THE MIGRATION OF MARY HAGGERTY FERRY

A PROPOSED HISTORY

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Introduction

My great-great-great grandmother, Mary Haggerty, immigrated to the New World in the 19th century from Donegal, Ireland. From letters that were written about her travels, historical sources, and imagination, I have put together what I believe to be an accurate account of her voyage. The life and journey contained in the following pages describe plausible experiences that Mary Haggerty had on her way to the New World.

The immigration of Mary Haggerty plays a crucial part in my family's history. Unfortunately, her journey is not well documented. Letters written by my great-grandmother contain little more than her name, where she grew up, and where she settled upon arrival to America. Being such an important event for my family, I want to fill as many gaps as possible in the hopes that her experiences will not be swept up in the tides of time.

This is her story.

Ireland

Nestled in a protected bay, Donegal is a place of immense natural beauty. Much like the rest of Ireland, it is characterized by its loping shamrock-colored hills and striking cliffs that peer across the Atlantic Ocean. Despite its visual splendor, Donegal is a difficult place to live. Most of the year it is plagued by ferocious winds and high precipitation. The winters are cold and long, and there are only a few months of the year where outdoor activities are tolerable.

Mary Haggerty grew up in Teelin, County Donegal. Teelin is a small fishing village on Donegal Bay, just east of Slieve League, the highest sea cliffs in Ireland. These cliffs survey across the Atlantic Ocean, towards the New World. I like to think that sometimes Mary stood at the precipice of these cliffs and thought about her future.

During the mid-19th century, Ireland was devastated by a famine brought on by a water mold, colloquially known as potato blight (if anyone is interested, the actual pathogen is called *Phytophthora infestans*, and it's a nasty little thing). The words of an Irish priest of the period aptly capture the effects of the blight; "As to the potatoes they are all gone – clean gone. If travelling by night, you would know when a potato field was nearby from the smell. The fields present a space of withered black stalks." A pungent stench and fields of dead crops were the only things left of the once prosperous country.

With genomic tracing technology, scientists discovered that the origin of the blight was actually in the Midwest United States, and crossed over the Atlantic around 1845, presumably by a ship carrying freight.[1] Upon arrival, the blight quickly radiated across Ireland, wreaking havoc on croplands everywhere. Ireland was particularly susceptible to the blight due to low genetic diversity of potato crops, a high reliance on potatoes in the diet, and an already impoverished and malnourished Irish population.[2] In other words, it was the unfortunate and deadly perfect storm.

The Great Famine, as it was later known, resulted in a net decrease in the population of Ireland of two million people, of whom half perished, and half fled the country.[3] The resulting emigration was mostly directed to the United States. When the Irish emigrated, they brought along entire households, including parents, children, and grandparents,[4] all pushed from the only home they had ever known by poverty and despair, and drawn to America by the promise of a more hopeful life.

From the 1900 U.S. Census, it is revealed that Mary Haggerty was born in November 1856 in Ireland, a country still reeling from the horrors of the previous decade. The economy was

[1] Swihart, "Protists."
[2] Ibid
[3] Ibid
[4] Jackson, "Women in 19th Century Irish Emigration."

left devastated from the famine, and land was quickly losing its value. Landowners, hemorrhaging capital at an alarming rate, sold their estates to wealthier groups of Irish and English opportunists, accelerating agricultural change in Ireland and disrupting standard social practices along with it. What used to be a countryside dotted by small plots of property quickly became a countryside dominated by large, sprawling estates. Additionally, previous tenants were "encouraged" to emigrate by their landlords. Land scarcity, limited employment opportunities, and new laws that impacted land inheritance, resulted in a rise of arranged marriages as a way to mitigate risk in 19th century Ireland.[5]

The use of arranged marriages to secure dowries, which often included either cash or land, put strain on existing social practices. Love was no longer the principal reason for marriage, and young women were used as a means to an end. This stripping of autonomy is considered to be a major push factor for female Irish emigration from this period.[6] America was seen as a place where young women could regain control over their own lives. One Irish emigrant proclaimed; "Over in Ireland, people marry for riches, but here in America, we marry for love and work for riches."[7]

Demographics from this period of Irish emigration are markedly different than previous years, with increasing numbers of single, young adult women emigrating until they outnumbered men in the latter part of the century.[8] Due to the inadequate documentation, the exact circumstances of Mary's emigration are unclear. However, for the sake of the story, I will make an educated guess. At the time of her emigration Mary was seventeen years old, and fast approaching the age of adulthood. Seeing her peers get stripped of their own autonomy, she

