

## Immigration Clues in Everyday Records: Census, Passports, Vital Records, and More

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### SESSION OBJECTIVES

1. Understand the process of finding clues to an individual's or family's immigration.
2. Explore fundamental genealogical records that provide clues to an ancestor's immigration.
3. Learn to identify patterns and nuances in records that provide information on an individual's or family's immigration.

### WHEN SEARCHING FOR CLUES

#### Search Numerous Records

In family history, a single document rarely reveals all the details about an individual or a family. Instead, research needs to extend across multiple record types. Sometimes, information will conflict from one document to the next or might be incomplete. Take your time tracking the details you find in individual documents.

Creating a timeline is a terrific way to keep track of your research and identify critical details for finding immigration clues. Overlay a family's timeline with key dates in the history of immigration to learn about specific records that might exist and other details that might provide a broader context for your research. Be sure to include details from extended family members in the timeline.

#### Spelling and other Considerations

When examining records for immigration details, remember that dates, spelling, and other details might be inconsistent. The personal memories of a relative might differ from a written census or vital record. Where possible, estimate dates based on other information. Note specific discrepancies for future research.

Spellings of first, middle, and last names were often not standardized throughout the 1800s and early 1900s. Names were often spelled phonetically and, as such, will vary from record to record. Names were not changed at places like Ellis Island. Instead, a family's name might have gradually become more Americanized as a family assimilated into a local community. Always consider the knowledge and background of the person writing a name—as well as those providing the information.

### RECORDS TO EXPLORE

Many records exist to identify clues to a family's or individual's immigration status. The items below represent selected essential resources to begin this important step in the process.

#### Family Records

Materials gathered by relatives in the past are terrific resources for information about a family's immigration to the United States. These materials can include:

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- Baby books
- Birth, marriage, and death announcements
- Newspaper clippings
- Diaries and letters
- Scrapbooks and photograph albums
- Yearbooks
- Original certificates
- Family bibles and other religious mementos

For an example of integrating letters to tell a family’s immigration, see Nancy Niles Wehner, “The Stuebner Letters, Brooklyn, New York: Tragedy in a German Immigrant Family,” *The New York Genealogical and Biographical Record* 145 (2014), p. 259.

### Vital Records

Official government records documenting the birth, marriage, or death of an individual contain essential details. As these records are inconsistently kept in various states and other jurisdictions, it is essential to take time to identify these records for all members of a family—especially those beyond a direct ancestor.

When using vital records, take note of the informant, as the knowledge of the informant has a direct impact on the contents and accuracy of a given vital record. Compare details relating to names, dates, and places within vital records for a family. A certificate for one individual might only list a country of birth, whereas another might include the precise town or city.

### Census Records

The U.S. federal census, taken every 10 years since 1790, includes clues to an individual’s immigration status. Later census years (as shown below) often provide more details.

	1870	1880	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940
Country of birth	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Native language				X	X	X	X*
Number of years in U.S. or year of immigration			X	X	X	X	
Naturalized	X**		X**	X**	X**	X***	X
Declaration of intention filed				X	X	X	X
Parents’ birthplace	^	X	X	X	X	X	X*
Parents’ native language				X	X		

^If parents were of foreign birth

\*\*If male and over 21

\*Random 5% of the population

\*\*\*If naturalized, what year?

Data adapted from Anne Buitter, *Tracing Immigrants through the Port of New York...* (New York: New York Genealogical and Biographical Society, 2020), p. 125.

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---

Some states also took a census in various years. The state of New York took a census in 1825, 1835, 1845, 1855, 1865, 1875, 1892, 1905, 1915, and 1925. Earlier years are often unavailable, as they were destroyed. However, information about immigration is often found in later years of the state census (as shown in the table below).

	1855	1865	1875	1892	1905	1915	1925
Native and naturalized voters	X	X	X				
Years resident in city or town	X						
Numbers of years in the U.S.					X	X	X
Citizen or alien	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
If naturalized, when and where						X	X

Data adapted from *The New York Family History Research Guide and Gazetteer* revised edition (New York: New York Genealogical and Biographical Society, 2017), p. 38.

### Newspapers

Newspapers often contain details relating to family events, including births, marriages, and deaths. In addition, they can offer lists of incoming passengers alongside details about arriving or departing vessels. Some newspapers also include advertisements from friends and relatives seeking details about those who immigrated to the United States.

