



# How to Trace Your Irish Ancestors Back to the Homeland

## Presenter: John Manning

### Background

- Successful research in Irish genealogy depends upon knowing the exact location in Ireland where your ancestors were born and came from. Typically, those clues can be found in the records they left behind in the United States.

### Challenges in Irish Research (Irish Records)

- The fire during the Irish Civil War on June 30, 1922, at the Four Courts at the Public Records Office (PRO) was devastating. Despite popular misconception, not all records were destroyed. Some of the documents that survived include:
  - The 1901 and 1911 Irish census returns
  - Several Church of Ireland parish registers
  - Roman Catholics, Presbyterian, and Methodist baptism, marriage, and burial records were not housed at the PRO.
  - Griffiths Valuation (19th-century land and property records)
  - Indexes to wills and probate bonds
  - Several local muster rolls, poll tax lists, and other records date back to the early 1600s.

### Challenges in Irish Research (US Records)

- Passenger lists of Irish immigrants to the US from the 18th and 19th centuries are incomplete or non-existent. If names can be identified, they often list only the head of the household.
- Vital records recording births, marriages, and deaths varied from state to state, and not all these records survived. (e.g., loss of antebellum records from burnt courthouses during the US Civil War).
- Early census records were not very explicit (e.g., tic marks used to record information in columns) but held more information as each new census gathered more data.
- Church records may not always be accessible, legible, or complete.
- Personal diaries, papers, Bibles, and artifacts are lost or scattered among distant relatives.

### Start With What You Know

- Identify the ancestor to be researched
  - Evaluate the records you have from the immigrant's arrival until death.
  - Collect the names of friends, acquaintances, and neighbors who may have associated with your immigrant ancestor.
  - Have you interviewed vital family members who may have knowledge or artifacts of your ancestor?

- What are some of the sources of information we can use?
  - Passenger lists
  - Citizenship and/or naturalization papers
  - Church records
  - Vital records ((birth, marriage and death)
  - US Census
  - Newspapers (obituaries, marriage notices, local news, etc.)
  - Cemetery records/headstone inscriptions
  - Land and property records (land grants, deeds, bounty lands)
  - Probate records (wills, probate case files)
  - Military Records
  - Tax lists
  - Voting registers
  - Local histories
  - Family artifacts

### **Timeline of Irish Immigration to the US**

- **Colonial Era (1600s – 1776)**
  - Scots-Irish (Ulster-Irish) immigrants from Ulster
  - Poor Harvests, Rackrents, Agricultural Riots
  - Indentured Servants/New Opportunities
  - Potato Famine (1740-41)
- **Opportunities (1780 – 1820)**
  - Labor needed to build canals, roads, and railways in the rapidly expanding US economy.
- **The Great Famine Era (1820 – 1860)**
  - Irish Potato Blight/Starvation (1845 – 1855)
  - Irish Catholic Migration
- **Post Famine Era (1860 – 1900)**
  - "Chain Migration"
  - Cheaper and faster passage to the US on steamships
- **20th Century (1900 – 1950)**
  - Irish Civil War/Formation of the Irish Free State
  - Great Depression and World War II

### **Passenger Lists/immigration**

- Immigration periods:
  - The earliest waves of Irish emigration date to the second half of the 17th Century, primarily to Newfoundland in British North America.
  - Approximately 8 million men, women, and children emigrated from Ireland between 1801 and 1921.

- Primary ports of departure:
  - Londonderry and Belfast were essential ports for emigrants from Northern Ireland who sailed to British North America and the United States.
  - Approximately 2.5 million emigrants left Ireland via Cobh (Queenstown) port in County Cork.
  - Over time, travel to North America from Liverpool became very cheap, and many Irish immigrants made the transatlantic journey from that port.
- Primary ports of entry for Irish to the US - New York, Boston, Philadelphia, New Orleans
- 1900, 1910, 1920, and 1930 censuses indicate the person's year of immigration to the United States. This information helps in locating a ship's passenger arrival list.

### **Citizenship and/or Naturalization Papers**

- While this was not unique for the Irish immigrant, there were many reasons that they sought citizenship:
  - After years of being denied their political rights by the British, the Irish were deeply involved in the political processes in their new home. They cast their votes in higher proportions than other ethnic groups.
  - The naturalization process was seen as a means of fitting into American society.
  - Citizenship also provided a means to avoid the nativism prevalent in the mid-1800s by becoming involved in the political process.
- Critical points for searching records:
  - No central index exists.
  - The Federal courts - naturalization records dated before October 1991 are in the National Archives.
  - In most cases, NARA will not have a copy of the citizenship certificate granted to a petitioner – their holdings typically include only the immigrant's declaration of intention (along with any accompanying certificate of arrival) and their petition for naturalization.
  - Naturalization records generated by the state or local courts are often found in state archives or county historical societies.
- US Census records can provide clues about your ancestor's naturalization status.

### **Church Records/Vital Records/Census**

- Church records often identified information about where the ancestor came from
  - The parents' names were always recorded for baptisms and usually included in marriage records.
  - Sibling relationships in similar records can also be used to validate parental information.
- Vital records (birth, marriage, death) can be used to correlate/corroborate information needed in your research.
- Census records can provide clues regarding the ancestor's place of birth, immigration, naturalization, and if the ancestor's parents were foreign-born.

## Other Records to Consider

- Newspapers – especially local papers.
- Land Records – The first land record of an immigrant often listed their previous place of residence.
- Probate Records – Some immigrants arranged for financial disbursement from their estate to family members in Ireland.
- Military Records – Especially during the period of the US Civil War (Irish soldiers fought on both sides of the conflict). Enlistment records and soldier and widow applications often included birthplace information.
- Published Histories/Biographies – These documents are often written by a family member with first-hand knowledge of the immigrant.
- Family Artifacts – May have some reference to where the ancestor came from.

## Sources of Online Information:

- [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com) - Extensive Irish information sources.
- [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org) - Extensive Irish information sources.
- [https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Ireland\\_Emigration\\_and\\_Immigration](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Ireland_Emigration_and_Immigration) - Irish Emigration and Immigration (FamilySearch Wiki).
- <https://www.genealogybranches.com/irishpassengerlists/> - Irish Passenger Lists Research Guide
- [https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Finding\\_an\\_Irish\\_Anccestor\\_Using\\_United\\_States\\_Records](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Finding_an_Irish_Anccestor_Using_United_States_Records) - Finding an Irish Ancestor Using United States Records (FamilySearch Wiki).
- [JohnGrenham.com](http://JohnGrenham.com) – Irish Ancestors
- [RootsIreland.ie](http://RootsIreland.ie) - Irish Family History Foundation
- [IrishGenealogy.ie](http://IrishGenealogy.ie) – Ireland Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts
- [AskAboutIreland.ie](http://AskAboutIreland.ie) - Cultural Heritage Project is an initiative of Ireland's public libraries
- [NLI.ie](http://NLI.ie) – National Library of Ireland

## Recommended Reading:

- Barrett, James R., *The Irish Way: Becoming American in the Multiethnic City*, (The Penguin History of American Life, 2013), ISBN: 978-0143122807.
- Grenham, John, *Tracing your Irish Ancestors*, 5th ed., (Genealogical Publishing Company, Inc., 2019), ISBN: 978-0806320946. (The newest edition has updated information on Irish internet resources).
- Miller, Kirby A., *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America*, Oxford University Press, 1988), ISBN: 978-0195051872.
- Ryan, James G., *Irish Records: Sources for Family and Local History*, (Salt Lake City, Ancestry Publishing, 1997), ISBN: 978-0916489229.