

Finding Immigrant Origins – A Case Study on Finding the Elusive Immigrant

David Ouimette, CG, CGL
david.ouimette@familysearch.org

Immigration Research: A Two-Step Process

1. Research in the country of arrival

- Clear objective
- Research plan (with local, regional, and national records)
- Become familiar with the immigrant's family and community
- Adapt plan and scope as needed
- Identify the immigrant's ancestral village

2. Research in the country of departure

- Clear objective
- Research plan (with local, regional, and national records)
- Become familiar with the immigrant's family and community
- Adapt plan and scope as needed
- Identify the immigrant's deeper origins and ancestry

Why Did Your Immigrant Ancestor Come to America?

Your ancestor's story—including what pushed or pulled him to America—is a chapter within the broader stories of family, community, and nation. Factors such as economy, religion, culture, family, and friends influenced your immigrant ancestor's decision to emigrate and where he settled. Chances are your ancestor was part of a greater movement, following family, friends, or dreams for reasons shared by others in his community of origin and community of arrival. Look at the bigger picture:

Expand the Circles of People You Research

Expanding your research into "cluster genealogy" will reveal far more about your immigrant ancestor's origins than you could learn through studying the immigrant exclusively. First, research kith and kin in the various family circles – immediate family, extended family, in-laws, and others of the same surname. Then research the various circles of friends and associates – religious circles, fraternal circles, military circles, educational circles, neighbor circles, and economic circles.

Identifying the Immigrant

- His names (and spellings) and those of his family and friends
- Timeline of vital events and key milestones within the family
- Research U.S. records, consult previous research, draw upon local and ethnic history and sources, learn the family stories, join a genealogical or historical society, and meet your people

Chain Migration: a Polish Case Study

Polish immigrants, compelled by economics and other pressures, uprooted their families to seek for a better life away from their ancestral homeland. Polish communities sprang up in Germany, France, the United States, Canada, Brazil, and many other countries, becoming extensions of the ancestral village as families and neighbors left Galicia and reunited abroad.

The story of immigrants leaving Wójtowa and settling in Chicopee, Massachusetts, typifies the migratory patterns of many European immigrants.

Pushes for Polish Families to Emigrate from Wójtowa

Wójtowa, a small farming village in Małopolskie (aka Galicia), was occupied by Austria from 1772 to 1918. During the years of Austro-Hungarian occupation, living conditions in Galicia, in Wójtowa in particular, were difficult:

- **Depressed economics.** Poland ceased to exist as a nation, having been partitioned by Austria, Russia, and Prussia. Partitioned Poland was held back while much of Europe made great advances economically. Industrial development, improved farming techniques, and other signs of modernization were denied to the Polish peasantry.
- **Forced military service.** At the age of twenty-one years, males in Galicia were conscripted into the Austrian army for three years of service.
- **Serfdom.** As serfs to the local lord, Polish peasants could not move freely and were required to labor without pay on the lord's estate a certain number of days a week. In eighteenth-century Galicia, each household had to provide six person-days of unpaid labor per week. Serfdom wasn't abolished until 1848 in Galicia.
- **Starvation.** Primitive farming conditions often yielded meager harvests. Even after liberation from serfdom, many Galician families could not produce enough food to subsist. Population growth multiplied the challenge to survive.
- **Poverty and disease.** Widespread poverty weakened the people and exacerbated the spread of disease, causing numerous fatalities as typhus and cholera outbreaks ravaged Galicia. Over ten percent of the people of Wójtowa died during these epidemics, as attested in parish registers.

Evidence of family relationships, vital events, and living conditions may be found in a variety of historical documents found in church and civil archives throughout Galicia. In the case of Wójtowa, these archives preserve major manuscript collections:

- **Archiwum Diecezjalne w Tarnowie.** The diocesan archive holds some transcripts of church registers for the parishes of Wójtowa (1874–1889) and Lipinki (1846–1879).
- **Parafia Wójtowa.** The parish priest maintains the original parish registers in his home. Baptism, marriage, and burial records (1777–present). Tombstone inscriptions in two local cemeteries reveal additional details about family members.
- **Parafia Lipinki.** The new parish church houses the original registers for the parishes of Lipinki (1784–present) and Pagorzyna (1784–present).
- **Urząd Stanu Cywilnego, Lipinki.** This registration office holds many volumes of civil registers, including a birth register for Wójtowa (1890–1945). The civil registers are transcripts containing entries less than one hundred years old; public access to these volumes is highly restricted.
- **Archiwum Państwowe w Rzeszowie Oddział w Skołyszynie.** This state archive branch office, although now in great disrepair having recently suffered flood damage, houses transcripts of baptismal registers for the neighboring parish of Biecz (1864–1907) and an original marriage

register for the parish of Bednarka (1784–1893). Of particular interest is a register of all residents for Wójtowa, created in 1938 and including additions through the 1970s.

