

The Cork Settlement of Merry Meeting Bay By Rebecca Graham

What's the importance of studying a short-lived 18th century community on the banks of the Kennebec River? This is a question one might ask when examining the few written documents pertaining to the Cork settlement. The historical significance is elusive when weighed against the lack of written history. Its story is the story of a group of people written out of most of the histories of Maine. The Cork settlement is a story of beginnings in North America and of a people seeking improvement of their circumstances, with little assistance from those who are often glorified in the popular historical record.

The Scots-Irish had traveled in large numbers from the Scottish Lowlands to present day Northern Ireland, but were leaving during a period of crop failures and rent increases. Their choice was to starve at home with certainty, or chance success in the New World. After an arduous trans-Atlantic journey, the Scots-Irish were welcomed to Boston by "a volley of sticks, stones and other offensive weapons" (Reverend Jacob Bailey). A land agent, Robert Temple, sought to settle them on lands along the lower Kennebec River that ostensibly belonged to him and other agents. His unspoken charge was to improve the landlords' holdings and provide a human barrier against Indigenous anger, while pushing further into French-controlled territory. Despite their poor welcome by the Puritan English, the Scots-Irish passengers were reluctant to accept Temple's offer. After a week, they finally headed northwards to the Kennebec in November of 1718. The families from the Bann River Valley were about to become pawns in a land grab.



18th century map showing French and English controlled areas in New England courtesy Barry Rodrigue

Upon arrival, they settled in fertile areas with fresh water and wild grasses for livestock to feed upon. However, these improvements were short-lived. The area's indigenous people, the Abenaki, warned them to leave the Native land. They protested that Scots-Irish livestock trampled Native plantings and consumed the food needed for migratory birds. Scots-Irish pleas to the Puritan government in Boston for military aid remained as unanswered as the Indigenous pleas for the unruly newcomers to fence livestock. The stage was set for conflict.

The Abenaki burnt houses, slaughtered livestock, and abducted male residents and took them north to Quebec. There was little choice left for the women and children left behind expect to move on. Many fled to Boston only to be welcomed again with official warnings to leave. Governor Shute of the Massachusetts Bay Colony provided

little guidance and at one point called the residents “traitors” for leaving their homes. Puritan intolerance remained strong. Some Scots-Irish remained in denser populated Maine areas like Brunswick and Topsham, while others moved into southern Maine, Londonderry (New Hampshire) and elsewhere.

During the intervening years, the actual site of this brief settlement was forgotten. Reverend Henry Otis Thayer argued in 1893 that the popular belief of the Cork settlement being in north Bath was incorrect. He used court documents, containing statements from 1740’s builders, which had been given in land disputes, to show that the Cork settlement actually lay on the eastern side of the Kennebec on Merrymeeting bay. While the real location is important, it is still secondary.

The real significance of the Cork settlement lies with the people who established themselves in the area: the Scots-Irish. It provides a snapshot of the Scots-Irish immigration to the frontiers of the Americas, their importance, their exploitation, and the larger lack of historical focus on their accomplishments. Referred to as “Irish” in documents, there was no distinction between a family from county Cork (in the south) and a family from county Derry (in the north). This is the result of the change in the political landscape over the last 300 years. In 1718, Ireland was one unified state within the British Empire. In 1921, it was divided into Northern Ireland, which remained part of the United Kingdom, and the independent Republic of Ireland (Éire). This led to historical ambiguity about the settlers, which is still a problem in New England historical studies and school curriculums.

Important to remember is the fact that the Scots-Irish represent a significant portion of Maine’s current population. Unlike their Appalachian cousins, Maine’s Scots-Irish are largely unstudied, yet Maine still contains the second largest percentage of self-reported Scots-Irish population nationally.¹ They are not new arrivals on the landscape, but Maine’s Scots-Irish are newly studying their origins. This interest has fed a systematic regional study locally and globally

Geographer/archeologist Barry Rodrigue (University of Southern Maine) and student-researcher Rebecca Graham (pictured collecting data) carried out field



surveys of the area in 2006–2008. The project linked with work underway by John Mann and Bill McKeen of the Maine Ulster Scots Project. Their joint efforts brought in Director John Wilson of the Institute of Ulster-Scots Studies at the University of Ulster, as well as the St. Andrew’s Society of Maine. A conference on Scots-Irish in the

United States held in Savannah, Georgia in 2009 closed with a commitment by those present to put the Scots-Irish back into history books. A second conference was held at the University of Southern Maine's Lewiston-Auburn College in April 2010, which brought music and academia together. The Cork Settlement Archaeology Project is the first of its kind in Maine. With local and international cooperation, this project exemplifies cultural cooperation without borders. The Institute of Ulster-Scots Studies has supported an oral history collection of Maine's Scots-Irish residents and continues to link cultural projects in Maine and Northern Ireland. We are continuing to raise funds to support second stage excavations, which will be conducted by historical archaeologists Pam and Peter Crane. Alister McReynolds and Frank Ferguson from the Institute of Ulster-Scots Studies are republishing the poetic works of Robert Dinsmoor, a Scots-Irish poet from New Hampshire with a Cork Settlement connection. Dinsmoor's grandfather, John Dinsmoor, had settled in Maine from Ballymoney. He was taken captive during the same Indigenous raid that destroyed the Cork settlement. Dinsmoor's poetic verse written in Scots-Irish vernacular was popular in Maine and New Hampshire in the latter half of the 18th century.

“Though Death our ancestors has cleekit
An' under clods them closely steekit,
We'll mark the place their chimneys reekit,
Their native tongue we yet wad speak it
Wi' accent glib.” –Robert Dinsmoor

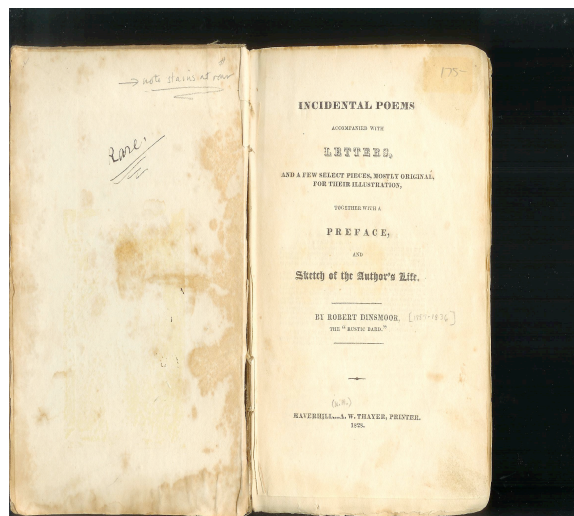


Photo of one of the few remaining Dinsmoor publications
courtesy Frank Ferguson

When we seek to understand the history of Maine, we must insure that the Scots-Irish are included in the narrative along with Maine's Indigenous peoples and Franco-Americans. Maine's connections with Ulster have been strengthened by Senator George Mitchell's involvement in the Irish Peace Process. Perhaps this has aided the increase of residents reporting their Scots-Irish origins. All of these possibilities should be examined, beginning by recognizing the role Scots-Irish played in creating the communities we live in today. This reconstruction begins with the physical study of the Cork settlement in Maine that so many of you have supported. This community cultural endeavor would not be possible without the interest and passion of individuals like the members of the St. Andrews Society of Maine and the Maine Ulster Scots Project. To all of you, THANK YOU!