



*The Evolution of the Transatlantic Transportation and its Influence on
the Nineteenth Century Immigration History of the United States*

تطور النقل البحري عبر المحيط الأطلسي وتأثيره على تاريخ الهجرة إلى الولايات المتحدة
الأمريكية في القرن التاسع عشر

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Date of receipt:
22/03/13

Acceptance date:
22/03/25

Publication date
2022/04/16

Editing:
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Abstract

The United States witnessed the influx of massive numbers of European immigrants during the nineteenth century. The upsurge of this movement coincided with the evolution of the transatlantic transportation and the introduction of the steamship lines which substituted the classical sailing ships. This paper tries to shed light on the role that the new mode of transport played in the shaping of the nineteenth century European immigration to the United States. The focus will be on the contributory factors that helped increase the number of immigrants choosing America as a destination, and how this increase was influenced by such transatlantic crossings. The paper concludes that the nineteenth century travelling evolution impacted on the whole process of peoples' movement as the passage became faster, less risky, and cheaper which contributed in the rise of European mass migration to America.

Keywords: transatlantic transportation- evolution- nineteenth century- European immigration- United States

الملخص:

شهدت الولايات المتحدة تدفق أعداد هائلة من المهاجرين الأوروبيين خلال القرن التاسع عشر. تزامن تصاعد هذه الهجرة مع تطور النقل عبر المحيط الأطلسي وحلول خطوط سفن الركاب البخارية محل السفن الشراعية الكلاسيكية. تحاول هذه الورقة البحثية إلقاء الضوء على الدور الذي لعبه أسلوب النقل الجديد في رسم معالم الهجرة الأوروبية إلى الولايات المتحدة في القرن التاسع عشر والعوامل التي ساعدت في زيادة عدد المهاجرين الذين اختاروا أمريكا كوجهة لمشروع هجرتهم. بالإضافة إلى مدى تأثير هذه الزيادة بمثل هذه الرحلات عبر المحيط الأطلسي. تخلص الورقة إلى أن تطور السفر في القرن التاسع عشر قد أثر على حركة الناس برمتها حيث أصبح المرور أسرع وأقل خطورة وأرخص مما ساهم في تنامي الهجرة الجماعية الأوروبية إلى أمريكا.

الكلمات الدالة : النقل عبر الأطلسي- التطور- القرن التاسع عشر- الهجرة الأوروبية- الولايات المتحدة

1. INTRODUCTION

The United States has always been a refuge for millions of immigrants throughout its history. People chose America as their final destination for a set of reasons; the most important push factors that led millions of Europeans to quit their countries and find refuge in the United States included bad economic conditions resulting from unemployment and poverty, natural tragedies like famine which killed big numbers and compelled many others to escape, and religious and political persecution due to the lack of freedom and liberty in societies where authoritarian regimes ruled. The Europeans suffered during the nineteenth century and hoped to change their lives for the better far from their lands. They moved out of their homes to join other European countries, or even further to settle in North or South America. The century saw the introduction of the steamship lines that made the trip easier and less costly which had significant impact on the movement of people between the Europe and America, and which helped shape the U.S. immigration history during the nineteenth century.

2. The Inhuman ocean travel conditions before 19th century

Immigration to what is now known as the United States has started since the day the British colonists set foot on the Americas when they established the first English permanent settlement, Jamestown in Virginia. Since then, people from the four corners of the globe poured into the country. Though it is agreed that their number was significant, it is impossible to give accurate statistics about the different waves of immigrants during the colonial era and until the first two decades of the nineteenth century. It was until 1819 that the U.S. congress passed an immigration act which is considered as the first step taken by the federal government in the goal of keeping official records and regulating the flow of foreigners to the country. The act, also known as *An Act regulating passenger ships and vessels*, was passed on 2 March and required captains of all ships travelling to the United States to submit to local collector of customs lists of all the passengers on board with detailed information such as their origin, destination, age, sex, occupation ...etc.

Besides, the 1819 act was an attempt made by the federal authorities to have a firm reaction to the inhuman conditions the passengers to the United States and to other destinations were facing. Those unpleasant travelling conditions were the result of the greedy ship owners who profited from the development that the transatlantic transportation underwent in the beginning of the eighteenth century, and who carried huge numbers of passengers on their ships in the goal of making money. The poor

people desiring to leave Europe and join America paid the lowest fares but got the worst placements in the ships; they were travelling in steerage. The United States issued the Steerage Act to protect the poor passengers by compelling the captains of all vessels coming to its shores to change their transportation methods. The Act limited the number of passengers on board vessels to no more than “2 for every 5 tons of such ship or vessel” (Steerage Act). It also set severe penalties on the captains who did not fulfill the requirements of the law. In fact, the 1819 Act initiated the beginning of the official registration of immigrants entering the country. Therefore, data about immigration are available starting by 1820, the year in which the act went into effect.

