

Migration Patterns - Ulster to America 1717 to 1775

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There are historical patterns, documented migration patterns, that tell you where your ancestors went and why they went there. Using some of these migration patterns you can sometimes trace that pioneer sitting in Kentucky or Ohio back to where they came from - not always, but sometimes. It's these historical patterns that I want to discuss in this presentation, and I'm going to concentrate basically on the emigrants out of Ireland into the American colonies before the American Revolution. The majority of the Blairs who came to America came during that particular time period came out of Ireland, with the exception of a few in the Carolinas and Massachusetts.

The emigration from Scotland to Ireland started about 1603. The Montgomerys and Hamiltons with Lord Chichester started a settlement of Scots in Ireland, which preceded the so-called Plantation of Ulster. The old owner of the land refused to pay his excise tax on a shipment of wine and the British confiscated his land. Mr. Hamilton and Mr. Montgomery then found themselves owners of the property. They gave some land to Lord Chichester because he lived in Ireland and they needed his cooperation. The majority of all the Blairs in Ireland settled on this land in County Antrim. The Plantation that was administered under King James in 1609 involved the counties of Derry, Fermanagh, Cavan, some of Tyrone—the western counties for the most part. There is some Plantation land in County Antrim but most land was privately owned, the subleases held by the various families of these three estates of original control. There are some Blairs who came later into Ireland to what was Plantation land but even as late as 1666, the majority of Blairs were concentrated in County Antrim near Larne in mid-Antrim to the town of Antrim on these three estates, and to an area near Raloo where Brice Blair settled in 1625.

Some of the Blairs became what were called "Strong Farmers" in that they were major tenants and held subleases, to entire Townlands in some cases. They are the exception. Most Blairs were Irish tenant farmers by lease, very tentatively by lease, and there's no question they were poor. We have not found any major landowners who were Blairs. "Strong Farmers" leased, but they were the exception, not the rule. Blairs left Scotland, went over to Ireland where they leased their farms and this was a step up for them. Most were Presbyterians; many, many of them were Covenanter Presbyterian, and there's a real problem with documentation for these Covenanters as it was never accepted to be Presbyterian Covenanter. Some

records do exist, but it wasn't legal to be married as a Presbyterian. Sometimes they were in the marriage records of the Anglican Church of Ireland because that's where they were supposed to be married. If they weren't married or were married by the Presbyterian Church, their children were considered to be bastards and that played into inheritance and other legal issues. So, some of the Presbyterians would actually go to the effort of being baptized and married in the Anglican Church even though they weren't Anglican. It's lucky for you if they did, as some Anglican records do exist while finding Presbyterian Church records is difficult. The Presbyterian Historical Society in Ireland does hold any records that exist and you can find these if your people stayed in Ireland, but rarely if they left in the pre-Revolutionary War period.

The generally accepted date for the beginning of the massive migration out of Ulster is 1717. A number of factors coalesced to cause our ancestors to be extremely unhappy and ready to emigrate: the persecution of religious issues of the Presbyterian Church of Ireland; the restrictive Test Act of 1704,¹ and strictures on Irish trade. There was literally a class structure: Anglicans, then Presbyterians and then the Catholics of Ireland. There was a line between the Anglicans and Presbyterians and if you were a Presbyterian, you were not going to rise above that line. The social structure did not translate across the ocean. That's part of the reason they came here: they wanted to practice their Presbyterian religion, they wanted to be politically active and they wanted to run their communities.

Another incentive to emigrate was the restrictions put on the Irish linen trade that caused massive ups and downs in the markets of that industry that in turn caused major dislocations for those who were dependent upon it. When the industry was depressed you find people getting on the boats. There is almost a direct correlation between the two.

¹ The Test Act, passed under Charles II, required the Oaths of Allegiance & Supremacy as a condition of acquiring property in corporate towns of Ireland. Aimed at Catholics, the Presbyterians, Independents, Huguenot immigrants and Quakers, not protected in their public worship like the English Dissenters by a Toleration Act, were swept under the same political disabilities and were at once cut off from the army, militia, civil service, Commission of Peace and from seats in the municipal corporations. Charles A. Hanna, *The Scotch-Irish*. New York, 1902, p. 172 (reprinted Baltimore, Genealogical Publishing Company).