

# Navigating Naturalization Records

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First papers, petitions, certificates and registrations. These are some of the key documents for Naturalization--the process to apply to become a U.S. citizen. Due to changing laws and an evolving process over time, locating the appropriate official paperwork can often be a challenging task for family historians. In this webinar, learn how to navigate naturalization records and what information they contain about your ancestors.

## Overview

- Learn how and where to find naturalization documents
- What genealogy-rich information do naturalization records include?
- Tools and Resources

## Key Steps for Locating Naturalization Records

- Learn about immigration history
- Understand the naturalization process
- Track down the records
- Consider other possibilities

## Naturalization Process History

- Between **1776 and 1790** each state had its own procedures
- In **1790** applicants: free white male over 21
- **1790**: Congress passed first federal naturalization law; a series of acts changed restrictions and requirements
- **1795**: the two step process to become a citizen was instituted. Applicant filed declaration of intent (first papers) then after a minimum of three years could petition for naturalization. Eligibility to free white females over 21
- Requirements changed **1798-1824**
- **1924**: American Indians full citizenship
- Asians could not naturalize: **1882-1943**

- Between **1855 and 1922** alien wives had derivative citizenship
- **1907-1922**: if American woman married an alien she lost her citizenship (this was repealed in 1922)
- **1906**: Creation of Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). Now known as the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) <http://www.uscis.gov>
- Each year approximately 680,000 people become citizens of the United States during naturalization ceremonies.

### **What is Naturalization?**

1. to confer upon (an alien) the rights and privileges of a citizen.
2. to become naturalized.

### **Citizenship Process**

- Declaration of Intention (first papers)
- Petition for naturalization (second or final papers)

### **Path to Citizenship**

- First Papers (“Declaration of Intent”)
- Alien renounces allegiance to homeland
- Declares intention to become US citizen
- Immigrant could do this as soon as he stepped off the boat
- Petition for Naturalization
- Formal application for citizenship
- Some courts didn’t require prior to 1903

### **Types of Naturalization Records**

Each step in the citizenship process produces its own set of documents. The three created for most naturalized citizens are the declaration of intent, petition for naturalization and certificate of naturalization. In some cases, other records also might be generated.

## **Declaration of Intention (also called “First Papers”)**

With this record, an alien declares his intention to become a US citizen and renounces his allegiance to foreign governments. Declarations of intention filed before Sept. 27, 1906, usually contain bare bones information:

- the applicant 's name
- country of birth or allegiance (but not the specific town)
- date of the application
- A few records of this era show the date and port of US arrival.

Declarations of intention filed after Sept. 27, 1906, provide more details, including:

- a more-specific birthplace
- port and date of arrival
- a physical description or photo\*
- the names of a wife and any children naturalized along with the husband
- \*After 1929, declaration and final certificate includes photograph of applicant. The declaration of intention requirement ended in 1952, although immigrants still have the option to file a declaration if they want to.

## **Petition for Naturalization (also called “second” or “final” papers)**

Once an person declared his intention to become a citizen, met the residency requirement and waited the required period after filing, he could submit a naturalization petition to the court. He often filed in the court closest to where he lived. Starting in 1906, second papers typically include:

- the petitioner's name (possibly his birth name)
- residence
- occupation
- birth date and place
- citizenship
- personal description
- date of arrival in the United States
- arrival and departure ports
- date when US residence commenced

- length of residence in the state
- name changes
- marital status (listing wife's name and date of birth, if married)
- the names, dates and places of birth and residence of the applicant's children

### **Certificate of Naturalization**

After the applicant completed the citizenship requirements and signed an oath of allegiance (a record usually found along with the petition), a certificate of naturalization was issued to the immigrant. Most certificates contain the following information:

- individual's name
- certificate number
- name of the court where he filed
- date issued
- After 1929, the certificate also included a photo. The government didn't retain copies of these certificates, so the best place to find them is among family papers.

### **Certificate of Arrival**

After 1906, courts began to require proof that an immigrant had legally entered the country. It was provided in the form of a certificate of arrival, which listed the port name, date and ship of the immigrant's arrival.

- A clerk at the immigrant's state port of entry would locate his passenger list to verify the date and ship of arrival, often making a notation on the passenger list.
- The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) would then issue a certificate of arrival and then send it to the naturalization court.
- Certificates of arrival were first issued under the Basic Naturalization Act of 1906; a 1929 law mandated them for every naturalizing immigrant.
- These certificates are generally included in a naturalization records file.

### **Naturalization Deposition**

These documents contain statements made during a naturalization hearing by witnesses in support of an applicant's petition.

