



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 all the key details you currently know. Birth dates, death dates, marriages, and names of spouses and children are all useful information.

Ask around: This can be a formal interview or casual conversation with parents, cousins, and other extended family. Even if they're unsure of their answers, each detail can be a clue on where to begin your research.

- Open-ended questions can get them talking: start with what, when, and how. 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 Records

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 crucial information. You don't have to pay a subscription to search census records! The [National Archives](#) and [Familysearch.org](#) offer free, searchable U.S. Federal Census databases.

Pro 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 a 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.](#)"

Finding the Port of Entry

New researchers may immediately think of Ellis Island as their ancestor's port of entry. It's a great place to start! Try: "[Passenger Ship - The Statue of Liberty & Ellis Island.](#)"



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Don't lose hope if you enter a name and arrival date and it turns up nothing. 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 economical, low-cost alternatives to New York City. Ship Passenger List records are the most direct way to determine the port of arrival. You may make a connection to a potential port by investigating where relatives who may have come before lived.

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, sometimes called "passenger manifests" or "ship passenger lists," for arrivals to 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 the voyage, name of the ship, shipping line, and the official number (an identification number assigned by a government authority where the ship was built). The port of departure is an important fact that can lead to their hometown.

It is common to see markings and notations on a passenger list. To learn more about these manifest markings and how to interpret them, check "[A Guide to Interpreting Passenger List Annotations](#)" by Marian L. Smith in 2002.

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?

Steamship lines promoted Canada as an "economical route," resulting in large numbers of immigrants coming to the United States via Canadian ports. In 1884, the Canadian Agreement between the U.S. Immigration Service and railroads and steamship lines serving Canada resulted in U.S. inspectors placed in Quebec, Halifax, Montreal, Vancouver, and Victoria to monitor immigration at the Canadian seaports. The resulting gold mine of documentation, popularly known as the "St. Albans Lists," is held at the National Archives. Learn more by reading Marian L. Smith's "[By Way of Canada](#)," National Archives, August 15, 2016.

Passenger Ships Images

Don't stop now! If you found the ship your ancestor arrived on, how about providing the family with 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."



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If you don't find what you're looking for, email info@sshhsa.org. We have many items that are not listed or available online that our Archivists can help you find. Mystic Seaport has compiled an interactive list of [320 steamships](#), available in a sortable table listing. It includes images as well as key details about the ship, such as the owner, tonnage and identifying details.

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.

See: 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. Records before October 1991 can be found in the [National Archives' collection](#).



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State and local court 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, such as "[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 3×5 inch cards arranged by state and then the name of the petitioner. National Archives. The Fall 2004 "[A Gold Mine of Naturalization Records in New England](#)," by Walter V. Hickey is a must-read article on the topic.

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

State Visa

The Immigration Act of 1924 required all arriving noncitizens to present a visa when applying for admission into the United States. Residents without citizenship were historically referred to as "Aliens." The National Archives holds the State Visa collection in three distinct groupings: 1910 through 1949, 1950-1962, and beginning 1963. A helpful finding aid at the bottom of their webpage will enable your search. See 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 and a treasured source for genealogists, but you will need to search the index first at <https://catalog.archives.gov/>. Then you will need to order the records for a fee 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.



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Lost Citizenship?

The Expatriation Act, passed on March 2, 1907, mandated that “any American woman who marries a foreigner shall take the nationality of her husband,” regardless of where the couple 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 suggestions on how to navigate 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 created by Federal agencies relating to immigrants. Digitized records are available online, while others are currently only accessible in paper or microfilm format at NARA locations. See:

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

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 outline "Other Resources," including government resources, online records, and guides, which you may also find helpful. See: Boston Public Library. “Immigration,” n.d.

Additional Resources

Steve Morse's website, www.stevermorse.org, is a series of additional search tools that go far beyond the standard search capabilities of many leading genealogical websites. It is also 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.

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/>.



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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. Sshsa.org

Context on the Immigrant's Experience

A timeline of immigration in the United States from 1790 - 2000 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 equally rewarding and helpful for research clues. Recording your interview allows you to go back and jot down clues AND it can be a great keepsake for future generations. For inspiration, see: "Bibliography ·A Place to Go to: The Oral History of Federal Hill Rhode Island College Special Collections."

<https://shiphistory.org/2017/07/10/immigration-to-providence/> Accessed March 25, 2022.



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