ancestry

RESEARCH GUIDE

Finding Your Immigrant Ancestors

Homeward Bound

More than 95 percent of Americans descend from individuals who did not live on this continent in the 18th century. While immigration has occurred steadily since the first settlers ventured to the New World, most arrivals can be categorized into three major waves:

FIRST WAVE

Settlers in the 1600s were often fleeing religious persecution and/or seeking new opportunities in a new land. Most immigrants from this wave were German, English, Welsh, or Dutch.

SECOND WAVE

Crop failures, political turmoil, and poor living conditions brought on by the Industrial Revolution all led to people leaving their homelands for America in the 1800s. Additional migration motivation came for people seeking religious freedom. While immigrants arrived from around the world, the greatest numbers came from places such as Scandinavia, Ireland, Scotland, England, Turkey, Armenia, and China.

THIRD WAVE

Political turmoil and, ultimately, wars in Europe in the early to mid-1900s brought more immigrants to the U.S. Other immigrants sought relief from religious persecution or were seeking political asylum. Well-represented ethnicities in this immigration wave include German, Russian, and Polish Jews, and Italians, Greeks, and Austro-Hungarians.
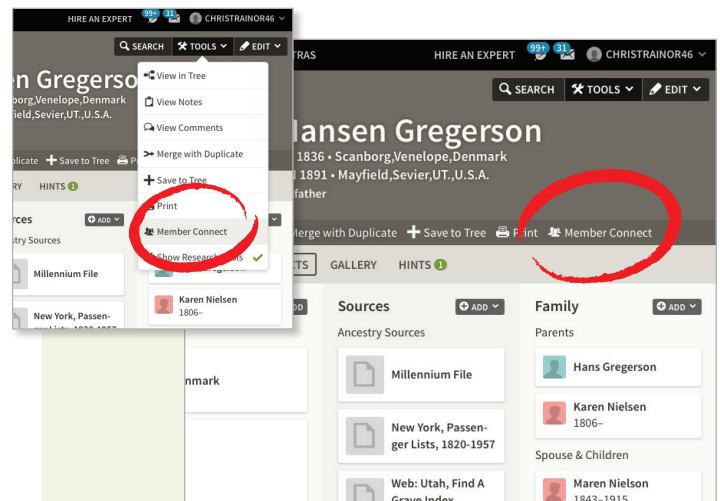
Click on the name to send a note to another researcher.

Tip: *Immigrants often settled near other immigrants from their home county—sometimes even the same hometown. You can find other people researching your ancestor through Member Connect at Ancestry. Look for the Member Connect link on your ancestor's profile page in your online tree.*

Ellis Island

Coming to America

Not all passenger arrival lists were created equally. Here's what you'll find and where to look to help fill in any blanks:

Tip: Seeing Double or Solo. You may find more than one passenger arrival record for your ancestor if he or she returned home to visit. You may also find a parent traveling solo. Often the father would immigrate before other family members and secure a job and a home before the rest of the family arrived.

KEY DATES	WHAT YOU'LL FIND
Colonial period through 1819	Passenger lists weren't required, but some ship captains retained lists of all aboard. Search the Passenger and Immigration List Index to see if a record of your ancestor's arrival exists. Records in this collection date back to the 1500s.
1820-1893	Passenger lists first required to be kept; however, details on these lists are somewhat limited. To successfully identify an ancestor in a less-detailed list, look for the full family unit. Compare names, location information, dates, and any other available details to facts you've discovered in later U.S. records about the family to determine if the person could really be your ancestor.
1893-1906	Sixteen new fields added to passenger lists, including marital status, last residence, final destination, literacy, and financial status. Use each of these to help you determine if you're looking at the correct person.
1906-0n	Manifests required to include a physical description of the passenger and place of birth; shortly thereafter, name and address of the closest living relative in the country of origin were added, too. Use the latter to help you locate the family in their homeland.

Steps to Discovering Your Immigrant Ancestor in the U.S. and Their Homeland

STEP 1: **BEGIN WITH RECORDS CREATED BY THE FAMILY IN THE U.S.**

Start with the most recent records, including the 1940 and 1930 censuses, military draft registration cards, yearbooks, obituaries, and other records at Ancestry.

