

Identifying Your Immigrant Ancestor in U.S. Passenger Lists on Ancestry



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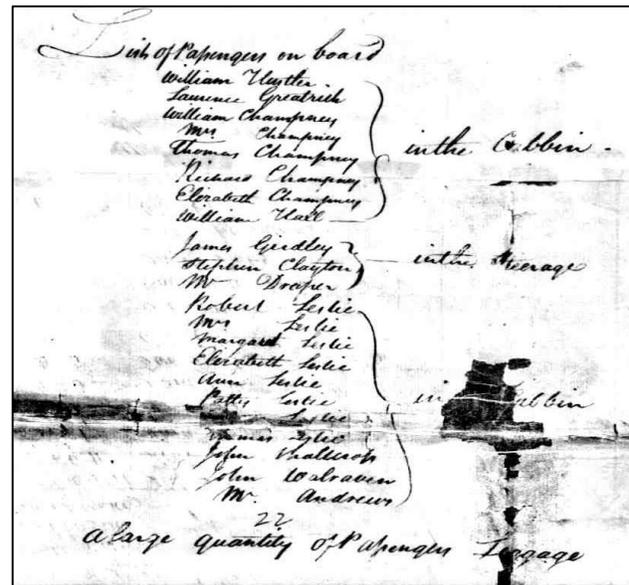
There's something special about locating records documenting your immigrant ancestor's trip to America. It's a moment that changed the course of your family's story. Ancestry is home to the largest online collection of immigration records, but depending on the era in which your ancestor came to this country, the details included can vary. Here are some things that are helpful to know when it comes to finding your ancestor's arrival record in America.

Eras of Immigration

Pre-1820

Prior to 1820, there were no laws requiring captains to maintain passenger lists. Some did but no central repository holds manifests prior to 1820. Some have been lost or destroyed, but some survived. For example, some [records from the Port of Philadelphia](#) date back to 1800. There were no standard forms, and details about passengers tended to be very sparse.

Some early lists were published and you may find them in collections like [Emigrants from England to the American Colonies, 1773-1776](#). Search the [Card Catalog](#) for similar collections as these types of publications typically don't surface well in a global search and should be searched directly.



1820-1890

The Steerage Act in 1819 was aimed at regulating overcrowding on ships and required a list be submitted to the customs collector at the port of arrival. "Customs Manifests" or "Customs Passenger Lists" included:

- Ship and captain's name
- Ports of departure and arrival
- Date of arrival
- Passenger name
- Age
- Gender
- Occupation
- Nationality
- Some lists also recorded births and deaths on board.

NAME.	AGE.	SEX.	OCCUPATION.	The Country to which they actually belong.	The Country to which they intend to remove.	HEAD OF THE FAMILY.
John Gray	65	M	Wagoner	England	Virginia	
James Day	62	M	Carpenter	"	"	
Mrs. C.	60	F	"	"	"	
Henry Spelling	44	M	"	"	553	
13 Franklin	45	M	Common	"	"	
13 White	40	M	Merchant	"	"	
13 King	38	M	"	"	"	
John W. Donald	60	M	Merchant	Virginia	United States	
Mrs. C. Davis	38	F	"	"	"	
Mrs. Evans	40	F	Merchant	"	"	
Mrs. White	27	F	"	"	"	
Mrs. Thomas		F	"	"	"	
Mrs. Elizabeth		F	"	"	"	

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1890s to 1957

In 1891 responsibility for passenger lists was transferred to the U.S. Office of Immigration. Additional information was required throughout 1890s-1900s. Forms were standardized in 1893. Changes to the form were made in 1903, 1906, and 1907. Details from this period can include things like:

- Marital status
- Last residence—town names!
- Final destination
- If they had been in the U.S. and when, where, and how long
- Whether they were going to join a relative, who and where
- Whether they could read and write
- Whether they had a train ticket to their final destination
- Who paid for the passage
- How much money they were carrying
- If they had ever been in prison, an almshouse, institution for the insane
- Whether they were polygamists
- If they had a contract to work in the U.S.
- Whether they were healthy
- Ethnic background
- Name/address of relative in the old country

TIP: Some manifests from this period are two pages long, so be sure to page forward to ensure you're capturing the entire record.



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Identifiers to Help Locate Your Ancestor

Before you begin your search in the Immigration Collection on Ancestry, it will be helpful to review what you know about your ancestor so you'll be able to pick him or her out of the millions of other immigrants.

The first thing you'll need to know is, who is the immigrant ancestor is and his or her name. You're going to want to make sure you have a good list of variants. Looking at spellings that may have been used in the "old country," and phonetic interpretations in particular.

