

45 Reasons to Research Immigration Records

When I first started my ancestor research, after I had gotten over the initial excitement of reviewing census records and interviewing my living relatives, I almost immediately began trying to find my immigrant ancestors and how they got to America. Through free repositories such as Ellis Island and Castle Garden and other sites, as well as records available via subscription sites I plugged away.

After collecting a few records, I began to analyze the contents of those records. There are tons of information included in them, and thorough analysis can lead you to discover familial relationships that are much beyond what ship they arrived in, and on what date they immigrated. My first few records were from the mid-1850's and all that was on the passenger lists were name, age, sex, occupation, and where they were coming from. Make sure that you analyze the hospital/medical detainment information for the trip also. Later lists have much more information requested and on the passenger lists, as you can see below.

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- Name of the Immigrant – to Despite the legend that names were changed at Ellis Island – they certainly were not. But folks did change their name later. Members of my own family changed their Hebrew names to their English/American equivalents – not necessarily at the time of immigration but at some point later. So searching for the Anglicized name may not bear fruit in these cases when searching for their immigration records.
 - Family – families certainly did travel together and sometimes not, and sometimes not on the same ship or in the same year. Other relatives may have been on the same ship – so take a look at all the manifest pages. Just like in census records, a page or two away may be an aunt, a cousin, or other relative.
 - Age
 - Gender
 - Marital Status
 - Occupation
 - Ability to Read and/or Write – also indicates which language they were proficient in.
 - Nationality /Citizenship
 - Race
 - Place of Birth – City/town and country
 - Place of Last Residence – City/town and country
 - Name and Address of Contact for Location from Whence they Came – This is very useful information because it may provide information about a family member in the “old country” that you may know nothing about.
 - Visa – Number and where and when issued.
 - Final Destination – City/Town and State.
 - Whether Going to Visit a Relative or Friend – name and complete address is requested in this entry. Similar to the contact person from whence they came – this entry can also provide terrific clues as to other relatives of the immigrant.
 - Ever Been in Prison, Almshouse, Mental Institution or Supported by Charity?
 - Polygamist?
 - Anarchist?
 - Labor Contract?
 - Physical and Mental Health Condition?
 - Deformed or Crippled?
 - Do You Have a Ticket for Final Destination?
 - Who Paid for Your Passage?
 - How Much Money in Your Possession?
 - Been to The U.S. Before?
 - Height – just one of the physical characteristics requested in the form. In lieu of a lack of a photo for an ancestor – these characteristics provide some clue to what they looked like.
 - Hair Color
 - Eye Color
 - Complexion Type
 - Marks of Identification
 - Name of Ship
 - Port/City of Departure
 - Date of Departure
 - Part of the Vessel for Travel – which deck, for example
 - Port/City of Arrival
 - Date of Arrival
 - For Aircraft – Carrier and Flight Number
 - Purpose for Coming to the U.S.
 - Length of Intended Stay
 - Ever Excluded from U.S., Deported or Arrested?
 - Detained Aliens – Name
 - Detained Aliens – Reason for Detention– usually medical; the form is not shown here but is a separate form
 - Detained Aliens – Final Disposition
 - Detained Aliens – Date of Discharge
 - Detained Aliens – Number of Meals Provided