

Tracing Your Irish Ancestors in Chicago

Tina Beard

I admit it. I am proudly South-Side Irish. My mom always joked that in order to live in Bridgeport you had to be three things: Irish, a Democrat and a White Sox fan, and if you weren't all three of those things, you didn't live in Bridgeport! My two Irish great-great grandfathers came to Chicago from Albany, New York in 1876 to build the Nativity of Our Lord Church. They were a stone mason and a brick layer and heard about the work in Chicago after the Great Chicago Fire. My family has lived in the neighborhood ever since. I will figuratively 'stir-the-pot' by claiming Bridgeport is THE quintessential Irish neighborhood of Chicago. Bridgeport has been the epicenter of Chicago politics for generations. Dozens of police and fire chiefs have come from our neighborhood as well as five mayors, four of whom were of Irish descent.

Bridgeport gets its name from the construction of the Illinois and Michigan Canal in 1836. I&M Canal's Commissioners began surveying land as early as 1824, but poor management and bankruptcy delayed the canal numerous times before its completion in 1848. Thousands of Irish laborers worked on the canal from Chicago to Peru, Illinois. The canal brought skilled and unskilled Irish laborers to Bridgeport. These workers stayed and put their skills to use building St Bridget's Church which opened in 1854 <http://lockzero.org.uic.edu/iv.html>.

Bridgeport is just one of a handful of Irish neighborhoods that sprang up along the south-side of the Chicago River in the mid-19th Century. Other early Irish neighborhoods include Canaryville, Back of the Yards, and Brighton Park. As Chicago grew, the wealthier, more established Irish began moving further south into Morgan Park, Oak Lawn, and Beverly, home to the infamous South-Side Irish Parade held the weekend before St. Patrick's Day every year. Not all Irish lived in these neighborhoods. Thousands more

spread out into every neighborhood in Chicago. The website Chicago in Maps www.chicagoinmaps.com is a great resource for following Chicago's expansion from the 1830s through the 1990s.



1883 O. W. Gray and Son Map of Chicago www.chicagoinmaps.com

A great place to learn more about Chicago's Irish neighborhoods is through the Chicago History Museum

<http://libguides.chicagohistory.org/research> which has a neighborhood file along with dozens of other resources for researching your Irish ancestors from old newspapers to street image files. Priceless information on your Irish ancestors can be found in their Architectural and Building History Collection

<http://chicagohistory.org/research/research-sources/architecture> which includes city directories, photo and maps. The collection also contains information about building permits filed within Chicago from 1898-1912. Additional permit information can be searched online through the University of Illinois at Chicago

<http://researchguides.uic.edu/microforms/permits>. The Chicago History Museum is also the repository for thousands of images from the Chicago Daily News photo morgue. The Chicago Daily News was often the newspaper of choice for Chicago's South-Side Irish. The paper closed its doors in March of 1977 and many Chicago Irish moved their allegiance to the Chicago Sun-Times. Many images from the collection have been digitized and are available through

<http://explore.chicagocollections.org>. Explore Chicago is comprised of digital collections from Chicagoland universities and research facilities. Thousands of images have been scanned representing major events, 'movers and shakers' and influential neighborhoods around Chicago.

The Newberry Library, a world-class facility with outstanding genealogy and history collections, is located on Chicago's near-north side. The Newberry is not just a leader in genealogical research, but a pioneer in digital access to materials. Portions of their collections like their Chicago and the Midwest Collection are available through their website www.newberry.org/chicago-and-midwest.

They have partnered with Internet Archives <https://archive.org/details/newberry> to make over five thousand books available from their extensive holdings. They are the creators of Chicago Ancestors www.chicagoancestors.org which contains dozens of tools for tracing your Chicago Irish. Two additional resources you should explore are the Illinois Digital Archive www.idaillinois.org which has newspapers, letters, year-books, photos, postcards and more documenting the history of Chicago and Illinois. Also, the Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Illinois (CARLI) Digital Collections: <https://collections.carli.illinois.edu> includes multiple digital collections embodying Chicago's rich history.

The Chicago Public Library's Harold Washington Branch has an extensive Chicago History Collection. Thousands of images, books, maps and architectural drawings are available for in-depth research. Digital copies of the Chicago Herald Examiner from 1908-1918 <http://digital.chipublib.org> are available for free. They have placed some of their more popular images from their Neighborhood Collections www.chipublib.org/archival_subject/neighborhoods online as well. Sadly, a large portion of the library's extensive newspaper collection is only on microfilm. If you are ever in Chicago, it is worth a trip to the microfilm research room to access over 150 years of Chicago newspapers like

the Inter Ocean, Chicago Herald American and Chicago Daily News which are not readily available online.

