

Descendants of William O'Brien and Mary Sexton of Watergrasshill, Ireland

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Chapter 1

The O'Briens in Ireland

The family of William O'Brien and Mary Sexton came to America from the town of Watergrasshill in County Cork, Ireland.^[1;2;3] The village of Watergrasshill is situated mostly within the civil parish of Ardnageehy and partly within Kilquane, in the larger barony of Barrymore, on the main road between Cork and Dublin.^[4] The name Watergrasshill was originally "Watercress Hill," and in Irish is *Cnocán-na-biolraighe* (Knockaun-na-billery).^[5]

Watergrasshill was a small town of 801 inhabitants in 1841, when William and his family lived there prior to their emigration to the U.S. By 1871 the population had dropped to 143^[6]. Some of this population loss was likely due to the famine, but the arrival of the railroad may also have played a role. The Great Southern and Western Railway reached the City of Cork in 1849.^[17] Two people performing land valuations included their impressions of Watergrasshill and its transformation. D. Quinn wrote in Feb 1849:

This Town is Poor, but a great deal is done in the way of "Carmen's Stages," it being on the Dublin line to Cork and half way (11 miles) from the latter City to Fermoy – a good deal of benefit is done the Town by these persons —^[16]

J. Montgomery wrote in Dec 1852 and sometime prior:

2 coaches & Bianconis¹ can pass through the village daily & change Horses here – one or two individuals are thus making pretty well by this – by the rent for stabling &c – & when the railway to Cork is finished, it will lose a good part of this advantage —

It has lost a great deal of it now – (1852) but it is the best of the little villages in this neighborhood although poor enough – Poor Rates are low – only 1/7th for 1832 & none at all in 1837 – Those made a moderate valⁿ. considering these circumstances.^[16]

¹Charles Bianconi was an Italian entrepreneur who operated passenger coaches between cities throughout Ireland.^[17]

There are few Irish records available covering the early 19th century. Civil registration of births, marriages, and deaths didn't fully occur in Ireland until 1864.^[8] Census records prior to 1901 were mostly lost in a 1922 fire at the Public Records Office.^[9] However, there are O'Briens in Watergrasshill who appear in name directories and Griffith's Valuation records from the time period when William's family lived in the area. It's possible that these sources may reveal some small details about the family's life in Ireland.

F. Jackson's *County and City of Cork Post Office General Directory, 1842–43* includes a "William O'Brien, gent." with a seat at "Transtown mills" and post town at "Watergrass hill."^[10] Land valuation records for Trantstown in 1847 and 1850 show a John O'Brien leasing a paper mill, house, offices (outbuildings), and land from Lady Augusta Henrietta Fitzgerald.^[11;12] A revised valuation in July 1850 indicates that John O'Brien no longer resided there, and that the mill became idle in 1847.^[13] Residents in Trantstown reported that a Mr. O'Brien owned the mill and employed many people there, but he sold his house when the mill closed down.^[14] The timing of John O'Brien's departure from the mill property around 1850 coincides with the arrival of William O'Brien's family in Boston.

There is no William O'Brien who appears in the valuation records as occupying land in Trantstown. It's possible that John O'Brien was William's son, and that he took over the running of the mill from his father. There is a "W^m. Brien" listed in the town of Watergrasshill who was leasing a house with a yard and garden. The Feb 1849 revision has William's name crossed out and the word "Vact." written, indicating that the house was vacant and William had moved away.^[15] There are no other William O'Briens or similar name variants listed in Watergrasshill, although other [O']Briens in town include Denis, Owen, Patrick, and Margaret.[add citation]

Watergrasshill was a poor town in the 1840s that was largely sustained by horse travel between Dublin and Cork. With the loss of that business to the railway, the effects of the famine, and the closure of the paper mill in nearby Trantstown, it made sense for the O'Brien family to look for new opportunities in America.

[include a description of Griffith's Valuation, House Books, etc.]

