

The Swedish Emigration to America

Introduction

During the period of 1821 until 1930 about 1,3 million Swedes emigrated; some to Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South America but the overwhelming majority to the States. Nearly a sixth, in total over 200 000, did return to Sweden, but more than 1 million left their country for good.

Among the factors that pushed people from Sweden:

- down-sizing of farm labourers (better tools, redistribution of land)
- the rapid population growth ("the vaccine, the peace, the potatoes")
- the years of bad crops during the second half of the 19th century
- discontent with society (military conscript duty, religious intolerance)

Among the factors creating a pull to America:

- the supply of fertile land and of work opportunities
- the immigration propaganda
- the emigrants' letters home to Sweden

The first Swedish immigrants to North America were the colonists of New Sweden (*Nya Sverige*). The colony was established at the Delaware River in 1638, only 18 years after the first emigrants ("the Pilgrim Fathers") from England had arrived on the Mayflower to New England. In total there were some 700 - 800 Swedes and Finns in the colony, which however eventually became Dutch and later British.

During the next two centuries only the occasional Swede went to America, mostly merchants.

Only during the first half of the 19th century did some emigration start, often through different, not seldom religious groups led by strong personalities. For the period of 1820 – 1850 it has been established that about 5 000 people emigrated from Sweden and the following decade some 15 000 people.

The first major wave of emigration started right after the Civil War and ran until 1873. In the years 1866 – 1869 Sweden had three years of bad crops and it is estimated that some 120 000 left the country during this period.

1879 – 1893 is regarded as the top years of the emigration and during these 15 years a total of 485 000 Swedes emigrated. For five years more than 40 000 people emigrated every year.

In the emigrant statistics for the period of 1894 – 1930 the years 1904 - 1907 (about 20 000 emigrants/year), 1910 (about 23 000 emigrants) and 1923 (about 25 000 emigrants) are particularly noteworthy.

Before 1900 the immigrants went first to the Mid West farming country (Iowa, Minnesota, Illinois etc) and later, when land became scarce, went further west (Colorado, Montana, Washington etc) where lumber-jacking was possible. Around the turn of the century, as the possibility of acquiring land diminished and the American society grew more industrialised, more Swedes wound up in the big American cities; more Swedes also originated from Swedish towns. The women became maids and the men often builders and carpenters. Many stayed in New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts and Rhode Island.

The Journey

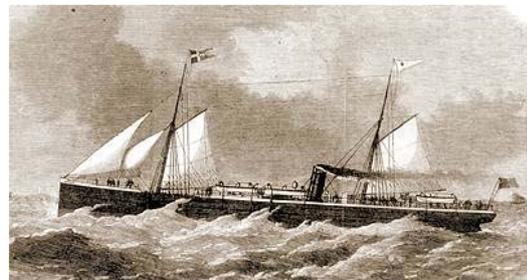
During the first half of the 19th century the journey was made on sailing ships carrying iron ore; it took 1,5–2 months and was very arduous. Sailing ships departed from many Swedish harbours, but above all from Göteborg.

From about 1850 the immigration became more organised, even if no direct line to the States from Sweden started until World War I (Swedish America Line (SAL) 1915). Instead emigrants had to go to a hub like Liverpool, Southampton, Hamburg or Bremen to take a ship for the States. By far the most common route was taking one of the Wilson Line's so-called America-boats from Göteborg to Hull or Grimsby (departures a couple of times a week), go by train to Liverpool (or sometimes Southampton) and there embark on a ship belonging to any of the 17 shipping companies that had agents in Sweden. Among the biggest shipping companies were the Cunard and White Star Lines. The shipping agents sold package trips that included not only the journey to Grimsby/Hull, the train trip to Liverpool and the voyage over the Atlantic but also transport in the States, e.g. train to Chicago. The journey was made first on sailing ships, later on steamers, and took a total of 10 – 20 days; transit time (in e.g. England) as well as weather played a part. Göteborg – England took two days (usually 40 hours) and crossing the Atlantic five to ten days. Ships departing from Liverpool usually made an intermediate stop at Queenstown (Cobh) in Ireland to embark more emigrants.

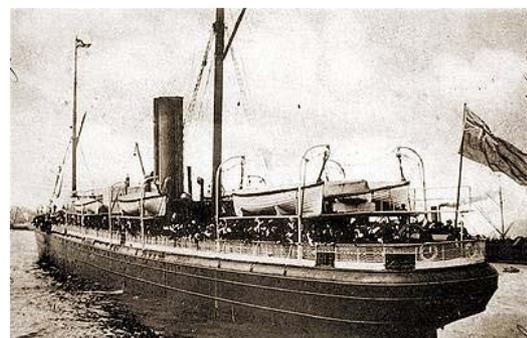
People from southern Sweden (Skåne, Blekinge) often went by Copenhagen and people from Värmland and other provinces close to the Norwegian border often departed from Oslo (called Christiania until 1925).

The Ships

Many emigrants thought the bare two days to England the worst part of the journey since the Wilson Line also carried cattle, which made the ships more or less like cow-byres. The ships offered very primitive quarters and pitched and rolled heavily on the often stormy North Sea. Until 1869 you had to bring your own provisions, but after that "tasty food in generous portions" (gruel, meat and potatoes was considered excellent food) was served – though you still had to bring your own mug, plate and cutlery... Wilson's "tubs" were at first rather small, but to keep up with the increasing emigration larger ships were substituted. The largest ships (e.g. "Rollo") could from 1870 carry upwards of 1 000 passengers.



