

Getting Started

IN FAMILY HISTORY WITH



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Getting Started in Scottish Genealogy



Getting Started in Family History with American Ancestors is a series of free downloads and short videos that covers the basic research methods genealogists use to find and verify information. Explore the entire series at [Getting Started in Family History](#).



In the United States, tens of millions of people have Scottish and Scots-Irish heritage. Whether your forebears emigrated from the Scottish Highlands or from Ireland's Ulster province, determining the exact location your ancestors came from can be the hardest part of research. Knowing the history of Scotland and the many waves of emigration may assist you in narrowing down possible origins. Records kept in America—such as immigration, naturalization, civil records, and more—may also provide information regarding exact origins.

Once you have a location of origin for your ancestor, it's time to turn your attention to Scottish records. The following guide offers an introduction to many go-to records and resources for tracing your roots in Scotland.

Religious Records

Scottish vital records fall into two main periods: pre- and post-1855. Records created before 1855 were maintained by parish churches and are known commonly as “Old Parish Registers” (OPRs). These registers typically document births, marriages and marriage banns, and occasionally entries of deaths or burials. The term “Old Parish Registers” applies not only to records from the Church of Scotland but also to pre-1855 records kept by churches of other denominations. They are indexed and searchable on several websites, including [FamilySearch.org](https://www.familysearch.org) and [ScotlandsPeople.gov.uk](https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk).

Church of Scotland

With a couple of exceptions in the 1600s, when it was Episcopal, the Church of Scotland has been Presbyterian. The OPRs cover the years 1553 to 1854 and are indexed by surname and given name. There are an estimated 900 parishes across Scotland's 33 counties, though only an approximate 3,500 registers survive.

One of the most useful records in the Church of Scotland are the Kirk Session books, which records are the minutes of parish meetings that were held by the minister and church elders. These sessions kept records of the poor seeking help from the parish, parentage of illegitimate children, and other church business. They also may contain the records of births, marriages, and deaths not recorded in the parish registers. Currently, the National Archives of Scotland is digitizing the Kirk Sessions books and other records. Session records of selected parishes are also available on microfilm from the FamilySearch Library.



Kilmory Parish Church, Isle of Arran, Scotland, Wikimedia Commons.

Catholic Church Records

The Catholic Church was the established church in Scotland until the Scottish Reformation in the 1650s. The earliest Catholic records date from 1703, but are scant; most date from the late 18th-century. Records of the Catholic Church include births, deaths, and marriages, and may also include sacramental dates, sick visits, and lists of parishioners. The Catholic Archives of Scotland have indexed and digitized all records in their holdings prior to 1855 and most after. All digitized records are available on ScotlandsPeople.gov.uk.

Non Conformist Church Records

Other religious denominations in Scotland, often called Non Conformists, include Episcopalians, the Society of Friends, Baptists, the Free Church, Methodists, and the Reformed Presbyterian Church, among others. Many of the records are also available from FamilySearch.org and ScotlandsPeople.gov.uk, and several books on the Non Conformists have been published as well.

Jewish Records

The first Jews arrived in Scotland during the 17th century, mostly as students, teachers, and craftsmen. The first Jewish communities did not become established until the late 19th century. The Scottish Jewish Archives Center has preserved synagogue member lists, register books, and other information regarding the Jewish community in Scotland. Information about their holdings can be found on their website.

Civil Records of Birth, Marriage, and Death

An Act of Parliament required civil registration beginning in 1855. Civil registrations of births, marriages, and deaths post-1855 to nearly present day have been indexed and digitized and are available to view by purchasing credits on ScotlandsPeople.gov.uk. These include the following:

- Births, Deaths, Marriages (1855–current)
- Divorces (1984–current)
- Register of Corrections (1855–current)
- Civil Partnerships (2005–current)
- Dissolutions of Civil Partnerships (2007–current)
- Registers of births, deaths, marriages outside Scotland (years vary)



The Highland Wedding (1780) by David Allan (Scottish painter 1744–1796), Wikimedia Commons.