[add context for Potato Famine driving emigration]

[include maps locating Watergrasshill within Ireland and showing local area]

Chapter 2

Name and Lineage

O'Brien is the Anglicized spelling of the surname *Ua Briain* in Classical Irish, and *Ó Briain* in Modern Irish. The *Ua* or *Ó* part of the name means a "grandson" or generally any descendant of the named person. In this case, O'Brien derives from the first name of Brian Boru (born c. 941 and died 23 Apr 1014), High King of Ireland. Boru's descendants formed one of the major dynasties in Ireland.^[18]

Brian Boru was born a member of the Dál gCais clan (Dalcassians). This clan controlled much of what is now County Clare in Ireland.^[19] Due to modern genetic testing, it is possible to determine whether a living person is a descendant of Brian Boru, a member of his clan, or an unrelated O'Brien who came from a family that adopted the surname. This is facilitated by the Y-DNA testing of Brian Boru's direct descendant, Sir Conor O'Brien, 18th Baron Ichiquin.^[20]

Unlike other chromosomes, the Y chromosome is passed from father to son without significant recombination. This means that a living man's Y-DNA is nearly identical to that of his direct male line ancestor from many generations in the past. While rare, mutations on the Y chromosome do occur. These variations are called single nucleotide polymorphisms, or SNPs. It is possible to map groups of people onto branches of a tree based on the SNPs they have in common. These branches are known as haplogroups, and they're named after the Y-DNA mutation that defines them.^[21]

The Y-DNA testing of Sir Conor O'Brien has revealed that Brian Boru's Dalcassian clan and its descendants are located within the R-L226 haplogroup. Furthermore, Brian Boru's defining mutation places him and his descendants in the sub-group of R-L226 known as FGC5659. There is another group of non-Dalcassian O'Briens known as the "Northwest Irish/Lowland Scots" O'Briens, who are in haplogroup R-M222.^[20]

The author performed a Y-DNA "Big Y" (700 SNP) test through the website *Family Tree DNA* (FTDNA). Being a direct male descendant of William O'Brien from Watergrasshill, County Cork, his results should indicate the

clan and/or geographic origins of William's ancestors. In fact, William's haplogroup reveals that there is no relation to either the Dalcassian or Northwest Irish O'Briens, and does not even have ancient Irish origins. The William O'Brien branch is located within haplogroup R-Y11179. This is the branch containing the Anglo-Norman family with the surname "Barry" that occupied large parts of County Cork subsequent to the English invasion of Ireland in the 1100s.^[25;26]

Several websites provide age estimates to determine when William O'Brien's line may have split off from the Barry family. The closest match to the author's Y-DNA kit on FTDNA is a man with a Barry surname. FTDNA's "TiP Report" estimates that the Barry match and the author have a common ancestor within the past 8 generations at 60.41% likelihood, within 12 generations at 90.11% likelihood, and within 18 generations at 98.28% likelihood.^[27] On the website *YFull*, which allows uploading Y-DNA kits for additional analysis, the author's closest match is the same Barry individual from the previous comparison. *YFull* predicts that the two matches have a most recent common ancestor at a median of 425 years ago with 95% certainty, placing the common ancestor around the year 1600.^[28]

The Anglo-Norman Barry family may have originated as "De Barry," members of which accompanied William the Conqueror in his invasion of England and Wales in 1066.^[22] In 1206, King John of England granted William de Barri a portion of land in Ireland that included what is now the Barony of Barrymore, where Watergrasshill is located.^[23] A member of the Barry family in Ireland was appointed as the first Earl of Barrymore in 1627/28.^[24]

Somewhere in William O'Brien's ancestry, the O'Brien name was assigned to (or adopted by) a man of Barry descent. This is known as a non-paternity event (NPE). It is likely impossible to determine when or how this occurred, as useful records in Ireland rarely go back far enough past the early 1800s. However, the Barry family had a major presence in the area of County Cork where William came from. More information may arise as additional men submit Y-DNA tests and the timeline for the O'Brien/Barry split can be further narrowed. It is also important to note that the Y-DNA results only pertain to the direct male line. William's descendants still have Irish roots, owing to the Irish spouses of his children. William's own mother is unknown, but it's quite likely she had ancestral Irish origins.

