

Ancient Origins of the Wilson Families

The surname Wilson has roots in Ireland, Scotland and England, and before that some lines extend back into Normandy and Denmark. The surname appears to have originated independently in many different areas, and thus not all Wilsons today are related to each other. Five of the principal family lines bearing the name of Wilson in Britain today stem from (1) the ancient Irish, (2) Wolf of Denmark via clan Inness, (3) William of clan Gunn, (4) William de Waldershelf, and (5) an unknown Norman invader named Wilson. Spelling variants include Wilson, Willson, Willsonne, Wilsone, Wulson, Wilsoun, Wolsoun, Wolfson, Wilfson, Wylsone and others, some versions being older than others but the differences often meaning relatively little, since one man might spell his own name in more than one way at different times in his life.

Our Wilson line stems from the ancient Irish clans, as proven by DNA analysis (see below). However, before we get to the Irish Wilsons, let's review all of what is currently known about the various other independent and mutually unrelated Wilson families in Great Britain:

The Norse Willsons of Scotland

Many of the English Wilsons are of Norman ancestry whereas some of the Scottish Willson's are mostly of Irish or Picto-Norse descent and represent either a branch ("sept") of the clan Gunn in Caithness or the much older House of Inness in Banffshire. The clan Gunn Willson's are descended from George Gunn "the Crowner," through his son William—hence "Will's son"—who lived in the late 1400's.

The Wilsons of clan Gunn, however, were a relatively late-emerging Norse branch of the Wilson surname. The name Wilson definitely dates to a much earlier time in Scotland. The early Nordic Wilsons were descended from a Danish Prince of the

Royal House of Norway (Norway administered Denmark for centuries), and established themselves at a very remote period in the Orkney Islands, in the 9th century, soon after 888 when King Harold of Norway routed the more rebellious clans. The name occurs in the Viking Sagas and the Orkneyinga Sagas.

European historians generally refer to the period between the 8th and 11th centuries as the Viking Age. The Vikings expanded east, west and south from Scandinavia through trading, raiding and the establishment of settlements. From bases in Sweden they invaded the Baltic region and Russia; from Denmark they invaded England, France and coastal Spain. The Shetland and Orkney Islands were the first of the British Isles to be colonized around 780, and by 800 the Western Isles, the Faeroe Islands and Iceland were colonized. In the Orkney Islands the indigenous Pictish population may have been entirely replaced by Viking settlers from Denmark. Numerous Viking settlements sprang up both east and west of present-day Cheshire County where our Tattenhall Wilsons were to be centered. Scotland did not regain administrative control of all of these lands until 1469, and the language called Norn, the Norse dialect of Shetland and Orkney, survived there until the 19th century.

These earliest Wilsons stem specifically from a Danish tribe who followed a 9th-century Prince named Wolf—which allegedly gave all Wilsons who possessed a grant of arms the privilege of using the golden wolf on their family crest. The Wilson surname from this line is a corruption of “Wolf’s son” and “Wilf’s son.” Apparently any Wilson coat of arms containing the rampant wolf, and there are a number of them, indicates an ancient line stemming from Prince Wolf in the 9th century. The Wilsons of Sandbach in Cheshire, for example, situated just a few miles from Tattenhall where our Wilsons lived, had just such a coat of arms: a golden wolf on a black background surmounted by three gold stars (or, in the old English/French language of heraldry: “Sable, a wolf rampant Or, in chief three estoiles of the second”). One might theorize that our Wilsons, in such close proximity but of commoner status by the 18th century, were from the same stock but had lost their armorial roots over the generations. That, however, would be wrong.

It should be noted that the name Wilson was recorded in Ayrshire at least a hundred years prior to the time of William Gunn: a Michael Wilson, born in the mid-1300’s, was burgess of Ayr in 1418. That example alone predates the Wilsons of the clan Gunn by at least a century or more, and probably stems from the more ancient clan Inness, Wilsons who had taken their name from Prince Wolf. The Wilsons of the Tattenhall and Carden area who trace their ancestry to Andrew Willsonne (born ca. 1450) also predate William Gunn.

