

CUMMINGS CHRONICLES

FOR THE DESCENDANTS OF ISAAC CUMMINGS (1601-1677)

A SERENE SUMMER MEADOW AT MARY CUMMINGS PARK IN BURLINGTON, MA. PHOTO BY JONATHAN SACHS.

In This Issue

President's Note	2
A Wonderful Cummings Gift	3
A Spy in the Family and Other Lore	6
Our New Autosomal DNA Project	8
My Family's <i>Titanic</i> Memories	10
When You're Not a Cummings...but Your DNA Says You Are!	13





PRESIDENT'S NOTE

by DAVID ROLAND

We need legends and lore in our families. They make us ask questions and inspire us to search for the real story. Sometimes they are true (or true-ish) and often they prove to be more interesting than facts. If your family's tales, rumors, myths and mysteries are like mine, you know that it can take a lot of digging to find reality – if it can be found.

Some families are lucky and don't have many mysteries. This is usually because someone back in the day took the time to write things down, or their stories were important or public enough to be carefully documented. In this issue of *Chronicles*, Sarah Cumings Morse' *Titanic* family memories article is a good case in point.

Most of us have ancestral lines that contain a mix of mysteries and reliable information, as suggested by Sharon Sorensen's "A Spy in the Family and other Lore." Incidentally, Sharon was appointed ICFA's Secretary at our second quarter Executive Committee meeting. Congratulations to Sharon.

Three of our stories are connected to nineteenth century Cummings ancestors from Boston, which may not be surprising given the origins of the Isaac families just up the road in Ipswich and Topsfield. Like many early New England families, Cummings groups headed west as the nation opened. And like most pioneering families they created their share of confused relationships. In the article "When You're not a Cummings...but Your DNA Says You Are!" by John Cleary and Tim Cummings we learn about a successful effort to connect two families from that migration using the tools of traditional research and genetic technology.

Speaking of genetics, we urge you to consider DNA testing so you can participate in both ICFA's ongoing Y-DNA project and its new autosomal initiative, described in this issue by Susan K. Thompson.

I'm a hiker and birder so it was a special pleasure to learn about the family generosity described in Janine Balistretti's piece about Mary Cummings Park. From time to time members have told me about other notable examples of philanthropy involving Isaac's descendants. We'd like to know more about them and share them with you.

This edition of *Chronicles* also contains the usual collection of reports from officers and committee chairs about finances (stable), membership (increasing), database archives (an underutilized member benefit) and the 2021 Online Reunion (Saturday dates in October or November are now being surveyed). As always, thanks to them for their efforts on your behalf. Thanks also to all of our writers. We hope you enjoy their contributions and are motivated to send us your family stories.

A closing word about family mysteries: Yes, family lore and legend sometimes proves more interesting than reality. And sometimes we find the opposite result. Either way you will know for sure and can pass along your reliable history to future generations. That's what good genealogists do.

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- Susan K. Thompson – Archives and Database
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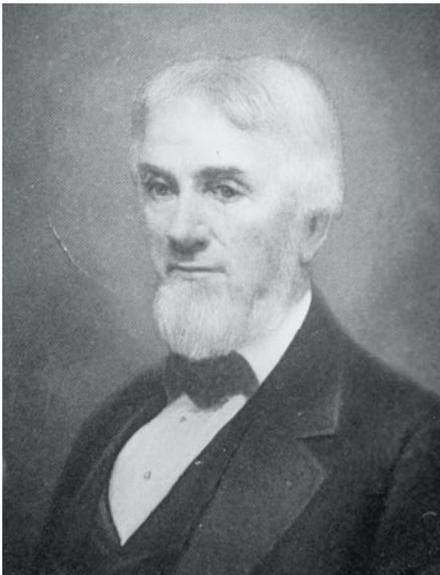
- Laura Prescott (2015-17)
- Lincoln Cummings (2011-15)
- Leigh E. Cummings, Jr. (2009-11)
- David L. Cummings (2001-03 and 2007-09)
- Sherry Milham (2005-07)
- Darla Jarvis (2003-05)
- Barry C. K. Moravek (1997-2001)

MARY CUMMINGS PARK
BURLINGTON, MASSACHUSETTS

A Wonderful Cummings Gift

By Janine Marie Balistreri





ABOVE: MARY CUMMINGS AND JOHN C. CUMMINGS.

PREVIOUS PAGE: THE CUMMINGS FAMILY FARMHOUSE AND TWO PHOTOS FROM MARY CUMMINGS PARK TODAY BY JONATHAN SACHS.

Special thanks to Warren Cummings for sharing the historical photos from his family album and to photographer Jonathan Sachs.

Janine Balistreri has been a member of ICFA since 2018 and is a lifelong resident of the Boston area.

Recently I came across a story of wonderful Cummings Family philanthropy from a century ago that has finally been resolved in the public's interest. The tale involves the gift of 216 acres of a Boston-area farm for use as a public park by a visionary lady named Mary Cowles Cummings, the widow of John C. Cummings, a 5th-great grandson of our Colonial patriarch Isaac Cummings. The land is named Mary Cummings Park.

I was thrilled to learn about the story and the link to Isaac and thought you would enjoy it as well.

John was a wealthy banker, member of the Massachusetts legislature and influential Bostonian who was born in 1812 and died in 1898. His parents were John and Marcia (Richardson) Cummings and his grandparents were Ebenezer and Jemima (Hartwell) Cummings.

