Immigration and Naturalization Service Records Timeline

1892 1906 1917 1924 1929 1940 1944 1956 1995

Records at NARA

Records with USCIS

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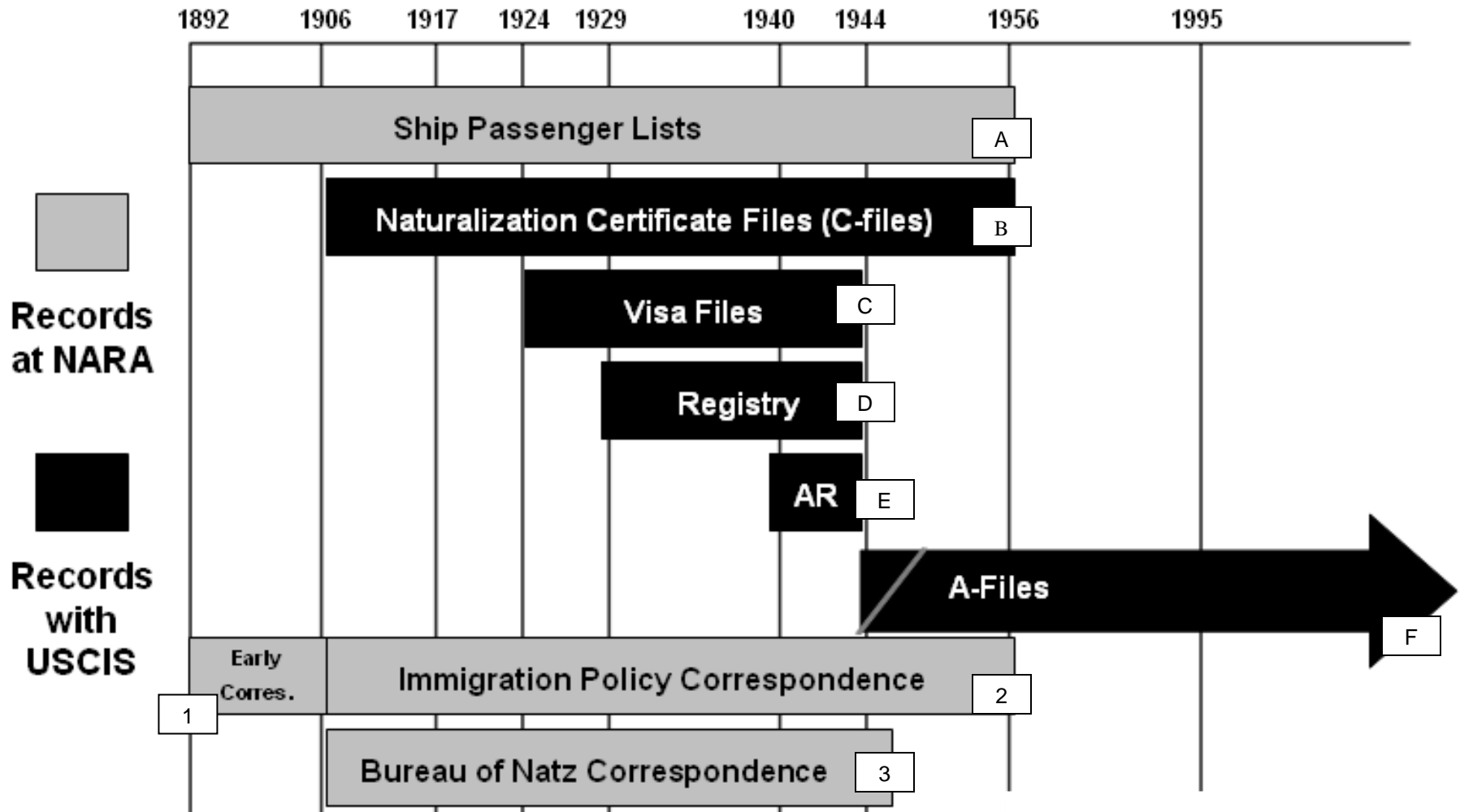
Immigration and Naturalization Service Subject and Policy Records

