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IRISH EMIGRATION AND IMMIGRATION TO NORTH AMERICA

DAVID S. OUIMETTE AND DAVID E. RENCHER

INTRODUCTION

Irish immigration to the United States and Canada has been marked by peak periods of mass migration in history. Major historical events have triggered the influx of large numbers of Irish immigrants seeking better wages, more comfortable lifestyles, and political or religious freedom. Careless stereotypes have been attached to the immigrants and their methods of travel and lifestyles, but there were numerous ways to immigrate to North America and each course had the potential to create the records needed to identify a home county or parish.

Irish emigration across the Atlantic began in the early 1600s. Emigration patterns mirrored the ebbs and flows of emigration from the rest of the British Isles with two notable exceptions: first, the emigration of Scots-Irish Presbyterians to North America in the mid-1700s, and second, the famine-initiated emigration of mostly Catholics in the mid-1800s.

This article focuses on the many record sources in America and Ireland that may be used to link the Irish immigrants with their origins in Ireland. Similar record sources may help trace the many Irish who went to France, South Africa, India, Australia, New Zealand, and elsewhere.

RESEARCH IN NORTH AMERICA

The research techniques for determining the place of origin for an Irish immigrant involve many of the same methodologies that would be used to trace any immigrant. This paper focuses on sources proven especially effective in tracing Irish immigrants. The primary sources to examine include naturalization papers, land records, probate documents, church registers, census records, tombstone inscriptions, vital records, newspapers, military papers, and most importantly, family records.

Immigrants have different lifestyle patterns based on economics, religion, and the time of immigration. Generally, the heaviest Scots-Irish immigration occurred from 1740–80. Many of these immigrants traveled as families or friends, sometimes immigrating with the minister and their entire congregation. The Catholic immigration gained steam in the 1820s, peaked in 1853, and continued into the early 1900s. Family migration often occurred over a period of years, with one or two family members making the initial journey, followed by another relative, then another. Often they would find work in America, save their earnings, and send the money back to Ireland to assist additional family members to immigrate. This pattern of family migration—referred to as “chain migration”—allowed poorer families to pay for passage to America person by person at a pace commensurate with their income.

There are no “absolutes” when doing research on an Irish immigrant problem. It is important to know the religion of the immigrant and as much as possible about who came with them or whom they contacted once they arrived in North America.

MIGRATION ROUTES FROM IRELAND TO NORTH AMERICA

The principal ports for persons leaving Ireland were Dublin; Waterford; Cork; Tralee, Kerry; Limerick; Sligo; Donegal; Londonderry (Derry); Belfast; Dundalk, Louth; Drogheda, Louth; and Galway. Passage from Ireland was expensive for the poverty-stricken immigrants. Often the passage would be paid by estate landlords, opting to pay the price of immigration rather than support the family on the estate. The fare in 1827 from County Louth was £4 10s. to New York, and about £2 10s. to Québec. This accounted for the tremendous flow of immigrants sailing to Canada and then working their way down into the United States if that was their ultimate destination. From the *Minutes of Evidence before the Select Committee on Emigration from the United Kingdom* in 1827, those giving testimony stated that their preferred destination was New York. However, some of those being questioned thought that the immigrants could be persuaded to go to Canada with the proper incentives.

Giving further testimony on the subject of the situation of the immigrants, John Leslie Foster stated:

“I know some instances in which proprietors are now giving at the rate of £3 to assist individuals in emigration; and I wish to add, that many thousand individuals in the county of Louth would most gratefully accept that amount, upon the terms of immediately employing it in going to America, and taking all chances for what might there befall [sic] them. A majority of those who have already emigrated from that part of Ireland in this year, had not each of them so much as £1 in their pocket, after paying for their passage. I have made a good deal of inquiry upon the subject.”¹

As early as 1827, witnesses were giving testimony that a failure in the potato crop would have a devastating effect on the population of Ireland. Minor crop failures had already precipitated the flow of emigration to other lands, and not even the prognosticators could envision to what degree their predictions would come true. The population of Ireland in 1801 was approximately four million people. By 1841, it had reached nearly eight million. Yet in 1901, the population was again at approximately four million persons. Thus, in a century, the population had remained stagnant because of death and emigration.