During the creation of the Scottish boroughs under King David of Scotland (1084-1153) many English/Welsh people came north to settle in the new boroughs; Irish—descended and Norman-descended Wilsons may have been among them. In any case, the Ayrshire group of Wilsons is considerably larger than any other branch of Wilsons in Scotland, and they also seem to have held lands in Ireland.

The Norse-descended clan Inness Wilsons and clan Gunn Wilsons took lands around Berwickshire, Ayrshire, Fraserburgh, Fingach, Kelton, Glenderston, Glasgow and Edinburgh, and are especially numerous today in Ulster. They aided William the Conqueror by taking part in the war on the side of the Vikings, whom Harold of England fought in the North of England prior to the battle of Hastings in 1066. This was a diversionary tactic which drew Harold's attention from the actual invasion site of William the Conqueror in the south of England.

Although the surname Wilson is among the 30 most common surnames in Ireland today, it was formerly thought that all Wilsons from Ireland were actually of Scottish ancestry, descended from Scots who went there after the religious wars when King William of Orange (1650-1702) settled Protestant lowland Scottish families there. DNA analysis, however, has shown that many Northern Irish Wilsons are instead descended from an Irish warlord over a thousand years earlier, long predating the Scottish immigration there. The Wilson name today is most common in Ulster, and also in Antrim, Armagh, Down, Tyrone, Dublin, Derry and Fermanagh..

The Irish and Norse-Scottish Wilsons also moved south into England, especially after the disbanding of the Scottish border clans in 1603. Major branches of the Wilson family were established in Eshton Hall, Yorkshire; Melton, Bankhall; Penrith in Cumberland; Casterton Hall in Westmoreland; Forest Hall in Northumberland; and Rivington Hall in Lancashire.

The Wilson family of Ayrshire was a Covenanting Protestant family. ("Covenanters" were adherents of the "National Covenant," a 1638 agreement among Scottish Presbyterians to uphold their faith.) The name is also seen in the land of Kintyre (a peninsula between Scotland and Ireland) where the Ayrshire Wilsons who were Covenanters settled and were given farm land.

The Wilson's in Glasgow are predominantly related to the Wilson family that originated in 11th-century Berwickshire, Scotland and moved out into Ayrshire, during the formation of the Royal Burroughs under King David, and later into Kintyre (during the Covenanting wars). This accounts for the earliest records of the name, which are found in Yorkshire, Berwickshire and Ayrshire. Berwickshire is situated along the border of Scotland and England, but was originally part of Scotland. The earliest written historical records of the name Wilson as a Scottish name are in Berwickshire, which is where the Wilsons of the lands south of Edinburgh and on the West coast, Ayrshire and Kintyre, are claimed to descend from. It is interesting to note that Berwick is barely a stone's throw from Yorkshire, where the Norman-descended Wilsons of Jerusalem Hill are to be found.

The murder of the "virgin martyr" Margaret Wilson (who was of Berwickshire) at the hands of Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658) caused many Wilsons who were Covenanters to go west into Ayrshire and later Argyll. One instance of this is Margaret's brother, who was outraged at his sister's murder and became a soldier in the Covenanting army which opposed Cromwell and his slaughter of Presbyterians. After waging war he fled to

Kintyre and ultimately Ireland and may have ended up in the American colonies as a fugitive.

The Norman Wilsons of Jerusalem Hill, Yorkshire

In Yorkshire the name of Wilson of Jerusalem Hill (not our line) is attributed to the descendents of Sir William (Will) de Waldershelf, a knight from the Pennine Hills of Hunshelf and Waldershelf in Normandy, who came to the British Isles to join William the Conqueror after the conquest in 1066 and was apportioned lands in Yorkshire. His descendant, John de Hunshelf and de Waldershelf, born around 1320, had a son William whose son John was the first to take the surname Wilson, in honor of their ancestor. This Yorkshire Wilson family is of the peerage, and their full and documented family tree can be found in older editions of *Burke's Peerage*. Despite being from Normandy, their coat of arms is similar to that of most of the Nordic Wilson arms, with a rampant Wilson wolf surmounted by three stars, and similar latin mottoes including *Aut pax, aut bellum* ("Either in peace or in war") and *Vincit qui se vincit* ("He conquers who conquers himself").

