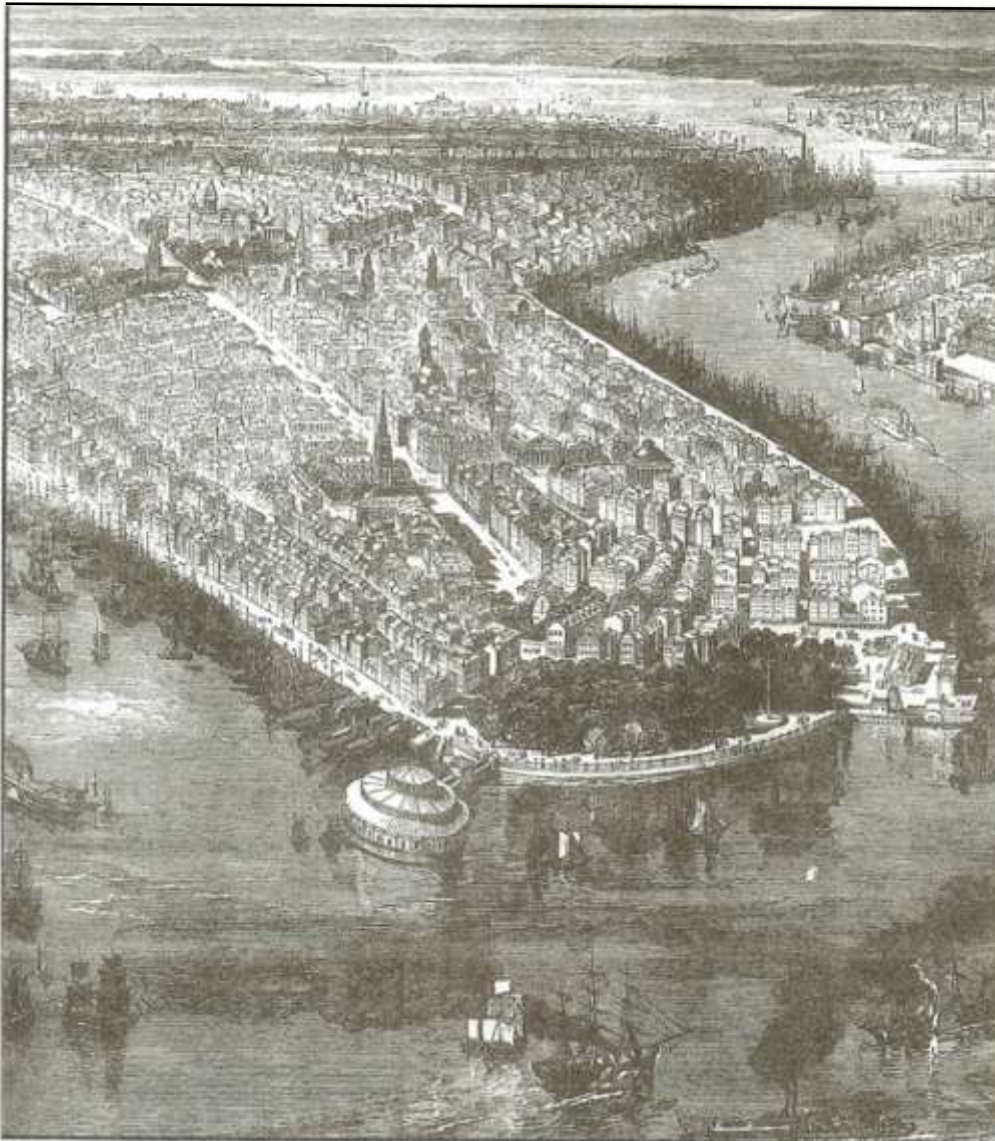


The History of Castle Garden-Part 1 of 2

Did you ever wonder where and when your ancestors first arrived on the American shores? In case you are not sure and suspect that your family arrived prior to 1892 (when Ellis Island was established) then you ought to try searching the website for the Castle Garden, New York immigrant processing center: www.castlegarden.org. Be sure to search for all possible spelling variations of your family name. Case in point, on November 18, 1856, my Kadlec family arrived at Castle Garden as the 'Kadletz' family, which was how the family name was required to be spelled under/during the Germanic-speaking Austrian Empire, where Czech language characters were not recognized by the authorities.



Castle Garden and Manhattan (Illustrated by London News, November 24, 1855)

More than a dozen forts were built to defend New York Harbor at the time of the War of 1812. The Southwest Battery was constructed on the rocks off the tip of Manhattan Island between 1808 and 1811. Although fully armed, the fort never had occasion to fire upon an enemy. In 1817, the fort was

renamed Castle Clinton in honor of DeWitt Clinton, Mayor and later Governor of New York. The army vacated the fort in 1821 and the structure was deeded to New York City in 1823.

