

# DESTINATION CANADA

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They came from east, west and south, shaping today's Canada, just as immigrants helped to create the United States. Comprehensive passenger lists in Canada were started later than in the United States, and there are more restrictions on access. With effort and a bit of luck, however, researchers should be able to find family members.

The first choice for information about an arrival will often be ship passenger lists, which represent the most comprehensive source available. Most people came to Canada by crossing the Atlantic or Pacific oceans – and even the ones who came north from the United States would have probably had an ocean crossing in their family history. Canadian passenger lists covering 1865 through 1935 are available for research. A variety of other sources are available for those years, as well as for arrivals from before the official start of passenger lists, and for arrivals after the 1935 cutoff.

The roots of Canadian passenger lists can be traced to 1803. In that year, the British Parliament passed the Passenger Act, the first of a series of government initiatives designed to force shipping companies to improve the conditions faced by emigrants. Ships were required to deposit, at the points of departure and arrival, a list of the passengers on board. The ships had to carry enough food and water, and provide enough space, to ensure the comfort and safety (within reason, of course) for the passengers.

This information served other purposes as well. The passenger list might have provided the proof needed so an immigration agent could qualify for a bonus. It could have given the government help when a person was being deported, because the shipping line that brought the person to Canada was responsible for the return journey. Later, the entry could have been the evidence needed when a person applied for naturalization or citizenship.

Spotty records exist for the years before 1865, including the Irish famine immigration years at Grosse Île, a quarantine station downstream from Quebec City in the St. Lawrence River. Some early records have been indexed and placed online. Coverage is by no means comprehensive, but these sites should be checked:

Findmypast has a [database](#) of some immigrants before 1854.

The Olive Tree Genealogy site has [many links](#) to old passenger lists.

Also look for arrival information in other sources, such as local histories, newspaper accounts and census returns. The 1901 census shows the year of immigration, but remember that memories can be weak.

If you cannot find your immigrants in ship records, do not despair. It is just as important to find out all that you can about their journey here, including why they chose to leave their homeland, and what conditions were like on ships.



The key immigration ports on the Atlantic Ocean are shown above. From 1865, passenger lists are available on microfilm, starting with Quebec, the busiest Canadian port. Records from Halifax, Nova Scotia, begin in 1881, when substantial immigration began, and Saint John, New Brunswick, in 1900, also the year when the port saw a sharp increase in traffic.

Lists for North Sydney, Nova Scotia, a minor port that saw little overseas traffic, were started in 1906.

Records from Vancouver and Victoria, the two Pacific Ocean ports, were started in 1905, almost half a century after heavy traffic began in British Columbia.

Information on Canadian lists is similar to the information found on American lists. They usually include the name and age of the passenger. The amount of information increased over time, so by the 1920s the lists included contact information at both the place of origin and the destination. (The contact information in Canada was often an immigration or railway office.)

Gather all the information from the lists. The first page might include details on the voyage itself, including its length, the number of people on board, and the name of the ship's master. Ports visited in transit might be shown. Check the lists of names for any additional notations, including references to births or deaths on board, as well as notable people. If a name was crossed out, that usually means the person did not make the voyage. Check other vessels and later sailings – and also consider that the person might have died.

In the first half of the 1920s, the government did not use regular passenger lists, but required individual forms for each person that were then filed, and later microfilmed, in rough alphabetical order. The forms included the basic information previously found on passenger lists. An individual manifest, known as Form 30A, was completed and submitted to immigration officers at the ports of arrival. This form, which replaced the large sheet passenger manifests, was introduced in different immigration offices between 1919 and 1922.

Links to Canadian immigration sources are at [www.CanGenealogy.com](http://www.CanGenealogy.com). Four websites should get most of your attention.

- **Library and Archives Canada (LAC)** has an extensive collection of documents. [www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/search/Pages/ancestors-search.aspx](http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/search/Pages/ancestors-search.aspx).

- **Ancestry** has been responsible for much of the digitizing work, and has worked with Library and Archives Canada. All Canadian government records on the Ancestry site will also be, eventually, available on the Library and Archives Canada website. Ancestry.com or .ca.

- **FamilySearch.org** includes material relating to immigration; check the catalog under Canada, emigration and immigration. Note that you will find records showing travel both ways across the border. The collection includes:

Passenger lists 1881-1922: [www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1823240](http://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1823240)

- **Findmypast** has a database of people outbound from ports in the British Isles; these passengers were not always from Great Britain, since some people from continental Europe went to England on the first stage of their migration to North America. Coverage is to 1960, but bear in mind that immigration by air became common in the late 1950s.

<https://search.findmypast.com/search-world-records/passenger-lists-leaving-uk-1890-1960>

Several other sources could be consulted. Some should be checked even when passenger arrival information has been found, because they can confirm or complement that information.

Many people coming to Canada went through United States ports, so check the Ellis Island index and other American sources. Web: [libertyellisfoundation.org/passenger](http://libertyellisfoundation.org/passenger). (Many people going to American destinations went through Canadian ports as well. It was often a matter of finding the cheapest way to cross the ocean, rather than picking a specific route.)

Records of entry at land crossings into Canada are available on the Ancestry site, but there is not much information and the records cover only 1908 through 1935. The collection is based on digitized microfilms at Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa.

Once in Canada, people coming from non-Commonwealth countries could become naturalized. Canadian citizenship did not exist until 1947; until then, the best a person could do was to be naturalized as a British subject.

Naturalization files up to 1917 have been destroyed, although there is an index of names at LAC. From 1917 through 1951, the names of people naturalized were listed in the *Canada Gazette*, a federal government publication of record. A database is on the Library and Archives Canada site. This index refers to files; copies can be ordered from the Access to Information and Privacy Division of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC).

Access to key documents such as ship passenger lists after 1935 is still restricted. A set of 583 microfilms at Library and Archives Canada might hold key information regarding immigrants who arrived in the 1940s and 1950s. This set of films is known as RG 76, records of the Central Registry of the Immigration Branch of the Department of the Interior. It has not been digitized yet.

The RG 76 series includes a wide variety of documents, including deputy ministers' files, files about specific immigrants, and the operational records of federal government agencies in Canada, the United States, Great Britain and Continental Europe.

There are several reasons why immigrants might not appear in databases. Perhaps they came to Canada before 1865, and the passenger list no longer exists. If they came to Canada from Europe after 1865 – the start of passenger lists for Quebec – then perhaps they came through another Canadian port, one that did not yet have passenger lists. Or perhaps they came through the United States.

It is also possible that they are on a passenger list, but not in the database. Sometimes there were mistakes, possibly because the original documents were too difficult to read. Search a database by a first name only, with no family name, and you will see how many family names could not be read or were not included for another reason.

A name might have been omitted or mistranscribed. Check every source available, even after a likely ancestor has been found. There are differences between records. In the 20th century, for example, the English outbound ship lists did not necessarily match the inbound Canadian ones.

Online databases should lead you to the passenger lists themselves. Always check the original document; never be satisfied with the information from the database. Always cross-check the information found on an original document.

In some cases, databases say that boats came from the incorrect ports – and the confusion can be quickly cleared up by checking the original passenger lists.

### **Suggested reading:**

Obee, Dave. *Destination Canada: A Genealogical Guide to Immigration Records*. Victoria, B.C.: Dave Obee, 2010.

LINKS ARE AT [CANGENEALOGY.COM](http://CANGENEALOGY.COM)

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