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Early Naturalization Records at the National Archives

Joseph P. Keefe

Mr. Keefe, archives specialist, discusses how to use naturalization proceedings—from federal, state, county, and local courts—from Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont between 1790 and September 26, 1906. Broadcast from the National Archives at Boston.
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Mr. Keefe lectures in New England on numerous subjects including genealogy; Census; naturalization; passenger lists; and 18, 19, and 20th-century military records such as the 54th Massachusetts Infantry and World War II records held at the National Archives. He is a member and researcher of numerous archival and historical societies in the United States and Curator for the Waltham, Massachusetts Historical Society.
Early Naturalization Records at the National Archives
During the Great Depression, many employment and relief opportunities were limited to citizens of the United States. Anyone looking for work from the Work Projects Administration (WPA), for example, was required to prove U.S. citizenship, and civil service, old-age pensions, the right to vote, and other benefits and privileges were reserved for citizens. Additionally, many positions in private employment were open to Americans alone.
This requirement posed a problem for those who had become U.S. citizens as wives or children of a naturalized citizen. Most courts, if indeed not all, recorded only the name of the person being naturalized—the head of household. Although the wife and children of foreign birth under twenty-one years old derived their own citizenship from the husband or father, their names were not mentioned at all in the final official record. How could they prove their citizenship?
To assist those who needed to document citizenship, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) used a WPA project to photograph "something" of the fact of naturalization in all of the courts. Under this project, various courts in Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont made their naturalization records available to the INS. Clerical staff then summarized critical data on index cards to create an index, and WPA workers copied the naturalization records using the dexigraph reproduction system. The WPA started with New England, New York, and Illinois, but World War II halted the project before it could get to courts in other regions.
From the late 1930s until about 1961, the INS used these copies to document citizenship granted before 1907, whether it was of the actual petitioner or of the wife or child who derived citizenship. If the INS found a record, it then sent a form to the court holding the originals asking for verification of the data.
The Work Projects Administration used a dexigraph camera, shown here with operators and supervisors, to copy naturalization records from various courts in New England, New York, and Illinois before World War II halted the project.
Prior to 1906 naturalization proceedings were handled in a somewhat loose and slipshod manner. The proceedings could be handled in any court. Each court had its own methods and rules regarding naturalization procedures, no matter what federal statutes might demand. Some were far less demanding than others. It didn’t take early immigrants long to learn this, and they flocked to the courts that made the naturalization rules the most lenient.
What information is needed to locate a naturalization petition?

To conduct an effective search of our records the following information is necessary: the naturalized person's
(1) full name, including any different spellings
(2) home address and/or city/town when naturalized
(3) approximate date of naturalization.

Also useful are:
date of birth,
date of U.S. arrival,
country of origin
Dexigraph collection for New York, New England and Illinois is a soundex index: The soundex is a coded surname (last name) index based on the way a surname sounds rather than the way it is spelled. Surnames that sound the same, but are spelled differently, like SMITH and SMYTH, have the same code and are filed together. The soundex coding system was developed so that you can find a surname even though it may have been recorded under various spellings.
WPA clerical staff prepare and proofread index cards against the dexigraphs.

Soundex index for Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont—all grouped on one Index Rhode Island—each have separate Connecticut index’s
New York
Illinois

Ancestry.com has digitized and indexed these by name
Index cards from naturalization proceedings are valuable records in their own right. These examples of soundex cards from New York provide some good information for genealogists themselves including:
Address
Occupation
Date of birth
Date of arrival
Name, address and occupation of witness
Examples of soundex cards
From Chicago The cards themselves like those from New York have good information about each individual
Petition (Second or Final Papers)
Naturalization petitions were formal applications submitted to the court by individuals who had met the residency requirements and who had declared their intention to become citizens. As with the declarations of intention, their information content varied dramatically from one court to another. Most petitions created before 1906 offer little in terms of personal information. After 1906, petitions contain generally the same information as the Declaration of Intention. This is an example of a dexigraph copy from the United States District Court in Boston.

United States of America,
Massachusetts District, ss.

