

The Search for Anne Sullivan Macy's Sister Mary

by Carolyn Sano

Ever since I was a little girl I have always been intrigued by the story of Anne Sullivan and Helen Keller. When I started my hobby of building family trees, I became curious to see if I could figure out Anne Sullivan's family tree and where they came from in Ireland. I too have ancestors from Ireland, and I know how difficult it can be to track them down. But aside from locating her ancestors in Ireland, a question that always seemed to come up in my searching was what happened to her sister Mary? The following is how I was able to solve that mystery and where her family came from in Ireland.



Anne Sullivan, photo courtesy of Perkins School for the Blind Archives, <https://www.perkins.org/history/archives/about/image-licensing/contract>.

Johanna "Anne" Mansfield Sullivan was born in the parish of Feeding Hills in Agawam, Massachusetts, in April 1866.^[1] Her parents were Thomas Sullivan and Alice Clohessy, who immigrated to the United States sometime between 1862 and 1866. In addition to her mother and father, Anne had several younger siblings all born in Agawam — there were Ellen "Nellie," James "Jimmie," Mary, and John.^[2] Mother Alice, Nellie, and John all died during a seven-month period from May 1873 to January 1874.^[3] In February of 1876, Anne and Jimmie were sent to the Tewksbury Almshouse in Massachusetts where Jimmie died a few months later in May.^[4] Mary was sent to live with a relative, and Thomas headed to Chicago shortly after this splitting up of the family.^[5] After four years in the Tewksbury Almshouse, Anne attended the Perkins School for the Blind and eventually ended up being the lifelong

teacher and companion to Helen Keller.^[6] For about five decades she did not have any contact with any of her extended family, but something finally made her reach out to them to know what happened to her father and her sister. Anne and Mary were never to meet as adults, as Mary had already passed away by the time Anne started asking about her family.

To begin my research, I looked up everything I could to see what was out there for data. Then I re-read Anne's biography by Nella Braddy Henney and made notes of what I thought would be relevant facts. In the first chapter of her book, there is mention of the family members in Agawam. There was her father Thomas, his older brother John, his brother Daniel, his half-brother James, and his sister Ellen. From what she remembered, her mother had no family at all in the area. She knew

that both of her parents were from Ireland, but initially she believed her mother was French Canadian. (It was a fantasy that she would report in the 1910 census when asked where her mother was born.) At some point she learned that they both came from County Limerick.^[7] This gave me enough information to get started, so I began by locating vital records and census information in Agawam.

Since Anne was just under 10 years old when she was sent to Tewksbury in 1876, I suspected that she was remembering some of her relatives incorrectly. After her mother died in 1874, she was living with her father in a cabin on her Uncle John's tobacco farm.^[8] This arrangement must have only been for a short time because eventually Thomas went to live with another relative and Anne said she was living with her Aunt Anastatia and Uncle John.^[9] The following shows how I determined that she mixed up the wife of her uncle John Sullivan with another relative.

In the days just before Christmas (likely 1875) Anne says that there was an off-limits room where the presents were kept so she snuck into the room and saw an expensive doll that she believed was meant for her but was given to one of her cousins.^[10] There was a John Sullivan and Anastatia Kelley in Feeding Hills, but they married in 1873 and had two girls by 1875.^[11] The eldest, named Anna, was just a little over two years old in December of 1875. From Anne's description of the home, the family she was staying with sounded fairly well established, and I find it unlikely that such a doll was procured for a toddler in a family just starting out.^[12] Anne also says that if it weren't for her eyes she would be going to school with the cousins of this family.^[13] Anastatia's daughter Anna Sullivan, at two years old, would be too young to go to school.

When Anne and Jimmie were admitted to Tewksbury, somebody must have given the information to the almshouse staff ahead of time as it appears that they traveled alone. The admissions document is online; it mentions their mother being dead, being not sure if the father was naturalized or was in the war [Civil War] and that sister Mary was with Aunt Mary Clarey.^[14] This is information that a young child is not likely to describe to an official, so the adult giving this information was probably one of Thomas Sullivan's brothers or cousins. Based on this information, it is more likely that the family Anne was staying with was John Sullivan and Mary Clarey — not John Sullivan and Anastatia Kelley. John and Mary had several children that were near Anne's age and were going to school. Anne thought that her sister Mary was with Aunt Ellen,^[15] but according to the Tewksbury admissions, the aunt was Mary Clarey. This may have been true initially, but Anne was correct in that eventually Mary went to live with Aunt Ellen — which I will discuss later.