How: Click on the Search tab at Ancestry to get started. Input the name of an ancestor who would have been living during the 20th century. Include other details—birth year, residence or birthplace, and the names of other relatives—if available.

What to look for: Click on the results returned and inspect the details. Family names, ages and relationships, birthplaces, occupations, and addresses (scan horizontally across the page to see all of the information) can help you determine if you've found the correct family.

Where next: Use the information you discover to conduct more searches for the same family moving back in time. Census records are full of details—and 20th-century records include information about immigration and/or naturalization—so try to discover each one your family appears in. Be sure to pay attention to birthplaces on all documents. A foreign birthplace points directly to your family's immigrant.

STEP 2: **FIND THE IMMIGRANT IN THE IMMIGRATION AND TRAVEL COLLECTION AT ANCESTRY**

Once you know who the immigrant was—and have his or her name, approximate birth year, and other identifying details from census and other records—search for records directly related to his or her immigration.

How: Click on the Search tab at Ancestry. From the Special Collections list on the right side of the page (or from the Search drop-down menu), select Immigration & Travel to limit your search to records from this collection. Fill in the search form with details you've discovered about your family's immigrant—name, birth year, year of arrival—and search. Note that the form contains fields for names of other family members, locations where your ancestor may have lived, where he or she arrived in America, and more. You can fill these in later if you receive too many results, but be careful: immigration details reported years later on a census may not be entirely accurate.

Tip: Check 20th-century census records for immigration year and/or naturalization status. Then use that information to help you focus your next search in the Immigration and Travel Collection.

Barges [i.e., ferry boats] at Ellis Island

What to look for: The Immigration & Travel collection includes passenger arrival lists, naturalization (citizenship) documents, passport applications, and other records that link to a person's international travel. Compare dates, family members, and other details you find on an immigration or travel record to the information you've already collected about your ancestor to see if you've found a match.

Census record with Teresa Ventura's family

Passenger list with the right Teresa shows the same family members and age ranges but with ethnic-equivalent given names.

Passenger list for a different Teresa Ventura can be ruled out since children's names and ages don't match the later U.S. census record.

Tip: Discrepancies exist. Details in immigration and naturalization records may not mirror what you've found elsewhere. Census immigration dates may be off by a few years, and even first and last names can differ slightly (yes, even English-speaking immigrants sometimes changed their names or how they spelled them after arrival). Carefully analyze all finds and assess them against known facts to be sure you have the right person.

Where next: Your goal is to find the location of the home in the old country so you can dive into records created there. Some passenger lists and naturalization documents include this information—but not all do. Search for details in death certificates, church records, military documents, wills, and resources in your own attic (place names may be listed on the backs of old photos, and letters could point to family members who remained behind). Also look at immigration and travel records created by other immigrating family members, which may include details you're looking for even if your own ancestor's records don't. You'll find more tips for finding a hometown in the appendix at the end of this guide.

STEP 3: USE NAME, BIRTH DETAILS, AND PLACE INFORMATION TO LOCATE YOUR ANCESTOR IN INTERNATIONAL RECORDS.

As they were in the U.S., records in other countries were also created and retained on a local level. Knowing where your ancestor lived and details about his or her family can help you pinpoint the right person when searching through inter- national records.

How:

Click on the Search tab at Ancestry and choose Show more options. Then fill in the search form with details you've learned about your ancestor. At the bottom of the form is a Collection Focus option. Select the country you're interested in to focus your search on records created there. (Be sure to undo these settings before your next search of all records.)

Where next: Your ancestors likely left a long trail of records through their homeland, but you may need help locating some of them. In addition to searching records at Ancestry, use the site's message boards to find other researchers who can help. You can also hire a professional to assist with some—or all—of the research. You can find details about professional research services via the Hire an Expert link.

Not sure a record you found is linked to your family? Save it to your Ancestry Shoebox so you can review it later after you've had time to learn more about the family.

Immigrants waiting to be transferred,
Ellis Island, October 30, 1912

Key Resources at Ancestry for Researching Immigrant Ancestors
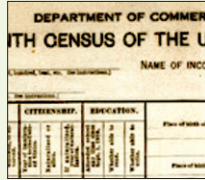
U.S. Federal Census Collection

Discover more about your family's life in the U.S. and find the clues you'll need to to follow them back through generations until you reach your family's immigrant ancestor.

