#### Western Kentucky University

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### Using Federal Documents to Dispel a Myth about Ellis Island

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#### USING FEDERAL DOCUMENTS TO DISPEL A MYTH ABOUT ELLIS ISLAND

KATHERINE PENNAVARIA and ROSEMARY MESZAROS Western Kentucky University KLA Fall Conference September 21, 2012

### ELLIS ISLAND Immigration Center, 1893–1954



# "MY FAMILY'S SURNAME WAS CHANGED AT ELLIS ISLAND."

#### HAVE YOU HEARD THAT ONE BEFORE?

# Didn't happen.

HISTORIANS AND PROFESSIONAL GENEALOGISTS KNOW THIS IS A MYTH.

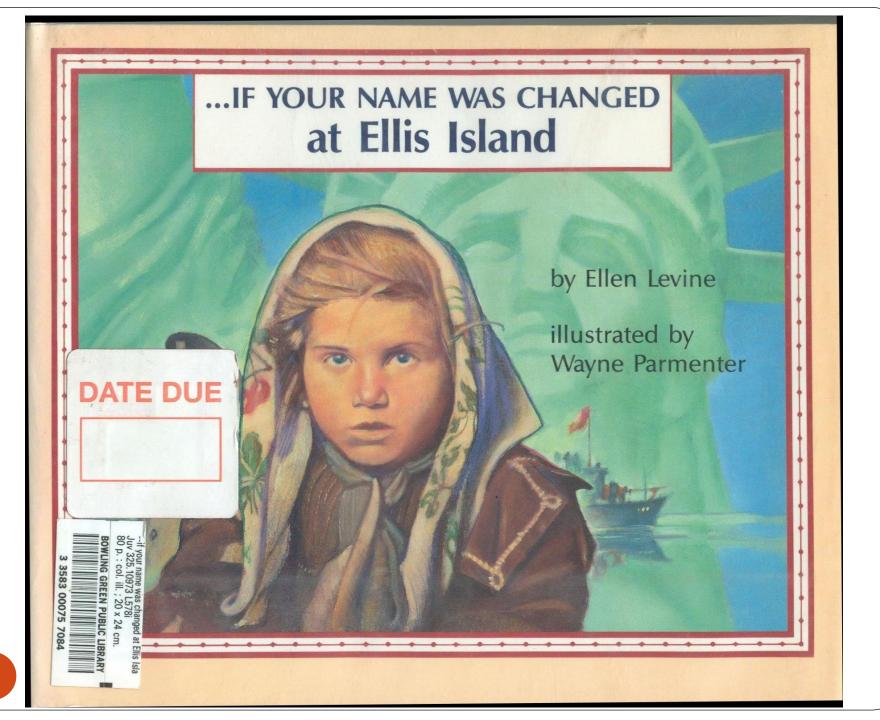
# But it's a persistent myth...



"For the great enemy of the truth is very often not the lie (deliberate, contrived, and dishonest), but the myth: persistent, persuasive, and unrealistic."

(JFK, from a commencement speech at Yale University, June 11, 1962)





### From the Internet...

#### COMMENT:

"Some of my relatives' surnames were recorded incorrectly on arrival."

#### **ASSUMPTION:**

Immigrants' names were "recorded" upon arrival.

<u>REALITY</u>: Immigrants' names were recorded by the shipping company at the <u>point of origin</u>, when the tickets were purchased.

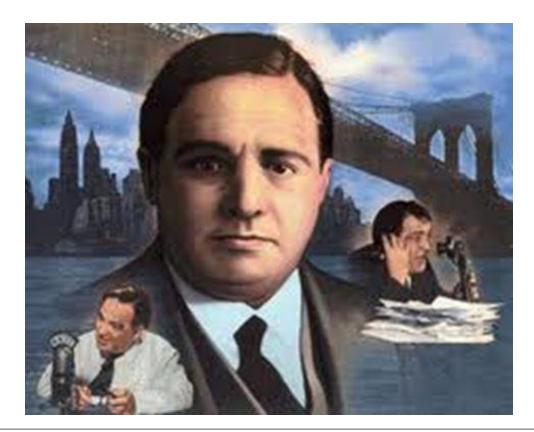
#### **COMMENT:**

"The bastards at Ellis island decided [my ancestor's] last name was too Irish and changed it."

<u>ASSUMPTION</u>: Officials were of different ethnicities than the immigrants. <u>REALITY</u>: Quite often the officials were hired precisely *because* they knew the languages of the immigrants.

#### FIORELLO LA GUARDIA ELLIS ISLAND TRANSLATOR - AND--MAYOR OF NEW YORK

#### (spoke English, Yiddish, German, French, and Italian)



<u>COMMENT</u>: "My family name was probably shortened from something Eastern European to something German, certainly at Ellis Island." <u>COMMENT</u>: "My greatgrandfather came through and the name was shortened and changed by the worker."

