

Diving into Customs and Passenger Lists

SESSION OBJECTIVES

1. Understand what customs and passenger records exist.
2. Learn how to locate and search customs and passenger lists.
3. Discover techniques when using customs and passenger lists.

UNDERSTANDING THE RECORDS

Few passenger lists exist before 1820, though newspapers and other records can sometimes be used to find potential arrival information during this period. Between 1820 and 1896, both passenger and customs lists were kept for arrivals through the Port of New York; however, only the customs lists have survived. This includes arrivals at Castle Garden from 1855 through 1890. Originally, the passenger lists were kept by New York State and were transferred to federal custody before 1897. These passenger lists, alongside those created by the federal government from 1891 through 1897, were destroyed in an 1897 fire at Ellis Island. The fire **destroyed all New York State and federal passenger lists for the Port of New York in existence at the time.**

Customs Lists, 1820–1897

However, though the passenger lists were destroyed, the **customs lists survived, which document arrivals through the Port of New York between 1820 and 1897.** These lists, often referred to as passenger lists created under the *Steerage Act of 1819*, were preserved by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) and include the following details:

- Name
- Age
- Marital status
- Gender
- Occupation
- Place of origin

For many entries, the place of origin listed can indicate the individual's actual nationality, assumed nationality, or the flag of the incoming vessel. Those who created the customs lists also frequently abbreviated first names with an initial or only listed a passenger by their title or other characteristics (e.g., James Wiseman might be recorded as J. Wiseman, Jas. Wiseman, or Mr. Wiseman). Customs lists documenting arrivals at the Port of New York can be browsed and searched at:

- *Ancestry*, part of “New York, U.S., Arriving Passenger and Crew Lists (including Castle Garden and Ellis Island), 1820–1957,” ancestry.com/search/collections/7488
- *FamilySearch*, part of “New York Passenger Lists, 1820–1891,” familysearch.org/search/collection/1849782 and part of “New York Passenger Arrival Lists (Ellis Island), 1892–1924,” (which includes customs lists from 1892–1896), familysearch.org/search/collection/1368704

Diving into Customs and Passenger Lists

Passenger Lists, 1897–1924

Passenger lists kept by the federal government exist for arrivals at the Port of New York, beginning in 1897. Lists were created **at the place of departure, not upon arrival**. Though passenger lists were created as early as 1882, they were destroyed in the 1897 fire at Ellis Island. Surviving passenger lists include the following details:

Passenger Lists, 1897 through 1902

- Name
- Last legal residence
- Occupation
- Gender
- Other Notes
- Final destination
- Previous travel in the United States
- Other relatives in the United States

Passenger Lists, 1903 through 1905

- Name
- Last legal residence
- Occupation
- Gender
- Other Notes
- Final destination
- Previous travel in the United States
- Other relatives in the United States
- Race

Passenger Lists, 1906

- Name
- Last legal residence
- Occupation
- Gender
- Other Notes
- Final destination
- Previous travel in the United States
- Other relatives in the United States
- Birthplace
- Personal description

Passenger Lists, 1907–1924

- Name
- Last legal residence
- Occupation
- Gender
- Other Notes
- Final destination
- Previous travel in the United States
- Other relatives in the United States
- Birthplace
- Personal description
- Contact details for nearest relative

Diving into Customs and Passenger Lists

Passenger lists are available online at:

- *Ancestry*, part of “New York, U.S., Arriving Passenger and Crew Lists (including Castle Garden and Ellis Island), 1820–1957,” ancestry.com/search/collections/7488
- *FamilySearch*, part of “New York Passenger Arrival Lists (Ellis Island), 1892–1924,” familysearch.org/search/collection/1368704

SEARCHING THE RECORDS

When using customs and passenger lists online, it is important to recognize nuances within specific records. Be sure to search for initials, abbreviations, and other similar names. In addition, remember that places of origin might be generalized from information that pertains to every passenger on a particular list. Other specific techniques include:

- Conducting a broad search, avoiding specific details that might yield inaccurate results.
- Expanding the range of years of arrival or birth.
- Browsing the digitized images by arrival date or vessel when needed.
- Searching databases at both *Ancestry* and *FamilySearch* (or elsewhere), as differences in indexes do occur.
- Employing wildcards, such as an asterisk (*) or question mark (?), as necessary.
- Searching other fields, including intended destination, last known residence, nearest relative, and ship name.

Be sure to search passenger lists and customs lists for **every family member**, as each entry can provide different details. It is also important to recognize that members of a family (particularly those participating in chain migration) might have arrived at ports other than New York. Families might have first traveled to Canada, as passage to Canada was often less expensive. Other potential ports of arrival include:

- Boston
- Philadelphia
- San Francisco
- Baltimore
- New Orleans

USING AND INTERPRETING THE RECORDS

Carefully evaluating the information found on a customs list or passenger list is important. Additional markings or other details might yield clues that tell a broader part of a family’s immigration story. Additional markings might include details relating to an individual’s naturalization process or alien registration number. Markings on passenger lists include:

Diving into Customs and Passenger Lists

General

- *Not shipped* [person did not sail]
- *N.O.B* [person did not sail]
- *V /L* [landing verified]
- *V* [landing verified]
- *No C/A* [no arrival certificate issued]

Citizenship status

- *Non-im alien* [An alien, not intended to immigrate]
- *US Born* [Born in the United States]
- *USB* [Born in the United States]
- *USC* [United States citizen]
- *Nat* [Naturalized citizen]

Detained passengers

- *D* [detained]
- *S.I.* [held for special inquiry]
- *B.S.I* [held for special inquiry]
- *X* [detained or held for special inquiry]
- *Held* [detained or held for special inquiry]

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. 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.
4. Smith, Marian L. “Manifest Markings: A Guide to Interpreting Passenger Lists Annotations,” *JewishGen*, online at jewishgen.org/infofiles/manifests.