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Before Ellis Island

How were early immigrants received?

BY ELISABETH THORSELL

Well-known Swedish author Fredrika Bremer visited the U.S.A. in 1849 and stayed until 1851. She wrote long letters to her sister in Sweden, which later were published as a book "The Homes in the New World" (1853).

In this book she mentions in November 1849 "Next day an outing was taken to one of the islands near the city, where right-thinking men have founded a huge institution for reception and help for immigrants that are arriving sick or destitute from Europe to New York. The name of the island is Wards Island and the institution is called Emigrant Asylum...."

"At Wards Island one can understand a little of the difficult task the Americans have to encounter in receiving the poor of Europe, often the most miserable of the population, and how to try to meet with them. Thousands that come, clad in rags, being sick, are taken here, being clad, cared for, fed, and are then sent to the West to the Mississippi states, in case they do not have family and friends in the nearby area. Special houses were built for those that were sick with typhoid, for those that were sick to their eyes, for sick children, for those that were recovering, and for child-bed women; several more were going to be built. On the green, free hills, caressed by the soft winds of the sea, the sick, if possible, must become well, the weak stronger. We visited the sick – of which several hundred had typhoid – and also visited the newly recovered at their rich and plentiful dinner table: 'But if they all days get such a soup and such meat' I said to Mr. Colden, the director, 'how do you get them to leave – at least those that only live for their stomach?' 'With them we do as the Quaker did with his adversary' Mr.

Colden answered me smilingly. 'He grabbed the insubordinate with his strong hands. What now! this man said, you are not going to hit me, that is against your religion. No, said the Quaker, I will not hit you, I will just hold you, – fairly unpleasant.'

I was delighted to see this great and growing institution that the people of the New World here build for the wrecked children of the Old World."

More on Wards Island

Miss Bremer's visit made me search for more information on Wards Island. The website of the New York City parks told me:

"The State Emigrant Refuge, a hospital for sick and destitute immigrants, opened in 1847 and it was the biggest hospital complex in the world during the 1850s. The predominance of public works led the City to purchase Wards Island outright in 1851. Twelve years later, the New York City Asylum for the Insane opened on the island. From 1860 until the 1892 opening of Ellis Island, Wards Island along with Castle Clinton on Manhattan's southern tip welcomed America's newcomers at its immigration station."

Castle Garden

From August 1, 1855, through April 18, 1890, immigrants arriving in the state of New York came through Castle Garden. America's first official immigrant examining and processing center, Castle Garden welcomed approximately 8 million immigrants – most from Germany, Ireland, England, Scotland, Sweden, Italy, Russia, and Denmark.

Castle Garden welcomed its last immigrant on April 18, 1890. After the closing of Castle Garden, immigrants were processed at an old barge office in Manhattan until the opening of the Ellis Island Immigration Center on 1 January 1892. More than one in six native-born Americans are descendants of the eight million immigrants who entered the United States through Castle Garden.

Researching Castle Garden Immigrants

The free CastleGarden.org database, provided by the New York Battery Conservancy, allows you to search by name and time period for immigrants who arrived in Castle Garden between 1830 and 1890.

Links on p. 30



The institutions on Wards Island (ca 1880).