

Finding more about Irish Immigrant Families using Ontario Land Records

Introduction

On a 2017 trip to St. Marys Ontario to learn more about my Irish Ancestors, who settled there in the mid 19th century for 30 years before coming to Dennison Minnesota, I learned some things about the neighborhood where they lived - "Skunks Hollow" - and the railroad trestle building they did. Today the "Hollow" area and an adjacent part of the trout creek valley has been largely cleared of its one time shanty housing, and is a parkland. I learned about the evolution of the Catholic Church there and took photos of the few older houses still standing in the Hollow and collected historic information from the archives of the wonderful local museum.

Having established (with museum help), the likely location of one of the properties, I was able to translate a current street address to the legal property description based on original surveys found on a historic cadastral map. This then opened a world of research; I was able to search abstracts of parcels by street or local area and find property transactions made by my ancestors, then translate these to contemporary google maps and locate their still standing houses. In some cases I was able to translate current addresses to historic cadastral maps to locate property legal descriptions and then go to onland.ca, and find abstracts that listed filing numbers that indexed the actual deed, sale, conveyance, and mortgage transactions recorded in land and property records at familysearch.org.

I was then able to add to the narrative of the lives of my Irish diaspora laboring families and follow their progress from shanty living to land and home ownership, and modest wealth accumulation and education, things they were likely denied in their homeland.

I will give the stories first, and then detail the methods.

My Irish Immigrants

Visit Trudeau Family Tree User RGrems67 on [ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com)

Mary Byrne - born in Borris County Carlow 1827 and came to Canada between 1830 and 1840. Nothing is known of her family of origin in Canada, may have been detained at Grosse île in 1832 and had a possible sister Bridget. Surname spelled "Burns" in Canadian records. **Pat Doyle** though to be born in Belfast around 1825 and came to Canada in 1850 to "Bradford", found in East Oxford Twp. He may have come with two brothers, Michael and James about 1850. Pat married Mary in the village of Ingersoll, Oxford County, Canada West in 1852. They moved to St. Marys in 1858 responding to a call for laborers to build the massive limestone towers over the Thames and Trout Creek for the Grand Trunk railroad. While having and raising her 10 children, Mary Doyle acquired a number of parcels of property for back taxes, obtained mortgages, built the home on Widder Street (still standing) and transferred it all to her son, James in 1877. Mary then bought a farm in the adjacent township, then sold it. Between Mary's sale and her son James sale in 1880, the Doyles had \$2,569 and moved to Dennison MN where they bought a farm. Meanwhile, **Simon McDonald** born near Kilrush, Clare, Ireland about 1825 came to St. Mary's about 1864. The next year his wife **Mary Collins**, thought to be born in Molougha, Claire in 1825, sailed on the St. George from Dublin to Quebec with their 5 children. Their 6th is baptized in St. Marys the following year. In 1870 they buy lots 18,19,20 on block V, the same block the Doyles are on, get a mortgage and build a home still standing. Their oldest boy Michael develops an abiding friendship with Ellen Doyle, daughter of Patrick and Mary Doyle in their adjoining back yards; they marry in Detroit in 1881, then join the Doyles

in Dennison, where Michael begins his career as a foreman and roadmaster for the CGW railroad. Michael and Ellen Mc Donnell are my great grandparents.

St. Marys, the “Stonetown”

Visit <https://www.townofstmarys.com/en/recreation-and-culture/Museum-and-Archives.aspx>

