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2020 American Ancestors Essay Contest

In 1620, the pilgrims came to America seeking religious freedom from the Church of England. The pilgrims traveled long and far to create a better life for themselves. Much like the pilgrims, my family came to America to improve their living conditions. In the 1840s, my great-great-grandparents came to the United States from Ireland to escape starvation during The Great Potato Famine.

The Great Potato Famine, also referred to as The Great Hunger started in 1845 and ended in 1852. The Great Potato Famine was caused by a fungus-like organism which caused the potatoes to turn black and rotten, destroying crops over the course of 7 years. As a result of The Potato Famine, about 1 million Irish people died of starvation or famine related diseases. At least another million were left with no choice but to flee Ireland. My family was part of that one million to flee Ireland. They traveled by boat and settled in America.

When my family came from Ireland to America it was not quite what they expected. They were not accepted because they were Irish. They needed to find work but they were not welcome so they had to come up with a solution. They decided to change their last name from O'Kelly to Kelley because they thought Kelley sounded more English. They also worked very hard to lose their Irish accent. I cannot imagine how they must have felt when they were not accepted. Eventually, they were able to find jobs. Some of them went off to work for the railroad and others found jobs in train engineering.

My family's journey to America is similar to the journey of the pilgrims because they both came to America to make a better life for themselves and both became successful. I am very proud to have the middle name Kelley after my great-great grandparents. My middle name has a very strong meaning to me because my family worked very hard and overcame many challenges. I have really enjoyed participating in this project because it encouraged me to learn about my family history and the struggles my ancestors overcame to make a better life for my family.