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'Said to have left His Wife in Ireland:' Adultery, Bigamy and Desertion in Ulster Presbyterian Migration to Pennsylvania, 1780-1815

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In October 1794, as Pennsylvania's southwestern backcountry contended with the unsettling outcome of the Whiskey Rebellion, the Session of the Hannastown Associate Reformed congregation wrestled with a different kind of domestic disturbance: the unsavory prospect of adultery within its midst. Uncertain as how best to proceed, the Session sought the advice of the Associate Reformed Second Pennsylvania Presbytery, then meeting at Robert Clark's house in Hannastown.

As the Hannastown elders explained, James Hunter had "married a Woman in Ireland & cohabited with her some time; afterwards left her alive; received Intelligence in America (as he says) of her Death; & was married to another Woman." Unfortunately for James Hunter, his American bride and ultimately the Hannastown Session, this close-knit Irish Presbyterian community in Westmoreland County had received intelligence indicating that the original Irish wife was, in fact, very much alive.¹

Hunter's apparent adultery presented the Session with a myriad of difficulties. He was a man of some stature in the community.² Hunter had survived a notorious frontier battle, capture by Britain's native allies and imprisonment by British forces in Canada, eventually returning to his farm.³ He owned three hundred acres favorably situated along Forbes's Road, the principal east-west thoroughfare.⁴ And there was substantive

¹ *Proceedings, Second Associate Reformed Presbytery*, 13 Oct. 1794.

² Hunter had arrived in Westmoreland County relatively early, apparently by 1769, and obtained property along the military road named for British Gen. John Forbes. (Sharon Cook MacInnes, *Early Landowners of Pennsylvania: Atlas of Township Patent Maps of Westmoreland County, PA* [Apollo, Pa.: Closson Press, 2007], 453.) Hunter's Revolutionary War service (see below) may have had particular resonance in the vicinity of Hannastown, devastated by a raiding party of British and Indians in July 1782.

³ Ensign James Hunter was among the Westmoreland County rangers who mustered at Carnaghan's blockhouse, eleven miles northwest of Hannastown, on 24 July 1781. Nearly 100 men under the command of Col. Archibald Lochry of Westmoreland County set off on Friday, 3 Aug. to rendezvous with the United States forces under Gen. George Rogers Clark at Fort Henry (present-day Wheeling, West Virginia). The Clark expedition aimed at taking war to Native American strongholds to the west, in response to the devastating raids on American settlements west of the Appalachians. Clark had left Fort Henry shortly before Lochry's rangers arrived. En route to join the Clark expedition, in what is now Indiana, the Lochry contingent came under attack by Mohawk forces led by George Girty and under the command of Chief Joseph Brant. Ensign James Hunter of Captain Robert Orr's company was among the survivors taken to Canada and released after the war. (Edgar W. Hassler, *Old Westmoreland: a history of western Pennsylvania during the Revolution* [Pittsburgh: J.R. Weldin Co., 1900], 145; C. Hale Sipe, *Fort Ligonier and its times* [Harrisburg, Pa.: The Telegraph Press, 1932], 520.)

⁴ John N. Boucher, *Old and New Westmoreland* (New York: The American Historical Society, 1918), 85-86. A Westmoreland County Patent Map shows the adjoining tracts of James and Joseph Hunter in Unity Township, in close proximity to the tract containing the gristmill of prominent Ulster-born political leader William Findley. (MacInnes, 436.) Early in the year of Lochry's defeat, James Hunter

procedural difficulties. Key documents and principal witnesses were in Ireland—in particular, the aggrieved wife—and therefore could not be produced for a church trial in accordance with longstanding Presbyterian practices. Under the rules, witnesses were expected to offer direct testimony and undergo cross-examination. But the elders and minister who comprised the Session could hardly ignore a breach of moral discipline as egregious as adultery. And so the Session sought the advice of the Associate Reformed Second Pennsylvania Presbytery.⁵

But the problem, apparently, proved as intractable to the Presbytery—which directed the session to “enquire as fully as possible” into the available details and report back.⁶

During the late eighteenth century, Presbyterian judicatories in the western Pennsylvania backcountry considered cases in which male church members like James Hunter were accused of unlawful relations with women in America because of abandoned but still living wives back home in Ireland. This “Irish wife” phenomenon derived from substantial Ulster Presbyterian migration into the upper Ohio valley. In these episodes of emigration, women and men became caught up in vortices of competing personal, political and economic circumstances and transatlantic crossings. Distances in time and space complicated the deliberations of sessions and presbyteries charged with unraveling cases fraught with the sometimes competing demands of church standards and human needs.

