

Finding the Story of Your Immigrant Ancestors in Three Steps

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Step 1: Setting the Context: Using existing sources

Understanding the Port of Entry

New York City

Of the 5.4 million immigrants to the United States between 1820 and 1860, more than two-thirds passed through the port of New York. Castle Garden was established in 1855 under the authority of the state of New York. In 1890, the facility officially came under control of the United States federal government. Just 2 years later, Ellis Island was opened as a new immigration center to replace Castle Garden.

Boston

Some immigrants who arrived in Boston. Immigration from Ireland was often subsidized following the Potato Famine and by 1850, more than 75% of Boston's population was Irish.

Philadelphia

A major point of entry for German and Scots-Irish settlers, Philadelphia became a destination for Italians, Hungarians, Poles, and Jewish immigrants by the 1880s. Between 1880 and 1900 5.6% of all immigrants passed through Philadelphia.

Baltimore

Due to its connection to the National Road and the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, Baltimore became a popular port of arrival by the mid-1800s.

Other Ports

A number of other ports, including New Orleans, Los Angeles, and San Francisco saw immigrants from all over the world, including Canada.

What Can I Find on a Passenger List?

Passenger lists represent the key resources for tracing immigrants to the United States through a port. Though some from the colonial period exist or have been reconstructed, many begin around the 1820s (though it is not until the 1880s that detailed information was standardized).

What about Colonial Settlers?

The decision to migrate across the ocean was not taken lightly. An individual or a family's migration to the colonies needed a great deal of preparation. Financial, social, and political avenues all required careful planning.

A deeper understanding of the process of immigration and its various economic and social contexts can be found in multiple published resources. An excellent, all-encompassing source for

understanding migration to colonial America is *Migration and the Origins of the English Atlantic World*, written by Alison Games (published by Harvard University Press, 1999).

Constantly reviewing articles in scholarly genealogical journals (*The New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, *The New York Genealogical and Biographical Record*, and *The American Genealogist*) is a key strategy for pursuing colonist origins. Past articles offer clues to precise origins and compiled records, and current articles include modern methodologies, additions, and corrections.

Step 2: Discover the Journey: Passenger lists, customs, records, and substitutes

The most comprehensive passenger lists for the port of New York begin after the Steerage Act of 1819 with the U.S. Customs service holding passenger lists. See NYFHRGG, chapter 4, Immigration, Migration, and Naturalization. Origin of the list depends on the time period and what records survive.

Ancestry database New York, Passenger and Crew Lists (including Castle Garden and Ellis Island), 1820-1957 is an amalgamation of several (at least 5) lists
<http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=7488>

FamilySearch keeps the lists more consistent with the original publications:

New York Passenger Lists, 1820-1891
<http://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1849782>
(During this time, only U.S. Customs lists for New York are extant; immigration records burned.)

New York Passenger Arrival Lists (Ellis Island), 1892-1924
<http://familysearch.org/search/collection/1368704> (from 1892 to 1897, U.S. Customs lists only are available; post-1897 fire, immigration lists are generally available).

New York, New York Passenger and Crew Lists, 1909, 1925-1957
<http://familysearch.org/search/collection/1923888>

Consider whether people came via Canada, which may have been less expensive, but for which records begin in 1895. Ancestry database: U.S., Border Crossings from Canada to U.S., 1895-1960, <https://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=1075>.

Consider county histories to find where neighbors may have come from. "Alsatian-American Case Studies" by Richard Haberstroh, Ph.D., is a recorded program using indirect evidence and showing sibling research can be key (<https://www.newyorkfamilyhistory.org/video/alsatian-american-case-studies>).

Clues to immigration can be found in some census records, e.g. 1900 federal census. However, until 1940 the informant is not known, so the accuracy of reported information varies.

Step 3: Finding the Story: Naturalization records and pathways after immigration

Naturalization records document our immigrant ancestor's journey to become a United States citizen. This process has been different and generated different variants of records throughout New York history, so the first step for all researchers is to learn about the naturalization process at the time of the ancestor in question.

