

Researching Immigrant Ancestors to America, 1620–1965

Coming to America: 400 Years of Immigration and Naturalization in the United States

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Since the earliest communities were settled in the American Colonies, people have come from near and far, immigrating to America.

The 1600s – 1700s

Though there were no passenger lists during this period, many of the immigrants in this period, especially up until the American Revolutionary War, can be found on other lists. While the majority of those who were arriving were coming from British areas, the major influx of Germans, especially to the colony of Pennsylvania, were making some individuals nervous. As a result, those Germans who disembarked at Philadelphia were required to make an “oath of allegiance” to the British monarch. These oaths have been used as passenger lists by those with early German ancestors.

After the American Revolution and during the drafting of the Constitution, concerns were raised about whether or not newly arriving immigrants should be accepted and if they could ever hold a public office. Discussions about immigration would continue from this day forward. The changes over the next two hundred plus years in regard to immigration will change the questions asked on the passenger lists, and how genealogists find these records.

The 19th Century

As the United States began to grow and expand its lands, the enticements for immigrants would increase. Newly created territories and states would help in advertising abroad and—with the exception of the period of the United States Civil War—most of the years of this century would see an increase in the arrival of immigrants.

As those numbers grew and issues took place in America, concerns would escalate as well in regard to who should be allowed in the United States and just what the process should be, including waiting periods. These waiting periods resulted in the research problems we experience today in finding the naturalization records for our ancestors.

Patterns of Immigration

Three major waves of immigrants:

- 1815-1860: 5 million immigrants, primarily from the British Isles, Germany, Holland, Scandinavia, and Switzerland
- 1860-1890: 10 million immigrants primarily from the same countries
- 1890-1914: 15 million immigrants, primarily from Austria-Hungary, Greece, Italy, Romania, Russia, and Turkey

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:

- Southern states had very few immigrants
- The bulk of the foreign-born settled primarily east of the Mississippi and north of the Ohio River and Mason and Dixon’s Line
- Four states contained almost half the total foreign-born population: New York, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Illinois

Distribution by ethnic groups was also determined from these statistical extractions from the census:

- **Germans:** Middle West (esp. Illinois, Wisconsin, Ohio, and Minnesota), New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey
- **Norwegians, Swedes and Danes:** Minnesota, Illinois, Wisconsin, The Dakotas, and Washington
- **Finns:** Michigan, Minnesota, and Massachusetts
- **Canadians:** Almost half in New England, New York, Michigan, and other states along the Great Lakes
- **Irish:** Middle Atlantic states (includes New York), New England, Illinois, and California
- **Italians:** Middle Atlantic states (includes New York), New England, Illinois, and California
- **Russians and Austrian-Hungarians:** New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Illinois, and Massachusetts

The 20th Century

By the 1900s, immigration was running at an all-time high. The influx of those who looked and dressed differently from the earlier Anglo-Saxons was beginning to cause concerns among some. And the settlement patterns suggested a sense of isolation among the new arrivals of certain ethnicities.

Immigrant Restriction

The previously mentioned Dillingham Commission included 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 was certainly no love for the Chinese either.

Chinese Exclusion Acts

The first act to exclude Chinese immigration was in 1882, but subsequent acts in 1884, 1888, 1892 and 1902 expanded the exclusions. Ultimately in the Immigration Act of 1917, an Asiatic Barred Zone was identified that included much more than just China. These acts forced many immigrants from China before 1917 to create fictitious relationships to those already in the United States. These were known as “paper sons.” Because these immigrants knew they would be heavily interrogated upon their arrival they spent their ship crossing studying complete family trees with information about hometowns and more.

Immigration Inspection Process

Once the federal government took immigration under its control, especially after the passage of the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1906, the inspection process was somewhat standardized. The first- and second-class passengers were inspected aboard the ship while it was being tugged into port. If a passenger could afford a first- or second-class ticket, they were already assumed to be financially stable and able to support themselves once in the United States.

