

What's in a Name? Immigrant Name Changes

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Introduction

Why do you need to know about immigrant name changes? First, this could help you track your ancestor's movement, and potentially find more records. Next, if they have seemed to disappear, discovering a name change could help you find them. This can also help you break your brick walls and move your research into your ancestors homeland. Finally, your ancestors changed their names for a reason, so you can learn more about their story and connect with them.

Immigration

Immigration is the process of people coming from one country into another. Before you can research, you need to learn about the history of immigration. Understanding trends is essential to a research project. Before 1890, the state government regulated immigrants, which means they kept the records. After 1890, the federal government took over the process and records.

Acts

Many governmental acts have affected how immigrants were processed and what records have been kept. Prior to the federal government controlling the records, states differed how much documents were used and preserved. Learning about these acts can help you understand if any records have been kept.

The Act of 1819 was the first federal act which regulated immigrants. This act was created not to restrict any person from entering the country, but to improve ship conditions and protect the passengers. This included beginning to create passenger lists which were supposed to be sent to the Secretary of State.

The Act of 1875 did not change much of the process except restrictions began to take effect. Those prohibited to coming into the country were criminals and prostitutes.

The Act of 1876 was the federal government holding the state government into accountability. States were now restricted in taxing immigrants, which was given to the federal government to regulate.

The Passenger Act of 1882 changed what was ask on passenger lists. Control of immigration processes began to be taken over by the Treasury Department

The Immigration Act of 1891 restricted more individuals including polygamists and seriously contagious people. The federal government began to have total control.

The Immigration Act of 1893 required ship manifests to be sent to an inspector instead of a customs official. Passenger lists were now supposed to be created at the time of embarkation. This meant that these records are more reliable and more likely to have been preserved.

Patterns (Timeline)

Immigration to the United States is divided into four-time periods. Immigration is still occurring in the U.S., but records past 1960 will be more difficult to find. Majority of the immigrants from these time periods came from Europe. Many from the same country settled in the same areas.

Pre-1820 saw around six hundred and fifty thousand immigrants. Most immigrants came from the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Spain, and Africa. Once in the United States, they settled in states along the Eastern Coastline.

1820-1880 resulted in over ten million immigrants from Europe. They came from Germany, the United Kingdom, Scandinavia, and parts of Northern Europe. Most settled in the Midwestern and Western states. They also lived in Eastern and Midwestern cities.

1880-1920 was a major immigration period. Over twenty-five million immigrants came from Germany, Ireland, Italy, Austria-Hungary, Russia, and England. These people settled in large cities, particularly New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia.

1920-1960 brought about eight million immigrants from Western, Central, and Northern Europe, specifically from the United Kingdom and Ireland. Many from Latin America also came to the U.S. during this time. Birthplace Quotas were placed in Eastern and Southern Europe to limit the number of immigrants. Those prohibited in entering the Country were Asians and communists.

Other Countries that immigrated to the United States throughout history include Canada, Mexico, Central and South American countries, China, Japan, India, African countries, Middle Eastern countries, and Australia.

Statistics of U.S. Immigration (1820-1970)

Germany	6,950,000	Canada	4,040,000
Italy	5,260,000	Mexico	1,850,000
Great Britain	4,840,000	Central America	1,590,000
Ireland	4,720,000	South America	580,000
Austria-Hungary	4,310,000	China	480,000
Russia	3,360,000	Japan	390,000
Sweden	1,270,000	Turkey	380,000
Norway	850,000	Australia	110,000
France	740,000	Africa	100,000
Greece	620,000	India	90,000
Poland	500,000	Other European Countries	1,010,000
Portugal	400,000	Other Asian Countries	81,000
Denmark/Netherlands	360,000	Rest of the World	410,000
Switzerland	350,000	TOTAL	45,641,000

Ports

There were five major ports in the United States that many immigrants came through to enter the country. Some smaller ports were also popular.

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|-----------------|------------------|
| 1) New York | a) San Francisco |
| 2) Boston | b) Angel Island |
| 3) Philadelphia | c) Galveston |
| 4) New Orleans | d) Cincinnati |
| 5) Baltimore | |

Ellis Island

New York had the most popular ports in the country. From 1855 to 1890, Castle Gardens saw thousands of immigrants every year. Castle Gardens began to no longer manage the number of immigrants arriving, so in 1890, Ellis Island opened. In 1897, a fire destroyed most of the records contained there, which closed the station until 1900. Ellis Island remained open until 1954 when it permanently closed.

Myths

Many people have ancestors who traveled through Ellis Island. These families had stories pass down, telling of their experiences with immigration. A common trend was that immigrants changed their name. Many stories have begun to fabricate myths.

Inspector Changed Name

Some people claim that an inspector changed their ancestors' names. This is false. Inspectors at Ellis Island did not record any information. Their job was to inspect the passenger lists and confirm the information on them were correct. They processed hundreds of immigrants daily, so they had no time to make unnecessary changes.

Names Changed at Ellis Island

Even if an inspector didn't change a name, many believe the name change happened at Ellis Island. This is false. Again, all this was done at Ellis Island was to inspect the documents already created for the person. Therefore, if a name change happened, it occurred before or after their immigration. Many that occurred after happened within 5 years, usually when they naturalized.

Language Barriers

It is reasonable to believe that a name change happened because of miscommunication. However, this rarely happened. Around a third of employees at Ellis Island were foreigners themselves and would be assigned to individuals from their country of origin. If there was no one to interpret, they reached out to the aid societies to assist. At least 22 languages were spoken at Ellis Island.

