

Early Nineteenth-Century Welsh Immigrants in Upper New York State

By Dr. Marian S. Henry

Many groups participated in early nineteenth-century immigration into upper New York State. In this article we take a look at a quiet, unassuming group – the Welsh. Welsh immigration did not begin in the nineteenth century, of course. Fourteen generals of the Revolutionary army were Welshmen. Eighteen of the signers of the Declaration of Independence were of Welsh descent.[1] Both Thomas Jefferson and John Adams claimed Welsh lineage.[2] However, waves of Welsh immigrants came to America between 1800 and 1850. There was some degree of social unrest in Wales with low farm prices, high rents, and a shift to industrialization. Farmers' children had to leave the land to work in the mines. In America they saw the promise of cheap land, religious freedom, and a chance for advancement. Although they came to America in groups and settled together, they did not cling to their ethnic background like the Palatines or the Irish. Within two or three generations they were assimilated. Thus, their "Welshness" can be hard to spot. You may have Welsh ancestors and not even know it. In this article we look at ways of identifying these elusive Welshmen.

The clue that uncovers a Welsh[3] community can be quite small. We will use the Welsh community in Cattaraugus County as an example. Gertrude Barber's work on cemetery inscriptions in the county[4] includes records from a "Welch" Cemetery in the town of Freedom.

An early history[5] of Cattaraugus County describes a Welsh community in the town of Freedom thus:

"In 1841, Robert Williams, John Higgins, Thomas Rees, Daniel Morgans, H. O. Roberts, John Lewis, and others came in from Oneida Co., N. Y., and formed the nucleus of a Welsh settlement, which has prospered and increased in numbers until there are found in this and the adjoining towns of Farmersville and Centreville a population of at least 500 of these thrifty, law-abiding, enterprising people."

In addition to listing the names of these six immigrants, the same article mentions Ebenezer Baptist Church (Welsh), organized May 2, 1843, with forty-two members, and Salem Church (Welsh Calvinistic Methodist, first meeting in 1851). A more recent county history continues the history of these churches:[6] "Freedom Ebenezer Church, which is Welsh Baptist, observed its centennial in 1943. The old records were written in Welsh but Rev. R. J. Williams of Scranton, Pa. translated them and so furnished an excellent history to be read at that meeting." The author goes on to say that by 1895, the town had established Bethel Baptist Church to accommodate Welsh children who wanted services in English. In 1919 the two churches were combined, forming Freedom Baptist Church. The Calvinistic Methodist Church changed to Presbyterian in 1892. From this we have a picture of a group of families moving west, forming a supportive frontier community. Within fifty years use of the Welsh language was greatly diminished and before a hundred years had disappeared altogether.

A search for the "others" that accompanied or followed the six named pioneers is conveniently begun using the 1850 Federal Census, which records place of birth. A survey for heads of household born in Wales for the town of Freedom, Cattaraugus County, yields the names in Table I. The names are presented alphabetically by page number. Although the entire census for Freedom occupies pages 430 to 450, half of the names in Table I are clustered on pages 430 to 434, and nearly three-quarters are on pages 430 to 438. This supports the idea of close proximity. The six names listed by Ellis as having moved into Freedom in 1841 are all found.[7] Undoubtedly a similar survey of the 1850 census records of adjoining towns, not forgetting neighboring Allegany and Wyoming counties, would yield similar results.

**Table I. Heads of Household Born in Wales
1850 Federal Census, Cattaraugus Co., NY, Town of Freedom**

First name	Surname	Page	First name	Surname	Page
David	Francis	430	Thomas	Jones	435
Lewis	Griffith	430	David O.	Davis	436

David	Phillips	430		Griffith	Griffith	436
Hugh	Richards	430		John	Higgins	436
Stephen	James	431		John T.	Owens	436
William	Philips	431		Hugh	Roberts	436
Daniel	Reese	431		Hugh O.	Roberts	436
Thomas	Reese	431		William E.	Williams	436
Hugh H.	Roberts	431		William	Jones	437
Thomas	Wiggin	431		Thomas	Morgan	437
Thomas	Evans	432		John	Lewis	438
Thomas W.	Morgan	432		Daniel	Morgan	438
Benjamin	James	433		John R.	Rogers	438
John	Jones	433		William J.	Williams	438
Robert P.	Roberts	433		Thomas	James	440
Robert	Williams	433		Hugh M.	Jones	442
Daniel	Edwards	434		John R.	Jones	443
Benjamin	Pairs	434		Stephen W.	Owens	444
John J.	Jones	435				

