

*MY POSTAL PENSIONER,  
PHTHISIS, AND A PASSAGE TO  
AMERICA  
BY PATRICIA DAVEY*

The pensioner who I was assigned, John Armstrong, was born in 1857 in Belfast, my own city where I have always lived. Obviously the world into which he was born would be very different to mine, but I know that the early years of his life would see a great expansion to Belfast as it became an industrial and a relatively prosperous city. Queen Victoria had reigned for twenty years at the time of John's birth and one significant event was the Indian Mutiny (1857), a direct threat to Britain's imperial power.

John's parents also lived in Belfast and he was the eldest of six who were all born in Crumlin, a village outside Belfast.. His father was a nailer -- a gruelling job which wouldn't exist today -- but nails were essential for the building work probably going on in the growing city of Belfast.

The family seemed to have moved back to Belfast at some point and were living in Michael Street, where John lived with his first wife, Jane Nelson. They had married in 1883 and had four children, all of whom lived to a reasonable age by today's standards. Their first born William, however, didn't live beyond his first year. Infant mortality rates were quite high at this time and frequently deaths were not even recorded, although in my study of life expectancy in Ireland infant mortality rates were 149 per 1,000 at the time of William's death in 1885.

Michael Street which still exists today was in the middle of an urban area, where accommodation existed for those who worked in the surrounding mills and its proximity to the docks. Much of this area has been demolished to allow for road widening schemes and it was in Michael Street where Jane died in 1893, not long after the birth of her youngest son, John.

The cause of death on Jane's death certificate is listed as phthisis and lung congestion. She was thirty-one at the time of death and on reading the Medical Officer's Report for Belfast for 1893 I discovered that there were 1,016 deaths from phthisis. By 1901 it was the main cause of death amongst females especially those in the 25-34 year old age range. It was obviously a highly communicable disease due to factors such as poor diet, unhealthy environment, alcohol intake and rural migration to towns such as Belfast for work. The population of Belfast was 386,449 in 1911, a sizeable city by any standards.

I had never heard of phthisis until I embarked on this research and on further investigation discovered it was pulmonary tuberculosis and still exists today. Jane would not have access to any treatments or the common advice given, which was exercise and fresh air or treatment in a sanatorium. There was a Fever Hospital in Belfast, which is on the site of the present City Hospital. It was only a few years before Jane's death that Koch identified the bacterium known as mycobacterium tuberculosis. Before it had often been regarded as a hereditary disease. As a cure for tuberculosis or consumption, as it was also often known, there were rather bizarre treatments at the time: one of the recommendations being a diet which included the consumption of gold!

My last topic is emigration; my pensioner decided to leave Ireland in 1907, having remarried and fathered four more children (another one was born in America in 1908). He married Margaret Long in 1895 and according to the 1901 census they had moved to Knockbreda, now part of Belfast. It was in 1901 when John retired from the postal service, aged forty-four after twenty three years of service as a postman . Between 1901 and 1907 -- when his father died -- I have no knowledge of his occupation and it is possible that his father's death (his mother had already passed away) may have been a factor in his decision to leave Ireland.

In 1907 John, his wife and the four children from his second marriage to Margaret Long, sailed from Liverpool to Boston. They were joined later by one of his children from his first marriage, John, and as I have stated they had one further child, who was born in America. Two of his older children from his first marriage remained in Ireland.

They settled in Connecticut, just outside the capital, Hartford, as on arrival in Boston, they were sponsored by John's sister-in-law, who lived in Buckland, Connecticut. From the ship's manifest we read he had a Post Office pension of \$45 dollars every three months. John worked initially as a grinder in a soap factory and later as a janitor in a silk factory, where some of his family were also employed. Hartford was at that time a major manufacturing city with industries such as Colt (firearms), Royal & Underwood (typewriters), Pope (bicycles) and Cheney Bros. where John was employed. Nowadays little is left of these industries and the only legacy of the silk factory are 'The Silkworms', the local baseball team.

Some of John's descendants have remained in this part of America, while John himself returned to Ireland, now known as Northern Ireland, where he died in 1934 at the age of seventy-seven. I conclude by wondering why he returned back home, leaving his family so far away.