- **Archiwum Państwowe w Rzeszowie.** This state archive preserves a major collection of cadastral maps and significant quantities of notarial papers. The cadastral land survey maps for Wójtowa completely document all land holdings by family for the year 1853.
- **Archiwum Diecezjalne w Rzeszowie.** This diocesan archive has no parish registers before 1990, even though the Diocese of Rzeszow was created in 1975 from the Dioceses of Tarnow and Przemyśl. The original dioceses retained parish registers and transcripts received from their respective parishes.
- **Archiwum Państwowe w Przemyślu.** This state archive holds an extensive collection of parish registers and cadastral land surveys, including a large number of land records for cadastral communities of Wójtowa and Lipinki (1850–1851). These land records list homeowners by home number and alphabetically by homeowner. The map collection includes field sketches of property ownership and cadastral land survey maps.
- **Österreichisches Staatsarchiv – Kriegsarchiv, Vienna.** Service records for the Galician Crownland document the military careers of officers and the rank and file.

Pulls for Polish Families to Immigrate to Chicopee

America attracted millions of Polish immigrants during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. New England farm lands and mill towns appealed to many Galician immigrants. Chicopee, Chicopee Falls, Ludlow, and a number of other cities in Massachusetts provided gainful employment for many Poles. A number of Wójtowa families settled in Chicopee and worked in the cotton mills. They were drawn to Chicopee for many reasons:

- **Economic prosperity.** The Dwight Cotton Mills in Chicopee and the Chicopee Manufacturing Company in Chicopee Falls employed and housed many thousands of Polish immigrants. Men, women, and teenagers could earn significantly more money for the family than was possible laboring on the farm back in Poland.
- **Clerical appeals.** Reverend Stanisław Czełuśniak, himself a native of the Wójtowa area and the priest of St. Stanislaus Roman Catholic Church in Chicopee, Massachusetts, appealed to the Polish people to immigrate to the Polish neighborhoods of Chicopee and Ludlow, distributing handbills (in Polish) that described in glowing terms the benefits of working in the linen mills.
- **Family appeals.** It only takes one person to start a chain migration. Hundreds of Wójtowa residents migrated to the United States between 1884 and 1914. A large number flocked to Chicopee and other mill towns in Massachusetts, writing letters home to encourage others to join them in America. Heads of household often arrive first and later brought their families.
- **A thriving Polish-American community.** Polish enclaves in the United States became extensions of the ancestral village. New immigrants could stay together as families and neighbors, attend a Polish Catholic church, speak Polish at home and in the community, and raise their children in the same culture that united them in Poland.

A variety of historical records reveal the ancestral origins and familial relationships of Poles in Chicopee. Churches, government entities, and other institutions have recorded personal and family information such as birth, marriage, death, residence, occupation, and immigration details. In the case of Chicopee, these records provide valuable evidence on the Polish community:

- Local records
 - Parish registers of the Holy Name of Jesus and St. Stanislaus Basilica
 - Tombstone inscriptions and burial records of Calvary and St. Stanislaus cemeteries
 - Birth, marriage, and death registers at the Chicopee city clerk's office

- Employment records of the Dwight Manufacturing Company
 - Naturalization papers in local courthouses
- State and federal records
 - Passenger lists
 - Naturalization papers
 - WWI and WWII draft registration cards
 - Social Security application cards (SS-5 forms)
 - Census records
- Published works (available at the Chicopee Public Library)
 - Annual city directories for Springfield and Chicopee
 - Hampden County atlas (detailed maps naming the head of household for each residence)
 - Sanborn fire insurance maps
 - Local, ethnic, and church histories

Subsequent Trips Back and Forth across the Atlantic

In the final decades of the nineteenth century, families emigrating from Wójtowa found new homes in Paraná, Brazil; Amsterdam, New York; Chicopee, Massachusetts, and elsewhere in the United States. Some families migrated between these Polish communities, settling briefly in Brazil before traveling to New York, or arriving in New York only to then move to Massachusetts. They left or rejoined friends and family with each relocation.

Employment in the Chicopee cotton mills enabled migrant workers to save sufficient funds to eventually bring their families to America. The men and older boys could afford to travel back and forth seasonally between their boarding houses in Chicopee and their family farms in Wójtowa. A careful study of passenger lists reveals a steady flow of laborers crossing the Atlantic multiple times, eventually booking passage for their wives and children to join them permanently in the United States.

Recommended Reading

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