

The VERY simple stone that marks the resting place of a poor Irish girl who became one of New York's wealthiest property owners – before suffering a tragic fate



PETER AND HIS WIFE MARGE WERE THE FIRST FAMILY TO VISIT ANNIE'S GRAVE, 70 YEARS AFTER HER DEATH



ANNIE ROSE UP THE RANKS TO BECOME A VERY SUCCESSFUL WOMAN

Annie Maher's descendant has traced the incredible story of his grand-aunt, who took American society by storm

REPORT: PHILIP NOLAN

FOR any girl born in Ireland in the middle of the 19th century, the future was preordained. For most, there would be a brief period of work, often in domestic service, before marriage, multiple pregnancies and the almost inevitable grinding poverty in a rural hovel or a city tenement. Annie Elizabeth Maher should have walked that path. Instead, she converted a modest education into a career running the household of one of the wealthiest families in New York, travelled widely in Europe and even as far as Egypt, and became the owner of a substantial property portfolio before life took the most tragic of turns and led to a pitiful death, at 89, in an asylum in New Jersey.

Her story would have remained undiscovered were it not for the curiosity of her grand-nephew Peter Maher, an Englishman who came across it while tracing his family tree. Long believing his

family was Protestant, he was amazed to find his journey starting in St Peter and Paul Catholic church in Clonmel, Co Tipperary, where Annie was baptised in 1860, the eldest of 11 children, many of who would not survive to adulthood.

Annie was born to Patrick Maher, a carpenter, and his wife Alice, who was 18 years younger. He was distant with Annie from the off, disappointed that his first-born was not a boy. The family was not as poor as many others – the Famine had kept Patrick busy making coffins, but when the blight ended, times were tougher. When Annie was four, the family, which now also included two sons, moved to England, where Patrick got a job as a labourer in the recently rebuilt Royal Dockyard at Sheerness on the Isle of Sheppey in Kent.

The house was small, and conditions were poor, and the two boys ultimately died of tuberculosis, a tragedy from which their mother never fully recovered. Annie was a bright girl, and with the support of an inspirational teacher, Mrs Dubby, whose motto was 'read to learn', she

devoured books and educated herself. Like so many others at the time, though, it was a truncated education, and at the age of 12, she was sent to work in domestic service for Commander Farrell of the Royal Navy. To her surprise, she found she had a room, albeit small and boxy, all to herself. In it were three shelves of books, and she read them all when she had time – her standard working shift was 5am to 8.30pm.

Biology intervened, though. The son of the family, Anthony, became fixated on her as she matured; of similar age, and an artist, he asked to paint her in the nude. Scandalised, she declined, but one night he came to her room and stripped naked himself and her screams woke the rest of the household. In such situations, there was always going to be only one winner, and Annie was dismissed to avoid scandal, but not without a certain kindness.

The commander's wife arranged a job for her at the officers' mess in nearby Chatham Dockyard, and there Annie learned the art of hospitality, right down to mastering silver service at dinner.

At this time, her Uncle John already was living in Brooklyn, and had developed a business selling floral arrangements to the wealthiest New York families. A genial man, he was popular with his clients and when one of them asked if there was anyone like him who would be suitable as a lady's

maid, he wrote to Annie. At the age of 18, she arrived at the Castle Garden immigration centre in New York, and a new and glittering life began. Manuel Texido Bolmer was a wealthy industrialist who had a substantial house on the fashionable Upper East Side, and Georgiana was a daughter from his second marriage. At 22, she was just four years older than Annie and they developed a friendship beyond the usual mistress/servant roles, confiding in each other and even occasionally sharing champagne.

While still in her 20s, Georgiana married Richard Arnold, a widower in his 50s whose father Aaron had immigrated from England and founded Arnold, Constable and Co, one of Manhattan's biggest department stores and a huge property portfolio. The family art collection was the biggest in the city, and their house on Fifth Avenue was so massive it could accommodate not only the art but 400 people to private balls.

By the time of the marriage, Annie had become so indispensable, she organised the entire event and, naturally, Uncle John supplied the flowers. Impressed by her organisational abilities, Richard Arnold promoted her to supervisor of social events.

Now 23 and on a substantial salary, but with nothing to spend it on as all her daily needs were met and paid for, Annie began to save, and she

would end up a wealthy woman in her own right. In 1884, Arnold and Georgiana decided to travel to Europe, visiting Paris and London. With a week off, Annie returned to Sheerness to see her family, and her father remained as distant as ever, while mother Alice seemed broken by his coldness and often excessive drinking. It was the last time they all met – Alice died the following year at just 47, soon after the death of another beloved daughter.

Two years later, Patrick remarried to Mary O'Connor. He was 63 and she was 46, and perhaps mindful he would be fired if his true age was known, they pronounced themselves 42 and 38 on the marriage certificate. Fortunately, Mary was no wicked stepmother, and she raised the remaining children with love and affection.