The obvious ports of arrival—New York, Boston, Philadelphia, St. John’s, Québec, Baltimore, and Charleston—are always thought of first. However, there were numerous Irish who entered the United States through points not usually considered for Irish immigration, such as Ogdensburg, New York; Galveston, Texas; and the route north of the Great Lakes and dropping down into Minnesota.

Some immigrants arrived in North America at a port far from their intended destination. Many would seek the least expensive passage, sailing from the west coast of Ireland to Nova Scotia, with the intent of working their way further into Canada or into the United States. These immigrants often left a trail of historical records in one place after another before arriving at their final home.

SOURCES FOR IDENTIFYING IMMIGRANT ORIGINS

Many record sources preserve significant biographical details of immigrants, including the names of friends and relatives who also immigrated, the names of relatives

1 British Parliamentary Papers, *First, Second, and Third Reports from the Select Committee on Emigration from the United Kingdom with Minutes of Evidence, Appendix, and Index*, 4 volumes (Shannon, Ireland: Irish University Press, 1968), 2:337.

who stayed behind, dates and places of vital events, places of residence, occupation, military service, religious persuasion, and even personal appearance. Although discovering the place of origin is usually the ultimate goal in immigrant research, other personal and family clues are worth seeking for their own intrinsic value, as well as their potential to clearly identify the immigrant in place, time, and family. Look for all the biographical details you can—not just place of origin—as you search the records for your immigrant.

As you examine the record sources for clues about your Irish immigrants, it's a good idea to conduct the research in two phases. In Phase I, **examine sources where the immigrant lived**. In Phase II, **examine sources where the immigrant was in transit**. Remember that every source of information you discover about your immigrant ancestor begins a paper trail leading to more record sources. For example, a twentieth-century U.S. census may tell you your ancestor's year of immigration or naturalization, triggering a more informed search of ships' passenger lists or naturalization papers, respectively.

Phase I—Sources Where the Immigrant Lived

There are sources in every community *where the immigrant lived* that may provide vital information. The following sources are the most commonly used in this process:

- 1) **Naturalization records** – Declarations of intention (first papers) and naturalization petitions (second papers) are especially useful because they list a place of origin. Beginning in 1906, these documents include such precise details as birth date, birthplace (Irish townland or parish), and last foreign address.
- 2) **Land records** – In some instances, the first land record of an immigrant—perhaps a deed or mortgage—will list the previous place of residence. If this is out of the country, the record will give the place they came from.
- 3) **Probate records** – Wills and other probate instruments are rich in family history details and can help solve many genealogical research problems. Probate research is complicated by the need to examine documents of many relations and friends of different surnames.
- 4) **Church records** – Many congregations would receive new members upon the recommendation of another minister or congregation. Certificates of members in good standing were often filed with the other records of the Church. These records tell you the immigrant's congregation before coming to America and thus open the door for ancestral research in Ireland.
- 5) **Census records** – While census records are usually not specific in identifying an exact place of origin, they can be useful to pinpoint and create a timeline of movement from place to place. The twentieth-century censuses specify the year of immigration to the United States as well as the naturalization status of immigrants. The 1920 census states the year of naturalization, helping narrow the search for naturalization papers.
- 6) **Tombstone inscriptions** – Many Irish-born Americans have their birthplace stated on their tombstones. Names of family members may be listed far from where the immigrant was

interred. Other family tombstones may record the information you need, but will remain undiscovered until after you have reconstructed the entire family.

7) **Birth, marriage, and death records** – These vital records often contain the most useful genealogical details on immigrant ancestors. The immigrant’s death certificate may state the precise birthplace in Ireland. Birth and marriage records often state the birthplaces of parents; remember to check the vital records of all your immigrant ancestors’ children. Birth, marriage and death records are most useful in the later years (after 1900). Be sure to identify the source of the information and determine his or her credibility. Remember that in the instance of death certificates, the information for birth or origin is secondary.

