

For many of us, the stories of where our ancestors came from, when they arrived, and what ship they traveled on have either been lost or have faded with time. The purpose of this class is to help you uncover the story of your ancestor's immigration experience. We will discuss the history, records, resources, and strategies often used in U.S. immigration research.

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## HISTORY OF IMMIGRATION IN THE UNITED STATES

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### Major Immigration Laws

- The **1819 Steerage Act** required that a copy of each ship's passenger list be filed by the master of the vessel with the customs agent located at the port of arrival
- The **1891 Immigration Act** required that passenger lists be filed with federal inspection agents who boarded the ship before docking and were responsible for all medical and personal examinations; also allowed for the creation of inspection stations along the Canadian and Mexican borders
- The **1924 Immigration Act** required immigrants to obtain an Immigration Visa from a Consular Office (U.S. Embassy) prior to sailing to America and set quotas on the number of immigrants allowed into the United States from each country each year

### Border Crossings

For some, the cheapest route to America was through either Canadian or Mexican ports. Prior to 1895, passage between countries along either border was unregulated.

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## AMERICAN SOURCES WITH IMMIGRATION INFORMATION

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In order to find your ancestor in his or her country of origin, you will need to know the name of the town in which he or she was born. Start by looking for that information in American sources.

**Privately Held Records:** Records held by families can hold clues to your ancestor's birthplace. Locate family letters, bibles, pictures, and other documents that have been passed down through the family.

**Census Records:** Census records include information on your ancestor's country of origin, date of immigration, and naturalization. Make sure to find your ancestor in every available census and read each column carefully.

- The 1850 census was the first census to ask for place of birth.
- The 1880 census was the first census to ask for place of birth for both father and mother.
- The 1900-1940 censuses asked for immigration information including year of immigration (1900-1930), number years in the U.S. (1900), whether naturalized (1900-1940), and year of naturalization (1920).

**Vital Records:** Vital records may list an individual's date and place birth. An immigrant's marriage record, death record, and their children's birth and death records may include the name of the town from which your ancestor originated.

**Obituaries:** Obituaries, especially those published just prior to or during the twentieth century, may also include place of birth, date of immigration, or name of ship.

**Church Records:** Religion acted as a tie to the old world. Ecclesiastical leaders often noted a town of origin when recording marriages, deaths, and even the births of children. Other individuals belonging to the same religious community may also have emigrated from the same location.

**County Histories:** County histories can provide clues as to where a large community of immigrants originated. Biographical sketches of prominent members of the community may also include immigration information. Also locate sketches for all of your ancestor's children and grandchildren.

**Naturalization Records:** Naturalization is the process whereby an alien becomes a citizen. In the United States, naturalizations date from 1790. Three sets of papers were usually created during the naturalization process: Declaration of Intentions, Petition for Naturalizations, and Naturalization Certificates. Prior to 1906, declarations required that applicants list only their country of origin. After 1906, applicants were required to list their place of birth. For more information on U.S. naturalization law as well as how to locate records, see

[https://wiki.familysearch.org/en/United\\_States\\_Naturalization\\_and\\_Citizenship](https://wiki.familysearch.org/en/United_States_Naturalization_and_Citizenship).

**Military Records:** Military records, especially those from the 20th century, may include birth information. Search records of enlistments, pensions, draft registration cards (both WWI and WWII), discharge records, and personnel files.

## AMERICAN IMMIGRATION RECORDS

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After exhausting American sources and identifying an immigrant ancestor's name, approximate date of birth, and country of origin (and as much other information as possible), immigration records may provide additional clues.

### Passenger Lists

**Customs Passenger Lists (1820-1891):** Customs Passenger Lists were filed by Ship Masters starting 1 January 1820. Though no official forms were used, required information included age, sex, occupation, country of origin, and intended country of settlement.

**Immigration Passenger Lists (1891-1954):** The U.S. Office of Immigration collected passenger lists starting in 1891 and developed a standardized form by 1893. Required information included name, age, sex, occupation, nationality, marital status, last residence, final destination within the United States, if joining a relative who and where, original purchaser of the ticket, race (1903), place of birth (1906), and name and address of closest living relative in the country of origin (1907).

**Records of Border Crossings:** Starting in 1895, Canadian authorities allowed U.S. officials to create passenger lists for incoming immigrants who intended to cross the border into the United States. Immigrants were given inspection cards upon arrival into Canadian ports which were handed off at the U.S. border. Canadians crossing the border were not recorded until 1906. Similar procedures were implemented along the Mexican border also starting in 1895.

### Passport Applications

Passport applications may provide information about naturalized citizens if they returned home. The earliest passport was issued in 1796, but passports were not required for traveling abroad until the twentieth century. Passport applications may include information about an individual's date and place of birth, current residence, and where and when they were naturalized.

## COUNTRY OF ORIGIN RECORDS

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If you experience difficulty locating your ancestor's town of origin through U.S. records, additional country-specific resources are available.

