

Navigation our Nation's Federal Records

Immigration and Naturalization

Rhonda R. McClure, rmcclure@nehgs.org

Most genealogists when they hear *immigration and naturalization* consider the traditional passenger lists and the records generated during the naturalization process. However, there are many additional records that have been created and of those a large percentage can be found at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

When researching our immigrant ancestors, we turn our attention to the passenger lists, begun in 1820, as a result of the Act of March 2, 1819, which required manifesting passenger lists for all ships from foreign ports docking in the U.S. This was to help limit the number of passengers a ship could transport and outlined provisions for each passenger leaving the U.S. that the shipping company had to supply. Most of the passenger lists have now been digitized and indexed and are available on sites like Ancestry.com and FamilySearch.org. However, the passenger lists are just the beginning of the records amassed under the National Archives Record Group 85 collection—Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service [INS], 1787-1993; with the bulk of them covering 1882-1957

In addition to the RG 85 records, researchers may also find information in the following Record Groups:

- RG 21 – Records of District Courts of the U.S.
- RG 36 – Records of the U.S. Customs Service
- RG 56 – General Records of the Department of Treasury
- RG 90 – Records of the Public Health Service

Why Other Record Groups

It is important to remember that the Immigration and Naturalization Service was not actually begun until 1906. Though the passenger records that predate 1906 are found under RG 85, they were actually the responsibility of the U.S. Customs Service for much of the 1800s and there are some volumes that may prove useful for those years that are classified under RG 36 and may be located at the regional NARA branches. The doctors who were examining immigrants at Ellis Island and Angel Island (in California) worked for the Public Health Service. Their records are classified under RG 90. Understanding the history and hierarchy of the various individuals and government groups who may have had a connection to our immigrant ancestors is important. The District Court records in RG 21 include certain naturalization records.

Immigration

Though people had been coming to the shores of America even when it was colonies, as the 1800s continued and the numbers of immigrants continued, concerns about who was entering the United States of America and how the states and cities were going to handle all these people began to become a concern. In addition to the simple high numbers of immigrants, events that were unfolding within the United States also forced the government to become more concerned with those newly arriving individuals.

As a result, the passenger lists over time underwent dramatic revisions well into the 1900s in the number of questions that they asked of a person.

- 1820-1854: asked for name, age, gender, occupation, country of citizenship, country in which they intended to reside, if the passenger died on the voyage
- 1855-1881: asked for name, age, gender, occupation, country of citizenship, country in which they intended to reside, if the passenger died on the voyage, intended destination; location/compartments on vessel, if died then date and cause of death
- 1882-1900: asked for name, age, gender, occupation, country of citizenship, country in which they intended to reside, if the passenger died on the voyage, native country, number of pieces of baggage, if a transient or permanent settler
- 1901-1906: Name, age in years and months, gender, marital status, occupation, ability to read/write, nationality, last residence, final destination, if they have a ticket to final destination, who paid for passage, how much money in possession, if they have ever been in the U.S. before (if so, when and where), if joining a relative or friend (who and where), if ever in prison or an asylum, if a polygamist or an anarchist, whether under contract (express or implied), health (both mental and physical), if deformed or crippled (nature of or case and where)
- 1907-1918: Name, age in years and months, gender, marital status, occupation, ability to read/write, nationality, last residence, final destination, if they have a ticket to final destination, who paid for passage, if they have ever been in the U.S. before (if so, when and where), if ever in prison or an asylum, if a polygamist or an anarchist, whether under contract (express or implied), health (both mental and physical), if deformed or crippled (nature of or case and where), race, name and address of the nearest relative or friend in U.S., if they had at least \$50 (if not, how much), height (feet and inches), complexion, color of hair and eyes, identifying marks, place of birth (country and city)

Closing the Door Begins

The Immigration Act of August 3, 1882, is by most considered to be the first time in which Congress began to exercise its muscle in this area. It began to close the “open door” policy by identifying classes of individuals that the United States felt were “unacceptable aliens.” Out of this, and subsequent acts, many



documents have been generated in efforts to identify such aliens, determine what to do with them, and keep a paper trail of the entire process. This Act was also the first time in which the immigration officials had the authority to deny entry to aliens.

“If on such examination there shall be found among such passengers any convict, lunatic, idiot, or any person unable to take care of him or herself without becoming a public charge, they shall report the same in writing to the collector of such port, and such person shall not be permitted to land.”

It was this beginning to identify what the country deemed an unacceptable immigrant that would also begin to give genealogists more records in which to find clues about their ancestors or at least some insight into the experiences their immigrants saw and went through.

Case Files – Entry 9 Files

The case files of the immigration and naturalization service include pages and pages of correspondence, documents, medical certificates, inquiries and more that resulted from the detention of, investigation of, or questions about immigrants. These records are somewhat indexed in the •*U.S. Subject Index to Correspondence and Case Files of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1903-1959* which is found on microfilm (publication T458) as well as on Ancestry.com.