## Fact Sheet: John Armstrong

Pensioner Details
<i>Pensioner name:</i> John Armstrong
<i>Person ID:</i> IR1001
<i>Your name:</i> Patricia Davey
<i>U3A group:</i> Belfast
Part One: Birth and Family
1: When and where was your pensioner born?
Born 30th July 1857 in Ireland, in Belfast. I assume it was Michael Street, Belfast as this is the address given on his mother's death certificate and also the address on his parents marriage certificate.
2: Who were your pensioners' parents? Record any details you can find out about them here (e.g. occupation, religious affiliation, whether they could read or write)
John's parents were William John Armstrong and Anne Jane Morrow, they were married 27th February 1854 in St. Anne's Church, (Church of Ireland).  Both were single when they married, John was a Nailer, a laborious occupation, which literally consists of making nails.  John died in 1907, aged 85, he was a widower at the time of his death and died from Cerebral Haemorrhage. He was living in Newtownbreda at the time of his death, where his son, John was living at the time of the 1901 census.  Newtownbreda was regarded as a village outside Belfast at that time but is now part of the Greater Belfast area.
3: Did your pensioner have any siblings? What were their names, and how old were they in relation to your pensioner? Use this space to record anything else you have found out about them (e.g. occupation)
John had 5 siblings, 4 brothers and 1 sister: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• James Armstrong 1860-1932</li><li>• William Henry Armstrong 1861-?</li><li>• David Armstrong 1866-1890 Worked as a labourer and died 29/04/1890 from pneumonia, he was single; his death is recorded in Crumlin.</li><li>• Andrew Armstrong 1868-?</li><li>• Eliza Armstrong 1871-?</li></ul> The family seemed to have moved to Crumlin, a small village outside Belfast, when the 3 younger siblings were born. According to Griffiths Valuation, James and Eliza were living in no9 and no 16 Hole stone in the Parish of Kilbride,

Crumlin. It is possible that the family may have worked in one of the local mills

## Part Two: Marriage and children

1: Did your pensioner marry? What was their spouse's name, and when and where did they marry them? Use this space to record any extra details you can find out about their spouse (e.g. when/where they were born, their occupation)

John married Jane Nelson 29th November 1883 in St. Matthew's Church, Belfast. He was 26 when they married and Jane was 21. John's father was a nailer, while Jane's father was a sailor.

Jane died in 1893, aged 30 from phthisis, which is tuberculosis and lung congestion. At the time of death the family were living in 7 Michael Street, Belfast.

In 1895 John married Margaret Long in Donegall Street Independent Church, and in the 1901 census his family's religion is listed as Congregationalist.

2: Did your pensioner have any children? What were their names, and when they were born? Use this space to record any extra details you can find out about them (e.g. occupation, where they lived later in life)

With John's first wife, Jane they had four children, although one died when only one year old.

- William Henry Armstrong 1884-1885
- Jane Armstrong 1886-1971
- Beatrice Armstrong 1890-1935
- John Thomas Armstrong 1892-1934.

In the 1901 census, we discover that John had two more children with his wife Margaret

- Alfred Armstrong 1896-1984
- Maude Elizabeth Armstrong 1899-1949

They subsequently had 3 more children

- Eve Armstrong 1902-1987
- Audrey Ida Armstrong 1905-1995.
- Victor Leopold Armstrong 1908-1978 (the only child born in America)

In 1907 most of the family sailed to America, i.e. John and Margaret with Alfred, Maude, Eve and Audrey. John and Beatrice didn't accompany them in 1907 but by 1910 they had joined them as did Jane.

### Part Three: Work

1: What occupation was your pensioner recorded as doing in census years? Please make sure to state clearly which year you are referring to

In 1901 John is described as a Postman, retired at the age of 44. He had started work at the age of 21 and worked for 23 years in the Postal Office.

He received a Post Office pension of \$45 every 3 months as stated in the Ship's Manifest when the family sailed to Boston in 1907.

According to the 1910 USA census he was working as a Grinder in a Soap Factory, this would have involved moulding soap into certain shapes.

In the 1920 census he was working as a janitor in a silk mill, the family had settled in Hartford, Connecticut. Some of the family members also worked in the mill, run by the Cheney Bros company

2: What occupations were people living with your pensioner (e.g. spouse, children, boarders) doing in the census years? Please make sure to state clearly which year you are referring to

At the time of the 1901 census the only person who had an occupation was John, Margaret was a housewife and apart from their children the only other person living with them was Margaret's aunt, Eliza McKinstry, aged 73, a widow. She had previously lived at 75, Inkerman Terrace, Belfast. The children are listed as scholars, so they attended school and were able to read and write.

