

3-1-1999

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Michael R. Leonard

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Recommended Citation

Leonard, Michael R. (1999) "Ellis Island Arrival Records Computerized and Available by 2000," *Swedish American Genealogist*. Vol. 19 : No. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag/vol19/iss1/9>

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Ellis Island Arrival Records Computerized and Available by 2000*

Michael R. Leonard

The church is playing a key role in the establishment of a new, state-of-the-art family history research facility in the Ellis Island Immigration Museum in New York, it was announced at a news conference in the museum Oct. 28.

“The American Family Immigration History Center” will open in the year 2000 and will make information on the more than 17 million people who immigrated through the port of New York from 1892-1924 available on computer.

Enlisting an army of volunteers, the Family History Department of the Church [The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints] has been poring through passenger records and ships’ manifests from Ellis Island and entering them into a computer database. Since the project began in 1993, approximately 2 million volunteer hours have been logged—with approximately 753,000 hours so far in 1998 alone.¹

Lee Iacocca, chairman emeritus of the Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation, noted in his remarks at the news conference that the work Church volunteers are undertaking to digitize the records is “unbelievable.” Steve Briganti, president and chief executive officer of the foundation, said the Church is saving the project millions of dollars by volunteering its resources. Don Barry, U.S. assistant secretary of the Interior, said the Church has played a most important role as a partner in making the center possible.

When the project is finished in 2000, a simple push of a button will lead to a multimedia presentation containing information such as an immigrant’s given name and surname, the name of the ship he or she arrived on and his or her port of origin, date of arrival, age, gender, marital status, nationality and last place of residence.² All of this information is being extracted by Church members from

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¹ “The work has been done through the church’s family history extraction program, which comprises thousands of volunteers working at small genealogy research centers in more than 1,000 LDS stake centers. - “Ellis Island records go high-tech,” *Deseret News*, 31 October 1998, E2.

² “The database will be accessible through 35 computer stations. Visitors will pay a ‘nominal’ fee for access, and each search should take about seven to eight minutes.... Searches will be done by name, and the names do not need to be spelled correctly.” - “Ellis Island records go high-tech,” *Deseret News*, 31 October 1998, E2.

microfilmed copies of the original ledgers, which were mostly hand-written, faded and damaged. The original documents were destroyed many years ago.

The Ellis Island records represent about 60 percent of all U.S. immigration records. More than 40 percent of all Americans can trace their ancestry back to Ellis Island. These records will prove essential to more than 110 million Americans who are interested in their family history. So far, Church volunteers have processed approximately 65 percent of these records.

Brent J. Belnap, president of the New York, New York Stake, represented the Church at the news conference and noted the intensive effort that is being made to digitize the Ellis Island records. "Every manifest is different, reflecting the many ships from all over the world that sailed into New York Harbor," he said in his remarks. "Every single entry is reviewed, interpreted, entered into a computer and checked for accuracy."

National Park Service rangers observe that the most frequently asked question by visitors to Ellis Island is, "Where can I find my family immigration records?"

Since the microfilm copies of the passenger and ship's manifests are currently found only at the National Archives, visitors to Ellis Island have not been able to access those records. For this reason, Mr. Iacocca noted that a research facility, since restoration of Ellis Island began in 1982, has been considered a very important part of the Ellis Island Museum. However, technological and budgetary problems at the time stopped the project from being carried out. With advances in technology, and with help from organizations such as the Church, the new center will make the records easily accessible.³

Pres. Belnap said the work for Ellis Island is a natural extension of the Church's commitment to families and family history research.

"The Church founded its famed Family History Library in 1894 to gather genealogical records and to assist Church members in tracing their roots," Pres. Belnap said in his remarks. Today, the Family History Library in Salt Lake City contains the largest collection of genealogical records in the world. Open to the general public, it also operates more than 3,200 satellite facilities worldwide called "Family History Centers."

Partners in the creation of the American Family Immigration History Center include the Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation, the National Park Service, the U.S. Department of the Interior, Center designer Edwin Schlossberg, and the Family History Department of the Church.

³ "[T]he church will make the Ellis Island information available at the Family History Center in Salt Lake City as well as on CD-ROM, so individuals can purchase it for home use." - "Ellis Island records go high-tech," *Deseret News*, 31 October 1998, E2.