Finding Irish Ancestors: A Guide to Civil and Church Records

Class 2: Other Civil Records

Rhonda R. McClure, Senior Genealogist, rhonda.mcclure@americanancestors.org

Understanding Administrative Divisions

It's best to discuss administrative divisions from the smallest to the largest as the smallest division, the townland, will determine other relevant divisions for your research. Administrative divisions (aka "land divisions") refer to areas created to handle a variety of records and other administrative issues.

There are administrative divisions that handle civil issues and records (i.e., those records and issues handled by the respective governmental bodies) and often *different* divisions and boundaries that address ecclesiastical issues (i.e., anything having to do with a religious denomination). Below are the civil divisions needed for seeking the civil records discussed in this class:

- Townland
- Civil Parish
- Barony
- Poor Law Union
- General Registrar's Districts/ Superintendent Registrar's District
- District Electoral Division (DED) – aka Electoral Division
- County
- Province

Understanding the administrative divisions, or perhaps more importantly, the history of those divisions, will aid you in locating records pertaining to your ancestors.

Townlands

Townlands are the smallest divisions and are an important locality needed when researching Irish ancestry. It also helps to know the county as some townlands share a name but are in different counties.

A townland can vary in size and the size of the townland is based on the quality of the land. Some are as small as three roods and one perch (less than an acre), while others have thousands of acres. The smaller townlands tend to be in low-lying areas, while the larger ones are found in the uplands. Some counties referred to these as "ploughlands," though ploughlands were supposed to contain 120 acres. Eventually because of the decennial censuses and the Ordnance Survey, there was a standardization of the use of the term "townland" to represent the smallest land division for administrative purposes. Another important note: townlands may straddle borders of larger divisions.

Townlands are the most important division for family historians as they are usually referenced in church records, gravestones, even in newspaper advertisements, such as those found in the *Boston Pilot* when families were trying to find those who had immigrated to America after losing touch. It is through the townland that you learn the respective larger administrative divisions.

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Keep in mind that while the "townland" is considered the smallest official division, you may find references to unofficial areas within a townland including the names of farms, reference to nearby landscape features, or named fields. When searching landed estate records, those estates were comprised of townlands, and farms were the subdivision within the townland.

Once you have identified the townland, you then identify the larger jurisdictions using a source such as the *General Alphabetical Index to the Townlands and Towns, Parishes and Baronies of Ireland, Based on the Census of Ireland for the Year 1851*, JohnGrenham.com, and Townlands.ie.

Civil Parish

A civil parish consists of approximately 25 to 30 townlands. The origins of the civil parish, trace confusingly back to their religious counterparts. The earliest churches in Ireland usually consisted of a church building, burial ground, and holy well. There were many more churches than were required for the population, suggesting that some may have been built by families. Many also served as shrines for local saints. By the 1200s, it was clear that there were ecclesiastical parishes across all of Ireland. It was at this time that the Anglo-Normans came into Ireland, and largely left the parishes as they existed, though some were rededicated to better known saints of the time.

During the Reformation, the Anglican Church, known in Ireland as the Church of Ireland, became the state church, and the medieval (Roman Catholic) churches were taken over by this state church. In addition to the church parish serving the Church of Ireland, a network of matching secular, or civil, parishes were created to serve the administrative duties of the civil authorities in the area. As a result, the civil parish was born.

It is the civil parish that is usually referred to in census records, taxes, and land surveys. It is because they grew out of the already established Church of Ireland parishes that the boundaries of the civil parishes generally mirror that of the Church of Ireland parish.

Barony

While in Celtic Ireland there were territorial boundaries representing tribes or people, known as *tuaths*, beginning in the sixteenth century the barony represented a boundary within the larger counties for the purposes of taxes. They were further used as references in land records which is one of the reasons that they continued. The censuses through the 1800s, of which very little survive, also used the barony as a divisional unit. The baronies were discontinued when local government was reorganized at the end of the 19th century.

