

# The Five Families of Records of the USCIS Genealogy Program

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The USCIS (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services) Genealogy Program was created in 2008 to provide access to the millions of historical records that the agency held for late 19th and early-mid 20th century immigrants. While most federal records from that era have transferred to the National Archives (NARA), USCIS records are usually complicated, and moving these records to NARA is difficult. Thus, we are forced to interact with a byzantine agency which has both poor intellectual control over their records, and little desire to function as their archive in the first place.

## C-Files (Naturalization Certificate Files)

- Series existed from 27 September 1906 to 31 March 1956
- Created when an immigrant naturalized
- Usually Contains Declaration of Intention, Petition, and Certificate of Naturalization
- Contain photographs from 1929 and later
- Sometimes there is additional correspondence, especially in later years
- C-Files post ~1950 often consolidate other records series into one file
- ~6.5 million of these files only survive as very poor quality microfilm
- Another ~1 million exist as paper files
- There are various types of C-Files for atypical circumstances:
  - People who were born as US citizens abroad
  - People who derived citizenship from a parent / spouse
  - People who naturalized before 1906 who had replacement records created
  - Military naturalizations overseas
  - Records of repatriations
- These are temporary records and are slated to be destroyed in 2056. They will likely be rescheduled by NARA before then, as they are of considerable historic and legal interest.

## Visa Files

- Visas were first issued on 1 July 1924
- An immigrant would apply for a visa at a US Consulate before immigrating
- After 31 March 1944, this series closed and they were rolled into A Files
- This becomes the official record of arrival (as opposed to the passenger list / border crossing)
- The file generally contains a copy of the birth record and often other vital records, police conduct reports, etc
- The Visa Files were scheduled to transfer to NARA in 2019 but have not yet done so

## Registry Files

- Immigrants who arrived after 27 September 1906 could not naturalize unless the US government was able to locate a record of their lawful entry
- Those for whom no arrival record could be found underwent the process of registry in order to create an after-the-fact arrival record
- Congress created this process in 1929 for those who arrived prior to 1924
- These contain significant biographical information because the immigrant had to document their presence in the US
- 250,000 files exist
- These files also close on 31 March 1944 and consolidate into A-Files.
- The Registry Files were scheduled to transfer to NARA in 2019 but have not yet done so

## AR-2s (Alien Registration Forms)

- WWII-era registration of every non-citizen resident above the age of 14
  - Run from 1940-1944
- Every registrant was assigned an A-Number
- Asked aliens to report their date and place of birth, arrival information
- Recorded an alien's thumbprint
- If an immigrant never filed a naturalization declaration or petition, sometimes this is the only record to tie them to their arrival record or ancestral hometown
- ~5.5 million AR2s exist
- These records are also at NARA, but there have traditionally been restrictions placed on them