Mary was a highly educated woman born in 1839 whose parents ran an educational Academy in Ipswich. She married John in 1881. They operated a very large farm in Woburn and Burlington that he bought from his family. Called Babylon Hill, it was a major enterprise where they "raised hogs, pigs and cows, and grew vegetables for the Boston market."

Mary outlived John by nearly three decades. When she died in 1927 she gave the land, its buildings and money to care for the gift to the City of Boston "To hold and keep the same forever open as a public pleasure ground." She loved the idea of public parks and wanted to preserve the beauty of their land for public use. It was a remarkable act of public generosity and the property today is described as containing a variety of natural habitats including wetlands, vernal pools, forest, fields and thickets.

But it has not been an easy century for the Park. As reported earlier this year in the *Burlington Union*, "For much of its existence, though, the site has been neglected, rarely used, and the subject of possible development." Dating from almost the time of the gift there was controversy over Boston's handling of the land and its finances. Extensive efforts were made to break Mary's will and sell the land, most recently for development.

In 2007 a group of local residents created an organization called The Friends of Mary Cummings Park and set out to protect and improve the grounds and its facilities. I'm pleased to report that they have succeeded. In fact, they were recently named Volunteers of the Year by The Trustees, Massachusetts' largest land conservation and preservation organization. The Trustees has also assumed management responsibilities for the Park, and is working on a final agreement with the city and its new supportive mayor to protect and improve the park.

There is still a Cummings family connection to the land. Warren Cummings, 81, a 2nd-great nephew of John and Mary, lives across the street from the barn location and has been cutting fields for decades. His brother Dave, who passed away last year, was a longtime active member of the Friends Group. ♪



ABOVE: JOHN CUMMINGS FARM WAGONS; FARMHANDS STARTING THE 4.5 HOUR TRIP TO BOSTON TO SELL CROPS AT MARKET. BELOW: A GROUP OF FARMHANDS AND A YOUNG GIRL AT CUMMINGS FARM IN ITS HEYDAY. SEE MORE HISTORICAL PHOTOS AT MARYCUMMINGSPARK.ORG IN "GALLERIES."

A Spy in the Family and Other Lore

By Sharon Sorensen



Our Cummings family lore says we might have an ancestor who conducted secret Civil War missions for the Union Army and was a friend of Ulysses S. Grant.

But I'm getting ahead of my story.

Even the best researched family has its mysteries. Those of us who try to make sense out of our family history know the reality (and frustration) of "brick walls" all too well. It may have been an unresolved story about one of our ancestors that lured us into genealogy in the first place – and then hooked us into spending decades trying to figure out the rest of our family puzzles.

I still have a few unsolved puzzles in my family tree. I'd like to share my biggest one with you in the hope that someone may have insights that help me move closer to understanding some fascinating nineteenth century family tales that have so far defied proof.

Mary Cummings was my 2nd-great grandmother and the 4th-great granddaughter of Isaac Cummings through his son Isaac. That's 11 generations down to me from Isaac. Born in 1806, Mary was married to Clement Willis, a prominent Boston merchant, banker, church deacon, alderman and state legislator. They had nine children including Charles Justin Willis who was born in 1833. That's Charles in uniform in the top photo at left. On the back of the photo my father, George Clement Willis, wrote, "My grandfather



during Civil War 1865.” There is also some writing that appears to be from Charles Justin himself, but we can’t read it. It’s nice to have that old image.

Charles married, had a child, divorced and remarried. I descend from his second marriage. My great grandparents Charles and his second wife Susan Talbot with their five children are in the bottom photo on the facing page. A handsome family and another nice family memento.

Charles attended the famous Boston Latin School, the oldest existing school in the United States, as did at least one of his brothers. When Charles was 53, an 1886 volume cataloging the school’s alumni said he was worked in the Clerk Assessor’s Office. Census and other public records from throughout his life also gave Charles’ occupation as that of “Clerk.” Did he spend most of his working years in the Assessor’s Office?

This is where the mystery part of Charles’ story comes into play, because family lore about Charles’ activities is anything but as normal as a career as a clerk of any sort. That lore (or legend?) contains a legacy of derring-do that I and other serious researchers including ICFA’s Sherry Milham and Susan Thompson have been unable to verify, most especially his Civil War experiences.

In an audio tape recollection from the mid-90, my father recounted several popular family stories about Charles:

“He led a very interesting life, as he was from a very wealthy family and he had his own yacht at one time and was sailing around the world, but it crashed somewhere off the coast of Australia. Later on, he was a mule skinner, a miner and fought in the Civil War. He was a major under US Grant, and would go on scouting expeditions behind the enemy lines. One time, he was captured and escaped after a short time. Another time, they wanted him to go behind the lines, so they dressed him in a confederate uniform. He was put in a prison with 5 or 6 other confederates and was allowed to escape so that he could get behind the lines to get information that was wanted. He got back safely.”

Charles’ post-Civil War family history suggested he was financially secure in some way. His father’s wealth may be one explanation. He had a home in and another outside of Boston. My father visited the country home as a boy and was impressed. Charles was also said to drive a two-horse carriage. All of which would have been handy because another fascinating part of the Charles legend is

that US Grant was a friend who would stay with Charles and his family when he visited Boston.

For all the fun and exotic nature of the Charles stories, my problem as a genealogist is that after years of digging the things I can prove are mostly the basics: who his parents and siblings were, his marriages, children, and key life dates. Given his origins, his financial status story is not unreasonable. Maybe he was just a quiet family man from a wealthy family. As for his international yachting story, in 1886 he was made Fleet Captain of the American Yacht Club in Newburyport, Massachusetts. Mule skinner and miner? Who knows, but he married at 27 and had a lot of youthful years to play. Why not believe at least some of it?

