

SCOTT HOUSE JOURNAL



President's Message

Since our last issue, we have elected our new Executive Board and Officers for the 2020-2022 term. I am honored to introduce myself and grateful for the opportunity to help further the Ridgefield Historical Society's mission.

The Society's Nominating Committee worked arduously this summer to both identify areas to support our continued growth and to better apply various skills of our existing talented Board members. We are overjoyed to welcome new members with superb experience and insight and to congratulate those taking on new roles.

I would like to recognize our outgoing president, Sara Champion, who took the reins in March to complete the term of former president Sharon Dunphy. We are extremely grateful to Sara for her

Three Centuries of Voting

Ridgefielders, at least some of them, have been voting since the early 18th Century, when the first town meetings were convened. Not all residents of the town were allowed to cast a ballot: Universal suffrage in Ridgefield did not become a reality for all elections until 1920, when women gained access to the vote with the 19th Amendment. Black men had attained the right to vote with the passage of the 15th Amendment to the Constitution in 1870, and it wasn't until 1971, with the 26th Amendment, that young adults, 18 and older, could vote.

In 2020, the year of the coronavirus pandemic, the tradition of going to the polls in person has been altered by Connecticut's decision to make absentee ballots available to all voters who request them. So on Nov. 3, some people will pick up felt-tip pens and mark ovals on paper ballots, which they'll then feed

into optical scanning machines, while others will have marked their ballots at home, sealed them in envelopes and dispatched them via the U.S. Postal Service or delivered them to the special ballot drop-box at Town Hall.

The first votes of the Ridgefield proprietors were taken in 1708 and 1709 in Norwalk, where most of the founders lived; according to Rockwell (*The History of Ridgefield Connecticut*, George L. Rockwell, 1927),



John Copp recorded Ridgefield's first votes, which were actually taken in Norwalk. His tombstone is in East Norwalk Cemetery.

the first town meeting vote to take place in Ridgefield was in 1709. John Copp of Norwalk, a surveyor and school teacher, was selected as Ridgefield's first "Register" or town clerk.

dedication and commitment to the board. Taking on a leadership role during a pandemic was no easy feat. Under Sara's guidance, we were able to successfully continue our efforts during a very turbulent time.

Fortunately we have plenty to keep us busy this fall. Thanks to the sizable grants the Society received from the National Park Service's American Battlefield Protection Program and the Anne S. Richardson Fund, we have kicked off the first phase of our planning. To administer the National Park Service grant, we have formed a Battlefield Advisory group whose first task is to hire researchers for the project. Meanwhile, Richardson funding will support the continued outfitting of the Society's state-of-the-art vault with sliding-shelf storage units and acid-free preservation materials.

Also this October--with the support of the CT Humanities and the excellent work of our summer interns-- we have launched the Main Street Architecture walking tour through the ConnTours app. Uncover the architectural roots that make Ridgefield's main street what it is today--at your leisure!

We hope you enjoy our ongoing virtual programs and weekly eblasts.

Stay well, stay tuned, and thank you for your continued support. I look forward to serving the Ridgefield Historical Society to the best of my ability.

Tracy Seem

Voting was not only a civic duty, but a time to celebrate. According to the Hartford Courant, "Election Day was a holiday in colonial New England. There were parades, feasts, celebratory sermons and booming cannons. In Connecticut, citizens and their families often traveled great distances to vote. Their patriotic duty done, they would gather and gorge themselves on Election Cake, a state tradition since at least 1771."

This Ridgefield ballot from the late 19th Century was apparently used to tally vote totals as they were announced after the polls closed.

For many years, the paper ballot was the method of voting in Ridgefield and there was one polling location, at the meeting house, later known as town hall. But in 1914, a major change occurred with the introduction of a mechanical voting machine.

This description is from Jack Sanders' Who Was Who in Ridgefield:

"On Oct. 5, 1914, at 6 a.m., a dapper little man with a long waxed moustache and wearing spats entered the Ridgefield Town Hall. Municipal elections back then were in October, and the town had just bought a modern replacement for the paper ballot system that had been used for two centuries. It cost \$600 — about \$15,000 today.

Officers for 2020-2022

President Tracy Seem, 1st Vice President Michele Mahland, 2nd Vice President Geoff Harrington, Treasurer Molly McGeehin, Recording Secretary Laurie McGavin Bachmann, Corresponding Secretary Nancy Selander.

Directors 2020-2022: Phil Esser, Betsy Reid, Sara Champion, Melanie Marks, Sharon Dunphy.

