PRELIMINARY HISTORICAL RESEARCH REPORT ON ELLIS ISLAND

by

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New York City, September 1965

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INTRODUCTION

This study has been prepared under contract with the Northeast Regional Office, National Park Service, April 13, 1965. Under the terms of the contract, I am to provide a "Preliminary Historical Research Report on Ellis Island," to be submitted by October 1, 1965. The study is to "give a brief account of the early history of the island, a more detailed study of its history as an immigration depot, 1890-1954, including the organization of the immigrant station, its policies and administration, and the physical structures associated with it."

I have tried to meet the specifications. The problem has not been to find material; it has been rather that of an embarrassment of riches. The published reports are, for most periods, voluminous and detailed. The New York newspaper and periodical press took note of all that happened at Ellis Island, and while it was an immigration station there was always something newsworthy going on there. The manuscript material, on the other hand, while bulky in the extreme, is badly broken up and difficult of access. Only readily available fragments have been used in this study.

Ellis Island's early history is interesting only as it occasionally reflects in miniature the larger life of the growing port of New York. It was chosen as the site of the first Federal immigration station more or less by accident and against the judgment of the Secretary in whose Department it was to be placed. Its first structures were hastily and cheaply constructed of wood and were burned after only a few years of service.

Its second physical plant was designed to handle the modest immigration of a recession period and was almost immediately inundated by a swelling tide of newcomers eager to share in reviving American prosperity. Ellis Island was never quite equal to its task, in spite of much conscientious effort on the part of some very able administrators.

It acquired a sinister reputation very early and never overcame it. This reputation was based in part on the corruption and brutality that were rampant in an early phase, but more especially on the very effort put forth by its best administrators to carry out the immigration laws with whose execution they were charged--laws tending steadily toward the exclusion of all but the most select immigrants.

When, in the late 1920's, the selection of immigrants passed very largely to the American consulates overseas, Ellis Island lost the prime function for which it had been established. It continued in use for many years as a convenient center for the detention of questioned immigrants and the deportation of undesirable aliens. At long last, when it came to be accepted that most of the detainees were relatively harmless and could be turned loose under parole, this function also practically disappeared and the overbuilt, outmoded station was closed.

This, in barest outline, is the story of Ellis Island as a Government institution. What it meant to the immigrants is another study.

Thomas M. Pitkin

CHAPTER I

Early History of Ellis Island

Ownership and Nomenclature of Ellis Island, 1630-1806

Ellis Island is one of the islets off the New Jersey shore in the Upper Bay of New York. These tiny islands, including Liberty Island (formerly known as Bedloe's) and a now submerged reef, are all in the shallow waters west of the ship channel, usually known as the Jersey Flats. In Colonial times they were often referred to in a group as the Oyster Islands, and the waters around them were sometimes called the Oyster Bank.[1]

Nomenclature was flexible, however. The largest of the Oyster Islands came to be known as Bedloe's Island, from an early owner. Ellis Island, called by the Indians Kioshk, or "Gull Island," from its only inhabitants, was later labelled Dyre's Island, Bucking Island and Gibbet Island before the name of Samuel Ellis, its only known 18th Century owner, was firmly fixed to it.[2]

The Island was a tiny bank of mud and sand, mixed with oyster shells, about three acres in extent and scarcely rising above the water at high tide. It was a singularly uninviting piece of terrain, useful only because of its position in the midst of rich oyster beds and as a fine place from which to stake out nets during the spring run of shad.[3] It had none of the attractions of its somewhat larger neighbor, Bedloe's Island, which was closer to deep water, had some vegetation and a pleasing elevation at the end toward the channel, and boasted a supply of good fresh water.

When the Dutch West India Company in 1629 created the patroon system,

to stimulate settlement and development of its colony of New Netherland by granting lands and extensive feudal privileges to company directors who would bring in settlers. Michel Paauw (or Paw) was one of the first patroons. He received a grant of land on the west bank of the North River opposite New Amsterdam, including the site of present-day Hoboken. This land was purchased for him from the Indians by the Director General and Council of the colony on July 12, 1630, the compensation being "certain cargoes, or parcels of goods."[4]

To this purchase there was shortly added Staten Island, and some time afterward the intervening tract including the site of Jersey City. The colony that Paauw founded was called Pavonia, the first white settlement in the later State of New Jersey.[5] These purchases presumably included the later Ellis Island. Washington Irving, in his fanciful account of the assembling of the Dutch Colonial forces to attack the Swedes on the Delaware, speaks of "that renowned Mynheer, Michael Paw, who lorded it over the fair regions of Pavonia, and the lands away south even unto the Navesink mountains, and was moreover patroon of Gibbet Island."[6]

Michel Paauw (Paw) could not actually have taken part in this muster, since he never left the comforts of Amsterdam for the crude colony overseas, and he had, in any case, sold Pavonia to the Company long before the Swedes threatened the Dutch control of the Delaware.[7] Nevertheless, Irving's assumption that his patroonship of Pavonia had included Gibbet (Ellis) Island seems sound. It is quite likely that the later Bedloe's Island

was regarded as part of his domain, as well. Both islands huddled close to the shore of Pavonia.

The first supposed reference to the later Ellis Island is found in a court case of 1661, in which a missing boat was discovered undamaged "on Oyster Island."[8] Why it has been assumed that this was Ellis Island and not Bedloe's Island is not clear. It could have been either, more likely Bedloe's, the larger and more inviting of the two.

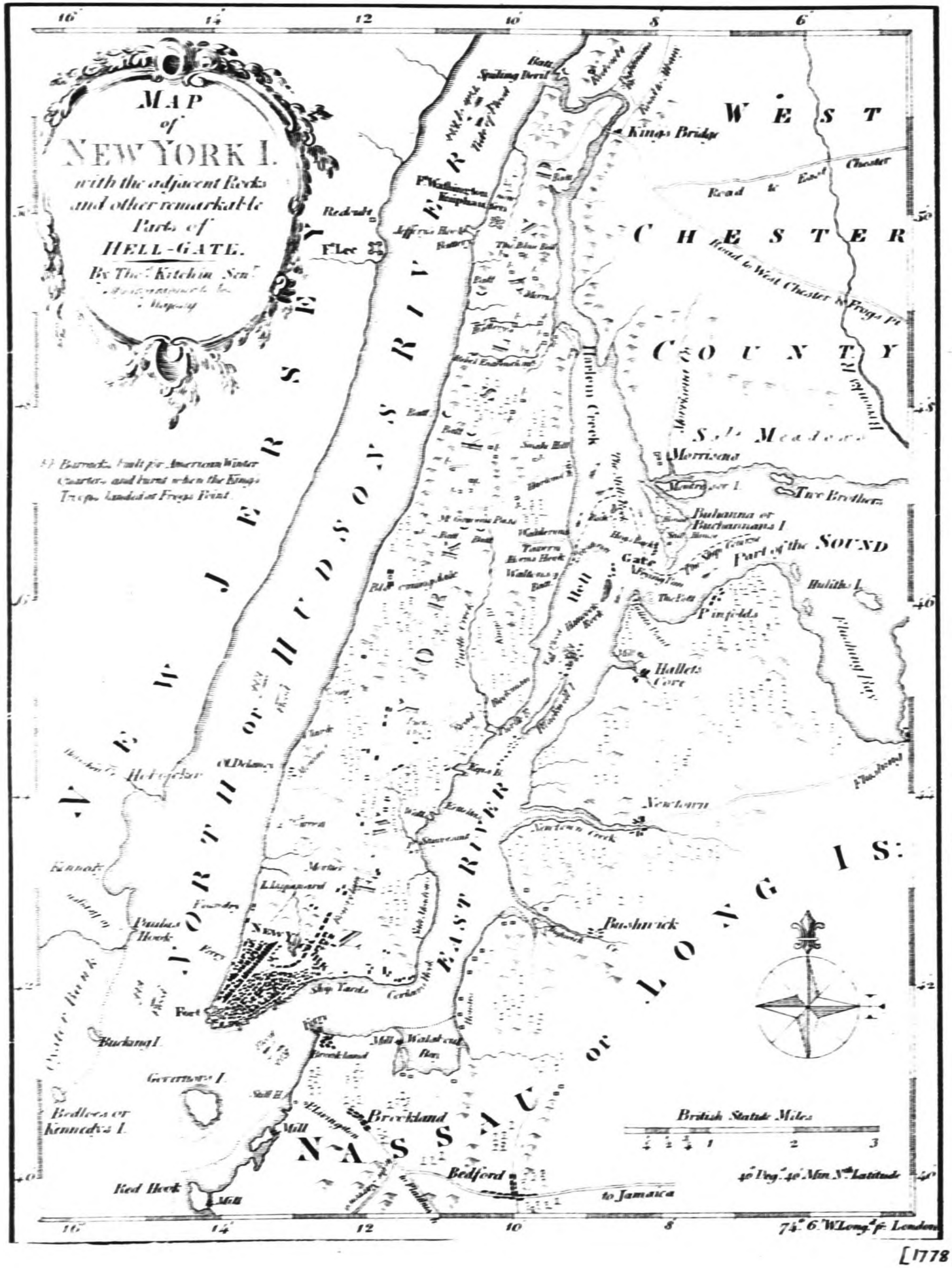
The first certain reference is in an undated grant by Governor Andros to William Dyre, his collector of customs, of "Little Oyster Island." The grant was made at some time between 1674 and 1680.[9] A few years later, in 1686, William Dyre and Mary, his wife, conveyed to Thomas Lloyd lands on Manhattan, "And alsoe A certaine Island Scituate and lyeing in Hudson River to the Westward of Manhattans or York Island and north of Bedloes Island Comonly called or knowne by the name of Dyre's Island or Oyster Island."[10] Lloyd in turn conveyed the Island to Enoch and Mary Story.[11] Here the trail of ownership breaks off for nearly a century.

In 1691 the Island was formally included within the boundaries of New York City and County. An act of that year divided the colony into counties, each county being bounded and described: "The city and county of New York to contain all the Island commonly called Manhattan's-Island, Manning's-Island, the two Barn Islands, and the three Oyster-Islands; Manhattan's Island, to be called the City of New-York, and the Rest of the Islands, the County."[12]

The charter granted to the City of New York by Governor Montgomery in 1730 referred to the Island as Bucking Island and again included it within the

Figure 1.

"Map of New York Island." 1778. This map shows Ellis Island as "Bucking Island" in the "Oyster Bank." Stokes Collection, New York Public Library.



"NEW YORK IN 1778"

For the London Magazine 1778

[1778]

city's boundaries, which were "to include Nutten Island, Bedlow's Island, Bucking Island, and Oyster Island, to low water mark on the west side of the North River."[13] The name Bucking Island, of unknown origin, was applied to the Island during a good part of the 18th Century. In 1757, when the City Council was seeking a site for a pest house, it appointed a committee "to view and Examine Buckin Island."[14] The committee's report, not found, was probably negative, for in the next year Bedloe's Island was purchased for the purpose.[15]

The name Gibbet Island has been traced to an event of 1765. A pirate by the name of Anderson, captured in the West Indies, was returned to New York, the port from which his ship had sailed, tried and executed "upon an Island in the Bay, near the city, which, from that circumstance, has ever since been called, Anderson's or Gibbet Island." Other hangings took place there[16] and Washington Irving, writing early in the following century, consistently used the name Gibbet Island.[17] The British Army during the American Revolution, however, in its military cartography, used the name Bucking Island on one map and Oyster Island on another, to designate the later Ellis Island.[18]

Private ownership of the Island reappears in 1785 with the advertisement for sale by one Samuel Ellis of "that pleasant situated Island, called Oyster (now Ellis) Island, lying in New York Bay, near Powles Hook."[19] How he obtained his title is unknown, but it seems not to have been challenged. No sale followed the advertisement. Samuel Ellis died in 1794 and by his will

of the same year the Island, "with all the buildings and improvements thereon," was bequeathed to the child of his daughter Catherine Westervelt, with which she was then pregnant, if it should be a son. He also wished the son to be named Samuel Ellis. If the child should be a daughter, his estate was to be divided among Catherine's children equally.[20]

Catherine dutifully produced a son, who was named Samuel Ellis as his grandfather had wished. But the boy died in infancy and letters of administration were granted to his mother. At this point the title becomes confused. Samuel Ellis Ryerson, son of another daughter of the elder Samuel Ellis, and his wife Rachel deeded the Island and property in Manhattan to John A. Berry in 1806.[21] When Colonel Jonathan Williams, U. S. Army Chief of Engineers, wanted the Island shortly afterward for fortification he found that there were several claimants.

Ellis Island as a Military Installation, 1794-1890

In 1794 there was a serious threat of war with Great Britain because of her interference with American trade in the French West Indies. The long European conflict that followed the French Revolution was under way and England and France were beginning their titanic 20-year struggle. The War Department sent engineers to the chief coastal cities to prepare defenses against the British fleet. Charles Vincent was sent to New York, to make a plan on a very limited budget.[22] At about the same time the State of New York appropriated funds for the same purpose and appointed a commission, including Governor George Clinton, with full powers to erect forts "at or near the city and port of New-York."[23]

Figure 2.

"Plan of three Islands Situated in the Harbour of New-York fortifyed for the defence of the said harbour." Governor's, Bedloe's and Oyster (Ellis) Islands as fortified by Charles Vincent in 1794. Karpinski Collection, No. 305, New York Public Library.

PLAN of three Islands situated in the Harbour of New-York fortified for the defence of the said harbour

305 A

Red Hook

Part of Long Island

Governor Island

Head of Robbins Reef

Bedlos Island

Oyster Island

EAST RIVER

NORTH RIVER

City New-York

Scale of two hundred rodsons

Vincent submitted a plan including outer works on the Narrows and an inner defense based on the triangle of Bedloe's, Governor's and "Oyster" Islands. Bedloe's Island, he pointed out, was "situated so as to face the channel," and its "fires might cross, with great advantage, those of Governor's Island, and concur with those of Oyster Island." His plan called for a battery of six pieces of the largest caliber and two mortars on Bedloe's Island. "After Bedloe's," he noted, "and on the same side of the channel, we find a very low Island (Oyster Island,) which its proximity to the city, to Bedloe's and Governor's Islands, renders infinitely precious; it will be necessary to place there the same defence as on Bedloe's Island." Heavier works should be built on Governor's Island, Vincent said.[24]

In the same year he reported the works on all three islands as under construction.[25] Just how Vincent, representing the War Department, and Governor Clinton's commission, representing the State of New York, collaborated, is not entirely clear. The commissioners apparently accepted Vincent's plan, however, and considerable work was done, mostly in the form of earthworks and presumably largely with State money. The City of New York deeded Bedloe's Island, which it owned, and the "soil from high to low Water mark around the said Island called Ellis's Isle," which it evidently claimed under the Montgomery charter, to the State for purposes of fortification.[26] The State prepared to buy the Island itself, and a deed was drawn for the purpose, but Ellis died and the deed was not executed.[27] The works built there in the 1790's were actually on private property, so far as they rose above high tide.

The State made a further appropriation for "compleating, making and repairing the fortifications on Governor's island, Bedlow's island and Oyster island" in 1795.[28] When there was a threat of war with France in 1798, and the nation looked once more to its harbor defenses and began to build up its army, Ellis Island was used as a recruit depot, a "General Rendezvous for the Recruits of the Corps of Artillerists & Engineers in the United States Army."[29] In the same year it was reported that barracks had been completed there sufficient to"accommodate one company of soldiers."[30] The State of New York, in 1800, passed an act ceding jurisdiction over all three fortified islands--Governor's, Bedloe's and Oyster (Ellis)--to the United States.[31] The United States Government has since held Governor's and Bedloe's Islands continuously. Ellis Island remained disputed territory.

The successive threats of war and bursts of fortification fever had not brought the works in New York Harbor to completion. Major Decius Wadsworth, reporting on the state of the forts there in 1802, found Fort Jay, on Governor's Island, in serviceable condition, though badly planned. There were good quarters on Bedloe's Island, but there were no cannon mounted there and the works were "of trifling account." As for Ellis Island, the work there was "a semicircular battery calculated to mount 13 guns." The parapet was of timber and was unfinished; no guns were then mounted, though 12 pieces of rather light caliber cannon were lying on the Island. There were very good quarters for a company of men and possibly more,

but the officers' quarters were inadequate. "The quarters for the men," Wadsworth reported, "are of stone and brick work, furnished with loop-holes, and an ell calculated to resist an attack of musquetry." Ellis Island, though it lacked good fresh water, he thought "a very proper position for batteries to defend the harbor of New York against an attack by sea." Only part of the Island had been purchased for public use, he noted, and he recommended that the rest of it be acquired.[32]

There seems to have been no garrison on the Island at this time and Washington Irving, describing a walk on the Battery in 1804, depicted it as a quiet place, concerned only with the surrounding oyster beds: "...the fleet of canoes, at anchor between Gibbet Island and Communipaw, slumbered on their rakes, and suffered the innocent oysters to lie for a while in the soft mud of their native banks." Presently a storm came up and "the oyster-boats that erst sported in the placid vicinity of Gibbet Island, now hurry to the land...."[33]

The War Department used the name Gibbet Island occasionally. When Colonel Williams was sent to New York in 1805 to survey the harbor for further fortification, he was instructed, among other things, to measure "the distance from Governor's Island to the Island near Gibbet Island."[34] In his report on this mission, however, Williams used the modern designation. He noted that "The forts at Bedlow's and Ellis's Islands are dismantled and totally out of repair."[35] Like Vincent and Wadsworth before him, Williams approved the position of Ellis Island, if not its other characteristics. He

dreamed of erecting there a three-tiered circular work of many guns. "Ellis's Island appears to me a proper place for such a battery," he stated, "since it could fire in a sweep of 3/4 of a circle from Paulus Hook to the Narrows to the extent of cannon shott."[36]

Under the pressure of fund limitations and other considerations, he had eventually to forego his tower on Ellis Island and content himself with a very modest battery. But for a time he was unable even to work on the Island because of the lack of title. His plan of fortification, approved in the summer of 1807, called for "a casemated Battery" to be erected on Ellis Island and urged that "a purchase should be made of the part now belonging to citizens."[37] Governor Daniel D. Tompkins of New York had assured him that the title to the land between high and low water was in the hands of the State and would be conveyed to him, but that he would have to get a deed for the Island as a whole. The works that had been built there were "occupied merely by the permission of the owner."[38]

Williams set about this task but, as he reported a few weeks later, "I have had all manner of difficulties about the title to Ellis's Island which is in so confused a state that many legal questions might arise." By the advice of the local U. S. attorney, he had "determined to buy the claims for what they may be & depend upon the State for a title by an act of the legislature."[39] This procedure forced him to wait until the following winter, when the legislature met. Meanwhile, as he told Governor Tompkins, he had not felt "justified in doing more than to make a

convenient landing place for all the purposes that may be wanted." This landing, he said, "being situated between low & high water mark cannot be considered as standing on private territory."[40]

The law moved ponderously. It was not until the following March that the necessary legislation was passed. Meanwhile, Williams had arrived in the harbor to begin the year's construction program and had been refused permission to cross Ellis Island from the new wharf to the old fort, "on the ground of private territorial right." He complained to Tompkins and asked for immediate information on the proposed legislation. The permanent work on this Island was to be postponed, he said, but he meant "immediately to endow Ellis's Island with as many heavy pieces behind the old breast work as can be placed there."[41]

A few days later Williams had word that the necessary law had been passed in Albany. He immediately notified the Island's occupant, he wrote Governor Tompkins, "that I should under your authority repair thither with authorized surveyors and take possession in the name of the State of New York." This action was assented to by the occupant, a Mr. Simmons, and it became possible for the engineers to begim work, but Williams urged the Governor to speed the remaining steps leading to a title.[42]

The procedure prescribed by the act of cession called for condemnation by a special jury, and in spite of his impatience Williams had to wait for its verdict. When it came, at the middle of May, he was outraged. The jury had priced the Island at $10,000, he informed Secretary of War Dearborn.

"The jury are acknowledged to be of the most respectable kind & generally esteemed good judges of property," he admitted, "but in this instance they have estimated capabilities instead of real estate, taking into consideration the advantage of setting fish nets on the flatts all around, letting rakes to the oystermen, & keeping a house of entertainment for all these amphibious customers." Still, Williams did not see any remedy unless the Secretary was prepared to abandon the position altogether.[43] Governor Tompkins, writing to the Secretary on the same subject, was rather apologetic about the price but indicated his belief that the Island could not be had for less.[44] On Dearborn's advice, he concluded the purchase on behalf of the State.[45] A deed was then executed, June 30, 1808, conveying the State's title to the United States.[46]

At the end of the year, Williams reported on the progress of fortification in the harbor of New York. As for "Ellis's or Oyster Island," its position was so advantageous that "it would be desirable to erect a castle here," similar to the one then under construction on Governor's Island. However, the Island was of so spongy a nature that no foundation could be made without filling and without entirely removing the old fort, since there was no space for a new site. The Secretary had therefore ordered him to make "an open barbette battery here for about twenty guns on one platform." This was nearly completed.[47]

In spite of this optimistic report, work on the little fort lagged, other

projects in the harbor receiving priority in the fortification construction program. At the end of the season of 1811, it still lacked a magasine and adequate barracks.[48] In the following spring, only a few weeks before the outbreak of the War of 1812, this construction was directed[49] and presumably completed.

During the second conflict with Great Britain, the battery on Ellis Island was manned by a small garrison, sometimes of New York State troops, sometimes of regulars (mostly recruits), sometimes of artillery, sometimes of infantry.[50] Like the other forts that Jonathan Williams built in New York Harbor, it saw no action with the enemy. Like those forts, however, it no doubt helped to discourage a British naval attack on New York, such as those that were made in the course of the war on Baltimore and Washington.

In the fall of 1814 Governor Tompkins briefly took command of the forts in New York Harbor. One of his first acts was to give names to the forts on Bedloe's and Ellis Islands. The works on Bedloe's were named Fort Wood and those on Ellis were named Fort Gibson, in honor of two gallant and distinguished American officers who had recently been killed at the battle of Fort Erie.[51]

Fort Gibson's peacetime history thereafter was relatively uneventful. In the 1830's the Island came into use again as a place of execution. In 1831 two convicted pirates, George Gibbs and Thomas Wansley, were brought to Ellis Island by steamboat under the guard of marines. There,

at high noon, they were hanged. According to the newspapers, "The concourse of spectators was immense, the little Island was crowded with men and women and children, --and on the waters around, were innumerable boats...." In 1839 Cornelius Wilhelms, convicted of murder and piracy on the ship Braganza, met a similar fate on Ellis Island.[52]

In the 1830's, also, the States of New Jersey and New York finally came to an agreement on a boundary dispute that had flared up from time to time and involved Ellis Island. New York claimed the waters of Hudson River and New York Bay to high water mark on the New Jersey shore, while New Jersey contended that her sovereignty extended to the middle of the river. In 1833 commissioners of the two States met in New York City and entered into a compact later ratified by the legislatures of the States and approved by Congress in 1834.[53]

Under this compact the boundary line between New York and New Jersey was declared to be the middle of the Hudson River through New York Bay, but Staten Island was recognized as part of New York and it was further declared that "The state of New York shall retain its present jurisdiction over Bedloe's and Ellis's Islands." The State of New York was to have exclusive jurisdiction over the waters of the Bay of New York to low water mark on the New Jersey side, except that "The state of New Jersey shall have the exclusive right of property in and to the land under water lying west of the middle of the bay of New York...." New Jersey retained exclusive jurisdiction over wharves and docks on its shore and

had exclusive right of regulating the fisheries on the westerly side of the rider.[54] This complicated arrangement, needless to say, has since given rise to considerable litigation in the busy harbor and has left jurisdictional ghosts that apparently have not yet been laid.

Fort Gibson was used for a time as a recruit depot,[55] but by 1835 it had been turned over to the Navy Department for use as a powder magazine.[56] It was returned to Army control in 1841, the Navy reserving "the entire control over the Naval Magazine there and the rights and privileges incident thereto."[57] The Army made extensive repairs to the fort in the next year, including the construction of a hot shot furnace.[58] By 1843 Fort Gibson was reported as "armed and equipped" since its return by the Navy.[59] Curiously, in the light of its later use, the New York State Commissioners of Emigration wrote to Secretary of War Marcy in 1847 inquiring whether Ellis Island might not be available for use by "the Convalescent Emigrants." The request was denied. "Ellis' island," it was stated, "is very small; it is the site of a naval magazine, containing large supplies of ammunition; the government has not heretofore allowed any person, other than a proper guard, to reside on the island."[60]

The Army, after repairing and modernizing Fort Gibson, had put no garrison in it but allowed the Navy to maintain Ellis Island under a small guard to protect its munitions. This odd arrangement continued. During the Civil War the Navy built extensive additional magazines there.[61] At the same time the Army was installing heavy new guns on the Island.[62]

Figure 3.

"Ellis' Island." 1854. This map shows a Navy magazine in the middle of the Army's Fort Gibson. Record Group 66, National Archives.

ELLIS ISLAND.

SCALE 50 FT PER INCH

SEA WALL

SEA WALL

33.30

NAVAL MAGAZINE

101.30

CAR

PROPOSED NAVAL MAGAZINE

24.0

57.0

FURNACE

60.0

100

BARRACKS

22.60

DWELLING HOUSE

64.80

OVEN

KITCHEN

15.60

24.

15

DOCK

DOCK

60.0

BOAT HOUSE

BOAT SLIP

GUN CARRIAGE HOUSE

30.

32.

BARN

23.60

GUNNERS HOUSES

44.0

32.0

Bureau of Ordnance & Hydrog.

April 5th 1854

There was some friction evident between the services on the tight little island at this time, and small wonder. The Engineer officer from Governor's Island reported unhappily to his chief that the Navy had put its magazines so close to the hot shot furnace that it could not be used, and he could not learn what else the Navy was up to. "The Gunner in charge states that the Chief of the Naval Ordnance Dept. contemplates erecting another building; information with respect to its location could not be definitely obtained by me."[63] Shortly after the war the Navy was left in sole possession, and it continued to maintain large stocks of munitions on Ellis Island.[64]

A few years after the end of the war, the presence on Ellis Island of all these explosives gave rise to alarm. The New York Sun, corroborated by Harper's Weekly, "called attention to the startling fact that New York, Brooklyn, Jersey City, and the numerous villages on Staten Island, are now, and have been for a long time, in imminent peril of being at once destroyed by the explosions of the magazines on Ellis's Island...." Harper's sent over an artist who made sketches of these sinister structures. There were six of these buildings, "built of solid masonry with slate roofs." They had a combined capacity of 5,000 barrels of powder. At the moment, it was said, they held about 3,000 barrels and "a very large number of shells." While elaborate precautions were taken to prevent any accident on the Island, "still the greatest of precautions are sometimes in vain." There was not the slightest necessity for accumulating this amount of powder "in such close proximity to the most populous city in the country," and Harper's demanded that Secretary of the Navy Welles

should at once remove it.[65]

Having given their readers a few chills, Harper's and the Sun apparently let the matter drop. The subject was revived in 1876, when Congressman Hardenbaugh of New Jersey offered in the House a resolution that Ellis Island in New York Harbour be abandoned as a site for a powder arsenal. "If it were struck by lightning," he said, "the shock would destroy Jersey City, Hoboken, and parts of New York."[66] Nothing came of this and the Navy still maintained a powder magazine on Ellis Island at the beginning of 1890.

Footnotes

1. I. N. Phelps Stokes, The Iconography of Manhattan Island, 1498-1909 (New York, 1925-1928), IV, 960.

2. James G. Wilson, The Memorial History of the City of New York (New York, 1892-1893), 52-53; Stokes, Iconography, V, 1198.

3. Sidney Berengarten, Ellis Island (Civil Works Administration for the Office of National Parks, 1934), 1; Hugh Hastings, ed., Public Papers of Daniel D. Tompkins, Governor of New York, 1807-1817. Military (Albany, 1898-1902), II, 85-86.

4. E. B. O'Callaghan, History of New Netherland; or, New York Under the Dutch (New York, 1846-1848), I, 125-126; Mrs. Schuyler Van Rensselaer, History of the City of New York in the Seventeenth Century (New York, 1909), I, 94-95.

5. Ibid., 96-97; O'Callaghan, op. cit., I, 125-126.

6. Washington Irving, Knickerbocker's History of New York (New York, 1894), II, 182-183.

7. O'Callaghan, History of New Netherland, I, 199; Van Rensselaer, New York in the Seventeenth Century, I, 146.

8. Berthold Fernow, ed., The Records of New Amsterdam (New York, 1897), III, 420; Stokes, Iconography, IV, 217.

9. Berengarten, Ellis Island, 2-3; Tompkins Papers, II, 37-38.

10. Stokes, Iconography, V, 1198.

11. Henry H. Pike, Ellis Island: Its Legal Status (General Services Administration, Office of General Counsel, February 11, 1963), 2-3.

12. Stokes, Iconography, IV, 370; Murray Hoffman, A Treatise Upon the Estate and Rights of the Corporation of the City of New York, as Proprietors (New York, 1862), I, 78-79.

13. Ibid., II, 33-34.

14. Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, 1675-1776 (New York, 1905), VI, 98; Berengarten, Ellis Island, 5-6.

15. Council Minutes, VI, 124-125.

16. Berengarten, Ellis Island, 6-7.

17. Irving, Knickerbocker's History, I, 281-282; II, 182-183.

18. Stokes, Iconography, V, 1030, 1141.

19. Ibid., V, 1198.

20. Ibid.; Berengarten, Ellis Island, 9-10. Berengarten discovered that there were two Samuel Ellises and that Stokes had confused them slightly. Ibid., 7-9.

21. Stokes, Iconography, V, 1198; Berengarten, Ellis Island, 9-10.

22. American State Papers. Military Affairs, Vol. I (Washington, 1832), 77-78.

23. Stokes, Iconography, V, 1306.

24. American State Papers. Military, I, 78-80.

25. Ibid., 81.

26. Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, 1784-1831 (New York, 1917), II, 71, 73.

27. Tompkins Papers, II, 5-7.

28. Stokes, Iconography, V, 1318-1319.

29. Berengarten, Ellis Island, 13-14.

30. Ibid., 14.

31. Pike, Ellis Island: Its Legal Status, 3-4.

32. Maj. Decius Wadsworth to The Inspector of Fortification, February 15, 1802. Jonathan Williams Papers, Lilly Library, Indiana University.