At the core of our mystery is Charles’ Civil War service where we have found no evidence to corroborate any of the family derring-do lore. There are a few other men named Charles Willis in Civil War military records but none from Massachusetts and none in the federal pension records I’ve seen. All we have is multi-generational family hearsay that Charles was a Major in the Union Army serving with Grant and the photo of Charles in a Union uniform.

Even without the spy and friend of Grant stories, you might assume that the life of a seemingly well-connected mid-nineteenth century Bostonian with service as a Civil War officer would be a fairly open book. Well, not so far for me. I’m stumped. I accept that there is often some truth to old family mysteries, but also think that how much truth depends on what you want to believe. After decades of research I’m not sure what to believe.

Can you help me make more sense of my Charles Willis Mystery?

Oh yes, I almost forgot one other interesting tidbit – Charles’ wife Susan, my great grandmother, carried a .38 cal. Smith & Wesson pistol in a leather holster engraved on the edges with small flowers. We have both.

Sharon Sorensen has been a genealogist for more than 30 years and an ICFA member since 2013. In this article she shares her “brick wall” family mystery and seeks your advice about where to go from here and how to think about what she knows.

Sharon can be reached at sharon.sorensen@live.com.

Our New Autosomal DNA Project

by Susan Thompson

Do you know how many patrilineal male descendants carry Isaac Cummings' DNA or how many individuals are descended through female Isaac Cummings lines? A few answers can be found below but with our new ICFA autosomal DNA project and your help we're hoping to find many, many more.

Since 2015 our Association has operated a Y-DNA project investigating the origins of the Isaac Cummings male line. But what about the rest of his descendants, some named Cummings but most not? Who are they, where did they come from, what are their names, and where did they go?

Every person included on a tree is an integral part of a much larger genealogical family tree. We all have a role to play, whether it be to provide historical context, family stories or DNA samples. Our goal as Isaac Cummings-related researchers is to broaden our understanding of our huge family, its origins, migration patterns, achievements past and present, occupations and connections. We're all trying to grow our life stories that make us who we are.

Today, the Isaac Cummings Family Tree in the private ICFA members-only database documents contains over 35,000 individuals born over at least 15 generations -- about 17,600 males, 17,000 females and 4,000 unique surnames. The records include descendants born in 15 countries and every state but one. (Can you guess the state where no one was born? You can find the answer later in this article.) There are many new stories and connections to forge.

With the help of our members who have taken or will take a designated autosomal DNA test, we are developing an Autosomal DNA Project to pair with our Y-DNA project.

[Autosomal DNA is inherited from the 22 pairs of autosomal chromosomes of both our parents as opposed to just the Y sex chromosome of our fathers.] Using both types of DNA research, we can identify the potential DNA segments passed on through our Cummings ancestry, broaden our understanding of ethnicity and migration patterns within the family lines, identify new Cummings ancestors, and even break through brick walls. More importantly we can expand the stories not only of our early ancestors, but recent ones as well and assist members in developing their own genetic family tree.

Diahan Southard's book "Your DNA Guide, The Book," tells us an autosomal DNA project "will focus on generations closer than your 4X great grandparents and will ask not for the names of specific ancestors, but just good genealogy leads and next steps." We will strive to do the same.

We will also employ a helpful approach called "Triangulation, which genetic genealogist Blaine Bettinger defines as "a process or method by which three or more people all sharing an overlapping segment of DNA in common and compare their family trees in order to identify a common ancestor or ancestral couple shared by all."

Roberta Estes, another genetic genealogy expert who produces an excellent website and blog called dna-explained.com has written extensively about triangulation and highlighted several issues of importance to our new Cummings Autosomal Project.

- Early families with a very large number of descendants may have many matching and triangulated members, even 9 or 10 generations later.
- While exactly 50% of each ancestor's DNA is not passed in each generation, on average, you will carry 7 cM (cM refers to centimorgan, a unit of testing measurement and genetic linkage) of your ancestors 10 generations back in your tree. However, you may carry more, or none.
- The percentage of matching descendants decreases with each generation beyond great-grandparents.
- The ideal situation for triangulation is a significant number of people, greater than three, who descend from the same ancestor (or ancestral couple) through different children whose spouses in descendant generations are not also related.
- This means that tree completion is an important factor in match/triangulation reliability.

As some of us know from our personal research, the Cummings tended to be farmers in the early years and there were lots of them. DNA experts have noted that large families as seen in early farming communities are a useful tool for identifying early ancestors. Hopefully this characteristic will also help in our search to identify our genetic trees and development of our genealogical tree.

We plan to begin the Autosomal Project by gathering the names of members who have already participated in Autosomal DNA testing. We will evaluate segment data available through testing companies and/or transfer information into a designated project where segment information can be evaluated. We have already started compiling a list of members who have taken autosomal tests and will be reminding members again soon about taking such tests.

This fall, as part of ICFA's first Zoom-like online Annual Meeting, we will be conducting a seminar titled "Getting the most out of your DNA results at Ancestry.com" for starters.

If we combine the efforts of old-fashioned genealogy research with the results obtained through Y and Autosomal DNA projects, our story of the many, many families who descend from Isaac Cummings via both maternal and paternal lines over fifteen or more generations will be enlightening. We hope to be better able to answer such questions as who are we, where did we come from, how many male descendants carry the Cummings name and how many individuals are descended through female Cummings lines?

