Have You Checked Canadian Passenger Lists?

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While researching the National Archives of Canada Passenger Lists, looking for my English ancestors, I noticed the following situation. In 1871 many ships arriving in Quebec had first stopped at Bergen, Norway, where passengers embarked, before continuing to Glasgow, Liverpool, or Londonderry to complete their loads. Many of the Scandinavian passengers indicated various locations in the U.S. as final destinations, if such were recorded.

By 1888 the procedure had changed. Scandinavian passengers, who had earlier made their way to Liverpool and embarked along with people from the British Isles, were classified as "Foreigners." Most of them booked passage via the Canadian Pacific Railway to Winnipeg, Manitoba, and stated that they planned to travel to various locations in the Midwestern U.S. Researchers unable to locate ancestors at U.S. ports may be successful checking the Canadian Passenger Lists. Although these lists are not indexed, they were filmed in the order in which the ships arrived at Quebec, Halifax, or Montreal.

Besides the possibility of locating your immigrants in these passenger lists, you may also find the unexpected. The fate of one Norwegian woman, who arrived in Quebec aboard the Parisian (Allan Line) on 7 June 1888, illustrates the point. Passenger number 1446, Eli Rolfesen, who is listed as a married, seventy-year-old foreigner—as opposed to English, Scotch, or Irish—had the following handwritten note next to her name: "died on wharf / immediately after landing / when this woman was helped / on shore by 2 of the crew / and had an order from the D[octo]r of ship / to admit her to Hospital."

The following note, which appeared in a local newspaper, completes the story:

INQUIRY—The immigrant woman arrived by the Parisian and found dead in the sheds as reported in the Chronicle yesterday, was identified yesterday as Eli Rolfesen, aged 81 [sic] years, from a village near Christiansen, Norway. She had a C.P.R. ticket from Quebec to Grand Forks, Dakota. She has a son living at Bornates, Dakota. The jury rendered a verdict of death by syncope, and she was buried yesterday at Mount Hermon.

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2 From Passenger Lists, National Archives of Canada (NAC), C-4536, Acc. 85.205/17.