

Researching Immigrant Ancestors to America, 1620-1965

Class 2: Passenger Lists

Hallie Kirchner, hallie.kirchner@nehgs.org

What are passenger lists?

Passenger lists, passenger manifests, or ship's manifests are key resources for genealogists, helping to identify the names, ages, occupations and, of course, places of origin of our ancestors. These lists contain the names of individuals traveling aboard a particular vessel. The information on the lists was typically collected by the shipping agency at the port of departure (not the port of arrival) and later turned over to a U.S. government agency.

Generally, the earliest complete passenger lists date to 1820 and the information collected varies based on the time period, as described below. Separate lists were kept for crew members. Earlier "passenger lists," e.g. those from the 17th and 18th centuries, are typically compiled lists created at a later date based on different record types such as oaths of allegiance, court records, land records, etc.

To locate your ancestor on a passenger list, you need to know their full name, when they immigrated, and how old they were at the time. It can be useful to also know where they entered and where they came from. Information gathered from vital, census, and/or naturalization records can typically provide all the details needed to begin searching passenger arrival records.

Laws Relating to Passenger Lists

As the number of immigrants arriving in the U.S. grew, the government imposed a series of laws aimed at tracking these new arrivals. The first of these federal laws was passed in 1819, though the port of Philadelphia did require that lists of passengers from Continental Europe be kept from 1727 to 1808. The legislation summarized below impacted the creation of passenger lists. These are not the only immigration laws passed throughout the course of history, only those most relevant to the creation and maintenance of passenger lists.

- Steerage Act of 1819: Required ship captains to report names, ages, sex, and occupations of passengers to U.S. Customs and limited the number of passengers based on ship tonnage
- Carriage of Passengers Act of 1835: Regulated conditions aboard the ship and continued the obligations set forth in the Act of 1819, but added that the part of the vessel in which the passenger had traveled also be recorded
- Passenger Act of 1882: required that "the name, age, sex, calling, and native country of each emigrant passenger, or passengers other than cabin passengers, and their intended destination or location, and the number of pieces of baggage belonging to each passenger, and also the location of the compartment or space occupied by each of such passengers during the voyage" be reported to Customs



- Immigration Act of 1891: Created the Office of the Superintendent of Immigration and transferred control to the federal government; formalized inspection of passengers
- Immigration Act of 1893: Revised inspection of passengers, established Boards of Special Inquiry, and expanded passenger information collection by shipmasters
- Immigration Act of 1903: Expanded passenger information collection and excluded four “inadmissible classes” from entering the country

Published Passenger Lists

Generally, few true passenger lists exist for the 17th and 18th centuries. “Passenger lists” from this time period are more often lists compiled at a later date based on other record types. These lists are typically available in published form, either in books or journals. There are also published passenger lists that draw from true 19th or 20th century passenger lists that have been compiled based on a certain ethnic group, departure port, or arrival port.

Perhaps the most comprehensive publication that identifies immigrants in published volumes is the massive undertaking of P. William Filby, begun in 1981, with annual supplements. *Passenger and Immigration Lists Index: A Guide to Published Records of More than 720,000 Immigrants Who Came to the New World Between the Sixteenth and the Mid-Twentieth Centuries* consists of more than 40 volumes, each supplying information on the immigrant as found in the published volume which could include age, place of origin, family, place of settlement, ship traveled on or more. This collection is searchable on Ancestry.com and browsable on FamilySearch.org.

Selected Bibliography of Published Passenger Lists

David Dobson, *Directory of Scottish Settlers in America, 1625-1825*, 7 vols. (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1984),

Ira A. Glazier and P. William Filby, *Germans to America: lists of passengers arriving at U.S. ports*, 67 vols. (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1988-2002)

Ira A. Glazier and P. William Filby, *Italians to America: lists of passengers arriving at U.S. ports, 1880-19--*, 10 vols. (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1992-)

John Camden Hotten, *The Original Lists of Persons of Quality: Emigrants, Religious Exiles, Political Rebels, Serving Men Sold for a Term of Years, Apprentices, Children Stolen, Maidens Pressed, and Others Who Went from Great Britain to the American Plantations, 1600-1700*, (Boston, Mass.: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 2012).

