

New York City Research:

20th-Century New York City: Closing the Golden Doors

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The Immigration Act of August 3, 1882 is considered by most 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.

Exclusions

The initial idea of excluding immigrants was an attempt to keep out those that were deemed undesirable. Many of the Immigration acts passed from 1882 well into the 1900s included identifying classes of individuals who should be excluded. The original classes were:

- Convicts
- Immoral classes
- Mental defectives
- Those likely to become a public charge

As the years went on and immigration continued, sometimes at staggering numbers, additional exclusions were developed and intended to cover:

- Avoiding health epidemics
- Preventing anarchy
- Prevention of the undermining of the American “way of life”
- Protection of immigrants from forced or immoral labor

- Protection of jobs for those already residing in the U.S., namely U.S. citizens, for which they had the skills to do

The immigration inspectors were tasked with examining the incoming 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 a result of the Immigration laws that were passed and the identification of excludable classes that resulted in the need for investigation of arriving non-U.S. passengers to ensure that they would not become a burden to the country. Out of these investigations come a number of records.

Investigation

So, just why might an immigrant be detained or further investigated? There were a number of reasons in addition to the established excludable classes.

- Health issues
- Morality issues
- “Likely to become a public charge”
- No Money, No Tickets, No Address
- Labor Laws
- Just Because

How many were actually held, detained and deported? When reading some of the publications of the day it seems that it was either not enough or too many.

On any given day at an immigration station, approximately 20% of those inspected would be detained. Of that number roughly 50% would end up going before a Board of Special Inquiry for further investigation. And of those who did have to plead their case to the Board of Special Inquiry, about two percent were actually deported.

Detention was the most likely situation for an immigrant, and it resulted from lacking something that would allow them to continue on their way. Some did not have a railway ticket to their final destination. Others may have not known the exact address of their relative to whom they were going. Some may have needed additional funds. And in the case of women traveling alone, often it was the need for a male family member to meet her at the port of arrival.

For those who had to go before the Board of Special Inquiry, it was an opportunity to perhaps prove that they could be a contributing member of the American society. The three-man tribunal consisted of

immigration inspectors and in some of the busier immigration stations they may have been running at least three such boards simultaneously. These were administrative hearings which meant that the immigrants had very few protections. They were not entitled to a lawyer. The evidence was informal at best—relying on letters, telegrams, sometimes telephone interviews and hearsay. They were also not open to the public which had many critics questioning them and referring to them as “star chambers.”

Border Crossings

Up until the mid-1890s it was possible for immigrants from Canada to go back and forth between Canada and the United States, and they often did, especially when having their children. However, beginning in 1895, the United States began to keep track of those coming into the United States from Canada in the form of what they called border crossing records. Records of these crossings are available online from 1895 through 1956.

Though New York City was not on the border, some of those who arrived through the New York border stations did ultimately travel to New York City.

Settlement Patterns

In 1907 the federal government felt they needed to know more about the immigrants who were entering the United States. By an act of Congress, 20 February 1907, a commission headed by William P. Dillingham—and often referred to as the “Dillingham Commission”—was created to examine the “immigrant question.” When the report was finished, they had made certain conclusions that were not supported by documentation in census and other records. Statistical records from the census revealed some interesting settlement patterns—especially that four states contained almost half the total foreign-born population: New York, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Illinois

Immigrant Restriction

The previously mentioned Dillingham Commission, including not only William Paul Dillingham who was best known for his restriction of immigrants from certain countries, but also a number of other restrictionists. For instance, Henry Cabot Lodge was the public voice of the Immigration Restriction League. The Immigration Restriction League was founded in Boston, Massachusetts in 1894 by three Boston Brahmin Harvard alumni: Charles Warren, Robert DeCourcy Ward and Prescott F. Hall. They believed that immigrants from southern and eastern Europe were ethnically inferior to Anglo-Saxons. In 1906, Prescott F. Hall wrote a book entitled *Immigration and Its Effects Upon the United States* in which he compared the Northwestern Europeans to Southeastern Europeans, with records showing the deficiencies in those coming from southeastern Europe.

In addition to the biases being vocalized about the southeastern Europeans, there were also limitations being placed on Chinese immigration in part to protect them from labor abuse and in part because of the numbers of Asians who had already arrived.

Literacy Tests

While included in Congressional bills beginning in 1891, a literacy test was not actually approved until 1917. The Immigration Act of 1917, despite being vetoed by President Woodrow Wilson, was overridden by Congress and became a law on February 5, 1917. In addition to the previously mentioned Asiatic Barred Zone, which was also part of this act, it required all immigrants over the age of 16 to prove they were literate. One of the tests included reading a passage from the Bible in their native language.

Quotas

The Immigration Act of 1921, passed on May 19, set an annual quota for each nationality group at three percent of the number of foreign-born persons of that national origin as enumerated in the 1910 census. Certain classes of alien were exempted from this quota. It still acknowledged the Asiatic Barred Zone, denying those immigrants entry.

The National Quota Act of 1924 was heavily weighted to limit the southern and eastern Europeans from gaining entry. The “national origins” system became fully operational in 1929. It capped the total immigration outside of the Western Hemisphere to 150,000 immigrants, which averaged out to five northwestern Europeans to one southeastern European. Great Britain and Northern Ireland were allotted 65,721 immigration slots. Germany had 25,957. Meanwhile Greece had 307 slots per annum and Portugal had 440.