33. Irving, Knickerbocker's History, I, 281-282.

34. Secretary of War Henry Dearborn to Lt. Col. Jonathan Williams, September 28, 1805. Williams Papers.

35. Journal of soundings &c and of surveys made in the Harbour of New York...(undated). Williams Papers.

36. Williams to Mr. Van Rensselaer, January 31 [1807]. Williams Papers.

37. Outline of a Plan of defence, for the City and Harbour of New York, July 25, 1807. Ibid.

38. Tompkins Papers, II, 5-7.

39. Williams to Secretary of War, August 28, 1807. Williams Papers.

40. Williams to Governor Tompkins, December 3, 1807. Ibid.

41. Williams to Tompkins, March 27, 1808. Ibid.

42. Williams to Tompkins, April 11, 1808. Ibid.

43. Stokes, Iconography, V, 1488; Williams to Secretary of War, May 17, 1808. Williams Papers.

44. Tompkins Papers, II, 85-86.

45. Ibid., 89-90.

46. Pike, Ellis Island: Its Legal Status, 4-5.

47. Williams to Secretary of War, November 1808. Williams Papers.

48. Capt. Bomford to Williams, November 1, 1811. Ibid.

49. Secretary of War William Eustis to Williams, March 18, 1812. Ibid.

50. Orderly Books, Third Military District, 1812-1815, passim. Records of the War Department, National Archives.

51. Stokes, Iconography, V, 1577; R. S. Guernsey, New York City and Vicinity during the War of 1812-'15 (New York, 1889-1895), II, 371.

52. Berengarten, Ellis Island, 23-24.

53. Pike, Ellis Island: Its Legal Status, 9-11.

54. Ibid., 11-14

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56. Maj. J. L. Smith, Governor's Island, to Chief of Engineers, December 19, 1835. Correspondence, Office of the Chief of Engineers, Ibid.

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CHAPTER II

The First Immigration Station

Federal Control of Immigration Begins

Except for the counting of immigrants as they arrived, and some limitations on the packing to which they could be subjected on shipboard, the Federal Government left the control of immigration in the hands of the States until 1882. In that year a law was passed excluding "any convict, lunatic, idiot or any person unable to take care of himself or herself without becoming a public charge." A separate law excluding Chinese laborers was passed in the same year.[1]

The Secretary of the Treasury was charged with the execution of the general exclusion law, but he was authorized to work through State boards or officers in its actual administration. The law provided for a head tax of 50 cents on immigrants, to be used to defray the expenses of examination of passengers on their arrival and for the relief of those in distress.[2] New York had long been the principal port of immigration and since 1855 the State had received immigrants at Castle Garden on the Battery. Under the new law, the Secretary made a contract with the New York State Commissioners of Emigration to carry it out as far as that port was concerned.[3]

Another piece of Federal legislation in 1885 marked a further step in the direction of national control and restriction of immigration. This was the Alien Contract Labor Law, making it unlawful to import aliens for labor under

contract.[4] This law did not provide any administrative machinery, but in 1887 its execution was also placed in the hands of the Secretary of the Treasury, to whom the State authorities were to report on the status of aliens under its provisions.[5]

For several years the reception of immigrants at New York and elsewhere was handled by this mixed Federal-State system. The arrangement proved unsatisfactory and pressure developed for full Federal control of immigration. A special House committee looked into the question and reported in 1889. It had concentrated its investigations at New York. Of the operations at Castle Garden it concluded that "it was almost impossible to properly inspect the large numbers of persons who arrive daily during the immigrant season with the facilities afforded," and that "large numbers of persons not lawfully entitled to land in the United States are annually received at this port." One of the New York State commissioners was quoted as admitting that the local administration was "a perfect farce."[6]

The Treasury Department in the same year reported "grave difficulties in the execution of the law through State agencies," which were not subject to effective control. There were jurisdictional disputes and "serious differences in the settlement of the accounts of certain State commissions." The Secretary recommended that the Federal Government assume the whole business.[7]

Pending appropriate legislation covering the whole field, the Treasury Department, after some further investigation, decided to cancel its contract

with the New York State authorities.[8] The first site chosen for a Federal immigration station to take the place of Castle Garden was Bedloe's Island. At once the New York World, which had a few years before led the campaign to raise money for the pedestal of Bartholdi's Statue of Liberty, began a vigorous protest. The island, which it said "was to have been made into a beautiful park as a fit setting for the great Statue," was now "to be converted into a Babel."[9]

There was action, too, in Congress, where a special joint committee was appointed to investigate the subject. Senator McPherson of New Jersey proposed that the Navy powder magazine on Ellis Island be removed as a hazard to the citizens of his State and the immigrant depot be located there instead of at Bedloe's Island. The committee, after a hearing in Washington and an inspection tour in New York, approved this proposal. Legislation was passed accordingly and signed by President Harrison on April 11, 1890.[10]

This action was not taken without protest. One of the committee based his opposition on the statement of Secretary of the Treasury Windom, who had looked at Ellis Island, among other locations in New York Harbor, and rejected it as a possible site on what he considered good and sufficient grounds:

> We also tried to reach Ellis Island. We were on a little revenue cutter, and asked the officer to take us to Ellis Island. He said he could not get the boat there, because the water was not deep enough....The difficulty of reaching it and the observations we had at that distance from us, where it seemed to be almost on a level with the water, presented so few attractions for an immigrant

> depot that we steamed away from it under the impression that even if we could get rid of the powder magazine which is there now, and could secure the island, it was not a desirable place; and we were so advised by the collector of customs at New York and some others who were with us. [11]

Whether he liked it or not, Ellis Island was the place presented to the Secretary for the building and operation of the first Federal immigration station. It was transferred to the Treasury Department for this purpose, together with a small appropriation to begin development, on May 24, 1890.[12] Planning got under way almost at once and the Secretary's report for the fiscal year indicated that the work of construction was already "being prosecuted with vigor," with hopes that the new plant would be ready for occupation in the following April.[13]

The work going forward consisted of the dredging of a channel to a depth of 12 feet or more, 200 feet wide and 1,250 feet long; the building of 853 feet of docks, with 860 feet of additional crib work (to contain fill enlarging the Island); the construction of a large two-story wodden building, with a small separate hospital group, a boiler house, laundry, and electric light plant;[14] and the digging of artesian wells and the construction of cisterns. As might have been expected, such a formidable program was not completed in the following April; it was the end of the year before the Ellis Island station was ready for use.

Use of the Barge Office, 1890-1891

The notice of contract termination that the Secretary of the Treasury

had sent to the New York State Commissioners of Emigration in the middle of February was to take effect in 60 days, on April 18.[15] The Commissioners, in a resentful mood, refused to permit the use of Castle Garden by the Treasury Department while the Ellis Island station was under construction.[16] A temporary immigration station was found in the Barge Office, at the southeast corner of Battery Park, not far from Castle Garden. The Barge Office got its name from the fact that there had been in the vicinity from Colonial times to the Civil War a landing place for barges plying to and from Governor's Island.[17] The building then existing under that name, near the Staten Island ferry, was a granite structure with a corrugated iron annex, completed in 1883 for the use of the Customs Service. It was intended as a central landing place for steamship cabin passengers and their baggage, to simplify customs inspection. The plan had not worked, as both passengers and steamship companies had objected strenuously.[18] In 1890 the building, which was a Treasury Department facility, was lying largely idle.[19]

The quarters at the Barge Office were cramped, and immigration was on an upward curve and heavily concentrated at New York. In the two and one-half months remaining in the fiscal year 1890, there were landed and examined at this temporary station 118,819 immigrants.[20] In the following full year 405,664 immigrant aliens were received there, of a national total of 516,253, or approximately 80 percent.[21] The Secretary put a good face on the situation, reporting that though the place was "not entirely satisfactory," his expectation that "the Department could administer the service with greater

economy and efficiency through agencies under its own control" had been fully realized.[22]

The Department had no staff of its own ready and trained to take over this sudden and serious responsibility. The organization at the Barge Office was made up largely of former Castle Garden employees, under the general direction of a superintendent subject to the control of the Collector of the Port.[23] Many former State immigrant examiners, or "registry clerks" as they were long called, served later at Ellis Island.[24] There was at first no bureau in Washington charged with responsibility for immigration matters. The special "Report on Immigration" in the Secretary's annual report for 1890 was signed by one J. W. Thomson, whose title was "Chief of Miscellaneous Division."[25] For the time being, the port of New York was the only one at which immigration was handled directly by the Department, existing contracts with State authorities at the ports of Portland, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Key West, New Orleans, Galveston and San Francisco remaining in force.[26]

All this was changed beginning with the passage of the first comprehensive immigration law in the spring of 1891. This act laid a permanent foundation for national control of immigration. It placed immigration wholly under Federal authority. It set up a practical method of enforcement of exclusion regulations by compelling steamship companies to carry back to Europe all passengers rejected by United States inspectors. It contained the first effective provision for deporting undesirable aliens; those who entered

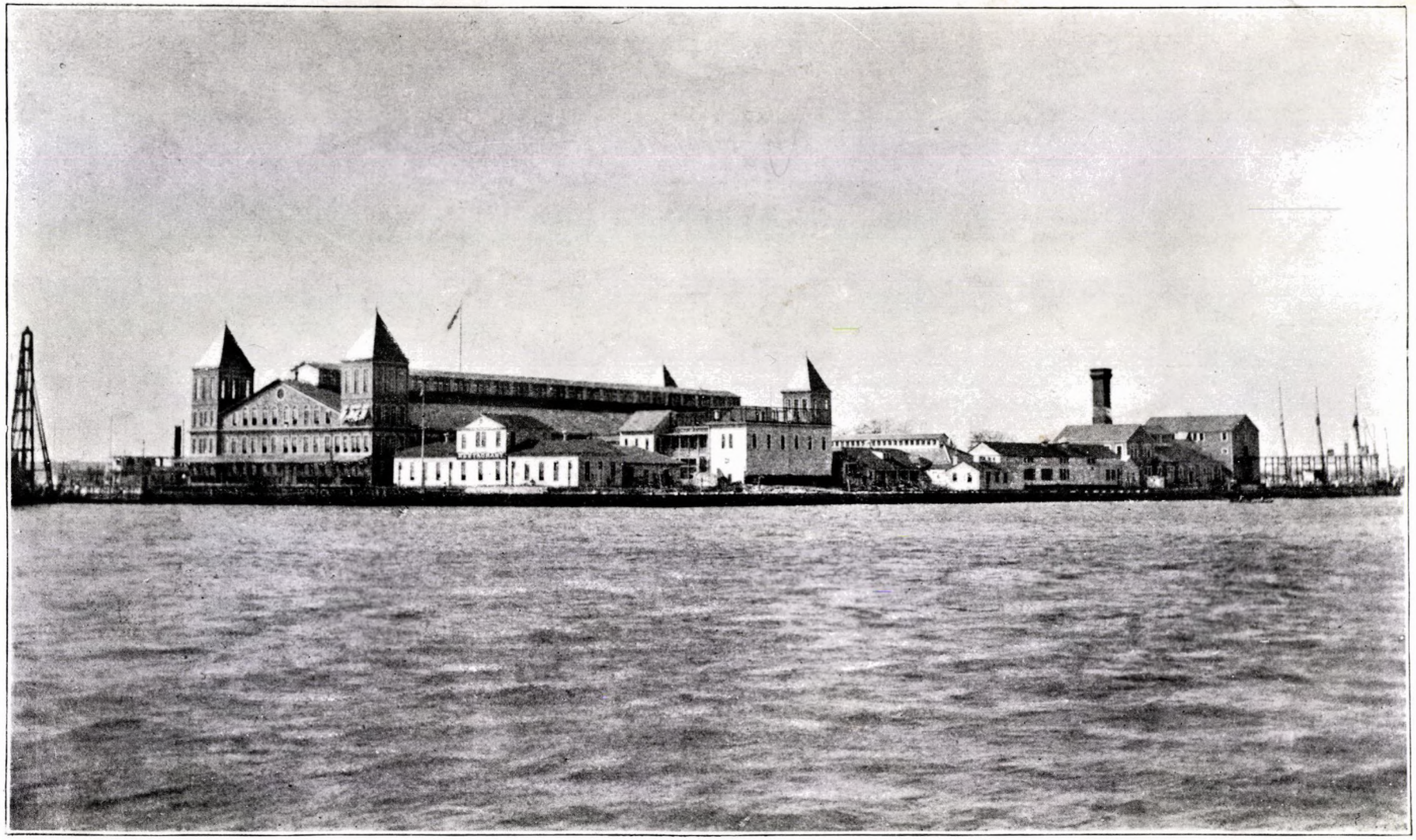
illegally, or who became public charges from causes existing prior to landing, might be expelled within one year. It added to the exclusion categories polygamists and "persons suffering from a loathsome or dangerous contagious disease," and broadened the contract labor law to exclude immigrants encouraged by employers' advertisements, making such solicitation in itself illegal.[27]

The act created the office of Superintendent of Immigration in the Treasury Department. The Superintendent was required to report annually to the Secretary on the work of his office. In accordance with the provisions of the act, the Bureau of Immigration was established in the Department on July 12, 1891.[28] At the port of New York there was set up the office of Commissioner of Immigration, and Colonel John B. Weber, a Buffalo businessman, was the first appointee.[29]

The Secretary's report for 1891 stated that "The new and commodious Immigrant Station on Ellis Island, in New York harbor, is practically completed, and the business of receiving and inspecting immigrants will be transferred thither from the Barge Office as soon as certain details are arranged." There would be a regular ferry maintained between Ellis Island and the Barge Office, and the annex forming part of the latter was to be used as a final landing place for those immigrants going to New York and nearby points. Officials at New York were obviously close to desperation in their limited quarters and with their overwhelming responsibilities, and looked forward eagerly to the move. "The new receiving station," it was affirmed,

Figure 4.

Buildings of the first immigration station at Ellis Island in 1896. These buildings were all burned in the following year. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1896.



MAIN BUILDING, ETC., ELLIS ISLAND, NEW YORK HARBOR.
View from northeast.

"besides adding vastly to the comfort, convenience, and sanitary well-being of the arriving immigrants, will enable the inspection officers to perform their duties much more thoroughly, effectively, and expeditiously."[30]

The Ellis Island Station

Not long before Ellis Island was opened for business as an immigration station, an enthusiastic writer described the new plant in admiring detail in Harper's Weekly:

> ....It is... apparent that in reaching the conclusion to build a proper depot, the Federal government does not appear to be overestimating its needs so much as to be putting to shame the neglectful State officials who previously mismanaged the business. The determination to build and the work of construction followed one another closely, after the immigrants had been forced to land at the inadequate Barge Office. Ellis Island, one of the very smallest dots of land that rises above the waters of the Upper Bay, was chosen....The Island was only two and a quarter acres in extent, and was long used as the naval magazine. A government architect drew the plans for the new Castle Garden, or immigrant receiving-station, as it should be called, and Major George B. Hibbard superintended the work upon the new building and grounds. Sheridan & Byrne are the contractors. By necessity the island has been about doubled in size.
>
> For a long time the great new building has been one of the sights for those who enjoy the Battery Park and those who cross the North River on the ferry-boats. It looks like a latter-day watering place hotel, presenting to the view a great many-windowed expanse of buff-painted wooden walls, of blue-slate roofing, and of light and picturesque towers. It is 400 feet long, two stories high, and 150 feet wide, and, with its adjuncts, will cost about $200,000. It is devised to permit of the handling of at least 10,000 immigrants in a day, and the first story, which is 13 feet in height, is sufficiently capacious for the storage and handling of the baggage of 12,000 newcomers.

Steerage passengers were to be landed in barges at Ellis Island, Harper's continued, and to ascend to the second story, by a double staircase, for

medical inspection and interrogation. Some would be separated and detained for further physical examination.

> ....The others will continue on and into the great second-story room, to be separated into ten lines and to march through that number of aisles between the desks of the so-called "pedigree clerks," who will cross-examine them as the law requires. Beyond the aisles and the desks of the questioning inspectors they will find two great pens or enclosures, one 58 feet wide and 144 feet long, and the other 72 x 110 feet. Into one will go those whose destination is New York city or its suburbs; into the other will be put the greater number who are about to begin another journey to distant States and Territories....
>
> On this second floor, conveniently arranged, are spaces for the railroad ticket-sellers, the clerks of the information bureau, for the telegraph and brokers' counters, and the lunch stand. Colonel John B. Weber, the Commissioner of Emigration, will have his office in one corner on that floor, and General O'Beirne, the Assistant Commissioner, will occupy a similar office in another corner....

On the grounds, Harper's reported, either finished or under construction, there were hospital buildings, bath house, power house, kitchen and restaurant, and doctors' quarters.[31]

The Ellis Island Immigration Station was formally opened on January 1, 1892. The cost of the plant up to that time was about $500,000. In addition to the new construction, which was wholly of wood, there was then and later some remodeling of the brick and stone buildings of old Fort Gibson, as well as of the heavy stone and concrete structures formerly used for the storage of explosives by the Navy.[32] The magazines were converted into vaults for the storage of immigration records. The other old buildings were used for various purposes. Some of them, enlarged and extended, formed part of an

extensive two-story dormitory for detained immigrants. The hospital buildings, which were new, were built with sheltered verandas, arranged in a quadrangle.[33]

A medical officer who served at Ellis Island during this period recalled that the main building was closer to the water than the present structure, "in fact directly alongside the ferry slip." Its functional arrangement was closely similar to that of the later main building, but it "was built largely of Georgia pine" and the interior was finished in the natural wood. The greater part of the second story was open to the roof. The floor was of Georgia pine and effort was made to keep it looking like the wooden deck of a ship. Numerous tall windows running to the eaves let in abundant light and sunshine. "On the whole," he said, "the former building at Ellis Island impressed the visitor with its cleanliness, light and airiness."[34]

To some degree, perhaps, this cleanliness was made possible by the falling off of immigration. The tide was still rising when the new station opened for business. Fiscal year 1892 saw 445,987 immigrants admitted through the port of New York. Germany, Ireland, England, Sweden and Norway, the leading emigration nations of the recent past, were still sending considerable numbers of their sons and daughters to America, but Italy, Russia, Poland, Hungary and Austria were sending more.[35] The change from the "old immigration" of northern and western Europe to the "new immigration" from southern and eastern Europe, about which nativists then and later were greatly concerned, was taking place.

Beginning with the latter half of the calendar year, immigration both old and new dropped off sharply. In August there was a cholera scare and a strict quarantine was established in the Atlantic ports. Many steamship companies thereupon refused to embark immigrants.[36] In 1893 there was a panic followed by years of nation-wide depression. Immigration figures went down accordingly, reaching a low point in 1898 of 229,299, of which New York's share was only 178,748.[37]

The first immigration station on Ellis Island was a very busy place, but it was not tested to its full capacity for protracted periods as was the later station. When it was destroyed by fire and plans were made to rebuild it, calculations were based on the experience of the past rather than on imaginative projection of future needs. The port of New York had never been called upon to receive as many as 500,000 immigrants in a year, and in the late 1890's immigration officials thought that the trans-Atlantic movement of population had passed its crest. The new station, put into operation during an upward swing of the business cycle and a rapid expansion of the national economy, with an unprecedented rise in immigration as a natural result, was almost at once taxed to its physical limits and often beyond them.

Grover Cleveland succeeded Benjamin Harrison as President in 1893 and, naturally, there was a new Commissioner of Immigration at the port of New York. He was Dr. Joseph H. Senner, a highly educated gentleman of Austrian German background, who had been on the editorial staffs of some of the leading German language newspapers in the United States.[38] His

appointment was closely scrutinized and his administration of Ellis Island was critically viewed early in his tenure by the Senate Committee on Immigration.[39] Some of the New York press ridiculed his accent and attacked his administration vigorously. He was evidently a man of ability and integrity, however, intent on improving the service at Ellis Island.[40]

Just before Dr. Senner's appointment a new immigration law had been passed. The act of 1893 was an administrative measure intended to facilitate the enforcement of the general legislation passed two years before. For the administration of the Ellis Island station, its most important feature was the requirement that shipowners prepare manifests on incoming passengers to aid the immigration inspectors in their work. These manifests were of a prescribed form and carried much detailed information on individual immigrants. Their preparation involved an inspection process abroad, for which the steamship companies were responsible. This preliminary screening was intended to cut down the percentage of inadmissible aliens received at United States ports.[41]

The ships' manifest no doubt did serve this purpose to some extent in the years that followed, although the document was often carelessly or fraudulently prepared. Immigrants constituted a profitable self-loading cargo and shipowners tended to count on mass movement for their profit, taking chances on rejections. The manifest became the basic record on the individual immigrant. Copies of ships' manifests accumulated at Ellis Island in enormous numbers and became invaluable references in cases

involving naturalisation and deportation.

Under the laws of 1891 and 1893, which provided the basic procedure for a generation, the admissibility of an alien on arrival was determined by a medical examination, an interrogation of each passenger by an immigration officer armed with a copy of the manifest sheet bearing his name, and the consideration of any information furnished by the medical examiner. The passenger was to be admitted to the United States forthwith if he was, in the opinion of the inspector, "clearly and beyond doubt entitled to land." If not, the law required that he be held for investigation by a board of special inquiry, composed of four (later three) qualified and designated officials. The adverse decision of this board formally excluded the immigrant, but appeal was allowed from its judgment through prescribed channels to the Secretary of the Treasury (later to the Secretary of Commerce and Labor, still later to the Secretary of Labor). The Secretary's decision was to be final.[42]

A sympathetic account of the ordeal of the immigrant appeared in Harper's Weekly not long after this full procedure came into effect:

> The hospitality of our land is given freely to all who deserve it; but Uncle Sam has drawn wisdom from experience, and in these latter days has come to demand at least a show of evidence that it will be rightly employed. For the saloon passenger our doors still swing wide open. He may come and go freely, save for the inquisitive custom-house examiner and the boisterous and importunate dock cabman. But the voyager in the steerage finds his course strewn thick with obstacles. For him the New World speedily becomes a mighty interrogation point. Failure to answer properly any one of a score of questions, asked him perhaps half

> a score of times and by as many different men, failure even to allay suspicion by his manner, though his words are satisfactory, may cost him vexatious delay, or the shame and bitterness of a wrecked ambition.
>
> His trials presumably begin when he seeks to buy his passage ticket; for in these days the steamship companies are made responsible for the people they bring to us, and may be subjected to a fine of $20 for each unwelcome visitor, along with the necessity of taking him home again. No sooner does the immigrant get on board ship than he is passed in procession before a physician, and if he looks ill he is put ashore. During the voyage he is put through his catechism once more. Nineteen questions are asked him concerning his nationality, age, health, trade, resources, and prospects in the New World, and these answers must be sworn to. Then he is drilled in the proper method of conducting himself before the examining officer in New York, and a tag is given him to be worn conspicuously upon that occasion, the purpose being to indicate clearly upon what particular sheet his answers are recorded.

The steamer itself had to pass a quarantine inspection, Harper's noted, to make sure that no contagious disease was rampant aboard. Oh its arrival at the pier the steerage passengers were separated and sent to Ellis Island.

> It is a strange, a stirring, and an instructive spectacle which is thus presented almost every day in the year upon the great airy second floor of the Ellis Island building....
>
> Presently there is a stir. A waiting figure stands before the little desk at the end of each lane; every booth is tenanted; interpreters mass themselves; and there is the distant clatter of many feet, as the immigrants crowd open-mouthed and bewildered through the further doorway. For a moment all is confusion; the carefully ticketed groups are broken, as friends find themselves separated, or parents see their little ones stupidly assigned to another batch. At length they come down their proper lanes in single file, their queer baggage bumping against the rails and playing havoc with those in the rear. They clearly have small notion of what is to follow. Some look frightened when halted at the desks, some angry, and some stolid, with the

> indifference of stupidity. Many are nervously defiant; now and again a woman's laugh sounds perilously akin to hysteria.
>
> If their answers agree with those recorded on shipboard they are passed on. If there is any discrepancy or any dubiousness of manner, the suspect is pounced upon by waiting officials, questioned closely, and either sent upon his way, or pushed into the cage to await investigation by the established board below.
>
> But having passed the desks, the immigrant's worries are not over. The contract-labor inspector is there to halt such as look to him suspicious, and just now the bulk of the immigrants returned are of that class. And other agents stop and jostle them at every point to learn their destinations and with well-meaning if irritating zeal to set them right and save them from the hovering swarms of sharpers on shore. [43]

Many improvements were made in the physical plant at Ellis Island during the few years that the station was in operation, and Dr. Senner forwarded to his superiors a number of recommendations, not then acted upon, for the betterment of the service.[44] But the days of the first immigration station, like those of Dr. Senner's tenure of office, were numbered. On June 14, 1897, shortly after midnight, fire broke out "and in one hour's time scarcely a vestige was left of these pine buildings."[45]

The plant, it was reported, had been completed only the day before, with the fulfilling of the last outstanding contract, one for laying cables to New York for telegraph and telephone communication by way of Governor's Island. While the fire was discovered almost at once, "all efforts to extinguish it were unavailing." It was of mysterious origin, and a later investigation failed to trace its cause. There were a good many immigrants on the Island at the time, some in the hospital and others in the dormitory. The medical staff and the night guard force acted promptly and they were all evacuated safely to New York by

ferry.[46] The sick were transferred to Bellevue Hospital before sunrise.

In some ways the destruction of the station was a relief to its administrator. While he did not include the language in his official report, Commissioner Senner spoke freely to a New York Tribune reporter after the fire. "Ever since I have been in office," he said, "the fear of something like this fire has haunted me, and now that it has come and no lives were lost I am glad of it. A row of unsightly, ramshackle tinderboxes has been removed, and when the Government rebuilds it will be forced to put up decent fireproof structures."[47]

The wooden buildings could be, and eventually were, replaced with structures of more permanent and fireproof type, but the loss of records was irreplaceable. The immigration records of Castle Garden, from 1855 to 1890, had been turned over to the Ellis Island authorities only the year before and had been placed in the old Navy powder magazines for safekeeping.[48] The intense heat of the fire cracked and crumbled these heavy vaults and all the priceless State records on immigration, together with most of those since accumulated at the Island, were destroyed.[49]

Back to the Barge Office

The Barge Office was at once put into use again for the reception of immigrants. The agents of the steamship lines offered the use of their piers for immigrant inspection. Several ships with large numbers of steerage passengers arrived the day following the fire, but inspection was carried out on that and succeeding days "with the same scrutinizing care employed

on the island." The Customs Service vacated the annex of the Barge Office and it was immediately set aside for the use of detained immigrants. As this space was wholly inadequate, two large houses on State Street, facing the Battery, were leased and fitted up for detention quarters and hospital purposes.[50]

This emergency arrangement was soon modified. An old passenger steamer, the Narragansett, was chartered and fitted up for detention quarters. It was tied up at Ellis Island. Landing and inspection of immigrants took place at the Barge Office, which also housed the administrative offices, and detainees were ferried over to the Narragansett as fast as they accumulated. The steamer furnished sleeping accommodations for 800, as well as quarters for a matron, physician and necessary attendants.[51] The sick were farmed out to local hospitals under contract.[52] Operations in the "very inconvenient and cramped accommodations of the old Barge Office," with a necessarily reduced staff, were reported in the following year as progressing "uninterruptedly and satisfactorily."[53]

In spite of this cheerful official note, trouble was brewing at the Barge Office. The return to the Battery removed whatever protection to the immigrant the isolated position of Ellis Island had afforded. The arrival of steerage passengers took place in "the old Castle Garden environment." Dr. Senner had been replaced as Commissioner of Immigration for the port of New York, soon after the fire, by Thomas Fitchie. Fitchie was a prominent New York Republican politician who had actively supported William McKinley in his successful campaign for the presidency. His assistant was Edward F. McSweeney, who had served Dr. Senner in the

same capacity. Fitchie was generally regarded as a man of high character, but was getting on in years and seems to have lacked executive force. In this situation McSweeney became the active directing power at the immigration station under the very difficult prevailing conditions.[54]

The new head of the Bureau of Immigration was Terence V. Powderly, former chief of the Knights of Labor and still influential in labor circles. Powderly, too, had assisted McKinley in the campaign of 1896. All three men--Powderly, Fitchie and McSweeney--were active politicians while in office. It was not long before friction, not uncommon in the relationship between the head of a Washington bureau and a principal subordinate in the field, developed into a serious feud. This split the force at the Barge Office into factions, one loyal to the Commissioner, another currying favor with the Commissioner-General (this title had now replaced that of Superintendent of Immigration), and another waiting to see which way to jump.[55]

One particular point of friction between Powderly and McSweeney concerned the contract labor inspectors. The contract labor law had been passed at the behest of the Knights of Labor, who believed that foreign labor was imported in large numbers under contract to break strikes and hold down wages. Actually, big industrialists and mine owners did not have to bother making such contracts. They hired their unskilled foreign labor from agencies in New York and elsewhere in the United States, though small numbers of highly skilled craftsmen were imported under contract from time to time both before and after the law was passed.[56] But it was an article of faith

with the Knights of Labor and the later American Federation of Labor that foreign contract labor was a serious threat. The terms of the contract labor legislation were tightened again and again by an obliging Congress to keep out this type of competition.[57]

To enforce this legislation, contract labor inspectors were appointed to work with the State immigration authorities. When the Federal Government assumed responsibility for immigrant reception they were continued as a separate class of inspectors. Under Powderly's administration of the Bureau of Immigration they were increased in numbers. Their attitude toward their immediate superiors was independent, sometimes insubordinate.[58] Some of them were corrupt. Fitchie and McSweeney sought to get rid of them as a class, by combining the registry clerks and the contract labor inspectors in a single class as "immigration inspectors." This reform eventually took place,[59] but Powderly resisted it bitterly.

Dr. Senner had not been entirely happy with the quality of his staff at Ellis Island, and had in vain urged that the Immigration Service be placed under civil service regulations. At the Barge Office, where the waterfront harpies swarmed, temptations and opportunities for graft were abundant. It was not long before there were charges of brutality and corruption. Press attacks were redoubled, culminating in a serious scandal involving the improper landing of an immigrant in 1899. The facts presented to the Commissioner-General justified him, he felt, in a full-scale investigation of the Barge Office. Extensive hearings were held in New York in the following

year[60] and a report was submitted to the Department in June, implicating a number of officials in the New York office. Eleven of them, mostly of subordinate grades,[61] were dismissed from the service.

There was no thorough house cleaning at the Barge Office, however, and the sorry mess was carried over, still stewing, to the rebuilt immigration station at Ellis Island. Immigration was reviving and the Barge Office was, aside from its other troubles, overwhelmed with business. The Commissioner-General's report for the fiscal year expressed the hope "that before the close of the calendar year 1900, the contractors will have completed the new buildings and turned them over for the occupancy of the immigration force at the barge office, thus relieving a tension that had become almost unendurable."[62]

Footnotes

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27. John Higham, Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism (New Brunswick, 1955), 99-100.

