



Using Irish naming convention to discover the family of Thomas Delaney in mid-nineteenth century Ireland

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Born and raised in Dublin, Ireland, Susan developed her love of family history growing up enthralled by the stories her mother told. She is now a U.S. citizen, and a longtime resident of Seattle, Washington, where she lives with her Irish husband and their four American-born children. She is a member of the Seattle Genealogical Society, where she facilitates the monthly Irish Special Interest Group.

Susan is a contributing writer for Irish Roots, Ireland's top genealogy magazine. Her four-part series on using Irish naming convention to find ancestors in mid-nineteenth century Ireland was published in each of the magazine's 2024 issues. She presents seminars on researching Irish ancestors at the annual Seattle Irish Festival and to genealogical societies across the U.S.

Researching ancestors in Ireland in the mid-nineteenth century has a reputation for being difficult. This reputation exists for multiple reasons. The era predates civil registration in the country. Nearly all nineteenth century census returns have been lost for one reason or another. Researching births and marriages using church records can be tricky and, for some areas in the country, no church records survive from the early half of the nineteenth century.

However, there are strategies that can help researchers eek the most out of available sources to push through the challenges and navigate how and where to look for information.

The starting point for researching the life of Thomas Delaney

Identify names, dates, and places

Start with the known and research back in time to the unknown

Apply Irish naming convention as a tool

Background information

Thomas was named on the marriage record when Kate married Henry Burge in Dublin on 5 November 1878. Apart from knowing Kate's father's name, information about Kate's family of origin was

unknown. To learn more about Thomas, and guide research into his life in the mid-nineteenth century, clues were extracted from extensive research conducted into the lives of Kate and Henry.

These clues pointed to a geographical location (the townland of Derryduff in Queen's County) and identified a time frame (around 1860-1862 when Kate was likely born) for when to look in records for that location. The goal of the research was to identify Thomas's wife and any other children he may have had aside from his daughter Kate.

Derryduff townland in Queen's County, Ireland – Geographical and historical context

The townland of Derryduff is located in the heart of Ireland's midlands. Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4 pinpoint the location of the townland of Derryduff in Queen's County (present day Laois).



Fig. 1. Map of Ireland showing the outline of 26 counties in the Republic of Ireland with Laois and Dublin indicated.



Fig. 2. County Laois and surrounding counties.

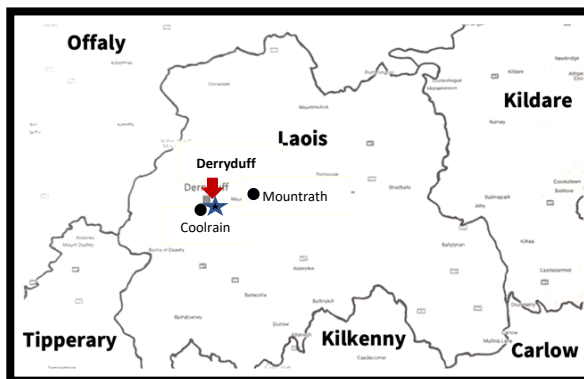


Fig. 3. Map of Laois showing Derryduff townland.



Fig. 4. Map of Derryduff and surrounding townlands.

Derryduff: With an area of 0.54 square miles, or just over 343 acres, Derryduff had a population of 99 people in 1851.¹ By 1891 the number had dropped to 50.²

Coolrain: Located about 1.5 miles to the west of Derryduff is Coolrain, which is both a townland and a village. Derryduff townland is contained within this village.³

Mountrath: Although small in population, Derryduff would have benefited from its proximity to Coolrain and Mountrath, which was the closest market town as well as the local post town.⁴

