

# How to Trace Your Immigrant Ancestors

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

Statue of Liberty NM  
Ellis Island NM



A good place to start your search is with the passenger arrival records. These documents mark your ancestors' first footprints in America and can lead you backward and forward in your family genealogy.

Most nineteenth-century passenger arrival records (also called the ship's *manifest*) provide the name of the vessel, the ports of embarkation and arrival, and the date of arrival in the United States. For each passenger the list provides the person's name, age, sex, occupation, country of origin and country of intended settlement. You may also learn if your ancestor was traveling alone or with family and, occasionally, the number of bags carried. Births as well as the date and cause of death of any passenger who died en route are also noted.

Beginning in 1893, the lists provide more detailed information for each passenger. The manifest also recorded the person's marital status, nationality, last residence and final destination. Passengers were asked whether they had been in the United States before, and, if so, when and where. If the passenger was going to join a relative in the U.S., that person's name, address, and relationship to the passenger was recorded. Manifests can include notes about any passengers detained at Ellis Island.

The format of passenger lists was later expanded to include entries for a person's race (1903), physical description and birthplace (1906), and the name and address of the nearest relative in the immigrant's home country (1907). It's good to have some very basic information before you start your search:

- Name of your ancestor
- Approximate age at arrival
- Approximate date of arrival
- Port of embarkation or departure

There are a number of ways to trace your immigrant ancestors---here at Ellis Island's American Family Immigration History Center, on a variety of internet sites, or by visiting one of the offices of the National Archives and Record Administration. Feel free to ask any of the rangers or anyone at the information desk for help or suggestions!

## **Tracing Your Ancestry at Ellis Island and Online at [www.EllisIsland.org](http://www.EllisIsland.org)**

The American Family Immigration History Center (AFIHC) is an exciting interactive area *at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum* where visitors can find passenger arrival records documenting their family's beginnings in the new world. For a small fee, you and your family can log on to one of 41 computers, type in a name, and within seconds, set in motion your journey of discovery; you can access the passenger records of the ships that landed millions of immigrants, crew members, and other passengers at the Port of New York from 1892 to 1924. And copies of these ship manifests as well as pictures of most of the ships that carried immigrants to America are available for purchase. For the use of the AFIHC computers and for the help provided by the trained staff of the AFIHC, there is a minor fee.

**Ellis Island Online.** The same information being accessed by the AFHIC's computers can also be accessed online for no cost at [www.EllisIsland.org](http://www.EllisIsland.org). There is something for everyone interested in genealogy at this site, and you can do it on your own, in your own home, and take as long as you would like. Here you can research and discover ship manifests for all family members who arrived through the Port of New York and Ellis Island from 1892 to 1924; you can order copies of passenger manifests, ships pictures, and other family heritage documents. And whether your ancestors' names appear in the database or they came to America through another port or at another time period, you have the unique opportunity to register their names for inscription on The American Immigrant Wall of Honor ([www.wallofhonor.org](http://www.wallofhonor.org)). There is also a section devoted entirely to family history research with helpful suggestions on getting started including links to other useful sites. In addition there's a section on the history of Ellis Island, a collection of historic photographs, and information on visiting the Ellis Island Immigration Museum.

## **Tracing Your Family History Through the NARA The National Archives and Records Administration: ([www.archives.gov](http://www.archives.gov) or 1-866-272-6272)**

**In addition to the national headquarters in Washington, D.C., there are regional offices throughout the country.** For a complete list of these locations, go to the NARA web site ([www.archives.gov](http://www.archives.gov)) and follow the link on "Locations/Visit Us." You will need to check with each of the offices in your area to find out exactly what records they hold and what programs they offer.

For example, the National Archives in New York City at 201 Varick Street (12<sup>th</sup> Floor) (1-866-840-1752 or [newyork.archives@nara.gov](mailto:newyork.archives@nara.gov)) has passenger lists indexed for most of the years 1820-1957; it provides access to the online databases of Castle Garden for 1855-1892 ([www.castlegarden.org](http://www.castlegarden.org)), Ellis Island from 1892-1924 ([www.ellisland.org](http://www.ellisland.org)), and free access to several commercial genealogical websites; it also offers regular genealogy workshops.

