

Portrush as an emigration port in the 18th & 19th Centuries

Many people emigrated from the Northern part of Ireland in the 18th and 19th centuries, mainly from ports such as Londonderry and Belfast. Occasional mention is made of Coleraine but one rarely hears mention of Portrush. The River Bann leading up to the Port of Coleraine and its entrance from the sea at the Bar Mouth was difficult to navigate in the days of sail and treacherous in bad weather. The shifting sand bar across the entrance limited access to high tides and even then an unwary Captain could be caught out and ground his vessel.



Replica of 18th Century Brig "La Grace"- 126 tons burthen, length 78ft 1in.

Portrush did not have a harbour suitable for large vessels until 1830 but such vessels could anchor in the sheltered waters of the Skerry Roads or, with suitable weather, in the West Bay. Passengers would be rowed out to these ships from the small harbour in the lee of Ramore Head (now the Old Dock) or, more often, from Port-an-Dubh (The Black Inlet) on the East side of the peninsula to vessels moored in the Skerry Roads.

It may be that many recorded emigrations from Coleraine actually took place from Portrush with one reason for the confusion being due to the major shipping agents being based in Coleraine. It may also be due to ships that were scheduled to arrive at and depart from Coleraine were unable to reach the port and anchored off and sailed from the waters around Portrush. One extract from the *New-York Gazette* of 28 November 1768 supports this:


Remarks on board the Ship Providence, Thomas Clarke, Master, from Colerain, in Ireland, bound for New York in America. Sailed from the Skerry road of Portrush on 27th August, 1768, for New-York

Many emigrants from the North of Ireland set sail for New England on the Eastern coast of North America where they hoped to receive a welcome from settlers already established there who shared their views on religious freedom and equality of opportunity. Many, however, were to be sadly disappointed and found themselves pushed further West to settle the frontier lands and to a hard life battling the elements, the virgin ground and, in many instances, the Native Americans whose lands they were trespassing upon.

The earliest mention of emigrants leaving from Portrush that I have been able to find is for a Robert Morrison, born in Scotland c1684, who sailed from *Port Rush* on 7th August 1726 and ended up in Nottingham New Hampshire.

being several Thousand Acres, mostly Arable, to be lett —
For further Particulars enquire of Hugh Boyd Esq; a: Bal-
leville, Jackton Wray, Esq; at Coleraine, and of Richard

Advertisement,



HAT the Snow Prince
GEORGE, of Coleraine, Capt.
Michael Mc Nemara Commander,
burthen One Hundred and Sixty
Tons, will be clear to sail from Sker-
ries Road of Portrush, for NEW-
CASTLE and PHILADELPHIA,
by the 15th of May next — Any
Persons that want their Passage thi-
ther, and will pay here for it, or
will go upon Redemption or as Ser-
vants, may apply to William Galt in Coleraine, or to John
Caldwell of Ballymoney, Merchants, who will agree with
them on very reasonable Terms, and they may depend on
getting such Treatment as they will not have Reason to com-
plain of
Dated at Coleraine, the 7th April, 1752.
N. B. The Departure of the above Vessel is postponed un-
til the 15th of June next; at which Time she will Sail
if Wind permit, whether full or not.
Coleraine, th 8 May, 1752.
Jackson, Esq; by whom Proposals will be received at Du-
dalk from the Beginning of June. — N. B. Terence Done-
gan and Patrick Shields will shew the Lands.
May the 12th, 1752

STALLIONS.
THE noted Horse LADY'S DELIGHT,
is to be let to Mares this Season, at Broca near Mount-
joy in the County of Tyrone, at Half a Guinea a Leap and
Grains and a Shilling to the Groom. This Hottie's Pedigree

One of the earliest advertised emigration ships to sail from Portrush was the *Snow Prince*, a ship of one hundred and sixty tons burthen scheduled to sail from the “Skerries Road of Portrush” on 15th June 1752 bound for Newcastle (a port on the Southern bank of the Delaware River which lead up to Philadelphia) and Philadelphia. The shipping agents advertised were William Galt (Gault?) of Coleraine and John Caldwell of Ballymoney. The advertisement gives little information on the ship and the voyage and no indication of the expected duration or the risks involved:

“and they may depend on getting such Treatment as they will not have Reason to complain of.”



By 1755 we have a larger ship, obviously designed for carrying passengers rather than cargo being advertised. The *Lord Dunluce*, a new ship of 350 tons burthen Captained by William Osborne, is scheduled to depart the Skerry Roads on 20th June 1755 bound for Newcastle and Philadelphia again. The shipping agents are, as before, William Galt (Gault?) of Coleraine and John Caldwell of Ballymoney. The advertisement gives information on the ship and its provisions but no indication of the expected duration or the risks involved:

“they may depend on getting kind Treatment, and of being plentifully supplied with all Things necessary during their Passage. And as the Ship was designedly built for carrying Passengers, and made more commodious for that Business than any other belonging to this Kingdom in that Trade, hopes it will be an Inducement so such as are bound there this Summer to take their Passage in her.”

In 1760 Captain Osborne is once again being advertised as sailing from the *Skerries of Portrush* in a different ship, the *Snow Success*, to New York on the first day of May. William Galt, merchant, of Coleraine is once again the agent. In 1763 Thomas Clarke is the captain of the *Providence* departing the *Skerries* on the 1st August for Newcastle and New York. In 1767 we find the *Rainbow* advertising a voyage in early May to Newcastle and Philadelphia. On 1st August that year the *Providence*, of 300 tons, under Captain Thomas Clarke, is due to sail for New York; the agents again now being Messrs William, John and Charles Galt of Coleraine. In August 1767 we find the *Providence* sailing again to New York and in 1768 the *Rainbow*, now under captain James Caldwell departing in August for *New York, America*. The ship *Rainbow* sails again in 1771 and 1772. In 1775 we have the *Betty and Hellen* departing Portrush in May for Newcastle and Philadelphia under her Captain Patrick McCormick.

The year 1812 brings a new vessel, the American Brig *Mary* due to sail on 19th March to New York under her Master, Francis Boggs, formerly Captain of the ship *West-Point*. In 1818 the ship *Nicolia Pawlowitsch* from Portrush in May. From 1821 there are records of several vessels sailing from Portrush to St. John's Newfoundland; Halifax, Nova Scotia; Quebec; Charleston and Savannah in what is now Georgia.

Sadly many vessels crossing the North Atlantic Ocean in those years were lost on either the outward or inward passages and in many cases scant record was made of those tragedies. Voyages would have been perilous and uncomfortable and could have taken several weeks depending on the season and weather. By 1821 reference is being made to the speed of crossing:

Arrived at Portrush, the schooner Lark, W. Inglis, Master, from Halifax, Nova Scotia, after a remarkably quick passage of 17 days;- making the passage out and home in 82 days.

It is clear that Portrush was a well established port of embarkation for many of those who wished to travel to the New World to seek their fortune or to escape persecution.

Portrush Heritage Group would like to thank John for this excellent contribution to our series of Heritage Newsletters.

June 27th 2020