In 1885, Georgiana gave birth to her only child, a daughter known to all as Nellie, but the joy of birth was followed a year later by the pain of loss, when Richard Arnold died of a fever. Independently wealthy Georgiana had formally relinquished any claim on his estate before they married – she neither needed nor wanted his money, and moved to a home of her own on Madison Avenue. Though five storeys in height, it was smaller but easier to run, and Annie went along too as head of the household.

To prise Georgiana from the torpor of her grief, her brother DeForest Bolmer, a noted artist in →

the Hudson River School of landscape artists painting in the Romantic style, gathered some of his friends and, with Georgiana, Nellie and Annie in tow, they set off for Europe and Egypt for five months.

Once home, they decided they also would leave New York for a month and rented the Wright Cottage, in truth a substantial oceanfront mansion, in Long Branch, New Jersey, an increasingly fashionable resort at the time. The town would play an increasingly important role in Annie's life, but not before tragedy struck again.

In April 1891, a flu pandemic claimed the life of Nellie. She was only six, and it sent Georgiana into another downward spiral she finally escaped by devoting herself to charitable works, especially with the New York Hospital for Sick Babies on Lexington Avenue.

Through her work there and with her Episcopal church, she met the Rev Charles Harvey Hartman and later married him, dividing her time between her life as a socialite during the week and as the wife of the rector in Dover, New Jersey, 50km away, at weekends.

At 40, Annie decided to take control of her own life, and used her \$30,000 savings (around \$900,000 in today's money) to buy a house in Long Branch for \$2,500. Remembering how the Arnolds made their money, she bought six more properties to rent out, and her purchasing fund soon was augmented when, in 1903, her beloved Georgiana also died, at just 46, and left \$5,000 to Annie in her will.

The loss took a huge toll on her, though. She had spent 26 years with the mistress who became a friend and now found herself unemployed and with time on her hands. Her father also recently had died, and on top of the loss of little Nellie, grief took its often familiar path.

By the time her younger brother Joseph (even though he was 28, she had not seen him since he was six) arrived in 1906 for a visit en route to a new



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WITH HIS WIFE
MARGE IN
NEW YORK

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job with a shipping company in Shanghai, Annie was drinking heavily. Concerned, Joseph told her of a doctor he had met on the voyage to the United States on the SS Celtic who specialised in such matters, and arranged an appointment with Dr Henry Cotton.

Cotton is one of the most infamous doctors

in American history, and

posited the briefly fashionable theory that mental illness stemmed from what he called a 'focal' infection. Remove the source of that infection, and the mental illness would disappear.

He told Annie the cure in her case would be the removal of all her teeth and possible her adenoids and tonsils, though in more extreme cases, he insisted on the removal of ovaries, uteruses and, for male patients, the testicles.

As many as a third of his patients died before a damning report led to his removal from his post in the 1930s

Annie and Joseph found his suggestion barbaric, and declined his help, but Dr Cotton would return to Annie's life in the most gruesome way imaginable.

For a time, she got her life together. She was offered a job as a journalist on the Long Branch Record, but was let go to accommodate a man returning from the First World War, as so many women were.

She started drinking again and was arrested in 1924 after being found unconscious in the street after drinking adulterated illegal spirits during the Prohibition era. In the cruellest of twists, she was sent for psychiatric assessment – to Dr Cotton.

Still smarting after the rejection of his help almost two decades earlier, he had Annie

committed, removed all her teeth and tonsils without anaesthetic, and left her to be subjected to brutal treatment at the hands of orderlies.

Her sister Mary, now Sister Dorothea in an Ohio convent, tried to intervene, to little avail. Annie's legal guardians, the daughters of Uncle John the florist, abrogated their responsibilities and stopped visiting.

In a final roll of the dice, in 1936, Annie sought to be discharged. Sister Dorothea testified in court that she was in the full of her mental health but her cousin Margaret sent a damning letter: 'Annie Maher is now and for the space of 12 years last past and upwards has been so deprived of her reason and understanding that she is rendered altogether unfit and unable to govern herself or to manage her affairs.'

A year later, Sister Dorothea had a stroke, and any avenues Annie might have pursued were gone forever. In 1949, after 25 years in the Trenton asylum, she died at 89.

Why was she treated so badly? Was it because she was a single woman of substantial means and therefore the target of jealousy and resentment? We never will know.

What is irrefutable is that an extraordinary life that straddled extreme poverty and extraordinary wealth, one that began in Clonmel and was played out in the salons of New York, the mansions of New Jersey and even the Pyramids at Giza, ended ignominiously in a Trenton cemetery.

There is no headstone for Annie Elizabeth Maher, only a small stone in the ground bearing a cross. History records her quite simply and coldly. She is Section O. Avenue G. Grave 51.



Finding Annie: Travels with My Great Aunt – From Tipperary to Trenton N.J. is written by Peter Maher, published by Xlibris UK, it is available on amazon.ie at €16.50 (paperback) and €3.25 (Kindle edition). Peter is keen to hear of any details about his family's pre-emigration time and can be contacted on petermaher6547@icloud.com

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