

# The Origin Story of O'Mara of Limerick

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## Abstract

The O'Mara family of Limerick was a Catholic merchant family who rose from poverty and obscurity in Limerick city in the early 19th century to riches and high status by late in the 19th century. Other Catholic merchant families made a similar journey throughout the 19th century, and when they arrived at generations of wealth, leisure and education, they often told stories about where they came from. This article is about the origin story the O'Maras told themselves. In 2020, I discovered that this origin story is false.

## Introduction

After the end of the Penal Laws, and the final Catholic Emancipation in 1829, many Catholic families, all throughout Ireland, began to rise, starting often from nothing, like the start of a race whose participants had been artificially held back for centuries. Their riches by the end of the century could not come from conquest, war, royal favour or grants of land. They had to come through other more prosaic routes, like business and trade.

O'Mara of Limerick was a classic example. The wealth of the family came from O'Mara's bacon company. Founded by James O'Mara in his house in Mungret St, Limerick, in 1839, it grew into an international business with factories, outlets and investments in Limerick, Dublin, around Ireland, Liverpool, London, the US, Canada, France, Romania and Russia. It was the foundation of generations of O'Mara family wealth, which produced doctors, priests, town councillors, Mayors, High Sheriffs, MPs, TDs, Senators and a famous opera singer.

## Notable O'Maras

As noted, the founder of O'Mara's bacon company in Limerick in 1839 was James O'Mara.<sup>1</sup> James later became a nationalist Town Councillor, J.P. and Poor Law Guardian. He was High Sheriff of Limerick city in 1887.

James O'Mara had a number of notable sons. His eldest son was the businessman and nationalist politician Stephen O'Mara.<sup>2</sup> Stephen was Mayor of Limerick in 1885 and 1886, and a Parnellite MP in 1886. He was High Sheriff of Limerick city in 1888, and again in 1913 and 1914. He was a Trustee of the Irish Parliamentary Party. In old age

1 James O'Mara, born 1817, died 20 Apr. 1899. See appointment as High Sheriff, *Irish Times*, 10 Dec. 1886. See obituary in *Limerick Chronicle*, 20 Apr. 1899.

2 Stephen O'Mara, born 26 Dec. 1844, died 26 July 1926. See entry in *DIB*. See his letters in the Rynne papers (P133) at NUIG.

he was a Free State Senator in 1925-1926. Another son of James was Joseph O'Mara,<sup>3</sup> the opera singer, the leading Irish tenor of his time. He was granted the Freedom of Limerick in 1908. Another son of James was Dr. Frank O'Mara, physician and surgeon, who was Head of Ennis Lunatic Asylum for decades.<sup>4</sup>

Stephen O'Mara also had notable issue. He was the father of James O'Mara, an important figure in Irish independence.<sup>5</sup> This younger James was a Home Rule MP in 1900-1907, and left to join Sinn Fein. He was a Sinn Fein TD in 1918-1921. He acted as Sinn Fein Director of Elections in the famous 1918 victory, and he was a Member of the First Dail in Jan 1919. He was a Trustee of Dail funds in 1919-1921. After independence he was a Free State TD in 1924-1927. Another son of Stephen was Fr. Paddy O'Mara, a noted Jesuit priest.<sup>6</sup> He was a British Army chaplain in WWI, after which he was decorated by Portugal in 1920 as an Officer of the Military Order of Christ. He was Rector of Crescent College, Limerick, in 1931-1934, and an author of million-selling pamphlets. A daughter of Stephen was Nell O'Mara, a pioneer (with her husband James Mark Sullivan) of Irish film.<sup>7</sup> Two more sons of Stephen were a younger Stephen O'Mara, Mayor of Limerick in 1921 to 1923,<sup>8</sup> and Phons O'Mara, Mayor of Limerick in 1918 to 1919.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, in this list, old James O'Mara was grandfather of Connie O'Mara, who married two members of European nobility: Baron Werner von Trapp (uncle of the famous singing family) and Count Johann Herbert of Herberstein.<sup>10</sup>

This article does not attempt a complete history of the O'Mara family and all its branches. For that decades-long project see my website.<sup>11</sup> This is very much a personal project.

- 3 Joseph O'Mara, the opera singer, born 16 Jul. 1864, died 5 Aug. 1927. See entry in *DIB*. See "Joseph O'Mara" by Robert Potterton (1970), reprinted in *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, vol. 32 (1990), pp.83-95.
- 4 Dr. Frank O'Mara, baptised 18 Sept. 1862, died 7 Dec. 1946. See obituary in *Limerick Leader*, 16 Dec. 1946.
- 5 James O'Mara, born 6 Aug. 1873, died 21 Nov. 1948. See entry in *DIB*. See his papers (Ms 21543-21552) in the NLI.
- 6 Fr. Paddy O'Mara, born 13 Mar. 1875, died 23 Mar. 1969. See entry in *Australian Dictionary of Jesuit Biography 1848-2015*, by Fr. David Strong, 2017. See his papers (J/552) in the Irish Jesuit Archives.
- 7 Nell O'Mara, born 6 Jun. 1882, died 17 May 1919. See: 'The Limerick woman who was one of Ireland's film pioneers', Veronica Johnson, RTÉ Brainstorm, 2 Mar. 2021.
- 8 Stephen O'Mara, born 5 Jan. 1884, died 11 Nov. 1959. See entry in *DIB*. See his papers (P40) in UL.
- 9 Phons O'Mara, born 13 Oct. 1887, died 16 Feb. 1958. See Judith Crosbie, 'The Era of Radicalism: Limerick's Mayors During World War One', in *Remembering Limerick*, ed. David Lee (1997), pp.213-223.
- 10 Connie O'Mara, born 8 Sept. 1891, died 24 Mar. 1952. See *Memories Before and After the Sound of Music*, Agathe von Trapp, 2004. See Herberstein in *Titled Nobility of Europe*, Marquis of Ruvigny and Raineval (1914), p.776.
- 11 O'Mara of Limerick, by Mark Humphrys. 152 chapters. Online at: <https://humphrysfamilytree.com/OMara/contents.html> (24 Oct. 2024).

My grandmother was Eithne O'Mara, daughter of James O'Mara (Member of the First Dáil). O'Mara money helped start my grandfather in business and got him a house. The house was sold about twenty years ago, with some of the money trickling down to my generation. So, while the O'Mara family wealth has been diluted and combined with other families, I still sometimes feel like I am benefitting from James O'Mara's bacon factory even today.

