

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 (Maggie) Sneddon (later Adamson's) Story

Introduction

I looked at the life of Margaret (Maggie) Sneddon, a woman employed in the Ulster linen industry at the time of the 1901 census. The reconstruction of her story is based primarily on official records, including birth, marriage, and death registrations, as well as census data from both the UK/Ireland and the United States.

Maggie's life provides insight into the linen trade on both sides of the Atlantic and Irish emigration to the United States.

Variations in spelling of both her surname and given name appear throughout the records, reflecting the limited literacy levels within her family and the wider population. I believe that she was known as 'Maggie', so I have referred to her as such throughout.

Family background

Margaret's parents James Sneddon and Margaret Gillespie aged 22 and 23 respectively married in the Registrar's Office in the City of Armagh on 6 February 1869¹. James' father was a shoemaker and Margaret's a labourer. James lived in Mullavilly, Kilmore, Armagh and Margaret from Kilinne (Killeen?), Armagh. Both Margaret and James worked as flax pressers. This was a generic term for the laborious task of preparing flax for spinning.

The registry office marriage was relatively unusual at the time and may indicate that they were of different religions or not religious at all.

Maggie (Margaret) Sneddon was born on 01 April 1875 at Banbridge in County Down, Ireland, the third of six known children all daughters. Her surname was Snedden on her birth entry. At the time of her birth and that of the other children, the family were living at Weir's row, Kilpike, Banbridge and her father's occupation was that of a 'Rougher' and he was described as such or as a 'mill worker' on all his children's birth entries. Weir's row on the northern outskirts of Seapatrick in a rural area near the present day A26 and the river Bann.

The other children were as follows:

Elizabeth Snedden (known as Minnie) born 8 April 1871²; Annie Snedden born 5 April 1873³; Sarah Snedden born 30 March 1877⁴; Lucinda (Lucey) Sneddon born 26 April 1879⁵.

The youngest, Emily Sneddon, was born 1 June 1881 also at Weirs Row, Kilpike⁶. Emily died at the age of 1 year on 17 July 1882 after suffering with teething for one month – there was no medical attendance⁷. Clearly, no child dies of teething and presumably it masked the illness that killed her. Maggie would have been about 7 years old at the time.

Unfortunately, the census records for 1881 and 1891 for Ireland were destroyed so it is not possible to know much about Margaret's early life.

Maggie's mother died relatively young in April 1891 age 42⁸ when Maggie was about 16. The death entry stated that she had been paralysed for 7 years prior. Whether this was caused by an accident – industrial or otherwise – or a disease process - is not known. There was no medical attendance at the death, and no actual cause was provided in the death entry. She died at Seapatrick Village.⁹

Maggie and her sisters are likely to have had additional responsibilities in caring for their mother as well as working from the age of about 13 or so.

The elder two sisters left home about 2 years after their mother's death when they both married within a few months of each other.

Annie married James McCarron at the age of 20 in the Roman Catholic church at Banbridge on 4 April 1893. He was a clerk in the Spinning Mill¹⁰.

Minnie then working as a spinner married Francis McCracken on 12 July 1893 at the Church of Holy Trinity in the parish of Seapatrick. Francis was a Railway Guard.

Three years later when Maggie was 21 her father, James remarried. James Sneddon (recorded as Snodden) married Eliza Jane Brown (born Wilson) on 10 October 1896 at the Methodist Church in Banbridge, Down¹¹. Residence for both at the time was Seapatrick. Both had been widowed. James's occupation was described as a flax dresser, with no occupation entered for Eliza.

Eliza Wilson had previously been married to Alexander Brown and lived in Belfast. He had died at the age of 30 in the Royal Hospital 36 hours after an accident in October 1891¹². before the birth of their youngest daughter, Rachel. He had been a coachman.¹³

What Margaret and the other two sisters remaining at home made of this can only be speculated. It must have been awkward and uncomfortable for her father to marry a woman only 8 years older than Maggie herself as well as bringing 3 young girls into the house. There was likely little free time or privacy.

Sarah Sneddin a spinner married Robert Fleming a hand weaver in Seapatrick on 23 December 1898¹⁴.

1901 Census

On 31st March 1901, the date of the census¹⁵. Margaret Sneddon, aged 26, resided with her family in Seapatrick, County Down. The household composition indicated the family structure resulting from remarriage. It consisted of her father James (52), stepmother Eliza Jane (34), sister Lucey (22), three paternal half-brothers—George (3), Herbert (2), and infant Frederick (1 month)—and three step-sisters from Eliza Jane's previous marriage: Minnie (Mary) (13), Sarah (10), and Rachel (8) Brown. Additionally, Lucey McCracken (6), a granddaughter of James born in Lancashire, lived with the family. She may have been a temporary resident as both her parents were living. The household identified as Church of Ireland.

Economic circumstances were modest. James worked as a flax rougher, a physically demanding occupation involving the manual separation of flax fibres in preparation for spinning. Despite managing three young children, Eliza Jane was employed as a mill worker, as was her thirteen-year-old daughter Minnie. Margaret and Lucey worked as spinners.