Queen's County 1850-1880: The Great Famine of 1845-49 devastated the county.⁵ The existing workhouses were overrun by people, destitute and seeking shelter. By 1853, when the local workhouse at Donaghmore opened, many of the poorest people in the area had died or emigrated.⁶ Attempts to recover from the famine were set back with crop failures in the 1860s and 1870s. This continuing hardship and mounting debt for tenants led to tensions with their landlords at a time when political unrest was mounting throughout the country. Local activists, farmers, shopkeepers, and clerics were drawn to the Land League.⁷ This political organization, which sought to help poor farmers by fighting for tenant's rights, ultimately aimed to abolish the landlord system, and enable tenant farmers own the land they worked on.⁸ These tensions amongst tenants and landlords led to the national Land War of 1880-1881, which engulfed Queen's County.⁹ After the Land Act of 1881, which allowed tenants to sue landlords over lease violations, tensions began to settle and, in order to prevent more violence, the British government passed a series of acts through the early 1900s, which improved tenants' rights and eventually led to the transfer of land ownership from the majority of landlords to the people of Ireland.¹⁰

It is during this period from the late 1850s through the 1880s that this research sought to discover the life and family of Thomas Delaney. Thomas was working as a farm laborer in 1878¹¹, which meant he would not have been leasing any land. Given that his surname Delaney was native to Queen's County¹², he was likely working the land of family and neighbors leasing property in Derryduff or surrounding townlands. Researching Thomas's life through church, civil, and census records was helped by having a precise townland to use as a starting point.

¹ "Census 1891 Original Reports: Area, houses, and population – Queen's County." *Central Statistics Office [Ireland]* (<https://www.cso.ie/en/statistics/historicalreports/census1891/>; accessed 5 November 2023).

² Ibid.

³ "Coolrain" *Wikipedia* (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coolrain>; accessed 14 Mar 2023).

⁴ Samuel Lewis, *Topographical Dictionary of Ireland* (London: S. Lewis and Company, 1837, Vol I), 398.

⁵ "A short history of Laois." *Laois County Council* (<https://laois.ie/departments/heritage/history-of-laois/>; accessed 8 November 2023).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Vincent McDonnell, *Ireland: Our Island Story*. (Cork: The Collins Press, 2011), 112.

⁹ A short history of Laois." *Laois County Council*

¹⁰ "Historical Insights: Irish Land Acts" *Ancestry* (<https://www.ancestry.com/historicalinsights/irish-land-acts/person/1930011053:1030:26835191>; accessed 8 November 2023).

¹¹ Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, "Civil Records," online database, Civil Marriage Record for Henry Burge and Kate Delaney, 5 November 1878, Civil registration District: Dublin South, Group Registration ID 2639411, Entry on register: No. 32, *Irish Genealogy* (<https://www.irishgenealogy.ie/en/>; accessed 27 August 2023); The GRO Public Research Facility, master indexes and digital images, Werburgh Street, Dublin 2, D08 E277, Ireland.

¹² Edward MacLysaght, *The Surnames of Ireland*, Sixth Edition. (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1991).

The importance of identifying a precise townland in Irish genealogical research

There are over 61,000 townlands in Ireland.¹³ They are the smallest units of land dating back to Gaelic Ireland in the pre-Christian era (which means prior to the 5th century in Ireland). Although not technically an administrative division in the country, a townland is the most important of geographical units for researching Irish ancestors. Townlands:

- **provide a traceable address** for Irish ancestors up to the present day, especially for ancestors who lived in rural or less populated areas.¹⁴
- **help identify ancestors in land records by location.** As well as being the smallest geographical units, townlands are also the smallest land divisions of civil administration. They were used as the basis for:
 - issuing plantation grants in the 16th and 17th centuries¹⁵
 - regular land transactions such as the setting of rents¹⁶
 - major land valuations, surveys, and censuses.¹⁷

Identifying an ancestor's townland pinpoints small, localized rural areas in the land records, even down to the precise homes and fields where ancestors lived and worked.

- **enable searches for ancestors in civil and church records.**

Civil records: By knowing the townland from which an ancestor came, it is then possible to identify the registration district for an ancestor so that they can be located in civil birth, marriage, and death records.

