LEVEL C1

Did Ellis Island Change Your Family's Name?

The Story Every Family Tells, and What the Records Say

Many American families believe an official at Ellis Island shortened their surname. Sean takes Olivia through the passenger manifests, the interpreters and the court records that tell a very different story.

Key words

- squint
- myth
- demolish
- quarantine
- unmarked
- hijack
- scribble
- manifest
- peppery
- shorthand
- bewildering
- mangle
- flustered
- blurt out

In this workbook

Key words 2
Full transcript 4
Did you understand? 11
Real or fake? 11
Code breaker 12
Your turn 13
Answer key 14

How to use it

1
Listen to the episode on YouTube.

2
Read the transcript and learn the key words.

3
Do the activities, then check the answer key.

Includes the full transcript, key words, activities and answers

Listen to the episode on the Aprendos YouTube channel

Key words

These words appear in the episode.

Key words	Meaning	Example
squint *verb*	To look at something with your eyes partly closed, usually because it is hard to see.	*He squinted at the menu on the wall because he'd left his glasses in the car.*
myth *noun*	A story or belief that many people accept, although it is not true.	*It's a myth that you need to wait an hour after eating before you swim.*
demolish *verb*	To destroy an argument or belief completely by showing that it is wrong.	*Her lawyer demolished the witness's story in about ten minutes.*
quarantine *noun*	A period when a person or animal is kept apart from others so that a disease does not spread.	*When we moved abroad, our cat spent two weeks in quarantine at the airport.*
unmarked *adjective*	Without any sign or name to show what or who it is.	*Two detectives were waiting outside the bank in an unmarked car.*
hijack *verb*	Informally, to take control of a conversation or event that someone else was leading.	*My uncle hijacked the wedding speech and talked about his boat for ten minutes.*
scribble *verb*	To write something quickly and carelessly.	*I scribbled her number on the back of a receipt and then lost it.*
manifest *noun*	An official list of the passengers or goods carried on a ship or plane.	*The airline checked the passenger manifest to see if he had boarded the flight.*
peppery *adjective*	Easily annoyed and quick to show it; hot-tempered.	*Our peppery old neighbour shouts at anyone who parks in front of his gate.*
shorthand *noun*	A short word or phrase used to stand for something longer or more complicated.	*In our office, "the Monday problem" is shorthand for the printer breaking every week.*
bewildering *adjective*	So confusing that you don't know what to think or do.	*The train station had a bewildering number of exits, and we took the wrong one twice.*
mangle *verb*	To say or write a word or name so badly that it is hard to recognise.	*The tour guide mangled every Welsh place name, and the locals were too polite to correct him.*
flustered *adjective*	Nervous and confused, often because you are in a hurry or under pressure.	*I got so flustered in the interview that I forgot the name of my own university.*

Key words	Meaning	Example
blurt out *phrasal verb*	To say something suddenly, without thinking first.	*My little brother blurted out the secret before the surprise party had even started.*

Full transcript

Did Ellis Island Change Your Family's Name?: The Story Every Family Tells, and What the Records Say

SEAN Almost every American family has the same story. Great-grandfather steps off the boat, a tired official **squints** at his long foreign surname, and writes down something shorter.

OLIVIA And the family has carried that shorter name ever since.

SEAN That's the legend. The archivists who look after the paperwork call it something else.

OLIVIA Which is?

SEAN The Ellis Island name change **myth**.

OLIVIA A myth? Four of my friends have told me that exact story about their own grandparents.

SEAN Then keep this episode away from their family group chats.

OLIVIA You'd better have receipts.

SEAN This is Aprendos English, level C1. I'm Sean.

OLIVIA And I'm Olivia.

SEAN And I do have receipts, as it happens, several hundred pages of them.

OLIVIA Before you start **demolishing** anybody's grandmother, a quick word to everyone listening. If you like true stories where the paperwork turns out to be stranger than the legend, subscribe to Aprendos English, so the next one finds you.