To the Honorable the Judge of the District Court of the United States, within and for the District of Massachusetts,

Respectfully represent Timothy Sullivan of Lynn in said District Laborer an alien, and a free white person, that he was born in County Cork Ireland on or about the 1st day of June in the year of our Lord eighteen hundred and 131 and is now about 45 years of age; that he arrived at Boston in the United States of America, on or about the day of May in the year of our Lord eighteen hundred and 126, being then a minor under the age of eighteen years; that he was and is still, his bona fide intention to reside in and become a citizen of the United States of America, and to renounce all allegiance and fidelity to every foreign Prince, State, Potentate, and Sovereignty whatsoever—more especially to Victoria, Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, whose subject he has heretofore been; all which appears in the Record of the Honorable Court.

And the said petitioner further represents, that he has ever since continued to reside within the jurisdiction of said United States, that he has never borne any hereditary title, or been of any of the orders of nobility; that he is ready to renounce and adjure all allegiance and fidelity to every foreign Prince, Potentate, State, or Sovereignty whatever, and particularly to Victoria, Queen as aforesaid, whose subject he has heretofore been; that he is attached to the principles of the Constitution of the United States of America, and well disposed towards the good order and happiness of the same.

And the said petitioner further represents that he enlisted in the Volunteer forces of the Army of the United States, and that he was honorably discharged therefrom on the day of .

Therefore your petitioner prays, that he may be admitted to become a citizen of the said United States of America, according to the forms of the statutes in such case made and provided.

Witnessed Daniel Collis Nov 2, 1856.

Sworn to by said Petitioner,
Naturalization records can help you find the date and port of arrival, and the place of birth for your ancestor. How much information is found on them will depend on when the naturalization was done. This is a typical naturalization which was completed at the USDC in Boston—usually two pages—the naturalization shows:

- Address
- Occupation
- Where born
- Date of birth
- Date and place of arrival in the United States
This is the second page of James Mackenzie's naturalization which shows two witnesses who would speak for his moral character, knew that he had resided in the state for at least one year and that he was attached to the principles of the constitution—these would vary from court to court—often, the witnesses were co-worker, friends or family members which can also give genealogists other clues for research.
If a Declaration of Intention was taken out this will also be listed on the petition. James Mackenzie’s lists US Circuit Court in Boston on October fifth, 1895. If the Declaration was taken out in a Federal Court NARA will hold copies. If it was taken out in a state court, the researcher will have to contact the State Archives for a copy.
Declarations of Intention (or First Papers)

Normally the first papers were completed soon after arrival in the U.S., depending on the laws in effect at the time. Certain groups, such as women and children, were exempt in early years. After 1862, those who were honorably discharged from U.S. military service were excused from this first step.

Until 1906, the content of forms for declaration of intention varied dramatically from one county to another and from one court to another. A large percentage of the first papers created before 1906 contain very little biographical information. This is the Declaration of Intention for James Mackenzie from the USCC Boston—Declarations taken out in Federal Courts would usually contain:

Occupation
Place and date of birth
Where and when immigrant arrived in the United States—the information varied in state courts

United States of America.

To the Honorable the Judges of the Circuit Court of the United States, Within and for the District of Massachusetts.

RESPECTFULLY representsJames B. Mackenzie
of Boston, in said District, occupation laborer
an alien and a free white person, that he was born in
Nova Scotia

the 27th day of April

on or about in the year of our

Lord eighteen hundred and forty and is now about fifty five

years of age; that he arrived at Boston, in the United States of America,
in the District of

on or about the

day of

in the year of our Lord eighteen hundred and seventy ; that

it then was, and still is, his bona fide intention to become a citizen of the United States of America, and to renounce forever all allegiance and fidelity to every foreign Prince, State, Potentate and Sovereignty whatsoever, more especially to Victoria, Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland,

whose subject he has heretofore been. He therefore prays that this, his Declaration and Intention, may become a record of this Honorable Court, agreeable to the laws in such case made and provided.

James B. Mackenzie

Circuit Court of the United States,
Massachusetts District.