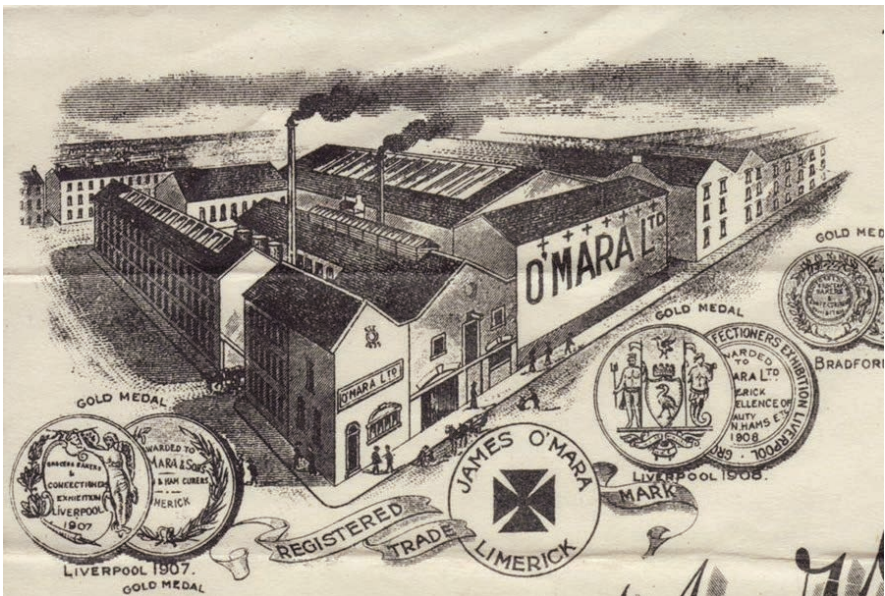
Rather than a complete history of the O'Maras, this article will focus on one fascinating aspect - the O'Mara origin story.



The earliest known photograph of the O'Maras: James O'Mara and wife and some of their children, around 1868. In author's possession.



Four generations of O'Maras, 1898: Old James O'Mara (the founder of the bacon factory), his son Stephen, his son James, and his son Stephen. In author's possession.



A drawing of O'Maras bacon factory, Roches St, Limerick, in its heyday. From a letterhead in or shortly after 1908. Posted by the Killaloe-Ballina Local History Society. The factory was demolished in 1988 or 1989. The site is now a multi-storey car park.

### **The Toomevara origin story**

The origin story the O'Maras told about themselves was that they came from Toomevara in the Barony of Upper Ormond, Co. Tipperary, the historic home of the O'Meara family. Toomevara is also spelled "Toomyvara", but I will use the former since the O'Maras always did. Toomevara in Irish is Tuaim uí Mheára, "Tomb of the O'Mearas". The O'Mara family of Limerick believed they were once O'Meara of Toomevara.

The story is summarised by Patricia Lavelle in the biography of her father James O'Mara that she published in 1961. Her book opens as follows:

My great-grandfather, James O'Mara, came to Limerick from Toomevara in the County of Tipperary.

Like the young men in fairy-tales who set out to seek their fortunes, great-grandfather carried little with him from the historic home of the O'Maras except his own essential sense of integrity, his sound Catholic principles and a possible belief in his high descent from Ossian, son of Finn MacCoul, poet and adventurer into the Land of Tir-na-nog.

On his way to Limerick great-grandfather spent a year or two in Clonmel where he was married about the year 1840. Great-grandmother was a miller's daughter. When they finally settled in Limerick they were in the wool trade for a while.

Great-grandfather started curing bacon in a casual manner in the basement of his house in Mungret Street. When there was a rush of business, great-grandmother was not above enveloping herself in a big white apron and lending a hand. In her leisure moments she devoted herself to the rearing of her twelve children, the eldest of whom was Stephen, who became my grandfather.

After some years the bacon factory proper was established in Roche's Street, where it is to-day, and Stephen went to work there at the age of fifteen.<sup>12</sup>

Patricia Lavelle, in her unpublished notes, says James 'walked out of the village of Toomevara into Clonmel'.<sup>13</sup> The story is a little odd in that Clonmel, at the opposite end of the county, is nowhere near Toomevara, and is certainly not "on his way" to Limerick. We will return to this later.

Of course, the Toomevara origin story has been reproduced elsewhere, e.g., in McCloskey<sup>14</sup> and in Wikipedia and on my own site before 2020. Also, in Guiry<sup>15</sup> (which incorrectly gives the name as Joseph O'Mara, and suggests arrival in Limerick possibly

12 Patricia Lavelle, *James O'Mara - A Staunch Sinn Feiner* (Dublin, 1961).

13 The unpublished family history papers of Patricia Lavelle, in private possession. <https://humphrysfamilytree.com/OMara/lavelle.papers.html> (24 Oct 2024).

14 Morgan McCloskey, 'O'Maras of Limerick and their Overseas Businesses', in *Old Limerick Journal*, no.37, (Summer, 2001), pp 10-12.

15 Ruth Guiry, *Pigtown - A History of Limerick's Bacon Industry* (Limerick, 2016), p.16.

in the 1820s, which would be too early).

The Toomevara story is a classic origin story for a Catholic nationalist family. The origin in the ancestral homeland. The claimed ancient Gaelic descent. The dispossession of the old family in the turmoil of the centuries of Irish history. The lone hero walking to a new place with nothing, and gradually building up his family and his enterprise. It is not a story of rebellion and battles, war and conquest. But it is still in its own way a heroic story. Patricia Lavelle, in her unpublished notes, was impressed by the struggles of her ancestors to improve their material lot. She wrote, when she looked at the grand family townhouse, Hartstonge House, on Hartstonge St, Limerick, that her grandfather Stephen O'Mara owned during her childhood:

...what I saw, the comfort and well-being of Hartstonge House, the crowds of relations, the stables with carriages and horses, had all been achieved by the work and energy of two men, my grandfather and his father James.<sup>16</sup>

### **A mythological origin story**

James O'Mara's "high descent from Ossian, son of Finn MacCoul" above needs some explanation. Here is the start of the entry for O'MEARA in *Irish Family History*, by Richard Francis Cronnelly (1865, pp.326-328):

The O'Meadhras or O'Mearas, derive their descent and surname from Meadhra, a celebrated chief of the race of Ailgenan, son of Cathal, son of Hugh Caemh, son of Conal, son of Eochy Baldearg, son of Carthin Fionn, son of Blod, son of Cas, son of Conal, son of Lughaidh, son of Angus, son of Fear-Corb, who was the son of the celebrated Modh of the Chariots, son of Cormac Cas, king of Thomond, by his wife, the daughter of the poet Ossian, son of Fionn Mac Cumhal.

