



Shillelagh

A shillelagh was traditionally both a walking stick and a means of protection, offering support on the road and strength when it was needed. To me, this blackthorn stick has come to mean something more: a tangible connection to the ancestors whose lives I am still learning to understand, and a reminder of why their story deserves to be uncovered, preserved, and honored.

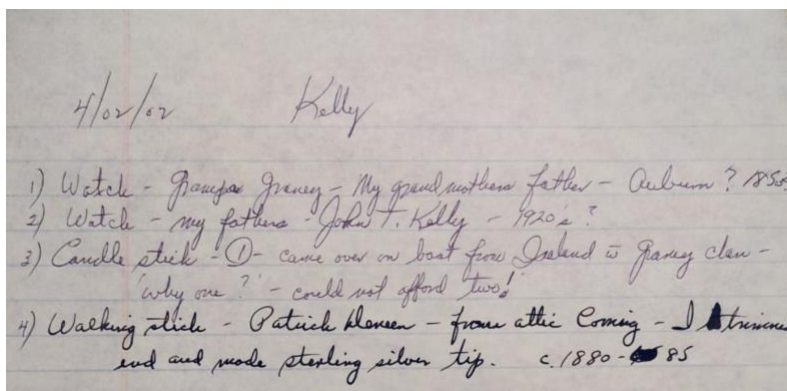


The shillelagh was discovered in the attic of the Deneen family home at 245 W. 2nd Street in Corning, New York, by Patrick's grandson, Dr. James F. Kelly (my dad), during the final clean-out after great Aunt Anna's passing in the 1970s. I imagine it resting in the dark for decades, carrying more memory than anyone could easily name. Made from seasoned blackthorn wood, cured with lard, and rooted in the soil of the Old Country, it speaks of Irish resilience and a rural man's pride. It is highly probable that Patrick inherited this heavy stick from his own father, Denis, in Ahil Beg before sailing to America aboard the SS Erin in May 1880.

Decades later, when Dad trimmed the weathered wood and added a sterling silver tip, he did more than preserve an old family possession. He physically joined the raw struggles of a 19th-century immigrant's life to the more polished legacy of the generations that followed.

When Patrick's daughter, my great-Aunt Frances Deneen Taylor, passed away in 1986, it closed that foundational immigrant chapter. Within a few generations, the Deneen siblings shattered an eighth-grade educational limit to raise a family of doctoral degrees, dental surgeons, deeply respected school leaders, and ordained clergy. Yet, what moves me most is not the list of achievements, but the way they refused to let distance, time, or hardship erode their bonds.

For that reason, this rugged piece of wood feels deeply personal. It is a reminder that the strength of one generation becomes the physical foundation on which later generations build fuller, more expansive lives.



Written in my dad's hand [James F. Kelly]

4/02/02 Kelly

- 1) Watch – Grandpa Graney - My grandmother's father – Auburn? 1850s?
- 2) Watch – my father – John T. Kelly – 1920s
- 3) Candle stick – 1 – came over on boat from Ireland with Graney clan – ‘why one’? Could not afford two!
- 4) Walking stick – Patrick Deneen – from attic in Corning – I trimmed end and made sterling silver tip. C.1880-1885