

An Introduction to U.S. Immigration Records, 1820-1957

Intro:

The United States is a nation of immigrants who came for many different reasons and at varying points in US history. Tracking down your immigrant ancestor can be challenging but not impossible. Knowing the different push and pull factors of immigration can greatly help in tracking down your ancestor as well as exhausting all of the sites and record types you can. Here are resources covered in our class as well as additional resources to help you have the best experience possible researching your immigrant ancestors.

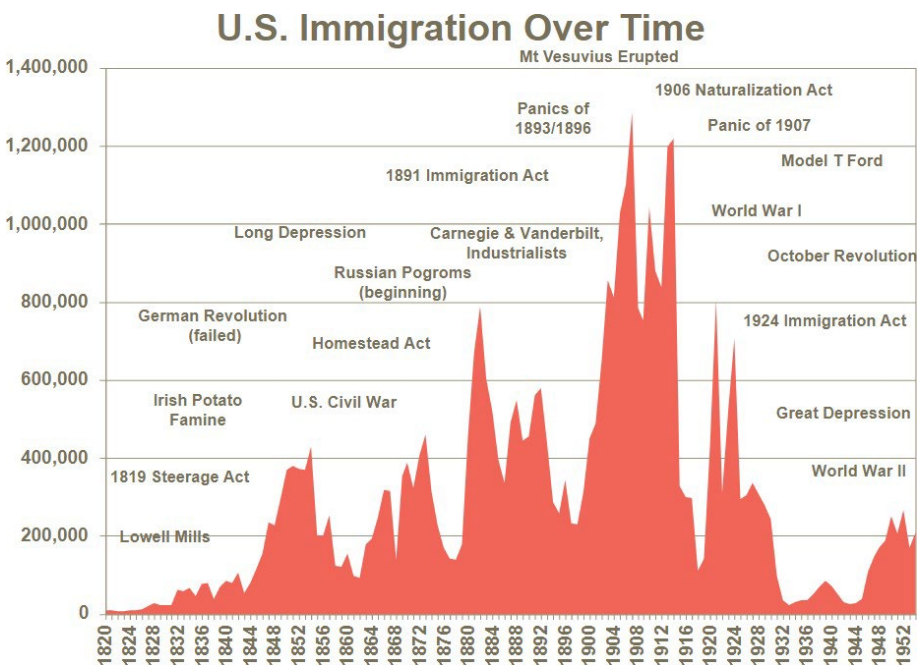
Throughout the webinar I mention that you can search the FamilySearch Wiki and the FamilySearch Catalog for a lot of these resources, here are links to both.

[FamilySearch Catalog](#)

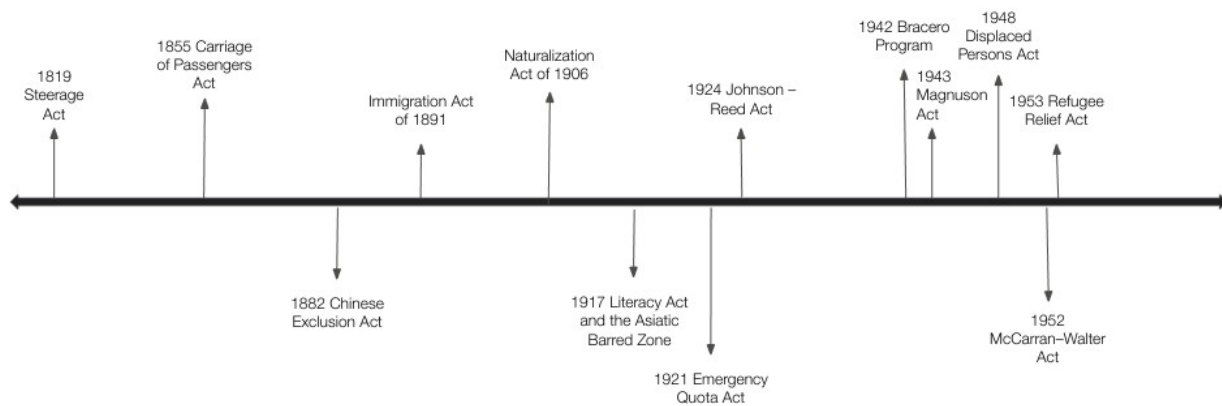
[FamilySearch Wiki](#)

History and Background:

Knowing what was going on in US history as well as in the country of your immigrant's origin can be one of the most beneficial points in doing immigration research and knowing where and when your ancestor entered the United States.