28. Smith and Herring, Bureau of Immigration, 6-7.

29. Safford, Immigration Problems. 72. Colonel Weber had been in charge of the Barge Office with the title of "superintendent," since it opened as an immigration station. New York Tribune, June 8, 1890.

30. Annual Report of the Secretary of the Treasury, 1891, LXII-LXIII.

31. Harper's Weekly, October 24, 1891.

32. Annual Report of the Supervising Architect, 1891, 65-66; Ibid., 1892, 63.

33. Safford, Immigration Problems, 22-23.

34. Ibid., 23-24.

35. Annual Report of the Superintendent of Immigration, 1892, passim.

36. Ibid., 1893, 10.

37. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1898, 3.

38. New York Tribune, March 29, 1893.

39. Ibid., May 17, 18, 1893.

40. Annual Report of the Superintendent of Immigration, 1893, 15; Safford, Immigration Problems, 13-14; Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1895, 25-28; Edward Corsi, In the Shadow of Liberty: The Chronicle of Ellis Island (New York, 1935), 287.

41. Bennett, American Immigration Policies, 23; Safford, Immigration Problems, 190-191.

42. Ibid., 192-193.

43. Harper's Weekly, August 26, 1893.

44. Annual Report of the Superintendent of Immigration, 1894, 23-24; Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1895, 19, 25-28; 1896, 24-26, 27-33.

45. Ibid., 1897, 8.

46. Ibid., 8-9.

47. New York Tribune, June 16, 1897.

48. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1896, 33.

49. Ibid., 1897, 38-39; Safford, Immigration Problems, 199-200; Corsi, Shadow of Liberty, 113-115.

50. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1897, 8-9.

51. Ibid., 1898, 41; Safford, Immigration Problems, 200-201.

52. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1898, 41.

53. Ibid., 40-41.

54. Safford, Immigration Problems, 201-203.

55. Ibid., 205; Elting E. Morison, ed., The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt (Cambridge, 1952-1954), III, 171-172.

56. Charlotte Erickson, American Industry and the European Immigrant, 1860-1885 (Cambridge, 1957), preface, 104-105, 149-150.

57. Ibid., 164-165, 168.

58. Safford, Immigration Problems, 83-84.

59. Ibid., 218-219.

60. New York Times, June 6, 7, 9, 1900.

61. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1900, 49; Harry J. Carman, Henry David, and Paul N. Guthrie, eds., The Path I Trod: The Autobiography of Terence V. Powderly (New York, 1940), 299-300.

62. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1900, 49.

CHAPTER III

High Tide

The New Station on Ellis Island

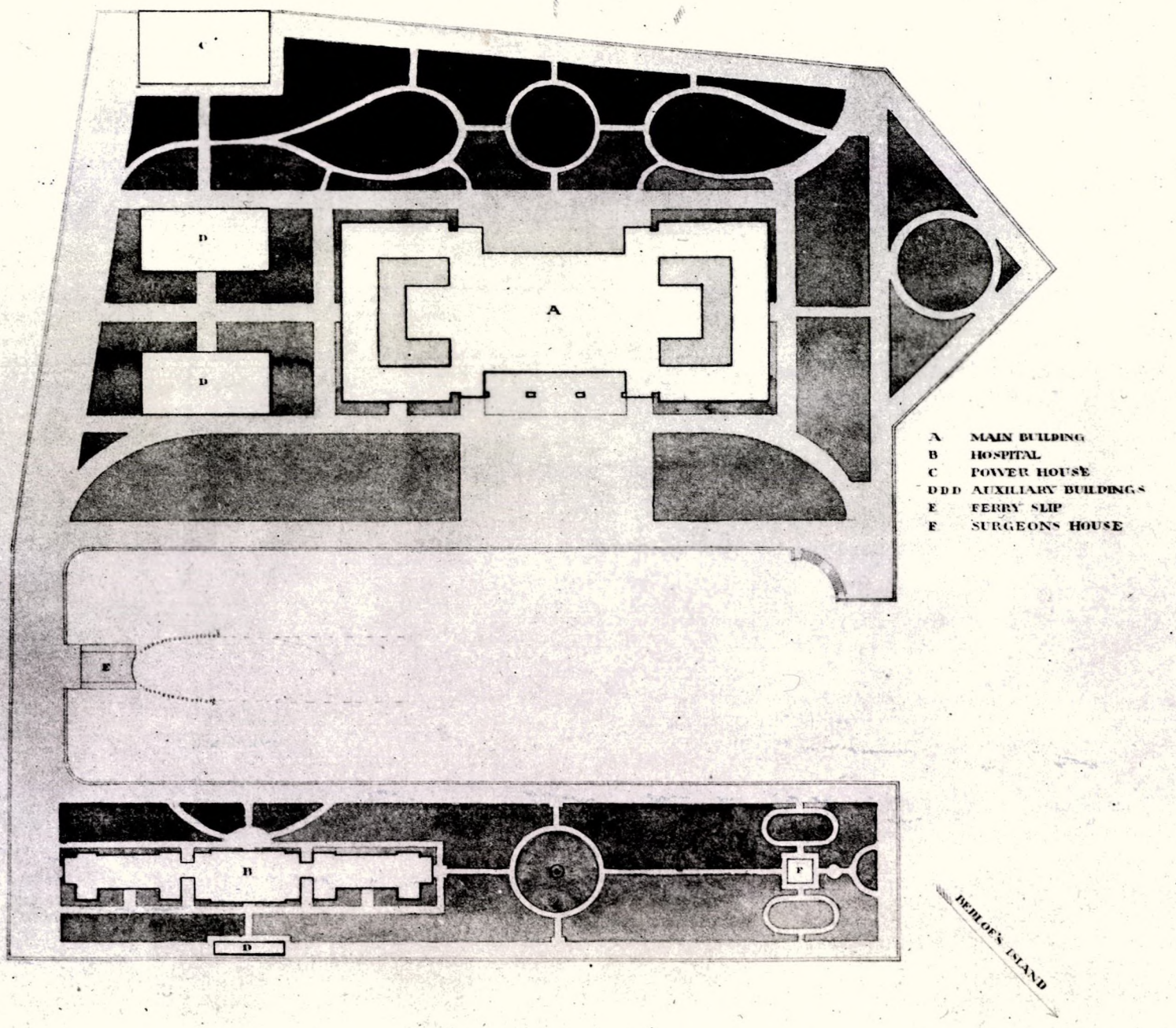
At last the new station on Ellis Island, on which work had been pushed as rapidly as possible,[1] was ready for occupancy, if not entirely completed. Commissioner Fitchie and his staff moved in with little ceremony and, on December 17, 1900, received for inspection the first shipload of immigrants. It consisted of 654 Italians from the steerage of the Kaiser Wilhelm II. Other steerage passengers came in during the day from the Victoria, the Vincenzo Florio and the Umbria, making a total of 2,251.[2]

The new group of buildings had been authorized in little over a month after the fire.[3] It was the first important Government architecture to be designed by private architects under award following competition, in accordance with the recent Tarsney Act providing such procedure. The New York firm of Boring and Tilton won the contract, awarded in 1898, in a competition entered by a number of eminent firms.[4]

The problem to be solved, as called for by the Government's program, lay in planning a fireproof structure which would keep immigrants free from all outside interference until discharged, while affording means for relatives and friends to communicate with them at the proper time. Suitable facilities were also needed for the officials of the Immigration Bureau in the discharge of their duties. The new station must be adapted to the shelter and despatching

Figure 5.

"Plan of U. S. Immigration Station Ellis Island N. Y. Harbor." Annual Report of the Supervising Architect, 1898.



PLAN OF U·S·IMMIGRANT STATION ELLIS ISLAND N·Y·HARBOR

of several thousand immigrants, together with the countless relatives and friends who would flock to the Island with the arrival of each new shipload.[5]

"This meant," explained Harper's Weekly when the award was first made, "immense waiting rooms, men's and women's dormitories accommodating a possible total of fifteen hundred sleepers, a restaurant capable of supplying food to thousands, a hospital equipped for the treatment of any disease or emergency, docks and wharves with immediate transportation facilities for passengers and baggage to all points on this continent, a special post-office, custom-house, and telegraph station, with numberless administration offices, courts of inquiry, witness-rooms, detention pens, quarters for physicians, missionaries, employment and information bureaus, and sundry charitable enterprises, besides baths, lavatories, laundries, and abundant toilet facilities, and all the other needs of this greatest of caravanseries perched on an island of diminutive size."[6]

While it was to be assumed that all these practical purposes would have been met by a Government architect "selected according to the plan of political expediency," Harper's asserted that "old Ellis Island and the harbor of New York would probably have suffered in consequence." The chief merit of the plan presented by Boring and Tilton was that "the little island, as such, is to be allowed to retain some of the green space, while the buildings are to be so placed that, unlike the former immigration station, they will show to best advantage to ships approaching them from the Narrows, and to those who pass to and fro between the island and the city of New York."[7]

The main building of the group was in the center of the Island, approximately on the site of the old wooden one. It was 385 feet long, 165 feet wide and 62 feet high, with four corner towers reaching to a height of 100 feet. There were massive triple-arch entrances on the east and west sides, the arches reaching well into the second story. The material was brick laid in Flemish bond, with limestone trim.[8]

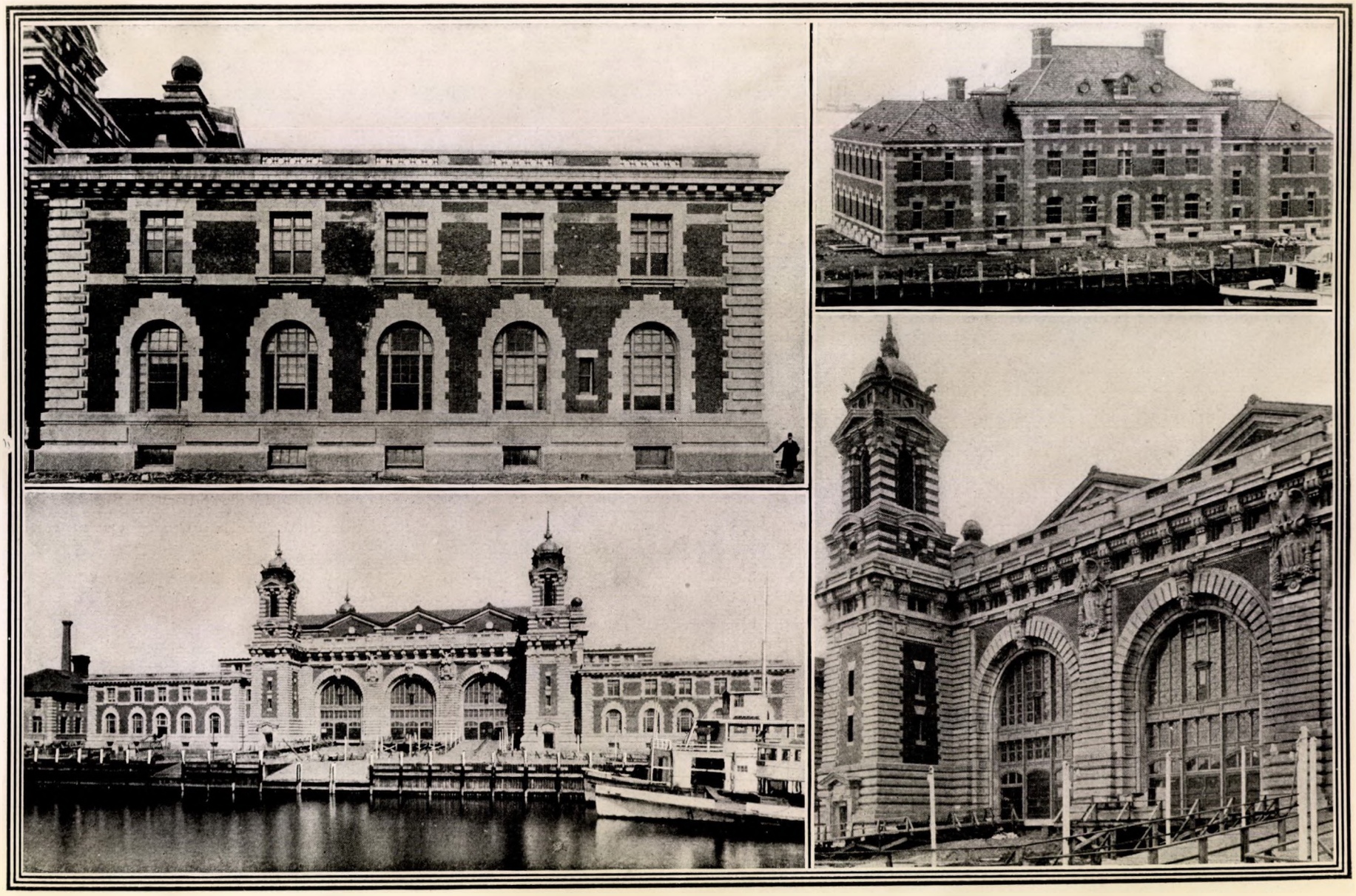
The largest room in the building was the registry room, or examination hall, on the second floor, 200 feet long, 100 feet wide and 56 feet high. Most of its floor space was divided into twelve narrow alleys by iron railings. Down these passages the immigrants marched in the examination process, after having landed from barges, entered and climbed the stairs. Here both medical and legal examinations to determine their right to enter took place. It was calculated that 5,000 immigrants could be examined here with ease in a day, and many more in an emergency.[9]

Surrounding this room at the third floor level was an observation gallery where visitors could watch the inspectors at work. Dormitories opened off the gallery, there being two such apartments capable of accommodating 600 sleepers. Iron stairways led from these quarters to the roof at either end of the building. These areas, on top of the wings which were only two stories in height, were called "roof gardens."[10]

On the second floor, in addition to the registry room, were telegraph and railroad offices, court rooms for the "Board of Special Inquiry" which determined the disposal of doubtful cases, and a dormitory for the unfortunates

Figure 6.

"The Immigrant Station on Ellis Island, New York Harbor." Architectural Record, December 1902.



THE IMMIGRANT STATION ON ELLIS ISLAND, NEW YORK HARBOR.

Boring & Tilton, Architects.

excluded by the Board. The Commissioner's office and other administrative offices were on the first floor. There also were the baggage room and the large railroad room where immigrants awaited transportation to distant points.[11]

North of the main building were a large restaurant and laundry building, with a bathhouse capable of bathing 8,000 in a day under showers, and a power house. On a separate new island across the ferry slip from the main building was the hospital. At the time the new station was opened it was estimated that more than $1,000,000 had been spent in its construction and an additional appropriation was necessary to complete it.[12]

After the station had been in operation for some time and most of its elements had been completed, the Architectural Record bestowed its professional approval. The problem here, as the Record saw it, had been to meet the requirements of "both a hospice and a hospital," and also essentially that of a railroad station, the requirement of landing, collecting and distributing great and sudden crowds with a minimum of confusion and delay. This last requirement the designer had met successfully, having provided for a continuous human flow that had already handled more than 6,500 arriving immigrants in one day.[13]

The Record believed that "the general composition of the central building, the distribution of its masses and the treatment of them," were "thoroughly admirable." The character of the detail aroused less enthusiasm; it was "scarcely worthy of the real nobility of the general composition." Molding

could have been used to good effect to soften the harshness of rectilinearity. "But these," the Record concluded, "are mere blemishes upon a capital piece of work."[14]

TR Cleans House

Ellis Island in its new incarnation got off to a bad start. The staff that operated the station, being essentially the same group that had served at the Barge Office, included a certain percentage of "worthless and dishonest characters." The employees of the various concessionaries, and the concessionaires themselves, averaged higher in knavery. To Ellis Island were also drawn, in spite of its isolation, many of the varied types of sharpers who had preyed upon the immigrant since Castle Garden days. As a veteran medical officer in immigrant inspection service observed in this connection many years later, "wherever one finds ships he will find at least an attenuated form of piracy...and wherever one sees travelers he can find extortion and robbery."[15]

Within the first year of operation, petty racketeering had come to be so openly practiced at Ellis Island that Commissioner Fitchie requested an extra detail of New York City policemen to help prevent aliens from being robbed of their money and baggage.[16] "Roughness, cursing, intimidation and a mild form of blackmail prevailed to such a degree as to be common," stated a traveler and observer of immigrant conditions; "the restaurant was a den of thieves, in which the immigrant was robbed by the proprietor, whose employees stole from him and from the

immigrant also." As an experiment, he changed a twenty-mark gold piece at the exchange concession and was robbed of nearly 75 percent of his money.[17]

Another scandal broke in the summer of 1901, involving frauds in the landing of immigrants direct from steamships, bypassing Ellis Island altogether. Fraudulent American citizens' certificates were supplied to the immigrants for a fee, which was split between ships' officers and immigration boarding inspectors. It was believed that the practice had gone on for years and that possibly 10,000 immigrants had been landed in this way at an average fee of $5 a head.[18]

Within the first month after he succeeded William McKinley as President of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt began moving to clean up the situation at Ellis Island. Writing to Nicholas Murray Butler on October 9, 1901, he noted that "As for Fitchie, there is a consensus of testimony to his utter inefficiency," and "Every really good man whom I have met who knows anything about that office has agreed in believing McSweeney to be corrupt." His own friends had been united in telling him that Powderly was a good man, but some question had come up about him, too. Roosevelt had already determined to replace Fitchie, and probably to make a clean sweep of the Immigration Bureau. He asked Butler for suggestions for possible successors to all three men, adding, "I am more anxious to get this office straight than almost any other."[19]

This was not easy. All three men had powerful backing and McSweeney, in particular, whom Roosevelt saw as the prime villain, was strongly entrenched in New York, Connecticut and Massachusetts politics, and had friends among the steamship companies and the missionaries. Fitchie's term of office

conveniently expired and the removal of Powderly was made easy by replacing him with another respected labor man, Frank P. Sargent, chief of one of the railroad brotherhoods. In spite of loud protests from high sources in the Republican party, Roosevelt also dismissed McSweeney.[20]

For Commissioner of Immigration at New York, the President appointed William Williams, a young lawyer of good standing, with some experience in Government service and a commendable record in the recent war with Spain.[21] Joseph E. Murray, an old friend of Roosevelt's with some knowledge of immigration problems, became his assistant. Williams, as Commissioner, was the actual as well as the nominal chief of Ellis Island and "a place which had been a political snug harbor was swept, garnished, and set in running order on a strict merit basis."[22]

Sniping at Williams soon began, as he antagonized influential New York Republicans by his award of contracts for money exchange, food and baggage concessions. In the past these had gone to deserving Republicans who found them highly profitable. Williams awarded them to firms which seemed to offer the best service to immigrants. The steamship companies were also concerned as their expenses under the new dispensation were increased. Roosevelt stood by his new man, telling Governor Odell of New York that "the management of the Ellis Island business has been rotten in the past, and Williams has got to make a thorough sweeping out."[23]

Williams entered on duty April 28, 1902, so that his first annual report as Commissioner covered only two months of his own administration. Nevertheless, he had already uncovered a good bit of skullduggery and in-

efficiency and had instituted a good many reforms. When he took office, he reported, he found conditions in the new plant far from the ideal predicted by his predecessor.[24]

Among former abuses was the practice of detailing unqualified persons to inspect immigrants, the inspectors signing blank detention cards and handing them to interpreters or even laborers, who made the actual inspections. The chief inspector was in the habit of arbitrarily marking "Hold" against the names of selected immigrants on the ships' manifests, thus having them brought to him for inspection. Most of those so marked were shown to have had fair amounts of money and many very large amounts. Williams pointed out drily that these were "points not without interest."[25]

Boards of special inquiry, he discovered, by statute independent tribunals, frequently rendered decisions directed by the executive office, including the admission of many immigrants certified by the medical staff as incapacitated. Some officials themselves examined detained immigrants and discharged them or put them back in detention, bypassing the boards of inquiry. "The resulting power of blackmail," the Commissioner observed, "will be readily seen."[26]

The information bureau often did not receive results of hearings until 24 hours after decisions. Meanwhile, of course, the friends of the detained immigrants and the immigrants themselves were kept in unnecessary suspense. Deportation papers were made out clumsily and at an enormous waste of time. Many other instances of abuses or lack of system had already been reported in Williams's letters to the Secretary.[27]

The general treatment accorded immigrants before the change in administration "was not calculated to make upon them a favorable impression at the time of their first contact with the institutions of this country," Williams reported. They were hustled about and addressed in rough language. The detained quarters were formerly called "pens" and were in filthy condition. He mentioned particularly the dining room, "the floor of which was allowed by the former privilege holder to remain covered with grease, bones, and other remnants of food for days at a time." He himself saw, in the first days of his administration, that immigrants were fed without knives, forks or spoons. The same bowls were used over and over without washing.[28]

At the food stands "an employee of the privilege holder wore a cap with a gilt eagle and compelled immigrants to buy bags of food, in some cases even where they were bound for New York." The prices were in many cases exorbitant. In the kitchen immigrants were frequently compelled to perform service. A sick immigrant was found peeling potatoes. "The influence exerted here by the former holder of the feeding privilege in the face of such facts," Williams professed to believe, "is incomprehensible." The former Commissioner, he said, could have had his contract cancelled immediately by reporting the conditions to the Secretary. The new concessionaire, he affirmed, fed the immigrants in an orderly, decent manner with wholesome food, though his charge for meals was lower than formerly by 15 percent.[29]

While the administration of the office was still in a state of transition, many evil practices had been abolished or would be soon. Primary inspection of the immigrant was being made "more conscientious." Detained immigrants

could no longer be discharged except by specified inspectors and all data on detention cards must be in ink, to prevent alterations. Every effort was under way to reduce detention time at Ellis Island. A notice had been posted requiring that all immigrants be treated with "kindness and consideration," and severe penalties were imposed for violations. All concession contractors had been replaced by new ones and these were under notice that their contracts would be rescinded if they did not perform honestly.[30]

Railroad companies had formerly issued passes "to a demoralizing extent" and in the names of officials. No passes were now requested. No favors were to be accepted from transportation companies, whose interests "obviously demand liberal immigration laws and a liberal execution of the same." Some of the steamship companies had been bringing in cases of favus and trachoma, contagious diseases easily detected. This had been taken up with the companies "in very plain language" and some improvement had resulted. Violations of the law requiring that all aliens appear on ships' manifests had been constant. Fair warning followed by fines had, Williams believed, largely cleared up this practice.[31]

The Williams regime won enthusiastic approval from Leslie's Weekly only a few months after it had begun. All records for immigration had been broken in the fiscal year ending June 30, 1902, but in spite of this rising tide at Ellis Island "the aliens are now treated in the main quite as considerately as would be crowds of like size and character in the heart of the city." There had been advantage taken of them in the past and they had been "misused and fleeced by dishonest employees of the bureau," but the new commissioner, Mr. William Williams, Leslie's said, was "a thorough,

resourceful, and hard-working executive," who, with his able associates, was doing his best to make the conduct of affairs "more honest, efficient, and humane."[32]

This high praise, by itself, might be thought a mere reflection of what we would today call a public relations handout. But there is plenty of other evidence to the same end. There is no doubt of the almost revolutionary character of the changes that Williams brought about with the vigorous support of the President. Jacob Riis, an immigrant of the Castle Garden days, an old friend of Roosevelt's and intimately associated with him during his term as police commissioner of New York City, visited Ellis Island a few months later. He saw and approved the new regime in action, but also noted that the "law of kindness" now ruling on the Island was sometimes put to a severe strain. Not one in a thousand landing at Ellis Island needed harsh treatment, he believed, but rather advice and help. This did not prevent the thousandth case from receiving its full due. Riis says that he saw Williams himself "soak" a Flemish peasant twice his size for beating and abusing a child. The man turned and towered over the Commissioner, "but the ordinarily quiet little man presented so suddenly a fierce and warlike aspect that, though neither understood a word of what the other said, the case was made clear to the brute on the instant, and he slunk away."[33]

Williams resigned early in 1905 to return to his neglected law practice.[34] He was succeeded by Robert Watchorn, a career Immigration Service official also hand picked by Roosevelt.[35] Watchorn carried on the Williams tradition for a four-year term and then Williams returned to Ellis Island, at the earnest

Figure 7.

"The Registry Desk, Ellis Island." Immigrants under interrogation by an immigration inspector in 1903. Century Magazine, March 1903.

Drawn by G. W. Peters. Half-tone plate engraved by W. Miller

THE REGISTRY DESK, ELLIS ISLAND

request of President William H. Taft. He served again as Commissioner of Immigration until the year before the outbreak of World War I.[36] Williams was succeeded by his trained assistant, Byron H. Uhl, who served for a year as Acting Commissioner.[37] During the great period of Ellis Island as an immigrant receiving station it was, once the pattern of politics and corruption had been broken in 1902, probably run as efficiently and with as much consideration for the immigrant as its overwhelming problems and the frailty of human nature would permit.

Operations Under Pressure

What was it like to go through Ellis Island as an immigrant during that station's heyday from 1901 to 1914, when immigrant arrivals at the port of New York rose from just under 400,000 the first year to over 1,000,000 in 1907 and later again approached that figure? Oscar Handlin presents a composite account in his sympathetic study of The Uprooted. While Handlin's thesis is the sorrow and frustration of the immigrant, this account is objective enough:

> Men, women, and children come off their floating homes. They are arranged in lines cut off from each other by wooden barriers, and they begin wearily to tread an incomprehensible maze. Officials in uniform survey them, look at the already large collection of papers, peer at eyes, down throats, thump chests, make notes on cards, and affix tags of various colors to the hesitant bodies that pass uneasily along before them. Now and again one of the fellow travelers is separated out from the rest--to go who knows where.
>
> After a while, and it can be a long, eventful while, there come questions. How can a simple man understand the language? The clever gentleman, smooth-shaven and freshly washed, conducts the interrogation, but speaks down only through the

> aid of an interpreter. (One knows the type, a fellow who gains the good graces of the authorities by trapping his unfortunate countrymen.) One must answer cautiously, reveal not too much, lie if need be. Keep in mind: destination, funds on hand, relatives, work. These are trick y matters. The law says you must not have contracted for your job, also that you must not be likely to become a public charge. How can you demonstrate that you will not become a public charge? It is said a show of money, say ten dollars, will do it. But caution.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> There are the right words at last. Magically you are through.
>
> Anyway, most are lucky and do get through. The handful of inspectors are too few to permit more than a perfunctory examination. They look for surface disabilities (trachoma, an infection of the eyelids, is one; favus, a skin disease, is another), for obvious deformities, and for signs of idiocy or insanity. On the hot, summer days which see the peak load, the impatient officials, starched collars melting under the heavy serge, now and then single one out for more than casual study, a case from the long rows that move stolidly before them. The rest get by. They escape to the free American air and leave behind the luckless who must still face medical boards of review, hearings, and appeals, perhaps soon to be sent back from whence they came or to spend more months in the confinement rooms at the station while distant powers thumb through the dossiers that pile up on Washington desks.[38]

Broughton Brandenburg and his wife went to Italy and back in steerage in 1903 to gather material for magazine stories. They saw much brutality in the steerage of a German ship carrying chiefly Italian immigrants, but the examination at Ellis Island, though conducted at the end of a long day when the examiners were tired, they found no great ordeal. "The more I saw of the inside of the great system on the Island," Brandenburg reported, "the more I was struck with its thoroughness and the kindly, efficient manner in which the law was enforced."[39] Brandenburg was an American and perhaps subconsciously defensive about Ellis Island because it was an American institution. Anyway,

he had had a hard time in the steerage and Ellis Island was, he knew, the last hurdle to home and comfort.

Other observers were not so charitable. Edward Steiner, himself an immigrant in the old Castle Garden days, later professor in an American college, made many trips back and forth in steerage gathering material for books. In 1905 he landed at Ellis Island with a mixed group of immigrants. Steiner did not minimise the bewilderment of his fellow travelers at the strange routine, nor the tragedy of separated families and the hopelessness of those destined for probable deportation. "Let no one believe that landing on the shores of 'The land of the free and the home of the brave' is a pleasant experience," he emphasised; "it is a hard, harsh fact, surrounded by the grinding machinery of the law, which sifts, picks, and chooses; admitting the fit and excluding the weak and helpless." Nevertheless, Steiner believed, "The hardships which attend the examination and deportation of immigrants seem unavoidable, and would not be materially reduced if any other method were devised."[40]

Steiner reserved most of his hard words for the steamship companies that brought the immigrants to Ellis Island. Many of them, he declared, "still practice their ancient wrongs upon their most profitable passengers." There should, he said, be an immediate demand made for the abolition of the steerage.[41] Unfortunately, the steerage hung on for a long time. When it did disappear, it was not for humanitarian reasons but in response to changing economic circumstances.

Paul Knaplund, an intelligent young Norwegian arriving at Ellis Island

in 1906, thought that "the newcomers were pushed around a good deal," but conceded that this might be "perhaps an inevitable result of their being so numerous and unfamiliar with the language of the officials." He "had the feeling that he was not being treated as a human being but as a commodity to be processed."[42]

Stephen Graham, a British author arriving in steerage from Liverpool in 1913, had the same dehumanized sensation. He thought that the inspection process illustrated "the mechanical obsession of the American people," and commented that "this ranging and guiding and hurrying and sifting was like nothing so much as the screening of coal in a great breaker tower." "It is not good," he observed, "to be like a hurrying, bumping, wandering piece of coal being mechanically guided to the sacks of its type and size, but such is the lot of the immigrant at Ellis Island."[43]

What was it like to work at Ellis Island during this period, examining the immigrants? Fortunately some thoughtful reminiscences are at hand. Victor Safford joined the medical staff at the old station in 1895 and stayed on well into the heyday of the new. Able, conscientious and experienced in hospital administration, he had been called to the Immigration Service when it was trying to make the medical examination something more than the legal fiction it had been.[44]

Safford, recalling Ellis Island many years later, could not help thinking of its color and action first. "Everybody finds a certain interest in watching a crowd," he noted. "At Ellis Island there is an added fascination of the kind that is found in watching a circus procession plus a hustle and

bustle lacking in the more deliberate circus parade." In the peak years, "hour after hour, shipload after shipload, day after day, the stream of human beings with its kaleidoscopic variations was then hurried along through Ellis Island by the equivalent of 'step lively' in every language of the earth. There were few old-time employees at Ellis Island who could not tell an immigrant to 'hurry up' in at least a dozen languages."[45]

Many immigrants, at least in the earlier years, arrived at the station sick or even dying. For instance, there was a heavy mortality from measles, which was not eliminated until the isolation hospital was completed, a decade after the new station was opened. Until then measles patients, mostly children, had to be transported across town to a city hospital under contract.[46] "It was not an uncommon event at that time," Safford recalled, "to find steerage passengers dead on the steamboats or barges on their arrival at the Island because they were in such physical condition by reason of acute sickness or otherwise when they were run off the ship onto the wharf that the exertion incident to the transfer to the Island finished them." It took much effort to persuade the ships' companies, in the absence of a regulation from Washington,[47] to send their doctors with the steerage passengers to Ellis Island.