“Frederic Fayerweather became the first person in Ridgefield to cast a ballot using a voting machine.”

(Mr. Fayerweather, a Ridgefield native, was a renowned designer of stained glass windows for the Tiffany Studios and commuted by train to New York City from his Ridgefield home for more than four decades.)

In the early part of the 20th Century, women in Ridgefield, and throughout Connecticut, had

taken advantage of two suffrage laws that gave them the right to vote on matters related to schools (1893) and libraries (1909). Laura Curie Allee (wife of Dr. William Allee) told the story of women in Ridgefield making their first attempts to vote in 1912:

“Some years back, it seems, after a few intrepid women in Ridgefield had decided to vote on school questions and had given in their names to be made voters, when they came to be sworn the list was lost, and so they had not tried again. Dr. Allee spoke before our Equal Franchise League and agitated the question with every woman with whom he came in contact. Two hundred and six women gave their names to him to be made voters. Doctor made the list in duplicate. The day came for the registrars to meet, and the women went to the Town Hall to be made voters. Doctor was there, and I will never forget the amazement and confusion of the men that so many women came up to the scratch. The men fumbled around at their desks and whispered and conferred with each other, and finally we were told that the list had been mislaid. Doctor was all ready for them and handed in the duplicate list. Had it been the first time the list was handed in, it would have been void, but the original having been filed previously, they had to accept it. Cheers went up. The room was full, as well as the hall outside. We, we were all ‘made,’ and I assure you it was a sacred rite. I will never forget my first full suffrage vote.”

Women increased the voting rolls substantially following 1920’s ratification of the 19th Amendment and their presence was (somewhat archly) noted by The Ridgefield Press in its account of the municipal election, which took place on Oct. 4 that year.

Centered at the top of the front page: BIG VOTE POLLED AT ELECTION ON MONDAY; Many Women Participate—Operate Machines Like Veterans—Women Also Serve as Election Officials—Dr. Allee, Running Independent, Secured 63 Votes as School Committeeman—Republican Candidates Win—Democrats Make Strong Showing—Board of Finance Appropriations Approved.

The story continued:



Ridgefield used mechanical voting machines like this until 2007. They required no electricity.

“The annual election Monday was largely attended. For the first time women participated in the selection of town officers.

“Two voting machines were used. The women showed cleverness in their ability to properly use the voting machine and voted like veterans.

“The result of the voting was as follows:

WOMEN’S LIST,

Number of names on list	326
Number voting	218
Number not voting	108

MEN’S LIST

Total number on list	660
Number voting	410
Number not voting	250

That year, Republican Eldridge N. Bailey defeated Democrat Michael McGlynn, 366 to 250. Town voters also agreed to bond the town’s \$20,000 appropriation for “the new state road now being built by the state between Ridgefield and Branchville.”

With the town’s huge population increase beginning in the 1960s, voting was taking place at two and later three polling places. The third district was requested by the Registrars of Voters in 1987 and finally enacted by the Selectmen in 1989.

While sex was no longer an impediment to voting after 1920, the story of Jimmy Joe, the store owner who’s remembered in the place name, Joe’s Corner, is an example of other ways access to voting was limited.

In *Wicked Ridgefield* by Jack Sanders, the story of James Joseph (“Jimmy Joe”) includes this:

“In 1918, Joe Joseph [M.C. Joseph, Jimmy Joe’s brother] began operating Joe’s Store near the corner of Main Street and Danbury Road while Jimmy Joe opened a similar store in Georgetown. ...

“In the early 1940s, Joe Joseph died, and Jimmy Joe took over the Ridgefield store.

“He became a citizen in 1958, but could not become a voter because he couldn’t pass the literacy test — though he was well read in Arabic.

“When the Supreme Court banned literacy testing as a voting requirement in 1970, Jimmy Joe Joseph, well over 100 years old and a resident for nearly 70 years — walked into the office of Town Clerk Ruth Hurzeler to be sworn in as a voter.

“ ‘He had tears in his eyes,’ Hurzeler said later.

“So did she.”

How We Vote

(*From Old Ridgefield, Facebook; Nov. 6, 2018; by Jack Sanders*):

Ridgefield essentially uses paper ballots, a method that’s been around since ancient Rome. But instead of writing out the names of the people we want for each office on a piece of paper, as Romans and early Americans did, we blacken boxes next to their already printed names.

