"Mournful Exodus":
Finding your Irish Ancestor's Home

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Introduction

Finding the origins of your immigrant ancestor may be one of the most difficult genealogical problems you will try to solve. The solution may be one as simple as a common record, like a death certificate giving the exact correctly spelled place of birth. More often, however, it will be a less common record or a combination of records that will be necessary to solving it. Most of the work you will do to try to establish your immigrant's place of origin will be in "country of arrival" sources. Rarely are there records in the place of origin that describe where someone left and went to.

Key Considerations

- Ireland Censuses: 1851 – 1891 essentially destroyed
- Civil Registration (Vital Records): Begin fully in 1864
- Church Records begin on average in 1830, many lost, not kept, or destroyed
- Probate records destroyed in the Four Courts Fire in 1922

John Grenham says "What you can expect to find...in the majority of cases, that is, for the descendants of Catholic tenant farmers, the limit is generally the starting date of the local Catholic parish records, which varies widely from place to place. It would be unusual, however, for records of such a family to go back much earlier than the 1780's and for most people the early 1800's is more likely to be the limit".[1]

Starting

Before beginning, consider possible reasons your ancestor immigrated. These may be the key to solving the problem. These reasons are often divided into push factors which encouraged them to leave their homeland and pull factors that drew them to the United States. Here are some:

Push Factors

These include famine, overcrowding, unemployment, and political upheaval or unrest.

Pull Factors

These include land, relatives already migrated, religious freedom, and employment opportunities.

Use clues from the things you "know" about your ancestor and then consider the most likely push or pull factors helps you keep your ancestor in context. It will also help you extend the scope of your research to others around him or her as needed.

With some context regarding your ancestor's immigration in mind here are five strategies to follow.

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[1] Grenham, John. Tracing your Irish Ancestors. (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co.: 1999) FHL# 941.5 D27gj page xviii.

#1 - Straight Forward Strategy

Often the first thought when searching for an immigrant ancestor is… "If I find the passenger list for the boat my ancestor arrived on, that will tell me where my ancestor is from!" Unfortunately, most of these give no such details. In the U.S., precise places of origin don't appear on passenger lists until the 1890's with better information once immigration and naturalization law is federalized in 1906.

Passenger Lists

- **Pre-1820 (pre-NARA):** Filby's Passenger and Immigration Lists Index (PILI).
- **Customs Passenger Lists (1820-1891):** Customs Passenger Lists were filed by Ship Masters starting 1 January 1820. Though no official forms were used, required information included age, sex, occupation, country of origin, and intended country of settlement.
- **Immigration Passenger Lists (1891-1954):** The U.S. Office of Immigration collected passenger lists starting in 1891 and developed a standardized form by 1893. Required information included name, age, sex, occupation, nationality, marital status, last residence, final destination within the United States, if joining a relative who and where, original purchaser of the ticket, race (1903), place of birth (1906), and name and address of closest living relative in the country of origin (1907).
- **British Outbound Passenger Lists:** Not kept until 1890
- **Name Variations:** Search for initials, middle names, nicknames, and maiden names, longer variations or more original spellings, English equivalent of a foreign surname, and become familiar with language, traditions, and culture of ancestor's country-of-origin

Tips for Finding Passenger Lists

For excellent information and links, the FamilySearch Wiki page titled "US Immigration Passenger Arrival Records". https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/US_Immigration_Passenger_Arrival_Records

Naturalization Records

Naturalization is the process by which a native or citizen of one country becomes a citizen of a different country.

Main Documents

1. Declaration of Intention or 1st Papers: First legal document, renouncing former allegiances and declaring intention to be U.S. citizen.
2. Petition, 2nd Papers or Final Papers: Legal document filed in court, proving all requirements of naturalization have been completed.
3. Naturalization Certificate

General Naturalization Requirements

Laws changed throughout the years, but the General Rule was:

- 5 years residency in U.S. to naturalize
- About 2-3 years between Declaration and Petition
- Good moral character
- Performed in a court of record

How to Find Naturalization Records

Aliens could naturalize in *any* court, in *any* state. The alien usually chose the most convenient court. Jurisdiction was not an issue, meaning they could naturalize in any jurisdiction: City, County, State, Federal. Start with the FamilySearch Wiki:
https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United_States_Naturalization_and_Citizenship

#2 - Leave No Stone Unturned Strategy

This more likely is the strategy you will have to use to locate your ancestors' town of origin. As described below, calling it "Leave No Stone Unturned" really means not leaving any stone unturned. To do this:

1. Find EVERYTHING about your ancestor's life in the country they immigrated to. Locate birth, marriage, death dates and places and records. Even events that seem extraneous may contain important clues.
2. Do the same for everyone they were related to.
3. Do the same for everyone they are associated with in the new country and who you suspect they were associated with back in the old country.
4. Come forward in time. Documents of the immigrant's children may reveal the missing link.

