

Migration from Scotland to Illinois

Name	Date	From	To
John Fraser (1764--1847)	1803	Muirton, Inverness, Scotland	Livingston County, New York
Thomas Alexander Fraser (1812-1882)	1839	Livingston County, New York	Rutland, Kane, Illinois

Name	Date	From	To
Anne Fraser (1817-1893)	1835	Reelick, Kirkhill, Inverness, Scotland	Livingston County, New York
	1839	Livingston County, New York	Rutland, Kane, Illinois

John Fraser (1764--1847)

Muirton, Scotland, where John Fraser was born in 1764, was a small rural settlement lying just west of Inverness, within Inverness-shire. Though only a short distance from the burgh, Muirton was not urban in character. It consisted of scattered farmsteads and cottages set among open fields, pasture, and rough grazing land, shaped by older Highland land-use patterns. The land was workable but modest, supporting mixed farming rather than surplus production. Proximity to Inverness meant access to markets, roads, and occasional wage labor, yet daily life remained grounded in the rhythms of the countryside. Muirton occupied a marginal position—neither isolated nor prosperous—where families were near opportunity yet remained economically insecure.

Life in Muirton

Growing up in Muirton, John would have entered adult responsibility early. Childhood was short in an agricultural household, and from a young age he would have contributed to farm labor—tending animals, working the fields, cutting peat, and assisting neighbors during planting and harvest. Education, if available, was limited and intermittent, but literacy was valued in Presbyterian communities, particularly for religious instruction. Family life revolved around shared labor, mutual dependence, and adaptability, especially in households where income came from a mix of farming, seasonal work, and occasional employment tied to Inverness. With siblings to support and land that could not be easily divided, John grew up understanding both the necessity of hard work and the uncertainty of the future—a formative experience that prepared him for migration and the willingness to seek opportunity beyond the place of his birth.

Marriage

John's marriage in 1793 suggests that by his late twenties he had achieved modest stability, perhaps holding a tenancy or long-term employment. Yet this security was fragile. Rising rents, short leases, and population pressure increasingly limited opportunities for younger generations. Although the most dramatic Highland Clearances lay ahead, the forces that produced them were already narrowing the future.

Scottish Settlement in New York

Just as John was becoming disillusioned about life in Inverness, Captain Charles Williamson began actively recruiting Scots to move to Livingston County, New York. Captain Charles Williamson was a land agent for the Pulteney Estate. Beginning in the 1790s, Williamson actively promoted settlement in the Genesee Country, targeting Scottish farmers accustomed to hard labor and frontier conditions. His recruitment efforts encouraged chain migration, resulting in transplanted Scottish communities with familiar churches, schools, and social structures. News of these new communities traveled fast and far in the Highlands.

John Fraser's Decision to Emigrate

By 1804, John Fraser was about forty years old and the father of four children. His decision to emigrate was deliberate. One of his uncles was already living in Livingston County and encouraged John to join him. Letters from other family members offered a compelling contrast between uncertain tenancy in Scotland and the promise of landownership in New York.

Migration to America: John and Mary Fraser¹

John and Mary Fraser emigrated in 1803 as part of a group of Scottish neighbors from Invernessshire, a pattern common among early Highland migrants. Departing Glasgow on 1 August 1803, they sailed aboard the *Mercury of Kirkcaldy*, paying ten guineas per person for passage. The Atlantic crossing took forty-two days, a long and uncertain journey made more bearable by traveling among familiar faces who shared language, faith, and expectations.

Upon arrival in New York City, the family continued upriver by sloop along the Hudson to Albany, following one of the primary inland routes of the era. From there they traveled west to Johnstown, where they remained through the winter of 1803–1804. Tragedy struck during this period when their two-year-old daughter, Mary, died suddenly—an all-too-common loss in an age when illness could turn fatal without warning. The timing of her death underscores the emotional and physical toll of migration, particularly for families with young children.

In February 1804, John resumed the journey westward, traveling by sleigh through snow-covered roads into the Genesee Country. The family stayed for about a month in Wheatland with friends while John scouted suitable farmland. Land in the region had not yet been fully surveyed, but

¹ From *Memoir of John Fraser, Sr.*, unpublished family manuscript based on oral history recorded by Simon J. Fraser, 1853. Copies of the transcribed manuscript are held at the Livingston County Historian's Office (Livingston County, New York) and the Rochester Public Library. [I have a digital copy.]

settlement was already underway. Confident in the area's promise, John built a cabin in the Genesee River Valley, establishing a foothold even before formal ownership was possible.