Such cases arose because sessions had responsibility for determining eligibility to the communion table and therefore had the authority and need to inquire into congregants’ moral lapses. Although sessions generally admitted applicants to communion without incident, minutes frequently reported disciplinary cases involving intemperance and interpersonal conflict, and to a lesser extent, fornication and other sex-related moral infractions. Neither reports of “Irish wife” cases nor accusations of adultery were especially numerous within the oldest extant Presbyterian records for western Pennsylvania. Remarkably, though, half of the twelve adultery cases mentioned in session or presbytery minutes involved a wife left in Ireland.⁷ The cases discussed here are not necessarily representative of backcountry Presbyterian marital relations but may be suggestive of a number of aspects of the migration process. The details of such transatlantic incidences of adultery and bigamy are unlikely to be recorded elsewhere and are not found in conventional family histories or among the genealogical details that were a staple of late nineteenth-century local histories.

These session and presbytery minutes do not supply with all the answers, however. The record is tantalizingly silent with respect to a report and subsequent deliberation by

served on a jury at a Court of Common Pleas held at Hannastown, on the second Tuesday in January 1781. (Civil Court Docket, Westmoreland Co., Pa., January Term 1781.)

⁵ Associate Reformed Synod, *The Constitution and Standards of the Associate-Reformed Church in North America* (Pittsburgh: Johnston and Stockton, 1832), 397; *Proceedings, Second Associate Reformed Presbytery*, op cit.

⁶ *Proceedings, Second Associate Reformed Presbytery*, op cit.

⁷ See Peter E. Gilmore, “Rebels and Revivals: Ulster Immigrants, Western Pennsylvania Presbyterianism and the Formation of Scotch-Irish Identity, 1780-1830.” Ph.D. diss., Carnegie Mellon University, 2009, especially Part II, “Rituals of Reintegration, Structures of Definition.” It is worth noting that these questions of adultery and bigamy came before ecclesiastical and not civil courts, itself indicative of the strength and prerogatives of ethnoreligious cohesion.

Associate Reformed Second Pennsylvania Presbytery in the case of James Hunter.⁸ What we do know is that former prisoner of war was apparently unwilling or unable to live with the woman whom he legally wedded in Ireland but also unwilling and unable to live alone in the semi-wilderness of the Appalachian foothills. The federal census of 1800 reported seven in the Hunter household; a will composed eight years later referred to his wife and eight children and a grand-daughter raised within the household. If Hunter had late-life misgivings of how he had treated his first wife, they are not reflected in his 1809 last will and testament.⁹

John Coleman of Westmoreland County, like James Hunter, may have been among the thousands who migrated in the first half of the 1770s. Unlike Hunter, however, Coleman was under no illusions that the woman whom he had married in Ireland was still alive. Believing he had been morally correct in renouncing his Irish wife, Coleman vigorously prosecuted his case and eventually—nearly twenty years later—received some small satisfaction.¹⁰

The session of the mainstream Presbyterian congregation of Salem in Derry Township had denied Coleman the privileges of church membership due to reports that he had married since in his arrival in America although he had previously wed another woman in Ireland. Coleman protested this decision to the Redstone Presbytery when it convened, convenient for his defense strategy, in Mount Pleasant Township in mid-April 1788. Coleman asked to be restored to the church privileges denied him by his congregation, asserting “that by the laws of God and man he was free from [his wife in Ireland], as by her conduct in his absence she had violated her marriage covenant in a very essential part; of which he had sufficient information, before his second marriage.” Coleman presented three witnesses who had been in Ireland since his emigration to corroborate his claims of adultery and estrangement. Their testimony contributed to reconsideration of his case by the session.¹¹

Alexander Hunter of Mount Pleasant Township testified “that when he was last in Ireland he was informed by the neighbours of Mary Coleman, wife to John Coleman, that she had behaved basely, as taken in the act of Adultery with a certain Henery Irvin.” Further, Hunter alleged, Mary Coleman refused his offer to pay her passage to America, declaring that if her husband himself were present, “she would not go with him.” And Hunter claimed he had read a letter from John Coleman’s father in which the erstwhile father-in-law reported that Mary had given birth to a child out of wedlock, “and was then

⁸ *Proceedings, Second Associate Reformed Presbytery*, 13 Oct. 1794.

