Navigating Passenger Lists: Arrivals to the United States

Class 3: 19th Century Passenger Lists: Ellis Island and Beyond

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Ports of Entry

While about 100 ports in the U.S. saw immigrant arrivals in the 19th century, the vast majority of immigrants entered through the port of New York. Other immigrants entered through the major ports of Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and New Orleans. Still others entered through minor ports on the East Coast, Gulf Coast, or Great Lakes. Some passengers entered at minor ports on the West Coast such as San Francisco and Seattle.

It was not until the mid-19th century that any immigration stations or "emigrant landing depots" existed. Before such institutions were established, immigrant ships docked at regular piers and immigrants were processed on board the ships. The first immigration station in the country was Castle Garden (also known as Castle Clinton and Fort Clinton) in New York City. Located in the Battery, it opened in 1855 and was used as an immigration station until 1890. It was run first by the state of New York and later run jointly by the state and federal governments.

In 1890, the federal government started looking for a new place to process immigrants and settled on Ellis Island, a small island in between New York and New Jersey. Castle Garden was closed and the New York Barge Office temporarily used to process immigrants while the immigration station at Ellis Island was built. Ellis Island opened from 1892 and was in operation for five years until a fire destroyed the building. While it was rebuilt, immigrants were again processed at the Barge Office. Ellis Island reopened in 1900 and was used for general immigrant processing until 1924, and for special cases between 1924 and 1954. A hospital was also built on the island.

At other ports in the U.S., there were similar situations. In the early- to mid-19th century, immigrants tended to be processed on board ships at piers that were not purpose-built for immigrants. In Baltimore, the Locust Point piers handled immigrant arrivals from 1868 to 1914. In Boston, immigrants were processed on Long Wharf. The East Boston Immigration Station was opened in 1920, but only used for special cases—most immigrants were still processed on board ships.

Ports of Entry: Further Reading

"Castle Clinton: History and Culture," *National Park Service,*
https://www.nps.gov/cacl/learn/historyculture/index.htm

American Ancestors
by NEW ENGLAND HISTORIC GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY

"City of Immigrants," *Baltimore Magazine,*
https://www.baltimoremagazine.com/section/historypolitics/city-of-immigrants-the-people-who-built-baltimore/

"Genealogy Q&A: Other Ports of Entry for Immigrants," *Family Tree Magazine,*
https://familytreemagazine.com/records/immigration/genealogy-qa-ports-of-entry/.

Massport, *The East Boston Immigration Station: A History,* (Feb 2012),
https://www.massport.com/media/2327/eastbostonimmigrationstation.pdf

"Overview + History," *The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation,*
https://www.statueofliberty.org/ellis-island/overview-history/

Customs and INS Passenger Lists

Passenger lists were sent to U.S. Customs from 1820-1891 and then to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (or to its predecessor). Because of this, the earlier lists are called "Customs Lists" while the later lists are called "INS Lists" or simply "Immigration Lists." This distinction was more necessary before records were digitized and searchable online, as one previously had to examine an index (either to Customs Lists or Immigration Lists) to locate a name before examining the microfilm containing the complete passenger list. Original Customs Lists are held by the Balch Institute at Temple University while NARA retained microfilm copies. NARA also has microfilm copies of the Immigration Lists, but the originals no longer exist.

The appearance of Customs Lists can vary greatly, as standardized forms were not required until 1893. Prior to that date, private printers prepared and sold lists to shipping companies, who purchased their own supply of forms. Sometimes companies even hand-drew their own forms, rather than using a pre-printed form. After 1893, shipping companies were still required to purchase their own forms, but the laws governing these forms were more rigorous and the variations between forms are much less noticeable.

Customs officials made quarterly abstracts of passenger lists from 1820-1874 and sent these abstracts to the State Department. These abstracts may be missing information that the copyists deemed "extraneous." Notably, the abstracts typically do not contain given name(s) and instead show only first initial(s). When microfilms were compiled for NARA, the abstracts were included if no other copy could be located.

Births and deaths at sea were not required on Customs Lists, however, they were often reported. Both may appear on the last page of the list, though a death may also have been recorded somewhere to the right of the passenger's name wherever they appear on the list. Births at sea may or may not contain information about the parents. Deaths (from the last page of a passenger list) may or may not have been indexed. If you think your ancestor was born at or died at sea, browse the list and be sure to check the last page.

Stowaways may appear on passenger lists or on crew lists.

Some of the resources listed in the "Passenger List Guides" section of this handout contain further information about the differences between these lists.

Online Search Tips

19th-century passenger lists are widely available online and can be found on genealogy websites such as Ancestry.com ($), FamilySearch.org, StatueOfLiberty.org/EllisIsland.org, and FindMyPast.com ($). These websites tend to group arrivals by port and make no distinction between Customs Lists and Immigration Lists.

On Ancestry.com, passenger lists can be found by searching the card catalog or by browsing the "Passenger Lists" collection at https://www.ancestry.com/search/categories/img_passlists/.

At FamilySearch.org, passenger lists can be located in the catalog at https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog by doing a keyword search or by searching the catalog for the relevant port location and choosing the "Emigration and Immigration" category.

FindMyPast.com has grouped all passenger arrival lists for the U.S. into one database, called *United States, Passenger and Crew Lists*.

A state-by-state guide to immigration records (including passenger lists) is available on the FamilySearch Wiki at https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Immigration_Online_Genealogy_Records.

A "Tips and Tricks" guide to using the Ellis Island Foundation passenger database, which includes all port of New York records from 1820 to 1957, is online at https://www.statueofliberty.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Tips-Tricks-Guide.pdf.

