

A Limerick Coffin Ship

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A detailed analysis is provided of the passengers who died when a ship sailing from Limerick to Quebec sank on route in 1834. Their names, gender, home parishes and occupations are listed and analysed. The shipwreck is discussed in the social and economic context of conditions in pre-famine Limerick.

Coffin ships, old, un-seaworthy, over crowded sailing ships packed with poor starving people fleeing from Ireland, are usually associated in the popular mind with the period of the Great Famine of the 1840s. But such ships existed before this period and terrible tragedies occurred when they sank with large loss of life. Such a tragedy occurred in April 1834, when a ship named *James*, which had sailed from Limerick, on route to Quebec, sank in the mid-Atlantic with the loss of two hundred and forty-eight people. It was a brig, a two-masted, square-rigged ship with an additional lower fore-and-aft sail on the gaff and a boom to the masthead. The vast majority of the victims were from County Limerick and appear to be from the farming rather than labouring class. A full list of those lost survives as well as details about their place of origin and in some instances their occupations and ages.¹

The ship sailed from Limerick on 8 April 1834 with two hundred and forty-two passengers and a crew of eighteen. On its way down the Shannon estuary, one woman, Mrs Lowes from Rathkeale, died and her body was taken off and buried near Tarbert. Her husband, Peter Lowes decided against continuing the journey alone and returned to his home.² They reached open sea three days later and almost immediately hit very bad weather. Gales quickly blew away the topmast, studding sail boom, jib boom, main sail, foresail and yard. By eight o'clock on the morning of Sunday 26 April, with the weather blowing a heavy gale, the ship was taking on water. Attempts to pump this out were hampered by the potatoes brought on board by the passengers. The potatoes had fallen out of their bags due to the severe weather and had blocked the pump wells, rendering them ineffective. Attempts to bail out the water with buckets and baskets also failed. Eventually by 5pm, after being hit by two heavy waves and with over eight feet of water in the hold, the ship listed so much on its side that it led to its ballast shifting with the result that it could not regain an upright position. It was now found impossible to save her and the captain gave orders to take to the boats. As the long boat and jolly boat were lowered a sail appeared on the horizon. This was the *Margaret*, out of Newcastle, England. An hour and a half later, eleven people who were in the jolly boat were picked up by this vessel whose crew immediately hoisted a light and in poor sea conditions kept within two miles of the sinking ship. The *James* remained visible to the crew of the *Margaret* until 8.30 pm. The *Margaret* stayed all night in the vicinity of where the *James* sank, but nothing was seen of the remainder of her passengers or crew. The eleven persons saved comprised seven of the crew and four passengers. The captain, William Laidler, clearly did not believe in the tradition of 'going down with his ship' as both he and his brother, Robert Laidler, were rescued along with the ship surgeon (Henry Downes), the carpenter

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¹ *Limerick Chronicle [LC]*, 28 June 1834.

² He was listed among the dead, as Peter Lawes, and it was only later discovered that he was safe, *LC*, 2 July 1834.

(Thomas Enright), a sailor (James Cook) and two apprentices (Peter Lillywall and James Clarke). The lucky passengers were Mary Hastings (from Castletown), Andrew Young (Croagh), Edmund Curry (Golden) and James Sheahan (home not identified).³

Of the two hundred and forty-one passengers that sailed on the *James* from Limerick, one hundred and forty-seven were from County Limerick (eighty-two from west Limerick), sixty-four from Tipperary, twenty-one from Clare, four from Cork and three from Kerry. Eighty-four females, (forty-five per cent) and 105 males (fifty-five per cent) were described as adults over fourteen. The occupations of the adult males on board were given as ninety-four farmers, five labourers, three mechanics, two butchers, and one silversmith. The vast majority of those on board were farmers. This fits the pattern of pre-famine emigration as stated by a witness before parliament in 1836 'few labourers are to be found among the emigrants', because 'they are unable to pay the passage; their earnings hardly suffice for their daily maintenance, they cannot save'.⁴ Sources from Ulster indicate that between 1827 and 1832 farmers of means were generally those that emigrated. Many took with them as much as £100-£500, while others had at least £10 5s. The surviving evidence from the *James* tragedy suggests that this was also true in Munster. According to Canadian newspaper reports the passengers had over £3,000 in gold.⁵

An analysis of the passenger list shows that only twenty-two men and fourteen women had the same family name and parish affinity with other adults and children on board. This strongly suggests that the vast majority were single people. This is in line with emigration trends to the United States at this time, where over sixty-two per cent of Irish emigrants to New York in 1826 (two-thirds of whom were male) travelled alone rather than in family groups.⁶

