



**Dundee-born painter Thomas Patrick Morris, top; who claimed he was the son of John Wendel, brother of real estate heiress, above; and the family home at 442 Fifth Avenue, New York, left**

# The real estate magnate, the ‘affair’ and the Scots painter claiming to be heir to an American fortune

**Author reveals long-forgotten story of curious \$100m wrangle**

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**Until 1932, Dundee-born Thomas Patrick Morris lived a hand-to-mouth existence in Brooklyn, eking out a living as a painter and decorator in between bouts of ill health.**

But, that summer, his photograph appeared in newspapers across America alongside articles which told a rags-to-riches tale, describing him as poised to inherit one of the country’s great fortunes.

The \$100 million in question was the estate of Ella Wendel, the last remaining member of a New York real estate dynasty.

When she died, in the depths of the Great Depression, after years of living as a recluse in her dilapidated Fifth Avenue mansion, her lawyers were unprepared for the stampede of claimants to her estate.

As I describe in my new non-fiction book, *Curse Of Riches*, more than 2,200 people came forward, from every corner of America, and from Germany, Denmark and beyond. Most were easily dismissed as greedy, deluded, or both.

But Morris stood out from the rest. So what connected

a famous Gilded Age family with a man born in a Dundee tenement, who worked in the city’s jute mills and shipyards before going to sea as a painter and jumping ship in New York?

The answer, Morris told reporters and anyone else who would listen, was love.

In July 1932, Morris was called to appear in Manhattan’s Surrogate’s Court.

The bald, bespectacled 50-something was dressed in a worn grey suit and spotted bow tie. In a Scots accent little changed by the 25 years he had spent in America, he explained he was the product of an unlikely romance between Ella Wendel’s only brother, John, and an Edinburgh-born woman named Mary Ellen Devine.

To back up his claim he presented the couple’s marriage certificate, dated June 1876, along with a small, cloth-bound book, entitled *The Blockade Of Phalsburg*. Inside was a handwritten letter addressed to Morris signed, “Your loving Father, John G Wendel” and a document purporting to be John Wendel’s will in which he left his entire estate to “my son, Thomas Patrick Morris Wendel.”

The letter recounted a falling out between John Wendel and his bride when she was pregnant. The couple had rowed

over religion (her family was Catholic and the Wendels were Methodist). She fled to Scotland, where she stayed with friends, Peter and Margaret Morris. There she gave birth to their son whom she named Thomas Patrick, after the saints.

Two weeks after the birth, she vanished. The Morrises raised the baby as if he were their own.

Morris described how John Wendel had become a regular visitor to his family’s Dundee home though it wasn’t until after his 21st birthday that Wendel revealed he was his real father. He added he had no idea Wendel was rich.

Morris described an occasion in 1907 when Wendel took him to 442 Fifth Avenue to meet his aunts. But when he introduced Morris to his sisters and said: “This is my son,” Morris said Ella screamed: “Get out. You can’t stay here. Take your brat and get out.”

John Wendel had died in 1914. Why had Morris waited so long to come forward? “I always entertained the idea I was illegitimate,” said Morris. But recently, one of Morris’s stepsisters had found the marriage certificate in her deceased father’s cobbler’s box.

As he spoke, Morris revealed a familiarity with John Wendel’s quirks; the fact that he always

carried an umbrella, and wore baggy suits cut from grey wool cloth ordered in bulk from Scotland. He described Wendel’s obsession with his health and the inch-thick rubber soles he wore on his shoes which he believed would prevent germs from passing into his body.

Lifting his shoe so it was clearly visible, Morris said he had adopted the habit himself. It was a curious detail and an accurate one.

To prove his physical resemblance to his “father” Morris’s legal team had come up with a bit of theatre that delighted the courtroom. A sculptor unveiled a bronze bust of the head of John Wendel and painstakingly compared its features to that of Morris.

During a break, the judge was overheard remarking that Morris’s story was “either a monstrous hoax or amazingly true.”

Asked by a reporter what he planned to do with the millions if he got them, Morris said: “When the money comes to me, I’ll be thinking of my family and of others like myself – of people who are sick and poor and passed over by the world.”

He would donate a large sum to charity and to public projects. The judge announced a recess to enable the lawyers acting for the Wendel estate to investigate Morris’s claims.

They met with some of Morris’s step-siblings. His family backed up his story. But the lawyers could find no record of a Mary Ellen Devine being born in Edinburgh.

Back in New York, another team of lawyers went through the Wendel papers. The Wendels were an eccentric bunch who lived a frugal existence and never threw anything out. From their real estate office at 175 Broadway, the lawyers produced boxes filled with cheque stubs, letters, appointment books and ledgers, all in John Wendel’s hand. From these they compiled a timeline which showed that Wendel had not left America between 1879 and 1914.

Worse was to come for Morris. Witnesses who had worked for John Wendel for many years, along with a handwriting expert; they were unanimous in the view that the letter and will supposedly written by Wendel were not in his hand.

A private detective, after trawling the secondhand bookshops of Brooklyn, discovered that *The Blockade Of Phalsburg* had been stolen just before Morris made his claim. The house painter had been a regular customer in the shop.

The judge threw Morris’s claim out, declaring him a fraud. He went on: “There is not a shred of evidence Mary Ellen Devine ever existed, much less that John G ever associated with her.”

Morris was referred to the District Attorney for prosecution. Before sentencing, the DA made him an offer; it was clear he had been put up to this by someone who knew the Wendels and their business well. If he revealed the identity of this person, he would be given a lighter sentence. Morris declined. He was sentenced to 33 months in jail.

But, even a century later, questions remain about Morris.

Everyone involved agreed that Morris had been in cahoots with an insider. The identity of that person has never been discovered. Morris had worked as a painter in properties owned by the Wendels. Could he have picked up snippets of gossip from other tradesmen who worked to upkeep the Wendel properties?

Despite his sentence, Morris was philosophical, telling a reporter: “I told what I knew. What we never had we will never miss. The money made no one happy. For my part, I’m happier a poor man for the rest of my days. I wouldn’t go through it again for twice the millions.”

Morris was released nine months early for good behaviour and returned to a life of obscurity in Brooklyn. The Wendel millions went to charities, religious organisations and to a corrupt lawyer who had worked for them his entire career.

*Curse Of Riches* by Claire Prentice, which tells the story of the Wendels and the claims on their estate, is out now with Audible Originals. [Claireprentice.org](http://Claireprentice.org)

**Wendel family portrait in 1860**