### Vital Records Indexes

Countrywide vital record indexes can be helpful when a specific town of birth is unknown and all other resources have been exhausted. <https://www.familysearch.org> has a number of country wide databases. Other available vital record indexes include <http://www.freeBMD.org.uk/> or <http://www.UKbmd.org>. Be careful when using these databases as several individuals with names and birthdates similar to your ancestor may be found in the same index. Use cluster methodology (see below) to find and compare friends and relatives in both the United States and your ancestor's country of origin.

### Emigration or Port of Departure Records

Some locations kept records of those leaving the country or departing from a specific port. These records may list specific information about an emigrant including the town from which they originated. Emigration records are available for Sweden, Baden (Germany), Wuerttemberg (Germany), and England (after 1890). Port of Departure lists are available for Hamburg, Germany.

### Surname Distribution Maps

Use surname distribution maps to identify pockets of possible relatives in your ancestor's country of origin. Free online maps are available for Austria, Belgium, Canada, England, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Switzerland, United Kingdom, United States, and Wales. For more information and links to a number of surname distribution maps see [http://wiki.familysearch.org/en/Surname\\_Distribution\\_Maps](http://wiki.familysearch.org/en/Surname_Distribution_Maps).

## RESOURCES FOR FINDING IMMIGRATION RECORDS

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### Printed Resources

Morton Allan *Directory of European Passenger Steamship Arrivals: For the Years 1890 to 1930 at the Port of New York and for the years 1904 to 1926 at the ports of New York, Philadelphia, Boston and Baltimore*. Baltimore, Maryland: Genealogical Pub. Co., 1998.

Filby, P. William & Mary K. Meyer, ed. *Passenger and Immigration Lists Index: A Guide to Published Arrival Records of about 500,000 Passengers who came to the United States and Canada in the Seventeenth, Eighteenth, and Nineteenth Centuries*. Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research, 1981-2010. Also available at <http://www.ancestry.com> ("Passenger and Immigration Lists Index, 1500s-1900s.")

Harris, Ruth-Ann M. & Donald M. Jacobs, ed. *The Search for Missing Friends: Irish Immigrant Advertisements Placed in the Boston Pilot*. Boston, Massachusetts: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1989-1997. Also available at <http://infowanted.bc.edu>.

United States. Immigration and Naturalization Service. *Register of Vessels Arriving at the Port of New York from Foreign Ports, 1789-1919*. Washington, District of Columbia: National Archives and Records Service, 1980.

### Online Resources

<http://www.ancestry.com> (\$) – 300+ collections listed under United States "Immigration and Travel"

<http://www.familysearch.org> – 65+ collections listed under United States "Migration and Naturalization"

<http://www.fold3.com> (\$) – includes Passport Applications as well as 25+ Naturalization collections

<http://ellisland.org> & <http://www.castlegarden.org> – searchable indexes for those inspected at Castle Gardens (1855-1891) or Ellis Island (1892-1924); EllisIsland.org requires registration and includes images

<http://archive.org/details/texts> – The Internet Archive has digitized thousands of books and microfilm. Search for “Passenger Lists” to view digitized immigration resources.

<http://aad.archives.gov/aad/> -The U.S. National Archives has indexes of German, Italian, Irish, and Russian immigrants (click Genealogy under Personal History).

<http://www.uscis.gov/genealogy> - The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Website allows users to order immigration records online, including visa applications (1924-1944) and naturalization certificates (1906-1956).

<http://www.stevemorse.org> & <http://www.germanroots.com/ei.html> – helpful links to other websites.

## RESEARCH STRATEGIES

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**Cluster Methodology:** The people in your ancestor’s life may have shared a common origin. Identify and research those listed as witnesses, guardians, neighbors, or fellow passengers. Focus first on those who share your ancestor’s surname or birth country, then on neighbors, witnesses, and other individuals who appear in the records of your ancestor more than once.

**Names:** Names are often shortened, misspelled, or otherwise changes as immigrants settled in the United States. Make sure to search online databases and other records using alternate spellings, initials, middle names, nicknames, maiden names, the English equivalent of foreign surnames (and vice versa), shorter (and longer) versions of the same name, etc.

**Follow Candidates through Life:** Once you have identified a candidate for your ancestor in his or her country of origin, search birth, marriage, death, and other records. Make sure he or she disappear from the records of his or her country of origin at the same time he or she appears in records of the United States.

## LEARN MORE

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“United States Emigration and Immigration.” <http://wiki.familysearch.org>

“U.S. Immigration Legislation Online.”

<http://library.uwb.edu/guides/USimmigration/USimmigrationlegislation.html>

Colletta, John Philip. *They Came in Ships: A Guide to Finding Your Immigrant Ancestor’s Arrival Record*. Orem, Utah: Ancestry Publishing Inc., 2002.

Szucs, Loretto Dennis, Kory L. Meyerink, and Marian Smith. “Immigration Records.” *The Source: A Guidebook to American Genealogy*. Provo, Utah: Ancestry Publishing Inc., 2006. Also available at

[http://www.ancestry.com/wiki/index.php?title=Overview\\_of\\_Immigration\\_Research](http://www.ancestry.com/wiki/index.php?title=Overview_of_Immigration_Research)

## CONCLUSION

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Although the story of where your ancestor’s immigration may have been lost or faded with time, a little patience and perseverance can go a long way in helping you uncover their story.

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