The vast majority of the passengers, as might be expected were Catholics, however there was a significant representation of Protestants from the Rathkeale, Croagh and Croom, districts of County Limerick, mostly from the sizeable Palatine population. From Rathkeale, there were ten people named Delmege, John and Hugh, Barbara, Frances and Charlotte, all adults, Joseph, Catherine and Margaret aged between seven and fourteen and Samuel and Eliza aged less than seven years. Five had the surname Starke (Stark), Eliza, Henry (senior) and (Junior), all adults and William and Philip returned as boys aged between seven and fourteen. From Croagh came Eliza, William and John Ruckle (Ruttle), all aged over fourteen. The Hedermans came from Croom and were recorded as Daniel, William, Johanna and Johanna (Junior), all adults, a girl, Ellen aged between seven and fourteen and a boy, Samuel aged under seven years. The fact that the Protestants on board seem to have been family units in comparison to their catholic fellow passengers, is also in line with the general picture of emigration at that time.⁷

Some parishes were well represented on board the *James* with fifty-five people from Golden, Co. Tipperary, twenty-two from Rathkeale, twenty-one from Limerick City, thirteen from Castletown (near Pallaskenry), thirteen from Scariff, eleven from Croom and ten from Tipperary town. Whole families were destined to perish. From Golden, eight adults and six children named Dalton and three children and two adults named Daniels. From Rathkeale, five adults and five children named Delmege. From Kildimo-Pallaskenry, three adults and six children named Cliff. From Castletown, one adult and five children named Morgan, including Henry Morgan, who had broken three fingers

³ LC, 28 June 1834, Enright arrived back home in Limerick on 8 July, LC, 9 July 1834.

⁴ British Parliamentary Papers, *First Report of the Commissioners into the condition of the Poorer Classes of Ireland*, 1836, Volume 33, 133, 137

⁵ Quoted in LC, 28 June 1834.

⁶ British Parliamentary Papers, Report of the Select Committee on Emigration from the United Kingdom, 1826.

⁷ LC, 28 June 1834.

helping to pump out the ship in a futile attempt to save the lives of his family.⁸

Those farmers that emigrated on board the *James* were leaving behind a climate of poor economic prospects. From the 1820s farming incomes declined sharply. The price of beef on the Limerick market had fallen from 6d. to 7d. pence a pound in the early 1820s down to 3d. to 4d. a decade later. Wheat was making 20d. a stone in 1821 but by 1834 prices had declined to 13d. to 14d. a stone. To add to this economic misery, the area was ravaged by a dreadful cholera epidemic in 1833. Such was its virulence through county Limerick that eighteen deaths were reported from Shanagolden, thirty from Croom and thirty-eight from Askeaton.⁹ Desperate to escape economic hardship in the 1820s and 1830s many looked to Canada for a new life. The reason this destination was favoured was cheaper fares. Following the lifting of emigration restrictions by the government in 1827, passage to Canada was a mere £1 10s. while fares to the United States were from £2 to £3. Unprecedented numbers emigrated in the early 1830s exceeding the capacity of the shipping agents and the Canadian authorities to absorb the demand. Reports of overcrowding, cholera and shipwrecks became common.¹⁰ To meet the demand old and in many cases un-seaworthy ships such as the *James* were requisitioned to the emigrant trade with disastrous consequences. Within weeks another ship, the *Astrea* bound for Quebec from Limerick sank with the loss of two hundred and eleven adults, fifty children and fourteen in crew, on 8 May 1834. Only three people, the carpenter, a seaman and a passenger, Dr Jerome N. Sullivan, survived.¹¹ Following the loss of these two ships the authorities reacted by tightening shipping regulations for emigrants. Lieutenant Lynch R.N. was appointed shipping inspection agent at Limerick port.¹² This action was too late for the passengers of ill-fated *James*. Built in the 1780s, she became in 1834 the coffin for these unfortunate emigrants from north Munster.

