Origins of the Scotch-Irish

Within a century of the Norman conquest of England, adventurous Norman knights began carving out small kingdoms in the ancient Celtic island of Ireland. It was not long before the Norman monarchy of England under Henry II began laying plans to subjugate Ireland to the Anglo-Norman throne, but his goal was never fulfilled. For the next four hundred years, the Irish remained a thorn in the side of the English monarchs; their militant independence and their unyielding Catholicism did little to endear them to the kings and queens of England, who were generally Protestant after Henry VIII and who wished to see Ireland brought under the control of the English crown. The northernmost province of Ireland, known as Ulster, was especially troublesome for the English monarchy, and was the scene of a bloody revolt against the forces of Queen Elizabeth I in the late sixteenth century. At the same time, both the English and Scottish monarchs were experiencing problems in the border area between southern or Lowland Scotland and northern England. Unable to sustain their growing population, the clans along the English-Scottish border turned to cattle rustling, kidnapping, thievery and other outlaw endeavors in order to support their families. These “Border Reevers” made the border area between Scotland and England a lawless and dangerous place to live, and brought the region to the unwelcome attention of the both monarchies.

After Queen Elizabeth I died childless in 1603, her cousin James VI of Scotland inherited the English throne, thus becoming King James I of England and combining the crowns of both Scotland and England into a unified Great Britain. Within a few years of ascending the English throne, King James came up with a plan that he believed would solve his problems in both Ireland and Scotland. After confiscating the estates of several rebellious Irish chieftains who had fled the Ulster province in defeat, James granted these large tracts of land to several English nobles and London merchants, with the understanding that they would resettle the land, grow crops, and make the plantation profitable. Since James was a both a Scot and a Protestant himself, he was anxious for Protestants from Scotland and England to inhabit the Ulster colony. The Highlanders of northern Scotland, who still spoke the ancient Gaelic language and adhered to the Catholic faith of their Irish cousins, were almost as troublesome as the native Irish and thus were not included in the colonization process. In 1610 King James formally initiated the process of transplanting the troublesome border clans from Lowland Scotland and northern England to Ulster, where they could become productive farmers and loyal Protestant subjects of the crown. The Ulster Irish who had lived on the land for generations were driven off from their homes or, at best, allowed to remain as forced laborers for their Protestant landlords. The conflict between Protestant and Catholic in the Republic of Northern Ireland, which continues even to this day, can be traced directly back to the Ulster colony founded by King James in 1610.

Throughout the seventeenth century, thousands of farmers from Lowland Scotland and northern England either migrated or were forcibly relocated to the Ulster Plantation, as the colony was generally known. Since the Irish had never practiced large-scale agriculture, the Scots found that the land was richer and easier to farm than their old barren homeland, and their crops thrived in the virgin soil of.
Ireland. From the English colonists they learned more advanced farming methods and were able to achieve crop yields they could never have dreamed of in Scotland. As they had done in their homeland, the Ulster Scots began raising sheep, and they soon developed a thriving wool industry. Later, flax was introduced from Holland, and it developed into a highly profitable industry as well. But there were still problems. The Irish proved to be less than enthusiastic about having their land taken by foreigners, and there were frequent and bloody uprisings against the Ulster colonists. Religious freedom also proved elusive: conflict between the Church of England and the Presbyterian Church resulted in widespread persecution of the Presbyterians in both Scotland and Ireland. Droughts and hard winters caused crops to fail, and economic pressure from England effectively killed the highly competitive Ulster wool industry. These problems resulted in several migrations of Ulster Scots back to Scotland in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Then, during the second and third decades of the eighteenth century, the Ulster tenants’ leases began to expire, and their landlords began raising the rents, doubling or even tripling the amounts of the original thirty-one year leases. For many of the Ulster colonists, this was the last straw. Once more they began leaving the Ulster Plantation, but this time instead of returning to Scotland or England, they looked toward the British colonies in North America.

Emigration to the New World

In the early eighteenth century, the colonies of Pennsylvania, Virginia, and the Carolinas were mostly uninhabited by Europeans except along the Atlantic coast. The governors of these colonies began to actively solicit settlers from all over Europe, and they found many of the families in northern Ireland ready to leave Ulster for the New World. By settling these immigrants along their western frontiers, the colonial governments hoped to increase the productivity of their colonies and provide a buffer against the hostile Indians who still inhabited the Appalachian “wilderness.”