Church records: Identifying a townland is the first step in locating the local parish to which the townland belongs. Once the local parish(es) relevant to an ancestor has been located it is possible to search for individuals in church parish records and hopefully find baptism and marriage records in church registers.

- **help distinguish between same named individuals.** Irish naming patterns led to large numbers of people with the same common names living in the same geographical area, appearing in the same records. Townlands provide a way to distinguish more precisely between individuals with the same names. As townlands are small geographical units, they help distinguish between same-named people by placing people in very specific small areas.

¹³ Based on data from: Irish OpenStreetMap, *Irish Townlands* (<https://www.townlands.ie> : accessed 6 November 2023).

¹⁴ "What is a townland?" *Ireland Reaching Out* (<https://irelandxo.com/ireland-xo/news/irelandxo-insight-what-townland> : accessed 14 Apr 2022).

¹⁵ "Townlands in Ireland" *Roots Ireland* (<https://www.rootsireland.ie/townlands-in-ireland/> : accessed 14 Apr 2022).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Irish naming convention

An effective strategy for researching in the mid-1800s is directly related to another challenge in Irish research: multiple people with the same name in a geographical area.

A traditional naming convention (see Table 1) was often used by Irish parents until the late nineteenth century and was still used into the early twentieth century, though less reliably.¹⁸ The pattern of naming children resulted in many individuals with the same name living close to each other. This makes it challenging to tell same named individuals apart in the records.

Table 1: Irish Naming Convention	
Naming sons	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• First son usually named after the father's father• Second son usually named after the mother's father• Third son usually named after the father• Fourth son usually named after the father's eldest brother• Fifth son usually named after the mother's eldest brother
Naming daughters	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• First daughter usually named after the mother's mother• Second daughter usually named after the father's mother• Third daughter usually named after the mother• Fourth daughter usually named after the mother's eldest sister• Fifth daughter usually named after the father's eldest sister

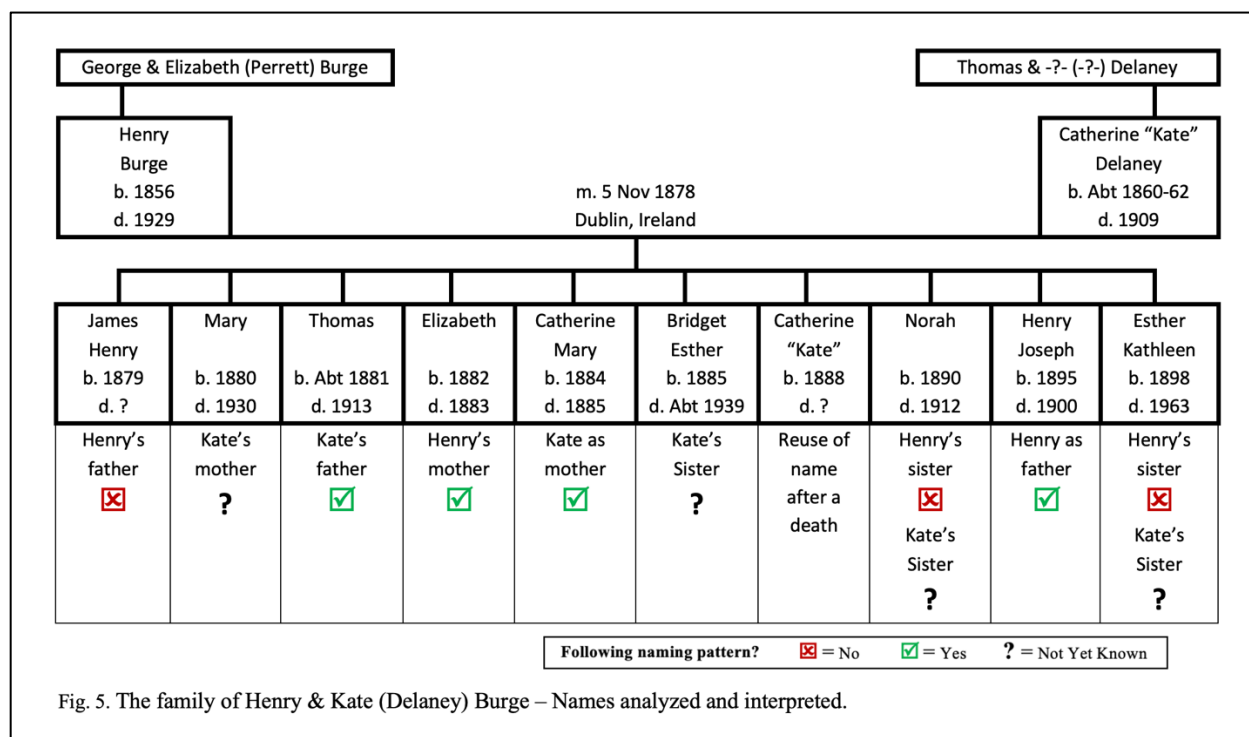
Using Irish naming convention as a tool to meet its own challenge