## A-Files (Alien Files)

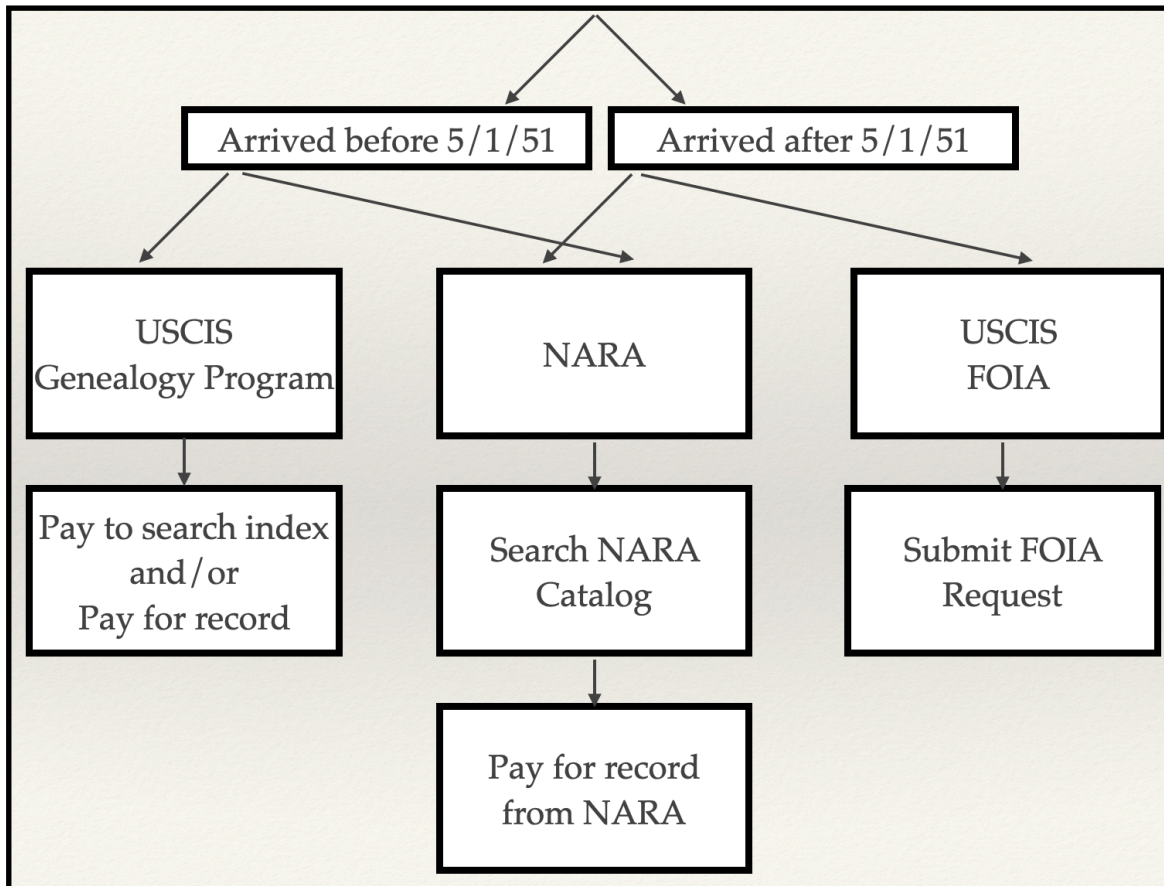
Alien Files (A-Files) were created to streamline record-keeping within the INS. Since 1 April 1944, an individual A-File would hold all of the records related to the immigration and naturalization status of an alien with an active case. Prior to this point, it could have been that there were several files (perhaps in several places and accessed via several different indexes) all related to the same individual – a visa file, an AR-2, and a C-File, for instance. The INS began issuing non-citizens an A-number under the Alien Registration Program in 1940. These A-numbers would be the basis to create these individual A-Files. Unlike the other series, not all A-Files are obtainable through the USCIS Genealogy Program, and the existence of an A-Number does not guarantee the existence of an A-File.

An A-File should have been opened or consolidated for:

- All immigrants who arrived after 1 April 1944
- Immigrants who naturalized on/after 1 April 1956 (this is when the C-File series closed)
- Reopened cases of immigrants in-country registered under the Alien Registration Act
- Immigration and/or law enforcement matters
- Included in this category would be when an immigrant had their naturalization cancelled or revoked, or a citizen expatriated himself

- Included in this category would be when an immigrant applied for a Certificate of Derivative Citizenship after 31 March 1956 to prove their derivative citizenship status (but they may have been a citizen for decades at that point)

## Where are A-Files?



## Locating Files

- In order to locate file numbers, it is often necessary to pay for a USCIS Index Search
- They search their historical indexes and provide a listing of every file that can locate
- This includes the five series above, as well as some files that can be obtained directly from NARA
- Index Searches take over one year, so it's preferable to locate file numbers through other means
- C-File numbers are listed on the back of granted Naturalization Petitions
- Visa and Registry Numbers can almost always only be located via and Index Search
- AR-2 / A-File numbers are sometimes listed on later naturalization records, or may be available in family records.
- Once the number is known, a file can be ordered for \$65, and takes about one year
- Access the Genealogy Program: <https://www.uscis.gov/records/genealogy>