Using the clues in her book about her father's older brother John Sullivan and his wife Mary Clarey, I was able to find quite a bit of information on this family.

John must have come to America in the early part of the Irish famine as I found his marriage record to Mary.^[16] They married in Chicopee, Massachusetts, on 24 October 1852^[17] and shortly after moved to Illinois where their eldest daughter Anna was born about 1853.^[18] Later on, they moved back to Chicopee and then eventually to Agawam, where they settled permanently and John worked as a tobacco farmer.^[19] According to Henny's book, Anne said that Uncle John paid the passage to America for Thomas and Alice.^[20] This also shows why John Sullivan and Anastatia Kelley are unlikely to be the relatives she lived with. That John Sullivan was only a teenager/young man in the mid-1860s and probably did not have that kind of money available.

I looked more closely at the data that I found for John Sullivan and Anastatia Kelley. As I mentioned previously, they married in 1873 in Springfield. The marriage record gives the names of John's parents as Thomas Sullivan and Johanna.^[21] I looked up his death record at the Massachusetts State Archives, and it names his mother as Johanna Hayes.^[22] In the records from Ireland, I found baptismal records for John and his siblings Margaret and William.^[23] Except for John, none of these names match the ones that Anne states are her father's siblings. Another fact is that Anne says her uncle John is older than her father, but the John Sullivan married to Anastatia Kelley was born in 1845, which would make him around five to seven years younger than Anne's father Thomas.

In reviewing the data I listed above, I concluded that Anne mixed up the wives of the two John Sullivans living in Feeding Hills. The John Sullivan married to Mary Cleary is the uncle she was living with temporarily, while the John Sullivan married to Anastatia Kelley is another relative, perhaps a cousin of Thomas. I had confirmation that I had the correct aunt and uncle from letters sent by her cousins Mary Sullivan Hannon and Theresa M. Sullivan (granddaughter to John Sullivan and Mary Cleary) which I found in Henney's papers.^[24] But some of the most important information I discovered comes from the Chicopee marriage record of John Sullivan and Mary Cleary, because it lists the names of their parents and where they were born. John's parents were James Sullivan and Johanna (no maiden name listed), and he states he was born in Hospital, Ireland. Therefore, the names for John's parents must be the same as the parents of Anne's father Thomas, and they do not match the parents' names for John Sullivan married to Anastatia Kelley.

Looking at Anne's parents, I found a marriage record in 1862 for Thomas Sullivan and Alice Clohessy in Hospital, Limerick, Ireland.^[25] At the time of Alice (Clohessy) Sullivan's death, her record says that her father's name was Owen, but there is no name listed for the mother.^[26] Using this information and knowing that Alice and Thomas came from Limerick, I did a search for Alice. I located a baptismal record for an Ally (nickname for Alice) Clohessy born in 1841

at Castlefarm in Limerick with the parents' names as Owen Clohessy and Ellen Keogh.^[27] The name Owen Clohessy being somewhat an unusual name plus the fact that the mother's name was Ellen makes me believe I have located Anne's maternal grandparents. Many people of that era tended to name their oldest children after family members. So when Anne was born she was probably named after her paternal grandmother Johanna. When Ellen "Nellie" was born, she was probably named after her maternal grandmother, and when James was born he was named after his paternal grandfather. While the evidence is not as strong as I'd like, the places, dates, and the names all seem to make sense here.

