

*The Crossing: An Ulster-Scot Immigrant in America*

I wake; my eyes are squeezed shut against the bitterly cold air. My breath catches—the sound is unmistakable. In spite of the exhaustion that overwhelmed me into a moment of sleep, a violent shiver surges through my body. I know it too well.

The shiver arrived with the stealth of an assassin's dagger, on a damp, salty-aired morning on Long Island Sound, along with the swarming black clouds of English bullets and the gore of bodies blown to pieces by cannon-launched grapeshot. It was my first battle. I have no words to describe the horror of blood splattered on my face from heads, arms, and legs shredded by flying metal. The shiver came, too, with the humiliation of the “each man for himself” chaos of cowardly retreats—retreats of men running as fast as their fear-stricken legs would go. The shiver comes when everything in life changes.

For weeks, after safely arriving in winter camp, we, the Continental Army and collection of militia, have been losing ten to fifteen men a night to desertion and death. The deserters, when caught, are hanged. Who can blame them? They are crushed between the weight of their honor as soldiers and their duty as men. The news is gut wrenching: wives and children suffering in cold and hunger since first frost, struggling against their unrelenting fear of endless, black nights and the pox; babies born dead or dying. The pleas to come home are pitiful howls in the souls of these men, sounding their failed duty as husbands and fathers. The others? They never woke. Men are sucked into death as they sleep, their bodies too wasted to survive Pennsylvania's frozen ground.

The sound continues: creaking wood, the regular crunching of snow beneath plodding feet and hooves, the strained rumbling of iron wheels wrapped in rags to muffle the telltale sound of men and oxen hauling cannon over the frozen, rutted ground. We will cross the Delaware. This time the shiver comes not from the impending battle; after two campaigns, I have no fear of this death. The shiver comes with the “getting there.” The Continental Army will cross the Delaware with tons of cannon and horses, too many men on too few low, flat river barges of dubious construction operated at night by men, with no more experience than I, in a blinding blizzard on an ice-packed river. The river cares little. It has no mercy for the labors of men—men without enough clothes on their backs for an October chill are nothing to the river and howling wind. The stakes are definitely high. Add to this the orders of secrecy; we must accomplish this Delaware crossing without detection by the British and Hessian troops. The code: Victory or Death.

How did I get here, on this frozen ground, on Christmas Eve, 1776? My mind takes me to another time.

In 1764 they called it the Land of Hope: America. Father said there was a promise that grew faster than a four-leaf clover. It was the promise of a place where all people could live their dreams. No one could hold you down or deny your hopes because of your religious beliefs, lack of property, or the heritage of your forefathers. Father said America called to us. It called us away from tyranny and oppression to seek our very own land as well as our dreams. There was plenty of land, land we could claim as our own. There would be no more landlords to raise the rent beyond what we could pay.

I was barely six years old in 1764, but I knew about tyranny and unjust laws. I suspect I had an idea about freedom. I don't think I could exactly put it into words, but I felt it. I lived in a country where some people, simply by being born to certain parents, ruled. I saw my father bullied and humiliated by men not half as good as he. I saw land our friends had improved for generations taken away by rent-racking landlords. I saw that no matter what my father did they could take away everything he worked so hard to build, or plant, or harvest. I understood that the British Parliament could change the laws to take away our successes. They took away our wool business so that theirs would thrive instead of ours! I saw in times of drought, when we and our animals had little to eat, they still took everything. They even tried to tell us in what God to believe and how to pray!

This country, my home, is Ireland. Ireland is not the home of my great-grandparents. My great-grandparents came from Scotland long ago with a promise of good land. The land was good, and it became home. I can remember our stone house. The stone walls were cool to my touch and each stone had patterns and shapes unlike any other. Our churches and schools, also of stone, were important parts of our lives. We Scots are the best-educated people anywhere; every Scot can read and write. Our towns have names like Tyrone and our counties names such as Ulster. Like many living in Ulster, Ireland, we are Scots. We are called the Ulster-Scots.

My given name is Robert. I am the third born son of William and Jayne Fife. Bobby Fife, that's what they call me. It seems ironic; I never played fife in Ireland, now I am the first fifer with the Pennsylvania militia. I was, and still am, devilish on penny whistle. They say I got the musical talent from my grandfather—he was famous for his skillful playing. I heard many times that grandfather took you on a journey with his playing, like his son, my father, did with his colorful storytelling.

For years Father spun tales of how we would build new houses, schools, and churches in a place we could call our own. He said we would have to be brave, we would have to meet great challenges, and we would have to survive—together. His stories always excited my longing for adventure, even as we were safe at home. I noticed Mother's silence during these stories.

In 1768 Father made a decision that would change my life. We would leave Ireland. There was another drought; the flax would not grow and the sheep had rot disease. The British had taken away the best of our wool customers years before. Father said it was time. Mother nodded, her face solemn. Father said that we would risk our lives crossing the Atlantic Ocean. It would be eight to ten weeks of what some said is one of the toughest tests of survival: deprivation of food and water; sea-sickness; and the fear of either devastating storms, or worse yet, no wind at all. If the winds failed, most of us would die. Father said only people made of adventure and commitment should undertake "the crossing." We were such people.

