



## Research Guide: Immigration via Passenger Ship

[Steamship Historical Society of America](#)

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There are several record types that can help uncover information on an ancestor's immigration to America. This guide from the [Steamship Historical Society](#) is designed to help researchers access documentation on an individual's travel via passenger ship and to help understand what that experience may have been like.

### Where to Start?

- Start with what you know! Write down vital information, including birth, death, marriage, and names of spouses and children.
- Now ask around! Fill in blanks by asking parents, cousins, and everyone in between, even if they seem unsure. Each detail can serve as a clue where to begin researching.
- Ask open-ended questions that start with what, when, how to get them talking. Where did they live in the US? What family lived nearby? How did they meet their spouse?
- Don't stop at "I don't know" when they shake their head, instead share your memory about an ancestor as a jumping off point.

### Census

The 1900, 1910, 1920, and 1930 census listed year of immigration. History Hub's blog post "[Census Records May Help Locate Immigration and Naturalization Records](#)" offers invaluable tips on where to look for key information. You don't have to pay a subscription to search census records! Both the [National Archives](#) and [Familysearch.org](#) free, searchable database of U.S. Federal Census information and images.

Pro tip: Keep in mind it may be a clue or a "guesstimate" because the person reporting to the census taker was not necessarily the individual. Often someone in the household or a neighbor.

### Which Port?

New researchers may immediately think of Ellis Island as their ancestor's port of entry. Don't lose hope if you enter a name and arrival date on "[Passenger Ship - The Statue of Liberty & Ellis Island](#)" and ended up with no results.



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There were many ports of entry along the U.S. East and West Coasts. Canada was also a common port of entry, in fact, some passenger lines marketed their Canadian ports as an economical, low-cost alternative to New York City. Ship Passenger List records are the most direct way to determine the port of arrival. You may make a connection of a potential port from investigating where relatives were living that may have come before.

## Ship Passenger Lists

An arrival date from the census, along with a first and last name, can help find an ancestor's name on a passenger ship list. The [National Archives](#) has passenger arrival records, or "ship passenger lists," documenting arrivals into the United States from foreign ports between approximately 1820 and December 1982. Generally, a passenger list will offer arrival age, birth date, port of departure, arrival date, port of arrival, ports of voyage, name of ship, and shipping line. The port of departure is an important fact that can lead to their hometown.

It is common to see markings and notations on the passenger list. A guide designed to assist researchers interpret the markings, or annotations, found through immigration passenger lists. To learn more about the manifest markings, check "[A Guide to Interpreting Passenger List Annotations](#)" by Marian L. Smith in 2002.

Tip: If your searches are unsuccessful, broaden the arrival date +/- 1 year. The census information may have been reported by another family member or even neighbor who was guessing around the time. Try different spellings of the last name. For more help on refining a search, check out Findmypast.com's blog post "[10 Google Search Techniques for Family History Research.](#)"

## Border Crossing

No luck finding a passenger list? Still searching for "the ship" they arrived on? How about searching for a land crossing to connect to the port of arrival?

Large numbers of immigrants came to the United States via Canadian ports. U.S. immigration records of arrivals to Canada or from Canada into the United States, held at the National Archives, are popularly known as the "St. Albans Lists." Steamship companies began to Canada as a "more desirable route." An 1884 agreement between railroads and steamship lines serving Canadian ports and the U.S. Immigration Service resulted in documentation that can assist researchers.

You can learn more by reading Marian L. Smith's "[By Way of Canada.](#)" National Archives, August 15, 2016.



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## Passenger Ships Images

Don't stop now! If you found the ship your ancestor arrived on, how about providing the family an impressive picture of the ship to show off your research skills?

You can search the [Steamship Historical Society's online catalog](#) by typing in the ship name. Make sure to tick the box under the search bar that says "Items with Images Only." If you don't find what you're looking for, email [info@sshsa.org](mailto:info@sshsa.org). We have many items that are not listed or available online that our Archivists can help you find.

[320 Steamship Information](#) records are available in a sortable table listing vessel information. Some are linked to images as well.

Also, Ancestry.com, a subscription service, offers a searchable database "[Passenger Ships and Images](#)" which boasts thousands of images of passenger ships.

## A Path to Citizenship

Becoming a naturalized citizen was a process that would take, at a minimum, five years. A Declaration of Intention, also referred to as "first papers" could be filed by an immigrant, or "alien," after living in the United States for two years. This paperwork was filed in a local court close to the immigrant's residence.

Three years after the declaration, a Petition for Naturalization, or "second papers," was filed.

Kettner, James H. *The Development of American Citizenship, 1608-1870*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1978.

## Petitions for Naturalization

Petitions for Naturalization records, also commonly referred to as declaration records, include name, birth date, approximate entry into the United States, approximate date of naturalization, and where they were residing at the time of naturalization before October 1991 can be found at the [National Archives' collection](#).



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State and local courts records may also be found in the state's archives or local historical societies. Diane Boumenot, a leading Rhode Island genealogical researcher, suggests looking at the 1920 census for the year of naturalization. Her *One Rhode Island Family* blog offers links "[Rhode Island Naturalization Records](#)" by country.

"[United States, New England Petitions for Naturalization Index, 1791-1906](#)" is an index that provides photocopies of naturalization documents filed in New England states.

The index in the National Archives-New England Region, consists of 3x5 inch cards arranged by state then the name of petitioner. National Archives. "A Gold Mine of Naturalization Records in New England," August 15, 2016.