Searching multiple websites for passenger arrivals is recommended; different websites have different algorithms, indexes, transcriptions, and/or quality of images. In addition to the websites mentioned above, the site SteveMorse.org can also be used to search passenger lists. No passenger lists live on the SteveMorse site, but the search engines there feature enhanced search options and algorithms to help locate records on other genealogy websites. The search engines on https://stevemorse.org/ cover the ports of New York, Baltimore, Boston, Galveston, New Orleans, Philadelphia and San Francisco; outbound Hamburg lists; Canadian border crossings; Germans to America; Italians to America; and Russians to America.

While most websites have specific databases for each of the major ports, the minor ports are often grouped together in a database as "Atlantic and Gulf Coast Arrivals" or a similar title. Some major ports may be included in these collections.

- *U.S., Atlantic Ports Arriving and Departing Passenger and Crew Lists, 1820-1959,* https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/8758/ [includes Gulf Coast and Great Lakes]
- *United States Index to Passenger Arrivals, Atlantic and Gulf Ports, 1820-1874,* https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1921756 [searchable index cards]

American Ancestors
by New England Historic Genealogical Society

- *Copies of lists of passengers arriving at miscellaneous ports on the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts and at ports on the Great Lakes, 1820-1873 : NARA RG36 M575,* https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/66154 [browse-only]

Some Customs Lists for Boston were lost in a fire. However, Massachusetts also required that copies of lists be sent to the state (as well as to the federal government). The state copies of lists were microfilmed along with the federal records and therefore a potential gap in Boston arrival records was avoided. There are known gaps in the records from Galveston and New Orleans. It is important to remember that even if no "known gaps" in records from other ports exist, we do know that passenger arrival lists are not perfect nor are they complete.

Separate lists for Chinese arrivals were kept after the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Lists for arrivals at San Francisco, Seattle, and Port Townsend can be found on Ancestry.com and FamilySearch.org.
- *San Francisco, California, U.S., Registers of Chinese Laborers Returning to the U.S., 1882-1888,* https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/5418/
- *Lists of Chinese passengers arriving in San Francisco, California, 1882- 1914: NARA publication M1414,* https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/574273
- *Lists of Chinese passengers arriving at Seattle and Port Townsend, 1882- 1916: NARA RG85 M1364,* https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/588748

Published passenger lists, often centering on a particular ethnic group, port, or span of arrival years, were discussed in Class 1 and resources relating to those are listed on the Class 1 handout.

When searching online passenger list databases, keep the following in mind:
- Be flexible with spelling. Spelling was not necessarily standardized in the 19th century. Additionally, there may have been transcription errors when the database transcriptions were created. You can use wildcards (*, ?) or perform a "Soundex" or "sounds like" search to broaden your search terms.
- Be flexible with age. Plus or minus two years from the approximate age expected is generally a good rule of thumb.
- Be flexible with arrival year. If a naturalization or census record suggests an arrival year of 1880, but no 1880 arrival can be found, expand the search to 1878-1882, using the + or – two rule again.
- If you think a family immigrated as a group, consider the whole—do the names and ages of the group generally match? Is the birth order of the children correct even if the ages of the children are off?

Keep in mind that an immigrant may have misremembered or misreported details of their immigration at a later date. The following errors are relatively common:
- A family story recalls an immigrant coming through Ellis Island, though Ellis Island wasn't yet opened (it opened in 1892). The immigrant probably came through New York City, and was processed at the Barge Office or Castle Garden.

- The immigrant confused the name of the port of departure and the ship. Many ships were named after large ports—such as Bremen, Hamburg, Antwerp, Rotterdam—and this information could be confused as a later date.
- The immigrant may have remembered the correct month or time of year of their arrival, but forgotten the exact year.

If you are struggling to find your ancestor's arrival record, review all other documents you've collected for that ancestor for possible clues—a ship name or date may be mentioned in an unusual place! In addition to naturalization records, sometimes bank records or newspaper articles may be useful.

Passenger List Guides

Anne C. Sibert, *Tracing immigrants through the Port of New York: early national period to 1924*, (New York: New York Genealogical & Biographical Society, 2020).

Joe Beine, "US Ports of Arrival and their Available Passenger Lists 1820-1957," *GeneSearch.com,* https://www.genesearch.com/ports.html

John Philip Coletta, *They Came in Ships: A Guide to Finding Your Immigrant Ancestor's Arrival Record*, 3rd ed., (Orem, Utah: Ancestry, 2002). [Focuses on using indexes and physical rolls of microfilm, but contains excellent background information about the sources and the major ports. Available as a digital loan on Archive.org.]

Marian L. Smith, "Manifest Markings: A Guide to Interpreting Passenger List Annotations," *JewishGen.org,* https://www.jewishgen.org/infofiles/manifests/

Megan Smolenyak, "The Name Game," *Ellis Island Foundation,* https://assets-heritage.statueofliberty.org/genealogy/pdf/The_Name_Game.pdf

"Passenger Arrival Records," *National Archives and Records Administration,* https://www.archives.gov/research/immigration/passenger-arrival.html

"Passenger Search Tips & Tricks," *The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation,* https://www.statueofliberty.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Tips-Tricks-Guide.pdf

"United States Emigration and Immigration," *FamilySearch Wiki,* https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Emigration_and_Immigration

"United States Immigration Online Genealogy Records," *FamilySearch Wiki,* https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Immigration_Online_Genealogy_Records

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