

## **Oscar Ewing and His DNA Odyssey**

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For me, researching my family history is like putting together a jigsaw puzzle...a never-ending jigsaw puzzle with a big blue sky. After being at it for thirteen years, I am now at the point where I am working on that dreaded, uniformly-colored, blue sky and progress is painfully slow and arduous. To ease the frustration, I will sometimes just adopt other families to do some quick research on. This is how I came to be so involved with one Oscar Ewing born about 1870 in Maryland, parents unknown.

My Ewing saga begins with my good friend David Lee Ewing (DL) of York County, Pennsylvania. He expressed interest in his family history, and I jumped at the opportunity for a new family to dig into. What made it even more appealing was that he believed his Ewing line had deep roots in Harford County, Maryland, which is where I currently live. Being able to use local resources for research would be an unfamiliar and pleasant treat for me. Having gleefully found a new puzzle to work on, I told Dave that with relative ease I should be able to get his family lines at least back to the early-to-mid 1800s. Little did I know that in short order I would be smacked in the face with a good dose of humility.

I started his family research with his surname line which is of course Ewing. Dave's father could go as far back as his grandfather Oscar Ewing, but knew little about him other than he lived in Harford County. That was no problem, though, as with that unique name I was readily able to locate Oscar with his wife and children in the 1900 through 1930 censuses. Those censuses indicated that Oscar was born about 1870 in Maryland, so the next step was to find him as a boy with his parents to learn their names. And that is where my troubles began.

Oscar was nowhere to be found in the 1870 census, but that was no big surprise as I knew it was a possibility he may not have been born when the census was taken. What was a great surprise, however, was what I found in the 1880 census. Instead of living with his parents, he was living as "servant" in the household of a wealthy family in Peach Bottom, York County, Pennsylvania, which is right over the state line from Harford County. This was certainly a new twist I had never encountered before and one that left me scratching my head.

My first thought was that he was an orphan with no family to take him in. A subsequent discussion with Harford County's local genealogy expert shed some more light on the subject, though. Henry Peden told me that it was not at all uncommon back then for children who could not be adequately cared for by their parents to be sent to live as servants with other families where they would at least be fed and clothed. He said these "transactions" were rarely documented in official records which was not the news I wanted to hear. So Oscar could have been an orphan, but he also could have been one of these children Henry mentioned.

At this point, I started doing everything I could think of to identify Oscar's parents. Right off the bat, I requested his death certificate from the state archives. If his parents were known by Oscar's next of kin at his time of death in 1942, they would be named on the death certificate. No such luck. Since Oscar was preceded in death by his wife, his son provided the information for the death certificate. Unfortunately he apparently did not know the names of his grandparents because that area of the form was blank. Perhaps Oscar was orphaned after all, or maybe just estranged from his parents?

With hope springing eternal, I next scoured records in Harford County and Cecil County, Maryland. I was, and still am, convinced that Oscar was born in one of these two counties. Both counties had numerous Ewing households in the 1870-1880 timeframe, and both are also within a stone's throw of Peach Bottom, Pennsylvania, where Oscar was in 1880. Unfortunately the only record I found that mentioned Oscar was his marriage record in Harford County.

Without going into all the gory details, other steps I took at that point included talking with more of Dave's older relatives, networking with other Ewing researchers, communicating with researchers of the family with whom Oscar was living in 1880, and doing analysis on the 1870 and 1880 censuses looking for possible or probable parents. These were all fruitless, although I did identify one seemingly unusual family situation that developed from 1870 to 1880, but I had no way of learning more about it. I was officially at one of those dreaded genealogy brick walls and had run out of ideas except for one: DNA.

As the administrator of two Y-DNA surname projects, I know how valuable DNA testing can be for helping getting over research hurdles. In thinking about my problem with Oscar, though, I was a little skeptical that DNA would be able to help much. I suspected that all these Ewings in Harford and Cecil County were likely related, so what were the odds of DNA being able to help me isolate what branch Oscar might be from? It seemed to me that there would have to be something very unique in Dave's DNA marker values to help me hone in on a branch. I did not have high hopes that would be the case, but there was one definite thing DNA testing could likely tell me: whether Oscar was illegitimate. His circumstances in childhood made me wonder if he was the illegitimate son of an unmarried Ewing woman and took her surname. I felt having Dave's DNA tested would almost certainly help me there, so for that alone, I approached Dave with the idea. Being the good sport that he is, he was more than willing to donate a sample and gladly paid for the test.

About six weeks later, the results were back. Dave's DNA was a solid match with the established Ewing DNA baseline!<sup>1</sup> He differed from the baseline on three of 37 markers which is a characteristic he shares with many other known Ewing descendants in the Ewing Surname Y-DNA project. At least that was settled and I knew for sure the Oscar had indeed been a Ewing by paternity. Unfortunately that was about all I could conclude from the results at that point. He had no exact matches, and his closest match proved to have no known ties to Maryland or Pennsylvania. There was a glimmer of hope, though: Dave did indeed have something unusual about his DNA results. His DYS 390 marker had a value of 26 which was unique amongst Ewings in the project at the time. Virtually every other participant who matched well with the Ewing baseline had a DYS 390 marker value of 24 or 25. Dave's 26 on this DNA marker stood out like a sore thumb, and this is exactly what I was hoping for. All I needed to do was wait and hope that another Ewing would eventually be tested who had this same unusual marker.

