

CFGS Irish Special Interest Group
Meeting Notes, 18 March 2017

Researching in New York City

Many Irish genealogists find researching their immigrant ancestors even more difficult, because they settled in New York City. Trying to locate them in the vast metropolis can be overwhelming, like trying to find a needle in a haystack. The municipal archives are so extensive, even the archivists don't know all the records they have. They span 350 years, created at a variety of locations within the five boroughs that comprise the modern city and were only consolidated into a single repository in the 1900s. Archivists were trained to assist law enforcement investigations, scholarly historians, and members of the media; but, traditionally, they were not trained to be helpful to genealogists. Fortunately, the municipal archives recently established a partnership with the New York Genealogical & Biographical Society to digitize and index their collections.

Genealogical milestones in New York City:

1642 – New Amsterdam records begin, in **Dutch**.

1675 – Common Council established, **English** records begin.

1684 – Earliest surviving **court records**.

1699 – First municipal **property valuations** made for tax purposes.

1708 – **Denization** process allowed foreign-born persons to buy and sell property, but not to inherit or transmit title via a will. Immigrants who came to New York directly from Ireland were not considered “foreigners,” as Ireland was part of the British Empire. The exception would be if they had sojourned in a non-British territory during the Irish diaspora.

1715 – Colonial assembly declared all Protestant aliens could become British subjects by taking an **Oath of Abjuration**, which included swearing loyalty to King George I. Abjurations were conducted individually after this date. These acts are well organized/indexed with other legislation, maintained by the state archives.

1740 – **Naturalization** process defined by British statute. An alien had to live in colony 7 years, then swear an Oath of Allegiance before a local magistrate. These acts are also maintained by the state archives.

1758 – Records begin for municipal charities on Blackwell's Island. The **almshouse records** include ledgers that recorded workhouse labor, inmate biographical information, and medical treatment details.

1774 – Christopher COLLES (1739-1816), a native of Limerick, installed NYC's first system of water pipes. He continued to work as an inventor and engineer in the city for many years, but actually arrived at Philadelphia. Not all Irish immigrants came directly to the city. It was an **economic magnet** for ambitious new arrivals.

1776 – New York’s Irish community was heavily involved in a **plot to assassinate George Washington**. As the British prepared to take the city, Sgt. Thomas HICKEY and Pvt. Michael LYNCH plotted to kill the American general and future first president. Fortunately, their plans were foiled by master spy Hercules MULLIGAN, a native of County Derry.

1785 – St. Peter’s Parish established, **first Catholic church** in New York City. Genealogically significant records are still maintained at the PARISH level within the Archdiocese of New York. (See link at end.)

- 1787 – Baptismal registers begin
- 1802 – Marriage registers begin
- Historical trustee minutes/records are the only records that have been consolidated in the archdiocese’s Chancery Office (1011 First Ave – 19th Floor, NYC 10022). These are important to genealogists beyond general history of a given parish, because they include petitions for:
 - Dispensations for marriage (by a Catholic to a non-Catholic)
 - Sanation – recognition of non-Catholic wedding ceremony and legitimacy of any children.
 - Consanguinity – permission for couples to marry who share a common great-grandparent or closer relative (second cousins). i.e. Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy’s parents!

1795 – first municipal **vital records** begin.

1802 – first **city directory** published.

1815 – Registration of **apprenticeships** begin, partially indexed in NGSQ (Sep 1984), pages 193-198. Since 1937, the state archives has maintained these records in a 38-volume set.

- **Apprentice obligations:** To serve and keep the master's secrets and obey all commands; not to waste his master's goods or lend them to anyone else. He could not buy or sell his own goods, or the goods of others, without license from the master. He was to behave as a faithful apprentice- not to commit fornication, not to marry, no card or dice playing, to avoid alehouses, taverns and playhouses. He was not to absent himself from the master's service. Boys were to serve until the age of 21, girls till the age of 18. Boys were expected to learn the trade of his master. Girls, with rare exception, were to learn the art of housekeeping, in other words, to be a servant. At the expiration of the indenture, both would receive a Bible and a new suit or dress. Children were bound, not only in New York State, but throughout the nation.
- **Role of the master:** To use the utmost of his endeavors to teach his apprentice in the requisite art or trade. He had to provide sufficient food, drink, clothing, housing and washing fit of an apprentice. Cancellation of Indenture: If the child was found to be unsuited, sickly, lazy, insolent, thieving, or ran away. If the master ill-treated the child, moved away, abandoned his trade, or failed to teach it to the youth, failed to provide basic needs, was a drunkard or whipped the child without good cause.

1823 – Earliest **coroner inquest and medical examiner reports**.

