In 1871, in the tiny cluster of houses known as Carrowntober West, in County Galway, Ireland, Mary Laffey pinned a note to the coat lapel of her daughter, Ellen, listing the address of Ellen’s sister in Fitchburg, Massachusetts. Mary kissed her 11-year-old daughter goodbye and turned her over to a neighbor who was leaving for America.

By 1880, Ellen was working as a domestic servant with the family of Warren and Lillian Emerson in Waltham, Massachusetts. In this article, we will research the life and ancestry of Ellen Laffey, since her family history demonstrates some of records and research techniques used to learn about ancestors who worked in domestic service.

Ellen Laffey’s employer, Warren Emerson, was a dry-goods and carpet merchant in Waltham, and he, his wife Lillian, and their two children lived in a middle-class, two-family house on Lyman Street. In the late nineteenth century, the availability of Irish domestic servants enabled even middle-class women to pursue the ideal of “true womanhood,” i.e., submissiveness and the maintenance of the home as the center of morality. American women regarded performing heavy household chores as demeaning. Consequently, the cult of true womanhood fueled a demand for domestic servants that young Irish women readily filled. But Irish women were generally independent and did not conform to this image of submissiveness; they were regarded as feisty by their employers. Although these differences in outlook often resulted in conflict between American employers and Irish servants, the high demand for their services ensured that Irish domestic servants had the upper hand in negotiations.

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Irish historian David Fitzpatrick has estimated that more than three million women emigrated from Ireland in the nineteenth century. In New York City in the 1860s, 80% of employed Irish women worked as domestic servants. In 1880, 63% of domestic servants in Waltham were born in Ireland, or had parents born in Ireland. Nationwide statistics on the ethnic origins of domestic servants show that African American women made up the largest group, followed by Irish American women. Consequently, many descendants of Irish immigrants have domestic servants in their ancestry.

Ireland was unique among European counties in that women were as migratory as men. Irish women generally travelled not with their parents and families, but alone or with siblings and friends. The typical Irish female immigrant was a single 21-year-old woman. Several factors in Ireland and America influenced Irish women’s decision to leave home. Female emigration was not tied to fluctuations in industrial jobs, but to a ready American market for domestic servants. Social reasons also played a large role in the decision to emigrate. In Ireland after the Famine, marriages were arranged between men with land and women with dowries. Poor and middle class families with several daughters could not accumulate enough money to provide dowries for all of them. Furthermore, opportunities for female employment in rural areas were scant. In America, domestic servants were paid wages in addition to room and board, and these terms enabled Irish female immigrants to accumulate capital. The women’s savings funded the subsequent immigration of their siblings, and helped their families in Ireland pay rents and survive famine and poverty.

Also, young Irish women in America were free to marry whomever they pleased. Many Irish women left poor rural communities of limited economic opportunities and restricted marriage choice, and entered an America in which they could save capital and marry for love.

Researching domestic servants presents special challenges. Naturalization petitions and declarations of intent are some of the most fruitful records for determining an exact origin in Ireland, but few women applied for citizenship. The women had no reason to—they could not vote, and automatically gained citizenship when their husbands were naturalized. Many nineteenth-century genealogical sources, such as pre-1850 censuses, most of the census indexes, and street directories, record only the head-of-household. Women are largely missing from these essential records. Servants lived away from the own families, thereby hindering genealogists from learning about the servants’ siblings and parents. Furthermore, many records do not include maiden names. How many times have we seen a civil death record or a church baptism in which the parents are listed simply as John and Mary Murphy? With maiden names, we might locate these women in a countrywide search in Ireland. We also have trouble tracking female descendants of our immigrant ancestors because their surnames were often common, and it is difficult to determine their married names. It takes a special person to research every Mary Murphy who married in Boston between 1860 and 1900. As a result, our quest for Irish female ancestors is often daunting.

Record sources with information about women

As challenging as the search may be, some records do provide details about our Irish and Irish-American female ancestors:

- Newspapers offer possibilities for finding females, such as in the “Missing Friends” ads in the Boston Pilot. The Search for Missing Friends is a searchable database on our website, AmericanAncestors.org. Likewise, the Boston Pilot contains some death notices and obituaries for females, although fewer for women than men. These notices cover the entire country, not just Boston.
- Occasionally, a census taker recorded the Irish county of origin, as in the 1865 state census of Charlestown, Massachusetts, and the 1860 census for Ward One, Boston.
• Even less frequently, a town clerk or a priest recorded the exact birthplace in Ireland of parents in civil registrations and church records.
• Because domestic servants received wages in addition to room and board, they could accumulate cash, and many opened bank accounts. Banking records, particularly signature records, can document personal information about the depositors, including birthplaces and next-of-kin. These records are often held in local repositories, such as the Massachusetts Historical Society, the Rhode Island Historical Society, and the Boston Athenaeum. The New York Emigrant Savings Bank Records are available on microfilm at NEHGS and online at Ancestry.com.
• Irish domestic servants sent money to their families in Ireland via business agents, such as the unknown agent in the town of Deposit, in Delaware and Broome Counties, New York, whose records were published in Tree Talks.11 Agents recorded the names and addresses of the senders as well as the names and addresses of family members in Ireland. Agents’ records may be found in local and university libraries and repositories.
• Many twentieth-century (but not nineteenth-century) passenger lists provide the birthplaces, last residences, and/or names and addresses of family members in Ireland. Even if your ancestor immigrated in the nineteenth century, she may have travelled home for a visit (and may appear in later passenger arrival lists) or she may have sponsored younger siblings at a later date.
• After 1920, many immigrant women petitioned for citizenship, sometimes many years after their arrival. These post-1920 naturalization petitions often provide the exact birthplace in Ireland, as well as the name of the passenger ship and its date and port of arrival.