Even though names rarely changed at Ellis Island, misspellings were common, even if there was no intention of changing the name.

Why Change Name?

There are various reasons why someone would change their name. This would change either in their home country before they emigrated, or once they settled in the United States.

- Illiteracy → unable to spell name.
- Simplification → make it easier to say or spell.
- Necessity → Transliterate to Latin Alphabet
- Mispronunciation → Language barriers and accents.
- Fear of Discrimination → Conceal nationality or religious orientation.
- Desire to Fit in → Assimilate to new country.
- Desire to Break with the Past → Start new life.
- Dislike of Surname → Change name to one they preferred.

Examples of Changes

Shorten Name	Rudnitzky → Rudd
Simplify	Ó Lionáin → Lennon
Transliterate	Елена → Yelena → Helen
English-Sounding Name	Shang → Shawn
Shorten, Americanize	Schidtmuller → Schmidt → Smith
Similar, but American	Josè → Joseph
Literal Translation	Bianco → White
Remove/add Letter	Germaine → Germain

Patterns in Name Changes

Many people followed similar trends when choosing name changes. If they didn't change their name like the examples from above, they might have changed it to names they know from friends, family, or even popular names. Here are some examples:

- Nickname
- Middle name
- Fictitious name
- Name of another person
- Misspelling
- Stepfather's surname
- Putative father's surname
- Customs
- Maiden name of mother

Especially in Scandinavian countries, patronymics were common. For example, the son of a man name Peter, would go by the surname Peterson. Some even were named after their farm, and would change their name depending on where they were living. Other people reused family names. This could be from ancestors, or even reusing a name if an infant died. In England between 1700 and 1875, many families used this pattern:

- 1st son = father's father
- 2nd son = mother's father
- 3rd son = father
- 4th son = father's eldest brother
- 1st daughter = mother's mother
- 2nd daughter = father's mother
- 3rd daughter = mother
- 4th daughter = mother's eldest sister

Find

Finding immigrants can be difficult, especially if their name changed once or more throughout their life. You can't simply enter their name in a database and find all of the records. Follow these steps to make the most out of your research.

Known Information

First, discover what you already know. Many times, answers have already been found, but you just don't know it.

Family Stories might not contain the whole truth, but they are a great place to get clues and ideas of what the answer might be. Even if the name change is correct from these stories, be hesitant on *how* the name changed. Do your research to learn about the history.

Records already in your possession could reveal some clues to your research. This includes family trees and personal records about not just the individual, but their entire family. Collaborate with others to gather as much information as you can.

Name variations of your ancestor should be known. Whether or not your immigrant ancestors drastically change their name, various spellings would likely occur. Make a list of all variations.

Plan

Next, you need to plan your research and stayed organized throughout the process. Take the facts you learned from your known information and create your plan around it. Start with a fact you know and go from there.

Ports

Discover which ports your ancestors came through. They might have come through the ports listed above, or another one. Some immigrants stayed in the city they arrived in, which means records could have been made while they were there. Research which ports were most common for those from your ancestor's homeland in that time period.

Settlement

Many immigrants settled near others of the same ethnicity to keep their cultures and traditions. Discover where your ancestors might have settled based on their ethnicity and time period. They might have settled near their port city, in a major city with other immigrants, or where their relatives lived. If you still can't locate part of their journey, consider if they went on common migration routes including trains, canals, and roads.

Track Whole Family

Sometimes, doing research on one individual does not reveal much information. If you are struggling to identify a name change, or where your ancestor might have been, begin to research extended family. This includes children, siblings, parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents.

Research

As mentioned, you shouldn't just research common genealogy records. You need to also do research on history. Learn common trends of immigrants from the country your family came from. Learn common surname changes and common ethnicities in the area your family settled.

Records

Next, identify what records could be most helpful to your research. Not all these records will clearly state your ancestor's original name and their name change. However, when you compile all of these records together, you might be able to put the pieces together. They will also help you identify other family members of which you can then research if needed. These are just a few of the records that can help you discovery name variations, name changes, and family members.

- **Naturalization** → Discover hometown, family, residence, might include name change.
- **Immigration** → Identify name immigrated with, family members, possible residence.
- **Census** → Track movement and name changes, identify family members.
- **Vital Records** → Identify family, track movement, name changes.
- **Newspapers** → Discover country of origin, family, residence, might include name change.
- **Ethnic Churches** → Discover homeland, religion, family, name changes.
- **Passports** → Discover hometown, family, residence, might include name change.
- **Voting Registers** → Discover when naturalized to find more records.

Websites

FamilySearch Catalog – search by place and find various records for research.

<https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog>

FamilySearch Wiki – look at U.S. or specific county or city for records and history.

https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Main_Page

Ancestry – view card catalog and filter according to location and record type.

<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/catalog>

Ellis Island Database – records of passengers from 1820 to 1957.

<https://heritage.statueofliberty.org/>

Steven Morse Website – tools for immigration, census, vital, and Ellis Island Records.

<https://stevemorse.org/>

Ellis Island Database One-Step Search Tools – database for Ellis Island records.

<https://www.jewishgen.org/databases/eidb/>

Filby Books - helpful for colonial immigration and naturalization.

<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/7486/>

National Archives – learn about records or request a copy.

<https://www.archives.gov/research/immigration/naturalization>