Please get involved and let us know if you or yours have taken or want to take an autosomal test.

Still thinking about which U.S. state does not yet show an Isaac descendant in our database? The answer is Arkansas.

Susan can be reached at skthompson71@comcast.net

2021 ZOOM REUNION REPORT

The ICFA Board is pleased to confirm that a 2021 Reunion event will be held online on a Saturday in October or November using Zoom-like distribution technology.

We are currently surveying members and presenters and will soon announce the date and details. It will be a full Cummings Reunion and is expected to include both autosomal and Y-DNA seminars, a historical research program, both board and General Session meetings, and a digital version of the always fun closing Charitable Auction. Stay tuned.

Sheila Arestad, Reunion Chair

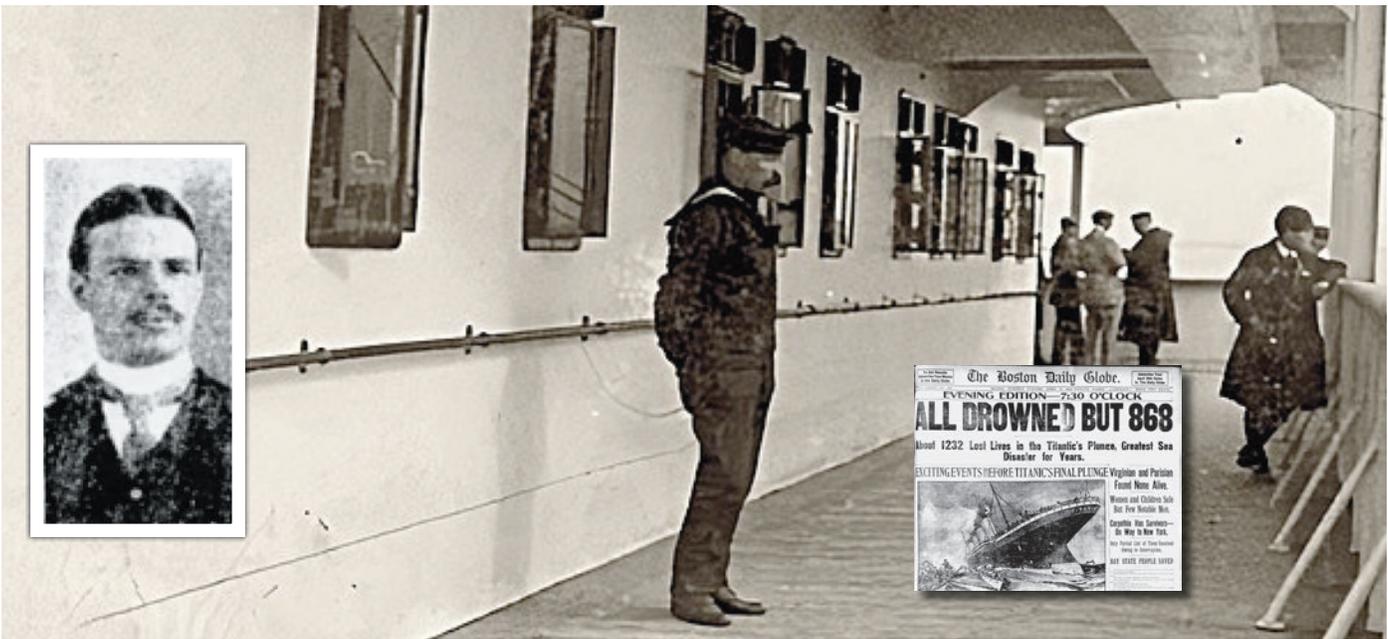
Treasurer's Report

ICFA's financial position has held fairly steady this past year. Our cash outflows over the past 12 months have been less than forecast. In part due to postponing some activities and their related expenses. Membership income is trending above budget for 2021, thanks to new members, prompt membership renewals, and those who have become lifetime members this year. Annual income for 2021 should be around \$4,500.

We continue to support our successful Y-Chromosome DNA project with more than 50 men participating and encourage additional members to be tested and join. During the past year the Executive Committee has done a thorough review of our founding constitution and bylaw documents with an eye to updating them for easier compliance and use and our recommendations for changes will be presented at our Zoom-like online Reunion event this fall. The process may involve additional expenses for legal review and for state and federal filings of the updated documents. Expenses for our outside professional partners, including website management and Chronicles publication, and financial advisors for annual tax and 501(c)(3) requirements will likely cost \$3,000 to 4,000 this year. Expenses related to the Reunion will fall short of the original expected total as we transition to a virtual event for 2021 and some Reunion funds and costs will be moved forward to 2022 when we hope to be able to meet in person again.

We continue to monitor our financial activities closely to ensure the long term fiscal health of ICFA.

Tamara Larson, Treasurer
treasurer@isaaccummingsfamily.org



TITANIC'S FORWARD A DECK PHOTO BY THE ODELL FAMILY, WHO LEFT THE SHIP IN IRELAND, FROM WIKIMEDIA COMMONS/ENCYCLOPEDIA-TITANICA.ORG/THE-ODELL-TITANIC-ALBUM.HTML. INSET OF JOHN BRADLEY CUMINGS FROM BOSTON *GLOBE* 1912/ENCYCLOPEDIA-TITANICA.ORG. BOSTON *GLOBE* HEADLINE FROM NEWSPAPERS.COM.