Searches for the baptismal records for Thomas and his siblings have not produced the results I was hoping for. I did find a James Sullivan and a Hannah Terane in the Limerick/Tipperary area who had the following children baptized: John, 26 December 1835; Thomas, 13 December 1838; James, 23 December 1840; Patrick, 22 March 1843; and Ellen, 9 June 1845.^[28] If I have the correct naturalization papers, John says he was born 12 June 1832^[29] and a lot of his data places his birth around that time; but his death record does suggest his birth year as being 1836.^[30] If the baptism followed shortly after his birth, then he would have been around seventeen years old when he married – not unheard of, but men were usually in their twenties when they wed. In the 1900 census, Ellen stated that she was born in January 1840,^[31] but a couple of items place her birth year around 1844/1845.^[32] There is almost no Massachusetts information for Thomas and nothing for the remaining siblings. Assuming these baptisms follow birth order, then James would not be a half-brother, as his baptism falls in between the other children with the same parents, and I did not locate a baptism for Daniel. So based on this information, I am unable to come to a conclusion as to whether or not they are the parents to John, Thomas, and Ellen.

My next step was to find out about Aunt Ellen. It was very difficult to find her at first because I had almost no information on her whereabouts until I came upon a letter sent by Mary Sullivan Hannon to Anne and forwarded to Henney.^[33] Mary Sullivan Hannon mentioned that Anne's cousins Elizabeth Ahern and Nellie Ahern were living in New Haven, Connecticut. From that piece of information I was able to locate a number of records including Aunt Ellen and Uncle Stephen in the 1880 census for New Haven, Connecticut.^[34] After I located these relatives, I was able to find the marriage record for Stephen Ahern and Ellen Sullivan in Hospital, Limerick, as well as baptismal records for some of their children.^[35] Their marriage record is separated by one other marriage entry followed by the one for Thomas Sullivan and Alice Clohessy. I believe these marriage records are strong evidence that I have located Anne's relatives and where they came from in Ireland. As an interesting side note, the Tewksbury admissions document says that Thomas was in Agawam working as a farmer for Stephen O'Hearn. This must be Ellen's husband Stephen Ahern, but I think they were in Connecticut at this point

because their son Stephen Jr. was born in September of 1875 in New Haven.^[36] Perhaps Thomas was really in Connecticut when Anne and Jimmie were sent to the almshouse, and he brought Mary with him to live with the Ahern family.

Anne's sister Mary was hardly addressed in her biography at all, and until now it has been a mystery as to what happened to her. Anne had it right when she said that Mary was living with Aunt Ellen, because when I found the 1880 census for Stephen and Ellen Ahern, I noticed there was a daughter named Mary Ahern who was born in Massachusetts about 1871.^[37] Because Stephen's and Ellen's sons James and John were born in Ireland in 1870 and 1872 respectively, I could see that this Mary Ahern could not have been their daughter as they were not in Massachusetts in 1871. In addition, clues from the letters sent by Anne's cousins indicate that this is Anne's sister Mary Sullivan. Another detail from these same letters says that Mary (called Mamie by the Ahern family) married and had children. She had at least two sons as indicated in the letter from her cousin Mary Sullivan Hannon.^[38] Theresa M. Sullivan said that her family found a copy of Mary's baptismal record when she was going to marry, and she seemed to think that Ellen Sullivan Ahern was a witness.^[39] This suggested that the marriage record for Mary might include her birth parents' names and Aunt Ellen's name as a witness. Unfortunately, I have seen the New Haven marriage records from the 1890s, and they do not list the parents' names. A manual search turned up about a dozen or so couples with the woman's name being Mary Sullivan, but none seemed to be a good fit. Even after I discovered her husband's name I was unable to find any record of their marriage.

With the little information I had about Mary, I started searching on FamilySearch.org. Since I did not have her married surname, I had to think of a way to locate it. FamilySearch.org has quite a lot of records for New Haven, but much of it is not indexed, and that meant going through the records manually one by one. It was a challenge to know where to start, so initially I tried looking for a death record for her. The Connecticut death records on FamilySearch.org range from very early records to about 1900, and my intuition was saying that she probably died later. When nothing turned up there, I got the idea that if I looked at the births for children in New Haven in the 1890s maybe I could locate her and that's exactly what happened. I found birth records for several children whose parents were James Joseph McLaughlin and Mary Sullivan.^[40] One of the records said the mother's name was Mamie Sullivan and that she was born in Springfield, Massachusetts. At this point I felt sure that I had located Anne's sister. But I was looking for a little more evidence, and I found that in her daughter Alice E. McLaughlin's records. I found a 1920 census record for an adopted daughter named Alice McGlocklin living with a Daniel and Annie Lynch.^[41] Investigation of the Lynch family showed that Annie Lynch is Johanna Ahern, Mary Sullivan's cousin, who was the eldest daughter of Stephen and Ellen. This was another

