

## Why Did They Come?

Early immigrants left their homelands and came to America for a variety of standard reasons: Religious, economic and political. But what motivated your particular ancestor to emigrate?

### Irish

- 1847–1860: The infamous Irish Potato Famine happened during this time period. By its end, hundreds of thousands had escaped to America in over-crowded ships. The number of Irish immigrants to the U.S. declined considerably after the famine.
- 1881–1890: Crops continued to fail. Political and religious contention also occurred during this time.
- **Database Online:**  
If your Irish ancestor came during the famine, look for them in this database of passengers who sailed from Ireland and to NY from 1/12/1846 through 12/31/1851:  
<http://aad.archives.gov/aad/fielded-search.jsp?dt=180&cat=GP44&tf=F&bc=s>

### Scandinavian

- 1881–1890: The main waves of Norwegian and Swedish immigrants came to the U.S. leading up to the 1890s. Crop failure and rising unemployment fueled this search for new opportunities.
- Early 1900s: Finnish immigrants fled to the United States to escape Russia's growing power.
- **Research Tip:** Scandinavian surnames were often formed from patronymics, a system in which a father's first name is added to a suffix like "sen" or "son" to create a child's surname. Finding such a surname in your family tree can be a clue to Danish, Swedish, Icelandic or Norwegian roots. The suffix "son" (Anderson) usually denotes Sweden, whereas "sen" (Andersen) denotes Denmark.

### German

- 1683–1820: Religious persecution, wars and hardships lasted through much of this time period.
- 1820–1871: Many Germans emigrated in order to escape war and military service.
- 1843–1859: The unsuccessful German Revolution in 1848 along with crop failure led to a large influx of emigration.
- 1865–1874: Skilled workers began transferring to U.S. companies. German Catholics were expelled from regions of the German Empire.
- 1871–1914: Religious persecution, constant political unrest, overpopulation and low wages led many to immigrate to the U.S.
- **Research Tip:** In U.S. censuses from 1860, 1870 and 1880, in the field for birthplace, enumerators were asked to specify the German state, rather than just listing Germany.
- **Database Online:** *Germans to America 1850-1897*  
<http://aad.archives.gov/aad/fielded-search.jsp?dt=2102&cat=GP44&tf=F&bc=,sl>

### Italian

- 1891–1910: Italians were facing a combination of low wages, high taxes, poverty, poor soil, an inability to own land and a fierce feudal system. These hardships and low ticket fares to America led Italians to sail in droves for a better life.
- **Research Tip:** Look carefully at U.S. passenger lists for Italians arriving between 1890 and 1914. Often you'll get more than just a port of departure and a country – you'll find the town of origin listed, too.
- **Database Online:** *Italians to America Index 1855-1900:*  
<https://familysearch.org/search/collection/2110811>

## Chinese

- Mid-1800s: Famine, epidemics, repression, civil wars, and the Gold Rush all convinced many Chinese to leave their homes and come to America.
- **Research Tip:** Most Chinese and Asian immigrants arrived through the port of San Francisco, although you'll also find some crossing the border into America from Mexico and elsewhere.

## English and Welsh

- 1600s: The emigration began with the Puritans escaping religious persecution and continued as England became overcrowded. Many excess populations were sent to the New World.
- 1870, 1881–1890: A growing population and difficult living conditions during the Industrial Revolution continued the trend of immigration to the United States. Skilled laborers needed to find better opportunities.
- **Research Tip:** English colonists may not appear on traditional passenger lists, but they may show up in books and other documents related to America's early history. Try searching for your ancestor's name and an estimated birth year in the general index for <http://books.google.com/>.

## Scottish

- Mid to late 1800s: Scottish immigration peaked during the Highland Clearances, a program that pushed Scottish farmers off of pastureland leading up to the late 1800s.
- **Research Tip:** Most Scots entered the U.S. in New York, but it's a good idea to check all passenger lists, just in case. Yours could be one of the almost 16,000 Scottish immigrants who came through Baltimore, which, incidentally, offered immigrants a quick route to the Midwest.

## Austro-Hungarians

- 1880–1914: The 1867 creation of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire began an exodus that lasted until the end of World War I. Poles, Jews, Czechs and Slovaks sought escape from the empire's forced military service, political tensions and cultural and religious oppression.
- **Research Tip:** Borders changed often in this part of Europe. You may discover that an ancestor from Austria-Hungary claimed to be from Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia or another country, depending on when the record was created.

## Armenians

- 1890: Kurdish and Turkish attacks on Armenia in the mid 1890s resulted in the first major wave of Armenian immigration to the United States.
- 1901: Religious persecution forced many to leave their country.
- 1918: More Armenians left following the First World War, in which Armenia suffered heavy losses at the hands of Turkey.

## Greeks

- 1920–1950s: Religious persecution gave cause for many Greeks to immigrate to America.
- **Research Tip:** Have a family member who suddenly seems impossible to track in America? Look for a return trip to Greece – Greeks, Italians, Russian Christians, Hungarian Christians, and certain Slavic groups were the most apt to return home for good.

## French

- 1685-1750. More than 100,000 French Huguenots (Protestants) settled along the eastern seaboard in America.
- French Revolution 1789-1799 encouraged refugees to leave France. Napoleon emerged in 1804 spreading French Revolutionary principles all over Europe.
- 1851: Political refugees of the 1848 Revolution in France found safety in the United States.
- **Research Tip:** Ancestors with French roots (and Acadians) may have actually arrived in America via Canada rather than directly from France. Search Ancestry's Immigration & Travel collection for U.S.-Canada border crossings and Canadian passengers.

## German Jews

- 1933–1950s: As Nazi anti-Semitism grew, Jews fled Germany for the United States. However, German immigration quotas prevented some from finding safety in the U.S. After the war, more than 80,000 Holocaust survivors found refuge in America.
- **Research Tip:** Ancestry.com has a relatively new Jewish Family History collection.

## Russians

- **Database Online:** Russian's to America 1834-1897  
<http://aad.archives.gov/aad/fielded-search.jsp?dt=2126&cat=GP44&tf=F&bc=,sl>

## Russian Jews

- 1880–1917: Anti-Semitism spread across Russia fueled by false ideas about Judaism. Jews were forced to flee from town to town to escape violent Pogroms. Seeking religious tolerance in the U.S., Jews fled Russia en masse migration until the Russian Revolution in 1917.
- 1901–1910: Violence and riots were targeted at both Gypsies and Jews.
- **Research Tip:** Between 1907 and 1914, Jews escaping Russian pogroms were encouraged to immigrate through Galveston because of fears that an influx of Jewish immigrants through Atlantic ports would result in a wave of anti-Semitism.

## Poles

- 1880–1914: This was a period of high religious persecution for Jews in Poland. Many of those that emigrated did so because of this persecution.
- 1919–1950s: After gaining independence in 1919, Poland was overridden by the Nazis and Russians as World War II dawned.
- **Research Tip:** If your ancestor's passenger list includes numerous males with the same, non-relative destination, it could be a clue that your ancestor was recruited to work in a mine or factory in America.