The above was reprinted verbatim in the *Tuam Herald* on 24 May 1913. A cutting of this was found in Patricia Lavelle's papers. She took a great interest in these kinds of genealogies. In her unpublished notes is found the following:

Now my father's family, the O'Maras, came from Toomevara in the County of Tipperary. ... The sub clann traced a direct descent from Ossian, son of Finn MacCool. Finn lived about the reign of Conn of the hundred battles, Ardriugh of Ireland. That was in 300 A.D. and before that of course the genealogy was traced back to Oiliol, son of Milesius through his second son, Cormac. This very ancient lineage from which I come is something quite wonderful to me.<sup>17</sup>

Patricia Lavelle loved material like this about mythological Ireland, and she chose to open her book with it. But it is unclear if old James O'Mara the businessman knew about or had an interest in such things. This article will have no interest in older myths,

16 The unpublished family history papers of Patricia Lavelle, in private possession. <https://humphrysfamilytree.com/OMara/lavelle.papers.html> (24 Oct 2024).

17 Ibid.

but will stick to a factual problem: Can we prove that O'Mara came from Toomevara in the early nineteenth century?



Stephen O'Mara's house, Hartstonge House (now Ozanam House), Hartstonge St, Limerick, in 1908. In author's possession.

## O'MEARA.

**The O'Meadhras or O'Mearas, derive their descent and surname from Meadhra, a celebrated chief of the race of**

|                        |                  |
|------------------------|------------------|
| Ailgenan, son of       | Blod, son of     |
| Cathal, son of         | Cas, son of      |
| Hugh Caemh, son of     | Conal, son of    |
| Conal, son of          | Lughaidh, son of |
| Eochy Baldearg, son of | Angus, son of    |
| Carthin Fionn, son of  | Fear-Corb,       |

**who was the son of the celebrated Modh of the Chariots, son of Cormac Cas, king of Thomond, by his wife, the daughter of the poet Ossian, son of Fionn Mac Cumhal.**

The mythological origin story for the O'Maras in Richard Francis Cronnelly's work.<sup>18</sup>

### **O'Meara of Toomevara**

An extensive history exists for the landed family of O'Meara (thus spelt) of the Toomevara area. Their ancestors were regarded as chiefs of the name. The question of course is whether we can prove O'Mara of Limerick are linked to them.

The non-mythological O'Meara history in the Barony of Upper Ormond seems to begin with a grant of lands to "Alan O'Maghra" from James Butler, 2nd Earl of Ormond, signed at Nenagh on March 14, 1354.<sup>19</sup> MacCotter provides evidence that this is the grant of Lissanisky, near Toomevara, which became the main O'Meara seat.<sup>20</sup> There was also a small O'Meara castle at Toomevara, and (apparently at a later period) O'Meara was at nearby Ballymackey Castle.

O'Meara of Lissanisky became Protestant and held onto their property through the seventeenth century confiscations, when almost every family in the Barony was dispossessed. They are still there in the late-eighteenth century. The will of Morgan O'Meara of Lissanisky was proved in 1760.<sup>21</sup> Ballymackey is listed as the seat of his son Morgan O'Meara by Wilson in 1786.<sup>22</sup>

John O'Meara shows how ownership of Ballymackey and Lissanisky ended with the latter Morgan O'Meara, who "gambled his estate away" before his death without issue

18 Richard Francis Cronnelly, *Irish Family History*, vol.1 (1865), pp 326-328.

19 Grant of land to Alan O'Maghra from James Butler, 2nd Earl of Ormond, signed at Nenagh, March 14, 1354. Deed no.22 in *Calendar of Ormond Deeds*, Irish Manuscripts Commission, vol. ii (1934), pp.10-11.

20 Paul MacCotter, 'The M7 motorway historical landscape: Studies in the history of Ormond' in *Tipperary Historical Journal* (2018), pp.66-87.

21 *Index to the Prerogative Wills of Ireland, 1536-1810*, Sir Arthur Vicars, Dublin, 1897.

22 William Wilson, *The Post-chaise Companion* (1786 edn), p.168.

in 1829.<sup>23</sup> By 1814 in fact, O'Meara is gone from both Ballymackey and Lissanisky.<sup>24</sup>

Today, Lissanisky House survives in good condition, and is a guesthouse. The older Lissanisky Castle is long gone. In Ballymackey townland, the newer Ballymackey House is vanished, but the ruin of the old Ballymackey Castle survives today, in the middle of a pig farm.

The most evocative O'Meara survivals are in Toomevara village. Surviving at the ruined Abbey there is the 15th century tombstone of a Joannes O'Meara, and the Latin inscription dated 1624 of the tomb of William O'Meara of Lissanisky.<sup>25</sup> We will return to these O'Meara monuments later.



The 15th century tombstone of Joannes O'Meara at Toomevara Abbey.<sup>26</sup>

23 John O'Meara, 'The O'Mearas of Lissanisky' in *Tipperary Historical Journal* (1996), pp 117-135.

24 *Ambrose Leet, A Directory to the Market Towns, Villages, Gentlemen's Seats and other noted places in Ireland* (1814). See Ballymackey, p.48 and "Lisanisk", p.266.

25 Dermot F. Gleeson, 'Churches in the Deanery of Ormond part II', in *North Munster Antiquarian Journal* (1952), pp 130-135.

26 From [www.archaeology.ie](http://www.archaeology.ie)

### Kate O'Brien and the "Considine" origin story

Another person struck by the origin story of her own family and (it seems) the O'Mara family was the novelist, Kate O'Brien. Stephen O'Mara the younger (born 1884) married in 1918 to Nancy O'Brien, sister of Kate. Nancy and Kate had been orphaned in 1916. Kate was always close to her sister and the O'Mara family.

In 1931, Kate O'Brien published the epic, multi-generation novel *Without My Cloak*.<sup>27</sup> This tells the story of a family of Catholic merchants (the "Considines") who rise from poverty in the 18th century to great 19th century prosperity. It is set in "Mellick", a fictional equivalent of Limerick. The story spans from 1789 to 1877. The Considine family does strongly resemble the O'Mara family (with the dates pushed back one generation). There are also similarities with the O'Brien family.

In the story, Anthony Considine arrives in "Mellick" in 1789 on a stolen horse:

#### PROLOGUE - 1789 - *The Horse-Thief*

The light of the October day was dropping from afternoon clarity to softness when Anthony Considine led his limping horse round the last curve of the Gap of Storm and halted there to behold the Vale of Honey.

The Vale of Honey is a wide plain of fertile pastures and deep woods, watered by many streams and ringed about by mountains. Westward the Bearnagh hills, through whose Gap of Storm the traveller had just tramped, shelter it from the Atlantic-salted wind, and at the foot of these hills a great river sweeps about the western valley, zigzagging passionately westward and southward and westward again in its search for the sea.

A few miles below him on this river's banks the traveller saw the grey blur of a town.

"That must be Mellick," he said to hearten himself and his horse.<sup>28</sup>

Anthony Considine's son founds the family business in 1810 and rises to great prosperity. The Considine family moves to a big townhouse. The family produces doctors, priests, an Alderman, and a Mayor of Mellick. The family business has an agent in London. They move to a big house in leafy grounds on the river. All of this is very like (sometimes exactly like) the O'Maras. Many of the O'Maras saw themselves and their ancestors portrayed in the book.

