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Debunking an Immigration Myth

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One question that routinely comes up in genealogy research: why is the family's surname different from its (presumed) original form? Most people have heard one explanation: those names were "changed at Ellis Island," altered either maliciously or ignorantly by port officials when the immigrant passed through. The charge against immigration officials, however, is provably false: no names were written down at Ellis Island, and thus no names were changed there. The names of arriving passengers were already written down on manifests required by the federal government, lists which crossed the ocean with the passengers. Records kept by the government demonstrate conclusively that immigrants left Ellis Island with the same surnames they had arrived with. The idea that names were changed at the point of entry is a myth, an urban legend promoted by a popular film. Changes were made later, by the immigrants themselves, usually during the naturalization process.

> *For the great enemy of the truth is very often not the lie (deliberate, contrived, and dishonest), but the myth: persistent, persuasive, and unrealistic.*
>
> —John F. Kennedy
> (Yale commencement Speech, June 11, 1962)

Most Americans are familiar with the idea that immigrants to the United States during the Ellis Island years (1892–1954) had their surnames altered by the processing officials, either deliberately or through ignorance of the correct spelling. A search of the internet on the phrase "name was changed at Ellis Island" yields more than 300,000 hits; variations on the phrase yield even more. Here is a sampling of recent statements in an online forum asking people whether they believe that such a thing happened:[1]

My family name was probably shortened from something Eastern European to something German, certainly at Ellis Island.

My great-grandfather came through and the name was shortened and changed by the worker.

Some of my relatives' surnames were recorded incorrectly on arrival.

My great-grandfather and his two brothers came over together from Lithuania and left Ellis Island with three different last names.

Our Italian surname was changed at Ellis Island when my great-grandparents came over.

If one is to believe these earnest posters, the surnames of immigrants to the United States were routinely treated in a shoddy, unprofessional manner by the government representatives at American ports.

They are wrong. No one's family name was changed, altered, shortened, butchered, or "written down wrong" at Ellis Island or any American port. *That idea is an urban legend.*

Many names did get changed as immigrants settled into their new American lives, but those changes were made several years after arrival and were done by choice of someone in the family. The belief persists, however, that the changes were done at the entry point and that the immigrants were unwilling participants in the modifications. Sophisticated family history researchers have long rolled their collective eyes at the "Ellis Island name change" idea. In genealogy blogs and online

publications, they wearily repeat the correction—names were not changed at Ellis Island; immigrants changed their own names, usually during the citizenship process. But the belief persists, perhaps because people need to explain surname changes in a way that satisfies them (thinking that their immigrant ancestors made the changes themselves apparently does not do so).

Why is this myth so persistent? Malcolm Gladwell, in his book *The Tipping Point*, explains his concept of "stickiness," the elusive quality that some ideas and concepts have: they catch on and don't let go.[2] Since Gladwell's book was published in 2000, social science and behavior research has explored the nature of "sticky" ideas. Among the conclusions reached is, "When we have a gap in our knowledge, we strive to resolve it."[3] Across America today, people descended from nineteenth- and twentieth-century European immigrants strive to resolve why their family's surname is different from the (presumed) original. In addressing this gap, however, many seekers have reached the wrong conclusion. Unfortunately, that incorrect conclusion has proved quite "sticky."

Other writers have dealt with why and how surnames evolved or were altered as immigrants settled into US cities to begin their lives as Americans;[4] the focus here is on presumed behavior of clerks at Ellis Island and other immigration points during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when they encountered (primarily) European surnames. These federal employees have been accused of, at best, carelessness, and at worst, racial prejudice, both presumably perpetuated while they were on the job.

What does the historical record tell us about these immigration officials and about the US government's policies and procedures relating to immigrants? That record, loosely defined, begins with the inception of America itself: everyone who came here, or who was brought here, after the official founding of the nation was an immigrant. Until 1819, people coming to the United States were dealt with according to state laws. In 1819, the federal government took over and immigration law and policy as we know it began.

Tempting as it is to blame the government, the issue of name changes is one where federal officials at American ports can be been cleared of the charges. Those officials are not around today to defend themselves against accusations of carelessness and prejudice, but if we look at federal laws relating to immigrants, at the copious paperwork from the period, and at contemporary writings and imagery, we can see for ourselves that the idea is false: not only didn't those officials change names—they *couldn't* have. Abundant evidence from the period shows

conclusively that American officials were not recording passenger names onto paper.