As indicated above, some of the Norman Wilsons were apparently also the descendants of the original Danish Wilsons. They had been driven out of Scotland and England in 1002 by King Ethelred the Unready because he feared (justifiably) that they were against him. Fleeing to France, they returned with William the Conqueror and were by then considered Normans. The Wilson family is found in the Domesday Book (William the Conqueror's census of England in 1086), indicating that people of that surname (distinct from William de Waldershelf's Norman line) had come to Britain with William the Conqueror in 1066. In Devon a Manorial Lordship dating from the Domesday Book is also called Wilson. The arms include the emblematic Wilson wolf with a fleur-de-lis overhead representing Normandy, and the motto of *Wil sone wil* (a pun on the name, translating as "Get one's way").

Recent Genetic Research

There is new and current speculation based on some recent evidence found in a huge DNA study (drawn on by the BBC for their show "The blood of the Vikings"). DNA samples were taken from groups across the four countries of the British Isles in order to determine the impact and spread of the Danish bloodlines, especially in the areas which were traditionally known to be Viking: the area of "the Danelaw" lands in northeastern England, and northeastern Scotland (Caithness and Orkney). **It was revealed that the Irish today are predominantly descended from the "Britons" or Brythonic Celts**, as are most of the Welsh, and are *not* of Danish or Norman ancestry. Areas of northeastern Scotland and the Danelaw areas of England, on the other hand, were found to be predominantly of Danish/Norman descent. The Wilson name, however, does have some representation in northern Wales, and this is also an area of A+ blood grouping—a blood group which only people of Nordic descent have. [See, for example, Helgason *et al.* (2001) MtDNA and the islands of the North Atlantic: estimating the proportions of Norse and Gaelic ancestry. *American Journal of Human Genetics*, vol. 68, pp. 723-737.]

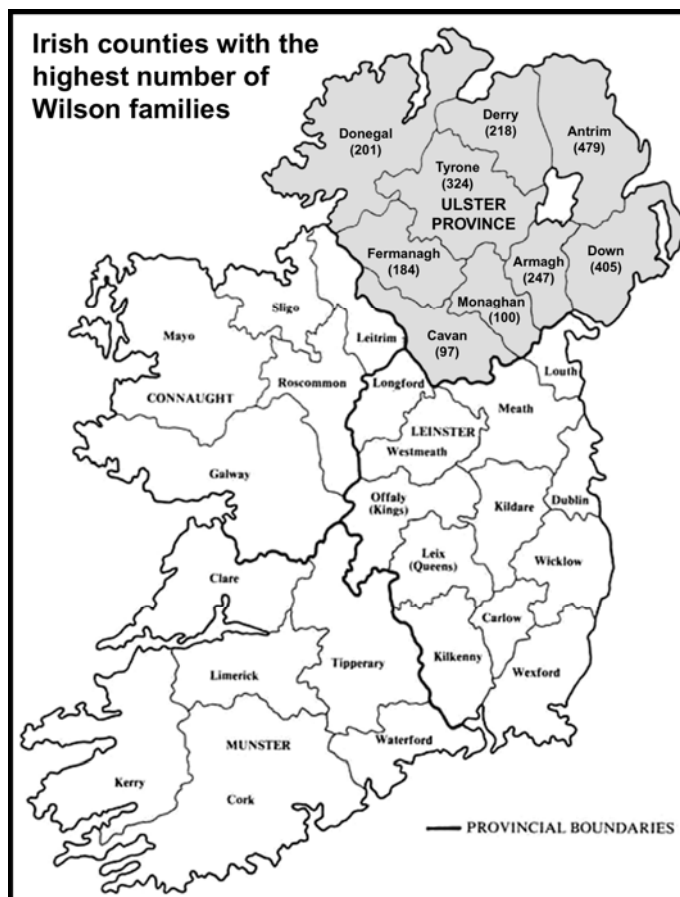
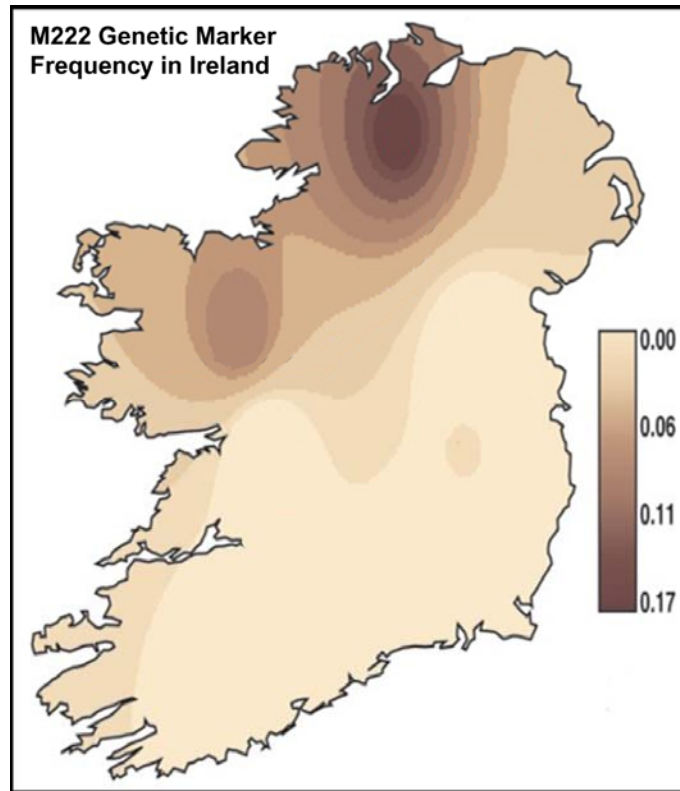
Our Wilsons