The pre-printed paper ballot began to be used in the middle 1800s, but the new twist is that instead of human eyes tallying the results of our choices, computers do the job. We feed our ballots into a high-tech machine that scans and counts all our votes.

From the mid-1800s until 1914, Ridgefielders turned in ballots that had the names of candidates printed on them, to be viewed and counted by election officials. Ballots could be pre-printed or entirely hand-written. One pre-printed ballot was provided by the Republican Party for Republicans and one by the Democratic Party for Democrats.

The technique of pre-printing ballots allowed each party to encourage their members to “vote the party line.” Just check off everyone on our list of names and you’re done!

However, a Republican voter using a Republican ballot could legally cross out a Republican name and instead insert the name of a Democrat — or any local citizen — for a given office. And, of course, Democrats could do the same switch on their ballots.

To make that possibility more difficult, parties started printing their ballots with the names of the candidates close together to make it hard to squeeze in a new name. Such may be the case with the late-1890s ballots that accompany this article.

The alternative to using a party ballot was to write out in longhand all your selections for elected officers on a blank ballot. That’s what unaffiliated voters did or what party members who liked to split their votes between the two parties’ candidates might do.

The arrival of voting machines in 1914 made it much easier and quicker for people to vote for the person instead of the party. The voter could simply push down a lever over the name of the candidate desired.



Another way to vote: This handmade voting box was used by the Italian-American Mutual Aid Society to anonymously record yes or no votes through the use of black or white marbles. It was donated to the Ridgefield Historical Society by Irene Tulipani Gray.

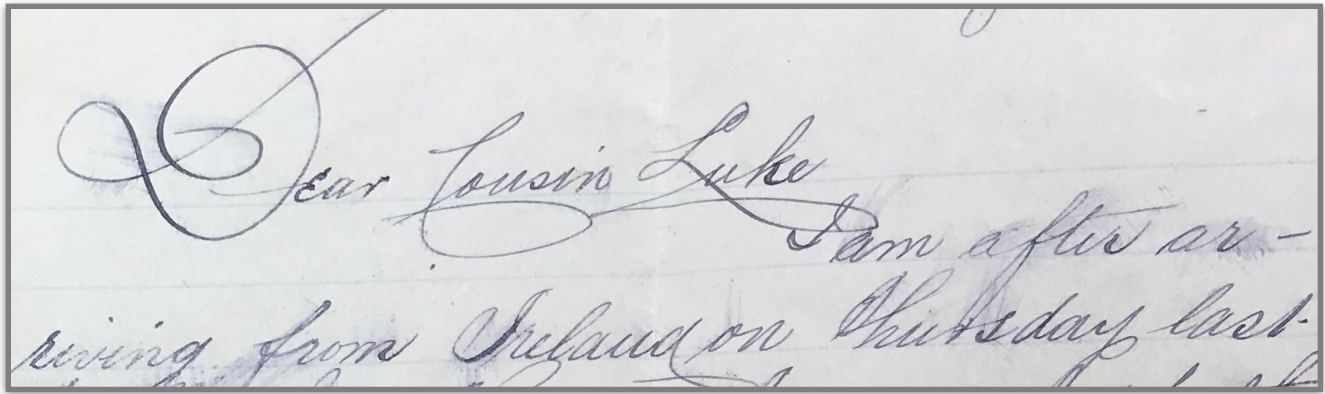
However, to appease party leaders — who didn’t want to lose the opportunity for people to vote “the party line,” voting machines included a special lever that allowed voters to, with one flick, select every Republican or every Democrat. Not only party bosses but lazy voters liked that.

Those machines were mechanical, consisting of a complex system of rods, switches, gears, and drums. However, each included a roll of paper, and, through a slot on the face of the machine, one could write in the names of people not on the ballot — just as one could write in candidates 200 years ago.

In 2007, Ridgefield introduced the current voting system, using paper ballots read by computers. The system was almost instantly cheered by both voters and by the election officials who disliked dealing with the clunky old mechanical machines.

Unlike many localities’ super-high-tech, all-electronic, paperless voting, Ridgefield’s system has a “paper trail.” You fill out your paper ballot and feed it into a tallying computer. If the computer fails or the election is challenged, all of the paper ballots still exist and can be recounted — by human eyes, if need be.

And it’s a system virtually impossible for Russians — or anyone else — to hack!



