Getting Started: Irish American Genealogical Research

By Marie E. Daly

Irish American genealogists need to determine their ancestor's exact origin in Ireland before they can begin researching Irish records. The records that provide this information are generally located in New World records such as naturalizations, tombstone inscriptions, banking and insurance records, missing friends advertisements or obituaries. Genealogists can increase their chances of successfully finding records with exact origin by employing strategies that avoid false assumptions, tie together disparate records, and widen the focus of research to include siblings, other relatives, and friends.

Avoid making assumptions about your ancestor.

Many people say that they have researched all the available records for their ancestor but cannot find any mention of their exact place of origin in Ireland. Their search did not go beyond census and civil registration records. They have assumed that their ancestor was too poor to generate probate records or deeds or to have had a tombstone; that their ancestor never bothered naturalizing; or that their ancestor probably did not fight in the Civil War, so they have not bothered searching for these records. Starting out with low expectations for your ancestor will guarantee failure.

To ensure success, do not make assumptions about your ancestors. Until you have eliminated each of these sources by actually looking for them, you cannot say your ancestor did not generate any records. In fact, even the poorest people can be found in the records of almshouses, orphanages, settlement houses, state hospitals, mental institutions, prisons, courts, newspapers, churches, schools, undertakers' and police logs. Even though your ancestor may have been a common laborer or servant, he or she probably can be found in a number of standard sources. Search federal and state censuses, civil registrations, naturalizations, burial records, military rolls, church baptisms and marriages, passenger arrival lists, probate court records and deeds, and street directories.

Use sources that link to other records

Two good sources for beginners are the 1920 and 1900 federal censuses. These are indexed by soundex, which makes it fairly easy to locate Irish immigrants in big cities. The census records for these years provide the year of immigration, the citizenship status (naturalized, alien, or pending), the year of naturalization, how many years in the U.S., and how many years married. From these records you can estimate the time frame for searching naturalization records and passenger arrival lists. You can also determine whether or not your ancestor was married in the U.S. or in Ireland. If the number of years married exceeds the number of years in the U.S., then the marriage took place in Ireland. If they number of years married is less than the number of years in the U.S., then you can search for a marriage record in the U.S. The birthplaces and ages of a couple's children will help you determine the year of immigration. If a twenty-year-old child was born in Ireland, and an eighteen-year-old child was born in the U.S., then the year of immigration took place eighteen to twenty years before the census year. The 1870 census indicates whether the person is an eligible voter (look for naturalizations), and the 1860 census lists the value of personal and real estate (look for probate records and deeds).

Marriage records are some of the most reliable sources and can help pinpoint an ancestor in a big city. Consider the source of the information. The information on death certificates comes from distraught family and friends, undertakers and physicians, and can be inaccurate. "Our dear, departed uncle John said he sailed from Derry, so that must be where he was born." (Uncle John is no longer around to correctly state he was from Buncrana, Donegal, fifteen miles northwest of Derry.) But the information for the marriage record is from the bride and groom, who state the names of their parents and their birthplaces. In addition, the marriage record often indicates the priest or minister as the source. You can then determine through street directories and church directories the location of the priest or minister in the year of your ancestor's marriage. This will help you pinpoint the ward and street your ancestor (or the bride's parents) lived on, and differentiate your Patrick O'Brien from the fifteen others in the street directory.

Death certificates, undertaker records, and obituaries may provide the place of burial, so you can look for the tombstone. In some states, the state death record does not provide the burial place, but the city record does. In this instance, the city death certificate would be a better choice. You can also determine the name of the undertaker from

the death certificate and the obituary. Undertaker records may also provide the burial place and other details. Some undertaker records even list the birthplace in Ireland.

While federal census records were collected every ten years, many street directories, especially for large cities, were printed every year. Street directories can help you track the movement of your ancestor from one address to another over the years, ascertain the ward number necessary for using the federal censuses, and find in which parish your ancestor lived. Street directories can also help you determine the date of death. If you are uncertain about the date of death, find your ancestor in a street directory, look ahead ten years to see if your ancestor is still listed. If he is listed, look ahead another ten years, until you cannot find him. Then look back five years, and ahead or back two years, until you have found the year in which your ancestor disappears from street directories. Several factors can cause this disappearance: your ancestor could have moved to another town, gone to California, moved in with his daughter, or died. At least you have a time period in which to search the death records. Furthermore, many early-twentieth-century street directories give the actual date of death of your deceased ancestor.

Associate your ancestor with as many people as possible

The most common mistake researchers make is focusing only on their direct ancestor. Even if you research all the records that mention your ancestor, you may not find the exact birthplace in Ireland. You can increase your chances of success if you increase the number of people you are looking for. When you visit the National Archives, or the county superior court, bring a list of several people associated with your ancestor in addition to your direct forebear. Irish men and women did not generally emigrate by themselves and live alone once they arrived in the New World. They often traveled with their peers or siblings from the same village or parish. Once they arrived at the docks of New York, Boston, or Philadelphia, they were ushered into Irish American communities, often consisting of people from their former villages or counties. They formed their own congregations; many were led by clergy from home. Every town had its Kerry Corner or Cork Hill. Friends and relatives often appear in records as godparents for baptisms, witnesses for marriages, or witnesses on wills, deeds, and naturalization records. They are the adjacent families in the census records, the beneficiaries of insurance policies, or the next of kin in probate records. Make note of the other people with the same last name in the town directory. When going through your family papers, make note of whose Mass cards are in your grandmother's prayer book, who donated gifts to your mother's bridal shower, or whose photographs are displayed in the family album. Once you have assembled a list of people associated with your ancestor, research their origins in addition to your own.

Researching Irish women can be difficult because, until 1920 women, with few exceptions, did not naturalize. And they are less likely to appear in many records, such as deeds or military records. Nevertheless, the same strategy can apply to women, i.e., associating your female ancestor with as many males as possible. Instead of looking for your great grandmother's naturalization, look for her brothers' or cousins' records.

This list of strategies implies that the genealogist will actually turn off their computer and go to the local or state archives to access these records. Although many records are becoming available over the Internet, most of these sources can only be accessed by visiting an archive, courthouse, church, or library. The Internet is extremely useful for bringing researchers together to share information about their common ancestors. But you should always refer to the sources used and double check the information whenever possible. By maintaining a wide focus when researching Irish ancestors and chasing down every clue, no matter how unlikely, researchers can improve their chances of successfully determining the exact origin of their immigrant ancestor.