⁹ Westmoreland Co., Pa. Will Book 1, 1773-1811, Item No. 376, 232. The executors of the will were son James and brother-in-law Peter Tittle, who farmed 282 acres in Unity Township near Hunter. (MacInnes, 465.) (Rendered as “Title” in the will, the brother-in-law’s surname seems to be more properly spelled as shown.) Tittle, along with Rev. Samuel Potter and prominent Scotch-Irish elected official William Todd, was among the friends and neighbors of Congressman William Findley who co-signed a letter to Captain Matthew Jack proposing a volunteer force to keep the peace at the time of the Whiskey Rebellion. (Albert, 205) Findley and son James were the executors of the will of Elizabeth Hunter, the “American” wife. (Westmoreland Co., Pa. Will Book 1, Item No.388, 242.) Although a member of the mainstream Presbyterian church by 1809, Findley had been a founding member of the Associate Reformed church and would have at one time worshipped with the Hunters.

¹⁰ The surname Coleman/Colman (both spellings are found in connection with this case) can be of Irish, English or Scottish origin, and derived from Gaelic and Old English. A variant of Gaelic derivation introduced to northern England by Scandinavians in the early middle ages.

¹¹ *Minutes of the Redstone Presbytery*, 37-38.

great with another, and was therefore dead as to him.” Hunter’s wife Barbara Patterson affirmed that such a letter from the senior Coleman, containing those allegations, had been read in her presence.¹²

The third witness, Robert Rayburn, likewise attempted to corroborate the allegations against Mary Coleman. He told the presbyters that he had been informed by Edward Deny, who came from the same town as Mary Coleman, of the same adulterous relationship with “Henery Irvin.” Rayburn, who had traveled north to Derry Township from Tyrone Township, testified further that he had long known Coleman, who had “always sustained a good moral character, both in Irland and in this country, and never made any secret of his having a wife Irland.”¹³

Coleman proposed further witnesses. Presbytery agreed to let the case proceed and appointed Rev. James Power of the Mount Pleasant congregation to meet with the Salem Session (which did not have a minister) in taking the testimony of any additional witnesses Coleman brought forward. The Salem was expected to report back to Presbytery at its fall meeting. The case languished, however, for another two decades.¹⁴

For reasons not explained, Redstone Presbytery took up Coleman’s appeal again in April 1807. After first excusing the delay on the grounds that there had been inadequate testimony on which to base a decision, presbyters decided that Coleman’s conduct “was not such as to exclude him from the distinguishing privileges of the church.” Coleman could once again partake of the Lord’s Supper. We do not know if lingering bitterness over his exclusion from the table contributed to Coleman’s decision to leave the neighborhood or if his plans to leave Westmoreland County triggered the Presbytery’s belated action in his case. Although recorded in the federal censuses of 1790 and 1800, the name “John Coleman” does not subsequently appear among those enumerated in Westmoreland County.¹⁵

Economic factors may have persuaded the Coleman family to relocate. Coleman was not among the early settlers to acquire land, but had a household of nine according to the 1800 census. Cheaper land in other districts could have been a powerful inducement to relocate. The Revolutionary War veteran named John Coleman who died in 1847, aged 99 years, in North Beaver Township in relatively remote Lawrence County may well have been the Irish migrant whose Irish wife reportedly chose not to join him in a new home, half a world away and more than half a life-time earlier.¹⁶

¹² Ibid. Nancy, the daughter of Alexander and Barbara, was born in Ireland, 2 Feb 1772; she married John Kilgore, the son of Capt. David Kilgore, a prominent Revolutionary War veteran and Mt. Pleasant Township property owner. (John Newton Boucher, *Old and New Westmoreland*, Vol. 4 [New York: The American Historical Society, 1918], 1265, 536; MacInnes, 275.) The immigrant father of Nancy may be the Alexander Hunter who sailed from Derry City in 1773. (Irish Emigration Database.) He died in Mt. Pleasant Township, Westmoreland County, 14 Sept. 1829. (This, and the intelligence that his wife was born Barbara Patterson, from Ancestry.com.)

¹³ *Minutes of the Redstone Presbytery*, 37-38. Rayburn, of Tyrone Township, appears on a 1783 list of Westmoreland County taxpayers. (His surname in the *Minutes* appears as “Reyburn.”)

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ *Minutes of the Redstone Presbytery*, 218; U.S. Census, 1790; U.S. Census, 1800.

¹⁶ MacInnes (whose compilation of land warrants has no reference to Coleman); U.S. Census reports for 1800, 1830; J. Fraise Richard, *History of Beaver County, Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: A. Warner and Co., 1888), 113; Joseph Henderson Bausman, *History of Beaver County, Pennsylvania* (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1904), 476.