The system of medical inspection at Ellis Island remained substantially unchanged for many years. The ships' manifests listing the names of the passengers, 30 to a sheet, were brought to the Island with the immigrants. Each sheet had a letter or number designation and the names on it were numbered consecutively. Before leaving the ship each passenger was given a card bearing his name and the letter or number of the manifest sheet on which his name and

description were to be found, as well as his number on the sheet.

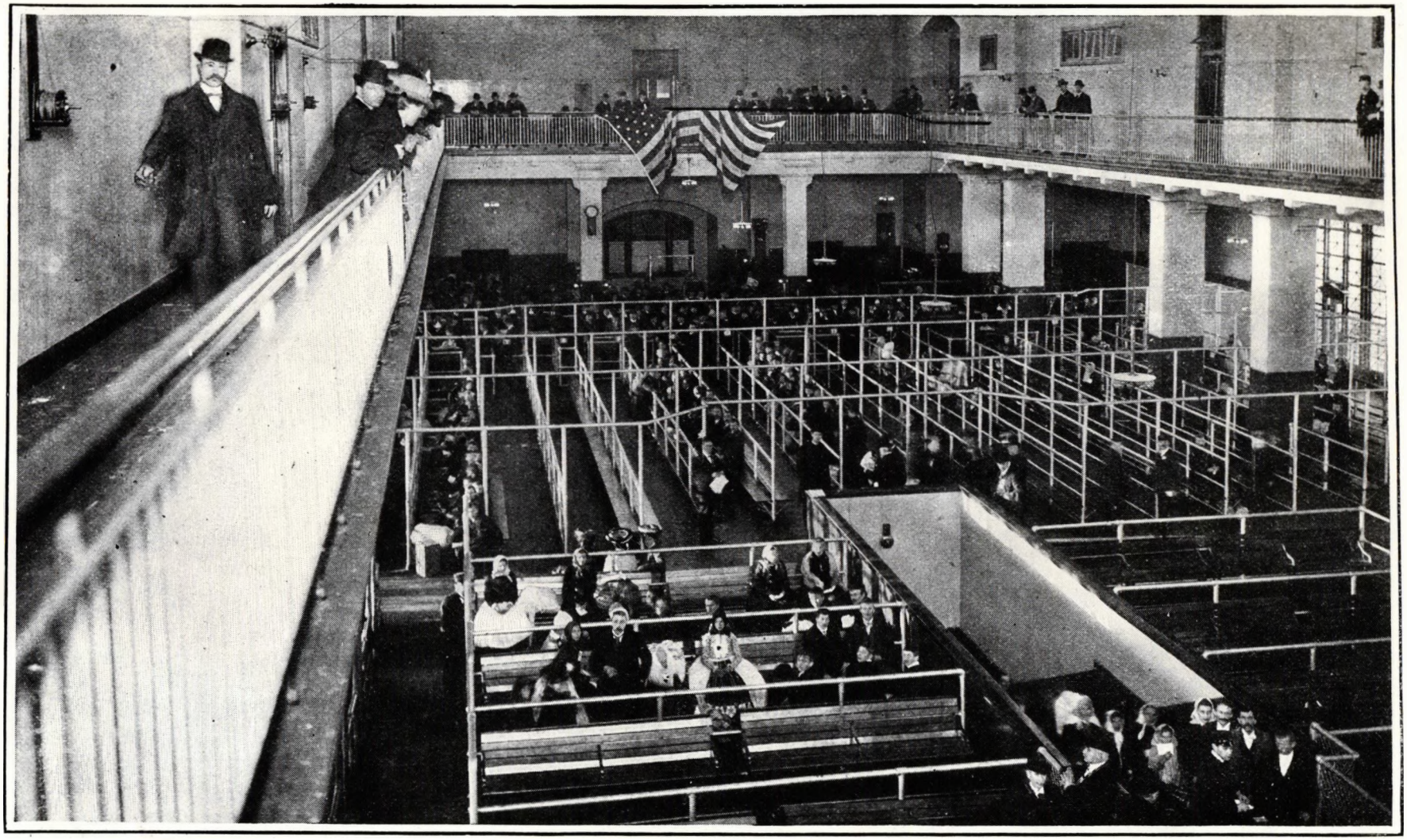
After the passengers left the barges and entered the main building they first passed before the medical officers, who turned aside for careful examination all who presented any suggestion of abnormality, physical or mental. When this examination was completed, whether an hour, several hours, or days or weeks later, the medical staff turned the passenger back into the mill, with the results of the examination certified in writing "for the information of the immigration officers." The medical officers did not themselves exclude an alien or take part in the legal determination of his admissibility. Aside from its examination work, of course, the medical staff cared for the sick and had charge of the Island's hospital.[48]

Safford compares the medical examination of aliens at Ellis Island to the examination of an automobile for purchase. It is well to see both in motion as well as at rest. Defects, derangements and symptoms of disease were often recognizable by watching a person twenty-five feet away. The value of this observation was not to see what was wrong, but to see quickly that something was wrong and put proper examination procedure in operation.

The "line inspection" was so arranged that the medical officer could scrutinize the immigrant as he approached, then as he came close at hand. Provision was made for close examination of hands, eyes and throat. The inspection process might seem to the spectator a rapid, hasty procedure, but no limit was placed on the time taken for the subsequent medical examination of those detained. If an immigrant had just carried his baggage upstairs, the condition of his heart could be judged; the carrying of luggage

Figure 8.

"The World's Greatest Clearing-House for Immigrants." Examination of immigrants in the great registry room in 1905. Leslie's Weekly, December 28, 1905.



THE WORLD'S GREATEST CLEARING-HOUSE FOR IMMIGRANTS.

DELEGATES TO THE NATIONAL IMMIGRATION CONFERENCE AT NEW YORK VIEWING THE LANDING BUREAU AT ELLIS ISLAND, WHERE THE INCOMING ALIENS UNDERGO EXAMINATION BY DOCTORS AND INSPECTORS.—*Photograph by A. E. Dunn.*

also made lameness more noticeable and revealed deformities and posture defects. By having the passenger hold an identification card in his hand after it was stamped, defects of eyesight were disclosed, as he always looked at the card to see what had been done. Aliens were also required to make two right angle turns, thus bringing both sides of the face into view, revealing expressions indicating abnormal mental condition and other defects.[49]

Most of the time Safford had to manage with insufficient help to do the medical work as it should have been done. In the heavy seasons, spring and autumn, he was obliged to recruit temporary medical officers through his professional contacts in the locality. Help asked for well in advance was likely to arrive after the rush was over. "For this reason," he recalls, "one spring at Ellis Island my associates and I were repeatedly on our feet almost continuously for periods of thirty-six hours at a stretch."[50]

The system that Safford describes was still in use, with only a few variations, toward the close of the period. Dr. Alfred C. Reed, of the U. S. Public Health Service staff at Ellis Island, in 1913 described the work of the medical staff as it then operated. There were three sections into which the 25 medical officers were divided--the boarding division, the hospital and the line. The boarding division, based at the Barge Office in Battery Park, made the inspection of aliens in the first and second class cabins as the liners came up the bay from quarantine. The hospital division operated the two hospitals on Ellis Island, the general hospital on Island No. 2 and the contagious disease hospital on Island No. 3. The line division made the inspection of the steerage passengers as they were brought to the Island

in barges from the landing piers. While the hospitals were well equipped and now included such specialists as officers "specially trained in the diagnosis and observation of mental disorders," the line inspection was still conducted in much the manner that Safford recalled.[51]

When Edward Corsi was Commissioner of Immigration at Ellis Island many years later, he spent much time reading the files on interesting cases and listening to the reminiscences of old-time staff members. One of his favorite raconteurs was Frank Martocci, veteran interpreter.

"We went to work, of course," Martocci related of the days of peak immigration, "from the Barge Office at the Battery. From there the ferry-boat took most of the employees to Ellis Island at nine in the morning. Hundreds of other people were always eagerly waiting and clamoring to get on the same boat. These were the friends and relatives of immigrants expected during the day, or already being detained at the Island." This mixed crowd had to obtain passes from the steamship office and guards circulated among them at the Barge Office to make sure that only the proper people had passes. "Once at the Island," Martocci recalled, "we employees had to plunge immediately into our work, for in those terrifically busy days whole boat loads of immigrants were waiting to be inspected every morning."[52]

Corsi thought that the inspection routine must have been different in those days. Martocci agreed emphatically. "I can well remember, for at that time I was in the registry department, assigned to decide the eligibility of aliens to land. To make things run fairly smoothly in that mixed crowd of poor, bewildered immigrants, we would tag them with numbers correspond-

Figure 9.

Manifest sheet from the steamer Francesca arriving in New York from Patras, Greece, on April 19, 1907, with Greek and Turkish steerage passengers. Records of the Immigration and Naturalisation Service, National Archives.

IMMIGRATION SERVICE
Form. 1500 B.

SALOON, CABIN, AND STEERAGE ALIENS MUST BE COMPLETELY MANIFESTED.
THIS SHEET IS FOR STEERAGE PASSENGERS.

List 63

LIST OR MANIFEST OF ALIEN PASSENGERS FOR THE U. S. IMMIGRATION OFFICER AT PORT OF ARRIVAL.

Required by the regulations of the Secretary of the Treasury of the United States, under Act of Congress approved March 3, 1903, to be delivered to the U. S. Immigration Officer by the Commanding Officer of any vessel having such passengers on board upon arrival at a port in the United States.

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S. S. FRANCESCA sailing from PATRAS 30th March 1907 Arriving at Port of NEW YORK APR 19 1907 190

No. on List	NAME IN FULL	Age Yrs.	Age Mos.	Sex	Married or Single	Calling or Occupation	Able to Read	Able to Write	Nationality (Country of last permanent residence.)	Race or People.	Last Residence (Province, City, or Town.)	Final Destination. (State, City, or Town.)	Whether having a ticket to such final destination.	By whom was passage paid?	Whether in possession of $ 50, and if less, how much?	Whether ever before in the United States; and if so, when and where?	Whether going to join a relative or friend, and if so, what relative or friend, and his name and complete address.	Whether a Polygamist.	Whether an Anarchist.	Condition of Health, Mental and Physical.	Deformed or Crippled. Nature, length of time, and cause.
1861	1 Chas. N. Charos	18		M	S	Laborer	Yes	Yes	Greek	Greek	Trevoca	New York	Yes	Self	$ 20	Never	Christ Nicolaou Friend 109 Gt. St. New York	No	No	No	Good No
1862	2 Apost. Theodorou	18		M	S	Laborer	Yes	Yes	Greek	Greek	Tersora	New York	Yes	Self	$ 12	Never	Alex Athanasiadis Cousin No 205 6th av. New York	No	No	No	Good No
1863	3 Panag. Argiti	38		M	M	Laborer	No	No	Greek	Greek	Arachova	St. Louis Mo	Yes	Self	$ 12	Never	G. B. Kitsas Mother in Law No 511 Clark av St. Louis Mo	No	No	No	Good No
1864	4 Const. Th. Caponis	24		M	S	Laborer	Yes	Yes	Greek	Greek	Kyaton	New York	Yes	Self	$ 12	Never	George Bonpas Cousin 163 Sixth Ave New York	No	No	No	Good No
1865	5 Efthimios A. Kamitsis	21		M	M	Laborer	Yes	Yes	Greek	Greek	Kyaton	St Louis Mo	Yes	Self	$ 15	Never	Ath. Potopoulos Cousin No 224 Elm st St Louis Mo	No	No	No	Good No
1866	6 Dimitrios Fotopoulos	26		M	S	Laborer	Yes	Yes	Greek	Greek	Kyaton	New York	Yes	Self	$ 12	Never	Christo Cosmo fm C Kalamata Cousin No 123 South Front st New York	No	No	No	Good No
1867	7 Dionissios Andriotopoulos	20		M	S	Laborer	Yes	Yes	Greek	Greek	Saniana	New York	Yes	Self	$ 12	Never	Evan Andriotopoulos Friend 241 Water St Bridgeport Conn	No	No	No	Good No
1868	8 Const. Tapparis	19		M	S	Laborer	Yes	Yes	Greek	Greek	Sanga	Chicago Ill	Yes	Self	$ 15	Never	Nick Chiapsale Brother No 820 S. Halsted st Chicago Ill	No	No	No	Good No
1869	9 Michael Miakis	25		M	M	Laborer	Yes	Yes	Greek	Greek	Sanga	Chicago Ill	Yes	Self	$ 20	Never	Peter Colopulo Cousin No 320 S. Halsted st Chicago Ill	No	No	No	Good No
1870	10 Efthimios Doris	19		M	S	Laborer	Yes	Yes	Greek	Greek	Sanga	Newark N.J.	Yes	Self	$ 12	Never	Nicolas Mauris Friend No 39 Pearson St New York	No	No	No	Good No
1871	11 Anastasios Stavropulos	35		M	M	Laborer	Yes	Yes	Greek	Greek	Sanga	Chicago Ill	Yes	Self	$ 15	Never	James Nampas Cousin No 41 S. Holden st Chicago Ill	No	No	No	Good No
1872	12 Mustafa Chasean	16		M	S	Laborer	No	No	Turkish	Turkish	Coritza	Worcester Mass	Yes	Self	$ 12	Never	Att Bot Frantzis Friend 1 Grum St. W. 25 Worcester Mass	No	No	No	Good No
1873	13 Petros Spiron	20		M	S	Laborer	No	No	Turkish	Greek	Coritza	Worcester Mass	Yes	Self	$ 12	Never	Att. Sot Giantse Cousin Grum St. W. 25 Worcester Mass	No	No	No	Good No
1874	14 Joannis Fatas	35		M	M	Laborer	No	No	Turkish	Greek	Magoula	Woburn Mass	Yes	Self	$ 12	Never	Eath. Fiagas Mother No 47 Commercial St Woburn Mass	No	No	No	Good No
1875	15 Joannis Cotsinares	22		M	S	Laborer	Yes	Yes	Turkish	Greek	Elassona	Haverhill Mass	Yes	Self	$ 10	Never	J. Contzanas Mother 13-15 Cooke St Haverhill Mass	No	No	No	Good No
1876	16 Joannis Papayannis	19		M	S	Laborer	Yes	Yes	Greek	Greek	Tricala	Lowell Mass	Yes	Self	$ 10	Never	Athana Samuna Cousin No 262 Suffolk st Lowell Mass	No	No	No	Good No
1877	17 Stefano Thomas	30		M	M	Laborer	Yes	Yes	Turkish	Greek	Magoula	Woburn Mass	Yes	Self	$ 10	Never	Jazo Casavas Cousin No 52 Todd st Woburn Mass	No	No	No	Good No
1878	18 Efstratios Simos	38		M	M	Laborer	No	No	Turkish	Greek	Janoulena	New York	Yes	Self	$ 28	Never	John Christ Cousin 229 Cril st New York	No	No	No	Good No
1879	19 Leonidas Yanakis	24		M	M	Laborer	Yes	Yes	Turkish	Greek	Janoulena	New York	Yes	Self	$ 50	Never	Pet. Constantinou Cousin Keen Street New York	No	No	No	Good No
1880	20 Thomas Casavas	20		M	S	Laborer	Yes	Yes	Turkish	Greek	Magoula	Woburn Mass	Yes	Self	$ 14	Never	Jesse Casava Brother No 45 Cross st Woburn Mass	No	No	No	Good No
1881	21 Pelasgakis Pantelakis	28		M	M	Laborer	Yes	Yes	Turkish	Greek	Janoulena	New York	Yes	Self	$ 10	Never	Stavros P. Canakis Cousin 61 Marion st New York	No	No	No	Good No
1882	22 Tzanelis Manolis	35		M	M	Laborer	Yes	Yes	Turkish	Greek	Janoulena	New York	Yes	Self	$ 30	Never	Peter Constantinou Cousin Keen Street New York	No	No	No	Good No
1883	23 Joannis Raptis	41		M	M	Laborer	Yes	Yes	Greek	Greek	Aegion	New York	Yes	Self	$ 12	Never	Christ Zaptzos Friend No 262 67 [illegible] st New York	No	No	No	Good No
1884	24 Ch. J. Marinos	43		M	M	Laborer	No	No	Greek	Greek	Caparelli	Chicago Ill	Yes	Self	$ 50	Never	John Stavis Friend No 149 S. 12 st Chicago Ill	No	No	No	Good No
1885	25 Emm. Gounpouras	25		M	S	Laborer	Yes	Yes	Greek	Greek	Arahova	St Louis Mo	Yes	Self	$ 12	Never	Nic. Nicolopulos Friend No 511 Clark av St Louis Mo	No	No	No	Good No
1886	26 G. A. Duros	20		M	S	Laborer	Yes	Yes	Greek	Greek	Vlavoka	St Louis Mo	Yes	Self	$ 14	Never	Const. Bouras Friend No 717 Ofallon st St Louis Mo	No	No	No	Good No
	27 Kyriako Tsitaki	21		M	S	Laborer	Yes	Yes	Greek	Greek	Vortizza	New York	Yes	Self	$ 12	Never	Evan Canagalos Friend 53 Thom. st New York	No	No	No	Good No

English Insp

*"Race or People" is to be determined by the stock from which they sprang and the language they speak. List of races will be found on back of this sheet.

NOTE.—This slip must be attached to the right side of each ma
Cat. Nos. 500, 500-A, and 500-B, and the information indicated by
masters of vessels.

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PERSONAL DESCRIPTION.

Height Feet	Height Inches	Complexion	Color of Hair	Color of Eyes	Marks of Identification
5	6½	Dark	brown	brown	None
5	2	Dark	brown	brown	None
5	11½	Fair	Brown	Brown	None
5	7	Dark	brown	brown	None
5	6	Dark	black	brown	None
5	6½	Dark	brown	brown	None
5	7	Dark	black	brown	None
5	2½	Dark	brown	brown	None
5	7½	Dark	black	black	None
5	3½	Dark	brown	brown	None
5	6	Dark	black	black	None
5	3½	Fair	Fair	Hazel	None
5	3	Dark	black	brown	None
5	6½	Fair	red	brown	None
5	7½	Fair	red	brown	None
5	3½	Fair	red	Grey	None
5	3½	Fair	red	brown	None
5	3½	Fair	red	Hazel	None
5	7½	Fair	black	brown	Mole on wrist
5	6½	Fair	red	brown	None
5	6½	Fair	black	brown	None
5	5½	Fair	black	brown	None
5	6	Fair	brown	brown	None
5	3	Dark	Brown	Brown	None
5	6¼	Fair	Fair	Grey	None
		Dark	Brown	Brown	None
		Dark	Brown	Brown	None

ing to numbers on their manifests, after they had been landed from the barges and taken into the building. Here, in the main building, they were lined up--a motley crowd in colorful costumes, all ill at ease and wondering what was to happen to them. Doctors then put them through their medical inspection, and whenever a case aroused suspicion, the alien was set aside in a cage apart from the rest, for all the world like a segregated animal, and his coat lapel or shirt marked with colored chalk, the color indicating why he had been isolated. These methods, crude as they seem, had to be used, because of the great numbers and the language difficulties."[53]

All the aliens who had run this gauntlet successfully passed down a long line and were grouped according to their manifest numbers, and the inspection continued. While the arrangement of the examination hall was changed more than once, Martocci remembered that at one time there were twenty-two lines of inspection. "Every manifest held thirty names, but one inspector never got all thirty." Some had been detained by the doctors and others had been held back for other reasons. As they cleared the medical lines, the aliens were directed to follow the line to a point where an inspector sat with his manifest before him. At that point, Martocci reminisced, "most of our headaches began." Before a barrage of questions such as: sex? married status? occupation? where born? where last resided? where going? by whom was the passage paid? is that person in the United States or not? if so, how long? to whom is the alien going? the immigrant would do his best, wondering what it was all about and when and how it would end.[54]

If a woman came alone, she was most carefully questioned and held

until the person she had named came for her. He was also looked over and questioned. If there were any discrepancies between her story and his, the case was turned over to a board of special inquiry. A sharp eye was kept for contract laborers as well. If, for instance, a group of men came before the inspector, all hailing from the same section of Italy, he was on the alert at once. Sometimes one of the group would proudly produce a letter from a friend or relative in the United States to prove that work had been promised him here, thereby leading not only to his own deportation but also most likely to that of his whole group.[55]

"Three or four times a week," Martocci told Corsi, "from nine o'clock in the morning to nine in the evening, we were continuously examining aliens. I thought it was a stream that would never end. Every twenty-four hours from three to five thousand people came before us, and I myself examined from four to five hundred a day. We were simply swamped by that human tide."[56]

Administrative Problems

The problems of administering Ellis Island during these years of the peak of immigration were many and varied. Roughly grouped, they fell into a few general categories. First of all were the problems resulting from the rapidly rising immigration and its impact upon facilities that almost immediately proved physically inadequate. The difficulties attendant upon enforcing increasingly complex legislation under such conditions were closely related. There was perpetual wrangling with the steamship companies in the effort to make them observe the immigration laws and regulations. Always, and interwoven with the others, were the difficulties of public relations. Ellis Island

was under constant criticism, in this period largely because of its determined effort to carry out the laws passed by Congress, laws tending steadily toward restriction of immigration. As one shrewd observer put it: "Immigration laws must be characterized as unpopular. They may be endorsed in the abstract, but the public will always be found against their enforcement in concrete cases."[57]

Ellis Island was fair game for the press. It was right on the doorstep of the New York metropolitan newspapers. It was a Government institution and it is, by the Jeffersonian tradition, the duty of the press in a democratic society to keep public servants in their place. Rich as it was in human interest, there was always a good story to be had at Ellis Island, and if it involved a dishonest employee or some pathetic case of exclusion so much the better. The attitude of the metropolitan press was not usually friendly, but it was generally within the limits of legitimate news gathering and dissemination. The foreign language press, on the other hand, sensitive to every exclusion within its particular group, was likely to be shrill and vituperative, freely charging the Ellis Island authorities with perpetrating brutalities, atrocities, and even murder.[58] An Ellis Island veteran with considerable knowledge of European tongues declared, probably with some exaggeration, that he had never read a newspaper article on Ellis Island involving an immigrant, that did not make the staff there appear as "stupid fools."[59] Even able and honest administrators such as Williams and Watchorn were frequently under attack. Edward Corsi thought that "It would require a special volume to fully chronicle

the investigations at Ellis Island and their repercussions across the nation."[60]

Some of the problems that were to haunt him and his successors were described in Williams's second annual report, the first covering a full year of his own administration. The fiscal year 1903 saw 631,885 aliens arriving at New York out of a national total of 857,046. On one day in April, 12,600 immigrants arrived in New York Harbor. Williams refused to receive more than 6,800 of them because it would be impossible to examine more than that number in a day. (This meant, of course, that the rest had to spend another night in the steerage, making both immigrants and steamship companies unhappy. Such scenes were common in the next few years.) His office had transacted business on every Sunday of the year and with practically the same staff that had been on duty during the week. The inspection work frequently continued without relief from 9:15 a.m. to after 7 p.m. and sometimes much later, while the boards of special inquiry sat regularly from 9:15 a.m. to 4:40 p.m. and often to 5:30 p.m.. Of both inspection and board of inquiry work, Williams said he believed that "there is no other public office in which such a large number of subordinate officials are called upon to do incessant mental work and exercise discretionary powers of such volume and importance."[61]

The discipline and efficiency of the staff had improved during the year, in spite of the work load. Some dismissals had been made under regular civil service procedures, but the staff as a whole he thought equal to that of any public office. While he did not believe "that the millennium can ever

exist here," he thought it was possible to keep evil practices well within bounds and give immigrants proper treatment while they were under Government care. Actually few complaints of improper treatment of immigrants had come in during the year. Deportations were another matter. Williams was making unceasing effort, he reported, to enforce the laws "with the utmost rigidity." There were 6,839 aliens excluded during the year and deported at the expense of the steamship companies. These deportations had brought many protests, to the immigration authorities, to members of Congress, and to the President.[62]

The President had, in fact, written to Williams on the matter, cautioning him about what had been reported to Roosevelt as "star chamber business" in the handling of deportation cases. The President said that he was heartily in favor of sending back an alien "where his presence would tend to the physical or moral deterioration of our people," but that Williams should remember that "to send him back is often to inflict a punishment upon him only less severe than death itself." Williams must not only act aright but be able to show that he was acting aright. The President suggested that he have a reputable representative of an appropriate ethnic or religious society attend courts of inquiry, and in general should work more closely with the New York social and philanthropic agencies concerned with immigration.[63]

The immigration law then recently passed had added to Williams's problems by adding new categories of deportees, but it had also given him a new weapon. It permitted the imposition of a $100 fine on steamship companies for bringing in detectable cases of loathsome or dangerous

contagious diseases. He had used this club effectively, imposing over $7,500 in fines, and believed that the steamship companies had learned a lesson.[64] This proved to be only a successful skirmish in an unending struggle with the shipowners.

The new law, on the other hand, not only added new categories of excludable aliens, such as anarchists, but also required the examination of discharged alien seamen. These were, at first, brought to Ellis Island for the purpose.[65] This function of examining alien seamen later took on huge proportions, but was handled by examination on shipboard. Already the examination of cabin passengers, largely farcical in the past, was being enforced by this method. Cabin passengers, legally immigrant aliens like the steerage passengers, were now required to be listed in ships' manifests, instead of merely on printed passenger lists. A fine new tugboat had been chartered and, equipped with this, immigration inspectors were able to board incoming steamers whenever they pleased, demand the manifest sheets, and make quick and efficient examinations.[66]

The main building at Ellis Island, Williams had found in another full year of experience, was inadequate to the purpose for which it was designed, as he had reported earlier,[67] and additional hospital facilities were needed. Problems of space and space arrangement, encountered thus early, were to haunt the Island pretty much throughout its career.

Not long afterward Williams was again under attack by the Staats-Zeitung of New York, for his treatment of aliens. President Roosevelt appointed an investigating committee to look into the matter, making the announcement

during a whirlwind visit to the Island.[68] There was little with which his accusers could charge him except over-zealous enforcement of the law and many of the missionary societies represented at Ellis Island supported Williams warmly in their testimony.[69]

The charges were refuted in the committee's report, but even before it was given to the public Roosevelt belabored one of its members because the draft did not "in one telling sentence embody what it in effect said, and back up Williams not merely by inference but by positive statement."[70] When the report was made public it did contain such a statement: "The committee is under the duty to unhesitatingly declare that Commissioner Williams is entitled to the highest commendation for the indefatigable zeal and the intelligent supervision he has exercised in administering the affairs of the Ellis Island station, and for the humane consideration he has invariably shown to the immigrants while they remained under his jurisdiction."[71]

In the next year's report, Williams stressed another group of problems. These had to do with the application of the indefinite legal tests for the admission of aliens. What rules should be applied for determining that a man was not likely to become a public charge? How was one to determine whether or not he was a pauper? How could it be discovered whether he came in violation of the contract labor law?

To meet these problems, he had formulated a few general rules to guide immigration inspectors and boards of inquiry. Aliens with small amounts of money were to be admitted only in exceptional cases, when it was reasonably

certain that they could soon find employment. This determination was to be based on a man's real occupation, his physical and mental aptitude, the state of employment in his occupation in the United States, the general state of the labor market and other considerations. The mere possession of money in ordinary amounts without such ability to become self-supporting was not to qualify an alien to land.[72] Immigrant inspectors, it seems, were expected to be economists as well as psychologists and experts in immigration law.

If it was difficult to determine who were paupers and who were likely to become public charges, it was no less difficult to ascertain which aliens came in violation of the contract labor law. The execution of this law, Williams conceded, would always be difficult as it was so easily evaded through false testimony.[73] He had formulated no rules on the subject. Actually, the law was practically unenforceable if an immigrant had been warned that it existed and had been well coached on the subject.

The problems of detention were becoming serious. For this he blamed the steamship companies, even though they had to pay for feeding the detainees. Detentions varied greatly in the case of the various companies, those bringing chiefly immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, "the new field from which immigration is mainly recruited," paying much more than the others bringing chiefly immigrants from northern Europe. It was within their own power, Williams believed, to reduce detention charges to a small amount by closer inspection on their own part. Meanwhile, "intolerable crowding and congestion now exist in all detention quarters on days when large numbers arrive." The

sidewalks of Ellis Island were sometimes used for detention purposes.[74]

The tide of immigration was still mounting in the following year, when Watchorn had succeeded Williams as Commissioner. Able career man though he was, Watchorn was staggered by his task. "To receive, examine, and dispose of 821,169 aliens in one fiscal year," he reported, "is a work so stupendous that none but painstaking students of the immigration service could possibly have any intelligent conception of what arduous duties and unusual considerations it involves."[75]

It was the problem of detention that seemed to impress Watchorn most as he began his four-year tour of duty. "Large numbers of each day's arrivals," he pointed out, "are for various causes detained at Ellis Island for many days, and all of those deported are usually detained from one to two weeks, pending the next sailing of a vessel of the line bringing them." While they were under detention they had to be fed, sheltered, and furnished with beds, baths and miscellaneous services. Their friends had to be communicated with. This had involved, Watchorn reported, sending 30,000 telegrams to relatives and friends, and receiving a like number in reply, during the past fiscal year. Some 10,000 letters addressed to detained aliens had also been received and delivered, and 16,555 remittances aggregating $260,891.85 had been received for detainees and aliens expected to arrive.[76]

Watchorn insisted that all the business of the station had been handled by the Ellis Island staff "with the fullest possible measure of courteous consideration," and that it was "unquestionably due to their individual tact, good nature, and efficiency that so vast an army of people, unfamiliar with

our tongue and unacquainted with our customs, were examined and every essential statistical fact concerning them carefully recorded, and every one of them treated politely."[77]

This was the sort of thing to put in an annual report for the benefit of the staff itself, to be sure, and no doubt there was some exaggeration in it. But there is good evidence that Watchorn's administration was not only honest and efficient but also highly considerate of the immigrants. Edward Steiner, who had known most of the Ellis Island officials over a span of years, was lavish in his praise of Watchorn and even dedicated one of his books to him, as "The Man at the Gate."[78] Steiner, in an interview, asked him what the President had said to him by way of instructions. According to Watchorn, Roosevelt had said, "All I ask of you is that you give us an administration as clean as a hound's tooth."[79] Steiner thought that he had more than followed orders.

