New research by Damian Shiels
In 1917 thousands of American servicemen came to Ireland to participate in the First World War. The majority served in the U.S. Navy, located at bases around the country in Cork, Wexford, Dublin and Donegal. The bulk of them served in and around Cork Harbour, particularly in the vicinity of Queenstown/Cobh.

Over the course of the next two years, many local Irish women met and married these sailors; St. Colman’s Cathedral in particular was the scene of a large number of ceremonies. Who were these women, and what are their stories? This exhibition is based on new research which has sought to identify some of these young women through an analysis of the passport applications they submitted when seeking to travel to America. Twenty of their passport portraits are presented here, together with what we have been able to uncover about their lives.
During the First World War, American liaisons with Irish women were not always welcomed by the locals. Many of the women featured in this exhibition would have had to deal with a mindset from within their own community that viewed American sailors as “preying upon the purity of our daughters.”¹ When this animosity was combined with the heightened political tensions of the period, it often spilled over into confrontation. Violent attacks on American sailors and their Irish girlfriends in Cork ultimately led to the U.S. Navy permanently banning the majority of their servicemen from entering the city. In another incident, a group of women who travelled to Queenstown to meet American sailors were attacked at the train station by youngsters “armed with sticks and stones and chased back to the station.”²

In contrast to how these relationships were often viewed at home, the Irish women usually met with a positive reception in the United States, where European “War Brides”³ were a popular topic. Beneath headlines such as “Colleens Win American Tars”⁴, newspapers reported that “after the war, every part of the United States from Maine to California, and from the Great Lakes to Florida, will boast of an Irish bride who was wooed and won in her native land by an American sailor.”⁵ Other reports emphasised that Irish girls were the favourite of Americans, suggesting “that the highest average of comeliness is among the Irish brides. Few of the girls are of the high heeled variety, the majority having efficient acquaintance with household duties. The girls themselves are unanimous in pronouncing Americans persistent and gallant lovers.”⁶

While many of these women would have had the blessings of their families at the start of their new lives in America, some of these marriages would undoubtedly have been viewed disapprovingly.
A number of women would also have had to endure the social consequences of becoming pregnant while unmarried in early 20th century Ireland. Not all of them had happy endings in their marriages to their American sweethearts, but many certainly did. It must have taken considerable courage on their part to embark on the very daunting step of seeking a new life across the ocean. On the occasion of the centenary of the American entry into the First World War, their stories and experiences are ones that deserve to be explored, and remembered.

This exhibition was researched and prepared by archaeologist and historian Damian Shiels. It was designed and produced in association with Sirius Arts Centre, Cobh. The images in this exhibition were scanned by The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, where the original passport applications are stored. Thanks to David Ferriero, James Zeender, Patrick Kepley, Jackie Budell and Michael Hussey at the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration for their assistance. Thanks also to Dr John Borgonovo, School of History, University College Cork. The exhibition has been kindly sponsored by the Port of Cork.

1 The comment was made by the priest at Sunday Mass in St. Colman’s Cathedral, Cobh. Borgonovo, John “‘Exercising a close vigilance over their daughters’: Cork women, American sailors, and Catholic vigilantes, 1917-18”, Irish Historical Studies Vol. 38, No. 149, May 2012.


3 The term ‘War Bride’ was used throughout the media to refer to the women who had married servicemen in Europe.

4 The syndicated report with this headline appeared in newspapers throughout the United States in early 1918. Examples include The Oneonta Star (New York), La Grande Observer (Oregon), Tensas Gazette (Louisiana), The Breckenridge News (Kentucky) and the La Plata Home Press (Missouri).

5 From the same syndicated report. Some newspapers, such as the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, chose less dramatic headlines, such as “Many American Sailors Finding Wives in Ireland.”

