A Limerick Coffin Ship

Gerard Curtin*

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.

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. 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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1Limerick Chronicle [LC], 28 June 1834.
2He 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.

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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 1832. 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

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adults Males</th>
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<td>Limerick Males</td>
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<td>George Edwards</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hugh Delmege</td>
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<tr>
<td>Henry Starke</td>
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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.
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

Castletown
Thomas Hayes farmer
Harry Morgan farmer
James McDonald farmer

Shanagolden
John Lacy 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

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

Donoman
George Culhane farmer

Kildimo
Michael Hickey farmer
Patrick Rourke farmer

Hospital
Felix O’Neill farmer
Patrick Ryan farmer

Roxborough
James O’Connor farmer
Foynes Island
Michael Allen farmer

Ardagh
Michael Shaughnessy farmer
George Halpin farmer

Listowel
John Rourke farmer

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

Newport
Daniel O'Brien farmer

Silvermines
Daniel Browne farmer

Doon
Timothy Danaher farmer

Golden
Thomas Butler farmer
Denis Dalton farmer
Edward Dalton farmer
James Dalton farmer
John Dalton farmer
Michael Dalton farmer
Maurice Daniel farmer
John Fitzgerald farmer
John Fitzgerald farmer
Robert Ginnane farmer
Thomas Hogan farmer
Denis McEniry farmer
John Murphy farmer
Thomas Murphy farmer

Boys aged between seven and fourteen

Kilbreedy
Henry Cliff
Patrick Cliff
William Cliff

Rathkeale
Joseph Delmege
William Starke
Philip Starke

Oldtown
Bryan Donovan

Castletown
John Morgan
James Morgan

Scariff
William Mulcahy

Golden
Edmond Dalton
Thomas Dalton
James McEniry
Thomas McEniry
William McEniry

Croom
Daniel Hederman

Glanomera
Pat Hayes
Thomas Hayes

Boys aged under seven years

Rathkeale
Samuel Delmege

Shanagolden
Patrick Lahy

Castletown
Thomas Morgan
Richard Morgan
Michael Morgan

Croom
Samuel Hederman

Adare
John Fitzgerald

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 McDaniell
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 Mclnchie
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

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

Listowel
Mary Shaughnessy
Bridget Shaughnesy

Ardagh
Catherine Upton
Bridget Halpin

Girls from seven to fourteen years

Scariff
Nancy Mulcahy
Jane Madden
Eliza Farrell
Mary Bennett

Killaloe
Honora Guerin

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*

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<th>Males 7.-14</th>
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Source: *Limerick Chronicle 28 June 1834.*