North Uist has been inhabited for many years as evidenced by the plethora of chambered cairns from Neolithic times, and Stone Age and Bronze Age stone circles and other remains which dot its landscape. The Celts arrived in the Outer Hebrides about 500 BC. The Norse invaded and conquered all of the Outer Hebrides in about 800 AD and remained in occupation until 1266 AD, a period of almost 500 years. The Norse had a lasting influence over these occupied lands. The names of virtually all lochs and mountains on North Uist are of Norse origin and Norse blood runs strongly in the veins of most of it’s people.

North Uist and its adjacent islands to the south, Benbecula and South Uist, were owned for hundreds of years by two different branches of the MacDonald clan descended from John MacDonald, Lord of the Isles (c1315-1386). From about the 13th Century until 1855 the MacDonals of Sleat in Skye owned North Uist. During most of this period the MacDonals of Clanranald of South Uist owned both South Uist and Benbecula. At the time of the Reformation in Scotland (1560) the MacDonals of Sleat converted to Protestantism and 100% of their tenants in North Uist followed their lead. The MacDonals of Clanranald on the other hand remained Roman Catholic and the great majority of their tenants in Benbecula and South Uist at the time did the same. Over subsequent years many from North Uist were encouraged by Clanranald to relocate to South Uist with the result that today there is a large population of Protestant families in Benbecula and a fewer number in South Uist. There was no similar migration from South Uist to North Uist. Thus knowing the religion of your forebears is most helpful in determining whether they were from North Uist, South Uist or Benbecula. If they were Catholic they were definitely not from North Uist and if Protestant could have been from any three of the islands but North Uist would be certainly the first place to look. If your forebears are Protestant but from either Benbecula or South Uist it is most likely that they are descended from a family that was originally from North Uist.

The adjacent neighbour of North Uist to the north is the Isle of Harris. Harris was owned for centuries by the MacLeods and the inhabitants, like those in North Uist, were Protestant. While the Isle of Harris is about 12 miles north east of North Uist across the Sound of Harris all of the intervening islands, other than Boreray, were part of Harris and not North Uist. The largest of these intervening islands is Berneray which lies only a few hundred yards off the north coast of North Uist. Today a short motor causeway connects Berneray to North Uist and a car ferry connects Berneray to Leverburgh on Harris. Over the years there were many “incomers” to North Uist from Berneray and the Isle of Harris and the many MacKillops, MacCuishs, Morrisons, MacLeods etc. found in North Uist, principally along the north coastal area, were originally from Berneray or the island of Harris. A few years ago logic prevailed and Berneray was ceded to North Uist and thus Berneray is now politically part of North Uist and not of Harris. Concurrently its name was changed from "Berner" to "Berneray" to avoid conflict with another island in the Western Isles with the same name). Also concurrently with such changes the Register Office in Berneray (Berner) was closed and all subsequent births, marriages and deaths.
on Berneray were registered in the North Uist Register Office. To further complicate matters, a few years ago the North Register Register Office was combined with and re-located to Balivanich in Benbecula. Thus today all births, marriages and deaths for Berneray, North Uist and Benbecula are registered in the Register Office in Balivanich and all post 1855 records for the three islands are now found there. (As Berneray, North Uist and Benbecula are today all inter-connected by motor causeways this creates little hardship for for locals but is most confusing for genealogists from abroad trying to find the post 1855 records for North Uist and Berneray.)

The island of Boreray mentioned above as being off the north coast of North Uist has always been a part of North Uist and not Harris. In about 1460 a lease of Boreray was given by the MacDonals of Sleat to the MacLeans of Ardgour. Their descendants, known as the “MacLeans of Boreray” held Boreray for 13 generations (from 1460 to about 1810) when the MacLeans gave up the lease and Boreray was divided into 20 crofts. The 1841 Census shows 181 crofters and their families on the island. Over cultivation and the collapse of the kelp industry (see below) lead to a continuous decline in the population of Boreray until the last residents were evacuated in 1925. It now has no human population – just sheep. Virtually all MacLeans found in North Uist in the 19th C trace their forebears to Boreray.

