

Chapter One – Where the Journey Began

Our Woven Place in American History

We all know the story of the United States—its historical events and turning points, and the storied figures who shaped and defined our country’s history. What we may not know is where our own family fits within that story.

Through research, family stories, artifacts, photographs, and records saved and passed down through generations, we can begin to discover that place. The challenge is to gather those pieces, understand them, and tell an accurate series of family stories that might otherwise be lost.

The fabric of America is woven from the stories of American families. Those stories are found in where people lived, the work they did, the families they raised, the hardships they faced, the opportunities they pursued, and the contributions—large and small—they made along the way.

Most were not famous. They did not make speeches or have their names written into history books. They were everyday people who built lives, supported families, served their communities, practiced trades, crossed oceans, endured wars and loss, and adapted to a changing country.

Their lives were part of American history, too.

So where is our family woven into the American story?

That is the question these pages seek to answer.

Our Ongoing American Dream

This book is intentionally focused on my family’s American story. It begins with the immigrant Generation of the men and women who left their homelands to build new lives in America—and follows their descendants through the present day.

While many of these families have rich histories stretching back centuries in Germany, Ireland, and elsewhere, those stories deserve their own separate work.

Here, the focus is on the generations that transformed the dream of immigration into the reality of an American family.

I was eleven years old when my mother handed me a family tree starter kit when the family first moved into the house in Harleysville, Pennsylvania. She probably thought it would be an interesting project to engage with my grandparents who were now living with us.

Neither of us could have imagined that small gift would become a discover journey lasting more than fifty years.

Armed with a notebook, the kit worksheets and youthful curiosity, I began asking my parents and grandparents interview questions about their lives and ancestors. I carefully wrote down their answers in my own handwriting that I still have in my possession. At the time, I didn’t realize I was preserving names with great stories that would one day be impossible to recover.

For generations, immigrants have come to the United States seeking opportunity, freedom, and the hope of a better life. Our nation has been shaped by people from every corner of the world who arrived with little more than determination, faith, and a dream for the future. The American story is, in many ways, an immigrant story.

Immigration has long been as natural to our country as waves rolling onto the shore. Each generation has added its own traditions, culture, values, and talents to the great American melting pot.

While the journey was often difficult, countless families found the opportunity to build lives that would have been unimaginable in the lands they left behind.

The immigrants who left Germany and Ireland in my case could never have imagined that one of their descendants would spend years reconstructing their lives, travel back to their towns and churches, stand where they once stood and then preserve their stories for future generations.

My goal is not simply to create a family tree filled with names, dates, census records, and obituaries. Those facts are important, but they are only part of the story. I want to understand who these people were, what they valued, what challenges they faced, what dreams they carried with them, and how their choices shaped the generations that followed.

As I have researched my family’s history, I have come to appreciate that every branch of the

Chapter Two – Why They Left Home

The German Experience

The decision to leave Germany was rarely based on a single event. Rather, it was the result of generations of hardship that affected entire families and communities. While every immigrant carried a personal story, most shared common pressures that made remaining at home increasingly difficult. Some sought relief from the devastation left by decades of warfare. Others struggled to obtain land, support growing families, or practice their faith without interference. At the same time, stories from America described a colony where land was plentiful, religious diversity was accepted, and opportunity appeared within reach.

For many, immigration was not an escape from one problem but a calculated decision to pursue a better future.

A Region Shaped by War

The German lands, particularly the Rhineland and the Palatinate, endured repeated invasions during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Armies crossed the region several times, villages were burned, farms destroyed, and crops ruined. Families who rebuilt after one conflict often faced another only a few years later.

The cumulative effects of these wars left many communities economically exhausted. High taxes, damaged farmland, and uncertain harvests made it increasingly difficult for ordinary families to prosper.

Land, Opportunity, and Family

Even after peace returned, another challenge remained. Land was scarce. Farms were divided among heir’s generation after generation, leaving many young families with little opportunity to own productive property.

For skilled craftsmen, laborers, and farmers alike, Pennsylvania offered something that had become increasingly difficult to obtain in Europe—a chance to build a future through hard work and land ownership.

William Penn actively encouraged immigration by promoting Pennsylvania as a place where industrious settlers could own land and practice their religion freely. His reputation spread throughout German-speaking Europe, making Philadelphia the principal destination for thousands of immigrants between 1682 and the American Revolution.