To wit: Oct 8, 1895.

Then the above named petitioner personally appeared before the Clerk of said Court, and made oath to the truth of the facts as set forth in the above declaration to the Court by him subscribed.

Attest:

[Signature]
Declaration of Intention for William Edmonds from the Albany, New York City Court from 1832 - this declaration gives Edmond’s birth place, age, nation of allegiance, where immigrated and “intended settlement”
The State of Ohio,
Cuyahoga County, SS.

Be it Remembered, That on the 3rd day of
Nov A.D. 1856, Adamee Mezkel
an Alien and Native of the
Dominion of Germany, personally appeared before me
F.S. Smith, Deputy Clerk of the Court of Common Pleas in and for said
Cuyahoga County, and declared, on his solemn oath that he first arrived in the United States in the
month of December A.D. 1851.

and that it is his bona fide intention to become a citizen of the United States, and to
renounce forever all allegiance and fidelity to any Foreign Prince, Potentate, State or Sovereignty
whatever, and particularly to Louis II.

Gentleman, Deputy Clerk, and subscribed his
name to said Declaration, which remains on file in the office of the Clerk of said Court.

In testimony whereof, I hereunto set my hand officially,
and affix the seal of said Court, at the City of Cleveland,
this 3rd day of Nov A.D. 1856.

F.S. Smith, Deputy Clerk.
Example of a non-Federal court record - this is from the Third District Court of Bristol County in New Bedford for Charles Lomboy who was a free black living in Fair Haven, Massachusetts and was employed as a mariner. This naturalization is three pages long.
COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS.

In the Third District Court of Bristol, held at New Bedford, within and County, on the third day of July, A. D. 1897.

WE, the undersigned, petitions for the above
in the County of
Bristol, in the Province of Massachusetts Bay, in the United States of America, severally depose and say that we are the persons mentioned in the foregoing petition, and that we have known Charles Lomba, one of the foregoing petitioners, for five years last past, during which time he has resided in said city, and that he has resided within the Commonwealth of Massachusetts one year at least, and has conducted himself and behaved as a man of good moral character, attached to the principles of the Constitution of the United States of America, and has devoted himself to the good order and happiness of the same.

Thomas A. Codd
New Bedford, July 31, 1897—
Justice of the Peace.

OATH TAKEN BY PETITIONER.

1. Charles Lomba, do solemnly swear that I do absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to every Foreign Prince, Potentate, State or Sovereignty whatsoever, particularly to the Crown, Government, and People of Portugal, King of Portugal

Whose subject I have heretofore been; and that I will support the Constitution of the United States of America. So help me God.

Charles Lomba

COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS.

At a session of the Third District Court of Bristol, held at said New Bedford, on the third day of July, A. D. 1897, the said
Charles Lomba, having produced the evidence required by law, took the aforesaid oath and was admitted to become a citizen of the United States of America, and the Court ordered that record thereof be made and filed.

Attest:

Clerk.
Pre-1907 -- CT

And at same September Term, 1879.

Present, Hon. Daniel M. Shrader, Judge.

