

# The Cummiskeys of Crossan, Parish of Kilskeery, Co. Tyrone

*By Colm J. Donnelly and Gillian Allmond*

In March 2009 an Agreement of Collaboration was signed between Queen's University Belfast (QUB) and the University of Massachusetts in Lowell (UMASS Lowell). As part of this agreement the Center for Irish Partnerships at UMASS Lowell and the Centre for Archaeological Fieldwork at QUB established a new archaeological research project – the Irish-American Heritage Archaeological Program (IAHAP). This is a transatlantic project that involves staff and students from both institutions participating in archaeological excavations at the heart of what was once the Irish urban settlement within 19th-century Lowell and at a rural cottage in County Tyrone associated with Hugh Cummiskey, one of the leading figures within Lowell's early Irish community. The objective is to further our knowledge and understanding of life for the Irish emigrants in 19th-century Massachusetts, and the life of the Irish in 19th-century Tyrone.

Lowell is the birthplace of the industrial revolution in the USA and was established in 1821 by a group of Bostonian entrepreneurs who wished to harness the waters of the Merrimack River to power the waterwheels in new textile factories (Malone 2009). The water would be brought to the mills by canals, and the canals would be dug and maintained by labourers. While this work employed many local Yankees, it also attracted a team of Irish workers based in Boston, led by Hugh Cummiskey, who arrived to commence work in what had been the farmlands of East Chelmsford on 5th April 1822. The story of the early Irish settlers in Lowell has been told by Brian Mitchell (1988), how more settlers arrived and based themselves in a squatter's camp which developed into a settlement known as the Acre. What is apparent, however, is the fact that many of these early Irish settlers in Lowell were from County Tyrone and – in particular – the area around Trillick and Dromore. Hugh Cummiskey was to become a leading figure in the Irish community in Lowell, dying aged 82 on 12th December 1871, and buried in St Patrick's Cemetery. Ongoing research into his life in Massachusetts is being undertaken by Lowell historians Walter Hickey and David McKean, but what of his origins in Ireland? The information included in his naturalization paper of 1821 provides crucial evidence. Hugh had come to Boston in 1817 and the stated place of his origin in Ireland was Crossan, County Tyrone, a townland of 367 acres in the Parish of Kilskeery and the Barony of Omagh East.

A review of Griffith's Valuation has revealed a John Cummiskey in Crossan in the mid 19th-century, in Plot 6. The accompanying map denotes two houses that were part of his farm of land in the townland. A summary of Hugh Cummiskey's life in Boston and Lowell is included by local historian Michael McCaughey in his book *Come Listen A While* (1992, 96–99) who also relates that John Cummiskey was Hugh's nephew. The source of McCaughey's information on Hugh's story in Lowell would seem to have been Edward Harley, Lowell City Library, and the two men had been in communication with each other through Fr Joseph McCann. In a letter dated 12th March 1991 McCaughey recounts to Fr McCann how he had gone to Crossan and spoken to the two oldest residents, aged 94 and 96 years, who told him that the last Cummiskey to live in Crossan was John, that he had died around 1880, and that all the other members of his family had emigrated to America in the early 1800s. Oral history recently

obtained by local historian Aidan O'Neill further elaborates on the significance of the Cummiskey homestead in Crossan to this process of early 19th-century emigration from Tyrone. Any local men who wished to emigrate and work with Hugh Cummiskey in Boston or Lowell had first to visit the family cottage at Crossan and be checked for their suitability by members of the Cummiskey family. Perhaps assistance was given with the fare and the newly emigrated labourer was then to pay back that financial assistance through their work with Hugh in the USA, and perhaps it was in this way that so many men from Dromore and Trillick with surnames such as McCosker, McLaughlin, McSorley and McQuaid made their way to the Acre in Lowell.

McCaughey's informants were fairly accurate with regards the date when John Cummiskey died, for he passed away in 1878 and with him the Cummiskey name in Crossan. A relative – perhaps a niece – named Anne Cummiskey, however, had married Charles Colton. The Coltons were a family who would seem to have been John's sub-tenants living within the second house (now demolished) marked on the Griffith's Valuation map of the Cummiskey's plot within the townland of Crossan. Charles and Anne moved into John's home in 1875 and the house remained within the Colton family until it was burnt down in 1979, subsequently becoming an abandoned ruin and the subject of the IAHAP archaeological excavation during August 2011. The Coltons, in turn, are also extinct in Crossan and the Cummiskey/Colton lands are now owned by Oliver Donnelly.

