

Genealogy Escape RoomSM

The Case of the Only Name Change at Ellis Island

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You are stuck at the Ellis Island Family History Center in New York City where you've been researching the "urban legend" that names were changed for arriving immigrants. It is mid-afternoon and you **MUST** locate information on FRANK WOODHULL, born 1858 in Canada, before the last ferry leaves at 4:30 pm!

It is rumored that Woodhull was **THE ONLY PERSON** who legally had their name changed at Ellis Island. You need to locate **DEFINITIVE PROOF** of the name change before you are stranded on the island! Use the intake form at <https://forms.gle/qqKpG8LzdUEoncw47> to record your responses.

NOTE: You are encouraged to use ANY online sites for GENEALOGY research including Ancestry, FamilySearch, MyHeritage, WikiTree, and search engines including Bing and Google.

The Case of Frank Woodhull: Introduction

You may have heard in a family story that a family's surname or even a person's given name was changed upon arrival in the United States at Ellis Island. This "urban legend" has been discussed and debunked for decades in the genealogy community. Since an immigrant's name **MUST** match the ship's manifesto, most name changes took place **AFTER** the person was successfully admitted. The change could have been done simply by adopting a new name or by selecting a new name during the citizenship process.

But ... there is **ONE** case of a name change of an immigrant at Ellis Island and that person is Frank Woodhull who arrived at New York City on October 4th, 1908. Follow an amazing research journey with twists and turns and you'll find out how Woodhull lived under an assumed name in the United States for almost 15 years before his fateful return to the US from a holiday in England.

The Case of Frank Woodhull: Clues, Answers, and Research Notes

Here are the questions, answers, and information on how the research was performed.

Question: When did Frank WOODHULL arrive at Ellis Island?

2 October 1908

Genealogy Research Log No. 1 "New York Passenger Arrival Lists (Ellis Island), 1892-1924", database with images, FamilySearch (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:JX5D-3M9> : 16 August 2023), Mary Johnson, 1908.

Question: Why was Frank WOODHULL detained at Ellis Island?

Immigration officials feared that Frank Woodhull had tuberculosis due to his appearance.

"Genealogy Research Log No. 7

""Frank Woodhull's Ellis Island Experience."" U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) (<https://www.uscis.gov/about-us/our-history/stories-from-the-archives/frank-woodhulls-ellis-island-experience> accessed 1 September 2023) updated 20 July 2022."

Question: When Frank WOODHULL arrived at Ellis Island, where was he traveling from?

Southampton, England

"Genealogy Research Log No. 3

The National Archives; Kew, Surrey, England; BT27 Board of Trade: Commercial and Statistical Department and Successors: Outwards Passenger Lists; Reference Number: Series BT27"

Question: What was Frank WOODHULL's legal name?

Mary Johnson

"Genealogy Research Log No. 8

""New York Passenger Arrival Lists (Ellis Island), 1892-1924"", database with images, FamilySearch (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:JX5D-3M9> : 16 August 2023), Mary Johnson, 1908."

Question: What was the ailment from which Frank WOODHULL suffered?

Rheumatism

"Genealogy Research Log No. 4

""Happy As A Man, She Says, After 15 Years Posing,"" The Evening World (New York, NY), 5 October 1908, digital images, Digital Transgender Archive (<https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/x633f1307>: accessed 1 September 2023)."

Question: What were the reasons given by Frank WOODHULL for disguising his appearance?

Economic

"Genealogy Research Log No. 4""Happy As A Man, She Says, After 15 Years Posing,"" The Evening World (New York, NY), 5 October 1908, digital images, Digital Transgender Archive (<https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/x633f1307>: accessed 1 September 2023)."

Question: Locate Frank WOODHULL at WikiTree.com. Do you agree that the Frank WOODHULL detained at Ellis Island is the same Frank WOODHULL documented in marriage and census records at WikiTree?

Uncertain

"Genealogy Research Log No. 10

""Frank Woodhull (1858 - abt. 1936)"" Wikitree (<https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Woodhull-215>, accessed 1 September 2023) listing various sources of information for WOODHULL Frank b1858."

Question: After reading newspaper accounts of Frank WOODHULL's Ellis Island experience and more recent articles about Frank WOODHULL, do you think modern perspectives suffer from "presentism"?

Yes

"Genealogy Research Log No. 9

Thomas, Morgan ""A Snapshot Diagnosis."" Guerniza e-zine

(<https://www.guernicamag.com/a-snapshot-diagnosis/> accessed 1 September 2023) 13
September 2022"

Mary Johnson / Frank Woodhull: Transgendered?

