

## CHAPTER ONE

### IRISH IMMIGRANTS

#### William Bell (1775-1863) and Mary Gilmore (1767-1832)

William Bell (1775-1863) and Mary Gilmore (1767-1832) were born, reared and married in Northern Ireland. Mary's parents, Samuel and Mary Smith Gilmore, might have lived in Ballymeana of County Tyrone and belonged to the Church of Ireland, the Irish equivalent of the protestant Church of England. Ireland's Religious Census of 1766 lists a Samuel Gilmore as a protestant member of the Tullaniskan parish in the Diocese of Armagh, Townland of Ballymeana in County Tyrone. Modern-day Ballymena (*spelling changed*), however, is located in County Antrim, which is next to County Tyrone. A William Bell (there were many) is listed among the registered flax growers of County Tyrone in a 1796 Irish census. We know at least that William and Mary were married around 1795 and lived in County Tyrone, where they had two sons, Thomas (1796) and Samuel (1798). If of Scottish descent, they probably were Presbyterian and might have been part of the early Wesleyan movement. When their son Samuel was a few months old, they sailed from County Tyrone for America with Mary's parents, plus five of her siblings and their families, arriving in Philadelphia in September 1798. (*PBW, a descendent of Mary (Polly) Codner Bell, "The Boston Transcript," August 1932, as cited by Mike Ruddy and Gary Gilmore; cf. also "Ireland 1766 Religious Census Record"*)

1798 also was the year of the rebellion by the United Irishmen, which centered in County Tyrone and involved thousands of Protestant commoners fighting alongside Catholics against the British – in vain, as it happened. The Bells and Gilmores therefore might have emigrated to flee sporadic violence, to escape British rule or even to evade capture for rebellious acts (the romantic fantasy of descendents). It's most likely that they left simply to find a better life and greater prosperity, as was true of most Ulster émigrés.

The 1800 United States Census lists a William Bell and John Gilmore (the name of one of Mary Gilmore Bell's brothers) sequentially as residents of Second Moon Township in Beaver County, Pennsylvania. William Bell is recorded as having four family members and John Gilmore, six. The same census shows William Bell, John Gilmore and Robert Gilmore (another of Mary's brothers) in Mercy County, which is contiguous with Beaver County along Pennsylvania's far western border. Because their names were relatively common, one or both of these listings might refer to other families; but the families also might have moved during the lengthy Census process and been recorded at each locale.

Both the Gilmores and Bells soon made their way to the southern edge of the Adirondack Mountains in upstate New York, where the Bell's third son, William Jr., was born on August 31, 1801. Official records and biographical references disagree as to whether his place of birth was Oneida, Herkimer or Montgomery County. Either he or his spouses later identified his birthplace as Montgomery County to at least two different census takers (1855 and 1865). He was baptized, in any event, in the Town of Florida of Montgomery County on September 20 when he was three weeks old (*Diane Thomas and Ruth Roerig, trans., "The Dempster Records, 1778 – 1803, Baptisms, Part VII", cf. also*

1880 NY State Census). In New York, townships are called “towns,” unincorporated 19<sup>th</sup> Century settlements were hamlets, and modest incorporated settlements were called villages. Counties and towns were still forming and splitting from one another in the early 1800s, so identifying the precise location of births and residences during that period can be a challenge. In 1810, according to the Census of that year, the Bells and Samuel Gilmore (either Mary’s father or her brother) were living in Schuyler Township of Herkimer County, as was Ebenezer Yearns, whose daughter later married a Gilmore.

Mary’s brother John moved from Utica, Oneida County, New York to the Town of Mentz in Cayuga County on March 24, 1809, settling “a little south of the Ward Settlement,” a group of farms owned by one family. Other Gilmores, including Mary’s parents, brother Samuel, brother-in-law Josiah Andrews and their families all joined John’s family within about a year (but after the 1810 Census). That part of Mentz later split off as the Town of Throop, which was named after New York Governor Enos Throop, a native of Cayuga County. Five years after John Gilmore’s family arrived, the Bells came from Herkimer County and settled nearby. On May 31, 1814, they bought a parcel of land next to Mary’s brother Samuel in Lot 3 of Mentz from the State of New York. The original buildings are now gone, but the site is on Donovan Road, 1,980 feet south of McDonald Road in Throop (“*History of Throop,*” *History of Cayuga County, New York, Elliot G. Storke, with Jos. H. Smith; D. Mason & Co., Syracuse, New York, 1879*).