Fortunately, the very same naming convention can provide information about what names are likely to be found within any three-generation family unit. By looking at the names a couple gave to their children (see fig. 5), it is possible to speculate, often successfully, about names for siblings and parents of the couple (see fig. 6).¹⁹ This speculation is grounded in the culture and tradition of Ireland around the importance of naming. There is great benefit when researching to think broadly about cultural context and use known information to speculate about Irish ancestors, particularly when there is little information known about them, or there are fewer records to consult further back in the early nineteenth century. Looking at all possible clues surrounding an ancestor can potentially further the research.

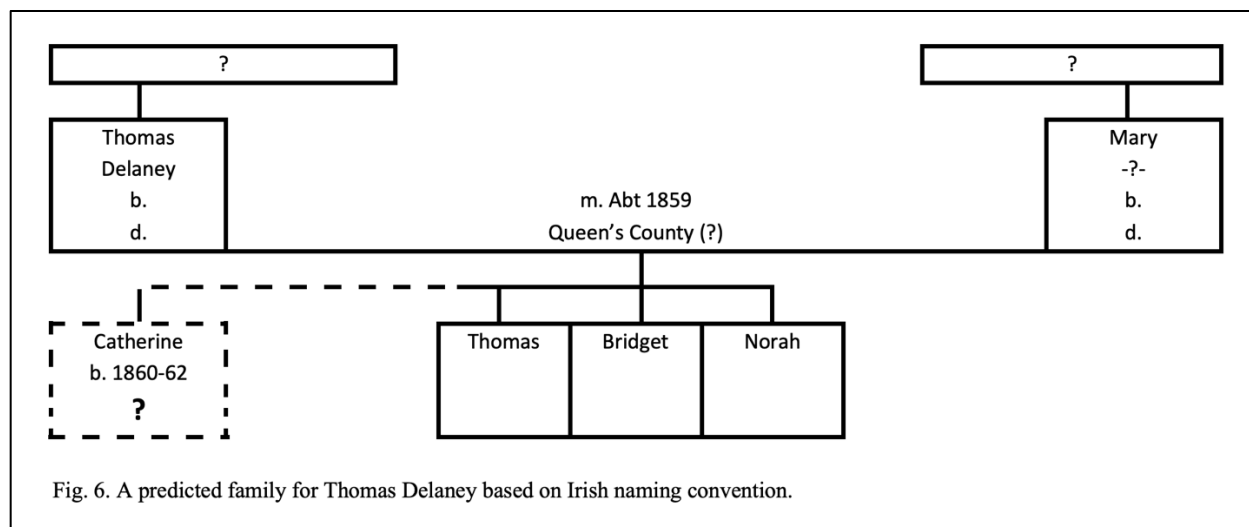
¹⁸ "Irish Naming Conventions and Baptism Traditions" *Ireland Reaching Out* (<https://www.irelandxo.com/ireland-xo/news/irish-naming-conventions-and-baptism-traditions> : accessed 22 Dec 2022).

