

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2021

2125 The Coffey Connection

By Sharon Greene

The Coffey Connection

DNA testing has become the latest trend in family history researching and with very clever advertising, a phenomenal success with television adverts where a possible ancestor will whisper: I have stories to tell - come find me! After thirty-three years of research I took a leap of faith with my parents, the three of us tested with FamilyTreeDNA in 2015, a year later with Ancestry.com.

Triangulation of results with my parents and me became invaluable, as I was readily able to see which side of my family the results belonged. Plus the confirmation my long and careful research was correct. Over the next few years results were to prove both puzzling and a revelation, in more ways than one.

My reason for DNA testing was my fraternal great grandfather, George Arthur FRANCIS. Years of checking at every opportunity: shipping arrivals, BDM's, books, databases, Trove, State and National Archives, anywhere I happened to be with any possible link to genealogy, for this elusive ancestor. The perplexing thing was George had potentially 'three Christian names' which needed checking, rightly or wrongly, under any of these three names George, Arthur or Francis.

His marriage in Bathurst, NSW on 4 January 1882ⁱ stated he was born in NSW, a miner, 36 years of age; his parents were listed as John FRANCIS and Margaret MANNING. Most of this information was added later in 1931 when the registers were recalled to Sydneyⁱⁱ. Birthplace NSW, now that really narrows things down! I could never locate his parents' marriage or their arrival into Australia separately, as a couple or George's birth.

This line remained dormant until my DNA results started to arrive in mid 2016. Of my initial thirteen results, seven had a COFFEY surname as very close markers to my father. Coffey was a name I had never encountered in my research. DNA was still very new to me and Jim Coffeyⁱⁱⁱ in New York advised me that my father was a Coffey descendant, as DNA does not lie. FTDNA provided accurate connections back eight-twelve generations (200-300 years) however I needed a connection closer in time and Ancestry appeared to offer that. My parents and I tested with Ancestry.com.

So began my search for a Coffey connection. Using Trove again I reduced my search strategy to 'George Arthur' and did not include the usual Francis name. Immediate results appeared with two advertisements, in the Sydney Morning Herald, Tuesday 27 April 1858^{iv}:

We hereby caution the public against harbouring or employing the undermentioned Boys – four in number – having left their homes on last Sunday afternoon, named respectively Alfred BURNS

age 15; George Arthur F COFFEY, aged 14; Edward James GEIGIAN, age 13; Tobias TURNER age 12 years. Any person harbouring these said boys after this notice, will be prosecuted according to law.

Signed: John COFFEY, Thomas WORMBARTON, John TURNER. Castlereagh-street.

Oh my goodness! Could it be? Could my George Arthur FRANCIS be this lad George Arthur F COFFEY and he simply dropped the Coffey surname? The second Trove result confirmed my suspicions and gave me that ahhh!! moment.

Sydney Morning Herald, Persons Advertised For: Thursday 3 June 1858^v:

George Arthur F. COFFEY, who left his home on 23rd April, in company with three other boys, age fourteen, height five feet, light complexion, full light blue eyes, dark hair : supposed to be in the Swamp slaughter-houses. Any information of his whereabouts will be thankfully received by his afflicted mother, who is in very bad health since he left, and she offers £2 reward to anyone that will bring him home, and his mother promises him forgiveness and kind treatment. John COFFEY 303 Castlereagh-street.

With this information I went back to NSW BDM and found a George Arthur F Coffey born 1844^{vi}. Because it was pre-1856 I was able to confirm these details on microfilm at my local library^{vii}. George Arthur COFFEY was born 19 April 1844 to John COFFEY and Margaret LEGASS^{viii}. George continued his trend of using their correct Christian names.

Genealogy is about discovery, checking, re-checking and the odd hunch. Emailing an Ancestry cousin^{ix} I put forward my theory about George, he gave me contact details to a living Coffey person. Long story short: I asked a total stranger to test with FTDNA, Robert Coffey, a 3xgreat grandchild of John Coffey. FTDNA results gave zero genetic distance between Robert and my father^x. Thus proving my theory correct and discovering new ancestors: John^{xi} and Margaret^{xii xiii} both from Ireland.