Literacy levels within the household varied considerably. Margaret, Lucey, and Minnie possessed both reading and writing abilities, while all other residents aged six years or older were recorded as literate in reading only. The census documentation recorded that the household of eleven persons occupied a four-room dwelling. The residence was classified as "second class" private accommodation, constructed with brick or stone walls, a tiled or slate roof, and featuring two front windows¹⁶. Even by contemporary standards this must have made it crowded and uncomfortable.

Banbridge/Seapatrick

At that time Banbridge was a significant centre in the Irish Linen Industry with the natural resource of the river Bann. Over time the linen industry became mechanised with several major mills operating by 1901 including the Dunbar McMaster and Co Mill at Gilford (which merged with the Linen Thread Company in 1901), bleaching works and other related industries were also situated in the area¹⁷.

F.W. Hayes & Company at Seapatrick Mills, which had been established in 1834 and shifted from weaving to linen yarn spinning and thread making in 1840, joined the newly formed Linen Thread Company in 1899^{18 19}. The neighbouring Dunbar, McMaster & Company at Gilford Mill, which employed over 2,000 workers, followed suit by joining the Linen Thread Company amalgamation in 1901.²⁰ This consolidation marked a pivotal moment in the local industry, as these independent family-run enterprises became part of a larger industrial conglomerate that would reshape production methods and employment patterns throughout the Upper Bann Valley.

The early 1900s brought significant reorganization to the area, with thread manufacturing ceasing at the Gilford Mills of Dunbar, McMaster & Company while Seapatrick Mills took on the manufacture of linen sewing threads, bookbinders threads, and carpet threads at Banbridge. The 1901 census reveals the prominence of linen industry professionals in the area, with records showing linen merchants in Belfast, master bleachers at Ballydown near Banbridge, and linen manufacturers throughout the district²¹.

Working conditions

Working conditions in the linen mills around 1901 were harsh and often hazardous, with most factory employees working eleven and a half to twelve hours per day from Monday to Friday, plus a

half-day on Saturday, with only six unpaid holidays per year²². The mills used a "wet spinning" technique that kept factories hot and humid, forcing workers to go barefoot to avoid slipping on the water-soaked floors, and at the end of their twelve-hour shifts, workers left the factories drenched with water and sweat.²³

The scutching and preparation rooms were particularly dangerous due to atmospheric flax dust, which caused tuberculosis, asthma, and bronchitis at far higher rates than other industries, with the average working life in these rooms being only seventeen years before workers became permanently unfit or died.²⁴ Women comprised approximately seventy percent of the mill workforce up to 1895, and in 1910 reports noted extremely high infant mortality rates attributed to women working until the beginning of their confinement and returning to work quickly after giving birth out of economic necessity.²⁵

Later that year, Lucinda Sneddin still a spinner married George Redpath a flax rougher on 23 August 1901 again at Holy Trinity²⁶. Maggie Sneddin was a witness.

Margaret was not present at the family home at the date of the 1911 census²⁷. By 1911 Census²⁸, James was still a flax rougher, the three Brown daughters were all flax spinners and George at the age of 13 was also working as a flax machine boy. Now they were a family of 8 in 5 rooms.

Emigration

Maggie was 30 years old in 1905, when the opportunity presented itself for emigration to the United States. Maggie's sister, Sarah emigrated to the United States in 1904²⁹ or 1905³⁰, along with her husband Robert Fleming and young children. Robert's maternal cousin lived in Greenwich, New York State among a community of linen workers who worked at the Dunbarton Mill.

A Maggie Sneddin is recorded as leaving Liverpool on 2 December 1905 on the *Carmania* bound for New York. Her entry stated she was 23, a spinner from Banbridge. A cousin, John Richardson of Greenwich, New York State had paid her fare, and she was heading for his home. She had about \$10 on her. There is a discrepancy with age but this matches with other information known about Maggie.

It is likely that Maggie was travelling to join her sister. John Richardson's wife appears to have been a cousin or sibling of Robert Fleming and families still lived close to each other in the same street in Greenwich at the date of the 1915 New York State Census³¹.

Greenwich, New York State

A Dunbarton Mill was established in Greenwich in 1879, when a preexisting building was purchased by the owners of the Dunbarton Mill near Banbridge and construction began on a canal. By the following year, there were 51 Irish workers from 32 families working in the mill³². The business was transferred to the Barbour Flax Spinning Co in 1914³³.

The people of Dunbarton Mill and their lives in Greenwich have been extensively documented in two volumes (published in 2006³⁴ and 2011) *Linen Threads and Broom Twines: An Irish and American Album and Directory of the People of the Dunbarton Mill: Greenwich, New York 1879 – 1952*. The author is William T. Ruddock himself a descendant of the emigrants and the publisher is www.heritagebooks.com

There is not scope here to reproduce much of this fascinating work, but I have added some context from the book (as 'the Ruddock book') where it adds to the census and birth, marriage and death records. The book does however present an overall rosy and nostalgic view and concentrates on

what might be termed the founding families, who appear to overall have done better than later immigrants.