The following-named persons, each for himself, on the day and date set against his name, appeared in open Court and applied to be admitted to become a citizen of the United States. And each for himself, there exhibited to said Court a certificate of the declaration of intention made by him before the authority, and at the time hereinafter set against his name, as on file, and required as the first condition according to the last section of the Act of Congress, entitled "An Act to establish a uniform Rule of Naturalization, and to repeal the Acts heretofore passed on that subject," approved 14th of April, 1870. And it appearing to the satisfaction of the Court, that said applicant has resided within the United States five years at least, and that during said five years he has lived as a man of good moral character, attached to the principles of the Constitution of the United States, and well disposed to the good order and happiness of the same. And the said applicant having declared on oath that he would support the Constitution of the United States, and that he did absolutely and entirely renounce all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign Prince, Potentate, State, or Sovereignty whatever, and particularly to the Prince, Potentate, State, Sovereignty, and Government set against his nation, of which he was before a subject. It was, therefore, considered by the Court that the said applicant be, and he was accordingly admitted to become a citizen of the United States.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Place of Residence</th>
<th>Date of Birth</th>
<th>Date of Declaration</th>
<th>Date of Admission</th>
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<tr>
<td>Thomas &amp; Coomings</td>
<td>Hartford</td>
<td>1879</td>
<td>October 20, 1879</td>
<td>October 12, 1879</td>
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<td>John Lawson</td>
<td>New London</td>
<td>1879</td>
<td>October 20, 1879</td>
<td>October 24, 1879</td>
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<tr>
<td>Andrew Hallman</td>
<td>Hartford</td>
<td>1879</td>
<td>October 20, 1879</td>
<td>October 26, 1879</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edward K. Chapman</td>
<td>Hartford</td>
<td>1879</td>
<td>October 20, 1879</td>
<td>August 8, 1879</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Example of pre-1906 naturalization from the Circuit Court of Northern Illinois-this is a good example of how information prior to 1906 varied from court to court
United States District Court for the Northern District of Ohio—again showing the variance in information from court to court.
"Any woman who is now or may hereafter be married to a citizen of the United States, and who might herself be lawfully naturalized shall be deemed a citizen."

Section 2 of the Naturalization Act of February 10, 1855
Naturalization-Women

In general before 1922 women did not naturalize.

When women were granted the right to vote, they began to naturalize under their own names.

Prior to 1922 women would simply derive their citizenship from either their father or husband. Very few women naturalized under their own name prior to 1922.
Barbara M. Baier applied for citizenship in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia on January 29, 1892. The clerk had to alter the text to "a woman of good moral character." (NARA, Records of District Courts of the United States, RG 21)

Naturalization Petition for Barbara Baier, 1892
Naturalization record for Mary Medley from the United States District Court in Boston. Ms. Medley was naturalizing under her own name because her husband had died before he completed the naturalization process. While unusual to see a women's name on a petition before the year 1922, some women did naturalize if their husband had died before completing the naturalization process or if they were single.
When women were granted the right to petition for citizenship under their own name in 1922, women who were married to an alien had to petition for citizenship—even if they were native born. This is a repatriation naturalization for Catherine Hogan who was married to her husband James Hogan in 1907—she was Petitioning the court for citizenship in 1943.
1824 to 1906, minor aliens who had lived in the United States 5 years before their 23rd birthday could file both their declarations and petitions at the same time.
Card for Timothy Sullivan-for researchers to find the correct dexigraph (naturalization) they are looking for-they need to know the volume and page number of the record-this can only be obtained via this index.
Family search.org has recently finished digitizing the National Archives at Boston’s Dexigraph collection. This material is now free and available to all researchers. Family Search is currently working on an index-so that researchers can simply search for these records via a persons name. Researchers still have to request an index search from us or they can search the index via ancestry.com until this is completed.
The collection can be located on FamilySearch under New England, Petitions for naturalizations. The year range which family search has given the collection is incorrect—all of the records are for the years 1790-1906. You can find this link under United States collections.
Because you cannot yet search by name within this collection-Researchers have to browse thru to find the naturalizations which they are looking for. As of this program-not all of the images have been uploaded-Vermont has not yet been uploaded and the Rhode Island, Maine, New Hampshire and Massachusetts are still in the process of being uploaded.
Index card for William C. Bowles of Lowell Massachusetts who was naturalized at the United States Circuit Court in Boston, Massachusetts-Volume 115-Page 7-Now the researcher will have to find the USCC Boston-Volume 115-Pg 7
Researchers then must pick the court in which the naturalization was completed. These are broken up by state-then by county—then by court.
Researchers must then located the court which they need and scroll thru until the volume and page which they need is located. Until the name index is completed by family search-researchers need to know the volume and page number to locate the correct naturalization record.
Researcher will find the Court and Volume and page numbers on the side of each dexigraph—this is the information which researchers will be looking for once the court has been located.
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Thank you for attending!

Today’s video recording and materials will remain available at
www.archives.gov/calendar/know-your-records