6 From a syndicated report that appeared in newspapers across the United States in early 1919. It ran under various headlines, such as “No High Heels on Yanks’ War Brides” in The Washington Times (5 February 1919) to “Comely Yank War Brides Coming to U.S. From Erin” in The Indianapolis Star (9 February 1919).
Mary Josephine-known as Mollie- was born in Youghal on 14 March 1900. Her family lived on Kenny’s Lane, where her father worked as a carrier. She met and married Eugene Clark from Floyd County, Iowa, in early 1918. Eugene was serving as a First Class Gunner’s Mate aboard USS Shaw. The couple’s daughter Mary Josephine Gene Clark was born in Cork on 21 October 1918. By the time of their daughter’s birth, tragedy had already struck the young family. Only two weeks previously, at 6.45am on 7 October, Eugene had been attempting to secure an after billboard on his vessel which had been torn loose by heavy seas when he was caught by a wave and washed overboard to his death. Mollie was unaware when she gave birth to her daughter that her husband had been lost. A cablegram in the National Archives, Washington D.C., dated 25 October 1918 records the following:

...next of kin wife Josephine Clark 13 Smith St. Cork Ireland now critically ill we will inform her as soon as her condition warrants...

Mary, who had lived in Ireland all her life, decided to proceed with her move to the United States regardless. She hoped to make her home in America with her deceased husband’s family at 110 Linden Avenue in Waterloo, Iowa.

Mary did move to Iowa. Given the nature of her husband’s death, her arrival occasioned mention in the local press. The Iowa Adams County Free Press reported on 10 May 1919 that “Mary Josephine Clark and her six month’s old baby boy [actually a baby girl] reached Waterloo to make the parents of her late husband a visit. The baby...
is the only grandchild and the little fellow and his mother, a well educated Irish girl, received an enthusiastic welcome in the Clark home, but Eugene will never return.” The newspapers had more to report on 8 November that year, when Mollie married her late husband’s brother, Harry, in Waterloo. The couple had children of their own, but by 1930 Mollie was recorded as divorced, though still living with her parents-in-law in Waterloo. It appears Mollie died in the United States in the 1970s. Her Cork-born daughter, Mary Josephine Gene, passed away in Iowa in 2010.
Letitia was born in Youghal on 21 July 1896. She later worked as a dressmaker—her father was a shoemaker on South Main Street. Letitia married Joseph Leonard Becker, a Chief Machinist’s Mate in the U.S. Navy, in early 1918. The couple’s son, John Arthur, was born at 15 South Main Street in Youghal on 14 January 1919. In her passport application Letitia stated that she had lived in Ireland all her life, and had never been to the United States before. She hoped to make her home at 5 Ernst Street in Rochester, New York. Letitia was accompanied when making her application by Ann Bingham, a fellow Youghal ‘War-Bride’, who was presumably a long-time friend.

We know that Letitia made it to the United States, where in 1920 she was living with her husband’s family in Rochester, along with her son. Within a few months she was back in Ireland to visit family and for health reasons, but she eventually returned to America. In 1930 she and her husband Joseph were living in Trenton, New Jersey, where John Arthur had been joined by a sister, Elizabeth, born in New York in 1926. Letitia passed away in Lee, Florida in 1985. Her Cork-born son, John Arthur, also died there, in 1991.
Like Letitia Collins, Annie was also from Youghal, having been born there on 4 September 1896. The two women were almost certainly friends, as each served as witnesses on the others passport application. Annie was from a large family in the town who in 1911 made their home on Cross Street- her father worked as a plumber. She married U.S. Navy Watertender Edward Ross Bingham in early 1918. The couple’s son John Patrick was born in Nelson Terrace, Youghal on 24 December 1918. In her declaration Annie stated that she had lived in Ireland all her life, and had never been to the United States. On arriving in her new home, she planned to make her home at 715 East Seminary Street in Danville, Illinois.

In 1930 Annie (recorded as Nancy) was living with Edward in Danville, where they had four children; daughter Jane and sons Joseph and Edward Junior having joined Irish-born John Patrick. By that date Edward was working as a fireman on the railroad. Annie appears to have died in the United States in 1983. Cork-born John Patrick died in New York in 2005.
Margaret, known as Madge, was born in Cork on 7 April 1895. She may be the Maggie Ring who is recorded on the 1911 Census living on Bachelors Quay in the city, the daughter of Robert Ring, a general labourer, and Mary Ring. Madge had the misfortune to be a victim of the often violent tensions that developed between local Cork men and the American sailors. On 3 September 1917 she had been to the theatre in the city with a friend, Rose Blackshields, and their American dates. While making their way home they encountered a mob of young men who had been harassing U.S. servicemen. The crowd prevented the couples from passing, and the sailors fled the scene. When they attempted to follow, Madge was struck in the eye by one of the mob, while Rose was hit in the mouth. Madge apparently lost her job as a result. The events of the night ultimately resulted in a police baton-charge. In the hearing into the incident some weeks later, Madge was asked if she would go out with an American again, to which she replied “Sure, I would.” True to her word, on 13 April 1919 she married Anthony Elia Lapenta, an Italian-born Machinist’s Mate aboard the submarine USS L-3, at St. Mary’s of Mount Carmel in Harwich, Essex. Madge applied for her passport to travel to America from Cork, and intended to live at 126 North Elliot Place in Brooklyn.

