

Where is my immigrant ancestor from?

The purpose of this guide is to provide tips on finding foreign places of birth in U.S. records.

Database Key

Ancestry	<i>Ancestry Library Edition</i> , a database available for use at every B&ECPL location.
HeinOnline	A legal database available for use at every B&ECPL location.
HeritageQuest	<i>HeritageQuest Online</i> , a database available for use at every B&ECPL location and from home with a valid B&ECPL card.
NARA	U.S. National Archives and Record Administration - https://www.archives.gov/

Try These Sources First

Record Type	Notes
Church records	Especially Catholic and Lutheran. Check the immigrant's church marriage, baptisms of their children born in the U.S., and death record (less likely.)
Naturalization records	Obtain the Declaration of Intent and the Petition for Citizenship. Late September 1906 and forward are the most detailed. They usually provide place of birth, last foreign residence, and birth places of spouses and children. Earlier records often only list the country of birth or last residence.
Passenger Lists	1893 forward likely list last foreign residence and may include place of birth and address of a close relative in the country from which they came.
Social Security Application	Social Security began in 1935. Your ancestor did not necessarily sign up for Social Security. Obtain a copy of your deceased ancestors' applications for a fee: https://secure.ssa.gov/apps9/eFOIA-FEWeb/internet/main.jsp To obtain your deceased ancestors' Social Security number try the Social Security Death Index (1935-2014), available in <i>Ancestry</i> . Every deceased person who signed up for Social Security is not listed in this database.
Social Security Application and Claims index, 1936-2007	An <i>Ancestry</i> database that may list place of birth.
US, Index to Alien Case Files at the National Archives, Kansas City, 1944-2003	This is an <i>Ancestry</i> database. It may list place of birth and immigration information. For more information on Alien Case Files see: https://www.uscis.gov/history-and-genealogy/genealogy/files-numbered-below-8-million
Visa Files, A-Files Naturalization Certificate Files, Registry Files	Learn about and order these records through the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services website: http://www.uscis.gov/history-and-genealogy/genealogy/historical-records-series-available-genealogy-program
U.S. Canadian (1895-1954) and Mexican (1895-1964) Border Crossing Records	These usually list last foreign residence and may also include place of birth and address of a close relative in the country from which they came. Buffalo area lists do not start until 1902 and are available on microfilm and in <i>Ancestry</i> .
Military Records	Enlistment records, draft registrations, and 20th century discharge papers usually list place of birth. Military pension files may also list place of birth.

Next Try These

Record Type	Notes
Passports	Oct. 1795-Mar. 1925 are available on <i>Ancestry</i> . Later years require a FOIA request through the U.S. Department of State: https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/passports/have-passport/passport-records.html
Newspapers	Any feature articles or obituaries about your ancestors. Especially foreign language newspapers. See the Grosvenor Room's Local History File, a partial index to newspapers and other local publications.

Vital Records	Birth (may list birth location of parents), death and marriage records.
Books	Local, business, and ethnic group histories may feature a profile on your ancestor.
Gravestones	Place of birth may be inscribed on your ancestor's gravestone. This is especially true for Irish immigrants.
Estate Papers	May list foreign heirs and their places of residence.
Census Records	Birth location for immigrants born in areas affected by border changes may be listed as a specific province or region instead of a country only.

Long Shots

Record Type	Notes
Institutional Records	If your ancestor lived in an institution such as an orphanage or poorhouse, those institutions may have recorded their place of birth. Select Erie County Poorhouse records are online: https://www.buffalolib.org/research-resources/digital-collections
Employment Records	Search the following website to see if there is an archive for your ancestors' places of employment: https://beta.worldcat.org/archivegrid The Buffalo Irish Genealogical Society carries New York Central Railroad employee cards: http://bigsnv.webs.com
Federal Land Records	Especially from Donation Lands in Florida, Oregon, Washington, and New Mexico. Start researching in the General Land office Records: https://www.blm.gov/programs/lands-and-realty/federal-land-records
Patents	May list foreign heirs of patentees and their cities of residence. <i>Ancestry</i> includes patents: 1790-1909.
Freedman's Bank Records	The Freedman's Bank was set-up after the Civil War for the formerly enslaved and African American soldiers. For some reason many European immigrants also had accounts. Applications for the bank are online in <i>HeritageQuest</i> .
Federal Government Correspondence	If your ancestor corresponded with the Federal Government, those records may still exist. If the correspondence was related to their citizenship, immigration, naturalization, deportation, proof of birth, and possibly other reasons, their foreign place of birth may be included. Search for your ancestors in the following resources. If you find them, contact the U.S. National Archives regarding what you find. They may have the original documents associated with the interaction. https://www.archives.gov/contact <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>U.S. Congressional Serial Set</i> – This is a series of publications ordered to be printed by Congress. Partial content of the Serial Set is available in <i>HeritageQuest</i>, <i>HeinOnline</i> and this website: https://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lwss.html • <i>U.S. Subject Index to Correspondence and Case Files of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1903-1959</i> – <i>Ancestry</i> • <i>Name Index, ca. 1893 - ca. 1932</i> – An index to select early federal government immigration correspondence. NARA identification number 4709010. It is online in the NARA catalog: https://catalog.archives.gov/id/4709010. Click the "Search within this series" button and then input a name in the search box at the top of the screen. • <i>Name Index to Bureau of Naturalization Correspondence Files, 1906 – 1946</i> – This is on microfilm at the National Archives in Washington, DC and Chicago. NARA ID 1593296.

The following Grosvenor Room guides will be helpful in locating and learning more about the record types included in this handout:

- [Buffalo, WNY, and NY State Newspapers](#)
- [Biographical Resources for Buffalo and Erie County](#)
- [Cemetery Records for Erie County](#)
- [Church Records in Microfilm and Print](#)
- [Miscellaneous Genealogical Records: Adoptions, Border Crossings, Draft Cards, Land Records, Naturalizations, & Wills](#)
- [Passenger Lists](#)
- [Vital and Related Records for Buffalo and Erie County](#)

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716-858-8900 ♦ <https://www.buffalolib.org/research-resources/special-collections>