Finding Your Irish Immigrant Ancestors

Juliana Szucs – *Staff Genealogist and Social Community Manager*

10 Places to Start Your Search in the U.S.

While it may be tempting to cross the pond and begin your research in the Emerald Isle as soon as you identify your Irish immigrant ancestor, your journey really begins here in the States. Irish names tend to be common, so the more you know about your ancestor, the better equipped you'll be to start the search in Ireland. In this guide, you'll find ten places that will help you learn more about your Irish immigrant and his or her family, plus additional tips and resources for when your family history journey takes you to Ireland.

1. Start at Home

Search attics for mementos, including wedding announcements, postcards, funeral cards, photographs, and family correspondence. Any of these could give you names of relatives who remained back home, other family members and addresses that point you to a hometown in Ireland.

2. In the Census

Check birthplaces listed on census records. You may discover that the ancestor you thought was your family's first immigrant was actually the immigrant's child, cousin, or in-law. Begin with 20th-century records and search for everyone in the family. Look for year of immigration in census records for 1900-1930. (1920 will give you a bonus, as it asked for a naturalization year if they had become citizens.) Research the entire family and follow your ancestor's siblings, and even their descendants. You never know whose entry will hold that key bit of information. Plus, knowing as much as possible about the extended family group will make it easier to identify the family in the records as you go back in time.

Mary Kelly living with her nephew Francis Kane, and niece, Catherine Sullivan, in District 297, Marlborough Ward 2, Middlesex, Massachusetts, image 16, on Ancestry. The 1920 census includes both her year of immigration and the year she naturalized, possibly through the naturalization of her husband, from whom she could have derived citizenship in 1867.

3. With Friends and Relatives.

Ever notice how many people on a single page of a census seem to have been born in the same country? It could be the result of chain migration. Often a single immigrant would arrive in America, land a job, and send word of opportunity back home. Soon more family and friends would immigrate and send for their families and friends. For researchers, these ethnic enclaves can provide all manner of clues: maiden names, hometowns, extended family lines. Do a little digging and also check online trees to see who's researching the neighbors. They may have some details you're looking for, too.

4. On Board a Ship or Crossing a Border

Irish immigration to America peaked around the time of the Great Famine; unfortunately passenger lists from around that time were a bit stingy with details. Typically you'll only get the name, age, occupation, and country of origin for the immigrant. But those mid-19th-century lists also hold the names of other passengers, who may have been your ancestor's friends or relatives. Families were often listed together in a group, even though the relationships weren't typically stated, so family structure can help. Be aware, though, that sometimes one or both parents went ahead to secure jobs and a place to live before sending for the rest of the family, so you may find the family's arrival split in groups.

The Welsh family arriving on the ship New York *from Liverpool, 2 September 1850. It was common for the Irish to immigrate through the busier port of Liverpool where there were more ships to America.*

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Scan the entire manifest looking for other related surnames. (Think sponsors at baptisms, witnesses to marriages or naturalizations, etc.) You may find extended family, friends, or neighbors from the old country traveling with your ancestor.

When you find these members of your ancestor's FAN club (friends, associates, neighbors), research them as well and see where they went and if their paths crossed your ancestor's again.

If you can't find a passenger list for your ancestor, consider that at times it was cheaper and simpler to travel to the U.S. via Canada. Your Irish ancestor may have crossed the border immediately or even a generation or two later. At times, it was also cheaper to travel to America by way of Canada, although passenger arrivals for Canada were not kept until 1869. Border crossings into the U.S. began being kept in 1895.

5. Church Records

Don't overlook your ancestor's religious community. Baptisms, weddings, funerals, and more took place in churches. Use census records and city directories to find your ancestor's address, then search for surviving churches near the family home. Contact the church to inquire about records created when your ancestor lived in the neighborhood. Also call the local library, which may know of other resources you haven't yet considered. For more on researching in religious records, see our guide to *Using Religious Records*.

