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Castle Garden Revisited

Nils Kolle*

(The following account of Castle Garden in New York, which during the years 1855–1890 served as a receiving station for immigrants, was written by Prof. Nils Kolle for *The Norseman*, the official organ of the Norsemen's Federation (*Nordmanns-Forbundet*) and appeared in the March 1985 issue of that organ. Although written from the Norwegian perspective, it is equally current for the Swedes who arrived in New York during this time. It is printed here in translation with the gracious consent of the author and the publishers of *The Norseman*.)

“Finally we perceived the east coast of Long Island, like a long, low cloudbank silhouetted against the western horizon. It was early in the morning and the coast began to appear clearer as we came closer. Soon we espied Sandy Hook, a bit to the south, near the approaches to New York.

The hope of the emigrant rose and we thanked God that we had reached land before illness had completely engulfed us.”

(K. Langeland, *Nordmaendene i Amerika*)¹

The unspeakable relief which these people felt as they finally sighted land after almost ten weeks at sea, must have been typical for all emigrants during the period of sail. This emigrant party had departed from Bergen, Norway in May 1843. In the beginning favorable winds pushed the vessel along at a good speed. After two weeks the ship had reached the half-way mark to America and crew members were beginning to discuss the speediest crossing yet across the Atlantic.

Then one night the wind turned. For six or seven weeks the vessel had to battle west winds and fresh breezes. What one gained during one day was lost during the next.

Then illness began. The rumors were rife on board that an evil illness, probably a type of typhoid, had ravaged the area in Norway, from which the emigrants had come. Now one after another the passengers became ill. By the time the ship finally anchored at the Navy Hospital on Staten Island, the master of the vessel had conducted a number of burials at sea.

After a short stay in the quarantine harbor, the emigrants were taken to the docks along the southeast shore of Manhattan. Here the passengers finally were able to step ashore and to feel solid ground under their feet again. But for those who had thought that their troubles were over, they were to experience New York as a shock.

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The "Runner" System

In the beginning of the 1850s Norwegian emigration had been relatively light. It averaged about 4,000 to 5,000 persons on an annual basis. This was a drop in the bucket compared with other European nationalities. From Great Britain alone it is estimated that approximately 300,000 persons emigrated annually.

Each summer, then, New York became flooded by an immense tide of immigrants. And as is stated in an old America letter, "where the carrion is, the vultures will congregate." This immense stream of humanity descending upon the city became the basis for the notorious "runner" system.

As soon as the immigrants stepped ashore along the wooden docks on the southeast shore of Manhattan, pale and weakened by the sea journey, often completely ignorant of the strange language, they were surrounded by a host of agents or so called "runners." These individuals capitalized on the ignorance of the immigrants and cheated them in the most cunning ways.

Occasionally the "runner" would grab the baggage of the immigrant and disappear. This method was not very lucrative. An emigrant chest containing clothes, pots and pans, knick-knacks, etc. could not have had much monetary value.

There was more money to be made by taking the immigrant's baggage and carrying it or trundling it over to a nearby lodging place, whereupon the "runner" would ask a highly inflated price. Often he had spoken to the lodginghouse owner earlier and had been promised a certain sum for each guest he was able to bring in.

The most widespread as well as most profitable business, however, was the sale of travel coupons or tickets for the onward journey toward the west. Sometimes such tickets were completely phony. Most of the time, however, the ticket, which was supposed to be good for the journey to Chicago, only covered the journey to Albany. Once there the poor immigrant had to purchase a ticket for the additional journey to the west.

Up until the 1850s little had been done by the American authorities to cope with the "runner" system. Several investigative commissions had been appointed to look into the matter, but no concrete results had come from such studies. There was, however, a body appointed in the 1840s, known as The Commissioners of Emigration, which had as its purpose the responsibility for the health and welfare of the immigrant. The commission accomplished a great deal so far as the health of the immigrant was concerned. But so far as the system of the "runners," the commission seemed helpless. It was not until the establishment of Castle Garden as a receiving station for