The Ulster colonists who migrated to North America in the early 1700s were proud of their Scottish heritage and still considered themselves to be Scots, even after spending several generations in Ireland. Upon their arrival in America, they were dismayed to find that the English colonists referred to them simply as “Irish,” and made no distinction between the Protestant inhabitants of Ulster and the Catholic inhabitants of the rest of Ireland. This offended the Ulster immigrants, and they began to use the term “Scotch-Irish” to distinguish themselves from the native Irish. The use of the hybrid term “Scotch-Irish” to refer to Ulster settlers of Scottish ancestry is documented as far back as the year 1573, when Queen Elizabeth I employed it to describe Highland Scots who were migrating over to northern Ireland. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the term “Scotch-Irish” was employed in both North America and Great Britain, along with related terms such as “Scoto-Irish,” “Scots-Irish” and “Ulster Scots,” to describe the Scottish settlers of the Ulster Plantation. In modern times some individuals in both Great Britain and America have attempted to discredit the term “Scotch-Irish” by alleging that it has no historical validity and is unknown in Great Britain and Ireland. Others claim to be “offended” by the term, maintaining that the word “Scotch” applies to a type of whiskey instead of an ethnic group. Both claims are groundless and are nothing more than examples of the type of revisionist history that has unfortunately become very popular in the last few decades. Over four hundred years of historical documentation exists to prove the usage of the term “Scotch-Irish” in both North America and Great Britain, and throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the term was almost universally applied to the emigrants from northern Ireland who came to the United States. Those who claim that “Scotch” is a drink and not a people ignore the simple fact that the word “Scotch” is an adjective that has its roots in the Lowland Scots dialect of the Middle Ages; it is equivalent to, and has the same meaning as, the English word “Scottish.” Scotch whiskey was named after the people who
invented it, not the other way around; and assertions that the term is properly applied only to alcoholic spirits are ludicrous.

While most of the settlers of the Ulster Plantation originally come to northern Ireland from Lowland Scotland, some also come from England and Wales, and the names of the “Scotch-Irish” who came to America actually indicate a mixture of Welsh, English and Scottish families. In fact, many family names from Lowland Scotland are identical to English and Welsh surnames. There were also smaller numbers of native Irish, French Huguenots, and other groups who became assimilated into the predominantly Scottish population of Ulster. After spending upwards of one hundred years in the Ulster colony, the “Anglo-Irish,” “Welsh-Irish,” and others who settled there became difficult to distinguish from the original Scottish settlers, and once they had settled in America they all became known simply as “Scotch-Irish.”

The historian James Leyburn, in his classic work *The Scotch-Irish: A Social History*, identified five great waves of emigration from Ulster in the eighteenth century, with lesser movements occurring in the intervening years. These five waves occurred in 1717-18, 1725-29, 1740-41, 1754-55, and 1771-75. This “Great Migration” of colonists from northern Ireland spanned a period of fifty-eight years, and by the time the American Revolution began in 1775 as many as 200,000 Ulstermen had emigrated to the American colonies.

The early Scotch-Irish colonists, in the first two decades of the eighteenth century, arrived at various ports in New England, Pennsylvania and Maryland, and as the population grew their settlements fanned out to the south and west. Word of their success quickly spread back to Ulster, and soon thousands of Scotch-Irish families were embarking for the New World. They continued to arrive, primarily at the port of Philadelphia, and from there they moved on into the uninhabited regions of western Pennsylvania and Maryland, filling up the Cumberland and Susquehanna Valleys with their farms and communities. Here they were joined by equal numbers of immigrants from the German states of central Europe known as “the Palatinate,” and both the Germans and Scotch-Irish soon began to carve out neighboring enclaves along the Appalachian frontier. With the Appalachian Mountains as their western boundary, by 1730 both Germans and Scotch-Irish were moving down the Shenandoah Valley and settling western Virginia. When this region also became thickly populated, the Scotch-Irish and German farmers traveled the “Great Philadelphia Wagon Road” into the Piedmont regions of North and South Carolina. These settlers began to trickle into the foothills of the Carolinas in the late 1740s. By the early 1750s the tide of migration had increased, and both North and South Carolina began issuing land grants in the fertile river valleys of the Yadkin, Catawba, Broad, Pacolet, Tyger and Enoree Rivers of the Carolina Piedmont. Smaller numbers of Scotch-Irish settlers came in through coastal ports like Charleston and Wilmington and moved into the backcountry from there.

