NEWSPAPERS
Give Us the Rest of the Story

Coming to America: William Kemp

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About GenealogyBank

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NewsBank, Inc. has been one of the world's premier information providers for more than 35 years. Through partnerships with the American Antiquarian Society, Wisconsin Historical Society and more than 3,000 publishers, NewsBank is uniquely qualified to offer some of the most comprehensive genealogical information available – and to provide new content regularly.

About the Author

Thomas Jay Kemp is the Director of Genealogy Products at GenealogyBank. Tom is an internationally known librarian and archivist. He is the author of over 45 genealogy books and hundreds of articles about genealogy and family history. Tom previously served as the Chair of the National Council of Library & Information Associations (Washington, D.C.) and as Library Director of both the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and the New England Historic Genealogical Society. He began his career in 1963 as the Assistant to the Librarian in the Genealogy & Local History Room at the Ferguson Library (Stamford, Connecticut).
Newspapers make the difference in learning about our ancestors.

Basic genealogical records can tell us the Who, What and When...but it is newspapers that tell us not only those three basic sets of data—but also the How and the Why!

And that is what makes family history interesting.

**My Ancestor William Kemp**

This is how newspapers helped me learn the story of my ancestor William Kemp. William (the Who) decided to go to America (the What), arriving in 1853 (the When).

Newspapers tell the rest of the story – filling in the details long lost in memory to families generations later.

Newspaper articles tell us the How and Why about William’s trip to America and describe how dangerous it was.

I had always wanted to know exactly when my ancestor William Kemp came to America. We knew that he was born in Ireland and came over in the mid-1850s, but we did not know the name of the ship and the date of his arrival.
After searching for years, I finally found that date and the name of the ship on the free Internet site CastleGarden.org.

Source: CastleGarden.org

William arrived in America on 21 October 1853, a passenger on the ship Benjamin Adams.

There it is: the name of the ship and the date of his arrival.
I confirmed this information by looking at passenger lists on FamilySearch.

![Passenger list](image1)

Source: FamilySearch, *New York, Passenger Lists, 1820-1891*

**But, Was There More to the Story?**
According to the ship history website [Scandinavian Emigrant Ship Descriptions and Voyage Narratives (1852-1868)](https://www.geographicus.org/shipdescriptions), the ship *Benjamin Adams* was built in 1852 by William Drummond in Bath, Maine.

**Newspapers Fill in the Details**
I next turned to GenealogyBank’s Historical Newspaper Archives to learn more.

The *American and Commercial Daily Advertiser* (Baltimore, Maryland), 1 April 1852, page 3, reported that the *Benjamin Adams* left Friday, 25 March 1852, on its maiden voyage from Bath, Maine, to Baltimore, Maryland. It arrived there eight days later on Saturday, 3 April 1852.

See a follow-up report in the *American and Commercial Daily Advertiser* (Baltimore, Maryland), 1 April 1852, page 1.
Advertisements for the *Benjamin Adams* highlighted its comfortable accommodations of 6 to 8 cabins above deck and another 75 to 80 accommodations in steerage below deck.

Passengers considering making the voyage were encouraged to come and see the ship for themselves while it was docked in Baltimore, Maryland.

Once William Kemp made his decision to emigrate he would have taken a steamship from Ireland to Liverpool, England, arriving at Clarence Dock along the Mersey River in Liverpool.

Liverpool has a series of docks along the banks of the Mersey River. It was one of the major hubs of immigration to America.

According to *Liverpool and Emigration in the 19th and 20th Centuries, Information Sheet number 64*:

"By 1851 it [Liverpool] had become the leading emigration port in Europe with 159,840 passengers sailing to North America, as opposed to the second port, Le Havre [France], with 31,859.”
This would have been the scene in mid-19th century Liverpool when William arrived to wait for his ship to America.


**Newspapers Tell Us Just How Difficult That Trip Was**

Here is a newspaper report that the ship *Benjamin Adams* had moved from the dock and into the Mersey River ready to head outbound, waiting to move up the river with the aid of a tugboat that would direct it safely to the open ocean.

