

PORTS AS TOOLS OF EUROPEAN EXPANSION

European Migrants' Crossings to the United States (1880-1925)

Antoine RESCHE

ABSTRACT

Throughout the 19th century, the United States fueled the hopes of ever more European migrants who were determined to cross the Atlantic and start a new life. From 1880 to 1914, the peak period for that migratory wave, some 20 million Europeans crossed the ocean to reach the United States, which alone drew in over half of trans-Atlantic migrations. At a time when the sea was the only way to get from one continent to another, that huge flow of migrants became a high-stakes market for trans-Atlantic steamship companies of all nationalities, which fought to attract the largest share of those migrants.



A group of emigrants posing around the photo of a Cunard Line steamship. Rotterdam, 1900. Source : [National Archives and Records Administration](#).



Services of Unequal Quality

Right from the 1840s and 1850s, when a great many poor Europeans – essentially from southern and central Europe, Scandinavia and Ireland – began leaving the Old World in hopes of making it rich in the United States, migrants were particularly profitable clients for steamship companies. Unlike first class, which implied luxury, fancy food and a large staff, “steerage” (the original name of what eventually was referred to as “third class”) was much less costly to operate. A small staff sufficed to supply frugal meals (when meals were served at all) to passengers packed into dormitories. In fact, some ships specialized in that kind of travel: in that case, even greater savings could be made by lowering their speed. Unlike wealthy passengers, migrants weren’t on a tight schedule. That meant steamships could use less fuel, lowering expenses and raising profitability even more.

But the flow of migrants, though large, was still finite, and a large number of shipping companies were competing for them. As early as the late 19th century, those companies were making arrangements amongst themselves to share the clientele and, above all, to provide passengers with new ways to request their services. The playing field was not always level: Germany, for instance, tended not to allow migrants planning to take a ship of another nationality from crossing its territory. More generally, specific ports attracted clients of specific nationalities: British companies were ideally located for transporting Scandinavian and Irish migrants, while the ports of northern France, Belgium (especially Antwerp, the European home port of the Belgian-American Red Star Line) and Germany attracted a central and southern European clientele. That didn’t keep some steamship companies from venturing beyond their traditional territories. In the early 1900s, the British White Star and Cunard Lines opened Mediterranean services intended to recuperate as many Austro-Hungarian and Italian emigrants as possible. For other steamship lines, like France’s Compagnie Générale Transatlantique (C.G.T.), attracting that clientele required a serious effort. In the 1880s, that company’s board of directors prided itself on having replaced their seat-less and windowless third-class train cars with more modern ones, in order to encourage migrants to travel to the port of Le Havre rather than Antwerp.

In addition, companies raced to have the largest ships. Steerage offered the advantage – for the companies – of allowing the largest number of passengers to be packed into the least space. On an early 20th-century French steamship, for example, passengers in steerage slept, lived and ate in dormitories of up to 140 berths that took up the same amount of space that, one deck higher, accommodated fewer than fifty first-class passengers in luxurious cabins. Some ships pushed those figures even higher. In 1901, RMS *Celtic*, the largest steamship ever built at the time, could carry up to 2,300 migrants, in addition to its other passengers. In 1913, the German company H.A.P.A.G. went even further by inaugurating a “fourth class” on its SS *Imperator*, in order to be able to crowd in a few more migrants in conditions that were no longer worthy of third class.

So distinctions in steerage conditions began to appear. In the 1890s, the jewels of the White Star Line provided proper toilets, a separate dining room and family cabins offering some privacy to third-class passengers.

Conversely, in 1919, the C.G.T.'s *La Lorraine* still housed and fed passengers in huge dormitories, and offered them nothing more than precarious latrines to relieve themselves.

An Obvious Health Issue

In those conditions, hygiene and how passengers were treated, which had not been a priority for the steamship companies, soon became a sensitive topic. Much to the companies' displeasure, American legislations gradually began to require more space per passenger, lowering profits. Yet even those measures were wildly insufficient. In the 1900s, American journalists began to investigate the issue. Some of them actually travelled in steerage in order to report on the experience. What they found was horrifying: an unbearable stench (some investigative reporters were unable to hold out for more than a day before asking to switch to first class), no cleaning services whatsoever, food of appalling quality (that was often dirty), overcrowding, theft and assault.

The issue of the sexual assault of single female passengers was taken quite seriously by the companies, who wanted to avoid trouble. Single passengers of opposite sexes were assigned to dormitories on opposite ends of the ship, and a female crewmember was often assigned to stand guard over the single women's area.

Disease was also a touchy subject for the companies, since the United States had established rigorous a health screening before allowing people to enter the country. Diseased passengers could be sent back to Europe at the company's expense. To avoid that risk, the companies established their own screening before boarding, and, above all, carefully kept the steerage passengers separate from the other classes, who were assumed to be healthy by immigration officials.

Finally, in the early 20th century, pressure groups lobbying for better-quality transportation for migrants – particularly non-English-speaking ones, who often had more trouble sticking up for themselves – began to crop up in the United States. Those groups considered it important that migrants had a good impression of their host country, and that impression included the conditions of their crossing to America.

Stemming the Tide

In the meantime, America couldn't welcome ever-growing numbers of migrants indefinitely. With over a million migrants transported, 1913 was the last big year of that period. After World War I, America passed laws establishing quotas based on national origin for how many passengers could be transported. The numbers began dropping significantly in 1921, and even more so in 1925, as admission criteria became ever more draconian.

Many companies suddenly found themselves burdened with oversized ships that could no longer be filled. Now they needed to reach New York before their rivals so that their passengers could debark before the month's quotas had been reached. Companies urgently needed to adapt their ships to the new situation. So steerage gradually

disappeared, replaced by “tourist class.” A new trans-Atlantic society emerged and was flourishing by the late 1920s.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

FEYS, Torsten, “The Battle for the Migrants: The Introduction of Steamshipping on the North Atlantic and its Impact on the European Exodus”, *Research in Maritime History*, n° 50, 2013.

MARNOT, Bruno, *Les migrations internationales entre l'Europe et les États-Unis des années 1840 à 1940* (Neuchâtel: UTBM/Éditions Alphil, 2006).

NUGENTS, Walter, *Crossings: The Great Transatlantic Migrations, 1870-1914* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

Source URL:

<https://ehne.fr/encyclopedia/themes/europe-europeans-and-world/ports-tools-european-expansion/european-migrants-crossings-united-states-1880-1925>