Poor Law Unions

With the passage of the Poor Law Relief Act in 1838, three poor law commissioners were tasked with "the administration of relief to the poor" in England and Wales and expanded those efforts throughout Ireland. It was intended to be a more effectual method of relief for the "destitute poor" in Ireland. The commissioners, however, quickly realized that the administrative districts of the civil parish and the larger barony were not suitable for the Poor Law Unions in large part because they were not equal in size. As a result, in 1838, the commissioners divided the whole country into 130 Unions. Ten years later, when they realized that some of the Unions were still too large, an additional Union was added. In 1850 during the Famine, more Unions were added, many in the west, for a total of 163.

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Each Poor Law Union was centered around a market town in which a workhouse was built (from which the Poor Law Union drew its name). It was through the workhouse that the poor would receive whatever relief they needed.

The decision to put the workhouse in a market town was not an accident. The building of the workhouse offered labor to locals. Likewise, the local traders bid on contracts to supply goods to the workhouse. It was the responsibility of the Board of Guardians—one for each Union—to manage the relief. Individuals who were not residing in the workhouse could also apply for relief which was referred to as "outdoor relief" in the manner of food or money.

The Poor Law Unions were funded by the collection of a poor law rate (or tax) from the landowners that was based on the value of their lands. Each Union consisted of several townlands.

General Registrar's Districts/Superintendent Registrar's District
A further sub-division to the Poor Law Unions occurred in 1851 with the creation of *dispensary districts*. These districts were created for the purpose of health care: a doctor was assigned and responsible for the inhabitants within its borders. While these dispensary districts did not affect records at the time, they played an important role in civil registration.

Civil registration—recording births, marriages, and deaths—began 1 January 1864 (non-Catholic marriages had been recorded since 1 April 1845). Dispensary districts became registration districts with the doctors as registrars, under the supervision of a Superintendent Registrar. Superintendent Registrar Districts mirrored the boundaries of the Poor Law Unions.

One of the best resources for identifying which registrar district a townland falls in is JohnGrenham.com. For every townland, the site will supply the County, Civil Parish, Poor Law Union, and Registrar's district.

Civil registration records appear in ledger books. The top of the page identifies the superintendent registrar's district and the registrar's district followed by the name of the Poor Law Union (which usually is the same as the superintendent's district), and finally the county. Because so many of these divisions cross boundaries, you may see mention of *two* counties.

Indexes of vital records supply you with the registrar's district, not the townland. If you are seeking someone with a common name, knowing the registrar's district could eliminate several individuals.

If you only know your ancestor's county, but not the townland, you *can* use the search function for civil registration records at IrishGenealogy.ie: search for a name and use the list of SR Districts displayed on the left to narrow down to just those found within the county known.

District Electoral Division (aka Electoral Divisions)
Within the Poor Law Unions, divisions known as *poor law electoral divisions*, were established. These Electoral Divisions were responsible for submitting one or more individuals to serve as members of the Board of Guardians, who were in turn responsible for the daily operation of the Poor Law Union. As such, there are multiple electoral divisions within a Poor Law Union. Those who served on the Board of Guardians were, as the name suggests, elected to the position. In 1898, these divisions became known as

District Electoral Divisions (DEDs) due to the Local Government Act. This 1898 Act also did away with the above-mentioned Baronies. The term was changed again in 1996 to Electoral Divisions (EDs).

The divisions were intended to be equal in population size and the amount of "rateable" land (i.e., land from which the property taxes were based), thus everyone would have an equal share in the tax for the necessary funds of a Poor Law Union and no one area would be overburdened.

Originally, the 1838 Poor Relief Act required that Electoral Divisions include complete townlands within their boundaries, however, many townlands did not conform to their larger divisions. An amendment to the 1838 Act was passed in 1839 removing this restriction. This is important when working with larger towns, as it resulted in breaking them up into wards for poor law elections: cities like Dublin, Cork, and Belfast were broken into wards due to their size.
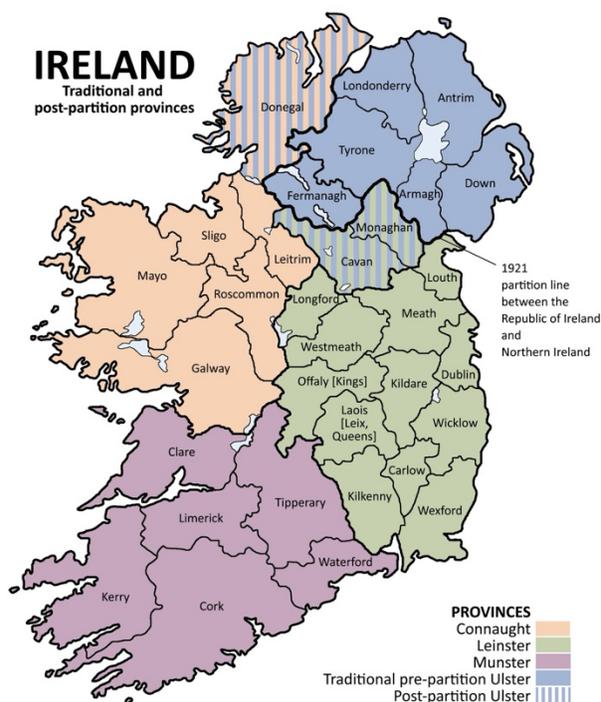
Note: You may see mention of District Electoral Divisions when searching the 1901 or 1911 Irish census.