Faith and Religious Freedom

Religion also influenced many emigrants. While conditions varied greatly from one German state to another, Protestants often experienced restrictions depending upon the policies of local rulers.

Among those seeking greater religious freedom were Lutherans, German Reformed believers, Mennonites, and later the Moravians, who established communities throughout Pennsylvania beginning in the late 1730s.

These immigrants carried more than their possessions. They brought their churches, languages, customs, craftsmanship, and traditions, many of which would shape Pennsylvania for generations.

Building Pennsylvania

After arriving in Philadelphia, German settlers steadily expanded into the forests and fertile valleys west and north of the city. Communities soon developed throughout present-day Montgomery, Berks, Lancaster, and surrounding counties.

They became known primarily as farmers, but they were also blacksmiths, butchers, coopers, millers, wagon makers, craftsmen, merchants, and builders.

With mattocks, axes, and mauls they cleared forests, constructed homes and barns, built churches, and transformed wilderness into productive farmland. Their work helped establish the agricultural and economic foundation of colonial Pennsylvania.

Our Family’s Journey

Our family’s story reflects this larger history.

The earliest known immigrant in this German branch was **Hans Bernard Wolf**, who arrived

Chapter Five – A New Beginning in America

For ships bound for Philadelphia, the final leg of the voyage brought passengers past Cape May at the southern tip of New Jersey, through the Delaware Bay, and then north along the Delaware River to the Port of Philadelphia. After weeks at sea, this first glimpse of America must have brought an overwhelming sense of relief and anticipation.

As the ship sailed upriver, peaceful vistas gradually gave way to the growing activity of one of the young nation’s busiest ports. The city skyline slowly emerged in the distance as hundreds of sailing ships crowded the Delaware waterfront. Along the bustling commercial wharves, longshoremen loaded and unloaded cargo while horse-drawn wagons filled the streets. Church steeples rose above the rooftops, and the sights, sounds, and smells of the city became unmistakable. Coal smoke drifted through the air, mingling with the scent of horses, fresh bread from neighborhood bakeries, breweries, and the river itself.

For most immigrants arriving in Philadelphia during the eighteenth and much of the nineteenth centuries, there was no formal immigration station waiting for them. They gathered the few belongings they had carried across the Atlantic, stepped ashore at the commercial wharves, and entered America on their own. The voyage had ended, but the real journey was only beginning.

The hardships of the crossing were finally behind them, yet a new set of challenges immediately took their place. Most passengers would have been exhausted, hungry, and in desperate need of a warm meal, a bath, and a good night’s sleep simply to feel human again. Unlike many modern travelers, they could not expect a welcoming committee or organized assistance upon arrival.

Some immigrants were fortunate enough to have relatives or friends already living in Philadelphia and may have arranged a meeting place or temporary lodging before leaving Europe. Others arrived knowing no one at all. For them, the first priority was finding a boarding house or inexpensive lodging where they could rest and begin planning their future.

Their minds were undoubtedly racing. Every decision carried importance—finding a safe place to sleep, locating food, protecting the few possessions they owned, and beginning the search for work. Surrounded by unfamiliar sights, sounds, and customs, survival depended upon making wise decisions one step at a time.

Once they had gained their bearings, securing employment became the next priority. Churches, ethnic neighborhoods, and immigrant communities often became lifelines for newcomers, providing guidance, friendship, and introductions to employers. These close-knit communities helped immigrants find work, locate affordable housing, and begin building a support network in an unfamiliar land.

For many newcomers, employment began as a day laborer. The work was physically demanding, often lasting ten to twelve hours a day, six or even seven days a week. Whether unloading ships, digging canals, laying railroad track, working on farms, or laboring in workshops and factories, every day’s wages mattered. Each dollar earned helped pay for food, rent, clothing, and the necessities of daily life.

Yet those wages represented far more than simple survival. They marked the first small steps toward achieving the hopes that had inspired these immigrants to leave their homelands. Through determination, sacrifice, and countless hours of hard work, many would eventually establish businesses, purchase homes, raise families, and become respected members of their communities.

The stories in the chapters that follow begin with those first courageous steps taken on American soil. The voyage across the Atlantic had brought our ancestors to a new country, but it was their perseverance after arriving that transformed opportunity into legacy and laid the foundation for the generations that followed.

From this point forward, the story becomes personal.