This popular novel has led to stories that the O'Maras came to Limerick as "horse traders" (or even "horse thieves"). A note made around the 1950s on an O'Mara tree says: "*Legend has it he [James] came to Limerick leading a horse, barefoot.*" No evidence has been found for this, and it is likely this comes entirely from Kate O'Brien's book.

In fact, it was the O'Brien family that started in Limerick as horse dealers. Kate O'Brien's

<sup>27</sup> Kate O'Brien, *Without My Cloak* (London, 1931).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

grandfather Thomas O'Brien was from Kilfinane, Co.Limerick. He was evicted in 1852, after which he came into Limerick city, and started as a horse dealer. He rose to become a wealthy horse breeder, and supplier of horses to the army and gentry.

Thomas O'Brien, it seems had his own origin story, by naming his house "Boru House" on Mulgrave St, Limerick.<sup>29</sup> Presumably named because people of the name O'Brien like to consider themselves descendants of Brian Boru, which is actually *true* for some of them (O'Brien, Baron of Inchiquin) but alas cannot be proved for most.<sup>30</sup>

### **Heroic, or "dross"?**

A curious judgement on these origin stories, and indeed the whole class of wealthy Catholic merchants, was made by Eavan Boland in a 1980 edition of *The Ante-Room* (Kate O'Brien's sequel to *Without My Cloak*). Boland expresses a strong dislike for the bourgeois Catholic Ireland that Kate O'Brien writes about. She says: "It is Kate O'Brien's achievement to make us love these selfish merchant souls. They are dross. We know they are dross. ... It is not a place or a time or a people we can be proud of."<sup>31</sup>

It is not clear why Boland dislikes the merchant class. But it is clear this is not how Patricia Lavelle saw things. Nor, it seems to me, did Kate O'Brien see things this way either. Both saw some *heroism* in the struggle of Catholics from poverty to wealth. *Without My Cloak* is at heart an *affectionate* portrayal of the prosperous middle-class Catholic Ireland that Kate O'Brien came from. Even the "villains" of various sub-plots are not actually bad people. And of course, it was all those years of business that was able to *fund* the nationalist politics of the later O'Maras, if that is more appealing to people. In any case, we can dispense with value judgements and ask, is the origin story *true*?

### **Investigating the origin story: Foley and Casey**

In researching the O'Mara origin story, it soon became clear that we need to look at the *wife* and *mother* of old James O'Mara.

Above, Patricia Lavelle thought old James O'Mara married in Clonmel "about the year 1840". It was easily discovered in parish records and other sources that the mother of his children was Honora Foley (thus spelt on her grave and in most sources). All their children were born not in Clonmel but in Limerick, where their births and baptisms

29 Boru House on Mulgrave St, Limerick, fell into a derelict state, but, it seems, has been saved and is being restored. See: *Limerick Leader*, 28 Apr. 2019.

30 The O'Brien male line can be traced every step of the way (with proof) from Brian Boru through O'Brien, Kings of Munster, to O'Brien, Kings of Thomond, then to O'Brien, Earl of Thomond (extinct) and O'Brien, Baron of Inchiquin (extant). A look through a recent *Burke's Peerage* (e.g. 106th Edition, 1999) shows that O'Brien, Baron of Inchiquin, has a large number of living male-line O'Brien members. Unlike most O'Briens in the world, their male-line descent from Brian Boru is proved.

31 Kate O'Brien, *The Ante-Room* (1980 edition) by Arlen House, The Women's Press. Introduction by Eavan Boland.

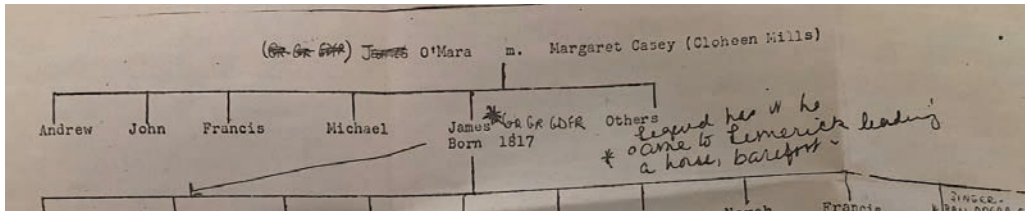
are found from 1844 to 1866, with a further apparent baptism in 1842, but entered incorrectly in the register. At first, their marriage could not be found. Presumably it was in Clonmel.<sup>32</sup>

Meanwhile, two different unsigned family trees surviving in the family said that the mother of James O'Mara was "Margaret Casey (Cloheen Mills)" or "Peggy Casey". In her unpublished notes, Patricia Lavelle has more information about "Cloheen Mills" owned by Casey. This is at Clogheen, Shanrahan parish, Co. Tipperary, close to Clonmel.

But this immediately leads to a problem. Being near Clonmel, they can hardly be linked to the *mother* of James O'Mara of Toomevara. They must be linked to his *wife*. So, Patricia thinks Casey is the mother of Foley. She writes:

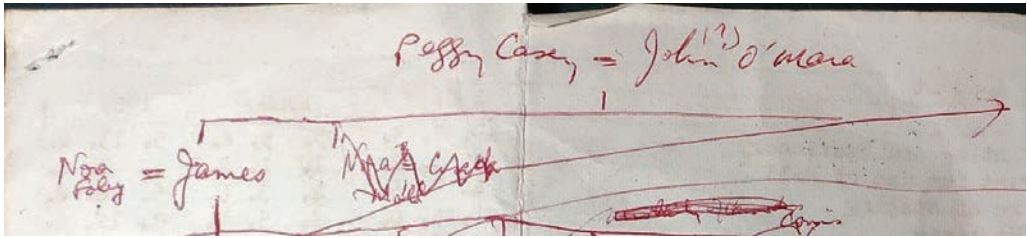
In Clogheen, Co. Tipperary, just under the mountain pass that leads to Mount Mellary there is a woollen mill in ruins. This was known up to 1800 as Murray's mill. It was willed to Margaret Casey of Clogheen about the year 1825 by her uncle. The story goes that somehow, she never came into this legacy. Gr. Gr. Grandfather Foley married Honor Casey about 1810-1814 and my Gr Grandmother Margaret Foley may have been the person to whom the mill was left as her father came from Clogheen.

This account has issues though. Her great-grandmother was Honora Foley, not Margaret Foley. Note there is a "Honor Casey", "Margaret Casey", and "Margaret Foley" in this confusing account. In other notes by Patricia, James' wife is "Margaret Foley (Lynch)" and "Mary Lynch". Even more confusing.