Research by Bill Lawson (see below) of Harris indicates that the major emigration from North Uist commenced only in the 1820s, much later than from many other areas of Scotland, as the economic and religious pressures that caused emigration from the Western Isles occurred later in North Uist than in most other areas. Until about 1850 the great majority of such emigration was to the Gabarus, Catalone, Mira and Loch Lomond areas of Cape Breton. After 1850 emigration diminished and tended to be to Ontario and Australia. After about 1880 the emigration was to Western Canada as vast areas were opened up there by the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway. (An excellent article on emigration from North Uist, and the reasons for the same, can be found at [http://globalgenealogy.com/globalgazette/gazbl/gazbl35.htm](http://globalgenealogy.com/globalgazette/gazbl/gazbl35.htm).

The early emigrants from North Uist spoke only Gaelic and were fiercely Protestant and when emigrating almost invariably went to the same areas as relatives and others from their town or district had earlier emigrated (where they could be assured of receiving assistance, having people with whom they could converse in Gaelic until they learned English, and where a Presbyterian church was nearby). Accordingly when you find a North Uist emigrant in an early community in America or Australia, you will usually find more nearby! (For more information as to the destinations in Cape Breton of North Uist emigrants see article by Bill Lawson at the following website [http://www.electricscotland.com/history/canada/hebrides_breton.htm](http://www.electricscotland.com/history/canada/hebrides_breton.htm).

There is unfortunately a dearth of written records relating to the genealogy of North Uist. (The reasons for which are explained later). Statutory registration of births, marriages and deaths did not commence in Scotland until 1 January 1855. However for such events occurring after 1855 Scots records are arguably more easily accessible than for any other country. Post 1855 registrations of such events can be searched and images
of the actual entries downloaded (for a fee) at www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk on the Internet. For record of any such events in North Uist prior to 1855 one must rely on the following sources:

1. **Old Parochial Records**

   The only surviving public registers of genealogical events in North Uist prior to 1855 are the parish registers of the Church of Scotland (known as “the Old Parochial Registers” or “OPRs”). These however record only births and marriages and not deaths. The oldest surviving “OPRs” for North Uist date only from 1821. For a variety of reasons, including the “Disruptions” (which resulted in most of the inhabitants of North Uist leaving the Church of Scotland for the Free Church in the 1840s), the extant OPRs for North Uist show no more than perhaps 5% of the births and marriages that actually took place in North Uist between 1821 and 1855. Thus in the case of North Uist the OPRs are of only very limited assistance and with few exceptions only cover Kilmuir Parish (the Paiblesgarry area) on the west coast of North Uist. These OPRs are also available and can be searched (for a fee) at www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk.

   There are many stories that the OPRs for North Uist were “lost” when, following the commencement of statutory registration in 1855, all such local records in Scotland were required to be delivered to New Register House in Edinburgh. However, at page 169 of the Statistical Account of Scotland, 1841, the then parish minister of North Uist states:

   “Parochial Registers. No parochial registers were kept till lately in this parish; and even now, the entries from more remote districts of it are irregular.”

2. **Census Returns and Rental Rolls**

   A Rental Roll for North Uist dated 1718 exists however as at such date surnames were not widely used in North Uist (or elsewhere in the Western Isles) and as a result tenants are only identified by their “sloinneadh” and not by the surnames in use today (see comments in this connection below). A Rental Roll from 1799 also exists but it too does not identify tenants by surname. There are also available whole or partial Rental Rolls for 1804, 1814, 1815, 1817, 1827, 1829, 1833, and 1848/9 but again these are of limited value as they show only the tenant and not all persons in the family.

   The earliest document relating to North Uist of particular importance to genealogists is the 1841 Census of Scotland. This was the first “all person” census of Scotland and includes the names and ages of each resident on the date of the Census (7 June 1841). (A transcription of the 1841 Census of North Uist can be found on-line at http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/~ked1/1841NorthUist.html and (for a fee) at www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk

   There have been “all persons” censuses of Scotland every ten years after 1841 (except 1941). Copies of each of these censuses, up to and including the 1911 Census, are available on microfilm through any local Family History Center of the Church of the Latter Day Saints (Mormon Church). (The Government of Scotland, for privacy reasons, does not allow public access to census data until a date following the estimated death of
the persons named.). The 1841 thru 1911 Censuses are also available and can be searched on-line at www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk (Note that in the 1841 Census the age of adults are rounded up to the nearest number divisible by 5 – thus someone age 21 will be shown as 25 in the 1841 Census). Ages shown in census returns are frequently in error and should not be regarded as definitive.