**Strategies for researching females**

Develop some compensating research strategies to increase your chances for success.

• Research the people connected with your ancestors. Your ancestor likely lived in a network of friends and relatives. Immigrants generally clustered in neighborhoods of people who came from the same area of the old country. So identifying the origins of neighbors in census records or street directories can be useful. Researching others with the same surname in the same town may also reveal a cluster of people with a common background. You can then look for the naturalizations and gravestones of the identified set of neighbors, cousins, and possible relatives.
• Determine the names of parents, including the maiden name of the mother, from marriage and death records. Using the names of the parents, find any siblings of the immigrant ancestor. The names of godparents in baptism records can also help locate siblings. Once the siblings are identified, you can then look for birth records in Ireland, naturalizations, and entries on ship passenger lists.

**Notes**

5 Hasia R. Diner, *Erin’s Daughters* [note 3], 89.
9 Ibid., 33.
10 Margaret Lynch-Brennan, *The Irish Bridget* [note 2], 90–93.
The case of Ellen Laffey

Ellen Laffey married John Cooley in Waltham, Massachusetts, on November 29, 1882. Her marriage record listed that her parents were Patrick and Mary Laffey. A query was entered on FamilySearch.org using the surname Laffey, the names of Ellen's parents, and the location of Waltham, Massachusetts. The results showed Ellen had three sisters living in Waltham: Catherine, Delia (a nickname for Bridget), and Mary. Vital records for the three sisters showed that their mother's maiden name was Kendrigan or Kindrigan.

Using the pay-per-view website for the Irish Family History Foundation, irish-roots.ie, a search was conducted for the baptism records of Ellen and her three sisters. A record for Bridget (Delia) was located which showed the Catholic parish as Athenry, County Galway.

When the names of the three sisters and their parents were entered in the Ireland, Births and Baptisms, 1620–1881 database on FamilySearch.org, the results produced a transcription of Catherine Laffey's civil birth record. The civil registration district was Tulloughmore, County Galway. A civil registration district can encompass a hundred townlands, so more detail may be required to find the exact birthplace. We borrowed the film (#101138) from the Family History Library.

Using the Ireland, Civil Registration Indexes, 1845–1958 database on FamilySearch.org, we entered the name Catherine Laffey, location Galway, and 1866. The results gave volume and page numbers, so we ordered the microfilm of the civil registration records for 1866 from the Family History Library, then went to the volume and page and found Catherine Laffey's birth record. The information included the exact townland of her parents' residence: Carrowntober West.

With the townland identified, we then went to AskAboutIreland.ie and searched Griffith's Valuation for Patrick Laffey in the townland of Carrowntober West, civil parish of Athenry, County Galway. Griffiths Valuation is a mid-nineteenth century, head-of-household census of land occupiers. Patrick Laffey was located at the address 7B in Carrowntober West. The valuation map for Carrowntober West showed a clachan, i.e. a large cluster of closely spaced houses, at 7B. This arrangement was a remnant of a medieval system of land distribution called rundale. With her father located in Griffith's Valuation, Ellen's Irish origins were firmly established.

After her initial employment, Ellen went on to a long and rewarding life as a wife, mother and grandmother within a large extended family. Ellen (Laffey) Cooley lived to be 83, and her 1943 obituary named her two children, George Cooley and Louise (Cooley) McQuiston. While little was known about Ellen's early life and family at the start of this process, collateral research directed me to a great deal of new information. Discovering that Ellen had several sisters in Waltham was the key; researching them led to Ellen's origins in Ireland. The case of Ellen Laffey demonstrates the resources and strategies genealogists can employ to find the origins and connections of their Irish domestic servant ancestors.

Notes

2. Obituary of Ellen (Laffey) Cooley, Boston Globe, Dec. 20, 1943, 7. Louise (Cooley) McQuiston was the wife of James W. McQuiston, president of the Waltham Bleachery and Dye Works. The McQuiston genealogy has been posted online: Descendants of Matthew McQuiston, gmccuistion.com/matthew8503/index.htm, and Ellen's family recently donated papers and photographs to the Waltham Historical Society.

Ellen Laffey, Waltham, Massachusetts, 1940s. Photo courtesy of her granddaughter, Ellen McQuiston.