Discovering Irish Genealogy through Surnames - Karen Hubbard
Where are you from?

Begin with what you know - gather information from family members, home and US resources, document sources carefully. Knowing your ancestors' religion can help narrow your search!

Learn a bit of history

Many came to Ireland as settlers/traders/mercenaries/refugees/invaders/planters. These new waves of residents brought distinct cultures and surnames with them, the majority assimilated into Irish Gaelic culture and language as they settled down and intermarried.

Their surnames were Viking, Norman, English, Norse-Scottish mercenaries known as Galloglass "young foreign warriors", English and Scottish "planters", or Cromwellian soldiers. Even English clerks helped "civilize" Irish names by spelling names phonetically. "O'Fuarain" was heard as "Oh-Foor-an" by one English clerk which became O'Furan" and eventually "Foran". Another clerk heard "O'Fuarain" and decided "Ford" was the nearest word that made sense.

Be flexible with spelling, record variations

McGarr in U.S. might be McGirr in Irish records. Mac Ganly or Gantley in the U.S. is Mag Shenlaoich in Gaelic and in English Shanly. Knockton could be Naughten. Prefix O' , Mc, Mac with and without prefix. There is another key in first names as somewhere down the O'Brian genealogy there was the original Brian, himself. No O. Just Brian, The same goes for the original Donnell of the MacDonnells and the first Allen of the McAllens. The descendants of Brian (meaning "noble") of Donnell (meaning "world-mighty") and Allen (meaning "handsome") remember that somewhere down the line their ancestor earned or was given that name.

Language of origin, assimilation and anglization

Learn shorthand versions for "son of", "grandson of", "from" a geographical place, and possibly their profession, nickname or trade in the language of the surnames' origin. Surnames were business cards that identified one's family trade, skill set or business acumen.

Irish Gaelic: 1st recorded Irish surname is O'Clery in modern Galway 920AD. Surname use increased over 300 years. Used O',short for Ua = "descendant of" or "Mac"/"Mc" = son of".

Viking: Used "son of" Olafson = son of Olaf. Surnames changed each generation.

Norman/French: "Son of" = "Fils de" in French became Fitz e.g. Fitzgerald.

Of/From - "de", "du", or "de la" in French e.g. de Bari - became "de Barra" and eventually "Barry". A nickname/profession - "le" in French - e.g. le Gros (the fat one). Another famous Irish role name was DitzWalter "le Boteler" which became Butler in Ireland. Splinter groups often formed new surnames.

English and Scottish: English and Scottish surnames tended to be mostly occupational (Smith, Cooper, Wright etc) or related to a geographical feature or place (Churchill, Harland, Hall, Windsor, Wood, etc). Patronymic surnames typically had a "son" at the end (Thompson, Johnson) or "s" in the case of Welch (Davies). Personal characteristics were in their original form e.g. Armstrong. The "planter" influence has a long reach. The 1901 Irish census shows 3.2 million Roman Catholics and approximately 1 million Protestants most of which are the descendants of those planter protestants from Scotland and England!

Palatine and Huguenot - Exiled Protestant refugees from Germany's Palatine known for farming & winemaking and French Huguenots, skilled weavers, found new homes with Irish landlords as a desirable addition to their new towns and estates across counties Carlow, Tipperary, Wexford, Kerry and Limerick in the early 1700s. When leases expired, crops failed and cholera outbreaks occurred many left to try their luck in North America. When the Edict of Nantes was suspended 5,000 Huguenots left La Rochelle France, and came to Ireland. Large Huguenot settlements were established at Portarlington, Younghai, Lisburn, Castleblayney, Carlow, Kilkenny, Dublin, Cork and Waterford. Their skills supported the growth of a textile industry.

Great grandfather Robert Thomas Smith - born in New Brunswick, Canada in 1850, he is on the Canadian census of 1851 as 11 months old "Thomas Robert". His father John Smith was born in "Ireland" and immigrated to Canada in 1825. John's soon to be wife Anne Malone was born in "Ireland" and immigrated to Canada in 1828. They were married in Bathurst, New Brunswick, 21 June 1832. How do you find the correct Smith ancestor? Research every Smith in the locale where you find your ancestor.
Is "Smith" hopeless? They were blacksmiths, locksmiths, gunsmiths and goldsmiths. In medieval England your occupation determined your last name.
MacLysaght says: Smith is spelled Mac Gabhann in Gaelic, or Mac Gowan which means "son of the smith". In1800s Smith was the 5th most common surname in Antrim, Cavan, Down, Meath counties according to Matheson.
1. Gather everything on your Irish line in one place, review it carefully for clues (birthplace, marriage place, children born in Ireland or here, religion, occupation, gravestones) Did other family members come at the same time?
2. Check surname dictionaries and surname distribution maps. Be flexible with spelling.
3. Use naming patterns for Irish, Scottish, and English to form clues to check.
4. Immigration is rarely a straight line from homeland to final destination. People kept moving! Tradesmen, merchants and laborers moved to where the jobs were.
5. DNA test because your genes can hold a clue to your ancestor's location!

Resources:
Edward MacLysaght's The Surnames of Ireland
Robert E Matheson's Special report on Surnames in Ireland, free on Internet Archive
www.archive.org or in print
https://www.aletterfromireland.com/irish-surnames-2/#tab-con-11
Family tree magazine's March 2020 issue has an Irish Genealogy Cheat sheet!