CASTLE GARDEN - America's First Immigrant Receiving Station

by Gene Aksamit

If your ancestors entered the U.S. at New York City prior to 1890, they probably came through Castle Garden rather than the commonly known Ellis Island. From August 1, 1855 to April 18, 1890, Castle Garden served as the entry point for New York City and was America’s first immigrant receiving station. The Ellis Island immigrant receiving station did not open until January 1, 1892, almost two years after Castle Garden was closed.

Castle Garden was located at the tip of Manhattan Island near the current Battery Park. A view of Castle Garden as it and Manhattan Island appeared in 1855 (Illustrated by London News, November 24, 1855) is shown in Figure 1. During 35 years of operation over 8 million people entered the United States through Castle Garden, accounting for close to 75 percent of the almost 11 million immigrants who entered the U.S. during this same period.

Even with the difficult and emotional decision to leave the homeland, the horrible conditions often encountered during the voyage which could take 4-6 weeks, or longer with sailing ships, these problems were sometimes only exceeded by new ones upon landing in New York City. Prior to 1855, the helpless newcomers were being swindled and robbed on the waterfront as soon as they disembarked. These prevailing conditions led to the drive for and eventual establishment of Castle Garden as a receiving station where immigrants, at least initially, would be isolated from these threats. While the opening of Castle Garden certainly improved the situation, it by no means eliminated the difficulties new immigrants faced.

Early History of Castle Garden

Originally, Castle Garden was a fort. More than a dozen forts were built to defend New York Harbor at the time of the War of 1812. The Twenty-eight-gun Southwest Battery (as it was initially called) was constructed on the rocks off the southern tip of Manhattan Island between 1808 and 1811. The Southwest Battery was circular in shape, stood in about 35 feet of water and 200 feet from shore. A

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timber causeway with a drawbridge connected the fort to Manhattan. Although fully armed and staffed, the fort never had occasion to fire upon an enemy. In 1817, the fort was renamed Castle Clinton in honor of DeWitt Clinton, Mayor of New York City.

The army vacated the fort in 1821 and the structure was deeded to New York City in 1823. In the summer of 1824, a new restaurant and entertainment center opened at the site now known as Castle Garden. A roof was added in the 1840's and Castle Garden served as an opera house and theater until 1854. Although the closing represented the end of an era, the Castle Garden structure was yet to play its role in the lives of millions of immigrants.

Factors Leading to Establishment of Castle Garden as an Immigrant Receiving Station

During the early days of the U.S. no official national immigration policy had been established. Immigration control was largely left to the states except that the U.S. government insisted that the states provide a count of immigrants. This situation led to the abuse of immigrants both before they left Europe as well as upon landing in the U.S.

Although European laws limiting the number of passengers a sailing ship could carry did exist, ship captains found ways to circumvent them. Some captains would load the permissible number of passengers at one port and then move to a second port where they would cram more unsuspecting passengers into steerage. The steerage deck was below the main deck, usually near the stern and the steering apparatus, and not far from the hold. It was dark, windowless and sometimes no more than 5½ feet high. Wooden platforms covered with straw and located on both sides of a narrow isle served as bunks (Figure 2 is an illustration of a steerage deck from a May 10, 1851 issue of the Illustrated London News). The overcrowded deck often led to illness and disease as well as generally miserable conditions during the voyage. In 1819 and again in 1847, Congress passed laws defining the minimum space requirements for passengers. Although not consistently enforced, these regulations did improve conditions somewhat. Nevertheless, the voyage to the new world still continued to be very difficult.

Immigrants were sometimes taken to Boston or Halifax even though they were promised to be taken to New York. Several dozen families from the vicinity of Pilsen, Bohemia were victims of one such flagrant deception. They had contacted an agent in Hamburg requesting to be sent to Nebraska. Instead, they arrived in the port of Auckland, New Zealand in June 1863! The unscrupulous agent was receiving bonus money from the English for each newly arrived immigrant and sent them to New Zealand instead of Nebraska as they had requested1. (Have you checked New Zealand for that missing branch of the family?)

