

ARTS & CULTURE | BOOKS | A-HEAD

The Question Trailing Tim Walz: Is He Irish?

Genealogists try to trace Irish heritage wherever they can. With Kamala Harris's running mate, things got complicated.

When Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz became the Democratic vice presidential candidate, genealogists began sifting through family records in search of an Irish link. ANDREW HARNIK/GETTY IMAGES

By [James Hookway](#)

Oct. 14, 2024 10:00 am ET

SOMEWHERE IN COUNTY WEXFORD, Ireland — The race began as soon as Tim Walz was announced as Kamala Harris's running mate.

From home offices and libraries, a crack team of experts fired up their laptops and began sifting through images of yellowing family records and old photographs of tombstones. Pots of tea were brewed. Coffee was slurped.

With the election approaching, would they be able to show that the Minnesota governor, Harris's choice for vice president, was at least a little bit Irish?

Whenever a new politician hits the national stage, Irish and Irish-American genealogists set out to find any connection they can to the old country.

Some ties are obvious. Portraits of President John F. Kennedy still adorn buildings in Ireland. President Biden's whole thing is being Irish.

But historians have also linked Ronald Reagan to the town of Ballyporeen, where his great grandfather once lived, and traced Barack Obama to the village of Moneygall, from whence his great-great-grandfather hailed.



U.S. PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN, WHOSE IRISH ROOTS ARE WELL-KNOWN, TAKES A SELFIE OUTSIDE A PUB IN DUNDALK, IRELAND LAST YEAR.

Tracking down these relationships is almost a sport. Genealogists sift through birth certificates and smudged baptismal papers to establish an ancestral bond.

Proving a connection is like finding the proverbial pot of gold.

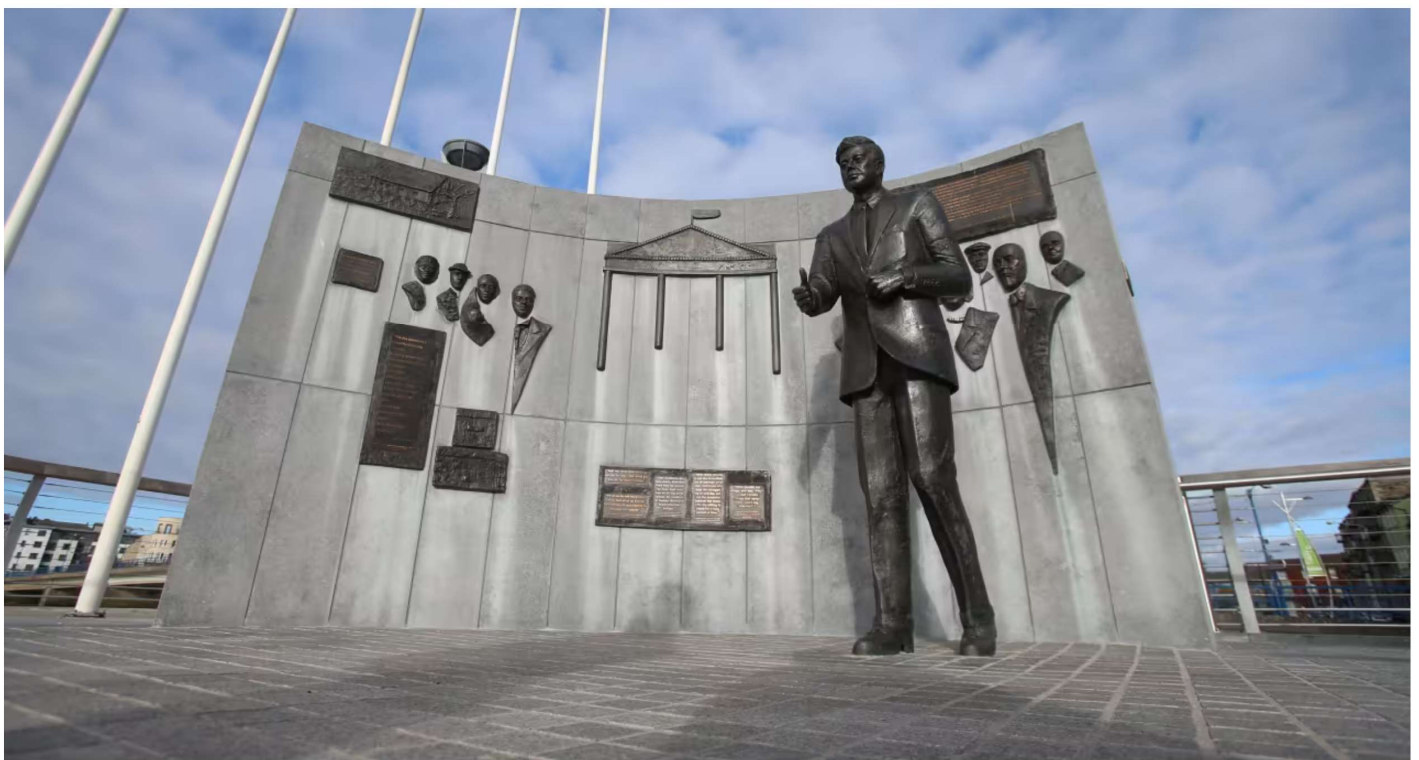
It could strengthen trade. It could bring a surge of tourism. There is a highway rest stop just outside Moneygall hopefully called Barack Obama Plaza, complete with a statue of Barack and Michelle Obama and a Papa John's pizza joint.