Though online newspaper databases provide access to important content, they often exclude important short-run publications in New York State. State historical societies and libraries, alongside their respective digital projects, remain crucial resources for accessing newspapers between 1780 and 1924. In addition to examining *Chronicling America* ([chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/](https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/)), be sure to investigate the New York State Library's listing of New York newspapers at [nysl.nysed.gov/nysnp/](https://nysl.nysed.gov/nysnp/), *New York State Historic Newspapers* ([nyshistoricnewspapers.org/](https://nyshistoricnewspapers.org/)), and *Fulton History* (more easily searchable at [fultonsearch.org/](https://fultonsearch.org/)).

### City Directories

Directories of businesses and residents were produced for many cities by the 1800s. Entries can provide a name, address, occupation, and other details. While the head of the household might only be listed, be sure to look for other individuals living at the same address or nearby, as they might be relatives or associates.

Searching for an individual across numerous years of city directories is essential. In doing so, details (and any changes) relating to a specific person can be examined year by year. For tracing families in New York City, the New York Public Library (NYPL) offers several free browsable city directories as part of its digital collections online (<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/new-york-city-directories#/?tab=about>).

## Immigration Clues in Everyday Records: Census, Passports, Vital Records, and More

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### Passport Applications

Those traveling abroad from the United States applied for passports as early as 1783. However, relatively few passports were issued before the early 1900s. Between 1912 and 1925, more than 1.2 million applications exist. Those dated after 21 December 1914 include photographs. Passports were required briefly during the U.S. Civil War (19 August 1861 to 17 March 1862) and were recommended after 15 December 1915. Passports were also required for travel abroad between 22 May 1918 and 1921. All those traveling overseas were required to have a passport after November 1941.

Applications often detail an individual’s birthdate, birthplace, immigration details, naturalization status, and other information. In most cases, only the head of the household was required to apply, and the applications do not include alien residents (except between 2 March 1907 and 4 June 1920, when anyone who had decelerated their intention to naturalize could apply). Passport applications between October 1795 and March 1925 have been preserved by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) and are searchable on *Ancestry* ([ancestry.com/search/collections/1174/](https://ancestry.com/search/collections/1174/)) and *FamilySearch* ([familysearch.org/search/collection/2185145](https://familysearch.org/search/collection/2185145)).

### Draft Registration Cards

During World War I, all men ages 21 to 30 were required to register for the draft, including those who were alien residents. More than 24 million registrations were received. Three distinct registrations occurred, each with a different card as follows:

- First Registration: 5 June 1917 “12-Question card”
- Second Registration: 24 August 1918 “10-Question card”
- Third Registration: 12 September 1918 “20-Question card”

The table below outlines the various points of information collected during each registration.

	First Registration “12-Question card”	Second Registration “10-Question card”	Third Registration “20-Question card”
Name and address of nearest relative		X	X
Town, state, and country of birth	X	X	
Father’s town, state, and country of birth		X	
Native, naturalized citizen, or alien	X	X	X
Gained citizenship through father’s naturalization?		X	

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Draft registration cards from World War I have been preserved by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). Name searchable databases may be accessed on *Ancestry* ([ancestry.com/search/collections/6482](https://ancestry.com/search/collections/6482)) and on *FamilySearch* ([familysearch.org/search/collection/1968530](https://familysearch.org/search/collection/1968530)).

### FOR FURTHER REFERENCE

1. Buitter, Anne. *Tracing Immigrants through the Port of New York: Early National Period to 1924*. New York: New York Genealogical and Biographical Society, 2020.
2. Colletta, John P. *They Came in Ships: A Guide to Finding Your Immigrant Ancestor's Arrival Record*. Salt Lake City, UT: Ancestry.com, 2002.
3. Greenwood, Val D. *The Researcher's Guide to American Genealogy*, fourth edition. Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2017.
4. New York Genealogical and Biographical Society. *New York Family History Research Guide and Gazetteer—revised edition*. New York: New York Genealogical and Biographical Society, 2017.
5. Szucs, Loretto Dennis and Sandra Hargreaves Luebking, *The Source: A Guidebook of American Genealogy*. Salt Lake City, UT: Ancestry.com, 2006.