

Genealogy Basics – Using Ancestry’s and other Missing Friends Databases

By Joe Petrie

BACKGROUND:

Ancestry has recently added a database named “Searching for Missing Friends: Irish Immigrant Advertisements Placed in The Boston Pilot” (henceforth Missing Friends). There are over 96,000 Ancestry records from over 41,000 advertisements in the Boston Pilot newspaper from 1831 – 1921.

The source of the records is a publication from the New England Historic Genealogical Society (NEHGS). The publication is an 8 volume set from 1989 until 1993. The editors were. Ruth-Ann Harris, Donald M. Jacobs and B. Emer O’Keeffe. The initial task of indexing and publishing these notices was conducted as a joint venture between the NEGHS and Northeastern University. AmericanAncestors.org has the original database.

I discovered the 8 volume set when reading “Newfoundland Ancestor”. The author indicated that there were Newfoundlanders in the 8 volumes. There was no database at the time. I found a local library that had the 8 volumes and researched my Newfoundland ancestors. In Volume 3, I found a notice from Michael Tobin living in Thorold Ontario who was searching for his brothers: Richard living in Newfoundland and Patrick living in Prince Edward Island. His notice indicated that they had previously lived in Goran, Kilkenny, Ireland. (Goran is not the current spelling.) Also, the notice indicated that their parents were Patrick Tobin and Judith Keeffe. Richard was my great, great grand-father but I never knew his parents’ names. Also, I did not know that he had 2 brothers. Edward-Vincent Chafe, a certificated Canadian Genealogist, verified the record for me.

In this article, I’ll cover the “same” database on 3 web sites: NEHGS’s AmericanAncestors.org; Boston College’s infowanted.bc.edu and Ancestry Library (henceforth Ancestry). Why all three? There are differences.

MISSING FRIENDS ON THE AMERICANANCESTORS.ORG WEB SITE:

Dr. Jim Ryan a noted Irish Genealogist in <http://theindepthgenealogist.com/> describes the value of the database as follows:

The information available in these notices provides very important information on the Irish origin of a named immigrant. Some even list the townland of origin which is invaluable in locating this person within the Irish records. It can also identify relatives, the immigrant’s age, and possibly a port of departure and entry, year of arrival or occupation. Note also that the location of the persons listed is not restricted to Massachusetts or even New England but refer to all parts of the Eastern US. Whereas most adverts seek brothers or sisters of children or parents, there are also incidences of spouses seeking their errant ‘other halves’, or the robbed seeking the robber. All human life is here.

Initially, the database was only available at NEHGS’s web site, now the AmericanAncestors.org web site. (This is a subscription site. It is available for use at many libraries in New England.)

NEHGS describes the database and gives retrieval tips as follows:

Beginning in 1831 and over the course of the next eighty-five years, the nationally distributed Boston Pilot newspaper printed some 45,000 “Missing Friends” advertisements placed by friends and relatives. No one knows how many of these families found each other as a result of the ads, but these nineteenth-century notices continue to help families today find their ancestors. These advertisements typically referred to the exact place of origin of the seeker and/or the sought. Many of the ads also describe the process and route of immigration, and even the name of the passenger ship. Many advertisements refer to women, for whom determining exact origin is even more difficult, due to the lack of naturalization records. So the Missing Friends advertisements help fill a great gap in nineteenth-century records for a mobile, impoverished, immigrant population.

Tips from NEHGS on searching this database:

- The names of the "Missing Friends" have been indexed, and are searchable by first name and/or last name.
- Keyword searches can reveal the name of the person's original home, place of departure, first known residence, and last known residence, if published in the advertisement.
- The search years are for the dates of publication of the notice. Notices were routinely posted years after someone's arrival in America.
- Try searching for all spelling variations. The spelling of surnames was not standardized and the Soundex search will not find all variants. The asterisk wildcard, which matches any string of characters, can be helpful in this regard.

When the software became available, I searched for Richard Tobin in Newfoundland. No records were found; I searched for Richard in Gowran, Kilkenny, Ireland and found the record. The AmericanAncestors.org selection criteria screen for the record that I found follows:

The screenshot shows the AmericanAncestors.org Advanced Search interface. The browser window title is "Advanced Search" and the URL is "https://www.americanancestors.org/search/advanced-search". The page has a "Database Search" header and a "Saved Searches" dropdown menu. The search form includes the following fields and options:

- Name:** Two text boxes containing "Richard" and "Tobin". Radio buttons for "Exact Search" and "Soundex" are present.
- Years:** "From" and "To" text boxes, and a "Record Type" dropdown menu set to "-All-".
- Location:** A text box containing "Gowran, Kilkenny, Ireland" with a radio button for "Exact Location".
- Keywords:** A text box with the placeholder "Enter terms or words".
- Database Type:** Radio buttons for "All databases", "Favorites", "Free", and "Databases with images".
- Category:** A dropdown menu set to "-All-".
- Database:** A dropdown menu set to "-All-".
- Family Members (Father/Mother/Spouse):** A dropdown menu set to "Any", and two text boxes for "First and Middle Names" and "Last Name".