The local Catholic parish was the glue that held the Irish community together. Most kids went to the parish school and families attended mass together on Sundays. Church records are some of the best records available for early Irish families in Chicago. Old St. Patrick's Church was the first Irish Catholic parish in Chicago. You can find their records online back to 1846. Luckily the LDS Church digitized most of Chicago's Catholic parish books up to 1915 and has made them available online at <https://familysearch.org/search/collection/1452409>. Several churches in Chicago started as missions to St. Patrick's, so if you struggle finding your family listed in your parish's early church records; browse Old St. Pat's books to see if they are listed. The reason why these church records are so vitally important is because Illinois did not start recording births and deaths until November 1877. From 1877 until 1914 these records were merely requested by the state but not required. ALL of my Chicago Irish are missing from the official county birth records until the 1920s even though it was mandatory to register births beginning in 1914. Luckily EVERY one of them has a baptismal record from a Chicago Catholic parish.



Karins Family Record in author's personal collection

The Catholic Church oversaw more than just vital statistics. The archdiocese oversaw poor houses like the Little Sisters of the Poor and orphanages and homes like the Catholic Boys Asylum in Bridgeport as well as hundreds of parochial schools. Contact the Chicago archdiocesan archives

<http://archives.archchicago.org> for additional records. You can find more information on Chicago's Catholic churches through sites like www.chicagoancestors.org. Here, Catholic churches are pinned to a Google map platform showing information on the opening and closing of the church, the ethnicity of the parishioners and where the records are now held. The Encyclopedia of Chicago <http://encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org> also has chapters on Chicago Irish and the aforementioned Catholic parishes, homes and orphanages.



Charles Comiskey
Internet Archives
<http://bit.ly/2aMV39U>

Chicago and Irish are nearly synonymous. Dozens of nationalities call Chicago home, but for whatever reason, the Irish have dominated our collective minds and hearts for generations. Charles Comiskey owner of the Chicago White Sox was the son of well-respected alderman, "Honest" John Comiskey who was born in County Cavan. Mayor Richard A. Daley's family hailed from

County Waterford. Irish-American celebrities like Bill Murray, Chris O'Donnell, and John Cusack all call the Chicagoland area home. From Claire to Tipperary, every county in Ireland is represented in the neighborhoods of Chicago. Ancestry has a database pertinent to your Chicago Irish research called *Chicago Irish Families 1875-1925* <http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=3524>. This

collection is derived from early books, indexes and newspaper resources. Another great avenue for finding your Chicago Irish is through Internet Archives www.archive.org. This is one of my favorite resources for tracking down early Chicago families. Hundreds of books are available, free of copyright, to download and use in your genealogy research. Remember births and deaths weren't recorded until 1877, so there is nearly 50 years of Chicago history represented in these early histories before vital records registration began.

Television and film sensationalize Chicago's gangster history. Irish mobsters like Dean O'Banion, Terry "Machine Gun" Drummond, and George "Bugsy" Malone are a few of the more 'colorful' Chicago Irish. If you've found that your relatives might have run with the likes of Bugsy Malone, there are places to look for those records as well. The Chicago Police Department Homicide Index 1870-1930 www.cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/archives/databases/homicide.html or the Cook County Coroner's Inquest Index 1872-1911 www.ilsos.gov/isairad/cookinquestsrch.jsp may offer some clues to your family's gangster past. Another avenue of research is the Cook County Clerk of the Circuit Court Archives which is the repository for criminal, family and probate court records. They sampled their criminal court records, only keeping a small percentage of the original case files, and destroying the rest. Luckily many of the dockets are still available to browse on microfilm in the archives offices. A list of their archival holdings can be found here:

www.cookcountyclerkofcourt.org/?section=RecArchivePage&RecArchivePage=archive_holdings. The Clerk of Court is also responsible for wills and probate. Recently Ancestry released a new database *All Illinois, Wills and Probate Records 1772-1999* which includes a healthy number of Chicago records <http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=9048>. This database is not comprehensive, so if you do not find all of your Chicago ancestors, contact the Cook County Clerk of Court Archives for additional information. This office was also responsible for handling naturalizations. An index to Declarations of Intent can be found at <http://12.218.239.55/NR/default.aspx>.