SEAN Nicely put. Right then, where do you think the story comes from?

OLIVIA Honestly? I can picture the scene perfectly, and I've never set foot on Ellis Island.

SEAN You can picture it because Hollywood painted it for you. Do you remember The Godfather Part II?

OLIVIA Vaguely. Lots of dark rooms and men whispering in them?

SEAN That's the one. In 1974, early in the film, Francis Ford Coppola shows a nine-year-old boy from Sicily arriving at Ellis Island in 1901. His name is Vito Andolini, and he comes from a town called Corleone.

OLIVIA Oh, wait, I know where this is going...

SEAN ...go on, then.

OLIVIA The official gets confused and writes down the town instead of his surname.

SEAN Spot on. The boy is too frightened to answer, so an official reads the tag on his coat, and Vito Andolini becomes Vito Corleone. Then a doctor finds smallpox, and the boy is put in **quarantine** for three months. He sits alone in a bare room, looking out at the Statue of Liberty and singing to himself in Sicilian.

OLIVIA That poor kid. It's a beautiful scene, though.

SEAN It's a gorgeous scene. As history, I'm afraid it's rather less impressive.

OLIVIA So what actually happened when somebody walked into that building?

SEAN Let's start with the building, because Ellis Island opened on the first of January 1892...

OLIVIA ...with Annie Moore!

SEAN You know about Annie Moore?

OLIVIA Half my college roommates were Irish American, so I've heard about her many times. She was a seventeen-year-old from County Cork, travelling with her two younger brothers. As the very first person processed on the island, she was handed a ten-dollar gold coin.

SEAN Quite right. I was about to say exactly that.

OLIVIA Sure you were, but do you know what happened to her afterwards?

SEAN A quiet life somewhere in New York, I'd guess.

OLIVIA For years, everybody believed she moved west, married a descendant of the Irish hero Daniel O'Connell, and died in Texas in a streetcar accident. That Texan family grew up believing she was their ancestor.

SEAN I sense a problem coming.

OLIVIA In 2006 a genealogist called Megan Smolenyak checked the records and found that the Texas Annie had been born in Illinois, so she'd never been on that boat.

SEAN So the family story belonged to a completely different woman...

OLIVIA ...and the real Annie never left New York. She lived on the Lower East Side and married the son of a German baker, a man who worked at the Fulton Fish Market. They had at least ten children, and many of them died young.

SEAN That's heartbreaking.

OLIVIA She died in 1924, and she lay in an **unmarked** grave in Queens until a headstone finally went up in 2008.

SEAN Well, that's almost too perfect for today, because the very first name in the Ellis Island story was attached to the wrong family.

OLIVIA Okay, sorry, I **hijacked** your episode. Carry on.

SEAN Gladly. Between 1892 and 1924, more than twelve million people came through that island. On the busiest day, the seventeenth of April 1907, they processed eleven thousand, seven hundred and forty-seven people.

OLIVIA In one day? Then the inspectors must have been rushing like crazy, which makes the family story more likely, surely. You're exhausted, the queue never ends, so you **scribble** down whatever's easiest...

SEAN ...which is the argument everybody makes, and it collapses once you ask who actually wrote the names down. Have a guess.

OLIVIA Some poor clerk on the island, with a fountain pen and a headache.

SEAN Nobody on the island at all. The names had been written down thousands of miles away, before the ship had even left Europe.

OLIVIA Seriously? By whom?

SEAN By the shipping companies. When you bought your ticket, in Hamburg, say, or Naples, an agent took down your details, and a clerk copied them onto a document called the passenger **manifest**. Under a law from 1903, it listed your name, your age and your occupation. It also recorded whether you could read, where you'd last lived and where you were heading.

OLIVIA So a German clerk in Hamburg is writing down a German name...

