

# OPERATION GRANNY FILES

Immigration Records Quick-Reference Field Guide

*Ships, Stamps, and Suspicious Ages*

Field Guide & Quick-Reference

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Mission 12: The Paper Trail Across the Water

Clearance Level: Biscuit-Tin Operative

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### QUICK-GRAB SUMMARY

Three record types trace an immigrant's crossing: passenger lists (the arrival record), naturalization papers (the citizenship record), and border crossing records (for land-border arrivals). Start searching on FamilySearch (free), then try the Ellis Island passenger search and the USCIS Genealogy Program. Always search the original spelling of the surname. If a ship manifest doesn't appear, check the land borders.

## The Three Record Types at a Glance

Every immigration research trail runs through one or more of these three record types. The table below shows what each contains, its date range, and where to find it.

Record Type	What It Contains	Date Range	Where to Find
Passenger Lists / Ship Manifests	Name, age, occupation, last residence, destination, money, contacts in old & new country, literacy, physical description	1820–1957 (richest after 1893)	FamilySearch (free), Ellis Island search (free), Ancestry
Naturalization Records (First + Second Papers)	Name, birthplace, arrival port & date, ship name, spouse, children, witnesses. Post-1906: standardized & detailed	Varies; centralized after Sept 27, 1906	USCIS Genealogy Program, FamilySearch, Ancestry, local courthouses
Border Crossing Records (Canada & Mexico)	Personal details, origin, destination, physical description — similar to ship manifest	Canada 1895+, Mexico 1903+	FamilySearch (free), Ancestry

### GRANNY PRO TIP

The later the arrival, the richer the manifest. An 1850 list gives you a name and a prayer. A 1910 manifest practically interviews your ancestor: hometown, destination, contacts, money, literacy, and physical description. If your ancestor arrived after 1893, expect a goldmine.

## How to Read a Passenger Manifest

A post-1906 manifest has roughly 30 columns. Here are the ones that matter most for genealogy research:

Column	What It Tells You	Genealogy Value
Name	As recorded by shipping company, possibly in original language	Search for original spelling — compare with naturalization papers
Age	Often approximate — people routinely lied	Cross-reference with other records; expect

		discrepancies
Last Permanent Residence	The hometown in the old country	★ GOLD — narrows search to a specific village or city
Final Destination in US	Where they were headed	Tells you where family was already established
Relative/Friend Joining	Name & address of contact in US	Identifies chain migration — who was already here
Nearest Relative in Origin Country	Name & address of who stayed behind	Links to the family branch that didn't emigrate
Amount of Money	Cash declared at arrival	Economic class in a single number
Who Paid for Ticket	Self or another person	Reveals chain migration economics
Read and Write	Literacy in any language	Education/class indicator
Physical Marks	Health inspection notes, identifying features	Can confirm identity across records

# Where to Find Immigration Records

Start free. Always start free. Move to paid resources only when the free databases come up short.

Resource	What It Has	Cost
FamilySearch	Passenger lists (Castle Garden & Ellis Island), border crossings (Canada & Mexico), naturalization indexes	Free
Ellis Island Search (statueofliberty.org)	65 million records, Port of New York 1820–1957	Free
CastleGarden.org	11 million pre-Ellis Island names 1820–1913	Free
USCIS Genealogy Program	Naturalization C-Files and A-Files (post-1906)	Fee per request
Ancestry.com	Largest commercial collection: NY passenger lists, border crossings, naturalization, passports	Subscription (free at many libraries)
Fold3	NARA microfilm, military & naturalization records	Subscription
MyHeritage	Growing immigration collections, strong European departure records	Subscription (free raw DNA upload)

## BONUS INSIGHT

Many public libraries offer free Ancestry.com access in the building. Some library systems also offer remote access through their website. Check your local library's database page before paying for a subscription — you may already have access.

# Common Name-Spelling Variations

Names changed through anglicization, clerk error, and personal choice — not at Ellis Island. When searching, try these common substitution patterns:

Original	Americanized	Notes
W	V (or vice versa)	Wagner ↔ Vagner; Weiss ↔ Vais
C	K (or vice versa)	Koenig ↔ Coenig; Czar → Kaiser
-ski / -sky	-ski / -sky / -sky	Grabowski ↔ Grabowsky
-ow / -ov	-off / -ov	Smirnov ↔ Smirnoff
-stein	-steen / -stine	Goldstein → Goldsteen
Sch-	Sh-	Schmidt → Smith; Schneider → Snider
-cz / -ts	-ch / -tch	Kovacs → Kovach

Mc- / Mac-	Mc- / Mac- / M'-	MacDonald ↔ McDonald ↔ M'Donald
O'-	O- / Oh-	O'Brien → Obrien

## Search Strategy: Where Did They Enter?

Use this decision tree to guide your search:

- **Do you know the port of arrival?** — Go directly to FamilySearch or Ellis Island search for that port. Most East Coast arrivals came through New York (Castle Garden before 1892, Ellis Island after).
- **No port, but a ship name?** — Search by ship name on FamilySearch or Ancestry. Ships had regular routes — the ship name narrows the port and date range.
- **No ship at all?** — Check land border crossings. Canada-US records on FamilySearch cover 1895-1960+. Mexico-US records cover 1903-1957. Approximately 40% of immigrants who landed in Canada were headed for the US.
- **Found the manifest?** — Read every column. Then search for naturalization records using the arrival port and date from the manifest as search keys.
- **Naturalization records?** — Before 1906: check local courthouses. After 1906: request from USCIS Genealogy Program. The Petition for Naturalization (Second Papers) is the richest document — it names the whole family.

### GRANNY SAYS

“Every record is a story. The manifest isn't just a list — it's the last page of one life and the first page of another. Seven dollars and a suitcase. And from that, somehow, all of us.”

## Notes

Use this space for personal notes and discoveries.