Appendix 1

List of the 236 passengers who died aboard the *James*

Adults Males

Limerick City

George Edwards	silversmith
Patrick Shannon	mechanic
James Kelliher	mechanic
William Walsh	mechanic
John McDonnell	farmer
Patrick Doyle	farmer

Rathkeale

John Delmege	farmer
Hugh Delmege	farmer
Henry Starke	farmer

Henry Starke jun. farmer

Patrick Shaughnessy	butcher
James Shaughnessy,	butcher
Patrick Reddan	farmer

Friarstown

Edmond Hogan	farm labourer
Denis Hogan	farm labourer
John Tuomy	farm labourer
Michael Murphy	farm labourer
Thomas Canty	farm labourer

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ LC, 23 Jan., 23 March 1833; *Limerick Evening Herald*, 7 Feb. 1833; Limerick market prices from *Limerick Chronicle*, *Limerick Evening Post* and *Clare Sentinel* newspapers, 1821-34.

¹⁰ K. A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles, Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (Oxford 1985) p. 197.

¹¹ LC, 28 June 1834.

¹² LC, 21 June, 1834.

Pallaskenry

Patrick Cliffe	farmer
John Cliffe	farmer
Thomas Cliffe	farmer
Wm. Supple	farmer

Loughmore

William Buckley	farmer
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Castletown

Thomas Hayes	farmer
Harry Morgan	farmer
James McDonald	farmer

Shanagolden

JohnLaky	farmer
Daniel Kennelly	farmer

Croom

Thomas Fitzgerald	farmer
Patrick Blake	farmer
James Kennedy	farmer
Daniel Hederman	farmer
William Hederman	farmer

Croagh

William Ruckle	farmer
John Ruckle	farmer
James Dundon	farmer

Cappa

Andrew Neville	farmer
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Stonehall

John Meagher	farmer
Edmond Mahony	farmer

Oldtown

John Donovan	farmer
Patrick Molony	farmer

Rivermount

John Dickson	farmer
Gerald Gaynor	farmer

Ballysteen

James McMahon	farmer
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Donoman

George Culhane	farmer
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Kildimo

Michael Hickey	farmer
Patrick Rourke	farmer

Hospital

Felix O'Neill	farmer
Patrick Ryan	farmer

Roxborough

James O'Connor	farmer
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Foynes Island

Michael Allen	farmer
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Ardagh

Michael Shaughnessy	farmer
George Halpin	farmer

Listowel

John Rourke	farmer
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Scariff

Martin McCarthy	farmer
James Mulcahy	farmer
Thady Sheehy	farmer
Patrick Madden	farmer
Denis O'Hara	farmer
Edmond Farrell	farmer
Edmond McMahon	farmer

Thomastown

Richard Cummins	farmer
Henry Allison	farmer
Timothy Ryan	farmer

Tipperary

Cornelius Ryan	farmer
Edmond Ryan	farmer
John Hare	farmer
Michael Ryan	farmer
John Honan	farmer
Michael McNamara	farmer
Martin Murphy	farmer

Clonakilty

William Creed	farmer
John Clancy	farmer
Patrick Ryan	farmer
Thomas Curry	farmer

Killaloe

Philip Holland	farmer
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Newport

Daniel O'Brien	farmer
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Silvermines

Daniel Browne	farmer
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Doon

Timothy Danaher	farmer
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Golden

Thomas Butler	farmer
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Denis Dalton	farmer
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Edward Dalton	farmer
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James Dalton	farmer
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John Dalton	farmer
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Michael Dalton	farmer
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Maurice Daniel	farmer
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John Fitzgerald	farmer
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John Fitzgerald	farmer
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Robert Ginnane	farmer
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Thomas Hogan	farmer
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Denis McEniry	farmer
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John Murphy	farmer
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Thomas Murphy	farmer
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John O'Brien	farmer
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James Quin	farmer
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Michael Ryan	farmer
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Timothy Stapleton	farmer
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Doonas

Thomas Craddock	farmer
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Glanomera¹³

John Collins	farmer
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John Hayes	farmer
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James Hayes	farmer
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William Terry	farmer
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Boys aged between seven and fourteen**Kilbreedy**

Henry Cliff	
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Patrick Cliff	
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William Cliff	
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Rathkeale

Joseph Delmege	
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William Starke	
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Philip Starke	
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Oldtown

Bryan Donovan	
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Castletown

John Morgan	
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James Morgan	
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Scariff

William Mulcahy	
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Golden

Edmond Dalton	
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Thomas Dalton	
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James McEniry	
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Thomas McEniry	
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William McEniry	
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Croom

Daniel Hederman	
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Glanomera

Pat Hayes	
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Thomas Hayes	
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Boys aged under seven years**Rathkeale**

Samuel Delmege	
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Shanagolden

Patrick Lahy	
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Castletown

Thomas Morgan	
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Richard Morgan	
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Michael Morgan	
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Croom

Samuel Hederman	
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Adare

John Fitzgerald	
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Golden

Maurice Dalton	
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¹³Near Broadford, Co. Clare, I am grateful to the editor, Liam Irwin, for this information.

