[September 2003]

CASTLE GARDEN AND ELLIS ISLAND: DOORS TO A NEW WORLD

by Barry Moreno

When studying the history of mass migration to the United States, one is inevitably drawn to the nation's leading port of entry, New York City, for it was there that the majority of immigrants arrived between 1820 and 1960.[1] The city dominated North American shipping and trade, and the human cargo of immigrants was no exception to this, for, rather like an endless queue, the people continued their journeys to destinations that took them to the many cities, towns and rural areas of the United States and Canada. But the great waves of immigrants caused serious strains on the city's resources and soon led to the establishment of two unique immigrant control stations that came to define United States immigration policy for nearly a century – Castle Garden and Ellis Island.

Prominent citizens and state officials were anxious to find a way of safeguarding immigrants from criminal assault and other dangers, and so to reduce the workload of charities, hospitals, and courts, their solution was to arrange for immigrants to be taken to a central location directly upon their arrival in New York where they could be registered, counted and receive help and advice. From 1855 through 1890, Castle Garden, an old fortress in lower Manhattan, was used for the purpose. It was succeeded by the federal immigrant station on Ellis Island, which remained opened until 1954.

Representing two distinct periods in migration history, both Castle Garden and Ellis Island were central locations where immigrants could be brought from ships entering the port of New York. Before 1855, foreigners had been released at piers in different parts of the city. The state Board of Emigration Commissioners regarded this scattered landing of thousands of immigrants as a serious flaw, for it left the newcomers vulnerable to criminals, confidence men, and crooked boarding house keepers.[2] In some ways, the

[1] During this period, approximately 30 million immigrants passed through New York.
[2] Friedrich Kapp, *Immigration and the Emigration Commissioners of the State of New York* (New York, 1870), p. 44

immigrants themselves – and the response to them – define the two stations. Scholars and commentators have defined the type of immigrants who passed through Castle Garden as the "Old Immigration" and those who later passed through Ellis Island as the "New Immigration." The terms originated just before 1900, when critics noted the change of nationalities that dominated the flow through Ellis Island. These terms reveal how citizens of the United States perceived the cultural and ethnic differences of the peoples of Europe. The "Old Immigration" of Castle Garden days chiefly consisted of northern and western European Protestants and Roman Catholics. The "New Immigration" of Ellis Island that so startled Americans largely emanated from eastern and southern Europe and consisted primarily of Roman Catholics, Jews, and Eastern Orthodox Christians.[3] 1896 was the first year in which the New Immigration exceeded the Old Immigration at U.S. seaports.[4] Another feature that distinguished the two stations is that the work at Castle Garden was not only to land foreigners safely in the United States, but also to help them make a better transition into the new country; there was an element of charity in its philosophy. Thus a labor exchange was available to aid immigrants in finding work and boarding house keepers offered immediate housing in New York City. In contrast to this, the federally-operated station of Ellis Island provided no employment assistance, and its inspectors' chief task was to weed out undesirable or inadmissible aliens and return them to their countries of origin as expeditiously as possible. There are also striking similarities between the two depots. Officials from both stations boarded ships entering the harbor and transported steerage passengers to their respective facilities; both required medical examinations and had staff members qualified to register aliens through a series of questions and answers; both had procedures for uniting relatives and friends; both possessed ample facilities for detaining aliens; and both allowed missionaries and agents of ethnic mutual aid society to provide assistance to immigrants on site.

