

Step 10: Naturalization Records — Terry and Jim Willard

EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is the tenth in our continuing series "Family History Made Easy: Step by Step." <http://ancestry.com/library/view/ancmag/2082.asp>

As a genealogist, you have learned by now that no institution or organization does paperwork better than the federal government. It seems there is a form to be completed for every conceivable situation—from taxes to censuses to permits. And while most federal records were never intended as sources of genealogical information, they can contain very significant data about our ancestors.

One important piece of information that is difficult to discover is the town from which your immigrant ancestor originated. Many families do not have this information as part of their family lore, and other sources such as census records and ships' passenger lists do not necessarily reveal this critical piece of information. However, if your ancestor applied for United States citizenship, you may be able to learn exactly where he or she came from through some of this all-too-prevalent federal paperwork.

What Are Naturalization Records?

When immigrants enter the United States, they are classified as aliens. As such, they are allowed to reside in the United States as long as they register with the federal government annually. If they choose, aliens can become citizens. By definition, naturalization is the process by which an alien achieves the status of citizenship. The documents required to complete this process are known to genealogists as naturalization records.

Prior to the American Revolution, citizenship was not a major issue, as most immigrants were British citizens living in a British colony. Therefore, citizenship was handled by the various colonies, making records from this period scant. After 1790, the process of becoming a citizen became more important and was taken over by the new federal government. Congress established a three-step citizenship process that remains in place today.

Step I: After residing in the United States for at least two years, an alien could declare his or her intent to become a citizen. In truth, it was a male ancestor who declared his intent, as women (from 1790 to 1922) and minor children (from 1790 to 1940) were granted "derivative citizenship" automatically when the husband or father was naturalized. The paperwork necessary for this first step is known as the Declaration of Intention, or the "first papers."

Prior to 1906, the year the naturalization process was standardized through the Basic Naturalization Act of 1906, the declaration of intent could be submitted to any local, county, state, or federal court. The applicant was required to supply the following information:

- A. An oath declaring the intent to become a citizen of the United States.
- B. A pledge to support the Constitution of the United States.

C. A sworn statement renouncing any foreign allegiance or claims to hereditary titles that may have been granted in the applicant's homeland.

D. The name of the applicant.

E. The date of the application.

F. The provision of various demographic information such as current address, age and/or birth date, place of birth, and port of immigration into the United States.

After 1906, the form remained similar, but the required information increased significantly. In addition to the details listed above, the declarant had to supply personal information such as occupation, color, height, weight, eye and hair color, and distinctive marks. The declarant also had to supply biographical information such as date and place of birth, place of departure for the United States, last foreign residence, name of vessel, and date of arrival in the United States. In later years, more information was required, such as spousal information and details about the applicant's children.

Step II: The alien was required to reside in the United States for a specified period of time—usually an additional three years after the Declaration of Intention was filed. After 1906, this period of time could not exceed seven years.

Step III: The alien, upon satisfying the first two steps, could petition a court for admission as a citizen. This process is referred to as the "second papers." The court to which this petition was submitted did not have to be the same court to which the first papers were submitted.

As with the first papers, the data included on the petition depends upon the court to which it was submitted and the submission year. As a general rule, the documents contained the name of the applicant, an oath of allegiance, and two affidavits from witnesses confirming that the residency requirement had been met. After the Basic Naturalization Act of 1906, the form used for this petition was standardized, and the required information also included the applicant's name, date of petition, names of the witnesses, age or birth date of applicant, port of entry, and the date the first papers were filed. Additional information might include place of birth, name, date, and place of birth of spouse and even of children.

If the applicant's papers were deemed to be in order, a Naturalization Certificate, or "third paper," was issued. This was the legal proof of citizenship, and it often became an immigrant's prized possession. These certificates were also standardized after 1906. They became two-part forms that were serially numbered. One copy went to the new citizen, while the Immigration and Naturalization Service retained the other.

Locating Naturalization Records

Of all the public records available to genealogists, naturalization records are perhaps the most difficult to use because they are so difficult to track down. Since immigrant ancestors could begin the process of naturalization at any authorized court, and since virtually any court was

authorized, the actual records of naturalization could be scattered over the various levels of American courts—from local and county to state and federal.

It is essential for the researcher to know where the ancestor was residing at the approximate time the "first papers" were filed. Ask family members about the residence of the immigrant ancestor, or check the federal census. Fortunately, some of the more recent censuses also asked when an individual was naturalized. Below is a list of some of the useful census years and the column for that census that might help your search:

1870 Census—Note the column, "Male Citizens of the United States of twenty-one years of age and upwards." If your male ancestor was enumerated in this census and a check appears in column 19, you have a clue that the naturalization occurred before 1870. While that does not pin down the exact year of naturalization, you can use it as a starting point. For example, you might know (from a different source) that your immigrant arrived in 1858, and thus you will have a range of dates to search. Knowing that he must have resided in this country at least two years before filing "first papers," then the range of possible dates would be between 1860 and 1870.

1900 Census—The 1900 Census requested the individual's naturalization status in column 18. The responses are "AL" for alien, "PA" for having filed first papers, and "NA" for naturalized. Again, no actual year is provided, but you can use your powers of deductive reasoning to narrow down the possibilities.

1910 Census—The 1910 Census requested the naturalization status in column 16, and the responses are the same as on the 1900 Census.

1920 Census—The 1920 Census records the same data in column 14, but also asks for the exact year in which the individual was naturalized in column 15. Remember that the individual being interviewed was working from memory and that the answer in column 15 may be off by a few years.

Census records can be an advantage in our search for naturalization records. Armed with the knowledge of when the ancestor was naturalized and where that individual might have been residing at the time, the researcher can begin the quest for the court where the papers would have been filed. The best rule of thumb is to begin with the court located nearest the immigrant ancestor's home. For an excellent resource on the levels and locations of various courts around the United States, see one of the following books:

They Became Americans: Finding Naturalization Records and Ethnic Origins, by Loretto Dennis Szucs. Salt Lake City, Utah: Ancestry, 1998.

Guide to Naturalization Records in the United States, by Christine Schaefer. Baltimore, Maryland: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1997.

After locating the court that might have jurisdiction of the naturalization records, either write and request a copy of the naturalization papers or personally go to the courthouse. In either case, you

must have as much specific information as possible about the ancestor——full name, date of birth, etc. In some cases, naturalization records have been moved to another location, such as a state historical society or even the National Archives. It is possible that an index has been published for a particular county's naturalization records, such as the Index of Naturalizations, Ashtabula County, Ohio, 1875-1906, published by the Ashtabula County Genealogical Society. In most situations, it is safe to assume that the search process will be time-consuming.

In addition to these sources, a researcher may choose to go online to see if the court that handled the naturalization application has made any records available on the Internet. Web sites such as [Cyndi's List](#) and Ancestry.com are excellent starting points for electronic research. As an example of what can be found online, the Indiana State Archives has become the repository of all Indiana naturalization records prior to 1951. The Archives is microfilming these records and making them available as a searchable database on the Internet. Other similar Web sites are available and should be investigated.

While naturalization records may be difficult to locate, they have the benefit of providing significant information about your ancestors.