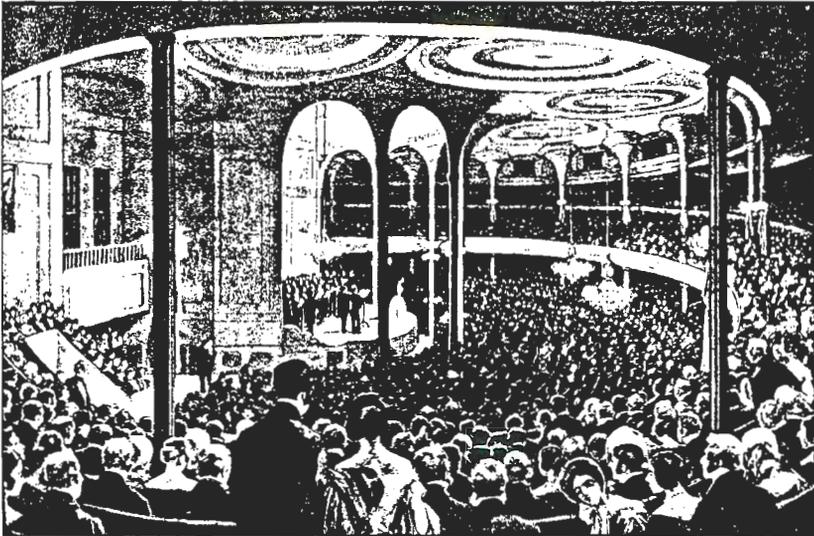
immigrants in 1855, that the authorities were able to control, in some measure, this nuisance.

From Fort to Public Garden

Seen in perspective, the establishment of Castle Garden as an immigrant receiving station, was really an irony of history. The construction was originally completed as a defense against the Old World. England's privateering during the Napoleonic Wars had also hit American shipping. New York was at this time, as it is today, one of the large ports of the world, and as a defense against possible privateers, a number of fortifications were built during the years 1807–1811 surrounding the port areas.

Neither Castle Clinton farthest out on Manhattan, nor the other defenses were ever used during the conflict. In the 1820s the city of New York acquired Castle Clinton and created out of it a public garden, renaming it Castle Garden.

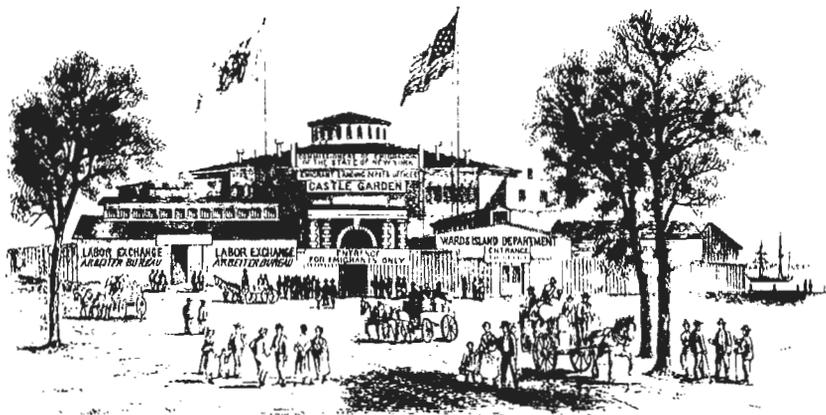
The fort and the park inside the fortification, named Battery Park, then became a most popular excursion goal for many New Yorkers. Here one could experience any kind of entertainment, from opera, concerts and theater, to listening to presidents and other world famous persons. The visitors could also promenade along the top of the circular wall or on the walk between the fortress and the park.



Jenny Lind gave her first American concert in Castle Garden in 1850.

A Reception Center for Immigrants

During the 1850s Castle Garden was rented to the Commissioners of Emigration and transformed into a reception center for immigrants. For those who arrived in the United States via New York, there was now only one way and that was through Castle Garden.



Castle Garden in the 1860s. Around the entire complex a fence, 13 feet high, had been erected, primarily to keep out the "runners".

The center was opened in August of 1855. The immigrants were taken from the piers by means of a locked passageway into Castle Garden. Here they were aided in various ways. After the compulsory registration they were given a very superficial physical examination, after which they could take a bath and wash themselves after the long journey. Here they could also purchase the most necessary foodstuffs. Here one could also purchase onward tickets, by boat and rail, confidently knowing that one got what one paid for. Here one could exchange one's coins and moneys for American currency. And for those who were looking for employment there was also an employment office in the building.

