

A Case Study: Finding The Immigrant Ancestor

INTRODUCTION

Naturalization is the process by which aliens (foreign-born residents) become citizens of another country. Records created in the U.S. by this process can be an important source of genealogical information about your immigrant ancestor's place of origin, former place(s) of residence, birth name, and date of arrival in the United States.

Generally, knowing only the country of origin has little research value. To continue genealogical research in an immigrant's homeland, it is necessary to know exactly where they lived, the name of a town or Parish.

There is no single source available to genealogists that can provide the place of origin for our immigrant ancestors. There are however, dozens of record types associated with immigration and naturalization which may contain useful information to lead you to an immigrant ancestor's place of origin. The chance of success increases when certain steps are followed in the research process, which are:

- Clearly identify the immigrant.
- Learn the historical background.
- Use the right research methodology.
- Search U.S. records thoroughly first.
- Know the immigration process.

THE NATURALIZATION PROCESS

As a general rule, naturalization in the United States was a three-step process.

Step One: After residing in the U.S. for two years, an alien could file a "*Declaration of Intention*" to become a citizen, often referred to as "*first papers*." Aliens usually filed these papers with the court most convenient to them, the court of the county in which they resided.

Step Two: After three additional years, the alien could file a "*Petition for Naturalization*." During the three years intervening since filing their *Declaration* papers, immigrants often moved to different counties or states. Because of this, *Petition* records are often found in different counties or states than where an ancestor's *Declaration* records are located.

Step Three: After a *Petition* was granted, the court issued a "*Certificate of Citizenship*." It was necessary for the alien to appear in court to receive their certificate.

Records were created at each step in the process. As a general rule, *Declarations of Intention* contain more information of genealogical value than records created by the other steps in the process.

RECOMMENDED SOURCES

Below is a list of useful sources when researching immigration and naturalization records:

- Begin your search at home. Locate and organize the information you already have about your immigrant ancestor and their family. You may have letters, photographs, diaries, certificates, family Bibles or other documents that will provide important clues.
- After collecting and organizing what you have, expand your information gathering effort to your living relatives. A distant aunt may have useful documents or artifacts that you don't even know exist. Search these sources for names, dates, geographic names, and other clues.
- Search published compiled family trees for clues. Perhaps someone else has determined a place of origin for your immigrant ancestor. Experienced genealogists consider information obtained from such sources as clues, and not as authoritative.
- Search published histories where you know your immigrant ancestor lived. Histories were published for most counties in the United States and available in local public libraries, historical societies, genealogy libraries and online at Google Books, www.books.google.com.
- Search probate records of the county in which your immigrant ancestor lived at the time of death. Probate records may contain important clues about an immigrant ancestor's place of origin. Names and places of residence for surviving relatives who still lived in the native country may be listed.
- Search local church records, which often mention an immigrant's place of origin.
- Search local funeral home and cemetery records. An immigrant's place of origin is sometimes recorded. If no such information was recorded, the names of surviving relatives may provide another trail for your research. As stated earlier, the clue you need may be found among records held in another branch of the family.
- Search military records for immigrant ancestors known to have served in the military. Enlistment documents and pension application documents may contain important clues for places of origin.

A Case Study: Finding The Immigrant Ancestor

- Search William P. Filby's "*Passenger and Immigration Lists Index*" and *Supplements*. More than one million immigrants came to the colonies prior to 1820, but few were recorded on passenger lists. Most of the known lists have been published and many have been indexed by Filby. This useful multi-volume reference contains more than 1.9 million names and is available in most genealogy libraries and on CD-ROM from Broderbund.
- Search ship passenger lists. Two useful websites are *The Immigrant Ships Transcribers Guild*, and *The Olive Tree Genealogy*. For URLs see *Internet Resources* listed below under "*Additional Resources*."

Experienced genealogists know that they cannot rely on someone else's research. They know that it is important to verify information obtained from other sources by always looking at the original records themselves.

SEARCH TIPS

Here are a few tips to consider when researching immigration and naturalization records:

- Always begin your search in the destination country, or United States. Mistakes are easily made when searches begin in the suspected countries of origin.
- Don't limit your search to just one individual, your immigrant ancestor. Search records all known family members of your immigrant ancestor. Important clues may be found in the record of each individual of the family, that otherwise might get missed.
- Search all possible spellings (and misspellings) of the surname. It is handy to keep a written list with you of all known derivative spellings and misspellings of the surname being searched.
- Search several years before and after the date you suspect that your ancestor arrived in the U.S.
- When unable to locate your immigrant ancestor in historical records, expand your research and search for known friends, associates and neighbors, referred to as *FAN Club* research. Tracing this group to their places of origin may also lead you to your immigrant ancestor's place of origin.

ABBREVIATIONS IN CENSUS RECORDS

Below is a list of abbreviations commonly encountered in U.S. census population schedules:

- AL "Alien," meaning that this individual had not yet begun the naturalization process.
- PA "Papers," or "first papers" meaning that the individual had completed step one of the naturalization process by filing a "Declaration of Intention."
- NA "Naturalized," meaning that the individual had completed the naturalization process and received their "Certificate of Citizenship."

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Printed Resources:

Greenwood, Val D., *The Researcher's Guide to American Genealogy*, 3rd ed., Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2000. See chapter 24, American Aids to Finding the Home of the Immigrant Ancestor. See the chapter on Ethnic Origins.

Szucs, Loretto Dennis, and Sandra Hargreaves Luebking, *The Source: A Guidebook to American Genealogy*, 3rd ed. Salt Lake City: Ancestry, 2006.

Colletta, John P. Colletta. *They Came in Ships* (revised edition). Salt Lake City, Utah: [Ancestry Incorporated](#), 1993.

Filby, P. William (editor). *Passenger and Immigration Lists Bibliography, 1538-1900* (second edition). Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research Company, 1988.

Szucs, Loretto Dennis. *They Became Americans: Finding Naturalization Records and Ethnic Origins*. Salt Lake City, Utah: [Ancestry Incorporated](#), 1998.

Tepper, Michael. *American Passenger Arrival Records: A Guide to the Records of Immigrants Arriving at American Ports by Sail and Steam*. Baltimore, Maryland: [Genealogical Publishing Co., Inc.](#), 1993.

Internet Resources:

The Immigrant Ships Transcribers Guild (ISTG) www.immigrantships.net.

The Olive Tree Genealogy, www.olivetreegenealogy.com.

Castle Garden, www.castlegarden.org.

Ellis Island, www.ellisland.org.