In 1754 long-standing tensions between Great Britain and France over control of North America came to a head in what would become the Seven Years War, or the French and Indian War as it came to be known in America. The Native American tribes who allied themselves with the French soon made life along the western Pennsylvania and Virginia frontiers a dangerous proposition for the newly-arrived Scotch-Irish settlers. After the disastrous defeat of the British general Edward Braddock in July 1755, hundreds of Scotch-Irish and German families fled the northern frontier for the comparative safety of the Carolina Piedmont, especially the area between the Catawba and Yadkin Rivers in western North Carolina. At the same time, early settlers on the western frontier of South Carolina found themselves facing incursions from the Cherokees, who claimed the area for themselves, and the immigration into this area slowed dramatically until after 1760, when the South Carolina colonial militia under Gov. James Grant put down the Cherokee revolt and forced the Indians to sue for peace. Following the Treaty of Paris in 1763 that brought the French and Indian War to a close, migration into the Carolina Piedmont once again picked up its former pace, and by the 1760s the upstate region of South Carolina was becoming thickly populated with Scotch-Irish settlers. This flood of immigrants did not begin to
subside until the beginning of the American Revolution.

Life on the Frontier

Most of the pioneers who settled the American frontier in the 1700s made their living by subsistence farming. Eventually small towns sprang up, and ministers, blacksmiths, merchants, clerks, and other professionals soon followed. But the frontier farmer still found it necessary to be as self-sufficient as possible, and the farms in those days were miniature colonies where all manner of industries were practiced. While both men and women wore clothing made of homespun material (or store-bought if they could get it), the men of the frontier families tended to adopt the dress of the Indians for working and hunting. From deerskins the pioneers would make fringed leather jackets, breeches, leggings, and moccasins, which became the daily uniform of the frontiersman. Money was scarce on the frontier, and store-bought goods were very expensive. The settlers manufactured everything they possibly could, but sooner or later they were forced to borrow money or to purchase items on credit.

The typical house on the Appalachian frontier in the 1700s was the log cabin or log house. The log cabin was introduced by Finnish and Swedish settlers around 1638 in New Sweden, on the banks of the Delaware River. The early Nordic version of the log cabin generally had only a single door, facing south to let the sun in. The Scotch-Irish modified this design to incorporate two doors facing east and west, located directly across from each other for cross ventilation. Many of these early log houses included an upstairs room where the family slept. Windows were few, but frontier homes often featured small openings in the walls called “loopholes” from which guns could be fired for defense. The frontier settlements were always located close to springs or creeks so that fresh water was readily available for drinking and cooking, although bathing was an infrequent luxury at best. Homes were heated by fireplaces, with the chimney and the fireplace generally at one end of the house. Cooking was done in iron pots suspended over the fire, and lighting was provided by candles or oil lamps. Most of the furniture was homemade, consisting of a table of hewn planks, plain benches and a few chests. The bedstead was usually a rough frame supporting a straw mattress.

The frontier settlers grew a variety of crops, some of which they brought from Europe and some of which were native to America. Grains like wheat, oats and rye were very popular, and mills where these grains could be processed became important early industries. One of the most important crops for the pioneer farmers was “Indian corn” or maize, which they adopted from the Native Americans. It was easy to dry and store, could be eaten by humans and most farm animals, and could be ground into meal to make bread and cakes. It could also be fermented into whiskey, a drink which the Scotch-Irish were long accustomed to both in Scotland and Ireland. Not only was whiskey easy to manufacture and store, but it was also easily marketable and quickly became an alternative to cash on the American frontier. Corn whiskey was the most popular drink at social gatherings and in the home, and even ministers engaged in its distillation and use. The settlers also quickly found that fruit trees like apple, peach, pear and plum thrived on the southern frontier. Not only could these fruits be eaten but they could be easily fermented into brandy, which soon became second only to corn whiskey in popularity on the frontier.
Hunting was also a universal method of providing food for the family. Game and fowl abounded in the forests of the Appalachians and the Piedmont, and the early frontier hunters found buffalo, elk, deer and bear plentiful. The fields and pastures were filled with wild turkey and quail, and the rivers and creeks teemed with beaver, otter and muskrats as well as a variety of edible fish. The forests and mountains were also home to predators like mountain lions, wildcats and wolves, and every home included some type of weapon for protection. The weapons of choice along the frontier were the knife, the tomahawk, and the highly-accurate flintlock rifle. While the standard military weapon of the day was the smooth-bore flintlock musket, the musket was too inaccurate for game hunting, although it could be used as a “fowler” or shotgun when loaded with multiple shots. The American rifled flintlocks were originally developed by German and Swiss settlers in Pennsylvania in the early 1700s, and by 1732 they were being manufactured commercially there. Based on earlier European hunting rifles, they were modified by the gunsmiths in the colonies to suit the needs of the American hunters. The barrels were longer and more accurate, and they were more rugged than their European counterparts. The front sights were blade-type or bead-type, while the rear sights were notch-type. Although originally developed in Pennsylvania, these weapons eventually became known as “Kentucky rifles” because of their extensive use by eighteenth-century hunters in the area between the Cumberlands and the Mississippi River known as Kentucky. Describing the accuracy of these excellent rifles, we are told that in the colonial days the favorite target for militia practice was the head of a tack at 20 yards, the head of a turkey at 60 to 100 yards, and the body of the turkey at 200 yards; at 400 yards these rifles could regularly hit an object the size of a horse.