Madge landed in New York on 29 August 1919. In 1930 she and Anthony were living in Kings, Brooklyn, where Anthony worked as a stationery engineer. They were still there in 1940. The couple had two children, Thomas Lawrence and Eileen Mary. It appears she never left New York- Madge passed away there in 1992 and is buried in Brooklyn.
Mary was born in Cork on 23 February 1898. Her father George, who served in the British Army, was originally from Colchester in England, while her mother Catherine (née Donovan) was from Bandon. Mary had lived on Spike Island in Cork Harbour until 1901, before her father was posted back to England. The Blackshields family returned to Cork in 1908. Mary was no stranger to the strife that sometimes surrounded social interaction with the Americans in Cork. Her younger sister, Rose, was the woman attacked by the violent mob in the city with Madge Ring. But it was Mary, not Rose, who ultimately sought to make a future with a U.S. sailor. She met Marion J. Blanston, a native of Chatleston, South Carolina and a Carpenter’s Mate 1st Class aboard USS Panther. The couple married in Queenstown’s St. Colman’s Cathedral on 17 February 1918, and their daughter Florence was born in the same town on 23 December that year.

When Mary applied for her passport she had her photograph taken wearing a sweetheart brooch that depicted her husband. She had never been to the United States before, but hoped to make her home in her husband’s home city. The 1930 Census records her in Charleston with Marion, then a dry cleaning proprietor, and their large family of eight children; Florence, George, Marion Junior, Mary Junior, Eileen, Dorothy, Vilma and Ruby. Mary Blanton passed away in Charleston on 19 April 1972, Marion having pre-deceased her in 1965.
Alice was born in Cork on 12 July 1896. In 1911 her family were living in Shanakiel, with her father working as a bookkeeper for an iron and lumber firm. She married Joseph Pranis from Cleveland, Ohio, in Cork in late 1917. At the time Joseph, who was of Russian descent, was serving aboard USS Porter. On 17 October 1918 the couple celebrated the birth of their son Joseph Arthur Pranis in Cork. When she applied for her passport, Alice stated that she had lived in Ireland all her life and had never been to the United States. Unusually, her photograph was not a studio portrait, instead being taken in a garden, where Alice is shown with baby Joseph and the family dog. It may have been taken at 5 Langford Terrace, where Cissie Pain, possibly Alice’s sister, was living at the time.

Alice appeared on the 1920 U.S. Census with her husband and son in Brooklyn. Joseph was a career officer in the Navy, and as a result the family moved around a lot. In 1940 they were living in Norfolk, Virginia. By then the family had grown, with Joseph Jr. having been joined by Elizabeth, Robert and Mildred. Alice died in San Diego, California in 1999. She had outlived both her husband and her Cork born son Joseph, who had passed away four years before her.
Elizabeth was born in Cork on 10 November 1899. In 1911 she was living on Shandon Street, with her father working as a dock labourer. She married John Johns of the U.S. Navy in St. Colman’s Cathedral, Queenstown on 19 February 1919. John had been born in Scot Haven, Westmoreland, Pennsylvania to Welsh parents in 1893 and had spent his life in Homestead, Pennsylvania. The couple’s son John T. Johns was born in Cork on 24 November 1918. When applying for her passport, she revealed that she had never been outside of Ireland before.