John was soldier, a mounted policeman, a labourer and a drunkard^{xiv} and perhaps George had much to flee. Margaret was a needlewoman and dressmaker^{xv}, and a survivor; she supported herself and her remaining family for well over forty years.^{xvi xvii}

DNA enabled me to continue this line of research and my most unexpected research finding was to discover that my parents are related. No, not through marriage alone, as my mother said when I told her but through blood. My parents share a set of great grandparents (1xgreat for father and 2xgreat for mother) perhaps not unusual considering Sydney's population in the 19th century. In 1848 George and Sarah GREEN (nee Skidmore) arrived in Sydney aboard the *Waterloo* ^{xviii} with their six adult children. My father is descended from the eldest son Mark with my mother via the youngest son Jesse. It was through triangulation of my Ancestry results I discovered George and Sarah Green on both sides of my family.

I have attended many workshops over the years and one presenter spoke of the importance of recording your own family history because within three generations the

family stories are lost: it made an impression on me at the time and after my discovery became more poignant. Discovery and connection is what family history is all about however we need to record our stories for our families and generations to come.

My Ancestry research did 'have some stories to tell'.

NB: John died 1861^{xix} and Margaret died 1906^{xx} ^{xxi}, George never returned home.

ⁱ New South Wales, Birth, Death and Marriages, purchased 29 May 1986

ⁱⁱ *ibid*

ⁱⁱⁱ Email: received from Jim Coffey, New York USA, arrived 4 Apr 2016

^{iv} Sydney Morning Herald (NSW : 1842-1954) Tues 27 Apr 1858, p. 1, Trove: trove.nla.gov.au, accessed 2016

^v *Ibid* ... Thurs 3 Jun 1858, p. 1, Trove: trove.nla.gov.au, accessed 2016

^{vi} NSW, BDM, pre 1856 microfilm, 1040/1844 V134, accessed microfilm in Campbelltown library

^{vii} *Ibid*

^{viii} NSW Transcription agent, Joy Murrin, Baptisms transcription (1040/V134), supplied 7 April 2017

^{ix} Email: received from Steven Williamson, Newcastle NSW, arrived 8 June 2017

^x FamilyTreeDNA: www.familytreedna.com/my/y-dna-matches, accessed 30 Sep 2017

^{xi} John Christopher Coffey: native of Kerry Ireland, arrived in colony 1824 as a soldier in 3rd Regiment of Buffs

^{xii} NSW, Australia, Assisted Immigrants Passenger Lists, 1828-1896: *Red Rover* 10 August 1832: accessed via Ancestry.com.au account, Sep 2017

^{xiii} Rushen, Elizabeth and McIntyre, Perry; *Fair Game : Australia's first immigrant women*, Spit Junction, NSW: Anchor Books, 2010

^{xiv} Empire (Sydney, NSW : 1850-1875) Central Police Court - Thursday, Fri 7 Oct 1859, p. 2

^{xv} Margaret Legass: native of Wicklow Ireland, arrived in the colony 1832 needlewoman aboard the *Red Rover*

^{xvi} Sands Directories: Sydney and NSW, Australia, 1858-1933, 1865: p. 33 (listing), p. 196 (index): accessed via Ancestry.com.au account, Jan 2018

^{xvii} Sands Street Index, 1861-1930, 1885: p. 52: accessed via Ancestry.com.au account, Jan 2018

^{xviii} NSW, Australia, Unassisted Immigrant Passenger Lists, 1826-1922: *Waterloo* 11 Dec 1848: accessed via Ancestry.com account, Sep 2017

^{xix} SMH, family notices, death: Tues 5 Nov 1861, p. 1, John Christopher Coffey: native of Kerry Ireland, arrived in this colony in 1824 as a soldier in 3rd Regiment of Buffs

^{xx} NSW Transcription agent, Marilyn Rowan, Death transcription (1906/8820), supplied 2 June 2017

^{xxi} SMH, death notice: Sat 8 Sept 1906, p. 12, at Protestant Hospital, Newington, Parramatta River