The settlement that formed around them reflected strong kinship ties. John's uncle's family, along with four other families from Invernessshire, settled nearby. Among them were two additional Fraser families, a single man named William Fraser, and the Clunas family. These families had traveled together from Scotland to New York, reinforcing the communal nature of the migration. They named their small settlement "Inverness," a deliberate act of remembrance and continuity that anchored their new lives to the place they had left behind.

Once the land was officially surveyed, John moved to secure legal title. On 10 April 1810, he made a down payment on Lot 75, formalizing ownership of land he had already been working for several years. This transition—from informal occupation to legal ownership—marked a critical step toward the stability he had sought by emigrating.

The Next Generation and Westward Movement

John and Mary Fraser had four children—three sons and a daughter—born in Invernessshire, and after settling in New York, two additional sons and a daughter were born. Although John succeeded in acquiring land in Livingston County, it was never sufficient to provide farms for all of his sons. As was customary, the family property could not be divided.

The eldest sons, Donald and John, reached adulthood in the years following the War of 1812. By that time, land in the Genesee Valley was largely taken up by earlier settlers, and available parcels were either already under cultivation or priced beyond the reach of young men starting out. Canada, by contrast, was actively opening vast tracts of inexpensive land to settlers, offering a practical alternative for families seeking opportunity.

In 1819, Donald, the eldest son, left New York with his wife and migrated to Canada, following a path taken by many second-generation settlers from western New York. Two years later, in 1821, his brother John also moved north, settling in the Toronto area. Their departures reflect the same pressures that had once driven their parents from Scotland: limited land at home, expanding families, and the pull of newly opened frontiers.

Thomas Alexander Fraser (1812-1882)

Thomas Alexander Fraser, the youngest son, would later follow a similar pattern of westward movement, settling in Illinois.

[Thomas's migration story is told in the Biographical Sketch.]

Anne Fraser (1817-1893)

Anne Fraser was born in 1817, the daughter of William Fraser and Isabelle MacLean of Knockbain, Inverness-shire, which lay on the Black Isle near Reelick, overlooking the Beaulieu Firth.² This Fraser line traces its roots in the Highlands, extending back to at least the fifteenth century.

A Medieval Landscape

Reelick lies within territory long associated with the Clan Fraser of Lovat.³ By the 1400s and 1500s, landholding was organized through kinship and allegiance rather than individual ownership. Families lived as tenants or subtenants, farming shared strips of land under the *runrig* system and raising cattle as a central economic activity.

Life was shaped by obligation and reciprocity. Tenants owed rents and services to their superiors, while Gaelic language, oral tradition, and family structured daily life. Literacy was rare before the seventeenth century, and the church—Catholic and later Presbyterian—served as a central institution.

Change and Pressure in the Eighteenth Century

By the seventeenth century, the social order began to shift. Clan authority remained important, but land increasingly became a commercial asset rather than a purely kin-based trust. Leases replaced traditional tenures, and rents gradually rose. Reelick's families continued to farm, but with growing pressure to produce surplus for markets rather than subsistence alone. Despite these changes, the area remained strongly Gaelic in culture, speech, and custom.

The eighteenth century brought more profound disruption. Following the Jacobite uprisings—especially after 1745—traditional clan structures were systematically dismantled. Chiefs became landlords, military service was suppressed, and estate management grew more centralized. In places like Reelick, tenants faced rising rents, shorter leases, and increasing insecurity. Although Reelick did not experience the most dramatic clearances seen elsewhere, the underlying forces of change were keenly felt, and many of Anne's family and neighbors began to emigrate to America.

Family Loss and Emigration

Anne was the sixth of eight children born to William Fraser and Isabelle MacLean. Her childhood was shaped by loss. Three of her older brothers died young, and in 1834 her father died, leaving the family in a vulnerable position. That same year, her eldest surviving brother, William, emigrated to New York. His departure reflected a familiar Highland reality: without land or long-term security, emigration often offered the only viable future.

William settled in Livingston County, New York, where members of the Fraser kin network were already established. Encouraged by his experience, the remaining siblings followed in 1835. Anne,

² Much of the original documentation for this ancestral line was gathered by Judd Mason (1914–2007), whose correspondence and visits to Scotland provided valuable evidence.

³ Our branch of Frasers is likely connected to Lord Lovat, but the existing evidence has not been confirmed.

then eighteen, emigrated with her sister, Elizabeth, and her younger brothers, Finlay and Donald, traveling alongside other relatives.

Once in Livingston County, Anne met Thomas Alexander Fraser, a Fraser from a different family line. They married and migrated to Illinois.

[See Biographical Sketch for Anne's migration story.]