There is no apostrophe in this towns name. Founded about 1840, by 1858 the village was growing rapidly with an influx of Irish and Scottish born workers. By 1861 the census shows 2,815 people with 471 households, about a quarter of them Irish born Roman Catholic Laborer families, the vast majority living in shanties on rented or squatted land. One such shanty neighborhood was Skunk's Hollow. Crude makeshift houses were huddled on the flood plains of Trout Creek near the lime kilns, whose smoke and smell may have given the hollow its name. The Doyles are living in a shanty here in the 1861 census. Before the Irish and Scots descended, the village was composed almost entirely of Protestant families from England, who lived mostly on the high ground south of Trout Creek and along the Thames River and on Queen Street. The Scots were quarrymen who mined the huge blocks of limestone that the Irish hoisted as they built the 90 foot towers for the train trestle over the waterways. After a hard day of this the Scots and the Irish would drink and fight each other, according to an article in the museum. The Scots built a handsome limestone Presbyterian Church, and several decades later the Irish built a towering stone Catholic Church, the two steeples today dominating the north ward. But at first the Catholics had only a crude log chapel so drafty it had to be shoveled out before winter mass, said by the few available priests able to travel from London and Stratford. The Irish Catholic laborers languished without an organized Parish till Holy Name of Mary was founded in 1865. The school came first, so that proper religious instructions could be given “to counter Presbyterianism,” said one of the priests. Today the town is lovely and genteel, with many stately stone victorians, and an abundance of walking trails that follow abandoned rail lines over stone bridges and meander through pleasant meadows where the shanty towns once stood. Only a few of the older houses still stand in what was once Skunk's Hollow, and many newer homes are there today. The homes the Doyles and McDonalds built are still there.

Land Records

Canadian genealogy research is especially rewarding because of the growing wealth of notarial, church, and legal land records that are researchable on line. I have learned to use three main resources, switching from one to the other to get what I need.

A. HISTORIC ONTARIO CADASTRAL MAPS

Many of these can be found in local libraries or in historical societies. There is an excellent collection accessible for viewing - and for sale in handsome frames- on line at <http://www.historicmapworks.com/> Maps can be found for townships and municipalities. I found it quite easy to search these maps and make screen shots of areas of interest, even though they are only downloadable for a fee. They are the “Rosetta Stone” for land legal descriptions. If you have an idea where someone lived in a municipality or township, you can get an idea of the lot numbers and street names to search with. Conversely, if you have the legal description from the abstracts (B) or Property and Land records (C), you can locate the parcel, then superimpose it on a google earth and see what's there now and find a street address.

B. ONLAND.CA

This site contains historic abstracts of parcels indexed by county, then township or municipality, by parcel descriptors such as “lots 17,18, 19 on the west side of Huron Street in block V of Lot 17 Concession 18 of the Ingersoll Survey” - a typical description for municipally located parcel. Farm land parcels are listed by Township, then located by concession (usually

Roman numerals) and lot (Arabic numerals). Once you have an idea of where to start your search, its time to scroll through the pages to find the ones where your names of interest are located. Once the search is completed there is a trove of information about year, type of transaction, principal parties, and most importantly, the filing number of the property transaction. Some of the pages are of poor quality, but most are legible. Abstracts continue to about year 2000.

C. ONTARIO LAND AND PROPERTY RECORDS

Indexed by County and then by township or municipality under “Catalogue” at familysearch.org many volumes are now microfilmed and searchable by year and transaction number. Prior to 1867, the year of Confederation, the acts are recorded by notaries, afterward by barristers, and are legibly hand written by scribes in legalese; “I did as such Sheriff duly execute and deliver to Mary Doyle of the town of St. Marys, in the County and Province aforesaid, wife of Patrick Doyle of the same place Assignee of the purchaser, a deed of conveyance....” These are sometimes pages long and repetitive, but contain lots of hints about life, like occupations, and social status. For instance, Mary had usurious interest of 20% for her first mortgage compared to the 12% of others better off granted by the same lender a few pages away. Mary could not sign her name. But she had an angel, John E. Harding Esq, and Anglo-Irishman, who did all of her transactions, and in some carefully noted that they had been read and explained to her before she made her witnessed mark. Mary’s son James, educated at the school, could sign, and likely read and understand when he took over the parcels in St.Marys. And there is a search bonus - the first pages of each bound volume contains an index semi-alphabetized by surname of the parties being granted a conveyance of property, or relief of mortgage, etc. I found this to be a useful shortcut, and a real lifesaver when the abstracts (B) were illegible. Most records available until early 1900’s.

Conclusion

It is possible to add to a documented narrative for your Ontario ancestors by searching land records without ever leaving your computer. I have found that experience very rewarding, especially when I had made a visit and had a lay of the land — but most of the work was done afterwards at home following the ABC’s above.

Good hunting.

Go raibh maith agat

David Trudeau