Research within the Registry of Deeds in Dublin by one of the current authors (Gillian Allmond) has made a remarkable discovery – a document that may indicate when the Cummiskeys first settled in Crossan. The deed relates how in 1761 three farmers – Dudley McElbride, Thomas McElbride and Owen Cummiskey – had entered into a 31-year lease with William Nixon for 62 acres in the townland of Crossan, land that had formerly been held by John O'Neil, at a rent of 8 shillings per acre. This document is the earliest known reference to the connection between the Cummiskey family and Crossan, and – perhaps significantly – it seems to demonstrate that Owen and his two accomplices were moving onto land previously held by John O'Neil. The three men were described as being from Kinine, a nearby townland within the Parish of Kilskeery, which suggests that this had been their home prior to 1761, with the implication being that they were newcomers to Crossan.

When we read the document in full, however, we notice that it contains some unusual information. The deed is dated 27th June 1765, four years after the commencement of the lease of 1761, and the three men are transferring that lease to John Woods of Feglish, another neighbouring townland within the parish of Kilskeery. The duration of the original 1761 lease – 31 years – suggests that the McElbrides and Cummiskey were Roman Catholics since Protestants might expect a lease for three lifetimes of named people. This was the era of the Penal Laws, and under Section 6 of the 1703 Act to Prevent the Further Growth of Popery it was explicitly stated that "every papist shall be disabled to purchase any lands, or any rents or profits of lands, or any lease of lands, other than for a term not exceeding 31 years". Bills of Discovery could be issued

against Catholics holding lands on terms forbidden by this legislation, with a Protestant who presented such a bill to the authorities in Dublin then able to lay claim to the lands that had been identified (Roulston 2005, 79–80). There is a strong possibility that the three Crossan farmers felt that their lease was under threat in this way, and hence they had transferred it to John Woods, perhaps a Protestant friend who was willing to help them by taking the lease into his own name and having it registered in Dublin. It is certainly the case that the Cummiskeys remained in the townland for over a hundred years after this episode, while the McElbrides are a family that has only recently become extinct in Crossan.

A full transcription of the deed follows:

‘A Memorial of an Indented deed made the third day of April in the year one thousand seven hundred and sixty five between Dudley McElbride, Thomas McElbride and Owen Cummsky all of Kinnine in the Co[unty] of Tyrone farmers of the one part and John Woods of Feglish in the said Co[unty] of Tyrone Gent[leman] of the other part reciting that W[illia]m Nixon of Mettaduff in the Co[unty] of Fermanagh Gent[leman] did by an Instrum[en]t in writing dated the twenty third day of April one thousand seven hundred and Sixty one Sett and to farm Lett to Dudley Thomas McElbride and Owen Cummsky all that part of Crossan that John O’Neil then Lived in Containing Sixty two acres or thereabouts of arable and Green Pasture with a Large Bogg for thirty one years from the twenty fifth day of March then Last past at the yearly rent of Eight Shillings p[er] acre for the arable and pasture Lands besides duties reciting also that the said Dudley Thomas McElbride and Owen Cummskey did by said deed for the consid[eratio]ns therein ment[i]one[d] assign transferr and make over unto the said John woods his Ex[ecut]ors Adm[inistrat]ors and assigns all their right Title and term of years yet to come and unexpired of in and to the same and which said deed and this Mem[oria]l are witnessed by James Lendrum of Moorefields and Joseph Armstrong of Laghterush

both in the Co[unty] of Tyrone gent[leman]. John Woods “seal” Signed Sealed and Executed in presence of James Lendrum. The above named James Lendrum maketh Oath that he is a subscribing witness to the deed of which the above writing is a Memorial and Sayth that he saw the same duly Executed by the partys thereto and Sayth that he also saw the above named John Woods duly Execute the above Mem[oria]l and that the name James Lendrum is Subscribed as a Subscribing Witness to said deed and this Mem[oria]l is this dep[onen]ts proper name and hand writing and that he delivered Same to Mr Charles Meares Dep[uty] Reg[istra]r the twenty Seventh day of June one thousand Seven hundred and Sixty five at or near twelve o’Clock in the forenoon. James Lendrum – Sworn 27th June 1765 Cha[rles] Meares Dep[uty] Reg[istra]r.’

Source: Registry of Deeds, Volume 235, Page 619, Number 156031

#### Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Fr Joseph McCann, Oliver Donnelly, Aidan O’Neill, Walter Hickey and David McKean for all their help with our research into the Cummiskeys of Crossan.

#### References

- McCaughey, M., (1992): *Come Listen A While*, R&S Printers, Monaghan.
- Malone, P.M., (2009): *Waterpower in Lowell: Engineering and Industry in Nineteenth-Century America*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.
- Mitchell, B.C., (1988): *The Paddy Camps – The Irish of Lowell, 1821–1861*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana & Chicago.
- Roulston, W.J., (2005): *Researching Scots-Irish Ancestors – the Essential Genealogical Guide to Early Modern Ulster, 1600–1800*, UHF, Belfast.



The Cummskey homestead in Crossan, Co. Tyrone, August 2010