Once you've worked through the research and have read both the newspaper articles about Frank Woodhull's arrival in 1908 and more recent articles about the life of Frank Woodhull, would you consider Woodhull to have self-identified as transgendered?

I would make the case for an answer of NO. And here's why:

- The term "transgendered" is a late 20th-century term and was first in common use to describe sexual orientation and gender identification only in the 1990s.
- Many of the current articles seem to want to embrace Woodhull as a "hero" and an inspirational historical figure for transgendered persons. Assumptions are made without facts in evidence. Other than the newspaper accounts, there are no personal letters or diaries from Woodhull.
- In addition, the newspaper accounts give a "sympathetic portrait" of Woodhull as a disfigured person who dressed in men's clothing in order to work and earn a living.
- While it was illegal in New York state for a woman to appear in public dressed in men's clothing in 1908, Woodhull was still allowed to leave Ellis Island in men's clothing despite having his name changed to Mary Johnson on the original passenger list.
- The research at Wikitree presents several documents including a Michigan marriage index as well as United States Federal Census population schedules suggesting that Frank Woodhull was married to a woman and even had a child. Due to inconsistencies in the documents including birth location and professions for Woodhull, I'm not convinced that these documents relate to Mary Johnson/Frank Woodhull.
- More importantly, if the Wikitree research were true, and Woodhull had not disclosed the information to immigration officials at Ellis Island, he would be guilty of violating several provisions including the "moral turpitude" issues barring his admission to the United States.

Resource List

- **FORM The Case of the Only Name Change at Ellis Island** - Google Forms
<https://forms.gle/ggKpG8LzdUEoncw47>
- **RESEARCH LOG The Case of the Only Name Change at Ellis Island** - Excel
<https://genealogybargains.s3.amazonaws.com/WOODHULL+Frank+b1858+Genealogy+Research+Log.xlsx>
- **CASE STEPS The Case of the Only Name Change at Ellis Island** - Excel
https://genealogybargains.s3.amazonaws.com/CASE+STEPS++Genealogy+Escape+Room_+The+Case+of+the+Only+Name+Change+at+Ellis+Island.xlsx
- **Frank Woodhull's Ellis Island Experience** - U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS)
<https://www.uscis.gov/about-us/our-history/history-office-and-library/frank-woodhulls-ellis-island-experience>
- **Frank Woodhull (1858-1836?)** - WikiTree
<https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Woodhull-215>
- **Frank Woodhull (1858-1836?)** - WikiTree via Wayback Machine
<https://web.archive.org/web/20230920150749/https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Woodhull-215>
- **Why Your Family Name Was Not Changed at Ellis Island (and One That Was)** - New York Public Library
<https://www.nypl.org/blog/2013/07/02/name-changes-ellis-island>
- **Frank Woodhull** - Digital Transgender Archives
https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/catalog?f%5Bdate_other_subject_ssim%5D%5B%5D=Frank+Woodhull
- **Adopts Men's Clothes Because Nature Had Given Her Mustache**
Publisher The Mitchell Capital
Date Issued Oct. 9, 1908
<https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/5x21tf68v>
- **Allowed to Proceed in Male Attire**
Publisher The Forest Republican
Date Issued Oct. 7, 1908
<https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/cn69m4438>
- **Happy as a Man, She Says, After 15 Years Posing**
Publisher The Evening World
Date Issued Oct. 5, 1908
<https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/x633f1307>

- ***Lived Fifteen Years as Man - Experiences of Woman Whom Nature Obligated to Assume Masculine Garb***
 Publisher Omaha Daily Bee
 Date Issued Oct. 10, 1908
<https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/p5547r70j>
- ***Passed Off as a Man***
 Publisher Evening Star
 Date Issued Oct. 5, 1908
<https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/8336h2203>
- ***She Plays Man***
 Publisher The Waterbury Evening Democrat
 Date Issued Oct. 5, 1908
<https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/6d56zw865>
- ***Wears Man's Attire in Order to Earn a Living***
 Publisher The Mitchell Capital
 Date Issued Oct. 30, 1908
https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/catalog?f%5Bdta_other_subject_ssim%5D%5B%5D=Frank+Woodhull
- ***A Snapshot Diagnosis*** - Guernica
<https://www.guernicamag.com/a-snapshot-diagnosis/>
- ***Exceptional Queerness: Defining the Boundaries of Normative U.S. Citizenship, 1876-1936***
<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/4834222.pdf>
- ***Framing Gender: Ellis Island Immigration Portraits***
<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/235416447.pdf>
- ***Frank Woodhull or Mary Johnson*** - My Ellis Island Story
http://myellislandstory.blogspot.com/2013/02/everyday-i-am-privileged-with-hearing_25.html