8) **Newspapers** – Obituaries are especially important sources of information on immigrant ancestors. Because of their size and scope, newspapers remain one of the more difficult sources to use. Look for indexes and centennial issues listing biographies on early residents.

9) **Military records** – Military pension applications, service records, and draft registration cards are among the best sources for learning about ancestors, including immigrants. Any of these records might provide birth date, birthplace, and other genealogical details helpful in the search for immigrant origins.

10) **Family records** - Through the years, families gather and preserve information. However, as the generations get further removed from the immigrant, the clues are lost. These family records are most likely inherited by the first daughter in each generation. Trace the descendants of the oldest female lines first, and then work in descending order of birth.

11) **Family heirlooms and artifacts** – You may find artifacts that will give you clues about an ancestor. These may include family Bibles, samplers, quilts, military awards, uniform buttons or Presbyterian communion tokens.

12) **Railroad retirement records** – Historically, the railroad was a major employer for the Irish, both during construction and operation. Many of these occupation records are located at the National Archives Branch in Chicago, Illinois.

13) **School records** – A number of the Irish became notable figures in the history of the Americas. When they did, school records become a vital source of biographical information.

14) **Passport records** – Many of the Irish returned to Ireland at some point during their lives. When they did, they may have applied for a passport with information on their place of origin.

15) **Funeral home records** – A source often overlooked in American research, funeral homes have a variety of content based on the needs of the business owner. To find an online database for the names and addresses of current funeral homes, perform a Google search on the term “funeral homes.”

16) **Orphan records** – Thousands of orphans were sent from Ireland to North America. These family lines can be some of the most challenging, yet the most rewarding when solved.

17) **Published histories** – Printed family histories are particularly good sources of biographical material throughout the East and Midwest. These histories were often written by a family member with first-hand knowledge of the immigrant.

Phase II—Sources Where the Immigrant Was in Transit

Some sources identify the immigrant *while in transit to the final destination*. These were created far from where the person may have settled and raised a family. They are more difficult to identify, since you may not know the route the immigrant took to get to their final destination. The following types of sources are included in this phase:

1) **Ship passenger lists** – Early ships' manifests are usually searched to gain information about the immigrant's arrival, including the names and ages of traveling companions. These records rarely give details about the precise origins of the passengers, stating only that the passengers were from Ireland or that they were British. Only in the late 1800s onward do passenger lists record detailed places of origin.

2) **Quarantine hospital records** – Some of these records are known to exist in Canada, particularly for Grosse-Ile, Québec. Many children were orphaned while their parents were in quarantine, and details about their dispositions are recorded.

3) **Church records in Canada** – Because Canada was still a part of the Commonwealth, Canadian marriage records often list the place of nativity/origin.

4) **Newspapers** – Beyond obituaries, newspapers contain other information of value to family historians searching for their immigrant ancestors. Some newspapers have advertisements for lost relatives, especially the *Boston Pilot* (Boston) and the *Truth Teller* (New York City) in the United States and the *Toronto Mirror* and the *New Brunswick Courier* in Canada.

FAMILY RECONSTITUTION

Extensive research on Irish families in North America shows that, in most cases, the immigrants did not come alone. While there are certainly some instances where only one family member ever came, there many more examples of families that immigrated in parts or phases.

Often, money was earned from labors in North America and sent back to Ireland to send the next family member abroad. Thus, uncovering all information about interaction between the immigrant and his or her family and friends is an important strategy for solving many research problems. In many instances, the other family members are identifiable only through meticulous research. The commonness of some Irish surnames will sometimes make the problem appear overwhelming. Certain pieces of information, however, will illuminate the interaction of family members. It is useful, for example, to determine who the witnesses

were at key events such as marriages, land purchases, naming of godparents, and signing of probate records. Other helpful information might be where family members are living in large cities, what churches they are attending, and what other names appear in family burial plots. These facts will help you piece together and reconstitute the family as it was in previous generations.