It's difficult to say when the urban legend about names being altered at Ellis Island began, but easy to know when the notion spread to the popular imagination. In the 1974 film *The Godfather II*, which closely follows events described in the novel *The Godfather* by Mario Puzo, Vito Andolini is sent away from his violence-suffused home town of Corleone, in Sicily, when he is a child. He arrives at the Ellis Island processing station and, overwhelmed by the noise and the people, finds himself unable to speak. The immigration official asks the boy his name, and the question is repeated in Italian by a translator. The frightened boy stays mute, so the translator looks at the card pinned to Vito's clothing. He clearly says, "Vito Andolini, from Corleone," but the clerk misunderstands and mutters, "Vito Corleone" (the translator does not, for some reason, correct him). The clerk then appears to record "Vito Corleone" on the paper in front of him, and little Vito is sent on his way. And that, we are clearly expected to conclude, is how the Godfather got his name.[5]

It's a powerful scene, but the action is based on a misunderstanding of what really happened when someone reached the front of the line and was asked, "Name?" Though the film otherwise captures the crowded, noisy process at Ellis Island effectively, an egregious historical inaccuracy occurs the moment the clerk writes down Vito's name incorrectly. In reality, immigration officials did not write names down—they checked them off on a list in front of them. In other words, the names were *already written down*. The officials were not working with blank sheets of paper on which they created lists of newly arrived passengers, but with ship manifests, official lists of passengers who had disembarked. These manifests were required by US federal law as of March 2, 1819. Beginning on that date (i.e., when the federal government assumed control over immigration), ship captains were required to report a list of all passengers brought to US shores from foreign countries; information required included name, sex, age, and occupation.[6] Several decades later, in 1893 (just after Ellis Island opened), the requirements for manifests became even more specific: the shipping company clerks were required to obtain contact information and to ask each passenger a series of questions about their health and political views. Furthermore, the clerks who created the manifests were told that "immigrants shall be listed in convenient groups . . . and no [list] shall contain more than 30 names."[7] These instructions are precise and clear, and they are not mere suggestions—they are published in the *U.S. Statutes at Large*, which contain federal laws as they are passed by Congress. Any captain who didn't turn over a list of names when he dropped off

his passengers faced a displeased federal official and some steep fines.

As the statements in the *U.S. Statues at Large* make clear, the passengers' names were recorded long before they arrived, usually as part of the ticket-buying transaction—the same way we arrange travel today. And just like today, before they boarded, each traveler had their name and ID checked against the list of people who had purchased tickets. Today we don't give our names at the arrival point, but this additional step was part of the processing during the height of immigration to America—hence the misunderstanding promoted by *The Godfather* saga.

It's vital to remember that the people coming over from Europe and other places were paying passengers, not cattle. They weren't shoved onto ships and then dumped onto American shores to be newly cataloged by harried immigration officials. The shipping companies were running a business, much as airlines do today—they sold tickets to people who could afford to purchase them (even a steerage class ticket cost almost a thousand dollars in today's currency). These companies aggressively advertised, and their agents crisscrossed Europe in search of customers. Someone wanting to book passage to America, Canada, Australia, South America, etc., would have had no difficulty locating an agent. Agents quoted ticket prices to the would-be traveler, accepted payment, and then recorded each traveler's name and other identifying information (the specific information collected varied over the years). The information taken down by the agents was sent to the home office, where it was transferred by shipping company clerks onto large blank sheets provided by the US government. Those sheets became the passenger lists which later were used by American port officials.

After all the tickets for a particular voyage had been sold and the manifest was complete, it was turned over to the ship's captain. On departure day, crew members checked people's names against the list as they came on board. The crew allowed past them only those people whose names were on the list, i.e., those who had paid for a ticket. If a person had paid but did not board, then their name was crossed out on the manifest. If someone was transferred to the vessel after the official manifest had been handed to the captain, that name was added to the list. If a passenger died en route, a notation was made. Thus the captain had an accurate, up-to-date list of who was on board when the ship left its home port and who was on board when it docked at the end of the journey.[8] Captains were required by the 1819 Steerage Act to sign a statement printed on the manifest verifying that the names on each list matched the names of those people disembarking.[9] Any discrepancies resulted in fines for the shipping company. Thus it was in the shipping

Figure 1. Registry clerks at Ellis Island

company's interest to make sure no one stepped onto American soil whose name was not already on a manifest.