[5] Jackson, "Women in 19th Century Irish Emigration."
[6] Ibid
[7] Campbell, "Ireland and the American Emigration."
[8] Jackson, "Women in 19th Century Irish Emigration."

made the decision to flee the country. Mary and her three sisters; Anna, Lucy, and Alice, ventured out on their own to America, where they had seen their friends and family go in the decades prior. After gathering what little possessions they owned, they traveled to the major emigrant port at the time; Londonderry-Derry of Northern Ireland to begin their journey west.[9]

Journey

Mary and her sisters probably had their trip paid for by their connections in Pennsylvania who had emigrated in the previous decades. Prepaid emigration, as it was called, was especially common with major cities such as Philadelphia.[10]

So, the sisters traveled from Donegal to Londonderry-Derry sometime during the year of 1873. Londonderry-Derry was and still is one of the largest cities in Ireland, and at the time was a major shipping port. Due to its presence in global commerce, Derry was the main launching pad for emigrants from Northern Ireland traveling to the Americas during that period.[11,12]

Other possible, albeit less likely, routes include traveling to Dublin or Cork where emigrants would sail to Liverpool and be transferred to a subsequent ship to take them to the U.S.[13] The reason for this convoluted route is the result of limited trade between Ireland and the US, which meant that there were limited established shipping routes directly between the countries. The trip from Donegal to Londonderry, however, could be completed in a day, and there was an established shipping route directly to the US from there.

The shipping route was established in the previous century through the linen industry. Ships from Derry would bring flaxseed, the primary ingredient in linen, to Philadelphia where

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[9] Beattie, *Donegal in Transition*. p. 55.
[10] Clark, "The Adjustment of Irish Immigrants to Urban Life."
[11] Beattie, *Donegal in Transition*. p. 55.
[12] Clark, "The Adjustment of Irish Immigrants to Urban Life."
[13] Page, "Transportation of Immigrants."

mills would make linen that would be sent back to Derry.[14] The decades of trade gradually established reputable shipping lines that brought migrants across the Atlantic in the 19th century.

As it currently stands, my hypothesis is that Mary and her sisters left Donegal and made their way to Londonderry-Derry, where they took advantage of these established and relatively trustworthy transatlantic shipping lines to take them to the U.S. From letters, it is known that the sisters' initial destination was Philadelphia, the major shipping destination of Pennsylvania and a predominant center for global textile production.[15]

At the time of Mary's emigration, which we know from the 1900 US census data to be 1873, around ninety percent of migrants crossed the Atlantic on steamships.[16] This was advantageous for two main reasons, reduced travel time and lower mortality rates.

Ships that migrants boarded to cross the Atlantic during the Famine years were notorious for their horrific conditions, slow travel times, and high mortality rates. These ships were known as "coffin ships," a sobering testimonial to the many that lost their lives on board. In 1867, when coffin ships were still used by the majority of European migrants, the average length of voyage was forty-four days and passengers were required to pack enough food for themselves to account for any unforeseen delays. In 1872, after steamships became the norm, the same trip took around two weeks.[17]

Conditions in the coffin ships that dominated the first half of the 19th century were dismal. Passengers were taken advantage of by captains and emigration agents who exploited insufficient regulations to make extra money. Emigrants were crowded into any and all spaces on

[14] Clark, "The Adjustment of Irish Immigrants to Urban Life."
[15] Mitchell, *Derry-Londonderry: Gateway to a New World.*
[16] "On the Water."
[17] Page, "Transportation of Immigrants."

board, with passengers describing conditions as being "little better than that of a slave ship." [18] People were made to lie in their own filth for weeks, often succumbing to rough seas and pestilence. Transatlantic ships at the time had, on average, a mortality rate of around thirty percent.[19] In comparison, those traveling via steamship saw a significantly lower mortality rate of around 1.03 percent.[20]

Mary Haggerty and her sisters boarded one of these steamships at the ports of Londonderry-Derry in 1873 and made their voyage in around two weeks. Thankfully, she was not made to endure the horrifying conditions of those that crossed before her. The ship took her to Philadelphia, where the next chapter of her story began.

America

Mary and her sisters stepped off the ship and into a completely different world. The calm countryside of Donegal had been replaced by the chaotic, seething masses of a U.S. city. The cliffs of Slieve League were replaced by brick buildings with towering chimneys belching smoke into the air. Instead of being allowed to take it all in, she was likely jostled by the crowds of sun-starved emigrants behind her, down the gangway and onto American soil for the first time.

