

## About Castle Garden: Notes from an 1871 Article

by Blanche Krbechek

*How were our ancestors greeted at Castle Garden before the days of Ellis Island? This is a brief summary of 'A Day in Castle Garden' by Louis Bagger from the March 1871 Harper's New Monthly Magazine. The article appeared in the magazine at the time of the Franco-Prussian War. To place the article in the proper time perspective, it was written during the Partitions when emigrants from Poland are referred to a Prussian or German. In New York City, the park known as The Battery was approached on Broadway. In the background was Castle Garden with its outbuildings and hospitals. The area outside Castle Garden was crammed with vehicles, peddlers of cheap cigars, apple stands and runners from different boarding houses and the intelligence offices that abounded in the neighborhood.*

To reach the rotunda, the main feature of Castle Garden, one must first pass through the gateway where on the left side there is a roomy and cleanly kept washroom for females and on the opposite side one for males, both plentifully supplied with soap, water and large clean towels for free and unlimited use of all immigrants. Steerage passengers who just landed passed the two officers whose duty it is to register in large folios every immigrant's name, birth place and destination. From there they pass to the desk of the so-called "booker," a clerk of the Railway Association whose duty it is to ascertain the destination of each passenger and give a slip with the number of tickets needed before they go to the railway center to purchase tickets for travel either first class or on the immigrant train. The Railway Agency is under strict control of the Commissioners of Emigration and is held responsible to the purchaser of a ticket for any mistake that may occur. On the other hand, outside ticket offices are not controlled and do not exercise such care and vigilance in forwarding a passenger.

Directly opposite the railway counter are the desks of the exchange brokers who exchange all kinds of foreign coin for paper money. The bulk of the exchange is for British sovereigns and Prussian thalers, most likely 'harte' (silver) thalers rather than gold. Rates are posted on a large blackboard and are regularly updated in line with Wall Street quotes.

The German immigrants seem altogether to be those that give the least trouble in the Garden. They are willing, obey orders and try to help each other along. If one of their number is short a couple dollars it is very seldom that he cannot raise that by the assistance and cooperation of a few countrymen.

After money is exchanged and tickets purchased the immigrant needs to have his baggage weighed and checked to his destination. If there is mail waiting for him, his name will be called out loudly. Then he will receive a card to present at the letter desk. He can also find a clerk at his proper desk who will write a letter for him, telling of his safe arrival and forward his letter free of charge. It is also possible to find a telegraph operator to send a message. If desired, there is a restaurant or bread stand serving the plainest fare consisting chiefly of white and brown bread, pies, coffee, milk and sausages, all of which tastes well after the hard tack and salt mess on board ship.

All this having been done he prepares to start his travels in America. On the dock where the passengers landed is the baggage room and scales where his boxes and chests are weighed and checked according to his ticket. There, also, are several wooden structures containing offices for the Custom house officers and police detailed for service at the Garden.

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The Ward's Island and medicinal department, situated in a long wooden building of one story, is one of the most important bureaus of the Garden. The Board of Commissioners own an immigrant refuge and hospital on Ward's Island, both densely peopled. Here immigrants who are without means of subsistence are kept and cared for at the expense of the Board until assistance comes from their friends in the shape of money or tickets or they can be disposed of as laborers.

Ward's Island department has offices set aside for reception of immigrants by their friends. A large blackboard shows the names of the steamers and ships that are reported 'up', whose passengers are or will be landed. The person expecting a passenger simply reads the list of arrivals in the morning paper each day to learn the time when a particular vessel is due. Then he goes to a special entrance at Castle Garden and gives the clerk in charge the name of the expected passenger which is called out inside the rotunda.

Opposite this building is located the Labor Exchange. Not only immigrants, but any one seeking work can apply and will generally succeed in finding an employer. Farm-hands and mechanics have the best chance. Weavers seem also to find ready employment. Next come laborers on railroads and gardeners. Office clerks and other nondescripts have the poorest chance of finding employment. Servant girls form the greatest proportion of those seeking work.

The City Express office is always a busy scene. Wagons are loaded, heavy boxes and trunks are rolled on trucks along smooth asphalt flooring, bundles, beds and baskets are carried. There is confusion and noise everywhere.

To rest a day or two before traveling, usually West, there are boarding house keepers found both inside and outside of the Garden. The boarding house keepers located inside generally furnish good and substantial board and complaints of extortion are seldom made. This is quite the opposite of the outside houses, or those not represented on the premises.

On the second floor are the various offices of the Commissioners of Emigration, their meeting rooms, the Treasurer's office and the office of the General Agent and Superintendent. The General Agent and Superintendent is assisted by the Board of Commissioners who form a body of the most experienced and esteemed men of the metropolis including the Mayors of the cities of New York and Brooklyn.

Statistics of the Board of Commissioners indicate that during 1869 there were 2884 letters written for immigrants to their friends, to which answer were received at Castle Garden containing \$41,615.55; remittances amounting to \$50,549.49 were also received in anticipation of the arrival of passengers; 5393 telegraph messages were forwarded to which 1351 answers were received; 504 steamers arrived with passengers and 209 sailing vessels. For the passage of destitute immigrants back to Europe or to their friends in the interior \$10,876.89 was expended out of the funds of the Commissioners.

Thus our ancestors were greeted about 140 Years ago.

The entire article about Castle Garden from Harper's Monthly Magazine can be found at <http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/sgml/moa-idx?notisid=ABK4014-0042-83>

More information including passenger lists can be found at [www.castlegarden.org](http://www.castlegarden.org)