Dear Luke — An Irish immigrant experience

When Luke Joseph Kilcoyne died at the age of 79 in December 1947 he had been a Ridgefield resident for nearly 52 years. He moved to town permanently following his marriage to Ellen (“Nellie”) Nevins on New Year’s Day in 1896 in “the old Catholic Church” on Catoonah Street, where the Ridgefield congregation worshipped before St. Mary’s Church was built. (It was later the home of the Ridgefield Thrift Shop.)

The Ridgefield Historical Society archives include a collection of Kilcoyne papers, among them several letters that Mr. Kilcoyne had saved from his early years in the United States, when he and many other young people from Ireland were establishing themselves. Even with the support of family and friends who’d come before them, it wasn’t an easy life, as these letters make clear.

The earliest of the letters is from a friend, James Eddy, who describes his efforts to find work, both in Danbury, Conn., and in Brooklyn, N.Y. Danbury’s hatting industry was growing at the time and one of the ancillary businesses was the processing of rabbit pelts, or as Mr. Eddy describes it, “picking coneys.”

Brooklyn Nov the 30th, 1891

My Dear Friend Luke,

I take the pleasure of writing you a few lines hoping they may find you in good health as this leaves me at present thank God.

Luke, I come down here the morning after I was to see you and I went to Sacketts Shop to look for a job so he gave me a job picking coneys at 75 cents a hundred. I was the only man around there that knew anything about picking. When I went there there was 65 girls there picking on their knee. The best picker that was there then could not pick over 40 skins so he asked me if I would show them the way to pick on a [unclear] and that I would only have to look over their work and pass their skins. Now they are picking 170 a day he is giving me at the rate of what we were getting in Danbury. McIntyre sent me the letter that you sent me. It was my bad luck not to be around but nevertheless I am thankful to you and your foreman for thinking of me but like plenty more of the Irish I was born to be knocked about. I have not a very good time here except on Sunday nights we go around to visiting. We were over in New York last Sunday night [to] see John Gallagher and the

Sunday night before that I was at Catherine Brett of [unclear]'s wedding. She got married to a fellow by the name of Wemsby from Bridge of old rock.

The super that you worked for in J. Robinson's [unclear] is back again in Brooklyn and he is the super with Hitchcock's fur shop now. There is steady picking there for the last 3 years. There is men there getting 18\$ a week picking. Jim Walsh started there last week. [unclear] wanted me to go there to pick and that I could learn to dress at the same time. If our hand is any more mean to me it's a good thing I will know where to go to.

I heard that Jack Gildea and Anne Dorsey got married last week if you were in Danbury you would be at the wedding. Luke I am boarding with Pat Lundy and two of the O'Rourkes from [unknown]. So I must close my letter this time as I cannot think of any more. I conclude by sending you my best regards. I am the James Eddy. Good night.

The following letter appears to be from one of Luke Kilcoyne's sisters, possibly Anne, who lived in Chicago: it's signed, simply, "Me." She urges her brother to consider making a big move, for big opportunities. However, Luke, it seems, was already seeing Nellie, whose family had settled in Ridgefield where he was working.

Chicago
March 2nd, '93

Dear Brother Luke,

Your very welcome letter reached me a few days ago. We were very happy to hear from you and to know you are getting along good. I believe you thought it very mean of me for not writing you. I would have wrote you long since but I happened to lose your address somehow. I wrote to Annie Walsh and asked it of her. She said she did not know it and the last time I wrote John I asked him for it. So I hope you will excuse me. We are both very well at present thank God. James' work is steady right along. We have had a dreadful cold winter of it. We are glad the spring is drawing near. I had thought Marie was coming out this spring but she said in her last letter that the old folks were not inclined to have her come so I believe now she will never come. I am expecting a letter these days from her. Luke I think you had better make up your mind and come to Chicago this spring. I think you could do much better than working for farmers. You can save much more money. James says you can get work in the stock yards. You want to come and try it anyhow and if you don't like it you can go back again to your little hundred of pork. It shan't cost you a pile. The spring is the best time to find work in the yards. We live very near where James works. Just ten minutes will take him there. I should be very glad to see John come for the World's Fair. Chicago is a good city for working people. There are all kinds of work going on in it but it takes a steady fellow to work in the stock yards. The companies don't allow them to drink while they are round working. If they find the drink they are bagged right away. James is a very good steady fellow. I had no idea he was such so I hope to be all right as long as the Lord leave him his health. He is much a better choice than what I was going with in Danbury. Remember me to Nell. I may write her bye and bye when I have more news to send. I have got one picture left only and that I will send to you if you don't come to Chicago. I would like to hear from you right away. I expect to have more news to send you next time. I am sending you a paper I hope you will get it all right.

