

U.S. Naturalization Records

The most useful naturalization records for genealogists are the applications filed by our ancestors to obtain U.S. citizenship. These are the Declaration of Intention (“First Papers”), which could be filed two years after the immigrant’s arrival in the U.S., and the Petition for Naturalization (“Final Papers”), which could be filed after a waiting period of another three years. The citizenship certificate given to the immigrant contained relatively little information useful to genealogists, while the declaration and petition often included town and/or country of origin, occupation, date and port of arrival in the U.S., names of family members, and addresses. Some immigrants also changed their names at the time of naturalization, so name changes may also be recorded.

A Brief History of Naturalization

For most of our nation’s history, naturalizations could take place in any court—federal, state, or local. After the federal Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) was established in September 1906, procedures became more standardized and new forms requiring significantly more background information came into use. Until 1922, the husband’s citizenship status determined that of his wife and minor children. Aliens serving in the military were granted concessions and are listed separately from ordinary naturalizations

The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) web site provides an overview of the history of naturalization at <http://www.archives.gov/genealogy/naturalization>. See also Marian L. Smith, “Women and Naturalization, ca. 1802-1940,” *Prologue: Quarterly of the National Archives*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Summer 1998), pp. 146-153 (www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1998/summer/women-and-naturalization-1.html), and the other references listed below.

How to Find Records

If you possess your ancestor’s naturalization certificate, that document states the court where the naturalization took place, and the volume and number of the petition, making the location of the naturalization declaration and petition easier to identify. If he or she was naturalized in a federal court, seek the documents at NARA. If in a state or local court, determine where the records for the court are housed, such as the County Clerk’s office.

It is possible to find naturalization records, however, without possessing a naturalization certificate. For information about where to find Federal, State, and local naturalization records, see Christine Schaefer, *Guide to Naturalization Records of the United States* (Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Co., Inc., 1997), and the sources listed below. For New York City naturalizations, see Estelle Guzik, “Finding Naturalization Records in New York City,” *Dorot: the Journal of the Jewish Genealogical Society*, Volume 21, Number 2, 1999.

National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)

If the naturalization took place in a Federal court, then naturalization indexes, declarations of intent, and petitions will usually be in the National Archives regional branch serving the state in which the Federal court is located. Many indexes and records have been microfilmed. For the addresses and holdings of regional branches, see www.archives.gov/facilities/index.html.

Some indexes to naturalization records cover not only federal but also local and state courts. One index for New York naturalization petitions filed in local, state, and federal courts in New York, Kings, Queens, and Richmond counties from 1792 to 1906 is available at the NARA New York regional branch and the New York Public Library. The index provides the court, date, and petition number.

Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services (BCIS)

Since the creation of the federal Department of Homeland Security in 2003, the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services replaced the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). The new agency continues to maintain the INS index to naturalization certificate files, and can retrieve individual records based on name, date of birth, and place of birth. Files from 1906 to 1956 have been microfilmed, and are available via Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request to agency headquarters in Washington, D.C. For naturalization records after 1956, Freedom of Information requests should be sent to the appropriate INS District Office. More information about immigration and naturalization records, and about requesting and submitting a FOIA request, can be found on the BCIS web site: <http://uscis.gov/graphics/aboutus/foia/request.htm>.

Director, Freedom of Information Act Program
425 Eye Street, N.W., 2nd Floor
ULLICO Building
Washington, D.C. 20536
(202) 514-1722

Other

- The Jewish Genealogical Society, New York (JGS) has a searchable index for State Supreme Court, Kings County (Brooklyn) naturalization records from 1907 to 1924. See www.jgsny.org/kingsintro2.htm.
- The JGS also has links to other New York State naturalization databases at www.jgsny.org/nynats.htm.
- The American Jewish Historical Society, at the Center for Jewish History, has on microfilm approximately 500 Declarations of Intent to Become a Citizen and related naturalization documents, from the New York County Court, 1816 to 1845, indexed by last name of the declarant (**Collection I-152**).
- Several naturalization indexes are available at www.ancestry.com, including State Supreme Court petitions in New York County (Manhattan) from 1907 to 1924. (Once a document has been found on this index, a copy can be obtained from the New York County Clerk, 31 Chambers Street, 7th floor, New York, NY 10007.) Most Ancestry.com databases are fee-based, but free access is available at the Center for Jewish History.
- Additional links may be found in the online guide to finding U.S. naturalization records at <http://home.att.net/~wee-monster/naturalizationrecords.html>

For Further Reading

Guzik, Estelle, editor. *Genealogical Resources in New York*. (Jewish Genealogical Society, 2003).
Genealogy Institute Z 5313 .U6 N524 2003

Newman, John. *American Naturalization Processes and Procedures, 1790-1985* (Indiana Historical Society, 1985). **Genealogy Institute KF4710 .N49 1985**

Schaefer, Christine. *Guide to Naturalization Records of the United States* (Genealogical Publishing Co., 1997).
Genealogy Institute CS49 .S28

Szucs, Loretto Denis. *They Became Americans* (Ancestry, 1998) **AJHS CS47 .S96 1998**

U.S. Department of Justice, Immigration and Naturalization Service, *An Immigrant Nation: United States Regulation of Immigration, 1798-1991* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991).