3. Passenger Lists

As the residents of North Uist emigrating left Scotland not directly from North Uist but from one of the mainland ports (usually Glasgow) there are no passenger lists for North Uist. The first ship to bring Scots immigrants from the Western Isles to Nova Scotia was the “Hector”, which sailed from South Uist on 1 July 1772 and arrived at Pictou, Nova Scotia on 15 September 1772. I am not aware of any North Uist passengers on the “Hector”. The “Waterhen” and “Cashmere”, two ships chartered by Lord MacDonald of Sleat (the “owner” of North Uist), both sailed from Greenoch (Glasgow) for Quebec City on 21 August 1849 with destitute families from his Estates in the Outer Hebrides. Many of those aboard were from North Uist and many of those went to Middlesex County (near London) in Western Ontario on arrival in Canada. There were also 250 passengers from North Uist aboard the “Hercules” which sailed from Greenoch for Australia on 26 December 1852 (21 of the North Uist passengers died en route). Copies of the passenger lists for the mentioned ships are available. Most emigrants from North Uist to Canada however sailed on ships where they were the sole or among the few North Uist passengers aboard and only a few of the passenger lists for these ships survive. Those that do survive are held by Archives Canada and microfilm copies are available through any Family History Center of the Church of the Latter Day Saints (Mormon Church).

4. Oral History

A major source of North Uist genealogical information is “oral history”. Prior to the mid 19th C most residents of North Uist could neither read nor write. Accordingly they were forced to rely on memory rather than written records. Many had prodigious memories and a great interest in genealogy and both the lore and the genealogy of the island were passed down orally from generation to generation. Even today there are residents of North Uist who can recite their patronymic that takes their pedigree back 12 or more generations. While few today have this degree of knowledge many born in North Uist prior to about 1850 did and if you are lucky enough to find a knowledgeable relative, a recorded written family history by a family ancestor, or a family bible with the family history entered, you are indeed fortunate!

5. Bill Lawson

No discussion about the genealogy of any of the Western Isles is complete without mention of Bill Lawson. Bill is a “Lowlander” born in Paisley who after graduating as a lawyer accepted a position in the south of the Isle of Harris (about 12 miles “as the crow flies” from North Uist). He quickly fell in love with the Western Isles, taught himself Gaelic and became fascinated with the genealogy of Harris (to which he then had no personal family connection). Over time he expanded his research to cover the genealogy of the whole of the Western Isles. At a later date he further expanded his
research to include Cape Breton, Quebec and Western Ontario in an attempt to follow those who had emigrated from the Western Isles. (Being a bachelor until middle age allowed him the time to pursue such research!). Bill’s research compiled over many years is prodigious. In about 1990 he took early retirement (and married another Western Isles genealogist!) and subsequently has devoted the whole of his time to researching, writing and lecturing on the genealogy of the Western Isles. Bill is a “professional genealogist” (i.e. he charges for his services). Concerned that his research be preserved, the government of the Western Isles has recently created a non-profit foundation to acquire Bill’s records and to fund his continuing research. Bill has written several books on the genealogy of North Uist. These include the following:

- “Croft Histories, Balranald and Paiblesgarry” (1988) which shows the tenants of Balranald and Paiblesgarry
- “Croft History of North Uist, Volume 1” (1991) which shows all known tenants of Vallay, Griminish, Scolpaig, Balelone, Balmartin, Baleloch, Hosta, Tigharry, Hougharry and Goular.
- “Croft History, Isle of North Uist, Volume 3” (2001) which shows all tenants of the island of Grimsay
- “Croft History, Isle of North Uist, Volume 4” (2005) which shows tenants of the following townships in the north-east of North Uist: Orinsay, Athmor, Trumisgarry, Vallay, Reumisgarry, Clachan Sand, Gaulbay, Baile Mhic Coinein, Baile Mhic Phail, (Newton), Portnalong, Kylis Bernera and Boreray
- “Croft History, Isle of North Uist, Volume 5” (2007) which covers Balranald, Balemore, Knockintorran and Paiblesgarry
- “Index to the Marriages (Recorded and Unrecorded) in the Parish of North Uist (1820-1855)” (1999)
- “A Register of Emigrant Families from the Western Isles of Scotland to Ontario, Canada, Part 1, Bruce, Grey and Huron Counties” (1996)

