

Certifying Citizenship: Introduction to U.S. Naturalization Records

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History

To become a United States citizen, one can either acquire birthright citizenship or undergo naturalization. Birthright citizenship is granted to individuals born in the U.S. or its territories, regardless of their parents' citizenship status. It also extends to children born abroad to U.S. citizens, such as military personnel or government employees.

Naturalization is the process by which a native or citizen of one country becomes a citizen of a different country. Naturalized citizens often gain more opportunities than non-citizens, such as the ability to buy and sell land, participate in voting, or hold political office. It was not a requirement for immigrants to naturalize, and not all who began the process completed it.

Collective Naturalization

Collective naturalization refers to the process of granting citizenship to an entire group of people without individual documentation. The first instance of this occurred in 1776 when the American Colonies declared independence from Britain. Various territories and groups have since undergone collective naturalization, including:

Territories

- 1803 – Louisiana Purchase
- 1819 – Florida
- 1845 – Texas
- 1848 – Mexico Territory
- 1867 – Alaska
- 1898 – Hawaii
- 1917 – Puerto Rico

Groups

- 1868 – African Americans
- 1898 – Children*
- 1922 – Women*
- 1924 – Native Americans
- 1943 – Asian Americans

*Derivative

Derivative

Derivative naturalization is the process by which an individual acquires citizenship through another person. Historically, this applied primarily to married women and children. (Note: unmarried women could become citizens but had little advantages to do so).

Women

- 1804 – Women were permitted to naturalize alongside their husbands.
- 1855 – Women acquired citizenship by marrying a U.S. citizen.
- 1907 – The Expatriation Act revoked a woman's citizenship if she married a foreign-born citizen, regardless of her birth. She could regain it through naturalization.
- 1922 – The Cable Act repealed the Expatriation Act, ensuring woman could no longer lose their citizenship due to marriage.

- 1936 – Women who lost their citizenship from the Expatriation Act could regain it if they were no longer married to a foreign-born individual (due to death or divorce) through a simplified process.
- 1940 – Women could regain their lost citizenship regardless of their marital status through a simplified process.

Children

- 1790-1940 – A child automatically became a citizen through their father.
- 1804-1934 – A mother could not pass on her citizenship to her children.
- 1824-1906 – Minors could naturalize without a declaration upon turning twenty-one.
- 1907 – All foreign-born children registered with a consulate once they turned eighteen.
- 1934 – A child must reside in the U.S. for five years for derivative naturalization to apply.
- 1940 – Both parents could pass their citizenship to their minor children, subject to certain residency requirements.

Pre-1790

Before 1790, naturalization in the American Colonies was governed by British rule. Colonists born in Britain were automatically considered citizens of the colonies. Those not born in Britain had to naturalize in Britain to become colonial citizens.

Types of Naturalization

- Denization: Partial naturalization allowing individuals to vote and purchase land, but not to run for political office or pass land to heirs.
- Oath of Allegiance: Full naturalization granting all citizen privileges, including voting, running for office, buying land, and passing land to heirs.
- Collective Citizenship: Group naturalization in 1776, when all residents of the Colonies became citizens of the newly formed United States.

Value of Pre-1790

These records typically contained limited information but can still be valuable for tracing your ancestors' origins and residences in the colonies. Pre-1790 records usually include the applicant's name, country of origin, date of naturalization, and place of residence.

Post-1790

1790 Naturalization Law

The first naturalization law, enacted in 1790, established a process that has largely remained consistent. The requirements included being an adult, residing in the U.S. for a specified period (ranging from 2 to 11 years), living in the state for one year, and demonstrating good moral character. The process generated three key records: the Declaration of Intention, Petition, and Certificate of Citizenship.

Declaration of Intention

This step, also known as the Declaration or First Papers, required immigrants to formally declare their intention to become citizens in court. While some filed immediately upon arrival, many waited a few years. Any court could be used, though most chose the most convenient one.

Petition

The Petition or the Final or Second Papers, involved the immigrant petitioning the court to confirm they had met the requirements and wished to become a citizen. The Petition was typically filed two or three years after the Declaration, provided the residency and moral character criteria were satisfied. Any court could be used, and it did not have to be the same court where the Declaration was filed.

Certificate of Citizenship

The Certificate was the final stage in the process. The immigrant took the oath of allegiance, renouncing former loyalties and pledging allegiance to the United States. Upon completion, the new citizen received a certificate proving their citizenship, while the court retained the certificate stub. The courthouse was the same court as where the Petition was filed.

After 1906

Federal Departments

In 1906, new laws were passed, resulting in standardized forms throughout the country. The process and records after 1906 remained the same. More federal courts began to naturalize. Courts were also required to send copies of each record to the Federal department over immigration and naturalization. This department has gone through three name changes.

Bureau of Immigration Services

From 1906 to 1933, this department included two administrations: the Bureau of Immigration and the Bureau of Naturalization. They oversaw federal laws and regulations.

Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS)

After 1933, the two administrations combined to form the INS. In addition to overseeing laws and regulations, they were tasked with border protection and enforcing laws. A copy was sent to the INS by the courts.