But what can we learn about these families before their migration to Cattaraugus County? Since these Welsh settlers were said to have entered Cattaraugus County in 1841 from Oneida County, one might look for these names in the 1840 Federal Census of Oneida County. In fact, such a search yielded one or more matches for every one of them. Some of the names are quite common. For example, I found eighteen entries for “John Jones,” three for “John R. Jones,” but only one “John J. Jones.” All of the name matches in the 1840 census come from ten contiguous towns in the northeast section of Oneida County – Lee, Western, Steuben, Remsen, Boonville, Floyd, Trenton, Whitestown, Marcy, and Deerfield. All of these towns are east of the city of Rome and north of the Mohawk River.[8]

By comparing ages and family makeup it is possible in some cases to be reasonably certain of a match between a family in Cattaraugus County in 1850 and in Oneida County in 1840. I chose two households as a test case – Hugh O. Roberts and William E. Williams, entered next to each other on page 436 in the 1850 census for Freedom.

1850 Federal Census, Freedom, Cattaraugus Co., NY, p. 436

Name	Age	Sex	Born
Hugh O. Roberts	50	M	Wales
Elizabeth Roberts	53	F	Wales
Robert Roberts	23	M	N.Y.
Benjamin Roberts	18	M	N.Y.
Jane Ann Roberts	15	F	N.Y.
Elizabeth Roberts	13	F	N.Y.
Owen Roberts	12	M	N.Y.

William E. Williams	61	M	Wales
Margaret Williams	55	F	Wales
Samuel W. Williams	22	M	Wales
William Williams	15	M	N.Y.
John Williams	12	M	N.Y.
Elen Williams	6	F	N.Y.

Assuming that these households each represent a married couple and their children, we can already say something about when the families left Wales. Samuel W. Williams, age 22, was born in Wales, but his younger brother, William Williams, age 15, was born in New York. On this evidence the family of William E. Williams left Wales after 1828 and settled in New York before 1835. By similar reasoning, the birthplace of Robert Roberts, age 23, in New York, limits the emigration of Hugh O. Roberts to before 1827.

In the 1840 Federal Census for Oneida County there are entries for Hugh O. Roberts, town of Western, and William E. Williams, town of Trenton, which seem to match, allowing for older children to have left home.

**Comparison of 1840 Census Records, Oneida Co., NY, with
1850 Census Records, Cattaraugus Co., NY**

Hugh O. Roberts		William E. Williams	
1840 Western	1850, Freedom	1840 Trenton	1850 Freedom
1M<5	Owen, 12	1M<5	John, 12
1M 5-10	Benjamin, 18	1M 5-10	William, 15
2M 10-15	Robert, 13	1M 10-15	Samuel W., 22
	[son, 20-25]	1M50-60	William E., 61
1M 30-40	Hugh, 50		Elen, 6
2F 5-10	Jane Ann, 15	2F 15-20	[2 dau. 25-30]
	Elizabeth, 13	1F 50-60	Margaret, 55
1F 15-20	[dau. 25-30]		
1F 40-50	Elizabeth, 53		

To the writers of early county histories, these events were quite recent. Pomroy Jones, writing in 1851 about the town of Remsen in Oneida County, states, “David Mound, John James, Griffith I. Jones, John Owens, Hugh Hughes came about 1808 to Remsen from Wales.”[9] These Welsh became successful dairy farmers and wrote back to Wales encouraging others to come. It seems likely that only part of the Welsh community in Oneida County moved to Cattaraugus County, for he further states, “at least three-fourths of its population are Welsh. It is said that Remsen, Steuben, Trenton, and portions of Deerfield, Marcy, and Boonville are almost as well known in Wales as in Oneida County.”[10] Church records would seem to be an appropriate tool for Welsh genealogy in this instance. All of the churches in Remsen were Welsh as were six of the seven churches in the town of Steuben.

In an 1896 county history, Daniel Wager described the twilight of the Welsh as a separate community in Oneida County. After speaking of the arrival of Welsh settlers in Marcy, Remsen, and Steuben, he gives these particulars of Thomas Thomas:

“About the year 1800 the family of Thomas Thomas, another Welshman, settled in this town [Steuben]. He had been a

sailor and was a victim of the British press gangs. He afterwards lost his right leg in an engagement with a French ship; this occurred in 1796, and he was taken to Halifax, thence to Greenwich Hospital, and finally married and returned to America. He died at the age of eighty-seven years, and was the last survivor of the Welsh pioneers of this town.”[11]

Even though a Welsh community melted into the mainstream quickly on a genealogist’s time scale, it maintained its identity long enough to leave local traces. In addition to the sources cited above, place names can be a clue. A place named “Welsh Creek” or “Wales Hollow” may contain the echo of one of these evanescent communities. Table II contains a list of some place names in New York State[12] containing “Welsh/Welch” or “Wales.” Consider the entry for “Welsh Hill,” a summit in the town of Plainfield in Otsego County. Was there once a Welsh community in Plainfield? I searched on the word “Welsh” on the Otsego County rootsweb site[13] and found reference[14] to the Welsh Congregational Church of Plainfield, organized in 1861, first pastor Hugh R. Williams. Further research should readily determine how this congregation came to Plainfield.