SEAN ...or an Italian clerk in Naples is writing down an Italian one. And that manifest crossed the Atlantic on the same ship as the passengers.

OLIVIA Okay, so once the ship docks in New York, does everybody get sent to the island?

SEAN Only the poorer passengers. First and second class usually got a fairly quick inspection on board, on the assumption that people who could afford a cabin...

OLIVIA ...were unlikely to end up needing charity. Of course.

SEAN Everyone in steerage went over by ferry.

OLIVIA Steerage being the cheapest tickets, right down at the bottom of the ship.

SEAN The cheapest and the most crowded, yes. They'd climb the stairs into the Registry Room, an enormous hall, and go through the medical checks. Eventually they'd reach an inspector sitting at a tall desk, with the manifest open in front of him.

OLIVIA And this is the moment he asks, "What's your name?"

SEAN Funnily enough, that's the one question he usually didn't need to ask. He already had your name, on the line of the manifest that matched the number on your inspection card. His job was to check your answers against what had been written in Europe, and accounts from the time say any differences were noted in red ink.

OLIVIA Hold on. So if the name on that page was already wrong...

SEAN ...then it went wrong in Hamburg or Naples, long before anybody at Ellis Island had laid eyes on you.

OLIVIA Fine, but that doesn't prove nobody changed it on the island. An inspector who only speaks English, a family who only speaks Polish, and a thousand people waiting behind them? Somebody's going to lose patience.

SEAN There are two problems with that picture. Firstly, the immigration service's own historian, Marian Smith, explained that inspectors were under orders to leave a person's details alone. They could only change them if the immigrant asked, or if the inspection proved the original was wrong.

OLIVIA And secondly?

SEAN Secondly, the inspector was rarely on his own.

OLIVIA Interpreters?

SEAN Interpreters, and plenty of them, who had to pass a civil service exam in every language they claimed to speak. Would you like to hear about the most famous one?

OLIVIA Obviously.

SEAN Between 1907 and 1910, one of the interpreters at Ellis Island was a young man studying law at night school, certified in Italian, German, Yiddish and Croatian. His name was Fiorello La Guardia.

OLIVIA La Guardia? As in the airport?

SEAN The airport was later named after him, and he went on to become a congressman...

OLIVIA ...and mayor, right?

SEAN Three terms as mayor of New York.

OLIVIA So every time I land at LaGuardia and wait forty minutes for my suitcase, I'm technically landing on an Ellis Island interpreter.

SEAN In a manner of speaking. My favourite document in the whole story is a letter from the commissioner of Ellis Island, William Williams, written in February 1910. He praises La Guardia's languages, and then he adds that the young man is "inclined to be **peppery**."

OLIVIA Peppery! That's the most passive-aggressive reference letter I've ever heard.

SEAN To be fair to Williams, he added that it was "not a defect of the first order," and he recommended him for promotion.

OLIVIA Okay, I'm half convinced. Only half, though. Twelve million people went through that place, and there isn't a single name that was changed at the desk?

SEAN People have looked very hard for one. A researcher called Joel Weintraub went through the records and concluded that hard documentation of officials changing names there is, in his words, "basically non-existent."

OLIVIA Basically.

SEAN You caught that. He found precisely one documented case, and I'm saving it for later, because it's quite extraordinary.

OLIVIA You can't just leave it hanging like that!

SEAN I'm afraid I can. It's called suspense, Olivia.

OLIVIA It's called being annoying. While Sean enjoys himself, a question for everyone listening. Is there a story in your family about a name that changed on the way to a new country? Tell us in the comments, and tell us whether you still believe it by the end of this episode.

SEAN I'd genuinely love to read those. Now, since errors certainly happened, let me give you a real one. Weintraub describes a man called Heinrich Focht, whose inspection card and typed manifest both call him "Emerik."

OLIVIA Emerik? That isn't even close to Heinrich.

SEAN Not remotely, and the mistake came from paperwork created before he landed, which Ellis Island simply carried forward...

