

The Voyage of Eagle Wing, 1636

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A little bit of Groomsport history from



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Background to the voyage

One of the most important events in the village's history, was the voyage of Eagle Wing to America in 1636.

In 1606 Scottish noblemen, James Hamilton and Hugh Montgomery began settling the eastern part of county Down with people from the south-west of Scotland, who were mostly Presbyterians. As there was no Presbyterian church in Ireland at that time, Scottish clergymen were invited to minister to the settlers in County Down.

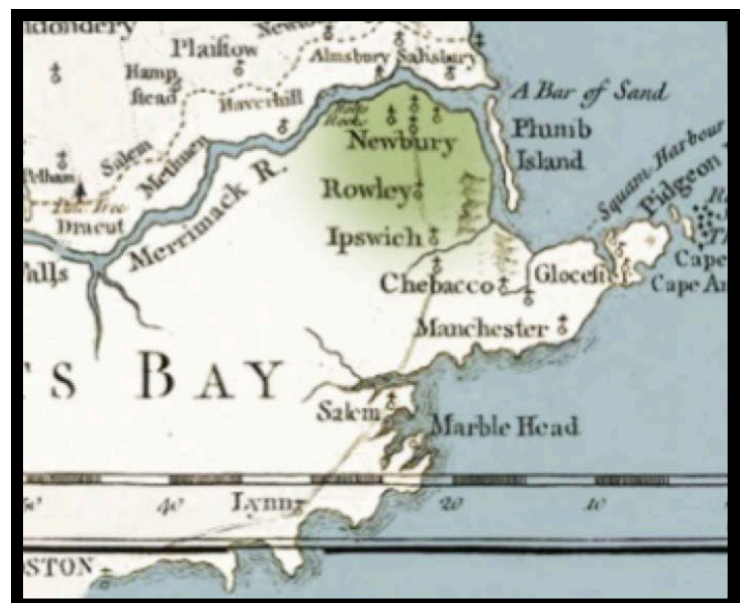
At first these ministers were tolerated by the established church - the Church of Ireland. Some became ministers in the church, even though they did not acknowledge the authority of the bishops. For example, Rev Robert Blair became the minister of Bangor Abbey and Rev John Livingston was the Rector of Killinchy.

Around 1630, the established church decided that the Presbyterian ministers could no longer be tolerated and they were expelled from their churches and their livings. They felt that they did not have freedom to practice their religion.

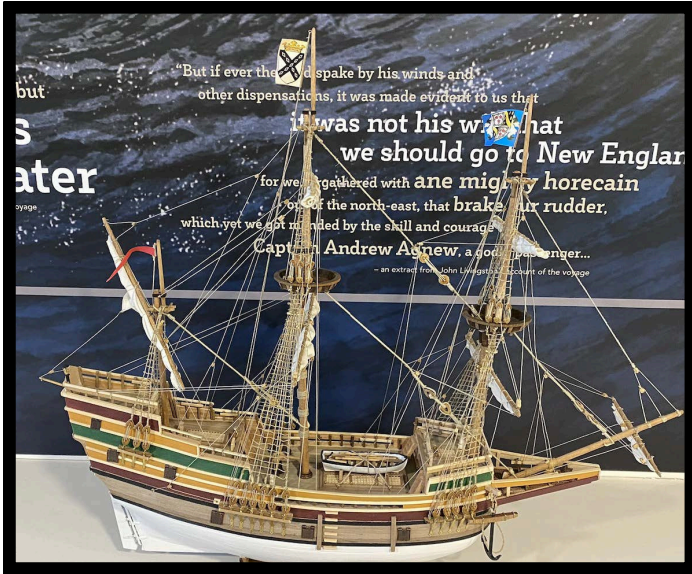
The Massachusetts Bay Colony, had been established by the English Puritans who had sailed across the Atlantic Ocean in 1620 in the Mayflower so that they would be free to practice their religion.

Rev John Livingston wrote to Governor of the colony, to ask if a Presbyterian church would be welcome.

The Presbyterians were encouraged to travel to New England and, in 1634, an area of some 30,000 acres was set aside for them between the Merrimack and Ipswich rivers (the area shaded green on the map).



Building the Eagle Wing



Model of Eagle Wing
in the Livingston Centre, Killinchy

Eagle Wing was probably built in Groomsport with wood from the Dufferin estates. It was almost 150 tons with a length of 70 feet, breadth 21 feet and depth 10 feet.

Its name refers to the Book of Exodus, Chapter 19, verse 4 – “Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bear you on eagles’ wings and brought you unto myself”.

The voyage

Eagle Wing left Groomsport on 9th September 1636 to sail 3,000 miles to America. There were 140 passengers, including the four Presbyterian ministers.

September was very late in the year to attempt the crossing. The ministers had waited to attend the funeral of the nobleman Hugh Montgomery, in Newtownards the previous day - 8th September.

Conditions on board were awful – cold, damp and smelly. There was no heat and little food or water. The deck leaked and was cluttered with livestock pens. Below deck there was only 5 feet of headroom. During the voyage, one older man and a child died and a Mrs Coltheard gave birth to a son who was named Seaborn.

We think the ship was quite near Newfoundland, when it hit a terrible storm which damaged the ship and sails and broke the rudder. The ministers met together in prayer and decided that, after all, it was not God’s will for them to go to America. They turned for home and arrived in Belfast Lough on 3rd November 1636.

After the voyage

The returning passengers had difficulty settling back in Ireland because they had sold all of their possessions to undertake the journey. The following year (1637), fearing arrest, the four ministers who had sailed on the Eagle Wing returned to Scotland. Rev John Livingston moved to Stranraer, Rev Robert Blair to Ayr, Rev James Hamilton to Dumfries and Rev John McClelland to Kirkcudbright.

The Scottish-Irish in the America

Although it was unsuccessful, the voyage of Eagle Wing was the first attempt by Ulster Scots people to emigrate to America. The first successful organised migration took place in 1718 and it is thought that a total of some 250,000 people settled in the American colonies in the following century. In USA, these people, and their descendants, are called "Scotch-Irish".

Down the centuries, Scotch-Irish people provided leadership in politics, the military, churches and business. 17 Presidents of the United States of America have had Scotch-Irish ancestors.

Medal of the Scotch Irish
Society of America



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