United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS)

In 2004, the INS was dissolved and replaced by three departments: USCIS, ICE, and CBP. The USCIS was created to oversee the application process of naturalization, while the other two departments focused on law enforcement and border protection. Today, they hold all records pertaining to Naturalization including:

- A-Files
- C-Files
- Visa Files
- Registry Files
- Certificate of Registry
- Certificate of Arrival

Value of Records After 1790

Although the records created after 1790 remained consistent in type, the information they contained varied. Before 1906, there were no standardized forms, so the details on the Declaration and Petition differed between states and courts. After 1906, the federal government standardized the forms, ensuring uniformity across the country. The table on the right illustrates the information found in naturalization records before and after 1906.

| Information on Naturalization Records | | | | |
|---------------------------------------|-------------|------------|-------------|----------|
| | Before 1906 | | After 1906 | |
| Data | Declaration | Petition | Declaration | Petition |
| Name | ★ | ★ | ★ | ★ |
| Age | | ★ (rarely) | ★ | |
| Birth info | | | ★ | ★ |
| Residence | | ★ | ★ | ★ |
| Application date | ★ | ★ | ★ | ★ |
| Last foreign Address | | | ★ | ★ |
| Country of Birth or Allegiance | ★ | ★ | ★ | ★ |
| Occupation | | | ★ | ★ |
| Personal Description | | | ★ | ★ |
| Port & Date of Arrival | ★ (rarely) | ★ (rarely) | ★ | ★ |
| Vessel & port of embarkation | | | ★ | ★ |
| Marital Status | | | ★ | ★ |
| Name of wife & children | | | ★ | ★ |
| Birth info of wife & children | | | ★ | ★ |
| Address of adult children | | | ★ | ★ |
| Where & when declaration filed | | | | ★ |
| Witness affidavits | | | | ★ |

Looking for Clues

To determine if your ancestors naturalized, you should gather all variations of their names, including birth names, maiden and married names, nicknames, and Americanized names. Additionally, it is helpful to know their approximate year of birth, country of origin, year of immigration, U.S. residence, and whether they might have been part of a Collective or Derivative Naturalization. There are many records you can turn to that might provide clues about the citizenship status of your ancestors:

- Census
- Naturalization Index Cards
- Immigration
- Voting Registers
- Passports
- Military
- Death
- Obituaries
- Histories
- Homestead Records
- Personal Collection such as journals, photos, letters, etc.

Federal Census Clues

Naturalization Status Meanings in Federal Census

Each federal census has different abbreviations or numbers representing the naturalization status of the individual.

1900-1940

- AL = Alien
- PA = First Papers
- NA = Naturalized
- NR = Not Reported

1940 (occasionally)

- 1 = Foreign born, Naturalized
- 2 = Foreign born, 1st Papers
- 3 = Foreign born, Alien
- 4 = Foreign born, Citizen

1950

- Y = Yes
- N = No
- AP = American Parents, born abroad

U.S. Federal Census Immigration and Naturalization Questions

| | 1820 - 1830 | 1850 - 1860 | 1870 | 1880 | 1900 - 1910 | 1920 | 1930 | 1940 | 1950 |
|--------------------------|-------------|-------------|------|------|-------------|------|------|------|------|
| Aliens not naturalized | ★ | | | | ★ | ★ | | | |
| Birthplace of individual | | ★ | ★ | ★ | ★ | ★ | ★ | ★ | ★ |
| Birthplace of parents | | | | ★ | ★ | ★ | ★ | ☆ | ☆ |
| Year of Immigration | | | ★ | | ★ | ★ | ★ | | |
| Naturalization Status | | | | | ★ | ★ | ★ | ★ | ★ |
| Year of Naturalization | | | | | | ★ | | | |
| Years in Country | | | | | ★ | | | | |

☆ = Only on Certain Lines

Courts that allowed Naturalization

Many courts in the United States could naturalize immigrants. Before 1906, local and state courts primarily handled naturalizations. After 1906, federal courts became the main venues. While the Declaration and Petition could be filed in any court, the Petition and Certificate had to be processed in the same court. Here is a list of possible courts your ancestors naturalized in (you can also check this FamilySearch Collection - <https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/477392>)

- | | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chancery • Circuit • Common Pleas • County • Criminal • District • Equity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mayors • Marine • Municipal Police • Probate • Superior • Supreme • Surrogate |
|---|---|

Steps for Finding Naturalization Records

First, search the federal, state, or county naturalization collections that have been indexed. If you have trouble finding the declaration or petition using indexed collections, try searching for index cards on websites like Ancestry and Fold3. Once you find an index card, use the FamilySearch Catalog. Navigate to the state or county where the court is located and find a collection with the correct year and court. Within the collection, look for the petition number or date of naturalization under the "Film/Digital Notes." Use the magnifying glass or camera icon to search the specific collection of naturalization records.

Read every page and extract all details such as names, dates, places, and relationships. Compare this information with what you already know and resolve any conflicts. Use the clues from the naturalization records to search other records, such as vital and immigration records.

Websites

Ancestry.com – view card catalog and filter according to citizenship records and location.
<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/catalog/>

Browning Genealogy & Local History – Immigration database with some naturalization information for certain counties in Illinois, Indiana, and Kentucky.
<https://www.browninggenealogy.org/cm/Databases/Immigration>

California Great Registers – County clerk voting registers include naturalization information.
<https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1935764>

FamilySearch Catalog – search by all potential place (state, country, town) and find naturalization records. <https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog>

FamilySearch Wiki – look at the United States or the specific locations' naturalization page.
https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Naturalization_and_Citizenship

Filby Books – helpful for colonial immigration and naturalization.
<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/7486/>

Fold3 – naturalization index cards for some states and U.S. passports.
<https://www.fold3.com/collection/non-military>

German Roots – places to find U.S. naturalization records and indexes online.
<https://www.germanroots.com/naturalization.html>

National Archives – learn about records or request a copy.
<https://www.archives.gov/research/immigration/naturalization>

Steve Morse – used to locate the ED on the census based on an address.
<https://stevemorse.org/census/unified.html>

USCIS – learn about records and request to order an index search or record request.
<https://www.uscis.gov/records/genealogy> or <https://www.uscis.gov/records/genealogy/historical-records-series-available-from-the-genealogy-program>

Google Search – search for “naturalization records [year] [state] genealogy records.” (i.e. “naturalization records 1910 Missouri genealogy records”).