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Using Federal Documents to Dispel a Myth about Ellis Island

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From the Selected Works of Rosemary L. Meszaros

September 19, 2012

Using Federal Documents to Dispel a Myth about Ellis Island

Katherine A. Pennavaria

Rosemary L. Meszaros



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/rosemary_meszaros/30/

USING FEDERAL DOCUMENTS TO DISPEL A MYTH ABOUT ELLIS ISLAND

**KATHERINE PENNAVARIA and
ROSEMARY MESZAROS**

Western Kentucky University

KLA Fall Conference

September 21, 2012

ELLIS ISLAND

Immigration Center, 1893–1954



**“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...



“For the great enemy of the truth is very often not the lie (deliberate, contrived, and dishonest), but the myth: persistent, persuasive, and unrealistic.”



The Godfather



...IF YOUR NAME WAS CHANGED at Ellis Island

by Ellen Levine

illustrated by
Wayne Parmenter

DATE DUE



--if your name was changed at Ellis Island
Juv 325 10973 L578
80 p. : col. ill. : 20 x 24 cm.
BOWLING GREEN PUBLIC LIBRARY
3 3583 00075 7084

From the Internet...

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.

FIORIELLO 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.

another myth...



STICKINESS: “The elusive quality that some ideas and concepts have—they catch on and don’t let go.”

Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point*



**How do we determine
the truth
about the past?**

EVIDENCE

WHAT IS GOOD EVIDENCE?

**RECORDS
CREATED AT
THE TIME**

(especially paper)



**AND WHO HAS CREATED THE BEST PAPER
RECORD COLLECTION IN THE UNIVERSE?**

**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

ALL OF THESE ARE PRIMARY SOURCES

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)

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:

METHOD:

MOTIVATION:

Why would the immigration officials change the names?

How would the officials have achieved a permanent name change for the immigrants with whom they *briefly* interacted?

The blank manifest books were designed 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**.

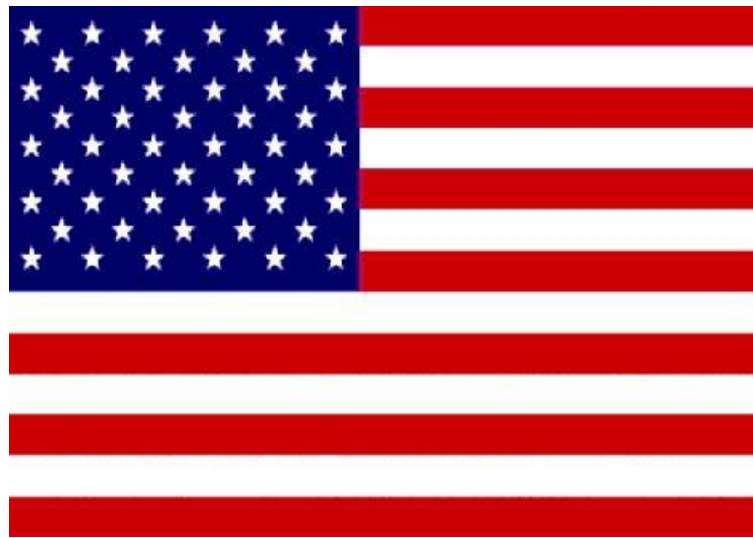
If we assume, for a moment, that the myth is true... by what means did the immigrant carry away his or her “new” name?

Did the officials hand them a piece of paper with their new name?



“GOOD ENOUGH FOR GOVERNMENT WORK”?

**At Ellis Island, that work was done
exceptionally well!**



Immigration Through Ellis Island –
Award-Winning Documentary Video Film

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u4wzVuXPzmk>

Many names definitely were
changed... later.

BY THE IMMIGRANTS THEMSELVES.

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.*

HISTORY MATTERS.

EVIDENCE MATTERS.



THANK YOU!

**Sign up to
receive this
PPT via
email!**

