Immigration Records Ellis Island and Castle Garden

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**The National Archives had immigration records between 1820 and 1982**

* Arranged by Port of Arrival
* They are not online
* They have a list of microfilm records for every port

**Two of the most known Immigration Ports**

* Ellis Island (1892 – 1954)
	+ Open over 60 years
	+ Best known
	+ Processed 12 million
	+ Started with 3.3 acres increased to 27.5 acres
* Castle Garden (1855 – 1890)
	+ Open 35 years
	+ Initially a defense installation in War of 1912
	+ Processed over 10 Million immigrants
* New York was the cheapest and most convenient port of entry

**In 1903 alone the top 10 Ports of Entry processed over 900,000 immigrants**

**Reasons that you sometimes cannot find your ancestor in the Ellis Island records**

* Health Issues
* Lack of funds
* If one member was rejected some or all might have returned home
* If they traveled first class they did not have to go through Ellis Island

**How to Search Ellis Island**

* Go to [www.LibertyEllisfoundation.org](http://www.LibertyEllisfoundation.org)
* Fill in the name you are searching
* When you find your ancestor you can view passenger record, ship image, or ship manifest

**Where to find records**

* www.Archives.com
* www.Ancestry.com
* www.Familysearch.org
* www.Libertyellisfoundation.org
* www.Genealogy.com
* www.Usgenweb.org
* www.Castlegarden.org
* www.Cyndislist.com/immigration
* www.genesearch.com/ports.html
* www.genealogybranches.com/arrivalports.html

When looking at Ellis Island immigration records, here are the things you need to know:

• **For an immigrant** coming from Europe, the most expensive part of the journey from their home in the old country to their final destination in North America would have been the cost of buying a ticket on a transatlantic steamer. As can be seen from the table above, New York City had by far the most number of ships visiting its port

• **For many immigrants**, New York City was the cheapest and most convenient port of entry to North America regardless of their final destination. Even immigrants to Canada could have chosen New York City as their port of entry (entry to Canada was not an issue at the time since as late as the 1930s many crossings at the border between Canada and the US were totally open and had no customs or border officials). Thus, anyone who had ancestors who arrived anywhere in North America in the forty-year period between roughly 1892 and 1932 should consider checking the Ellis Island immigration records.

• **Not all immigrants** were successful in entering the United States. Official statistics suggest about 2% of immigrants were rejected and sent home. The most common reason for rejection was a concern by immigration officials that the person may become a ward of the state. This could be due to health issues (especially a fairly common eye disease called trachoma, which led to blindness), mental illness or lack of sufficient funds for immigrants to support themselves.

• **Immigrants were sorted** based on their health condition, financial status and language. When looking at the records, don’t assume all your ancestors passed through Ellis Island. Some may have been sent home

• Immigration officials also turned away communists, anarchists and bigamists. They did this by asking some rather ingenious questions: “Are you a communist?” “Are you an anarchist?” and “Are you a bigamist?” If a person answered ‘yes’ to any of the questions, they were rejected. If a person answered ‘no’ to any of the questions they were put aside for further questioning. The correct answer would have been: “What is a communist?”, "What is an anarchist?" and “What is a bigamist?”

• **One hundred years ago**, most people would not have been familiar with the terms communist, anarchist or bigamist. If they were aware of any of these terms then they may have been a communist, anarchist or bigamist and they were questioned in greater

• **If one member** of a family was rejected, then it was up to the family to decide if they wanted to proceed into America or go back home. Usually, if the husband or the head of the household was rejected then the entire family would go home because the husband was generally the main breadwinner. If the mother or one of the daughters was rejected then often the family would often split up with the rejected person going home and the rest of the family staying in America. Sometimes, another family member would accompany the rejected person back home. Thus, the number of immigrants who went home was higher than the official 2% rejection rate would suggest.

• **You may come** across an ancestor in the Ellis Island records who was accepted into the United States but then you cannot find any other record after that of the individual being in America. Consider the possibility they may have gone back home to the old country accompanying someone who was rejected.

• **Often, families** did not travel to America together. Be aware of this when looking for records. The more common pattern was for the husband (the main bread winner) to go to America a year or two before the rest of the family. The husband would get a job, get established and then earn enough money to pay for the passage of his wife and children. A variation of this might be an uncle, a brother or another relative (they were usually male) who arrived before the rest of the extended family. Therefore, when looking for immigration records on Ellis Island, always check for other relatives +/- 3 years from the date when you find a record for one of the family members.

• **A common misconception** is that immigration officers changed or anglicised immigrants’ names. This did not happen. Many immigrants had their names changed, but it was not due to immigration officials. Instead, it was the responsibility of the officers aboard the ships that brought the immigrants to America to prepare the immigration documents. Many of these officers made mistakes in the immigration forms with the spelling of names and some of the ship officers were simply downright lazy

• **For example**, consider an immigrant with the name like “Papadopoulos”. The ship officers would sometimes write down an abbreviated name like “Papa” instead of spelling out the entire name. Be aware of this type of error when looking through Ellis Island records. It is more common than you might think.

• **Also be aware** that often immigrants could not spell their own name. As a result, many errors (like the one noted above) passed through the system in addition to the usual problems of misspellings that occur in old documents. Remember, immigration officials at Ellis Island had to process an average of 5,000 people per day and for them it simply became a numbers game.

• **Of course**, immigrants who arrived with proper documentation (such as a passport, as shown below) were much less likely to have spelling issues. In addition, even if the immigrant could not spell their own name, the name on the passport would be written by a government official from the old country that was much more likely to know how to spell it. Therefore, if possible, check to see if your ancestor travelled to Ellis Island with passports and other official documents. Knowing this fact will likely result in less spelling errors and this generally makes it easier to trace your ancestors.

• **Some immigrants** who arrived in America also deliberately masked or hide their identity: New country; new life; new name. This was typically done to hide an immediate problem from the old country (such as a criminal past or an unfortunate family situation). Basically, the immigrant did not want to bring problems with them from the old country to the new country. In fact, the reason some immigrants decided to go to America was specifically to avoid serious problems at home, such as a potential jail term.

• **Sometimes immigrants** masked their identity out of concern they may be rejected. In other words, they had a reason to lie. For example, indentured servitude was not allowed in the United States (and would be grounds for rejection) even though some companies in America tried to recruit people in Europe under these conditions. Basically, the company would pay for the passage to America in exchange for a couple of years of labor (this approach apparently was tried by some coal companies in Virginia according to Ellis Island officials). These immigrants were likely coached by the company that recruited them on how to lie to immigration officials. People also tried to recruit indentured servants from Europe using a similar approach. Immigration officials were on the lookout for this kind of activity and would reject immigrants based on indentured servitude.

• **Sometimes,** changing identities extended to not just changing names but also changing relationships within a family. For example a bigamist might claim to immigration officials that his second wife was actually his sister since both would likely have the same last name on official documents. Look out for this possibility, if you know your ancestor came to America from a region or religious group that supported polygamy.