These files may include almost any record imaginable, including:

- Board of Special Inquiry manifests & Detainee lists (filmed with the passenger lists only for port of NYC)
- Detention Cards
- Medical certificates and other health records
- Board of Special Inquiry interview transcripts
- Correspondence
- Bills for expenses of lodging and feeding of detainees
- Bonds
- Court records
- Verification of landing
- Records generated by county officials
- Arrest warrants
- Deportation warrants

If the immigrant was found to be “unacceptable” then he was likely deported back to the country from which he came. This is sometimes noted on the passenger lists. Some of them have a “X” to the left of the name. Others may have “S.I.” written and then the word “deported” stamped over that.

Other Immigration Files

Americanization Files

The Immigration and Naturalization Service was intent on not only identifying those immigrants that they felt would be valuable additions to the country and weeding out those they felt would be a drain, but also in assisting them to become Americans. There are a number of resources that were created to assist these immigrants in every manner of their understanding of:

- History of America
- How to write and to do math
- Proper nourishment of a child
- Keeping a house and family clean

Publications were created to teach these new Americans what they needed to learn to assimilate into the culture as well as to prepare to become a citizen of their new country. Classes were held in schools, fraternal halls, and elsewhere in their communities. Some of the records created to assist in this education include:

- Education and Americanization Files, 1914-1936 (Entry 30)
- Citizenship Training Textbooks, 1918-1935 (Entry 34)

Registers and Indexes

The INS kept track of many things in regard to those aliens coming to live in the United States. A lot of correspondence went back and forth between the main office in D.C. and the various ports of arrival and offices of the INS. And while much of that correspondence can be found in the case files, there were registers (similar to chronological indexes) to keep track of the letters coming and going as well as to other aspects of identifying immigrants and dealing with those who had circumvented the system. Some of these include:

- Registers of Letters Received, 07/12/1891-09/11/1903 (Entry 3)
- Records of Passports Procured by the Deportation Division, 1927-1937 (Entry 11)
- Index of Fraudulent Naturalizations, 1906-1915 (Entry 28)
- Index to Naturalizations of World War I Soldiers, 1918 (Entry 29)

Naturalization Records

Naturalization Process

Naturalization is the method by which someone who was born in another country can become a citizen of the United States. The naturalization process is a three-step system:

- Declaration of Intention (First Papers)
- Application for Naturalization (Second Papers)

- Certificate of Naturalization

Many researchers who find the certificate of naturalization assume they have found the only record that exists. This document gives the least information of all of them, though it may indicate where he filed his application, and that can be valuable for pre-1906 naturalizations.

Before 1906, naturalization and the individual steps to citizenship could be done at any “court of record.” This includes:

- Municipal courts
- County courts
- State courts
- Federal courts

One of the issues with this period is that an immigrant could file his first and second papers in two different places and then receive his certificate of naturalization at yet another.

Post-1906

The year 1906 is the year when the courts began to forward copies of the naturalization papers to the Immigration and Naturalization Service. This division year, while important, often causes genealogists to forsake repositories because they assume the records they want won't be there.

In fact, many of the State and local court naturalizations have since been deposited in the National Archives and may be available through one of the regional NARA facilities. There are microfilmed indexes to some of these records.

Repatriation

Repatriation was a method of regaining citizenship in the United States if a man had somehow lost his citizenship. There were a few ways in which he could have lost his U.S. citizenship, perhaps without even realizing that it would happen. For many of the men, this happened during World War I, when they went to fight for Canada or England before the United States actually entered the war. When a man takes up arms for another country, he is swearing allegiance to that country and therefore lost his citizenship in the United States.

Of course, if for some reason a man actually applied for citizenship in another country, then he was renouncing his allegiance to the United States. So of course, he would lose his U.S. citizenship. And there were times in history when if a person lived too long in a foreign country, he ran the risk of losing his U.S. citizenship as well.

For those who did lose their citizenship, they could go through the repatriation process, which was a single paper and swearing the oath of allegiance to the United States at that moment and he was again an American citizen.

Repatriation was done through the U.S. District Courts and as such those records are found under RG 21 – Records of District Courts of the United States.

Women and Naturalization

Women were included under their husbands' naturalizations until 1922. Actually, for women there was little reason before 1920 to become naturalized, as they could not vote. However, beginning in 1907, an important aspect of women and naturalization is that when a woman who was an American citizen married a man who was from another country and had not yet naturalized, then she lost her citizenship. Beginning in 1936, there are repatriation records that often contain dates and places of marriage, divorce and/or death of spouse. Repatriation was, at first, only available to women who were widowed or divorced from the alien spouse (1936 Act). Eventually women were allowed to repatriate regardless of if they were still married to their alien spouse (1940 Act). And because this was a form of repatriation, these records were handled by the U.S. District Courts and are found in regional NARA branches under RG 21.

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