OLIVIA ...because every record on the island had to match the manifest.

SEAN Exactly, or the system simply couldn't function.

OLIVIA So he's stuck as Emerik for the rest of his life.

SEAN Only until he did something about it, because in 1924 he applied for citizenship, and by 1928 he had a new name, which he'd chosen himself.

OLIVIA Let me guess. Something very American.

SEAN Henry John Ford.

OLIVIA Ford! He went from Heinrich to the most American name he could possibly find.

SEAN In the twenties, with Model Ts on every road, I'd say he chose rather well.

OLIVIA And that's the part that slips out of the family version, isn't it? The change happens years later, on a citizenship form or in a courtroom...

SEAN ...and two generations on, the story quietly moves it back to the island, which is the explanation genealogists attribute to Marian Smith. "Ellis Island" became **shorthand** for the whole **bewildering** first stretch of life in America, so anything from those years got filed under the island.

OLIVIA Can I take over for a minute, since I read something about this a while ago and I've only just realised how it connects?

SEAN Be my guest.

OLIVIA There's a historian at Michigan State University called Kirsten Fermaglich. She went through name change petitions filed at the New York City Civil Court, from 1887 all the way to 2012.

SEAN That's well over a century of paperwork...

OLIVIA ...and in it she found thousands of Jewish immigrants and their children standing in front of a judge and asking for a new name.

SEAN Asking for it. Of their own free will.

OLIVIA Of their own free will, with the forms filled in and the fee paid. She argues that many did it in response to antisemitism in America, although most of them stayed active members of the Jewish community. The new name was for the world outside.

SEAN And then their grandchildren tell it as something done to them at a desk on an island.

OLIVIA Pretty much. Her book is called "A Rosenberg by Any Other Name."

SEAN Superb title. I'd buy it for the cover alone.

OLIVIA It also reminds me of my grandmother. When she started working in the States, her customers kept **mangling** her Korean name, so she picked an English one for work in about five minutes. And yet, if you ask my cousins, America "gave" her that name.

SEAN Which proves Smith's point beautifully, and you didn't even need an island.

OLIVIA Okay, one thing I still don't get. If historians knew all this, how did the myth get so big?

SEAN Fermaglich looked into that as well, didn't she?

OLIVIA She did, and this part surprised me most. From 1892 to 1920, the busiest years, popular magazines and books didn't describe officials changing names at Ellis Island, and for decades after that they still mostly didn't.

SEAN So it's a much younger story than it sounds.

OLIVIA Much younger. In 1974 you get The Godfather Part II. Then in 1979 a popular book called "Island of Hope, Island of Tears" described the officials as "casual and uncaring on the matter of names."

SEAN And after that, everyone's grandfather had a clerk with a fountain pen.

OLIVIA Including yours, actually. There's an old joke that made the myth even more popular, and I'm afraid it involves you.

SEAN Me? How on earth...

OLIVIA ...just listen. A nervous Jewish immigrant reaches the desk, and the official asks his name. He's so **flustered** that he **blurts out** in Yiddish, "Shayn fergessen," which means "I've already forgotten."

SEAN Oh no. Please don't...

OLIVIA ...and the official writes down "Sean Ferguson."

SEAN That's dreadful. I love it, but it's dreadful.

OLIVIA Fermaglich found it in a Jewish humour book from 1969, although in that version it's about a Yiddish actor heading to California, with no island in the story.

SEAN So even the joke went through its own name change.

OLIVIA Exactly, Mr Ferguson.

SEAN I'm going to regret ever having a first name. Right then, one more thing that should worry anybody planning to check their family's papers.

OLIVIA Go on.

SEAN If you look up your great-grandfather's manifest today, you won't be reading the original page. In July 1943 the immigration service started copying the New York manifests onto microfilm. It took more than a year and cost around two hundred thousand dollars, and afterwards the paper originals were destroyed.