These publications contain a huge amount of information and it is hoped that Bill will shortly publish “Croft Histories” for the remaining districts of North Uist not covered by the mentioned volumes.
Copies of these publications can be obtained directly from Bill Lawson Publications, Northton, Isle of Harris, Western Isles HS3 3JA, Scotland (www.billlawson.com). (Global Genealogy in Milton, Ontario http://globalgenealogy.com for some years stocked these publications however recently they appear to have stopped doing so.)

The almost complete absence of any North Uist written records pre-dating the 1841 Census means, that in most instances, there will be no reference in any extant North Uist written record of any North Uist native who who emigrated before the 1841 Census. In such instances any record of such persons (written or oral) that may exist is usually only found in the place to which they emigrated. For persons who emigrated to Cape Breton one place to look is certainly the Beaton Institute at the University of Cape Breton in Sydney which has collected much information on the early settlers of Cape Breton. One should also search and monitor the several very active Internet Message Boards where people researching their Western Isles or Canadian Maritime provinces exchange information. There have also been a number of local “histories” published covering the communities in Canada to which such persons emigrated. Another possible source is Bill Lawson (supra), who as mentioned above, has done much research in Cape Breton tracing the families of the Western Isles who emigrated there. Also be alert to any “oral history” that may have been passed down within the family.

Most of us today find the lack of early written records unbelievable. There are several reasons for the paucity of extant written records. First is that before about 1850 in North Uist (and the Western Isles) only a small minority of the population could read or write and so placed little importance on written records. The second is that following the Jacobite Highland uprising in 1746 at Culloden Parliament, in an attempt to prevent further Highland uprisings, proscribed the bagpipes, the kilt and the use of the Gaelic language for any public record, requiring that all "official records" (including registration of births, marriages and deaths, censuses, etc) had to be in English. So in the case of North Uist, which until the second half of the 19th C you have a population that could neither read nor write, nor speak English. Is it any wonder that no written records were maintained?

Not even a brief summary of North Uist genealogy would be complete without a comment on surnames. Many today (particularly residents of North America) put completely unwarranted importance on the spelling of surnames (“I can’t possibly be related to him as he is a MacDonald whereas our family is McDonald”). In North Uist and the Outer Hebrides before about the year 1800 surnames did not exist! People were known by their “sloinneadh” (i.e. their “handle” or name by which they were commonly known) that was usually a combination of one or more of the following: nickname, patronymic, occupational name and/or place of residence. For example, the tailor Angus MacPherson might be known as “Angus Tailor”. More frequently the “sloinneadh” was the person’s patronymic (e.g. “Aonaghus Iain Domhnullach” (Angus John son of Donald), which was the patronymic of Angus John MacDonald of Knockline, the well-known North Uist genealogist born in 1900). Another example would be “Domhnull
mac Alasdair ‘ic Raonuill” (Donald son of Alexander the son of Ranald). (In Gaelic “mac” means “son” and mhic, or abbreviated “‘ic”, means “son of the son”. Note in the foregoing examples that the surname is not used (or needed!) as everyone would know from the naming pattern the family to which such person belonged.

Much the same problem exists with given names. After the commencement of statutory registration in 1855 the Registrars were forced to find anglicized names for gaelic given names. Gradually a "standard" translation appeared but for example your forebear who you now know as "Archibald MacDonald” would be known to his friends as “Gilleasbug Mac Dhomnull” and his wife whom you know as "Effy" would be known as "Oighrig" to her friends and family.