U.S. Laws as Push-Pull Factors



Passenger Lists

[Immigrant Arrivals: A Guide to Published Sources](#)
[Olive Tree Genealogy Ships Passenger Lists](#)
[SteveMorse.org](#)

- Passenger Lists pre-1820

It is estimated that 650,000 immigrants traveled to the United States before 1820. A large majority of these immigrants were English or Welsh. Smaller numbers of German, Irish, Scotch-Irish, Dutch, French, Spanish, African, and others also arrived. For the most part these immigrants settled in clusters along the eastern, mid-Atlantic, and southern states. At this time there was no requirement to record passenger lists or any documentation regarding immigration. While there were some passenger lists recorded prior to 1820, they are no longer available. The best sources for tracking down immigration information prior to are compiled sources such as the Filby Collection.

- Passenger Lists post-1820

Because of regulations put in place by the Steerage act in 1819, passenger lists were required by captains of ships upon arrival into the United States. These lists were recorded upon arrival and given to a customs agent who would forward these lists to the US Secretary of State. These records were kept from 1820 to 1982. From 1820-1891 you may find the immigrant's name, age, gender, occupation, and country of origin listed. Additional sections were added after the 1855 Carriage of Passengers Act was passed. These sections include replacing occupation with "calling", date and cause of death onboard the ship, where they stayed on the ship, the number of bags they had, and whether they were a

citizen, visiting, or intending to immigrate. These records are filed by port of arrival and date of arrival.

Chinese Exclusion Act Records

- Chinese Passenger Lists

Due to the Chinese Exclusion Act that began in 1882, no new Chinese immigrants were allowed to enter the United States. Chinese immigrants who had entered the United States prior to this date were allowed to travel, but restrictions were high for re-entry to the United States. Because of this, separate passenger lists were kept for anyone of Chinese descent entering the United States. These lists included information about the person's age, occupation, and last place of residence like normal passenger lists. They also list the individual's height, weight, complexion, color of their eyes, and identifying marks. They also will have a certificate number listed next to their name or they will have a stamp stating they were refused entrance.

- Case Files

Case files were kept for those who petitioned that their rejection of entry was invalid. These records can be a wealth of genealogical information as the individual was asked to answer questions about their family history, address and life in the United States, and other personal questions. The easiest way to find them is by going to our wiki page about the Chinese Exclusion Act. You'll need to know which regional archive location has the files for the port your immigrant tried entering through.

- Return Certificates

These records were required for anyone of Chinese descent that wanted to leave the US and then return. These certificates correspond to the number listed next to the person's name on the passenger list. They contain tons of genealogical information about the person and their family. They also will often have multiple photos of the individual. If these certificates were ever lost, there was a lengthy and difficult process for having a new certificate issued to you.

These records can be found at the National Archives and ordered.

[Chinese Exclusion Act Wiki](#)

[National Archives](#)

[Chinese Emigration and Immigration](#)

[New York US Index to Chinese Exclusion Case Files, 1898-1943](#)

[California US Index to Chinese Exclusion Case Files, 1903-1944](#)

[ChineseExclusionFiles.com](#)

[Chinese Family History Group](#)

[Finding Genealogical Data in the Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files Webinar](#)

Border Crossings

- Canadian Border Crossings

Until 1894 there was no record kept of individuals crossing the US/Canadian border. Prior to this time, many immigrants to the United States would come by way of Canada to avoid the inspections at the US ports. After the Immigration Act of 1891 was put into place, the US Immigration Service entered into an agreement with Canadian railroads and steamship lines having them treat each passenger entering into the United States as they would at any other US Port of entry. This meant that they were to create a manifest form that would be collected by an immigration inspector at each Canadian Seaport.

Immigrants were also issued a Certificate of admission that they were to present at the US border if they had landed in Canada up to 30 days prior.

Up to 1906 these border crossing lists did not record Canadian citizens, and records were not kept for those who crossed the border any other way than by train or boat.

The largest collection of these records that were kept are called the St Albans Lists and can contain information regarding the immigrant's name, age, country of origin, and when and where they entered Canada. Additional information may have been recorded over time.

[Canadian Border Crossing Online Records](#)

[Border Entries Bac-Lac](#)

["By Way of Canada" NARA](#)

- Mexican Border Crossings

Like Canada, border crossings from Mexico to the United States were not recorded until 1906. While there are some places that began keeping records as early as 1895, they weren't consistent until 1906. There are also a wider variety of border crossing records for Mexico. While they kept the traditional passenger lists, they also kept what are called "Card Manifests" which are on an individual level rather than a group. The records collected at the border included information such as the immigrant's name, age, gender, marital status, occupation, point of arrival in the US and their final destination. Those who had lived in Mexico for more than a year or those who were planning on being in the United States less than 6 months were not recorded until 1930.