6. Court Records

Court records aren't just for the criminally inclined (although those records are full of detail you won't find elsewhere). In the Probates, Land, Tax & Criminal collection at Ancestry, you'll also discover probate records, real estate transactions, small business dealings, records from the Emigrant Savings Bank in New York City, and more. And just because your ancestor was poor, don't think you won't find them in some of these rich collections.
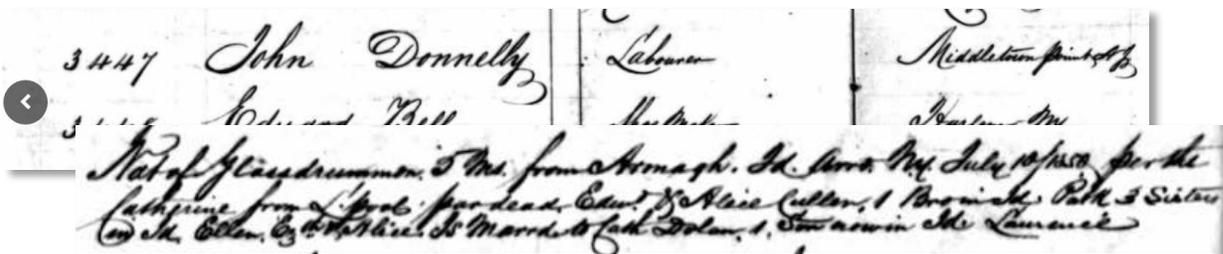
Emigrant Savings Bank record for John Donnelly, a laborer living in Middletown Point, N.J. His record tells us he was a "Nat[ive] of Glassdrummon, 5 ms from Armagh, Id. Arrd. NY July 10/1850 per the Catherine from L'pool. Par. dead Edwd & Alice Cullen. 1 Bro in Id. Patk, 3 sisters in Id Ellen, Ezth, & Alice. Is married to Cath Dolan. 1 son now in Id. Laurence."

Search for all members of the family in probate records and read the records carefully. Check to see if the names of witnesses, administrators and executors sound familiar. They may be family and represent new avenues of research for discovering your Irish roots.

7. Military Records

Draft registration cards from World War I and World War II can be brimming with family details, including hometown, occupation, and name of nearest kin. For earlier arrivals to the U.S., Civil War-era records may be even more revealing.

Pension records can be particularly revealing, often including affidavits from family members and other helpful clues to your ancestor's origins. George Callahan's application for a Confederate pension tells us he was born "Ireland, City of Cork." (Alabama, Texas and Virginia, Confederate Pensions, 1884-1958)

Many Civil War soldiers who were injured in the war may have spent time in one of the National Homes for Disabled Soldiers.

Thomas Brown's World War I Draft Registration

Moses Beckett in the registers of the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers following his service in the Spanish-American War, where he contracted malaria.

8. Read Between the Lines of Family Stories

Family stories may not always be entirely accurate, but they're often full of names, places, and relationships that can help you figure out when your ancestor was where. Use them to build a timeline that you populate with details from the records you find. And enjoy the tales, which give you a better idea of the characters in your family tree. Click here to learn more about creating timelines.

9. Making Headlines

A graduation, engagement or even a visitor from out of town–any of these might have been big news at the time. Look in local newspapers for daily comings and goings as well as bigger events. And if your family is full of city dwellers, ask the local library if there were smaller, neighborhood or Irish-specific publications.

Check multiple newspapers for obituaries. Some were better than others when it came to listing parishes and/or counties of origin in Ireland. This clipping from the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, which is free on Newspapers.com, includes the townland and county in Ireland that Mary Anne Longworth was from. There are newspapers online at Ancestry as well.

