

Did Your Forefathers Have Papers Before Sailing to the USA?

A short history of what immigrants needed to enter America — from open shores to the visa — and the records your ancestors left behind

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The Short Answer

It depends almost entirely on when they sailed. For most of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries — the great wave that came through Castle Garden and Ellis Island — an immigrant needed no passport and no visa to enter the United States. The one essential “paper” was the ship’s passenger manifest, filled out at the port of departure by the steamship company, and checked by inspectors on arrival. That changed in 1924, when the United States began requiring every arriving immigrant to obtain a visa from an American consulate abroad before boarding the ship. So an ancestor who landed in 1905 carried essentially nothing; one who landed in 1925 could not have sailed without papers obtained in advance. Here is the whole arc at a glance:

Era	What it took to enter the United States	Passport needed?
Before 1820	Nothing federal — arrive and settle	No
1820–1891	Your name recorded on the ship’s manifest; state inspection (New York’s Castle Garden from 1855)	No (except briefly during the Civil War)
1892–1917	Federal inspection at Ellis Island, checked against the manifest — a health, funds, and eligibility screen	No
1917–1921	The same inspection, plus a wartime passport-and-visa requirement	Yes (wartime)
1924 onward	An immigrant visa obtained from a U.S. consulate abroad before sailing	Yes

The Open Shore

In the early republic the federal government barely touched immigration. Congress made naturalization — the path to citizenship — a federal matter as early as 1790, but entering the country was another thing entirely: there were no federal entry documents, no inspectors, and no numerical limits. People stepped off a ship and began their lives. What little oversight existed was left to the states. For your earliest immigrant ancestors, in other words, there simply were no papers to have.

The Manifest: The First Federal “Paper”

The first document the federal government required was not carried by the immigrant at all. The Steerage Act of 1819, effective in 1820, ordered the master of every arriving vessel to hand the customs collector a list of all passengers aboard — name, age, sex, occupation, and country of origin. That passenger manifest, prepared by the shipping line, became the official record of arrival, and it is the single document your nineteenth-century ancestor is most likely to appear on. The immigrant’s job was simply to be counted correctly; the paperwork was the ship’s responsibility.

Castle Garden and Ellis Island: Inspected at the Door, Not Before

As arrivals swelled, the states and then the federal government built places to process them. New York opened Castle Garden, the country's first formal immigrant depot, in 1855, and ran it until 1890. The federal government then took over and opened Ellis Island on January 1, 1892. The logic of the system is the key point: immigrants were examined on arrival, checked against the manifest their ship had prepared, not screened in advance. Inspectors quizzed each newcomer to confirm the manifest's answers — name, nationality, how much money they carried — and ran a brief medical and eligibility check. If the answers matched and the person passed, they were free to go, often within a few hours. Between 1892 and 1924 roughly twelve million people came through Ellis Island, and only about two percent were turned away. At the 1907 peak, more than a million arrived in a single year, and no passport, visa, or identity paper was required of them at all.

The screening that did exist was pushed onto the steamship companies. Federal law required full and accurate manifests, and a line that carried an inadmissible passenger could be fined and forced to carry the person back at its own expense. That is why the companies, not the government, did the first sorting — at the dock in Europe, before the ship ever sailed.

Who Got Turned Away — and Why It Wasn't Papers

Rejection, when it came, was about categories rather than documents. The Immigration Act of 1882 imposed a small head tax and barred those judged likely to become a public charge, along with convicts and the mentally ill; the Chinese Exclusion Act of the same year shut out an entire nationality. In 1891 the federal government assumed direct control of immigration, and in 1917 Congress added a literacy test and an "Asiatic Barred Zone." Through all of it, the test was applied at the door — health, money, morals, and labor — and still required no papers carried from home. An ancestor was admitted or refused on the strength of how they presented at inspection, not on a folder of documents.