[include haplogroup tree showing O'Brien branches vs Barry branches]
 [more background on Barry history in County Cork]

Chapter 3

First Generation

3.1 William O'Brien

1. **WILLIAM¹ O'BRIEN** was born probably in County Cork, Ireland, about 1791.^[29] He died in Boston, Suffolk County, Massachusetts, 28 Dec. 1856,^[31] and was buried at North Cambridge Catholic Cemetery, Cambridge, Middlesex County, Massachusetts.^[32] He married, likely in County Cork, **MARY SEXTON**.^[34;35;38;39] No further information about Mary is known.

William may be the William O'Brien listed in the 1842 Cork County Directory as owning Trantstown Mills, a paper mill close to the village of Watergrasshill.^[10]

In 1855, William was living in Boston with his son Edward, his daughter Abigail, and three of his grandchildren.^[29] William does not appear in the 1850 census. Since Edward immigrated to Boston in 1851^[1], it's likely that William arrived with him at that time. William's wife Mary does not appear in any census records from this time. She may have died in Ireland before 1851, or not accompanied her husband to America for reasons unknown.

William only lived in Boston for five years before dying of pleurisy. He was living at 207 North Street in Boston's North End neighborhood at the time.^[31]

Children of William¹ and Mary Sexton, all likely born in Watergrasshill:

- i. ANN² (O'BRIEN) DAILEY, b. abt. 1813^[40]; d. 23 Sep. 1898; m. MICHAEL DAILEY.^[38] Unknown if she had any children. She does not appear until the 1880 census, when she was living with her brother Edward. She may have arrived in the U.S. sometime between 1870–1880. No record of husband Michael Dailey being in the U.S.
- 2 ii. ABIGAIL (O'BRIEN) DOOLEY, b. abt. 1815; d. 4 Jan. 1897.
- 3 iii. JOHN O'BRIEN, b. abt. 1820; d. 22 Apr. 1863.
- 4 iv. EDWARD O'BRIEN, b. 10 Oct. 1822; d. 25 Aug. 1881.
- 5 v. MARY (O'BRIEN) WARD, b. abt. 1828; d. 23 Mar. 1908.

6 vi. MICHAEL O'BRIEN, b. 15 Dec. 1832; d. 25 Jun. 1891.

Chapter 4

Second Generation

4.1 Abigail (O'Brien) Dooley

2. **ABIGAIL² (O'BRIEN) DOOLEY** was born probably in Watergrasshill, County Cork, Ireland, about 1815.^[30] She died in Boston, Suffolk County, Massachusetts, on 4 Jan. 1897^[35] and is buried in Holy Cross Cemetery, Malden, Middlesex County, Massachusetts.^[36] She married, likely in County Cork, **MICHAEL DOOLEY**.^[35] He was born probably in County Cork.^[37] Michael died sometime before 1 May 1865,^[41] possibly on 1 Jan. 1857,^[42] and is buried in North Cambridge Catholic Cemetery, Cambridge, Middlesex County, Massachusetts.^[33]

Children of Abigail² and Michael Dooley, both likely born in Watergrasshill:

- 7 i. **HANNAH³ (DOOLEY) (COONEY) CUSICK**, b. abt. 1839; d. 1911.
- 8 ii. **MARGARET E.³ (DOOLEY) (SIMONDS) FERNALD**, b. 27 Dec. 1840, d. 1 Mar. 1918.

4.2 John O'Brien

Chapter 5

List of Persons

1. William¹ O'Brien
 2. Abigail² (O'Brien) Dooley
 3. John² O'Brien
 4. Edward² O'Brien
 5. Mary² (O'Brien) Ward
 6. Michael² O'Brien
 7. Hannah³ (Dooley) (Cooney) Cusick
 8. Margaret E.³ (Dooley) (Simonds) Fernald
- Ann² (O'Brien) Dailey

Notes

- [1] Edward O Brien primary declaration of intention (1854), no. 487, District of Massachusetts; Record Group 21: Records of the District Courts of the United States; National Archives at Boston, Waltham, Massachusetts; viewed at "Massachusetts, State and Federal Naturalization Records, 1798–1950," database with images, *Ancestry.com* (<https://www.ancestry.com/> : viewed on 23 Mar 2020), image 858.
- [2] Edward O Brien petition for naturalization (1868), Massachusetts Superior Court, Suffolk County; Oct term 1868 (Letters L–Z), Film # 007795438, viewed at "Primary and final declarations of intention and naturalizations, 1864–1888 and card index 1856–1884," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CS9H-83DG-G>) : viewed on 23 Mar 2020), image 1859.
- [3] Watergrasshill & Glenville Parish (Watergrasshill, Ireland), "Historical Baptisms from 1836–1901," database, "Margaret Dooly" baptism, 27 Dec 1840; *Watergrasshill & Glenville Parish Archives*. <http://www.wghparish.ie/index.php/archives/baptisms-1836-1901/easytablerecord/1-baptisms/7008> : viewed on 17 Apr 2019.
- [4] Samuel Lewis, *A Topographical History of Ireland*, vol. 2 (London: S. Lewis & Co. 1837), 695.
- [5] Patrick Weston Joyce, *Irish Local Names Explained* (Dublin: The Educational Co. of Ireland, Limited, 1922), 93.
- [6] *Census of Ireland, 1871*, Part 1, Vol. 2 (Dublin: Alexander Thom, 1873), 140; viewed at *Histpop - The Online Historical Population Reports Website* (<http://www.histpop.org/>) : viewed on 23 Mar 2020.
- [7] Central Statistics Office (Cork, Ireland) "Census 2011 – Population Classified by Area," 36; accessed at *Central Statistics Office*

- (https://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/census/documents/census2011vol1andprofile1/Table_5.pdf): viewed on 23 Mar 2020.
- [8] John Grenham, *Tracing your Irish Ancestors* (Dublin: Gill Books, 2019), 1.
- [9] *Ibid.*, 18.
- [10] F. Jackson, *The County and City of Cork Post Office General Directory, 1842–43* (Cork: F. Jackson), 125; viewed at *Cork City Libraries* (<http://www.corkpastandpresent.ie/places/streetandtradedirectories/1842-3jacksonscountycityofcorkpogeneralldirectory/>): viewed on 23 Mar 2020.
- [11] “Perambulation Book, County of Cork, Barony of Barrymore, Parishes of St. Michaels, Templeusque, and Killaspugmullane,” Parish of Killaspugmullane, Townland of Trantstown, p. 22 (hand-written), No. 22a, John O’Brien, dated 4 Aug 1847; viewed at “Ireland, Valuation Office Books, 1831–1856,” database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3QS7-L94N-1CR6>): viewed 26 Mar 2020), film #007246728, image 109.
- [12] “Perambulation Book, County of Cork, Barony of Barrymore, Parish of Killaspugmullane,” Townland of Trantstown, No. 7a, John O’Brien, dated 26 Jul 1850; viewed at “Ireland, Valuation Office Books, 1831–1856,” database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3QS7-L94N-1CR6>): viewed 26 Mar 2020), film #007246728, image 118.
- [13] “1st House Book, County of Cork, Barony of Barrymore, P. of Killaspugmullane (Revised),” Townland of Trantstown, p. 5 (hand-written), No. 7a, John O’Brien, original date Aug 1847, revised date 27 Jul 1850; viewed at “Ireland, Valuation Office Books, 1831–1856,” database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3QS7-894J-SZCB>): viewed 26 Mar 2020), film #007246783, image 420.
- [14] Bina Harte, “The Old Paper Mill of Trantstown,” recounted to the author by Jeremiah Harte, *The National Folklore Collection, UCD, The Schools’ Collection, Volume 0382*, p. 31; viewed at *dúchas.ie* (<https://www.duchas.ie>), The Schools’ Collection > Co. Cork > Cnoc na Biolarraighe, image 31.
- [15] “House Book, Town of Watergrasshill, County of Cork, Barony of Barrymore, Feby 1849,” *Houses in Town of Watergrasshill, Parish of*

- Ardnageehy, Townland of Tinageragh, No. 44 (original), Lot 29 (revised), Wm Brien; viewed at "Ireland, Valuation Office Books, 1831–1856," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q57-994N-YC62> : viewed 26 Mar 2020), film #007246869, image 442.
- [16] "House Book, Town of Watergrasshill, County of Cork, Barony of Barrymore, Feby 1849," title page; viewed at "Ireland, Valuation Office Books, 1831–1856," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q57-994N-YC62> : viewed 27 Mar 2020), film #007246869, image 433.
- [17] Brian Igoe, "Charles Bianconi and The Transport Revolution, 1800 – 1875," blog post, published 14 Dec 2012; *The Irish Story* (<https://www.theirishstory.com/2012/12/14/charles-bianconi-and-the-transport-revolution-1800-1875/> : viewed 27 Mar 2020).
- [18] O'Brien Clan Foundation, "Brian Boru: Historical View," webpage, *O'Brien Clan Foundation* (<https://www.obrienclan.org/historical-view.html> : viewed on 29 Mar 2020).
- [19] O'Brien Clan Foundation, "Brian Boru: Early History," webpage, *O'Brien Clan Foundation* (<https://www.obrienclan.org/early-history.html> : viewed on 29 Mar 2020).
- [20] Dennis O'Brien, "The DNA of Clan O'Brien (Dennis O'Brien)", recorded presentation and slides, Genetic Genealogy Ireland 2016 conference, posted on *YouTube* 29 Oct 2016 (<https://youtu.be/wp-1bfxaXYs> : viewed on 29 Mar 2020).
- [21] Blaine T. Bettinger and Debbie Parker Wayne, *Genetic Genealogy in Practice* (Arlington: National Genealogical Society, 2016), 23-25.
- [22] E. Barry, *Barrymore : records of the Barrys of County Cork from the earliest to the present time, with pedigrees* (Cork: Guy and Co. Ltd., 1902), 1.
- [23] *Ibid.*, 17.
- [24] *The Parliamentary Gazetteer of Ireland*, Vol. 1 (Dublin, London, and Edinburgh: A. Fullarton and Co., 1846) 227.
- [25] James Barry, email to members of the *Family Tree DNA* "Barry Project" on 17 Dec 2019.

- [26] "Big Y – Results," dynamic database of matches, kit #904650 *Family Tree DNA* (<https://www.familytreedna.com/my/big-y#/matches> : viewed 29 Mar 2020). Of the 29 total matches, 25 of them have surnames Barry, Berry, or Bearry. There are no O'Brien surnames or spelling variants in the match list.
- [27] "Y-DNA TiP Report," comparison of kit #904650 with kit #441938 at 111 markers, dynamic database of matches, *Family Tree DNA* (<https://www.familytreedna.com/my/y-dna-matches> : viewed 29 Mar 2020).
- [28] "SNP matches," dynamic database of matches, comparison of YFull member YF63552 with member YF65192, *YFull* (<https://www.yfull.com/snp/matches/> : viewed 29 Mar 2020).
- [29] 1855 Massachusetts state census, Suffolk County, population schedule, Boston, ward 1, p. 60 (left side), dwelling [blank], family 549, for William O'Brien in Edward O'Brien household; accessed at "Massachusetts, State Census, 1855," database with images, *Ancestry.com* (<https://www.ancestry.com/> : viewed on 29 Mar 2020), Suffolk > Boston Ward 01 > image 33.
- [30] 1855 Massachusetts state census, Suffolk County, population schedule, Boston, ward 1, p. 60 (left side), dwelling [blank], family 549, for Abby Dooley in Edward O'Brien household; accessed at "Massachusetts, State Census, 1855," database with images, *Ancestry.com* (<https://www.ancestry.com/> : viewed on 29 Mar 2020), Suffolk > Boston Ward 01 > image 33.
- [31] Massachusetts Town and Vital Records, Death Records, 1856, no. 4206, William O'Brien; accessed at "Massachusetts, Town and Vital Records, 1620-1988," database with images, *Ancestry.com* (<https://www.ancestry.com/> : viewed on 29 Mar 2020), Boston > Deaths, 1856 > image 96.
- [32] Diana Berberena, Catholic Cemetery Association of the Archdiocese of Boston, letter to Gavin E. O'Brien, dated 27 May 2019. This letter includes burial information for two individuals. William O'Brien, buried 12/30/[1856], age 76 years into O'Brien Family Grave G W124 Range N17 west, owner Edward O'Brien. Mary Ann O'Brien, buried 11/1852, age 1 month, 12 days old.
- [33] Diana Berberena, Catholic Cemetery Association of the Archdiocese of Boston, letter to Gavin E. O'Brien, received 11 Jul. 2019. Michael Dooley: North Cambridge Catholic Cemetery, Range 14 East, Grave 96

Ellen O'Brien: North Cambridge Catholic Cemetery, Range 17 West,
Grave 124 Michael O'Brien: Holy Cross Cemetery, 28 North Maple,
Grave 27 West

- [34] Massachusetts Vital Records, Death Records, 1891, no. 4862, Michael O'Brien; accessed at "Massachusetts, Death Records, 1841-1915," database with images, *Ancestry.com* (<https://www.ancestry.com/> : viewed on 29 Mar 2020), _Pre 1903 > 1891 > image 1303.
- [35] Massachusetts Vital Records, Death Records, 1897, no. 121, Abigail Dooley; accessed at "Massachusetts, Death Records, 1841-1915," database with images, *Ancestry.com* (<https://www.ancestry.com/> : viewed on 29 Mar 2020), _Pre 1903 > 1897 > image 1431.
- [36] Carol Gordon, Catholic Cemetery Association of the Archdiocese of Boston, emails to Gavin E. O'Brien in Apr. 2019. Holy Cross Cemetery plot locations as follows. Ann (O'Brien) Dailey: North Monument, Path 17, Grave 34 East Abigail (O'Brien) Dooley: North Monument, Path 12, Grave 38 East Mary (O'Brien) Ward: North Monument, Path 12, Grave 38 East
- [37] Abigail (O'Brien) Dooley and Michael Dooley had two children in County Cork, Ireland, prior to their immigration to the United States.
- [38] Massachusetts Vital Records, Death Records, 1898, no. 7910, Ann Dailey; accessed at "Massachusetts, Death Records, 1841-1915," database with images, *Ancestry.com* (<https://www.ancestry.com/> : viewed on 29 Mar 2020), _Pre 1903 > 1898 > image 1832.
- [39] Massachusetts Vital Records, Death Records, 1908, p. 576, no. 2762, Mary Ward; accessed at "Massachusetts, Death Records, 1841-1915," database with images, *Ancestry.com* (<https://www.ancestry.com/> : viewed on 29 Mar 2020), 1908 > Boston > image 2737.
- [40] 1880 U.S. census, Suffolk County, Massachusetts, population schedule, Enumeration District (ED) 576, East Boston, p. 24, Havre Street, house no. 307, dwelling no. 153, family no. 267, Ann Dailey in household of Edward O'Brian; accessed at "1880 United States Federal Census," database with images, *Ancestry.com* (<https://www.ancestry.com/> : viewed on 30 Mar 2020), Massachusetts > Suffolk > Boston > 576 > image 24.
- [41] 1865 Massachusetts state census, Suffolk County, population schedule, city of Boston, ward 1, dwelling 1570, family 3692, for Abby Duley in William Simonds household; accessed at "Massachusetts,

State Census, 1865," database with images, *Ancestry.com* (<https://www.ancestry.com/> : viewed on 29 Mar 2020), Suffolk > Boston Ward 01 > image 203. Abigail's marital status is listed as "widowed."

- [42] Massachusetts Vital Records, Death Records, 1857, no. 7, Michael Dooley; accessed at "Massachusetts, Town Clerk, Vital and Town Records, 1626-2001," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q57-L975-M988> : viewed on 30 Mar 2020), Suffolk > Boston > Deaths 1856-1857 > image 351. He is listed as "married" but wife's name is not included. Age 36. Address is 12 Pearl Pl.