Meanwhile the third-class passengers were transferred from the ship to an immigrant inspection station. Depending on the size and capabilities of the station, the inspections may have been done in more than one place. For instance, Ellis Island in New York City and Angel Island in San Francisco both had their

own hospitals. Ports like Baltimore, Boston, and Philadelphia, to name just a few, usually relied on the hospitals of the city if someone arrived ill or required more detailed health inspections.

Regardless of which port an immigrant arrived, they were all required to go through a cursory examination with any noticeable health issues then addressed in greater detail. All immigrants underwent an eye exam for the disease known as trachoma. This highly contagious disease could ultimately result in blindness. As contagious as conjunctivitis (aka Pink Eye) it was much more serious. If left untreated, the disease would ultimately dry out the underside of the upper eye lid, causing the eyelid to scratch the cornea when a person blinked. It and other contagious diseases often meant an automatic return back to the old country.

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.

And yet still the immigrants came to the United States.

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 aliens 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.

World War II and After

Once World War II began things slowed considerably. Many Europeans had been conscripted into their own country's military. Ships that had previously carried passengers to the United States were painted grey and carried troops to Europe, and crossing the Atlantic was not a safe passage with the German U-boats in wait.

While World War II continued for America, and the dislike of the Japanese was rampant, the Immigration Act of 1943, passed December 17, repeated all prior Chinese Exclusion Acts. It also allowed the Chinese to become naturalized citizens.

After the war, the United States realized they had to address the issue of service men who had married while overseas. The War Brides Act was passed December 28, 1945. Though there was still a quota system in place for immigrants, it established that brides and children of veterans carried non-quota status as immigrants and established that World War II began December 7, 1941 and ceased "upon the termination of hostilities as declared by the President or by a joint resolution of Congress." In addition, race could not bar an alien spouse from entry.

An additional act was passed June 25, 1948, known as the Displaced Persons Act, in which a non-quota status was created for certain displaced persons as a result of World War II. Some 400,000 people were admitted to the United States over four years under this act.

The Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1952, passed June 27, is the act from which all present-day immigration and naturalization laws stem. Like the Act of 1917, this one was vetoed by the then President, Harry S. Truman, but it was overridden. It had 407 sections under four titles addressing all things related to immigration and naturalization. Truman's issues with the 1952 Act had to do with the inequality of immigrants – where once again those of Northwestern countries were deemed to be better citizens than those from southeastern Europe. Likewise, he did not approve of the power given to the Attorney General in determining what immigrants could come into the country.

Also known as the Walter-McCarran Act, it established a preference system that determined which ethnic groups were desirable, placing great importance on labor qualifications. It defined three types of immigrants:

- Immigrants with special skills or relatives who were U.S. Citizens
- Average immigrants (number not to exceed 270,00)
- Refugees

The Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, also known as the Hart-Cellar Act, was passed October 4, 1965. It eliminated the national-origins quotas that began in 1924. It established a new immigration policy based on reuniting immigrant families as well as attracting skilled labor to the U.S.

The policies put into effect under the Hart-Cellar Act would dramatically change the demographic makeup of the American population. In the three decades that followed its passage, more than 18 million legal immigrants entered America. That was more than three times the number admitted during the previous 30 years.

The Immigration Reform & Control Act became a law in 1986. It was intended to address illegal immigration. Among other things it made it illegal to hire illegal immigrants. However, it did legalize certain seasonal undocumented migrants who had entered the United States before 1 January 1982. The act did nothing to curb illegal immigration.

After 9/11, the Homeland Security Act of 2002 created the Department of Homeland Security, and the Immigration and Naturalization Service was renamed the U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Service (USCIS) which now report to Homeland Security.

There are currently two legal methods of immigration

- Temporary, or what is known as non-immigrant, admission. This allows an immigrant to come to the United States for a certain amount of time depending on why they were coming—education for example.
- Permanent, also known as immigrant, admission. This method allows the immigrant to work in the United States and they get a Green Card which allows the immigrant to live and work permanently in the United States.

In Conclusion

Over the past 400 years, immigration has changed dramatically. From the years of encouraging immigrants to an effort to permanently close the door, immigration policy has gone back and forth in an effort to find a happy medium. Regardless of the laws in effect, from the 1900s immigration has continued to be a hotly debated topic.

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