¹⁹ Ibid. Also, "Irish Naming Customs" *Family Search* https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Ireland_Names_Personal : accessed 14 September 2023).

Irish naming convention – Analysis and interpretation



Irish naming convention – Predicting a family



Roman Catholic Church records

The importance of Roman Catholic church records for research in Ireland in the 1800s is related to limitations of other records for the time:

- Civil registration began in Ireland in 1845 for non-Catholic marriages, extending to all births, marriages, and deaths from 1864. It took another couple of decades before a high level of compliance was reached amongst the Irish Catholic population.
- Census taking in Ireland began in 1821 and continued every ten years throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. For various reasons, almost all census records in the nineteenth century have been lost.

Optimizing searches in the Catholic baptismal records

Images of original baptismal and marriage registers are available for free on the website of The National Library of Ireland (<https://registers.nli.ie/>). However, the collection is unindexed and incomplete. In addition, fewer than half the parishes in Ireland kept burial records. Most of those few that exist cover the northern half of the country.

Searching parish records is made easier using online indexes:

- Findmypast (FMP)
- Ancestry
- Irishgenealogy.ie (for Dublin City, County Kerry, County Carlow, County Cork (the Diocese of Cork and Ross except most of Cork City)²⁰)
- RootsIreland
- FamilySearch

Resources for identifying Catholic Parishes:

- The RC Parish-Townland Database <https://www.swilson.info/rcparishlink.php>
- The parishes map on the NLI website
- A New Genealogical Atlas of Ireland by Brian Mitchell

Case study:

Where was Thomas Delaney's daughter, Kate (Delaney) Burge, baptized?
The search for other children born to couples with Thomas Delaney as the father
Did Thomas Delaney have a namesake son?
Did Thomas & Mary (Nolan) Delaney have other children?
A potential family for Thomas Delaney and his daughter Kate
Where is the marriage record of Thomas Delaney?

²⁰ "What records are available online?" *Irishgenealogy.ie* (<https://www.irishgenealogy.ie/en/church-records/about/what-church-records-are-available-online>: accessed 31 May 2024).

Civil registration

Using civil registration as a tool to fill the information gap from the late 1700s to 1864

Case study:

Did Thomas & Mary (Nolan) Delaney die before 1901?

Civil birth and death records for children of Thomas & Mary (Nolan) Delaney

Other considerations based on findings

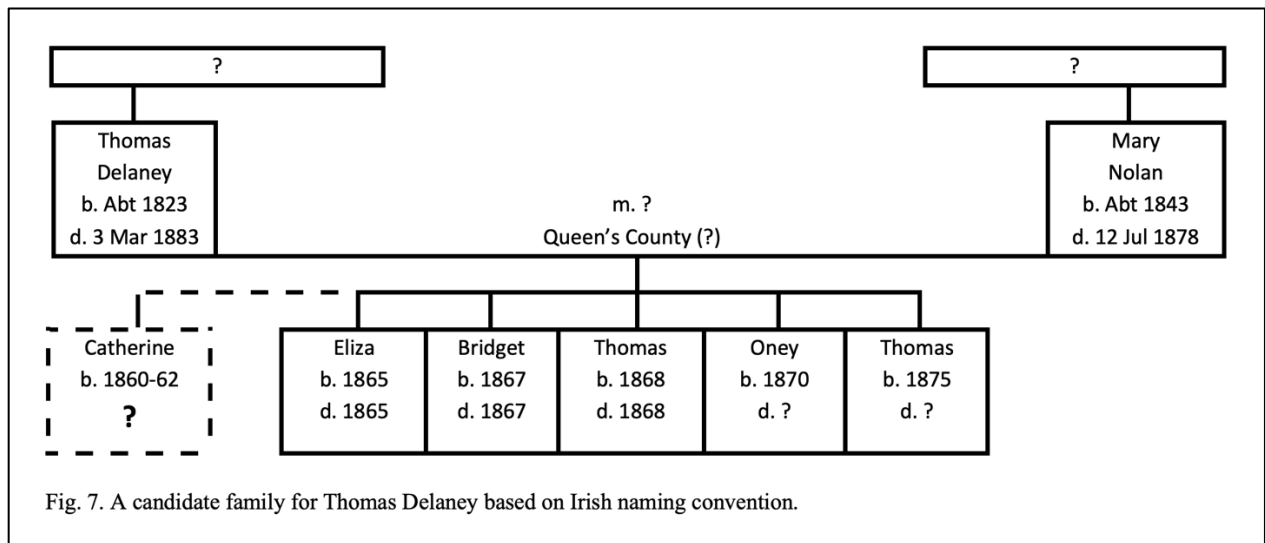
Case study:

Was Mary (Nolan) Delaney the mother of Catherine “Kate” (Delaney) Burge?

Was Mary (Nolan) Delaney the second wife of Thomas Delaney?

Was John Delaney, informant at his father Thomas’s death in 1883, the son of Thomas and an unknown first wife?

Conclusion: Irish naming convention – A candidate family



Future research

Irish Census records: 1901 and 1911

Irish Census reports: 1841 to 1911

Court records

Prison registers

Workhouse records

Vaccination records

Dog licenses

Newspapers

Land records

DNA

Resources

Learn about family research

Book: Smith, Drew. *Generation By Generation: A Modern Approach to the Basics of Genealogy*.

Baltimore: Genealogy Publishing Company, 2023.

Book: Watson, Eliza. *Genealogy Tips & Quips*. Self-published, Elizabeth Watson, 2020.

Book: Eichholz, Alice (editor). *Red Book: American State, County, and Town Sources*, Third Edition.

Provo: Ancestry Publishing, 2004.

Facebook Group: The Genealogy Squad <https://www.facebook.com/groups/genealogysquad/>

Magazine: Family Tree Magazine (U.S.) <https://familytreemagazine.com/>

Webinars: Legacy Family Tree Webinars <https://familytreewebinars.com/>

Website / Podcast / Book: Diana Elder & Nicole Dyer: Research Like a Pro <https://familylocket.com/>

Learn about Irish research

Book: Grenham, John. *Tracing Your Irish Ancestors*, 5th Edition. Dublin: Gill Books, 2019.

Book: Santry, Claire. *The Family Tree Irish Genealogy Guide: How to Trace Your Ancestors in Ireland*. Cincinnati: Family Tree Books, 2009.

Book: MacLysaght, Edward. *The Surnames of Ireland*, Sixth Edition. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1991.

Magazine: Irish Roots magazine <https://www.irishrootsmedia.com/>

Magazine article: Susan McKee, "Using Irish naming convention to discover the family of Thomas Delaney in mid-nineteenth century Ireland," *Irish Roots* Issue No 129 (2024 First Quarter): 28-29.

Magazine article: Susan McKee, "Using Irish naming convention to discover the family of Thomas Delaney in mid-nineteenth century Ireland Part 2 of 4; Searching Catholic Church Records," *Irish Roots* Issue No 130 (2024 Second Quarter): 28-29.

Magazine article: Susan McKee, "Using Irish naming convention to discover the family of Thomas Delaney in mid-nineteenth century Ireland Part 3 of 4; Searching Civil Records," *Irish Roots* Issue No 131 (2024 Third Quarter): 28-29.

Magazine article: Susan McKee, "Using Irish naming convention to discover the family of Thomas Delaney in mid-nineteenth century Ireland Part 4 of 4; Research Summary, Analysis and Next Steps," *Irish Roots* Issue No 132 (2024 Fourth Quarter): 28-29.

Research Guide: Gleeson, Maurice. *Tracing Your Ancestors: Irish Research A Practical Guide*.