Counties

Counties are the most easily recognizable division of Ireland. Like so many of the other divisions described, they have their beginnings in the English tradition: the shires. This was England's approach to the political colonization—political and economic domination of the island of Ireland—and traced back to the arrival of the Normans. Shires served as a local government and were administered by sheriffs.

Counties were formed along the following timeline:

- Late 1100s: Dublin
- 1211–12: Waterford with Cork, and Munster
- 1232: Kerry and Louth (known as Oriel)
- 1247: Connacht
- 1254: Tipperary and Limerick
- 1292: Roscommon (created out of Connacht)
- 1297: Kildare and Meath
- 1300: Antrim and Down
- 1306: Carlow (previously known as the Liberty of Carlow)
- 1543:* Westmeath
- 1557: Laois (originally Queens County until 1922)
- 1565: Longford
- 1568-1578: Clare, Galway, Mayo, and Sligo (from Co. Connacht)
- 1585: Tyrone, Fermanagh, Cavan, Monaghan, Armagh, and Donegal
- 1606: Wicklow, Cork (from Waterford)

IRELAND
Traditional and post-partition provinces

PROVINCES
Connaught
Leinster
Munster
Traditional pre-partition Ulster
Post-partition Ulster

*The immigration and settlement of Plantations from 1550 to 1600 was the reason for the renewal in establishing counties after a gap of more than two hundred years. The ongoing creation of counties was in part England's attempt to extend their form of law and governance, while diminishing the control of Gaelic and Anglo-Norman families.

Provinces

The geographical "units" now known as the four provinces of Ireland trace back to before the arrival of the Normans. The boundaries of these large divisions were predominantly determined by the Irish families who held the most influence of the territories. Few realize that there were originally five such territories, known in Gaelic as *cúigí* (fifth parts). The family of Uí Néill held sway over Ulster and Meath, O Brien ruled Munster, O Conor had heavy influence over Connacht, and the Macmurrough-Kavanagh dynasty ruled Leinster. Eventually the fifths of Meath and Leinster merged in large part due to The Pale stretching between the two.

The Pale was the seat of English rule and stretched from Dundalk in Louth to Dublin. It was ruled by the Norman lords and the perimeter in some areas was identified by ditches and fences, thus earning it the name The Pale (from the Latin *palus* which means stake).

The change from *cúigí* (fifths) to provinces was the decision of English record-makers to call them provinces, taking it from the Roman imperial *provinciae*.

Of the four provinces, Ulster was the most dramatically affected by the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 6 December 1921, which formally created the Irish Free State. The six counties that made up Northern Ireland (Antrim, Down, Armagh, Londonderry, Tyrone, and Fermanagh) were all that the unionists felt they could keep under control, which is why the other original counties of Cavan, Donegal, and Monaghan were included in what became the Republic of Ireland.

Census Records

Census records have long been a valuable tool for family historians. Unfortunately, Irish census records prior to 1901 are few and far between. Though census enumerations for the entire island began in 1821 and were taken decennially through 1911, many of the records were destroyed by fire at the Public Record Office at Four Courts in Dublin in 1922 (see Bibliography for a webinar on this). The fire destroyed most of the 1821, 1831, 1841, and 1851 censuses. What fragments survive are searchable on the National Archives of Ireland website (https://nationalarchives.ie/collections/search-the-census-c19/). The 1861, 1871, 1881, and 1891 censuses had already been destroyed by order of the government. As such, only the 1901 and 1911 survive in their entirety. These are available via the National Archives of Ireland website (https://nationalarchives.ie/collections/search-the-census/).