An unsigned O'Mara family tree, written after 1946, gives the mother of James O'Mara as Margaret Casey of "Cloheen Mills".

32 Baptisms of the children of James O'Mara and Honora Foley, from 26 Dec. 1844 to 21 Aug 1866, at St. John's and St. Michael's, Limerick city. Also, the baptism of Bridget O'Mara, 29 Dec. 1842, at St. John's, the daughter of James O'Mara and "Honor Mulcahy", sponsors John Griffin and Bridget Mulcahy. "Honor Mulcahy" is what it says on the original - this is not a transcription error. This must be Bridget O'Mara, a known daughter of James O'Mara and Honora Foley, who married in 1861 to Michael Cusack (Mayor of Limerick 1896-1898). Bridget's baptism is not otherwise found. This must be it. The entry must have accidentally transferred the surname of the sponsor to the mother.



An unsigned O'Mara family tree, written after 1961, gives the mother of James O'Mara as Peggy Casey. It guesses that the father might be "John". This turned out to be false.

### **Foley is from Limerick**

The above then was the broad Foley-Casey story as I inherited it when I started researching the O'Mara ancestry in the 1980s. O'Mara is from Toomevara. He walks to Clonmel and marries Foley, daughter of Casey (details a bit confusing). They immediately go to Limerick and have a family.

But after some more research, there seemed to be a problem with this story. The O'Maras knew they were related to Kate Lynch, the wife of Michael Spain, High Sheriff of Limerick city in 1893. Patricia Lavelle said Kate was a niece of old James O'Mara:

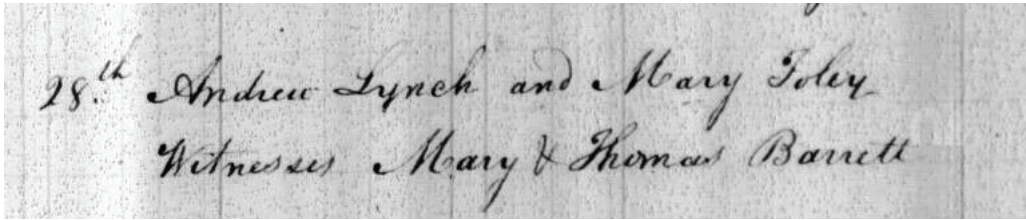
Great Grandfather's other sister married a Limerick man called Lynch. They had a daughter Kate who married Michael Spain of Nenagh...

Kate Lynch's marriage was easily found, showing her father as Andrew Lynch, provision merchant in Limerick city. This led to finding her baptism on 22 July 1848 at St. John's, Limerick, and the discovery that her mother was not O'Mara but rather Mary Foley.

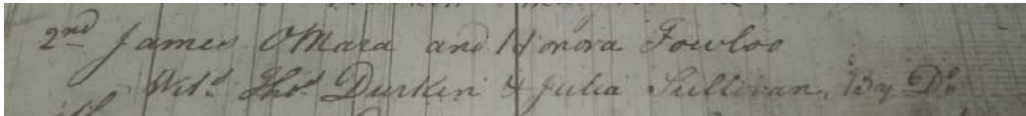
So, Mrs. Lynch is sister of James O'Mara's wife Honora Foley, not sister of James O'Mara. We find that Mary Foley married Andrew Lynch on 28 Apr 1836, not in Clonmel, but at St. John's, Limerick. It is clear from Stephen O'Mara's letters (see below) that Andrew Lynch and Mary Foley are his uncle and aunt. So, two Foley sisters of Clonmel ended up in Limerick?

Missing so far has been the marriage of James O'Mara to the other Foley sister. But then we found it. James' wife was said to be an Irish speaker. Foley in Irish is "Ó Foghlú". And "Fowloo" is a lesser-used Anglicisation of this. And we find that James O'Mara married Honora "Fowloo" on 2 Oct 1841 at St. John's, Limerick.

So, how could two Foley sisters of Clonmel both marry in Limerick, in 1836 and 1841? The answer is the Foley sisters are not from Clonmel. They are clearly from Limerick. But then who is Casey? Maybe their mother is from Clonmel? The O'Mara tree continued in an unresolved state. It was still unresolved as at 2019.



The marriage of Andrew Lynch to Mary Foley in 1836 in the register of St. John's, Limerick.



The marriage of James O'Mara to Honora "Fowloo" in 1841 in the register of St. John's, Limerick.



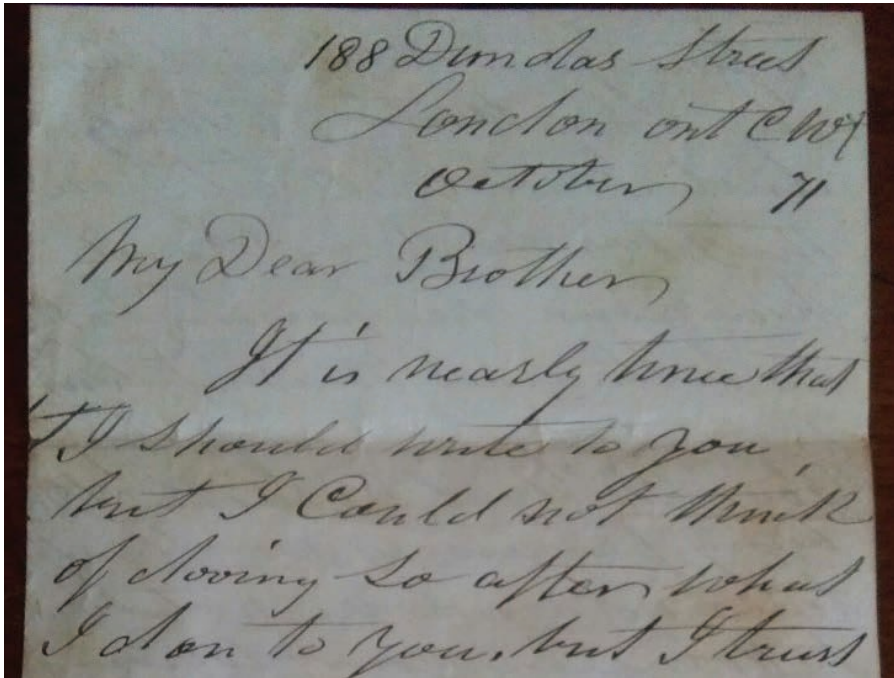
Kate Lynch (baptised 1848), the wife of Michael Spain, High Sheriff of Limerick city. Image courtesy of Nancy Hughes.

### The Rynne letters

The logjam was broken with the discovery of a large number of O'Mara letters (mainly from 1867 to 1898) in the library of Etienne Rynne, Professor of Archaeology at UCG, and former Editor of the *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*. He died in 2012, leaving

a vast library and collection of material, in which these letters were found. It is unclear if Etienne knew he had these letters, or at least had read them fully. The letters may have been collected by his grandmother Mary O'Mara.

