U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

News Release

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USCIS Begins Transfer of Historical A-Files to National Archives

Signing Ceremony First Step to Permanent Retention of Millions of Immigrant's Files

WASHINGTON—U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) and the National Archives and Records Administration took a major step today for personal, historical and genealogical research with a formal schedule to begin the transfer of alien registration files (A-files) for permanent retention at the National Archives. Archival processing of approximately 135,000 files could be completed by next summer and available for public access.

The schedule was formalized in a signing ceremony at the National Archives in Washington. Gregory B. Smith, Associate Director, USCIS and Chief, National Security and Records Verification Directorate, delivered the first files to Adrienne Thomas, Acting Archivist of the United States, who signed the new schedule.

"Immigration is one of the most significant aspects of the American experience," said Smith. The information contained in the A-file is unique. No other type of case file contains the same level of comprehensive personal data…especially concerning the alien's interaction with USCIS and the former Immigration and Naturalization Service, and their request for resident status and/or citizenship. This ensures that the records contained within the A-File will be retained forever in our National Archives – preserving a rich and important part of America's immigration history."

"These A-files are a key to unlocking the fascinating stories of millions of people who traveled to the United States in search of opportunity," added Thomas. "The National Archives is delighted that it will be able to safeguard the unique and important stories of brave men and women who left their homelands in search of a better life."

The A-file is a series of records consisting of numbered files used to document the complete history of the interaction between an alien and the U.S. government. The file is unique in that it not only contains routine demographic information, but may also include photographs, foreign birth certificates, marriage licenses, interview transcripts or actual recordings, and more. Currently, USCIS maintains approximately 53 million A-files; of these, about 21 million have been retired to a Federal Records Center.

Previously, the A-file was considered a 'temporary record' and could possibly have been disposed of 75 years from the date the file was retired to a Federal Records Center or 75 years from the date of last action. Now, the A-file becomes a permanent record which will transfer to National Archives custody 100 years from the individual's date of birth. Newly-eligible files will be transferred to the National Archives every five years.

After transfer to the National Archives, the majority of files will be housed at the National Archives in Kansas City. Files on immigration through the port of San Francisco will be housed at the National Archives in San Francisco. Once these records have been transferred, they will be available in the research rooms at these two National Archives facilities. Copies will also be available through the mail.

Additional immigration-related information and links to resources geared specifically for genealogical research is available online at www.uscis.gov/genealogy or www.archives.gov/immigration/.

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