

Researching Ancestors in Ireland from 1850 to 1901

By Marie E. Daly

Although the largest number of Irish immigrants came to North America at the time of the Great Famine from 1846 through 1851, an economic downturn in Ireland in the 1880s drove a smaller but significant number of Irish immigrants to America. Researching these emigrants can be especially challenging due to the lack of 1890 American census records and pre-1901 Irish census records. Available at the Family History Library, the revised valuation lists can provide useful information about heads-of-households for the period 1850 to 1901.

The case of Cornelius Riley is an example of how the revised valuations can be useful. Cornelius Riley immigrated as a child with his family to America in 1883, and settled in the Stonington, Connecticut and Westerly, Rhode Island area. His death record and obituary stated that he had been born in 1872 in Valencia, Ireland. He worked in slate quarries, as did his father and brother, both named Michael Riley. Born in 1835, Cornelius' father Michael Riley had married Hannah Sullivan probably in the late 1850s, and was therefore too young to be listed in Griffith's Primary Valuation, a mid-nineteenth century census substitute of land occupiers. But the Rhode Island death record of Michael Riley Sr. indicated that his father was also named Michael Riley. Unfortunately, a search of Griffith's Primary Valuation did not turn up any Rileys in Valencia, which is an island and a parish off the coast of the Iveragh peninsula in County Kerry. In my research, I noted that the name Riley in County Kerry is a corruption of the surname Rahilly, a clan native to the area around Killarney.¹ Knowing the variant spellings of Irish surnames is important in identifying our ancestors in Irish records.

I also found in the 1900 census that Michael Riley's son (and Cornelius Riley's brother) lived in a multi-family dwelling in Stonington, CT, and that his neighbors were named Shea and Sullivan, surnames common to the Iveragh peninsula and Valencia. A review of common Kerry surnames in the tombstone inscriptions of Saint Michaels Cemetery (Old), Pawcatuck, Stonington, revealed a number of immigrants from Valencia.² So I had found evidence of a cluster of Valencia immigrants in the Stonington-Westerly area.

The 1900 census indicated that Michael Riley Jr. had immigrated to the United States in 1883.³ Neither Michael Riley Sr. nor any of his sons (Michael Riley Sr. also had a son, John Riley, who settled in Templeton, Massachusetts) naturalized, so this often fruitful record of immigrants' origins was not available. However, I still thought the death record and obituary of Cornelius Riley, both of which stated he had been born in Valencia, were accurate. So I sent for the Family History films of the "revised" valuations, sometimes called the "cancelled land books," for the parish of Valencia, County Kerry.

Ordering Revised Valuations

Initially designed and collected under the direction of Richard Griffith, "Griffith's Valuation" of Ireland is a nineteenth century, head-of-household, census substitute of land occupiers. The information for this first valuation was gathered around 1848 plus or minus a few years, and several versions were published. There is an online index to the Primary Valuation on the website, <http://www.failteromhat.com/>. For a fee, researchers can access online the complete records of the primary valuation on Eneclann's website <http://www.irishorigins.com/>. The complete records can be viewed on microfiche in the NEHGS library⁴ and at many libraries around North America.

The information in Griffith's Primary Valuation was collected beginning in 1848, and listed heads-of households. Usually these were adult married or widowed persons. So Michael and Hannah (Sullivan) Riley would have been too young to be listed, since their children were born from the late 1850s through 1872. So I was really looking for records from a later period. This is where the revised valuations come in.

The Irish government continued to periodically revise the valuations over the next 150 years, just as your town tax assessors periodically revise the valuation on your house and property. These records are maintained in the Valuation Office in Dublin. See their website, <http://www.valoff.ie/>. The revised valuations are not on their website. However, North American researchers can look at the microfilms of the revised valuations in the Family History Library in Salt

Lake City, by borrowing the films through Family History Library branches near them, or through the NEHGS library. These are the steps a researcher should take to find the films:

1. Determine the parish or townland of origin of your immigrant ancestor. This must be done in North American records, not Irish records. How to do this will not be discussed in this article. For more information about this subject, please visit our online lecture, *Getting Started in Irish Genealogy*.
2. Next, you must determine the Registration District and the District Electoral Division (DED) in which the townland lies. In 1898, the poor law unions were divided into 829 Registration Districts and 3,751 District Electoral Divisions. You can find the registration district and electoral division by consulting George B. Handran's book, *Townlands in Poor Law Unions*.⁵ If you don't have access to this book, you can consult the Department of Agriculture in Ireland website <http://www.agriculture.gov.ie/farmerschemespayments/singlepaymentscheme/categoriesofdisadvantagedareas/> which has the DED's arranged by county. In the case of Valencia, the Registration District was Cahersiveen.
3. Once you know the district and DED, go to the Family History Library website homepage, at <http://www.familysearch.org> and select the Library tab. Then click on the Family History Library Catalog option. Select the "place search" option, and enter the name of the county (e.g. Kerry) and Ireland. Then choose the Ireland, Kerry (or other county) hyperlink. It will not work if you type in Cahersiveen, Kerry for the place search.
4. You will then see a [list of subject options](#), one of which will be "land and property." When you click on this, you will get a substantial [list of records](#) to choose from. Look for the Valuation List for County Kerry (or whatever county you typed in) and the name of the district, in this case Cahersiveen. The revised valuation lists for Cahersiveen range from 1860 to 1952.
5. Click on the "[Valuation lists for Kerry County, Cahersiveen Rural District, 1860-1952](#)" option, and you will get a more complete description of the record, including the fact that there are thirteen microfilm reels. Click on the gray button labeled "view film notes."
6. You will now see a [list of all the electoral divisions](#) in the Cahersiveen Rural District. Among them is Valencia. This list will give you the film number(s) to order. Write down the information and place your film order with the librarian at the Family History Library or at NEHGS.

Using Revised Valuation Lists

1. Research the film backwards. Once your order has arrived at NEHGS or the local Family History Library branch library, you can search the revised valuations in many cases into the twentieth century. But you need to know the organization of the film first. As I stated previously, the valuations were revised every few years or so, not necessarily on a regular schedule. The valuations are organized by townland, but it is not necessary to know the townland name to search the revised valuations, though it does make your search quicker. Each time the valuations were revised, the new pages were placed in a binder on top of the previous valuations. So the binders are in reverse order, from newest to oldest. This fact is important, since the microfilm reels are also in reverse order. You can research in any direction you want, but it does make sense to start your search at the end, where the oldest valuations are, and work your way backward on the film (and therefore forward in time).
2. Look for changes in occupancy. With each revaluation, changes in the names of the occupants, immediate lessors, valuations and even lot numbering may occur. Watch for changes in all of these factors, especially for changes in occupants and lot numbers. Whenever the information changed, the previous occupant was crossed out and the new information written just above the line. So you should be on the lookout for your ancestor appearing as new occupant, as he reached adulthood, moved into the area or took over his parents' holding. In the case of Michael Riley Sr. of Valencia, he appeared as Michael Rahilly in a revaluation of the late 1850s,

around the time of his marriage. [Click here to see example](#). The previous occupant, John Lenihan, was crossed out, and the name Michael Rahilly was written above. Note that his name was recorded as Michael Rahilly, not Riley. He leased a house and garden at #7 Jane Street in the village of Knightstown in Valencia. The record also indicates changes in the immediate lessor. The previous lessor, “Jane Blackman” was crossed out, and the word “Same,” referring to the first entry above, “Robert Lecky and the Valencia Slab Company”. So Michael Rahilly was probably a stonecutter in the slate quarry. By 1883, the slate quarry on Valencia had closed, and the entire area was economically depressed. In that year, the British government implemented a funded emigration scheme in which Valencia residents were given money to emigrate: £5 for adults, £2.50 for children and £1 for infants. The Board of Guardians, who administered the scheme, required that the families emigrate as a whole. The first group sailed on board the S. S. Belgravia, leaving Valencia on 1 June 1883, and arriving in New York on 12 June 1883.⁶ Among the emigrants on board was Nora (The given name Hannah and Hanora are often used interchangeably, and Nora is the nickname for Hanora.) Rahilly and her children, whose names and ages matched the Riley family of Westerly and Stonington.⁷

3. The actual records in Dublin are in color, whereas the FHL films are in black and white. Seeing the records in color is an advantage, but is not absolutely necessary to research the revised valuation lists. Sometimes the assessors did not make out a new list each time the lots were revalued. They just kept crossing out previous occupiers and writing in the new occupiers, until they had a stack of names consisting of crossed out names topped by the most current occupier. They used colored inks to indicate the year of the revaluation. Often the key to the colors is written on the index page. But the FHL films are in black and white. So you may not be able to tell the year of the change, just the fact that a change occurred.
4. Look for changes in lot numbering. These numbers and letters correspond with maps at the Valuation Office. Over time and especially after the Great Famine, land holdings were consolidated, especially in areas of high mortality and emigration. In the left-hand column of the valuations are numbers designating the lot number or street address, and upper and/or lower case letters, designating land only and/or dwellings respectively. In the case of towns, the street address is given. So Michael Rahilly lived at #7 Jane Street. For my own ancestor, James Murphy of Rahalisk, parish of Macroom, County Cork, he lived at Lot #4, dwelling place #e. This was one of five houses on the lot, with #a being the “big house.” In the subsequent valuation, #e was gone. In some cases you may find that your ancestor’s house was torn down. In the case of James Murphy, the building was converted to a farm building (a pig sty to be exact).
5. Look at who occupied your ancestor’s dwelling place after he/she emigrated. After the Rahillys (Rileys) emigrated from Valencia, the landlord continued leasing #7 Jane Street to others. Continue your research of the address as far as you can. There are books in the Valuation Office that go up to the present day. The FHL library films may stop in the twentieth century. Determining the last occupier will help you find the house if you choose to visit the location. Neighborhood residents may not remember your ancestors, especially since they emigrated. But they may remember people who stayed and lived there in the past 100 years.

Conclusion

Many of our Irish ancestors immigrated to North America, Australia or even South America in the post-Famine decades. The revised valuation lists help researchers track the Irish population in a period when few other records survive. The valuation lists may even help identify a still-standing structure that was our “ancestral home,” no matter how humble. The Valuation Office in Dublin is the ideal place to carry out this research, but an “arm-chair” researcher can use the resources of the Family History Library to determine the changes in land occupancy over time.

Endnotes

¹Edward MacLysaght, *Irish Families; Their Names, Arms, and Origins*. Dublin: H. Figgis, 1957. [CS498.M3]

²Tombstone Inscriptions, [Saint Michaels Cemetery \(Old\)Liberty Street](#), Pawcatuck, New London County, Connecticut
USA Postal Code: 06379.

³1900 US Census, Stonington, CT, roll T623-150, page 18B, ED 487.

⁴Richard Griffith, *General Valuation of Rateable Property in Ireland* . Dublin: Irish Microforms Ltd., c1978. [CS484
.G46 1978]

⁵George B. Handran, *Townlands in Poor Law Unions*. Salem, MA: Higginson Book Co., 1997. [DA979.T68 1997].

⁶Nellie O'Cleirigh, *Valentia. A Different Irish Land*. Dublin: Portobello Press, 1992.

⁷Passenger Arrival List, S. S. Belgravia, 12 June 1883, New York Passenger Lists, Film #M237-466, List 723.