Canadian border immigration records, 1895–1950s
Part 1: The records

Did your ancestor immigrate to the United States by crossing the U.S.-Canada border? The U.S. government began keeping records of alien arrivals at the Canadian border in 1895. Part 1 of this article will introduce the U.S. records that document U.S.-Canada land border crossings. In a future issue, part 2 of this article will examine the interesting process by which those records were created and work through some case studies.

Pre-1895 arrivals
Researchers can document the date—or approximate date—of pre-1895 alien arrivals by using a variety of records. Federal census records for 1900, 1910, 1920, and 1930 ask each foreign-born person’s year of immigration to the U.S. An immigrant’s presence or absence in earlier censuses can help approximate the decade in which he arrived. Post-1906 naturalization records should include the date and port of arrival, and pre-1906 often do so.

Newspaper obituaries might mention the immigrant’s year of arrival. If he lived in a city after arrival in America, his sudden appearance in the annual city directory could be a clue that he arrived in the U.S. a year or two before. Use clues from these and other records to narrow down that pre-1895 arrival.

The researcher seeking a pre-1895 immigration record should also check the 1895 and later immigration records described below. Aliens often departed from the U.S. and returned at a later date. An alien’s post-1895 arrival manifest may therefore tell you the date and port of his previous arrival(s).

1895–1950s
Understanding Canadian border immigration records first requires learning about the governmental administrative structure and process that created them. The filing scheme matters. Where was the record created, where was that record filed, and why?

Records of alien arrivals at the U.S.-Canada border were created and collected by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and its predecessors, the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization (1906–33) and the Superintendent of Immigration (1891–1906).

From 1895 to June 1917, alien arrivals along the entire U.S.-Canada border were recorded in duplicate on the familiar “ship passenger manifests.” One copy was kept at the INS office at the alien’s port of entry and one copy was forwarded to the INS District Office in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. The Montreal office was later moved to Saint Albans, Vermont. The copies sent to the INS District Office are included in NARA Microfilm Publication M1464, Manifests of Passengers Arriving in the St. Albans, Vermont, District, through Canadian Pacific and Atlantic Ports, 1895–1954.

The filing scheme became more complicated on July 1917, and changed again in July 1927 and July 1929. (In those days the federal fiscal year began on 1 July, so that is the reason for the July beginning dates. The federal fiscal year now begins on 1 October.)

Eastern U.S.
From July 1917 to June 1929, alien arrivals at land ports of entry in Maine westward to upstate New York (along the St. Lawrence River) were recorded in duplicate on the traditional “ship passenger manifest.” One copy was kept at the port of entry and the other was sent to the INS District Office at Montreal and will be found in M1464.
From July 1917 to June 1927, alien arrivals at land ports of entry in upstate New York (along the Great Lakes) westward through North Dakota were recorded in duplicate on the traditional “ship passenger manifest.” One copy was kept at the port of entry and the other was sent to the INS District Office at Montreal and will be found in M1464. From July 1927 to June 1929 alien arrivals at these ports were recorded in duplicate on card manifests. One copy was kept at the port of entry and the other was sent to the appropriate INS District Office at Buffalo, Detroit, or Chicago. Available microfilm publications are listed in the Canadian Border Crossings Microfilm Publication Chart.

From July 1929 to 1954, alien arrivals at land ports of entry in Montana, Idaho, and Washington were recorded on card manifests and kept at the port of entry. Available microfilm publications are listed in the Canadian Border Crossings Microfilm Publication Chart.

Who is in the records?

From 1895 to late 1906, the records only include non-Canadians entering the U.S. from Canada, either permanent or in transit. “In transit” means that the person was temporarily entering the U.S. for business or pleasure and would depart the U.S. at a different port. From late 1906 to the 1950s, the records include both non-Canadian and Canadian citizens. A “Canadian citizen” could be someone who was born in Canada or someone who became a Canadian citizen through the naturalization process. Some U.S. citizens are also found in the records. Typically these persons had either been absent from the U.S. for a long period of time or who were leaving the U.S. permanently.