Census

Scottish census and census substitutes provide more details about an ancestor's immediate family. The first census was enumerated in Scotland in 1801 and taken every ten years after that.

Pre-1841 Census

Between 1801 and 1831, census records contained only statistical information rather than detailed personal entries. These records summarize occupations, housing, and population figures for every parish, often noting changes from previous censuses and explaining the reasons for those shifts. The material is purely statistical in nature, although

some parishes also produced separate population lists that included names and occupations.

A portion of these pre-1841 census and population lists is available online at [FindMyPast.co.uk](https://www.findmypast.co.uk), which hosts records for six parishes. Surviving census material from before 1841 can also be found in kirk session records, which are accessible through virtual volumes in the Historical Search Room and at the ScotlandsPeople Centre in Edinburgh, and online via their website. Related collections such as the database *Rolls of Male Heads of Families, 1834–1845* can be accessed on Ancestry.com.

Pre-1841 Census Substitutes

Using a variety of pre-1841 census substitutes, you can occasionally locate your ancestors, learn of the taxes they paid in Scotland, and better understand their social status. Note that these substitutes do not always survive for each county in Scotland from the 17th to 19th centuries. Many of these records are available free from [ScotlandsPeople.gov.uk](https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk) and include:

- Land Tax (1645–1831)
- Hearth Tax (1691–1695)
- Poll Tax (1694–1698)
- Carriage Tax (1785–1798)
- Clock and Watch Tax (1797–1798)
- Dog Tax (1797–1798)
- Farm Horse Tax (1797–1798)
- Window Tax (1748–1789)
- Inhabited House Tax (1778–1798)
- Cart Tax (1785–1798)
- Female Servant Tax (1785–1792)
- Male Servant Tax (1777–1798)
- Horse Tax (1785–1798)
- Shop Keeper Tax (1785–1789)

Post-1841 Census

The 1841–1921 censuses offer a wealth of genealogical detail, often including place of birth, age, occupation, and family structure. Using these clues, you can better search church and vital records. There are several options for searching and viewing these records online:

- All Scottish censuses from 1841 to 1921 are available to search and download images at [ScotlandsPeople.gov.uk](https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk) (after purchasing search credits). (This is currently the only host of searchable records and images from the 1911 and 1921 Scotland censuses.)
- [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com) has transcribed copies of the 1841–1901 Scotland censuses (no images).
- The searchable index and images for the 1841–1891 censuses are available on the subscription website [FindMyPast.com](https://www.findmypast.com). (Only the name index for the 1901 Scotland Census can be searched here.)
- Under the 100-year privacy restriction, the complete 1931 census returns are scheduled to become publicly available in 2031.



Edinburgh Castle from George IV Bridge by Jane Stewart Smith (1839–1925), Wikimedia Commons.



Probate Records

The index to Scottish Wills, 1513–1925, is available at [ScotlandsPeople.gov.uk](https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk). To view the probate record image you will need to purchase credits. Wills registered between 1925 and 1999 have not been digitized and can only be consulted in the Historical Search Room at the National Records of Scotland in Edinburgh. The printed Calendar of Confirmations serves as the annual index to these records. Researchers should refer to the [National Records of Scotland's guide on wills and testaments](#) for additional details.

Land Records

Land records in Scotland are often more informative than testaments as they frequently name individuals and may explain how a person acquired the right to sell or transfer land. Until 2004, Scotland operated under a feudal system in which land was technically owned by the Crown and granted to vassals. In earlier periods, land was often awarded in return for military service, though this obligation was later replaced by the payment of tiends (tithes). Under this system, land did not automatically pass to heirs, making documentation of ownership transfers especially important.