OLIVIA Wait, they threw away the originals? The actual pages…

SEAN …yes, I know. The pages were falling apart from age and heavy use, and microfilm took up far less space. Marian Smith wrote about it for the National Archives in 1996, because researchers kept asking to see paper that no longer existed.

OLIVIA As someone who keeps every concert ticket she's ever bought in a shoebox, that physically hurts.

SEAN I'd have kept them too, but the microfilm survives, and the online databases are built on it.

OLIVIA Okay. You've made me wait long enough. The one documented case.

SEAN The one documented case. October 1908, a liner called the New York arrives from Southampton. Among the passengers is Frank Woodhull, a Canadian-born man of about fifty. He had lived as a man for roughly fifteen years, and he'd been on holiday in England.

OLIVIA Oh. I think I can see where this is going.

SEAN He wasn't an American citizen, so he had to go through the full inspection. When a doctor wanted to examine him for tuberculosis, he told them the truth before the examination began. He spent a night on the island and then went before what was called a Board of Special Inquiry.

OLIVIA And they put him straight back on the next ship.

SEAN That was my assumption as well, given the year. The next day, the board ruled that he was a "desirable immigrant." In their view, he should be allowed to earn a living as he saw fit.

OLIVIA In 1908?

SEAN It surprised me too. On the manifest, however, the officials changed his name to Mary Johnson, the name he'd been born with.

OLIVIA So the one name Ellis Island is documented as changing belonged to a man who'd chosen it for himself.

SEAN As far as anyone has found, yes. He told The New York Times that he planned to look for work in New Orleans, and after that nobody knows for certain what became of him.

OLIVIA I'd love to know he was all right.

SEAN So would I. The island's own story winds down soon after, because once the strict quotas of 1924 arrived, it became mainly a place for detention and deportation. In November 1954 the last detainee, a Norwegian merchant seaman, was released, and the station closed.

OLIVIA Let me push back one last time, because I still don't fully trust you. In sixty-two years, couldn't one exhausted inspector have misspelt a name and never recorded it…

SEAN …anywhere? Of course he could, and nobody can prove a mistake that left no record. Historians can only tell you what the records show, and the names came from documents made in Europe. The changes we can actually trace were made later, by the immigrants themselves.

OLIVIA Fine. I'll still be breaking this to my friends very gently.

SEAN Very gently. Perhaps with cake.

OLIVIA Quick-fire round, then. One detail each that you'll still remember next week, and mine is La Guardia being "inclined to be peppery."

SEAN Heinrich, then Emerik, then Henry John Ford.

OLIVIA Annie Moore in Queens while the wrong family told her story.

SEAN Sean Ferguson. Unfortunately.

OLIVIA Your turn, folks. Has a name in your family changed, and who really changed it? Tell us in the comments.

SEAN Every name and date from today is in the free PDF, with the full transcript and the key words, and it's linked in the description.

OLIVIA And subscribe, so you don't miss our next C1 story, about the web page that makes cancelling a subscription far harder than joining.

SEAN Bold thing to say straight after asking people to subscribe.

OLIVIA Ours has a cancel button that works. Bye, everyone!

SEAN Goodbye from Mr Ferguson.

Did you understand?

Choose the correct answer.

1. In The Godfather Part II, how does Vito Andolini become Vito Corleone?

- ◯ His father chooses a new name for him on the ship.
- ◯ An official reads the tag on his coat and writes down the name of his town.
- ◯ An interpreter mishears his surname.

2. What did Megan Smolenyak discover about Annie Moore in 2006?

- ◯ The woman who died in Texas was a different Annie, and the real one had stayed in New York.
- ◯ Annie Moore had never received the ten-dollar gold coin.
- ◯ Annie Moore had changed her name after she married.

3. Who normally wrote down an immigrant's name?

- ◯ The inspector at the tall desk in the Registry Room.
- ◯ The immigrant, on an inspection card.
- ◯ A clerk working for the shipping company in Europe.

