

# Uncovering Immigrant Origins Through Cluster Research

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One of the most challenging aspects of tracing ethnic ancestors is finding their place of origin. If this information is not passed down orally or in documented records kept by the family, then finding them can be challenging. If your ancestor is one of those who had very little recorded about his/her origins, then you will need to be more creative and try cluster research and see if you can find the origin of those associated or related to your family who may have traveled from the same area or come with them.

## Questions to consider when searching immigrant origins

- Did they speak or read English?
- Did they live in a time or place when few records were created or have survived?
- Did they stow away to get here?
- Were they an indentured servant?
- Did they work on a ship as crew to pay for their passage overseas?
- Were they forced to come to the colonies for a crime they did or did not commit?
- Did they serve in the German forces during the Revolutionary War?
- Did they leave to escape military enlistment, famine, or persecution?
- Did they want to forget their time in their home country? Were any oral stories of their origins passed on? Do any of the extended family or friends have details recorded about their voyage?
- How old were they when they arrived? Do they remember their home country? Were they orphaned at a young age?
- Did they come by themselves or with others?
- Were they poor and unable to pay for a tombstone or obituary?
- Did they die in their prime instead of old age?

## Tips for researching immigrants

- Understanding the circumstances of when they arrived as well as why they came might help.
- Tracing the origins of others with the same surname that were the same ethnicity and religion might help you find the record needed to tie them together if nothing exists in the U.S. records.
- Once you have exhausted all available records in the U.S. about your immigrant ancestor, look at the records of extended family, people with the same surname, friends who they work with, go to church with, or who are neighbors, and others of the same ethnicity who live in their same location and may belong to their same social or religious organizations.
- Make sure to check the records of the immigrant's children. They may have recorded their parents' origins in a biographical sketch, their obituary, death records, etc.
- Watch for sponsors or witnesses at baptisms and marriages. This is especially true if they are German. The godparents are usually someone closely connected to the family such as an extended family member or close friend. Researching for the origins of the sponsors or godparents might help you find the town of origin for your person.
- Search for their ship passenger list and see who traveled with them. Are any of them the same ethnicity? If so, track them and where they came from. Do a circular search surrounding that person's origins to see if your person is found in any of the town/church/vital records. If these records aren't online, hire someone overseas to obtain copies for you.
- If you use clues from online trees, be very careful. You don't know how much research the submitter did before posting the information online or how accurate it is. If they posted on your

person, ask them for a copy of their sources and records. If they don't have anything, then search to see if you can find original records to confirm or refute the information contained in the online tree. Online trees can provide good clues, but just be very careful and don't trust anything.

### **Records that might provide clues to a person's origin:**

- **Obituaries:** Many times obituaries will include the birth date and location for the deceased individual as well as the year of immigration, which you will need to find their hometown. They often list the cemetery and funeral home used.
- **Naturalization records:** These can sometimes provide valuable insight into the origin and ethnicity of the immigrant. It may contain detailed information such as the specific town name or the state in another country where they were born. Or it might only list the name of the Emperor or king they are renouncing to gain citizenship in America. The date of arrival, ship name, persons' birth date, or occupation sometimes is included. There are three steps to completing the naturalization process. Make sure to get a copy of all the records if they exist because they do not always contain the same information.
- **Ship passenger arrival and departure lists:** Ship passenger lists / manifests might provide helpful details such as the person's name, age, occupation, final destination, and if they traveled with other family members. Make sure to check for both the arrival and departure manifests (if they exist). Occasionally the town of birth or residence prior to emigration will be included. If your ancestor came from Germany, check for an auswanderungen record from the state in Germany they came from. These helpful records always provide either the birth location or the town of residence prior to emigration and can be key to finding your ancestor's origin overseas.
- **Death records:** If your ancestor died after the 1900s and has a death certificate issued by the state, there is a good chance the birthdate and location will be listed on it. Its accuracy is dependent on the informants' knowledge of the deceased persons origins. Rarely will the birth town be listed, but sometimes a more specific location such as the state within a country will be included. Later death records indicate the cemetery and funeral home used, which may lead to helpful clues not found in the death record.
- **Funeral Home records:** Funeral home records might provide a wealth of information different from what is contained in death or cemetery records. Check the funeral home records for other family members since families often used the same funeral home. Information about the deceased person's birth and (if you're lucky) their parents might be recorded in the file.
- **Cemetery records:** These don't often list the town of origin in their records, but they can be key to finding other family members or friends who were also buried in the same location. Occasionally the town and country of birth are engraved on the tombstone.
- **Church records:** Church records in the United States might provide clues to a person's origins. Clues might be found in the baptismal, marriage or burial entries for the person or their children. Don't overlook church membership records or witnesses at baptisms who were often friends or relatives of the family. If your ancestor was Catholic in America, there is a good chance they were Catholic in their home country.
- **Family Stories:** Don't discount family stories and legends. Sometimes the stories might provide clues that help you break through your brick walls. Are there stories of any friends or associates

who may have traveled with them or settled nearby? Once one relative was established in America, they would write home and encourage others to come and settle near them. Details on their voyage, landing in the United States and settlement in their new home might be passed down in the family oral histories.