Special Tribute

Through the Eyes of Shirley and Jack’s Grandchildren

The greatest measure of a life is often found in the memories left behind. These reflections from Jack and Shirley’s six grandchildren preserve the gestures, sayings, traditions, and quiet moments through which Mom Mom and Pop Pop made each of them feel loved.



Jenna Schwartz

“Who loves you?”
“Pop Pop.”
Without hesitation, that was always Jenna’s answer, spoken with a smile.



Collin Cusick

“Pop Pop always gave me half dollars and two-dollar bills. I still carry some of those two-dollar bills in a secret place in my wallet.”

Through the Eyes of Shirley and Jack’s Grandchildren



Claudia Gilmore

“He was the kind of grandfather I wished everyone could have.”
“He would tell amazing stories and always had a little something to give you that came with a back story.”
“Sometimes I’d sneak sugar into the hospital and hide it in his shoe because that’s where he told me to put it.”
“Mom Mom always had those little seashell candies.”



Kyle Phillips

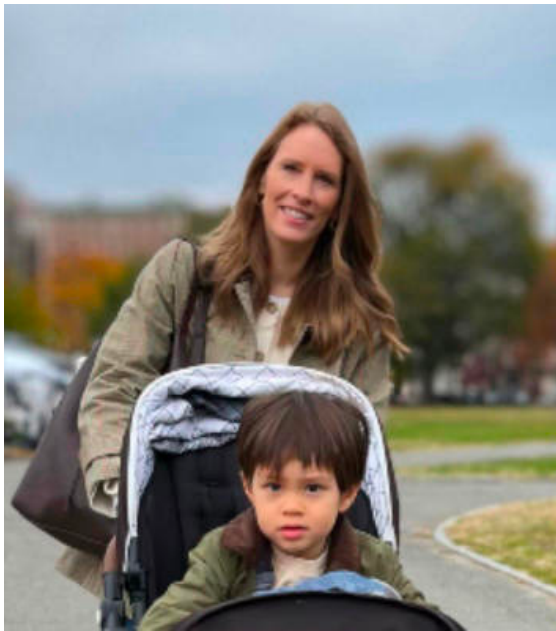
“No matter what, Mom Mom always made sure I was taken care of.”
“If she didn’t have my favorite snacks, we’d go to Henning’s to get them.”
“Every shift at Emil’s I’d look through the kitchen door and see Pop Pop sitting at the bar. We didn’t have to talk. His quiet presence spoke volumes.”

Through the Eyes of Shirley and Jack’s Grandchildren



Katie Plagianakos

“Sunday dinners, birthdays, Christmas Eve—that’s what togetherness looked like.”
“Mom Mom made me feel seen.”
“Looking back, they were honestly the parent figures we needed.”
“Pop Pop was the definition of a man—a dedicated worker who loved his family.”



Christine Hsieh

“One night after my shift at Montgomery Mall, Pop Pop was waiting in the parking lot just to make sure I got safely to my car.”
“Summer mornings meant pastries, bacon, scrapple, and breakfast with Pop Pop.”
“Mom Mom’s advice was simple: ‘Never turn your back to the ocean.’”
“I can still remember her Birkenstocks, her lipstick, and listening to ‘Midnight Train to Georgia’ together.”

V. The Living Generations



Margaret Jane (Connelly) Phillips



Matthew David Connelly



Mariann (Connelly) Schwartz



Jan Alice (Connelly) Cusick

Margaret Jane (Connelly) Phillips



ZIMMERMAN
CONNELLY

Margaret was named after our grandmother, Margaret Zimmerman. She was born on July 9, 1958, at Presbyterian Hospital in West Philadelphia. Marge was Jack and Shirley’s firstborn child, arriving while they were living in a small apartment in Drexel Hill, Pennsylvania.

From an early age, Marge was a gifted athlete. She excelled in organized sports at Indian Valley High School and later Souderton High School. Shirley enthusiastically supported her athletic pursuits, creating scrapbooks filled with newspaper clippings, varsity letters, awards, and other memories of her accomplishments.

Marge later settled in Hatfield, Pennsylvania, where she raised her three children—Christine, Katie, and Kyle. During her career, she worked at the Main Line Times and Roy Lomas Carpets before joining Altec. There, she managed a team that supported adults with developmental disabilities, helping them live more independently within their community.