The Bells now had a fourth son, John, and built a small farmhouse, probably of logs or rough timbers, for their family of six. County records show that when their sons reached adulthood and were farming on their own, they and William Sr. sometimes bought and sold land from each other. The 1853 map of Mentz (*sub-section above*) shows several Bells and Gilmores still living within a mile or two of each other. The youngest Bell son,

John, had by then become owner of the original Bell homestead (*cf.* “*J. Bell,*” *lower center*). “*Wm. Bell*” (*upper left*) refers to William Bell, Jr., whose farm was on Lot 1 in what later became the Town of Montezuma. His sons, Robert and Milo, are identified as “*R. Bell*” (*center top*) and “*M. Bell*” (*upper left*). The notation “*S.H.No4*” (*upper left*) refers to School House Number 4, a one-room wood frame building in front of William Jr’s farm. It was built around 1835 and served as a school for more than a century, closing in 1938. Paul Vitale, the current owner of the farm, burned the by-then dilapidated schoolhouse to the ground around 1973. William Bell, Sr. does not appear on this map, which may mean he was still living on the homestead with John’s family. Someone named “*W. Bell,*” however, bought the J. Hulse farm on Northrup Road (*center right, S. of S.H.No5*) between 1853 and 1859, then sold it by 1860, the year the Census found William Bell, Sr. living with his son Thomas in the adjacent Town of Aurelius. The temporary owner of the J. Hulse farm also could have been Samuel Bell’s son, William (i.e., a grandson of William Sr.). A Title search may clarify the matter.

Mentz had just 204 families and a total population of 1,207 in 1810, including many other Irish émigrés from County Tyrone, such as the Beaches and Glasgows. And Irish they were. According to the 1813 *Gazetteer of New York*:

The inhabitants clothe themselves principally in the products of their own families; and [except] for the exorbitant number of their distilleries ... are very temperate and industrious.

In addition to farming, William Sr. was active in freemasonry, which he probably first joined in Ireland where it was popular among Protestants who disdained the Church of Ireland and the British aristocracy. In Cayuga County, as elsewhere, Masonic activities could be controversial. In March 1820, the Baptist Church in the nearby hamlet of Montezuma, “Voted that we believe it to be a disciplinable evil for our brethren to attend the Free Mason Lodge; and therefore feel it our duty as a Church of Christ not to fellowship such brethren as do visit the Lodges, or any other of the Masonic meetings.” The congregation must have had second thoughts over the next few months because it rescinded the vote on November 4. Anti-Masonic sentiments, however, were erupting all over America, even spawning a national anti-Masonic political Party. Masonic rites and beliefs were kept secret from non-members, who were only too happy to fill their factual void with wild speculation about nefarious activities. Montezuma, however, was a tiny, close-knit community in which everyone knew and traded with each other. Condemning upright, god-fearing neighbors without actually knowing what lodge members did would threaten the social fabric. So lodges continued and even prospered for quite some time.

During their first ten years in Mentz, the Bells attended Methodist camp meetings in the barn of Mary’s brother, John Gilmore, by then a veteran of the War of 1812 who lived a half mile southeast (*Cf.* “*J. Wright*” *on 1853 map. The Gilmores sold their farm – on present-day Rice Road between Donovan and Northrup – to their son-in-law, John Wright, in 1845. As of 2006, Rice Road extends west from Northrup Road approximately 1/3 mile, and is closed to traffic from that point west to Donovan Road*). In late 1824, the Methodist “society” (congregation) bought a small, triangular parcel of land from the Weston family about a mile northwest of the Bell farm and began building a church (*cf.* “*M.E.Ch*”, *upper left corner of 1853 map*). They laid a foundation of field and quarried

