



Research
Services

The National Archives at San Francisco
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BASIC RESEARCH STEPS FOR SAN FRANCISCO AND HONOLULU IMMIGRATION CASE FILES

Our Regional Office holds more than 400,000 investigative case files of several types created by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) District Offices in San Francisco and Honolulu. Most files concern Asian immigrants and Asian Americans who were investigated under various immigration laws including the “Chinese Exclusion Acts,” 1882-1943 and later, the Immigration Act of 1924. As laws further restricted immigration, additional files can be found for individuals from former American colonies and Latin America. Case files were created when individuals traveled to or from the U.S through the ports of San Francisco and Honolulu.

Our facility also maintains many more Alien Case files (A-files), also created by the INS in the mid-20th century. See section on A-files for more information.

Some of the steps will include searching from the National Archive’s (NARA) digitization partners including:

- **Ancestry.com** – individual subscription required but free to access at any NARA facility or at many public libraries.
- **FamilySearch.org** – free to access from home

If the steps below do not produce results or if you have any other questions, see the last section in this guide. You may wish to make an appointment to discuss your research with a NARA staff. Same-day appointments are generally not available. Please contact us either by telephone or email (email is best).

All

1. Locate **original immigration documents among your family papers**. This might include Certificates of Identity, Certificates of Residence, or steamship tickets, and naturalization documents. Bring in or send scanned copies of these documents – NOT the originals – with your inquiry. When copying documents, copy both the front and reverse sides. Immigration officials noted dates and case file numbers and made endorsements on the reverse sides of documents. Any hand-written numbers on old documents may help locate case files.
2. Search **potential immigration records from the NARA online catalog** at <https://www.archives.gov/research/catalog>. Results may include case files, duplicate certificates of identity or other records. Name searches in the NARA online catalog may also result in Alien case files (A-files). See last section for A-files.

When writing to us at sanbruno.archives@nara.gov, please copy the link to the page you found to aid in reference. Not every case file in National Archives at San Francisco custody is currently indexed in our catalog. If you do not find who you are looking for, continue with the steps below.

3. Check naturalization indexes and/or petitions on

- **Ancestry.com**

[U.S. Naturalization Record Indexes, 1791-1992](#): Hawaii and San Francisco District Courts. You may use the index to request to see original copies of petitions held in our facility.
[California, Federal Naturalization Records, 1843-1999](#): Only 1906 and after for San Francisco.

- **FamilySearch.org**

[Hawaii, Naturalization Records, 1838-1991](#): Mainly records held by the Hawaii State Archives. Does not include Hawaii District Court. Does include Overseas Military Petitions held in our facility.

[California County Naturalizations, 1831-1985](#): County naturalization records for Alameda, Amador, Alpine, Butte, Calaveras, Colusa, El Dorado, Fresno, Glenn, Lake, Lassen, Los Angeles, Mendocino, Napa, Nevada, Orange, Placer, Sacramento, San Francisco, Sonoma, Santa Clara, Stanislaus, Santa Barbara, San Benito, San Diego, Solano, Sutter, Yolo, and Yuba counties. Coverage dates will vary by county.

Naturalization documents may include ship names and arrival dates for naturalization from 1907 through the 1940s. A-file numbers may be found at the bottom of the naturalization petition beginning in 1940.

4. For immigrants who were naturalized between September 27, 1906 and March 31, 1956, they may have a "Certificate File" (C-File). Inquire with the USCIS Genealogy Program - <http://www.uscis.gov/genealogy/>

San Francisco

- 1. Check our microfilm copy of the INS-San Francisco card index to immigration case files dated 1884-1979.** It is arranged alphabetically by surname. Each index card may include the INS case file or A-file number in the upper right hand corner. Most index cards also list the date of arrival or departure and the birth date or age at arrival. This is the most complete index we currently have. Unfortunately, the INS-San Francisco District lost 50 of the original 376 rolls of microfilm before NARA could acquire them. The INS destroyed the index cards immediately after they were microfilmed.
- 2. Check Immigration and Naturalization Service name-searchable passenger arrival lists on:**
 - **Ancestry.com**

- **FamilySearch.org**

For arrivals before 1913, the four or five digit ship manifest number might be written in the upper right hand corner of the right page of the passenger list or might be written somewhere else on the page. i.e. 9228, 11346, etc. The ticket number usually appears next to the passenger name.

If there is only a ticket number available, use microfilm **M1437**, Index to Vessels Arriving at San Francisco, 1882-1957, to determine the assigned ship's number (ie. 9228, 11346) to combine into a potential case number (ie. 9228/59).

For arrivals from 1913 to 1943,

- The first part of the case file number is the five digit ship manifest number in the upper right hand corner of the right page of the passenger list. i.e. 22311.
- The second part is the page number at the top of the left sheet and the line number immediately to the left of the person listed. i.e. page 30, line 22 becomes 30-22.
- These two parts combined give the arrival case file number: i.e., 23111/30-22.

For arrivals from 1944 to 1955, a 1300 file may exist. Inquire with a NARA staff.

For arrivals after 1956, see section on A-files.

3. Additional online sources from NARA partners. There may be additional digitized microfilms of indexes and original records related to Chinese immigrants. These include:

- Boards of Special Inquiry at San Francisco Immigration Office, 1899-1941 [various]
- California, Chinese Partnerships and Departures from San Francisco, 1893-1943 ["12017" files]

For a complete list, visit <https://www.archives.gov/digitization/digitized-by-partners>. If you find a page of interest, please save the image and e-mail it to us at sanbruno.archives@nara.gov.