It is important to note that **it is possible your immigrant ancestor did not finish or even start the naturalization process.** There were many reasons for an immigrant to forgo becoming a United States citizen, and certainly many never went through the process. Fortunately, it is usually easy to find an individual's citizenship status by looking at United States or New York State censuses, though not all years will have this information.

The below overview of the naturalization process at different periods in history comes from the *New York Family History Research Guide and Gazetteer*, which has an entire chapter dedicated to immigration, naturalization, and migration in New York State. Each period in history (along with locations of naturalization records from that period) is covered in the text in far greater detail than can be devoted to the subject here.

New Netherland, 1609 – 1664: Since the colony was operated by the Dutch, immigrants arriving in New Netherland had to take an oath of allegiance to the Dutch parliament, the States General. Naturalization records per se do not exist for this time period, but some compiled and translated Dutch sources can be used to identify passengers arriving on ships to New Netherland.

Colonial and Revolutionary Periods, 1664 – 1783: Immigrants arriving in New York after 1664 had to take an oath of allegiance to the king that made them British subjects in order to enjoy the privileges afforded to subjects of the Crown – until 1740, this process was very expensive and required action in London. During the Revolution, both sides required and often demanded oaths of allegiance. By 1783, all residents of New York State became U.S. citizens. Naturalization records from this time are rare, but some can be found in colonial court records.

Early Statehood and National Periods, 1783 – 1866: In 1790, the first federal naturalization act was passed – it allowed naturalization to occur at any court of record with a clerk and a seal. Because of this, researchers will find naturalization records at a wide variety of courts. In New York State, county governments are the primary repositories of records for this time period. Research into available naturalization records should be done at the county level. Though the exact period of time changed several times, after 1802 all aliens were not eligible for naturalization until living in the United States for 5 years. Soldiers serving in the U.S. military had relaxed requirements to obtain citizenship during this time period.

Post-Civil War and Peak Immigration Period, 1866 – 1924: Naturalization remained relatively similar to the prior period until 1906, when the federal Naturalization Service was created to federalize the now disparate processes of the states. After 1906, nonfederal courts could still process naturalizations, but needed to do so in a way that complied with federal standards, and needed to submit copies to the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization. This bureau maintains “C-files” for naturalizations between 1906 and 1956 – generally, these files contain the most genealogically relevant information of all naturalization records. The records for most naturalizations that took place in New York federal courts are held by NARA-NYC in New York City, and many are available online at Ancestry.com.

1924 – Present: In 1933 the Immigration and Naturalization Service was formed, and processed most naturalizations occurring in New York. Many of these records can be found at NARA-NYC and online at Ancestry.com. Researchers can visit the USCIS Genealogy Program at uscis.gov/genealogy for an index search program that can help locate the C-file number.

Pathways after immigration

Many immigrants remained in New York City or their port of arrival for only a short time. Though the story will vary greatly by individual, many immigrants moved out of desire or necessity to another part of the state or country. Typical methods of tracing a family through census records, city directories, or other geographically-oriented record sets can help find them in new towns and cities, but this may not always be possible – sometimes our ancestors will seem to simply disappear.

Researchers – whether or not they have “lost” the geographic trail of their ancestors – should all become familiar with mass migration patterns of the time periods we’re researching. History can often tell us a great deal about our ancestors’ world, and give context that provides new meaning to or understanding of the events we discover in our genealogy research. You may be surprised to find your ancestors’ story shaped by a greater historical trend – but after all, notable historical trends affected many people.

General studies of the historical time period in New York State can provide this kind of insight, including county and town histories available for locations of interest on archive.org and Google Books – these large volumes will often detail small, medium, and large migration patterns of incoming and outgoing groups of people. Sociological and demographic history can also provide similar insight, as can studying influential events and developments in New York history like westward expansion after the Revolutionary War, or the development of the Erie Canal in the early 1800s.