

## How to Find Your Ancestral Hometown

Let's say you've decided to trace your family back to the "old country" to find the relatives you never knew. Where do you start? You can't search all the records from an entire country or, worse yet, an entire region like Eastern Europe or Southeast Asia. You need an exact hometown to find those ancestors.

Here are some resources to help you identify your ancestral hometown so you know you're tracing the right family.

- **Family stories.** Each of my grandfathers mentioned the name of his hometown in Italy often, so those were never in doubt. But to trace my maternal grandmother's roots, I needed more evidence.
- **Ship manifests.** If you can find your ancestor's record of entry into the U.S., such as a ship manifest from [Ellis Island](#), his or her hometown may be listed. The amount of detail on the manifest depends on the year of entry. I found Grandma's parents' 1899 ship manifest, and they listed Sant'Angelo a Cupolo as their hometown. This was not the town name Grandma had told me.
- **World War II draft registration cards.** Grandma said her mother was born in Avellino, Italy, but that's a city as well as a province. It was Grandma's uncle's [World War II draft registration card](#) that finally provided me with the actual town name of Tufo in the province of Avellino.
- **Microfilmed records from overseas.** Using the Mormon Church's [Family History Center](#), I looked at vital records from Tufo in the correct timeframe to find the birth record of Grandma's uncle, plus another uncle who died as a child. But there was no birth record for Grandma's mother, aunt, or remaining uncle.
- **Marriage certificates.** I've gone to the [New York City Municipal Archives](#) a few times to view vital records. Only one, the marriage record of Grandma's aunt, listed the exact town of birth in Italy. It said my great grand aunt, Filomena Saviano, was born in Pastene, which I know from maps and my visit is part of Sant'Angelo a Cupolo, the town on the ship manifest. I was also lucky to obtain a record of Grandma's parents' marriage by writing to the webmaster for Sant'Angelo a Cupolo's website. It says that Grandma's parents were born in Sant'Angelo a Cupolo, which verifies the hometown from the ship manifest of 1899.
- **Naturalization papers.** Someday I hope to see the U.S. naturalization papers for Grandma's father to see if it says he was born in Pastene or Sant'Angelo a Cupolo. Still searching.
- **Passport applications.** Many 19th century immigrants travelled to the old country once or twice to visit family. At a certain time, a passport was required if you planned to get back into the U.S. These applications hold not only the name of the applicant's hometown, but their photo...or a photo of the applicant and his or her spouse and children.
- **Birth certificates.** This is a bit of a catch-22 because you probably won't find that birth certificate until you find the hometown. But at least it will give you the proof positive you need.

A few family tree researchers have grabbed some of my relatives from my [ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com) tree because the name was “close enough”. When I inspected their family trees I found that their ancestors came from a different part of Italy. So don’t be too hasty to claim ancestors until you know your true ancestral hometown.