



Immigration and Canadian Border Crossings

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Understanding Immigration

Immigration records provide sources that give information about the movement of groups or individuals from one place to another, usually between nations.

- Immigration—to enter a country
- Emigration—to leave a country

Why search for immigration records?

There are a variety of immigration records that can help to identify the town of origin of the immigrant so research can be continued in the home country. A search for a variety of different immigration records may produce an immigration date and even family members.

Where do I begin?

Always begin with home sources. Interview living relatives and search for any clues or documents that might be available in the family.

- Family traditions, recipes, and papers may give you clues to a country or locality to search for your ancestor.
- Bible records often have birth, marriage, or death information recorded in their pages.
- Church records including baptism, confirmation, or marriage certificates may be found in family records.
- Obituaries from newspapers may also be found in home sources.
- Pictures of ancestors might provide clues through their dress or locality.
- Other papers, including certificates or organization records.

After checking for any available home sources, search the following records for immigration information:

- Census
- Passenger lists, arrival and departure
- Passports
- Naturalization and citizenship
- Land entry case files
- Emigration and immigration

Census Records

Find your ancestor in every available United States census. Also search each state of residence for State census records. Immigration information in the United States census records include the following information:

- 1820 - 1840—number of individuals in household who were “foreigners” (not naturalized)
- 1850 census gives the place of birth
- 1870 census gives male citizens 21 years of age (naturalized)
- 1880 - 1940 census gives the parents’ birth places
- 1900 - 1940 census gives immigration information
- 1920 census gives the date of naturalization

Passenger Lists

Pre-1820 Immigration

For early passenger lists and immigration information search the U.S. and Canada, Passenger and Immigration Lists Index, 1500s-1900s, available on Ancestry.com. The following information may be found in these published records:

- Name and age
- Year and place of arrival
- Naturalization or other immigration record
- Names, ages, and relationships of accompanying family

United States Passenger Lists beginning in 1820

There are many online indexes and passenger lists. Several resources for passenger lists include the following:

- Ancestry: <https://www.ancestry.com> Collections are under Immigration & Travel.
- One-Step Webpages: <http://stevemorse.org/> Collections include Ellis Island, Castle Garden, and other ports.
- Links to indexes by port: Finding Passenger Lists & Immigration Records, 1820-1940s. <http://www.germanroots.com/passengers.html>

Search the FamilySearch Research Wiki for additional information on passenger arrival records. From 1820-1891 the records may include name, age, sex, occupation, and country of origin. After 1891 additional questions were added. They include marital status, last residence, destination in U.S., relative’s name, ability to read and write, who paid their passage, the amount of money they had, and whether they had been in prison, the poorhouse, or if they were a polygamist. The immigrants state of health was also added.

Major Ports in the United States

More people came into the United States through the port of New York than all of the other ports combined. The port of Philadelphia was the busiest port throughout the 1700s and there are some scattered passenger lists that have survived. The following list gives the number of people that arrived at each major port:

Port	Number of People	Port	Number of People
New York	23,960,000	Philadelphia	1,240,000
Boston	2,050,000	New Orleans	710,000
Baltimore	1,460,000		

European passenger departure lists

Hamburg (Germany) Passenger Lists, 1850-1934 are available on Ancestry. The records are indexed up to 1926 on Ancestry. There is a gap in the records from 1915 to 1919 due to World War 1.

Direct passengers left Hamburg and sailed to their destination. Indirect passengers left Hamburg on one ship and transferred to another ship before reaching their destination. The direct and indirect passenger lists are separate until 1911. The handwritten records are in German. For a detailed explanation of the multiple indexes associated with the Hamburg Passenger Lists, search the FamilySearch research wiki at https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Hamburg_Passenger_Lists.

Passports

The National Archives (NARA) has passport applications dated 1795 to 1925. The U.S. Department of State holds passports from 1925 until the present time. Passports were issued to one person, but may include a wife, children, or servants. Passports were often handwritten without a standard form in the early years.

Information on passports usually included the date and place of birth, a physical description, the occupation, foreign destination, and naturalization information. Photographs were added beginning on December 21, 1914.

Naturalization and Citizenship

1790 to 1906

1790 Naturalization Law

The first federal naturalization law was passed in 1790. The basic requirements were a one-year residency in the state, a two-year residency in the United States, good moral character, and the performance of the naturalization in a court of law. Although laws changed throughout the years, generally an immigrant was required to reside in the state for one year and in the United States for a total of five years to become a citizen.

Declaration of Intention

Immigrants could file a declaration of intention immediately after they arrived, although many waited one to three years. There was a three-year waiting requirement (which changed to two years after 1824) between filing the declaration of intention and petitioning the court for citizenship. The immigrant began the process by filling out a declaration of intention, or first papers. This could be done at the age of 18 or 21 (depending on the law at the time), or at any time in his or her adult life. Any court could be used—often the immigrant chose the most convenient court.

Petition

The second step of the process required the immigrant to petition the court for citizenship. This created a second document known as a petition, also called the final or second papers. The petition and the declaration may be filed in different courts or states. Depositions were often filed to attest to the immigrant's moral character.

Oath of Allegiance

To complete the naturalization process, the immigrant took the oath of allegiance. A certificate

of naturalization was then given to the immigrant and the court retained the certificate stub. The petition and certificate of naturalization were always recorded in the same court.