In New Ross, Co. Wexford, a bigger project includes an immersive exhibition tracking the journey of Irish emigrants that was built on Kennedy's connections to the town. The prime attraction is a full-size replica of the Dunbrody, a ship that carried hordes of Irish away from the horrors of the famine in the mid-19th century to build new lives in America.

"It brings people from all over the world to see where they came from," said Marie Moore, one of the period re-enactors who act as guides, dressed in her costume of a brown woolen shawl and a black apron.

"These connections also help the peace process," said Malcolm Byrne, an Irish senator who is one of the leaders of the U.S.-Ireland Parliamentary Friendship Group.

He was talking about the Good Friday Agreement, brokered by President Bill Clinton, which ended decades of conflict in Northern Ireland.



A JOHN F. KENNEDY MONUMENT IN NEW ROSS, CO. WEXFORD, THE ANCESTRAL HOME OF THE FORMER PRESIDENT

“It’s important for the island that we’re able to maintain those links as much as we can. If there’s a connection, then we look to develop that,” Byrne said.

There isn’t anything particularly Irish about the surname “Walz,” but this didn’t discourage Megan Smolenyak, a St. Petersburg, Fla. genealogist who works with the U.S. military in tracking missing soldiers lost in places such as Korea and Vietnam.

Of half-Irish heritage herself, Smolenyak connected Obama’s forebears to Moneygall and also found Irish antecedents for Bruce Springsteen and Barry Manilow.

Her first move was to trace Walz’s family tree in the U.S., where she found that one of his great-grandmothers was named Laura Ellen Sullivan—a name clearly denoting some Irish ancestry and making him one-eighth, or 12.5%, Irish. Then she found Laura’s father, a James Sullivan, who emigrated from Ireland.

For weeks it wasn’t entirely clear where this James Sullivan came from. Smolenyak knew it was somewhere in County Wexford, south of Dublin.



MEGAN SMOLENYAK HAS FOUND IRISH ANTECEDENTS FOR BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN AND BARRY MANILOW.

One possibility was the village of Ferns. Baptismal records seemed to show a James Sullivan born there on Nov. 12, 1840, a possibility that got the locals buzzing. But Smolenyak later surmised the name could also be a reference to the Diocese of Ferns, a larger area to the south.

“It drives me nuts when there’s an unanswered question,” she said.

Local genealogist John Nangle also concluded that people in Ferns were getting overexcited about the prospect of Walz having some roots there.

“They were hoping they’d get some of the benefits that New Ross saw from the Kennedys and all that,” he said.

Nangle instead suspected Sullivan’s father, Walz’s great-great-great grandfather Daniel, moved to Wexford to work on a new pier in the southern port of Kilmore during the height of the famine in the 1840s. When the work dried up, the young family left for America like so many others.

There’s no guarantee of what a genealogist might find when they begin. Records can go missing, family memories obscured.

Kamala Harris’s father sparked a flurry of interest in 2018 when he wrote an article about his upbringing in Jamaica and his two grandmothers. Donald Harris mentioned in passing that one of them was descended from a 19 century slave owner from what is now Northern Ireland. Genealogists consider the connection unproven and Harris hasn’t spoken publicly about it.

Sometimes the trail just goes cold.

Smolenyak retraced her steps and looked up the godparents of James Sullivan and his siblings on a hunch that some might be relatives of his parents, Daniel and Ellen Sullivan. All of them were Doyles, Ellen’s maiden name.



This suggested the young family might have lived among Ellen’s relatives—perhaps in Tomhaggard village, where there was a high concentration of Doyles and which was also near Kilmore.

Smolenyak then caught a break: She found an image of the tombstone in Dane County, Wisc., for John Sullivan, the brother of Tim Walz’s great-great grandfather.

“It takes a little squinting, but you can just make out the text at the bottom saying he was a native of “Tomhaggard,”” Smolenyak said.

“That picture was brilliant,” Nangle said. “She cracked it.”

This, of course, was big news in Tomhaggard, population 524.

“We heard about it a couple of days ago,” said Sarah McGuire as she set up some candles at the village church. “He should come when we do a novena for St. Anne on the beach. There’ll be a real buzz. If Walz does go, he’ll also be expected to perform the time-honored rite of pouring a pint of Guinness in the local pub, in this case the Hideout. Walz hasn’t commented so far, but owner Tush Lawlor is ready.

“We’ve always got room for a vice president in Tomhaggard,” she said.

Write to James Hookway at James.Hookway@wsj.com