[Mexican Border Crossing Online Records](#)

["Mexican Border Crossing Records" NARA](#)

[MexicanGenealogy.com](#)

["Crossing the Frontera: Finding Your Mexican Immigrant Ancestor in Mexico"](#)

[Mexican Border Arrival Records Glossary](#)
[National Archives of Mexico](#)
[Essential Immigration Records for Researching Your Mexican Ancestors Webinar](#)

Visas and Alien Registration

- Visa Files

Starting in July of 1924 Visas were required of all immigrants upon entry into the United States. All visas were collected upon arrival into the United States and all visas for non-immigrants were discarded while visas for all immigrants were collected and sent to a central office in Washington DC and were filed by port and date. These visa packets are some of the most genealogically helpful immigration records. They were a compilation of records such as a birth record or affidavit proving birth if a record did not exist. A certificate of health, police or moral certificate (background check), names of their parents, and a list of addresses they resided at for five years prior to their immigration. Some may also contain marriage records, and military service records.

These records can only be requested from the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). The visa file number can be found by submitting a request. From there the visa packet can be requested by submitting a G-1041A form found on their website with a \$65 fee.

[US Citizenship and Immigration Services](#)

- Registry Files

Documented any immigrant prior to 1 Jul 1924 for whom no arrival record was found. These records only exist for those who applied. They can also be ordered from the USCIS.

[USCIS Registry Files](#)

- Alien Registration Forms

These records were created to document any non-citizens during WWII (Aug 1940-31 Mar 1944)

[USCIS Alien Registration Forms](#)
[United States Index to Alien Case Files, 1940-2003](#)

Histories of Programs

- Bracero Program

The 1942 Bracero Program is just one of the many examples of pull factors that increased immigration from Mexico. This program was a temporary worker.

program that allowed 50,000-80,000 Mexican laborers into the United States yearly during WWII. During this time 4.5 million Mexican immigrants entered the United States.

While there are no specific records that were created during this time, there are other types of sources that exist to trace immigrants. The Bracero History Archive and the Library of Congress have recorded histories and stories and artifacts that preserve the histories of those who immigrated during this time and participated in this program.

[Records Relating to the Mexican Labor Bracero Program NARA Bracero History Archive](#)

Refugee Records

- Displaced Person Records

These records are another great example of records that were created because of a specific event. The 1948 Displaced Persons Act allowed refugees from certain European countries to immigrate to the United States. There are collections of records on FamilySearch that contain visa applications, newspaper clippings, court proceedings, and other records that pertain to refugees and displaced persons.

[Displaced Persons Immigration Correspondence, 1948-1952](#)
[Records Relating to WWII Era Refugees, Displaced Persons NARA](#)
[Records of the Displaced Persons Commission \(DPC\) NARA](#)
[Holocaust Survivors and Victims Database](#)
[Free Access: Africa, Asia and Europe, Passenger Lists of Displaced Persons ArolsenArchives](#)

Locating the Port of Arrival:

[US Ports of Arrival and Their Available Passenger Lists 1820-1957](#)

- Look at Major Ports: Larger east coast cities have been the point of entry into the United States for many immigrants since before the formation of the United States. These cities are located either on the coast or up the Mississippi River.
 1. New York: Two of the largest ports in New York are Castle Garden and then later Ellis Island. Castle Garden was the first immigration station that opened in 1855 and ran for 35 years processing more than 8 million immigrants. Needing to expand, Ellis Island was constructed and became the largest port of entry to the United States processing more than 12

million immigrants. It is estimated that about 40% of all Americans have at least one ancestor that passed through Ellis Island.