My Family's *Titanic* Memories

By Sarah Cumings Morse

On April 15, 1912 my great grandfather John Bradley Cumings, the 10th generation grandson of Isaac Cummings, died on the *Titanic* at the age of 39. His wife, Florence, was rescued. The world has since read countless stories and books and watched scores of films and television programs about the disaster. Here are some personal recollections and insights from our family's story.

I was told at an early age the story of Florence's experience on the *Titanic*. Unfortunately I was not able to hear the story from her firsthand as she died before I was born, but I heard it many times from my father and aunts. The reminiscences I want to share with you are largely from our family memories: How did she and her husband Bradley come to be on the *Titanic*? What happened that night and then afterwards? How did she survive the death of her husband and so many others that terrible night?

John Bradley Cumings was born in 1872 in Boston the son of John Wells Cumings, a sugar importer, and Abba M. Clark. John and Florence Thayer were married in 1896 and by the turn of the century they were

in Manhattan where he was a Wall Street Stockbroker and partner in the firm of Cumings & Marckwald. They had three sons, John Bradley, Jr. who was my grandfather, Wells who died at 18 in the battle of Belleau Wood during World War I, and Thayer.

In early March 1912, John and Florence took a leisurely business and pleasure trip to Europe. Six weeks later they booked their return to New York on the *Titanic* and sailed out of Cherbourg on April 10. The trip was the ship's maiden voyage and was expected to last about 5 ½ days. Shortly before midnight on April 14 about two days sailing from New York the ship hit an iceberg at nearly top speed and sank within three hours. Less than a third of the roughly 2,200 people on aboard survived.

After the collision, John and Florence went to the boat deck and waited with other first class passengers at lifeboat 4 until it was finally lowered around 1:20 am when the *Titanic* was seriously listing. Like so many women on board the *Titanic*, Florence refused to leave her husband, but finally relented when he told her that he would follow in a later boat. Little did she know that her lifeboat would be the last to leave the ship.

Florence never spoke of her last moments on the *Titanic*, remembering – or only saying – that it was “terribly cold.” The week after the sinking a story ran in the New York Evening Journal mentioning “a pathetic case growing out of the *Titanic* disaster is that of Mrs. J. Bradley Cumings [whose husband] perished with the ship. Mrs. Cumings, confined in her bed since her arrival on the [rescue ship] *Carpathia*, clings today to the hope that her husband still lives. Although suffering from exposure and shock she persists in rising from her pillow to say: ‘My husband is alive; you will find him somewhere.’”

A relative of Mrs. Cumings told a reporter that she believed her husband was picked up by a schooner or a lifeboat, insisting that all the boats have not been accounted for. She has told her relatives that she saw a schooner in the vicinity of the wreck shortly after the *Titanic* went down.

A new book about Florence Cumings’ experiences on the *Titanic* has been written by Louella Bryant, a member of our family. She says that although Lifeboat 4 was among the first to be loaded, as it was lowered it hung up at an uncomfortable angle on a sounding spar (used for measuring sea depth in harbors). A crew member broke into a firebox, took the axe, and chopped away the spar, which made Lifeboat 4 the eighth of twenty lifeboats to be lowered to the water.

Also aboard Lifeboat 4 was Madeleine Astor, the pregnant New York socialite wife of the prominent American businessman John Jacob Astor IV. When their lifeboat arrived at the *Carpathia*, its captain, Arthur Rostron, gave up his stateroom to Florence, Madeline and two other women from Philadelphia – the heiress Eleanor Widener and Marian Thayer. All lost their husbands that night.

Six weeks later in early June, still dressed in deep black of mourning, Florence and Marian Thayer arrived at Madeleine Astor’s home through a “cordon of photographers and moving picture operators” in a highly publicized event to honor and say thank you to Captain Rostron.

Six years later the *Carpathia*, a Cunard liner, was sunk by a German submarine off the coast of Ireland.

Louella Bryant also tells a lovely and not well known story about Florence and her friendship with First Class *Titanic* steward Andrew Cunningham. According to Cunningham’s 1912 Congressional testimony, he and his fellow steward Sidney Siebert leaped into the water at



ABOVE: FLORENCE CUMINGS PICTURED WITH HER SONS THAYER, WELLS AND JOHN, JR. (SOURCE: SARAH MORSE)

2:00 a.m. on April 15. From the water they watched the *Titanic* sink and then swam to the closest lifeboat, Number 4, where Florence Cumings hauled them aboard and covered them with her coat. Siebert was overcome by the cold and died at Florence’s feet. To distract Mr. Cunningham, she asked him to go around the boat and report to her who was aboard. He counted 55 survivors aboard Lifeboat 4 when they reached *Carpathia*.

Florence requested that Mr. Cunningham visit her each time he was in New York and their friendship continued until he died in 1932.

The body of John B. Cumings was never recovered. Florence had a memorial erected for him in the family plot at the Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with the inscription: “Greater love hath no man than this – that a man lay down his life for his friends.”

In 1921 Florence remarried to Chester Swain, an oil company lawyer. She died in 1949.

Over the years I’ve learned that each *Titanic* family has a special story. The bravery and resilience of my great-grandmother and her experience is mine.

Member Sarah Morse is Historian of the Society of Mayflower Descendants in the State of New York and recently retired as Executive Director of the organization after more than 20 years. She is herself a Mayflower descendant through a Cumings line marriage to a descendant of John Alden and another to Stephen Hopkins. She can be reached at smorse@mayflowernewyork.org.