There was a real difference in point of view between Williams and his successor. Williams shared the widely-held and growing belief that immigration ought to be restricted in quantity as well as quality. Watchorn evidently did not, but believed that the country could absorb all the immigrants meeting the legal requirements that came. While both men unquestionably had integrity and ability of a high order, this difference was no doubt reflected in their respective attitudes toward the immigrant. Williams's "law of kindness" was self-imposed; Watchorn's was spontaneous.

Many other problems presented themselves for solution at Ellis Island in the years that followed, but for the most part they were variations on old

themes--problems of overcrowding, of the application of additional legislative restrictions under operational pressure, of guerrilla warfare with the steamship companies, of defense against attacks in the press and in Congress. The climax of immigration came in 1907, when 1,004,756 immigrant aliens were received at Ellis Island.[80] Thereafter, with the panic and brief recession that came that fall, the rush subsided, only to rise again almost to the same peak just before World War I. Most of the old problems were still there, in one form or another, at the end of the period as they had been almost from the beginning. Administrators of Ellis Island were in the position of Alice and the Red Queen in the country beyond the looking-glass--they had to run very hard just to stay in the same place.

Physical Needs and Improvements.

Of all the difficulties that beset the administration of Ellis Island, none was more hampering or more persistent than the lack of adequate space. From the beginning the physical plant bulged at the seams, as the great American industrial expansion of the early 1900's brought a mounting tide of immigrants. In spite of improvisations, some long-range planning and extensive new construction, the Island's facilities were never adequate to the demands placed upon them.

The plant had been in operation only a few months when Surgeon George W. Stoner, in charge of the Medical Division, pointed out that "The new immigrant hospital on Ellis Island now nearing completion will not afford sufficient space for the service." Patients were being cared for

by contract, meanwhile, as they had been during the Barge Office period. Another pavilion would have to be built, Stoner reported, in addition to the one under construction, to take care of the sick exclusive of contagious cases. An additional building should also be constructed for officers' quarters, because the rooms intended for this purpose in the hospital building would be needed for patients. Even then the hospital would be crowded, the surgeon affirmed.[81]

In the next year it was reported that the main building, "the handsome structure" which had been expected to meet the needs of the Immigration Service at the port of New York, had in many respects failed to come up to expectations. It was not well designed in its interior arrangement, causing crowding and imposing unnecessary hardship on immigrants. This could be corrected to some extent by additions, but what seemed more serious was "the faulty material and construction involving outlays for repair and reconstruction almost from the moment the building was accepted."[82]

Surgeon Stoner at the same time reported that the Ellis Island hospital had been opened for the reception of patients on March 1, 1902, but that the ward space in it was barely sufficient for half the immigrants needing care and treatment. The existing contract with the Long Island College Hospital had therefore been continued. As there were no contagious disease facilities in the new hospital, cases of this nature were being sent, as usual, to the New York City Health Department. He recommended "that the present ward space of the hospital be duplicated, and a separate pavilion constructed for isolation and observation wards."[83]

Williams renewed his complaints about the main building in 1903, declaring that "no amount of repairing, unless the building is remodeled, will ever render it suitable for an immigration station." To cite one of its main defects, he pointed out that "every alien, be it man or woman, encumbered with heavy and unwieldy baggage and often surrounded with clinging children, has first to mount stairs and then to descend, in undergoing the process of inspection;" this, too, at a time when few of them were in a condition to undergo fatigue. He asked for an appropriation large enough to remodel the interior of the building and to enlarge it.[84]

Special appropriations had by this time been made to enlarge the Island for the construction of additional hospital quarters.[85] But during the year ejectment proceedings had been brought in the New Jersey courts to divest the Government of its title to Ellis Island. The case had later been transferred to the New York courts. No steps were being taken toward spending the money for enlargement while the title to the whole Island was in question, though the delay was "seriously detrimental to the interests of good administration."[86]

To meet the need of additional accommodations for detainees, Williams had erected a temporary barracks, so that sleeping quarters for 1,800 people were available. Quarters for 3,000 were needed, he declared. He pointed out other specific needs: larger railroad ticket and waiting rooms; larger quarters for deportees, who must be kept separate from ordinary detainees and whose sleeping space was overcrowded and often in bad condition; more rooms for boards of inquiry, four of which were often in session with only

three rooms available; the witness rooms were too small and yet "on busy days hundreds of witnesses come to Ellis Island for the purpose of giving testimony;" the quarters for the medical examination of doubtful cases were "shockingly inadequate" and needed to be extended; additional executive and clerical space was needed, as well as a record room. To remedy these conditions, he recommended that the main building be extended to the north (east)[87] about 70 feet, in accordance with plans already prepared by the Supervising Architect.[88] The cost would be about $370,000.

While the approved project for an extension of the Island to provide space for a contagious disease hospital was held in abeyance, and Congress had not appropriated funds for the extension of the main building, money had been provided for a good many improvements by the following year. In particular, a new dining room, tiled and with a terrazzo floor, had been installed at a point formerly used for detention purposes, and a new steel ferry boat had been built and was already in service.[89] A part of the roof garden had been made into a children's playground and extensive lawns with privet hedges now gave the Island an attractive appearance. Williams urged again that the main building be extended northerly "a sufficient distance to provide additional quarters for detention purposes, for the medical examination, for the use of boards of special inquiry, for witnesses awaiting their turn to appear before these boards, and for general clerical purposes."[90]

Late in 1904 the question of title to Ellis Island was settled. The United States formally filed with the New Jersey Riparian Commission an application for permission to enlarge Ellis Island, thereby acknowledging New Jersey's title to the submerged lands.[91] The Riparian Commission shortly conveyed

to the United States by deed approximately 48 acres surrounding and including the original Island and the area already filled in.[92] This meant that work could go ahead on the building of a new connecting island for the contagious disease hospital.[93]

The contract for the new island (Island No. 3) was let in 1905.[94] It was finished in the following year and "gratifying progress" had been made in the construction of the hospital itself. While several improvements had been made, by rearrangement, in the existing structures, Commissioner Watchorn pointed out that they were still "totally inadequate" to proper inspection of immigrants. The rated capacity was 5,000 per day, but on some days in March, April and May as many as 20,000 were awaiting examination at the port. The Supervising Architect, on request, had made an inspection of the Island and confirmed the need of extensive changes and remodeling. He had estimated that $400,000 would be needed. As for new construction, another $250,000 would be necessary to complete the contagious disease hospital on a scale adequate to the mounting needs, in addition to the like sum already appropriated. It would be a mistake to build that hospital on too small a scale, as had been done with the other buildings. A new cold storage plant was also needed, the existing plant being "barely sufficient to preserve a day's supply of food in the busy season." Another ferry boat was a further urgent need.[95]

Watchorn had written more emphatically to the Commissioner-General on the subject of physical deficiencies in the spring of 1906. "There is not a single feature connected with the reception, examination and detention of aliens that is not susceptible of very great improvement," he said. The

matter of handling baggage, for example, was a very serious problem. Baggage was placed in the main building and then trucked "almost the entire length of the Island." The station had been handling 5,000 a day. It "could not have handled more and given due and lawful care to each and every examination." Even if more persons could have been examined lawfully, it was doubtful whether the baggage could have been handled for a greater number. "This has caused thousands of people to be kept on board of ships from one to four days," he reported, "and a great many complaints have been made by those who strongly sympathize with passengers who are subjected to such delay and embarrassment as was necessary in this instance."[96] When Watchorn got his $400,000, ostensibly for alterations to the main building, he spent the greater part of it on a new building to handle the baggage and add dormitory space. This, of course, eased the pressure on the main building and opened the way to alterations and improvements there.[97]

The fiscal year 1907 brought almost intolerable demands on the facilities of the Island. During the months of March, April, May and June "every available bit of space at the entire station" was "in full demand," arrivals during the period averaging 150,000 a month. The Commissioner-General's report reminded the Secretary that the Bureau of Immigration had repeatedly pointed out the "utter inadequacy of the Ellis Island station" to meet the unforeseen conditions that had arisen since the original buildings had been erected. It urged again the building of a larger refrigeration plant and a second ferry boat, as well as a doubled appropriation for a larger contagious disease hospital.[98]

There was good progress on approved construction projects at Ellis Island during the next year. The baggage and dormitory building was near completion when the annual report went in; twelve buildings of the contagious disease hospital group were finished; an extension to the general hospital on Island No. 2 was well advanced. Important changes had also been made in the main building. In particular, the dormitories on the third floor had been remodeled, improved and extended. The entire upper floor of the kitchen and laundry building had also been remodeled into one large dining room accommodating 1,000 persons at one sitting.[99]

The progress in hospital construction was particularly gratifying and the imminent completion of the existing program would, it was expected, "meet every situation incident to the care of the sick and disabled."[100] The new baggage and dormitory building would greatly relieve pressure on the main building. It was Commissioner Watchorn's expectation that its completion would permit the lowering of the examining floor to the ground level. "To anyone familiar with the present method of taking aliens up a long flight of stairs to the inspection room," he pointed out, "the proposed alteration will surely commend itself."[101]

Watchorn privately justified to his superior the heavy expenditures of funds for his new baggage and dormitory building. More space was desperately needed and alterations in the main building would not meet the situation. "An acknowledged disgraceful condition has prevailed at Ellis Island for the past five years," he told the Commissioner-General, "and owing to the severe pressure to which the detention quarters were subjected last year, an intol-

erable situation was reached--a condition which no private corporation would have permitted to continue for a single day if the laws relating to health and decent comfort in any city of the United States had been applied to it."[102]

William Williams, returning to Ellis Island for his second term as Commissioner in 1909, noted with approval the physical improvements recently made. He thought that the hospital facilities, with the completion of the contagious disease hospital on the new island, would "probably now be adequate," except that there was no proper ward for mental examinations. The "fine new dormitory building, recently built," would greatly facilitate operations,[103] although it was "already taxed to its utmost."

Although the number of immigrants received had fallen off sharply in 1908, Williams noted that it was already rising again. As it was his intention to execute the immigration law at Ellis Island "with the thoroughness which its importance requires," he believed that facilities should be made available to permit more thorough examinations than had been possible in the past. To this end, he wanted more ample space for the whole process of special inquiry--detainees' quarters, witness room, and board rooms. He promised to spell out these needs in detail.[104]

A few months after turning in his annual report, he went into the problem of space for special inquiry in a long letter to the Commissioner-General. He thought that a new story on the west wing of the main building, which would cost an estimated $78,100, would meet this group of needs. "About 11% of arriving immigrants," he stated, "are detained for special

inquiry and, even now, with relatively low immigration, the available space is utterly inadequate." The limited available detention space was reduced by furniture and hand baggage piled upon the floor. "When there are from 800 to 1,000 persons packed into these quarters, as has frequently occurred during the past few months, the conditions are indescribably bad. The toilet facilities, too, are inadequate and the ventilating apparatus is incapable of carrying off the foul air." There were often six boards meeting and there were only four board rooms, one a makeshift. Boards were sitting "either in the Inspectors' dressing room or in quarters improvised on the registry floor. In both places they are subject to interruption and disturbance of various kinds." The present witness room was too small. "These persons come from New York to wait for periods ranging from an hour to five and six hours. It has been estimated that at times 300 persons were endeavoring to get into this room, it and the stairway leading thereto being packed to suffocation. It contains no toilet facilities."[105]

The flow of aliens was setting in strongly again and, so Williams contended in the following year, often of "so inferior a character that we are required to detain for a thorough examination as many as 30 percent." This meant that ampler detention facilities were needed. These should be in or near the main building, close to the space already occupied by the medical division. He recommended an appropriation of $455,000 to erect a new building at the northeast corner corresponding with the baggage and dormitory building recently erected at the northwest corner.[106]

This building, he argued, would also provide space for other important

functions. In particular, the strict enforcement of the laws brought a good many cabin passengers to Ellis Island for more thorough examination. Over 2,500 second cabin passengers, for example, had been brought over in the spring of 1910. There should be special quarters for their detention, "in which they may be accommodated in a manner appropriate to their condition in life." Placing them in the same kind of quarters as were furnished steerage passengers resulted in "unpleasant (but often just) criticism."[107]

Another operation of increasing size and importance was the maintenance of records. Statistical records were of vital importance, especially as they were now used extensively in verifying applications for citizenship. There was room neither for the records themselves nor for the clerks who maintained them.[108]

Williams did not get his new building, but he did get enough money to make many improvements, including the addition of a third story to the west (north) wing of the main building. This was erected in 1911. It served to ease the special inquiry operations considerably. Readjustments of space in the main building also made possible an area adequate to the needs of the information office, which handled relatives and friends of arriving immigrants. The medical offices were moved from the main floor to larger space on the lower floor of the main building. The removal of the medical offices, in turn, left the whole of the main floor available for the inspection of immigrants. (Williams no longer favored the plan of moving inspection down to the first floor to save immigrants the arduous climb, although he had been first to

propose it. He probably saw no other place for it now.) The old stairway, "which created a large opening in the middle of the floor and failed to land the immigrants at the proper point," was removed and a new stairway built beneath the gallery. The capacity of the floor for inspection had been doubled. Another new stairway led from the information office to the immigrants' dining room, to the great convenience of immigrants and visitors alike. Williams was also able to get rid of the unsightly temporary wooden barracks on the north (east) side of the Island, erected some years before. In this same year, too, the contagious disease hospital on Island No. 3 was at last opened for use.[109] For the first time, all sick immigrants could be cared for on Ellis Island itself. The buildings had been completed in 1909, but their use had been delayed for two years for lack of furnishings and lighting facilities.[110]

The most urgent remaining need, Williams believed, was for more adequate and better dormitory space for detainees. There were not over 1,800 beds on Ellis Island, almost all of the three-tiered type. Frequently more than 1,800 persons had to be accommodated overnight and this in crowded dormitories which also had to serve as day rooms. He asked for $375,000 to add a third story to the baggage and dormitory building, to provide both adequate dormitory space and separate day rooms. He also asked for $80,000 to add another story to the restaurant building for detention quarters for cabin passengers; $70,000 to add a third story to the east (south) wing of the main building to house records; $40,000 to renovate the old hospital on Island No. 2, which had had "hard usage at the hands of immigrants, many of them with filthy habits," for eleven years and would be condemned by the

Figure 10.

First section of new seawall under construction at Ellis Island. This section was begun in 1913 and completed in the following year. The main building, in the background, shows the third story on the north wing, completed in 1911, but not the third story on the south wing, which was begun in 1914. The old ferry house shows at upper left.

New York Board of Health. The other two hospital buildings on that island were in "perfect condition." Williams also wanted $60,000 for a covered way between the two hospital islands, so that sick immigrants would not be exposed to the weather, and miscellaneous improvements in the recently-built contagious disease hospital. A second ferry boat, too, was still needed.[111]

The appropriation for a third story to the baggage and dormitory building was made in the next session of Congress. It was believed that with its completion there would be adequate sleeping accommodations for all immigrants likely to be detained at one time. Remaining needs on the main Island, as listed in 1912, were substantially those described in the previous year and their cost was estimated at not over $600,000.[112]

In 1913 work on the enlargement of the baggage and dormitory building got under way. Appropriations had also been made for several other important improvements, including a new story on the east (south) wing of the main building; a fireproof carpenter shop, paint shop and bakery; renovation of the interior of the old hospital; and glass inclosure of the long passageway connecting the various units of the contagious disease hospital on Island No. 3. Another piece of construction for which first funds had been provided was a concrete seawall with granite facing along part of the Island's shore. "Two important additions for which Congress still declines to grant appropriations," it was noted, were "(a) the creation of quarters in which cabin passengers may be detained so that they need not be confined with what are commonly known as immigrants--(many of them persons of

Figure 11.

Third story of the baggage and dormitory building under construction, September 29, 1913. This work was completed in the following year.


ELLIS ISLAND, IM. STA.

filthy habits); and (b) an additional ferryboat."[113]

During fiscal year 1914, the last full year of operations before World War I cut off the major flow of immigrants, other physical improvements were completed or under way. The additional story for the baggage and dormitory building neared completion; the old hospital building had been renovated, with new floors and modern plumbing; the connecting glass corridor in the contagious disease hospital group had been constructed, "affording needed protection from the elements;" the first section of the new concrete, granite-faced seawall, to replace the old decaying cribwork, was completed. Plans and specifications had been prepared for the new carpenter shop and the contract had been awarded. There had been an appropriation for an additional story at the south end of the main building, less than the estimate but probably enough to complete this much-needed space.[114]

Improvements still needed, for which Congress had made no provision, in spite of repeated requests, included a covered way connecting Islands Nos. 2 and 3. "It is not creditable to this Government," the annual report declared, "to have sick children exposed to the elements and the spray from the bay while being transported across the present open walk." Another cherished project for which no funds had been appropriated was the construction of suitable accommodations for detained cabin passengers. "There can be no wonder," it was pointed out, "that such passengers complain when placed in the present detention rooms, though they be the best Congress has given us."[115]

On the whole, Ellis Island had been well treated in the matter of appropriations from the beginning. There had been many and frequent special appropriations to meet the unforeseen demands on the immigration station. The one appeal that seems always to have found Congress with a deaf ear, aside from that for a second ferry boat, was the request for "class" detention quarters. They were to be sorely missed when the post-war rush of immigrants began.

Footnotes

1. Annual Report of the Supervising Architect, 1900, 31-32.
2. Leslie's Weekly, January 5, 1901.
3. Annual Report of the Supervising Architect, 1897, 25.
4. Ibid., 1898, 4; Harper's Weekly, February 26, 1898.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. New York Times, December 3, 1900; Harper's Weekly, January 19, 1901.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.; New York Times, December 3, 1900.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.; Harper's Weekly, January 19, 1901. Including a supplementary appropriation of March 3, 1901, the cost of the original buildings was $1,500,000. Annual Report of the Supervising Architect, 1901, 33-34.
13. Architectural Record, December 1902.
14. Ibid.
15. Safford, Immigration Problems, 201-202.
16. Corsi, Shadow of Liberty, 293.
17. Edward Steiner, On the Trail of the Immigrant (New York, 1906), 79-81.
18. New York Times, August 20, 21, 23, 28, 1901.
19. Letters of Theodore Roosevelt, III, 171-172.
20. Ibid.; Francis E. Leupp, The Man Roosevelt: A Portrait Sketch (New York, 1904), 134-136; Carman, et al eds., The Path I Trod, 301-302; New York Times, December 21, 1901, March 16, 24, 1902.
21. New York Times, April 2, 1902.

22. Leupp, op. cit., 136.

23. Letters of Theodore Roosevelt, III, 280; New York Times, June 21, 1902.

24. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1902, 55.

25. Ibid., 56.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid., 56-57.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid., 57-58.

31. Ibid.

32. Leslie's Weekly, August 7, 1902.

33. Century Magazine, March 1903.

34. New York Times, January 16, 17, 1905.

35. Ibid., January 17, 1905.

36. Ibid., June 5, 1913.

37. Ibid., July 1, 1913.

38. Oscar Handlin, The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations that Made the American People (Boston, 1951), 56-58.

39. Broughton Brandenburg, Imported Americans (New York, 1904), 215-222.

40. Steiner, On the Trail of the Immigrant, 64-77.

41. Ibid., 76.

42. Paul Knaplund, Moorings Old and New: Entries in an Immigrant's Log (Madison, 1963), 147-149.

43. Stephen Graham, With Poor Immigrants to America (New York, 1914), 42-47.

44. Safford, Immigration Problems, 19-20.

45. Ibid., 34-35.

46. Ibid., 43-44.

47. Ibid., 76-78.

48. Ibid., 81-83.

49. Ibid., 245-247.

50. Ibid., 261-262.

51. Popular Science Monthly, January 1913.

52. Corsi, Shadow of Liberty, 72-75.

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid.

55. Ibid., 75-76.

56. Ibid., 77.

57. Safford, Immigration Problems, 260-261.

58. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1912, 27-28.

59. Safford, Immigration Problems, 90.

60. Corsi, Shadow of Liberty, 285.

61. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1903, 66.

62. Ibid., 66-68. See also New York Times, January 4, 1903.

63. Letters of Theodore Roosevelt, III, 411-412.

64. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1903, 67-68.

65. Ibid., 68-69.

66. Ibid.

67. Ibid.

68. New York Times, September 17, 1903.

69. Ibid., October 6, 7, 8, 16, November 3, 1903.

70. Letters of Theodore Roosevelt, III, 659-660.

71. New York Times, February 29, 1904.

72. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1904, 100-106.

73. Ibid.

74. Ibid.

75. Ibid., 1905, 71-72.

76. Ibid.

77. Ibid.

78. Steiner, On the Trail of the Immigrant, dedication, 86-93.

79. Ibid., 82.

80. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1907, 5.

81. Ibid., 1901, 40.

82. Ibid., 1902, 51-52.

83. Ibid., 60-61. All the buildings in the original plan were completed by the end of fiscal year 1902. Annual Report of the Supervising Architect, 1902, 45-46.

84. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1903, 65-66.

85. Supplementary construction was handled by the Department of Commerce and Labor, rather than by the Treasury Department. Annual Report of the Supervising Architect, 1903, 53-54.

86. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1903, 65-66.

87. Since the building was not in line with the cardinal points of the compass, the front was sometimes referred to as the "west," sometimes as the "south"; the rear was indifferently called the "north" or the "east." Here the rear of the building, the side toward Manhattan, is obviously meant.

88. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1903, 65-66. The temporary barracks had been "added to the main building." Leslie's Weekly, July 9, 1903.

89. This was the Ellis Island, out of commission but still lying in the slip at the Island in 1965.

90. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1904, 100-106.

91. New York Times, July 19, 1904.

92. Pike, Ellis Island: Its Legal Status, 61-63; New York Times. December 18, 1904.

93. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1905, 71.

94. New York Times, April 15, 1905.

95. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1906, 69-71.

96. Commissioner Robert Watchorn to Commissioner-General F. P. Sargent, April 25, 1906. Alterations and Improvements, Ellis Island--General. File No. 52519/18, General Immigration File. Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, National Archives.

97. Ibid., 1906-1908, passim.

98. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1907, 76-78, 80-83.

99. Ibid., 1908, 135-136.

100. Ibid., 138-139.

101. Ibid., 139.

102. Watchorn to Sargent, June 9, 1908. File No. 52519/18, General Immigration File.

103. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1909, 134.

104. Ibid.

105. Williams to Commissioner-General, December 3, 1909. File No. 52519/18, General Immigration File.

106. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1910, 134-135.

107. Ibid., 135.

108. Ibid.

109. Ibid., 1911, 144-145.

110. Acting Commissioner-General F. H. Larned to the Assistant Secretary, June 19, 1909; Williams to Commissioner-General, October 19, 1910. File No. 52519/18, General Immigration File.

111. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1911, 145-146.

112. Ibid., 1912, 29.

113. Ibid., 1913, 184-185.

114. Ibid., 1914, 225-226.

115. Ibid., 226.

CHAPTER IV

Wartime Interlude

The Tide Slackens

With the outbreak of general war in Europe at the beginning of August, 1914, the great tide of immigration slackened. The leading emigration ports of Hamburg and Bremen, in Germany, came under British blockade, and the German liners sought shelter wherever they happened to be. The flow from Liverpool, another great emigration port, was reduced. Immigration continued for a time from some of the Mediterranean ports, but became increasingly hazardous as submarine warfare developed and was reduced to a trickle after Italy entered the war. The heavy migration from the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires ceased almost at once and almost completely.

The impact of the war was felt almost at once on Ellis Island,[1] and was reflected statistically in the years that followed. In the fiscal year 1914, the last full year of migration, 1,218,480 immigrant aliens were admitted to the United States, 878,052 of them through the port of New York.[2] During the fiscal year 1915 there were only 326,700 admissions, 178,416 of them through New York. Immigration had been reduced by approximately 75 percent in a single year.[3] As the war went on the numbers diminished, the low point being reached in 1918, when only

28,867 immigrant aliens entered the port of New York.[4]

One natural consequence of the lessened traffic through Ellis Island was a reduction in the working force. There were many furloughs and transfers ordered by the Department from the veteran staff that had been carefully built up under Commissioners Williams and Watchorn.[5] This process went so far in the first year of the war that it impaired the efficiency of the station and made it "difficult to perform properly and promptly the duties incumbent upon it even though immigration" had "so greatly diminished."[6] After the United States entered the war the old staff was further dispersed.[7] It is probable that the organisation never again attained its prewar efficiency while Ellis Island remained a major point of reception for immigrants. Some of the odium heaped on the Island during the immigration revival of the early 1920's is undoubtedly attributable to wartime administrative and personnel dislocation.

Another and more constructive result of the falling off of immigration was the opportunity given to improve the medical examination. Much more thorough inspection was made of those immigrants who did arrive. "The results attained," it was reported, "show conclusively that the medical inspection heretofore accorded aliens has been totally inadequate to the conditions existing." As it was assumed that after the close of the war there would be a considerable influx of diseased and mentally deficient aliens, this seemed the time to introduce a system of inspection that would reduce admissions of such undesirables to a minimum. It was recommended

that the more intensive individual examination be permanently established in place of the old line inspection.[8]

There was more opportunity, also, to look into the activities of the missionary and immigrant-aid societies that maintained representatives at Ellis Island. These organizations had always been a part of the scene and their work as a whole was undoubtedly very helpful. Some of them, however, were primarily commercial in nature, actually preying on the immigrant, and under Commissioner Williams one or another of them had from time to time been expelled from the Island.[9]

Now it became possible to make a systematic check of missionary operations. There were 40 such organizations represented at Ellis Island at the beginning of the war, and 15 of them maintained immigrant homes in New York City where arriving and departing aliens might obtain board and lodging. Many immigrants needing help, particularly females, were discharged to their custody. Periodic inspection of these homes by the Commissioner's office, it was reported in 1915, "has tended to raise the standard of service and help extended to the immigrants." Some of them, it was found, were acting as ticket agents of the steamship companies. This practice was believed "incompatible with the purposes for which they are granted the privilege of representation at Ellis Island," and it was recommended that it be discontinued.[10]

The slackening tide of immigration also made possible a policy of "humanizing" Ellis Island. This policy was inaugurated by the new

Commissioner, Frederic C. Howe, a well-known municipal reformer, a long-time friend of President Wilson, and recently director of the People's Institute at Cooper Union in New York City. He had heard Ellis Island referred to as the Island of Tears, "one of the tragic places of the world,"[11] and set out to change it.

Howe's early activities as Commissioner were described in an issue of the Survey, spokesman of the relatively new social service profession, a few months after his appointment in the summer of 1914. "Commissioner Howe has two advantages over previous commissioners at Ellis Island," the Survey noted. "In the first place, the great falling off of immigration since war began, has given him time for experiments and a small group with which to experiment. All former commissioners have been so buried under the administrative detail of dealing with a million immigrants a year that they had no imagination for additional work."[12]

Howe had determined to change some of the old tradition at Ellis Island, which undoubtedly stressed efficiency at some cost in human warmth, and "to make of it a comfortable waiting room for those newcomers whose start in America must be safeguarded by certain precautionary measures."[13] In other words, he set out to make life a little less grim for detainees. This process began with the simple steps of taking benches out of storage, placing them on the lawn, and letting people out of detention quarters to sit on them. Next followed an outdoor playground for the children, and a teacher to direct it. Inside the detention quarters he broke a doorway through the wall separating husbands and wives and made it possible for them to see each other at other

than meal times. Cheap sewing materials were provided for the women, toys for the children, and foreign newspapers were distributed. Out on the piazza swings were set up. On Sunday afternoons there were band concerts, and Commissioner Howe talked of adding folk dancing. By arrangement with the Board of Education he planned to set up a school for detained children and classes for adults.[14]

The sleeping and boarding arrangements he found fairly adequate. The food was good, he thought, but he had stationed inspectors in the dining hall to take any complaints about it. The bunks in the sleeping quarters were not bad and there had just been completed space for 1,000 immigrants. "In fact," said the Survey, "the commissioner regards the regimen of the plant at Ellis Island as pretty well managed;--it is the fact that human beings are inside it, not digits in an annual report, which he believes has been forgotten."[15]

This picture of growing sweetness and light was only a little dimmed at first by the natural resistance to change on the part of the staff, by lack of harmony between Howe and his immediate superior in Washington, and by the gradual accumulation on Ellis Island of deportees who could not be sent home because the ships were no longer sailing to their native ports.[16] Nearly a year after Howe had taken office the innovations he had made on the Island were again described admiringly. "These changes," said the Immigrants in America Review, "have been due to the humanising

personality of Dr. Frederic C. Howe, the present Commissioner, who was appointed last fall by President Wilson for this very purpose."[17]

Howe had tried to make the main examination hall attractive by placing plants in the windows, hanging historical pictures on the pillars, and draping large American flags from the balcony. He trusted that these would "express in some measure ideals of patriotism, beauty and service to the new arrivals." He wanted to have the immigrants well started on their way to becoming good American citizens before they left the Island. As it had been and still was, "they arrive, we see that they are qualified to enter, tag them and then pass them on to shift for themselves." Ellis Island, he thought, ought to be a concrete impression of the best of America.[18]

Visitors to the Island at this time noticed the courteous treatment from all employees. "It is evident," said the Review, "to one familiar with the Old Ellis Island, that a new spirit of service is permeating the entire official force there." Complaint and suggestion boxes were found in various parts of the station. The staff had been organized on a democratic basis, each division sending a delegate to a periodic staff meeting to discuss suggestions. Prominent Government officials and immigration experts attended and spoke at these weekly staff meetings.[19]

The winter of 1914-1915 had been one of serious unemployment in New York and elsewhere, in part due to the war. Commissioner Howe, finding himself with empty sleeping quarters on his hands, had opened two buildings usually used as sleeping quarters for detainees to the local unemployed, chiefly immigrants. Some 750 men were given shelter there during the winter

months. The Ellis Island ferry took them over to the Battery every day so that they could look for work, and a charitable organization set up a soup kitchen for them there. "The expense to the Government," Howe said later, "was practically nothing."[20]

Wartime Problems

Howe's reforms, perhaps inevitably, gradually created enemies for him and his administration. As there was plenty of room at Ellis Island, he proposed to have second cabin passengers as well as steerage passengers landed there. A more thorough examination would be possible than the hurried one usually given to cabin passengers on the way up the bay from quarantine in the midst of preparations for landing and often in poor light. After their landing they were often fleeced in hotels and by baggagemen. If they were landed at Ellis Island, he reasoned, they would have the protection that the immigration station offered to the steerage passengers. At once there was a great outcry, particularly from Hoboken, where a very large percentage of passengers were then landed. Howe hoped for a simple order directing the desired action, but instead the Commissioner-General called a hearing on the subject at the Island. At this hearing a hungry crowd appeared, protesting against the proposal, including railway and steamship agents, hotelkeepers, expressmen, representatives of the Hoboken Chamber of Commerce and witnesses from elsewhere in New Jersey and from New York City. The entire community seemed to regard the second cabin immigrants as their legitimate prey. "The order for the change," Howe recalled, "was never made."[21]

Howe also crossed swords with the railroads on another matter. He found that the railroad "pool" at Ellis Island, which divided up the business of transporting immigrants to inland points, often sent passengers to the West by the most circuitous routes. "They lost days of time," according to Howe, in the process, and "often reached their destination late in the night without friends to meet them." He tried to get an order to correct this practice, which was based on what the railroads considered fair sharing of the traffic, but could not get action.[22]

He found that the rate paid by steamship companies for the care of immigrants detained in hospital was a purely nominal figure based on a calculation made many years before. He had the actual cost of the hospitals worked out by accountants on a per diem basis and obtained an order from the Department fixing the charges on the basis of cost. This brought in hundreds of thousands of dollars in revenue, but "organised the hostility of the steamship companies."[23]

There was also early in the war period a national hue and cry over the white slave traffic, which was assumed to be "an alien vice." There were many arrests of aliens, both women and men, throughout the country, and hundreds of these people were sent to Ellis Island for custody pending deportation. Most of them, from southern and eastern Europe, could not be deported because of the war. Howe found that many of them had been arrested and marked for deportation without much in the way of due process of law, and that many of the women were not real professionals. He invited a group of prominent New York women to the Island to listen to the evidence of some

of the arrested women. On the basis of this committee's report, he proposed to the Secretary that casual offenders in the group should be paroled. This action was approved and many were released.[24] This, too, made enemies.

