



Records Preservation & Access Coalition

BRIEFING PAPER



TRANSFER OF HISTORICAL US IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION RECORDS FROM USCIS TO THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Relevant Programs

Agency: National Archives and
Records Administration (NARA)

Program: Office of the
Chief Operating Officer

Agency: US Citizenship and
Immigration Services (USCIS)

Program: Immigration
Records and Identity
Services Directorate

Recommendation- Budget Proposal

\$10 million to the National Archives to facilitate scheduling, accessioning, ingesting, processing, and providing access to all USCIS historical records (other than A-files) and associated indices. A plan for this process must be presented by Q4 FY21, and the transfer process completed by 2024.

The Records Preservation and Access Coalition (RPAC) advises the genealogical and historical communities, as well as other interested parties, on ensuring proper access to public records and on public policy related to strong records preservation practices. RPAC is sponsored by the National Genealogical Society and the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies and is supported by American Society of Genealogists, Association of Professional Genealogists, Ancestry.com, Board for Certification of Genealogists, and International Commission for the Accreditation of Professional Genealogists.

For further information, contact Matt Menashes, Executive Director
National Genealogical Society, at mattm@ngsgenealogy.org or 703-525-0050.

TRANSFER OF HISTORICAL US IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION RECORDS FROM USCIS

Background in Brief

USCIS and its predecessor, Immigration and Naturalization Service, have long failed to manage the nation's historical immigration and naturalization records. USCIS historical records management problems include failure to reschedule significant historical records as permanent and/or transfer such records to NARA, failure to maintain accurate records of holdings and locations, failure to create/maintain adequate indices to historical files and records, failure to train staff to service historical records, and failure to satisfy FOIA requests for records in USCIS custody. As a result, irreplaceable records precious to the nation and individual family history remain beyond reach.

There is no current operational need for USCIS to maintain its historical records¹. The agency's overwhelming operational need for such records is to respond to historical FOIA and Genealogy Program requests (for which it charges unreasonable fees). USCIS must be unburdened of its historical records so it can focus on its mission of providing benefits and services to living immigrants.

This is a salvage operation to save the records of America's 19th and 20th Century immigration history. The National Archives and USCIS must cooperate to facilitate the transfer of custody of USCIS' historical records and indices to ensure their preservation and availability to both a nation of immigrants and their descendants.

¹ Any record needed could be obtained/recovered from NARA.