

Researching Scottish Ancestors

Class 1: Origins and Journeys: Migrations to the U.S. and Canada

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Many Americans and Canadians have Scottish ancestry. Determining exactly *where* in Scotland your ancestors came from, however, can be the hardest part of researching them. By understanding the history of Scotland and the many waves of emigration, you can start to narrow down possible origins.

History

Though part of the United Kingdom since 1707, Scotland has had its share of difficulties regarding rebellions, punishment, issues with ruling monarchs, religious persecution, and more.

- 1603 – Scotland and England share same monarch
- 1649-1651 – Scotland supports and then rebels against William Cromwell and his supporters
- 1707 – Formation of the United Kingdom: includes England and Scotland
- 1715 – Rebellion of Jacobites
- 1745 – 2nd major rebellion of Jacobites
- 1750s-1850s – The Clearings

Early Immigration

Scotland's inclusion in the United Kingdom allowed it to establish settlements in the New World. Among the earliest of settlements were many that did not survive:

- Nova Scotia (1629-1632)
 - King James I of England (James VI of Scotland) grants a charter to create the colony of Nova Scotia (New Scotland)
 - Grant given to Sir William Alexander of Menstrie
 - Settlement wiped out in 1632
- East Jersey (1683-1702)
 - Quakers seeking to escape religious persecution
 - Settled in East Jersey (which joined with West Jersey in 1702 to become New Jersey)
 - During the 1680's, about 700 Scots arrived, mostly from Aberdeen and Montrose
- South Carolina (1684-1686)
 - Stuarts Town, part of a 2-county area purchased for Scottish emigrants
 - 1684 saw the arrival of 148 Scots from Gourrock
 - They were Covenanter Presbyterians seeking religious freedom
 - Wiped out by Spanish and Indian allies in 1686

- New Caledonia at Darién near Panama (1698)
 - Intended to be a trading colony at Darién
 - 2,500 Scottish settlers set out in 1696
 - Lack of provisions and colonizing experience hurt them
 - Wiped out by 1700 because of disease and Spanish attacks
- Darien (New Inverness) Georgia (1736)
 - Founded in 1736 and named for the failed colony in Panama
 - Earliest arrivers came from Inverness and often referred to the town as “New Inverness”
 - Some of the Scottish began to abandon the settlement in 1739 heading for South Carolina
 - Some of these Scots were involved in the American Revolution

Unlike England, the momentum for the Scottish to emigrate to North America was much slower. They had been migrating to European regions since the Middle Ages. They also helped colonize:

- The Hebrides (16th & 17th centuries)
- Orkney (16th & 17th centuries)
- Shetland (16th & 17th centuries)
- Ulster (by 1650)

Voluntary Immigration

Voluntary immigration by the Scots to North America began to pick up in the 1700s. This was mainly due to increased rents among other push factors. Most immigrants from Scotland in the 1700s were indentured servants.

Estimates put the number of emigrants to 25,000 with many of them settling in the 13 American colonies. Some did go to Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island.

One of the most successful settlements of the Scots was the Cape Fear region in North Carolina. In 1739, the royal governor of North Carolina encouraged Scottish emigration, ultimately providing those who did come with a 10-year tax exemption. Highlanders who arrived in the early 1700s usually had land grants to the Upper Cape Fear region as the Lowlanders had settled in the Lower Cape Fear region. Unlike other colonies, intermarriage between the Highlanders and the Lowlanders was seen in North Carolina.

Tip: Many Scots, especially Highlanders, were Loyalists when it came to the American Revolution.

19th Century

Canada was still more popular than the United States for Scottish emigrants. Between 1820 (the start of U.S. passenger lists) and 1851, the per annum Scottish arrivals seldom reached 1,000 immigrants. Some years saw less than 100. Statistics show that a total of 10,525 Scottish immigrants arrived in the U.S. during those three decades.

The Clearances

The eviction of tenants, known as the Clearances, affected the Highlands and the Lowlands. They took place from approximately 1750 to 1860. The landlords cleared the tenants to make more money off the land—often by bringing in sheep, which were more profitable.

Important dates:

- 1746 – Battle of Culloden
- 1747 – Act of Proscription
- 1792 – Year of the Sheep
- 1807 – The Sutherland Clearances
- 1822 – Collapse of the kelp industry
- 1846 – The potato famine

Having already seen what had happened to Ireland during their famine, it was believed that clearances and emigration were the only solution when the famine hit Scotland. Roughly 11,000 Scots were “relocated” through “assisted passage,” from their landlords during the decade of 1846-1856. Another 5,000 emigrated to Australia with assistance. There are unknown numbers of individuals who either paid for their own emigration or were helped by the Colonial Land and Emigration Commission.

Conclusion

When it comes to researching Scottish ancestors, it is important to first understand the history of Scotland. That history often affected who and where ancestors went when they left Scotland. Additionally, where your ancestors settled could be a clue to their origins, especially in the early years.

There are many published compilations of Scottish immigrants to Canada and the United States. These should always be searched, not only for the names of ancestors but also for where the records used were located. Many repositories both in Scotland and in North America may hold records that have information on your ancestors. Finally, you may ultimately have to go offline and seek manuscripts from repositories, especially in Scotland.

Suggested Bibliography

Books

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National Records of Scotland <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/>

Useful Websites – Emigration: <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/research/visit-us/scotlandspeople-centre/useful-websites-for-family-history-research/emigration-ancestry>

Scotland’s People <https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/>

Scottish Prisoners of War Society <https://spows.org/>