The Struggle for Independence

Although the Church of England, or Anglican Church, was the official religious denomination of both Great Britain and the American colonies, it held little sway over the frontier colonists. Both the Scotch-Irish and German settlers brought their own churches with them, and the Presbyterian Church was the focal point for life among the Scotch-Irish pioneers. Throughout most of the eighteenth century, ordained ministers and “meeting houses” were few in number and widely scattered on the Carolina frontier. The settlers often rode or walked considerable distances, sometimes as much as fifty miles, to attend worship services at the nearest meeting house or preaching point. Sundays were reserved for worship, and no work was allowed on that day. Meals were prepared the day before and packed into basket lunches for the trip, and families would often camp out for several days to hear a minister preach. Worship services usually lasted all day, alternating between preaching, singing, and praying, along with breaks for lunch and other necessities. Since Indian attacks on church services were not uncommon, sermons were frequently preached with one hand on the Bible and the other on a musket or rifle, and lookouts were often posted to keep watch for hostile native warriors.

As the dissatisfaction with English rule grew among the colonists, the pulpits of Presbyterian churches up and down the frontier became a focal point for speeches denouncing the authoritarianism of King George III and the Church of England. The Scotch-Irish had long harbored a deep resentment toward the English church and state, dating back to their troubles in Scotland and northern Ireland, and on the colonial frontier they grew accustomed to life without interference from the king and his church. Armed conflict between backcountry settlers and royal authority broke out in both Carolinas in the late 1760s and early 1770s during the so-called “Regulator Wars.” The royal governments of the two colonies had long ignored the pleas of the frontier settlers for the establishment of local courts to control the lawlessness of the frontier and provide for the basic needs of the settlers. Eventually the settlers—primarily the Scotch-Irish—took matters into their own hands and formed armed bands of “regulators” to bring some order to the backcountry. The colonial governments then sent armed militia
to the frontier to put down the regulators. This backlash met with only limited success and did little to soothe the anger of the frontiersmen. The problems with government of the frontier were not truly resolved until after the Revolution, when the Carolinas took steps to create more effective county governments and court systems to administer the needs of the backcountry settlers.

In the Carolina Piedmont, Scotch-Irish Presbyterian ministers like Rev. Alexander Craighead of Mecklenburg County, North Carolina preached fiery sermons against the king and his colonial government. Craighead advocated independence from Great Britain as early as the 1760s, and by the beginning of the 1770s his voice was joined by other Presbyterian ministers in the South Carolina Piedmont like Joseph Alexander of Bullocks Creek, John Simpson of Fishing Creek and William Martin of Rocky Creek. Craighead’s lifelong opposition to British authority earned him the title “Father of Independence” in Mecklenburg County, and his legacy continued on long after his death. Four years before the beginning of the American Revolution, members of Craighead’s congregations in North Carolina joined other backcountry settlers in the Regulator movement, and they fought against the troops of the royal governor William Tryon at the Battle of Alamance in May 1771.

By 1775 the flames of rebellion burned hot in the Piedmont, and in May of that year many of Craighead’s followers signed what became the earliest American “declaration of independence,” the so-called Mecklenburg Resolves. Most of the signers of the Mecklenburg Resolves (also known as the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence) on May 20, 1775, were members of one of Craighead’s congregations, and the list of the names at the end of that document reads like a who’s who of prominent Mecklenburg County Presbyterians. One of Craighead’s most famous students was Gen. William Lee Davidson, who commanded both North Carolina Continental troops and militia during the American Revolution.

When armed conflict between Whigs and Tories broke out later that year in the Carolina backcountry, it was the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians who were the most ardent and dedicated Whigs, and for the next eight years these diehard rebels kept the rebellion alive in the upstate. It was their dedication and stubborn refusal to give up the fight that kept the Carolinas from becoming “conquered provinces” when the British invaded these states in 1780 and 1781, and battles like Huck’s Defeat, King’s Mountain and Cowpens in the South Carolina backcountry paved the road to Lord Cornwallis’ surrender at Yorktown in October 1781.