

Home / Irish News

Tim Walz’s family hails from Wexford, as 159-year-old grave shows link to village



Democratic vice-presidential candidate Tim Walz has Irish roots, a genealogist has discovered. Photo: AFP via Getty Images

Lynne Kelleher

Today at 01:30



A 159-year-old tombstone was key to *Who Do You Think You Are?* genealogist discovering Tim Walz hails from a pristine Wexford village called Tomhaggard.

The Minnesota governor has similar Wexford ancestral ties to JFK, George Harrison and Oscar Wilde.

During the summer, Megan Smolenyak, who discovered Barack Obama and Joe Biden's Irish ancestors, found from her research that Mr Walz was one-eighth Irish, with his ancestors coming from the diocese of Ferns.

[Lorcan Nyhan: Why JD Vance and Tim Walz showdown will be a battle for the sexes](#)

[Donald Trump says 'I hate Taylor Swift' in all-caps Truth Social post as spat with singer continues](#)

But ahead of the vice-presidential debate tomorrow between Mr Walz and JD Vance, which is expected to draw an audience of tens of millions globally, the US-based genealogist has spent recent weeks delving further into his past.

"I took a deep dive to find exactly where in Co Wexford," she said yesterday, "It was in the diocese of Ferns, but now we know more precisely it's the village of Tomhaggard on the outskirts of Kilmore."

Before Kamala Harris selected the governor as her running mate, Ms Smolenyak said Mr Walz had been scheduled to lead a Minnesota trade mission to Ireland in November.

She said she hoped he would get a chance to walk in his ancestors' footsteps in Tomhaggard whenever he did make a trip to Ireland.

"He's just such an affable, pleasant fellow, he's like the dad everyone wishes they had. Whenever he goes to Ireland, I think everyone is going to like him and have a grand old time."

Her latest investigations tracked down the exact location of relatives who left Ireland, with the discovery of a headstone of an ancestor called John Sullivan in a graveyard in Madison in Dane County, Wisconsin, a key swing state in the upcoming election.

"John Sullivan is a brother of the immigrant great-great-grandfather, or second great-granduncle," she said, referring to the tombstone of the 26-year-old Wexford man.



The tombstone of Tim Walz's relative, John Sullivan from Wexford. Photo: FindaGrave

Ms Smolenyak explained records for the family made a fleeting reference to Madison in Dane County, Wisconsin, prompting her search. When she found John Sullivan's tombstone, it chimed with other Walz family records.

At the bottom of the headstone, it says he was a native of 'Thomhaggard', now known as Tomhaggard, which confirms this was the original home for Tim Walz's Irish family.

"He was about 26, he was born around 1839 or so," Ms Smolenyak said.

Ms Smolenyak said the odds of a tombstone having a relative's name from the 19th century were "very slim", and it was rarer to find details of their Irish address.

"So many immigrant Irish couldn't even afford a headstone, much less give that much detail," she said.

According to Ms Smolenyak, the "exact same pattern" happened when she was tracing Barack Obama's Irish ancestors in early 2007, as again, she found a tombstone in America leading her back to Obama's relatives in Moneygall.

"In both cases, it was extremely long odds," she said. With Mr Walz's ancestor, John Sullivan, it was an isolated gravestone as the rest of his family later moved away from that part of Wisconsin.

Today, Mr Walz's ancestral home of Tomhaggard is notable for its mantle of one of the cleanest coastal spots in the country.

The area is also known as a location where Fr Nicholas Mayler, a former parish priest, was killed by British troops while celebrating mass at a Mass Rock on Christmas Day, 1653.

Ms Smolenyak said Tomhaggard was now a "gorgeous little place" with a lovely community. "If a visit ever occurs, it will be a lovely place for him to go."

With the debate between Ms Harris and Donald Trump attracting 67 million, the genealogist is expecting "sky-high" interest in the vice-presidential debate.

Mr Walz is among a string of US politicians with familial ties to Ireland, including exactly half of the US presidents to date, or 23 of the 46 presidents.