The food contract at Ellis Island expired at the end of fiscal year 1916. Howe, believing that the Government could do better for the immigrant by operating the restaurant itself, got the approval of the Secretary for such a plan. An amendment to this effect was inserted in a pending appropriation bill.[25] At this point Congressman William S. Bennet of New York, who had been the attorney for the food contractors, introduced and secured approval of an amendment forbidding the use of the appropriation for this purpose. Howe injudiciously criticized the action and Bennet denounced him as "a half-baked radical with free-love ideas," demanding an investigation of his administration.[26]

Howe had, Bennet charged, failed to separate the sexes on the recreation ground, had admitted prostitutes to the United States contrary to law, and "by proposing to have the government sell food to the immigrants on the island in place of granting a restaurant concession to contractors he was committing the government to a socialist practice."[27] Howe defended himself ably and was supported by the Secretary of Labor. He was able to fend off this attack after hearings before the House Immigration Committee,[28] but some of the mud clung to him. He was marked as a radical and a dangerous innovator.

Just when the Howe-Bennet controversy was at its height, Ellis Island suffered its worst disaster since the burning of the first immigration station. Early on the morning of July 30, 1916, there began a series of tremendous explosions at Black Tom Wharf, just behind Bedloe's Island and less than a mile from Ellis. The wharf and a number of moored barges were piled with munitions on the way to Russia. It was afterwards determined that the explosions were the work of German saboteurs.[29] Plate glass was shattered all the way to Times Square and there was panic all over New York City.[30]

Some of the flaming barges were carried, by a rising tide and a west wind, over to Ellis Island, where they set fire to the cribbing of the sea-wall. Heroic tugboat crews towed them away before they exploded, and the station escaped complete destruction. The immigrants in the detention quarters became panicky but were finally loaded on the ferry boat and taken to the Barge Office. The hospital patients, including a number of insane, were taken outdoors to the tennis courts on the sheltered side of the Island. Flaming debris fell in showers and the New York Fire Department came over to help put out the fires. Although there were more than 600 people on the Island, not a single life was lost and there were no serious injuries.[31]

"Visiting the little islands of the immigrant station group a day after the explosion," a reporter for the Survey declared, "one feels that he is treading ground where a miracle has been wrought." Shrapnel and bullets had rained down upon buildings and grounds; windows were blown out; locks and hinges were wrenched away; tiles were loosened in patches on the roofs;

window panes and transoms were either pulverised, bitten into, or jarred into patterns of lace.[32] With all this destruction the lack of casualties did seem little less than miraculous.

The damage was officially estimated at over $400,000 for replacements and repairs, but the fabric of some of the buildings had also been shaken. It was feared that injuries difficult to correct would show up later. Congress granted an appropriation of $150,000 to begin restoration, and there was a later supplement of $247,000. While repair work was going on, other improvements for which funds had been provided were delayed.[33]

When the United States entered the war, in April, 1917, the crews of the German ships in the harbors of New York and New London were picked up and transferred to Ellis Island for internment. The move had been prepared in advance and the operation proceeded smoothly.[34] There were about 1,150 officers and crew involved. "The burden put upon the station through this emergency called for a complete rearrangement of quarters, the shifting of detained aliens to other rooms, and the reorganization of the administration," it was reported later. The entire detention and dormitory quarters in the baggage and dormitory building were given over to the German crews, over which a stricter supervision than usual for detained immigrants had to be maintained. According to the New York Times they were quite comfortable and suffered from nothing but boredom and the lack of beer.[35] A detachment of soldiers was detailed by the War Department as a military guard for the Island, and the ground floor of the same building was used as barracks for them. A stockade was built around the power plant and floodlights were installed on the various buildings.[36]

In addition to the interned German merchant sailors, Ellis Island became host to a considerable number of enemy aliens arrested on warrant by the Department of Justice throughout the country and brought there for custody. Other arrests were made less formally by other Government agencies, including the Army.[37] These people, suspected of being spies and saboteurs, required even closer supervision than the other Germans and were kept at all times under strict surveillance. At the same time, the staff of the station was depleted by the detail of interpreters and inspectors to other stations and to other Government agencies. A new immigration law, requiring more rigorous inspection of arriving aliens, had gone into effect in the spring of 1917, and called for more inspectors on the station itself just when the ranks were being thinned.[38]

The immigration law of 1917, passed over the veto of President Wilson, was a detailed, general act repealing all prior immigration legislation inconsistent with it. It codified previous provisions for exclusion and added new categories. There were now 33 different classes of aliens excluded from the United States, the most important new category being the illiterate. This law remained a basic piece of immigration legislation until 1952.[39]

In addition to adding a new test, that of literacy, to the accustomed routine of immigration examination, the law called for the medical examination of all alien members of arriving ships' crews. This meant that every arriving merchant vessel had to be boarded, whether it carried any passengers or not. This put a great strain on the boarding division of the Ellis Island medical staff.[40]

Both the War and Navy Departments had their eyes on Ellis Island from the time the United States entered the war. After the interned German seamen and many of the other interned enemy aliens were removed to a new internment station at Hot Springs, N. C., to Fort Oglethorpe, Ga., and other stations, and the sick immigrants and internees were turned over to private institutions, the Ellis Island hospital was taken over by the Medical Department of the U. S. Army for the remainder of the war.[41]

At the same time, early in 1918, the Navy took over the baggage and dormitory building, together with considerable space in the main building. Several thousand Navy enlisted personnel were quartered there, pending assignment to ships. The Army Medical Department, in addition to the regular Ellis Island hospital group of 21 buildings fully equipped to receive patients, was also granted hospital space in the main building. The Immigration Service retained physical control over the whole station, supplying heat, light, power, refrigeration, telephone service and building maintenance, retaining minimum quarters for its own reduced operations.[42]

One piece of major repair work after the Black Tom explosion had been the restoration of the damaged ceiling over the great registry room on the second floor of the main building. The new ceiling was in the form of a "Gustavino arch," and its installation was believed to have added greatly to the general appearance of the large hall. A new red tile floor was also laid in the room, in a pattern to correspond with that of the ceiling, in place of the worn old concrete floor. This sanitary and easily cleaned

surface made the room suitable for hospital use and it was so employed by the Army.[43]

After the Army and Navy took over most of Ellis Island, the regular inspection of arriving aliens had to be conducted on board ship or at the steamship piers. This added greatly to the difficulties of the work, involving as it did a wide dispersal of activities. The Commissioner-General, in his 1918 report, asked for both additional medical officers and additional inspectors,[44] even though the head count of arriving immigrants was the lowest in Ellis Island's history.

The use of the Island by the War and Navy Departments came to a close in 1919, the Navy relinquishing its quarters at the end of March and the Army releasing the hospitals at the close of the fiscal year. The Commissioner-General took occasion to observe, in his annual report, that "it is pleasant to record that the Immigration Service was in position to furnish housing accommodations at our greatest port of embarkation to thousands of American sailors who were required to man vessels carrying troops and supplies overseas. Also that hospital facilities were available for thousands of returned heroes whose illness and wounds demanded hospital care when they were removed from the transports at New York."[45]

The Big Red Scare, 1919-1920

Even while the Army and Navy were using most of Ellis Island, the Immigration Service had granted space to the Department of Justice as detention quarters for alien enemy suspects pending examination and internment or other disposition.[46] With the close of the war the national

fear of the "Hun," which had reached the point of hysteria, subsided, only to be replaced by a new fear, that of the "Red." An act passed just a few weeks before the Armistice had made the deportation of alien anarchists and other radicals much easier. It had, in fact, authorized the deportation of any alien simply on grounds of belonging to an organization that advocated revolt or sabotage.[47] Soon Ellis Island became the principal dumping ground for this class of undesirables, as it had been for suspected wartime enemies.

The first such group, mostly members of the Industrial Workers of the World (the I.W.W. or "Wobblies"), arrived from Seattle in February, 1919, aboard a train popularly dubbed the "Red Special." It had been generally expected that these aliens would be deported at once, and the progress of the train eastward was "welcomed by one daily newspaper after another," which united "in commendation of such a skimming of the great American melting-pot."[48] Commissioner Howe tried to secure at least the rudiments of due process of law for these people, and some of the amenities of life, as he had done for the enemy aliens. Although his immediate chief, Commissioner-General Anthony Caminetti, was collaborating closely with the Department of Justice in the deportation procedure, Howe was supported by Secretary of Labor William Wilson. Both were denounced for their pains, and Howe was branded as a Red, just as he had been called pro-German only a little while before. Wilson demanded a full hearing for each candidate for deportation, and that it be shown that he had personally advocated revolution or sabotage. All but a handful of the "Red Specials" were eventually released.[49]

During the summer and fall the fear of Red revolution mounted, though for some time no further mass deportations were attempted. Howe, at the request of President Wilson, spent some months in Paris as a member of the American delegation to the peace conference. When he returned, he found that he had lost the active support of the Secretary and with it all control of Ellis Island; that there was a powerful demand for his resignation. He soon complied.[50]

A short time later there was an investigation of his administration of the Island by the House Committee on Immigration. Figures were produced showing that of over 600 aliens arrested for deportation and sent to Ellis Island since early 1917 only 60 had actually been deported. Howe bore most of the blame for this, and many other charges were brought against him.[51] One newspaper editor, in the light of the committee hearings, luridly described Ellis Island under Howe's administration as

> a government institution turned into a Socialist hall, a spouting-ground for Red revolutionists, a Monte Carlo for foreigners only, a club where Europe's offscourings are entertained at American expense and given the impression that government officials are subject to their impudent orders, a place where the inspection of immigrants required by law is made a mere pretense even when immigration is lightest, a place of deceit and sham to which foreign mischief-makers are sent temporarily to make the public think the Government is courageously deporting them.

When Howe demanded the right to present testimony in his defense to the Committee he was ejected from the hearing room.[52]

More arrests of radicals began in November, under the leadership of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, and Ellis Island was soon filled with them. For the next several months it was primarily a detention and de-

portation prison for Reds. On December 21 the Army transport Buford, popularly known as the "Soviet Ark," sailed from New York to great public applause carrying 249 deportees, anarchists and others, to Russia. Many wives and children were left behind.[53] The Island soon filled up again. On January 2 there were raids in many principal cities on the headquarters and affiliated activities of the newly-organized Communist and Communist Labor parties. More than 4,000 people were arrested, many with warrants, some without. About 600 of the aliens arrested in New York and nearby cities were taken to Ellis Island.[54]

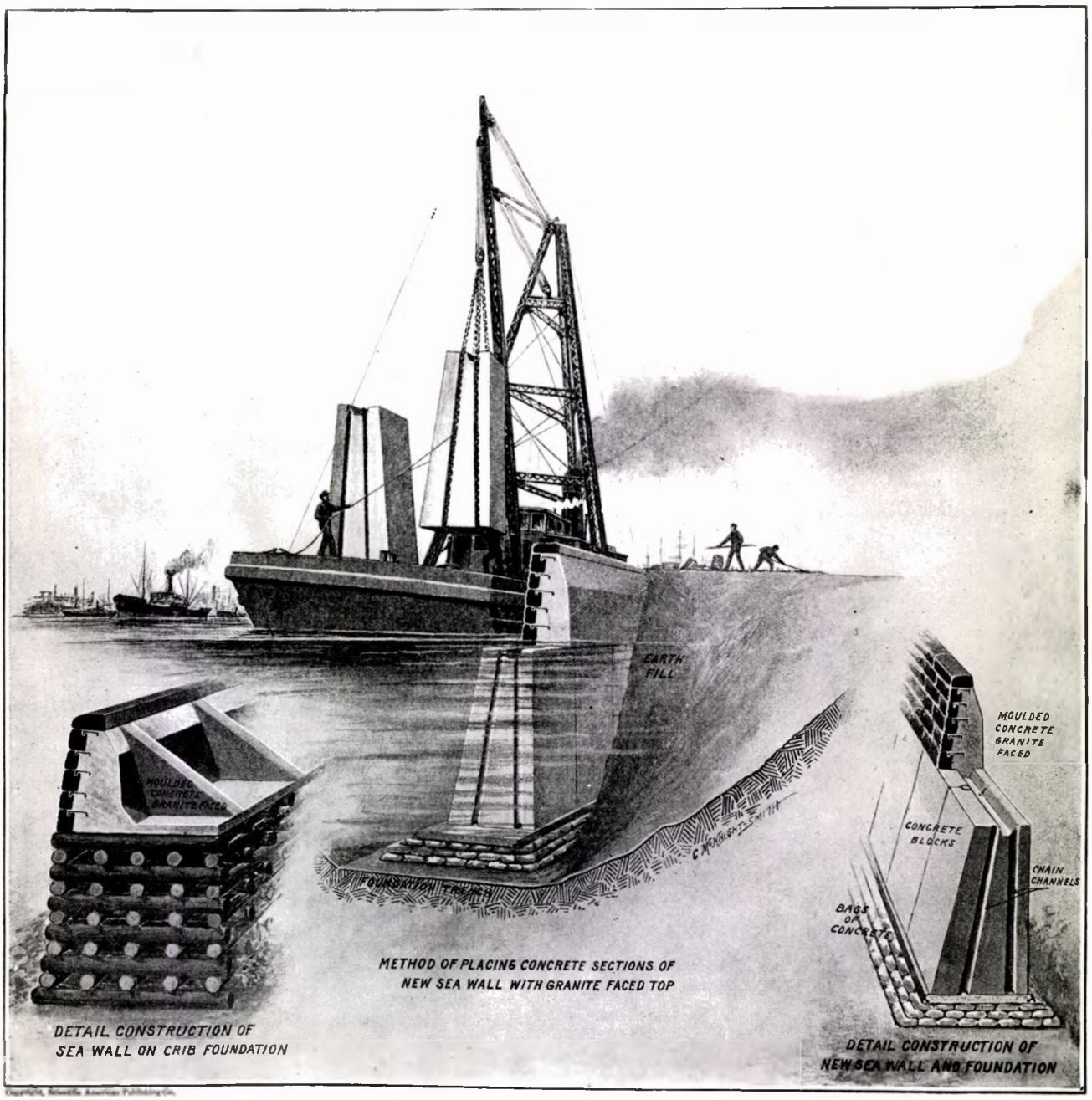
This time the public clamor for wholesale deportations was deafening. But Louis F. Post, Assistant Secretary of Labor, and Acting Secretary in the illness and absence of his chief, became the final authority in the matter. He insisted on reviewing each case on its individual merits, finally ordering about 700 deportations and cancelling 2,700 other warrants. He was charged with "coddling the Reds" and the House Committee on Rules investigated his administration. He defended himself with a great deal of spirit and the hearings were dropped. Thereafter the Red hysteria began to abate and many newspapers commended Post for simply doing his duty.[55]

Physical Needs and Improvements

One major physical improvement at Ellis Island, begun before the war, was continued at intervals during the conflict and after its close. This was the construction of a concrete and granite seawall, to take the place of the piling and cribwork originally used. The wooden seawall had become badly

Figure 12.

Seawall construction at Ellis Island in 1919. Two types of seawall are illustrated. The heavier type was used facing dredged channels; the lighter type was used elsewhere. Scientific American, April 26, 1919.



Rebuilding the seawalls of Ellis Island and adding to its acreage. (See page 427)

decayed above low water mark and extensive damage to the Island was feared. In the ferry slip between Islands Nos. 1 and 2 the constant dredging needed to keep the channel open undermined the cribbing so that the bordering sidewalks began to sag. The first appropriation for this work had been made in 1911 and the first section of new seawall had been built along the ferry slip in front of the main building. The new wall was built outside the cribbing and at a greater depth. In 1916 the new seawall was extended to the other side of the ferry slip.[56]

A further appropriation to extend this work was obtained in the following year and work was pursued even when the Island was being devoted almost entirely to wartime activities.[57] In 1919, when the construction of the seawall was far advanced, it was described in some detail, with illustrations, in the Scientific American as an interesting piece of engineering.[58] The new seawall was extended across the slip dividing Islands Nos. 2 and 3, with the intention of filling the slip and thereby enlarging the Island. This fill seems not to have been made, however, until some time later.[59] It was in place by 1933, but just when it was made is not clear.

Another project which Commissioner Williams had repeatedly urged was brought up again in 1916. This was "the urgent need of more suitable accommodations for detained cabin passengers." It was estimated that $100,000 would be required to provide suitable accommodations at Ellis Island for such passengers, and the Commissioner-General recommended that it be approved.[60] But while the 1917 appropriation did provide funds for some urgently needed items, such as the seawall extension and new

boilers for the power house, it made no provision for detention accommodations for cabin passengers. The request was renewed. "Complaints not only from passengers but from representatives of foreign governments," it was noted, "affecting treatment of their nationals have at times accentuated the necessity for quarters for cabin passengers at Ellis Island." It was hoped that the item would be allowed without further delay, "so that the work may be completed before the resumption of normal immigration is actually taking place."[61]

The 1918 appropriations were disappointing. Improvements amounting to $513,500 had been submitted, but most of them had been disallowed. The only items favorably acted upon were for new engines and generators for the power house and the additional seawall appropriation. A third story on the kitchen and laundry building had been proposed and it was "especially regretted" that it had not been authorized. This space, it was noted, "would be particularly valuable to the naval authorities at present, and the means would be at hand when immigration is resumed to avoid the serious embarrassment involved in the detention of cabin passengers, for whom satisfactory accommodations are almost wholly lacking."[62]

Some of the repair work made necessary by the Black Tom explosion in 1916 was not completed until two years later. This included the new ceiling over the big registry room in the main building, already referred to.[63] Beyond this extensive repair, and progress on the seawall, the war period was largely a static one as far as the physical development of Ellis Island is concerned.

Footnotes

1. New York Times, August 7, 18, 1914.
2. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1914, 35.
3. Ibid., 1915, 57.
4. Ibid., 1918, 54.
5. New York Times, November 26, 1914.
6. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1915, 223.
7. Safford, Immigration Problems, 91.
8. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1915, 222; 1916, 178.
9. Ibid., 1909, 134; 1910, 136-137; 1913, 186-187.
10. Ibid., 1915, 222-223.
11. Frederic C. Howe, The Confessions of a Reformer (New York, 1925), 252-254; New York Times, August 18, 1914.
12. Survey, October 17, 1914.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Howe, Confessions, 254-258; Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1915, 221.
17. Immigrants in America Review, June, 1915.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.; New York Times, January 15, February 16, 1915.

21. Howe, Confessions, 260-262; New York Times, October 6, 1915, January 21, 26, 1916.

22. Howe, Confessions, 262.

23. Ibid., 262-263; New York Times, July 25, 1915.

24. Howe, Confessions, 268-272.

25. Ibid., 259-260.

26. New York Times, July 1, 3, 17, 19, 1916; Outlook, August 2, 1916.

27. Survey, July 29, 1916.

28. New York Times, July 28, 29, August 12, 1916.

29. Corsi, Shadow of Liberty, 117-118.

30. New York Times, July 30, 1916.

31. Corsi, Shadow of Liberty, 118-120.

32. Survey, August 5, 1916.

33. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1917, XXIX.

34. Ibid., IX-X; New York Times, April 7, 1917.

35. Ibid., April 15, 1917.

36. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1917, 176-177.

37. New York Times, November 20, 1917.

38. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1917, XXIX.

39. Bennett, American Immigration Policies, 26-28.

40. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1917, 178.

41. Ralph C. Williams, The United States Public Health Service, 1798-1950 (Washington, 1951), 580; Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1918, 37-38; New York Times, February 24, March 8, 1918.

42. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1918, 37-38.

43. Ibid., 269.

44. Ibid., 272.

45. Ibid., 1919, 28-29.

46. Ibid.

47. Bennett, American Immigration Policies, 28; Higham, Strangers in the Land, 221.

48. Literary Digest, March 1, 1919; New York Times, February 11, 12, 1919.

49. Higham, Strangers in the Land, 229; Robert K. Murray, Red Scare; A Study in National Hysteria, 1919-1920 (Minneapolis, 1955), 176-177, 194-195; Howe, Confessions, 273-275.

50. Ibid., 326-328; New York Times, September 7, November 27, 1919.

51. New York Times, November 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, December 1, 1919.

52. Murray, Red Scare, 205; Literary Digest, December 13, 1919; Howe, Confessions, 276.

53. New York Times, December 21, 22, 1919; Corsi, Shadow of Liberty, 186, 194-195; Murray, Red Scare, 206-207; Louis F. Post, The Deportation Delirium of Nineteen-twenty: A Personal Narrative of an Historic Official Experience (Chicago, 1923), 4-5, 31-32.

54. Ibid., 106-109; Murray, Red Scare, 213-214; New York Times, January 4, 1920.

55. Murray, Red Scare, 246-249; Post, Deportation Delirium, 187; Higham, Strangers in the Land, 231-232.

56. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1916, XXIV-XXV.

57. Ibid., 1917, XXIX; 1918, 38.

58. Scientific American, April 26, 1919; Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1919, 29, 31-32.

59. Ibid., 306; Berengarten, Ellis Island, 29-30.

60. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1916, XXV.

61. Ibid., 1917, XXIV.

62. Ibid., 1918, 38.

63. Ibid., 269.

CHAPTER V

Revival and Restriction of Immigration

The Returning Tide

There was only a moderate rise in immigration in 1919. The normal lines of European continental and maritime transportation had been badly disrupted by the war, and were not restored all at once. Political and economic conditions in many lands were at first chaotic. For a time the outward movement through the port of New York exceeded the inward, as many new Americans returned to Europe to see how their relatives had fared during the great conflict.

In the following fiscal year there was a noticeable upturn, with 225,206 immigrant aliens being admitted at New York.[1] The departure of the Army and Navy had made Ellis Island available once more to the Immigration Service. The inspection of steerage passengers was completely resumed there, and the maintenance and guard staff were recruited up to prewar strength. By the end of the fiscal year pressure on the station, increased per immigrant by the more detailed examination procedures now in vogue and the resulting higher percentage of detentions, was beginning to mount. The need of new facilities, in addition to the proposed dormitory for cabin passengers, was foreseen. With the increase in immigration "already noticeable" and the assurance that unless it was restrained by the action of foreign governments or by new American legislation, it would continue for many years to come, the available space would become inadequate, "notwithstanding the immensity of the structures at Ellis Island." The

need of a large new dormitory was foreseen by the Commissioner-General.[2]

Ellis Island's function as a deportation center had by no means ceased, though deportation was no longer attempted on a mass basis nor in a mood of hysteria. A special deportation and transportation section was organized by the Bureau and parties of aliens subject to deportation on a variety of grounds were collected over the country and shipped periodically to Ellis Island or, increasingly, to the Mexican border, for embarkation or ejection.[3] This system remained in use for many years, and it continued to demand a share of the available dormitory and hospital space at the Island, and a portion of its staff services.

Another operation that had resulted from wartime legislation was the examination of alien members of ships' crews. While this examination continued to be held on shipboard, or sometimes at the Barge Office, seamen held on medical grounds, usually venereal disease, were brought over to Ellis Island for treatment. They proved to be a difficult class of patient. With sick immigrants, sick deportees, and diseased alien seamen, the hospitals that had only recently been returned to the Public Health Service were busy, nearly 6,000 cases being handled in the first year.[4]

The literacy test embodied in the 1917 immigration law had been long agitated and was intended by its sponsors to cut down the actual numbers of those admitted. As the postwar movement developed, it did not serve the purpose very well. The literacy rate had risen even in the backward nations of Europe since the device had first been proposed.[5] By the latter

part of the calendar year 1920 the rate of immigration was approaching that of the prewar years and Ellis Island was in trouble.

It became necessary, occasionally, to compel steamships once more to lie idle with their steerage passengers while the Island cleared itself.[6] Naturally, this brought a scolding from the newspapers. "Ever since 1914 it has been obvious that the end of the war would bring a tide of immigrants, yet not one effective step has been taken to cope with it," said the New York Times, which also declared that conditions at the port "are actually worse than during the record immigration before the war."[7] The Newark News was more charitable, at least toward the immigration authorities. Ellis Island had always been under staffed, it said. During the war, with immigration reduced to a minimum, it had been possible to make proper examinations and weed out the undesirables. "The Commissioner-General reported this in detail and urged that due preparation be made against the time when the rush would be on again." But his pleas had gone unheeded. "The island station is blocked. Ships are held idle at great expense. Incoming aliens are delayed and inconvenienced. No proper examinations can be made of the newcomers, and undesirables are bound to filter through with the desirables."[8]

A reporter for the Survey, generally sympathetic to the problems of the Ellis Island administration, wondered that "after the great machine has extracted patience, starch and intelligence from both the clientele and the practitioners, there is still such a remainder of personal interest and kindliness left in the attendants." The detention room, built to accommodate four hundred people

at the most, had a "quota of sitters-upon benches" of "frequently above a thousand." Their stay was anywhere from one day to much over two weeks. Cases for special inquiry were sometimes at the Island for as many months. "The sleeping quarters, adequate for fifteen hundred, have been at times in demand for more than three thousand immigrants who sometimes sleep standing up before being put to bed on the floor." The dining rooms, with facilities for 800, often had to feed 3,000 at one meal. "When the crowd is too great to be taken care of, the people are not even taken off the barges, but are fed coffee and sandwiches there. The antediluvian toilet rooms, the missing laundry facilities (the women wash their babies' clothes in a wash basin with sample sizes of government soap and then hang them on their beds to dry), the stinted, cramping detention quarters are things that God in His mercy and an appropriating Congress will have to care for."[9] The New York Times commented editorially of Ellis Island that "The facilities there for detaining, examining and distributing the arriving immigrants are inadequate to a degree that is a disgrace as well as a danger to the country."[10]

Frederick A. Wallis had entered on duty as Commissioner of Immigration at Ellis Island on June 1, 1920, replacing Byron Uhl, who had once more served as Acting Commissioner after Howe's resignation. Wallis had been a deputy police commissioner in New York City, was an active Democrat, an elder in the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, and had shown interest in the problems of the immigrant. His professional background was chiefly in the insurance business.[11] Wallis entered his new office full of noble plans

for the betterment of the service at Ellis Island, which he considered "the most important and interesting spot in the world today."[12] These plans were pretty well swept away by the new rush of immigration and Wallis was soon on the defensive, desperately trying to cope with a situation that would have tried even such a veteran administrator as William Williams.

While he was able to get his staff increased, and even to obtain modest pay raises for some of them, he had difficulty in recruiting first-grade personnel for the more responsible positions. Postwar prices were high and Government salaries were low.[13] He went to Washington with a plan for a $5,000,000 construction program for Ellis Island, and the Secretary presented it to Congress,[14] but that body was seriously considering bills to halt immigration altogether and was in no mood for enlarging the station's facilities.

As Wallis's frustrations grew and the barrage of criticism to which he was subjected increased in intensity, he grew querulous. Soon he was agreeing with his critics publicly, describing conditions on the Island as "deplorable." There was, he proclaimed in talks to various organizations throughout the East and in newspaper interviews, "filth, inefficiency, and red tape." These difficulties and the misery that resulted, he said, were all the harder to bear "because we have managed to pass laws bearing no relationship to our needs, such as the literacy test, and then, to make matters still worse, their application is made as inhumane and cruel as it is possible to imagine." Immigrants were regarded as a mass and not as individuals. "Our present immigration system is simply criminal." The literacy test, he asserted,

kept out sturdy workers but not educated criminals; moreover, it often separated families.[15]

This breast beating was hardly calculated to inspire confidence in his administration, but whatever his personal contribution to the situation, conditions at Ellis Island were certainly deplorable. Some of the buildings, never adequate to the needs of the station, were no longer new and all had been subjected to hard treatment during the war. Little seems to have been done toward rehabilitation afterward. Now they were being inundated with a new wave of immigrants. The administrative staff was evidently not as efficient as it had been. Detentions averaged higher than they had before the war.

"Go down to Ellis Island!" challenged a widely circulated Newspaper Enterprise Association report. "You will find:"

> Immigrants herded like cattle in the ill-ventilated, fetid detention-room.
>
> No separate quarters provided for mothers with babes in arms.
>
> Vermin on the walls and floors of detention-room and in dormitories.
>
> Immigrants forced to sleep indiscriminately two in a bed or on the floors.
>
> Only 1,100 beds, tho the overnight population averages from 2,000 to 3,000 and often is as high as 4,500.
>
> No mattresses for beds--only blankets spread over strips of steel; bunks built in tiers, three high.
>
> Only six bath-tubs for use of all the women and small children.

Figure 13.

"Future Americans 'putting up' with Uncle Sam." Immigrant women and children sleeping on the floor at Ellis Island in 1921. Literary Digest, April 30, 1921.

FUTURE AMERICANS "PUTTING UP" WITH UNCLE SAM.

Over a thousand immigrants were recently forced to sleep on blankets spread on the floors in overcrowded Ellis Island. Our treatment of the immigrant is "criminal," declare several investigators, and Commissioner Wallis agrees with them.