## **What if Your Ancestor Did Not Naturalize?**

In 1940, the Alien Registration Act required all noncitizens age 14 and older living in the United States to register. Each registered alien was assigned an **Alien Registration Number or A-number**. The registration form, part of the immigrant's Alien File ("A-file"), requested a broad array of detail including all names used, date and place of birth, immigration date and ship, activities and organizations, criminal history and more.

- Alien Registration Form (A-files)
- Early registrations are on microfilm (July 1940 to April 1944)
- Request from USCIS
- Not all immigrants intended to settle permanently in U.S. ("birds of passage")
- May have filed first papers, etc. but never completed the process

**TIP: Immigrants who filed the declaration of intention sometimes didn't complete the citizenship process before the declaration expired. Thus, you may find multiple declarations for one person.**

## **How to Locate Naturalization Records**

- Home and family sources
- Municipal, county, state and federal courthouses (esp. before 1906)
- Check Family History Library (FHL) as many records and indexes have been microfilmed
- City, county, regional, or state archives, including town halls or city halls
- Consult Joe Beine's Naturalization Guides (see Websites section of this handout)
- Check Ancestry.com, Fold3.com, and FindMyPast subscription sites
- National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)
- Regional facilities (federal courts)
- Washington, DC has records from federal courts in that city only
- United States Citizenship and Immigrations Services USCIS
  - After 1906 file FOIA request
  - Wait time can be several months (fees are about to increase)

- Besides declaration and petition you may be able to get a certificate of arrival; certificate stub (if it survived); naturalization certificate (later ones have photographs)
- Certificate files (C-Files) document the naturalization process. Granting of naturalized US citizenship by courts between 1906-1956 and issuance of Certificates of Citizenship to those who derived or resumed U.S. citizenship.

### **Problems/Pitfalls**

- More aliens applied at state or county level because of lower fees or less stringent standards
- Could have applied for first papers in one place and petition in another
- Problems with spelling of names indexes, transcriptions etc.–look for variants

### **Other Records to Check**

Not every immigrant filed for citizenship. The following sources can provide clues to whether an ancestor filed, and when he achieved citizen status:

- **Censuses**
  - US censuses in 1870 and 1900-1940 include notations about whether a person was naturalized.
  - The year of naturalization is given in the 1920 census.
  - Look at the citizenship columns for the following abbreviations:  
AL (alien), NA (naturalized), NR (not reported), PA (first papers filed), IN (declaration of intention), and Am Cit (American citizen born abroad, used in the 1940 census)
- **Immigration Records**
  - Passenger list annotations regarding nationality and citizenship: A number, perhaps with the note “Naturalization Certificate Number,” indicates a clerk checked the list to verify the person’s legal arrival.
  - If a naturalized citizen traveled abroad on business or to visit family, the passenger list documenting his return would have a notation such as USC (for US citizen), Nat, Natz or Naturalized (see article on “A Guide to Interpreting Passenger List Annotations” as listed under **Resources** on page 8 of this handout).
  - A naturalized citizen who applied for a passport would note his year of naturalization. Look for passport records on Ancestry.com, Fold3 and FamilySearch.org.

- **Voter Registration Records**
  - After 1906, an immigrant had to be a citizen in order to vote.
  - Voting records vary in availability and location.
  - Check county or city repositories, local libraries, and historical and genealogical societies.
- **Land Records**
  - Immigrants had to file at least declaration of intention before they could apply for land under the Homestead Act of 1862.
  - At the end of the five-year term, when the immigrant went to secure the patent to the homestead, he had to have become a citizen; homestead applications may contain copies of naturalization records. You can obtain these files from the National Archives, the appropriate state's Bureau of Land Management office, or from the county courthouse.
  - If your ancestor was successful in obtaining the homestead, finding the land patent should make it easier to get the homestead application records.
- **Military Records**
  - After 1862, aliens who served in the US Army and who were honorably discharged could apply for citizenship on an abbreviated timeline (this did not guarantee citizenship).
  - The military service record is not likely to contain the naturalization record, but if the veteran applied for a pension, you may locate documentation there.
  - World War I draft records indicated naturalization status.
  - Digitized WWI draft cards are on Ancestry, Fold3, and FamilySearch.