Marriage

There are no records for Maggie working at the Greenwich factory although she gave her occupation as a spinner in 1909 on her marriage. Maggie married Alexander Adamson at Greenwich on 24 February³⁵. The New York County marriage records provide confirm that Maggie was the daughter of James Sneddon and Margaret Gillespie although her age is given as 27 when in fact, she was about 5 years older. Both she and Alexander who was aged 23 came from Banbridge. Alexander's parents were Joseph Adamson and Bessie (Elizabeth) Drennan³⁶.

Alexander also came from Down but on 31 March 1901 at the census he was living in Antrim Street, Lisburn. his work was recorded as a tow machine operator (tow was an offshoot of linen used in rope making). His father Joseph was a flax dresser and his mother Bessie a spinner. He had two younger brothers, Robert and Joseph³⁷.

The Adamson parents and Robert arrived on 5 March 1906 at New York having sailed from Londonderry possessing \$35. Joseph stated his occupation as a flaxman. They were staying with Lizzie Avery, Joseph's sister in Mechanicville, New York State. Their last address in Ireland had been in Belfast³⁸.

Alexander arrived in New York on 19 October 1908 on board Columbia which had sailed from Londonderry³⁹. He was also bound for Greenwich and the immigration record stated he was going to join his mother Mrs Adamson in Washington County, Greenwich. He stated on his immigration records that he was not a polygamist or an anarchist and in good health and not crippled. He was described as 5' 6" tall with dark brown hair and grey eyes.

Life in the USA

It is likely that Maggie gave up her occupation as a spinner following her marriage, perhaps during her first pregnancy. Ruddock describes that the mill until 1912 when new labour laws were passed, operated 10 hour days, 6 days a week⁴⁰.

On 15 April 1910, the day of the Federal Census⁴¹ Maggie, then 33 and Alexander 23 were living at Corliss Avenue, Greenwich, New York. They appeared to share a home with Joseph Adamson and his wife Bessie, who were Alexander's parents, in the 1901 Irish census⁴². Both men were employed in the linen industry as labourers in a linen mill and Bessie was a washerwoman for a private family. But Alexander had been out of work for 20 weeks in the previous year and Joseph for 30. Alexander owned the house outright without a mortgage and Joseph may have been paying him rent. This may be an error, as the family had not lived there long although Ruddock suggests that many workers were successful in eventually purchasing property⁴³.

The family next appear in the 1915 New York State Census which took place on 1 June⁴⁴. They were still living at Corliss Avenue. Neighbours in the same street included the Flemings (Maggie's sister and husband) but the Adamson parents had moved out. Maggie had given birth to 4 boys since the previous census, Robert aged 4, James 3, Herbert 2 and Alexander, 1. Alexander senior now worked as a paper mill labourer. It is unclear if this was a product of the flax factory or if he worked at one of the paper mills in Greenwich. Ruddock's book suggests that due to labour shortages in the First World War a purpose-built nursery existed on the corner of Corliss Avenue in 1919⁴⁵, so there was plenty of work but he may worked elsewhere for reasons that are unknown.

By 1 January 1920 the Federal Census record indicates that the family had moved to a rented home at 36 Academy Street, still in Greenwich and Alexander was a labourer at a Foundry. The 4 boys, were all in school. Alexander and Margaret (not Maggie) said they had been naturalised in 1914 though the Ruddock book gives a date of 1916⁴⁶.

The family still lived in the area on 1 June 1925, the day of the New York Federal Census, now in Bleeker Street. Alexander worked in a paper mill as a labourer. The boys aged from 15 to 11 were all at school. 'Margret' was engaged in housework⁴⁷. Bleeker Street is described by Ruddock as one having many houses divided in two to house two families or alternatively to be set out as apartments⁴⁸.

On 1 April 1930, the date of the Federal Census⁴⁹, the family lived in a rented home costing \$10 per month rent at 2 Safford Road, in Greenwich. The Census recorded that the family owned a radio set. Herbert was the only family member who had attended school in the past year. Alexander was a labourer as were the other two sons. Alexander had worked in construction. James in a shirt factory and Alexander in a milk factory, although Alexander senior and James appeared to be unemployed – this was the onset of the great Depression although the flax mill was still in production and appeared unaffected. Maggie does not appear to have engaged in paid work after her marriage.

Alexander died in a road accident at the age of 61 on 01 July 1947 when he was pinned beneath a lorry and died of his injuries⁵⁰. He is buried in Greenwich Cemetery⁵¹.

Maggie died following a short illness. Her newspaper obituary said she was survived by all four of her sons, her sister Lucy Redpath in Ireland and nine grandchildren⁵². She was buried with her husband and two of her sons were buried with her later.

Legacy

Maggie's life exemplifies the experiences of thousands of Irish women who traded one set of industrial hardships for another across the Atlantic. Although her life story was largely determined by economic forces outside her control, she was brave enough to emigrate and make a new life for herself, bringing up her four sons with better prospects than she herself had had in Ireland.

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