stones, milled their own timbers and boards – some close to 24 inches wide – and erected a simple rectangular building, approximately 30 feet wide by 40 feet long. On May 10, 1825, the Rev. Samuel Bibbins of Weedsport officiated at its dedication as the First Methodist Episcopal Church in the Town of Mentz. The male members of the congregation chose Midad Buckley and John Gilmore to lead the congregation’s founding meeting and to submit its notice of incorporation to the State. They also elected John Gilmore, William Bell, Sr. and James Weston to serve as the church’s first trustees. Buckley and Gilmore then presented the written notice of incorporation to Commissioner Bethuel Farrand on January 7, 1826, and it was officially recorded on May 12, 1826 (Farrand’s his first name is spelled both “Bethuel” and “Bethual” in the same document).

There were at least two graves on the site before the church was built in 1825 and at least two more before the end of that decade, but when Mary Gilmore Bell died in September 1832 at age 65, she was still one of the first to be buried in the Mentz Church Cemetery, which borders the church on three sides. Her headstone is about fifteen feet northwest (left rear) of the building. Just fifty years later, newspaper reports already were referring to the “old Mentz cemetery” and “old Mentz church.”

A local news piece in December 1894 said, “The Mentz church has been repaired and a neat tower built and other needed improvements which reflects great credit on the society and congregation and Rev. Geo. A. Pearsall, who by the way is a worker.” (*Auburn Argus, December 1894*) Another article the same month said, “Some very commendable improvements are being made on the old Mentz church by thoroughly overhauling and renovating the inside with the addition of a tower, vestibule, etc. outside. The whole work when completed will add much to the convenience and comfort of those who worship and to its general appearance outside and inside. Next thing in order are sheds to protect the animals.” (*Argus, December 1894*) The congregation remained active until 1954, after which the building sat essentially unused for half a century before the community purchased it from the United Methodist Church. In 2003, Montezuma Town Historian Cheryl Longyear initiated a restoration effort and succeeded in getting the building listed on the National Register of Historic Places as “Historic Mentz Church.”



Mentz Church ca 1900



## **William Bell (1775-1863) and Margaret Gilmore Wallis (1780-1867)**

After a year of mourning, William married his widowed sister-in-law, Mrs. Margaret Gilmore Wallis (1780-1867), on a Friday in late October (the 11th, 18th or 25<sup>th</sup>) of 1833. A resident of Mentz, she was the younger sister of Mary Gilmore Bell and had come with the family from Ireland in 1798. Elder Noah Barrell of the Throopsville Baptist Church officiated and a woman named Hester Henry served as witness (“Attest”). William does not appear in the 1850 Census, but the 1830 Census lists his household as including two males, one between 20 and 29 years of age (perhaps his son John, who married in 1831) and the other 50 to 59, which would be William himself. There also were three females: one 5 to 9 years old, one 50 to 59, and the third 60 to 69. The last would be Mary Gilmore Bell and the second to last might well have been her widowed sister, Margaret, who would have been 50 years old in 1830. The marriage ceremony took place somewhere in the Town of Mentz, which included Throopsville at the time, but the exact location and total number of people attending are unknown. The most likely locations were the Rev. Barrell’s home, William’s home, and (less probably) the Mentz Church. The identity of Hester Henry and her relationship, if any, to William and Margaret are unknown. A woman by that name was living in neighboring Onondaga County in 1820 and may be the same one who was born in Connecticut around 1786 and appears in the 1870 Auburn Census, but there is no way to determine if either record refers to the Hester Henry who witnessed the wedding.

We also have no information on Margaret’s first husband or any children she might have had, but several Wallis families were scattered around Cayuga County. Marriage between relatives, such as second cousins and in-laws, was common on the frontier because of limited choices and high mortality rates. William and Margaret, who already had known each other almost 40 years, remained together the rest of their lives – more than 30 years. They farmed on the homestead until 1855, when they sold it to John Bell and might have remained in residence there or moved to the J. Hulse farm on modern day Northrup Road mentioned earlier (*cf. 1853 map*). The latter farm was sold again in 1859 to a family named Fre\*s. The 1860 Census then shows William and Margaret living with Thomas and Ann Bell in the Town of Aurelius a few miles south of there.