We have the claim that Mary Coleman refused to join her husband, although we have no way of knowing the particular factors which led to her recalcitrance. We do know that John Coleman's wife was not the only contemporary Irishwoman who resisted migration. The Presbyterian General Assembly in 1790 heard the appeal of an immigrant then living in Pennsylvania who had returned to Ireland three times in hopes of relocating his family to America. On the third trip his wife absolutely refused to join him and "peremptorily refused all further cohabitation."¹⁷

This transoceanic movement of Irishmen and women to and from America in the second half of the eighteenth century took place in the context of a North Atlantic economy dominated by British capital and British imperial interests. The British Empire required Europeans (particularly Protestants) to occupy, develop and defend lands of potential economic and strategic benefit. The northeastern counties of Ireland had a surplus, age-appropriate male population; economic mechanisms existed to convey this labor supply across the Atlantic.

As Ulster recovered from the famine of the 1740s, the province increasingly possessed growing numbers of young men simultaneously suited for life and work on the American frontier *and* vulnerable to economic fluctuations associated with the commercialization of the provincial economy. Tenant-farmer households in effect gambled that profits realized through participation in the linen trade through production of yarn and cloth would meet escalating rent-levels; the promise of textile incomes encouraged proliferation of farmer-weaver households, helping to provoke the intense competition for land which contributed to higher rents. Rising rent levels spurred the migration of linen workers; the distressing combination of industrial and agricultural depressions drove farmer-weavers to emigrant ships. James Hunter and John Coleman may have been among the 30,000 or so Ulster Presbyterians who migrated between 1770 and 1775 largely as a result of rapidly occurring commercialization and resultant economic dislocation. East Ulster, heavily populated due to its heavy involvement with linen production, suffered when the linen trade experienced downturns. These dislocations by themselves and in combination with farming losses, higher rents demanded by landlords and evictions propelled young men across the Atlantic.¹⁸ Men numerically dominated late colonial-era migration; relatively few single women emigrated in the latter decades of the eighteenth century, a pattern in sharp contrast to the prevalence of single women in later Irish migration.¹⁹

¹⁷ Samuel J. Baird, ed., *Acts, Deliverances and Testimonies of the Supreme Judicatory of the Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Education, 1855), 189-190.

¹⁸ Deirdre M. Mageean, "From Irish countryside to American city: The settlement and mobility of Ulster migrants in Philadelphia" in Colin G. Pooley and Ian D. Whyte, *Migrants, Emigrants and Immigrants: A social history of migration* (London: Routledge, 1991), 43; Liam Kennedy, "Population, Economy, and Society from 1750 to 1950," in James S. Donnelly, Jr., et al., ed., *Encyclopedia of Irish History and Culture* (Detroit: Thompson Gale, 2004), 566-567; Mageean, 43; Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York, 1985), 155-156; Graeme Kirkham, "Introduction," in R.J. Dickson, *Ulster Emigration to Colonial America, 1718-1775* (Belfast: Ulster Historical Foundation, 1988), viii-ix.

¹⁹ Deirdre M. Mageean notes that "In the first half of the [nineteenth] century [migration from north west Ireland] was dominated by young, single males. During the years 1803-6 the sex ratio of those sailing from Derry to the United States was 198 males per 100 females. By 1830-1 the ratio had fallen to 145 males per 100 females." In the second half of the century, the composition of the migration changed, both with respect to the north of Ireland and generally. (48-49) "In the decades after the Famine more Irish

The migration of entire families has been noted as a feature of this period. At the same time, however, a significant number of colonial-era migrants could not pay for their transatlantic passage and came to America individually as redemptioners or indentured servants. The servant trade favored males.²⁰ Thus, we have a circumstance in which large numbers of young (and not necessarily unmarried) males migrated together with family units. Even if Mrs. Coleman had been willing to emigrate, her husband may not have had the financial ability to bring her with him. James Hunter presumably lacked the means to migrate in the company of his Irish wife, or to arrange for her passage prior to the inaccurate (if convenient) reports of her demise.²¹

In general, the lower migration rates for single women may indicate (at least in part) the perception of favorable marriage prospects as the result of linen's success amid the growth of the Irish economy. Perhaps testifying to the effects of population growth and the resultant supply of young males, the Irish Mrs. Coleman appears to have found a man willing and able to partner her in the absence of her husband. But questions arise: Did their own potential access to linen-related employment give seemingly abandoned wives greater independence? Women's work as spinners of linen yarn was crucial to the industry's success. Did a measure of economic independence derived from spinning promote female autonomy—and embolden some wives in refusing to emigrate? When the linen trade was strong, tenant-farmer households could do relatively well through linen production based on a gendered division of labor, women preparing and spinning yarn and men weaving. The benefits of household production would be lost through migration. A wife's decision *not* to join her husband in an overseas trek might represent a last-ditch protest against what could have been perceived as a fundamentally unsound decision.²²

women than Irish men immigrated to the United States; the Irish communities contained more females than males.” (Hasia R. Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century* [Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983], xiv.) See also, Patrick Fitzgerald Fitzgerald and Brian Lambkin, *Migration in Irish History* (Houndsville, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 57-58.