Taxation Records

In the early 19th century, Ireland's property taxes were valued by a local Grand Jury system. Each grand jury consisted of nearly two dozen of the largest landholders in the county. At the time, there was no consistency for determining taxes, which caused resentment among landowners and tenants. A portion of collected taxes also supported the state church—the Church of Ireland—which served a minority of residents in most areas.

Tithe Applotment

With the Tithe Composition Act in 1823, landowners and farmers who lived on at least an acre of land—regardless of their religion—were "tithed" to pay (in cash) a tenth of their produce to the Church of Ireland clergy. While not an official tax, the result was much the same. This resulted in unrest, especially among Roman Catholics and Presbyterians who had spent the previous century also dealing with penal laws. The tithe system was abolished in 1838.

With the passage of the Tithe Composition Act, came three property valuations acts:

- The Townland Valuation of 1826 – created tithe applotment volumes
- Tenement Valuation of 1846 – resulted in Griffith's Primary Valuation
- Tenement Valuation of 1852 – resulted in Griffith's Primary Valuation

Griffith's Primary Valuation

The printed books of Griffith's Primary Valuation summarize the details gathered by the valuators for each land holding in every townland and civil parish in Ireland. Within the eight columns, the information is arranged as follows:

1. Number and letter of Reference to the Ordinance Survey map
2. Names of Townland and Occupiers
3. Names of Immediate Lessors
4. Description of Tenement
5. Areas in Acres, Roods, Perches
6. Rateable Annual Valuation of Land
7. Rateable Annual Value of Buildings
8. Total Annual Value

Note: Not all individuals are listed by name in Griffith's.

There are some individuals who are not included:

- City dwellers living in "flats" or apartments; listed as "Lodgers" next to the occupiers' names
- "Unnamed occupiers" are usually associated with occupations

Socio-Economic Status of Ancestors

The descriptions of the lands, coupled with acreage and valuations offers insight into your ancestor's living conditions.

Valuation Information	What it says about your ancestor/their home
House valued at 15s, 10s, 8s, or less	One or two room structure with mud walls and a thatched or turf roof
Living on less than 5 acres	Frequently referred to as a "cottier" or "laborer"; in some situations, the laborer worked on the landlord's land for a few pence a day. Tenancy was "year by year," aka "tenant at will."

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| House with a valuation of £2 or £5	Walls built of stone or brick with a thatch roof; some might have a second level or "dormer."
Living on a lot of 5 to 30 acres	Small or medium farms; the tenant usually paid their rent in cash. An occupier considered to be a medium farmer usually had a lease.

Records of the Poor

The passage of the Poor Relief Act, enacted 31 July 1838, created Poor Law Unions (PLUs), *see above*. From these PLUs, some records have survived offering insight into the lives and vital data of our Irish ancestors.

Identifying Poor Law Unions

The best way to identify the PLU is to know the townland. Because there are so many townlands that have similar names, John Grenham's *Irish Ancestors* website (www.johngrenham.com) is an invaluable resource. Just type in the name of the townland and receive the corresponding County, Civil Parish, PLU, Registrar's District, and Barony for that place. Keep in mind that the spellings of many of these townlands have varied over the years. Fortunately, the website allows you to use wildcards (*). You can search all the counties or limit the search to a specific county, which is best if you have an idea of what county your ancestors originated.

There are also published volumes that can provide the same information, including *General Alphabetical Index to the Townlands and Towns, Parishes and Baronies of Ireland, Based on the Census of Ireland for the Year 1851*. Originally published in 1861, it has been reprinted several times and is available online (see Bibliography).