Sasine registers are another key resource for tracing land ownership. The term *sasine* refers to the legal act of taking possession of land. Prior to 1617, these transactions were recorded by notaries. That same year, the Register of Sasines was established to record such transfers. Before 1781, the sasine registers are incomplete, and some counties have missing volumes. After that date, the records are more comprehensive, with reliable indexes and printed abridgements arranged by county. Many of these records have been microfilmed and digitized through FamilySearch, where researchers can access both the minute books, which summarize transactions, and, in some cases, the original sasine registers (although viewing access may be restricted).

Suggested Resources

- Black, George F. *The Surnames of Scotland, Their Origin, Meaning, and History*. 1946. Reprint, Origin, 2022.
- Clarke, Tristram, *Tracing Your Scottish Ancestors: The Official Guide*. 7th ed. Birlinn Limited, 2020.
- Dobson, David. *Searching for Scotch-Irish Roots in Scottish Records, 1600–1750*. Clearfield, 2007.
- Dobson, David. *The Scottish Surnames of Colonial America*. Genealogical Publishing Co., Inc., 2005.
- Dorward, David. *Scottish Surnames* (Collins Pocket Reference). Collins Celtic, 1998.
- Durie, Bruce. *Scottish Genealogy*. 4th ed. The History Press, 2017.
- Epperson, Amanda. *The Family Tree: Scottish Genealogy Guide*. Betterway Books, 2018.
- Fowler, Simon. *Tracing Scottish Ancestors*. Surrey Public Record Office, 2001.
- Irvine, Sherry. *Scottish Ancestry: Research Methods for Family Historians*. Ancestry, 2003.
- Jonas, Linda, and Paul Milner. *A Genealogist's Guide to Discovering Your Scottish Ancestors: How to Find and Record Your Unique Heritage*. Betterway Books, 2002.
- Paton, Chris. *Tracing Your Scottish Ancestry Through Church and State Records: A Guide for Family Historians*. Pen and Sword Family History, 2019.
- Roulston, William J. *Researching Scots-Irish Ancestors: The Essential Genealogical Guide to Early Modern Ulster, 1600–1800*. Ulster Historical Foundation, 2005.
- Sinclair, Cecil. *Jock Tamson's Bairns: A History of the Records of the General Register Office for Scotland*. General Register Office, 2000.
- “[Scottish Genealogy](#)” by American Ancestors.
- “[Scotland Genealogy](#)” by Family Search.



About American Ancestors

Founded in 1845, American Ancestors is the country's leading resource for family history research. We help genealogists of all skill levels improve their knowledge and understanding of their family and its place in history. Our award-winning website, AmericanAncestors.org, is the online repository for billions of searchable names from America and beyond. We provide research and expertise in nearly all areas of family history.

Our Mission

To advance the study of family history in America and beyond, we educate, inspire, and connect people through our scholarship, collections, and expertise.

Databases

AmericanAncestors.org provides access to billions of records spanning the United States, the British Isles, continental Europe, and beyond, including one of the most extensive online collections of early American genealogical records, the largest searchable collection of published genealogical research journals and magazines, and the only online source for records from Boston's Catholic Archdiocese.

Education

We provide exclusive, in-depth learning opportunities online and in person, including lectures, seminars, intensive research programs, tours, and special events designed to benefit family history researchers of all levels.

Expert Help

Our expert staff of researchers and genealogists are among the most respected and advanced in the profession. [Ask a Genealogist](#), our free online chat service, allows family historians to ask short research or history questions and get real-time answers from our experts. We also provide in-depth research assistance with our one-on-one consultations and research-for-hire projects.

American Ancestors

Named by *USA Today* as a top 10 world destination for genealogical research, all are invited to visit our headquarters at 97 Newbury Street in Boston, Massachusetts, where we offer the largest collection of original family history research materials in the country. Our growing collection dates from the fourteenth century to the present and spans North America, Europe, and beyond.

Original Scholarship

We produce significant original research and publications in genealogy, including the longest continually published academic journal in the field, the *Register*. We also publish the quarterly *American Ancestors* magazine, ten to twenty books per year, a weekly email newsletter, and landmark study projects.