²⁰ Dickson, 96; Fitzgerald and Lambkin, 57.

²¹ The immigrant John McBride worried about the costs of emigration in a 1827 letter to a brother in Ireland. McBride assured his brother in Ireland he would be of as much assistance possible in bringing him to the U.S. But what, he asked, about your new wife and our sisters?

²² Miller, 171. As W.H. Crawford points out, “There were... considerable benefits to be gained by those families that could organise themselves into an effective production team...” (*The impact of the domestic linen industry in Ulster* [Belfast: Ulster Historical Foundation], 2005), 122-124.) Brenda Collins points out, “Most important of all was the need for spinners to provide the yarn for weaving, particularly as the ratio of spinning to weaving labour was not on a one-to-one basis. The possibility of raising household income was therefore dependent on the labour of the female spinners as well as the male weaving members of the household. Sometimes this could be met by the temporary importation of suitable labour into the household; both Arthur Young and Edward Wakefield refer to a class of itinerant spinners who would settle in a weaver's home for some weeks or months and would spin his stock of flax in return for board and lodging and a small money payment. (133).” “Both in the wealthy upper classes and in the lower classes, women's sexual freedom was linked to their economic independence.” (Eve Tavor Bannet, “The Marriage Act of 1753: ‘A most cruel law for the Fair Sex,’” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 3 [1997], 243.) If, as James Jackson Jr. and Leslie Page Moch argue, migrants' perception of distant opportunity mattered more than “objective economic reality,” so too might the judgments of their wives that migration offered insufficient opportunity. (“Migration and the Social History of Modern Europe,” in Dirk Hoerder and

The Associate Congregation of Pittsburgh in 1814 heard how an immigrant's wife still living in Ireland had been physically removed from the marital residence by her father. We cannot know to what extent Mr. Thompson's intervention in the Kelly marriage was motivated in part by the possibility of migration, its economic consequences and the near-inevitability of a permanent parent-child separation.²³ To the grief and confusion afflicting women in America caught up in illicit marriages to immigrant men must be added the complexity of emotional and economic, individual and familial circumstances affecting the decisions of married women who chose not to emigrate.

Such intentionality by migration-widows is understandable. Women in Ireland, the contemporary observer Edward Wakefield wrote, "work[ed] more like slaves than labourers." But their burden was no less heavy in the sometimes desperate struggle for survival in the American backcountry. Despite their critical role in assuring their households' viability, women would be expected to remain as subservient to husbands and male relatives in America as they were in Ireland. In the western world, the interests of empire, land speculators, entrepreneurs, colonial regimes and eventually indigenous governments all tended to favor male labor and homesteading households headed by men. Women in the Pennsylvanian backcountry in the late eighteenth century lacked the opportunities for semi-autonomous income available contemporaneously in Ulster. The willingness of some to wed men already married in Ireland testifies to the reality of female dependence on male breadwinners and heads of household.²⁴

"Irish wife" cases came before church courts in communities constructed through endogamous marriages and the migration of networks of family and neighbors. With some consistency Irish Presbyterian migrants to North America chose their marriage partners from within their ethnoreligious group. In the cases examined here, the immigrant men appear to have followed this practice.²⁵ As points of contact with extra-familial, larger and more diffuse networks, church gatherings, and communion observances facilitated endogamy and thus furthered ethnoreligious cohesion among Irish Presbyterians in America.²⁶

Leslie Page Moch, eds, *European Migrants: Global and Local Perspectives* [Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996], 57).

²³ Pittsburgh Associate Congregation Session Minutes, 19 (22 Oct. 1814). Other factors seem to have taken precedence; Mr. Kelly had claimed that not long after he left Ireland, rumors had circulated about him in his old neighborhood. These rumors represented the proximate cause of Thompson's action in removing his daughter from the Kelly home.

²⁴ Edward Wakefield, *An Account of Ireland, Statistical and Political* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1812), 518; Kevin Kenny, *The American Irish: A History* (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 2000), 34, 52; David Noel Doyle, *Ireland, Irishmen and Revolutionary America, 1760-1820* (Dublin: The Mercier Press, 1981), 87-88.

²⁵ There is little readily available information on the American wives. James Hunter married Elizabeth Tittle, whose family was in Pennsylvania by 1760. The Tittles may have been of (Ulster-)Scots, English or Bohemian origin; they frequently intermarried with Irish Presbyterians and (at least by the nineteenth century) were Presbyterians themselves.