By 2020, the letters had been read and analysed, and this solved the origin story. Images of many of the letters are now online.<sup>33</sup> They allowed piecing together the lives of Andrew and John, two brothers of old James O'Mara, which was very difficult since the three men lived in three different countries.



Andrew O'Mara in Canada writes to his brother James O'Mara in Limerick, Oct 1871.  
From the Rynne letters.

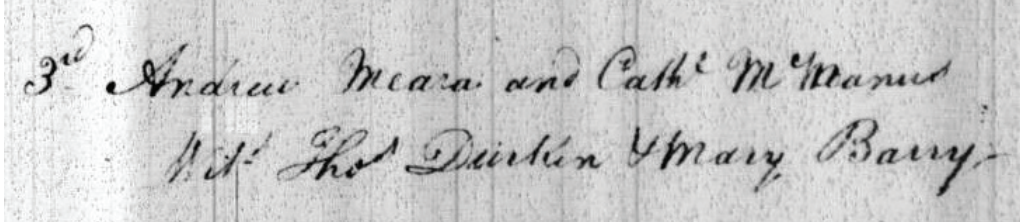
### **Andrew O'Mara of Canada**

One of the O'Mara family trees above lists brothers Andrew and John, with no details. In the Rynne letters we found letters of 1868 to 1876 from Andrew O'Mara to his brother James and his nephew Stephen O'Mara. And also letters from Andrew's sons. These show clearly that Andrew lived in Limerick until middle age and then emigrated in 1868 with his grown-up family to North America. He settled in London, Ontario.

Luckily for us, there was an "O'Meara" family in London, Ontario, at this time, and a researcher of them, Susan O'Meara, had been collecting extensive information on the Andrew O'Mara family, in case they were related. They are, it seems, not related, but her information, plus the Rynne letters, allowed piecing together the entire Andrew

33 O'Mara letters, from Etienne Rynne collection. Images of most online at: <https://humphrysfamilytree.com/OMara/rynne.papers.html> (24 Oct 2024).

O'Mara family. Their baptisms were then discovered in Limerick from 1838 to 1858. Andrew O'Mara married on 3 Feb 1837 at St. John's, Limerick, to Catharine McManus. So, we have two O'Mara brothers, both leaving Toomevara, both going to Limerick. One of them stopping in Clonmel on the way. But is Casey of Clonmel his mother or Foley's mother? The tree is getting even more mysterious.



The marriage of James O'Mara's brother Andrew O'Mara in Limerick in 1837.

### **O'Mara are from Clonmel**

The breakthrough came when we discovered Andrew O'Mara's grave is at St Peter's RC Cemetery, London, Ontario.<sup>34</sup> That itself might not have led anywhere, except there are photos of the grave online, at CanadaGenWeb's Cemetery Project and at findagrave.com.<sup>35</sup> From the photos can be read the inscription: "In memory of Andrew O'Mara, died June 14, 1878, aged 61 years 5 months, born in Clonmel, Co. Tipperary, Ireland, and his beloved wife Catharine, died Aug 16, 1891 aged 77 years".

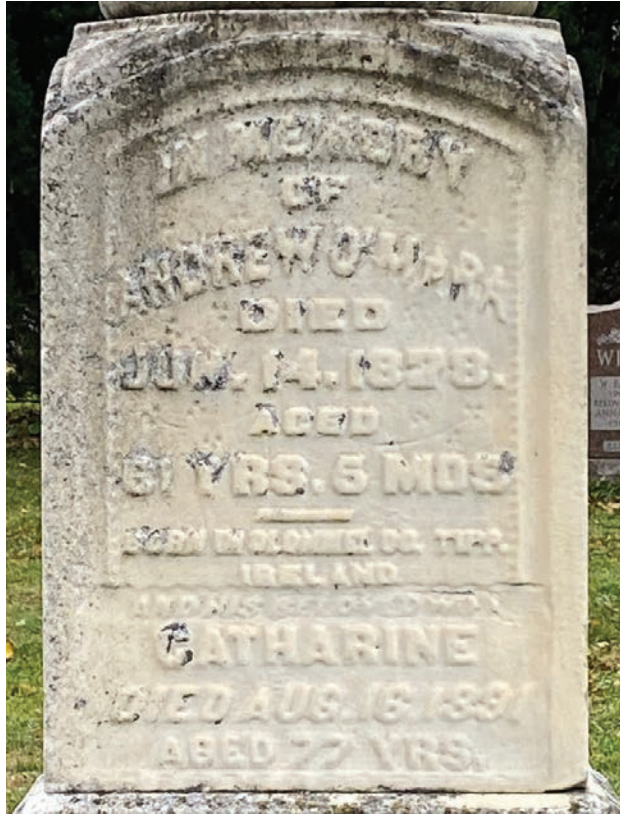
So, Andrew O'Mara was born in Clonmel. With an exact date of January 1817. Off to the Clonmel parish records and we find it: The baptism of Andrew and his twin brother John on 8 Jan 1817 at St. Mary's, Clonmel, the sons of "Petri Meara" (Peter Meara) and Margaret Casey - the name we already had, but thought must be the mother of Foley. So, the family trees above were right to say she was the mother of O'Mara.

I have not yet found the baptism of James O'Mara, but presumably he was baptised in Clonmel too. His age given at death would in fact imply he was also born 1817. But age given at death can be inaccurate. Still, a search in and around that year does not find him. I did find a baptism of a child (with illegible name) of "Peter Mara" and Margaret Casey, baptised 17 July 1826 at St. Mary's, Clonmel. This is too young for James but would be his sibling. It must be said that the microfilm of this parish register is almost illegible. We need to see the original paper register.

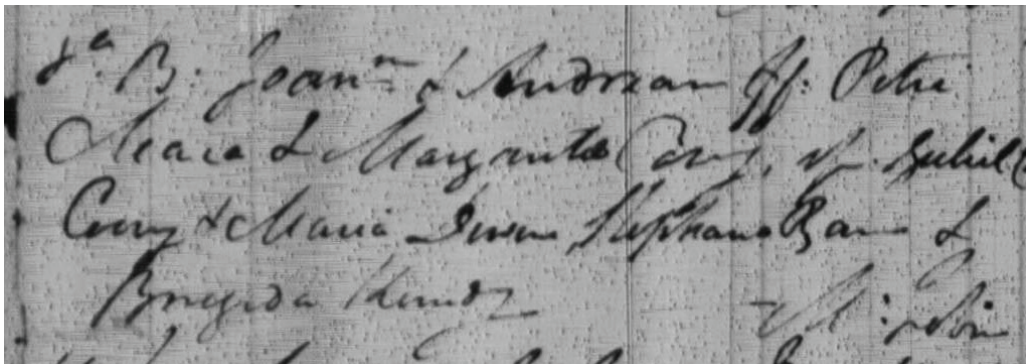
So, a new theory is now emerging that the O'Mara family is actually from Clonmel. We will now examine the other brother John.