> No bath-tubs for men; thousands forced to use sixteen shower-baths.
>
> Lavatories so inadequate that they are a menace to health.
>
> Many wash-basins on upper floors without a water-supply.
>
> Only two pumps, with low water-pressure, inadequate against fire.
>
> Many immigrants forced to wait weeks because affidavits and even money sent by relatives had been lost. [16]

Dr. Royal S. Copeland, New York Commissioner of Health, declared conditions at Ellis Island to be "a menace to the country." There were not enough medical inspectors; 40 men had to examine 4,000 immigrants a day, or 100 each. They should not have to examine more than 20. He saw filthy blankets piled in a corner, during a visit to Ellis Island. Commissioner Wallis told him that 1,000 immigrants had slept on these blankets on the floor the night before. The bed facilities on the Island were inadequate and there were vermin everywhere. [17]

It was through an Ellis Island older, shabbier and less well-run than that seen by the prewar arrivals that a new tide of 560,971 immigrant aliens passed in the fiscal year 1921. The national total for the year was 805,228, edging up toward the record figures of the 1900's. [18]

The First Quota Law

The movement to bring about an absolute reduction in immigration had been strong ever since the 1890's and had grown, during the war if not before, to the point of being a national consensus. The method of reducing numbers

by the literacy test had failed. Now another means was to be tried. A measure limiting immigration by basing it on percentages of national representation in the 1910 census was repassed early in the administration of President Warren G. Harding, after President Wilson had vetoed it.

This act, since known as the First Quota Law, was adopted as a temporary measure pending further study of the problem of immigration, but it proved to be the most important turning-point in American immigration policy to date. It imposed the first absolute numerical limits on European immigration, and established a nationality quota system based on the pre-existing composition of the American population. The principle is still (in 1965) basic in immigration law. It insured, as it was intended to do, that the new immigration from southern and eastern Europe could not reach more than a small fraction of its prewar level.[19]

The act provided that the number of any European nationality entering the United States in any given year could not exceed 3 percent of foreign-born persons of that nationality who lived here in 1910. Nationality was to be determined by country of birth. Not more than 20 percent of the quota of any nationality could be received in any given month. The total of immigrants admissible under the system was set at 358,000, but there were numerous classes exempted from the quota system.[20]

This act, passed and approved by President Harding on May 19, went into effect on 15 days' notice, on June 3, 1921. Since not more than one-fifth of a national quota could be used in any single month, steamship

companies rushed to land their immigrants as early as possible in June. The result was the exhaustion of many national monthly quotas within the first few days. Surplus immigrants were held on board while the immigration authorities wrestled with the problem.[21]

"The final week before the new law became effective," Edward Corsi, combing the old files at Ellis Island, noted many years later, "saw a mad dash of thousands to American shores. Imagine the ships, bulging with human cargo, racing through the Narrows and into New York harbor, actually colliding with one another in their hurry to be at Ellis Island before the last minute of grace." One of the last of the immigrant ships to get under the wire was the Cunard liner Saxonia. Her immigrants were admissible under the quota, but there was no more room at Ellis Island. "Guarded by Customs officials and Cunard Line detectives, her eight hundred human souls were landed on Pier 53, North River, at the foot of West Thirteenth Street, where they camped on the floor for four days." A storm of press criticism was the natural result.[22]

During the month of June more than 10,000 aliens of various nationalities in excess of the quotas for the month were brought to the United States, most of them to New York. These aliens were, as the authorities at Ellis Island saw it, "the helpless victims of the transportation companies," and "entitled to a full examination under the immigration law and also to an appeal to the Secretary of Labor." Yet, under the new law, they were barred from entering. The situation was "an utterly impossible one." The Secretary directed, after due deliberation, that these aliens could be admitted temporarily

on bond. The decision was believed to be necessary in the interests of humanity.[23]

The steamship companies continued their mad race, month after month, in the keen competition for the reduced immigrant traffic,[24] and the policy of general admission under bond could not be continued indefinitely. Whole shiploads were turned back.[25] The results were tragic. A woman physician on the Ellis Island staff later described a scene produced by such an adverse ruling:

> A greatly magnified tragedy was a shipload of 500 immigrants from southeastern Europe who had disposed of their homes and all their possessions to start life anew on American shores, only to find that they were above the quota and were forced to return. The ensuing demonstration of these excitable people is one of my most painful reminiscences of service at the Island. They screamed and bawled and beat about like wild animals, breaking the waiting-room furniture and attacking the attendants, several of whom were severely hurt. It was a pitiful spectacle, but officials were helpless to aid. Again it may be asked why they were permitted to leave their native port without a determination of the quota. Again, however, the Island was culpable in the eyes of those who were blind to facts. Still the officials were forced to do their duty.[26]

Quite aside from the problems of administering the quota law, which itself was freely belabored in the press, Ellis Island continued under vigorous attack. It was obvious that some action must be taken there soon. In November the Outlook pointed out the inconsistency of the current enthusiasm for "Americanization" of the immigrant at the same time that most new arrivals had to pass through Ellis Island, "one of the most efficient

factories in the world for the production of hatred for America and American institutions." The writer referred to three documents that lay before him describing conditions there, one of them a "calm and dispassionate" report by a committee of the Merchants Association of New York. "The foul sanitary conditions and the inefficiency of administration at Ellis Island" were "frankly pointed out in this report."[27]

Two of these reports, including that of the Merchants Association, by "a curious coincidence," said the writer, "refer with approval to the successful administration of Ellis Island by Commissioner William Williams in 1909." It was clear that while the organic law was responsible for some of the defects and injustices of our treatment of immigrants, "much depends upon the character and ability of the Commissioner, who has great power." The Outlook, an influential liberal Republican periodical once edited by Theodore Roosevelt, had been hoping for a reorganization of Ellis Island under the Harding administration. "That hope is justified," it proclaimed, "by the announcement of the appointment by President Harding of Robert E. Tod to succeed the present Commissioner, Frederick W. Wallis, who was appointed by President Wilson."[28]

Tod was a New York banker of Scotch birth, a successful administrator and man of affairs. He had seen service in France during the war and had been cited by General Pershing and decorated by the French government. "He is competent," declared the Outlook, "to deal successfully with the complicated and perplexing problem which faces him at Ellis Island."[29]

This change of administration had no doubt a natural political aspect, but it was made in part as a result of investigations, conducted by the office of the new Secretary of Labor, of charges of both inefficiency and corruption in the handling of immigrants.[30] There was no question of Wallis's integrity, but the fact that the investigation was made and involved several weeks of study at Ellis Island, indicates doubt of his efficiency.[31]

Another official step taken by the Bureau of Immigration itself had been the appointment of a committee to make a study of welfare work among arriving immigrants. The committee was headed by Fred C. Croxton, chairman of the Ohio Council of Social Agencies, and included Julia Lathrop, head of the U. S. Children's Bureau. The action was hailed by the Survey. "Ellis Island," it said, "provides illustration of the need for such a study." A number of volunteer agencies carried on work of various sorts there. Some of them limited themselves to legal activities, trying to get immigrants their full rights under the law and to secure the admission of deferred cases. Others undertook to get them started right for their destinations and assured of friendly welcome on arrival. Some of them spent "infinite pains" on individual cases, but limited their work to special racial or religious groups. "There are naturally gaps in such a spontaneous coterie on the one hand," the Survey pointed out, "and on the other hand there is overlapping."[32]

This committee concentrated its efforts at Ellis Island and held hearings there in the fall of 1921.[33] Its report, made early in the following year, contained a number of unanimous recommendations. These went far beyond

the activities of the welfare agencies and centered on the administration of Ellis Island. The report called for the close coordination of welfare work by a director of information, to be under the immediate direction of the Commissioner. This, presumably, was intended to end the bickering that had been more or less traditional between the administration and the "missionaries." It called for a general easing of restrictions on information, asking for interpreters trained in social work to assist detained immigrants, during the period when they were not allowed to communicate directly with their friends, and for a systematic exchange of allowed information between them and their friends. It called for a general information service to be available to them at all times. "Heretofore," the report noted, "immigrants have been without service of this kind until their examinations are completed," frequently being held apart from the public for several weeks. In case of deportation, it urged that explanation of the action be given to the immigrants and to their friends.[34]

The report recommended separate and improved quarters for women and young children, with a trained dietician in charge of the feeding of the children, and better laundry facilities for all detained immigrants. It asked that separate religious services, Protestant, Jewish and Catholic, be held on Sunday. It recommended that official interpreters meet the barges taking immigrants from the ships to Ellis Island and that pending medical examination the immigrants be taken from the barges to comfortable reception rooms in the main building, instead of being held on the barges. A large room on the ground floor, used as a money exchange and railway ticket office, the report

said, should be converted into a day room for detained women and children. There should also be day rooms with a view of the bay for other detained immigrants.[35]

This was a formidable program, but the new Commissioner seems to have anticipated many of the findings of the committee and to have set about vigorously to carry them out. The Outlook, having endorsed Mr. Tod's appointment enthusiastically, sent a reporter over to Ellis Island shortly after the report was made public, to see how he was doing. Tod, it was found, was not after personal publicity and preferred action to talk. He did not profess to have mastered the situation and had no ready-made philosophy on immigration.[36]

Some real changes had already been made under his administration and "this leads one to think," the Outlook said, "that the entire ambitious programme laid out by the Committee on Immigrant Welfare Work will become a reality in the course of time." There had always been some spots on the Island that were a shock, even when it was at its best, according to the reporter who knew the Island well, and the Great War had affected conditions there very materially. Commissioner Tod was eradicating "these evil spots" from the Ellis Island routine, and the staff seemed to be pleased. "We had never thought of doing this," said several old-time officials as they pointed out changes.[37]

Tod had already fitted up a large room, formerly used for storage, into reception rooms where immigrants were taken directly from the barges.

There they could wait in comfort for their turn to be examined. In each section there were water fountains. There was a new cafeteria in the information room for relatives and friends of incoming aliens. There was a nursery where immigrant women were taught to bathe and properly clothe their infants. A director of information was soon to be appointed to take charge of all welfare work, and there were to be more interpreters, available to immigrants when they were forbidden to communicate with relations and friends. A bigger detention room for women and children was planned ("the author's last visit to the detention room was a horror"), and plans were shaping up for improving living conditions for all detainees. Commissioner Tod seemed aware that Ellis Island had been the "Island of Tears,"[38] and to be determined to change the name. This, of course, had been tried before with no permanent results.

One byproduct of the war had been the outbreak of typhus and other epidemics in Europe. Some of these were still raging or endemic in parts of that continent. Body lice, carriers of typhus, common enough among some classes of prewar immigrants, were now regarded as a national health hazard. The discovery of lice among them sometimes held up whole bargeloads of immigrants at Ellis Island for hours. Dr. Copeland, who had been sharply critical of Ellis Island the year before, renewed his attack in 1922. "I would declare Ellis Island an infected port," he affirmed. There was always a danger that cases of typhus and other epidemic diseases would slip past ships' doctors and medical inspectors at quarantine, and be "herded in

insanitary conditions at Ellis Island, where the possibilities for the development and spread of diseases are many, and these cases may enter the city of New York and spread to various communities throughout the country, carrying disease with them."[39]

It was in the midst of attacks on Ellis Island, on the grounds of health hazard, of corruption, of filth, brutality and indiscriminate herding together of immigrants, that a real effort was under way to reform the place. Commissioner Tod resigned to return to private business at the end of June 1923. He had done much to improve conditions on the Island with the limited funds available to him, but the pressure of politicians to get unqualified aliens into the country wearied him of the office. They were "making a mockery of the immigration laws," he declared some months before his resignation.[40] The New York Times was editorially sympathetic. "Despite the unwillingness of Robert E. Tod to comment upon his resignation as Commissioner of Immigration for the New York District," it revealed, "it is scarcely a secret that his action was largely in protest against the incessant political pressure used by Congressmen and others intent on violating the provisions of the immigration restriction law." This fire was naturally concentrated on the keeper of the gate at Ellis Island. "Congressmen flatter, cajole, insult or threaten him. Immigrant societies employ skilled agents and lawyers to 'get around' him. The public is stirred by tales of pitiful suffering, of disrupted families, of cruelty and harshness. The brunt of all these attacks is borne by the Commissioner."[41] It was an old story, but still true as it had been in the times of Williams and Watchorn.

Tod was succeeded by Henry H. Curran, who had long experience in the hard school of minority Republican politics in New York City, had run for mayor, been a magistrate and Borough President of Manhattan, and had an acceptable war record.[42] Curran proved to be an able administrator, but he had scarcely taken office when the storm of abuse reached a climax. British immigrants were most sensitive to the conditions at Ellis Island, it seemed, or at least most vocal in protesting them. The English press printed long articles about the inhumanity of keeping British citizens in "cages" with "people of dirtier and inferior nationalities."[43] Speeches were made in the House of Commons denouncing Ellis Island.[44] Sir Auckland Geddes, the British Ambassador to the United States, visited Ellis Island at the invitation of Secretary of Labor Davis toward the end of 1922. He made a thorough inspection and wrote a full report to the British Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Lord Curzon, who held it until August 1923 and then issued it to the press.[45]

This report was a stinging piece of criticism and produced something approaching a first-class international incident. The British press had a field day with the document, which confirmed their worst suspicions of Ellis Island, while American journals, long accustomed to belabor the Island themselves, now rallied to its defense. Starting with the plan of the main building, which "did not impress him favorably," the Ambassador discussed Ellis Island exhaustively, commenting freely on "locked doors and wire cages" which might be necessary but did "mentally suggest imprisonment," and on such details as "impacted greasy dirt that had been there days, if not weeks or months," the "compound smell of old dirt and new

immigrant," which "it took thirty-six hours to get rid of after leaving the island," badly ventilated rooms and "makeshift facilities for medical examination." General comments included the statement that he would prefer "imprisonment in Sing Sing to incarceration on Ellis Island awaiting deportation," and the opinion that the time-consuming system of appeal to the Secretary of Labor in Washington in cases of rejection, though probably right in theory, was in practice "nothing short of diabolic."[46]

The report was "grossly misleading" and "out of date because it comes eight months after his visit to the station," said Commissioner Curran to the New York Times. Most of the trouble at Ellis Island lay in the detention cases, he said, "which constitute the one per cent of tragedy." These detentions and exclusions he blamed on the steamship companies for transporting inadmissible aliens, and on certain foreign governments for permitting emigrants who could not meet the requirements to start for America. British immigrants, he declared, his Irish temper roused, were "not very well picked, in spite of the large numbers trying to get in in excess of their quota." The British, he asserted, were "just kicking Uncle Sam's dog around." The Island wasn't a hell hole or a place filled with diabolical cages. "In most instances, the story ends right and they live happy ever after." Curran did agree heartily with some of Geddes's suggestions for physical improvements, he told the New York Tribune, and thought it likely that Congress would provide the funds to carry them out. "Actually, there are no great hardships suffered by immigrants at the present time on the island," he insisted, "We are running a pretty good hotel."[47]

Curran's predecessors at Ellis Island were sought out for their opinions of the validity of the Ambassador's charges. Former Commissioner Tod admitted that "there is still much need for improvement on Ellis Island," while his predecessor, Wallis, repeated his sad tale that Ellis Island was "literally a vale of tears." Curran could accept Tod's comment, but replied with spirit to Wallis's statement that he had "seen as high as 1,100 sleeping on the cold tiled floors in the middle of winter." This was simply an indictment of Wallis's own administration of past years, he pointed out, and had no bearing on his own or Mr. Tod's.[48]

A new official report on Ellis Island given to the public at this time, prepared by Assistant Secretary of the Treasury Wadsworth, took cognizance of the "enormous complexities" of administering the immigration law and was more critical of the accommodations there than of the staff. For example, the intensive individual medical examination introduced during the war could no longer be carried out fully. Only about 800 of the 2,000 now permitted to land daily could receive this examination. With more space all could be examined. The hospitals were good and well administered, but needed better quarters for personnel. The "traffic regulations" for handling immigrants were criticised, but could probably not be much improved for lack of space.[49]

This report demonstrated that "During Mr. Curran's administration great improvement has been shown," the Independent said. Hardship cases had not been eliminated, and there would be too many of them as long as the existing law remained unmodified. "But the comforting thing about the workings of Ellis Island is the thought that Mr. Curran is exercising as much common

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sense and humanity as he can while still adhering to the spirit of the law."

With all the blistering criticism to which Ellis Island had been subjected in the recent past, it was only natural that the authorities there should make the most of what came their way in letters of commendation. To Commissioner Curran there came a letter from an intelligent and highly educated French woman, depicting an Ellis Island scarcely recognizable as the same place that Ambassador Geddes had described. It told of a detention there less than a year after his visit. What most delighted her thrifty French soul, apparently, was that all the service there was free:

> Gentlemen:
>
> After a life of travels, and study, knowing five languages, it might have been supposed that I had seen everything worthy of interest, yet I had lately an excellent opportunity to study an institution unique in the world, and extremely interesting. I mean Ellis Island.
>
> The construction is vast and imposing tho often crowded by the immense quantity of emigrants, whose absolute ignorance prevents many to appreciate that the short detention is not only imposed for the security of United States, but for their own welfare.
>
> The ladies and gentlemen in charge of the emigrants have inexhaustible patience and kindness. The large admittion hall is (in the evening) used as a concert room (once a week) and cinema once also. Sundays a Catholic, a Protestant and Jewish services are held so any creed can be followed. All this is free. Above, all around the hall, is a balcony. This have white tile walls and floors, porcelaine lavabos and baths. There are two hospital, a kindergarten, medical attendance, all free as well as board logging, entertainment, etc. etc. Interrogation rooms, etc., are on the ground floor. Besides breakfast (coffee, eggs, bread, butter, jam) (lunch--meat, vegetables, cheese, tea) dinner (soup, meat, etc.) there are (morning, afternoon, evening) three distributions of the best of sweet fresh milk and crackers. Many days thirty of those enormous cans are needed (they contain fifty gallons each, I was told). Six hundred and fifty employees are

daily in attendance. Eighteen languages are interpreted. From morning till night colored men and women clean incessantly. Towels are changed daily. Sheets three times a week.

I leave to a competent man the estimate of the daily expense of such an establishment, and I should thank heartily an expert to compare Ellis Island to anything of the same sort, any other nation in the wide world has to offer.

This statement is not solicited, but if it can make emigrants understand and appreciate what U.S. does for them, you are welcome to publish it (in any and all of the eighteen languages understood at Ellis Island).

Thank you for all passed favors, I remain,

Gratefully yours,

F. M. Lalande [51]

Ellis Island was to know some dark days again, but by 1924 it was over the worst of its many crises. The quota law, whatever its faults, had served the purpose of cutting down immigration to more manageable proportions and the organization was being rebuilt and sharpened. There were still temporary jams at the beginning of each month the first half of the year,[52] but this was done away with by the new law that went into effect at the beginning of July. The Geddes report, resented though it may have been, had made authorities in Washington more receptive to the needs of Ellis Island. When Commissioner Curran presented a program calling for $2,500,000 for the rehabilitation of the existing buildings and the enlargement of the Island, he got at least part of what was needed--enough to put the old plant in presentable condition.[53]

In the midst of the furore over the quota law and the horrors of Ellis Island, a basic change in ocean transportation had come about almost unnoticed.

After the steamship companies had come to accept the new limitations on steerage traffic, they found that the steerage itself no longer paid. It could be filled only on west-bound voyages at the height of the season, and was little patronized between seasons, because of the poor accommodations. The new liners, beginning in 1922, had no steerage quarters but a new and comfortable set of third class cabins. "Competition and the Immigration Act have had a noticeable effect on third-class accommodations," an article in the Nautical Gazette noted. "Quality and comfort are the watchwords today rather than numbers carried, and the steerage is fast becoming a thing of the past in the North Atlantic service."[54] So passed an institution that had brought more sorrow and discomfort to the immigrant than did Ellis Island at its worst.

The Second Quota Law

The quota law applied to European immigration, but not to immigration from the Americas. There were also a good many classes exempted from the quota. In 1924 there was a large total immigration, 706,896, but New York's share of it was only 315,587, or considerably less than half.[55] Migration was increasingly across the borders of Mexico and Canada, in part of natives and in part of Europeans seeking entry through softer spots than Ellis Island.

Congress was determined to cut immigration further and the debate continued intermittently throughout most of the 1920's. The first quota law, a temporary measure, had been extended while the debate went on, but in the spring of 1924 a new piece of legislation took its place, effective

with the beginning of the new fiscal year. This Second Quota Law retained the basic principle of the first, but changed the quota base from the census of 1910 to that of 1890, to cut down still further the proportion of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. This quota base was to be replaced later by a similar device based on the national origins of the American people in 1920. The quota admissible from any nation in any one year was reduced from 3 to 2 percent of the census figure, thus reducing the total quota. Annual quota immigration under the new law was reduced from 358,000 to 164,000 per year. The most important single feature of the act, as far as Ellis Island was concerned, was a provision for selection and qualification in the countries of origin. All immigrants from the quota countries were required to obtain special immigrant visas, based on examination, from American consuls. Not more than 10 percent of a yearly quota's visas could be issued in any one month. This was intended to prevent, or at least reduce, the tragedy of rejection at immigration stations in the United States after immigrants had expended time and funds in making the crossing.[56]

The idea of having immigrants examined in the American consulates abroad was an old one, more than once proposed by hard-pressed immigration officials and others.[57] Now it was to be tried out. At the end of the first year of operation under the new law its impact was summarized approvingly by the Commissioner-General. According to his report, "In no previous year has so even and regular a volume of immigrant travel come to our ports nor has such travel ever before been so carefully and consistently inspected by Government officers." Immigration under the new law was also

of a very high order, as was shown by the small percentage of rejections, in spite of the "inspection methods of increased effectiveness made possible by the even flow of travel." Complaints on the part of both the steamship companies and the traveling public had been reduced. This success had been due not only to the inspection at the consulates overseas but more particularly to the distribution of the quota over a ten-month period.[58]

The 1924 immigration law was rightly termed a "law with a heart," the report went on. "There is no more midnight racing of immigrant-laden steamers to our harbors; no more congestion of aliens in over-crowded quarters awaiting inspection at ports of arrival; no excuse for hasty or cursory inspection of aliens, or harsh and summary treatment that might result from the efforts of inspectors to facilitate travel and relieve congestion at ports of entry." The Immigration Service had at last had "an opportunity to vindicate itself of the charge heretofore made by certain interests that, in its administration of the law, it did not take the human element properly into account."[59]

The millennium had come, it seemed, as far as the reception of immigrants at the Atlantic ports was concerned. But the formation in the same year of the Immigration Service's border patrol shows that the problem of immigration control had merely been shifted to new centers.[60]

While the new quota law had a great deal to do with the improvement of conditions at Ellis Island, a good bit of internal house cleaning had been going on as well.[61] The Survey reported "a remarkably changed Ellis Island." The frightful overcrowding that had been at the root of the worst conditions of the past was gone. The new law, "combined with a long needed appropriation

and an energetic and constructive administration both at Ellis Island and at Washington," had brought about a general reform. "The housing facilities have been reconstructed; adequate modern plumbing is displacing the ancient exhibits; the iron-pipe two-decker curiosities called 'immigrant bunks' have been scrapped and in their place--wonder of wonders--there now appear beds, real beds, with mattresses, sheets and blankets! Every effort is made to keep together the families who must be detained, while at the same time providing separate quarters for single women and men."[62]

The 1924 law required that prospective immigrants applying for visas at American consulates supply testimony of their physical fitness from local medical sources. It was found that the consuls could not depend upon these medical certificates, and a good many physically unfit continued to arrive at Ellis Island. At the suggestion of the Surgeon General, the experiment was made of posting Public Health Service examiners in the consulates. This was tried out in England and Ireland and later extended to most of the European lands. This went a long way toward making the possession of an American immigrant visa the equivalent of admission to the United States.[63]

What this meant for Ellis Island was that it was rapidly losing the basic function for which it had been created--that of primary inspection of the immigrant. This situation was intensified as immigration inspectors were added to the medical officers at the consulates[64] so that, in effect, the immigrant was completely "pre-processed" when he reached New York.

While Ellis Island continued to handle primary inspections of immigrants from countries where inspection teams had not yet been installed in the consulates, its functions had so diminished that extensive reductions in

personnel were under way by 1926. Trained immigration officers were badly needed elsewhere.[65] Two years later the Commissioner-General began to speak of the station as "something of an economic problem." It was thoroughly organized and modernized, "the best equipped and operated immigration station in the world," but the buildings were "larger than needful to accommodate present-day immigration." Moreover, "the overhead generally in the maintenance of this tremendous plant," was "a heavy item of expense." The suggestion of abandoning it for a more modest base was very cautiously advanced.[66]

Footnotes

1. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1920, 87.
2. Ibid., 28-29.
3. Ibid., 11.
4. Ibid., 316-318.
5. Higham, Strangers in the Land, 308.
6. New York Times, September 24, 1920.
7. Ibid., September 25, 1920.
8. Literary Digest, October 9, 1920.
9. Survey, October 30, 1920.
10. New York Times, December 14, 1920.
11. Ibid., April 30, June 2, 1920.
12. Ibid., August 15, 1920.
13. Ibid., September 12, 1920.
14. Ibid., December 9, 1920, January 15, 1921.
15. Literary Digest, April 30, 1921.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1921, 26.
19. Higham, Strangers in the Land, 311.
20. Bennett, American Immigration Policies, 41-42.
21. Higham, Strangers in the Land, 312.
22. Corsi, Shadow of Liberty, 288-289.

23. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1921, 16-19.

24. New York Times, September 2, 1921; Literary Digest, October 1, 1921.

25. New York Times, October 2, 1921.

26. Hygeia, January 1933.

27. Outlook, November 2, 1921.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.; New York Times, October 12, 23, 1921.

30. Monthly Labor Review, February 1923.

31. New York Times, November 29, 1921.

32. Survey, August 1, 1921.

33. New York Times, November 3, 1921.

34. Monthly Labor Review, February 1923.

35. Ibid.; New York Times, January 3, 1922.

36. Outlook, February 8, 1922.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid.

39. Literary Digest, April 8, 1922.

40. New York Times, April 1, June 11, 1923.

41. Ibid., June 14, 1923.

42. Ibid., June 13, 1923.

43. Corsi, Shadow of Liberty, 289-291; New York Times, August 17,1922.

44. Ibid., December 8, 1922.

45. Ibid., December 29, 1922, August 16, 1923; Literary Digest, September 1, 1923.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.; New York Times, August 17, 1923.

48. Literary Digest, September 1, 1923.

49. Independent, September 29, 1923.

50. Ibid.

51. New York Times, February 17, 1924; Literary Digest, March 8, 1924.

52. New York Times, June 5, 1924.

53. Ibid., December 22, 1923, January 23, March 17, 1924.

54. Literary Digest, January 21, 1922.

55. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1924, 34.

56. Bennett, American Immigration Policies, 50-52.

57. See Annual Report of the Secretary of the Treasury, 1891, XLVI.

58. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1925, 1-2.

59. Ibid.

60. Ibid., 8-9, 34.

61. New York Times, December 23, 1924.

62. Survey, January 15, 1925.

63. Williams, Public Health Service, 108-110.

64. Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1927, 9.

65. Ibid., 1926, 15-16.

66. Ibid., 1928, 26-28.

CHAPTER VI

Last Phase: Detention and Deportation

New Deal at Ellis Island

Any serious proposal to abandon Ellis Island at this time might have had an unhappy effect upon Congress, which had appropriated a good bit of money only a short while before, at the urgent request of the Immigration Service, for modernizing the station. Some sort of station for the examination and hospitalization of foreign seamen had to be maintained in New York Harbor. There were always stowaways to be picked up and deported. There were still some immigrants arriving there who had not gone through processing at American consulates. There were always some processed immigrants who must be detained for action by boards of inquiry or hospitalization for illnesses acquired after their examination overseas. Ellis Island, at the principal Atlantic port where the trans-continental railroads met the trans-Atlantic liners, was still the most convenient place for the collection of deportees. The Island was retained in service.

The long and deep depression that followed the stock market crash of 1929 had a significant impact on the station. As the depression wore on, fewer immigrants came. By 1932 there were more aliens leaving the United States than there were arrivals, for the first time since records had been kept.[1] While most of the reduction in immigration during the early 1930's was probably voluntary, it was the policy of the administration of President Hoover to keep it at a minimum. The State Department now to

a very large degree controlled immigration at its source, through the consulates. In 1930 instructions went to the American consuls to interpret strictly the "likely to become a public charge" clause of the basic immigration law and thus keep immigrant visas down.[2]

Another device for keeping what jobs there were in the hands of Americans was a general roundup of aliens illegally residing in the United States. Secretary of Labor William N. Doak set out in 1931 to clear the land of "every one who cannot prove he is lawfully resident here," and President Hoover assured him of adequate funds for the campaign. Doak estimated that there were 400,000 deportable aliens and planned to corral them. His methods were at first rather abrupt and brought loud protest. In a few weeks more than 500 aliens were rounded up in New York City alone and Ellis Island was crowded.[3] The Commissioner General reported that year "the greatest number of deportations in the history of the bureau, 18,142."[4]

It was in this situation, with the immigration station at Ellis Island functioning primarily as a deportation center, that Edward Corsi was appointed as the new Commissioner of Immigration at the port of New York, in November, 1931.[5] Corsi had himself passed through Ellis Island as an immigrant boy from Italy and he had spent most of his adult life (he was still young) in social service work among immigrants in New York City. The appointment flattered and attracted him.

