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## Why Your Family Name Was Not Changed at Ellis Island (and One That Was)

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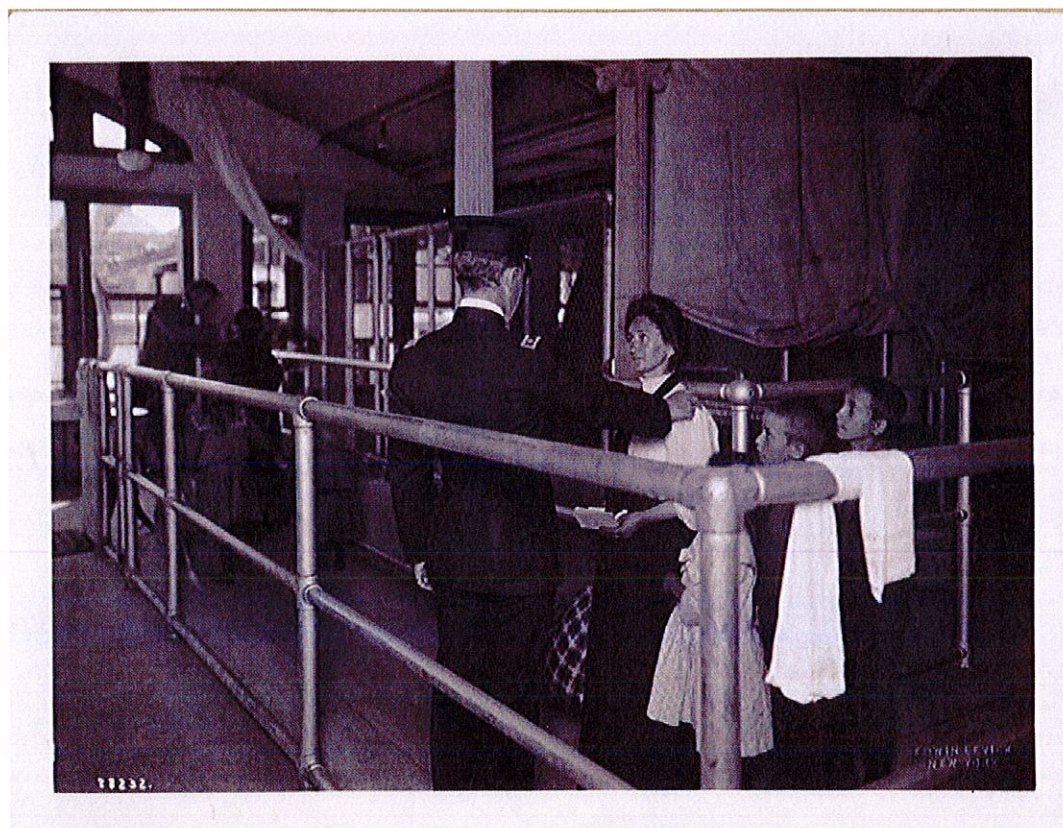
[EMIGRATION](#)

Between 1892 and 1954, over twelve million people entered the United States through the immigration inspection station at Ellis Island, a small island located in the upper bay off the New Jersey coast. There is a myth that persists in the field of genealogy, or more accurately, in family lore, that family names were changed there. They were not.

Numerous blogs, essays, and books have proven this. Yet the myth persists; a story in a recent issue of *The New Yorker* suggests that it happened. This post will explore how and



why names were not changed. It will then tell the story of Frank Woodhull, an almost unique example of someone whose name *was* changed, as proof that even if your name was changed at Ellis Island (it wasn't), it wouldn't have mattered. Confused? Read on...



The legend goes that officials at Ellis Island, unfamiliar with the many languages and nationalities of the people arriving at Ellis Island, would change the names of those immigrants that sounded foreign, or unusual. Vincent J. Cannato's excellent book [\*American Passage: The History of Ellis Island\*](#) explains why this did not happen:

Nearly all [...] name change stories are false. Names were not changed at Ellis Island. The proof is found when one considers that inspectors never wrote down the names of incoming immigrants. The only list of names came from the manifests of steamships, filled out

by ship officials in Europe. In the era before visas, there was no official record of entering immigrants except those manifests. When immigrants reached the end of the line in the Great Hall, they stood before an immigration clerk with the huge manifest opened in front of him. The clerk then proceeded, usually through interpreters, to ask questions based on those found in the manifests. Their goal was to make sure that the answers matched. (p.402)