When Elizabeth went to the United States she initially planned to live in Boston, but the 1930 Census finds them in Manhattan, where John was working as a washer in a garage. By then the couple had four children, with Lawrence, Helena and Mildred joining John Junior. John Senior was absent from the family by the time of the 1940 Census, but Elizabeth’s mother Helena O’Regan- herself born in New York- had travelled over from Ireland to live with them.
Bridie was born in Bantry on 3 June 1900. She was part of a large family; her parents Daniel and Margaret ran a pub in Bantry’s Harbour View. Bridie entered into a relationship with Walter Earl Comerford, a Chief Stoker aboard the USS Bushnell, a submarine tender which was based in Berehaven. She was already a number of months pregnant when the couple married in Forest Hill, London in December 1918; their son Robert was born in London on 20 March 1919. Bridie had never been to the United States before, and at the time of her passport application Walter had already returned to America. She hoped to make her home at 735 West 35th Street in Norfolk, Virginia.

Bridie eventually sailed for her new home with other ‘war brides’ aboard the SS Harrisburg, which left Liverpool on 17 June 1919. The passenger list states that she was ‘discharged to husb[and]’ on arrival in New York. Ultimately Bridie and Walter’s marriage seems not to have worked out; by 1930 the couple had divorced. That year found Bridie working as a servant in a hotel in Beverly Hills, California, while Walter and his three sons were living in Pasadena, California, where he was the custodian of a pumping station.
Veronica was born in Castlemartyr on 3 February 1898 to Thomas Dillon (a native of Monaghan) and Norah Dillon (née Ryan, from Tipperary). In 1911 the family were living in Corkbeg, Whitegate; her father Thomas was in the Royal Irish Constabulary. Veronica married New Yorker Francis (Frank) Cody Harris in Aghada, Co. Cork on 8 April 1918. Frank was then serving as a Chief Electrician, and was a longtime sailor, having entered the service in San Francisco in 1906.

By the time of Veronica’s application Francis was back in the United States; She hoped to join her husband in Brooklyn via the SS Plattsburg on 15 August 1919. When she had her photograph taken for her application, Veronica wore a United States Navy sweetheart pin. The 1930 Census has Veronica and Frank living in Mount Oliver, Pennsylvania, where Frank worked as a railroad electrician. Veronica reportedly died in the late 1970s.

9. Veronica Harris
(née Dillon), 21, Castlemartyr, Co. Cork
Husband in U.S. Navy.
Queenstown Consulate:
Passport issued 7 August 1919
10. Bridget Mary Mahony  
*(née Lynch)*, 22, Midleton, Co. Cork  
Husband in United States Navy  
Queenstown Consulate:  
Passport issued 9 May 1919

Bridget (known as Bridie) was born in Midleton on 7 May 1897 to Thomas Lynch and Mary *(née Geary)* Lynch. In 1911 the family lived in Knockgriffin, with Thomas working as a farm labourer. On 1 January 1919 Bridie married George Daniel Mahony, a cook aboard USS *Imperator*, in St. Colman’s Cathedral. George had been born in America and had enlisted in 1915. The couple’s daughter, Mary Veronica, was born the following May.

On her application Bridie noted she had lived in Ireland all her life and had never been to the United States. She intended to make her home with her husband in New York City. Bridie and baby Mary sailed for their new lives in America aboard the S.S. Plattsburg, leaving Liverpool on 18 August 1919. The 1920 Census shows the family living in Manhattan, where George worked as a butcher. Unfortunately tragedy was soon to befall them; baby Mary died on 9 March 1920, when only 10 months old. At the time Bridie was pregnant with the couple’s son George, who was born that October. Another daughter, Kathleen, followed in 1922. The family were still in Manhattan in 1930, by which time George had become a policeman. By 1940 they had moved to the Bronx. Bridie passed away there on 24 April 1943, and was buried in Calvary Cemetery.
Annie was born in Passage West on 8 August 1898. Her father Edward was from Tipperary and mother Mary was from Cork. In 1911 they lived in Ferry Point; Edward was an Royal Irish Constabulary pensioner and Mary was a licensed vintner. On 8 May 1919 Annie married U.S. Naval Gunner Eugene J. Emery in the Church of St. Mary in Passage West. Eugene had originally enlisted in the service in San Francisco, California in September 1903. At the time of Annie’s application, Eugene was in the Knotty Ash Rest Camp in Liverpool awaiting his return to America. Annie, who had lived in Ireland all her life and never been to the United States, hoped to travel aboard the SS Plattsburg on 2 June 1919, with the intention of living at 238 Monterey Avenue in Ontario, California.