Paying attention to any additional information such as occupations, friends and neighbors, religion etc. will also help. See Tracing Immigrant Origins research outline available at https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Tracing_Immigrant_Origins for guidance and suggestions.

Checklist – Have You Looked at These Records?

So you think you've uncovered all of the stones? There are many sources where you might find the place of origin when you are least expecting it. Even federal censuses occasionally give a county or town of origin. Using the list below, an asterisk "*" indicates first priority records.

Banking records
Biographies*
Business or Employment records
Cemetery or Sexton records
Census (all years they were alive!)*
Church records*
Compiled collections
County histories
Court records
Family records*
Family histories
Fraternal organizations or clubs
Funeral home records
Institutional records (for example, hospital)
Insurance records
Land records

Military records*
Naturalization*
Newspapers—local, trade, religious, etc.
Obituaries or Anniversary notices*
Orphanage records
Passenger lists (after 1890 these deserve an *)
Pension records
Periodicals
Poorhouse or Workhouse and Poor Law records
Probate records
School or University records
Social Security applications
Tombstone Inscriptions*
Vital records (check children of immigrant, too)*

Information on how to find and search many of these records types can be found at http://wiki.familysearch.org.

Ultimately, you may not have to search all of these, you really only need to search until you find the one that has the information you are looking for. It's also possible you search all of these and still don't find what you are looking for. If this doesn't work what should you do next?

#3 - Cluster Migration Strategy

This strategy may be critical for solving an Irish immigrant problem. Most people moved to a place where they already knew someone. Catholics practiced chain migration, and Presbyterian Scots-Irish often came over in groups. Trace family, friends, and associates that you believe your ancestor may have known in the old country. Reconstructing your ancestors' community in the U.S. or Canada may lead to the community they came from in Ireland. With these new people to look for, you can go back to the sources mentioned on the previous pages, and one of their records may give you a place of origin.

The key to making this strategy work is to study the history of the community in which they settle. For example, if your ancestor arrives in the United States and heads straight to Butte, Montana, why? What pulled them there? Study the history of the town, including major economic events. Use censuses to find out who else in that town is from the same country of

origin. The surnames may not be familiar to you but any one of them could be in-laws or cousins. You can also use their surnames in strategy #4, the "Surname Distribution Strategy."

#4 - Surname Distribution Strategy

You may be able to use surname distribution to pinpoint a location to begin searching, particularly if you have 1) an uncommon surname or 2) surnames of two or more people that you know (or suspect) knew each other in Ireland. For example, if you know the surnames of the immigrant's parents (you must know the mother's maiden name), the assumption is that they likely lived near each other to have met and married.

Try and locate comprehensive name lists like a census or tax record. Search your surnames in these databases and then plot out on a map where those with the name are living. Do the same for the other surnames you can connect to your ancestor. This can help you narrow down from the county to a town they were potentially from. (You can try this strategy even if you don't have a county, but without the county it often yields too many results to be helpful). However, you must then search other records to confirm if that town really is where they were from. It may give a place to start to gather evidence.

Irish Specific Resources:
Griffith's Valuation: One of the best tools to use for the Surname Distribution Strategy is www.johngrenham.com. This uses surnames from the Griffiths Valuation tax assessed from 1847-1864 to identify where the surname is found. It is estimated to contain 90% of heads of household.

A manual comparison can be done using one of the other websites with Griffith's Valuation such as www.askaboutireland.ie and http://www.failteromhat.com/griffiths.php.

Tithe Applotment: The Tithe Applotment was assessed from 1823-1837 and are estimated to list roughly 40% of heads of household. You may or may not find your ancestor in it but think of using this source in terms of locating the surname in Ireland. The National Archives of Ireland website is a good place to start: http://titheapplotmentbooks.nationalarchives.ie.

#5 - DNA

A newer strategy that may help you discover the place of origin of your ancestor is to do a DNA test. It may be possible to determine where an immigrant ancestor originated using genetic clues found in DNA. Once you've tested, it may be possible to share your DNA results with other DNA companies. Reviewing each company's DNA match lists for other living people who you share DNA with will be key, not your ethnicity estimate. Those still residing in Ireland may be extremely helpful. However, you may have cousins away from Ireland who have more family information than you. This strategy will work better and better as more and more people take the tests. It may be worth your time to find direct line male ancestors who can do a Y-DNA test which test the DNA that only comes down from the male line of the family. It may also require finding potential male cousins in Ireland to test as well. Yes, they cost, and the science may be complicated but many have had success this way. For beginners, a place to learn more is at https://www.familysearch.org/dna-testing. Another place to learn and to become involved in Ireland DNA projects is at the International Society of Genetic Genealogy website's Ireland page https://isogg.org/wiki/ISOGG_Ireland.