wonderful discovery, as I had lost track of Johanna after 1880 until I located this census record. At this point I was quite sure that I had found Mary Sullivan and her husband, Joseph McLaughlin [many records omit the James]. After locating the 1910 census^[42] for Mary and her family, I surmised that she passed away between 1910 and 1920.



Joseph James McLaughlin, Anne Sullivan's nephew. Ancestry.com. Connecticut, U.S., Military Questionnaires, 1919-1920 [database online]. Provo, Utah, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2013.



Alice E. McLaughlin, Anne Sullivan's niece, younger (left) and older (right). Photo courtesy of the Farrell family, Mary Sullivan's descendants.

A search on Ancestry.com for Connecticut deaths between 1910 and 1920 turned up three possible dates of women with the name Mary McLaughlin. After making a request to a library, I was sent a newspaper obituary in the *New Haven Evening Register* dated 1 July 1913. It gives Mary's maiden name and her husband's name and states that she died in New Haven on 30 June 1913. Satisfied that

I had finally determined when and where she died, I then requested the death certificate from the New Haven City Hall. When I received the death certificate I was disappointed, but not surprised, that her correct birth parents were not listed as I see this quite often. This does not affect my belief that I have found Anne Sullivan Macy's sister because I believe I have enough circumstantial evidence to back it up. If the church marriage record can be obtained, I feel that Ellen Sullivan Ahern or another relative may be listed as a witness. The church baptismal records for Mary's children may also show Ahern relatives and that these records will reinforce my findings.

After I completed writing this article, I went to the FamilySearch.org website to see what was out there for Anne Sullivan's family tree and up popped an entry for Mamie Sullivan with a marriage record in Manhattan, New York. The date of the marriage was 15 August 1895 to Joseph McLaughlin, and it shows her parents as Thomas Sullivan and Alice.^[43] This was a wonderful conclusion to my research to prove that I had located Mary Sullivan, her spouse, and her children.