ICFA POSTCARD INITIATIVE

ICFA is always thinking about how to positively attract attention to itself and gain new members. One idea was to create a three-fold brochure with a tear off membership application and another was to send out a postcard. Postcards won out due to both ease and cost factors. My daughter and ICFA member, Sarah Powelson, created the postcard seen here. The front of the card has the name of our association and what we are. The back provides a QR code that can be scanned with a smart phone to make it easier to reach our site.

I used a national online directory and searched for an A. Cummings, B. Cummings and so on in every state starting with Alabama and finishing up with Wyoming. **One thousand postcards have now been mailed!** Be sure to let me know if you hear from a relative who received one. Time will tell if this approach has merit. I am asking every new membership how they heard about us and am waiting to hear this response..."Well, I got a really nice postcard in the mail".

Darla Jarvis, Membership Chair
icfamembership@gmail.com



DATABASE REPORT

ICFA Database access is an important member benefit. Usernames and passwords are emailed after membership applications are received. Members may update usernames and passwords as necessary. The database has a wealth of information about our Cummings ancestors and their collateral lines. If you are new to the database, start by entering a name in the green box located on the lower right-hand corner of the Welcome Page. Click on the name of the individual and you will be taken to the Individual's Profile Page. The page is filled with details that are worth reviewing multiple times. Click on tabs titled Family, Ancestors or Descendants to view family trees. Trees can be printed or downloaded by clicking on the PDF tab. If you notice missing family members or inaccurate information, please send me an email indicating what is missing or inaccurate, along with documentation to support the correction. Your efforts will help grow the size and scope of the ICFA Database and will be greatly appreciated.

Susan Thompson, Archives and Database Chair, skthompson71@comcast.net

When you're not a Cummings...but your DNA says you are!

ICFA launched its private Y-Chromosome DNA project in 2015. Since only males carry Y chromosomes, Y-DNA testing is particularly useful to study male-line descent. The program now has test results from 50 male participants, most from ICFA member families. This article is the fourth in a series of *Chronicles* reports by project co-administrators JOHN CLEARY and TIM CUMMINGS. The first three reports can be found in past issues available on the newsletter page at our website.

When doing genetic genealogy, sometimes we can get tangled up in the science, with its *genetic distances*, *SNPs*, *clusters*, *centiMorgans*, and all the other linguistic porridge we throw around. But we should never forget that what we are trying to do is just what any other genealogist wants to do – solve family relationships, work out who descends from whom, and learn some of the history of those ancestors we discover. This article looks at how DNA solved family mysteries for two members of our Project.

A mystery grandpa

Clint Exley was an early adopter of this new-fangled DNA genealogy thing, taking a Y-DNA 37-marker test to help break through his brick walls. He had no idea of who his grandpa **Albert Exley**, born somewhere in the Midwest (maybe Nebraska, his father's home state), descended from. He had no birth records for Albert, just a record of his enlisting in the US Army in 1942.

In 2018 Clint thought he would have a go at upgrading his test to 111 markers. In the meantime, he had discovered that his grandpa had been adopted by an Exley couple in 1912, and there was a possible original birth surname – Cummings. Imagine his surprise that instead of almost no matches, as he had with his original test back in the 00's, he now had no fewer than 40 of them. And most of them were called – Cummings. So he joined our Y-DNA Project.

Another mystery grandpa

Julie and **Steve Hesler** had been doing a similar hunt for the original birth of Steve's grandad, Lehman Hesler, who was born in 1911. Steve had the advantage of knowing that his grandad had taken his step-father's surname of Hesler during the 1920s, but was born as **Lehman Cumings**; and even knew the name of Lehman's dad, **William P. Cumings**. However, William's origins and life after his divorce from Lehman's mother were shrouded in obscurity.

Steve ordered a Y-37 DNA test and was, like Clint, astonished to discover that he had 40-50 new matches, most of them brandishing that surname again – Cummings. Steve

and Julie immediately joined the ICFA DNA Project, and ordered some upgrades on his test right up to Big Y in order to find out the most they could about these new genetic relatives and ancestors.

Back to the genealogy

After joining the ICFA Y-DNA Project, both testers would discover not just who their grandfathers were, but also how they were part of the deep historic lineage of Isaac Cummings of Topsfield, Massachusetts. Their Cummings DNA test results now provided them with clues that let them return to the traditional hard work of genealogical research and start putting together a family tree to explain their new-found ancestry.

Clint's research story

With our assistance, Clint now knew that he was searching not just for someone called Cummings, but for a particular line of Cummings. The search could be concentrated on Isaac's descendants using ICFA's excellent genealogical database. More documents came to light – an obituary pointed the team towards a birth for Albert in Des Moines, Iowa. The 1920 US Census showed Albert living with Orville and Mary Exley in Nebraska as their adopted son, age 13, and confirmed Iowa for his birth state. Knowing where he was born led to an Iowa Delayed Birth Certificate for Albert, made at the time of his 1942 enlistment – and confirming his name at birth as Albert Cummings.

This document brought a new clue: the names of Albert's birth parents, **Walter Uriah Cummings** and Maggie Height. Now Albert could be spotted as an infant with his widowed mother in the 1910 US Census, with three older siblings, in Washington, Iowa. Walter was an older father (there were also older adult children), and he would die within a couple of years of Albert's birth at 59. So what happened to lead to Albert's adoption at a young age? It's not clear – his mother can be found remarrying to a Jack Stephens in 1911, but by the 1920 Census Stephens is recorded with a different wife (one of 4 he had at different times). Maggie was counted living with her father as Mae Cummings, a divorcée, and

still using that surname at her death in 1939. But Albert's life had moved on, to Nebraska and his life as an Exley.