A genetic analysis of markers on the Y-chromosome in our Wilson line (handed down solely from father to son through the centuries), carried out by the Family Tree DNA Corporation, has revealed that all members of our male Wilson line belong to the genetic haplogroup subclade designated as **R1b1a2a1a1b4b** [formerly called R1b1c7]; this determination is based on a particular genetic marker (a single nucleotide polymorphism, or SNP) called R-M222, so we are often referred to as the **M222 subclade**. This diagnostic marker is associated with individuals whose roots lie primarily in the counties of northwestern Ireland. In Donegal County, Ireland, over 21% of the population today is of this subclade. The frequency map shows the focus of the M222 population in Northern Ireland.

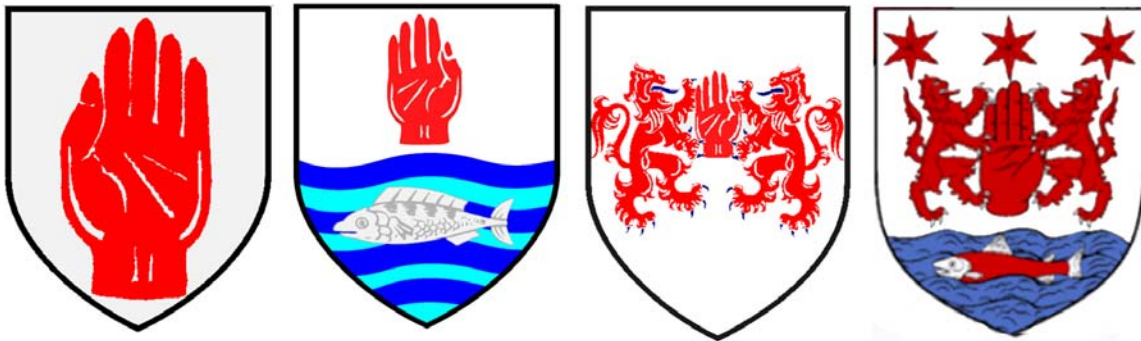
The M-222 marker is thought by geneticist to have been the Y-chromosome haplogroup of the Uí Néill (“descendants of Niall”) dynastic kindred of ancient Ireland (Moore *et al.*, 2006). M222 is also found as a substantial proportion of the population of Scotland which may indicate substantial settlement from northern Ireland or at least links to it (Moore *et al.*, 2006; Campbell, 2007).

