

Tracing your Donegal Ancestors: A Three-step Guide

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Background

There are 52 parishes in County Donegal. You can identify the civil parishes of County Donegal, and their associated townlands, at https://www.johngrenham.com/places/civil_index.php by selecting Donegal 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 Donegal 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.

'Historic' Civil Records of births 1864-1923, marriages 1845-1948 and deaths 1871-1973 for County Donegal 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'.

An excellent starting point in tracing family roots from Donegal is an examination of the database of births, marriages and deaths transcribed by Donegal Ancestry at www.donegal.rootsireland.ie for any references to your ancestors. This database, for example, includes the bulk of pre-1920 civil birth, marriage and death registers for County Donegal and pre-1900 church registers of baptisms, marriages and burials for all denominations (including Roman Catholic, Church of Ireland, Presbyterian and Methodist).

As the search facility on this website is very flexible it means that you should be able to determine if any entries of interest to your family history are held on this database. For example, if you are searching for the baptism/birth of a child you can narrow the search down

by year, range of years, names of parents and by parish of baptism/district of birth. Marriage searches can be filtered by year, range of years, name of spouse, names of parents and parish/district of marriage.

It must be stated, however, that a failure to find relevant birth/marriage entries in this database doesn't mean that the events you are looking for didn't happen in County Donegal. It simply means that they are not recorded in the database; for example, they may be recorded in a church whose registers don't exist/survive for the time period of interest or in a source that has not been computerised or, perhaps, in the database of another county.

Step 3 – Search Census Substitutes

Quite often the only realistic strategy in tracing ancestors beyond church registers (which are the building blocks of family history) is to examine surviving land records and census substitutes, often compiled by civil parish, for any references to a surname or given name of interest.

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, and in providing some insight into the frequency and distribution of surnames.

You can search online, free of charge, a number of important census substitutes for County Donegal. These include:

- Mid-19th century Griffith's Valuation at www.askaboutireland.ie/griffith-valuation
- Early-19th century tithe books at www.titheapplotmentbooks.nationalarchives.ie
- 1796 Flax Growers Lists at <https://www.failteromhat.com/flax/donegal.php>

It must be emphasised such sources will confirm the presence of a name and/or surname of interest but they will not confirm if there is a connection between people with the same surname!

You can also access Donegal Genealogy Resources at <http://donegalgenealogy.com> which offers free online genealogy resources for family research in County Donegal dating from 18th century to early 20th century.

Tracing Inishowen Ancestry

With no Roman Catholic baptismal registers of any parish in Inishowen Peninsula, County Donegal predating 1838 and with heavy concentration of common surnames such as Doherty and McLaughlin you will probably need to rely on local knowledge/oral tradition to take family history back beyond the mid-19th century.

There are 2 people with deep knowledge of family history in Inishowen, namely:

- Seoirse Ó Dochartaigh, www.seoirse.com
Seoirse's book, *Inis Eoghain - The Island of Eoghan: The Place-Names of Inishowen*, published 2011, locates every place name in Inishowen within its townland and parish.
- Jennifer Doherty, Irish Ancestral Tours & Research, www.irishancestral.com.

They can be commissioned to undertake research.