Adult Females

Limerick City

Miss McDonnell
Nancy Lynch
Mary Lynch
Judith Ryan
Mary Hayes
Mary Sharman
Eliza Kelliher
Maria Edwards
Bridget Stapleton
Catherine Dalton
Ellen Browne
Ellen Browne jun.
Margaret Burke
Mary Daly

Rathkeale

Barbara Delmage
Frances Delmage
Charlotte Delmege
Eliza Starke
Catherine Lacey
Mary Regan
Catherine Regan

Croagh

Eliza Ruckle
Mary Young
Honora Daly
Ann Dunden
Nancy Creed

Shanagolden

Eleanor Kennelly
Catherine Morgan
Johanna Laky

Castletown

Bridget McDaniel
Judith Cawn
Bridget Rahilly
Catherine Rahilly

Stonehall

Catherine Walsh

Oldtown

Nancy Dundon
Mary Bennett
Mary Connor

Croom

Johanna Blake
Johanna Hederman
Johanna Hederman jun.

Pallaskenry

Mary Nash

Ballinacarriga

Mary Stanley

Adare

Margaret Fitzgerald
Mary Castell
Nancy McDonnell

Kildimo

Nelly McCarthy

Hospital

Mary Couney

Thomastown

Sarah Cummins
Ann Allison
Ann Ryan
Eliza Cliff

Tipperary

Margaret Honan
Margaret Ryan
Catherine Connor

Golden

Mary Dalton
Mary Fitzgerald
Ellen Dalton
Mary Dalton
Margaret Dalton
Catherine McIncie
Catherine Daniel
Nancy Quin
Mary Kennedy
Margaret Hogan
Mary O'Brien
Kitty O'Brien
Judith Murphy

Susan Hewill
Maria Shea
Nancy Buckley
Catherine Burke
Catherine Collins
Ellen Fitzgerald
Mary Devany

Listowel

Mary Shaughnessy
Bridget Shaughnessy

Ardagh

Catherine Upton
Bridget Halpin

Scariff

Nancy Mulcahy
Jane Madden
Eliza Farrell
Mary Bennett

Killaloe

Honora Guerin

Kilbreedy

Mary Cliff
Eliza Cliff

Rathkeale

Eliza Delmege

Oldtown

Kitty Donovan

Shanagolden

Norry Dowan

Scariff

Bridget Kennelly

Golden

Ann Mulcahy
Margaret Daniel
Catherine Daniel
Margaret Daniel
Catherine Ince
Mary O'Brien

Girls from seven to fourteen years

Rathkeale

Catherine Delmege
Margaret Delmege
Mary Mulcahy

Croom

Ellen Hederman

Pallaskenry

Ellen Cliff

Golden

Bridget Dalton
Margaret Dalton
Peggy Fitzgerald
Bridget Dalton

Herbertstown

Mary Daly

Girls under seven years

Limerick City

Mary Shannon

Friarstown

Anne Hogan

Appendix 2

James Passenger List by Place and Age Group

From	Adult. Male	Males. 7.-14	Males U-7	Adult. female	Female. 7.-14	Female. U-7.	Totals
Golden	19	5	1	20	4	6	55
Rathkeale	8	3	1	7	3	1	23
Limerick City	6			14		1	21
Castletown	3	2	3	5			13
Scariff	7	1		4		1	13
Croom	5	1	1	3	1		11
Tipperary town	7			3			10
Croagh	4			5			9
Oldtown	2	1		3		1	7
Shanagolden	2		1	3		1	7
Thomastown	3			4			7
Friarstown	5					1	6
Glanomera	4	2					6
Pallaskenrv	4			1	1		6
Kilbreedv		3				2	5
Ardagh	2			2			4
Adare			1	3			4
Clonakiltv	4						4
Hospital	2			1			3
Kildimo	2			1			3
Listowel	1			2			3
Stonehall	2			1			3
Killaloe	1			1			2
Rivermount	2						2
Loughmore	1						1
Cappa	1						1
Ballvsteen	1						1
Donoman	1						1
Roxborough	1						1
Fovnes Island	1						1
Newport	1						1
Silvermines	1						1
Doon	1						1
Doonas	1						1
Ballincarriga				1			1
Herbertstown					1		1
Total	105	18	8	84	10	14	239

Source: *Limerick Chronicle* 28 June 1834.