Castle Garden was established when immigration affairs were still left to the individual states to handle; the federal government concerned itself only with narrow questions of

[3] Thomas M. Pitkin, *Keepers of the Gate: A History of Ellis Island* (New York: New York University Press, 1975)
[4] Barry Moreno, "United States Immigration Laws and Policies of the Nineteenth Century and Their Enforcement at the Port of New York," in *Schoene Neue Welt: Rheinlander erobern Amerika*, Kornelia Panek, editor (Kommern: Rheinische Freilichtmuseum, 2001)

policy such as naturalization, sanitary conditions aboard arriving ships and the tabulation of foreign passengers entering U.S. seaports. During Castle Garden's years as an immigrant-landing depot, 8.2 million immigrants were received there, of which approximately three million were Germans.[5] This number primarily represented a vast exodus from the leading nations of northern, western, and central Europe, but small numbers also came from unexpected quarters of the world such as China, Mexico, the Near East, and South America.[6] Castle Garden, originally a fortress, was constructed in 1808-1811, as part of a chain of harbor fortifications capable of defending New York City against a naval attack. It was first known as the West Battery but was renamed Castle Clinton in 1815. In 1823, the U.S. Army closed the military post and gave the fortress to New York City; the city then leased it to private investors. These investors reopened it several months later as a center for special events with a new name: Castle Garden. Memorable events that took place there included the public receptions for the Marquis de Lafayette (1824) and President Andrew Jackson (1832), and Charles Durant's spectacular balloon air race in 1830. In 1839, Castle Garden became a theatre. There, European stars such as the opera singer Jenny Lind, "the Swedish Nightingale," (1850), and Irish dancer Lola Montez (1851), made spectacular debuts. However, the Castle Garden Theater closed in 1855 and, shortly thereafter, the Board of Emigration Commissioners took the building over and, in spite of a public outcry against concentrating immigrants in the city's First Ward, opened the Castle Garden Emigrant Landing Depot on 3 August 1855.

Created in 1847, the Board of Emigration Commissioners consisted of ten members: six appointees of the governor, the mayors of the cities of New York and Brooklyn, and the presidents of the powerful German and Irish emigrant aid societies. The Board's agents inspected ships, aided newcomers on practical matters such as finding jobs, lodgings, and arranging for inland transport. In 1848, the Commissioners opened a hospital and immigrant refuge on Ward's Island, a 255-acre island located in the East River. The

[5] George J. Svejda, *Castle Garden as an Immigrant Depot, 1855-1890* (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 1968), pp. 158-59.
[6] State of New York, *Annual Report of the Commissioners of Emigration* [immigration tables], (New York, 1871).

island's Verplanck State Emigrant Hospital was capable of caring for 350 patients.[7] The Ward's Island Refuge and Hospital provided the Commissioners with sufficient detention facilities. Thus the opening of Castle Garden concluded its goal of protecting all newly arrived immigrants and relieving New Yorkers of caring for destitute or sick foreigners. The Commissioners controlled a staff of about one hundred employees at Castle Garden. A superintendent was in charge of daily operations there. Several departments carried out the various regulations. The Boarding Department's task was to send officers to board ships in New York harbor after the vessels had passed quarantine inspection. Clerks ascertained information such as how many passengers were aboard the vessel and how clean it was. When the ship docked, a New York City constable on Castle Garden duty and agents from the Landing Department transported the immigrants to the depot's pier via tugboats and barges. Immigrants were then marched into the Castle. They first submitted to brief medical examinations. Any immigrant found to be sick was put aboard a steamboat bound for either Ward's Island or the smallpox hospital on Blackwell's Island. Crippled persons, lunatics, the blind and others unable to care for themselves were only admissible under a bond. Next, the aliens were herded into the rotunda of Castle Garden, which was furnished with wooden benches and railings that served as alleyways and helped to control the crowds. At any one time as many as 3,000 persons might be in the room. Here, the clerks of the Registering Department, divided into English and Foreign language sections, interviewed the newcomers, recording their names, nationalities, old residences, and destinations. The following quote is a description of an interrogation witnessed by a reporter from the *New York Sun*.

A young German presented his passport, and the name was transcribed upon the clerk's book. Then the questions: "Have you any money?"
"No, sir." [through an interpreter].
"Friends in the city?"
"No, sir."
"Anywhere in the country?"
"No, sir"
"What do you expect to do?"

