

DISCOVERING YOUR IMMIGRANT ANCESTOR'S ORIGINS

WHY?

Why is it important to learn where your family came from? Many people trace their roots back to the immigrant ancestor and stop there. However, if you want to continue your research in European records it is essential to know where your ancestor came from. Often we have an idea of what country our family came from or even a specific region of the country, but this is not enough. In order to continue your research in European records you have to know what little town or village your ancestors called home.

Learning where your ancestors came from can also help you learn more about your heritage. As you learn more about the history, customs, dress and foods of your ancestral village or town it can provide you with a greater appreciation for your ethnic heritage. This presentation focuses on finding your immigrant ancestor's origins using records created in the United States.

WHAT INFORMATION IS NEEDED?

The following information is essential if you want to be able to identify your ancestor in European records. This information is most easily found in the records your ancestor created in the United States.

- Ancestor's **original** full name (the name you know, may have been Americanized)
- Approximate date of birth
- Place of birth (village or town)
- Name of a relative

Additional information that may be helpful in identifying your ancestor:

- Names of other family members
- Names of friends and neighbors
- Family stories and traditions
- Religion

RESEARCH STRATEGIES

IDENTIFY WHAT YOU ALREADY KNOW

- Create a timeline of events in the life of your ancestor and his family.
- Make a list of names used by your ancestor. Make a list of alternate spellings.
- Make a list of family members. Who were your ancestor's acquaintances?
- Make a list of all the different places your ancestor lived.

PowerPoint Presentation by Yvonne Curry
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DECIDE WHAT YOU WANT TO LEARN

Your primary goal will be to find your ancestor's place of origin, but you will probably have to set some secondary goals to help you achieve that goal. Some secondary goals could be: find his immigration date, find his place of departure, what port did he arrive at, what was the name of the ship; the names of other immigrants in the group, what country did he come from, what was his original name, etc.

SELECT THE RECORDS TO SEARCH

Begin with records created in the United States. Check both compiled and original records. Look for records in each place in which your ancestor lived. Check records for the complete time period that he lived in the U.S. Check different levels of jurisdiction: federal, state, county, town, etc. Study background sources to learn more about the area in which he lived, what life was like for immigrants, where immigrants from different regions settled in the U.S. This background information may suggest new records or localities to search.

FIND AND SEARCH THE RECORDS

After you know what records you would like to search you need to find them. While there are a lot of records available online, and more are being added every day, not everything will be found on the Internet.

Another great place to search for records of your ancestor is the Family History Library. They have millions of records on microfilm, but again you will not find everything there. Expand your search. Other places to check are state/local archives, local churches, courthouses, libraries, etc.

RESEARCH TIPS

SEARCH FOR THE ENTIRE FAMILY

If you limit your search to the target ancestor and ignore records created by other family members you may miss important clues. Expand your search and research the whole family. If necessary widen your circle even further and look for extended family, friends and associates.

SEARCH EACH SOURCE THOROUGHLY

Make sure you are getting all the information provided by each source. Try transcribing documents to make sure you aren't missing important information and that you understand everything. Go back and review documents from previous research – sometimes revisiting the results of previous research can shed new light on your problem.

SEARCH A BROAD TIME PERIOD

Search records from many years before and after the target event. If you have an approximate immigration date it could be wrong. Records created when a person died could contain important immigration information and some records may have been created after the individual's death.

USE INDEXES

Indexes can help point you to original records that may contain the information you are seeking. They can also help you locate your ancestor in a certain time and place.

SEARCH FOR PREVIOUS RESIDENCES

Evidence of your ancestor's life may be found in any place where he lived – even if he was there for only a short time. Create a list of all the places where he lived and watch for mention of other localities.

WATCH FOR SPELLING VARIATIONS

Names may have been spelled many different ways by record keepers and by the family itself. People liked to feel a part of their community so they often Americanized their names to help them fit in. Keep a list of spelling variations to use when searching for your ancestor. Every time you find a new spelling of your family's name add it to your list. Try spelling the name phonetically to see what variations you can find.

EVALUATE THE INFORMATION YOU HAVE FOUND

Do you understand the foreign spelling? Can you prove that the person you found is really the immigrant? Use gazetteers and maps to help you learn about foreign places. Remember that town names may be spelled differently in the original language than what we find in English. Place names may have changed over time. There may be several towns with the same name or a city and county may have the same name. Did your ancestor really come from that big city he reported or was he born in a nearby village?

UNDERSTAND FOREIGN SPELLINGS

Foreign names may be spelled differently due to:

- Phonetic spelling
- Misreading
- Special characters

DO YOU HAVE THE RIGHT PERSON?

If you find your ancestor in European records it's important to verify that you have the right person. There could be more than one person with the same name. Check the essential information that you gathered earlier. Make sure the information you found matches that of the U.S. records. Try disproving the connection; this will help you see any holes in your research.

WHAT ARE SOME GOOD SOURCES?

FAMILY SOURCES

Information found in the home may be the best place to find clues to your ancestor's origin. Make sure and interview older family members and friends who may remember where the family came from. Other sources to look for:

- Letters
- Documents
- Family Bibles

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Has someone else already found the information you are looking for? Take time to verify the information that someone else has published. All the information may not be accurate, but these types of records can provide valuable clues. Look for:

- Online databases such as FamilySearch or Ancestry
- Printed family histories

LOCAL HISTORIES AND PERIODICALS

Local histories may include short biographies and a history of the area, including histories of immigrant groups that settled in the area. Look for:

- Biographies
- Town, county, and state histories
- Ethnic histories
- Church histories
- Genealogical and historical societies' publications

VITAL RECORDS

Vital records are usually more helpful for more recent years. When a place of birth is mentioned usually only the name of the country is given. Death records may give information on mortuaries and burial locations that may have additional information. Death records also usually ask for parents' names, but the information is not always

accurate. Try to obtain vital records for all family members because the information you are seeking may be found on a child's birth certificate or a brother's death certificate.