3. Evolution of the Transatlantic Transportation and the Rise of steamship lines

European immigration to the United States developed quickly in the nineteenth century, even though the ocean crossings were long, expensive, and generally less comfortable and crowded since most immigrants were steerage passengers. At the beginning of 1800s, travelling on a sailing vessel was hard since the ships could start the trip only when they were filled with goods. The passengers had to wait till the ship got ready to depart to be allowed to embark and start their voyage. There were no fixed schedules, but by the second decade of the nineteenth century, the ships began travelling on a regular basis which helped carry more immigrants to the United States. Soon after, “passenger transportation became an important branch of commerce” (Page 734) and became a strong contributory factor responsible for the movement of considerable numbers of Europeans. The British, German, and British sailing vessels transported most of the European immigrants to America till the beginning of the second half of the century which witnessed a revolution in the oceanic transportation with the substitution of the sailing vessels by the steam ships. (Page 734)

One of the most important factors that induced millions of Europeans to immigrate to the United States was the development of the steamship lines that substituted the conventional and slow sailing ships. The transition was a significant event that changed the course of European emigration across the Atlantic Ocean. For a big part of the nineteenth century, immigrants’ transportation to the Americas relied on the sailing vessels. Though the latter was responsible for the movement of millions of people, but the trips were lengthy since it took one to two months in order to reach the other Atlantic coast, and the period depended on the weather conditions (Page 737). The introduction of the steamships reduced the period of crossing in a significant way. For instance, in 1867 the average length of a steam passage from Europe to the United States was shortened to less than fourteen days compared with more than forty-four days for the same passage by sail (Page 737). Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, the steamship became the main means of transportation which made crossing the Atlantic faster and more importantly accessible to the entire European people.

The first half of the nineteenth century witnessed a big movement of sailing ships in the process of immigrant transportation across the Ocean. It was not until the 1850's that the first steamship lines began to embrace this business. Rapidly, the steam substituted the sailing ships as the chief means of immigrant transport. The process occurred in a relatively short period of time. Cohn reported that in 1854, the year which marked the peak year of pre-Civil War immigration to New York City, less than 2 percent only arrived on steamship (Cohn 224). This year witnessed the highest rate of arrivals under sail but, ironically, the same year marked the beginning of the rise of transatlantic crossings via steamships. In the year 1856, Maldwyn reported that more than 94 percent of newcomers arrived on sailing ships (184). The sailing vessels remained the main means of transport but soon after that, the immigration movement by sail ended and was substituted by steamship. The transition occurred so fast that in 1861, for instance, the proportion of immigrants to New York City travelling on sailing ships decreased to 31 percent, and was only 20 percent six years later (Cohn 224). By 1873, the majority of immigrants came on steamers rather than sailing vessels (Maldwyn 184).

4. The Role of the Travel Agents in Boosting Immigration of Europeans

With the rise of steamship transportation, the number of European immigrants, Eastern and Western, increased significantly. It is believed that secret agents were actively working in the European countries to attract big numbers of immigrants to the United States. They used many advertising techniques to convince people to leave and provide the States with the workers needed. There is big debate between advocates of such hypothesis and those who see that the ticket agents had no role in persuading people to immigrate to the United States. In the 41-volume report about immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe submitted to Congress in 1911, Dillingham claimed that "the propaganda conducted by steamship ticket agents is undoubtedly the most important immediate cause of emigration from Europe to the United States." (61) According to Dillingham, the propaganda was present in all European countries despite the fact that the practice was illegal in such countries and even the United States. The laws prohibiting such practice and the sanctions inflicted to the law-breakers made the companies work in a discrete way. To the Commission, the agents kept attracting Europeans for the sake of gaining more profits.

Besides, the commission provided no exact data to show the number of active agents whose job was to encourage immigration and thus multiply the voyages which would bring more financial profits to the travel companies that hired them. The fact that no data available about the number of agents could be relied on weakens the claims of the report since it is based, as stated in the report, on the assertions of "one authority" without giving any details about such source. Nevertheless, according to the commission, the ticket agents worked mostly in Austria-Hungary, Greece, and Russia

more than other countries (Dillingham 62), and their secret job was not only to attract immigrants via propaganda, but also “procuring passports, and in smuggling across the frontiers” (Dillingham 63) of the Russian Empire since it had vigorous laws prohibiting the movement of its population to other countries. The agents’ job was to convince people to emigrate through making them attracted by the economic opportunities and the high wages that the United States offered, and by making their movement easier despite the fact that they clearly violated the laws of the countries which explicitly banned the emigration of its subjects.