34 Grave of Andrew O'Mara. St Peter's RC Cemetery, London, Ontario. Location: Section AA, Row 37, Entry 17.

35 Photographs of grave of Andrew O'Mara. Grave ID 1869291 at CanadaGenWeb's Cemetery Project, <https://cemetery.canadagenweb.org/> (24 Oct 2024). Also, Grave ID 219470999 at Findagrave.com, <https://www.findagrave.com/> (24 Oct 2024).



The grave of Andrew O'Mara in Canada. This says he was born in Clonmel in Jan 1817.<sup>36</sup>



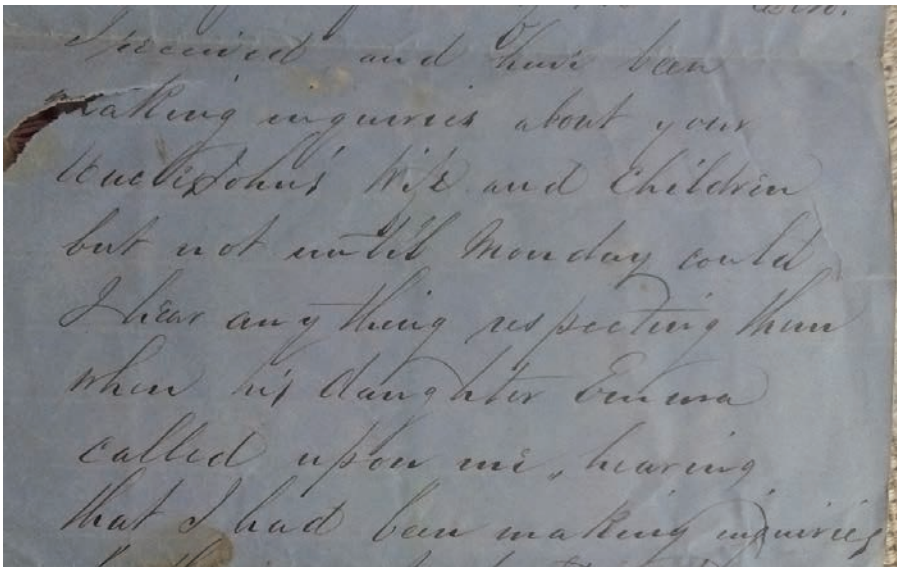
Baptism of twins John and Andrew O'Mara, 8 Jan 1817, Clonmel, sons of Peter O'Mara and Margaret Casey.

36 Find a Grave, Andrew O'Mara: <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/219470999> (31 Oct. 2024).

### John O'Mara of Liverpool

The Rynne letters also allowed the piecing together of the family of James O'Mara's brother John O'Mara. To complicate things even further, he left Ireland and went to Liverpool. The letters show that the Limerick family lost touch with his family. After John died, the Limerick family tried to restore contact. A letter of 4 June 1870 to Stephen O'Mara (nephew of John) from a John Collins in Liverpool says Collins has been trying to find "*your Uncle John's wife and children*" and has just had some success.

It is later clear that contact was established. A letter of 6 Aug 1876 survives from John O'Mara's son to "Dear Cousin" Stephen O'Mara. With a bit of work, much of John's family could be worked out. It turns out that John O'Mara died in 1864. He was buried on 7 Aug 1864 in Ford RC cemetery, Liverpool. It is believed there is no gravestone.



Letter of 4 June 1870 from John Collins: "*I ... have been making inquiries about your Uncle John's wife and children*". Collins has just contacted John's daughter Emma.

### DNA matches

The next breakthrough came through something very modern: DNA. Some of John's descendants had done genealogy DNA tests, as did some of James' descendants. Soon I discovered there were DNA matches. Two descendants of John O'Mara of Liverpool are DNA matches for multiple descendants of James O'Mara of Limerick.<sup>37</sup>

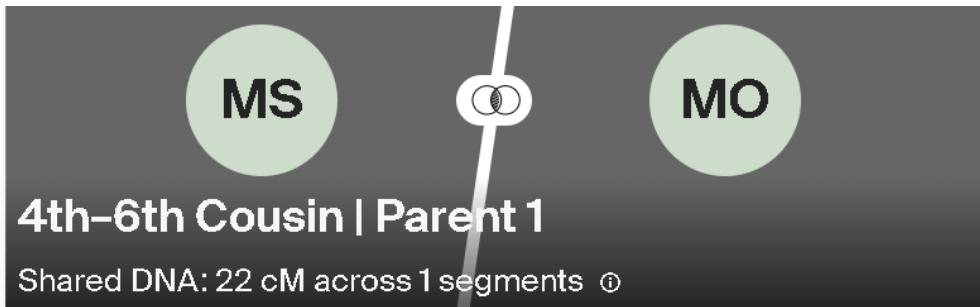
So, John O'Mara the brother has been identified through documents, and proved through DNA. The final piece is to find his marriage. John O'Mara married on 26 Nov 1842, at St Nicholas RC church, Liverpool, to Emma Houldin. The marriage cert says his father is "Peter O'Mara", farmer.

<sup>37</sup> I suspect there are even more DNA matches between the two sides, but I do not have access to all the accounts to see.

So, this is John, son of Peter of Clonmel, twin of Andrew. Despite three brothers living in four cities in three countries, we have linked them all together.

| No. | What Married | Name and Surname | Age | Condition | Rank or Profession | Residence at the Time of Marriage | Father's Name and Residence       | Rank or Profession of Father |
|-----|--------------|------------------|-----|-----------|--------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 172 | Male         | John O'Mara      | 27  | Bachelor  | Farmer             | 172, South Street                 | Peter O'Mara<br>172, South Street | Farmer                       |

Marriage cert of John O'Mara in Liverpool in 1842 shows his father as Peter O'Mara, "farmer".



Ancestry.com DNA match of Malachi Spain, descendant of James O'Mara, and Matthew O'Mara, descendant of John O'Mara.

## Summary

To summarise: O'Mara is from Clonmel. James and Andrew and John are the sons of Peter O'Mara (or Peter Meara) of Clonmel by his wife Margaret Casey. We notice now that James and Andrew and John all had sons called "Peter", after the grandfather.

Peter must be the "Peter Meara" who is listed in the Tithe Survey of 1826 as holding one acre of land at Abbey or Inishlounaght townland, just West of Clonmel. James O'Mara's father was a poor farmer of just outside Clonmel.