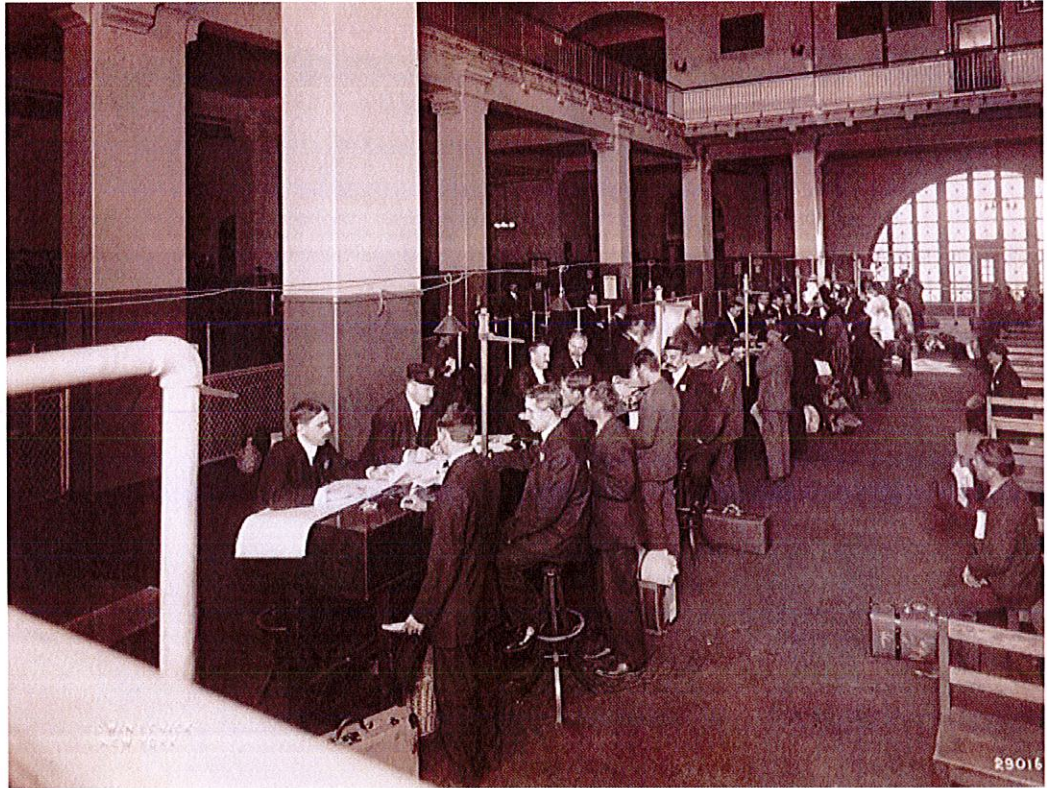
Inspectors did not create records of immigration; rather they checked the names of the people moving through Ellis Island against those recorded in the ship's passenger list, or manifest. The ship's manifest was created by employees of the steamship companies that brought the immigrants to the United States, before the voyage took place, when the passenger bought their ticket. The manifest was presented to the officials at Ellis Island when the ship arrived. If anything, Ellis Island officials were known to correct mistakes in passenger lists. The [\*Encyclopedia of Ellis Island\*](#) states that employees of the steamship companies,

...mostly ticket agents and pursers required no special identification from passengers and simply accepted the names the immigrants gave them. Immigrant inspectors [at Ellis Island] accepted these names as recorded in the ship's manifests and never altered them unless persuaded that a mistake had been made in the spelling or rendering of the name. Nonetheless the original name was never entirely scratched out and remained legible. (p.176)

Although it is always possible that the names of passengers were spelt wrong, perhaps by the clerk when the ticket was



bought, or during transliteration, when names were translated from one alphabet to another, it is more likely that immigrants were their own agents of change. Cannato, for instance, suggests that people often changed their name in advance of migration. More commonly, immigrants would change their names themselves when they had arrived in the United States, and for a number of reasons.



*Immigrants being registered at one end of the Main Hall, U. S. Immigration Station.*

Someone might change their name in order to make it sound more American, to fit in with the local community, or simply because it was good for business. There is at least one instance of a small businessman arriving in the United States from Eastern Europe changing his name, at least his public name, to something that sounded Swedish, because he had settled in a Swedish neighborhood in New York City. Immigrants would sometimes officially record their name

change, when naturalizing for instance, but often, as there was no law in New York State requiring it be done, no official record of a name change was made. People would just start using a different name.

John Colletta, in his book [\*They Came in Ships\*](#), describes the immigration process at Ellis Island in more detail:

[The] Inspector [in the immigration receiving center] had in his hands a written record of the immigrant he was inspecting and, asking the same questions over again, could compare the oral statements with it. The inspectors therefore, read the names already written down on the lists, and they had at their service a large staff of translators who worked along side them in the Great Hall of the Ellis Island facility. (p.12)

Contemporary descriptions of Ellis Island do not mention name changes at Ellis Island. A search of historical newspapers using the [ProQuest Historical Database](#) produces only one story about name changes written during the time that Ellis Island was in operation.

Leonard Lyons' entertainment column *Broadway Potpourri*, in the *Washington Post* of April 10th, 1944, states that Harry Zariief, "the assistant concert master for Morton Gould," and famously a father of quadruplets, had recently changed his name back from Friedman.

Friedman. His name originally was Zariief, but when his family arrived at Ellis Island the immigration inspector told him that Zariief was too complicated, and recorded his name as "Friedman." Many years later the "Friedman" was changed back to the original Zariief. (p.9)



Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Section: \_\_\_\_\_

# WHY YOUR FAMILY NAME WAS NOT CHANGED AT ELLIS ISLAND

After reading the portion of the NYPL blog post, answer the following questions in complete sentences.

1. What is the Ellis Island myth discussed in this article? How do scholars think it originated and why does it persist?
2. Who decided that names would be changed when immigrants moved to America?
3. What were some of the reasons why names were changed?
4. What was the significance of the ship's manifest in the immigration process?
5. Would you ever want to change your name? Why? What new name might you choose?