Honolulu

1. Check Immigration and Naturalization Service name-searchable **passenger arrival lists** on
 - **Ancestry.com**
 - **FamilySearch.org**

Immigration case file numbers for HI arrivals could appear in the "Immigration Visa Number" column – though not always. Examples of case file numbers include "4382/3750", "4382/3724", and "4382/3520".

2. **For arrivals between 1903 and 1954**, check the Hawaii Index to immigration case files (paper copy in one binder in our research room).
3. **Additional online sources from NARA partners.** There may be additional digitized microfilms of indexes and original records related to Chinese immigrants. These include:
 - **Hawaii**, Passenger Lists, 1843-1898 – digitized from Collector General of Customs. Records of Passenger Arrivals and Departures. Series 82. Hawaii State Archives, Honolulu, Hawaii. – *Ancestry.com*
 - **Hawaii**, Certificates of Identification for Chinese Arrivals, 1895-1898 – digitized from Board of Immigration (Department of the Interior). Certificates of Identification. Series 516. 18 volumes. Hawaii State Archives, Honolulu, Hawaii – *Ancestry.com*

For a complete list, visit <https://www.archives.gov/digitization/digitized-by-partners>. If you find a page of interest, please save the image and e-mail it to us at sanbruno.archives@nara.gov.

Alien Case Files (A-Files)

Created by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) beginning in 1944, Alien Case Files (“A-Files”) contain all records of any immigrant or alien **whose INS case was active after April 1, 1944, or who became a naturalized citizen after March 31, 1956.**

On June 3, 2009, the National Archives and Records Administration and US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) signed an agreement to transfer A-Files in five-year blocks into National Archives custody 100 years after the alien's year of birth.

The National Archives at San Francisco and the National Archives at Kansas City currently maintain over 1 million individual A-Files for persons born in 1920 and before (as of 2021). Because of strong interest and advocacy for the A-Files by local research communities and their congressional representatives, the National Archives at San Francisco will maintain A-Files (over 300,000 files) controlled by INS district offices located in San Francisco, Honolulu, Reno, and Guam. Researchers seeking individuals who may have lived in these areas should check the holdings of both the San Francisco and Kansas City facilities.

For information about how the A-Files, including how to search for and request copies of individual A-Files, please visit <http://www.archives.gov/research/immigration/aliens/>.

Does my immigrant ancestor have an A-File?

The A-Files do not document every immigrant to the United States. Use this chart to determine who may have an A-File or other type of record created by the former Immigration and Naturalization Service. (Adapted from a chart created by Marian Smith, Chief Historian, USCIS)

The USCIS Genealogy Program can be accessed online at <http://www.uscis.gov/genealogy/>.

The immigrant....	
Died before August 1, 1940	Will not have an A-File nor an Alien Registration Number. See above for instructions on immigration to SF and HI.
Became a naturalized citizen between September 27, 1906 and August 1, 1940	Will not have an A-File nor an Alien Registration Number. Inquire with USCIS Genealogy Program regarding a possible “Certificate File” (C-File) .
Became a naturalized citizen between August 1, 1940 and March 31, 1956	Will likely not have an A-File. Inquire with USCIS Genealogy Program regarding a possible “Certificate File” (C-File) or 1940 Alien Registration Form.
Immigrated to the United States after April 1, 1944	Will have an A-File. Check National Archives holdings if born in 1920 or prior. Otherwise, inquire with USCIS Genealogy Program.
Naturalized on or after March 31, 1956	Will have an A-File. Check National Archives holdings if born in 1920 or prior. Otherwise, inquire with USCIS Genealogy Program.
Registered in the United States as an alien in 1940 but never came back to the Immigration and Naturalization Service for any reason	Was likely assigned an Alien Registration Number but will not have an A-File. You can obtain a copy of their 1940 Alien Registration Form from the USCIS Genealogy Program.
Registered in the United States as an alien in 1940 and came back to the Immigration and Naturalization Service for any reason (other than naturalization) after 1944	Will have an A-File. Check National Archives holdings if born in 1920 or prior. Otherwise, inquire with the USCIS Genealogy Program.

To request additional staff assistance:

To request a NARA staff to search for a case file for a specific person, please provide the following information with your inquiry:

- **Names of the individual** who immigrated, including “paper” names, maiden names, and alternative spellings. What is most helpful here is how the name would have been written by immigration authorities and on other legal documents. Unfortunately, we have no way to refer to our files with someone's name as written in Chinese characters or other non-Romanized languages.
- **Dates (specific or approximate) of immigration/arrival** into the United States. If they often returned to their country of origin (as was the case with men who went back to visit their wives or brought family over) it's helpful to know when they made these subsequent trips, if you do know. Knowing about these later voyages is often more important than the date of initial immigration.
- **Date of birth** (specific or approximate)
- **Names of family members** traveling with them or to whom they were going to live with in the U.S.
- **How they entered the U.S.** (as the child of a citizen, a merchant, a “paper son”, etc.)
- **Where they lived** after they arrived in the U.S.
- Whether they later became **naturalized citizens**: if they lived in the San Francisco area, we can search our facility's federal court naturalization records for additional information.

To make an inquiry from home, please provide your request via email to sanbruno.archives@nara.gov.