Check out the Rhode Island Historical Society's [growing list of published works about immigration and emigration to and from the state.](#)

## State Visa

There are various reasons an ancestor may not have applied for citizenship. Residents were historically referred to as "Aliens" After April 1944. "Alien" visas were required after 1917 because of World War I. The National Archives holds the State Visa collection in three distinct time periods, 1910 through 1949, 1950-1962, and beginning with 1963. A helpful finding aid at the bottom of their webpage will enable your search.

National Archives. "[Department of State Visa Records](#)," September 16, 2019.

## Alien Files

The Alien Registration Act of 1940 required persons living within the U.S. Borders that were not citizens or nationals to fill out a 15 question AR-2 form. Individuals were assigned an Alien Registration Number and a card was subsequently mailed. The result of this act is five million forms. A-files may include photographs, a treasured source for genealogists, but you will need to search the index first <https://catalog.archives.gov/> then you will need order, for a fee, the records or schedule an appointment to visit in person.

For more information on the A-files check out the [National Archives website.](#)

Elizabeth Burnes and Marisa Louie also published "[The A-Files: Finding Your Immigrant Ancestors](#)" in the Spring 2013 *Prologue*, pages 54-61.

## Lost Citizenship?

The Expatriation Act, passed March 2, 1907, mandated "any American women who marries a foreigner shall take the nationality of her husband" regardless of where the couple



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resided. The Cable act, also known as the “Married Women’s Independent Nationality Act”, ended this law for women who married after September 1922. Married women who lost their citizenship were required to file a petition for naturalization. This article offers suggestion of navigating naturalization records.

Hacker, Meg. “When Saying ‘I Do’ Meant Giving Up Your U.S. Citizenship.” *Prologue*, Spring 2014, 56–61.

## Immigration Research Guides

This National Archives site is one of the best starting points for researching your ancestor's immigration journey. This site outlines the types of records Federal agencies relating to immigrants. Digitalized records are available online, while others are currently only accessible in paper or microfilm format at NARA locations.

National Archives: “Immigrant Records at the National Archives.”

Last revised in 2001, Barbara B. Walsh provides information on general works, passenger lists, the ships, the experience, personal narratives, internet resources, and other topics.

Library of Congress. “Immigrant Arrivals: A Guide to Published Sources: Bibliographies & Guides - Local History & Genealogy Reading Room (Library of Congress).” Local History & Genealogy Reference Services, 2001.

A very helpful genealogy library guide specific to immigration and naturalization, the Boston Public Library (BPL) resources outlines "Other Resources" including government resources, online records, and guides which you may also find helpful.

Boston Public Library. “Immigration,” n.d.

## Additional Resources

A very well-established genealogy resource listing over 300,000 genealogy websites in an easy-to-use index. The Immigration category allows you to quickly narrow down possibilities to address your research question.

Steve Morse's website, [www.stevermorse.org](http://www.stevermorse.org), a series of additional search tools that go far beyond the standard search capabilities of many leading genealogical websites. It also serves as an invaluable resource for helping researchers overcome spelling, pronunciation, and writing errors on passenger manifests and other documents. Steve Morse is a database guru who has developed the Ellis Island Gold Form to aid Ellis Island passenger manifests.



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Cyndi's List is a foundational website that provided an index of genealogical websites since the internet became a way to research ancestors in your pajamas from home. The "Immigration, Emigration & Migration" can be found at <https://www.cyndislist.com/immigration/>.

Bonsor, N. R. P. North Atlantic Seaway: An Illustrated History of Passenger Services Linking the Old World and the New | Steamship Historical Society of America. Isherwood, J. H.: David & Charles, 1975. <http://sshsa.pastperfectonline.com/library/34E586A4-6189-431E-B986-015672818927>.

## Articles & Reports: The Immigrant's Experience

### It's not a dead end when the record trail dries up!

A timeline of immigration in the United States from 1790 - 2000 which offers context through statistics, laws, and the immigrant experience. Statue of Liberty Foundation. "Immigration Timeline," n.d.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20200206012818/https://www.libertyellisfoundation.org/immigration-timeline>.

Capturing your ancestors memories can be equal parts rewarding and helpful for clues. How about recording your interview so you can go back and jot down clues AND your great grandchildren can hear their stories. "Bibliography · A Place to Go to: The Oral History of Federal Hill · Rhode Island College Special Collections." Accessed March 25, 2022. <https://www.ricdigitalcommons.com/SpecialCollections/exhibits/show/a-place-to-go-to/fh-bibliography>. is an example of taking research and turning it into a keepsake everyone in the family will appreciate.

### Old Fashion Books

Want to keep researching but don't want to bring your laptop to the beach? How about an old fashion page turner that can help with new ways to find that ancestor?

*Colletta, John P. They Came in Ships, 2002.*

*Ptak, Diane Snyder. A Passage in Time: The Ships That Brought Our Ancestors, 1620-1940. Albany, NY: Diane Snyder Ptak, 1992.*



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Szucs, Loretto Dennis. *They Became Americans : Finding Naturalization Records and Ethnic Origins. Salt Lake City, Utah: Ancestry, c1998.*

Stolarik, M. Mark. *Forgotten Doors: The Other Ports to Entry to the United States. Philadelphia: Balch Institute Press, 1988.*

Tenement Museum, New York, New York. <https://www.tenement.org/>  
The Tenement Museum focuses on America's urban immigrant history. The Tenement Museum provides walking tours and is a popular attraction in the Lower East Side NYC.



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