The Tired, the Poor, and the Huddled Masses
U.S. Immigration, 1820-1954

For many of us, the stories of where our ancestors came from, when they came, and what ship they traveled on have either been lost or have faded with time. In this class, we will discuss the history, records, resources, and strategies used in U.S. immigration research.

History and Background

Reasons for Immigration

Our ancestors had many different reasons for immigrating. These are often divided into **push** factors which encouraged them to leave their homes and **pull** factors that drew them to the United States.

Push Factors

- Forced military service
- Famine
- Overcrowding/Unemployment
- Limited social mobility
- Political upheaval/unrest

Pull Factors

- Land
- Relatives already living in America
- American propaganda
- Religious freedom
- Employment opportunities

Major Immigration Laws

- The **1819 Steerage Act** required that a copy of each ship's passenger list be filed by the master of the vessel with the customs agent located the port of arrival. Customs agents were responsible for forwarding passenger lists to the U.S. Secretary State.

- The **1891 Immigration Act** required that passenger lists be filed with federal inspection agents. Inspection agents boarded ships before docking and were responsible for all medical and personal examinations. The 1891 Act also allowed for the creation of inspection stations along the Canadian and Mexican borders.

- The **1924 Immigration Act** required immigrants to obtain an Immigration Visa from a Consular Office (U.S. Embassy) prior to sailing for America. The act also set quotas on the number of immigrants allowed to enter the United States from each country per year.

Major Ports of Arrival:

- New York, New York
- Baltimore, Maryland
- Boston, Massachusetts
- Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- New Orleans, Louisiana
- San Francisco, California

Major Ports of Departure:

- Liverpool, England
- London, England
- Glasgow, Scotland
- Le Havre, France
- Hamburg, Germany
- Antwerp, Belgium

Border Crossings

For some, the cheapest route to American was through either Canadian or Mexican ports. Prior to 1895, passage between countries along either border was unregulated.

U.S. Sources with Immigration Information

To find your ancestor in his or her country-of-origin, you need to identify the town from which they originated. Start by searching for that information in United States resources.

- **Privately Held Records.** Records held by families may include clues about your ancestor's place of birth. Locate family letters, bibles, pictures, and other documents that have been passed down through the family.
- **Census Records**. Census records include information on your ancestor's country-of-origin, date of immigration, and citizenship status. Find your ancestor in every available census and read through each column carefully.
    - The **1850 census** was the first census to ask for place of birth.
    - The **1880 census** was the first census to ask for place of birth for both father and mother.
    - The **1900-1930 censuses** asked for immigration and naturalization information including year of immigration (1900-30), number years in the U.S. (1900), whether naturalized (1900-30), and year of naturalization (1920).
    - The **1910** and **1920 censuses** asked for the native tongue and, in 1920, the native tongue of the person's parents.
- **Vital Records**. Vital records may list a person's date and place of birth. An immigrant's marriage record, death record, and the records of their children's births and deaths may include the name of the town where the immigrant originated.
- **Obituaries.** Obituaries, especially those published in the twentieth century may include place of birth, date of immigration, or name of ship.
- **Church Records**. Religion acted as a tie to the old world. Ecclesiastical leaders often noted a town of origin when recording marriages, deaths, and even the births of children. Other individuals belonging to the same religious community may also have emigrated from the same location.
- **County Histories.** County histories can provide clues as to where a large community of immigrants originated. Biographical sketches of prominent members of the community may also include immigration information. Also locate sketches for all your ancestor's children and grandchildren.
- **Naturalization Records**. Naturalization is the process whereby an alien becomes a citizen. In the United States, naturalizations date from 1790. Three sets of papers were usually created during the naturalization process: Declaration of Intentions, Petitions for Naturalizations, and Naturalization Certificates. Prior to 1906, declarations required that applicants list only their country-of-origin. After 1906, applicants were required to list their place of birth. Search "United States Naturalization and Citizenship in the FamilySearch Wiki to learn more.

U.S. Immigration Records

After exhausting American sources and identifying an immigrant ancestor's name, approximate date of birth, and country-of-origin, immigration records may provide additional clues.

- **Customs Passenger Lists** (1820-1891). Filed by ships masters starting 1 January 1820. Though no official forms were used, required information included age, sex, occupation, country-of-origin, and intended country of settlement.
- **Immigration Passenger Lists** (1891-1954). The U.S. Office of Immigration collected passenger lists starting in 1891 and developed a standardized form by 1893. Required information included name, age, sex, occupation, nationality, marital status, last residence, final destination within the United States, if joining a relative who and where, original purchaser of the ticket, race (1903), place of birth (1906), and name and address of closest living relative in the country-of-origin (1907).
- **Border Crossings**. Starting in 1895, Canadian authorities allowed U.S. officials to create passenger lists for incoming immigrants who intended to cross the border into the United States. Immigrants were given inspection cards upon arrival into Canadian ports which were handed off at the U.S. border. Canadians crossing the border were not recorded until 1906. Similar procedures

were implemented along the Mexican border also starting in 1895.

- **Passport Applications**. Passport applications may provide information about naturalized citizens if they returned home. The earliest passport was issued in 1796, but passports were not required for traveling abroad until the twentieth century. Passport applications may include information about an individual's date and place of birth, current residence, and where and when they were naturalized.

