

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.

The Story of Rachel Bates

Rachel Bates was born on 4 July 1868 in the townland of Marlacoo More in the Parish of Mullaghbrack, Co. Armagh, in what is now part of Northern Ireland. She was the illegitimate daughter of James Bates and Mary Anne Parks, who appeared to live together and had four known children, the eldest of whom, Thomas, died in infancy. Rachel was their second child and she was followed in 1871 by George and in 1873 by another Thomas. The birth registrations for all four children can be found on the www.irishgenealogy.ie website.

The three surviving children were all born in different townlands - Rachel in Marlacoo More, George in Cabragh, both of which are in the Parish of Mullabrack, and Thomas was born in Tamnaghmore townland in the Parish of Kilmore. These townlands are in close proximity to one another and to the town of Tandragee – Tamnaghmore is just north of Cabragh, while Marlacoo More is just two townlands to the west from Cabragh. The locations of these townlands and parishes may be seen on the www.townlands.ie website.

Rachel's parents, James Bates, who was a labourer, and Mary Ann Parks, were not married to each other because James was already married to Mary Anne Gillis from Marlacoo More townland – they had married in 1858 at The Registrar's Office in Armagh, as shown on

www.irishgenealogy.ie. The marriage does not appear to have produced any children, but by 1868 James had fathered a child, Thomas, with Mary Anne Parks and as we have seen, they went on to have three more children and seemed to be living together. It isn't clear where James's wife, Mary Anne (Gillis) Bates, was living at that time but presumably she wouldn't divorce James to enable him to marry Mary Anne Parks, the mother of his children.

From the results of Griffith's Valuation of Ireland, as shown on www.askaboutireland.ie/griffith-valuation we can see exactly where James Bates was living in Marlacoo More. Griffith's Valuation of Ireland was a survey carried out all over Ireland between 1847 and 1864, by Richard Griffith, appointed by the government, and every property was surveyed and recorded, and the details published. It was the forerunner to the system of rates that we have today. In the case of Marlacoo More, the date of printing was 1863, so the survey was probably carried out in 1862. James was leasing a house, outbuilding and land at Plot 13a, while a man named Joseph Gillis was leasing a house and land at Plot 13b, and another man named George Gillis was leasing a portion of the land at Plot 13. The landowner was a lady named Anne Pooler. There is a map on this website which shows the location of Plot 13 in Marlacoo More, so we can see in relation to the present day exactly where James was leasing. The Gillis men would undoubtedly have been relations of James' wife, Mary Anne Gillis, whose father's name was William Gillis.

At some point after the birth of the second Thomas in 1873, Rachel and the family moved to Ballyoran townland in the Parish of Drumcree, much closer to the town of Portadown, probably for work in the linen industry, in one of the large factories. However, George, possibly enticed by all the advertising, decided in 1891 that he was going to emigrate to the USA and took a passage in steerage class to Boston, Massachusetts. He is likely to have used a local agent to book his passage - in the 'Portadown News' throughout the 1880s and 1890s there were multiple adverts by local agents, such as 'John Walker, Ironmonger and Grocer, Portadown', who advertised "emigration to all parts at lowest fares per Royal Mail Steamers". Such adverts and other information on emigration from Portadown and other areas can be found by searching the British Newspaper Archives at www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk.

In the passenger list George was described as a 20 year old labourer. He made his way to Moville, near Londonderry and boarded the SS Nestorian, arriving in Boston on 9 September

1891. His brother, Thomas, followed in 1893, being described as a 20 year old weaver from Ballyoran who was going to join his brother in Taunton, Massachusetts. The passenger lists showing their emigrations are to be found on www.ancestry.co.uk.

Rachel, meanwhile, had probably been working as a weaver in a linen factory at Portadown. Having consulted PRONI's Historical Maps Viewer (www.nidirect.gov.uk/services/search-proni-historical-maps-viewer), it would seem that Castleisland Weaving Factory and Bannview Weaving Factory were both near Ballyoran, so Rachel might have worked in one of those. Working as a weaver was a hard job, with long working hours from 6am to 6pm, poor pay and bad working conditions. Although the weaving 'shed' would have been warm, it would also have been very damp and often led to workers having trouble with respiratory illnesses. It's not therefore surprising that Rachel decided to join her brothers in Taunton, Massachusetts.

She made her way to Londonderry, probably by train, and sailed to Boston on the SS Scandinavian on 9 April 1896. She was 26 years old and described herself as a 'servant' on the departure documents, no doubt because both the USA and Canada had advertised widely for servants to emigrate. However, Taunton, Massachusetts was known for its textile and clothing mills and factories (<https://historyofmassachusetts.org/massachusetts-textile-mills/>) and that probably encouraged Rachel to admit on her arrival documentation that she was a weaver. Her departure and arrival documentation can be found on www.ancestry.co.uk.

On 1 February 1899 Mary Anne (Gillis) Bates, wife of James Bates, passed away. She died of bronchitis, which she had been suffering from for 7 days. Interestingly, she died at Ballyoran where Rachel and her family lived, and her death was registered by Rachel's father, James Bates, who was unable to write and so made his mark on the registration form. Just a month later, on 1 March 1899, James married Rachel's mother, Mary Ann Parks, at The Registrar's Office at Lurgan. Both were in their 60s. The relevant documents can be found on www.irishgenealogy.ie.