Ontario: Moorhead Magazines, 2018. [<https://familyrootspublishing.net/products/tracing-your-ancestors-irish-research-a-practical-guide-pdf> \$8.50 for PDF eBook / \$9.95 for Print Edition]

Website John Grenham – Irish Ancestors <https://www.johngrenham.com/> [Paid/Some free searches]

Website: Ireland Reaching Out <https://www.irelandxo.com/>

Website: Irish Genealogy Toolkit <https://www.irish-genealogy-toolkit.com/index.html>

Website: Ask about Ireland <https://www.askaboutireland.ie/>

Website: Irish Family History Center <https://www.irishfamilyhistorycentre.com/> [Contains their free digital genealogy magazine *Irish Lives Remembered*]

YouTube channel: John Grenham <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dVLZQdxpGfs>

Learn about Irish history

Book: Clear, Caitriona. *Social change and everyday life in Ireland, 1850-1922*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007.

Book: Duffy, Seán. *Ireland: Atlas of Irish History*, 3rd edition. Cork: Gill & Macmillan, 2013.

Book: Killeen, Richard. *A Timeline of Irish History*. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2003.

Book: McDonnell, Vincent. *Ireland: Our Island Story*. Cork: The Collins Press, 2013.

Learn about Irish geography

Book: Mitchell, Brian. *A New Genealogical Atlas of Ireland, 2nd Edition*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2009.

Online article: “Irish Land Divisions Made Easy” (12 February 2024) *Ireland Reaching Out* (<https://www.irelandxo.com/ireland-xo/news/irish-land-divisions-made-easy> : accessed 13 July 2024).

Online article: Shane Wilson, “Duplicate Place names, Detached Parishes and Half Baronies” (7 December 2022) *SWilson.Info* (<https://www.swilson.info/wp/?p=1535> : accessed 13 July 2024).

Website: Townlands.ie <https://www.townlands.ie/>

Website: Logainm <https://www.logainm.ie/en/> [Irish placenames]

Website: SWilson.info <https://www.swilson.info/>

Website: RC Parish – Townland Database <https://www.swilson.info/rcparishlink.php>

Website: Irish Townland and Historical Map Viewer

<https://osi.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=bc56a1cf08844a2aa2609aa92e89497e>

User's guide: External Guide to using the Osi National Townland and Historical Map Viewer

<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/d982ad85855f41109d9c0c74ef2600f7>

Learn about Irish records

Church records

Books: Ryan, James G., editor. *Irish Church Records*, New Edition. Dublin: Flyleaf Press, 2001.

[Covers various religions in Ireland.]

Catholic parish registers

Free access to original registers and/or indexes:

National Library of Ireland <https://registers.nli.ie/> [Digital images of registers / Not indexed]

Findmypast <https://www.findmypast.com> [Although FMP has paid subscriptions, the Catholic Church indexes are free to access when you create a free account.]

Irishgenealogy.ie <https://churchrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/> [Limited to just a few counties, see website for details.]

FamilySearch <https://www.familysearch.org/en/> [Free site with some Irish Catholic Church records but it's hard to determine what Irish Catholic church records are in the database.]

Paid sites with indexes to Catholic Parish Registers:

Ancestry <https://www.ancestry.com>

Rootsireland.ie <https://www.rootsireland.ie/>

Civil records

Online article: Nicola Morris, "Irish Family History: Civil registration." 26 January 2018. *Free UK Genealogy* (<https://www.freeukgenealogy.org.uk/news/2018/01/26/irish-family-history-civil-registration/> : accessed 11 September 2023).

IrishGenealogy.ie – Homepage <https://www.irishgenealogy.ie/en/>

Irish genealogy.ie – Search the civil records <https://civilrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/civil-search.jsp>

Census records

1901/1911 Census of Ireland – National Archive of Ireland

<http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/search/>

Land records

Book: Paton, Chris. *Tracing Your Irish Ancestors Through Land Records: A Guide for Family Historians*. Yorkshire: Pen & Sword, 2021.