There are more things that are left to be discovered in Anne's family tree, but the most intriguing mystery is the circumstances of Thomas Sullivan's death. As of this writing I still have not determined exactly when and where Anne's father died. But there are a few clues that Anne mentioned in her book. Shortly after she and Jimmie arrived in Tewksbury, her father and one of his brothers visited and brought them some candy. Thomas told her and Jimmie that they were going to Chicago where there was work with canals and railroads. This is the last time Anne ever saw her father.^[44] Near the end of her book, Henney discloses that Anne's father ended his life by his own hand; she seems to imply that he was in Chicago and that he was a "young Irishman" when it happened.^[45] She found out about this in the late 1920s while in the midst of collecting data for her book. Anne, Helen Keller, Polly Thomson (assistant to Anne and Helen), and Henney visited Feeding Hills and got this information from one of the remaining relatives. No one was quite sure about the details, but they seemed to think that Thomas hung himself around 1881 in Chicago.^[46] Based on what was said by Anne and her family about Thomas and Chicago, I tried finding records for him. In my research I had read in a book that James was the brother who travelled with Thomas to Chicago.^[47] I did find an 1878/1879 Chicago directory^[48] that had a James Sullivan and a Thomas Sullivan both living at 12 Ashley Street, but when I checked the 1880 census they were no longer at that address. I also did a search on the Illinois Statewide Death Index for a Thomas Sullivan who died in 1881 but did not get a good match. It's quite possible that he died before 1881 so this will have to be a project for the future.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Massachusetts Vital Records from 1841, 187:1, daughter of Thomas and Anna C. [*sic*]. These Massachusetts state copies of vital records are online at AmericanAncestors.org, FamilySearch.org, and Ancestry.com under various titles. Her middle name is from her baptism and Nella Braddy Henney, *Anne Sullivan Macy: The Story Behind Helen Keller* (New York: Doubleday Doran & Co., 1933), 82.
- ² Massachusetts Vital Records from 1841, 197:1 (Elen, 6 July 1867); 215:1 (James, 14 January 1869); 233:2 (Mary, 15 June 1871); 251:1 (John, 15 June 1873).
- ³ Massachusetts Vital Records from 1841, 265:313 (Alice, 19 January 1874, age 30, consumption, daughter of Owen Cloesity); 247:1 (John, 15 August 1873, age 2 months, cholera infantum, son of Thomas and Alice); 247:1 (“Nel,” 15 May 1873, age 6, brain fever, daughter of Thomas and Alice).
- ⁴ Massachusetts Vital Records from 1841, 284:177, James, 30 May 1876, age 5, tubercular meningitis, son of Thomas and Alice. “Anne’s Formative Years,” *Entering Tewksbury Almshouse*, image and transcription of the admission document, American Foundation for the Blind <https://www.afb.org/formative-years/entering-tewksbury-almshouse>.
- ⁵ Henney, *Anne Sullivan Macy*, 15, 22.
- ⁶ Perkins School for the Blind, <https://www.perkins.org/history/people/anne-sullivan>.
- ⁷ Henney, *Anne Sullivan Macy*, 3–4.
- ⁸ Henney, *Anne Sullivan Macy*, 12.
- ⁹ Henney, *Anne Sullivan Macy*, 13.
- ¹⁰ Henney, *Anne Sullivan Macy*, 14.
- ¹¹ Massachusetts Vital Records from 1841, 254:37 (marriage in Springfield 12 January 1873); 268:365 (Maryann, 3 April 1875, daughter of John and “Anna”; *Massachusetts, Town and Vital Records, 1620–1988*, Agawam Births, 38 (Anna, 13 September 1873, daughter of John and Stacia), image 40 of 211, online at Ancestry.com.
- ¹² Henney, *Anne Sullivan Macy*, 13.
- ¹³ Henney, *Anne Sullivan Macy*, 14.
- ¹⁴ “Anne’s Formative Years,” *Entering Tewksbury Almshouse*, image and transcription of the admission document, American Foundation for the Blind <https://www.afb.org/formative-years/entering-tewksbury-almshouse>
- ¹⁵ Henney, *Anne Sullivan Macy*, 15.
- ¹⁶ Massachusetts Vital Records from 1841, 60:255.
- ¹⁷ Massachusetts Vital Records from 1841, 60:255, John born Hospital, Ireland, son of James and Joanna Sullivan, Mary born Lackquier, Ireland, daughter of Daniel and Catherine Clary.