²⁶ Rev. Joseph Smith recalled how sacramental occasions "paved the way for many happy marriages and many auspicious nuptials." (Joseph Smith, *Old Redstone; or, Historical Sketches of Western Presbyterianism, Its Early Ministers, Its Perilous Times and Its First Records* [Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo & Co., 1854], quoted in Eric Leigh Schmidt, *Holy Fairs: Scottish Communion and American Revivals in the Early Modern Period* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989], 198.) See also Michael

The “social exodus” of Irish Presbyterians prior to the American Revolution created networks which assisted their movement and eased the way of later migrants.²⁷ Participation in these interpersonal networks of family, friends, old and new neighbors and co-religionists created “social capital.”²⁸ We do not know how James Hunter came to settle in Westmoreland County, although it seems likely he followed or accompanied relatives, possibly Joseph Hunter, whose farm along Forbes Road in Unity Township adjoined his. He benefited from the knowledge and assistance of others, among them the relatives of his American wife, Elizabeth Tittle, who were already well-accustomed to frontier life.²⁹ John Coleman clearly made a home for himself in Pennsylvania that allowed for communication with and the company of friends and neighbors from Ulster—among them, Hunters, Pattersons, Rayburns.

Religious affiliation is also suggestive of settlement patterns and networking from which migrants created social capital. As a communicant of the Associate Reformed church in Pennsylvania, Hunter was likely a Burgher Seceder in Ireland; the Seceders had a strong presence in linen-producing areas such as Armagh and western Down.³⁰ In connecting himself with men and women with a shared theology, religious customs and sets of experiences, Hunter inserted himself into a network linked to Ireland. Whether born in Ireland or in the United States, the two Pittsburgh women connected to the Kelly-Thompson case mentioned earlier were nonetheless linked by religious affiliation and the closed-circuit communication of immigrant communities to individuals in Ulster.³¹

Distance in time and space no doubted limited the flow and availability of information, allowing women in the United States to wed men already married in Ireland. And yet, people and information circulated even as distance and the available technology slowed and limited international exchanges. Although delayed, word reached Ulster-American communities of deserted wives still living, rumors circulating in Ireland arrived in distant farms and villages in the United States, travelers’ stories and transported letters seemed to corroborate reports of adultery. The growing reliability of transatlantic pathways of capital, goods and labor, and living connections of friends, family and co-religionists, enhanced existing information flows.

As if to demonstrate the efficiency of communications, an abandoned Irish wife upon her own emigration located her philandering husband in western Pennsylvania—

B. Aguilera and Douglas S. Massey, “Social Capital and the Wages of Mexican Migrants: New Hypotheses and Tests,” *Social Forces*, Vol. 82, No. 2 (Dec., 2003), 674.

²⁷ Miller, 168.

²⁸ Aguilera and Massey, 672-673.

²⁹ Boucher, *Old and New Westmoreland*, 85-86; MacInnes, 436. A reference to Peter Tittle, probably the father of Elizabeth, can be found as early as 1760.

³⁰ Ian R. McBride, *Scripture Politics: Ulster Presbyterianism and Irish Radicalism in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), fn40,p73. “The Burgher Seceders established flourishing congregations at Drumgooland, Glascar, Ritchhill, Scarva, Donacloney, Loughaghery, Boardmills, Tandragee, Mountnorris, and Armagh City.” (Joseph Nimmons, *Newmills Congregation, 179-1947*, found at www.NewmillsPresbyterian.org.)

³¹ For example, we have the example of Nancy Logan writing from Pennsylvania in 1828; she informed a correspondent that “Brother John is well and is in Pittsburgh” and asked to be remembered “...to uncle and aunt and to Mr McCune and his wife and all the rest of my ‘acquaintens.’” She proceeded to report on the status of several individuals within her immigrant community who would have been well-known to friends and family in Ireland. Washington (PA?) to Brice, 1828, pp143-144 Similarly, in a 1830 letter from County Tyrone, an immigrant is informed: “Johns wife your Cousin is in pittsburgh...”

much to the embarrassment and consternation of the woman whom he had married in the United States. In 1814, this second Mrs. Hair told the session of the Pittsburgh Seceder congregation she had wed her husband unaware of his marriage in Ireland. She explained to the session in seeking divorce that the original Mrs. Hair, “coming to this Country claimed, & soon after by his own intention obtained her former husband.”³²

