

Introduction to Researching Your Irish Family History

D. Joshua Taylor, MA, MLS, FUGA

President, New York Genealogical and Biographical Society

GETTING STARTED

Family history is the exploration of your family's story, including people, events, and places. Research Irish heritage can require patience and creativity, as many records (prior to the 1900s) were destroyed or are no longer extant. To begin your journey, gather family records, then search within U.S. records for immigration details and clues to a family's origin before searching records from Ireland.

STEP 1: GATHER RECORDS AND OTHER MATERIALS

Collect information about your family history from sources at home and talking with family members. When searching around your house (or relatives' homes), look for items like birth, marriage, or death records, diaries, letters, family bibles, newspaper clippings, scrapbooks, and other materials. When talking with relatives, use open-ended questions and follow up with clarifying questions to determine who, when, and where.

STEP 2: RESEARCH IN U.S. RECORDS

Fundamental records include home sources, vital records, and censuses. To locate records, consider visiting:

- New York Genealogical and Biographical Society (www.newyorkfamilyhistory.org), a membership organization with free resources
- *FamilySearch* (www.familysearch.org), a free website with searchable records and online family trees
- *MyHeritage* (www.myheritage.com), a subscription website with online family trees and records
- *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com), a subscription website with free access to some New York materials for New York state residents
- Public libraries, such as the New York Public Library (www.nypl.org) and libraries near where your family lived.

Search Numerous Records for Immigration Clues

In family history, a single document rarely reveals all the details about an individual or a family. Instead, research needs to extend across multiple record types. Sometimes, information will conflict from one document to the next or might be incomplete. Take your time tracking the details you find in individual documents.

Creating a timeline is a terrific way to keep track of your research and identify critical details for finding immigration clues. Overlay a family's timeline with key dates in the history of immigration to learn about specific records that might exist and other details that might provide a broader context for your research. Be sure to include details from extended family members in the timeline.

When examining records for immigration details, remember that dates, spelling, and other details might be inconsistent. The personal memories of a relative might differ from a written census or vital record. Where possible, estimate dates based on other information. Note specific discrepancies for future research.

Spellings of first, middle, and last names were often not standardized throughout the 1800s and early 1900s. Names were often spelled phonetically and, as such, will vary from record to record. Names were not changed at places like Ellis Island. Instead, a family's name might have gradually become more Americanized as a family assimilated into a local community. Always consider the knowledge and background of the person writing a name—as well as those providing the information.

Many records exist to identify clues to a family's or individual's immigration status. The items below represent selected essential resources to begin this important step in the process.

Vital Records

Official government records documenting the birth, marriage, or death of an individual contain essential details. As these records are inconsistently kept in various states and other jurisdictions, it is essential to take time to identify these records for all members of a family—especially those beyond a direct ancestor.

When using vital records, take note of the informant, as the knowledge of the informant has a direct impact on the contents and accuracy of a given vital record. Compare details relating to names, dates, and places within vital records for a family. A certificate for one individual might only list a country of birth, whereas another might include the precise town or city.

Census Records

The U.S. federal census, taken every 10 years since 1790, includes clues to an individual's immigration status. Later census years (as shown below) often provide more details.

	1870	1880	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940
Country of birth	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Native language				X	X	X	X*
Number of years in U.S. or year of immigration			X	X	X	X	
Naturalized	X**		X**	X**	X**	X***	X
Declaration of intention filed				X	X	X	X
Parents' birthplace	^	X	X	X	X	X	X*
Parents' native language				X	X		

^If parents were of foreign birth

**If male and over 21

*Random 5% of the population

***If naturalized, what year?

Data adapted from Anne Buiter, *Tracing Immigrants through the Port of New York...* (New York: New York Genealogical and Biographical Society, 2020), p. 125.

Some states also took a census in various years. The state of New York took a census in 1825, 1835, 1845, 1855, 1865, 1875, 1892, 1905, 1915, and 1925. Earlier years are often unavailable, as they were destroyed. However, information about immigration is often found in later years of the state census (as shown in the table below).

	1855	1865	1875	1892	1905	1915	1925
Native and naturalized voters	X	X	X				
Years resident in city or town	X						
Numbers of years in the U.S.					X	X	X
Citizen or alien	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
If naturalized, when and where						X	X

Data adapted from *The New York Family History Research Guide and Gazetteer* revised edition (New York: New York Genealogical and Biographical Society, 2017), p. 38.

Newspapers

Newspapers often contain details relating to family events, including births, marriages, and deaths. In addition, they can offer lists of incoming passengers alongside details about arriving or departing vessels. Some newspapers also include advertisements from friends and relatives seeking details about those who immigrated to the United States.

Though online newspaper databases provide access to important content, they often exclude important short-run publications in New York State. State historical societies and libraries, alongside their respective digital projects, remain crucial resources for accessing newspapers between 1780 and 1924. In addition to examining *Chronicling America* (chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/), be sure to investigate the New York State Library's listing of New York newspapers at nysl.nysed.gov/nysnp/, *New York State Historic Newspapers* (nyshistoricnewspapers.org/), and *Fulton History* (more easily searchable at fultonsearch.org/).

City Directories

Directories of businesses and residents were produced for many cities by the 1800s. Entries can provide a name, address, occupation, and other details. While the head of the household might only be listed, be sure to look for other individuals living at the same address or nearby, as they might be relatives or associates.

Searching for an individual across numerous years of city directories is essential. In doing so, details (and any changes) relating to a specific person can be examined year by year. For tracing families in New York City, the New York Public Library (NYPL) offers several free browsable city directories as part of its digital collections online (<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/new-york-city-directories#/?tab=about>).