In the summer of 1824, a new restaurant and entertainment center opened at the site, then called Castle Garden. A roof was added in the 1840s and Castle Garden served as an opera house and theater until 1854. Many new inventions were demonstrated there to amazed audiences including the telegraph, Colts revolving rifles, steam powdered fire engines and underwater electronic explosives.

The "Swedish Nightengale" Jenny Lind made her American debut here in 1850, brought to America by no other then P.T. Barnum.

On August 3, 1855, Castle Garden, now leased to New York State, opened as an immigrant landing depot. During the next 34 years, over 8 million people entered the United States through Castle Garden, until it was closed on April 18, 1890. The building was altered once again and reopened as the New York City Aquarium on December 10, 1896. It was one of the city's most popular attractions until it closed in 1941.

Saved from demolition in 1946, the Castle was restored to its original look as a fortification and serves not only as a museum, but the ticket office for the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island ferry. The fort built to keep out the British now serves to welcome all to America. (source: <http://www.nps.gov/cacl/historyculture/index.htm>)

But what was the actual experience of passing through Castle Garden in the mid-19th century? To answer this question, we can turn to a newspaper article dated August 4, 1855 from the *New York Daily Times* newspaper, which reported on activities at Castle Garden, then a newly-opened immigrant depot overseen by the New York Board of Emigration Commissioners. The writer commends Castle Garden for barring "runners" and others who would prey upon and exploit new arrivals. But the writer also suggests the potential for corruption within Castle Garden, and names several points that would soon become notorious for fleecing poor immigrants of their savings--the weighing and transfer of baggage, sales of transportation inland, vendors selling snacks, etc.

"Honored is that house which for generation after generation has served as an ornament, and in its old age commences a new corner of practical usefulness. And our venerable Castle Garden is very highly considered that, after half a century of service as a military rallying place and a fashionable resort for the peddlers of amusement, now when its walls are cracked and crumbling and all its early glory deserted, it is vouchsafed the privilege of granting a home to all humanity, as well as to the City, of which it is the gateway. In the old time, New York received LaFayette in Castle Garden with its most profuse hospitality; to-day hundreds of the countrymen of LaFayette come over from vine-clad France, and in Castle Garden receive the first welcome to America. So, after all, the change is not so very great. Instead of one ovation a year to some distinguished foreigner, henceforth there will be a perpetual ovation to thousands of foreigners and, whereas only stragglng couples have heretofore promenaded the balcony and pledged their eternal troth, henceforth it is utterly given up to young and old, lads and lasses, old men and crusty maids to wander at will throughout it, talking about good old times and plotting for future revenue on Western prairies, or arranging for the service of the clergyman, and the quiet cottage and the babies that are to be born.

The new order of things is fairly inaugurated. We went down yesterday to see how it works. Three ships loaded with emigrants arrived up from Quarantine, and it was a busy time all round. Compose yourself, reader, while we tell about it:

A high board fence, through which the eye cannot peer, nor over which the most curious boy can climb—for it is thirteen feet high—shuts in the proper inmates and shuts out intruders; among the “cuts” are all emigrant runners. On Thursday several of these hopeful gentlemen dressed themselves in emigrants’ clothes and tried to gain admittance under the pretense of having been landed in company with those just arrived. But the dodge did not work. Others pleaded earnestly to get in to see a father or a brother, a sister or other relative, who was among the passengers. But they were too well known to palm themselves off on that pretense.

Yesterday’s few did not scruple to manifest their dislike by open demonstrations of hostility. Besides continually hooting at the employees of the Commission, as they passed in and out, they attacked one or two of them with stones. They went at Commissioner Garrigur so fiercely that he called the Police to his aid. Commissioner Kennedy drew a revolver upon them, which had the effect of cooling them somewhat. It is feared, however, the end is not yet. The Commissioners, and those under them, will go armed for the present, and will be ready for any emergency. These runners have sucked the life-blood of emigrants for so long that they think they have a right to it. And now, when upon a sudden “their occupation’s gone,” they feel as melancholy and dissatisfied with the world as do the liquor dealers where a Maine Law is honestly observed.

A policeman waved the leeches aside, and we presented our face at the raised opening of a narrow door. A word assured the porter, and we entered, registering our names where some score had preceded us, as is the rule for all visitors to do. Now passing the heavy door of old Castle Clinton—that was its name until 1823—let us push straight through to the opposite side and out upon the wharf. “ (Source: <http://www.theshipslist.com/pictures/castlegarden1855.htm>)

NEXT COLUMN: The immigrant experience of Castle Garden

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