When the ship arrived at an American port, the captain signed the manifest and delivered it to the chief immigration official. That official checked it and then gave the manifest to officers called registry clerks who questioned each traveler and verified the information recorded on the lists. Figure 1 is a photograph of registry clerks at Ellis Island showing, on the left, the officials working with the manifest pages, and on the right, travelers (with clothing tags) and a translator (seated).

Each registry clerk worked with a subset of pages from the manifest of a particular voyage. The pages he was given corresponded to the numbers on the clothing tags issued to passengers. These tags, which you can see in the photograph and which play a prominent role in the *Godfather II* scene, usually had the individual's name, home address, and numbers that corresponded with a page in the manifest. Figure 2 shows an example of a tag.

You can see the words "Manifest Sheet No." above the number 5. In other words, a quick glance at a traveler's card told the officials charged with moving people along which line each traveler needed to stand in.

Obviously then, despite what the *Godfather* film conveys, the officials at Ellis Island did not record travelers' names—they had pages with the names *already filled in*. The task of the registry clerks was to do the same thing the ship's crew had done: check each person's stated name against the name recorded on
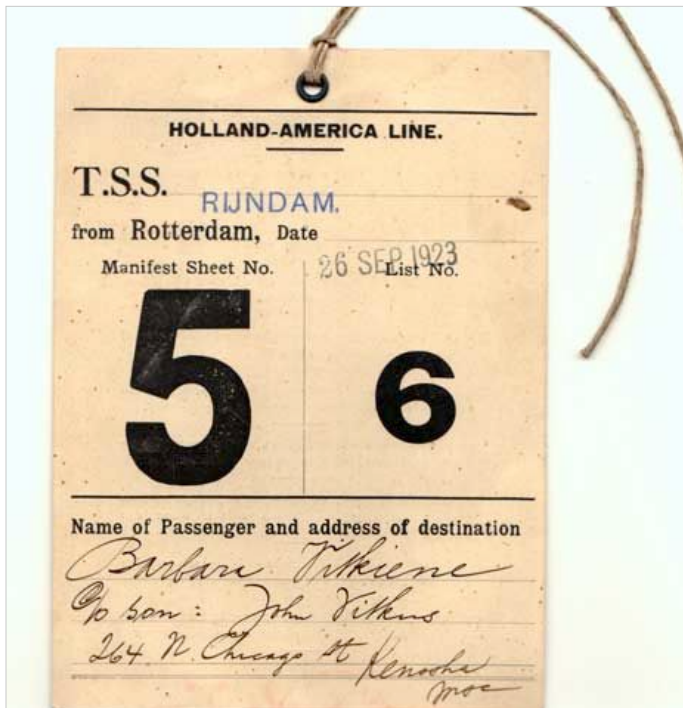
Figure 2. Example of a clothing tag

the manifest. If they didn't match, the newly arrived passenger was sent to detention so their case could be reviewed by a board of inquiry. Anyone who could not prove they had paid for a ticket—whose name was not already written down on the manifest—was sent back to the point of embarkation at shipping company expense. Those people were (and still are) called "stowaways."

Multiple contemporary films and photographs show officials working with already completed lists, making only checks and tick marks rather than recording the information each time.[10] As you can see in figure 3, the manifests were marked on repeatedly.

In addition to the tick marks, figure 3 also shows a name that has been crossed out, indicating that though a ticket was purchased, the passenger did not board. Every manifest page looks like this—full of names written in Europe or wherever the immigrant originated, with a series of marks over numerous columns and some names crossed out. The manifests did not even have blank lines by the time they reached the registry clerks—those blank spaces were lined through by the captain once the ship sailed to prevent any unsanctioned additions. Remember that these manifests were US federal property from the moment the captain passed them on; making alterations to them had to be done according to federal law. Had the officials at Ellis Island done what they are routinely accused of doing, they would have put their jobs in jeopardy.

After serving their official purpose, the manifests were boxed up and saved; they remain the property of the US government and today are stored at the National Archives. Interested parties can access them on digitized microfilm via Ancestry.com or through the National Archives site (www.archives.gov).