Like John Grenham's website, the published volume supplies important jurisdictional columns for each townland or town, plus the sheets of the Ordnance Survey Maps on which you can find the place and area in the English acre measurement (acres, rods and perches). Understanding the size of an area can be useful when thinking about other resources that may survive. And while much of the 1851 Census of Ireland was destroyed in 1922, the index also includes information about volume and page within that census.
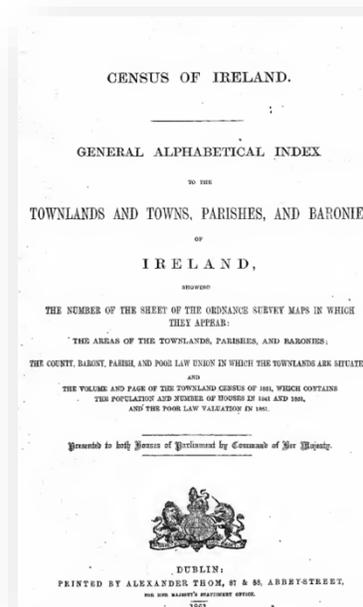
Records

Many records were created as part of the PLUs and workhouse scheme. Those that provide genealogical information include:

- Minute Books
- Rate Books
- Returns of Births and Deaths
- Registers
  - Workhouse Indoor Relief
  - Outdoor Relief

Minute Books

As the name implies, Minute Books record the minutes of the operation of the Poor Law Union, including information about supplies needed; weekly returns of the number of people admitted, discharged, sick, deceased, or born in the workhouse; and summaries of correspondence received. In some situations, you may also find Rough Minute Books which contain much the same information though not as organized. For many PLUs, especially in the south and west, these may be all that survive. Though they may mainly supply statistics, you should still examine them as they sometimes provide names of individuals.

Rate Books

Funding for the PLU services was generated through a tax known as *poor rates*. The tax was assessed on the occupiers of the land and buildings within the DED. Similar to Griffith's Valuation, Rate Boks supply:

- Location and description of each tenement
  - Area
  - New annual value
- Name of occupier
- Name of immediate lessor
- Liability for rates

During the Great Famine, these Rate Books may act like a bridge between the Tithe Applotment books of the 1820s and 1830s and Griffith's Primary Valuation which took place between 1848 and 1860. Unfortunately, of all the records created, Rate Books survive for only five PLUs during the Great Famine.

Indoor Relief Registers

As the name implies, these registers recorded information for those who entered a workhouse; a last resort for paupers and others. During the Great Famine, registers for only twenty-three PLUs survive, predominantly in the north and east. The information on the inmates can be quite thorough and include:

- Admission number
- Name and surname
- Sex
- Age
- Marital status for adults (single, married, widow or widower)
- Family situation of children (orphaned, deserted, illegitimate)
- Employment/Calling (aka occupation)
- Religious denomination
- Description of disability if such exists
- Given name of either wife or husband
- Number of children
- Condition of the pauper upon admission (clothing, clean or dirty, etc.)
- Electoral division (DED) and townland of which the inmate was a resident
- Date admitted (or date of birth if a baby born in the workhouse)
- Date when discharged (or date of death if they died in the workhouse)

Outdoor Relief

Sometimes also referred to as Out-Relief registers, these records contain information on relief provided individuals who did not actually enter the workhouse (a system begun in 1847 and a direct result of the famine). As mentioned elsewhere, Indoor Relief—active admittance to the workhouse—began with the 1838 Poor Relief Act. It was believed that this would eliminate anyone who was lazy from getting aid. Following the horrendous winter of 1846/47 and the effects of the famine, however, Out-Relief became an option as most of the workhouses were beyond capacity. The extension to the law was enacted 8 June 1847

as Poor Relief (Ireland) Act (10 & 11 Vict. c. 31) with the main purpose to offer relief for those who could still live on their own, but required assistance.

Like so many of the other records generated under the PLUs, there are very few for the period of the Great Famine—just five. However, if you do find that one exists for your ancestor, you may discover the following information:

- Name of the person
- Date when relief supplied
- Sex
- Age
- Employment

- Marital status (married, single)
- Name of wife of husband
- Number of children
- Date of application for relief
- Electoral division (DED) and townland of residence

Returns of Births and Deaths

Not often found, these volumes offer exact dates of birth and/or death sometimes from those in the workhouse. For those that are available during the years of the Great Famine, they offer complete dates of either birth or death in a period that predates the inception of civil registration for Ireland.