If your ancestor came from a non-English speaking country, you'll also want to determine the ethnic version of your ancestor's first name. Passenger lists were created at the port of departure by the shipping companies and presented to immigration authorities on arrival. Search for *[ethnicity] given names* or *[ethnicity] first names* (e.g., Polish given names, Italian first names, etc.) to see if there is a website that can help you translate your ancestor's name. BehindtheName.com is a great resource as well.

In addition, since pre-20th century passenger lists typically don't contain a whole lot of identifying information, it's important that you glean whatever you can from other records you have located on your ancestor. Using timelines and information found in other records you can establish, or at least estimate, the answers to at least some (if not all) of the following questions:

- **What was the date of immigration?** The date of immigration can be found in a number of records including some census records (the U.S. Federal Censuses for 1900-1930 all ask for year of immigration), death records (often recorded as "How long in the U.S.?" on death certificates), obituaries, and many other records and home sources. Often a combination of resources can help pin down the elusive dates. Using a combination of birth dates and birth locations, particularly among siblings in the family who immigrated vs. those who were born in the U.S., it is often possible to narrow the arrival date to within a few years.
- **How old was he or she?** Census records are also a good source for estimating how old an immigrant was at the time of immigration. Look for this information in death records, tombstones, correspondence, marriage records, and other records, as well.
- **What did he or she do?** Some passenger lists will list occupations, although an ancestor's occupation upon reaching the U.S. may have changed due to economic factors and as opportunities presented themselves. However, in some cases this information can be helpful in identifying the most promising individual(s).
- **Who might they have traveled with?** Family structure can be helpful in locating families who traveled together, although it bears mentioning that it wasn't unusual for the head of the family, both parents, or several family members to come over first and then send for the rest of the family later, once employment and a living space had been secured. It can also be handy to have a list of other surnames that have appeared with your ancestor. Witnesses and sponsors, neighbors, collateral relatives, and anyone whose name keeps popping up in conjunction with your ancestor could turn up as travel companions who arrived with your ancestors. This is where it really pays to be familiar with your ancestor's FAN club (friends, associates, neighbors).



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One last caveat: While having all of this information will be helpful, it's also important to remember to be flexible with your searches. As with all record creators, there were some who were more diligent about their jobs than others, and the accuracy of the information found in the lists will vary greatly. As with any search, it's a good idea to cast a wide net and then try to gradually narrow it by rotating various pieces of information in and out.

The Immigration Collection

[The Immigration Collection](#) on Ancestry is a large collection of databases available by subscription, including passenger lists (with an image of the list and sometimes an image of the ship), naturalization records, and more. Among the most popular of these databases are:

[Passenger Lists category search](#)

This category includes passenger lists from the most used U.S. ports as well as some international lists and Great Lakes passengers. It's a good idea to search from this level, as your ancestor may have traveled through a port you didn't expect. If you need to narrow your search, you can access links to some of the more popular ports from this page as well.

[New York Passenger Lists](#) (index and images)

Copied from the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) microfilm M237 (rolls 95-580), this database covers the years 1820-1957. The index includes the immigrant's name, arrival date, age, gender, port of departure, destination, country of origin, and ship name. All of these fields are available in the search template as well, allowing for greater flexibility in searching. After locating one ancestor, I was able to view all the passengers on his ship by leaving out the surname, searching by ship name, year of arrival, and date (in this case: 15 May) in the keyword space. This is a great way to look for other family members and acquaintances who may have traveled with your ancestor.

[Border Crossings](#)

Not everyone came into the U.S. by sea and in 1895, the government began keeping track of those arriving via its northern and southern borders. Ancestry has border crossing records for both Canada (to and from) and Mexico (arrivals only) that can be searched through the [Border Crossings and Passports category page](#).

[U.S. Passport Applications, 1795-1925](#)

The U.S. government has issued passports to American citizens since 1789 through several different agencies. For the most part, passports were not required of U.S. citizens for foreign travel until World War I, although they were mandatory for a short time during the Civil War (Aug. 19, 1861–Mar. 17, 1862). An Executive Order given in 1915 and a later act of Congress in 1918 established the passport requirement for citizens traveling abroad. This law lapsed with the formal termination of World War I and treaties with Germany, Austria, and Hungary in 1921. With the onset of World War II in 1941, the Congressional act of 1918 was reinstated, requiring U.S. citizens to carry a passport for foreign travel, as is required today. Immigrants often obtained passports to return home to visit family, settle estates, and for travel. These records may include details about your ancestor's arrival in the U.S.

There are many other databases included in the collection. All of the Immigration & Travel databases included can be searched [here](#).