Annie and Eugene had a daughter Catherine and son William in California. However, Eugene died in 1927, leaving Annie a widow. In 1940 she was living in Los Angeles and supporting her children by working as an office clerk in the county hospital. Annie died in Costa Mesa, California in 1971.
12. Mary Kate Wilder  
(née Magill), 22, Donoughmore, Co. Cork  
Husband in United States Navy  
Queenstown Consulate:  
Passport issued 16 April 1919

Mary Kate was born in Donoughmore on 8 May 1896. In 1911 the family lived on Gurteenroe Street in Macroom, where Mary Kate’s father Hugh- a native of Co. Down- was an Royal Irish Constabulary constable. On 22 December 1918 Mary Kate married Edwin Vernon Wilder in St. Colman’s Cathedral, Queenstown. Edwin was a native of Kansas and was a Junior Grade Lieutenant at the U.S.N.T. Barracks Base 6.

Mary Kate, who had lived in Ireland all her life, stated her intention to live in Osborne, Kansas. However, the 1930 Census found she and Edwin living in Brooklyn, where they had two children, John and Margaret. By 1940 they had moved on to Hillsdale, New Jersey, where Edwin was working as a Custom Inspector.
Nellie Anderson

(née Burns), 23, Queenstown, Co. Cork
Husband in United States Navy
Queenstown Consulate:
Passport issued 2nd December 1920

Nellie was born in Queenstown in March 1897 to John Burns of Cork City and Hannah Burns of Queenstown. In 1911 the large family were living in Cottrell’s Row, with John working as a skilled labourer. Nellie married Charles Dewey Anderson, of Green County, Pennsylvania on 9 February 1918 in St. Colman’s Cathedral, Queenstown. At the time Charles, who had been born on 21 February 1896, was serving as a Seaman in the U.S. Navy. He initially enlisted in August 1916, was discharged in August 1920 and later rejoined. The couple’s son Patrick was born in Queenstown a month after they were married, on 17 March 1918.

Nellie had lived in Ireland all her life and had never been to the United States. As part of her application Nellie produced a letter from her husband showing that he wished her to join him in America. He was then serving in Mexico, and she was living at 3 Cottrell’s Row in Queenstown. Upon emigration Nellie intended to live at 115 Murton Avenue in Mountville, West Virginia. She hoped to sail on the SS Baltic on 9 December 1920.
Sarah was born in Castlecary on 27 March 1898 to James McSheffrey of Moville and Mary Doherty. In 1911 the family lived in Castlcary, where Mary was trying to raise her large family as a widow. Sarah met Milton J. Stephens of St. Louis, Missouri, while he was serving as an Electrician 1st Class at the United States Naval Air Station base in Lough Foyle. The couple were married at the Roman Catholic Church of St. Columba in Drung, Co. Donegal on 25 December 1918. Milton was discharged on 7 August 1919, and at the time of Sarah’s passport application he was in St. Louis waiting for her to join him. Sarah, who had lived in Moville all her life, had never been to the United States.

The 1930 Census found Sarah still in St. Louis, where she and Milton – then an electrician – had four children, Milton Junior, Mary, Geraldine and Sheila. Sarah died in St. Louis in 1962.
Kathleen was born on 25 September 1900 to Terence Kennedy of Ballard and Alice Kennedy. In 1911 the family were living on Anne Street South in Dublin, where Terence worked as a ladies tailor. On 16 October 1918 Kathleen had married Jerome B. Sowder in Chapelizod, Dublin. Jerome, a native of Dearborn, Missouri, was a Machinist 1st Class in the U.S. Navy. A little over five months later, on 2 March 1919, they celebrated the birth of their daughter, also called Kathleen, in Dublin. Kathleen applied for her passport while staying at St. John’s Hotel in Liverpool. Although born in England, she had lived in Ireland all her life, and had never been to the United States.

