

Tracing your Derry~Londonderry Ancestors: A Three-step Guide

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Background

There are 46 parishes in County Londonderry (also known as Derry). You can identify the civil parishes of County Derry, and their associated townlands, at https://www.johngrenham.com/places/civil_index.php by selecting Derry on the map. To gain insight into the economic and social landscape of 19th century Ireland you can consult *A Topographical Dictionary of Ireland*, published in 1837, by Samuel Lewis. Arranged in alphabetical order by parishes, towns and villages this book can be viewed online at <http://www.libraryireland.com/topog/placeindex.php>. An excellent starting point for surname research is the 'Surname Search' option at <https://www.johngrenham.com/surnames> where you can explore the location, frequency, variant spellings and history of Irish surnames.

Research Steps

Step 1 - Search 1901 and 1911 Census Returns

Although census enumerations were carried out every decade from 1821, the earliest surviving complete return for County Derry is that of 1901. The census enumerations of 1901 and 1911, arranged by townland in rural areas and by street in urban areas, can be searched, for free, at www.census.nationalarchives.ie. These returns will list the names, ages and place of birth of all members in a household.

Step 2 – Search for births, marriages and deaths

Civil registration of births, deaths and Roman Catholic marriages in Ireland began on 1st January 1864 while non-Catholic marriages were subject to registration from 1st April 1845. Prior to the commencement of civil registration of births, marriages and deaths in Ireland, family history researchers usually rely on baptismal, marriage and burial registers kept by churches. With civil registration of births and deaths commencing in 1864, and with the patchy survival of church records prior to 1820, gravestone inscriptions can be a vital source for family historians.

The database of Derry Genealogy, at www.derry.rootsireland.ie, should now be examined as it contains the bulk of pre-1922 civil birth and marriage registers for the city and county of Derry, the early baptismal and marriage registers of 85 churches (26 Roman Catholic, 24 Church of Ireland and 35 Presbyterian; the earliest being the registers of St Columb's Cathedral in Derry city, dating from 1642) and gravestone inscriptions from 117 graveyards.

Derry City Cemetery was opened in 1853 and for the following hundred years, until the early 1960s, it was the main burial place for both Protestants and Catholics in the city. Owing to a community volunteer project organised by Derry City and Strabane District Council a database of 45,000 entries transcribed from the burial registers of Derry City Cemetery, dating from 1853 to 1961, can be searched at <https://www.derrystrabane.com/services/cemeteries/cemetery-records>. The burial registers of Derry City Cemetery provide a level of detail that no death certificate records. In addition to name, date of death, age and residence, the registers asked for names of parents and birth place of deceased and provide a burial reference which means all grave plots/headstones can be located by family historians and relatives.

Microfilm copy of church registers can be examined, at no charge, in the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland in Belfast. Their *Guide To Church Records*, which can be accessed on their

website at <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/publications/proni-guide-church-records>, lists, in alphabetical order by civil parish, church registers of all denominations for most parishes in Ulster and their commencement dates, together with their microfilm reference details.

‘Historic’ Civil Records of births 1864-1921, marriages 1845-1921 and deaths 1871-1921 for County Derry can now be searched and viewed at www.irishgenealogy.ie. On searching index, which returns name, event type, year and name of Superintendent Registrar’s District, a pdf of the full register page in which that birth, marriage or death certificate appears can be downloaded by selecting ‘image’.

You can also search and view ‘historic’ civil records of births, marriages and deaths for Northern Ireland at GRONI Online, by purchasing credits, of births (over 100 years old), marriages (over 75 years old) and deaths (over 50 years old) on the website of the General Register Office of Northern Ireland at <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/services/go-groni-online>.

Local newspapers, such as *Derry Journal*, 1825-2002, *Londonderry Sentinel*, 1829-2001 and *Londonderry Standard*, 1836-1872, can be searched and viewed at the British Newspaper Archive, www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk.

Step 3 – Search Census Substitutes

Church registers of baptisms and marriages with their ability to build and confirm family links are viewed as the building blocks of family history. However, in terms of their value in tracing 17th and 18th century ancestors in Derry, they are frequently irrelevant owing to their non-existence. There are no surviving Roman Catholic registers in County Derry prior to 1822. Fourteen Church of Ireland parishes (from 53) and three Presbyterian congregations (from 65) have baptism, marriage or burial registers predating 1800.

Quite often the only realistic strategy in tracing ancestors beyond church registers is to examine surviving census returns and census substitutes, often compiled by civil parish, for any references to a surname or given name of interest. There are a number of census substitutes – such as 1630 Muster Roll, 1663 Hearth Money Rolls, 1740 Protestant Householders Lists, 1766 Religious Census, 1796 Flax Growers Lists, early-19th century Tithe Books, 1831 census, and mid-19th century Griffith’s Valuation – which can be searched for County Derry to confirm the presence of the family name.

The problem with these sources is that they name heads of household only; hence they provide insufficient information to confirm the nature of linkages between named people in these sources. Census substitutes, however, are very useful in confirming the presence of a family name in a particular townland and/or parish (i.e. in suggesting/confirming an ancestral home), and in providing some insight into the frequency and distribution of surnames.

For County Derry, Griffith’s Valuation of 1858/1859 can be searched at www.askaboutireland.ie/griffith-valuation, Valuation Revision Books, 1864-1933 at <https://www.ancestry.co.uk/search/collections/62658>, 1831 census at <https://www.billmacafee.com/1831census.htm>, and Flax Growers’ Lists of 1796 at <https://www.failteromhat.com/flax/derry.php>; while many of the other sources can be searched either at www.derry.rootsireland.ie or www.billmacafee.com. Although such sources will confirm the presence of a name and/or surname of interest they will not confirm if there is a connection between people with the same surname!