

Researching Ulster Scots Ancestors

Class 3: Records of Northern Ireland: Religious Records

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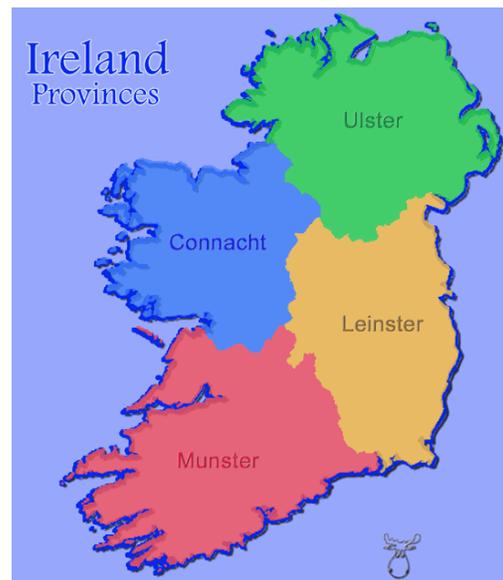
As a result of the Battle of Dublin, which was fought from 28 June to 5 July 1922, the bombing and fires on the Four Courts building resulted in massive record destruction. It is why there are no census records for the 1800s for Ireland, among other records. Even some Church of Ireland records were destroyed. However, most of the surviving records that researchers turn to for the 18th and 19th centuries are those records generated by most churches in the area.

Religion in Ireland

In 1841, Ireland was home to more than eight million inhabitants of whom four-fifths were Roman Catholic and one-fifth were Protestant. Of those who were Protestant, nearly half were Presbyterians while the other half were Church of Ireland and Dissenters.

Religious Denominations

- Ulster – predominantly Presbyterian
- Connacht – predominantly Roman Catholic
- Leinster – partly Church of Ireland
- Munster – predominantly Roman Catholic



Presbyterians

The Presbyterian faith can be found in Ireland since the 16th century. In Ulster, the roots stem from the religious activities in Scotland, as many Scottish settlers entered Ulster in the early 16th century. In the earliest years, the Presbyterian faith was accommodated by the larger Church of Ireland and afforded some freedom to organize their churches along Presbyterian lines. However, as the Church of Ireland began to associate and align more closely with the Church of England, some of these freedoms were in jeopardy. The first Irish Presbytery was founded in 1642. Following the Restoration in 1660, new restrictions and persecutions affected Presbyterians, who continued to form congregations and began to build meeting houses (their term for a church). This faith continued to grow and in the 18th century it outnumbered the state recognized Church of Ireland. As such, Presbyterians were denied the right to hold office and their clergy were often not allowed to perform marriages.

Within the Presbyterian faith itself there have been a number of schisms that resulted in the formation of additional Presbyterian groups, and when researching these records, it becomes important to know which of the Presbyterian denominations your ancestors belonged.

The major groups include: Seceder, Non-Subscribing, Reformed, Free, and Evangelical.

Seceder Presbyterians

The largest of the branches, this group followed a conservative evangelistic approach. It has its roots in a dispute within the Church of Scotland (Presbyterian in faith) in which a number of ministers seceded in 1733. The first Seceder congregation in the Ulster Province was founded at Lylehill in County Antrim in 1741. In 1840 most of the Secession churches rejoined with the General Assembly (the main Presbyterian Church), with the exception of 16 ministers who further broke off in 1829 and formed the United Synod of Original Seceders.

While many of the seceder churches had reunited with the General Assembly the complete reunification of the seceder groups with the General Assembly would not be complete until 1955.

Non-Subscribing Presbyterians

The first of the major disputes was the result of the requirement to subscribe to the Westminster Confession of Faith. The more conservative, or Calvinist, Presbyterians—also referred to as Old Lights in this regard—believed subscription was necessary. The more liberal, or New Lights, disagreed and did not require its ministers to subscribe. The Non-Subscribing Presbyterians were all placed in the Presbytery of Antrim (which does not mean they lived there but that was the larger governing body), which in essence ultimately became a separate denomination.

A further split within this group took place in 1830 which saw 17 ministers break away and form what was known as the Remonstrant Synod of Ulster, which was comprised of the more liberal of the Non-Subscribing congregations. They joined, rather loosely with the Presbytery of Antrim and the Synod of Munster to form the Association of Irish Non-Subscribing Presbyterians. Ultimately, all the non-subscribing sects rejoined and officially formed the General Synod of the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church in 1910.

