

A Westtown Love Story

by *Dave Walter, Westtown Township Historical Commissioner*

Now and then, an historian will uncover a true story that is far more fantastically improbable than any novel or Hollywood screen play. One such story surfaced in researching Camp Elder, the Union paroled P.O.W. camp situated in Westtown after the Battle of Gettysburg.

Thomas Nolan was born in Ireland circa 1832. As a young man he emigrated to America, the promised land for generations of Irish seeking to improve their lives. The 1860 Federal census lists several men with that name, and the approximate birthday, living in Ohio and working as day laborers. In any case, our Thomas Nolan enlisted in the Union Army's 25th Ohio Infantry regiment, Company F, in Steubenville, on June 13, 1861 for a three-year term of service.

After Union forces lost at First Bull Run, it was obvious the Confederates would not be defeated in 90 days. The 25th Ohio went through four weeks training at Camp Chase, in Columbus, and was sent - 1,000 strong - to the fighting front in what became West Virginia. The 25th saw combat all through 1862 and 1863. They were assigned to the Army of Virginia chasing Stonewall Jackson and getting beat at such battles as Cross Keys, Cedar Mountain, Second Bull Run, and Chancellorsville.

Thoroughly battle-hardened, Nolan, now a Corporal, was one of less than 300 men left in the 25th when it joined the pursuit of Gen. Lee's invasion of Pennsylvania in June 1863. Now assigned to Gen. O.O. Howard's XI Corps, the 25th were among the first Union soldiers to confront Lee north of Gettysburg on July 1st. Fighting alongside their buddies in the 75th Ohio, they could not stand against overwhelming odds. After a fierce defense, they were overrun. Their monument on the Gettysburg battlefield tells the story: Out of 220 men in action, 16 were killed, 96 wounded, and 71 missing. Corporal Thomas Nolan was one of the 15 missing and captured from Company F.

Fortunately for him, when the battle ended in Lee's defeat, Lee could not transport all 6,000 of his prisoners back to

Virginia. Nolan, and almost 2,000 other Union soldiers, were offered paroles: that is, they could not fight again until formally exchanged for Confederate prisoners held by the Union Army. Such parolees were kept, under guard, by their own side, in parole camps.

The parolees were marched to Harrisburg then carried by train to West Chester where the Union had established a parole camp on the Westtown farm of Enoch Williams, along what is now Goose Creek and the West Chester & Philadelphia Rail Road.

Here the 1,861 paroled prisoners camped for seven weeks. With not much to do, some prisoners were allowed to work, for pay, with neighboring farmers. The fruit crops and wheat were ready for harvest, and many farmers needed help. Their usual farm hands were off fighting too; many had joined Chester County's 97th Pennsylvania Infantry.

Thomas Nolan, seeking to supplement his meager Army pay, answered farmer Anthony Kirk's call for laborers. Kirk, 39, and his wife, Ellen Harington Kirk, 30, farmed 27 acres just off Little Shiloh Road. It had been their land since 1853, having been divided several times since Joseph Shippen (Uncle of Peggy Shippen, Benedict Arnold's wife!) bought the property in 1792. According to the 1860 census, the Kirks had three children, Catharine 9, John 6, and Anthony 2. Mrs. Kirk was pregnant with James.

One can imagine the shock when Nolan showed up at the Kirk farm to apply for the job: Mrs. Ellen Kirk was the girl Nolan had courted back when they both lived in Ireland!!

By September 7th, Thomas Nolan was on his way back to the 25th Ohio, after the War Department had ruled all the paroles were invalid. Camp Elder shut down. Then, on December 31, 1863, Anthony Kirk, age 43, suddenly passed away. He was buried in St. Agnes Cemetery, West Chester; his tombstone reads "IHS Erected by Ellen Kirk in memory of her husband, Anthony."

How fast did the widow, Ellen, notify Thomas? We can speculate it was quickly, because in January 1864, Thomas Nolan refused to join the majority of the 25th in re-enlisting for the war's duration. Those who did re-enlist, got to go home to Ohio on leave. Thomas, and the other refusers, were transferred to the 75th Ohio on January 16th to serve out the remainder of their three-year enlistment. On July 16, 1864, Corporal Nolan was mustered out.

He soon returned to Westtown because, as was later reported in the newspaper, he had "met a widow lady whom he had courted years before in Ireland. Their old love and affection for each other returned, and in due time the blue was exchanged for the more unostentatious garb of a farmer, and the two who had never met since their parting in the old country were married." We don't know the marriage date, but we know from the 1870 Census that they already had 2 children: Mary, 3, Ellen, 1. Lizzie would follow in 1872, and Annie in 1874.

Happily they lived and worked their Westtown farm until 1885 when Thomas, age 52, died on January 25th. The newspaper noted that he "was a useful and prominent citizen of (Westtown). He was highly respected by his neighbors as a man who possessed many excellent traits of character which rendered his example well worthy of imitation." He was buried in Oaklands Cemetery, West Chester.

Within three months, Ellen sold the farm to Catharine McMahan, who may have been her oldest daughter. Tragedy again entered Ellen's life; her son, Anthony, Jr., a carpenter by trade, was killed on Sept. 25, 1886 when he fell four stories from a house he was building in Atlantic City.

Ellen Kirk died in 1915, in Philadelphia, and their last child died in 1959. Their farmhouse, much expanded and modernized, still stands on Shippen Lane off Centre School Way, testimony to an improbable coincidence that brought the path of two Irish lovers together in Westtown.



Kirk/Nolan farmhouse on Shippen Lane, 2015. Photo by Jim Guterl.