1917–1924: The Birth of "Papers Before Sailing"

The modern habit of clearing immigrants before they travel was born of war and then made permanent by quota. When the United States entered the First World War, a wartime order in 1917 and then the Travel Control Act of May 1918 required arriving aliens to present a passport, and manifests began to be prepared from those passports. That requirement lapsed after 1921 — but the door was already closing in a more lasting way. The Emergency Quota Act of 1921 set national limits for the first time, and the Immigration Act of 1924 (the Johnson–Reed Act), effective July 1, 1924, remade the system: it assigned each nationality a quota and required every intending immigrant to obtain an immigrant visa from a U.S. consulate abroad before departure. The State Department issued visas only to approved applicants, and the Immigration Service admitted only those who arrived holding one. Selection had moved three thousand miles overseas, to the consulate. From that summer on, the answer to the title's question flips: yes — an immigrant absolutely needed papers, secured in advance, before sailing.

Passports: When a Traveler Actually Needed One

It is worth separating the passport from the visa, because passports have their own surprising history. The State Department has held sole authority to issue them since 1856, and issued them as far back as 1789 — but for almost all of that time carrying one was voluntary. Before the Second World War the United States required passports of its own travelers during only two windows: briefly in the Civil War (1861–1862) and during the First World War (May 1918 to 1921). Outside those spans a passport was optional, expensive (ten dollars in 1920, plus the cost of the photograph), and something of a status symbol — often issued to a man as head of household on behalf of his whole family, so wives and children frequently had none of their own. The passport became a permanent requirement for leaving or entering the country only in 1941, around the Second World War, later reinforced so that it applied

even in peacetime. The practical consequence for family history: most Ellis Island ancestors never held a passport, and it is usually futile to look for one.

“First Papers” and “Second Papers”: The Citizenship Trail

When families say an ancestor “got their papers,” they almost always mean naturalization papers — the documents of becoming a citizen — not anything used to enter the country. Naturalization was a two-step process that took at least five years. The immigrant first filed a Declaration of Intention, universally nicknamed “first papers,” announcing the intent to become a citizen and to renounce allegiance to the old sovereign. After the residency period came the Petition for Naturalization, the “second” or “final papers,” and, if the court granted it, a Certificate of Naturalization. Before September 27, 1906, any court of record — municipal, county, state, or federal — could naturalize, so the early records are scattered and thin on detail. The Basic Naturalization Act of 1906 standardized the forms, created a federal naturalization service, and required a certificate of arrival tying each petition back to the ship’s manifest. Post-1906 papers are genealogical treasure: they can list birthplace and birth date, the port and ship of arrival, occupation, physical description, and family members.

Finding the Papers Today

Four record trails survive, and between them they cover most immigrant ancestors:

- Passenger arrival manifests — the core record for pre-1924 arrivals. The originals are at the National Archives; the Statue of Liberty–Ellis Island Foundation hosts a free searchable database for arrivals from 1892 to 1924, and the Castle Garden database covers roughly 1820 to 1890.
- Immigrant visa files — for arrivals from July 1924 onward, the visa packet became the official arrival record. These are held by the USCIS Genealogy Program and are rich with attached vital records.
- Naturalization records — declarations, petitions, and certificates. Federal-court records are largely at the National Archives; state and local court records are often at state archives or historical societies; and post-1906 certificate files are available through USCIS.
- Passport applications, 1795–1925 — at the National Archives and digitized on the major genealogy sites — useful mainly for the wealthier or wartime traveler, and for naturalized citizens who wanted proof of status before revisiting the old country.

A practical note: because the 1906 reform and the 1924 Act each changed what was recorded, knowing an ancestor’s arrival year tells you which trail to follow first — a manifest and scattered court papers for the early arrival, a consular visa file and a standardized naturalization packet for the later one.

Bottom Line

For most families whose ancestors came in the Ellis Island heyday, the answer is no: they carried no passport and no visa, and the only paperwork was a manifest the steamship company filled out for them at the dock. They were judged at the door, quickly, and usually admitted. If your people arrived in 1924 or later, the answer flips to yes — they needed an immigrant visa obtained from an American consulate before they could sail. And the “papers” that families remember and treasure are usually neither of those, but the naturalization papers — first and second — earned in a courthouse years after the ship had docked.

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