The big day arrived, and the *Benjamin Adams* set sail on 24 August 1853 bound for New York City.

Ship *Benjamin Adams* Arrived in New York City on 21 October 1853

It was announced in this newspaper article that the *Benjamin Adams* arrived on 21 October 1853.

They made it.

This Was a Tough Trip

The *Weekly Herald* gave more details of the cross-Atlantic trip:

- The voyage took 56 days.
- There were 620 passengers on board.
- Fifteen of them had died on the passage.
- The ship was hit by a storm, suffering major damage.
According to the article:

"Sept. 10, while laying to under a close reefed topsail in a heavy gale from the NW, lost all three topgallant masts, closed reefed mizzen topsail, foresail, mainsail, stern boat, and received other damage."

Significant storm damage to the ship and fifteen people died?

What?
Fifteen people died?
Wow. Was that normal on these trips? Why did so many die?

In a follow-up article a week later, the Weekly Herald explained why so many had died on the passage.

Cholera was killing passengers on ship after ship. As the article reported:

"...it is pretty certain that the disease which carried them off was cholera...The sickness on the Benjamin Adams was decidedly cholera."

Cholera was a major problem in England and Europe in the mid-1800s.

In 1853-1854 it killed more than 31,000 people in London alone. It would be another year before the pioneering work of John Snow, M.D. (1813-1858) discovered the cause and cure for the repeated cholera epidemics.

The Albany Evening Journal added this report about the arrival of the Benjamin Adams:

Cholera on the Ship Sagadahock, &c.

Boston, Friday, Oct. 21.

The bark Benjamin Adams, from Syria, arrived at this port, brings a Jerusalem plow and other articles from the Holy Land, for the Crystal Palace at New York.


Wait—this article reported that the Benjamin Adams arrived "from Syria" bringing "a Jerusalem plow and other articles from the Holy Land, for the Crystal Palace at New York". Notice that it stopped in Boston, Massachusetts, on 21 October 1853 before continuing on to New York City.

When Was the Ship in Syria?

Digging deeper into GenealogyBank's Historical Newspaper Archives, I found the answer.

The Benjamin Adams was in Beirut on July 25th before going to Liverpool to pick up William Kemp and the other 619 passengers.

Source: GenealogyBank.com, Daily Atlas (Boston, Massachusetts), 1 September 1853, page 2
The *Springfield Republican* gave more details.

The barque Benjamin Adams, which arrived at Boston on Friday morning from the Holy Land, brought an Arab plough and other agricultural implements for the World’s Fair. In her list of curiosities are canes from the banks of the Jordan, branches from the Mount of Olives and cedars of Lebanon, and husks that the “prodigal son” would have eaten if he had had them to eat.


In addition to the plow “*and other agricultural implements*” it was carrying for the World’s Fair, the *Benjamin Adams* brought:

“*...canes from the banks of the Jordan, branches from the Mount of Olives and cedars of Lebanon, and husks that the ‘prodigal son’ would have eaten if he had had them to eat.*”

Did William know that this cargo, destined for the “Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations” in New York City, was on board?
Did he go to the Crystal Palace at Bryant Park to see these objects that had traveled with him across the Atlantic?

**Conclusion**

When I began searching for the name of the ship and the date that William Kemp arrived in America, I only knew that he was born in Corradownan, County Cavan, Ireland. I did not know any additional details about William’s cross-Atlantic trip.

Thanks to the online sites CastleGarden.org and FamilySearch.org I learned that he came over on the ship *Benjamin Adams* and that he arrived in America on 21 October 1853.

Those were the basic facts — but it took the old newspapers in GenealogyBank’s deep newspaper archives to fill in the rest of the story. These newspapers gave me the details of how dangerous the trip was, and the fact that it took an incredible 56 days. They also provided a description of the ship’s accommodations, and the interesting ancient relics the *Benjamin Adams* was bringing from Syria to the Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations— the World’s Fair held in 1853 in New York City.

Official records and documents give us the names, dates and places—but newspapers give us our ancestors’ stories, and make their experiences memorable and unforgettable.