

Leaving

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My parents' families came to Ulster from Scotland in the 1660s, and settled close to Coleraine. Ulster is only a short distance from Scotland by sea. They lived in a long, low thatched cottage and my father leased the land that he farmed. They attended kirk every Sunday. They were Presbyterian.

Listening to my father and mother, I realised that being a Presbyterian in Ulster was not easy. They were disadvantaged because of their beliefs. Presbyterians were not allowed to teach in schools, their marriages weren't recognised, funeral services were illegal and they couldn't inherit property or hold public office. Life wasn't easy.

My father said that our lease was ending very soon. The rent was constantly increasing and difficult to pay because the harvest had been poor, and my mother couldn't sell her woven cloth. Times were difficult, but my parents weren't the only ones that had a tough time.

Friends and neighbours talked about moving to America. My parents felt the whole community was leaving for a new life there. They'd heard of people going there before, but this time was different as the whole community planned to go together to begin new lives.

Close by in Aghadowey, the kirk was in serious financial difficulty. The Reverend James McGregor hadn't been paid a salary for three years and was owed 80 pounds. This was a lot of money especially as he had a wife and family to look after.

The Reverend McGregor is a very interesting man. He could be a bit dour at times, but had the best interests of his congregation at heart. Some say that at the age of 12 James McGregor fired the cannon from the walls of St Columba's Cathedral in Londonderry to signal that the ship, the *Mountjoy*, had broken through the barrier across the River Foyle. The barrier, or the boom as they called it, had stopped supplies getting through to



The Siege of Derry (Courtesy of 19th era / Alamy Stock Photo)



The Mountjoy breaking the boom (Courtesy of the British Library)

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those who were besieged within the walls of the city. The Reverend's wife's name was Maryanne. They had ten children and although they were not rich they did have wealthy family members.

Petition to Governor Shute from 'Inhabitants of the North of Ireland' 26 March 1718. (Courtesy of the New Hampshire Historical Society)

Samuel Shute, Governor of Massachusetts, copy portrait by Aiden L. Ripley, 1930. (Courtesy of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, State House Art Commission)

The Reverend McGregor felt that the time had come for a change, as there was no future in Ireland. My father along with some others signed a petition to Samuel Shute, the Governor of Massachusetts. The petition was drawn up on the 26th March 1718. It stated that those signing it would transport themselves to New England, in America, on the assurance that they would be made welcome and there was land where they could settle. Three hundred and nineteen people signed the petition, including nine ministers. They all came from an area around the east side of the Bann Valley, in and around the towns of Aghadowey,



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Map showing the main towns in Ulster affected by the 1718 migration to New England

Articlave, Ballymena, Ballymoney, Coleraine, Garvagh and Kilrea.

The Reverend William Boyd from Macosquin took the petition to New England. He arrived in Boston in July 1718. He met the authorities who told him they were keen to have new settlers, especially people used to farming. Everyone who met the Reverend Boyd was very impressed with him. Governor Shute, who was to be a good friend to the settlers from Ulster, gave assurances of support.

Members of the kirk discussed what they would do. Some of the people who had signed the petition decided they were

going to stay in Ireland, but my parents decided to leave. Sixteen families from their kirk decided to make the journey.

They had very little time to think about the journey and what they would do when they arrived. My parents had to raise the money to pay for the voyage. The fare was six pounds, so they sold what they could and gave away other possessions that they couldn't take with them. They could only take what they could carry on to the ship. Along with their clothes, my mother packed cooking pots and utensils, her loom and spinning wheel. Father took his tools and small items of farming equipment. My brother Andrew, who was three years old, took only a few small toys.