

How do I find my great-grandfather's ancestral town?

Part 3 - Naturalization Records

Dr. Ronald D. Doctor

6 July 2009

This month we'll continue our search for great-grandfather's ancestral town. We'll focus on naturalization records. I'll begin by describing the naturalization process which began when Congress passed the first naturalization law in 1790. Understanding this process will help you figure out where and how to obtain naturalization documents for your immigrant ancestors.

Naturalization is the process by which immigrants become citizens. The process typically produced three important documents over a five-year period.

- The immigrant filed a *Declaration of Intention* to become a citizen ("First Papers") after residing in the U.S. for two years.
- After another three years, he/she filed a *Petition for Naturalization*.
- A *Certificate of Naturalization* was granted after review of the Petition.

These documents, especially the Declaration of Intention, may give your ancestor's birth date and birthplace as well as immigration year, occupation, marital status, and spousal information. Other documents associated with naturalization may provide even more information. To locate these documents, we have to differentiate between naturalizations that occurred before and after September 27, 1906, and we have to be aware of how the law applied differently to women, children and men. I don't have space in today's column to deal with this differential treatment. Instead, I suggest reading Marian L. Smith's excellent article about citizenship for women. Go to <http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1998/summer/> . Ms. Smith's article is at the bottom of the page (<http://tinyurl.com/ykhqjv>).

Before September 27, 1906, naturalizations could be performed in any court: federal, state, county, or local. Each court maintained its own records. There was no central repository. There were no uniform procedures. Information contained in these records varied greatly from court to court. Working through this chaotic situation has been getting easier in recent years as volunteers and commercial services computerize the pre-1906 records and create name indexes to them. However, computerization is not complete. For now, it is best to use both on-line resources and microfilm/paper resources.

After September 27, 1906, the process became more uniform. A new law required all local, state and federal courts to send copies of new naturalization documents to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). For post-1906 naturalizations, you can learn what is available and obtain documents from a single source, the US Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS), successor to the INS (<https://genealogy.uscis.dhs.gov/>). The USCIS offers a two-step fee-for-service process. Begin by requesting an "Index Search" (\$20 fee) to identify file numbers for a deceased immigrant. The search will cover Naturalization files, WW2 Alien Registration Forms, Visa files and more, for various time periods after 1906. The USCIS website has good explanations of the documents they can provide. Be sure to read the descriptive material and to follow instructions. After you receive the file numbers, you can order copies of specific files on-line (\$20 to \$35 per file).

So, how do you find out whether your ancestor was naturalized before or after 1906? The easiest way is to check US Census records. The 1900 through 1930 Censuses give naturalization status. By examining successive Census entries, you can estimate when he/she was naturalized. The 1920 Census tells you the year naturalized. If you still can't tell when naturalization occurred, you will have to search both time periods.

If your ancestor was naturalized before September 27, 1906, your best bet is to start by searching various name indexes on-line. Those of us with ancestors naturalized in the New York City area can search the Jewish Genealogical Society of New York (www.jgsny.org) and the Italian Genealogical Society (www.italiangen.org). Both have name indexes for the courts of each Borough as well as surrounding counties and Trenton, New Jersey. These databases also include indexes for post-1906 naturalizations. Use Steve Morse's website (<http://www.stevemorse.org/vital/naturalization.html>) to search both websites in one-step and with greater ease. All these index searches are free. After you identify where and when naturalization occurred and the naturalization certificate numbers, you can order the documents from the appropriate court, the US National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), or on LDS microfilm.

Three other on-line name indexes are useful: (1) Joe Beine's "On-line Searchable Naturalization Indexes & Records" links to state and local naturalization indexes (<http://home.att.net/~wee-monster/naturalization.html>). Access to most is free; (2) Ancestry.com currently claims more than 10 million naturalization index entries and original documents for selected local and federal courts in 28 states (including Oregon) in 16 databases (<http://tinyurl.com/qcqwq4>); and (3) Footnote.com claims 3.3 million index

entries and 3.4 million records for selected localities in 8 states (<http://tinyurl.com/ql4md8>). Both Ancestry and Footnote are fee-based subscription services. They are free to search but require paid membership to view actual index entries and records. All three of these on-line resources cover both pre-1906 and post 1906 naturalizations. If your index search is successful, use the information you obtain to order the records directly from the local jurisdiction, the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) or on microfilm from a Mormon Family History Center.

In the 1930's, for a few regions of the country, the Works Project Administration (WPA) prepared comprehensive indexes to pre-1906 naturalization records, including New England (all 6 states, 1790-1906) and New York City (all 5 boroughs, 1790-1906). Microfilms of these card indexes are at NARA's regional branches and also are available through all LDS Family History Centers.

NARA's list of microfilmed state, county and local court indexes and records, arranged by state, is on-line at <http://www.archives.gov/genealogy/naturalization/naturalization.html>. Scroll to the bottom of the page to reach the list. NARA's list of microfilmed indexes and records for federal court naturalizations is at <https://eservices.archives.gov/orderonline/>. Click on the "Microfilm" button and in the search box, type "naturalization" (<http://tinyurl.com/lysayy>). If you have a question, submit a research question on-line at www.archives.gov/contact. Click the "Find & Request" button.

Microfilmed naturalization indexes and documents are available through local LDS Family History Centers (FHC). Go to www.familysearch.org. On the "Library" tab do either a "Keyword Search" for "naturalization index" or a "Place Search" for a city and state. Work through the results until you get microfilm numbers. Order the microfilms at any FHC. The FHC staff will help you.

If you need help with your search, please contact me at rondoctor@earthlink.net. If I can't help, other members of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Oregon (JGSO) will try to help you. JGSO's monthly meetings will resume in September. Let me know if you want to be on our e-mail list to receive meeting notices.