Table II. Place Names in New York State containing “Welsh” or “Wales”

Place Name	County	Type	Latitude	Longitude
Welsh Corners	Herkimer	locale	430934N	0745914W
Welsh Hill	Lewis	pop. place	433810N	0752739W
Welsh Cemetery	Madison	cemetery	424730N	0751558W
Welsh Hill	Otsego	summit	424809N	0750942W
Welsh Camp	Rockland	locale	411354N	0740405W
Welsh Corners	Schoharie	locale	422726N	0743401W
Welsh Hill	Schoharie	summit	422842N	0742953W
Welsh Brook	St. Lawrence	stream	443146N	0744430W
Welsh Church	St. Lawrence	church	442434N	0752359W
Welsh Creek	St. Lawrence	stream	441430N	0750702W
Welsh Vly	Warren	swamp	432842N	0735628W
Welsh Hollow Cemetery	Washington	cemetery	432903N	0732956W
Welsh Cemetery	Oneida	cemetery	432122N	0752726W
Wales Center	Erie		424606N	0783149W
Wales Hollow	Erie		424433N	0782919W
Walesville	Oneida	pop. place	420655N	0752157W
Wales, Town of	Erie	civil	424346N	0783112W
Wales Hollow	Erie	school	424548N	0783108W
Wales Center	Erie	pop. place	424606N	0783149W

Table II contains three entries in St. Lawrence County. A search of the Rootsweb site[15] of an associated Welsh community yielded a sample of text in the Welsh language – a newspaper obituary for the Rev. David Jones.

“Died. Jones. In Gouverneur, June 3, 1886, of kidney disease, Rev. David Jones, pastor of the Welsh Congregational church, Richville, aged 64 years, 10 months and 24 days. *BU FARW. Mehefin 3, 1886, yn Richville, N.Y. y Parch David Jones, Gweinldog yr Eglwys Gunulleidfaol Gymreig, yn 65 mlwydd oed: weedi bodyn pregethu yr efengyl amtua*

deugain mlynedd. Yr oedd el gymheriad yn ddilychwin. Yn ei amser goreu yr oedd yn un o'r pregethwyr mwyafcraffus a sylweddol. Cafodd gladdedlgaeth barchus Saboth y oed Cyf. Gweinyddwyd ar yr achlusur gan y Parch Mr. Morris, Crary's Mills, yn hypon effaithiol. Bydded nodedd "Barnwr y gweddwon a Thad yr Ymddifaid" dros y teulu."[16]

From this necessarily brief look at Welsh immigration into upper New York State we glimpse a prosperous community with a strong religious foundation. They were people looking for opportunities and open to change. If your family tree contains an Owens, or a Morgan, or a Reese, think Wales. Happy hunting.

[1] Jan Morris, *The Matter of Wales*, New York, 1984, p. 334.

[2] Jan Morris, *The Matter of Wales*, New York, 1984, p. 335.

[3] The variant spelling "Welch" is frequently found.

[4] Gertrude Barber, "Cemetery Inscriptions from Cattaraugus County, N.Y."

[5] Franklin Ellis, *History of Cattaraugus County, New York*, Philadelphia, 1879, p. 392.

[6] *150 years of Freedom 1811-1961*, O. M. Howlett, second edition, 1962, p. 5.

[7] The coincidence of finding the same six names is suggestive, but not definitive. Further research would have to be done to determine whether those listed in the 1850 census are the same as those listed in the county history.

[8] Settlement in this location is typical for the early nineteenth century. Settlement spread first up the Hudson River, then west along the Mohawk.

[9] Pomroy Jones, *Annals and Recollections of Oneida County*, Rome, NY, 1851, p. 306.

[10] *idem*.

[11] Daniel E. Wager, Ed., *Our County and its People, a Descriptive Work on Oneida County New York*, 1896, p. 550.

[12] Obtained from <http://geonames.usgs.gov/>

[13] <http://www.rootsweb.com/~nyotsego/churches/plainfield.htm>

[14] D. Hamilton Hurd, *The History of Otsego County, New York, 1740-1878*, Philadelphia.

[15] http://www.rootsweb.com/~nystlawr/html/searching_st__lawrence_county_.html

[16] "Births, Deaths, Marriages from Gouverneur, NY Herald, St. Lawrence County, NY" (approx. 1864-1904)