We don't know if this is why Rachel went back home, or if she simply found that life in the US wasn't as good as she had hoped, but she was living in Ballyoran with her parents by the time of the 1901 census, found at www.census.nationalarchives.ie. She was working as a

linen weaver and her mother, whose age was given as 8 years older than her father, was described as a retired linen weaver. Her father, James, was recorded as an agricultural labourer. The family's religion was Church of Ireland. James was able to read but not write, while Mary Anne could do neither. However, Rachel could both read and write.

The 1901 census also tells us about the property in which Rachel and her parents were living. Form B1 states that the cottage was built of stone, brick or concrete, with a slate, iron or tiled roof and had 3 rooms and 2 windows at the front, all of which meant that it was regarded as a 2nd class dwelling. Local knowledge means that we know it would have been a stone cottage with a slate roof.

On 12 May 1902, Rachel was found on a passenger list having arrived in New York, her final destination being Taunton, Massachusetts, where her brothers lived. Perhaps this was a visit, rather than an intention to emigrate. The passenger list may be found on www.ancestry.co.uk.

On 12 February 1904, Rachel's father, James Bates, passed away in Lurgan Infirmary, which was at the workhouse. He died from 'diabetes mellitus', and associated carbuncles. On 5 October of the same year, Rachel's mother died at home at Ballyoran from gangrene of the foot, which she had for a month. Rachel registered her death the next day, so must have returned to Ballyoran yet again. Both death registrations may be found on www.irishgenealogy.ie.

There was now nothing to keep Rachel at Ballyoran. Her brothers were in Taunton, Massachusetts, and so she made the journey back to the US for the last time. We don't know if Rachel was already in a relationship when she had previously lived in Taunton, but shortly after her return she fell pregnant and prematurely delivered twins, Joseph and Mary, on 31 January 1906 at Taunton City Home. Sadly Joseph died the next day, but Mary thrived. (www.ancestry.co.uk).

On 12 September 1907, Rachel went to court to try to fix the paternity of Joseph on a man named Joseph Lizotte, a bartender. However, the jury took just 40 minutes to return a verdict of 'not guilty'. This is from The Evening Herald newspaper report on www.ancestry.co.uk.

In 1908, Rachel's name appeared in the Taunton Directory (www.ancestry.co.uk) as an 'operative', boarding at 354 Washington Street, Taunton. The name of her sister-in-law, Bridget Bates, wife of her brother George, was also in the directory. Bridget was recorded as a weaver. There was no sign of George or Thomas in the directory, but Bridget continued to describe herself as married in later census returns, even though George was not there. We don't know what happened to George or Thomas Bates.

On 9 January 1909, Rachel gave birth to a third child, James. Very sadly he died from pneumonia when he was just 2 months and 11 days old. He was buried in St Joseph's Cemetery alongside his elder brother, Joseph. (www.ancestry.co.uk)

In 1909, Rachel's name again appeared in the Taunton Directory as an 'operative', now boarding at 17 Jenny Lind Street, Taunton. In the 1910 directory, she had again moved, this time to 300 Bay Street, Taunton. In the 1910 census on www.ancestry.co.uk we get more information, which is that 300 Bay Street was a boarding house, and Rachel was living there with her little daughter Mary, who was 4 years old, and a number of other boarders. Rachel was working as a weaver in the cotton mill.

The last reference found for Rachel was that she died in 1918. We have no idea what happened to her between 1910 and 1918, but according to www.findagrave.com, Rachel's death certificate said that she was 48 years old (she was actually 50 years old) and the cause of death given was 'exposure'. Her body was found on 21 October 1918, but she had disappeared on 24 August 1918.

Whatever had happened to her, she had been admitted to Grafton State Hospital in Shrewsbury, Worcester County, Massachusetts, which Wikipedia tells us had been opened in 1901 (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grafton_State_Hospital) as a farm colony for the 'chronic insane'. It was a large institution which, in 1916, was recorded as having over 800 patients. The Hospital occupied a hilly scenic site surrounded by woodlands, wetlands, and agricultural fields, the original site of 700 acres having been expanded to over 800 acres by 1908. Presumably it was into this site that Rachel disappeared in August, not to be found until October. What a sad end. Her grave at Grafton State Hospital Memorial Cemetery is marked only by a numbered marker '53' (www.findagrave.com).

It's sad to note that Rachel's sister-in-law, Bridget Bates, also appears to have ended up in this mental hospital, firstly being recorded on the 1900 census as weaver, married for 6 years with one child (not living with her); then on the 1920 census as a patient in Taunton State Hospital; and then on the 1930 Census and 1940 Census in Grafton State Hospital, where she passed away in 1944. This information may be seen on www.ancestry.co.uk.

Rachel's daughter, Mary, went on to marry Thomas Dwyer and they had one daughter, Ethel Anne Dwyer in 1936. Mary passed away in 1968 while Ethel died more recently in 1996. This information may also be found on www.ancestry.co.uk.

Sources:

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