That wait would last for one year and three months. In June of 2007, I received an EMail that would eventually prove to be the one I was waiting for. The EMail was from Esther Johnson of Cecil County, Maryland. She and another relative Francis McGrady had sponsored the testing of her cousin Harvey Brauer Ewing (HB), who was born and raised in Port Deposit, Cecil County, Maryland. She was writing to exchange information on our Ewing match. I knew Dave had a new match, but had not yet seen the actual DNA marker values. When I went to check them out on the project site, there I saw it: Harvey Brauer Ewing's DYS 390 marker was also a 26 like Dave's! Not only had a Ewing joined the project who

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<sup>1</sup> Here "baseline" means the same thing as Ewing Surname Y-DNA Project Group Administrator David Neal Ewing means when he says "Ewing modal haplotype."

had this same unique marker, but he was also from the geographic area I was looking for! This was the break I had been hoping for, but it was only the first step.

Despite having this unique marker in common, Dave and Harvey had differences on two other markers. Since the mutations of markers are supposed to happen infrequently, differing on two markers means Dave and Harvey's common Ewing ancestor probably lived a ways back in time. It was now time to dig into Harvey's Ewing line to understand his family better.

Thanks to information provided by Esther and also data posted on the *Clan Ewing* Y-DNA Project's site, I began to form a theory. Harvey, Esther and Francis descend from James Ewing of Inch Island via his son John who died in 1754 in Nottingham, Chester County, Pennsylvania (now Cecil County, Maryland). Five other Ewing project members descend from James of Inch, but they all descend from sons other than John, and none of them have the unique DYS 390 marker value Harvey has. So my working theory is that this unique marker in Harvey's line was acquired somewhere from John on down. If I am correct, then that means in all probability that Oscar also descends from John.

So how could this theory be proved? Essentially what is required is the DNA testing of more descendants of James of Inch's son John. If I could round up the right participants, it is conceivable I could determine exactly when this DYS 390 mutation took place. That in turn would let me hone in on which branch of the Ewing line Oscar descends from.

In an incredible stroke of luck, one such participant may have recently joined the project. Thomas Frederick Ewing (TF) of Maine decided to have his DNA tested after having run into a brick wall with his ancestor James Ewing born in 1793 in Maryland and died 1881 in Port Deposit, Maryland. Of course seeing Port Deposit made me hopeful, but there were an awful lot of Ewings in the area, so I was not getting my hopes up. Then the results for the first 25 of his 37 markers were returned, and lo and behold, his DYS 390 is also 26! So now we have two Ewings with ties to Port Deposit, Maryland, each with this unique DNA marker value. And adding to that, after poking around in the censuses, I discovered Tom's ancestor James was living right next door to Harvey's ancestor Alexander in one census. They were both born in the early 1790s, but there is no evidence they were brothers. We do not know how they might be related, but Esther is helping pursue that right now.

Assuming Tom's remaining twelve markers reasonably match Dave's and Harvey's and a relationship is confirmed, we have yet another clue as to when this DYS 390 mutation in the James of Inch line occurred. If Tom's ancestor James, born 1793, had this marker and Harvey's ancestor Alexander, born 1794, had this marker, then we know the mutation took place further back than the 1790s. The downside to this being the case (which is quite likely) is that my ability to hone in on Oscar's branch by using that marker will be diminished. If it had been a more recent mutation, I might have really been able to narrow in on Oscar's father. The further the mutation goes back, the more branches that remain in play.

But, there is yet another glimmer of hope from DNA. Dave and Harvey differ on two other markers which are known to mutate more readily and therefore more widely vary across the project. Both of these markers are in Tom's last twelve markers which we do not have the results for yet. The best case scenario is that Tom's values for these two markers are an exact match with Dave's. Should that be the case, I will immediately turn my attention to Tom's ancestor James and his descendants as possibly being Oscar's line. If it is not the case, then I will just be back to trying to find more participants from the John, son of James of Inch, line to try to find someone who more closely matches Dave or at least can

help narrow down where some of the mutations took place. We will know for sure in mid-October when Tom's final twelve markers are in, so stay tuned!

*Jane Gilbert is an avid genealogist researching her friend David Lee Ewing's line with roots in Harford County, Maryland. She is utilizing the Clan Ewing Y-DNA Project to help with a brick wall that conventional research has thus far failed to overcome. Not being a stranger to genetic genealogy, she has had cousins from four of her own lines tested and is the administrator of the Gilbert and Schneider Y-DNA Projects. Originally from Wadsworth, Ohio, Jane holds a bachelor's degree in Electrical Engineering from Virginia Tech and worked for nineteen years in high tech until deciding to take some time off and smell the roses. She currently resides in Bel Air, Maryland.*

*Note from the author: As you have read in the article, there is a good chance I will be needing more Ewing DNA donors from the John, son of James of Inch line. If you are a Ewing male or know a Ewing male who is a descendant of his and would be interested in being a DNA donor, please contact me. Or even if you do not know your exact Ewing lineage, but you have roots in Cecil County, I would also love to hear from you. Somewhere out there are exactly the donors we need!*

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