Let’s take a look at a few interesting records to see what we...
can find. Let’s start with National Archives Microfilm Publication A3440, *Manifests of Alien Arrivals at Sweet Grass, Montana, August 1917–June 1954*, roll 15. Here is Paul Lyman Roberts on an INS Form 548 card manifest that tells us he was born 16 January 1885 at Monroe County, Michigan, and had lived in the U.S. from his birth until 1910. He was a Canadian citizen, a rancher, living in Bengough, Saskatchewan. He had been in the U.S. several times since 1910, the last time being in November 1939. This manifest was dated 11 December 1939. He planned to visit the U.S. for six months. His destination was his son, Clair Roberts, 16005 Bassit [sic] Street, Van Nyes [sic], California. He was bringing $965 with him. Perhaps because he had such a large sum of money on him, the immigration inspector noted the amount of land (1/2 section) and money in the bank (more than $19,000) back home as evidence of this man’s temporary arrival.

Now let’s turn to National Archives Microfilm Publication A3441, *Manifests of Alien Arrivals at Port Huron, Michigan, February 1902–December 1954*, Roll 27. Here is Rebecca Dennison on INS Form 657 Record of Registry. She originally entered the U.S. at Port Huron, Michigan on 5 December 1919, when she was 24 years, 10 months old. In 1919, she had lived in Hamilton, Ontario. A record of her arrival should have been made in 1919, but the INS could not find one, so this Record of Registry was created on 28 April 1931 as an after-the-fact record of her 1919 arrival. In 1931, she was 36 years, 5 months old, and lived at 915 Fourth Street, Peoria, Illinois. Her physical description (eye color, hair color, and height) is given along with her photograph. She was born in Zitomir, Wolinsky, Russia.

Julia Evangeline Denomme is also found in A3441, Roll 27, on INS Form I-189, *Application for Resident Alien’s Border Crossing Identification Card*. Bad typing makes her surname nearly illegible
at the top of the card, but her signature on the reverse side is clear, and her name is clear on a 1941 manifest that follows as the very next card on the microfilm. From the I-189, we learn that she resides at 29416 Legion Street, Roseville, Michigan. She was born 11 December 1909 at Zurich, Ontario. She had entered the U.S. on 16 June 1929 by ferry boat under the name Julia Evangeline Ducharme. Her physical description is given. She applied for the border crossing card on 19 December 1951. Being an alien, she had registered with the INS as required by law, and her alien registration number is noted on the card.

Benjamin Bosworth Haight is found in A3441, Roll 12. He was recorded on 7 November 1916 on INS Form Spl. 187, Primary Inspection Memorandum. He’s another example of a U.S.-born Canadian citizen returning “home.” This record shows that he was age 75, married, and a Canadian citizen of Welsh descent. He was born in Macedon, New York, and had lived in the U.S. from 1841 (birth year) until 1852. Benjamin’s sister, Venilla Schooley, remained in Canada, but he was going to Clifford, Michigan, where his brother Samuel E. Haight lived.

These four examples may not be typical but they certainly illustrate the potential that exists in these records for finding useful information about your family.

**Types of card manifests created**

The traditional ship passenger list form made sense for recording passengers arriving on a steamship, but a huge list was unwieldy when recording individuals or families coming by foot, train, or car. Individual card manifests were easier to handle, and could be alphabetically arranged to make it easier to locate an individual’s arrival record at some later date for official purposes, such as verification of entry for naturalization applications. Naturally, different forms were used for different purposes. Some of the most common forms are described below.
INS Form 548, 548-B, or I-448, Manifest or Report of Inspection, generally includes the person’s name, age, gender, marital status, place of birth, physical description, occupation, citizenship (nationality), race, ability to read and write and in what language, place of last permanent residence, port and date of arrival, destination, purpose for entering the U.S., intention of becoming a U.S. citizen or of returning to country of previous residence, head tax status, and previous citizenships. It also includes the name and address of the friend or relative whom the alien intended to join, persons accompanying the alien, and the name and address of the alien’s nearest relative or friend in the country from which he or she came. If the alien had ever been in the U.S. in the past, the dates and places of such residence or visitation are indicated. Additional information may be recorded if the alien appealed a decision deporting or barring him or her from entering the United States. Form 548-B was used for INS records indexing projects by employees of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) during the 1930s.