Prior to Castle Garden, ships discharged their passengers at docks covering three to four miles of the East and Hudson River banks on Manhattan. Because of the size of this area, it was difficult to provide adequate protection for the newly arrived immigrants who were being fleeced and robbed of their personal possessions. The boardinghouse “runners” were the worst of the thieves. They tried to lure immigrants to decrepit lodgings where they were charged exorbitant rates. If an immigrant resisted the “pitch” too long, the runner would seize something of value, a baby, or a pretty daughter’s wrist and take off through the crowd. The immigrant family would be forced to follow. Once at the boarding house, they would also be charged outrageous rates for transporting and storage of their baggage. If the immigrant could not or would not pay, they were turned penniless into the street while their possessions were held as “security”2.

The German and the Irish Emigrant Societies were established by some of the very earliest immigrants to protect newcomers of their nationality. These two organizations convinced the New York State Legislature to create a Board of Commissioners of Emigration in 1847. Members of the German and Irish Emigrant Societies along with state and city politicians served on the new board. The board quickly established the Emigrant Hospital and Refuge on Ward’s Island. After the revolution of 1848 in Europe, the number of immigrants began to increase with a corresponding increase in problems when the new immigrants landed on the streets of New York City. The Commissioners of Emigration and the ethnic societies decided that the time had come to establish a single receiving station where incoming immigrants could be properly inspected and protected from the thieves. The lease for the Castle Garden entertainment complex expired in 1854. Over strenuous objections from citizens in the neighborhood who...
were concerned that newly-arrived immigrants would reduce their property values, in April 1855 the New York State Legislature authorized the Commissioners of Emigration to establish the immigrant receiving station at Castle Garden.
Arriving at Castle Garden

Castle Garden officially opened as the first receiving center for immigrants in the U.S. (see Figure 3) on August 1, 1855. The first immigrants arrived on August 3, 1855 when three ships that had just been released from quarantine discharged their passengers.

Castle Garden continuously made changes to the organization, operating procedures and the building over the 35 years of operation, reflecting the experience gained and need to accommodate the increasing number of immigrants. However, to provide a glimpse of the arriving immigrant's experience, we will in the following paragraphs view the situation as it existed in the late 1860's, a time when ancestors of many CGSI members began to immigrate in large numbers.

Both sailing and steam ships entered the New York harbor through the Narrows, the passageway between Staten Island and Brooklyn. Ships were then required to anchor at quarantine near the Staten Island shore. The local authorities always had a concern of the danger that shiploads of unwashed and unhealthy immigrants might carry smallpox, typhoid fever or cholera into the streets of the city. Quarantine was the screening process used to reduce this threat.

With a ship anchored at quarantine, Castle Garden officials started their process. In 1867, the operating procedures were organized into the following twelve departments.

1. Boarding – As the immigrants clustered on the deck of the ship at quarantine, an official health inspector scanned them quickly for signs of contagious illnesses and examined the ship’s records for details of deaths at sea. The ship was then allowed to proceed up the bay and anchor near Castle Garden.

2. Landing – After a customs inspector checked their luggage, the immigrants, accompanied by a landing agent, were taken from the vessel in barges and tugs to the Castle Garden pier. On landing, the immigrants were examined by a medical officer to determine if any sick might have been missed by the health inspector at quarantine. Sick immigrants were transferred by steamer to the hospital on Ward's Island which is located in the East River between the upper portion of Queens and Manhattan Island. Following this examination the immigrants were taken into the rotunda (Figure 4), a large circular space situated in the center of the depot, which had separate compartments depending on whether the immigrant did or did not speak English for registration.

3. Registration – The name, nationality, former residence and intended destination were recorded for each immigrant.

4. Agents of the Railroad Companies – After reg-

Figure 2 - Emigration Vessel – Steerage Deck (The Illustrated London News, May 10, 1851)
istration, immigrants were directed to this agency where they could purchase tickets to their destinations without danger of being defrauded or subjected to extortion, which frequently happened outside Castle Garden.