Reformed Presbyterians (Covenanters)

They garner their nickname of “Covenanters” as they adhered to the Covenants of 1638 and 1643 which addressed liturgical issues. Those who signed these covenants were to maintain the religion and oppose any changes. The Reformed Presbyterians believed that the obligation to protect the religion as it was at the signing of the Covenants was passed from one generation to the next, so that while the subsequent generations hadn’t official signed the Covenants, they were inheriting the responsibility. This was a belief that was not shared by most Presbyterians. They officially formed the Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland in 1811. Though they began to appear in Northern Ireland in the 1670s and 1680s as

Scottish emigrants avoiding persecutions in their own country, little is really known about the Covenanters until after the mid-1700s.

The types of records most useful to genealogists searching any member of a Presbyterian faith include:

- Registers of baptism, marriage, and death/burial
- Session books (the business of the church)
- Visiting books
- Communicants' lists

Other Denominations

Those who have family in Northern Ireland are probably well aware of the problems between the Catholics and the Protestants, especially from the mid-1900s until the Good Friday Agreement that was signed 10 April 1998. However there have long been issues among the religions that date back to the 1600s. There have been a number of uprisings over the centuries as a result of religion, but it is those religious connections that are so important to genealogists in their research, because they are the only records that may offer insight into family units.

Church of Ireland

The Church of Ireland is Episcopal in faith and structure. Because it has ties to the Anglican or Church of England religions, it is not surprising to find that it was most popular among the areas that saw the larger immigration of English families: South Antrim, North Armagh, and Northwest Down. Also known as “the Church” or the Established Church, it served as the state church in Ireland from 1537 to 1870, and a tithe was extracted from all landholders to help support the parish churches, regardless of the religion of the landholder. In the province of Ulster, it was the support from the landed classes that helped it maintain a presence.

The administrative unit within this denomination is the parish. This is an ecclesiastical (church) parish as opposed to the civil parishes of Ireland. The earliest parishes in Ulster, for which records still survived, are St. Thomas's Church in Lisburn (begun in 1637) and St. Columb's Cathedral in Derry (begun in 1642).

The types of records most useful to genealogists include:

- Registers of baptism, marriage, and death/burial
- Vestry minute books (the business of the church)
- Pew lists
- Tithe records

Tip: Church of Ireland registers may have marriages for those of other denominations.

Roman Catholics

The Catholic faith was the faith of its people, like it was in other areas that ultimately became the United Kingdom, until King Henry VIII broke away from the Catholic Church when Pope Clement VII refused to grant him an annulment from Queen Catharine of Aragon resulted in the passing of the Acts of Supremacy in 1534 in the English Parliament. This basically confirmed that Henry VIII was supreme, even above the Catholic Church, and resulted in a break with the religion. In 1541 the Irish Parliament changed the country from a Lordship to that of the Kingdom of Ireland, which gave Henry the title of King of Ireland. The change was necessary because as the “Lord of Ireland” Henry held the Lordship in fief from the Pope. Henry was also appointed the head of the “Church in Ireland.” The Church of Ireland, mentioned above, began in 1538, however despite this, the majority of the Irish-born remained Catholic.

Penal Laws passed in the late 17th century had significant effects on the Catholic Church and its members. Catholics, like Presbyterians, were denied rights to office and serve in the military. Marriages by Catholic clergy were not recognized by the state-supported Church of Ireland. While the persecutions continued in the form of the penal laws, the Catholic Church continued to establish parishes in Ireland, though few of these conform to the boundaries of the civil parishes or those of the Church of Ireland.

In part because of some of the historical issues, the Catholic Church registers often do not pre-date 1800. Unlike the records of other denominations, it is not unusual to find the church registers in Latin—especially in forenames and standard phrases.

The types of records most useful to genealogists include:

- Registers of baptism, marriage, and death/burial
- Dispensations
- Convert rolls
- Visitation books

Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)

The Quaker religion was introduced to Ireland by William Edmundson, an Englishman originally from Westmoreland. He and his wife moved to Ireland in 1652, travelling north to Antrim where his brother was stationed as a soldier. Edmundson established a store-keeping business, that is a business that kept custody of raw materials, supplies, and more, in which Edmundson served as a trustee of these goods. He was introduced to the Quaker faith in 1653 when he returned to England to get goods and it was at this time that he joined the Religious Society of Friends. In 1654 he moved his family to Lurgan, County Armagh and it was there that the first Quaker meeting in Ireland was established. The faith was particularly strong in areas with significant English settlements including the Lagan Valley and north Armagh.