So, who was Walter Uriah Cummings – who must be a descendant of Isaac? But before we answer that, let's return to the other mystery grandpa.

Steve's research story

Julie and Steve knew that Steve's great-grandfather was a **William P. Cumings** from Kansas, but he was their brick wall, the name being fairly common across the state. But the Y-37 marker test showed that William P. had to be another descendant of the Isaac Cummings fraternity, unknown to the ICFA database.

It was straightforward to find William in the 1910 Census, with his wife Grace and Lehman's known older brother Claude, at the home of Grace's parents in Cedar, Woods Co, Oklahoma. By 1920, both Claude and Lehman – still using the surname Cummings for now – were living with Grace and her new husband, their stepfather, John L. Hesler, in Elwood, Kansas. Ten years later with John dead, Claude had taken on the role of head of family, and both brothers had become Hesler. So tracking Lehman's maternal ancestry looked easy enough, but the origins of William P. remained somewhat foggy.

Julie tenaciously tracked down some key records through FOIA requests and with the help of a county clerk in Woods Co, Oklahoma. A divorce decree from Grace (1914) revealed William's middle initial P, and this would become an important clue. In 1918 a Will Parry Cummings, aged 36, of Mooreland, Oklahoma, was drafted and named Nancy Jane Cummings of Togo, OK, as his nearest relative. A 1939 SSN application for a William Perry Cummings, born 1882 and living in Kanute, Kansas, named parents Nancy J. Hunt and **Abiel L. Cummings**. The age of this William fitted with the age of 25 given in the marriage record to Grace in 1908 and the 1918 draft papers. Though the connection between all these records is a little weak, it seems to be our man – but linked to the DNA signal pointing to an Isaac Cummings line the identification looked firm.

Could we finish the hunt by connecting both these mid-western mystery great-grandpas right back into the Isaac line?

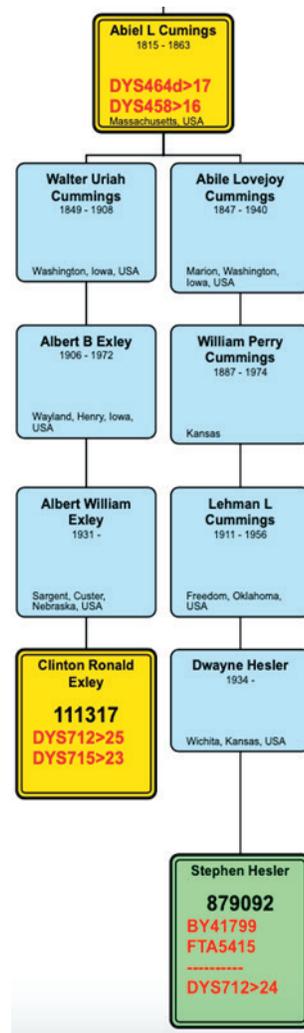
Sprinkle a little more DNA, and stir ...

Steve's and Clint's DNA results gave some intriguing further clues. Firstly, they shared a mutation on the Y marker DYS413 with a few other members of the Project which we have written about in earlier articles, and have dubbed the '21-23'. We are now fairly certain that this mutation first appeared in Isaac's grandson, 'Sergeant' John Cumming of Boxford, Massachusetts, b. 1657. All the living men with this mutation are John's descendants which seems to mark

membership of this Isaac branch.

Steve and Clint have their own unique Y mutations, but they also *share* a unique mutation that is not found in any other 21-23 branch descendants (DYS458=16 for those who like to know the mutation details). Even more intriguing is that Steve and Clint are also autosomal test DNA matches. They share 48 cM, an amount of shared DNA pointing to a relationship somewhere around third cousins, including half 3rd cousins or 3rd cousins once removed. *This example shows how Y and autosomal DNA test results are really types of evidence that need to be used together, integrated with each other and genealogical research, to get the best results.*

This additional evidence created intriguing possibilities. What if the new ancestors revealed so far, Walter Uriah Cummings (Clint's great-grandfather) and Abiel L. Cummings (Steve's 2nd-great-grandfather), were closely related? Abiel was raising a family in the 1880s when William P. was born, and we know Walter was an older father at Albert's birth in 1906, dying soon after. If these two men were brothers, then Steve and Clint would indeed be 3rd cousins once removed. Could this be just a bit of optimistic speculation?



More genealogy and a solution, but...

After more genealogical searching we were able to prove that Steve and Clint really are 3rd cousins once removed, just as predicted by the autosomal DNA test. The genealogy research was complex and the full story will be told in a planned full report on the discoveries of the ICFA Y-DNA Project. It was found that Steve's ancestor Abiel and Clint's ancestor Walter were indeed brothers – sons of another **Abiel L. Cummings (Sr.)** and his wife Susannah (née McDowell). There is no doubt that Abiel Sr. is a descendant of Isaac Cummings, since the DNA tests taken by the two living descendants prove this. This is not just great news for Steve and Clint, but also for ICFA, as the DNA Project has added a new Isaac descent line to its ICFA database – and a new story waits to be discovered and written.



Clint (left) and Steve met for the first time in Atlanta in June 2021.

