



Ancestors Revealed

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It's Getting Mighty Crowded...Immigrant life in NYC



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My great grandparents immigrated to America from Germany, Sweden and France in the 1800s. They were among the ten million Europeans who arrived in New York between 1830 and 1892, leaving behind famine, war, religious persecution and political strife. The world really had given us their hungry, tired and poor and the masses were huddled in the Lower East Side. By the turn of the 20th century, the 14 block area between Delancey, Allen, Division and Essex was the most densely populated place ON EARTH!

When I think of my ancestors coming to America, I see them bravely heading off

for a new and better life filled with opportunities. The American Dream, right? But, I never pictured their daily life once they arrived here.

Strolling through the galleries and trendy boutiques of the Lower East Side today, it's hard to imagine living conditions in the late 1800s. That is, unless you visit the Tenement Museum, as my family and I did recently. The tenement at 97 Orchard St. was built in 1863 in the heart of the most crowded area. It has been renovated by the museum to allow tours in 5 different apartments representing 5 families living in the building in different time periods. You can visit the apartment of an Irish family in 1869, a German-Jewish family surviving the Panic of 1873, 2 Jewish families of tailors around 1900 and a Sicilian Catholic family during the depression. There is also a tour in which an interpreter plays the role of 14 year old Victoria Confino, a Sephardic Jew, whose family actually lived in the building and had a factory nearby making underwear and aprons.

We spent our tour visiting with Victoria and learning about the day-to-day life of tenement families. Families

of up to 7 or more lived in three rooms, totaling 325 sq. ft. Prior to 1901, families had a key to an outdoor privy which was supposed to be provided for every 20 people. After that, there was an indoor toilet on each floor for up to 35 people to share. Tenement apartments had little ventilation, maybe only one window. The Confino's had gaslight, run on a meter (5¢ for 6 hours). Victoria let us know that an ice chip works as a substitute for the 5¢. Dishes and clothes were washed in the one sink in the kitchen. Heat came from the coal stove used for cooking.

The living arrangements reminded me of camping with my cousins, sister and grandparents in their RV when I was a kid. We were together all the time. No conversation could be had without everyone hearing. We each waited in turn for the privacy of changing in the tiny bathroom. To take a shower, we would walk up to the central building and use the communal facilities. At bed time, the dining area had to be converted to make enough room for all of us to sleep. Fun for a kid on a camping trip. Daily life for an immigrant in a New York tenement.

For a glimpse of the real experience, visit the museum!

Did You Know?

- In 1860, 1/3 of NYC was Irish, 1/2 was foreign born
- Over 73 million Americans can trace their ancestors to immigrants who entered this country through New York
- At it's peak in 1910, 550,000 people lived in the Lower East Side. Less than 200,000 lived there in 2000.

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10 Sources of Research on NYC Immigrants

1-Municipal Archives at 31 Chambers St. houses vital records for all 5 boroughs from 1860's to 1940. Search in person or send a request.

2-Castle Garden - online database of 12 million immigrants entering NY between 1820 & 1913.

3-Ellis Island—online database of immigrants entering NY between 1892 & 1924, www.ellisland.org.

4-National Archives, NY Regional Center on Varick St. holds historical, immigration,

court, census & other records, 1685 to the 1990s.

5-Naturalization records can be found at the Nat'l archives or Surrogates Court.

6-Church & Synagogue records of baptisms, confirmations & marriages are often available at the individual religious facility to which ancestors belonged.

7-The Irma & Paul Milstein Division of New York Public Library at 5th and 42nd has a large collection dedicated to genealogical research.

8-New York City Directories

listing place of residence, occupation and sometimes spouses names are available at both archives and the NYPL.

9- The Tenement Museum has archival material which can be used to research life as a tenement family.

10-The NY Genealogical & Biographical Society's vast collection of land, court, vital & church records, diaries, and letters, etc.. is being transferred to the NYPL and over the next 2 years will be added to the library's online catalog.

What did they do without Starbucks?

You can tell a lot about a community by the institutions it supports and the activities that go on there. For example:

Ridley's Department Store was located on the corner of Orchard and Grand Street. Built in the early 1870's, it was the largest retail establishment in the world. It even had its own wagon house and stables.

Prior to 1900, the **Bowery** was an entertainment district, home to upscale venues such as the **German Winter Garden** and the **Bowery Lane Theater**, where families enjoyed premieres and staged events.

Webster Hall on East 11th St. is an example of one of the 130 dance halls (called Pleasure Gardens) in the lower east side at the end of the 1800s. This ballroom was 70x100 ft. and 3 stories tall.

The **German American Shooting Society** on St. Mark's Place and the **Neue Turnhalle** on 4th St. (named for the Turners or gymnasts who met there) housed shooting galleries, fencing strips & 24 gymnastics teams.

Tompkins Square Park on St. Mark's Place was the site of parades and

gatherings. There was a riot there in 1874 when immigrant workers protesting for relief programs clashed with police.

There was a multitude of religious establishments such as **St. Nicholas Church**, (the 1st German Catholic Church in NY) built in 1833, the **first reform synagogue** in New York built in 1849 on Norfolk St. and the **Eldridge St. Synagogue** opened just in time for the High Holidays in 1887. It is newly restored and serves as a museum.

The **Rivington Street Bath House** was one of 15 which immigrants used once a week to clean up. It was built in 1900 in response to legislation mandating free public baths in cities of more than 50,000. The Rivington baths had 67 spray baths, allowing 3000, 20 minute baths each day.

In 1892 the **Elizabeth Home for Girls** opened on East 12th St. It was run by the Children's Aid Society as a home and training school for destitute girls.

The **Bowery Savings Bank**, founded to encourage thrift and industry in the local population, started with 5 depositors and by 1873 had \$27 million in deposits.



Hester Street, 1903