



Becoming a Citizen: Naturalization Records, 1850 - 1930 Video Podcast Transcript

Minnesota Historical Society

In a nation of immigrants, becoming a citizen – being “naturalized” has been an important part of our personal and national history. For most of American history there were few barriers to becoming a resident. The only official records of new arrivals were the Passenger Lists furnished by incoming vessels to U.S. Customs officials. These simply listed the names of all passengers, their nationality, where they embarked and, in some cases, where they were going. For many immigrants that simple list is the only record of their arrival in America. One could work, own property and enjoy most of the benefits of living in this county without ever becoming a citizen.

However, citizenship was a requirement for those wishing to vote, hold public office or purchase land from the U.S. Government. For most of the 19th Century, this was a simple, two step process. The person seeking to become a citizen first went to a local “court of record” that is any court that kept permanent records of its proceedings, and declared that it was his “bona fide intention” to become a citizen of the United States and to renounce allegiance to his former country. This usually involved making a sworn statement before a judge and signing a printed document. It should be noted that because women could not vote during the 19th and early 20th centuries, and few women purchased land or homesteaded, it is unusual to find a naturalization record for female immigrants before the 1920’s.

Some years later (the usual required period was 5 years) the applicant would reappear before the court with two witnesses who would swear that he had been a good citizen. The applicant would then take the oath of allegiance before the judge and be officially declared a citizen of the United States. If he was married and had children born overseas, his wife and minor children would automatically become citizens. Children born to a married couple after their arrival in America were considered citizens by birth, regardless of their parents’ status.

Most of the records from this period, both “declaration of intention” and “final papers”, contain only basic information. At best the first papers might give port and date of arrival, and even less frequently the town or city of birth. The usual forms only listed name, date of the oath and the country of origin. Final papers were equally sparse in content including name, date of oath, country of origin and names of witnesses – these were often relatives or neighbors.

During the late 1800’s the influx of immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe, led to changes in the immigration laws and procedures. The immigration center at Ellis Island in New York harbor kept much more elaborate records while processing new arrivals. In 1906, the U.S. Naturalization and Immigration Service was created. This new agency issued forms to local courts that required much more information for “letters of intention”. Applicants now had to furnish the names of family members who immigrated with them, as well as their specific place of birth, date and port of arrival and the name of their ship.

In the 1920’s as women gained the right to vote in national elections, requirements for separate papers for female immigrants began to be required. The new “Petition and Record” form combined letter of intention with the final papers, and often added details such a photographs of the individual applicant. By the middle of the 20th century, most of the citizenship process had been taken over by Federal agencies and few local courts were involved in the process.

The Minnesota Historical Society holds records for Naturalizations performed in the country district courts for the state. These records are available on microfilm and may be used here in our reading room or requested through interlibrary loan. For a fee, researchers can also place naturalization record requests through our web site.