In May 1795 the Session of the Forks of Yough Associate Reformed congregation “Took up the case of Margaret Kincaid charged with the sin of Adultery, having bore a child to a certain Jas. Maxwell said to have left his Wife in Ireland.”³³ We learn nothing in the session minutes of Maxwell (in 1790 the head of a household in Rostraver Township in Westmoreland County) or his Irish wife. His absence from the proceedings strongly suggests that he was not in communion with the Associate Reformed church. This case reminds us of the variations within contemporary Ulster Presbyterianism—and that not all migrants from the north of Ireland were church members in good standing or Presbyterians.³⁴ The Associate Reformed denomination represented a 1782 merger in the United States of the Reformed Presbyterians (or Covenanters) and Associate Presbyterians (or Seceders). Margaret Kincaid, who seems to have been raised in a Covenanter family, appeared before session and acknowledged her wrongdoing. Apparently unwilling to act on their own, the elders elected to postpone any action in this case until the presbytery’s August meeting. But the presbytery declined to intervene beyond directing the session to follow the church’s Book of Discipline. Accordingly, on 10 August, the session noted that “Margaret Kincaid be called at first opportunity to confess her sin—adultery—before congregation.” As the minutes end with that entry, we do not know what transpired next. Based on similar cases it seems reasonable to assume that Margaret Kincaid did what was asked of her.³⁵

Almost beyond the comprehension of twenty-first century minds is the willingness of these Presbyterians to voluntarily submit to church discipline; that, and the seriousness penalized petitioners attached to their particular versions of Presbyterianism in pleading for access to the sacraments. In these complex transactions we can perceive personal

³² Pittsburgh Associate Congregation Session Minutes, 22 Oct. 1814.

³³ Forks of Yough Session Minutes, 20 May 1795.

³⁴ U.S. Census, 1790. For the religious demographics of migration, see Michael P. Carroll, “How the Irish Became Protestant in America,” *Religion and American Culture*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Winter 2006), 33-38.

³⁵ Margaret was likely the daughter of John Kincaid, who had been an active participant in a Covenanter society in the 1780s and who served the Associate Reformed congregation of the Forks of Yough as a ruling elder in the 1790s. (Reid W. Stewart, *Minutes of the Correspondent, 1780-1809*, viii, 4, 5, 7, 12; Forks of Yough Session Minutes, 11 Aug. 1790; *Proceedings, Second Associate Reformed Presbytery*, Aug. 1794.)

A John Maxwell—possibly a relative of the alleged adulterer—resided in Rostraver Township in the 1770s and 1790s and was reported during the Revolutionary War to have owned 1 horse, 1 sheep and 1 horned cow. (John N. Boucher, *Old and New Westmoreland*, Vol. 2 [New York: American Historical Society, 1918], 495; Albert, *History of Westmoreland*, 562. Rostraver—named for the County Down village of Rostrevor—lies in the triangle formed by the Monongahela and Youghiogheny Rivers: the Forks of Yough.

Forks of Yough Session Minutes, 20 May 1795; *Proceedings, Second Associate Reformed Presbytery*, 20 May, 5 Aug. 1795; *The Constitution and Standards of the Associate-Reformed Church*, 403-404; Forks of Yough Session Minutes, 10 Aug. 1795. John Kincaid was not recorded as in attendance at the meetings which discussed Margaret’s case.

expressions of faith and a felt need to act on that faith within particular religious traditions, intermingled perhaps with face-saving and the desire to be re-integrated into the community. Religious ritual served a critical role in the cohesion of the transplanted ethnoreligious communities: invested with experiential understanding of communal allegiances, ritual linked individuals and families to the varieties of Presbyterianism known in Ulster.

And yet those contemporary meanings were conflicted, individual and intensely personal, even as the processes and allegiances were collective and covenantal. Coleman made no secret that he had a wife in Ireland, and his conviction that she had acted immorally provided him with a rationale for interpreting doctrine according to his own convenience. Hunter seems similarly to have been following his own course. Only Margaret Kincaid, already a victim, violated and vulnerable, seems to have willingly humbled herself through a full confession of her transgression of community standards and expectations, in order to secure a place for her child in the life of the congregation.

These events become more explicable, perhaps, when we consider how communities of faith in Pennsylvania and Ulster acted not only as instruments of rebuke and punishment but also as sources of solace and healing. The ability to be served at the Lord's Table had profound significance. As gatekeepers to the table, sessions therefore wielded real, community-sanctioned authority, although their exercise of power was subject to continual negotiation. Sessions could be both censorious and conciliatory, and although exclusively male and patriarchal, relatively even-handed in their treatment of men and women. Elders penalized the men who had betrayed wedding vows in Ireland more frequently than the women they married in the United States.