## Working with NARA Records:

The main National Archives and Records Administration web site ([www.archives.gov](http://www.archives.gov)) is very comprehensive and contains an extensive listing of different kinds of records useful for genealogical research; and many records can be ordered online, or by mail or email. The particular part of their website that is useful for genealogical work is: <http://aad.archives.gov/aad/> (go to the section on “**Genealogy/ Personal History**”)

- **Passenger Records---**When you find your ancestor’s name in what is called an index, use the information to locate the passenger list. Usually the index will direct you to the exact place on the manifest that your ancestor’s name appears. If the index provides only the name of the vessel and date of arrival, a line-by-line search of the manifest will be required to find the name.

Some specialized indexes have been compiled by nationality, port of entry or port of departure. You might also want to check naturalization petitions after 1892 and Federal census schedules for 1900, 1910, 1920, or 1930 which may list the year of immigration.

**Some passenger records are available only at the National Archives and cannot be viewed online at its website.**

- **Steamship Registers and Directories---**If you know the steamship on which your immigrant ancestor traveled, check *Registers of Vessels Arriving at the Port of New York from Foreign Ports 1789-1919*, a National Archives publication, and/or the *Morton Allen Directory of European Passenger Steamship Arrivals*.
- **If Your Ancestor Was Enslaved---**Even though your ancestor was not listed by name in the cargo manifest, circumstantial evidence of the ship can be obtained if you know where, when, and by whom the enslaved person was first purchased. You can then search:
  - The National Archives which holds microfilm copies of manifests of slave ships arriving in the ports of Savannah, Mobile, and New Orleans, 1789-1808; or
  - In museums’ special collections containing manifests of slave ships; or in libraries’ published compilations of documents related to the slave trade in America.
- **Naturalization Records---**Nineteenth century petitions for citizenship/naturalization seldom provide arrival information; after 1892, however, a date of arrival usually appears on the document. Beginning in October 1906, the petition includes the date of arrival, vessel name, and port of entry. Indexes are available for most of these records. To conduct a search you will need to know your ancestor’s name, place of residence, and the approximate time period when the petition for naturalization was filed. When searching, you should be aware that an immigrant had to maintain continuous residence for a minimum of five years before being eligible for citizenship.

**Naturalization and Women**---From 1855 to 1922, married women derived citizenship through their husbands, and would not have to file separate papers, so the dates of their arrivals will seldom appear on their spouses' petitions. However, the law of September 22, 1922 required all women, regardless of their marital status, to file separately.

Note: Petitions filed in Federal Court (i.e. the United States District Courts or Circuit Courts) are in the custody of the Courts or the National Archives, and are stored at one of the Regional Archives or Federal Records Centers. Petitions filed in local courts are in the custody of those local courts.

If your ancestor was naturalized after September 29, 1906 and you are unsuccessful in locating a record at the National Archives or County Clerk's office, you can submit a Freedom of Information/Privacy Act Request, Form G-639, to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service's regional offices or their main office in Washington, D.C.

**This information has been provided through the joint efforts of The Statue of Liberty/Ellis Island Foundation, Inc, The National Archives and Records Administration, and the National Park Service. In addition to our own Ellis Island web site at <http://www.nps.gov/elis/forteachers/learning-more-about-your-ancestors.htm>, other popular websites that may be helpful to those doing genealogical research are:**

- [www.stevemorse.org](http://www.stevemorse.org)---an extensive free listing of web sites and web pages useful for genealogical research.
- [www.cyndislist.com](http://www.cyndislist.com)---another free site that has 270,000+ links for research on family histories.
- [www.slavevoyages.org](http://www.slavevoyages.org)---the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database has information on almost 35,000 slaving voyages.
- [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)---a service provided by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.
- <http://www.gjenvick.com>---one of the largest collections of historical documents from the 1800s through 1954 with concentrations in Steamship and Ocean Liner documents and photographs, Passenger Lists, U.S. Navy Archives and additional materials covering World Wars I and II, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and Immigration documents from Ellis Island, Castle Garden and other Immigration Stations.
- [www.germanroots.com](http://www.germanroots.com)---a very helpful collection of sites with links and resources for doing German genealogical research.
- [www.jewishgen.org](http://www.jewishgen.org)---a website that features thousands of databases, research tools, and other resources to help those with Jewish ancestry find family members.