Immigration and Travel Collection

Discover the moment your ancestor arrived, as well as details reported to obtain citizenship. Note that women and children may have been naturalized through a parent or spouse, depending on laws at the time, and may not have naturalization records of their own.

Military Collection

Learn more about military service in both the U.S. and other countries. Look for key records associated with the Revolutionary War, Civil War, World War I and II and other conflicts, some of which mention land, give personal stories, or provide information about other relatives.
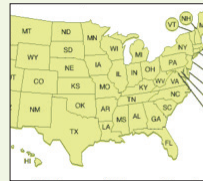
Obituaries and Newspapers

Locate other family lines and possibly the birthplace of an ancestor. Check for obituaries for siblings, too, which may contain additional details.
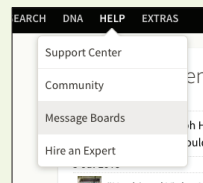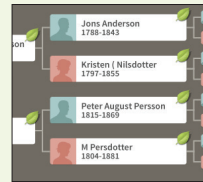
Location Maps

Quickly view all of the records available for a specific location at Ancestry. Access the map at the bottom of the search page and click on the location you're interested in to learn more.

Message Boards

Connect with other researchers who have experience researching immigration records.

Family Trees

Link to other family members, possibly even distant cousins, who are also researching the same family lines. One of them might have the details you're searching for.

Name:	Luigi Ventura
Arrival Date:	8 Nov 1922
Birth Date:	abt 1909
Birth Location:	Italy
Birth Location Other:	corato
Age:	13
Gender:	Male
Ethnicity/ Nationality:	Italian (South) (Ital
Port of Departure:	Naples, Italy
Port of Arrival:	New York, New Yor
Ship Name:	Colombo
Search Ship Database:	Search for the Colo 'Passenger Ships a database

View image(s) of the ship

🖉 Add alternate information

⚠ Report issue

Note the search result for Luigi provides his birthplace, arrival date, and other details, but page 2 of the original passenger list record also states Luigi's destination in the U.S., health condition, physical description, and more.

Tip: *Always view the original image. While the typed search result you receive provides a lot of information, the original image may contain even more—including clues about other relatives.*

Helpful Information

GOOD TO KNOW

Having the following details handy can make searching for a foreign-born ancestor in U.S. passenger lists, international records, and elsewhere much simpler:

- **Ethnic given name** (for instance "John" could also be Jan, Janos, Johann, or Giovanni): Search the internet to find equivalents.

- **Surname variations:** Sound the name out and see what types of phonetic spellings you can come up with. Search the internet for variations of the name and review citizenship to see if aliases or name changes were included.

- **Age**: Estimate from a census records or obtain from vital records.

- **Family structure:** You can discover the names of siblings in census records, which can help you locate the family immigrating, even if the surname has changed slightly.

- **Nationality:** Use caution with eastern European ancestors; countries have changed names and borders often.

- **Estimated date of arrival:** 20th-century census records include this detail, as do citizenship (naturalization) documents. Note that both were self-reported and could be off somewhat.

7 TIPS FOR TRICKY NAMES

Immigrant names can be tricky. Even something as simple as Luigi may have been changed to Lou after arrival. Use the following tricks to help you uncover your ancestor, regardless of the name he or she is hiding behind.

Trick 1

Use the internet to help you determine ethnic equivalents of an ancestor's name. Sites like BehindtheName.com let you type in your ancestor's name and search for related names that include various ethnic equivalents.

Trick 2

Look for literal translations. The German surname Schwartz may have been changed to Black, just like the French surname LeBlanc may have been changed to White.

Trick 3

Lengthen and shorten names. Remember that more than one ancestor may have changed a surname. Weisenberger, for example, may have originally been changed to Weisenberg before becoming Weisen and finally, generations later, Wise.

Trick 4

Try a wildcard search using asterisks to replace some of the letters in a name. For example, if the surname was Berlengauem, B*rl*g*m* would find it as well as Burlingame and other variants.

Trick 5

Search by criteria. Forego the surname and search using birthplace, age, gender, occupation, and other details to find people who match the ancestor you're seeking. Pay special attention to the names in your search results. Do any of them seem to be reflected in your family?

Trick 6

Check immigration records and passports carefully—they may include notations indicating a previous name change.