Land Records

Registry of Deeds

The Registry of Deeds opened in Dublin in 1708, as part of the Penal Laws of the time that denied Roman Catholics certain rights (including land ownership) to force conversion to Protestantism (for more on Penal Laws and religion in Ireland, see the Bibliography). Prior to the opening of the Registry of Deeds, the recording of deeds had not been required. The Registry's function was to provide evidence of legal title if ownership was disputed. Most deed holders during this early period were members of the Church of Ireland—something to keep in mind when seeking potential records on ancestors, especially in the 18th century.

In his book *Tracing Your Irish Ancestors*, John Grenham points out that, "by 1832, 586,983 deeds had been registered, and a hundred years later the total had risen to two and a quarter million." And though few of our ancestors may have owned land, it may be possible to trace the family who remained in Ireland and perhaps acquired lands later.

Like the deeds generated in the American Colonies, later the United States of America, there were two copies of the deeds created—one for the grantor (seller) and one for the grantee (buyer). In Ireland one of the individuals involved in the sale would have a *memorial* (basically a copy) of the original made. This would then be witnessed by two individuals, one of whom had to have witnessed the original deed. Unlike deeds recorded by clerks in the United States which are to be an exact duplicate, the laws for memorials required just the inclusion of:

- Date of deed
- Names and styles of address (such as titles) of the parties and the witnesses
- Locations of the properties
- Changes brought about by the deed (could be in summary form)

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Originally there were two indexes used by the Registry; both are incomplete. One index is arranged by grantor's name (the seller), the other index is by townland. There was no index by grantee (buyer) making it difficult to find records, however, there an online project is now indexing memorials with the names of the grantees. On the Registry of Deeds Index Project Ireland (https://irishdeedsindex.net/), you can search:

- Main index entries – a name index for the memorial transcriptions books held by the Registry of Deeds
- Grantors index transcriptions – transcriptions of the Registry of Deeds' grantors index (mentioned above)
- Townland indexes – transcriptions of the Registry of Deeds' townland index (mentioned above)
- Memorials transcriptions

Note: The indexing for this site is done by volunteers and likewise it is not complete, but it is a place to start.

Landed Estates

Irish landed estates began in the 17th century with the Plantation of Ulster. The practice was continued through the Cromwellian Restoration and the Williamite Land Settlements. This system of land ownership allowed single individuals to hold title to lands ranging from 1,000 acres to 100,000 acres and then lease parcels to famers and other tenants. The system was in effect until Acts of Parliament began to break up these estates in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Owners of the larger estates (upwards of 100,000 acres) were usually members of the aristocracy and may have had several estates in Ireland and Britain. Records of these larger estates tend to survive.

The smaller estates of 1,000 to 3,000 acres were often owned by more modest farmers. These records may not survive or may be incomplete.

Note: Almost all landowners were members of the Church of Ireland.

Understanding the Landed Estate System

The system is comprised of two main parties: Landowners and Tenants

Landowners	Lessee/Tenant
• Entered into leases with individuals/tenants • May have used agents/middlemen (aka jobbers) to handle the leases and day-to-day issues	• Entered into leases with landowner • Had to pay set rents 2 times a year – usually May 1 and November 1 • May have had a specific number of years on the lease (three-lives, 21 years, 31 years, etc.) • May have then rented some of their parcel of land to sub-tenants or cottiers.

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What are Estate Records?

Estate records refer to a variety of ledgers, letters, maps, and more that were routinely generated in the running of a large, landed estate, especially if the landowner was a member of the aristocracy. These records are often the only source available for identifying those Irish ancestors of the 18th and 19th centuries. They may also be the only record set available for searching for your poor ancestors and due to the recorded yearly rents, provide a year-to-year location for your ancestor.

However, these records do not exist for all of Ireland, and some of the smaller landowners' records may have been destroyed. Other records may still be in private hands. They are also seldom indexed requiring the researcher to be tenacious. Types of records include:

- Leases and lease books
- Rentals, rent books, and tenant lists
- Maps
- Correspondence

- Emigration lists and eviction records
- Account books
- Manor Court Records

Anatomy of a Lease

Leases are one of the most important records generated, as they may list family relationships. The primary items you want to identify and analyze include:

- Name of the lessor
  (the landowner or the middleman)
- Name of the lessee (the tenant)
- Location of the farm
- Rent to be paid

- Tenure of the lease (length of the lease)
- Conditions required of the lessee (may be limitations on what can be done on the property or sometimes required improvements)

Rental Books

Rental books usually list the townland of the property, the name of the tenants, and the rents that have been paid and if there are any arrears. Sometimes you will also see change in tenancy or a list of cottiers living on the property. These volumes are incredibly valuable when researching your ancestors before census records in Ireland, especially if the church records don't date back far enough.

