

Know Your USCIS Records

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[RecordsNotRevenue.com/IAJGS2021](https://www.recordsnotrevenue.com/IAJGS2021)

Much misinformation and misunderstanding surrounds the records created by US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) and its predecessor, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). This handout provides accurate information on the documents maintained by the fee-based USCIS Genealogy Program, and clarifies what documents might be found duplicated in court records, located at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) or obtained via a USCIS FOIA request.

Locating and using the USCIS records is not straightforward, given the changes in the immigration laws over time, and the changes in the agencies that created and store the records. This handout covers the most typical process.

Despite the public interest in these records, and their value to genealogical research, future access to USCIS records remains in jeopardy if the community does not continue to work to protect the records by taking action. The link [RecordsNotRevenue.com/IAJGS2021](https://www.recordsnotrevenue.com/IAJGS2021) provides additional materials and easy steps for researchers to help us protect the future of these immigration records.

Research Essentials

Improve your research requests by providing all useful information: USCIS will perform a search based only on name, date of birth, and country of birth. *Results improve* if you provide all alternate names and spellings; exact or estimated dates of arrival; naturalization; and death; locations, including address, where the immigrant lived in the US; names of spouses, children, and other immigrant family members; as well as any military service. NARA appreciates requests that provide all useful information as well. Keeping this data listed in timeline format will also help you better understand what files might exist for the person being researched.

Court records or immigration and naturalization records? The “old saw” that USCIS C-Files 1906-1956 are nothing more than duplicates of court naturalization records is not entirely true. USCIS C-files include at least one document not found in court records, often contain many additional forms and correspondence, and some C-File series are unique – not duplicated in court records at all. Naturalization research often requires following two separate research paths:

- Court Records: Federal Court naturalization records are found at the National Archives (and some online) as part of Record Group 21, Records of the Federal Courts; state and local court records are found across various archives.
- USCIS Naturalization records in USCIS’ custody (C-Files) are obtained via the USCIS Genealogy Program or USCIS FOIA.

USCIS Immigration Records: Access and Status

To view examples of the records listed, visit <https://www.recordsnotrevenue.com/example-files>. See page 4 of this handout for a timeline of the records.

Certificate Files (C-Files), from 27 September 1906 to 31 March 1956

INS files documenting every US certificate of naturalization, citizenship, or repatriation between 27 Sept 1906 and 31 March 1956. Some C-Files duplicate records found in court naturalization records, other C-Files are unique and provide information unavailable elsewhere.

- Format: More than six million C-Files on microfilm and a digitized copy housed within the USCIS MiDAS System. About 1.5 million C-Files exist only as paper/hard copy.
- Access: USCIS Genealogy Program
- Status: Temporary, **scheduled for destruction (2056)**

Visa Files, from 1 July 1924 to 31 March 1944

Original arrival records and supporting documents of immigrants officially admitted for permanent residence under provisions of the Immigration Act of 1924. In cases where the immigrant naturalized after 1 April 1944 or the case reopened after 1 April 1944, the Visa File may have been moved to a C-File or an A- File.

- Format: Paper
- Access: USCIS Genealogy Program
- Status: Permanent, scheduled to transferred to NARA in 2019 (**Overdue**)

Registry Files, from 2 March 1929 to 31 March 1944

Original records documenting the creation of official immigrant arrival records for persons who entered the United States prior to 1 July 1924, and for whom no arrival record could be found. Most Registry Files relate to immigrants who arrived before 1924, and naturalized between 1929 and 1944 (Registry files of those naturalized after 1944 were often moved to the C-File or A- File).

- Format: Paper
- Access: USCIS Genealogy Program
- Status: Permanent, scheduled to transfer to NARA in 2019 (**Overdue**)

Alien Registration Forms, from 1 August 1940 to 31 March 1944

Microfilmed copies of 5.6 million Alien Registration Forms (Form AR-2) completed by all aliens age 14 and older, resident in or entering the United States between the dates given. A digitized copy of the microfilm is included in USCIS' MiDAS System.

- Access: USCIS Genealogy Program. *Also on microfilm at NARA, but USCIS fully restricts access.*
- Status: NARA microfilm copies are permanent. USCIS microfilm indeterminate. USCIS digitized copy within MiDAS System is permanent but not transferring per records schedule.

Alien Files (A-Files), from 1 April 1944 to present

Alien registration numbers were issued beginning in 1940, and in 1944 used to establish a new file system in which ALL immigration (and after 1956, naturalization) records relating to an individual were filed by that number. Referred to as Alien Registration Files, Alien Files, or A-Files, determining their location and how to request them can be a challenge. A-Files created for immigrants or naturalized citizens who arrived prior to 1944 may contain all available records of that immigrant (i.e. records created prior to 1944 such as Visa or Registry Files).

