

History of The Cleary Family of South Side and Riverhead, Hr. Grace

by Pat Cleary



According to family lore John Cleary (my great-great grandfather) was banished from County Wexford, Ireland, after the Rebellion of 1798. He was married and living on the South Side of Hr. Grace by 1812. He and his wife, Providence George Cleary, had 8 children baptized in the Roman Catholic Church: Anne b. 1812; William (married Anne Fitzgerald) and Mkala b. 1815; Richard b. 1818 (married Julia Hearn); Elizabeth b. 1819; Providence b. 1824 (married Jacob Glavine) and John b. 1826 (married Mary Smallcombe); Julia b. 1829.

John Cleary is listed as living between Long Beach and Feather Point in the earliest voters list of 1832. He signed the nomination papers for John Ridgley in the election of 1835. In 1845 his three sons, William, Richard, and John Junior, bought the plantation and fishing room where their father and family were tenants. The property is just west of the remains of the old ferry dock on the South Side.

John Cleary and his wife, Mary Smallcombe, from the North Side, were married in 1870. They had eight children baptized in the Roman Catholic Church: Martin b. 1871 (married Alice Sullivan); John b. 1872 (married Elizabeth MacKay); Mary Esther b. 1874 (married Edward Sullivan); Cornelius b. 1876 (died young); Agnes b. 1878 (married Thomas Ennis and then Pat Dooley in the USA); James b. 1880 (married Maria Duggan); Margaret b. January 2, 1883 (married Peter Martin); Bernard b. 1886 (married Elizabeth Hanlon).

The Cleary men were fishermen, farmers, sealers, sailors and loggers – anything to keep body and soul together. For years the four boys went to the “Boston States” to fish from Gloucester. No doubt their father and uncles had done the same. Their sister Agnes went to the “Boston States” and stayed. Grandfather Bernard often visited with her when he was there for work. The wives were left in Riverhead to raise the children and tend the gardens and gather the vegetables, fish, berries, and hay for the winter..

Great-grandfather John’s obituary in The Free Press stated that he died on the South Side on September 6, 1904, after a long illness. He was an old and well known resident of that place. He was 79. Mary Smallcombe Cleary was living with her youngest son Bernard and his wife “Bessie” when she died on September 9, 1923. She was 80 years old.

Martin Cleary and his wife lived on Spaniards Bay Road and raised their family.

James Cleary had foxy hair. He was ready to return to NL with his three brothers in the fall of 1916, train ticket in hand. A friend had bought a Provincetown schooner and James signed on as cook and cashed in his ticket. His brothers arrived home in Riverhead but the boat The Jessie Costa was caught in a hurricane. Wreckage was found off the Sable Islands. He was 36. He left his wife “Min” and her 6 children living on Spaniards Bay Road.

John Cleary and his wife Eliza and children had moved to Boston. He died and Eliza MacKay Cleary sold his body to science to get money to return to Riverhead. They lived on Cooper Corner Road, across from where John and Gertrude Callahan lived.

Neither widow remarried. They knitted goods to sell, and sewed precut cloth to make clothes for a business, and kept the gardens, and raised the children.

Grandfather Bernard Cleary and Grandmother Elizabeth Hanlon Cleary were the last of the Clearys living on the South Side land. They had 8 children: John Joseph b. 1916 (married Mary Russell); Agnes b. 1917 (married Harry Hunt); James b. 1918 (married Margaret Griffin); Ronald b. 1920 (married Marie Stamp); Thomas b. 1922 (married Patricia Callahan); Gerald b. 1914 d. 1925; Bernard b. 1930 (married Loretta Shannahan). I remember my grandmother Bessie telling me about the hard work in the gardens. Shortly after giving birth she would be expected to get out and help with the work.

The family moved from the South Side to what is known as “Shea’s Place” sometime before 1926. It is the ball field and grove off the Hard Path behind Doran’s home. John Shea had no family left in NL so Bernard and Bessie moved in with him to care for him. He deeded the land to them in 1926.

Bernard returned from another Boston work term in the mid 1930s when he was about 50. He had been diagnosed with angina and given a few years to live. He was 62 when he died in 1948, and they were living in Riverhead center. Their daughter Agnes Hunt and her family left Gander and moved in with grandmother Cleary. Bessie Cleary kept a store in The River for many years before her death in 1988.

My father, Thomas Cleary married Patricia Callahan. They moved to Gander and lived there for a quarter of a century. They built the first privately owned home on the new town of Gander while dad worked with Shell Oil refueling airplanes. In 1971 they bought the Pine Grove Club on the Tilton Barrens and moved back to Riverhead. They raised ten children, five of whom are living in The River today. Linda, Kevin, Phyllis, Michelle and Scott have their homes in Riverhead. Ron, Patricia, Judy, Thomas and Donald visit The River and the remaining family.



Tom and Pats Cleary, 1945