These records are a treasure trove of information on your Chicago Irish from their Chicago street address to their Irish home town.

Speaking of Cook County records, no discussion of Chicago resources would be complete considering Cook County began in 1831. Nearly all of the records pertaining to the city and county were destroyed during the Great Chicago Fire www.greatchicagofire.org on October 8-9, 1871. Record keeping for Cook County began anew on January 1, 1872. A large number of marriages from the 1930s and 1940s are not represented here. If you cannot find your family listed in this database, submit a written request directly to the Cook County Clerk's office:

www.cookcountyclerk.com/vtalrecords/Page%2Fdefault.aspx. In my own personal research, I have found that both sets of my grandparents are missing in the online database, but I was able to purchase copies of each marriage certificate directly through the Clerk's Office.

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Marriage Certificate from the author's personal collection

You also have access to the indexes to vital records through www.familysearch.org which has Cook County births, marriages and deaths for various years from 1871-1994. Additionally, there are over 70 collections available for Illinois research here

<http://bit.ly/2aGTjgP>. If you strike out in both of these locations you can also check the Illinois Secretary of State's databases as well by visiting www.cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/archives/databases/home.html. Within the Illinois Statewide Marriage Index 1763-1900 you'll find the Fink Index which references Cook County marriages that predate the Great Chicago Fire. This information was collected by Sam Fink from Chicago area newspapers in an effort to recreate an index to the Chicago marriages from 1833-1871 that were destroyed in the fire. This index is by no means complete, but it is a nice substitute for the burned records.

There are numerous genealogical, historical and heritage societies in and around Chicago that can assist you in your research as well. The Chicago Genealogical Society www.chicagogenealogy.org has several online indexes including a decent index to surnames recorded in early Chicago newspapers. They also have an index to past issues of their newsletter

which can be requested from your home library through Inter Library Loan. One of my favorite groups, no offense to the others, is the South Suburban Genealogical and Historical Society

<http://ssghs.org/wp> in Hazel Crest, Illinois. They have the employment cards for the men who worked for the Pullman Car Works building train cars from 1900-1949. These cards include wages, physical descriptions and often photos of each employee. The historical society also has an extensive research library with dozens of Chicago and Irish genealogy titles.

The Irish-American Heritage Center <http://irish-american.org> promotes Irish and Irish-American culture and history through cultural events and educational programming. The center has several hard-working, dedicated museum, library and archives staff eager to assist researchers. There are three additional Hibernian groups in the Chicagoland area. The Ancient Order of the Hibernians is one of the oldest ethnic societies in Chicago. They offer support to Irish Immigrants and provide scholarships for Catholic school tuition

www.aoo.org. Ireland Network of Chicago is focused on keeping Chicagoans involved and up-to-date on what is going on within Ireland and the Irish community worldwide <http://theirelandnetwork.com>. Lastly, the Irish Fellowship Club <http://irishfellowshipclub.com> has been in existence since 1900 and offers scholarships and grants to students. They work to promote Irish culture and learning throughout the Chicagoland area with a series of programs, golf tournaments and public events.

There is a staggering amount of information waiting to be discovered about your Chicago Irish. I must confess, there are many more resources that I could and should include in this article, but in the effort of finishing this article within the decade, some had to be sacrificed. I leave you with my final handful of resources for those who had Irish working on the Illinois and Michigan Canal. While these sites are outside of Chicago, they are still useful in telling your story. I leave you with a slightly altered Irish blessing: May good and faithful records be yours wherever you roam.

Illinois State Archives I&M Canal Collection:
<http://bit.ly/2azebJj>

Illinois State Archives Regional Archives Depository System:

www.cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/archives/IRAD/iradreg.html

Lewis University John Lamb Collection:
http://www.lewisu.edu/im-canal/JohnLamb/section_0.pdf

Will County Historical Society
<http://willcohistory.org>

Tina Beard is a genealogy and local history librarian at public library in the Chicagoland area. She is a Governing Board member of the Oswego Heritage Association and the Northern Illinois Historical League and was recently appointed as a Director to the Illinois State Historical Records Advisory Board which oversees grant funding to small museums and libraries, for digitization and historic preservation projects. She volunteers her time with several local historical societies providing digitization and organizational support towards preserving their historic records. Tina is a member of the Genealogical Speaker's Guild and has been lecturing on topics including genealogical research, archival preservation, and Illinois history since 2003.