<https://archive.org/details/originallistspe00hottgoog/mode/2up>.

Peter Wilson Coldham, *Child Apprentices in America from Christ's Hospital, London, 1617-1778*, (Baltimore, Md.: Genealogical Publishing Company, Inc., 1990)

Peter Wilson Coldham, *The Complete Book of Emigrants in Bondage*, (Baltimore, Md.: Genealogical Publishing Company, Inc., 1988)

Peter Wilson Coldham, *The King's Passengers to Maryland and Virginia*, (Westminster, Md.: Heritage Books, Inc., 2006)

Ralph Beaver Strassburger and William John Hinke, *Pennsylvania German Pioneers: A Publication of the Original Lists of Arrivals in the Port of Philadelphia from 1727 to 1808*, 3 vols., (Camden, Maine: Picton Press, 1992). Available as a digital loan at [Archive.org](https://archive.org).

Robert Charles Anderson, *The Great Migration Begins: Immigrants to New England 1620-1633*, 3 vols. (Boston, Mass.: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1995). Searchable database at [AmericanAncestors.org](https://www.americanancestors.org) (\$).

Robert Charles Anderson, *The Great Migration: Immigrants to New England 1634-1635*, 7 vols. (Boston, Mass.: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1999-2011). Searchable database at [AmericanAncestors.org](https://www.americanancestors.org) (\$).

Robert Charles Anderson, *The Great Migration Directory: Immigrants to New England 1620-1640*, (Boston, Mass.: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 2015). Available for purchase at <https://shop.americanancestors.org/collections/great-migration/products/the-great-migration-directory>.

Theodore M. Banta, *Passengers to New Netherland, 1654 to 1664: from the copyrighted year book of the Holland Society of New York for 1902*, (1900).
https://archive.org/details/passengerstonewn00bant_0/mode/2up.

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) until 1957. 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. For some ports, information about individuals held for special inquiry (beginning in 1893) can be found at the end of the manifest. For other ports, special inquiry lists may have been maintained separately.

Online Search Tips

19th- and 20th-century passenger lists are widely available online and can be found on genealogy websites such as Ancestry.com (\$), FamilySearch.org, StatueOfLiberty.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*. <https://search.findmypast.com/search-world-records/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.

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.

Guides to Finding and Using Passenger Lists

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

Bodner Family Special Inquiry Case Study, <https://www.jewishgen.org/infofiles/manifests/bsi/>

“Charts and Forms,” National Archives and Records Administration,

<https://www.archives.gov/research/genealogy/charts-forms#:~:text=s%20physical%20characteristics,-.Immigration%20Forms,-New%20York>, includes blank passenger list forms from 1882-1957

Christine Cohen, “Mysterious Codes,” [https://static.libnet.info/frontend-images/pdfs/acpl/Genealogy/Mysterious_Codes - Christine Cohen 2023 .pdf](https://static.libnet.info/frontend-images/pdfs/acpl/Genealogy/Mysterious_Codes_-_Christine_Cohen_2023_.pdf)

“Colonial Immigration Records,” *New York Genealogical & Biographical Society*, <https://www.newyorkfamilyhistory.org/online-records/collection/colonial-immigration-records> (\$)

John Philip Coletta, *They Came in Ships: A Guide to Finding Your Immigrant Ancestor's Arrival Record*, 3rd ed., (Orem, Utah: Ancestry, 2002).

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

“Passenger Lists,” *The Newberry Library*, <https://www.newberry.org/uploads/files/PassengerLists.pdf>, bibliography with published resources regarding passenger lists, includes ethnicity-specific publications

“Researching U.S. Passenger Lists,” *Genealogical Forum of Oregon*, <https://gfo.org/learn/researching-us-passenger-lists.html>

“U.S. Arrivals – Customs Passenger Lists,” *NorwayHeritage*, <https://www.norwayheritage.com/US-passenger-arrivals.htm>