them out:

- Where were the households with that surname living over the decades?
- Were they predominantly in one county or section of the state?
- As you go back in time did the occurrence of the surname center in one area?

Carefully look at the clues in the census:

- Where does it say that they were born?
- Where were their parents born?
- Did these birthplaces change over the years of the census?

Use those clues to expand your search.

Did your relatives use distinctive first or middle names (Archibald, Benjamin, Esmerelda or Norman)?

Do you see a pattern in the use of the first names in the other families you are sorting through?

Select the county or town with the most households of your surname and start drilling down on these families.

Do the research on them, compiling the family history for each of these households. Apply Steps One, Two and Three to each household.

Dig deeper by finding them in church, probate and land records.

You want to see how these families are or are not related.

Step Five: Put Your Information Online

There are many options for posting your family history information online: family tree sites; blogs; email lists; and more.

Take full advantage of them.

- Email Lists: Write and post a question about the target ancestor you are researching and post it to an email list that is focused on your surname, or an email list that is for a particular county, state or country.
- **Blogs:** Create your own blog and write about your target family. Write about others with that surname. Post questions to other bloggers with the same research interest.
- Family Tree Site: It is essential that you post everything you find about all of the households of your surname on the various family tree sites like FamilySearch.org. This gets the information out to others researching the same family. It also is a handy place for you to keep your research notes so that it will be easier for you to evaluate and strategize how these families are or are not connected.

Many hands make light work—get the help of other genealogists by putting your information online. Others may already have solved your problem.

In Closing, a Word of Encouragement

Breaking down brick walls can take time.

Just like my search to find out where in Ireland my ancestor William Kemp was born, you might not find the information you want on the first try.

It can take years of careful research and sifting to find the facts that you need. You will want to be thorough and careful as you go through each step.

The records you need might not yet be online, so you need to be prepared to patiently research and sift through old, original records.

Make it easier for yourself and your extended family by consolidating your family tree data, research and notes online. Use the cloud for your real-time backup and storage.

Do this consistently and you will overcome all your genealogy brick walls.