At the bottom of the form is a link "+ Add family members +". The Windows taskbar at the bottom shows the time as 12:42 PM on 5/13/2017.

The following is the Search Results screen. The software found 3 records for a Richard Tobin – the first was the applicable record.

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL <https://www.americanancestors.org/search/database-search?firstname=Richard&lastname=Tobin&location=Gowran%2C%20Kilkenny%2C%20Ireland&#r>. The page features a sidebar with 'Sort By' (Relevance) and 'Category' (Journals and Periodicals (3)). The main content area displays three search results for Richard Tobin, each with a link to a specific record.

Name	Events	Relationship
Richard TOBIN Irish Immigrant Advertisements, 1831-1920 (Search for Missing Friends) Journals and Periodicals	RECORD : 9/29/1855 LOCATION : Goran, Kilkenny, Ireland RELATIONSHIP : Self VOLUME : V.3: 1854-1856 PAGE : 378	
Richard TOBIN Irish Immigrant Advertisements, 1831-1920 (Search for Missing Friends) Journals and Periodicals	RECORD : 8/25/1866 LOCATION : Abbeyfeale, Limerick, Ireland DEPARTURE : Ireland PLACE RELATIONSHIP : Self VOLUME : V.6: 1871-1876 PAGE : 98	
Richard TOBIN Irish Immigrant Advertisements, 1831-1920 (Search for Missing Friends) Journals and Periodicals	RECORD : 5/26/1866 LOCATION : Fancraft, Tipperary, Ireland PLACE OF : Washington LAST	

Please note that I believe that there should not have been records found that met my search criteria. The notice had the family from Goran. I used the current spelling of Gowran.

I selected the first record because I knew it was the record that I had found previously when reading the 8 volume set.

The following screen shows the page in the 8 volume set that the record was on page 378 of Volume 3. The record for my Tobin Family is the second from the top.

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL <https://www.americanancestors.org/databases/irish-immigrant-advertisements-1831-1920-search-for-missing-friends/image/?volumeld=13747&pageName=378&rid=244950371>. The page is titled '378 Missing Friends' and contains several paragraphs of text, including a notice about Mary Harden and a notice about Richard & Patrick Tobin.

378 Missing Friends

OF MARY HARDEN, of parish Kirlow, co Sligo, who was last heard from in Baltimore, Md. Information received by her uncle, Pat'k Dunledy, Racine, Wis.

OF RICHARD & PATRICK TOBIN, sons of Patrick Tobin and Judith Keffe, of parish Goran, co Kilkenny; when last heard from, one was in Prince Edward Island, and the other in Black Head, North Shore, Newfoundland. Information received by their brother Michl Tobin, Thorold, Canada West, where he has lived for the last 14 yrs.

6 October 1855 INFORMATION WANTED

\$50 REWARD!

OF JOHN FITZMAURICE, of Cloonfad, parish Aughrim, co Roscommon. His height is 5 feet 11 inches; has red hair and blue eyes. His last address was P Gribbin, Hamilton, Canada West; supposed to be in Canada West or Toronto. The above reward will be paid for information of him by his brother Charles, Knowlesville, Orleans co, N Y.
(see FITZMAURICE, JOHN, 1/6/55)

OF ELLEN O'LEARY, of the City of Cork, who arrived in Boston by the ship

The following is the Notice from Volume 3.

OF RICHARD & PATRICK TOBIN, sons of Patrick Tobin and Judith Keefe, of parish Goran, co Kilkenny; when last heard from, one was in Prince Edward Island, and the other in Black Head, North Shore, Newfoundland. Information received by their brother Michl Tobin, Thorold, Canada West, where he has lived for the last 14 yrs.

Based on the instructions from NEHGS on the use of the Keyword search, I would have expected that the Tobin record would be retrieved in Keyword searches for: Canada, Newfoundland, Ontario, and Prince Edward Island. No Tobin records were found.

Also, I thought the Exact Location search may have retrieved Tobin records for: Canada, Newfoundland, Ontario, and Prince Edward Island. Only one Tobin record was found. It was Michael's record!

In addition, and more importantly for individuals reasearching Canada Provinces, using only the Keyword field. I retrieved: 2524 records for Canada; 170 records for Newfoundland; 240 records for Nova Scotia; 151 records for Ontario; 64 records for Prince Edward Island; and 14 records for Cape Breton.