William Sr. died April 16, 1863, at age 88 and was interred at the Mentz Church Cemetery next to his first wife, Mary. His will, which he signed in 1859, named Thomas and John as co-executors and provided for the payment of his funeral expenses and any remaining debts before assigning everything else to his “beloved wife Margaret” and his four sons. Margaret received \$1,400, which Thomas and John were to invest on her behalf so that semi-annual interest payments would sustain her. The four sons received bequests ranging from \$10 (Samuel) to \$1,600 (Thomas). Three of the sons – Thomas, William Jr., and John – already had received the money as loans on which they were paying interest, so the effect of the will was to cancel the interest payments, transforming the loans into bequests. Samuel received just \$10, evidently because his share had been an interest-free gift. All four sons were present and signed a waiver to approve the will without probate. Margaret also approved a waiver by making her mark (an ink splotch) on a statement prepared by another woman. She either was unable to read and write or had by then become too feeble to sign her own name. William Sr.’s signature on the will

four years earlier evinced a trembling hand, as one might expect of an 84-year old man; Margaret's mark bore no resemblance whatever to actual handwriting.

In 2005 dollars, Margaret's inheritance would be the equivalent of \$181,884 in unskilled wages. Samuel's \$10 would compare to \$1,299, and Thomas's \$1,600 to \$207,866. The amounts, in other words, were significant in comparison with what people typically earned in a year in 1863. Using the CPI, however, the equivalencies would be radically lower: \$21,658 (\$1,400), \$155 (\$10), and \$24,752 (\$1,600). Although the inheritances were substantial in comparison with what people typically earned in a year, the bequests couldn't actually buy very much because there were far fewer goods available and products cost a lot more relative to what people earned. Put more simply, people got along with a lot less in 1863 than their descendants in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Even with a hefty inheritance there just wasn't that much to buy – especially in rural areas.

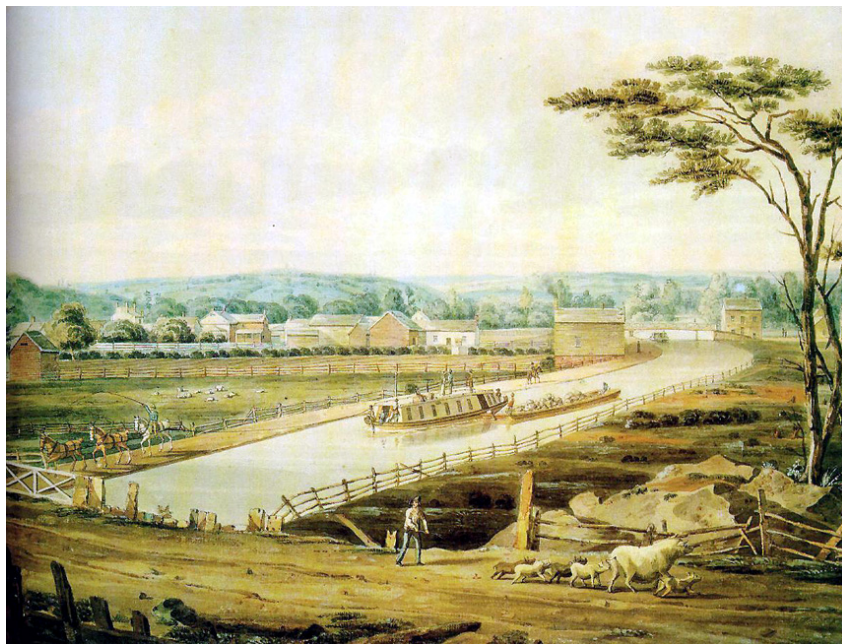
Margaret died September 30, 1867, but her place of interment remains uncertain. A small, unadorned headstone in the Mentz Church cemetery, directly behind that of William Sr., is inscribed with the initials "M.B." on the back, but includes no dates or other identifying information. Its miniature size (less than two feet high) and austereness set it apart from the Bell headstones surrounding it, and placing initials on the back while leaving the face completely blank seems an odd way to mark the grave of a loved one. It's as if the survivors were embarrassed by, or even hostile to, the person buried there, and one is left to wonder exactly who it was and why the family did that.