Goodbye, write soon —
Love from Me

The family network was strong, and cousins from the old country arrived with hopes of finding work with the help of people they might not have met before. The first letter from Michael O'Grady, a cousin of Luke's, was written with fine pen and ink in a beautiful hand, elaborate flourishes suggesting the optimism he felt, having just arrived.

The second letter has none of the elegance of the first, and its crammed scrawl suggests the stress the writer felt.

Danbury
8 May '94

Dear Cousin Luke,

I am after arriving from Ireland on Thursday last to the New World. I am in perfectly good health trusting you are the same. I am sure it will astonish you somewhat to hear of a spider spinning his web to such a long distance. There is not the smallest sign of work here in Danbury presently. Cousin John directed me to write you and see if there would be any chance out that part of the country where you are. It would be a never-forgotten gift, of mine, if you would try to get one in with some of the farmers whom you know there. If you are not coming in on Sunday, drop a line to John's and let me know if there is a chance.

All the folks in the old country are well, so is your father and mother. I would like very much to see you as they tell me you are a fine gentleman. Bring in that bicycle of yours till we have a ride. It might be hard to ask you from your girl but give her bones a crushing that will satisfy her for a few days.

Dear Luke, I am afraid that I have come a bad year, but however there's not much in the old country either. Write if you are coming in by which you will greatly oblige.

Your Fond Cousin,
Michael O'Grady

No. 18 Fairfield Ave.
Danbury
14/6/94 [June 14, 1894]

Dear Luke,

I am walking about here still, awaiting some work to turn up but nothing so far. I thought the trolley was about to start today or yesterday as the rails and wood are scattered on each side of the streets ready for its construction. There are other objections turning up now, such as being run too near some houses and not building it in the middle of the streets. So I am finally decided now on going to Chicago.

My heart is broke walking about here. Sweeney would not give my job back to me. You will kindly send me ten dollars for which I shall feel ever obliged.

I will compensate you back doubly if I live and if not I'll let the old folks at home to give it to you. John has his in the bank and does not like drawing a small sum. I will pay you back at first opportunity.

I had a letter from Thomas yesterday encouraging me to go to Chicago. He was very vexed with me for not letting him know that I was coming to America. He wanted to know also who authorized me to come to Danbury as it is no commercial city. I expect you have good times now with Starrs girls (if they are up from N.Y.). Tell me if yourself & Joe is chumming it still. If you fail Luke in sending me what I ask I am a lost cat. If I see that the trolley goes on a Monday and I do get work I'll send back the same evening. Trusting you are well I will come to a conclusion for this time and remain your ever obliged cousin.

M. O'Grady
Address
Michael O'Grady
18 Fairfield Ave.
Danbury Conn.

Luke, meanwhile, was working for an important resident of Ridgefield, George E. Lounsbury, who was then a state senator and later Governor of Connecticut, a post his brother Phineas C. Lounsbury had held from 1887 to 1889. Sen. Lounsbury offered this reference for his former employee:

Senator Geo. E. Lounsbury, 12th District, Chairman
Hartford, March 30, 1895

The bearer of this — Luke J. Kilcoyne — was in my employ from June 1893 to October 1894 and I considered him a faithful, trust-worthy and honest man. I was well pleased with the care which he gave to my horses.

George E. Lounsbury
Ridgefield, Ct.

References were an important factor in Luke Kilcoyne's life; he saved a number of these letters.

Luke Kilcoyne has lived with us for five months, he has been faithful, honest, and sober.

Miss E.W. Brown
Ridgefield
Conn.
September 22 1896
City address
31 East 36th St New York

For a time, Luke Kilcoyne worked for Melbert B. Cary, a lawyer, author, and inventor, who also was a politician; Cary ran as a Democrat for Governor of Connecticut in 1902, a year after Kilcoyne's previous employer, George Lounsbury, completed his single term as Governor. "Wildfarms" (see below) was also sometimes called Wildflower Farm and was set on lower West Lane, on both sides of the road. Melbert Cary's mansion stood on top of a hill across from Cedar Lane; he also maintained a residence in New York.

Melbert B. Cary
33 West 51st Street,
New York.
April 18th 1906

Luke Kilcoyne
Wildfarms
Ridgefield
Dear Sir

You may deliver the mare "Bettie" to H.K. Scott Jr.

