



# Coming to America: Finding Your Ancestor's Arrival

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## Discovering the Stories

- Look for stories of chain migration, where one or more family member immigrates and then sends for other family members later.
- Put your ancestor's trip in the context of history. What prompted him or her to leave?
- Look for extended family and friends who may be traveling with them. This can help you make sure you have the right family and it adds to the story.
- Look at conditions. Were they traveling in steerage or 1st class? What time of the year was it? How long did voyages take during the era?
- Look at the list as a whole. Were there many deaths? What was the ethnic background of fellow passengers? Ages? Were there many families traveling together or mostly men? How old were your ancestors?
- Check newspapers around the time of the ship's arrival to see if there is information about the voyage.

## Eras of Immigration

### Pre-1820 Arrivals

- No laws required captains to maintain passenger lists (also called manifests).
- Some lists have survived from this period. Others have been lost or destroyed, although some were published and saved in that form.
- Look for references to immigration in biographical materials and local histories.
- The Card Catalog on Ancestry is a good place to start looking.
- Check libraries and archives near the port to learn more.

### 1820s to 1890s

- Steerage Act in 1819 was aimed in part 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" required:
  - Ship and captain's name, ports of departure and arrival, date of arrival, passenger name, age, gender, occupation, nationality

### 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.

## What do you need to know?

- Ethnic given names (e.g., John = Jan, Janos, Johann, Giovanni, etc.)
  - Surname variants
  - Phonetic spellings
  - Non-Anglicized names
  - Aliases and name changes
- Place names can help (in 20<sup>th</sup> century records)
  - Phonetic spellings
  - Keep in mind border changes when including country of origin.
- Age (estimate from census, vital records, etc.)
- Family structure, including extended family.
- Nationality
- Estimated date of arrival



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## Narrowing the Arrival Date

- Create a timeline, chronicling events in your family's life and where they took place. Birth dates and places of birth of children, marriage dates and location, and other details can help you narrow the time frame you are searching.
- If your immigrant ancestors were in the U.S. and alive at the time of the 1900, 1910, 1920, or 1930 federal census, check the column that lists the year of immigration to the U.S.
- Check state censuses for places your ancestor lived. Does it list how many years in the U.S.?
- Naturalization records, particularly 20th century records, may list the ship, port, and date of arrival.
- Check to see if your ancestor applied for a U.S. Passport (1795-1925), as these too, may include immigration information.
- Vital records may include how many years in the U.S.
- Ancestry.com search forms for the Immigration Collection and Passenger Lists now include the ability to specify an exact day. Start wide with the year, and then if you know it, narrow by month, and finally day.

## Considerations

### Finding that Grain of Truth...

- Keep in mind that the records that list the date of immigration may have been created many years after the event. If you're having trouble finding the record in the year listed on the record, think about what would have stood out in the immigrant's mind. Would he remember the exact year? Maybe not, but arriving on Christmas Eve, New Year's Eve, a birthday, etc., would have been more memorable.
- Look for extended family in passenger lists, particularly in 20th century records, which list who they are going to join in the U.S.
- Check multiple ports and bear in mind that your ancestor may have made several trips before finally settling in for good.

### Worth Noting-Entry via Canada or Mexico

- Large numbers of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe prior to and in the early 20th century prompted the Quota Act of 1921 limiting the number of immigrants that could enter the U.S. Many immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe traveled to northern European ports to try to circumvent these measures.
- Coming in through Canada or Mexico to visit family was another way to get a foot in the door.
- Throughout much of history travel to Canada from Europe was cheaper than to the U.S.
- Check Border Crossings for Canada (1895-1956) and Mexico (1903-1957) for ancestors who entered the U.S. via these countries.
- Canadian passenger arrivals (1865-1935) are also available.
- Emigration records are available for several European ports and contain similar information as inbound passenger lists. Finding your ancestor in these records will give you the ship name and allow you to estimate entry into the U.S.

## Tips

- Search the Immigration collection on Ancestry.com directly by clicking the link on the Search tab or going to the Search page and selecting that collection.
- You can narrow your search further by searching the sub-category Passenger Lists.
- Use the birth and arrival fields and estimate dates where possible to narrow your search. Using +/- 1, 2, 5 or 10 years can give you a little wiggle room when the dates are fuzzy.