5. City Baggage Delivery – Those immigrants who chose to stay in New York City or the vicinity arranged for delivery of their baggage in this department.

6. Exchange Brokers – Immigrants possessing gold or silver could have it exchanged here for U.S. currency by three exchange brokers who were closely supervised by the Commissioners of Emigration.

7. Information – At this point in the process, the immigrants were assembled in the rotunda and those who had friends waiting for them at the entrance to Castle Garden were notified and directed to them. Those who had letters or funds waiting for them were likewise notified.

8. Letter Writing – This department included clerks versed in foreign languages who assisted immigrants wishing to communicate with someone at a distance. While waiting for a reply, and if destitute, such immigrants could find a temporary home in the institutions at Ward’s Island.

9. Boardinghouse Keepers – Boardinghouse keepers who were properly licensed by the city and certified to be responsible people were allowed in the rotunda to solicit immigrants who planned to stay in New York City for some time. To protect immigrants from the earlier abuses, the boardinghouses were regulated and closely supervised.

10. Forwarding – This department handled letters and funds sent to immigrants prior to arrival.

11. Ward’s Island – Applications for admission to the institutions on Ward’s Island, determining applicant eligibility for admission, and maintaining records of admission and discharge were handled here. Sick and destitute immigrants applying for relief were examined by two physicians here.
12. Labor Exchange – The Labor Exchange was established in 1867 and a new building, 80 by 52 feet, was erected adjacent to the main Castle Garden structure. The purpose of the Labor Exchange was to assist immigrants in securing employment at no charge.

Although the changes significantly improved the lot of the new immigrant, arriving in New York was still a frightening and dangerous experience. While the commissioners banned the thieves and undesirables from Castle Garden, they were still outside the gates ready to take advantage of the unwary.

In 1876, a fire destroyed much of Castle Garden including about 1000 pieces of baggage belonging to 120 newly-arrived immigrants, most of them Russian Mennonites. However, the structure was quickly rebuilt and Castle Garden remained in operation.

Who Were the Immigrants?
Between May 5, 1847 and December 31, 1889, 9.6 million immigrants arrived in New York. Germany and Ireland accounted for just over 60 percent of these immigrants. Available statistics show that, in the same period, 76,457 people arrived from Bohemia. However, because Bohemia and Moravia were part of the Austrian Empire, some immigrants from these countries listed Austria as their homeland. For this period, immigrants listing Austria as their country totaled 109,632. Likewise, after 1867, Slovakia was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Closing of Castle Garden
On August 3, 1882 congress passed the first comprehensive national immigration law. Under this Act to Regulate Immigration, state-run boards under contract to the Secretary of the Treasury, were to inspect immigrants according to rules that were uniform in all ports. The new rules also prohibited acceptance of any immigrant found to be a “convict, lunatic, idiot, or any person unable to take care of himself or herself without becoming a public charge.”

As time went on Castle Garden was found unsuitable for the reception of the ever-increasing number of immigrants. In 1881, there were 455,681
arrivals, more than double the annual rate during the 1870’s. Complaints about the management of Castle Garden led the Secretary of Treasury to authorize an inquiry in August 1887. The investigating committees found that Castle Garden’s facilities were inadequate for the daily flow of immigrants and that local inspectors were unable to enforce the rules. Various abuses related to baggage charges, railroad ticket costs and money exchange rates were also uncovered². However, the extent of the abuses was always disputed by New York’s Commissioners of Emigration. Finally, on April 18, 1890 the government’s contract with New York was terminated and Castle Garden closed its doors.

With the end of Castle Garden as an immigrant receiving station, responsibility for examination of immigrants was transferred to the Barge Office where the Federal Government assumed control of immigration on April 19, 1890. The Barge Office, located in the southeast corner of Battery Park, served as a temporary depot until the new station at Ellis Island opened on January 1, 1892.

What Remains of Castle Garden
Today the area known as Castle Garden is again called Castle Clinton. It is a national monument administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. The walls of the 1811 fort remain intact but the interior has been redone. Castle Clinton is open to tourists from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. every day of the year except December 25.

Sources: