Step 9: Immigration Records
— Terry and Jim Willard

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Give Me Your Tired
While "give me your tired" would definitely apply to a genealogist after a long day of research, it is actually a famous passage from the 1883 poem "The New Colossus," by Emma Lazarus. The poem was written as part of a project to raise funds for a pedestal for the Statue of Liberty, a gift to the United States from the people of France. The funds were raised, the base built, and the statue erected. Since then, the statue has become a symbol of the United States as well as a tribute to the millions of immigrants who have entered the country. It is to these immigrants, and the paper trail they left behind, that we turn in this article.

Genealogists are very fortunate that the people of the past left a paper trail. Unfortunately, this trail may be somewhat erratic, difficult to locate, and even incomplete, especially when compared to the trail we are leaving for our descendants to follow. However, a trail does exist.

Virtually every American can trace his or her family history back to an ancestor (or a group of ancestors) who entered this country as an immigrant. Estimates place the total number of immigrants to this country (1607 to the present) between 35 and 50 million. These immigrants generally entered through one of the port cities of the United States. If they entered legally and under normal circumstances, some type of paperwork was completed to document their entry.

Federal and State Records
The records are divided into two time periods that are identified by the level of government that kept the records. From the earliest Colonial period until approximately 1820, immigration records were kept by the colony or state where the port was located. The federal government did not require ship captains to present a list to port authorities. The colonies (and later, states) had requirements for the captains, and it is these records that exist for the time period. Approximately 1 million people entered the United States during this period, and the immigration records that exist can be found in either the port city or in the archives for that state, usually located in the state's capital.

An excellent general reference that details these records is *A Bibliography of Ship Passenger Lists, 1583-1825* (New York: New York Public Library), third edition, 1978, by Harold Lancour. You may find this book at your local library or any major research library.

Since 1820, the federal government has kept immigration records in the National Archives in Washington, D.C. Copies of some of these records are also located in the regional branches of the National Archives. It is always a good idea to call any branch of the archives to learn exactly which records can be found at that location. To find the regional archive nearest you, consult your local library.

Two types of federal immigration records have been kept since 1820:

••Customs passenger lists——These lists were kept by the U.S. Customs Service and cover the years from 1820 until approximately 1891.

••Immigration passenger lists——These lists were kept by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). They begin in 1906 and continue until 1957.

Each of these lists provides valuable information about our immigrant ancestors. From the customs passenger lists we can learn:

Name
Age
Gender
Occupation
Country of Embarkation
Country of Destination

In addition to these categories, the immigration passenger lists may offer place of birth, last place of residence, and name and address of a relative in the immigrant's native country, depending on the year.

Since the vast majority of our ancestors entered this country after 1820, the obvious problem is locating information on the one person being traced. Fortunately, many of the passenger lists have been indexed and are available on microfilm through the National Archives and in major research libraries. Designated copies can be ordered from the Family History Library for use in one of the hundreds of family history centers located throughout the United States. These indexes offer the best starting point for researching existing ships' passenger lists.

There are several ways new genealogists can begin their immigrant ancestor research. First, gather as much information as possible on the immigrant ancestor. The absolute minimum information needed to use immigration records is:

•• The individual's complete name. This should include first, middle, last, and any variations that might exist for each part. Try to experiment with spelling variations as well.

•• The approximate year the individual entered the United States.

•• The port city where the immigrant entered.

Any other relevant information you have been able to gather, such as the ship's name, a port of embarkation, or a hometown in Europe, will prove invaluable. Hopefully you have been able to learn some of these facts from other sources, such as documents in your family's possession or from family stories.

In order to get the most from passenger lists, it is important to know the year your ancestor entered the country and, if possible, the name of the ship that person entered on. The best

approach is to start with a good general reference book, which can be found at any major genealogical research library. Perhaps the best of these sources is *Passenger and Immigration Lists Index: A Guide to Published Arrival Records of Passengers Who Came to the United States and Canada in the Seventeenth, Eighteenth, and Nineteenth Centuries,* edited by William P. Filby (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1981-). This three-volume series is updated annually.

Another potential source is the Internet. Every day additional lists are finding their way onto various Web sites, and it is a source that cannot be overlooked. However, remember there is no substitute for old-fashioned legwork, and locating immigration information requires a great deal of this.

Also, don't forget to check publications that focus on specific ethnic groups that entered the country. Several books presented as alphabetical lists have been published dealing with ethnic groups such as German, Polish, Italian, and Russian.

We are often asked how to learn something——such as the date an immigrant entered the country——if that information is not a part of family lore. Simply start with the 1920 Census. Column 13 of the 1920 Census asks for the year of immigration to the United States. This information, while not always accurate, yields one of those key pieces of data to pursue ships' passenger lists. Then, coupled with an educated guess as to the port of entry, you are ready to consult the various indexes available from NARA. If you do not live near a major research library or an archive where these indexes are available, you may write to the National Archives. The following contact information is taken from the NARA Web site:

Paper copies of immigration records can be ordered by mail using one NATF Form 81 for each person or family group traveling together.

You can obtain the NATF Form 81 by providing your name and mailing address to inquire@nara.gov. Be sure to specify Form 81 and the number of forms you need.

You can also obtain the NATF Form 81 by writing to: National Archives and Records Administration, Attn: NWCTB, 700 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington, D.C. 20408-0001.

Ellis Island
Any discussion of immigrant records would not be complete without reference to Ellis Island, one of America's most revered historical sites. Between 1892 and 1954 approximately 12 million people were processed in the facilities. It is estimated that today forty percent of all Americans can trace their roots to at least one person who passed through the center.

Due to the constant interest people exhibit toward their immigrant ancestor(s), the Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation has begun computerizing the immigration records of the people who passed through the center between 1892 and 1924. Thus, Ellis Island will become the starting point for someone whose ancestors entered the United States at this port.

The first phase of the database project will be available in late 2000, and Internet access to the information will be available shortly thereafter. The data will cover eleven fields, including the

person's given name, surname, sex, age, marital status, ship they arrived on, port of origin, departure date from that port, nationality, and last residence. If a researcher discovers information on his or her family, a printout of the information will be available for a small fee, as will a scanned image of the original ship's manifest and a picture of the ship. The project at Ellis Island represents some of the best technology for genealogists and will serve as a model for other similar projects.

One of the most rewarding aspects of genealogical research is the contact we have with the lives of our ancestors through the records they left behind. Did they ever question the paper trail they left behind?

What was the experience like for the steerage passengers who arrived at Ellis Island? Were they inspired by the beautiful statue that stood before them? Regardless of our ancestors' thoughts during the stressful days of immigration, genealogists today benefit from the documents they routinely filled out. It is through these records that we learn to understand a bit more their courage and hope in the unforeseen future.