Finally, using only the Exact Location field, there were: 27 records for Canada; 19 records for Newfoundland; 22 records for Nova Scotia; 4 records for Ontario; 196 records for Prince Edward Island and 8 records for Cape Breton.

Please note that I believe that the transcription and/or the indexing was flawed.

MISSING FRIENDS ON THE BOSTON COLLEGE WEB SITE:

The free database is named Information Wanted on a website on Boston College's web site (<http://infowanted.bc.edu>).

The Search Criteria Screen follows:

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL <https://infowanted.bc.edu>. The page has a light beige background. On the left, there is a text block explaining the database: "FROM OCTOBER 1831 through October 1921, the Boston Pilot newspaper printed a 'Missing Friends' column with advertisements from people looking for 'lost' friends and relatives who had emigrated from Ireland to the United States. This extraordinary collection of 41,249 records is available here as a searchable online database, which contains a text record for each ad that appeared in the Pilot." Below this, it states: "The advertisements contain the ordinary but revealing details about the missing person's life: the county and parish of their birth, when they left Ireland, the believed port of arrival in North America, their occupation, and a range of other personal information. Some records may have as many as 50 different data fields, while others may offer only a few details. The people who placed ads were often anxious family members in Ireland, or the wives, siblings, or parents of men who followed construction jobs on railroads or canals." Further down, it says: "These 'Missing Friends' advertisements provide a window on the world of Irish immigration. For further resources and more about the history Irish immigration, the Great Famine, and the Pilot, visit the History or Resources pages." At the bottom of this section, it says: "Try a simple search on this page. For help or an advanced search, click here. After submitting a search, download the complete search results for use with statistical software." On the right, there is a search form titled ".... SEARCH THE DATABASE". It contains fields for "Name of sought person:" (First name, Last name), "Gender:" (Male, Female), "Location:", "Arrival port:", and a "Date of advertisement" dropdown menu with a "Search" button. Below the form, there is a small logo for the "IRISH STUDIES PROGRAM" and text: "Sponsored by Boston College's Irish Studies Program and produced by the Office of Marketing Communications." At the bottom of the page, there is a copyright notice: "© 2004-2017 THE TRUSTEES OF BOSTON COLLEGE | BOSTON COLLEGE HOME PAGE".

I searched for Richard Tobin. The following is the results screen.

The screenshot shows the search results page for "Richard Tobin". The page has a light beige background. On the left, there is a text block: "Search results" followed by "Your search yielded 6 result(s) and consisted of the following queries: First name: **Richard**; last name: **Tobin**." Below this, it says: "The results include names that sound like the search term as well. These results follow the exact name matches" and "Click on the name of the person(s) to view a more detailed description based on the contents of the advertisement placed to find them. Click on any of the five column headings to sort the search results in ascending or descending alphabetical order." At the bottom of this section, it says: "This search took 0.071 seconds." Below this, there is a link: "Download results as CSV file". On the right, there is a search form titled ".... SEARCH THE DATABASE" identical to the one in the previous screenshot. Below the form, there is a table with 5 columns: "NAME OF MISSING", "HOME COUNTY", "ARRIVAL PORT", "DATE", and "SEEKER". The table contains 6 rows of data. At the bottom of the page, there is a copyright notice: "© 2004-2017 THE TRUSTEES OF BOSTON COLLEGE | BOSTON COLLEGE HOME PAGE".

NAME OF MISSING	HOME COUNTY	ARRIVAL PORT	DATE	SEEKER
Richard Tobin			1863	Catherine Tobin (Wife)
Richard Tobin	Cork		1861	William, "Willy" Tobin (Nephew)
Richard Tobin			1863	Catherine Tobin Sullivan (Sister)
Richard Tobin	Kilkenny		1855	Michael Tobin (Brother)
Richard Tobin	Tipperary		1866	James Tobin (Brother)
Richard Tobin	Limerick		1866	William Tobin ()

Based on the AmericanAncestors results, I expected 3 results. There were six.

I selected the 4th record.

The results screen follows:

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the address bar displaying 'https://infowanted.bc.edu/record/?recid=16541'. The page title is 'Advertisement seeking: Richard Tobin'. The page contains several sections of information:

MISSING PERSON'S INFORMATION	
Name:	Richard Tobin
Gender:	Male
Age:	
Earlier Name Used:	
Alias:	
Description:	
Other:	Sons Of Pat./Jude. Keefe

POINT OF ORIGIN INFORMATION	
Home County:	Kilkenny
Parish:	Gowran
Townland:	
Barony:	Gowran
Poor-Law:	Kilkenny

WORK HISTORY	
Ireland Occupation:	
U.S. Occupation:	
Company Name:	
Work Location:	
Labor Union Member:	

LOCATION AFTER ARRIVAL	
1st Location:	Pei, Prince Edward Is.
2nd Location:	
3rd Location:	

SEEKING PERSON'S INFORMATION	
Name:	Michael Tobin
Relation to Missing:	Brother
Gender:	Male
Residence:	ONT, Thorold
Multiple People:	Y
Date of Advertisement:	09-29-1855
Contact Name:	
Contact Address:	
Second Seeker:	
Third Seeker:	

At the bottom of the page, there are two buttons: 'Back to search results' and 'Begin a new search'.