<u>ASSUMPTION</u>: Immigration officials had the *means* and *motivation* to change names.

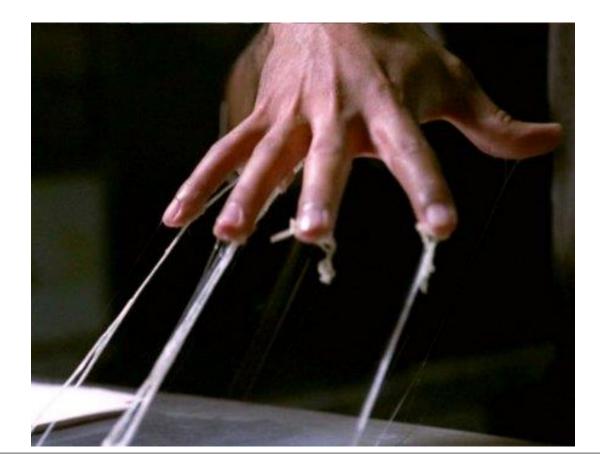
**<u>REALITY</u>: They had neither.** 

# another myth...



#### STICKINESS: "The elusive quality that some ideas and concepts have—they catch on and don't let go."

Malcolm Gladwell, The Tipping Point



# How do we determine the truth about the past?

# EVIDENCE

# WHAT IS GOOD EVIDENCE?

# RECORDS CREATED AT THE TIME (especially paper)



#### AND WHO HAS CREATED THE BEST PAPER RECORD COLLECTION IN THE UNIVERSE?

# THE U.S. GOVERNMENT



# THE EVIDENCE TO EXAMINE:

1. federal laws relating to immigrants

2. ship manifests (i.e. passenger lists)

**3.** contemporary films + photographs

### ALL OF THESE ARE PRIMARY SOURCES

#### THE

#### STATUTES AT LARGE

OF THE

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,

FROM

DECEMBER, 1881, TO MARCH, 1883.

AND

RECENT TREATIES, POSTAL CONVENTIONS, AND EXECUTIVE PROCLAMATIONS.

EDITED, PRINTED, AND PUBLISHED UNDER THE AUTHORITY OF AN ACT OF CONGRESS, AND UNDER THE DIRECTION OF THE SECRETARY OF STATE.

#### VOL. XXII.

WASHINGTON: GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE. 1883.

# INSTRUCTIONS TO SHIPPING COMPANIES:

"Report a list of all passengers taken on board, including name, sex, age, and occupation." "Immigrants shall be listed in convenient groups... and no [list] shall contain more than 30 names." (March 3, 1893)

(March 2, 1819)

In the Statutes at Large, the U.S. government spelled out exactly how the immigrants were to be treated and documented.

The officials would have been <u>breaking the law</u> if they had altered the officially recorded names.

They would have lost their jobs!

# THE KEY QUESTIONS:

### **METHOD:**

**MOTIVATION:** 

Why would the immigration officials change the names?

<u>How</u> would the officials have achieved a permanent name change for the immigrants with whom they briefly interacted? The blank manifest books were designed by the US government with intention of getting records that would remain their property.

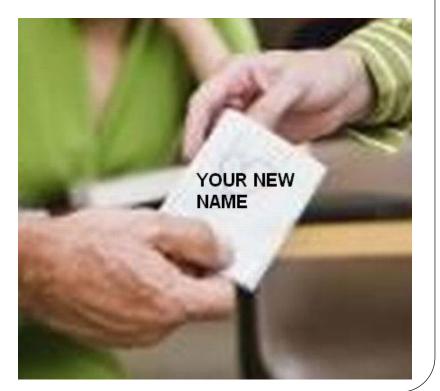


The officials had no authority to alter names on the manifests.

# Name changes had to be approved by a board of inquiry.

If we assume, for a moment, that the myth is true... by what means did the immigrant carry away his or her "new" name?

Did the officials hand them a piece of paper with their new name?



#### **"GOOD ENOUGH FOR GOVERNMENT WORK"?**

# At Ellis Island, that work was done exceptionally well!



#### Immigration Through Ellis Island – Award-Winning Documentary Video Film

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u4wzVuXPznk

# Many names definitely <u>were</u> changed... later.

#### **BY THE IMMIGRANTS THEMSELVES.**

# **BOTTOM LINE:**

There is NO evidence for the "name changed at Ellis Island" idea.

But there is LOTS of evidence that it did <u>not</u> happen.

# HISTORY MATTERS.

### **EVIDENCE MATTERS.**



# **THANK YOU!**

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