Solving one mystery often throws up another – in this case how does Abiel Sr. connect to the Isaac Cummings line, and when and how did this family branch split away from the ancestral home in New England? At the top of his tree, DNA shows he descends from John of Boxford 1657, grandson of Isaac, because of John's distinctive 21-23 Y mutation. But between John and Abiel there remains a puzzle, and a genealogical trail leading from Boxwood, Massachusetts, through New Hampshire, Ohio and Iowa. It seems to involve a Cummings family group – possible brothers and sisters of Abiel Sr. – who lived, worked and traded on the Ohio river, milling flour at Steubenville, Ohio, and then floating it down the river on flatboats to New Orleans. It leads to more people who travelled on farther west as routes were opened to Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma and beyond.

Finding the answers to Clint's and Steve's family mysteries has created these new questions in the history of the ICFA lineage. The next project is to research this new family history in the records of the time and with the help of both Y and autosomal DNA from more Isaac descendants.

This is a shortened version of John and Tim's full report. A full version will be available in the DNA PROJECTS section of the ICFA website at isaaccummingsfamily.org.

MEMBERSHIP REPORT

I am pleased to report 118 current members: 79 Individual memberships, 31 Family, and 8 Lifetime. Individual Memberships cost only \$20 and Family Memberships are priced at just \$25. A \$400 Lifetime Membership includes the purchaser, spouse and children under the age of 18 for the life of the purchaser and is a great arrangement for younger members. Don't forget you can also sign up new members from your family, which we encourage you to do. Most members now use our website (isaaccummingsfamily.org) to conveniently renew and purchase memberships using PayPal. The website's membership page also provides the mailing address where you can make payment by check if you prefer, or you can use the form on the last page of this newsletter.

Darla Jarvis, Membership Chair

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

Kathy Bolanowski Essex, CT
Brenda Booker Fort Wayne, IN
Sherry Caves & Family Hancock, WI
Tricia Cole Garden City, MI
Susan Cumings College Station, TX
Allen & Rhonda Cummings Peabody, MA
Francis Cummings & Family Acton, MA
Mark Cummings & Family White Lake, MI
Marvin A. Cummings Oak Creek, WI
Randy Cummings Clinton, CT
Robert Cummings & Family Superior, WI
Roger Cummings Hanson Jr. & Family Garrett, PA
Scott Cummings Chicago, IL
Janine Hall Jonesboro, GA
Todd Hinchy Lockport, NY
Ronald Kelly Washington, DC
Chris McGath Palm Bay, FL
Rebecca Miller Freeport, ME
Jillison Parks Savannah, GA
Anita Reeb Lockport, NY
Kristie Rogers Alden, NY
Mike Ross Edwards, CO
Austin Sloan San Diego, CA
Gary P. Cummings Family Rochester, MN
Cheryl Hollis Shepherd Knoxville, TN
John Wetherwax N Tonawanda, NY

**A NATIONAL GENEALOGICAL ORGANIZATION FOR DESCENDANTS AND RESEARCHERS OF
THE EARLY AMERICAN COLONIST ISAAC CUMMINGS (1601–1677)**

ABOUT ICFA

Isaac Cummings arrived in the Massachusetts Bay Colony with his wife and family from Essex, England, about 1635. He died in Topsfield, Massachusetts, in 1677. His American descendants today number in the hundreds of thousands. The Isaac Cummings Family Association (ICFA) was organized in the mid-1990's by a small group of these descendants who were serious family historians independently exploring their Cummings family ancestry. Their objective was to organize and share their efforts to discover, collect, and preserve information about the history and genealogy of Isaac's American families and honor them as nation-building pioneers. For the past quarter century, ICFA has helped Isaac's descendants and researchers find and understand their shared Cummings heritage and family connections. ICFA holds national reunions, publishes a newsletter, operates a DNA testing project, maintains an online genealogical database and archive, and supports traditional and genetic research into the history of Isaac and his English ancestors.

MEMBERSHIP

Membership is open to descendants of Isaac Cummings and anyone who is interested in Isaac's descendant families and the ICFA. Annual memberships are \$20 for an individual and \$25 for a family including spouse and children under 18. Membership runs for a full calendar year beginning January 1 and entitles members to access the private ICFA Genealogy Database, receive the *Cummings Chronicles* newsletter, Reunion information and other communications during the membership period. Lifetime Memberships are also available at a cost of \$400, twenty times the current individual rate of \$20. A Lifetime Membership includes spouse and children under 18 for the duration of the purchasing member's life. Membership funds are used to defray the Association's operating costs. Members who do not pay dues by January 1 become delinquent and are placed on the inactive list.

If you have a child, grandchild or relative with an interest in family history, give them the gift of an ICFA membership and get them involved as an active member of the ICFA family.

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION / RENEWAL

NOTE: This application is also available online at ICFA's Web site (isaaccummingsfamily.org) where dues payment can be made using your PayPal account.

Check one: New Member Renewal

Type of Membership: Individual \$20.00 Family \$25.00 Lifetime \$400.00

Name (s): _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Email: _____ Phone: _____

Note: Your email address will be used only for ICFA newsletter and other communications purposes.



Please make your check or money order payable to Isaac Cummings Family Association and send both form and check to:

**Darla Jarvis
23 Pulpit Rock Road
Raymond, ME 04071**

For more information, please email at: icfamembership@gmail.com

ICFA is a nonprofit 501(c)3 organization and my contribution may help defray expenses involved in operating ICFA. I understand that membership is from January 1st to December 31st of each calendar year. I acknowledge that ICFA may have access to my contact information. Furthermore, I trust the honest intent of the Association's volunteer board members and other leaders and hold them harmless of any actions and obligations.