- **Deeds:** Land records don't often provide details on the name of the town of origin, but they can be useful for finding extended relatives and friends who may have come from the same location. These records can also be useful to determine when they may have arrived if you can find their first land purchase.
- **Probate records:** Again, these records rarely will list the town of origin, but they are very good for determining family relationships, which might provide needed clues to find them overseas. Make sure to look at all the records including the receipts not just the will or executor / administrator bonds.
- **Other vital records (such as marriage records):** If your immigrant ancestor was married in America after 1900, there is a good chance their birth date and location was listed on the marriage application along with the name of his/her parents. If they had siblings who were born overseas and married here, check for their marriage record too.
- **Family Bibles:** If your family is lucky enough to have a family bible preserved, especially one from their home country, you might find a birth date for your immigrant ancestor. Sometimes these will be in another language. Many historical societies and the D.A.R. have bible records in their collections
- **Census:** These can be helpful in determining where the family lived. Keep in mind census records are notorious for having errors, but when used in conjunction with other records they can be helpful, and if you are lucky, it might list the country of origin correctly.
- **Family photos:** If you can find photos in your personal or family collection, check for additional clues on the front or back of the photo or on the album scrapbook page. Names of extended family members or birth/death dates might be included. If your family took a trip back overseas to visit relatives, there may be a photo from their trip or from correspondence with their overseas relatives.

### **You've found the town of origin, now what?**

Check to see if the records are online. Use the FamilySearch Wiki or catalog to find online records. Also check town or archive repositories where your town is located.

If the records are not online, consider hiring someone at the archive or who resides in or near your town to assist in copying these records. Use LinkedIn to find the names of researchers then use the filters to narrow down your search results to someone who lives in the area where you believe your ancestor resided.

## Foreign language difficulties

What do you do if your ancestor came from a non-English speaking country? Not only will the records be in another language, usually they will be written in script, which can be difficult to read.

But I can't read the language! Luckily there are many resources to help you online and published in books. If all else fails, hire an expert until you can confidently read the records yourself.

- FamilySearch Wiki offers many tools to help you be successful researching in another country or records in another language. There are free downloadable word lists and letter writing guides. Many countries offer handwriting helps and some even have downloadable handouts with examples of words in print and script for that country as well as in English.
- FamilySearch's Learning Center offers free webinars to help with understanding foreign language documents, research, and reading the handwriting. They have a wide range of topics and levels of difficulty to aid you.
- Many companies and websites offer books to help with handwriting, vocabulary and gazetteers.

FamilySearch Wiki Word Lists

[https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Genealogical\\_Word\\_Lists](https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Genealogical_Word_Lists)

Online helps for Reading Old English Handwriting (with links to several other European countries too)

[https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Online\\_Helps\\_for\\_Reading\\_Old\\_English\\_Handwriting](https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Online_Helps_for_Reading_Old_English_Handwriting)

Letter Writing Guides

[https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Category:Letter\\_Writing\\_Guides](https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Category:Letter_Writing_Guides)

Handwriting tools

Sütterlin schrift handwriting tool: <http://www.suetterlinschrift.de/Englisch/Sutterlin.htm>

Old German script generator: <http://www.deutsche-handschrift.de/adsschreiben.php#schrifftefeld>

German script downloadable handouts [https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Germany\\_Handwriting](https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Germany_Handwriting)

French Handwriting: [https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/French\\_Handwriting](https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/French_Handwriting)

BYU Script Tutorial (handwriting help for English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and Latin documents): <https://script.byu.edu/>

## Further reading

FamilySearch Wiki. ([https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Tracing\\_Immigrant\\_Origins](https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Tracing_Immigrant_Origins)) "Tracing Immigrant Origins"

FamilySearch Wiki. ([https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Tracing\\_Women\\_Using\\_Cluster\\_Genealogy\\_\(National\\_Institute\)](https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Tracing_Women_Using_Cluster_Genealogy_(National_Institute))) "Tracing Women Using Cluster Genealogy (National Institute).

Jones, Tom. "Inferential Genealogy," [https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Inferential\\_Genealogy](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Inferential_Genealogy)

Mills, Elizabeth Shown. *QuickSheet: The Historical Biographer's Guide to Cluster Research (The FAN Principle)*. (Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2012).

Sorenson, Yvonne. "Immigration - Crossing the Pond: Collect Records." Webinar. *FamilySearch Lessons*, 2019. Downloadable video and handout. <https://www.familysearch.org/en/help/helpcenter/lessons/immigration-crossing-the-pond-collect-records> : 2020.