

Using U.S. Records to Find Your Immigrant's Link to the Old Country

by Sara Allen

Goal: To find a U.S. record with:

1. Birthplace in old country
2. Home parish in old country
3. Parents' names
4. Exact birthdate of immigrant

So that you can then successfully research the family back in the old country

Strategies:

- Gather Background Information:
 - Speak to knowledgeable relatives (even distant cousins/aunts/etc.) from all branches of immigrant's family, not just yours
 - Seek out pictures/documents within the family
 - Answer questions such as: what language did the family speak? when did they come to the US? what religion did they practice when they came over? what was the family name in old country, prior to any name changes? what region/part of the country did they come from?
- Read up on the history and genealogy of the country/region they came from
- Get to know your Ancestor - compile all known information about him/her, such as: approximate age, economic status, names of wife and children, where & when married, where, when & to whom children were married, religious affiliation, where & when lived in particular state/county/town, landowner, when acquired land, when sold, what goods paid taxes on, who was property distributed to upon death, when died, where buried, etc. Use Research Checklist handout.
- Cluster Research – Research the entire family (all known children, spouses, siblings, parents, in-laws) and his **F**riends, **A**ssociates and **N**eighbors (FAN Club)
- Be flexible about spelling; Use the Soundex option if available; first names may be abbreviated or use initials only
 - Compile lists of phonetic spellings of last name
 - Learn how last name would have been pronounced in their language
 - Learn the English equivalents of first names & vice versa (see *Foreign Versions of English Names*)
- Look at several different census transcriptions for the same census year, because handwriting and census paper quality were poor, and foreign names were frequently misspelled
 - Check online indexes (Ancestry.com, FamilySearch.org) Also try MyHeritage, FindmyPast, etc. AND

- Check census index books in print, if available
- Check microfilm ALSO, if having difficulty locating someone
- Tips for searching censuses include trying different combinations of the following options in the Ancestry.com search box:
 - Use Soundex option for last name
 - Search for first name only (leave last name blank)
 - Search by birth year +/- 2, 5, 10 years
 - Select “Exact Matches Only” to narrow list
 - Enter birth place
 - Add spouse’s first name

U.S. Records which may include town of origin, parents’ names, home parish in old country:

Federal Census – look for birthplaces, year of emigration, whether naturalized; and names of neighbors also

- Find family in all applicable censuses, view original (handwritten) documents, and read all columns of information recorded
- Online at Ancestry.com; FamilySearch.org; etc.
- Few libraries may have on microfilm
- Record names of neighbors also (for FAN Club)- 20 families prior and after their census entry

City Directories

- Locate in local library in the city desired or at the state library

Land deeds/property records – buying and selling land/property; possible former residence named on deeds

- Locate in books, microfilm, periodicals as abstracts & indexes; originals in County Courthouse or online at FamilySearch.org

Passenger Lists – may give town of origin, birthplace of immigrants; especially post-1900 records

- Locate originals on Ancestry.com, FamilySearch.org or on microfilm; some also in books or periodicals as indexes/abstracts
- Tips for finding your ancestor in Ancestry’s Passenger lists
 - Use European spelling of first and last name
 - Use Soundex option for last name
 - Use Phonetic spelling option for first name or enter only first part of name, followed by asterisk, such as Mag* for Magdalena/Maggie/Magdalene, etc.

- Use Steve Morse's One Step search form (see below)

Naturalization records – may give town of origin, date of immigration, especially post-1900 records

- Locate in books, periodicals, microfilm as abstracts & indexes; some originals online at Fold3, FamilySearch.org, Ancestry.com; originals at County Courthouse, National Archives or State Archives, or USCIS (<http://www.uscis.gov/genealogy>)

Religious records – often give home parish or baptismal parish & parents' names for immigrants

- Locate at the church itself; denominational archives, local or state libraries; in books, microfilm or periodicals including copies of actual records or transcriptions; online at FamilySearch.org/Ancestry.com or other website

Civil birth, marriage, death records – often give birthplace, parents' names

- Locate at county or state health dept. or county clerk (marriages); online at Ancestry.com, Familysearch.org or other website; in books, periodicals or microfilm (transcriptions)

Cemetery records – tombstones sometimes give birthplace/parents' names

- Go to cemetery; see pictures of stones online at www.findagrave.com or Billion graves, Interment.net, or other website

Cemetery records – sexton's records

- Go to cemetery or call office; locate in books, periodicals and microfilm; other online sites

Funeral home records

- Contact funeral home; locate in books, periodicals & microfilm; online at various sites

Obituaries – English and foreign-language newspapers in US

- Locate at local library, state library (may be able to order on microfilm via ILL) or online at various sources such as Ancestry.com, findagrave.com, Newspapers.com, NewspaperArchive.com & other websites; abstracts in books, periodicals and microfilm

Home records – Bible, Letters, Photographs – at your house or a relative's house

Draft registrations/military – often gives birthplace

- Originals online at Ancestry.com or FamilySearch.org; some transcripts available in books, microfilm and periodicals
- Order federal military records from National Archives, and state from state archives

Court records – could give clues to family information

- Originals in County Courthouse or National Archives; some online on FamilySearch.org, Ancestry.com; some transcripts available in books, microfilm and periodicals

County or city histories

- Locate in books, microfilm or periodicals; some online at Familysearch.org; Internet Archive (<https://archive.org/>); Google books (<https://books.google.com/>), etc.

Social Security Application – birth place, parents' names

- Order from the Social Security Administration, called SS-5 – must include proof of death of person and parents, in order for them to release information (<http://www.socialsecurity.gov/forms/ssa-711.pdf>)

Websites:

Castle Garden – New York Passenger lists, 1820-1892

<http://www.castlegarden.org/>

Ellis Island – New York Passenger lists, 1820-1957

<https://www.statueofliberty.org/discover/passenger-ship-search/>

FamilySearch -- free digital Records, Books, & Genealogies; Catalog of materials in their library in Salt Lake City, and a How-to Wiki on with help on various topics in genealogy.

<https://familysearch.org/>

FamilySearch Catalog – to search for records online or to order copies from

<https://familysearch.org/catalog/search>

Order copies/lookups from Family History Library - <https://www.familysearch.org/family-history-library/family-history-library-records-look-up-service>

Genealogy Center, Allen County Public Library – Fort Wayne Indiana library with second largest print collection in the US

<https://www.genealogycenter.info>

JewishGen -- large website with Jewish genealogy helps: including maps, online records, contacts with other researchers, etc.

<http://www.jewishgen.org/>

Steve Morse One Step Website -- finding aid to help with searching passenger lists; use Ellis Island Gold Form for NY passengers 1892-forward

<http://www.stevemorse.org/>

WorldCat – online catalog from libraries all over the world – use to find sources in a library near you.

<https://www.worldcat.org/>

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