

Seven Keys to Understanding Naturalization Records

1. **Prior to 1906, naturalizations could take place in any court of record.** They can be found on a local, state, or federal level. You may even find them in criminal or marine courts. After 1906, while most naturalizations were processed in federal courts, some local courts continued well beyond that date.

2. **Prior to 1906, a wide variety of forms were used in naturalizations,** so you'll often find varying amounts of information from court to court, and from year to year. On 27 September 1906 the Basic Naturalization Act turned the naturalization process over to the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization, (now the U.S. Citizenship and Immigrations Services, or USCIS). From then on processes and forms were more uniform.

3. There were three steps to the naturalization process:

1. **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.
2. **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.
3. **Certificates of Naturalization.** Most certificates of naturalization contain the name of the individual, the name of the court, and the date of issue.

4. **The 1900-1940 U.S. federal censuses asked for the naturalization status of immigrants.** Additionally, the 1920 census also asked for the year of naturalization. The abbreviations you'll find include:

- Na. – naturalized
- Pa. – first papers filed
- Al. – alien

The 1870 U.S. federal census had a column to be checked for "Male citizens of the U.S. aged 21 years and upwards." Non-native-born males who checked this column would have been naturalized prior to 1870.

5. **Many times the immigrant may have filed in one court,** sometimes near his port of entry, and completed the process in an entirely different location, so the declaration of intention may be in one place and the petition in another. Not all immigrants completed the process.

6. **Many old naturalization records are not going to give precise answers,** and if they do, the information may be less than reliable. Sometimes, incorrect answers were given quite innocently and only because the immigrant had honestly forgotten, particularly in later papers. Others may have provided the wrong dates of arrival in hopes that officials would not know the difference and that the wait to be eligible for naturalization would not be so long.

7. **"Derivative" citizenship was granted to wives and minor children of naturalized men.** From 1790 to 1922, wives of naturalized men automatically became citizens. This also meant that an alien woman who married a U.S. citizen automatically became a citizen. (An American woman who married an alien lost her U.S. citizenship, even if she never left the United States.) From 1790 to 1940, children under the age of twenty-one automatically became naturalized citizens upon the naturalization of their father. Unfortunately, however, names and biographical information about wives and children are rarely included in declarations or petitions filed before September 1906.