

Scots in America

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Abstract

This essay examines the immigration and contributions of Scots to America, as well as offering an explanation regarding the resurgence of interest in Scottish ancestry. Scots were a core immigrant group from three regions of the United Kingdom that were, like other immigrants, both "pushed and pulled" into America. The Scots backgrounds in faith, political loyalties, and hardships influenced the integration into becoming what is recognized as American. Some generalities about Scottish immigrants in first the Colonies, and then the United States, can be identified in religion and political persuasion. The success of their assimilation is evidenced in numerous areas of American life and society, but specifically mentioned in the essay are politics, literature, business, and the military. A resurgence of interest and claims to Scottish ancestry are a result of the core groups seeking recognition after the 60s; the influence of television and movies; and the information age conveniences of the internet and social media.

Keywords: Clans, core group, genealogy, Highlanders, Lowland Scots, Presbyterian, Scots-Irish

Introduction

The United States is recognized as a diverse and complex weaving of people. Probably no other nation, in a current list of recognized nations, has such a collection of varied citizens, faiths and family customs (London, 2017). When we examine the beginning of what becomes the United States, going as far back as the Colonial period, there are several peoples that were, through choice or necessity, willing or unwilling, the foundation or core. This foundation or core becomes recognized as a predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant (WASP became the associated acronym – more often thrown about as a pejorative).

Most academics that specialize in American ethnicity, as well as historians who study American history, identify the Scots and Scots-Irish among the European peoples of this core (Aguirre, 2011). My attention, by virtue of ancestral and military-culture reasons, focusses on the Scots. Although there are advocates and fans of different ethnic contributions to America, they would be hard pressed to rival the lasting contribution, and interwoven nature of Scottish contributions and legacy in the United States. My purpose in this work is to call attention to the role of the Scots as a component of core culture in America, but also to highlight the depth of the Scottish connection in America, and ultimately suggest why the interest and claims of Scottish ancestry among Americans noticeably grew.

Throughout the year in the United States, but particularly in Spring and Summer, there are an increasing number of festivals, competitions and celebrations that are focused on Celtic, or specifically Scottish heritage (Berthoff, 1982). At these events you quickly appreciate the Scottish love for food, dancing, music, and rugged competitiveness (See Figure 1). Although there are those attending the event out of curiosity, there are many attending who know, or believe, they have Scottish blood running through their veins, but how plentiful does that blood run? (Celeste, 2005).

There is no absolute certainty of how many Americans today have Scottish ancestry, but one of the more reliable gauges is the American Community Surveys (ACS) through the Census Bureau. The most recent, accessible data set from the ACS (2016) provides a glimpse at how many in the population see themselves as at least partially Scottish (mixed ancestry). Roughly four million claimed Scottish ancestry, and almost two million answered as Scots-Irish from a total group of roughly 83,000,000 respondents.

According to ABC News (2012) Discovering ancestry has become more important to Americans. Genealogy is considered by some sources to be the second most popular hobby or pastime, and those genealogical "trackers" seeking to prove or confirm Scottish connection increased in the last thirty years.

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Figure 1 Scottish band playing at Celtic Fest in 2014



Scottish band Algnanach plays at numerous Celtic and Scottish Highland Game in Europe and North America. From authors collection (2014)

Who, When and Why

Before moving further, it is important to understand who I speak of when I say “Scots.” I will be speaking of, and will distinguish between, three groups of Scots; or people that scholars of American history normally refer to when addressing Scottish influence and arrival in North America. These groups are Highlanders, Lowland Scots, and Scots-Irish (or, in some circles, Ulster Scots).

Scots, or peoples of Scotland, are no different in origin from many other nationalities. Their roots are a result of amalgamation of different tribes and groups that either populated the rough and challenging terrain in the north portion of the British Isles, or invaded it. The tribes and invaders began to intermix and coalesce, shaping into family groups identified as clans. I will provide a summary of factors setting conditions for the immigration of these Scots to North America.

Like others who came to North America, willingly or unwillingly, the Scots who arrived were either legacies of previous generations of strife and hardship, or were themselves the survivors of hard times. In the vernacular of sociologist and ethnic historians, Scots were both “pushed and pulled” to North America. They were pushed voluntarily or involuntarily through hardship and war, or pulled through family and/or opportunities. Quite often, like other immigrants from Europe, Scots were pushed because of strife revolving around two arenas plaguing all humans – leadership and religion.

It is widely known that the English neighbors to the south of what is recognized as the borders of Scotland, were, and remain, primary players, both in the integration or integrity of Scotland as a nation, but also in the internal question of which region and affiliation would control Scotland’s future. Although the Scots achieved a recognized independence from England in the 14th century, the friction between the primarily Catholic Highlanders vs the primarily Protestant lowlanders, or Border Scots, was a fissure that the English (and some high-born Scots) repeatedly used to their advan-

tage. Ultimately, the Treaty of Union, in 1707, brought Scotland together with England to form Great Britain.