SOCIAL SECURITY AND PENSION RECORDS

Social Security applications ask for the person's birth date, birthplace, and parents' names. Social security numbers can usually be found on death certificates. Also check the online Social Security Death Index, but follow up by ordering the actual application from the Social Security Administration. Contact private companies for pension records.

CHURCH RECORDS

Marriage and death/burial records are the records most likely to give the town where an immigrant was born. Also members of smaller religious bodies tended to move in large groups. By studying the group you may find your ancestor's origins.

CEMETERY RECORDS

Tombstones sometimes give the person's birth place or may give other clues as to where the person was from.

OBITUARIES

Obituaries can be a great source of family information. Not only can you learn the identities of other family members, but they may state the place of origin. Immigrants who lived in small rural areas are more likely to have a detailed obituary than those who lived in large cities. Search for at least a couple of weeks after the death date because they don't always appear right away. Local libraries, online newspaper archives and online look-up volunteers are good sources for finding obituaries.

CENSUS RECORDS

Census records can provide some good clues. Later U.S. census records list country of birth for each person and their parents. They may also provide the date of arrival, status/date of naturalization, etc. Some state census records give more detail than federal records.

MILITARY RECORDS

There are many different types of records available for an ancestor who served in the military and any of them may provide clues to help you find his place of origin. Look for:

- Service records
- Pension applications
- Draft registrations
- Other records to search
 - Unit histories
 - Veteran's organizations

- Cemetery records
- Old soldiers' home records

IMMIGRATION RECORDS

Immigration records vary in content and availability. More recent passenger lists may give the town of origin. The Internet has made passenger lists easier to use. Look for:

- Passenger arrival lists
- Border crossing records for Canada and Mexico
- Passport records

NATURALIZATION RECORDS

If your ancestor became a U.S. citizen, naturalization records may contain the information you are looking for. Later records (especially after 1906) contain more detailed information than those for earlier time periods. Naturalization was a process that occurred over a period of years and generated various records. Make sure and check for all the records. The necessary paper work may have been filed in different locations as your ancestor moved around. Until recently any court could grant naturalization so make sure and check all different jurisdictions for your ancestor's records.

ARCHIVES AND LIBRARIES

There are certain libraries and archives that specialize in immigrant or ethnic research. They may have special collections that can be found nowhere else. You can visit their website to learn more about the types of records they collect. Examples:

- *Center for Migration Studies*
- *Ellis Island Immigration Museum Web Site*
- *Immigration History Research Center Web Site*
- *Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies Web Site*

COURT RECORDS

Besides naturalization records, courts may have other records created by your ancestor. These records may name other family members. They may mention property descriptions from the country of origin. They can be especially helpful for colonial-era immigrants. After you have identified relevant court cases try to obtain the case file from the court house or archive as these files have the most detailed information.

LAND RECORDS

Many immigrants came to the U.S. in order to own land. Local deeds do not usually provide you with information on the place of origin. From colonial times head rights may show the

country of origin. From later years homestead files can be especially helpful. Some records may include copies of naturalization records

NEWSPAPERS

Historic newspapers may provide helpful clues. Early newspapers may provide lists of arriving passengers, indentured servants or apprentices. You may also find queries by people looking for missing friends. Other events such as marriages and estate probates may be announced. Ethnic newspapers may have information on immigrants from different areas.

PROBATE RECORDS

Probate records may be most helpful for the colonial period. Colonial immigrants often identified themselves by their hometown. Family members left behind in the old country may also be mentioned. Wealthier immigrants may have owned property in the old country and property descriptions may identify the family's place of origin.

ETHNIC AND FRATERNAL SOCIETIES

Ethnic and fraternal societies kept records on their members but the records may be difficult to locate.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- "Balch Institute Online Resources." *The Historical Society of Pennsylvania*; online at <http://www.hsp.org/default.aspx?id=250>.
- "Immigration and Naturalization." *Cyndi's List of Genealogy Sites on the Internet*; online at <http://www.cyndislist.com/immigrat.htm>.
- "Immigration History Research Center." University of Minnesota; online at <http://www.ihrc.umn.edu/>.
- *Awesome Genealogy Directory: Genealogy: Immigration*; online at <http://www.awesomegenealogy.com/Genealogy/immigration.shtml>
- Carmack, Sharon DeBartolo. *A Genealogist's Guide to Discovering Your Immigrant & Ethnic Ancestors: How to Find and Record Your Unique Heritage*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Betterway Books, 2000.
- *Center for Migration Studies*; online at <http://www.cmsny.org/>.
- Colletta, John P. *They Came in Ships: A Guide to Finding Your Immigrant Ancestor's Arrival Record*. 3rd ed. Orem, Utah: Ancestry Publishing, 2002.

- *Ellis Island - FREE Port of New York Passenger Records Search*; online at <http://www.ellislandrecords.org/>.
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- Meyerink, Kory L. "Immigration Sources." *Printed Sources: A Guide to Published Genealogical Records*. Salt Lake City, Utah: Ancestry, Incorporated, 1998.
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- *The Association of European Migration Institutions*; online at <http://www.aemi.dk/home.php>.
- *U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services*; online at <http://www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis>.