In later years i.e. from 1907 onwards, when the family had settled in Connecticut some of the family worked in the local silk factory, where John had also been employed. Margaret is listed in every census as a housewife.

In the 1940 census Margaret, at the age of 69 is now listed as head of the household, John had returned to Ireland sometime before the 1930 census and died there in 1934 aged 77. There is no record of his death, even though I had looked at cemetery records in the Belfast area. Margaret died 26/09/1944.

In the 1910 census son John, aged 17 worked as a picker in the silk mill (he married Irene V. Donlin) and ten years later we learn from the 1920 census that Maude and Eva worked in the same factory.

In 1/06/1912 Beatrice married Robert Muir, they had 2 children Robert Buchanan and Mrytle Buchanan. Robert died in 1929, while Beatrice outlived him and died in 1935.

Audrey Ida married Robert Campbell, she had 6 children and died at the age of 89.

Maude Elizabeth married Leroy Muller Downes , she died in 1949, 5 years after her husband.

Alfred married Edna Gertrude Miller 21/08/1923. They had 2 children, Audrey and June. At the outbreak of World War One Alfred served in 18th Battalion RF Northumberland Fusiliers on Short Service.

Eva married Nelson Robert Wagner, he died in 1952, while she outlived him and died in 1987. They lived with Margaret at 186 Oak Street, Manchester, Hartford.

Jane married in 1907 to George Dewart, his first wife having died, Jane and her husband moved to Hartford, Conn not long after the rest of the family moved. He died in 1958 and she died in 1971.

Victor worked firstly in a typewriter factory and later in an aircraft factory. He was the only child to have been born in Connecticut. He married Cynthia Stuart in 1918, he died in 1978, his wife outlived him and died in 2002.

#### **Part Four: Anything Else**

Please use this space to record anything else you have found out about your pensioner

My pensioner and his family sailed from Liverpool to Boston in 1907, they stayed initially with a sister-in-law of John's, who was living in Buckland, Connecticut.

The family seemed to have gained employment from the local silk factory, which closed by the end of the 1930s. In the later census Victor was employed in an aircraft factory, reflecting the changes in twentieth century America.

It is puzzling why John returned to Belfast and we don't have any record of his death.

## Part Five: Your Sources

Please use this space to record the sources you have used

- *Marriage certificate of pensioner's parents:*  
[https://civilrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/images/marriage\\_returns/marriages\\_1854/09464/5429509.pdf](https://civilrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/images/marriage_returns/marriages_1854/09464/5429509.pdf)
- *Death certificate of pensioner's mother:*  
[https://civilrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/images/deaths\\_returns/deaths\\_1893/06004/4708647.pdf](https://civilrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/images/deaths_returns/deaths_1893/06004/4708647.pdf)
- *Death certificate of pensioner's father:*  
[https://civilrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/images/deaths\\_returns/deaths\\_1907/05534/4551253.pdf](https://civilrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/images/deaths_returns/deaths_1907/05534/4551253.pdf)
- *Marriage certificate to first wife:*  
[https://civilrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/images/marriage\\_returns/marriages\\_1883/10946/8000625.pdf](https://civilrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/images/marriage_returns/marriages_1883/10946/8000625.pdf)
- *Marriage certificate to second wife:*  
[https://civilrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/images/marriage\\_returns/marriages\\_1895/10513/5829288.pdf](https://civilrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/images/marriage_returns/marriages_1895/10513/5829288.pdf)
- *1901 census return:* <http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/reels/nai000744613/5/>
- *Ship's Manifest:* National Archives and Records Administration (NARA); Washington, D.C.; Crew Lists of Vessels Arriving at Boston, Massachusetts, 1917-1943; Microfilm Serial: T938; Microfilm Roll: 113
- *1910 census:* Year: 1910; Census Place: Manchester, Hartford, Connecticut; Roll: T624\_131; Page: 12A; Enumeration District: 0211; FHL microfilm: 1374144
- *1920 census:* Year: 1920; Census Place: Manchester, Hartford, Connecticut; Roll: T625\_181; Page: 48A; Enumeration District: 139; Image: 1190
- *1930 census:* Year: 1930; Census Place: Hartford, Hartford, Connecticut; Roll: 264; Page: 6B; Enumeration District: 0044; Image: 191.0; FHL microfilm: 2339999
- *1940 census:* Year: 1940; Census Place: Manchester, Hartford, Connecticut; Roll: T627\_504; Page: 2A; Enumeration District: 2-94