Reports came from sailors that the stench on the ship is enough to sicken even the most hardened travelers. The truth? It is far worse than can be imagined. Most days I could scarcely breathe and longed for the sweet morning air of Ulster. Rotting food, human and animal waste, and impending death mingled into an indescribable affront. We were told that ten or more might die of the fever or cough, or suffer immeasurable pain from contaminated water or rancid, maggot-infested food. We lost 20 of our 53 within a month; my grandmother was among the first. She succumbed to the fever. Mother and Father wrapped her in a tattered sheet and she was buried at sea. I managed to find a small, dark space behind a wooden barrel, away from the others, and muffled my cry so no one would hear. It was difficult to be brave. More than once during our voyage, Father assuaged everyone's fears with stories of the new world.

Our Transatlantic destination was Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Since we were able to pay our own way we could homestead wherever we pleased. Many on our ship were indentured—they had to work for several years to repay their passage. Since the English had settled most of the land in the east, the Tide Water, we were determined to move inland. None of us wanted anything to do with the English, even if it meant dangerous months on a wagon trail. Pennsylvania also had a reputation of making peace with the Natives.

It is as if it was yesterday. I saw the tall masts! Then ships, more ships than you could count. Everywhere you looked in the Port of Philadelphia there was something happening: ships loading, unloading, small boats darting between the ships. It was like the water was teeming with men and activity. We stayed on board for nearly two weeks while inspectors probed our bodies and documents. I was both thrilled by the sights and restless to begin the journey ahead.

Finally we set foot on American soil. Father gathered us for a quick prayer, and off we went. We did not linger in Philadelphia, as our real destination was a small supply outpost called Lancaster. Our Ulster-Scot thrift is legendary; it has been said that we keep the commandments of God—and everything else we can get our hands on. We made our money go as far as it could go as we collected such staples as flour, sugar, cornmeal, coffee, dried beans, rice, bacon, and salt pork. We hoped our thrift would serve us well as our wagon was loaded and we were ready!

For two months we conquered the challenges before us: muddy paths, barely a wagon's width, clogged with fallen trees that took all of our ingenuity and strength to clear; rock-filled, waist-high streams that soaked us, and most of our supplies; and day upon day filled with endless pushing, pulling, and straining to move forward that tested our resolve. At last, dirty and exhausted, father said, "Here." We found ourselves in the rolling hills between the Allegheny

and Appalachian mountains. It was a good place, perfect for our needs. Apparently the British thought so as well; they had built Fort Bedford and Fort Juniata Crossing nearby. Gratefully, the British had all but abandoned the forts not long before we arrived!

We soon found, however, that this new country, and we, would be put to another test. Father had always believed in the idea of “natural freedom,” which valued individual liberty and the right to be left alone. To his credit, he adapted his thoughts to the greater good of all. There was trouble brewing far from our frontier home in western Pennsylvania; the British had called troops to a colony called Massachusetts. We also heard that in the eastern part of our Pennsylvania colony, Ulster-Scots were beginning to talk of American independence. It felt like something far from us, except that we too, in a time seemingly long ago, had experienced British tyranny.

I was abruptly and severely reminded of this tyranny, and the values my father hoped I would embrace, in October 1774. During dinner one night, when the light of day was replaced by the glow of our family together, I asked why we should care about the troublemakers in Massachusetts.

“Those people are far from us, and anyway they must have done something to deserve the calling up of British regulars.”

Father’s tone stopped everyone’s fork in mid-air. “Are these your own thoughts or are you repeating what you have heard?”

I remember feeling ashamed. Father, a man devoted to reflection, and principles, was as emphatic as I can ever recall.

“To deserve to live in a free country such as this takes responsibility—civic responsibility. You don’t have the luxury of simply repeating what others have said. To live in this country, the country I hope it will be—a republic-governed by common people—will mean that you call upon all of your own knowledge and experience, plus everything you can learn about the subject—you must examine all sides, particularly the side you don’t immediately like or agree with, before you make a decision or speak your opinion. Otherwise, we might as well let the nobles and kings rule our lives. They would be right, ‘common people’ won’t be responsible; they won’t take advantage of education or the opportunity to learn what is right for themselves.”

Father paused, then asked, “What happened to our wool business back in Ulster?”

I knew it well and muttered, “The British Parliament wanted their own companies to thrive. They created laws so that we could only sell, and buy things we needed, from them.”

“Was it fair?” Father asked.

I nearly shouted, “No! They had no right!”

“If they did it again, what would you do?”

With all restraint abandoned I said, “I would fight!”

John, my oldest brother, spoke quietly, “The British Parliament is doing it again, with tea, this time. The new laws are destroying the businesses of people like us in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. It’s not the first thing they have done to anger and hurt people. The Parliament has outlawed assemblies as well.”

Mother seemed to stop breathing.

It wasn't long before we heard that shots were fired and men were needed for General Washington's Continental Army. Our time had come, would we fight for what we carried in our hearts, that idea for which we had risked all?

When news of the Declaration of Independence reached us; our choice became clear. Mother turned her back to cry, and then squeezed us tightly. She prepared our knapsacks with deer jerky, corn meal, and hard tack. Father, William, John, and I left together for New York on July 23, 1776. Our hastily formed regiment was a hodgepodge of men from Virginia, Delaware, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania.

All of us were ill-prepared for the British regulars. The first wave of bullets sent soldiers scattering like chickens. We did more running than fighting. It was during one desperate retreat across water on a foggy night in late August that I found myself separated from my father and brothers. I never saw them again. I feel the heartache of their loss as well as the burden I bear, should I live, to tell Mother.

With that sobering feeling lodged in my heart, the whispered order passes through camp that we are moving out. My thoughts drift back to Father and the principles of his life. The shiver is gone. I am happy to be here, on this frozen ground, ready to fight for myself and for others. I am happy to make this dangerous crossing, as my family had done so many years ago, for freedom.