[7] Kapp, *op. cit.*

"I am a baker and I propose to look for work here."
"How are you going to live until you find it?
The young man hesitated, and the interpreter explained that he would have to satisfy the officials that he would not be compelled to resort to charity. He thereupon pulled from his trousers's pocket a large and heavy gold watch and laid it upon the clerk's desk.
"I was intending," *said he*, "to call on the German Consul and ask him to take it as a surety for my board at some house he should recommend until such time as I should receive my first wages. It's mine by rights," *he continued quickly:* "you will find my father's name inscribed inside the case. It was his only legacy, and I would not sell it for anything."
He was held for further examination by the Commissioners, but was "allowed to land," as the saying is, when an officer of a German society agreed to assure the community that the young man would not become a public charge upon it for a year.[8]

After registration was completed, the people were directed either to the railroad agents to buy train tickets or, for those persons temporarily or permanently settling in New York City or its environs, to the City Baggage Delivery where luggage could be forwarded to a local address. In either case, bags were weighed and labeled and freight charges were calculated. A free steamboat service was offered to immigrants needing to reach the termini of the various railway and steamboat lines. Many immigrants had relatives and friends who came to meet them at Castle Garden. The Information Department handled these reunions and kept careful tabs on how many wives were delivered to husbands and children to parents and guardians. The workers in this department were qualified interpreters of several languages including, German, Swiss German, French, Italian, Spanish, Dutch, and Swedish.[9] The Forwarding Department, also in the rotunda, dispatched and held letters, remittances, and telegrams for immigrants. The Letter-Writing Department consisted of clerks versed in the languages of continental Europe. Here, they wrote letters for immigrants who were often illiterate.[10] Another important service was that of the Exchange Brokers, who changed foreign money into United States currency. A Labor Exchange helped foreigners to find work directly upon their arrival in America. In 1871, for instance, work was found for 31,384 immigrants, of which 20,507

[8] *New York Sun*. "Castle Garden Scenes – Among a Shipload Waiting to be Landed – Weeding Out the Ailing and the Friendless and the Very Poor." 28 May 1887
[9] Svejda, p. 126-30
[10] Svejda, p. 130

were male and 10,877 female.[11] The leading occupations in which men and boys found work were cabinetmaking, shoemaking, baking, weaving, tailoring, and gardening. Another important service was that of the Boarding-House Keepers, who had to be strictly regulated in order to protect the immigrants from duplicity and deception. In 1867, 76 "emigrant boarding house keepers" sent their representatives to Castle Garden; 35 of these houses served German immigrants exclusively. Also within Castle Garden was a well-provisioned restaurant, several bread stands, washrooms for both sexes, and a Western Union telegraph office.

In 1890, the U.S. Congress and President Benjamin Harrison selected Ellis Island as the site of the first federally operated immigration station of the United States. The first immigration buildings were constructed there in 1891, and the station opened on 1 January 1892. The U.S. Bureau of Immigration, headquartered in Washington, D.C., was the agency that controlled the station. A commissioner of Ellis Island, directly appointed by the President, supervised the staff of some 700 employees, which included inspectors, interpreters, matrons, and physicians. The hospital and medical staff worked for the U.S. Public Health Service. In the early years, many of the old Castle Garden procedures were continued at Ellis Island, and many of its former employees found jobs there. The best of these procedures, registering immigrants and detaining the sick were kept. New rules required inspectors to find out which aliens were in violation of the new Immigration Act of 1891 and subsequent laws. Persons excluded under the 1891 law included "those likely to become a public charge," those suffering from certain contagious diseases, and all convicted criminals, and polygamists.[12] Just as at Castle Garden, the Ellis Island bureaucracy was vital in insuring efficiency. The Boarding Division was charged with going out to the incoming ships and transferring steerage, third class, and suspicious or sick passengers to Ellis Island. The Medical Division conducted examinations of immigrants on the inspection line. Their task was to give each immigrant a quick physical examination of the eyes, face, neck, scalp, hands, and the general physique and mental state. They were especially vigilant of anyone showing possible signs of trachoma,

[11] State of New York, *Annual Report of the Commissioners of Emigration*, p. 116
[12] U.S. Department of Justice. *Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service*. (Appendix 1) Washington, D.C., 1997.