That said, sessions and presbyteries appeared at times uncertain how best to handle these fraught transatlantic cases. Although not recognized as a sacrament, marriage was nonetheless significant as a foundation of religious and community life. Marriage therefore came under the scrutiny of elders and presbyters obliged to protect religious and cultural norms.³⁶ Sessions thus contended with occasional cases of premarital sex; references to adultery appeared infrequently in the minutes and divorce was rarer still. Adultery and desertion were the only recognized grounds for divorce.³⁷ Similar to the

³⁶ In this period the church courts of all the various Presbyterian denominations appeared to have followed the rules governing marriage laid out in the seventeenth-century Presbyterian *Directory of Public Worship*. As in eighteenth-century Ulster, a marriage might be regarded as "irregular" if couples failed to publish the banns, eloped or if ceremonies had been conducted by someone other than a recognized minister with proper credentials. (Holmes, 218.) See, for example, the *Book of Church Government and Discipline* adopted by the Associate Synod of North America in Pittsburgh in 1817: the Synod declared church law requiring publication of marriage to be "in ordinary cases, indispensably necessary." (39) Similarly, the Reformed Synod in 1822 reiterated that denomination's *Testimony* with an amendment stating: "In order to prevent rash and unlawful connexions, no minister shall solemnize marriage, until he shall have evidence that the parties have caused their purpose to be duly published to all whom it may concern: such publication shall be made in the town or congregation to which each of the parties belongs, and for such length of time as may be necessary to ascertain, to the satisfaction of the elders of the church, that no lawful impediment to their union exists." (Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary Library *Minutes of the Reformed Presbyterian Synod, 1809-1833*, 118.)

³⁷ Andrew R. Holmes, *The Shaping of Ulster Presbyterian Belief & Practice, 1770-1814* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 212, 223.

“Irish wife” cases, charges of adultery were often linked to discovery of absent marital partners who had gone missing in the fluidity of relationships in post-frontier society.³⁸

The response of the General Assembly (the highest judicatory of the mainstream Presbyterian church) to a 1790 “Irish wife” case suggests the difficulties in balancing fairness and scrupulous faithfulness to religious tradition. An Irish immigrant who brought an appeal to the General Assembly asserted that he had lived as a bachelor for a time upon his third and final return to the United States, following his unsuccessful efforts to convince his wife to join him. Eventually he had remarried and started a new family; he and his new wife then applied for admission to communion. Lower church courts had denied their application and the General Assembly concurred, ruling that the couple were living in “vice.” Further, it seemed to the General Assembly that the twice-married man seemed not to have made all possible attempts to secure divorce. Recognizing his Irish wife’s “wilful [sic] and obstinate desertion,” the husband could secure admission to communion should he made a reasonable attempt to obtain a divorce in Ireland and furnished evidence of this endeavor.³⁹ If such determination by church courts to follow the rules penalized couples like the appellant and his new wife, commitment to these procedures also served to protect the interests of deserted wives.

Deserted wives and those women who wed men with wives still in Ireland simultaneously symbolize and measure the pain, confusion and dislocation of migration. The investigation into such events and subsequent decision-making by elders and presbyters suggests the vitality of transatlantic networks and transplanted Presbyterian institutions. But these cases raise questions, among them: how many more instances of wife desertion were there that may be largely unrecoverable because of the parties’ absence from church proceedings? What impact did the linen industry have on women’s role and decision-making in migration? How many wives, lovers and fiancées in Ireland chose to initiate separation from male migrants by refusing to gamble on a new life in a new world? However daunting the evidentiary challenges, a gendered history of earlier migration flows is needed for a fuller account.

³⁸ Elisabeth Kyle remarried when her first husband had been missing for two years and was presumed dead. The Rehoboth Session worried about the validity of this action, but the Redstone Presbytery in April 1798 ruled “the marriage is not of such a nature” to bar the couple from communion. George Hutchison received a less favorable judgment from the Associate Reformed Second Pennsylvania Presbytery. The Loyalhanna congregation’s session worried that Hutchison had married a woman whose husband was still alive; the presbytery decided “that sd. George appears chargeable with Adultery.” (*Minutes of the Redstone Presbytery*, 139; *Proceedings, Second Associate Reformed Presbytery*, 28 Aug. 1793.)

³⁹ Samuel J. Baird, ed., *Acts, Deliverances and Testimonies of the Supreme Judicatory of the Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Education, 1855), 189-190. The General Assembly recognized that in his pursuit of a divorce in Ireland the applicant might be “prevented and oppressed by the power of antagonists or of unjust courts”—a reference to the disabilities imposed upon Presbyterians by the established Church of Ireland.