Correspondence

Usually, the correspondence records are between the landlord and any agents he may have. Sometimes the correspondence has more to do with the demesne, but you may discover information about what the day-to-day life was like for the tenants.

Emigration and Eviction Records

The first clues to a family emigrating to America or being evicted are usually found in newspapers. Once those clues are found, however, you may be able to turn to rent books or other account ledgers to see if you can determine what happened.

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Account Books

The account books of most landed estates have more to do with the landowner's private abode (upkeep, purchases, etc.). These should not, however, be dismissed as the landowner may have hired tenants to complete work on the property.

Manor Court Records

Most manors conducted their own court proceedings, especially in the 17th century. Serving on a jury of Court Leet was sometimes one of the conditions included in a lease. With the introduction of a criminal justice system and magistrates, many of the manor courts were relegated to civil proceedings often involving lack of payment for services or goods or fines for disobeying rules of the manor.

Landed Estates Court Rentals

The Great Famine affected far more than the health of the Irish population; it also undermined the economic viability of the large estates that dominated the countryside. Many landlords, unable to manage mounting debts and declining rents, faced financial collapse. In response, the Encumbered Estates Court was established in 1849, allowing landowners to apply to have their estates sold to escape bankruptcy. The resulting "sales catalogues," created to market these properties, now serve as valuable sources of information for those researching their ancestors. Sales catalogues typically includes the following:

- Title Page
- Brief descriptive particulars of the estate
- Tenures of the lots

- Conditions of sale
- Maps
- List of rentals

And each page of rentals includes the following:

- Denomination
  (townland or location of the land)
- Tenant's name
- Gale days
- Yearly rents

- Quantity of land
- Tenure of the tenant
  (fee farm, lease in years, lease in lives)
- Additional observations
  (may name roads nearby, etc.)

These records are in a variety of places including the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), National Library and National Archives (Dublin) and also on FindMyPast.com.

Identifying Estates

Consult local and county histories to identify estates that may have existed in the place and time of your ancestors. Several Irish genealogy guides listed in the bibliography are also extremely useful in determining if a particular townland is covered by landed estate records. You may also find information about various estates from NUI Galway and the 1876 Landholders List—both of which are online and found in the list of online resources at the end of this handout.

Probate Records

Most wills and administration records were handled under the authority of the Consistorial Courts. Overseen by the Church of Ireland, the records were held in the local diocese until 1857. With the abolishment of the testamentary authority of the Church of Ireland, these records were moved to the

Public Record Office in Dublin and were among the records destroyed in 1922. A few survived. (See links in Bibliography). Estates worth more than £5 in a second diocese were handled by the Prerogative Court.

With the passage of The Probate Act (1857) testamentary authority was given to the Principal Registry in Dublin along with eleven District Registries. Like the system in place under the Church of Ireland, the district registries handled the bulk of the estates, with the Principal Registry handling those estates previously handled by the Prerogative Court, along with estates in Dublin and the surrounding area. The districts transcribed the wills into registers before sending the original along to the Principal Registry.

While much of the early records were destroyed in the 1922 fire, during the 1800s, Sir William Betham, Ulster King of Arms, prepared an index of testators up to 1810, but he also abstracted the family information of many wills before 1830 into notebooks. The original notebooks are at the National Archives, the FamilySearch Library had microfilms of his many notebooks which are now available digitally online as "Ireland, Betham Genealogical Abstracts, 1179-1830" (see Bibliography).

The National Archives of Ireland website offers several links to searchable databases of indexes and surviving probate records. For those researching in Northern Ireland, you will want to search the PRONI Names page (https://apps.proni.gov.uk/ProniNames_IE/SearchPage.aspx) for Pre-1858 Wills and Administrations (along with some other lists of names).

TIP: If you don't have it, consider getting John Grenham's Tracing Your Irish Roots*, 5th edition. A great resource for all the various records of Ireland.*

Suggested Bibliography

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