

How to Find and Use Naturalization Records

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Every year in courts across the United States, immigrants promise to renounce foreign allegiances and support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States. The Naturalization Oath of Allegiance to the United States of America is the culmination of a path that begins years earlier—applicants must meet certain residency requirements, demonstrate they can read and write English, complete an interview, pass a civics test and file a series of forms with [US Citizenship and Immigration Services](#).

Our ancestors, while perhaps not having to supply quite as much documentation, also had to meet a set of requirements in order to become citizens. The naturalization documents filed in various courts throughout the process can help you track down family history clues. In this guide, we'll cover the historical citizenship process and how to find naturalization records.

The Naturalization Process

The process of naturalization generally involved declaring an intent to naturalize, waiting a specified amount of time, then filing a petition to naturalize. After a hearing, a judge would grant the successful applicant a certificate as proof of citizenship. Laws governing the waiting period and required length of US residency varied over time.

The first naturalization law, passed in 1790, allowed free whites who had lived in the United States for two years and the same state for one year apply for citizenship. In 1795, the residency requirement was increased to five years, and applicants had to give three years' notice of their intention to naturalize before they could become citizens. A 1798 law, repealed in 1802, increased this to 14 years' residence and five years' notice. In 1824, the waiting period after declaring an intent to naturalize was reduced to two years.

Until 1922, women rarely applied for naturalization in their own right; instead, they became citizens when their husbands naturalized. After 1922, an alien woman who married a US citizen could skip the declaration of intention and file a petition for naturalization, but if an alien woman married an alien man, she'd have to start her naturalization proceedings with a declaration of intention.

Prior to 1906 immigrants could file for naturalization in any court at the local, county, state or federal level. He might go to the next county's court if it was closer, or file in a big city court before heading West. Some people even filed in criminal or marine court. A person could even begin the process in one court and finish it in another. A variety of forms were used for those naturalizations, so the information recorded varies from court to court and from year to year.

In September 1906 the Basic Naturalization Act turned the naturalization process over to the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization. (The Bureau later became the Immigration and Naturalization Service, or INS, which in turn became the US Citizenship and Immigration Services, or USCIS.)

This act standardized the process of becoming a citizen. After 1906 naturalization papers were supposed to be filed in certain federal courts, although some local courts continued to process naturalizations well beyond that date. In addition, from 1906 on forms filled out about the applicant

were standardized. For more about the history of naturalization, consult the Timeline of US Immigration Laws found at the end of this handout.

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 have been generated.

Declaration of intention (or 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:

- applicant's name
- applicant's country of birth or allegiance (but not the specific town)
- date of the application

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

- more-specific birthplace
- port and date of arrival
- physical description or photo
- names of a wife and any children naturalized along with the husband

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 (or second/final papers)

Once a 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:

- petitioner's name (possibly his birth name) and any name changes
- residence
- occupation
- birth date and place
- prior citizenship
- personal description
- date of arrival in the United States and arrival and departure ports
- date when US residence commenced
- length of residence in the state
- marital status (listing wife's name and date of birth, if married)
- 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 individual's name, certificate number, name of the court where he filed, and 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.

Naturalization depositions

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

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 stated 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 INS would then issue a certificate of arrival and 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.

Alien registration files

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.

Clues to naturalization

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 to 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

Examine your relative's entry on an [immigration passenger list](#) for 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*. For more information on passenger list notations, see [JewishGen.org](#). Finally, a naturalized citizen who applied for a passport would note his year of naturalization. Look for passport records on Ancestry.com, Fold3 and FamilySearch.

Depending when your immigrant ancestors sought citizenship, naturalization records can give you the precise date and port of arrival, the name of the ship, the port of departure, and the birth date and place. Being familiar with the United States' immigration laws will help you determine what documents may exist for your ancestor.

Want to learn more about US naturalization laws? Read our guide in the May 2008 *FamilyTree Magazine*. You also can consult *American Naturalization Processes and Procedures, 1790-1985* by John J. Newman (Heritage Quest, out of print) and *They Became Americans: Finding Naturalization Records and Ethnic Origins* by Loretto Dennis Szucs (Ancestry, \$19.95).

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| <p>1790 ■ US government establishes uniform naturalization rules for white males 21 and older; children of naturalized citizens get automatic citizenship</p> <p>1795 ■ Free white females age 21 and older can become citizens</p> <p>1804 ■ Alien widows and children receive citizenship if the husband or father died prior to filing final papers</p> <p>1824 ■ Alien minors, upon turning 21, can be naturalized if they've lived in the US for five years</p> <p>1855 ■ Alien women become citizens upon marrying US citizens</p> <p>1862 ■ Aliens who've received honorable discharges from the US Army can skip filing declarations of intention</p> <p>1868 ■ Former slaves become citizens under the 14th Amendment</p> <p>1870 ■ People of African descent may become citizens</p> <p>1882 ■ Government excludes Asians from citizenship</p> <p>1887 ■ Dawes Act entitles American Indians to become US citizens if they've accepted a land allotment</p> <p>1891 ■ US establishes Bureau of Immigration</p> | <p>1894 ■ Declaration of intention requirement is waived for aliens who've received honorable discharges after serving five years in the Navy or Marine Corps</p> <p>1906 ■ Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization Service is established</p> <p>1917 ■ Puerto Ricans become US citizens</p> <p>1922 ■ Married women's citizenship becomes independent of her husband's</p> <p>1924 ■ American Indians are granted full citizenship</p> <p>1929 ■ Photographs are required on petition for naturalization</p> <p>1940 ■ Alien Registration Act passes</p> <p>1943 ■ Asian immigrants are allowed to become citizens</p> <p>1952 ■ Age requirement for naturalization drops to 18; declaration of intention becomes optional</p> <p>1990 ■ Courts no longer naturalize citizens</p> <p>2003 ■ Immigration and Naturalization Service becomes US Citizenship and Immigration Services</p> |
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Toolkit

■ Finding US Naturalization Records: A Genealogy Guide

<home.att.net/~wee-monster/naturalizationrecords.html>

■ Footnote

<footnote.com>

■ Immigration Legal History

<www.uscis.gov>: Click on Education and Resources on the horizontal tab, then Immigration Legal History on the vertical list.

■ Immigration and Ships Passenger Lists Research Guide: Naturalization Records

<home.att.net/~arnielang/ship08.html>

■ List of Famous Naturalized Citizens of the United States

<www.answers.com/topic/list-of-famous-naturalized-citizens-of-the-united-states>

■ NARA: Naturalization Records

<archives.gov/genealogy/naturalization>

■ Naturalization Records in the US Citizenship and Immigration Services

<www.uscis.gov>: Click on Education and Resources, then Genealogy.

■ Prologue Magazine: Women and Naturalization, ca. 1802-1940

<archives.gov/publications/prologue/1998/summer/women-and-naturalization-1.html>

■ Records for the Study of Ethnic History in the National Archives Pacific Region

<archives.gov/pacific/san-francisco/finding-aids/ethnic-reference-paper.html>