tuberculosis, favus, goiter, diphtheria, venereal diseases, epilepsy, heart or lung conditions, measles, blindness, poor physique, lameness, senility, "feeble-mindedness," depression, chronic alcoholism, drug addiction, or insanity.[13] The inspectors of the Registry Division, working in the Great Hall (Registry Room), interrogated all immigrants and made the decision to accept or reject an alien. They asked each immigrant between 29 and 33 questions. The questions came from the passenger lists of the steamship that the immigrant passengers had sailed on and had been prepared by the steamship line officials abroad. Information recorded on these documents included the immigrant's name, age, occupation, destination, money on hand, and race. About 10% of the immigrants were detained for hospitalization and a Registry inspector detained another 10%, either temporarily or for more intense questioning by the Special Inquiry Division. This division consisted of several boards of inspectors who sharply questioned suspected immigrants and carried out further investigations. Additionally, a large staff of interpreters could translate as many as 36 foreign languages. Further immigrant related work was carried out by the Detention, Discharging, Deportation and Statistical divisions. Prominent immigrant aid societies at the station were the German Lutheran Society,[14] the Sankt Raphaelsverein,[15] and the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society.

The station's busiest years were from 1900 through 1924. During that period, from five to seven thousand immigrants were processed daily. On one record setting day, 17 April 1907, 11,747 people were inspected. More than one hundred steamship lines brought millions of immigrants to the United States. Emigrants saved money by traveling in steerage or third class. Beginning in 1920, they were required to have passports to enter the United States. In 1921, national quotas came into force that reduced immigration from southern and eastern Europe, but it was the highly restrictive Immigration Act of 1924 that severely cut immigration, completely ending mass migration to the United States. Visas were also introduced at about this time. Despite the drastic change, the Ellis Island immigration station remained in opened until 1954. During its 62 years of operation, more than 12 million immigrants passed through the station, approximately

[13] Unrau, *Historic Resource Study*, vol. 1.
[14] The Reverend Georg Doering was the leading German Lutheran missionary at the station, ca. 1900-1910.
[15] The Roman Catholic St. Raphaelsverein operated out of the Leo Haus in 23rd Street, Manhattan.

600,000 of whom were from Germany. In its last decades, the station was used chiefly for detentions and deportations of criminals and undesirable aliens. During the Second World War, thousands of German and hundreds of Italian and Japanese enemy aliens were held there. Suspected fascists and communists spent time at the island in the post-war years. Ellis Island was closed in November 1954, after it was determined that it was too expensive to keep the large facility open. Its abandonment by the Immigration and Naturalization Service in March 1955 attracted public interest to its role it played in the history of world migration and eventually led to its being added to the National Park Service in 1965 and a major restoration project in the 1980's, which led to the opening of the Ellis Island Immigration Museum in September 1990.

Bibliography

Corsi, E. (commissioner). *In the Shadow of Liberty: The Chronicle of Ellis Island*. New York: Macmillan, 1935.

Kapp, F. (commissioner). *Immigration and the Emigration Commissioners of the State of New York*. New York: 1870.

Moreno, B. "Castle Garden: The Forgotten Gateway," in *Ancestry* magazine, vol. 21, no. 2, March/April 2003.

----------. *Ellis Island*. Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2003.

----------. "United States Immigration Laws and Policies of the Nineteenth Century and Their Enforcement at the Port of New York," in *Schoene Neue Welt: Rheinlander erobern Amerika*, edited by Kornelia Panek. Kommern: Rheinische Freilichtmuseum, 2001.

Pitkin, T. *Keepers of the Gate: A History of Ellis Island*. New York University Press, 1975.

State of New York. *Annual Report of the Commissioner General of Emigration*. New York, 1871.

Svejda, G. *Castle Garden as an Immigrant Depot*. National Park Service, 1968.

Unrau, Harlan D. *Historic Resource Study – Ellis Island*. National Park Service, 1984.