Trick 7

Try maiden names. Female ancestors may have traveled using them, even when married.

Appendix: Finding the Hometown

Once you find your immigrant ancestor in U.S. records, you'll also need to discover where he or she was from—region, county, or, better still, a hometown—so you know exactly where to focus your international search. Look in the following U.S. records for mentions of the old country home.

AT HOME

Search attics for mementos, including wedding announcements, postcards, and letters sent from the old country, any of which could give you names of relatives who remained behind, other family members, or addresses that point you to a hometown.

IN THE CENSUS

Check birthplaces listed on census records. You may discover that the ancestor you thought was your family's first immigrant was actually the immigrant's child, cousin, or in-law. Begin with 20th-century records and search for the whole family—parents, siblings, and grandparents, too. Look for year of immigration in those same records. Can't find the immigrant? Keep working back in time and follow siblings as well. One of them may lead you to the immigrant.

WITH FRIENDS AND RELATIVES

Ever notice how many people on a single page of a census seem to be born in the same country? It could be the result of chain migration. Often a single immigrant would arrive in America, land a job, and send word of opportunity back home. Soon more family and friends would immigrate and send for their family and friends. For researchers, these ethnic enclaves can provide all manner of clues: maiden names, hometowns, extended family lines. Do a little digging and also check message boards to see who might be researching the area. They may have some details you're looking for, too.
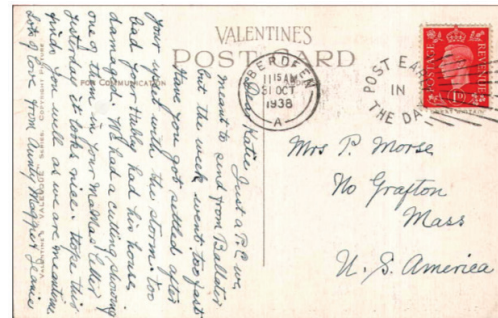
ABOARD A SHIP OR CROSSING A BORDER

Immigration was already booming in the mid-19th century; unfortunately, passenger lists were notoriously stingy with details then. But those mid-19th-century lists do hold the names of other passengers, who may have been your ancestor's friends or relatives and fantastic record keepers. Snoop around their family lines to see where they went and if their paths crossed your ancestor's again. If you can't find a passenger list for your ancestor, remember that at times it was cheaper and simpler to travel to the U.S. via Canada. Your ancestor may have crossed the border immediately or even a generation or two later.

IN CHURCH

Baptisms, weddings, funerals, and more took place in churches. Use census records and city directories to find your ancestor's address; then search for surviving churches near the family home. Contact the church to inquire about records created when your ancestor lived in the neighborhood. Also call the local library, which may know of other resources you haven't yet considered.

Appendix: Finding the Hometown

Emigrant Savings Bank entry

ON A DOCKET

Court records aren't just for the criminally inclined (although those records are full of detail you won't find elsewhere). In the Tax, Criminal, Land & Wills collection at Ancestry, you'll also discover real estate transactions, small business dealings, records from the Emigrant Savings Bank, probates, and more. Search for all members of the family, read records carefully, and check to see if the names of witnesses sound familiar, too. They may also be family.

IN THE MILITARY

Draft registration cards from World War I and World War II can be brimming with family details, including hometown, occupation, and name of nearest kin. For earlier arrivals to the U.S., Civil War-era records—pensions, muster rolls, the 1890 Veterans Schedule, enlistments, and others—may be even more revealing.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Family stories may not always be entirely accurate, but they're often full of names, places, and relationships that can help you figure out when your ancestor was where. Use them to build a timeline that you populate with details from the records you find. And enjoy the tales, which give you a better idea of the characters in your family tree.

MAKING HEADLINES

A graduation, engagement, or even a visitor from out of town, any of these might have been big news at the time. Look in local newspapers for daily comings and goings, as well as bigger events. And if your family is full of city dwellers, ask the local library if there were smaller, neighborhood- or ethnicity-specific publications.

AT THE CEMETERY

A simple tombstone may hold the birthplace or middle name you've been trying to locate for years. The one next to it could offer an elusive maiden name. Families often stayed together, even in death, so a trip to the cemetery could introduce you to distant family lines you may not have heard of and other details your ancestor surely wanted you to know.