When in the early 19th C surnames became necessary for civil purposes most Highlanders simply adopted the surname of their Clan Chief, which in the case of North Uist was Lord MacDonald of Sleat (Skye). This largely explains why some 70% of the population of North Uist today has the surname “MacDonald”. He was their clan chief as they were his followers and resided on his lands and under the pre-1746 feudal system in Scotland were obligated to fight for him. Thus notwithstanding their common surname, a minority of MacDonalds in North Uist today have any blood relationship to the MacDonald’s of Sleat, or indeed to others in Scotland with the surname “MacDonald”. The predominate view, at least in North America, that every one in the Highlands belonged to a clan to which they were related by blood is accordingly a romantic myth. The following extract from “How The Scots Invented the Modern World”, by Arthur Herman, Crown Publishers, New York, 2001 at page 104 makes this point very clearly:

“The term clan, comes of course from the Gaelic clann, meaning “children”. It implied a kinship group of four or five generations, all claiming descent from a common ancestor. And clan chieftains encouraged their followers to believe that they were indeed bound together like family. Men such as the Duke of Argyll of the Campbells or Lord Lovat of the Frasers routinely demanded a loyalty from their tenants not unlike that of children for a father. But it was entirely a fiction. The average clan … was no more a family than is a Mafia “family”. The only important blood ties were between the chieftain and his various caporegimes, the so-called tacksman who collected his rents and bore the same name. Below them were a large nondescript, and constantly changing population of tenants and peasants, who worked the land and owed the chieftain service in war and peacetime. Whether they considered themselves Campbells or MacPhersons or MacKinnons was a matter of indifference, and no clan genealogist or bard, the seanachaidh, ever wasted breath keeping track of them. What mattered was that they were on clan land, and called it home.”

It is another common misconception is that there is a distinction between a “Mc” and a “Mac” – say one family with the surname “McDonald” and another with the surname “MacDonald”. There is no distinction whatsoever. Both are attempts to translate the Gaelic “mhic” (meaning “son of”) into English. Thus “Iain mhic Iomhair” (John son of Iver) became “John MacIver”. 
The advent of computer databases requires “standardization” of surnames as it is obviously impractical to have to search a computer database for every possible variant spelling of the same name (e.g. “MacDonald”, McDonald”, “Macdonald”, “Mcdonald”) - all of which are different names to a computer. Accordingly in compiling my database of persons born North Uist before 1900 I USE ONLY THE “LONG FORM” OF A SURNAME (e.g. “MacDonald”) and always the currently accepted anglicized spelling of given names even though the source documents from which the information was extracted may use a variant spelling.

Hebridean families in the 19th C and earlier generally (but not invariably) followed the practice of naming the eldest son after the paternal grandfather, the eldest daughter after the maternal grandmother, the second son after the maternal grandfather and the second daughter after the paternal grandmother. If there was a recent death in the family the next born child might be named after the recently deceased family member. The result of this was that in any family there were usually only very few given names ever used. There are frequent cases where you will find in a family two or sometimes three children with the same given name (for example if both of the grandfathers had the same given name). This of course can be confusing for us but was not for our forebears. Where for example in a family where there were two brothers name “Angus” in daily life distinguishing adjectives would be used to avoid confusion. For example, the older child might be referred to as “Angus Mor” (“Big Angus”) and the other as “Angus Beag” (“Little Angus”) or “Angus Bhan” (“Fair Angus”). Knowing that such naming patterns were generally followed is of great assistance to a genealogist. As only certain given names usually appear in a family and not others you know immediately when hearing a patronymic what say MacDonald line he belongs to and which he definitely does not belong to. If you know all the children in the family it also allows you to make an “educated guess” as to the given names of the grandparents.