The receiving center had few possibilities for lodging new arrivals. The immigrants were asked to keep moving, preferably the same day they arrived. For those who required quarters overnight the center could provide dependable lodging in the vicinity of the station. It was not unusual for the immigrants to stay overnight in the building itself, however. It has been said that up to 3,000 persons could spend the night on the floor in the building.

Castle Garden contributed enormously to improving the situation for the newcomers. In one of the annual reports of the Commissioners of Emigration it was emphasized how the immigrants were protected from the "runners." The agents were not allowed inside Castle Garden and the staff did its best to keep them out. Additionally the reception center provided the authorities with much better control over immigration than what has been possible earlier.

The Confusion of Babel

During the 1850s it became more and more customary for Norwegian emigrants to use Quebec in Canada as the port of disembarkation as they arrived in the New World. This method of travel must be seen against the background of the favorable return cargoes, consisting of wood products, which the emigrant ships could get in Canada. Neither did Quebec represent an out of the way route for the Norwegians, since they normally were bound for the prairie lands of the Midwest.

Gradually the steamships took over the emigrant traffic and during the 1870s the pendulum swung back again to New York. When the emigration really began to reach its peak in the 1880s it was New York which again became the dominating port of entry.

During the hectic 1880s thousands upon thousands of Norwegians passed through this eye of the needle farthest south on Manhattan. Castle Garden became the theme which we see over and over again in America letters and in newspaper articles.

An article in *Aftenposten* from these years expresses the confusion and bedlam which characterized the interior of Castle Garden. Immigrants



The registration in Castle Garden was conducted by a civil servant, who asked each immigrant his name, age, domicile and destination, as well as the amount of money he or she carried.

arrived in a steady stream, first to be locked up in pens until such a time that they could be registered. "I shall never forget the deafening din in the building. It was so loud that one had to shout into the ear of the listener in order to be heard."

Ingrid Semmingsen describes an emigrant who also was struck by the overwhelming noise in the center. "The moment I arrived I was met by a violent roar. The immense room was packed by people representing every nationality in the world. It was impossible to remain here more than two minutes without reflecting how it must have been in old Babel, the moment our Lord stepped down to confuse and confound the speech of humanity. Here there was much to listen to, but nothing to understand."²

Castle Garden Today

From these eyewitness accounts we understand a little of the distress and problems which awaited the immigrants as they arrived in Castle Garden during the 1880s. It became increasingly more difficult to process the many newcomers within a reasonable time. Slowly the authorities were convinced that something had to be done and when the responsibility for immigration was given to the Superintendent of Immigration in the beginning of the 1890s, a new receiving center for immigrants was established on an island in the New York harbor called Ellis Island.

On 18 April 1890 the last immigrant walked through the gates of Castle Garden. An epoch was over. But the story of the fortress does not end there. In the 1890s the building became an aquarium and New Yorkers could once more travel to Castle Garden for relaxation and amusement.

When the United States was drawn into World War II and the aquarium was closed strong voices were raised that the entire structure be demolished. Fortunately this did not happen. But before the building was declared a national monument in 1946, vandals had been able to tear down a part of it, including the roof with its characteristic round tower.

Today only the circular wall remains. A statue, *The Immigrants*, stands at the entrance to the main gate. Battery Park is still there and people rush by on their way to the ferries which criss-cross New York's harbor. On the benches in the park people will sit to eat a package lunch, basking in the sunlight. Those with more free time than others promenade along the well-known walk. If it were not for the skyscrapers in the background, one could almost visualize a few pale and emaciated immigrants underneath the shady trees.

Castle Garden is well worth a visit.

¹Knud Langeland, *Nordmaendene i Amerika* (Chicago 1889).

²Ingrid Semmingsen, *Veien mot vest*. Utvandringen fra Norge til Amerika, I-II (Oslo, 1942, 1950). I am grateful to Dr. Odd Lovoll of St. Olaf College, Northfield, MN, for helping with the references.