Content of Naturalization Records (1790–1906)

The content of naturalization records in this time period might include the port of arrival, date of immigration, country of origin, and age of the applicant. Forms were not standardized, and each court created their own records, so the records vary.

After 1906

Immigration and Naturalization Service

The year 1906 was a turning point for naturalization records. New laws were passed and naturalization forms were standardized. More federal courts naturalized immigrants. The law required that the courts send duplicate copies of naturalization records to the newly created Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization—later changed to Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). In March 2004, the INS was renamed the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). However, the process for naturalization remained basically the same.

Content of Naturalization Records After 1906

After 1906, the following information may be found in naturalization records: Age, birth date, birthplace, residence, date of application, last foreign address, country of birth or allegiance, occupation, personal description, port and date of arrival, vessel of arrival, marital status, birth dates and birthplaces of spouse and children, and date and place the declaration was filed.

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

Use the USCIS Genealogy Program, to request the following records:

- Naturalization Certificate Files (C-Files), September 27, 1906 to March 31, 1956. Contents include: declaration, petition, certificate of naturalization, and other documents.
- Alien Registration Forms (Form AR-2), August 1940 to March 1944. Contents include: Name, address, date of birth, nationality, marital status, physical description, port and date of arrival and occupation.
- Visa Files, July 1, 1924 to March 31, 1944. Contents include: birth information, parents, children, and their previous residence. A photo after 1929.
- Registry Files, March 1929 to March 31, 1944. Contents include: employment records, a certificate of registry, and proof of residence.
- A-Files, April 1, 1944 to May 1, 1951. Contents include: biographical information, and depending on the time period they may also include a visa, photographs, applications, affidavits, and correspondence. The A-Files index includes the port and date of arrival.

Please note: A \$65 fee will be charged for an index search of the above records and an additional \$65 fee will be charged for a records request. USCIS <https://genealogy.uscis.dhs.gov/>

Canadian Border Crossings

In 1894 the United States created an Immigration Service Agreement with Canadian steamship and railroad lines. It provided for the following terms:

- Treat passengers destined for the United States as if they had arrived at a U.S. port.
- A Certificate of Admission was given to each passenger. This certificate was needed to board a U.S. bound train.

- The certificate was collected at the U.S. border.

Canadian border crossing records include people who came through Canada and crossed the border into the United States by ship or train. They do not contain Canadians until after October 1, 1906. A Soundex index was created by the Works Project Administration. The following information will help to understand the indexing of this record set:

- After June 1917 the Soundex index included only entries from east of the North Dakota/Montana state line.
- After 1 July 1927 the Soundex index included only entries from east of Lake Ontario.
- The Soundex index is complete for the years 1895-1917.
- The Soundex index is largely complete for the years 1917-1927.
- After 1929 there is no geographically complete index!

Both Ancestry and FamilySearch have an index of aliens and citizens crossing into the United States. On the Ancestry link, <http://search.ancestryinstitution.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=1075>, scroll down to the article "About U.S., Border Crossings from Canada to U.S., 1825-1960" for the land entry ports.

Manifests 1895-1954

From 1895 to June 1917 records were collected from land ports of entry along the entire U.S. and Canada border. These records were recorded on forms known as ship manifests. Two copies were created. One kept at the port of entry, and one entry forwarded to the INS office in Montreal. The Montreal office was later moved to St. Albans, Vermont and even though the records are from many different land entry ports along the border, the name of the collection was taken from the central office at St. Albans.

Records created from July 1917 to June 1927 were also created on ships manifests. This time period includes records from New York through North Dakota. Also recorded in duplicate, with one record kept at the land port, the second record was sent to the Montreal District office. Another form of record began in July 1927 through June 1929. These records were created on card manifests in duplicate. One copy was kept at the land port of entry, the other copy was sent to the INS District office closest to the port.

Beginning in July 1929 to 1954, land ports from Maine to North Dakota were recorded on card manifests kept at the port of entry.

The Western area of the U.S. from July 1917 to June 1927 with land ports of entry in Montana, Idaho, and Washington were recorded on ship manifest forms in duplicate with one copy kept at the port of entry and one copy sent to the INS District office in Seattle.

Border crossings often came through railroad stations all over the border of Canada and the Northern United States.

Additional Resources

- FamilySearch: <https://familysearch.org> Collections are under Migration & Naturalization.
- FamilySearch Research Wiki (by State): https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/United_States_Immigration_Online_Genealogy_Records
- Ancestry: <https://www.ancestry.com> Collections are under Immigration & Travel.
- U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services: <https://www.uscis.gov/history-and-genealogy>
- Smith, Marian L. "By Way of Canada: U.S. Records of Immigration Across the U.S.-Canadian Border, 1895-1954 (St. Albans Lists)." Prologue Magazine Vol. 32, No. 3 (Fall 2000).

- Smith, Marian L. "A Guide to Interpreting Passenger List Annotations."
<https://www.jewishgen.org/infofiles/manifests/>
- [Prechtel-Klusdens, Claire.](#) "Canadian border immigration records, 1895-1950s, Part 1: The records." NGS News Magazine (July-September 2007) 43.
- "Major U.S. Immigration Ports, plus tips for locating your ancestors in arrival records."
<https://www.ancestrycdn.com/support/us/2016/11/majorusports.pdf>
- "Passport Applications." National Archives. <https://www.archives.gov/research/passport>