Country-Of-Origin Records

If you can't find your ancestor's town of origin in U.S. records, there are other country-specific resources available.

- **Vital Records Indexes**. Countrywide vital record indexes can be helpful when a specific town of birth is unknown, and all other resources have been exhausted. https://www.familysearch.org has several country wide databases. Other available vital record indexes include http://www.freeBMD.org.uk/ or http://www.UKbmd.org. Be careful when using these databases as several individuals with names and birthdates similar to your ancestor may be found in the same index. Use cluster methodology (see below) to find and compare friends and relatives in both the United States and your ancestor's country of origin.

- **Emigration or Port of Departure Records**. Some locations kept records of those leaving the country or departing from a specific port. These records may list specific information about an emigrant including the town from which they originated. Emigration records are available for Sweden, Baden (Germany), Wuerttemberg (Germany), and England (after 1890). Port of Departure lists are available for Hamburg, Germany.

- **Surname Distribution Maps.** Use surname distribution maps to identify pockets of possible relatives in your ancestor's country of origin. Free online maps are available for Austria, Belgium, Canada, England, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Switzerland, United Kingdom, United States, and Wales. Search 'Surname Distribution Maps' on the FamilySearch Research Wiki.

Additional Immigration Strategies

- **Cluster Methodology**. The people in your ancestor's life may have shared a common origin. Identify and research those listed as witnesses, guardians, neighbors, or fellow passengers. Focus first on those who share your ancestor's surname or birth country, then on neighbors, witnesses, and other individuals who appear in the records of your ancestor more than once.

- **Names**. Names are often shortened, misspelled, or otherwise changes as immigrants settled in the United States. Make sure to search online databases and other records using alternate spellings, initials, middle names, nicknames, maiden names, the English equivalent of foreign surnames (and vice versa), shorter (and longer) versions of the same name, etc.

- **Ethnic Groups**. Learn about the history and pattern of immigration for your ancestor's ethnic group. Ethnic groups often immigrated together, settled together, and attended church together. Researching the other members of your ancestor's ethnic group may lead you information about your ancestor's origin.

- **DNA**. DNA may help you connect with cousins still living in your ancestor's country-of-origin or with cousins of other immigrants. Review your matches and identify your common ancestors. Focus on matches shared in-common with others with a similar country-of-origin. You may want to also test your DNA with companies popular in your ancestor's country-of-origin.

- **Follow Candidates through Life**. Once you have identified a candidate for your ancestor in his or her country-of-origin, search birth, marriage, death, and other records. Make sure he or she disappear from the records of his or her country-of-origin at the same time he or she appears in records in the United States.

Resources for Finding Immigrant Ancestors

Printed Resources

- *Morton Allan Directory of European Passenger Steamship Arrivals: For the Years 1890 to 1930 at the Port of New York and for the years 1904 to 1926 at the ports of New York, Philadelphia, Boston and Baltimore.* Baltimore, Maryland: Genealogical Pub. Co., 1998.

- Filby, P. William & Mary K. Meyer, ed. *Passenger and Immigration Lists Index: A Guide to Published Arrival Records of about 500,000 Passengers who came to the United States and Canada in the Seventeenth, Eighteenth, and Nineteenth Centuries.* Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research, 1981-2010. Also available at https://www.ancestry.com ("United States Passenger and Immigration Lists Index, 1500s-1900s.")

- Harris, Ruth-Ann M. & Donald M. Jacobs, ed. *The Search for Missing Friends: Irish Immigrant Advertisements Placed in the Boston* Pilot. Boston, Massachusetts: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1989-1997. Also available at http://infowanted.bc.edu.

- United States. Immigration and Naturalization Service. *Register of Vessels Arriving at the Port of New York from Foreign Ports, 1789-1919.* Washington, District of Columbia: National Archives and Records Service, 1980.

Online Resources

- **Ancestry** ($) – incoming passenger lists for most U.S. ports, border crossings, passport applications, naturalizations indexes, emigration registers, and much more. https://www.ancestry.com/

- **Ellis Island Foundation** and **Castle Garden** – free searchable indexes of passengers arriving at Ellis Island (1891-1954) and Castle Garden (1855-1890); The Ellis Island Foundation also provides free images of ships manifests. https://www.libertyellisfoundation.org, http://www.castlegarden.org

- **FamilySearch.org** – passport applications, incoming passenger lists, border crossings, naturalization records; make sure to check the catalog for additional resources (such as county naturalization records). https://www.familysearch.org

- **Findmypast.com** ($) – passenger lists of those leaving the UK (1890-1960), passenger lists for many U.S. ports. https://www.findmypast.com

- **Fold3 ($)** – passport applications, naturalization index and images from several U.S. district courts. https://www.fold3.com

- **Internet Archive** - thousands of books and microfilm, search for "Passenger Lists" and filter to "texts" to view digitized immigration resources. https://archive.org

- **National Archives and Records Administration: Archival Databases** – includes archival databases on Russian, Irish, German, and Italian immigrants (under "Genealogy/Personal History" click "Passenger Lists"). https://aad.archives.gov/aad/

- **U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service** – order immigration records online including visa applications (1924-1944) and naturalization files (1906-1956). http:///www.uscis.gov/genealogy