ANALYSIS OF EVIDENCE AND SOURCES

Researchers rarely agree on the method of analysis of any particular research problem. This is mainly due to the individualized nature of their research experience. While there is general agreement on what constitutes solid research fundamentals and documentation, the art of employing all of one's experiences in solving an immigrant problem defies description. Too often, persons working on their own lines are "blinded" by a variety of factors. Often, family traditions get in the way of solving the problem. In one instance, a family was insistent that their ancestor came from Belfast, County Antrim, Ireland. When the problem was solved, the marriage of the fourth-great-grandparents was located in the Church of Ireland parish registers of St. Andrews Dublin, County Dublin, Ireland. Years of searching the records of Belfast had failed to bear fruit. However, when an objective evaluation of the problem yielded no evidence for Belfast, the search expanded to include other possibilities.

In forming a hypothesis of what the evidence reveals, do not discount evidence that does not agree with the hypothesis. Evaluate all of the evidence and determine what the facts are and which elements are merely hearsay. As you compile the facts, ages will vary, localities will disagree, the descendants of younger children in an immigrant family may have less information than the descendants of older children. Solid family history research includes a reasonably thorough search of available records, careful documentation of what you found and did not find, good source citations, thoughtful resolution of conflicting evidence, and well-reasoned conclusions.

MIGRATION AND EMIGRATION ROUTES

In documenting an immigrant's journey from place of origin to North America, it is again useful to divide the research into two phases:

1) **The migration from home to port city**, unless the emigrant resides in a port community. Because there were no regular schedules of vessels sailing, the emigrant may have resided for a time in the port city, awaiting passage. Ireland's elaborate canal system may have been the vehicle for an ancestor's migration. There were also stage lines and later railways connecting all the major cities. Ultimately, many would have walked.

2) **The journey by ship across the Atlantic** may have taken a number of irregular paths. People leaving the eastern coast of Ireland (ports of Dublin, Drogheda, Dundalk, Waterford, and Belfast) often found it better to take passage to Liverpool, England where there were more vessels heading for North America. Again, they may have stayed in Liverpool for some period of time. Whatever route was used, the ship passage would take anywhere from a month and a half to three months, depending on weather conditions and destination.

These two phases of the emigrant's journey can provide clues to his or her place of origin. Records created in each phase may also provide clues about the emigrant and his or

her family. The following lists provide a few examples of the records available in each of the phases:

Phase I— Sources Created during the Migration from Home to Port City

- 1) **Church records in port cities** – Emigrants often spent days or weeks in the port of departure before securing passage to America. While away from home, couples were married and babies were born, and these events were often recorded in the parish registers of port cities. This was particularly common in the larger ports of Cork, Tralee, Limerick, Galway, Sligo, Donegal, Londonderry (Derry), Belfast, Newry, Drogheda, Dublin, Waterford, and Wexford.
- 2) **1841 and 1851 census fragments in Ireland** – These nominal censuses recorded the following details on each individual in the household: name, age, sex, relationship to the head of the household, marital status, year of marriage, occupation, and literacy (the 1851 census also listed religion). The same information was also kept on a separate schedule for family members who were absent on census day, including those who emigrated.
- 3) **National school registers** – If the emigrant’s family had any children attending school when the family left for America, consult the school records for each child. These records occasionally contain details in a “notes” column regarding the migration or emigration of students.
- 4) **Estate papers** – Estate papers may include lists of tenants who emigrated with the assistance of the landowner. Tenants on these estates generally had their passage paid and were often given “landing money” in addition to the expenses already paid.
- 5) **Newspapers** – Newspapers may contain different elements regarding the process of emigration, but some of the most useful are the lists of passengers thanking their ship’s captain and crew for a safe journey. These articles often give a list of many of the adult passengers, especially males.
- 6) **Ordinance Survey lists for 1834** – Primarily for the County of Londonderry (Derry), these lists were compiled to determine what skilled laborers were emigrating out of Ireland. The British government was concerned with the loss of this skilled labor force and the poverty of much of the population left behind.
- 7) **Poor Law records** – Poor Law records identify the destitute who sought government support for food and shelter. These documents reveal the names of people admitted to poor houses and provide sobering details about the harsh life of the sick, needy, and homeless in Ireland. Prior to the establishment of the Poor Law system in 1838, these records were to be found in the Church of Ireland parishes
- 8) **Church Fasti for the Presbyterian Church** – The Church Fasti provides researchers with a comprehensive list of the ministers of the Presbyterian Church and Seceder Ministers, often giving details about their departure from Ireland to America with their family, several families, or entire congregations.
- 9) **Tombstone inscriptions** – Some tombstones in Ireland were erected by children who emigrated to America, dedicated to the memory of the deceased parents. These tombstone

inscriptions often name the children and state their addresses in America.

