Mythbusting! Ellis Island

Rosemary Meszaros
Government Documents & Law

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GENEALOGY: A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR LIBRARIANS
Katherine Pennavaria
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March 2015
CLIP FROM THE GODFATHER II, SHOWING THE ARRIVAL OF VITO ANDOLINI (CORLEONE) IN THE UNITED STATES (4m):

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Trff2lqIySI
WHAT WAS TRUE?

WHAT WAS FALSE?
How do we determine the truth about the past?
WHAT IS GOOD EVIDENCE?

RECORDS CREATED AT THE TIME
AND WHO HAS CREATED THE BEST IMMIGRATION-RELATED PAPER AND FILM RECORD COLLECTION?

THE U.S. GOVERNMENT
THE EVIDENCE TO EXAMINE:

1. federal laws relating to immigrants
2. ship manifests (i.e. passenger lists)
3. contemporary films + photographs

THESE ARE BETTER SOURCES FOR THE TRUTH THAN A MOVIE IS.
THE STATUTES AT LARGE
OF THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,
FROM
DECEMBER, 1881, TO MARCH, 1883.
AND
RECENT TREATIES, POSTAL CONVENTIONS, AND EXECUTIVE PROCLAMATIONS.
EDITED, PRINTED, AND PUBLISHED UNDER THE AUTHORITY OF AN ACT OF CONGRESS, AND UNDER THE DIRECTION OF THE SECRETARY OF STATE.
VOL. XXII.
WASHINGTON:
GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE,
1883.
INSTRUCTIONS TO SHIPPING COMPANIES:

“Report a list of all passengers taken on board, including name, sex, age, and occupation.”
(March 2, 1819)

“Immigrants shall be listed in convenient groups... and no [list] shall contain more than 30 names.”
(March 3, 1893)
“Give me your tired, your poor
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore”

Actually, it was a bit more complicated.
FEDERAL LAWS REFUSED ENTRY TO:

AVOWED ANARCHISTS

KNOWN PROSTITUTES

CONTRACT LABORERS

ANYONE DISABLED IN ANY WAY
ALSO NOT WELCOME:

CHILDREN UNDER 16 TRAVELING WITHOUT A PARENT OR IMMEDIATE RELATIVE
LPC:

“LIKELY TO BECOME A PUBLIC CHARGE”
Anyone in the categories listed above was sent home, and at shipping company expense.
TRUE

- BARRIERS AND BENCHES
- LINES, NOISE AND CONFUSION
- OFFICIALS AND TRANSLATORS
- LARGE MANIFEST BOOKS ON DESKS
- TAGS ON CLOTHING
- MEDICAL EXAMS
- CHILD BEING PUT IN DETENTION
FALSE

Officials mistaking someone’s point of origin for their name.

Officials writing people’s names down.

An unattached child being released to the mainland.
Over the number 5, the words say:

“Manifest Sheet No.”

That told the officials which line a person should be in.
The captain was required by federal law to deliver an **accurate list** of every person who had been on the ship.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. on List</th>
<th>NAME IN FULL</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Able to Read</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
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**Non-immigrant Alien**

**S.S. St. Paul**

Sailing from Southampton

October 1st, 1910

List or Manifest of Alien Passengers for the United States.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Names</th>
<th>Manifest.</th>
<th>Cause of Detention</th>
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<th>Departamental and Executive Order</th>
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"likely to become a public charge"
another myth...
An advertisement from a shipping company, in Czech.

“Podnikatelství lodních výprav” means
“boat trips for entrepreneurs”
“For the great enemy of the truth is very often not the lie (deliberate, contrived, and dishonest), but the myth: persistent, persuasive, and unrealistic.”

(JFK, from a commencement speech at Yale University, June 11, 1962)
“MY FAMILY’S SURNAME WAS CHANGED AT ELLIS ISLAND.”

HAVE YOU HEARD THAT ONE BEFORE?
Didn’t happen.
HISTORIANS AND PROFESSIONAL GENEALOGISTS KNOW THIS IS A MYTH.

But it’s a persistent myth...
STICKINESS: “The elusive quality that some ideas and concepts have—they catch on and don’t let go.”

Malcolm Gladwell, The Tipping Point
...IF YOUR NAME WAS CHANGED
at Ellis Island

by Ellen Levine
illustrated by
Wayne Parmenter
COMMENT: “Some of my relatives' surnames were recorded incorrectly on arrival.”

ASSUMPTION: Immigrants’ names were “recorded” upon arrival.

REALITY: Immigrants’ names were recorded by the shipping company at the point of origin, when the tickets were purchased.
COMMENT: “The bastards at Ellis island decided [my ancestor’s] last name was too Irish and changed it.”

ASSUMPTION: Officials were of different ethnicities than the immigrants.

REALITY: Quite often the officials were hired precisely because they knew the languages of the immigrants.
FIORELLO LA GUARDIA
ELLIS ISLAND TRANSLATOR and
MAYOR OF NEW YORK

(spoke English, Yiddish, German, French, and Italian)
COMMENT: “My family name was probably shortened from something Eastern European to something German, certainly at Ellis Island.”

COMMENT: “My great-grandfather came through and the name was shortened and changed by the worker.”

ASSUMPTION: Immigration officials had the means and motivation to change names.

REALITY: They had neither.
In the *Statutes at Large*, the U.S. government spelled out exactly how the immigrants were to be treated and documented.

The officials would have been **breaking the law** if they had altered the officially recorded names.

They would have lost their jobs!
THE KEY QUESTIONS:

MOTIVATION:
Why would the immigration officials change the names?

METHOD:
How would the officials have achieved a permanent name change for the immigrants with whom they briefly interacted?
If we assume, for a moment, that the myth is true... by what means did the immigrant carry away his or her “new” name?

Did the officials hand them a piece of paper with their new name?
From *Island of Hope, Island of Tears* (1989 documentary) – 23.55

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=viHuhzP0Au0
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Age</th>
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*Note: Details of occupation, profession, and other information may vary for each passenger.*
The blank manifest books were designed and printed by the **US government** with intention of getting records that would remain their property.
The officials had no authority to alter names on the manifests.

Name changes had to be approved by a board of inquiry.
Many names definitely were changed... later.

BY THE IMMIGRANTS THEMSELVES.
THE BOOK GETS IT RIGHT.
“The Don was a real man at the age of twelve. Short, dark, slender, living in the strange Moorish-looking village of Corleone in Sicily, he had been born Vito Andolini, but when strange men came to kill the son of the man they had murdered, his mother sent the young boy to America to stay with friends. And in the new land he changed his name to Corleone to preserve some tie with his native village.”
BOTTOM LINE:

There is NO evidence for the “name changed at Ellis Island” idea.  But there is LOTS of evidence that it did not happen.
“GOOD ENOUGH FOR GOVERNMENT WORK”? 

At Ellis Island, that work was done exceptionally well!
HISTORY MATTERS.

EVIDENCE MATTERS.
THANK YOU!
Thank you!

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Katherine Pennavaria</th>
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