Yours,
Melbert B. Cary

June 1, 1907

Luke Kilcoyne has been in my employ as superintendent of my place at Ridgefield for the past three years, and I consider him an honest man and a good gardener.

Melbert B. Cary

By 1910, Mr. Kilcoyne was again looking for work and for the second time, a reference specifically notes that he refrains from drinking alcohol. The temperance movement, growing for more than a century, was strong and would culminate in the 18th Amendment, creating Prohibition, in 1920. Mrs. Coyle, author of the reference, is clearly fond of the Kilcoyne family and knows them well.

March 17, 1910
Ridgefield, Connecticut

My Dear Mrs. Hamilton,

In reply to your note regarding a gardener I will say that the best man I know of at present is Luke Kilcoyne. He is strictly honest & trustworthy and a good workman and am sure will give you satisfaction. Also I know that he is strictly temperate for the last two years.

Dear Mr. Kilcoyne,

Mrs. Hamilton received your letter and asked me to write you asking to come down on Saturday and get to #431 West-End Ave. at half past at noon as Mr. Hamilton will be home to lunch at that

time and would like to have a talk with you. Now there has been quite a few after the position but Mrs. H wants to see your face as I have spoken very highly of you to her. Now there is not any use of my telling you anything to say as you have held other positions and know just what to say. I know you will like it for there really is no hard work and I know you will like Mrs. Hamilton for she is very nice. Trusting that Mrs. Kilcoyne and the children, not forgetting yourself, are all well and hoping to see you on Saturday & am

Sincerely yours,
Mrs. M. Coyle

Be sure and come down

The last reference in the collection is written by Mrs. George S. Gardiner, whose home stood at the north corner of Main Street and Rockwell Road (it's now enclosed by a high stone wall). Her note to Kilcoyne indicates that he had been through some hard times.

Mrs. George S. Gardiner

Ridgefield, Connecticut
Oct. 17th, 1932

Mr. Luke Kilcoyne

My dear Luke,

Enclosed is the reference you ask for. I am very glad that you are again well enough to seek a position. I wish you every success.

Very truly yours,
Catherine M. Gardiner

Mrs. George S. Gardiner
Ridgefield, Connecticut

Luke Kilcoyne was in my employ for five years; he is industrious, faithful and competent.

Catherine M. Gardiner
(Mrs. George S.)
October 17th, 1932

Luke Kilcoyne's obituary in The Ridgefield Press told the outlines of a life; his collection of letters and other materials tell more and contribute to a fuller picture of how a 17-year-old immigrant from Ireland came to be living here and setting down roots.

“Luke Joseph Kilcoyne, 79, died at his home on Barry Avenue Saturday morning. He had been ill for about two months, during which he received medical treatment at Danbury Hospital.

“A gardener by trade, Mr. Kilcoyne had made Ridgefield his home since his marriage in the old Catholic Church to Miss Ellen Nevins. The couple would have observed their 52nd wedding anniversary on New Year’s Day.

“Born in County Sligo, Ireland, he was a son of the late Patrick and Mary Lundy Kilcoyne. Coming to the United States at the age of 17, he resided in Danbury before moving here.

“Surviving are his wife, four children, James, Margaret, Marie and Thomas, all of Ridgefield; a brother Patrick in Ireland; three sisters, Mrs. Fannie Cain of Liverpool, England, Mrs. Anne Rogers of Gary, Ind., and Mrs. Marie McComb of Chicago.

“Funeral services took place at St. Mary’s Church Tuesday morning with the Rev. Patrick Kilcoyne, a nephew, officiating. Burial will be in the family plot in St. Mary’s Cemetery, Ridgefield.”

Luke Joseph Kilcoyne Jr., born in 1905, predeceased his father in 1943; James J. Kilcoyne, born in 1899, was an electrician who died in 1975; Margaret E. Kilcoyne, born in 1901, had a long career in banking and died in 1993; Marie Augusta Kilcoyne, born in 1907, taught elementary school for 50 years, mostly in Ridgefield, and died in 2000; and Thomas James Kilcoyne, born in 1912, worked for the Gilbert & Bennett Manufacturing Company in Georgetown and died in 1977. Their mother, Nellie, died in 1968. All four of the surviving Kilcoyne siblings lived together in the family homestead on Barry Avenue.

The materials in the Kilcoyne collection were donated by Margot Wilbanks.

Ridgefield Historical Society

The Scott House, 4 Sunset Lane

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ridgefieldhistoricalsociety.org

Headquarters closed to the public until further notice because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

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