

OPERATION GRANNY FILES

The Substitution Playbook

A fact-by-fact field guide for when the record you wanted isn't the record you get

Field Guide & Quick-Reference

Mission 34: When the Records Burned

Clearance Level: Biscuit-Tin Operative

operationgrannyfiles.substack.com

QUICK-GRAB SUMMARY

A record burned. Or it was pulped, or it fell off a courthouse wagon in 1864 — the cause doesn't matter, the gap does. This playbook is a lookup table: find the fact you're missing down the left side, find your jurisdiction across the top, and the cell tells you what to search instead. Behind the table sits a four-question method that works whether the fire was in Dublin in 1922 or a Georgia courthouse in the Civil War. Learn the method once. Use it everywhere.

Section 1: How to Use This Table

You don't need to read this playbook cover to cover. Find the fact you're trying to establish in the leftmost column of the table below — birth, marriage, death, residence, land, family relationship, or occupation. Read across to your jurisdiction. The cell names the specific record, in order of how much weight it carries: what to check first, and what to check next if the first door is locked.

Two housekeeping notes before you dive in. First, "Ireland — Pre-1864" and "Ireland — Post-1864" are split because civil registration is the dividing line in Irish research — before it, you're substituting; after it, you usually aren't. Second, "American Burned County" is deliberately generic, because the method is identical whether your courthouse burned in Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, or Virginia — only the specific archive names change.

Section 2: The Substitution Table

Fact You Need	Ireland — Pre-1864	Ireland — Post-1864	Scotland (Contrast)	American Burned County
Birth / Baptism date	Catholic or C of I baptismal register (NLI microfilm / FamilySearch index); if none survives, cross- reference Griffith's Valuation for a plausible household by surname + townland	Civil birth registration, free at IrishGenealogy.ie — direct, no substitution needed	Statutory birth register at ScotlandsPeople, or pre-1855 Old Parish Register baptism entry	Church baptismal register; Bible record; delayed birth certificate filed decades later using affidavits

Fact You Need	Ireland — Pre-1864	Ireland — Post-1864	Scotland (Contrast)	American Burned County
Marriage date & spouses' parents	Parish marriage register (Catholic or C of I); non-Catholic marriages registered from 1845 at IrishGenealogy.ie	Civil marriage registration at IrishGenealogy.ie — names both spouses directly	Statutory marriage register naming both sets of parents, at ScotlandsPeople	Re-filed marriage bond/license (often re-recorded post-fire); church register; newspaper announcement
Death date & cause	Calendar of Wills and Administrations, 1858-1922 (if an estate existed); parish burial register; newspaper death notice	Civil death registration at IrishGenealogy.ie, including cause of death	Statutory death register naming the deceased's parents and cause of death, at ScotlandsPeople	Probate re-filing; church burial register; obituary or death notice in local newspaper; pension application
Residence at a point in time	Griffith's Valuation (1847-1864) or Tithe Applotment Books (1823-1837), both free, both local custody	Civil registration addresses; 1901 / 1911 census (both survive)	Decennial census, 1841-1921, at ScotlandsPeople	Tax rolls; city directories; land deeds naming adjoining owners
Land ownership / occupancy	Griffith's Valuation + Tithe Applotment Books + Registry of Deeds memorials (from 1708, survives complete)	Registry of Deeds continues; Land Registry records from 1892	Sasines (land registration) and testamentary records at ScotlandsPeople	Out-of-county deed books where land straddled a boundary; tax assessor rolls; re-filed deeds
Family relationships	Baptismal register naming both parents; will or Calendar entry naming heirs; Griffith's Valuation lease successions	Civil records name parents directly; National Archives genealogy portal census fragments	OPR and statutory registers name parents on every entry type	Bible records; pension application affidavits naming kin; probate filings naming heirs
Occupation	Griffith's Valuation (land use); parish register marginal notes; Tithe Books (agricultural only)	Civil registration records occupation of parents/informants	Statutory registers record occupation as standard practice	City directories; tax rolls; newspaper notices; census substitutes (state census years)

GRANNY PRO TIP

Start free before you pay for anything. For Ireland: the National Archives of Ireland genealogy portal, IrishGenealogy.ie, the Virtual Record Treasury of Ireland, and FamilySearch's Irish collections will get most beginners further than they expect. For Scotland, budget for ScotlandsPeople credits — there's no comparable free full-image alternative yet, but the records are worth every credit.

Section 3: The Four-Question Substitution Checklist

Behind the table sits a repeatable method. Any time a record you want turns out to be gone, work through these in order — this is the same checklist from the Mission 34 blog post, formatted here for quick reference in the field.

1. **What specifically was lost?** Not "everything." Name the record series, the years, and the office that held it. Vague loss feels unbeatable; precise loss has edges you can work around.
2. **What existed in parallel or duplicate?** A copy sent to a separate registry. A church or diocesan version. An index or calendar made before the original vanished.
3. **What indirect evidence stands in for the same fact?** You rarely need the exact record — you need any record that captured the same fact for a different reason.
4. **Who else had a reason to write this down?** A tax collector, a church, a court, a newspaper, a neighbor filing a claim on adjoining land.

BONUS INSIGHT

The Virtual Record Treasury of Ireland has been digitally reconstructing the Public Record Office's lost holdings by pulling in copies and duplicates held at partner archives worldwide. On the fire's 104th anniversary in 2026, the project passed half a million freely accessible reconstructed records — proof that "burned" and "gone forever" are not the same word. Check there before you conclude a record no longer exists.

Section 4: Reading the Result

A single substitute record is a lead, not a verdict. Griffith's Valuation and the Tithe Applotment Books are excellent for confirming a surname's *place and presence* — a household in a specific townland, at a specific time — but they say nothing about family relationships on their own. Treat any single land-valuation hit as a pointer to where you look next, never as proof by itself. Corroboration is what turns a lead into a fact: two or three independent substitute records, agreeing with each other, are something you can build a family tree on. One is a hunch worth chasing further.

GRANNY SAYS

A burned archive took the record, not the truth. Follow the substitutes, cross-check the pattern, and the story is still there for anyone willing to look sideways.

Notes

Use this space for personal notes and discoveries.