10) **Post-1858 wills and administrations** – Detailed summaries of the wills in the existing indexes often give information regarding estates still unsettled after several years.

11) **Bibliographic sources** – Hayes Manuscript Sources for the History of the Irish Civilisation—Pay particular attention not only to the heading “Emigration,” but also “Irish-Abroad U.S.A.” and “Irish-Abroad Canada.”

Phase II— Sources Created during the Journey by Ship across the Atlantic

1) **Census records in port cities out of Ireland** – Most valuable are the censuses of England and Wales for the years 1841–1901.

2) **Church records in port cities outside of Ireland** – Look for births, marriages, and deaths in the parish registers of the port city where your ancestor booked passage, even if it is outside Ireland. For example, Liverpool, Lancashire, England has eighteen Catholic Churches with parish registers.

3) **Poor Law records in the port cities outside of Ireland** – The overseers of the poor were directed to take an examination of any persons entering the parish who looked like they were destitute and might need assistance from the poor relief.

4) **Civil Registration, England, Scotland, and Wales** – Civil registration of births, marriages, and deaths began in England and Wales in July 1837 and in Scotland in 1855.

USING SURNAME FINDERS AS IMMIGRATION TOOLS

When researchers feel they have exhausted all of the possible leads in the country in which the immigrant settled, they usually resort to “shots in the dark” (One note of caution: inexperienced researchers often mistakenly begin this process long before better alternatives are exhausted.). While this approach is not to be totally disregarded (e.g. David Rencher found his fourth great-grandfather's marriage in Ireland “browsing one evening”), there are methodologies that the experienced Irish genealogist can apply to take advantage of the tools available.

The Householder’s Index is a surname index to the Tithe Applotments (1823–38) and Griffith’s Valuation (1848–64). It is widely used to locate persons of the same family name in the county or parish where the immigrant originated. Another finding aid is Grenham’s Irish Surnames, a CD-ROM designed around a database of surnames extracted from Griffith’s Valuation. You can use this CD to identify all the places where any particular surname appears in Griffith’s Valuation, along with the number of occurrences of the surname in each locality. You can enter two surnames and see a list of Irish parishes where families of both surnames coexisted.

In many instances, there are not enough “connectors” to make the leap from North America to Ireland. People researching ancestors with a common Irish name must have other identifying facts about the individual. If you want me to find a Patrick Murphy in Ireland for you, give me thirty seconds; there are literally hundreds. However, if you know that Patrick had brothers named Lawrence, John, and Dennis; that his mother's maiden name was Lynch; that Lawrence was married in Ireland; that Patrick was a carpenter etc., then we have something we can work with, even though there may be no indication of a parish or county of origin. This type of information is learned by exhausting all of the possible record sources

here before attempting to connect Patrick with his native parish.

Griffith's Valuation and the Tithe Applotment books are widely known to be woefully incomplete, and thus risky if used incorrectly. However, as a surname-locating tool, they are adequate for the “shot in the dark” approach. The power of the tool is leveraged in this way:

- 1) Two surnames must be known about the immigrant if the greatest success is to be achieved. Thus, the surname of the immigrant’s mother, the surname of the spouse (if married in Ireland), or another related surname should be selected for simultaneous research.
- 2) Select the counties in Ireland where the immigrant is believed to have immigrated from, or do all of the counties if you choose.
- 3) Identify the parishes where each surname occurs and compile a list of these. Compile a second list of the parishes where both surnames occur. Be sure to record the number associated with each entry in *Griffith's Valuation*. This number will be used later.
- 4) Many researchers do steps 1–3 above, but neglect to do the following, which we feel narrows the search the most and is the time saver if there is one. Use the 1851 Census Population Tables found in the *British Parliamentary Papers* and identify the populations of the parishes on your two lists.
- 5) Now take the number associated with the *Griffith's Valuation* listings and divide it into the population figure for the corresponding parish. This tells you how significant the surname is in the parish.
- 6) Once you have established the significance of the surnames in each parish, you can construct a list ranked in descending order of probability. From this list, you now branch into searching other genealogical records looking for the “connectors” (i.e. known christenings, marriages, etc.).

This technique will work with other records that have broad ranges of coverage. For example, the *Hearth Money Rolls* could be used for a Presbyterian problem in Northern Ireland.

Remember you are not using the surname locating tools to find an entry with your ancestor’s name on it—rather, you are using the power of the broad distribution of surnames to focus the efforts of your research in other records. Too many researchers are discouraged when these broad tools fail to yield the exact name they are looking for. If you find an exact entry for your ancestor, be pleasantly surprised, but don't expect it.

With broad picture in view, it is also obvious that the date of your surname distribution tool does not have to include the exact date your immigrant was in Ireland. To many this will sound incredible, but remember you are leveraging the power of the probability that the two surnames will intersect in any given parish. Sound statistical principles bear this one out. Even though the population changes over time, the change is not drastic enough to greatly disrupt the surname distribution. Thus, use the tool closest to the period when you are trying to identify your immigrant.

CONCLUSION

Millions of Irish men, women, and children came to America in search of a better future. Often, they did not know where they would ultimately end up as they boarded vessels

in their native land. During the process of immigrating, situations changed and routes were redirected. Even today, this happens on a regular basis—ask anyone who has had airline reservations rerouted from coast to coast. The odds of solving immigration problems are significantly higher when you search the areas where the persons are known to have lived and interacted with others.

The diversity of causes of emigration from Ireland created a number of records that the Irish researcher rarely discovers. Records of immigrants are buried in estate papers, Poor Law Union books, even National School registers. However, until a general idea of the area from which an immigrant came is determined, examining the wealth of records in Ireland remains a formidable task. There are no exhaustive efforts underway to extract all of the immigrant names from these records and compile them into a useable tool. Rather, as with most other countries, random lists are printed in numerous scattered periodicals, books, and articles.

If the Irish researcher is to successfully discover the link between North America (or elsewhere) and Ireland, a thorough search of the records might be necessary in the county where the immigrant settled. This point cannot be overstated, and those of us who constantly deal with immigration problems have seen the rate of success of those who ignore this strategy. Time and again, researchers fail and become discouraged when adherence to some simple techniques and perseverance would better solve the immigration problem.

USEFUL WEBSITES AND ELECTRONIC DATABASES

1. Boston College. “Information Wanted: A Database of Advertisements for Irish Immigrants Published in the Boston Pilot.” Online < <http://infowanted.bc.edu/> >.
2. Maher, James P. *Returning Home: Transatlantic Migration from North America to Britain & Ireland, 1858–1870*, CD-ROM. Dublin: Eneclann, Ltd., 2004. [Over 42,000 names and details of passengers.]
3. MyFamily.com, Inc. “U.S. Immigration Collection.” Online < www.Ancestry.com >.
4. Mystic Seaport. Ship Registers beginning with New York Marine Register (1857) through the Record of American and Foreign Shipping for 1900. 55 volumes (1M records). Online <<http://www.mysticseaport.org/library/initiative/ShipRegisterList.cfm>> These may be searched at <<http://www.mysticseaport.org/library/initiative/VMSearch.cfm>> by shipmaster name or by vessel name and rig type. Results include ship name, shipmaster name, and volume where it appears. The ship name links to the volume and page where it appears.
5. Raymońd, Stuart A. *Irish Family History on the Web, A Directory*. 2nd ed. Bury, Lancashire, England: Federation of Family History Societies, 2004. [Emigration 76–80.]

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