

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



This story was written, in October 2025, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of women who were working in the Ulster linen industry.

Margaret Ann Turkington's Story

Margaret Ann Turkington was born in January 1867, in the small village of Bannfoot / Charlestown. Technically the settlement – built in around 1800 – is called Charlestown and Bannfoot is the ferry crossing point just down the road, but they tend to both be called Bannfoot. That's in the townland of Derryinver, the parish of Montiaghs, the district of Lurgan and county of Armagh.

Those 1800 houses are pretty much unchanged in the later maps, photographs from the 1950s and indeed to this day. All that changes is a few outbuildings. There are ten houses on each side of the road, two storey but with the second under the eaves, and substantial back extensions and outbuildings and some kitchen gardens.

Margaret Ann's birth is registered on the 23rd of February 1867. Her father is John Turkington, aged 27. Her mother is Lavinia née Wilkinson, aged 22. The couple married at Lurgan parish church in March 1865, when both were weavers.

When Margaret Ann was born, she had a sister of roughly four. She's later known as Jane Maria, or Maria Jane; there are a couple of possibilities for her birth, but no perfect fits. Presumably she is from a previous marriage.

What can we say of Margaret Ann's first thirty years? Not a huge amount.

Presumably she went to school at the village school, built in 1850, though it was attached a Methodist chapel from 1855 (and a chapel which, in 1859, was said to have seen "many glorious displays of Divine power and grace, at that). One Thomas Henry Turkington was among those who carted the stone for its building.

We do know that she would have been surrounded by relatives. There have been Turkingtons in the area since roughly the 1690s – it's rumoured that five Turkington brothers were soldiers in King William's army to Ireland, 1689-91, and were given a lowland swathe of land including Bannfoot – and they proliferate. It's a closely-knit village; several households are headed by Turkingtons and at least some of the others are married to them.

Perhaps that's why we can also say it is a strongly Protestant area in the late nineteenth-century – and the Turkingtons were a part of that. Bannfoot is repeatedly in the news. There's an unlawful assembly that starts at Mr Turkington sr's house, in 1856. Margaret Ann obviously wouldn't have seen that one, but she would have been there in 1875, when a Miss Turkington – presumably a relative – married _Roman Catholic_ Mr McCorry, son of the local landlady. People gathered "from the Bannfoot and surrounding country", stones were thrown and a man fired a gun in the air. The following year once more several Turkingtons were prominent in a group of Orangemen who began their procession from Bannfoot, "incited" by John Turkington, Margaret Ann's father.

We only pick up the story of Margaret Ann Turkington in 1901, with the census. Here she is living with her older sister Jane Maria. Both are literate and members of the church of Ireland. Both are cambric weavers. The two of them had a house to themselves, with 5 rooms, 3 fronting windows, and 3 outbuildings.

At the time the village had 22 households. Including that the sisters there were twelve adult Turkingtons in the village, five of whom were household heads. The majority of the Bannfoot population were members of the Church of Ireland – there were no Methodists, in spite of the presence of the church, a couple of Catholic households and a couple of Presbyterians. The village had a mix of weavers and farmers, though curiously none of the other Turkingtons were weavers.

Margaret Ann's parents John and Lavinia have moved to Lurgan town by 1901, and had more children – adult children Mary, William and Lily are living with them. They are Methodists. He's now a railway worker. He either moved for work, or moved then found the job – there are no railways in Bannfoot!

Lavinia dies in 1903, of "cardiac degeneration".

By 1911, the two Turkington sisters are still unmarried linen weavers living in Bannfoot. One thing has changed, though – they have followed their parents into Methodism. The other Turkingtons of the area haven't, though the village has gained a couple of other Methodist families (who could still be relatives) and several Catholic families, making for a more mixed group than before. All the Catholics are weavers; the others remain divided between weavers and farmers, with the other Turkingtons still avoiding the former.

By 1912 it seems that Jane Maria is calling herself Maria Jane. That name turns up in the newspapers in June 1914, because several houses in Bannfoot – including hers and two other Turkingtons – have been found “unsanitary and in some cases unfit for human habitation” under the Public Health Act. The main complaint seems to be that there are no real privies, just cesspools which “run right up to the walls of the dwellings”. Also John Turkington (not her father) is keeping pigs which are a nuisance to the whole village, presumably roaming the street. That gives us an insight into the poverty of the area. House owners are given two months to build proper ash toilets (and get rid of the pigs).

In September 1912, Unionists sign the Ulster Covenant showing their support for the Crown. Unsurprisingly, a large number of Turkingtons of the Derryinver area sign. That includes “Maria Jane” – confirmation of the name change – and Margaret A Turkington (though for some reason she is a few miles away at Muckery at the time).

We do not know when Margaret Ann's sister dies. Her father dies in 1920, in his 80s, from bronchitis leading to heart failure. He's listed as a railway carter.

And that's all we know until the Portadown Times, 25th of March 1938, reports: “an old and much respected resident of the Bannfoot area in the person of Miss Margaret Anne Turkington, Derryinver, Newtown, passed away on Thursday last, aged 79, was a farmer and resided with her sister.”

So it looks like she stayed quietly in the village, with her sister, through her entire life. Technically she's only 72, but I think she's entitled to a little exaggeration.

Sources

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