So no one's name was changed at Ellis Island. Though denizens of the internet will repeat the myth as if it were truth, their immigrant ancestors without a doubt carried away from Ellis Island and other ports the name they arrived with. Many immigrants chose to change their names later on—in 1906, federal law made it easy to do so during the citizenship process, and still does so today.[11] The travelers themselves or their family members were therefore responsible for the name shortening and changing that so bothers many people trying to figure out their family history.

Even this brief examination of the procedures involved in traveling and processing makes clear that no federal officer at an American port ever carelessly or maliciously altered an immigrant's name because it was too difficult to spell or sounded too foreign. On a side note, the belief that immigration officials changed names to make them less "foreign" presumes that the Ellis Island officials were of different ethnicities than the immigrants and were openly hostile to them. In fact, officials were often hired *because* they spoke multiple languages. New York mayor Fiorello LaGuardia began his career as a translator at Ellis Island—the child of European immigrants, he spoke Italian and Yiddish in addition to English.

The memoir of one Ellis Island official provides a fascinating look at the process from within. Victor Safford began working at Ellis Island in 1895. In his 1925 book, *Immigration Problems: Personal Experiences of an Official*,[12] Safford describes encountering crowds of passengers on the day of his initial job interview. He notes the conversations he overheard between people who spoke a variety of languages, including German, Norwegian, Yiddish, Italian, Croatian, and Hungarian. He says this casually, as if a working knowledge of several languages is not unusual—and it wasn't, for someone being interviewed to work with foreign-born travelers. Safford was not an outlier in this fluency—he writes that at his interview, officials and government employees were conversing among themselves in various languages other than English. And if the official did not speak a traveler's language, translators were available to assist, as you can see in figure 1.

Mario Puzo's famous novel was published in 1969; most likely he did not know what really had happened to immigrants at Ellis Island apart from a general understanding that people

Figure 3. Ship manifest example

stood in long lines, gave their names, and were eventually sent on their way into America.

Perhaps Francis Ford Coppola, director of both *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Godfather II* (1974), also did not know the truth about how the immigrants were processed. After all, these creative projects were completed long before today's relatively easy access to the passenger manifests, federal documents, and contemporary video and photography hat show the truth about that processing. But the time when such ignorance of historical reality can be excused has long passed—librarians, historians, and information professionals can now set the record straight when they get a chance. The US government's well-known penchant for creating and saving large amounts of paperwork has made that possible.

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Notes

1. "Names Changed at Ellis Island," Straight Dope (messageboard), accessed July 21, 2016, https://boards.straightdope.com/sdmb/archive/index.php/t-493641.html.
2. Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point* (New York: Little Brown, 2000).
3. Barbara Kiviat. "Change Agents: Are You Sticky?" Time.com, October 29, 2006, http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,1552029,00.html.
4. See, for example, Donna Przecha, "They Changed Our Name at Ellis Island," Geneology.com, accessed April 2, 2018, http://www.genealogy.com/articles/research/88_donna.html; and Leslie Albrecht Huber, "Ancestors in the Records: Naming Patterns," Understanding Your Ancestors, http://www.understandingyourancestors.com/ar/namingPatterns.aspx, first published in Everton's Genealogical Helper (November/December 2005).
5. Watch the whole scene: "Godfather Ellis Island," YouTube video, Hola Soy Jey, November 17, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ubT-Bm36L2U.
6. Steerage Act of 1819, 3 Stat. 488.
7. Act of March 3, 1893, 27 Stat. 570.
8. This carefully delineated process shows why there never can be an accurate list of *Titanic* passengers. There were undoubtedly people listed on the manifest who did not board and others whose names were added after the manifest was delivered to the captain (people who missed their departure on another ship and had to be reassigned). Alterations made by the ship's crew existed only on that single copy of the manifest—and that document, like the captain of the *Titanic* himself, went down with the ship. Any list published today is a reconstruction made with shipping company notes and earlier drafts of the manifest.
9. Steerage Act of 1819, 3 Stat. 488, Section 4.

10. See, for example, the public-domain documentary *Island of Hope, Island of Tears* by Charles Guggenheim, internet video, National Park Service, 1992 (1989), https://archive.org/details/gov.ntis.ava15996vnb1.

11. Naturalization Act of 1906, 34 Stat. 596.

12. Victor Safford, *Immigration Problems: Personal Experiences of an Official* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1925). Available in full text at the Hathi Trust Digital Library (www.hathitrust.org)