

Smooth Sailing: Discovering Ship Passenger Lists

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When a person left one country and traveled to another country, often a record was created. If they traveled via boat across the ocean, a ship passenger will usually list their passage. Not all ships kept these records nor have all ship passenger lists survived. Most passenger lists for people who arrived in the United States have survived and many are available online. About 1820, the U.S. government required ships to keep a record of their passengers. Ship passenger lists prior to 1820 might exist, but the information varies. Many of the early passenger lists have been published and might be available from genealogical or historical societies. Make sure to check to see if there is a published list. For colonial ancestors contact the New England Genealogical & Historic Society. If your ancestor was a seaman or worked in the shipping industry check the newspapers to see when their ship sailed or arrived at port. The newspapers don't usually list those on board, but it will note their arrival and departures and may have an article if a ship sunk or had other newsworthy details.

To find the ship passenger list you need to first determine when they arrived. If your person lived long enough to be listed in the 1910-1930 census records, start there first since it lists the year of arrival in the United States and if they were naturalized. The census records are not always accurate but the dates will usually be within a year or two of the actual arrival date and are helpful to narrow down the time frame of when they may have arrived. Naturalization records often list the ship and date of arrival. Many genealogical societies have published indexes to those naturalized in their counties. Make sure to obtain a copy of this record if they became a citizen. Obituaries (especially ethnic newspapers) and county histories might also list the date of arrival for your ancestor.

Once you know the year of arrival, you will need to determine which port they used. If you don't know which port was used, search all of them starting with the one closest to where they eventually settled. Both Ancestry.com and FamilySearch have many of the ship passenger lists online. Cyndislist.com also has many links to online ship passenger lists.

There are six main ports used in the United States between the 1820's and early 1900's include:

- New York City, New York (Castle Garden or Ellis Island)
- Boston, Massachusetts
- Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- Baltimore, Maryland
- New Orleans, Louisiana
- Galveston, Texas

Many people also came into the United States through Canada then down into Michigan. Make sure to check for border crossings for anyone who came into Michigan through Canada. Sometimes they would come in through Michigan then take the rivers or railways into Iowa or other Midwestern states. Family Tree magazine has an excellent article in their September 2017 issue discussing ports used.

Popular International Ports for those leaving Europe include:

- Bremen, Germany - early Bremen passenger lists did not survive
- Hamburg, Germany - passenger lists have survived
- Liverpool, England - many passenger lists have survived
- Le Havre, France - many passenger lists have survived
- Rotterdam, Netherlands
- Ireland - most passenger lists for people leaving Ireland did not survive

FamilySearch has many excellent articles on tracing your immigrant ancestors:

https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/United_States_Emigration_and_Immigration

https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Tracing_Immigrants_Origin_Emigration_and_Immigration

https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Tracing_Immigrants_Arrival_Emigration_and_Immigration

If your ancestor came from a country where English was not their native language, their name will probably be recorded in the ship passenger list under their ethnic spelling not their Americanized name. For example, an ancestor from Germany known as Anthony later in his life will probably be listed as Anton in the ship passenger list. Be creative searching for your person. Many of the indexes have transcription errors due to poor penmanship or given names recorded under their initials.

If your ancestor arrived in New York check for passenger records at:

- Castle Garden: <http://castlegardens.org>
- Ellis Island: <https://www.libertyellisfoundation.org/passenger>

The following URLs have ship passenger lists sorted by state then title:

https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/United_States_Immigration_Online_Genealogy_Records
https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/US_Immigration_Passenger_Arrival_Records

If I can't find them, now what?

- Do you know their exact arrival date and port?
 - If **Yes**, then search by the exact date only and then browse the passenger list until you find a potential match.
 - If **No**, then search by surname variations or look for others of the same ethnicity who came at the same time and settled in the same area.

Passenger List Search Tips

- If you can't find them by using their name, but you know the ship name or arrival date, search by just those filters. If you get too many hits add a birth year range +/- 2 years and indicate whether they were female or male.
- Checking for name variations
 - Check for them under their ethnic spelling
 - Check for them by initials or an abbreviated form for the given name
 - Check for women under their maiden names
 - Check for letters that might be transcribed incorrectly: i.e. L ->S
- If you still can't find them
 - Expand the birth range in case their age was listed incorrectly
 - Search for those with (1) a specific given name and variations; (2) specific ethnicity; or (3) specific occupation. Don't use a birth range.
 - Search for other family members using the same tricks
 - Search the entire passenger list and look for potential matches – maybe they were indexed wrong or the wife and children are not specifically listed by name, but the husband was