## **Summary**

- Many laws and acts changed requirements over the years since 1790
- Could apply at local or federal level
- Usually a two-step process: 1st papers Declaration of Intention; Petition
- Pre-1906 papers less information
- May have to check multiple places
- Check other records for clues

## **Resources**

### **Articles**

- “A Gold mine of Naturalization Records in New England” by Walter V. Hickey *Prologue Magazine* Fall 2004, Vol. 36, No. 3  
<http://archives.gov/publications/prologue/2004/fall/genealogy-2004-fall.html>
- “A Guide to Interpreting Passenger List Annotations” by Marian L. Smith  
<http://www.jewishgen.org/InfoFiles/Manifests>
- “American Naturalization Processes and Procedures, 1790-1985” by John J. Newman (*Heritage Quest*, out of print)
- “The Colonial Naturalization Act of 1740 with a List of Persons Naturalized in New York Colony, 1740-1769” by Richard J. Wolfe, *New York Genealogical & Biographical Record*, Vol. 94, Issue 3, Page 137, 1963.
- “Women and Naturalization ca. 1802-1940” By Marian L. Smith, *Prologue Magazine*, Summer 1998, Vol. 30, No. 2. Women and Naturalization, ca. 1802-1940  
<http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1998/summer/women-and-naturalization-1.html>

### **Books**

- *Courthouse Research for Family Historians* by Christine Rose (CR Publications)
- *Genealogy and the Law: A Guide to Legal Sources for the Family Historian* by Kay Haviland Freilich and William B. Freilich (National Genealogical Society)
- *Guide to Genealogical Research in the National Archives of the United States* edited by Anne Bruner Eales and Robert m. Kvasnicka (National Archives Trust Fund Board)
- *Guide to Naturalization Records of the United States* by Christina K. Schaefer (Genealogical Publishing Co.)
- *The Researcher’s Guide to American Genealogy, 3rd edition*, by Val D. Greenwood (Genealogical Publishing Co.)
- *The Source: A Guidebook of American Genealogy, 3rd edition*, edited by Loretto Dennis Szucs and Sandra Hargreaves Luebking (Ancestry Publishing)
- *They Became Americans: Finding Naturalization Records and Ethnic Origins* by Loretto Dennis Szucs (Ancestry.com)
- *They Came in Ships: Finding Your Immigrant Ancestor’s Arrival Record, 3rd edition*, by John P. Colletta (Ancestry.com)

## **Websites**

**Ancestry.com (\$)**

<http://www.ancestry.com>

**Bureau of Land Management Office**

<http://www.blm.gov>

**Cyndi's List: Immigration, Emigration & Migration Records**

<http://www.cyndislist.com/immigration/records>

**FamilySearch**

<https://familysearch.org>

**FamilySearch Wiki: US Naturalization and Citizenship Records**

[https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/United\\_States\\_Naturalization\\_and\\_Citizenship](https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/United_States_Naturalization_and_Citizenship)

**FindMyPast (\$)**

<http://www.findmypast.com>

**Fold3 (\$)**

<https://www.fold3.com>

**National Archives Land Records**

<http://archives.gov/research/land>

**National Archives Naturalization Records**

<https://www.archives.gov/research/naturalization>

**National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) Locations**

<http://www.archives.gov/locations>

**Naturalization Records in the USA (Olive Tree Genealogy)**

<http://www.naturalizationrecords.com/usa>

**Naturalization Records Research Guide (Joe Beine)**

<http://researchguides.net/naturalization.htm>

**Naturalizations: Federal or State (The Legal Genealogist)**

<http://www.legalgenealogist.com/2012/08/17/naturalizations-federal-or-state>

**Online Searchable Naturalization Records and Indexes (Joe Beine)**

<http://germanroots.com/naturalization.html>

## Types of US Naturalization Records

<http://www.genealogybranches.com/naturalization.html>

## United States Citizenship and Immigrations Services (History and Genealogy)

<https://www.uscis.gov/historyandgenealogy>

## FREE NATURALIZATION RECORDS DATA SHEET

(Provide your email address to get the free PDF download)

<http://www.lisaalzo.com/seminars/resources/naturalization-records>

Sign up for the Lisa's Free Accidental Genealogist e-Newsletter for research tips, writing advice, and general genealogy resources. Go to <http://www.lisaalzo.com> and sign up in the right-hand column on the homepage

The screenshot shows the homepage of Lisa Alzo's website. At the top, there is a navigation menu with links for Home, Publications, Seminars, Genealogy, About, and Contact. Below the menu is a bio for Lisa Alzo, a professional writer and genealogist. To the right of the bio is a social media section with icons for Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube, and a link to her newsletter. A red arrow points to the newsletter sign-up form, which includes fields for Email Address, First Name, and Last Name, and a Subscribe button. Below the bio and social media are three promotional boxes: '2nd Edition Now Available' for 'Baba's Kitchen', 'Free for a Limited Time!' for a webinar 'The Write Stuff', and 'Conference Handouts' for various genealogy conferences.