**William L. Bell (b 1923) - Interior of Mentz Church – 2005**

## WHERE THEY LIVED: MENTZ, MONTEZUMA AND THE ERIE CANAL

Originally called Jefferson (after Thomas), the Town of Mentz sat at the northwestern edge of New York's Finger Lakes district and featured gentle swells and valleys with rich productive soil and good navigation for getting crops to market. It had two grain-mills as of 1810, two or three sawmills, two churches (Baptist and Congregational) and three or four school-houses. The "handsome and compact" but "flourishing" hamlet of Montezuma, with about 30 houses, lay at the mouth of the Owasco River, about two miles northwest of the Bell homestead and ten miles from Auburn, the new county seat. Montezuma was known back then for its abundant salt springs and related manufacture of salt. The 1813 *Gazetteer of New York* said, "...the place bids fair to increase rapidly in business and population." But it never did.



(Painting: "View on the Erie Canal" by John William Hill, 1830-1832)

Montezuma's best chance for growth came when the original section of the Erie Canal, America's first "highway," was built from Utica to there in 1819. Many of the canal workers were Irish immigrants like the elder Gilmores and Bells (who probably stuck to farming), but three-fourths in 1819 were born in America and, after 1828, most were recruited locally. The most challenging section of the canal to build was the one through the marshlands just west of Montezuma, now known as the Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge. The workers had to dig through muck, marl, clay and sand in water six to twelve inches deep and "nearly 1,000" died of malaria in 1819 alone. Another 200-700 became sick over a two-month period in 1821. Heavy rains and high water made things all the more difficult from late August through the fall of 1821, but they completed the Seneca River level just west of Montezuma by December of that year. One of the canal's most interesting local features was the spectacular Richmond aqueduct erected over the Seneca River and made of enormous cut stones (*cf. drawing below*). The canal, however, eventually succumbed to railway expansion and was drained in 1917-18. The state then

demolished the aqueduct's central arches to facilitate better navigation on the river below, leaving about 100 feet on each end as silent sentinels and enduring testaments to the high caliber of early 19<sup>th</sup> century stone cutting and aqueduct construction.



**(Drawing: View of the Richmond Aqueduct at Montezuma - 1859)**

Montezuma itself was "...a bustling place, with its hotels, saloons, locks and dry docks. It had a frontier town air about it." By May 1820, the village had grown enough to have its own post office and, in July, two canal boats, the 'Montezuma' and the 'Oneida Chief,' began regular trips between there and Utica. "The price of passage, including meals and lodging, was \$4.00. 'Way' passengers would pay three cents per mile." (*Gazetteer*)

For all that, Montezuma spent most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a by-stander to historic events and rarely had many more than 500 residents. It was just 8 miles northeast of Seneca Falls, where Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton launched the women's suffrage movement, and 10 miles northwest of Auburn, the home of such 19<sup>th</sup>



century luminaries as William H. Seward (Senator, Governor, and Lincoln's Secretary of State), Enos Throop (NY Governor 1829-1833), and Harriet Tubman (Davis), the famed "Moses" of the Underground Railroad. President Millard Fillmore (1800-1874) and John D. Rockefeller (1839-1937) were each born and reared in Cayuga County. Other illustrious figures, such as Lafayette and Ulysses S. Grant, also passed close to Montezuma, if not directly through it, but the tiny hamlet itself never rose beyond a humble stop on the Erie Canal. (Photo: "Winter on Canal," Montezuma, NY, ca 1910, Montezuma Fire Department Collection)



