



Voyage to the New World

How the Ulster-Scots or Scots-Irish came to America



Ulster-Scots Agency
Tha Boord o Ulstèr-Scotch

An estimated quarter of a million people emigrated from the north of Ireland through the 18th century, most of them of Scottish Presbyterian stock whose ancestors had moved to Ulster during the 17th century Plantation years. Religious persecution and economic and social deprivation were the main causes for the movement across the Atlantic, with the offer of a new life in rich and fertile surroundings, persuading many to forsake their homeland. These hardy resolute emigrants became first citizens of American frontier lands, opened up in the movement from the eastern seaboard regions of the New World and, over several generations, they created settlements that became the backbone of the United States as a nation.

There were five great waves of 18th century Ulster emigration to America: in 1717-18; 1725-29; 1740-41; 1754-55 and 1771-75. In 1717 - the year ships were officially chartered for 5,000 men and women to head to Pennsylvania - a severe drought completely destroyed crops on the Ulster farmlands.

The 18th century Ulster-Scots (Scots-Irish) emigrants sailed to America from the ports of Belfast, Londonderry, Larne, Newry and Portrush, the ships arriving on a regular basis at Philadelphia, New Castle (Delaware), New York and Charleston. The hazardous journey across the Atlantic in simple wooden sailing ships took an enormous toll, but, despite health perils faced through over-crowding, the effects of storms and lack of food and fresh water, most reached their destination to start a new life in much more amenable surroundings. The journey across the Atlantic took an average time span of six to eight weeks, depending on the weather and sea worthiness of the vessel. The ships normally sailed in the spring, summer and autumn - a winter journey across the Atlantic was not advised.

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Even in spring and autumn, the weather often forced many passengers to remain below deck for long periods and it was there, in the steamy atmosphere of the confined spaces, that exposure to the fatal diseases lay. Child mortality was common on the journey, but illness also took its toll of adults and, when death came, the bodies were thrown overboard after the appropriate burial rights were observed. It is remarkable, however, that of the thousands of 18th century Ulster emigrants who set out for America, only a very small percentage perished before the journey's end. A large proportion of Atlantic journeys were completed with the minimum of fuss.

Indeed, the greatest hardships experienced by passengers on board some ships were boredom and discomfort. But such was the harshness of life for many people on the Ulster hillsides that they were happy to put up with some temporary deprivation and suffering to obtain a better deal in the New World. Heavy trans-Atlantic storms caused the shipwreck of some vessels, but those that did not reach their destination were the exception rather than the rule.

It was generally accepted that the Ulster shipowners and captains had a much better safety and success record than their counterparts from German, Dutch and French ports who ferried the German Palatine Lutheran emigrants to America. The average cost of the fare between Ulster and America in the 18th century was five to six pounds, but, in some cases journeys could be made for as little as three pounds. Those who did not have the means to pay for the journey could take out an indenture which was an agreement to serve the master of the ship or his associates. Alternatively, the migrants could agree to pay the cost of the passage shortly after arrival in America.

When the first major wave of Ulster emigrants arrived in America in the 1717-1730 period, they settled mainly in townships in Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, Maryland, New York, New Jersey and Massachusetts. In the mid-1730s, they were setting their sights on new Western frontier lands, moving over time along the Great Wagon Road on horseback, in covered wagons or on foot to the Valley of Virginia (Shenandoah Valley), North and South Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, Georgia and Alabama and to lands west of the Mississippi River. In these territories, the Scots-Irish (Ulster-Scots) diaspora took root and, in these regions today, many people proudly proclaim the pioneering spirit and true grit that was manifest in their ancestors in settling what was then a bleak wilderness. Next to the English, the Scots-Irish became, by the end of the 18th century, the most influential of the white population in America, which by 1790, numbered 3,173,444.

At the time, the Scots-Irish segment of the population totalled about 14 per cent, with the figure much higher in territories like Tennessee and Kentucky. In the United States today, there are as many as 44 million people of Irish extraction and, of these, an estimated 56 per cent can trace their roots back to 18th century Ulster migrants. The Scots-Irish settlers of 200/250 years ago totally assimilated into the mainstream of American society. They were, after all, first Americans and they played a leading role in creating the cities and towns in the inner regions after doggedly cutting their way through dense Appalachian forests and overcoming formidable river and mountain barriers.

Before the major 18th century migration of the Ulster-Scots to America, there had been some movement across the Atlantic from the north of Ireland in the late 17th century to the territories

opened up by the British explorers. It was a trickle, compared to the emigration flood that followed for 100 years, but it was nevertheless significant, with some of the early colonialists having links to Ulster. The first passenger ship to set sail to America from Ulster shores was the 150-tonne *Eagle Wing* vessel, which left the tiny port of Groomspoint, Co Down for Boston on September 9, 1636. Some 140 Presbyterians, from congregations on the Co Down and Co Antrim sides of Belfast Lough, were on board and when the ship reached mid-Atlantic, not far from the coast of Newfoundland, heavy storms broke out, causing much trauma and concern among the passengers and crew. The voyagers had completed three-quarters of their journey and it was on the advice of one of the four Presbyterian ministers on board the Rev John Livingstone that it was "God's will: we should return home". The ship's captain was of similar mind and the ship was turned around. The journey ended at Carrickfergus harbour on November 3, 1636, with the ship's shrouds asunder, mainsail in ribbons and rudder badly damaged.

The historic *Eagle Wing* journey was aborted, but it was indeed remarkable in that it took place only 16 years after the Pilgrim Fathers landed at Plymouth Rock after their celebrated crossing of the Atlantic on the *Mayflower*.

Early emigrants from Ulster to America were the Rev FRANCIS MAKEMIE and JAMES LOGAN, two men who became very prominent citizens in New World society. Makemie, who emigrated in 1683, was a Presbyterian pastor from Laggan Presbytery in Co Donegal, who set up the early American church and his itinerant ministry and organisational abilities earned him the reputation of being "the father of American Presbyterianism". He was the Moderator of the first American Presbytery and was a strong advocate



Francis Makemie



James Logan

of religious freedom in America. In 1707, Makemie was imprisoned for six months by Lord Cornbury, Anglican Governor of New York, for preaching without a license. James Logan, an aristocratic and bureaucratic Quaker from Lurgan in Co Armagh, was Provincial Secretary to Governor William Penn during the first wave of Ulster emigrants to the colonies in the 1700s-1720s. Logan emigrated in 1699 to take up an executive position under Penn and, for the next 40 years, he held high civic office in Pennsylvania, including Governor of the colony, Mayor of Philadelphia and Chief Judge of the Supreme Court.

Historical research for this leaflet was carried out by BILLY KENNEDY, author of the *Scots-Irish Chronicles* (10 volumes), 1995 – 2009.



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