It was while under these quotas in the 1930s that immigration saw struggles. Those in the United States didn't want any new arrivals as those in America were already struggling to find ways to make ends meet. Meanwhile, in Germany the Nazi Party was taking control and many immigrants were seeking refuge out of that country—especially Jews. Some refugees were required to wait two or more years to get a visa to immigrate to the United States.

Researching in New York City

Vital Records

Up until recently, while FamilySearch.org offered abstracts of vital records for the five boroughs of New York City, you had to be in the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, Utah to view those vital records or you had to order the records from New York City. The Municipal Archives of New York City has made available digital files of the births, marriages, and deaths for New York City.

Note: As of December 2022, the digitizing of these records was only 76% complete.

City Directories

City directories offer a great way to track an individual or a family through each year, especially in large cities such as New York City. In addition to being published every year, thus filling in the years between the decennial federal censuses, they can also be used to aid in finding people in those censuses when a search on an online site doesn't seem to find your ancestor.

City directories can also reveal others who may be residing at the same address. City directories identify adults and include their occupation (sometimes with the address where they worked) as well as their residential address. Using the residential address, it is sometimes possible to find individuals of the same surname residing at the same address. These could be relatives.

Cemeteries

When it comes to researching your Jewish ancestors in New York City, there is one resource that offers hints to the old country—possibly even the town of origin. Many Jewish cemeteries in New York have large plots that were purchased by organizations known as *landsmanshaftn* – these were akin to fraternal organizations. One of the benefits of joining such an organization was the fact that they purchased the large plots, thus ensuring you had a place to be buried.

Once you have identified where your ancestor was buried, you may be able to call them or search an online database at the cemetery's website to determine who owned the plot where they were buried.

The records of many *landsmanshaftn* can be found listed in Rosaline Schwartz's and Susan Milamed's *A Guide to YIVO's Landsmanshaftn Archive*, which is also available online through YIVO here:

<https://www.jgsny.org/index.php/searchable-databases/indexes-to-jewish-organizations/yivo-landsmanshaftn-collection>

New York City Repositories

One of the amazing things about New York City research is the many repositories that are available, which include:

- Municipal Archives of New York City
- Center for Jewish History
- New York Public Library
- Center for Migration Studies

Available on the websites of all of these repositories are some digital content, but they offer much more should you visit them in person.

Municipal Archives of New York City

Located in the heart of New York, the Municipal Archives is home to a variety of records, some of which can be extremely useful to family historians. Among their 38 collections they have the records of many of the mayors of New York City, tax department photographs from the 1940s, Almshouse registers, some court records, commissioner records and more. Finding aids have been made available to assist researchers in knowing what might be available, and those collections that have been digitized have been identified as such.

Center for Jewish History

The Center for Jewish History is comprised of the following organizations:

- Ackman & Ziff Family Genealogy Institute
- American Jewish Historical Society
- American Sephardi Federation
- Leo Baeck Institute
- Yeshiva University Museum
- YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

It is in the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research that the *landsmanschaftn* organization records can be found. The Ackman & Ziff Family Genealogy Institute and the American Jewish Historical Society have resources and guides that can assist with your genealogical research. There are focuses on art, business, sports, philanthropy and more as well.

New York Public Library

Well known for the lions who sit outside, the New York Public Library has been seen in many television shows and movies. It is also the home of the Milstein Division of United States History, Local History & Genealogy (which is in room 121 of the library). There is also the Milstein Microform Reading Room that has items of genealogical value.

The New York Public Library also acquired the collections of the New York Genealogical and Biographical Society when that organization downsized their physical presence.

You will find many digitized collections of the Irma and Paul Milstein Division of United State History Local History and Genealogy including photographic views of New York City buildings and neighborhoods, the New York City directories from 1786-1934, and some interesting publications of some of the larger apartment houses within New York City.

There are also a variety of research guides available on the New York Public Library's website devoted to researching your genealogy and researching in a large city such as New York City.

Center for Migration Studies

The Center for Migration Studies is perhaps not as well known among genealogists, but they house a variety of collections dealing with immigrants, especially those who arrived through Ellis Island, such as the St. Raphael Society for Italian Immigrants. They also have collections that include manifests of ships that brought refugees to the U.S. after World War II and case files on those that were helped.

For those with immigrants, especially from the time of the opening of Ellis Island, it may be that the Archives of the Center for Migration Studies may have information that could assist your research.

Suggested Bibliography

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Center for Jewish History

<https://cjh.org/>

Center for Migration Studies – Archive

<https://cmsny.org/about/archive/>

FamilySearch.org

<http://www.familysearch.org>

Manifest Markings, A Guide to Interpreting Passenger List Annotations

<https://www.jewishgen.org/InfoFiles/Manifests/>

Milstein Division of United States History, Local History, & Genealogy (NYPL)

<https://www.nypl.org/about/divisions/milstein/genealogy>

NYC Historical Vital Records Project

<https://a860-historicalvitalrecords.nyc.gov/>

NYC Municipal Archives Collection Guides

<https://a860-collectionguides.nyc.gov/>

One-Step Webpages by Stephen P. Morse

<https://stevemorse.org/index.html>

YIVO Landsmanshaftn Collection

<https://www.jgsny.org/index.php/searchable-databases/indexes-to-jewish-organizations/yivo-landsmanshaftn-collection>