Casey of Clonmel is not the mother of Foley. She is (as the original family trees thought) the mother of James and Andrew and John. The general story of Clogheen mills, near Clonmel, is probably true. But that is the family of James O'Mara's *mother*, not his wife. James did not "spend a year or two in Clonmel". He grew up in Clonmel, and went from there to Limerick, where he married Foley, who is nothing to do with Clonmel but rather a Limerick family.

His brother Andrew O'Mara went from Clonmel to Limerick where he married, and then later went to Canada. His brother John went from Clonmel to Liverpool where he married. None of them are anything to do with Toomevara.

At some point (maybe when a widow) Margaret Casey moved from Clonmel to Limerick, and lived with her son there. She died in Limerick on 23 Sept 1863, and was buried at

Mount St. Lawrence cemetery, Limerick. Her grave spells the surname “O’Mara”. Her grave says she is age 78 (born around 1785).<sup>38</sup> Her burial record says she is age 84 (born around 1779). Since she had a child in 1826, we think she is more likely born around 1785. She lived to see the start of the O’Mara Bacon empire in Limerick.

|    |                   |          |   |   |            |   |   |            |
|----|-------------------|----------|---|---|------------|---|---|------------|
| 27 | Mr. Tho. Taylor   | 15 3 20  | . | . | 11 2 6     | . | . | 3 19 4 1/2 |
| 28 | Peter Meara       | 1 1 35 5 | . | . | 7 6 10 3 7 | . | . | 5 3 1/2    |
| 29 | Rev. George Miles | 2 2 36 7 | . | . | 19 1 6 5   | . | . | 13 8       |

“Peter Meara” listed in the Tithe Survey, 1826, as holding 1 acre at Abbey or Inishlounaght townland, just West of Clonmel.

### Further research

As for whether we could go back further, the notes above about Casey’s woollen mill at Clogheen, near Clonmel, seem like a good lead to learn more about Margaret Casey and her family. Nothing solid has been found so far, but maybe something will emerge.

On the O’Mara side, the surname (and variants) is not rare in Clonmel, but “Peter” is a rare first name. It might be significant that there is a Peter Mara, son of James Mara, baptised on 27 Oct 1818 at St. Mary’s RC church, Clonmel. The father might be the James Mara who is listed as a woollen draper on Main St, Clonmel, in 1824<sup>39</sup> and 1846.<sup>40</sup> Our family was in the woollen business, so this James O’Mara might be related to our Peter O’Mara. More work is needed, but this might indicate that the family of Mara or O’Mara, and the name Peter, goes further back in the Clonmel area. Toomevara might be merely a legend.

This has been the story of lots of small clues rather than a single dramatic discovery. The slow accumulation of small clues finally constructed a different theory. And now all the evidence makes sense. But it leaves one question: Why did the origin story say Toomevara?

### Why did the story say Toomevara?

The family certainly believed the story of a Toomevara origin. Stephen O’Mara the younger married in 1918. He and his wife briefly lived in a house in Limerick that they named “Tuaim uí Meára”.<sup>41</sup> Dr. Frank O’Mara called his house in Ennis “Toomevara” when he built it, probably in the late 1930s. (It still has that name.) It was Frank’s own

38 Grave of Margaret O’Mara (née Casey). Mount St. Lawrence cemetery, Limerick. Buried with Lynch and Spain relations. Location: Lat. 173 to 183, Long. Qa to Qb.

39 *Pigot & Co’s Provincial Directory of Ireland* (1824), Clonmel entry, p.239. This entry and other clues suggest our O’Mara family might go further back in Clonmel.

40 *Slater’s Commercial Directory of Ireland* (1846), Clonmel entry, p.181.

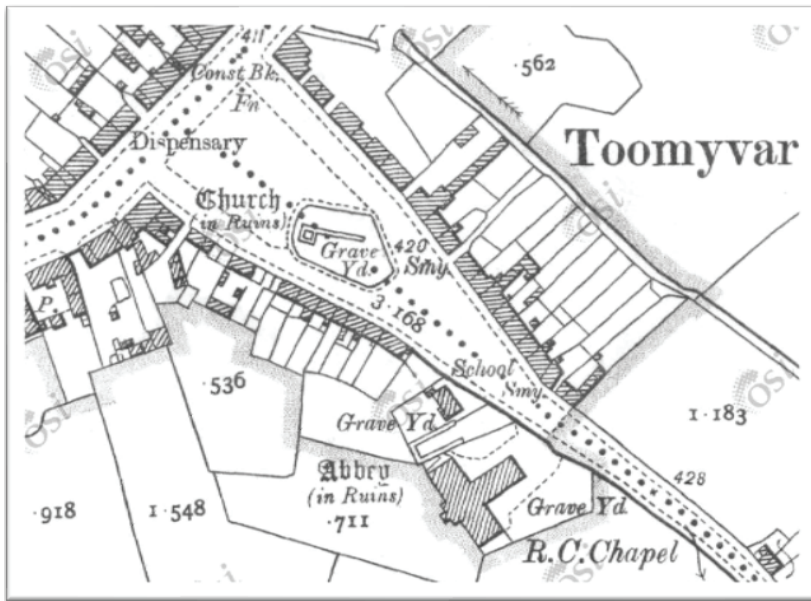
41 Stephen O’Mara’s house in Limerick (location unidentified) is spelt “Tuaim uí Meára” in 1920 in P40/238 in UL, which is the only contemporary reference we have to it. The correct spelling of the village would be “Tuaim uí Mheára”.

father and uncles who were from Clonmel, and you would think he would know that. So, did Frank know something more? Maybe before Clonmel they were from Toomevara?

Here is an alternative story: Old James O'Mara is from Clonmel. He moves to Limerick. He and his descendants prosper, and they are constantly on the road to Dublin, often heading to Liverpool and London. The Dublin-Limerick road passes through Toomevara, right past the ruined Abbey with its 15th century O'Meara tombstone, and its O'Meara inscription of 1624.

At some point, as they have more education and leisure, the O'Maras think about their origin. They read up on Toomevara, "Tomb of the O'Mearas". They see the 15th and 17th century O'Meara monuments in Toomevara, and start considering it as their ultimate ancestral home. It becomes the family story.

Maybe they really are from there, a generation or two before Clonmel, back in the 18th century, and we shall find out one day. Or maybe it is a modern myth with no real basis. I would like to say that we have tracked down a modern origin myth. That we now know more about the origin of the O'Maras than Stephen O'Mara and Dr. Frank O'Mara did a century ago. But this story has had so many twists that maybe we should not rule out one further one.



Toomevara (they use "Toomyvara") on the historic 25-inch Ordnance Survey map (1887 to 1913). To the NW side here is the old Dublin-Limerick road, along which O'Mara family members would have passed countless times. In the ruined Abbey here are ancient O'Meara monuments. These, and the name of the village, may be the entire foundation of the story that O'Mara of Limerick was from Toomevara.