From the beginning of his administration Corsi realized that the problems

of Ellis Island were "in distinct contrast to those of the flood-tide days." The news had gone to all parts of the world that America was no longer the land of promise, discouraging immigration. In the administration of Secretary Doak there was a clearly defined policy of deportation. In some instances he used the "anarchist" or radical clause of the law, but he also made a drive against vagrants and the unemployed, as well as those in the United States illegally. Doak had detailed "ambitious Immigration inspectors" to Ellis Island and, early in Corsi's regime, they cooperated with the New York City police in raiding a Finnish dance hall in Harlem. All who could not convince the officers that they were in the country legally were arrested. The performance was repeated at the Seamen's Home on South Street, where many men were jerked from their beds and taken to Ellis Island.[6]

In addition to those aliens rounded up throughout the country and shipped against their will to the deportation station, there were in these days many who went gladly. In the hard times, quite often, "the radical or voluntary deportee left Ellis Island with a smile." Any alien in the United States less than three years who could prove himself destitute could be deported at Government expense. For some time about 200 a month in this category alone were applying for deportation.[7]

The tragic cases were the involuntary deportees. The laws were rigid and Corsi had little discretion in the matter, but as he confessed later, "the duties of deportation were never very pleasant to me and often very bitter." This was particularly true when the laws applied to "men and women of honest behavior whose only crime is that they dared enter the promised land without conforming to law." Often they were forced back

to the countries they came from penniless, "and at times without coats on their backs."[8]

Corsi believed that Ellis Island's reputation suffered more from the inflexibility of the legal system, and the want of discretionary power on the part of its administration, than from wilful abuse of authority by the enforcing officials. The tradition he found at Ellis Island was one of the assumed necessity of enforcing the laws to the letter. He felt the need of tempering justice with mercy. "Let us carry out the intent of the law, but let us do it as humanely as possible," he said in one of his first official statements.[9]

One of his first efforts was to create better relations with the press than Ellis Island had known in the past. Hitherto, he found, the press had been sharply restricted in its coverage of the Island's activities. He called a meeting of New York reporters, had them to lunch and promised them free entry to the Island and all its inhabitants. He had a similar meeting with the correspondents of foreign newspapers, which had for years been giving the United States a bad name because of the actual or imaginary conduct of the Immigration Service at Ellis Island. There was a third meeting with the consuls of foreign nations in New York. The result of these meetings was better local and world-wide publicity. Following this up, Corsi made numerous radio addresses and platform appearances, and urged his senior staff men to do the same, the message being, "We have nothing to hide!"[10]

To Corsi Ellis Island was not a prison and it was wrong to treat deportees as prisoners. Hitherto they had been allowed to have visitors only

on Tuesdays and Thursdays. He issued an order that friends and relatives might come to the Island any day in the week. He found that detained aliens were denied the use of the telephone and, after a staff meeting on the subject, had telephones installed in the detention rooms. Hitherto detained aliens were allowed only an hour or two a day outdoors. This, it was explained to Corsi, was because of the lack of guards. He requested more guards and got them, "and the immigrants, weather permitting, now spent most of the day playing games or walking in the sunshine." He granted deportees the privilege of going out under guard to visit relatives or to attend to business. He had a special mail box set up in the detention quarters for mail addressed to him, and he made himself accessible to listen to complaints. "Many made valuable suggestions," he noted, "and often these talks were responsible for the prevention of injustices."[11]

Corsi managed to hold the confidence of his superiors through the Hoover administration. He invited Secretary Doak to the Island and he came on several occasions, "watched the games of the aliens, mingled with them and gradually changed his attitude." Corsi was able to soften the Secretary's deportation policy considerably:

> Such wholesale raids as that on the Finnish dance hall were stopped. The Washington special agents, untrained and overly ambitious, were gradually cleared from the Island. Raids were canceled; arrests were made in orderly fashion and on warrants as provided by law; third-degree methods were strictly prohibited; agents abusing aliens, severely punished; hearings on warrants of deportation were orderly, fair and strictly in accordance with law. All this was in direct contrast to conditions which the public had protested vigorously.[12]

Good relations with the Washington office brought not only a more humane deportation policy but also helped Corsi to get the money and authority for physical improvements at Ellis Island. Early in his administration he obtained $350,000 for a general cleaning and dressing up. The old marquee in front of the main building was torn down and replaced by a plaza adorned with flower beds, and a new room to house the scattered records of the station was built. Larger sums were forthcoming later.[13]

Corsi's policies at Ellis Island blended harmoniously into the New Deal of the Roosevelt administration beginning in 1933. He had known Frances Perkins, the new Secretary of Labor, in social service work, and on her recommendation he was reappointed.[14] One of the new Secretary's early actions was to appoint a non-partisan committee of prominent citizens under the chairmanship of Carleton H. Palmer to undertake a complete analysis of Ellis Island, and to make recommendations for future improvement there. Corsi worked closely with this committee and had the great satisfaction of finding embodied in its report, issued in 1934, "practically the whole body" of his own conclusions and recommendations not only for the improvement of Ellis Island but also for the reform of the deportation laws.[15]

The committee's report was painstaking and detailed. It reviewed the history of Ellis Island and noted the changing conditions facing the arriving immigrant. In the old days all immigrants went to Ellis Island as a matter of routine; now they were so thoroughly inspected, both overseas and on shipboard, before arrival that comparatively few were held for further examination there. Only 4,488 incoming aliens, including both immigrants

and visitors, had been held on the Island during the previous fiscal year, usually for not more than two or three days. The problem of the outgoing alien was more acute. In the same fiscal year 7,037 outgoing aliens had passed through Ellis Island. Most of these had to wait there for their passports and sailing arrangements, sometimes for long periods, while foreign consuls carefully investigated their status as nationals whom they should take back.[16]

The report described the physical development of the Island and its present functional use. It noted that "a generous grant" of Public Works Administration funds had already been allocated to Ellis Island and was being used to add new land to the Island for recreational purposes. The Committee's "recommendations in regard to buildings and grounds," it was observed, "are thus already in the process of being carried out."[17] In other words, the Committee had gracefully accepted a fait accompli.

The administrative organization of the Ellis Island station was described, after complimentary language to the staff and to "the enlightened supervision under which the Island was administered." It found that Ellis Island was now the headquarters of District No. 3 of 22 immigration and naturalization districts into which the country had been divided since the Immigration and Naturalization Bureaus had been merged in August 1933. The district included southern New York and northern New Jersey. Separate naturalization offices were maintained in New York and Newark. The district was administered by a District Commissioner, Immigration and Naturalization Service, aided by

a District Director and an Assistant Director.

The Ellis Island station, in addition to its executive offices, consisted of 12 divisions:

Boarding Division, which boarded steamers at quarantine, got the manifests and examined passengers. Admissible aliens were discharged with a landing card. If there was doubt as to his eligibility to land, the alien was put aside for further questioning or held for hearing before a Board of Special Inquiry at Ellis Island. This division, the Committee found, was badly understaffed.

Inspection Division, which made primary inspections of such aliens as were not examined abroad or for some reason were not examined at the pier. From this division were formed Boards of Special Inquiry. Certain inspectors were appointed chairmen of these boards, with the approval of the Commissioner. Under this division also was the Information Bureau, which answered inquiries made by callers or telephone, regarding detained aliens. The Bureau also arranged for the delivery of mail to detainees.

Record Division, which had custody of the records of arrivals and departures, as recorded on manifest sheets. The records of arrivals dated from June 1897. This division verified records of arrival for aliens applying for naturalisation. At that time, the Committee noted, there was a delay of several months on current cases and more personnel should probably be added. This division also kept a record of aliens admitted for temporary residence.

Registry Division, which investigated applications for certificates of registry (under the law of March 2, 1929, covering aliens of good character of whose legal entrance there was no record). The division interviewed

applicants and witnesses, and made recommendations to Washington.

Law Division, responsible for investigating deportation cases. It arranged for bail bonds in warrant cases; investigated cases of fraudulent re-entry permits; handled fines, prosecutions and habeas corpus proceedings. This division, too, was short handed and "could use more inspectors for this very important branch of the work."

Bonding Division, which handled all bonds required for persons likely to become public charges, students, children under sixteen required to attend school, visitors and others.

Passport Division, engaged in securing passports for aliens who were to be deported. Very frequently this involved protracted correspondence with the consulate of the foreign country of which the deportee was a citizen.

Treasury Division, which had custody of all aliens awaiting deportation or the decision of their cases. It handled all deportation arrangements except the procuring of passports.

Chinese Division, concerned with all cases involving Chinese aliens, both immigrants and deportees, either under the deportation law or the Chinese Exclusion Act.

Night Division, consisting of an officer in charge, matrons, guards, laborers and charwomen, responsible for night security and for the cleaning of the rooms occupied during the day.

Filing Division, in which were kept all correspondence files. The total staff at the time of the Committee's report amounted to 450, a much smaller figure than the station had maintained during the height of its operations.[19]

The Committee made no comparable analysis of the medical staff at Ellis Island. This was composed of Public Health Service employees, who co-operated with, but were not subordinate to, the Immigration and Naturalisation Service.

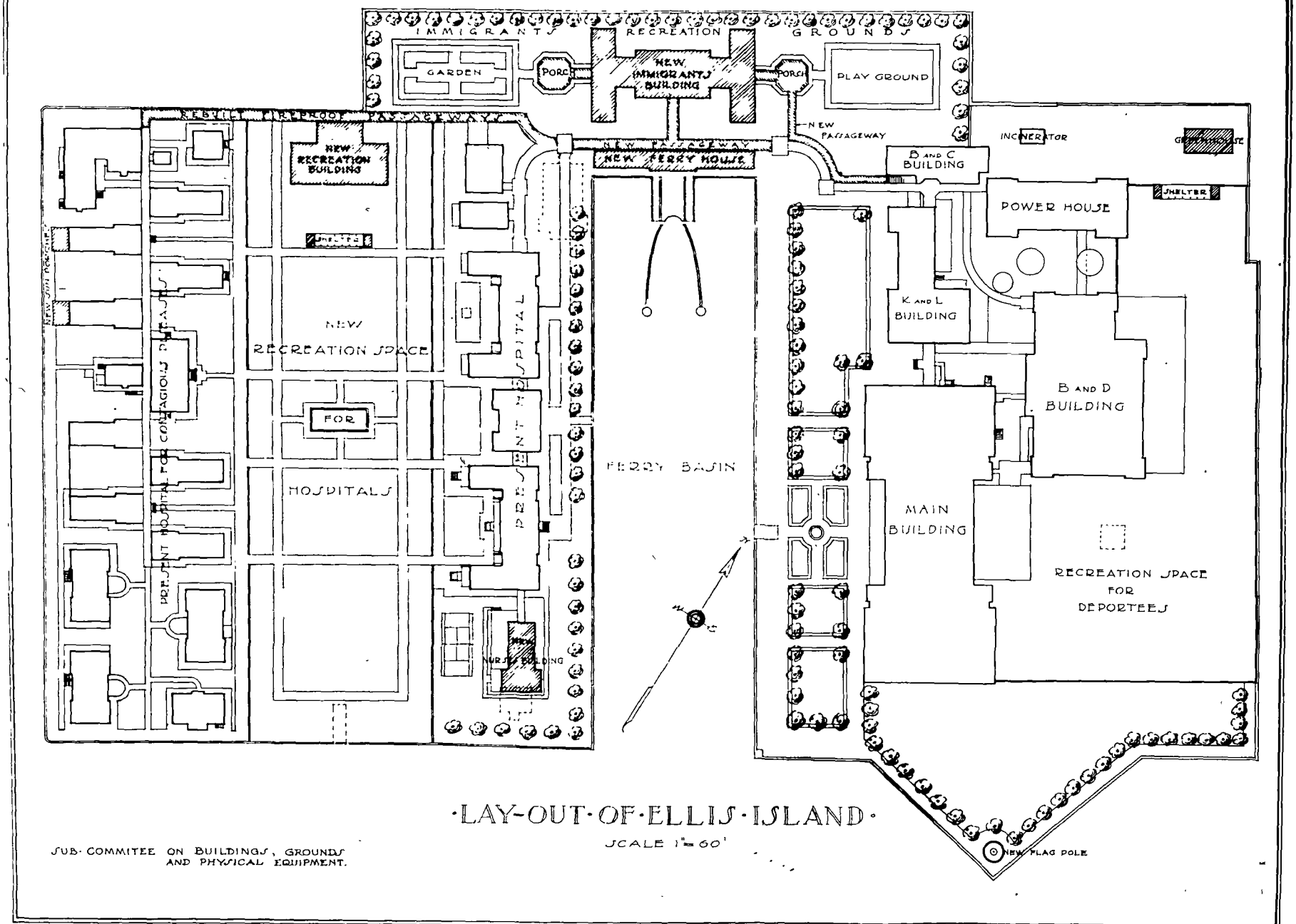
The Ellis Island Committee, while generally approving Corsi's administration, pointed out a number of possible improvements. Boarding inspectors, it believed, should explain to immigrants not immediately discharged just why they were being held and should permit social workers to assist them. They should refer doubtful cases to the chief inspector aboard the boat before sending them to Ellis Island for special inquiry. At the beginning of a special inquiry the chairman should read to the alien the facts in his case as stated on the detention card, so that he might know what the issue was that he had to meet. Relatives or friends of aliens should be permitted to post a bond in advance of the arrival of an alien, to be retained by the Government only if such alien were admitted under bond. There should be a more modern literacy test, the Committee believed, than the existing one which employed texts from the Bible. There were other recommendations for improving administrative practices both on Ellis Island and at the consulates abroad.[20]

Social welfare work at the Island, it was recommended, should have broader recognition through the establishment of a Division of Information and Immigrant Aid, and the Commissioner should be authorised to secure the assistance of prominent citizens to serve as a board of visitors.[21]

Going far beyond the boundaries of Ellis Island, the Committee concerned itself with departmental regulations and made recommendations, generally

Figure 14.

"Lay-Out of Ellis Island," showing proposed new construction. Report of the Ellis Island Committee, March 1934.



·LAY-OUT·OF·ELLIS·ISLAND·

SCALE 1"=60'

SUB-COMMITEE ON BUILDINGS, GROUNDS AND PHYSICAL EQUIPMENT.

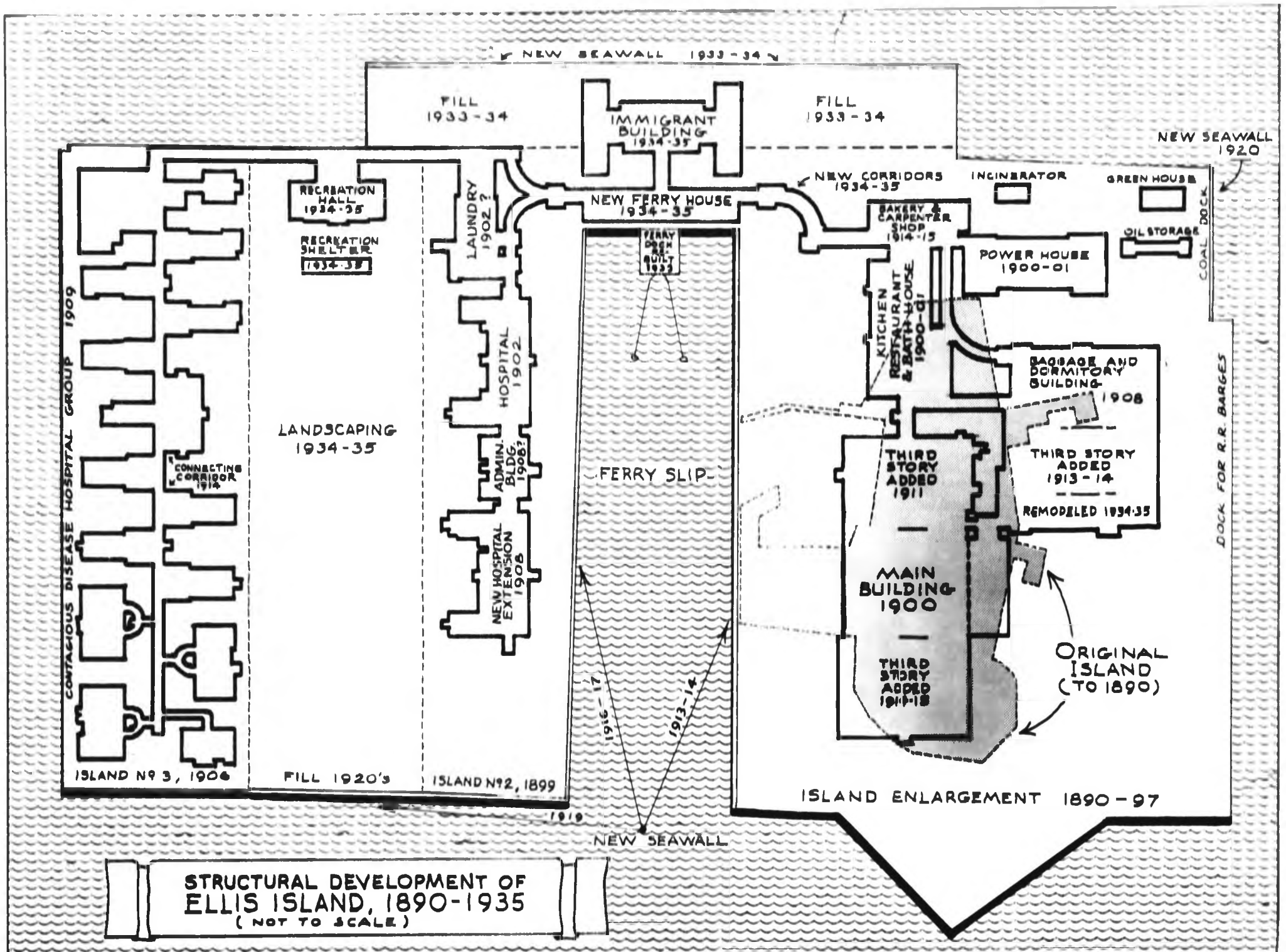
for the protection of the alien, in connection with re-entry permits, certificates of registry, deportation, education and naturalization.[22] The Committee also drew up a broad program of legal reform, under the heading of "Recommendations Requiring Action by Congress." In general, proposed amendments to existing immigration and naturalization laws were in the direction of greater efficiency and, more especially, more humane and just treatment of the alien.[23]

Accepting Corsi's building program, already under way, the Committee called for better facilities at Ellis Island for segregating the different classes, both of deportees and incoming immigrants. To this end it recommended that the baggage and dormitory building should be remodeled for deportees, and that a new building should be built to hold the incoming immigrants. The remodeling of the baggage and dormitory building was to be done in such a way as to allow better segregation of the different classes of deportees. The new building for immigrants was to be put up "behind the new covered passage and new ferry house." This building was to be on a new fill, behind a new seawall on the northwest side of the Island. This fill, about 100 feet wide and extending some distance on both sides of the new building, well fenced, would provide recreation space for the immigrants.[24]

A number of physical improvements were proposed for the hospital group. The "Cottage" on Island No. 2 should be removed and a new pavilion built for housing personnel, nurses and doctors, with kitchen and dining rooms. There should be verandas on four pavilions of the contagious hospital on Island No. 3, for tubercular and other patients. The space be-

Figure 15.

Structural Development of Ellis Island, 1890-1935.



STRUCTURAL DEVELOPMENT OF ELLIS ISLAND, 1890-1935

(NOT TO SCALE)

tween Island No. 2 and Island No. 3, "now covered with cinders, should be regraded, surfaced, planted, landscaped and used for hospital recreation for all classes of patients." A new recreation building should be built in the space between the two hospitals "to replace the old A.R.C. building now on Island No. 2, at present a fire Hazard." More small ward units should be provided within the hospital group.[25]

A new fireproof ferry house should be built, connecting with covered passages, and containing waiting rooms, lunch counter, guard room, toilets, repair shop, etc. Existing connecting passages should be fireproofed and new connecting passages, connecting buildings on Island No. 1 with the new buildings of the ferry house and the two hospitals, should be of fireproof construction. All tiling, roofing, wiring, heating, plumbing and elevators in the old buildings should be repaired, and there should be new painting. The incinerator should be rebuilt and changed from wood to oil burning or, preferably, be replaced by modern construction.[26]

A large part of this physical development program was carried out, the last major construction on the Island. The Secretary's annual report for the same year referred to the recommendations of the Ellis Island Committee for alterations and extensions of facilities, and said that there were similar needs at other stations. An allotment of $1,422,980 had been obtained from the Public Works Administration for improvements and, of this total, $1,151,800 had been given to Ellis Island. "Work on these various projects," the report said, "was started in 1934 but will not be completed until 1935."[27]

The Secretary's office accepted not only the Ellis Island Committee's building program but also many of its administrative recommendations. "The report of the Ellis Island committee," said the Secretary's report, "and the recommendations of the district directors, as weighed and considered by the Commissioner and his principal assistants, have been the basis of many of the administrative reforms effected during the past year and of the recommendations for legislation which have been submitted to Congress."[28]

Corsi resigned early in 1934, before the Ellis Island Committee's report was released. He found that the routine at the Island was so well established that there was little for him to do except sign his name to letters and documents. "Aside from overseeing the functioning of the job," he said, "my daily duties were practically nil. My work there was finished." Fiorello H. LaGuardia, the dynamic new Mayor of New York, had asked him to serve as his director of relief.[29] Corsi felt the challenge and accepted.

Ellis Island Under the Department of Justice

Immigration continued at a reduced pace throughout the 1930's. With the growth of totalitarianism in parts of Europe there was great pressure to relax the immigration laws in favor of refugees from persecution. No legislation was passed, but administrative measures did allow the entrance of perhaps 250,000 such persons during the years immediately preceding World War II.[30] This influx was not on a scale to affect operations at Ellis Island to any marked degree, though this type of immigrant was checked

with especial care under the "likely to become a public charge" clause.[31]

Deportations also continued, but in a more orderly and generally more humane manner than had been the practice before Corsi's time. A committee appointed by the Secretary in 1938 made a further study of administrative procedure in deportation cases. As a result of its recommendations, some improvements were made in the conduct of deportation hearings, making them less arbitrary and more closely conformable to normal judicial procedure.[32]

Internally, Ellis Island was long racked by a scandal that broke as a result of the consolidation of the Immigration and Naturalization Bureaus. It was found that for years there had been frauds perpetrated, involving both immigration and naturalization cases, by racketeers acting in collusion with employees of the Service having access to official records. Similar frauds had been exposed in the past, but these were on a scale large enough to justify prolonged investigation. In the first year 5,000 bound volumes of passenger manifests filed at Ellis Island covering the arrival of 4,000,000 individual immigrants were examined for alterations and insertions, and approximately 150,000 naturalisation petitions, with files and court records in New York City and Brooklyn extending over a period of 9 years, were checked. It was revealed that manifests had been altered, official documents were missing, and whole files had been stolen. The investigation continued into 1940, and involved the successful prosecution of over 250 racketeers, employees, aliens and steamship companies. The scope of the investigation was ultimately enlarged to include registry frauds, visa frauds, the smuggling of aliens, seamen's certificate frauds, and other illegal activities.[33]

With the coming of World War II, Ellis Island went through a cycle of use similar to that which it had experienced in World War I. Before the United States entered the war, however, Ellis Island celebrated a birthday party. Commissioner Rudolph Reimer, who had succeeded Corsi, decided to observe the fiftieth anniversary of the signing by President Benjamin Harrison of the bill establishing the immigration station. The affair took place on April 12, 1940. Governor's Island fired an 11-gun salute and the Coast Guard, newly-installed on Ellis Island, responded with its cannon.[34]

The immigrant had at first been regarded pretty much as a species of import, and the function of immigration control had been assigned to the Treasury Department. Increasingly, he came to be viewed as an addition to the national labor force--a threat or a blessing, depending on the point of view--and immigration control was assigned to the Department of Commerce and Labor (1903). When a separate Labor Department was set up (1913) it was assigned to that agency. Now, with Europe once more ablaze, and especially with the fall of Norway to the forces of Hitler partly through the agency of subversion, the immigrant came to be viewed in still another light. He was considered primarily in the aspect of his potential threat to the national security, and the Immigration and Naturalization Service was shifted to the Department of Justice, effective June 14, 1940.[35]

As part of the same trend, the Alien Registration Act passed in the same month not only required the registration of all aliens but also added to the list of deportable classes and called for the finger printing of aliens seeking to enter the United States.[36] This added another to the growing bundle of papers that each immigrant had to carry with him and that the immigration

inspector from Ellis Island had to check.

As in 1917, Ellis Island in 1941 and 1942 played host briefly to the crews of enemy ships taken over by the Government. These men were soon transferred to detention camps elsewhere,[37] as were many other German, Italian and Japanese nationals picked up by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and temporarily deposited on the Island.[38] As the war went on, and immigration through New York almost ceased, Ellis Island became primarily a place of detention for family groups of enemy aliens.[39]

Normal detention and deportation functions were resumed at Ellis Island after the war. While immigration through the port of New York revived considerably, Ellis Island came to be classified officially in accordance with its primary function as a "detention facility" of the Immigration and Naturalisation Service.[40] It had lost even the name of an immigration station.

The Immigration and Naturalisation Service Monthly Review, describing Ellis Island in 1949, had this to say of it:

> Ellis Island, in the harbor of New York City, is used solely as a detention and deportation center by the U.S. Immigration Service. Once a general reception center for all aliens entering the United States, it has not been used for this purpose for 30 years [a slight exaggeration]. No immigrant or visitor whose passport and entry papers are in order now goes to the island. More than 99 percent of all immigrants and visitors arrive with documents and papers in order.[41]

The "cold war" with Soviet Russia that developed in the years following World War II brought additional measures looking toward the exclusion of subversive aliens. Most noteworthy was the Internal Security Act of 1950. Among its many provisions was one specifically excluding members of

Communist and Fascist organizations.[42] This measure was passed over President Truman's veto and his vehement opposition. With its passage, he directed its enforcement to the letter.

This brought a new flurry of activity at Ellis Island. Aliens arriving at the port of New York who had received passports before September 23, 1950, and who arrived after that date, had to be screened there for membership in the proscribed organizations. Those who had been members--even if nominal--had to be detained.[43] The magazine Life sent a team to Ellis Island and took pictures reminiscent of those taken there by Lewis Hine in 1905.[44] The New Yorker ran a story telling of the detention there of a Czech theatrical producer, George Voskovec, a man with his first papers toward American citizenship, who had been picked up at LaGuardia airport and sent to Ellis Island for 10 months on the hearsay evidence of one witness to his pro-Communism.[45] The American Mercury proclaimed that many world-famour artists, GI brides and other aliens had been pulled off ships and planes and sent to Ellis Island after having been issued immigrant visas by the State Department.[46]

This was the last serious beating that Ellis Island was forced to take from the press. Clarifying legislation was passed in the spring of 1951, making the exclusion dependent solely upon voluntary, and not upon involuntary, membership in totalitarian organizations.[47] Those who had been members of the Hitler Youth in childhood, for instance, or who had been members of a Fascist labor union in order to be able to eat, were no longer to be regarded as dangerous subversives.

Ellis Island quieted down again, although increased deportations under the 1950 act for a time raised the population of the Island to nearly 1,500. This caused some hurried rearrangement of space. File rooms had to be cleared and reclaimed as detention quarters. The dining room then in use seated only 300 people and, as deportees had to be separated from others, this meant that meals had to be served practically all day. Meanwhile, the Public Health Service had closed its hospital on the Island and there was nothing but a small infirmary for the sick. Medical examinations, in many cases, had to be held in Public Health Service hospitals elsewhere in the New York area. A new school was opened for the children of detainees, with as many as 125 children in attendance at one time. The chapel was re-equipped and plans were made for buying new furniture for the detention quarters.[48] The hospital buildings on Island No. 2, abandoned by the Public Health Service,[49] were taken over temporarily by the U.S. Coast Guard.

The program of renovation and repair at Ellis Island was continued in the following year. A public address system was installed, providing an "integrated system of surveillance." A 30-bed infirmary was completed, though serious illnesses were still handled at hospitals elsewhere in the city. Plans were completed and approved for refurnishing the quarters occupied by "passengers", as incoming aliens were now called. At the same time it was noted that the Ellis Island plant was physically a problem area: "This detention station, with its great, wide halls and corridors, high ceilings, unusable spaces and outmoded utilities, will always present the dual problem of how to utilise it with economy and yet make it serve our

purposes efficiently."[50]

The McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 completely revised and codified immigration legislation, while leaving intact and even extending the list of excludable classes,[51] but its provisions were not long to affect Ellis Island. In 1954 a new detention policy went into effect, under which "only those aliens likely to abscond and those whose release would be inimical to the national security" were to be detained. "Many aliens whose papers were not in order," it was noted, "were previously detained at Ellis Island and other facilities. Under the present policy most aliens with purely technical difficulties are allowed to proceed to their destination under 'parole.' "[52]

This simple humanitarian ruling brought the long and troubled history of Ellis Island to a close. Within ten days of the change the number of aliens held in New York City dropped to about 25, compared with a usual detention population of several hundred. "Ellis Island and other large facilities," the Immigration and Naturalization Service reported, "were closed."[53] The Island was vacated and declared excess on November 3, 1954.[54] It was determined to be surplus property on March 4, 1955.

Footnotes

1. Corsi, Shadow of Liberty, 95; Annual Report of the Secretary of Labor, 1932, 73-74.

2. Robert A. Divine, American Immigration Policy, 1924-1952 (New Haven, 1957), 78-79.

3. Nation, March 18, 1931.

4. Annual Report of the Commissioner General of Immigration, 1931, 35.

5. Corsi, Shadow of Liberty, 30-31.

6. Ibid., 93-95.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid., 97.

9. Ibid., 296-297.

10. Ibid., 308-309.

11. Ibid., 300-301.

12. Ibid., 308-310.

13. Ibid., 309-310.

14. Ibid., 513.

15. Ibid., 310-312.

16. Ellis Island Committee, Report of the Ellis Island Committee, March 1934 (New York, 1934), 12-13.

17. Ibid., 17.

18. Ibid., 48-53.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., 140-143.

21. Ibid., 147-149.

22. Ibid., 143-146.

23. Ibid., 132-137.

24. Ibid., 137-140.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. Annual Report of the Secretary of Labor, 1934, 72.

28. Ibid., 49.

29. Corsi, Shadow of Liberty, 313-314.

30. Divine, American Immigration Policy, 103-104.

31. Annual Report of the Secretary of Labor, 1939, 89-90.

32. Ibid., 1940, 122.

33. Ibid., 1935, 82; 1936, 91; 1937, 94; 1940, 123-124.

34. Lemmon, Ellis Island, 156.

35. Divine, American Immigration Policy, 106-107; Bennett, American Immigration Policies, 66-67.

36. Ibid., 65.

37. Annual Report of the Attorney General, 1941, 236.

38. Annual Report of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1942, 3-5.

39. Ibid., 1945, 46-47.

40. Ibid., 1948, 19; 1949, 23-24; 1950, 47.

41. Immigration and Naturalization Service Monthly Review, May 1949.

42. Bennett, American Immigration Policies, 81-82; Divine, American Immigration Policy, 163.

43. Annual Report of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1951, 13.

44. Life, November 13, 1950.

45. New Yorker, May 12, 1951.

46. American Mercury, May 1951.

47. Annual Report of the Immigration and Naturalisation Service, 1951, 13.

48. Ibid., 52, 54-55.

49. Ibid., 96.

50. Ibid., 1952, 48-49.

51. Bennett, American Immigration Policies, 135-152.

52. Annual Report of the Immigration and Naturalisation Service, 1955, 6.

53. Ibid.

54. Pike, Ellis Island: Its Legal Status, 7.

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