INS Form 521, a pre-entry examination form, includes the person’s name, gender, age, place of birth, country of citizenship, home address, and the names of any accompanying children under age 16. For aliens, the person’s occupation, destination in the U.S., the name of the person to whom he was destined, and the intended length of stay in the U.S. were also recorded. The reverse side of the card states, in part, that “This form is intended to facilitate the entry into the United States of returning United States citizens, aliens lawfully resident in the United States returning from a temporary visit to Canada, and aliens coming from Canada for a temporary visit. It should be filled out, signed, and presented to a United States immigration officer at Halifax, Yarmouth, St. John (New Brunswick), Quebec, Montreal, Winnipeg, Vancouver, Victory, or Sidney (British Columbia).”

INS Form 657, Record of Registry, includes the following information about the alien as of the alien’s date of arrival: name; age; occupation; race or people; place of last residence before entry; and date, port, place, and means (ship, railway, or other) of arrival in the U.S. This form also includes the following information about the alien as of the alien’s date of registry: name, age, occupation, physical description, place of residence, and place of birth. It also includes the alien’s photograph, date of approval of registry, certificate of registry number, district file number, and bureau (registry) file number.

INS Form 694, Record of Alien Admitted as Visitor, includes the person’s name, home address, date and place of birth, gender, marital status, occupation, citizenship (nationality), race, color of hair and eyes, height, names and ages of accompanying children under age sixteen, home address and nearest relative there, destination, length of time admitted, signature, and date and place of admission to the U.S. The reverse side indicates the date and port of departure.

INS Form I-94, I-94B, I-94(C), I-94(E), I-94F, or 257D, Record of Alien Admitted for Temporary Stay, includes the alien’s name, date and place of birth, gender, marital status, occupation, citizenship (nationality), physical description, names of accompanying alien children under age 14,
The purpose of the U.S. visit may be described in English (such as “pleasure 1 month”) or as “B-2 72 hours” or “P1/3/2/3/8 days”).

INS Form Spl. 187, or Spl. 187A, *Primary Inspection Memorandum*, includes person’s name, gender, age, marital status, occupation, ability to read and write and in what language, head tax status, citizenship, race, place of last permanent residence, destination, citizenship before becoming a citizen of Canada, port and date of arrival, destination, purpose for entering U.S., intention of becoming a U.S. citizen, head tax status, and previous citizenships. It also includes the name and address of the friend or relative whom the alien intended to join, persons accompanying the alien, and the name and address of the alien’s nearest relative or friend in the country from which he or she came. If the alien had ever been in the U.S. in the past, the dates and places of such residence or visitation are indicated. Additional information may be recorded on the reverse side of the card if the alien appealed a decision barring him or her from entering the U.S.

**Locating and searching the records**

Finding a record of a relative’s Canadian border crossing is becoming easier. More records are available as NARA microfilm publications at the National Archives Building, Washington, D.C., and at selected NARA Regional Archives. (Find research facilities having NARA microfilm in NARA's microfilm catalog at Order Online <http://www.archives.gov/research/order/orderonline.html>. You do not need to register or buy anything.)

Some commercial genealogy companies are making these NARA microfilm publications accessible from any desktop via online access. Unfortunately, however, the online image quality is sometimes poorer than the image quality of the microfilm available for public use at the National Archives. Unfortunately, also, the explanatory information accompanying the online images often fails to note from which specific NARA microfilm publication and roll the image came from, which makes it difficult or impossible for conscientious researchers to completely and accurately cite the original data source.

Images accompanying this article were reproduced from microfilm at the National Archives.