2. Boston: This port was not that popular in the earlier years of immigration to the United States. It wasn't until the Cunard line began a route from Liverpool to Halifax and then to Boston that numbers began to increase. Many immigrants that passed through this port went to Canada first as passage was cheaper from the British Isles to Canada. A large majority of immigrants to this port were Irish, and many of those immigrants remained in Boston upon arrival. In later years, many Eastern Europeans, especially Jewish immigrants, chose to immigrate through this port.
 3. Baltimore: One of the earliest ports, Baltimore opened in 1634 and was a common port for Slave ships. During the 19th century the National Road or the Cumberland Road was completed and connected the Chesapeake Bay to the Ohio River. The Baltimore & Ohio Railroad (B&O Railroad) was also completed and was an attraction for immigrants wanting to move further inland. It was also a large port of immigration for Irish famine immigrants in the 1840s. The peak of immigration through this port was at the close of WWI with about 40,000 immigrants passing through this port.
 4. Philadelphia: This port is about 100 miles from the Atlantic Ocean, but 1.3 million immigrants passed through this port. They would come up around Cape May by New Jersey and into the Delaware Bay to the Delaware River to Philadelphia. Since the river would often freeze during the winter, immigration was often limited to the warmer months. Early immigrants through this port were often German or Scots Irish coming to the United States as indentured servants or "redemptioners". Between 1847 and 1854 this port ranked 4th as it received 4.4% of the country's immigrants. This number would fluctuate until WWI when Philadelphia would receive approximately 1% of the nation's immigrants. This port was also the first to require health inspections. Railroad depots were built directly at this port allowing immigrants to spread out rapidly into other cities. Often immigrants that stayed in Philadelphia entered the US through other ports (especially New York and Baltimore).
 5. New Orleans: An estimated 550,000 immigrants passed through this port between 1820-1860. It was cheaper as many crops were being transported along the Mississippi by steamboat. This was one of the busier ports during the Antebellum Period.
- Don't overlook "Minor Ports": Knowing the history of seemingly smaller ports can give hints as to what nationalities often would travel through at given points in time. [insert links]
 - Look where the family settled: Where your ancestor settled can help you narrow down which port they may have come through. Lots of immigrants did not have a ton of resources when they arrived in the United States and would often settle

close to where they landed. If your ancestor did not settle near a port city, consider how they may have traveled from their port of arrival to their destination. Look at migration patterns and routes.

[Railroad Maps](#)

[Popular Overland Migration Routes](#)

- Consider where the family came from: Immigrants would often settle in communities. Following the migration patterns of others from the same country of origin that they live nearby can give you clues of where they may have entered the United States.
- Use Naturalization Records: Naturalization Records prior to the 27th of September 1906 do not list the immigrant's port of entry, however after this date this is a question asked on the petition for naturalization. You will often find their date of entry and which port they came through.

Finding the Records:

- Use U.S. "Non-Immigration" Sources
Thoroughly exhausting U.S. "non-immigration sources such as censuses, vital records, obituaries, church records, county histories, naturalization records, and military records can be crucial in tracking down not only where your immigrant came from, but approximate years they came to the U.S.
- Cluster Method (FAN Club)
Focusing on Friends, Associates, and Neighbors of your immigrant can be highly effective in tracking immigrants. As many people would travel with people they knew, looking at those around your ancestor can give clues as to when and from where your ancestor immigrated.
- Name Variations
Search with Initials, middle names, nicknames, and maiden names. Sometimes names will change after the person has immigrated, be aware of all possible spelling variations.

- Ethnic Groups
Different ethnic groups would often maintain communities. They can be seen immigrating as a group, settling in the same localities, attending the same churches, and printing newspapers.
- Religious Groups
It is quite common to see religious groups immigrating together. They would often leave their countries of origin due to persecution, opportunities to practice their religion, or following their religious leaders.

Finding the Records

The key to finding and searching immigration records is to

- determine which collections to search
- search multiple collections
- search multiple sites
- keep good notes

Additional Record Types and Repositories:

Slave Ship Lists: A large portion of Africans came to the United States as enslaved individuals. Slave manifests may be available and list your African immigrant ancestor. Searching the FamilySearch Wiki for [Slave Manifests](#) can give tons of online resources. Other helpful sites include

Enslaved.org

[Transcripts of Slave Manifests, 1800-1841](#)

SlaveVoyages.org

[Using Ship Manifests for Slave Research](#)

[US Southeast Coastwise Inward and Outward Slave Manifests, 1790-1860](#)

[Slave Manifests for Charleston NARA](#)

[Slave Ship Manifests filed at New Orleans 1807-1860 NARA](#)

[AfricaMap](#)

[African American Biographical Database](#)

[Digital Library on American Slavery](#)

Passports:

[United States Passport Applications, 1795-1925](#)

Immigrant Ancestors Project:

Immigrant Ancestors Project is an index of immigrants created using emigration registers.

Ship Pictures:

[SteveMorse](#)

Published Sources:

Check libraries and historical and genealogical societies for published sources about immigration.

Ellis Island:

StatueofLiberty.org