This extreme contrast was one that every Irish immigrant in the 19th century probably experienced at some level. Ireland, in addition to being the most rural country in Europe, mainly sent its most impoverished, least skilled members to one of the most flourishing industrial capitols in the world.[21] Men and women, who up to the moment of unloading, had only known their small farms and rural communities, were suddenly thrust into a world dominated by

[18] Page, "Transportation of Immigrants."
[19] Corporaal and Cusack, "Rites of Passage."
[20] Page, "Transportation of Immigrants."
[21] Clark, "The Adjustment of Irish Immigrants to Urban Life."

factories, smokestacks, and the clamor of busy people. I can't imagine the overwhelming fear that Mary must have felt at this moment in her life.

Life rarely got easier after that initial culture shock. Irish immigrants during the famine years felt prejudice and discrimination acutely, as they attempted to acclimate to life in the U.S. These immigrants unloaded from their ships starved, impoverished, illiterate, and relatively unskilled. Compared to German immigrants of the same era, who were literate and skilled, they were considered, by the prejudiced eye, to be inferior immigrants. Additionally, the majority of Irish immigrants were Catholic, which was met with apprehension by the largely Protestant Americans.[22]

To survive in this hostile new environment, Irish immigrants rallied around cultural institutions such as the church and the saloon. They formed social organizations around church life and learned about political organizations and blocs in the Saloon. These cultural institutions allowed the Irish to support one another and gain political clout, which they used to further the Irish cause in the US.[23] Subsequent generations of immigrants, such as Mary, were able to use these establishments to gain footing in the U.S.

However, Mary's journey didn't end in Philadelphia. Letters indicate that Mary made her way to Mauch Chunk, a borough in Carbon County, Pennsylvania, which is part of the Coal Region in Eastern Pennsylvania.

The town was established in 1818 near a coal-shipping outpost owned and operated by the Lehigh Coal and Navigation Company.[24] Lehigh Coal was a pioneer in the coal industry, famous for discovering the use of anthracite as a fuel. The company was a great success, and as it

[22] Bergquist, "Immigration."
[23] Ibid
[24] Drury and Gilbert, *Jim Thorpe (Mauch Chunk).*

grew, more railroads and coal-related services were established, making the small town one of the epicenters of coal and commerce in Pennsylvania.

Coal mining was a grueling industry, with difficult living conditions. Coal mines were often in desolate areas, isolated from the rest of the world. Mining towns could be so forbidding that "one could travel 35 miles and see only three dwellings."[25] As a result, mine operators were forced to create communities for their employees to make them sympathetic to the corporate mission. The Lehigh Coal and Navigation Company built Summit Hill, right downstream of Mauch Chunk, to house and entertain its employees.

Being the single source of employment in both Mauch Chunk and Summit Hill gave the Lehigh Coal Company a great deal of control over their inhabitants, and their malpractice was ubiquitous.[26] Much of their workforce was comprised of Irish immigrants, who, as you may recall from earlier, found strength in social organizations and movements. To combat widespread mistreatment, employees of the coal industry formed unions and radical groups including, but not limited to, the infamous Molly Maguires.[27]

The different conflicts and interactions give us an idea of what Mauch Chunk was like for Mary. Her environment was not dissimilar to that of other immigrants living in the larger cities such as New York and Pennsylvania, where labor movements and strikes were an important aspect of urban America.[28]

Data from the period suggests that Mary most likely would have taken a job as a domestic or personal servant. Live-in work solved the pressing issue of housing for many single

[25] Aurand, *From the Molly Maguires to the United Mine Worker*.
[26] Ibid
[27] Barry, "Molly Maguires."
[28] Breitzer, "Race, Immigration, and Contested Americanness."

female immigrants and provided them with stable income.[29] She would have been privileged to a fair amount of free time, during which she would make use of the town's facilities and explore her new home. It was during one of these excursions into town where she met her husband, John Ferry. John Ferry was from Londonderry, the same place that Mary departed from months prior. John came to the U.S. during 1872, only a few months ahead of Mary. John worked in the mines, just like all of the other men in town, and was drawn to Mary by their shared experiences.

Mary Haggerty and John Ferry married in 1878, after which they moved to Rock Island, Illinois to be with family and friends. They had seven children together, first Mary Agnes, then Bridget Margaret, Katherine Regina, Anne Irene, Lucy Marie, Ellen Leticia, and finally Agnes. My great-grandmother, Mary Elizabeth Bragdon, who was the oldest daughter of Mary Agnes, wrote the letters that inspired this paper.

[29] Jackson, "Women in 19th Century Irish Emigration."

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