1825 – **Alien Depositions** (aka “Letters of Intent”) simplified process of allowing foreign-born residents to buy and sell property, but limited rights to a span of six years from date of filing. These have been abstracted and indexed thru 1848, when state statutes were modified.

1830’s – population explosion resulted in scarcity of low-income housing near mills and wharves, led to construction of **tenements**.

1841 – **Irish Emigrant Society** founded in NYC, to protect recent arrivals. The society eventually established the Emigrant Savings Bank. Its early records were donated to the New York Public Library.

1842 – NYC tenements were declared a public health concern due to **overcrowded** conditions.

1844 – Refugees from the **potato famine** in Ireland began to arrive in the city, adding to overcrowding problems.

1848 – State statute allowed married **women** to buy, hold, and sell property in their own name; thus first time Alien Depositions were made by women. Sadly, these are NOT abstracted or indexed. They have been arranged chronologically (thru 1913) and bound in books maintained by the state archives, but archival staff will not search them for individual names.

Aug 1849 – **“The Irish American,”** a weekly newspaper, began publication; continued until Feb 1915. Regular columns: Heirs Wanted, Military Notes, Irish Marriages & Deaths, Last Week in Ireland, and Information Wanted (similar to “Missing Friends” in Boston Pilot).

Summer 1849 – A **cholera** epidemic swept NYC, killing more than 5,000. The deaths among the poor Irish immigrant community was disproportionately severe.

1850 – 18 members of the Irish Emigrant Society established the **Emigrant Savings Bank**, with headquarters on Chambers Street in NYC. Today, it is the oldest savings bank in the city, and the 9th-largest privately-owned bank in the country. In its early years, the bank collected extensive records of its depositors, eventually filling 59 volumes. These records were donated to the New York Public Library. They have been digitized and indexed.

1859 – Burial of human remains was outlawed in Manhattan, henceforth any dead body entering the city had to be documented with municipal authorities to ensure that it continued on its way to a burial location outside of the city limits. These **“Bodies in Transit”** records are a unique source of information on any relatives who died while away from their hometown, whose remains had to pass thru New York en route to their final resting place. Among the most famous were the abolitionist John Brown and President Abraham Lincoln, but the bulk of the records concern everyday people.

1860 – 25% of New York City’s population was born in Ireland on the eve of the **Civil War**.

1861 – The Civil War Volunteer **Soldiers’ Family Aid Fund** established, and maintained records of assistance rendered thru 1867.

July 1863 – Draft **riots** erupted in NYC, with most of the rioters being Irish Catholics. They remain the biggest civil insurrection in American history.

1872 – first city **cemetery records**.

1892 – “Police Scandal” led to state investigation into Tammany Hall political machine. The **Lexow Committee** was established to take testimony from roughly 700 witnesses, many Irish immigrants.

1919 - The Red Scare led to the creation of the **Lusk Committee**, charged with monitoring potentially seditious groups and activities in New York. The committee ordered an ethnic map of New York City,

printed by the Ohman Map Company. Eleven types of ethnic enclaves were to be shown, ostensibly to guide anti-sedition public policy: Germans, Russian Jews, Italians, Austro-Hungarians, **IRISH**, Chinese, Scandinavians, Near East (including Greeks, Turks, Syrians, and Armenians), French, African Americans, and “mixed” people. Irish enclaves identified: Chelsea, Greenwood, Hell’s Kitchen, Highbridge, Inwood, Knightsbridge, Vinegar Hill, and Woodside.

Bibliography:

- *Finding Your Irish Ancestors in New York City*, by Joseph Buggy (2014).
- *New York Exposed: The Gilded Age Police Scandal That Launched the Progressive Era*, by Daniel Czitrom (2016).
- *Famine Immigrants: Lists of Irish Immigrants Arriving at the Port of New York, 1846-1851*, edited by Ira A. Glazier (1983-6). 7 volumes.
- *New York City Municipal Archives: An Authorized Guide for Family Historians*, by Aaron Goodwin (2016).
- *Irish Passenger Lists, 1847-1871*, by Brian Mitchell (1988).
- *Denizations, Naturalizations & Oaths of Allegiance in Colonial New York*, by Kenneth Scott (1975). Abstracts of original records now housed at state archives.
- *New York Alien Residents, 1825-1848*, abstracted by Kenneth Scott & Rosanne Conway (1978).

Links:

- Archdiocese (RC) of New York – www.archny.org
- New York Genealogical & Biographical Society – newyorkfamilyhistory.org
- New York Irish History Roundtable – www.irishhistory.org
- New York Public Library – archives.nypl.org
- New York State Archives - www.archives.nysed.gov