Another myth is that persons who emigrated from North Uist in the 19th C did so as a result of being “forced off the land by the Clearances”. While this was certainly the case in areas of Sutherland and South Uist it was not generally the case in the rest of the Highlands including North Uist. There were however several “clearances” in North Uist. In 1826 the adjoining crofting communities of Baile mhic Conan, Baile Mhic Phail (now known as Newton) and Kylis Bernera were “cleared”. As Lawson has pointed out, most of those dispossessed went to Loch Portain, on the Northeast coast of North Uist. As such communities were relatively small not many people were affected by such clearance. The principal “clearance” on North Uist was of Sollas in 1849. This involved 603 persons, less than 15% of the population of North Uist at that date and less than 5% of the estimated number of persons who emigrated from North Uist in the 19th C. The primary reason for the emigration from North Uist in the 19th C was economic. As a result of the introduction at the beginning of the 19th C of public health measures (vaccination, sanitation etc), a major new food source (the potato), coupled with the collapse of the alkali industry after the end of the Napoleonic Wars (which required a large input of labor to collect and burn kelp and thus encouraged couples to have large families) there was a huge increase in the population of North Uist (and elsewhere in the Western Isles) during the first half of the 19th C. There was only a fixed amount of arable land and with
the failure of the potato crop (the staple food of the Western Isles) twice in the 1840s, the available land could neither provide sufficient jobs for the increased population or food to feed them. This, together with the promise of free land in Canada and Australia (no one in North Uist could ever aspire to own his own land) and the provision of “assisted passage” for many were the principal factors that resulted in the depopulation of the Western Isles in the 1800s. The following table giving the population of North Uist at various dates shows the effect of the above factors:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1750 (introduction of the potato to North Uist)</td>
<td>1,836</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1765</td>
<td>2,465</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1801</td>
<td>3,010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1811</td>
<td>3,863</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1821</td>
<td>4,971</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1883</td>
<td>4,264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>1,404</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Normal practice in North Uist and the Western Isles was for the eldest son to take-over the family croft on the death of the father. Accordingly in most families the eldest son remained in North Uist and his younger brothers emigrated.

A few comments on land ownership and landholding may be of assistance. Prior to 1746 (the defeat of the Highland Scots at Culloden) the Western Isles were probably the last surviving feudal society in Europe. A few families (the MacDonald’s of Sleat in the case of North Uist and parts of Skye) were the hereditary owners of all the land in the Western Isles. The arable portions of these estates were divided into large farms and were usually leased to “tacksmen”, frequently minor members of the absentee landlord’s family. The lessee was required to pay an annual rent and to also provide a stipulated number of fighting men anytime the landlord embarked on either a defensive or offensive campaign against a neighbouring clan. The tacksmen employed the local peasantry to work and live on the farm under the obligation to take up arms whenever the landlord called. Such leases were sometimes of long duration. In the case of North Uist the most notable lease in this connection was a lease of the Islands of Boreray and Grimsay and of Cladach Carinish that were granted to the MacLeans of Boreray in 1712 and continued to 1865.

After 1746 there was a dramatic decline in clan warfare in the Western Isles. Also many of the landlords took up expensive residences in London and increasingly looked upon their peasantry not as “clansmen” who in the past had fought alongside them in battle but as a source of income to support their increasingly expensive lifestyle. Rents were increased and tacksmen replaced by factors (agents of the landlord) who let the former farms out directly to the peasantry who previously had worked the farm. The new tenants would collectively agree to pay the specified rent for the farm and would then agree among themselves to a division of the farm between arable areas and grazing areas. They would also agree collectively to an equitable division of the arable lands and to ensure fairness there was a re-allocation every three years. The farms were characterized by the tenant’s houses being clustered together in a small village (in Gaelic a “clachan”)
on the farm. The grazing area of the farm would be held collectively with each tenant being entitled to graze a fixed number of cattle and/or sheep on such area.

In an attempt to accommodate more tenants on the available land and to ensure that there would be a large population available for employment (at low wages) to collect kelp and convert it into alkali (the major source of income of the landlords in the Western Isles between about 1775 and 1830) many Highland landlords decided to convert their lands into “crofting townships”. In the case of North Uist, Lord MacDonald of Sleat commissioned a mainland surveyor by the name of Reid to survey North Uist and suggest how the available land might be most profitably divided into small crofts. Such survey was completed in 1799. In dividing the available land into small crofts the intent was to accommodate the maximum number of people while keeping the size of each croft small so that the tenant would be forced to work in kelping for the landlord to pay the rent. Because of opposition from the tenantry the conversion of North Uist into a crofting community was not commenced until 1814.

The size of each croft only allowed the partial support of a single family. When the tenant died the croft usually passed to the eldest son. Younger sons were forced to find employment on the mainland or emigrate. As previously mentioned, this was one of the principal reasons for emigration from North Uist in the 19th Century.

