

Tracing Scottish Ancestry: Records, Resources, and Research Strategies

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

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Many family historians have Scottish ancestry, but identifying a specific point of origin is often the most challenging phase of research. By understanding Scotland's history and the specific patterns of emigration, researchers can narrow their focus from the entire country to more manageable local regions.

History

Although Scotland has been part of the United Kingdom since 1707, its history is marked by internal rebellions, religious persecution, and shifts in monarchical rule.

- 1603 – Scotland and England share same monarch.
- 1649–1651 – Scotland rejects Oliver Cromwell's Commonwealth, backs Charles II, and is defeated by Cromwell's forces.
- 1707 – Formation of the United Kingdom: includes England and Scotland.
- 1715 – Rebellion of Jacobites.
- 1745 – Second 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 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).
- South Carolina (1684–1686)
 - Stuarts Town, part of a two-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 the English, 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 (sixteenth and seventeenth centuries)
- Orkney (sixteenth and seventeenth centuries)
- Shetland (sixteenth and seventeenth centuries)
- Ulster (by 1650)

Voluntary Immigration

Voluntary migration increased in the 1700s, driven by rising rents and other “push” factors. Most Scottish immigrants during this era (an estimated 25,000) arrived as indentured servants, many settling in the thirteen American colonies, while others ending up in Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island.

One of the most successful Scottish settlements was in the Cape Fear region of North Carolina. In 1739, the colony’s royal governor actively encouraged Scottish immigration by offering a ten-year tax exemption to new arrivals. Highland Scots who came in the early 1700s were typically granted land in the Upper Cape Fear region, while Lowland Scots had already settled in the Lower Cape Fear. Unlike in many other colonies, intermarriage between Highlanders and Lowlanders was relatively common in North Carolina.

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

19th Century

Canada remained a more popular destination than the United States for Scottish emigrants. Between 1820—the beginning of U.S. passenger lists—and 1851, annual arrivals of Scottish immigrants in the United States rarely exceeded 1,000, and in some years fell below 100. In total, only 10,525 Scottish immigrants arrived in the United States during those three decades.

The Clearances

The Clearances (c. 1750–1860) significantly impacted both the Highlands and Lowlands. Landlords evicted tenants to repurpose land for more profitable sheep farming. 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 witnessed the devastation of the Irish famine, many believed that clearances and emigration were the only viable responses when famine struck Scotland. Between 1846 and 1856, roughly 11,000 Scots were “relocated” by their landlords through assisted passage. An additional 5,000 emigrated to Australia with similar support. The number of those who paid their own way—or were assisted by the Colonial Land and Emigration Commission—remains unknown.

Conclusion

When researching Scottish ancestors, it is essential to first understand Scotland’s history, as it often influenced when and where people emigrated. The places where your ancestors settled can also offer clues to their origins, particularly in the early years of migration.

There are many published compilations of Scottish immigrants to Canada and the United States, and these should be consulted carefully—not only for ancestral names but also for information about the sources used. Records relevant to your research may be held in repositories in both Scotland and North America. In some cases, it may be necessary to go beyond online resources and consult manuscript collections in person, especially in Scotland.

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