LONGWORTH.—On Wednesday, October 2, MARY ANNE, daughter of the late Samuel Longworth, of Anneville, county Westmeath, Ireland.
The relatives and friends of the family are invited to attend the funeral, from her late residence, 101 Summit street, Brooklyn, at half-past one o'clock this (Saturday) afternoon.
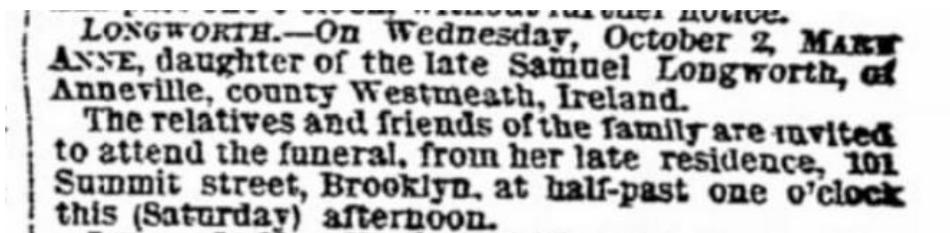
10. Cemetery Records

A simple tombstone may hold the birthplace or middle name you've been trying to locate for years. The one next to it could offer an elusive maiden name. Families often stayed together, even in death, so a trip to the cemetery could introduce you to distant family lines you may not have heard of and other details your ancestor surely wanted you to know. If you can't make it to the cemetery, you may find someone else has visited and created a memorial for your ancestor on FindaGrave.com. If your ancestor's memorial doesn't have a photograph, you can post a request for one. There are thousands of volunteers who post memorials and fill photo requests at local cemeteries.

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Tips for Searching in Irish Records

Following your Irish ancestors back to the records they created in Ireland seems like a natural next step, but if you're not armed with just the right information, the search can be slow-going. Use the following tips to help make your journey through Irish records as simple as possible.

Spelling Doesn't Count

Irish surnames can have many variants. You may find letters that were used interchangeably (Huggins, Higgins, Higgans, etc.), and prefixes were added and removed (Reilly, O'Reilly, McLoughlin, McLaughlin, Loughlin, Laughlin, Loghlin, etc.). In addition, nicknames and variants for first names were common as well. A good source of information on Irish names is *Varieties and Synonymes of Surnames and Christian Names in Ireland*, by Sir Robert E. Matheson (1901). It has been digitized and is available online at Internet Archive.

Here again, knowing the family structure and extended family will be very helpful in identifying your family in the records. Noting family naming patterns can be helpful as well.

When you're looking at parish records, keep in mind that many of the registers were kept in Latin, so knowing the Latin version of your ancestor's name will also be useful.
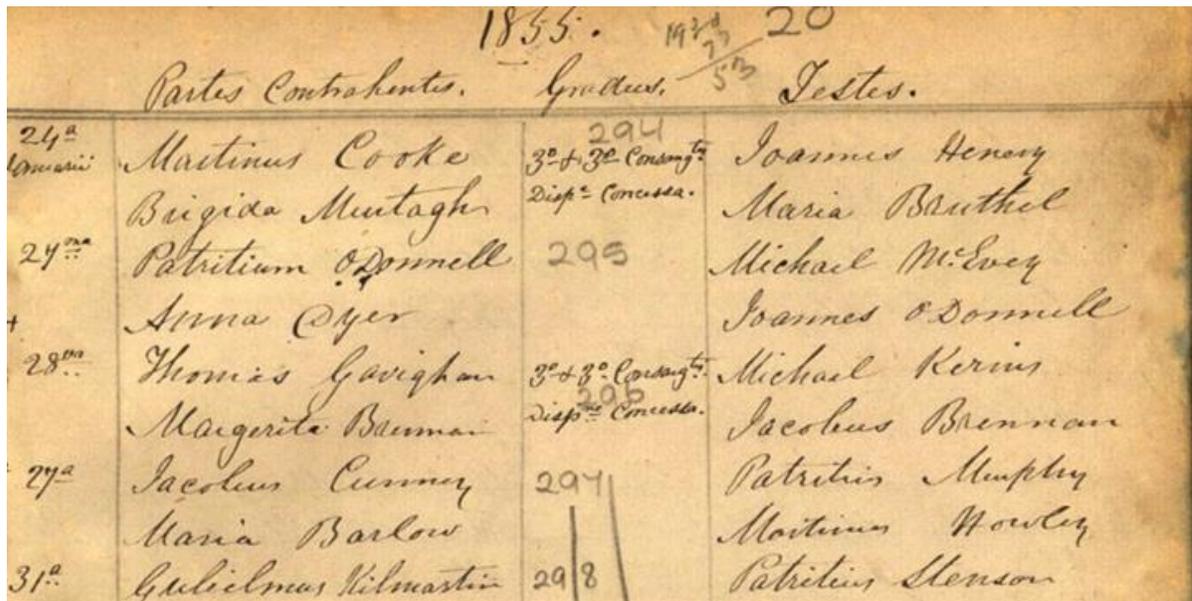
Marriage Register, Tourlestrane (Kilmactigue), Co. Sligo, Ireland, 1855 from Ireland, Select Catholic Marriage Registers, 1775-1912 on Ancestry