Based on mutation rates, calculated by three different methods, the M222 marker is thought to have originated with a single person in Northern Ireland around 1,500 to 1,600 years ago. The historical figure associated with this marker is a 5th century Irish warlord called Niall Nógiallach (“Naill of the Nine Hostages”), who died around 450 A.D. Niall is considered to have been one of the greatest Irish “kings” or tribal chieftains. He was said to have consolidated his power by leading raids on the Roman Empire, taking hostages from powerful rival Irish families, from families in Britain and from the European mainland, thus earning the surname meaning “of the nine hostages.” For example, Saint Patrick was said to have been kidnapped and brought to Ireland as one of his hostages during his raids. Niall reportedly had 12 sons, many of whom became powerful kings in their own right and fathered many more sons, all carrying the M222 marker. Moore *et al.* (2006) wrote: “Such phylogenetic predominance is a biological record of past hegemony and supports the veracity of semi-mythological early genealogies. The fact that about one in five males in northwestern Ireland is probably a direct patrilineal descendent of a single early medieval ancestor is a powerful illustration of the potential link between prolificacy and power and of how Y-chromosome phylogeography can be influenced by social selection.”

We cannot be absolutely certain that we descend directly from Niall, because he had two brothers: Brian (or Brion) and Fiachrach. Their descendants are known as the Connachta, because they (like Niall) have a common male ancestor who was called Conn Ceadcathach (“Conn of the Hundred Battles”). Surnames did not come into general use until several centuries after Niall; when they finally did, many different surnames were adopted by direct patrilineal descendants of Niall, including some Wilsons. A map of surname distribution in Ireland shows Wilsons concentrated in Northern Ireland, in the exact area where the M222 marker is concentrated and where it presumably originated.



With regard to family crests, we can be sure that any Wilson crest bearing the Wilson wolf (and thus representing the descendants of Wolf, the Danish Viking warlord) does *not* belong to our line. (That's too bad, because those crests are all quite elegant.) Rather our line might be best represented by the crests of the O'Neal and O'Neill families. "Almost all of the surnames historically linked to Niall of the Nine Hostages or his brothers branched off from the genetic line of the Tyrone O'Neills" (O'Neill and McLaughlin, 2006), who were descended from Niall's son, Tir Eoghain ("Tyrone"). Twelve generations later his descendant, Niall Glandubh ("Niall of the Black Knee"), became King of Ireland; he was killed in battle against the Norsemen near Dublin in 919. His grandson, Domhnall (ca. 943), was the first to adopt the surname O'Neill, meaning "descended from Niall." From the fifth to the eleventh century, and from the twelfth century to the death of Red Hugh O'Neill in 1608, members of this dominant family were monarchs of all Ireland, kings of Ulster, earls and princes of Tyrone, statesmen and soldiers.



The earliest O'Neill crest consists solely of a red hand on a white background. Eventually, with the passing generations, a swimming salmon was added beneath the hand in some cases, or two red lions, rampant, were added facing each other with the red hand between them. Finally three six-pointed stars (or "rondells") were added above them. If any Wilsons who descended from Niall attained high enough social status to receive a coat of arms, it would be somewhat different from these but would certainly include the red hand somewhere in the design.

The origin of the red (bloody) hand in the crest is interesting. According to legend, there was a time when the throne at Ulster was contested by the heads of the O'Neill and O'Reilly clans. It was agreed that a rowing race should take place and the first to touch shore would become king. The O'Neill leader was so determined to win the crown that, upon seeing he would lose the race, he cut off one hand and threw it to shore, thus winning the race and the kingship. (One could say that our genetic line carries a definite competitive streak!) The Gaelic motto accompanying the O'Neill crest, *Lam Dearg Eirann*, translates as "The Red Hand of Ireland."

