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Historic Naturalization Papers Go Online

Cumberland County, Pa. - Thousands of Naturalization documents are being listed and imaged by the Cumberland County Archives for online access. This effort is in coordination with Naturalization Day, which is June 16 at the Cumberland County Old Court House. Expanding on work previously undertaken by the Prothonotary's Office, these documents date from 1795 to the early 1900s and includes Declarations of Intent, Naturalization Petitions and Court Orders. Scanned as part of a preservation strategy, the online availability for viewing and printing will be an important resource for genealogists, historians and those researching immigration patterns in Cumberland County. The inventory list can be sorted by name, date and country of origin.

The Naturalization Act of 1790 was the first statute in the United States to codify the citizenship process for foreign-born applicants. It restricted applicants to "free white persons," who had been in the U.S. for two years. Later legislation extended the residency requirement to five years (Naturalization Law of 1795) and then to fourteen years. The Naturalization Law of 1802 reduced the requirement again to five years.

Although wording of early Naturalization laws suggested that only immigrant men were eligible for citizenship, alien women who were married to a native born or naturalized citizen were considered naturalized citizens. This gender issue was clarified in an 1855 Naturalization Law.

The naturalization process changed little during the Country's first century. After registering at his port of entry, an immigrant wishing to apply for U.S. citizenship submitted a Declaration of Intent ("DI") to the courts, affirming the immigrant's intent to renounce allegiance to his native country and monarch. When the mandatory residency period was fulfilled, the applicant could file a petition in any common-law court in the United States, along with a copy of his Declaration of Intent. The Petition included an oath of allegiance, statements concerning years of residency, character references, and signatures or marks of the applicant, witnesses and other officials. When the Declaration of Intent and Petition were found to be in order, the court granted the application. The newly franchised citizen was issued a Certificate of Citizenship. The Courts retained only the Declaration and the Petition.

To view these documents from the Naturalization Record Series and other early Cumberland County government records, visit the Cumberland County Archives at <http://ccweb.ccpa.net/archives/Inventory.aspx?PSID=463>

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