

Hannah Curtis, writing from Queen's County, Ireland to her brother John Curtis in Philadelphia.

1848.

Native woman of Keel, a struggling village of Achill Island, West coast of Ireland, 1903.

Source: Library of Congress



Note: Most of the selection includes letters from Irish immigrants already in the US. This 1848 letter is from Hannah Curtis, an Irish woman, to her brother John, who emigrated from Queen's County, Ireland to Philadelphia some years earlier. Hannah writes about the impact of the potato famine on her and those around her in their hometown. According to [HERB at the City University of New York](#), a year after this letter was written, Hannah and her husband William moved to the US.

The text has been lightly edited for clarity.

My Dear Brother John,

I had heard a letter come on the morning of this day from John Cullen to his Mother and money in it for her... My uncle William Dunne write to me saying he had a letter from you I think the latter end of February saying you would let me have one from you in March I was every day expecting it but all in vain. My uncle also told me you got a letter from me before you wrote to him. I sent it in the latter end of November and from what I said in it I think you would have no right to forget me when it is in your power. I related to you the state of the Country in that letter, therefore I need not go over it anymore only the distress that was amongst the people at that time was nothing to what it is at present. The people are in a starving state the poor house is crowded with people and they are dying as fast as they can.

[F]rom 10 to 20 a day out of it there is come kind of a strange fever in it and it is the opinion of the Doctor it will spread over town and country when the weather grows warm. [N]o person can be sure of their lives ... [I]n fact, I would not describe the awful state of Ireland at present, you all may think the people are not so bad on account of all the provision that is coming into it. [B]ut only for it the country could be a great deal worse... [T]here is no trade of any kind doing, nor no money in the country. [W]ent is gone to America from everyone that can go to America is going this year as there is no prospect of anything here but poverty... Reverend Father Healy is... getting, I think, above 50 letters and money in them all they were sent to his care by people in America to their friends at home... [T]he post office here is full of letters every day every one without money.

[D]ear John wither regard to the rates of provision they are as follows bacon is per pound butter 1-3s per pound beef 8 pens a pound mutton 4 pence a pound best flour 3s-8s for oatmeal 3s-10 per stone. I need not mention potatoes by any chance as we have none. For now, you see how hard it is to live here

. . . my aunt Betty Carroll and family aunt Smith and aunt Hannah Humphries and all her family are gone. [O]nly John that is in the army we are all gone to America they sailed for America the 19th of this month.

[D]ear John, as I was so sure of your letter when my uncle wrote to me as we thought we could go when my aunts were going we sold all our furniture in order to have in delay... what we got for them is not worth mentioning as everything is sold now for half nothing. [A]ll I kept was the bed and bedclothes that we would want to take with us so now we have nothing but the bare walls of the house. I thought nothing would make you all forget me and I the only person left alone and from the promises my father made one at the boat that you all would join and send for me in a short time... you need not be saying you would do better at home as you may know what home is. I am sure as would do as well as others and if you would only lend us what you could with the help of God we would be able to pay you again perhaps

Many time my father let money behind the back of a ditch to neighbors and got it again... I am sure he nor you could not turn it to better use than sending for me now. [I]t was my Aunt Arthurs sent Aunt Hannah and family everyone is getting money but me. I am quite jealous and ashamed of you all. [Y]ou are as I think behaving so bad as I can say nothing else to you if you attempt to forget one on the present occasion mind I don't [t]hink you will have me to trouble you long.

. . . don't attempt to leave me here to fall a victim to the miseries that awaits the country. I send my love with William to you all a thousand times also to my aunt Mrs Dillin and family aunt Margaret and family... I trust with the blessing of the Lord we will all meet and spend happy days together...

[T]here is not room in the churchyards for to bury the dead as they are dying so fast the coffins I may say are on the surface of the earth and has no more room for them... I said before don't forget me I have a great deal more news to send you if I had more room but I must leave it for some other time.

Reflection Questions

- What does this letter indicate to you about the circumstances in John's home country? What might have prompted him to migrate to the US?
- How might having a brother in the US impact Hannah's life in Ireland? What, if any, responsibility do you think John has for his sister at home?
- Not everyone had a sibling overseas – based on what you can tell from Hannah's letter, how might that put them at a advantage during the famine?
- Similar to John and Hannah's situation, individuals sometimes have to migrate without their family members. How do you think this might impact a) the person moving and b) the family they leave behind?

Print Page

[Back to Letters](#) [Back to Main Page](#)