Passenger and Customs Lists

Passenger and customs lists remain an important source for tracing Irish ancestors. Early lists are often less detailed than more recent records, though should still be examined as part of your research.

The most comprehensive passenger lists for the port of New York begin after the Steerage Act of 1819 with the U.S. Customs service holding passenger lists (see chapter 4 of the *New York Family History Research Guide and Gazetteer* for further details). Records vary in availability and content. Online access for many of New York's customs and passenger records can be found at:

Ancestry

- New York, Passenger and Crew Lists (including Castle Garden and Ellis Island), 1820-1957
<http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=7488>

Note: An amalgamation of at least five record sets.

FamilySearch

- New York Passenger Lists, 1820-1891
<http://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1849782>

Note: U.S. Customs lists for New York are extant; immigration records burned.

- New York Passenger Arrival Lists (Ellis Island), 1892-1924
<http://familysearch.org/search/collection/1368704>

Note: From 1892 to 1897, U.S. Customs lists only are available; post-1897 fire, immigration lists are generally available.

Naturalization Records

Naturalization records document our immigrant ancestor's journey to become a United States citizen. This process has been different and generated different variants of records throughout New York history, so the first step for all researchers is to learn about the naturalization process at the time of the ancestor in question.

It is important to note that it is possible your immigrant ancestor did not finish or even start the naturalization process. There were many reasons for an immigrant to forgo becoming a United States citizen, and certainly many never went through the process. Fortunately, it is usually easy to find an individual's citizenship status by looking at United States or New York State censuses, though not all years will have this information.

The following details of the naturalization process within New York and the United States is described in detail in chapter 4 of the *New York Family History Research Guide and Gazetteer*.

1783 – 1866: In 1790, the first federal naturalization act was passed – it allowed naturalization to occur at any court of record with a clerk and a seal. Because of this, researchers will find naturalization records at a wide variety of courts. In New York State, county governments are the primary repositories of records for this time period. Research into available naturalization records should be done at the county level. Though the exact period of time changed several times, after 1802 all aliens were not eligible for naturalization

until living in the United States for 5 years. Soldiers serving in the U.S. military had relaxed requirements to obtain citizenship during this time period.

Post-Civil War and Peak Immigration Period, 1866 – 1924: Naturalization remained relatively similar to the prior period until 1906, when the federal Naturalization Service was created to federalize the now disparate processes of the states. After 1906, nonfederal courts could still process naturalizations, but needed to do so in a way that complied with federal standards, and needed to submit copies to the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization. This bureau maintains “C-files” for naturalizations between 1906 and 1956 – generally, these files contain the most genealogically relevant information of all naturalization records.

The records for most naturalizations that took place in New York federal courts are held by NARA-NYC in New York City, and many are available online at Ancestry.com.

SPECIFIC RESOURCES IN IRELAND

National Archives of Ireland (<https://nationalarchives.ie>)

Census Records (<https://titheapplotmentbooks.nationalarchives.ie/>)

- Fragments, 1821-1851
- 1901 census
- 1911 census

Tithe Applotment Books (<https://titheapplotmentbooks.nationalarchives.ie/>)

Griffith's Valuation Books (<https://census.nationalarchives.ie/search/vob/home.jsp>)

Ask About Ireland (<https://www.askaboutireland.ie/>)

- Griffith's Valuation
- Other resources

Catholic Parish Registers at the National Library of Ireland (<https://registers.nli.ie/>)

- Browsable by parish

Roots Ireland (<https://www.rootsireland.ie/>)

- Church records
- Civil records

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

- Reilly, James R. *Richard Griffith and His Valuations of Ireland: With, An Inventory of the Valuation Office Survey Maps and Other Related Maps in the Public Record Office of Ireland*. Baltimore: Clearfield, 2000.
- Buiter, Anne. *Tracing Immigrants through the Port of New York: Early National Period to 1924*. New York: New York Genealogical and Biographical Society, 2020.

- Colletta, John P. *They Came in Ships: A Guide to Finding Your Immigrant Ancestor's Arrival Record*. Salt Lake City, UT: Ancestry.com, 2002.
- Faulkner, Caroline, and Brian Mitchell. *Discover Your Irish Ancestors: Irish Genealogy Made Easy*. Cork: Mercier Press, 2015.
- Greenwood, Val D. *The Researcher's Guide to American Genealogy*, fourth edition. Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2017.
- Grenham, John. *Tracing Your Irish Ancestors: The Complete Guide*. 5th ed. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2019.
- MacLysaght, Edward. *The Surnames of Ireland*. 6th ed. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2021.
- Mitchell, Brian. *A New Genealogical Atlas of Ireland*. 2nd ed. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2002.
- New York Genealogical and Biographical Society. *New York Family History Research Guide and Gazetteer—revised edition*. New York: New York Genealogical and Biographical Society, 2017.
- Radford, Dwight A., and Kyle J. Betit. *A Genealogist's Guide to Discovering Your Irish Ancestors*. Cincinnati: Betterway Books, 2001.
- Reilly, James R. *Richard Griffith and His Valuations of Ireland: With, An Inventory of the Valuation Office Survey Maps and Other Related Maps in the Public Record Office of Ireland*. Baltimore: Clearfield, 2000.
- Ryan, James G. *Irish Records: Sources for Family and Local History*. Rev. ed. Salt Lake City: Ancestry Publishing, 1997.
- Szucs, Loretto Dennis and Sandra Hargreaves Luebking, *The Source: A Guidebook of American Genealogy*. Salt Lake City, UT: Ancestry.com, 2006.