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# FINDING OVERSEAS ANCESTORS: AN IRISH CASE STUDY

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## START IN THE U.S.!

When you begin researching your immigrant ancestors, look first in the country where they settled to identify the following key items:

- Names (in English, in the original language, in the language used in records)
- Family structure (parents, siblings, spouses, children, any other known relationships)
- Place names and jurisdictions (in English, in the original language, in the language used in records).

## FOLLOW BEST PRACTICES

### Apply the Genealogical Proof Standard

The Genealogical Proof Standard (GPS)<sup>1</sup> has five components:

1. **Reasonably exhaustive research.** Conduct a thorough search of U.S. records. Include every available record that could possibly answer your research question. Keep records of your findings and sources.
2. **Complete and accurate source citations.** Citing your sources lets everyone know what you looked at and shows the quality of the sources you used. Follow citation guidelines.
3. **Thorough analysis and correlation.** Analyze the information in each source, and compare information from all sources.
4. **Resolution of conflicting evidence.** “If you haven’t found conflicting evidence, you haven’t looked long enough.” Explain and account for conflicts.
5. **Soundly written conclusion based on the strongest evidence.** Write your conclusion in the form of a proof summary, a proof argument, or biographical sketch (with citations).

### Avoid tunnel vision—use FAN club/cluster research

People live, work, worship, and migrate with other people. When your ancestor’s records don’t answer your questions, look for records of their FANs (Family/Friends, Associates, and Neighbors).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Board for Certification of Genealogists (BCG), *Genealogy Standards*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. rev. (Washington, D.C.: BCG, 2019), and Thomas W. Jones, *Mastering Genealogical Proof* (Arlington, VA: National Genealogical Society, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> See Elizabeth Shown Mills, *The Historical Biographer’s Guide to Cluster Research (the FAN Principle)* (Baltimore, Genealogical Publishing Co., 2012). For articles on cluster research, refer to “FAN Club or Cluster Research” on *Cyndi’s List* (<https://www.cyndislist.com/brickwall/fan-club/>).

## Use tables, charts, timelines, and maps

Tables, charts, timelines, and maps make it easy to compare evidence and see any gaps in your research. Check *Cyndi's List's* Timelines and Maps & Geography categories for ideas and resources. Many genealogy database programs have the capability to map ancestral migrations.

## GUIDE TO THE CASE STUDY

### Investigating William Dinneen (what makes this William different from other possible men of the same name)

#### Records used

**Family sources** (letter and photos, author's **personal files**), U.S. and Wisconsin **census** records (**Ancestry**), **death certificate** (Dane County, Wisconsin **courthouse**), **tombstone** (St. James Cemetery, Dane County, Wisconsin), **newspapers** (**Wisconsin Historical Society**), **naturalization record** (**FamilySearch**). Searched for but **not found** were entries in *county histories*, a *marriage record*, Wisconsin *church records*, and *passenger lists*.

#### What they told us

William was born in 1847 in Ireland, either in Fermoy (death certificate) or "Caystlyne" (obituary). He arrived in New York in 1867 and began the naturalization process in 1868. In Dane County he married the widowed Mary (Nevins) Mackin and had one daughter, Catherine. William died in Dane County in 1917. Census records and tombstones identified a brother Patrick Dinneen (1842-1906), a Civil War veteran. William's obituary also named six nephews and mentioned that he had two brothers and two sisters, including a sister in Ireland. His death certificate named parents Michael Dinneen and Catherine Difford.

This gave us several Irish places to investigate, and the skeleton of a family—named parents, two named sons, six named nephews, two unnamed sons, and two unnamed daughters, including the fact that one daughter lived in Ireland in 1917.

### Identifying Irish places

#### Resources used

**GENUKI** ([genuki.org.uk](http://genuki.org.uk)) and **John Grenham's Irish Ancestors** ([johngrenham.com](http://johngrenham.com))

#### What they told us

Fermoy is an Irish Roman Catholic civil parish, Poor Law Union, and registrar's district in County Cork, Ireland. "Caystlyne" is likely Castlelyons, a Roman Catholic parish and market town near Fermoy in County Cork.

### Learning more about brother Patrick Dinneen

#### Records used

**Tombstones** (St. James Cemetery, Dane County, Wisconsin; **Find A Grave**), U.S. and Wisconsin **census** records (**Ancestry**), **newspaper** obituary (**Newspapers.com**, **Wisconsin Historical Society**), veterans home records (**FamilySearch**), Civil War **compiled military service record** (CMSR) and **pension file** (**National Archives**). No passenger list or naturalization record has been found.

## What they told us

Patrick was born in 1842 in Ireland and died in 1906. He served in Company A, 105<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry during the Civil War under the name Patrick Denny and never married. He was an inmate in the soldiers' homes in Leavenworth, Kansas, and Milwaukee. He lived with his brother William in Dane County in 1900 and 1905. He was apparently not naturalized (1900 census).

## Finding William's pall bearers/nephews and siblings

Since the names of the pall bearer nephews were known, and none were Dinneens, a likely assumption is that the nephews were sons of William's sisters and bore William's sisters' married names.

## U.S. research

Research started with **census** searches (**Ancestry**), focusing on the federal censuses of 1910 and 1920 (closest to the time of William Dinneen's funeral). It was considered likely that pall bearers at a funeral near Madison would live in Wisconsin or neighboring states, so the search focused there. Once likely candidates for the pall bearers were identified, their families were traced through census records, looking for mothers more or less contemporary with William Dinneen who were born in Ireland. **Find A Grave**, **Google**, **vital record indexes** (**Ancestry** and **Wisconsin Historical Society**), and **newspaper** searches (**Chronicling America**, **GenealogyBank**, **NewspaperArchive**, and **Newspapers.com**) established relationships within the Dinneen family.