A-Files are permanent records, and nearly 1.5 million A-files of immigrants born more than 100 years ago are in NARA custody. Millions more A-files (of all birthdates) remain with USCIS. If an A-file is not found in the NARA catalog, one must request it from either USCIS' Genealogy Program or FOIA/PA Program, depending on the immigrant's date of birth and the A-number.

A-Number and Subject Information	Submit Request To
Subject born more than 100 years ago, regardless of A-number	Check NARA catalog https://catalog.archives.gov/id/4488912 (Kansas City) https://catalog.archives.gov/id/6105565 (San Bruno)
A-number is below 8 million and subject is deceased	USCIS Genealogy Program http://www.uscis.gov/genealogy
A-number is above 8 million; any living subject, regardless of A-number	USCIS FOIA/PA Program http://www.uscis.gov/foia

If the immigrant naturalized prior to 1 April 1956, refer to C-Files, described previously, as the A-File *should* have been consolidated into the C-File, though note this procedure did not always happen.

- Access: See table. A-Files are available from USCIS, but you must submit proof of death when DOB under 100 years, and proofs of death of other names that might be mentioned in the file regardless of birthdate; you must provide notarized permission for files of living people; many files that should have transferred to NARA remain with USCIS.
- Status: Permanent

Why We Must Take Action

The USCIS Genealogy Program, begun with the best of intentions, no longer functions efficiently or effectively, resulting in a difficult, time-consuming and very expensive process for researchers to access immigration records of the late 19th and 20th century ... if the records are found at all and not declared “missing.”

The ordering process is woefully inefficient, as is the time it takes to provide researchers with substandard copies on obsolete CD-ROM technology. The Genealogy Program provides zero transparency and little recourse if records are not located. Current staff are poorly trained and do not know the laws that created the historic records of the INS, and therefore often provide incorrect information or insufficient results to requesters.

USCIS is legally bound by the record schedules it has signed to transfer all eligible A-Files, Visa Files, and Registry Files to the National Archives. Furthermore, USCIS agreed to transfer the Master Index (MiDAS) and the relevant Soundex index within MiDAS beginning in 2007. Contained within MiDAS are digital images of the Alien Registration Forms and many of the C-Files. USCIS offers no sound explanation for this lack of compliance regarding records transfer.

There are records scheduled for destruction, such as the incredibly valuable C-files, and there are other records under USCIS control (Petition Files known as “P-Files” and Old DO Files) yet the agency offers no system to service them.

USCIS focuses on citizenship and immigration services. The home for historic records is the National Archives and this is the solution: **USCIS must transfer the historic records of our ancestors (and accompanying MiDAS index and Soundex), as they are legally bound, and do it without further delay. As long as any historic records remain in USCIS custody, they must be serviced by trained professionals who understand the complicated history of the agency and the records under its care.**

For these reasons, we call on genealogists to help us take action. Without oversight from Congress, and without additional funding for the National Archives, the records of our immigrant ancestors will continue to sit behind paywalls, out of reach, and some of them will eventually be destroyed.

Contact your Representative and Senators:

- Tell them you want the records of the USCIS Genealogy Program, and the accompanying index, transferred to the National Archives. Read tips on how to do this at [RecordsNotRevenue.com/IAJGS2021](https://recordsnotrevenue.com/IAJGS2021).
- Ask them to support increased funding for the National Archives. We support the request made by the National Coalition for History and the National Humanities Alliance to provide NARA with an operating budget of \$433 million. The Humanities Alliance provides this tool to contact Congress about funding for NARA: <https://p2a.co/sG53z3A>.

Important Links

- USCIS Genealogy Program <http://www.uscis.gov/genealogy>
- A-files at NARA: <http://www.archives.gov/research/immigration/aliens/>
- Search by A-file number at NARA: <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/4488912> or <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/6105565>

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Three Eras of US Immigration and Nationality Records

EARLY
 18th & 19th Century

GREAT WAVE
 Early 20th Century

RECENT
 Late 20th Century

1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980			
Customs Lists, 1820-1892							Immigration Lists, 1892-1954												
							Border Arrival Manifests, 1895-1954												
							Immigration Correspondence, 1893-1944												
										Visa Files, 1924-44									
												Registry Files, 1929-44							
												AR-2							
															A-Files, 1944 - present				
Court Naturalization Records, 1790-1992																			
										Certificate Files, 1906-1956				A-Files, 1944-					
										Natz Corresp., 1906-1944									

NON-INS Records

INS Records at NARA

INS Records at USCIS