

GENTREK: Guide to Passenger Lists

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What Did Passenger Lists Record?

Probably more time is spent hunting for our ancestors on ship passenger lists than any other type of research. In our naiveté we assume these records will reveal exactly from where in the "old country" our ancestors came. It is not always that simple. Depending on when your immigrant ancestors arrived, American ship passenger lists may or may not provide this information. In some instances determining the ancestral home can be discovered by tracking down naturalization papers, rather than ship passenger lists.

To be sure there is nothing quite like finding your ancestor on a ship passenger list. But be prepared to do some serious digging. There are three major time frames important to researching American ship passenger lists. They are: 1891-1954, 1820-1890 and pre-1820. The two major repositories for these microfilmed records are the [National Archives](#) and the LDS (Mormon) Family History Library (FHL).

If your ancestors arrived between 1891 and 1954, Immigration Passenger Lists are valuable. Immigrants were asked to provide information such as:

- Marital status

- Last residence

- Final destination in the U.S.

- If ever before in the U.S. -- when, where and for how long.

- If going to join a relative, the relative's name, address and relationship

In 1906 and 1907 more questions were added to the above list, including:

- Personal description: height, complexion, color of hair and eyes, identifying marks

- Place of birth the exact city, town or village.

- Name and address of closest living relative in native country.

However, if your ancestors landed between 1820 and 1890, you will need to search what's known as Customs Passenger Lists. These contain only the following data:

- Name of ship

- Name of its master

- Port of embarkation

- Date and port of its arrival

- Each passenger's name, age, sex, occupation and nationality.

Contrary to popular belief, the National Archives does not have copies of all ship passenger lists. It does have a microfilm copy of the passenger lists that were turned over to it by the Customs Service and the Immigration and Naturalization Service when this federal repository was established in 1935. Inbound federal ship passenger arrival records at the National Archives date back to 1820 for most East Coast and Gulf Coast ports and a few lists dating back to 1800 for Philadelphia. The archives staff will search available indexed lists for you

(first request NATF Form 81 from Reference Services Branch (NNIR), National Archives, 8th and Pennsylvania Ave., NW., Washington, DC 20408). You also can search indices and passenger lists yourself through the Family History Library system.

When requesting a search by the National Archives you must supply the following information on NATF Form 81:

- Full name of the passenger
- Port of entry

Whenever an ancestor immigrates to another country, we tend to concentrate on the country to which they migrated. This follows the **first principle** of genealogy research, where we work from the known to the unknown. We know that John SMITH emigrated in 1890. So we look for passenger lists at the **country of arrival**, beginning with the most likely of ports.

Many researchers stop with the passenger list research at this point. And sometimes this does their research a great disservice.

Passenger lists often exist for both the **old country** and the new.

Understanding the Resource

Like other avenues of research, immigration records have trends within them. Certain migration patterns allow us to estimate the possible port of entry for a given ancestor based on their year of travel and the country of origin. For instance, in the late 1800s and early 1900s, a larger number of immigrants came through Ellis Island, New York, than any other port on the eastern seaboard. Therefore, when we discover an ancestor arriving during that time period, we turn to the passenger lists and indices for New York City.

Unfortunately, not all passenger lists have survived. A few years ago, a researcher contacted me looking for a passenger list page. The individual did indeed show up in the **index** to the passenger lists; however, despite repeated searches of the supposed passenger list, the page referenced in the index could not be found.

Understanding the Alternatives

This does happen on occasion. In the United States, the indices were created during the 1930s as part of the WPA projects. However, the lists themselves were not microfilmed until the 1940s. Some of pages did not survive that time gap. So what will a researcher do when unable to locate their ancestor on the specified page?

In some cases, there may be emigrant lists that have survived in the old country. An excellent chart that can help you in determining if such records exist can be found in *The Source* edited by Loretto Dennis Szucs and Sandra Hargreaves Luebking and published in 1997 by Ancestry, Inc. Most public libraries have this book.

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From this chart you can determine not only what records exist, but also the dates covered, and whether or not the records are indexed. You can also learn where the originals can be found along with what repositories may have copies, including microfilmed copies. This chart includes emigrant lists for Australia, Belgium, Denmark, England, France, Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Scotland, Spain, Sweden, and the West Indies.

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A Different Approach

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Very often using these records does require that you know something about your ancestors' time of emigration. Perhaps more so than may have been needed in locating that same ancestor in records for their port of debarkation. Sometimes it is just a matter of rethinking your approach.

And of course, for most of these records, there is always the issue of a foreign language, since these records will be in the language of the originating country. For help with this, you may want to turn to the Word Lists created by the Family History Library and found in the Source Guide of the [[FamilySearch.org web site](#)].

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Some of the records that have been indexed are now available online. For instance, there is the [[Danish Emigration Archives](#)] that allows you to search for your Danish emigrants up to 1904 currently (though the project is planning to include emigrants up through 1940).

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In Conclusion

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The first line of research should be the passenger lists at the point of debarkation. However, if you cannot locate your ancestor because the page is missing, or worse yet, the port of arrival has not been indexed for those years, there may be an option. Be sure to check for possible records at the port of embarkation.

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How to start a search for your ancestor's immigration records? Many of these records are online, some are on CD-ROMs and all are available with a trip to the nearest [LDS Family History Center](#).

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Helpful URLs:

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Bureau of Land Management Records website [www.glorerecords.blm.gov]

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Location of your local LDS Family History Center [www.familysearch.org]

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Immigrant passenger list microfilm numbers
[home.att.net/~wee-monster/passengerlists.html]

Immigrant passenger lists

www.ancestry.com (pay for view site)

www.genealogy.com (pay for view site)

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