Marge has always been someone who keeps moving. Whether competing on the athletic field, supporting her clients, or keeping pace with her children and grandchildren, her energy has remained one of her defining qualities.

She also enjoys cooking and preparing family recipes, especially for Thanksgiving and Easter gatherings. Her specialties include baked scalloped potatoes, coleslaw, and Thanksgiving stuffing—and I admit those are my favorites.

Jack and Shirley lived with Marge for a time, and Shirley spent the final year of her life in the Hatfield home. Surrounded by the activity of family life, her children, and her grandchildren, Shirley found great happiness there.

Today, Marge lives in Perkasio, Pennsylvania, near Mariann and her family. She enjoys spending several days each week with her nearby grandson, Waylon, and her face lights up whenever she talks about her grandchildren. Above all, she is proud of the lives her three children have built.

Matthew David Connelly



ZIMMERMAN
CONNELLY

I was born on October 6, 1960, at Haverford Hospital. I know it was a Thursday morning because my father always enjoyed telling the story of going out for eggs with the doctor who delivered me after my birth.

I spent my career working in advertising before joining AT&T and later JPMorgan Chase, where I held corporate leadership positions in marketing and finance. After thirty-four years, I now enjoy my next life adventures in Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida.

More than any professional accomplishment, I hope those closest to me will remember me as thoughtful, adventurous, generous, and grateful for the family that shaped my life. I will always treasure the once-in-a-lifetime adventures shared with my sisters, nieces, and nephews. Preserving our family’s history through this book has been a meaningful project in my life.

Mariann (Connelly) Schwartz



ZIMMERMAN
CONNELLY

Mariann was born on May 1, 1962.

Mariann married Kurt Schwartz, and they reside in Perkasié, Pennsylvania. They have one daughter, Jenna, who lives with them. Jenna is autistic, and no one has been a stronger advocate for her than Mariann. Together, Mariann and Kurt have devoted themselves to providing Jenna with every opportunity to succeed.

Driven by determination and love for her daughter, Mariann fought for better educational support and behavioral services within the public school system. When those services fell short, she educated herself on Jenna’s educational rights and worked alongside Kurt to establish clear expectations and goals. Their perseverance led to the creation of a well-structured, in-home program tailored specifically to Jenna’s needs.

Working with experts throughout the community, Mariann developed a program that provides Jenna with educational, social, and life-skills experiences designed to strengthen her independence and prepare her for the future. What began as a necessity has grown into a small business managed from their home with a dedicated staff.

While overseeing Jenna’s program, Mariann also built a successful career with several large national banks, concluding her career at JPMorgan Chase in the Auto Finance line of business. She has always possessed a talent for managing people and solving problems.

Jack and Shirley lived with Mariann for many years, and Jack spent the final years of his life in the Perkasié home.

Today, Mariann and Kurt continue to share their home with Jenna and Kurt’s sister, Lynda. Through years of perseverance, Mariann created a supportive environment that has given Jenna opportunities to learn, grow, and experience life in ways that once seemed uncertain. It is one of the accomplishments of which she can be most proud.

Jan Alice (Connelly) Cusick



ZIMMERMAN
CONNELLY

Jan was born on May 15, 1968. Shirley gave Jan the middle name Alice so that her initials would become J.A.C. – after my father, Jack. It was one of the many ways Shirley expressed her love for her husband and family.

Jan married Eric Gilmore, and they had one daughter, Claudia. She later married Clinton Cusick, and together they welcomed their son, Collin. Today, Jan and Clinton reside in Lansdale, Pennsylvania, where family remains at the center of their lives.

Jan worked for many years at the pharmaceutical company Teva. Her ability to understand medications, treatments, and the language of medicine would later prove invaluable.

Throughout Dad’s illness, Jan became his strongest health advocate. She quickly learned his medications and treatment plans, carefully managed appointments and follow-up care, and ensured that no important detail was overlooked. When physicians asked questions, Jan often filled in the information Dad had forgotten. She approached every challenge with optimism, compassion, and determination, turning difficult news into practical next steps.

Modern medicine undoubtedly extended Dad’s life, but so did Jan’s unwavering advocacy, careful attention to detail, and loving commitment. She helped ensure that he received the best care possible throughout his illness.

Today, Jan enjoys family life as she and Clinton prepare to watch Collin begin his university education while continuing to celebrate Claudia’s accomplishments.