Quakers have been known to be excellent record-keepers, and it is through these records that much can be learned about families who followed this religion. There are many different records created in the business and spiritual teachings of this religion, and they were intent on ensuring accurate records as members moved from one meeting to another to inform the new meeting as to the qualifications of the member.

The types of records most useful to genealogists include:

- Registers of birth, marriage, and death
- Removals (members moving from one meeting to another because they have moved from one town to another)
- Meeting minutes (the business side of the denomination)
- Disownments (the excommunication of members)

Other Denominations

Some of the other popular denominations include the Methodists, the Moravians and the Huguenots. The Methodists trace to the preaching of John Wesley who visited Ulster Province in 1756. By the time of his final visit in 1789 it was estimated that there were more than 14,000 people now associated with the Methodist church. The majority of those followers came from the Church of Ireland, though they may have returned to that religious parish for sacramental rites.

The Moravian Church originated in what is now the Czech Republic. The Protestant denomination was introduced to Ireland in the mid-1700s and is formally known as *Unitas Fratrum* or United of the Brethren. The most successful community was founded at Gracehill, County Antrim which included a planned village arranged around the church building. Like the Quakers, the Moravians are excellent record keepers.

Finding Records

Unlike many of the records that genealogists rely on, church records of Northern Ireland are not as well represented online as other church records or other record types in general. It becomes necessary to seek out published volumes, finding aids, online databases (some of the records, some of abstracts and some about the places), and repositories themselves.

A variety of published volumes about Irish research in general and church records specifically have been published and are included in the bibliography at the end of this handout.

Finding aids have been compiled on many subjects for the records housed at the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), including an excellent one to the church records they have—*An Irish Genealogical Source, A Guide to Church Records*. The 374-page PDF file describes the various

denominations and their records. There is an alphabetical list of the civil parishes and the record availability of the various denominations.

JohnGrenham.com, a subscription site, also offers detailed lists of the church records for the various townlands and parishes along with where you may find these records, including online sites.

There are some records that have been digitized and made available through Ancestry.com, FindMyPast.com, and RootsIreland.ie. All of these websites require subscriptions to view the information. FindMyPast.com has images of some denominations including Quaker and Catholic and non-conformist records. Abstracts at Ancestry.com may include a Family History Library microfilm number that can be checked on FamilySearch.org to see if the records have been digitized and are viewable from home. RootsIreland.ie offers transcriptions of records.

Many of the church records have not been digitized and as such are only available through the collections of specific repositories including:

- Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI)
- Presbyterian Historical Society of Ireland
- Public Record Office – Dublin
- National Archives of Ireland
- National Library of Ireland
- Local custody

Suggested Bibliography

Grenham, John, *Tracing Your Irish Ancestors*, 5th ed., (Dublin: Gill Books, 2019).

Mitchell, Brian, *A Guide to Irish Parish Registers*, (Baltimore, Md.: Genealogical Publishing Company, Inc., 1988).

PRONI Guide to Church Records (Belfast: PRONI, 2019),

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/publications/proni-guide-church-records>

Roulston, William J., *Researching Presbyterian Ancestors in Ireland*, (Belfast.: Ulster Historical Foundation, 1988).

Roulston, William J., *Researching Scots-Irish Ancestors, The Essential Genealogical Guide to Early Modern Ulster, 1600-1800*, 2nd ed. (Belfast: Ulster Historical Foundation, 2020).

Online Resources

- Ask About Ireland www.askaboutireland.ie
- Catholic Parish Registers on National Library of Ireland registers.nli.ie/
- FamilySearch www.familysearch.org
- FindMyPast www.findmypast.com
- JohnGrenham.com www.johngrenham.com
- National Archives of Ireland www.nationalarchives.ie/
- National Library of Ireland, Catalogue catalogue.nli.ie/
- Presbyterian Historical Society of Ireland www.presbyterianhistoryireland.com/
- PRONI - www.nidirect.gov.uk/proni
- PRONI – eCatalogue <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/services/search-pronis-ecatalogue>
- PRONI – Guide to Church Records www.nidirect.gov.uk/publications/proni-guide-church-records
- RootsIreland,ie www.rootsireland.ie