This research identified four of the six pall bearers and established that their mothers were, in fact, children of Michael and Catherine Dinneen of County Cork and sisters of William Dinneen. It also identified two additional brothers living in Wisconsin (likely the two unidentified brothers mentioned in William's obituary), along with one sister living at the time of William's death.

## Irish research

Armed with the names of the Irish parents (including several versions of the mother's maiden name from the marriage and death records of William and his siblings), four sons, and three daughters, along with two Irish parish names, research turned to Ireland.

Indexes of **Irish parish baptisms** were searched at both **findmypast** and **Ancestry**, focusing on County Cork and the parishes named in the Dinneens' American records. Eleven baptisms were located, starting in 1842 and ending in 1864, all in the parish of Castlelyons. They included all the known immigrants to America—Patrick, William, John, Daniel, Margaret, Catherine, and Elizabeth. Original images of the baptismal records were viewed at **Ancestry** and the **National Library of Ireland** website.

Since the youngest child, Ellen, was born in September, 1864, after the start of Irish civil registration, **Irish civil registration records** were also searched (**Ancestry**, **IrishGenealogy.ie**). The civil registration record for Ellen's birth provided the information that the Irish Dinneen family dwelled in Ballyneilla and that Michael Dinneen's occupation was miller.

Two of the pall bearer nephews remained to be identified, as did the Irish sister mentioned in William Dinneen's obituary. Irish civil registration marriages were searched for the three Dinneen daughters identified in the Castlelyons baptisms. The searches produced marriages for

two of Michael Dinneen’s daughters, to men surnamed Barry and Higgins, the same surnames as the yet-unidentified Wisconsin nephews.

The Irish civil registration search was extended to births for the pall bearers, and several possible records were located. **Irish census** records (*findmypast, Ancestry/National Archives of Ireland*) were also searched. The census search located the family of one of the Irish sisters (Higgins) but revealed that she had apparently died before her brother William (and thus could not have been not the living Irish sister mentioned in William’s obituary). No death record was found for this woman in Irish civil registration deaths.

### **Back to the U.S.**

Armed with the birth dates of the two remaining Barry and Higgins nephews and the names and birth dates of their parents, research returned to U.S. sources. With the new information from the Irish records, the remaining nephews were identified in Minnesota and Wisconsin, and the remaining sister and her husband were located.

### **Summary of results**

William Dinneen’s records did not include several kinds of record commonly used in immigrant research—published sources, church records, and passenger lists—and his land and probate records held nothing relevant to his Irish origins. Nevertheless, his census records, vital records, and obituaries identified his parents and his Irish place of origin; they also led to the identification of three of his four brothers and three of his six sisters.

With this robust set of facts, it was possible to locate William’s family of origin in Irish records. The Irish records, in turn, led to the location of two more sisters—one in Ireland and one who emigrated to the U.S.

As in many nineteenth-century Irish families, eight of the eleven children of Michael Dinneen and Catherine Jeffers emigrated, in this case, to the United States. Only one is known to have remained in Ireland; the fates of two others are still unknown.

Even though the passenger lists and naturalization records of the immigrants were of the mid-nineteenth-century variety and contained minimal identifying information, it was possible to recreate family linkages through other means, with census, vital records, and newspapers playing a critical role.

### **Success factors**

Several factors led to the successful linkage of the American Dinneens with their Irish roots:

- Research was broad, exploring many different sources in the U.S. and Ireland, and embracing multiple family members
- U.S. records identified the Irish place of origin and parents. Continuing to conduct U.S. research after the first discovery of an Irish place of origin/parents resulted in identification of additional siblings and created a bigger, more specific “family footprint” to search for in Ireland. The enhanced “family footprint” increased the confidence level that the “match-up” between the American family and the Irish family was correct.

- Clues led from one record type to another. Research frequently doubled back to revisit record sets already examined. Following a straight-line, checklist-based approach would not have been as successful.
- Organizing tools—name variant tables, results tables, maps, and timelines—were used to good effect during the research process, helping to keep straight the information that had been located for each person/family and identify information gaps.

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# finding immigrant origins

## **Gather family sources**

Look for papers (military, passports, citizenship documents), photos. Assemble family stories.

## **Find the immigrant and known family in the census**

Compile a history. Record clues to other records (births, marriages, deaths, migrations, military service, naturalization, other people in the household).

## **Search published sources**

Are there any genealogies? Look for county and local history books, articles, and websites.

## **Collect birth, marriage, and death records**

Find civil government and church records of the immigrant's marriage and death. Also look for children's birth, marriage, and death records.

## **Look for tombstones**

Look for pictures or recordings of the immigrant's tombstone.

## **Find newspaper articles**

Look for obituaries, but don't neglect the social column. Are relatives mentioned?

## **Navigate naturalization records**

Look for all naturalization records. They may not be in the same place!

## **Peruse passenger lists**

Look for departure or emigration records, in addition to arrival or immigration lists.

## **Locate land, probate, and military records**

Did your ancestor claim land under the Homestead Act of 1862? Get those records! Also obtain probate and military records.

## **Research family members and associates**

Check records for family members and people your immigrant associated with (neighbors, sponsors, witnesses).



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