Where many of the families in North Uist came from is not known. Some came from Skye and others from the neighboring isles of Harris, Lewis, Benbecula and South Uist. The majority was however probably native Celtic stock that inter-married with the Vikings who occupied Uist for many years. Most families have been represented in North Uist for at least several centuries. There is extant some oral history relating to the origin of many of the North Uist families and the best commentary in this connection will be found in a monograph written by Rev. William Matheson in 1982 titled “Notes on North Uist Families” which originally appeared in the Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness, Vol. LII. Matheson was a North Uist native and a highly respected historian and genealogist and for many years was on the faculty of the School of Scottish Studies at Edinburgh University. He died in Edinburgh in 1995.

Any serious research into the genealogy of North Uist should start by obtaining a detailed small scale map of the island. The Ordnance Survey branch of the UK government publishes excellent maps. The best coverage of North Uist is provided by the Ordnance Survey, “Explorer No. 454” map titled “North Uist & Berneray” (scale 1:25,000) that provides coverage of the whole of North Uist on the two sides of the map. An alternative is the Ordnance Survey “Landranger” Series maps. This series of maps however has two disadvantages. First they are twice the scale of the above mentioned “Explorer” series maps and secondly as they are only printed on one side two maps are required (“Sound of Harris”, Landranger #18 and “Benbecula”, Landranger # 22) are required. All of these maps are widely available in the UK and in North America can be probably ordered via Amazon.com or in North American are usually available from www.globalgenalogy.com in Milton, Ontario.
Many who research the genealogy of North Uist eventually decide to visit the island. Having, as mentioned, visited North Uist many times I am an “experienced North Uist traveler” and have available a short monograph on traveling to and staying in North Uist that gives suggestions on how to get there, where to stay, what to see and do while there, where to rent a car, the available restaurants etc. If you are considering a visit to North Uist I will be pleased to send you a copy.

By this point you may be wondering why my interest in North Uist? The answer is that both my paternal grandparents emigrated from Knockintorran in North Uist to Canada in 1871. I have been researching the genealogy of North Uist for the last 35 years over which time I have made more than 30 visits to North Uist. Genealogy is my hobby and not my avocation. I am an “amateur genealogist” (that is I make no charge for any information that I provide) and am a retired lawyer and banker, having spent some 35 years practicing corporate law as a partner of an international law firm based in Toronto and the following 10 years as Lead Director (i.e. Chairman of the Board) of one of Canada’s five banks. I am now retired and much of my spare time is devoted to North Uist genealogical research.

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“Always pay attention to the informant who provided the information. If it was a male it will probably be wrong”.

“As death registrations were recorded at sad times they are more likely to contain errors than birth and marriage registrations that were recorded at happy times.”

“The only thing certain contained in a death registration is that the person died.”

“In most families there is a maiden aunt who knows more about the history of the family than can be found at the courthouse or on the internet. Get to her before the ‘Grim Reaper’ does”.

“The more unusual a surname the more different ways it could be spelled.”

“Surname spelling variations really don’t matter”

“Just because the information was found in the in the records of the Church of the Latter Day Saints it is not gospel”

“A family history without source information is not history but fiction and all serious genealogists will treat it as such.”

“Usually your married forebears had a child every two to three years. If there is a gap of more than three years between siblings you have probably missed one”

“Death in childbirth was a frequent occurrence and usually the husband re-married with unseeming haste. Don’t be too critical. It was impossible for him alone to both “bring home the bacon” and raise the surviving children. It also created a “faint hope” for all the un-married women in the community.”

“Few ancestors emigrated to any place by themselves. They usually followed friends or family”

“You will never obtain birth, marriage and death certificates for every ancestor as frequently the event occurred before the commencement of registration”

“You do not have to use a computer to do genealogical research – but it sure helps - especially if you use a genealogy program.

“If you do use a computer and don’t make regular backups you might as well hit ‘delete’ each time after you enter data.”

“No one is as interested in your research as you – so don’t bore them”
“The internet hasn’t made libraries redundant, it has just made it easier for serious researchers to find an available table and microfilm reader”

“There is always a grain of truth in most family stories. However previous generations have added too much manure and the seed has grown beyond recognition.

“The information that you are seeking will always be found in the last place you look – as you won’t be looking for it after you’ve found it!”

Blair MacAulay
Oakville, Ontario, Canada
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