Kathleen moved to Liverpool on 4 July 1919 and at the time of her application was residing at St. John’s Hotel in that city. Jerome was still in service and was staying at Liverpool’s Criterion Hotel. She hoped to sail to America with her husband aboard USS Harrisburg on 8 July 1919. By 1930 Kathleen and Jerome were living in Green Township, Platte County, Missouri, where Jerome worked as a general farm labourer. By that point their daughter Kathleen had been joined by siblings Milton and Laverna. Unfortunately Kathleen passed away tragically young, dying in Missouri in 1936.
Mary Florence was born in Westport, Co. Mayo on 26 September 1890. On 30 November 1918 she married New York native Frank Burck in Queenstown Church of Ireland Church. Frank was a Gunner's Mate 1st Class who served aboard USS Melville and also at the Queenstown Torpedo Repair Station. Mary had lived in Ireland all her life, and in her application stated that she wanted to make her home at 226 Winthrop Street in Brooklyn.

The 1920 Census showed Mary and Frank living in Newport, Rhode Island, where Frank was listed as working with ordnance for the Government.
Margaret was born on 25 March 1898 in Wexford. Her father Patrick was from Limerick, while her mother, also Margaret, had been born in India. She married 1st Class Storekeeper Chester Dion at St. Michael & St. Joseph Roman Catholic Church in Plymouth on 30 November 1918. He was from Escanaba, Michigan, and had entered the service around 1912. At the time of Margaret’s application Chester was serving aboard USS *Parker* at New York. Margaret had lived in Ireland and England all her life and had never been to the United States. The couple intended to make their home at 827 Kellogg Street, Greenbay, Wisconsin.

By 1940 Margaret was living in Vallejo, California. Chester had passed away in 1935, leaving Margaret to care for their children Gladys, Chester Junior, Patrick, Joseph and Bernard alone. In addition Margaret also had to look after a ward, Edward McLean. In order to help do this she turned once again to the Navy, working in the local Navy Yard Supply Depot. Margaret passed away on 18 February 1980, and was buried beside her husband in San Francisco Military Cemetery.
Not all of the Irish ‘war brides’ married sailors. Eileen, who was born in Mitchelstown on 30 June 1901, married Edmond O’Donnell who had been serving in Europe with the American Expeditionary Force. Edmond was himself an Irish emigrant, having arrived in the United States at the age of two in 1882. He had grown up in Ansonia, Connecticut. Eileen arrived in London in August 1919 to prepare for her journey to America, stating that she had lived in Ireland all her life and never been to the United States. She gave her intended address as 80 Howard Avenue in Ansonia.

In 1930 Eileen and Edmond appear to have been living in Manhattan, with their children Edmond Junior and Eileen Junior. By that time, Edmond was working as a medical physician.
Mary was born in Queenstown on 23 February 1902 to Eugene Donovan of Queenstown and Mary (Keating) Donovan of Cork. Her father worked as a general labourer, and in 1911 the family made their home on Old Street. On 13 April 1919 Mary married Chief Quartermaster Irwin Robert Horn of the USS Corsair in St. Colman’s Cathedral. Irwin had been born in Reading, Pennsylvania on 4 May 1897.

Her husband having already returned to America, Mary Josephine intended to join him there at 13 North 13th Street in Newark, New Jersey. She stated in her application that she had lived in Ireland all her life, and had never been to the United States. She hoped to sail on the SS President Grant on 3 September. When her image was taken, she was wearing a United States Navy sweetheart pin. Mary did sail on the President Grant, landing in New York on 22 September.
Gertrude (Gertie) was born in Queenstown on 19 September 1900. Her father George was from Cork City, while her mother Mary (née Brown) was from Queenstown. In 1911 they lived on The Mall, where George was a news-vendor and Mary was a lace-dealer. Two of Gertie’s older brothers worked as a painter and a fisherman. Gertie met and married James Caruso of Higginsville, New York at St. Colman’s Cathedral on 11 March 1919. He was then serving as a Fireman 1st Class on the USS Corsair. She planned to make her home at 730 Lansing Street in Utica, New York. In her application she noted that she had lived in Ireland all her life, and had never been to America.

Gertie and James had a daughter, Mary, in New York. She is recorded there in the 1940 Census under her maiden name, and registered as a widow, while Mary carried the Caruso surname.
The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration