Identifying the Origin of Your Irish Immigrant Ancestor

By Marie E. Daly

Finding the exact origin of your ancestor, i.e. parish or townland, is key to continuing your research in Irish records. But Irish surnames and given names are very common. In fact, in 1890 the four most common surnames were Murphy, Kelly, O'Sullivan and Walsh. See *Ireland-information.com* for a list of the 100 most common surnames. You cannot just look at a surname map of Ireland and determine that your ancestor came from a particular place. Information on exact birthplace in Ireland is to be found mainly in New World records.

A large percentage of Irish Americans have ancestors who immigrated in the early and mid-nineteenth century, a period when records were kept in less detail than their twentieth-century counterparts. The Irish tended to live, but not exclusively, in large cities and were highly mobile. The Irish worked wherever they could obtain employment, often building railroads, digging canals, plying steamships and canal boats, working on the waterfront docks and in factories. Many of the most readily accessible records, such as census records, civil registrations, and church sacramental documents merely record *Ireland* as the place of birth. In their quest for exact birthplace in Ireland, researchers will have greater (but not guaranteed) success with the following records.

Immigration and Naturalization Records

Naturalization petitions and declarations of intent are the most common and easily accessed records that provide exact birthplace. Beginning in 1790, citizenship required a residency period in the Unites States and the residency period varied over the decades. Prior to 1906, aliens could apply for citizenship in many types of courts, from courts of common pleas, local police and municipal courts, to (more commonly) county courts, and federal district and circuit courts. In 1906 the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization was established, and naturalizations occurred in federal courts thereafter. In most cases, there were three records created for each naturalized citizen. An immigrant would make a *declaration of intent* after a specified length of residency, and then several years later *petition* for citizenship. He was given a *record of his naturalization,* which he could take home. This last record was the least informative. Both the declarations of intent and the naturalization petitions are court records. Sometimes, the petitions are mixed in with all the other court records. When you use a court index, look for single names, which are petitions, and exclude double names, such as *Murphy* versus *O'Brien,* which are torts.

The 1900 and 1920 censuses are good records for finding the immigrant's citizenship status, year of immigration, or year of naturalization. These are arranged by soundex and are available in regional branches of the National Archives.

Whether the exact birthplace was recorded on the declaration of intent or on the petition varied by state, court, judge or clerk, and even by individual. The federal court records were better for some states than others, and in some states the local records are better than the federal records. So the genealogist must be prepared for failure when researching naturalizations. One way to offset the paucity of detailed records is to focus not only on your direct ancestor, but also collateral lines--in-laws, friends, neighbors, godparents at baptisms, and witnesses at marriages. When you go to the National Archives or the county courthouse, have a list of your ancestor's associates to research also.

For detailed information about the availability and location of naturalization records, readers are directed to the *Guide to Naturalization Records of the United States* by Christina K, Schaefer (Baltimore: GPC, 1997), *American Naturalization Records, 1790-1990: What They Are and How to Use Them*, by John J. Newman (Heritage Quest, 1998) and *They Became Americans: Finding Naturalization Records and Ethnic Origins*, by Loretto Dennis Szucs (Salt Lake City: Ancestry, 1998). In the New England states, except for Connecticut, the WPA copied onto dexographs the naturalizations of all court records, and indexed them by soundex. The information recorded often includes name, residence, occupation, age, date of birth, place of birth, date, port of arrival, and the court where the original declaration of intent was made. Unfortunately, Connecticut records usually give only country of birth. The WPA copies and indexes and federal court records for all New England states are available at the New England regional branch of the National Archives. For a complete list of National Archives regional branches, please consult NARA.

Passenger Arrival and Departure Lists

Many genealogists consider nineteenth-century passenger arrival lists their Holy Grail. For most of the nineteenth century, the only thing you are going to find is your ancestor's name and age. Exact birthplaces are rarely recorded. The port of departure in Ireland gives little clue either, since immigrants would walk hundreds of miles, or take canal boats and river ferries to reach the port. Also, many Irish emigrants went to ports in Great Britain, such as Liverpool and Glasgow, before immigrating to the New World.

Beginning in the 1890s, and most consistently after 1906, the passenger arrival lists give much better detail. The post-1906 lists provide the name and address of kin back in the old country as well as the name and address of sponsors in the New World. They also provide a physical description of the passenger, including hair and eye color (for identifying bodies in case of shipwreck). You can find the date and port of arrival on the naturalization record, but remember that the immigrant was stating this five to seven years later, and his memory was not always reliable. In addition, immigrants were known to falsify their arrival date in order to speed up the naturalization process and to acquire voting rights in highly contested elections. One clue that the dates of birth or arrival may be conjecture is the appearance of March 17 and July 12. If these dates are provided, the genealogist can assume that the immigrant may not be clear about his birth date or date of arrival. In a peasant society, the chronological date of March 5, 1839 may be better known as the Second Sunday in Lent or St. Ciaran's Day in the Year of the Big Wind, and under pressure by a bureaucrat, the immigrant will state March 17.

Passenger arrival lists for most ports in the United States are available on microfilm at the regional branches of the National Archives. Many of the NARA lists of smaller ports have been produced on CD, but they are not searchable by name. In addition, a number of searchable passenger arrival lists for certain ports in certain periods have been published CD format. These include *Passenger and Immigration Lists: Irish Immigrants to North America, 1803-1871*, (Broderbund, 1999), *Passenger and Immigration Lists: Irish to America, 1846-1865*, (Broderbund, 1999), *Passenger and Immigration Lists: Boston, 1821-1850*, (Broderbund, 1998), *Passenger and Immigration Lists, New York, 1820-1850* , (Broderbund, 1999), and *Passenger and Immigration Lists 1538-2000* , (Broderbund, 2000), which is also available in book format.

Some passenger departure and emigration lists are available for Irish ports and counties for certain years. One Derry shipping line, Cooke and McCorkell, plied trade routes from Philadelphia and St. John, New Brunswick, and brought back passengers from the northwestern counties in Ireland to these New World ports. Covering the years 1847-1871, the lists give the parish and county of origin. The lists were compiled, indexed, and published by Brian Mitchell, *Irish Passenger Lists, 1847-1871* (Baltimore: GPC, 1988). Also, when the information for the Ordnance Survey of Ireland was gathered, the names of emigrants were listed for parishes in Counties Derry and Antrim. These lists have been published in the book, *Irish Emigration Lists, 1833-1839,* by Brian C. Mitchell (GPC, 1989). TIARA links to many online emigration and passenger lists.

Tombstone Inscriptions

Many nineteenth-century Irish American tombstones have inscribed the deceased's birthplace in Ireland. The places often include the townland or parish of origin. These records can be very useful to the genealogist, but tombstone inscriptions are less centralized or accessible than other records, unless the graveyard has been transcribed. Genealogists encounter several problems in their search for tombstones, including (1) finding the cemetery, and (2) finding the grave within the cemetery.

In large American cities, Catholics were buried in diocesan cemeteries located in the nearby suburbs. They did not have the small white churches of puritan New England with the little graveyard attached. Death records often provide burial place, but this detail is sometimes omitted in state death records. Genealogists are better off consulting local town or city vital records. Newspaper obituaries and undertaker records are other sources for burial place, although many Irish Americans of the Famine period did not have obituaries, and undertaker records may have disappeared by the twentieth century.

Even if you have determined in which cemetery your ancestor has been buried, finding a gravestone presents another hurdle. The first place to look is the cemetery office that maintains the burial records. The records may have been centralized into a regional cemetery office, so a few phone calls may be necessary to locate the records. The lucky genealogist will find a burial record with a list of others buried in the lot. Write down the grave number and section or

row number, and ask to see a map of the cemetery, if one exists. If burial records are unavailable, you will have to search the cemetery. Most burial lots were sold in consecutive order by row or section, so that all the lot sales for a particular year will be in the same section. But just because your ancestor died in 1885, does not mean the grave was purchased in that year. With the high infant mortality rate, couples frequently purchased family lots to bury their young children.

Check for published tombstone inscriptions. Irish Americans are just beginning the process of transcribing Catholic graveyards, and there are only a few sources at this time. Readers are urged to go out into their local Catholic graveyards and write down and photograph the tombstones before they are destroyed by pollution and vandalism. Some Internet sites publish tombstones inscriptions. Although few Catholic cemeteries have been transcribed and published on the Internet, readers can publish their own data on the following sites: USGenWeb Tombstone Project and the Virtual Cemetery at Genealogy.com . One published print source is *Tombstones of the Irish Born: Cemetery of the Holy Cross, Flatbush, Brooklyn* by Joseph Silinonte, available through the Circulating Library, as is my *Gravestone Inscriptions of Mount Auburn Catholic Cemetery, Watertown, Mass.*.

Newspaper Records

Although few Irish Americans could afford to pay for a detailed obituary in a big city newspaper, there were some regular columns for connecting long lost relatives and friends (Missing Friends ads). These occurred in the nationally distributed newspapers, the Boston Pilot and the New York Herald. They have been indexed, and in the case of the Boston Pilot, published in an eight volume series, The Search for Missing Friends (Boston: NEHGS, 1988-1999) (on Vol. 3;Vol. 4;Vol. 5;Vol. 6;Vol. 7). The ads frequently provide the parish, if not townland of origin, as well as other family information.

Business Records

Two great largely untapped resources are banking and insurance records. Immigrants tended to use certain banks that catered to the immigrant population. Banks such as the Emigrant Savings Bank of New York (1850-1880) and the Boston Five Cent Savings Bank kept detailed records on people who opened accounts. Some of the banking records have been preserved by academic institutions. GenExchange.com has a search engine for looking up entries from the Emigrant Savings Bank of New York records. Also, a fraternal organization by Irish-American Catholics to provide insurance, the Catholic Order of Foresters, kept detailed records of claims, which included information from death records. Researchers in American cities should look through local public and academic archives, and also the banking and insurance companies themselves, to see if early records have been preserved.

Other Records

Many archivists will tell the public that you cannot find the exact origin of an immigrant in the census records, vital records, church baptisms and marriages, probate records, military records or deeds. Generally this is true, but enough exceptions occur to make all of these sources worth checking. For instance, one census taker recorded the county of origin for the Irish immigrant ward of the North End of Boston in 1860. Many census takers for the Massachusetts state census for 1865 recorded the county of origin. The Union Army pension records in Washington D.C. may not provide exact birthplace, but the Massachusetts National Guard mustering-in rolls do.

Some Irish American genealogists omit a very important initial step in their search for ancestors: their own family records. There is a misconception that Catholics did not keep family bibles, so people do not look for them. This search may require writing or phoning distant cousins, visiting elderly aunts or dragging out those musty boxes in the attic.

Conclusion

Finding the exact origin of your Irish immigrant ancestor requires the analytical skills of Sherlock Holmes and the persistence of Columbo. But you also have a third attribute, which will carry you a long way in your quest -- the luck of the Irish.