4. What did Kirsten Fermaglich find in the New York City Civil Court records?

- ◯ Complaints from immigrants whose names were changed at Ellis Island.
- ◯ Thousands of Jewish immigrants and their children asking a judge for a new name.
- ◯ Letters from inspectors who admitted they had shortened names.

5. What happened to Frank Woodhull's name at Ellis Island in 1908?

- ◯ The board gave him a new American name.
- ◯ Nobody touched it, because he was allowed to stay.
- ◯ Officials changed it on the manifest to Mary Johnson, the name he was born with.

Exercise 1. Real or fake?

Each word has three definitions. Only one is real. Find it.

1. squint

- ◯ To sign a document with a small cross because you can't write your name.
- ◯ To look at something with your eyes partly closed.
- ◯ To stand in a queue for so long that your legs start to shake.

2. manifest

- ◯ An official list of the passengers on a ship.
- ◯ A loud public speech given by a politician on arrival.
- ◯ The ink stain left when a fountain pen leaks in your pocket.

3. shorthand

- ◯ A glove with no fingers, worn by clerks in cold offices.
- ◯ A rude nickname for someone who never pays for drinks.
- ◯ A short word or phrase that stands for something longer.

4. flustered

- ◯ Nervous and confused under pressure.
- ◯ Covered in a thin layer of flour, like a baker.
- ◯ Proud and pleased after a compliment.

5. mangle

- ◯ To mix two languages in the same sentence on purpose.
- ◯ To say a name so badly that it is hard to recognise.
- ◯ To copy a document onto microfilm.

Exercise 2. Code breaker

Write the key word for each clue. The pink letters spell a name that appeared on a man's papers by mistake.

1. Commissioner Williams found La Guardia "inclined to be" this. ☐ ■ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
2. What archivists call the Ellis Island name change story. ■ ☐ ☐ ☐
3. Olivia warns Sean not to start doing this to anybody's grandmother. ☐ ■ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
4. What a rushed clerk might do with a name, according to Olivia's theory. ☐ ☐ ■ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
5. In the film, the boy spends three months alone here because of smallpox. ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ■ ☐ ☐
6. Olivia apologises for doing this to Sean's episode with the Annie Moore story. ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ■ ☐ ☐

WHAT IS THE NAME? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Exercise 3. Your turn

Think of a story your family or friends tell again and again. Could it be a myth? Write five or six sentences about where it may really come from. Use at least three words from the list.

Answer key

Check your answers after you finish the activities.

Did you understand?

1. An official reads the tag on his coat and writes down the name of his town.
2. The woman who died in Texas was a different Annie, and the real one had stayed in New York.
3. A clerk working for the shipping company in Europe.
4. Thousands of Jewish immigrants and their children asking a judge for a new name.
5. Officials changed it on the manifest to Mary Johnson, the name he was born with.

Exercise 1. Real or fake?

1. squint: To look at something with your eyes partly closed.
2. manifest: An official list of the passengers on a ship.
3. shorthand: A short word or phrase that stands for something longer.
4. flustered: Nervous and confused under pressure.
5. mangle: To say a name so badly that it is hard to recognise.

Exercise 2. Code breaker

1. peppery
2. myth
3. demolishing
4. scribble
5. quarantine
6. hijacked

EMERIK Heinrich Focht's inspection card and manifest both called him Emerik. The error came from paperwork made before he landed, and in 1928 he chose a new name for himself: Henry John Ford.

Exercise 3. Example answer

My family has always said that my great-grandfather won his farm in a card game. I suspect it's a myth, because nobody has ever found a single document about it. My aunt tells it at every wedding, and each time the stakes get higher. I once blurted out that the land register would settle the question, and she gave me a very peppery look. The real story is probably a bank loan, which is much less fun to tell over dessert. I'm in no hurry to demolish her version.