1) Early Correspondence, 1882-ca. 1912 [National Archives, RG 85, Entries 1-8].
   This group of records includes at least four sets (called "Entries") of correspondence files divided between letters received (arranged by file number, roughly chronological) and letters sent (arranged by date). There are also two entries of register books (1882-1887 and 1891-1903) and two name and subject indices (ca. 1903-1910) that serve as finding aides. Researchers interested in these early records should contact the USCIS History Office for assistance.

2) Immigration Policy Correspondence of the INS, 1906-1957 ("56000 Series") [National Archives, RG 85, Entry 9].
   INS used the Subject and Policy Correspondence File Series (also known as the "56,000 series") to house all types of immigration, nationality, and administrative correspondence material. Prior to April 1944, INS also opened correspondence files for individual immigrant cases that required a decision from Washington, DC. These cases included exclusion appeals, deportation warrants, investigations, and a wide variety of actions. The series also contains a vast number of subject files covering all aspects of immigration policy during the first half of the twentieth century. After 1936 INS began filing nationality correspondence files in the 56000 series as well.

   File numbers in this series were assigned based upon pre-printed file jackets rather than any coherent filing system, a fact that often confuses researchers. The best place to begin researching in the 56000 series is with the *Subject Index to Correspondence and Case Files of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1903-1952* (NARA Microfilm Publication T-458 [note that the index actually covers 1903-1957]). This microfilm index (31 reels) is available at NARA facilities in Washington, DC, Chicago, IL, New York, NY, Seattle, WA, and San Bruno, CA, and at any of the LDS Family History Centers across the country. The *Subject Index to Correspondence and Case Files of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1903-1952* is also now available through ancestry.com.

3) Bureau of Naturalization Correspondence Files, 1906-1944. Administrative Files Relating to Naturalization (Bureau of Naturalization Correspondence Files), 1906-1946 [National Archives, RG 85, Entry 26 and additional entries].
   From 1906 to 1934 the Bureau of Naturalization maintained a separate set of policy and administrative files (for some subjects the series remained open until 1944). The largest series, Entry 26, contains correspondence related to nationality matters. Smaller entries cover specific areas of nationality policy, such as files related to the Citizenship Education Program, an index to fraudulent naturalizations investigated, or boxes of oversized promotional material.

   The Bureau of Naturalization file system is organized by a coded system in which numerical prefixes indicate a certain subject. For example, all the files in the 35/ series relate to the general topic "soldiers and sailors." The file 35/gen contains agency policy and guidance regarding soldiers and sailors, while 35/1, /2, etc. cover cases of individual soldiers or sailors. Many files in Entry 26 include policy documents followed by interesting and/or precedent-setting case examples.

   The subject index microfilm (NARA T-458) references topical files in this series. A name index to Entry 26 is now available from the National Archives (NARA A3388).

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Immigration and Naturalization Service Records for Specific Individuals

A) Immigration Passenger Lists, 1892-1954 (NARA ; MICROFILM and Digital).

Ship passenger manifests collected by the US Immigration Service. The majority of passenger list microfilm is published has been published by NARA and is increasingly available from online services such as ancestry.com. Immigration Lists from 1954-1982 have also transferred to NARA, though these lists are on abbreviated forms with minimal information and most records are for crewmembers. NARA has not published the vast majority of these later passenger lists.

B) Naturalization Certificate Files (C-Files), 1906-1956 (most MICROFILM; some PAPER)

INS copies of records relating to all U.S. naturalizations in Federal, state, county, or municipal courts, overseas military naturalizations, replacement of old law naturalization certificates, and the issuance of Certificates of Citizenship in derivative, repatriation, and resumption cases. The majority of C-Files exist only on microfilm. Standard C-Files contain at least one application form (Declaration of Intention and/or Petition for Naturalization, or other application) and a duplicate certificate of naturalization or certificate of citizenship. Many files - especially those related to cases that brought up questions about nationality law or required extra investigation - contain additional documents, including correspondence, affidavits, or other records. Available through the fee-for-service USCIS Genealogy Program (www.uscis.gov/genealogy).