For the Ulster, or Scots-Irish, contribution to America we have King James I to thank. James was a Scottish king originally, but became monarch over England, Scotland and Ireland. Beginning in 1609 until the early 1700s, what becomes known as the Ulster Plantation was home to Scots, sent there by King James and some of them, primarily generational decedents, would later make their way to North America in the decades preceding the Revolution. The reader can follow-up with their own research to see how the plantation roots of the Scots-Irish settlers came about, but it was both a matter of control and religion to plant English and Scottish Protestants in the Northern portion of Ireland. These transplanted Lowland Scots included a few wealthier loyalists who became landowners and pseudo barons, but most were largely poor, lowland Scots who became tenants and yeomanry. Ulster-Scots departed the North of Ireland intermittently beginning from the mid-to late 1600s, the higher numbers arriving after 1718, seeking relief from increases in rent, religious persecution (Anglicans against Presbyterians) and native Irish violence against the occupiers (Goldfield, 2016, p. 81).

Another contributing group of Scots going to America were the Highlanders who, in Scotland, achieved great success in angering the English through both adherence to the Catholic faith, and opposing the lowland (and largely Protestant) Scots who became controlling leaders under the English. Several rebellions, labelled as Jacobite (a term which comes from a root French version of James) pitted Highlanders against primarily lowland loyalist and their English masters, but this was not exclusive. Some Highlanders chose to side with the English through their clan chieftains for opportunity at land and better future. The famed Black Watch is one such recruited group of Highlanders originally charged with putting down lawlessness and rebellion in the highlands (Parker, 2013). The battle of Culloden in 1745 ended any hopes of a restoration of Catholic rule and solidified the domination of the Protestant lowlanders in Scotland. Many Highlanders fled Scotland to the colonies escaping retribution for rebellion, were sent there involuntarily

as prisoners, or later departed to get away from poverty, and the evictions which occurred in the notorious "Highland Clearances" (Goldfield, 2016, p. 82).

Scots also departed what are referred to as the Lowlands, or borders, for North America. Like the other two previously mentioned groups, Lowlanders were both pushed and pulled. Presbyterians (the predominant Protestant denomination in Scotland) were persecuted by Anglicans, and economic downturns often accompanied by poor harvest, left many Lowland Scots the grim choice of staying, or risking it all in travel to North America and other places (Landsman, 1999). Jobs for unskilled labor also pulled them across the ocean.

The arrival destinations of Scottish immigrants into North America were primarily in the mid-Atlantic and Southern colonies – later states. In the earliest of years this included Scots who were indentures. While many Highland Scots remained along the coastal plains and piedmont, Lowlanders and Scots-Irish largely moved further inland, often becoming the point for frontier penetration, as well as targets for those resisting expansion (Celeste, 2005). Scots brought their belongings, faith, and behaviors with them, but were adept at entering the weave of American tapestry.

Generalities

As Scots moved out from ports of entry into the piedmont and backcountry of America we can recognize some generalities. Faith or religion is one such area (Leyburn, 1962). While a majority of the initial generation Scottish immigrants were Presbyterian, there were also some Anglicans, as well as Catholics. The second and third generation Scots, moving into and choosing to remain in the Trans-Appalachian West, were among the peoples swept-up into the Second Great Awakening. Some of them left Presbyterianism for the Methodist and Baptist camps. Some would also alter, or adjust Presbyterianism, into a less absolute model which comes to be known as Cumberland Presbyterianism. The frontier experience that nurtured the stubborn, resistant, and independent character of the settlers who surged into the colonial and post-colonial outlands of America encouraged less reliance upon the older and more ritualized faiths with educated clergy and ironed vestments. While some Highlanders kept Catholicism and some Lowlanders remained Anglican, the Scots-Irish and many Lowland Scots were beginning to worship like Americans, and less like Scots (Long, 2002).

The matter of politics and loyalty transferred over to America in as mixed and quarrelsome a fashion as it had existed in Scotland. From the heavy immigration period before the American war of Independence, Scottish colonist were faced with a familiar challenge after conflict broke-out between the colonies and Great Britain. Many Lowland Scots and Highlanders were against the conflict and remained loyal to the crown, even forming loyalist militias to assist in suppressing the rebellion (Celeste, 2005, p.49) In contrast many Ulster or Scots-Irish supported independence and contributed blood & coin to that effort (Leyburn, 1962,

p.307). Correspondingly, following the Treaty of Paris, many loyalist, including some Scots, joined those departing what was now the United States, and sailed back to Great Britain, Canada, or crown-controlled islands in the Caribbean.

For those Scots remaining in the United States, being a part of the core group of immigrants kept open opportunities to continue frontier settlements past the mountains with expansion southwest to the Mississippi river; or greater integration into the weave of business, education, and industry in cities and communities near the coast. Progression through the early nineteenth century, saw the Scots, like other core people, assimilating into being recognized simply as Americans, or Americans of Scottish ancestry.

Depth of Connection

According to Landsman (1999), Scottish integration and assimilation into a population labeled America, saw involvement or leadership in many venues and areas. A number of the so called "founding fathers" were either of Scottish decent or birth. Signers of the Declaration of Independence James Wilson and John Witherspoon were both natives of Scotland (Fry, 2003). Eleven other signers of the Declaration were decedents of Scottish or Scots-Irish. Seventy-five percent of our Presidents, to include the current resident of the White House, are from Scottish ancestry, but the connection is not limited to political leadership.