This is a transcript. There is no notice.

I like to read images. There's no images.

Finally, the location is inconsistent. The Boston College transcript indicates that the first location was Prince Edward Island. The Tobin family settled in Northern Bay Newfoundland in the early 1800s. Patrick, the son, relocated to Prince Edward Island and Michael relocated to Ontario. To my knowledge, Richard stayed in Newfoundland. Please note that I tried to get his record fixed. To date, I have not been successful.

I did get to talk to one of the Editors of the 8 volume set who was on the BC faculty. She told me that she could not get the record fixed.

MISSING FRIENDS ON THE ANCESTRY WEB SITE:

I use the New Collections tab whenever I want to search only one database. New Collections is really a misnomer. Actually, it covers all databases. Remember that Ancestry has over 10,000 databases.

There are 96,583 records in the Missing Friends database. I surmised that there were at least two records for each notice. For Michael's notice, there were 5 records. There was a record for each person named in the notice: the father Patrick; the mother Judith Keefe; Patrick; Richard and Michael (the source).

The following is the Record Selection Criteria Screen for Richard Tobin of Newfoundland. Please note that I wanted an exact match. I only wanted the records for Richard Tobin.

SEARCH ☐ Match all terms exactly

First & Middle Name(s) Richard Last Name Tobin

☒ Exact ☐ Exact...

☒ Exact and... ☐ Sounds like ☐ Similar ☐ Initials

About these settings

Day Month Year Location

Newfoundland and Labra

☐ Exact to...

City, County, State, Count

City, County, State, Count

City, County, State, Count

City, County, State, Count

Any Event

Origin

Publication Info

Browse this collection

To browse this image set, select from the options below.

Volume and Date Range

Vol. 1, 1831-1850

Vol. 1, 1831-1850 Introduction

Vol. 2, 1851-1853

Vol. 2, 1851-1853 Introduction

Vol. 3, 1854-1856

Vol. 3, 1854-1856 Introduction

Vol. 4, 1857-1860

Vol. 4, 1857-1860 Introduction

Vol. 5, 1861-1865

Vol. 5, 1861-1865 Introduction

There are 11 Ricard Tobins in the Ancestry version. My ancestor's record is the seventh. In total there are 211 Tobin records in the Ancestry version.

View Record	Name	Origin	Last Known Location	Publication Date	Relationship	View Image
View Record	Richard Tobin		Almond, Allegany, N Y	22 Mar 1851	Brother	
View Record	Richard Tobin		Reedville, Dedham, MS	3 Jun 1854	Brother	
View Record	Richard Tobin		St Louis	25 Jul 1863	Self (Head)	
View Record	Richard Tobin	Fancraft, Tipperary, Ireland	Washington	26 May 1866	Self (Head)	
View Record	Richard Tobin		Addison, Steuben, N Y	13 Mar 1869	Brother	
View Record	Richard Tobin		Boston, Massachusetts	24 Dec 1887	Husband	
View Record	Richard Tobin	Goran, Kilkenny, Ireland		29 Sep 1855	Self (Head)	
View Record	Richard Tobin			14 Sep 1861	Self (Head)	
View Record	Richard Tobin			12 Sep 1863	Self (Head)	
View Record	Richard Tobin	Abbeyfeale, Limerick, Ireland		25 Aug 1866	Self (Head)	
View Record	Richard Tobin			6 Mar 1875	Self (Head)	

The Ancestry record's Image is identical to the AmericanAncestor's image.

I retrieved: 3579 records for Canada; 183 records for Newfoundland; 210 records for Nova Scotia; 1459 records for Ontario; 54 records for Prince Edward Island; and 8 records for Cape Breton.

SUMMARY:

When I was an information specialist for NASA and a computer specialist and program manager for USDOT, I learned to expect the unexpected. I also learned that often the late-comer often had an advantage.

The unexpected: One would think that all 3 versions would be essentially the same. They used the same source, the NEHGS 8 volume set.

The late-comer: It is almost like Ancestry learned from the earlier versions of Missing Friends.

Now I use the Ancestry Missing Friends database exclusively.

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Your corrections, comments and suggestions are appreciated. Please Email me at:

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Genealogy Volunteer, Irish Cultural Centre of New England, Irish Fest, 2016, Canton MA