C) Visa Files, 1924-1944 (USCIS; PAPER)

Original arrival records of immigrants admitted for permanent residence under provisions of the Immigration Act of 1924. Visa forms contain all information normally found on a ship passenger list of the period, as well as the immigrant's places of residence for five years prior to emigration, names of both the immigrant's parents, and other data. Attached to the visa in most cases are birth records or affidavits. Also attached may be marriage, military, or police records. In cases where the immigrant naturalized or the immigrant's case reopened after April 1, 1944, the Visa File may have been transferred out of this record series to a C-File or an A-File. Available through the fee-for-service USCIS Genealogy Program (www.uscis.gov/genealogy).

D) Registry Files, 1929-1944 (USCIS; PAPER)

Original records documenting the creation of immigrant arrival records for immigrants who entered the United States prior to July 1, 1924 and for whom the INS had no record of arrival. Registry Files typically contain an application form describing the immigrant's arrival in the United States before 1924, and detailing their U.S. residence and employment history. Most files also include documents supporting the immigrant's claims regarding arrival and residence (i.e., proofs of residence, receipts, employment records, etc.). In cases where the immigrant naturalized or the immigrant's case reopened after April 1, 1944, the Registry File may have been transferred out of this historical Service record series to a C-File or an A-File. About 200,000 Registry Files exist. Available through the fee-for-service USCIS Genealogy Program (www.uscis.gov/genealogy).

E) Alien Registration Forms (AR-2), 1940-1944 (USCIS; MICROFILM)

Microfilmed copies of 5.5 million Alien Registration Forms (Form AR-2) completed by all aliens age 14 and older, resident in or entering the United States between 1940-1944. In some cases this is the only INS record for an alien. The two-page form called for the following information: Name; name at arrival; other names used; street address; post-office address; date of birth; place of birth; citizenship; sex; marital status; race; height; weight; hair and eye color; date, place, vessel, and class of admission of last arrival in U.S.; date of first arrival in U.S.; number of years in U.S.; usual occupation; present occupation; name, address, and business of present employer; membership in clubs, organizations, or societies; dates and nature of military or naval service; whether citizenship papers filed, and if so date, place, and court for declaration or petition; number of relatives living in the U.S.; arrest record, including date, place, and disposition of each arrest; whether or not affiliated

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with a foreign government; signature, and; fingerprint. Available through the fee-for-service USCIS Genealogy Program (www.uscis.gov/genealogy).

F) Alien Files (A-Files), 1944 to Present (USCIS, with select files at NARA; PAPER)
Individual alien case files (A-files) became the official file for all immigration records created or consolidated since April 1, 1944. A-Files opened on immigrants or naturalized citizens who arrived prior to 1940 should contain all available INS records of that immigrant including the records created prior to 1940. A-files served as the primary INS file system for the second half of the 20th century and continue to be USCIS's main file system.

A-Files numbered below 8 million, and documents therein dated prior to May 1, 1951, are available through the fee-for-service USCIS Genealogy Program (www.uscis.gov/genealogy), provided the subject of the file is deceased or born more than 100 years ago. Files above 8 million are subject to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and must be requested through the USCIS FOIA Program. Researchers who need assistance determining how to request an A-file should contact the USCIS History Office.

In 2009 USCIS began transferring A-files to NARA for permanent storage. All files transferred to NARA relate to individuals born 100+ years ago whose immigration file became active in or after 1975. Only about 400,000 of an estimated 200 million A-files have transferred to NARA. To determine if an A-file is at NARA researchers should search NARA's ARC database using the file number or the file subject's name (www.archives.gov/research/arc/).

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