The hypothesis suggested by the Dillingham Report stating that the ticket agents were behind the big migration of Eastern and Southern Europeans was categorically rejected by Maldwyn. He claimed that the steamship secret agents’ techniques were not novel and had been used before in Scandinavia in 1860’s and since they proved to be successful, they tried to use them in some Eastern European countries. The conditions were not the same and, according to Maldwyn, the job of the agents, contrary to what the Commission presented, was not possible due to the fact that their activities were firmly illegal and prohibited by all countries, and also because their efforts were meaningless given the fact that the movement of people was voluntary and did not need solicitation (Dillingham 183). The people were ready to leave their country by themselves and did not need any persuasion notably from the agents. The “push” and “pull” factors were strong enough to convince them to cross the ocean and try to seize the economic opportunities that they already knew about. He went further to state that the agents’ job was no more than selling steamship tickets for profits and not, as Dillingham claimed, advertising for the sake of persuading large numbers of people to immigrate to the United States.

Indeed, the Dillingham’s hypothesis that the steamship advertisement and the significant role that the agents played was proved to be invalid due to two major elements. First, the Eastern and Southern European immigrants’ movement was motivated by their conditions in their home countries. In fact, the advertisement was not needed since the people’s will to search for better economic opportunities in America was the main factor that pushed/pulled them to leave. In addition, almost similar conditions had led the Western and Northern Europeans to join America in huge numbers during most of the nineteenth century and a large part of them came on sailing boats and not steamships, which would lead to the conclusion that the common denominator in the two big waves was the hard economic conditions that prevailed in such countries and which shaped the peoples’ desire to improve their lives. Secondly, the lack of data about agents’ numbers and their impact on the migration of people from Eastern and Southern Europe is considered as a weakening element; the Commission stated that the agents worked mostly in Austria-Hungary, Greece, and Russia but neglected the fact that millions of immigrants from Italy arrived in America during the same period and without a significant influence of such propaganda. However, one could not ignore the important role that the introduction of steamship

lines played in increasing the number as well as in attracting new source countries of immigration, notably from Eastern and Southern Europe. The peoples' will to quit their bad situation was the main factor but it was amplified by the oceanic travel development and more importantly the declining cost of passage. In sum, the agents themselves were not responsible for the big migration but the steamship availability, safety, the reduced time of passage, and more importantly the lower prices were all contributory factors that facilitated the movement of big numbers of depressed people searching for a new start in the New World.

5. Less Lengthy and Less Costly Ocean Crossings

As stated above, one of the reasons that helped immigrants travel along the Ocean and join the United States was the price of transportation between their mother countries and the Americas. As noted earlier, the decreasing cost of fares was added to the many advantages that the steam engines brought to the passengers like reducing the time of the trip along with the improvement of the sailing conditions which resulted in reducing the perils that had long been behind the death of big numbers in the previous periods. Thus, the journey became quicker, safer, and more importantly less expensive compared with the advantages offered (Dupont). The oceanic transportation revolution stimulated the movement of people from places in Europe that were not familiar with immigration to the United States.

The steamship lines not only facilitated the movement of people across the Ocean in a shorter period and with less risk, but it also "led to a tremendous expansion of the prepaid passage system" (Maldwyn 186). The system was one of the ways that contributed in the migration of a considerable number of Europeans. It was the distant payment of the costs of passage to the United States by former immigrants who had already established themselves and made a living. Males used to emigrate alone and do their best to get a good job quickly to better their economic situation, and then pay the tickets for their relatives and friends who were unable to do it at home due to their bad conditions (Cohn 49). That would not be possible without the agencies that were highly represented in both the United States and the European countries. Thousands of agencies were established on American soil that allowed people to purchase tickets and send them back home to their families and friends. Their job was to facilitate the process of distant payment to attract the workers needed in the labor market. An important proportion of the travelling passengers could afford passage thanks to this system, the remittance system. It is estimated that the number of European immigrants arriving in the United States on prepaid passage was between one-quarter to one-third in 1890 (Cohn 49). The immigrants already established in America not only paid the passage to their relatives, but they could also send them money so that they could buy travel tickets and come to the United States. This immigration process was very popular by the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth; an important part of all those who entered the United States during that period had their

tickets been paid by their relatives in America either through the prepaid passage system or through the money they sent back to Europe. For instance, Andrew Urban pointed out that 90 percent of the 260 million dollars sent by Irish immigrants in North America back to their native country came from the United States and 40 percent were sent as prepaid passage to their families and friends desiring to migrate (Urban 283-284).

6. CONCLUSION

Indeed, as shown previously, the rise of a new transatlantic transportation boosted migration of big numbers of Europeans to America. The steamship reduced the time that the journey took with the sailing ships. The passage became less risky and more comfortable. The travel costs were reduced and new categories of people desiring to immigrate were attracted. The latter did not need any advertisement to join the Americas, their bad economic conditions were sufficient to shape their decision. What contributed in the shaping of such decision was also the opportunities their relatives offered through paying their passage from abroad. This was one of the pull factors that stimulated the big European stream by the late nineteenth and beginning of twentieth centuries.

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