Famous Scottish connections extend into business, literature, and military service. Names such as Carnegie, Bell, and Davidson are among the most well-known in business. Most American students, but sometimes foreign students as well, are required to read work by Poe, Melville or Irving. And in the military arena, some famous Scottish decedents include Jones, Crockett, MacArthur, and Marshall (Leyburn, 1962).

The connections are deep enough that there are several celebrations and days in the United States focused on Scots. Although celebrated worldwide, Burns Day is widely popular in America and usually includes three important ingredients to any celebration related to Scots – drink, stories and food. While Robert Burns is known globally for his poetry, in the United States, Burn's song "Auld Lang Syne" gets plenty of play time, particularly on New Year's Day.

The patron saint of Scotland is St. Andrew, and each November 30th the Scottish flag or "saltire" appears in numerous places, both as a tribute to Scotland, but also because the Scottish national flag, the white cross on blue background, is said to represent the way in which St. Andrew was crucified. On November 30th the generosity of St. Andrew is celebrated, and the day wouldn't be complete without more food, drink and stories – along with philanthropy.

Tartan Day, recognized in April in the United States celebrates all things Scottish. New York City has a large parade complete with bands, floats, plenty of plaid and kilts. The whisky flows, and haggis is consumed by many who like it, as well as those wish to demonstrate culinary bravery.

Why the Interest?

The influence of Scots, and Scotland, upon America is quite strong, but the pride and investment of it being so was not always visible or celebrated. In my early childhood the interest of whether you were of Scottish ancestry or not seemed to matter little. In most classrooms and living rooms in the United States, the names I mentioned earlier such as Crockett, Bell, MacArthur and even Carnegie were rarely mentioned as Scottish Americans, or decedents of Scots. They were simply discussed and taught as great Americans; however, beginning in the late 60s, the awareness of Scots and Scottish ancestry began to “heat-up.” I submit, for your consideration, several reasons why I think this changed.

For those familiar with American history, the 1960s and 70s were a difficult period with racial struggles, civil strife, war, assassinations, political failures, and the counter-culture. A feature of these decades was an awareness and declaration by peoples who had been on the fringe of America concerning their place in society; as well as their roots (Celeste, 2005, p. 27). These movements, although spurred by inequality and mistreatment, sometimes included the return to traditional dress and appearance, as well as an effort to educate others about who they were or believed themselves to be. Native-Americans, Latino-Americans, and African-Americans spoke-out, sought attention, and celebrated what made them different. This was also a rebellion against what some asserted was an effort to blend them into what the majority (white and European Americans) saw as acceptable and normal. This period caused great concern among descendants of the core group Americans who feared a collapse of the way things were. In the following decades, core groups, those of Scottish ancestry included, would also seek to rediscover their heritage and assert pride in their roots – sometimes real, and sometimes contrived or adopted. For two decades they felt pushed to the side and now sought attention.

Another influencer on the resurgence of interest in Scottish ancestry and things Scottish must include consideration of the entertainment industry. Since their appearance in the United States, first the cinema, and then television, have been influencing the cultural and self-perception landscape of America. Movies, television shows and the fictional or actual characters portrayed within them released in the 1980s and 90s, often heroically pitted Scottish underdogs against oppressors. These depictions showing Scots overcoming mistreatment, difficulties and demonstrating the famed Scottish stubbornness were hits that fueled both the interest and imaginations of Americans, and particularly those with surnames of Celtic origin. Boys, and then young men, desired to be Rob Roy and demonstrate the courage of William Wallace. Combine this with the increased popularity of genealogy and discovering your ancestry, and with excitement and steady research, the connections were uncovered.

Lastly, the information age and the power of the internet, with social media, have increased the interest and connection many Americans have with their Scottish background. Where the college professor, the encyclopedia and the bowels of a dusty library once were the keys (and sometimes

the dissuader) to learning about your ancestry; the internet and social media have opened paths and enabled those of similar interest and family names to connect and share. Numerous Facebook groups exist that promote a Scottish connection or Clan affiliation. Those with merely a slight suspicion that their family origins are Scottish can now do genealogical research, find clan areas, and travel by way of web site photos and movies to places like Edinburgh or Glasgow, further fueling the fascination with, and hunger to be confirmed Scottish.

Conclusion

The Scots were, and remain, through ancestors and immigrants, one of the important contributors to the weave of the American tapestry. As one of the core groups that came to North America quite heavily during the colonial period, as well as later, they have shaped and contributed in business, education, the military, and politics (as well as other areas unmentioned). Awareness of Scottish ancestry re-emerged strong within the last thirty years or so, and remains steady. Whether wished, or validated as real, there is a desire to be Scottish. An interesting question, yet to be answered, is whether the renewed attention to what makes us unique from our past will contribute to the strengthening or weakening of what binds us together now in this unique polity known as America.

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