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Cast a Wide Net at First

Start your search with the county and narrow to parish or townland if necessary. Just as with Irish surnames, you may find your ancestor's parish or townland had variant spellings. When you've found the name of the parish, you'll want to determine whether it's a civil parish or an ecclesiastical parish. While Church of Ireland parishes tend to run along similar boundaries as civil parishes, Catholic parishes did not and tended to cover more area. Spending some time getting familiar with Irish land divisions and the area where your family lived will pay great dividends when it comes to searching for them in the records. The Fianna Guide to Irish Genealogy website has a good description of Irish land divisions and a list of reference books that can help you become more familiar with the lay of the land in Ireland.

Resources on Ancestry include:

- Samuel Lewis' *A Topographical Dictionary of Ireland*
- Ireland, Ordnance Survey Maps, 1824-1846
- Cassell's Gazetteer of Great Britain and Ireland

Browse Around

Once you know where your ancestor hailed from, look at landowners and tenants nearby. You may discover other names that sound familiar to you—possibly friends and relatives who also maintained ties with your family after immigrating to the U.S. Griffith's Valuation of Ireland, 1847-1864 is a good resource for mid-19th -century research. Use these records in conjunction with the Ordnance Survey maps to plot where families were in relation to one another and look for those familiar surnames in places near your ancestor.

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Searching in Baptismal Records

When you're searching online baptism records in the collections on Ancestry, try a search leaving the child's name blank and including only the names of both parents. In this way, you may be able to identify additional children born to the couple.

Irish Content Highlights on Ancestry

Civil and Parish Registrations

- Ireland, Catholic Parish Registers, 1740-1900
- Ireland, Select Catholic Birth and Baptism Registers, 1763-1912
- Ireland, Selections of Catholic Parish Baptisms, 1742-1881
- Ireland, Select Catholic Marriage Registers, 1775-1912
- Ireland, Civil Registration Births Index, 1864-1958
- Ireland, Civil Registration Deaths Index, 1864-1958
- Ireland, Civil Registration Marriages Index, 1845-1958
- Ireland, Select Births and Baptisms, 1620-1911
- Ireland, Select Marriages, 1619-1898

Other Birth, Marriage, and Death Sources

- Belfast, Northern Ireland, The Belfast Newsletter (Birth, Marriage and Death Notices), 1738-1925
- UK and Ireland, Find A Grave Index, 1300s-Current

Photos

- Ireland, Lawrence Collection of photographs, 1870-1910
- United Kingdom & Ireland Historical Postcards – FREE

Maritime and Immigration

- U.S. Passenger Lists (all ports)
- Canadian Passenger Lists, 1865-1935
- Canada, Ocean Arrivals (Form 30A), 1919-1924
- U.S., Border Crossings from Canada to U.S., 1895-1956
- U.S. Passport Applications, 1795-1925
- U.S. Citizenship and Naturalization Records
- UK and Ireland, Masters and Mates Certificates, 1850-1927

Other Records

- Ireland, Grand Lodge of Freemasons of Ireland Membership Registers, 1733-1923
- Ireland, Lord Viscount Morpeth's Testimonial Roll, 1841 – FREE
- Ireland, Casualties of World War I, 1914-1922
- Ireland, Indexes to Wills, 1384-1858
- Ireland, Famine Relief Commission Papers, 1844-1847 – FREE