- ¹⁸ Her marriage record to Timothy E. Quinn on 4 February 1880 in Springfield. Massachusetts Vital Records from 1841, 216:409, says she was age 26 and born in Agawam; 1900 U.S. Census, Springfield, Hampden County, Massachusetts, E.D. 574, roll 62, p. 4, says born Illinois Sept. 1853.
- ¹⁹ Henney, *Anne Sullivan Macy*, 13.
- ²⁰ Henney, *Anne Sullivan Macy*, 2.
- ²¹ Massachusetts Vital Records from 1841, 254:37.
- ²² Massachusetts Vital Records from 1841, Deaths, 1922, 75:333.
- ²³ National Library of Ireland (<https://registers.nli.ie/registers/vtls000632731>), Dublin, microfilm 02507 / 04, Baptisms, images 5, 11, 16, 48, 51, 54, 58, Marriages, image 81.
- ²⁴ Perkins School for the Blind, Nella Braddy Henney notes, Box 1, Folder 1, correspondence to Henney, 1926–1932, 109–112; *ibid.*, Henney notes, Box 10, Folder 2, correspondence to Anne Sullivan Macy forwarded to Henney, 1903–1957, 29–31.
- ²⁵ National Library of Ireland (<https://registers.nli.ie/registers/vtls000632731>); Dublin, Ireland; Microfilm Number: Microfilm 02507 / 04, Baptisms image [5, 11, 16, 48, 51, 54, 58], Marriages image [81].
- ²⁶ Massachusetts Vital Records from 1841, 265:313.
- ²⁷ National Library of Ireland (<https://registers.nli.ie/registers/vtls000632730>); Dublin, Ireland; Microfilm Number: Microfilm 02507 / 03, Baptisms image [193].
- ²⁸ National Library of Ireland (<https://registers.nli.ie/registers/vtls000632632>); Dublin, Ireland; Microfilm Number: Microfilm 02508 / 01, Baptisms image [131, 160, 181, 205, 227].
- ²⁹ *Massachusetts, U.S., State and Federal Naturalization Records, 1798-1950*, online at Ancestry.com.
- ³⁰ Massachusetts Vital Records from 1841, 436:648, 18 June 1893, age 57, died Chicopee but residence was Agawam.
- ³¹ 1900 U.S. Census, New Haven, New Haven County, Connecticut, E.D. 370, roll 145, p. 17.
- ³² *New York, U.S., Arriving Passenger and Crew Lists (including Castle Garden and Ellis Island), 1820-1957*, as Ellen Ahern, 23 Oct 1874; Connecticut death certificate, 4 August 1904, in possession of the author; photograph of the gravestone online at FindaGrave.com, memorial #159935356, Ellen Sullivan Ahern, died 4 August 1904 aged 59, buried St. Bernard Cemetery, New Haven.
- ³³ Perkins School for the Blind, Henney notes, from Box 10, Folder 2, Correspondence to Anna Mansfield Sullivan, forwarded to Henney, 1903–1957, 29–31.
- ³⁴ 1880 U.S. Census, New Haven, E.D. 85, roll 106, p. 67C.
- ³⁵ National Library of Ireland (<https://registers.nli.ie/registers/vtls000632731>), Dublin: microfilm 02507 / 04, Baptisms, images 5, 11, 16, 48, 51, 54, 58,

- Marriages image 81; National Library of Ireland (<https://registers.nli.ie/registers/vtls000632738>), Dublin, microfilm 02506 / 03, Baptisms, image 155.
- ³⁶ New Haven Vital Records, Deaths, 21:98.
- ³⁷ 1880 U.S. Census, New Haven, E.D. 85, roll 106, p. 67C.
- ³⁸ Perkins School for the Blind, Henney notes, Box 10, Folder 2, correspondence to Anne Sullivan Macy, forwarded to Henney, 1903–1957, 29–31).
- ³⁹ Perkins School for the Blind, Nella Braddy Henney notes, Box 1, Folder 1, correspondence to Henney, 1926–1932, 109–112.
- ⁴⁰ New Haven Vital Records, 40:297 [FHL DGS 7731220, image 149] (Joseph born 25 June 1896); *ibid.*, 41:292 [FHL DGS 7731220, image 530] (Alice born 10 April 1898); *ibid.*, 43:192 [FHL DGS 7731221, image 474] (George born 27 July 1899), *ibid.*, 44:142 [FHL 7731222, image 513], (Thomas S. born 19 July 1901).
- ⁴¹ 1920 U.S. Census, New Haven, E.D. 337, roll 192, p. 4B.
- ⁴² 1910 U.S. Census, New Haven, E.D. 400, roll 139, p. 13B.
- ⁴³ *New York, New York City Marriage Records, 1829–1940*, online at FamilySearch.org [FHL 1,493,186], Joseph McLaughlin and Mamie Sullivan, 15 August 1895.
- ⁴⁴ Henney, Anne Sullivan Macy, 22.
- ⁴⁵ Henney, Anne Sullivan Macy, 323.
- ⁴⁶ Perkins School for the Blind, Henney, *Anne Sullivan Macy*, notes, (Box 6:Folder 1:Correspondence from Henney, 1927–1949, 47).
- ⁴⁷ Kim E. Nielsen, *Beyond the Miracle Worker: The Remarkable Life of Anne Sullivan Macy and Her Extraordinary Friendship with Helen Keller* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009), 19.
- ⁴⁸ *Chicago City Directory* [FHL DGS 7548398, image 1260 of 1482], online at FamilySearch.org.