Niall of the Nine Hostages

The following discussion of Niall of the Nine Hostages is taken from the Irish Genealogy Toolkit website (<http://www.irish-genealogy-toolkit.com/niall-of-the-nine-hostages.html>):

Niall of the Nine Hostages leapt from the legends of Ireland straight into the modern world when scientists at Trinity College Dublin revealed that as many as three million men living today may carry his y-DNA signature. The genetic evidence of the study shows that the strongest associations are with the surnames traditionally linked to the Ui Neill (“descendants of Niall”) clan, including Neill, Boyle, Bradley, Campbell, Cannon, Coleman, Connor, Devlin, Doherty, Donnell, Donnelly, Egan, Flynn, Gallagher, Gormley, Hynes, Kane, McGovern, McLoughlin, McManus, Molloy, Reilly, Rourke and Quinn. These names continue to be most prevalent in the Northwest of Ireland, the historical stronghold of the Ui Neill, where the study found the genetic fingerprint of Niall of the Nine Hostages in the y-DNA of one in five men (21%). The M222 pattern is a lot rarer in the south of the island.

Across the island as a whole, a different subclade – the M269 pattern – is predominant, while the M222 pattern is found in 8.2% or one man in twelve. The Trinity College study also found that about one in ten men in the west or central areas of Scotland have the so-called Niall of the Nine Hostages gene. So, too, do about one in fifty New Yorkers of European heritage, reflecting three centuries of Irish emigration to North America.

Niall of the Nine Hostages, (in Irish, Niall Naoi Noígiallach) is a quasi historical character in Ireland's story. Myth has it that he was descended by an unknown number of generations from Conn Céadathlach, aka Conn of the Hundred Battles, who may have lived in the middle of the 2nd century and was reputedly the first high king of Ireland.

The O'Neill dynasty is an historical certainty. According to legend, Niall was a warrior king at a time when Ireland was divided into many kingdoms and a hierarchy of kingship existed. Just how extensive an area he may have dominated is not recorded but he fought his way to become King of Tara in the late 4th or early 5th century. In time, the status of King of Tara came to denote High King of Ireland, the latter a misleading term that should not be construed as meaning the bearer had control of all the island. Ruling from Tara, Niall's modus operandi for achieving dominance was to take hostages from the families of neighbors and under-kings. He also led successful raids against Roman Britain and Scotland (some stories say that the future St. Patrick was among the hostages taken from one such expedition) and conquered much of Ulster.

Niall's legendary military skill was on a par with his sexual prowess. This was expected of someone of his status in a polygamous society where all children, from wives or concubines, were acknowledged. Legend accords him at least 12 sons.

After the death of Niall of the Nine Hostages, one of his sons, Laedhaire became High King. He and his descendants continued to dominate much of Ireland for most the next six centuries. All but two of the High Kings of Tara came from this family. By the 8th century, the Ui Néills held power in the northwest where they were known as the Northern Ui Néill, and also in the midlands where they are known as the Southern Ui Néill. Genealogical pedigrees dating back to the 5th century, when Laedhaire's children and grandchildren were around, are considered accurate.

In conclusion...

The early Wilsons were a courageous and determined lot. David Cramb Wilson, a Scottish genealogist and prominent Wilson researcher, writes:

As a Wilson I still feel the connection to the old country and the “family,” which is something the Wilsons as a bunch definitely have retained, wherever in the world their forebears ended up, whether they went there voluntarily or were involuntarily transported there because of their loyalties, political or religious beliefs. Wilsons had a lot of martyrs to our many political causes, it seems, but we should take pride in that type of courage, because most of all the Wilson's fought and died for their faith and their right to practice their chosen beliefs at a time when Protestants in England were being put to the sword. Even now, when I meet other Wilson's in my daily routines and travels, there is an almost immediate rapport and acceptance of one another. It is a very strange and unspoken thing I personally can't explain, but certainly it has its roots in clandom, from a time when all members of a clan and family were in fact related to the chief or head and there was an acceptance of mutual respect if not fealty to one another. I think for the Wilsons, though, it is almost a racial group type of thing, since, if historical speculation is correct, we were once a huge and powerful family who were together since well before the 9th century.

References:

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Campbell, K. D. (2007) Geographic Patterns of Haplogroup R1b in the British Isles. *Journal of Genetic Genealogy* **3**: 1–13. <http://www.jogg.info/31/campbell.pdf>.

See also: Septs of the Ui Neill: <http://clanmaclochlainn.com/septs.htm>



Tattenhall Parrish church and graveyard. The tower dates from 1512.