Wilson Line "Orlando" (1870-1909)



Wilson Line "Rollo" (1870-1909)

The ships crossing the Atlantic were at first not much better – until 1885 you had to bring your own bedding unless you wanted to sleep on the bare planks

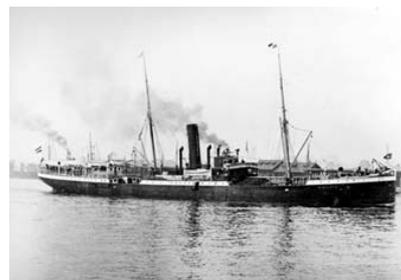
(on Sillgatan in Göteborg striped straw mattresses were sold for this very purpose). From the end of the 1880's the large shipping companies were however using fast, newly built and rather comfortable ships. Transporting emigrants was very profitable and at times the shipping companies more or less fought over the passengers. At the Göteborg Central Station men working for the various shipping agencies were stationed and they used very rough-and-ready methods to persuade putative emigrants to use the "correct" shipping company.

Peculiar to the emigrant ships was the fact that they had quite a large first class, a smaller – sometimes even non-existent – second class and a huge third class (most often called "steerage" in English; steerage really means the deck from where the ship is steered). E.g. Campania (Cunard Line) had 600 passengers in first class, 400 in second class and 1 000 in steerage, the German Virginia (Hamburg-Amerika Linie) had 30 passengers in first class and 800 in steerage – and a non-existent second class.

The ships were already from the beginning of the 1890's quite fast; service speed was about 20 knots and the fastest crossings were as early as 1894 made in less than 5 ½ days (Cunard's Campania).



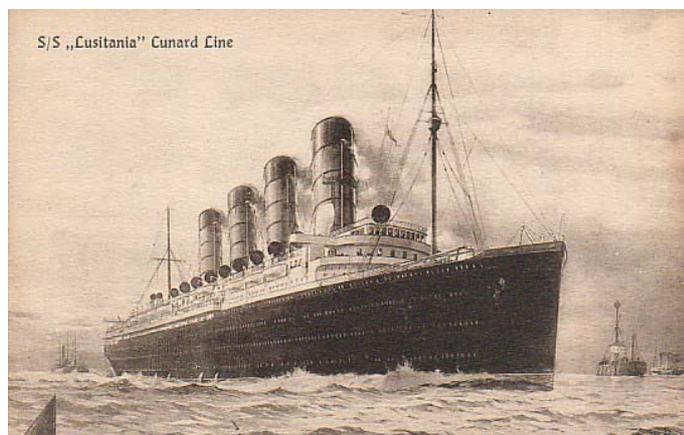
Cunard Line Campania (1893-1914)



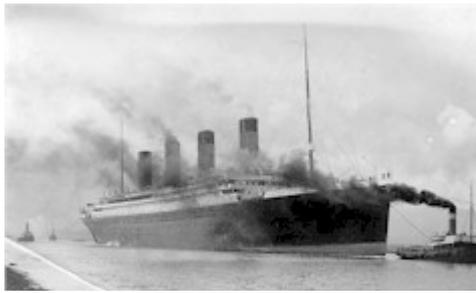
Hamburg-Amerika Line Virginia (1891-1898)

Among the largest shipping companies the Cunard Line and White Star Line were particularly popular among the Swedes; both shipping companies (they merged eventually) were British, departing from Liverpool. Another large company with many Scandinavian emigrants was the Hamburg–Amerika Linie which, as the name implies, operated out of Hamburg. Of course, after 1915 most Swedes used the Swedish America Line (SAL), out of Göteborg.

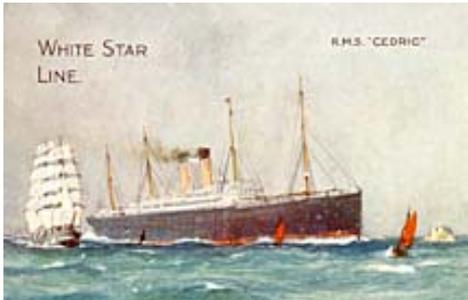
Cunard Line had ships with names ending in "-ia". The best known Cunard ship today is probably the Lusitania, launched in 1907. On her seven decks she carried 2 165 passengers (563/464/1 138) and won the Blue Ribbon already on her second voyage. The ship was sunk by a German submarine outside Ireland 07 May 1915 and contributed to the US joining the Allies in World War I since 128 Americans – civilians from a neutral country – died.



Cunard Line Lusitania (1907-1915)



White Star Line Titanic (1914)



White Star Line Cedric (1902-1932)

White Star Line – which early on merged with Dominion Line – had ships whose names often ended in “-ic”. The best known White Star ship today is unfortunately the Titanic. As probably everybody knows the Titanic sank on her maiden voyage 14 April 1912 after having collided with an iceberg; only 705 people of the 2 228 (passengers and crew) on board were saved. The Titanic was the world’s largest ship with 46 328 gross tons compared to a more “normal” Atlantic steamer like e.g. the 12 year older White Star Cedric of 21 035 gross tons that however took 2 875 passengers (365/160/2 350).

The Swedish America Line (SAL) was started by ship owner Dan Broström in Göteborg in 1915. As the Swedish emigration had decreased from about 1910 SAL was more important to Swedish Americans on visits to “the old country” than to emigrants. An exception was 1923 when the bad times in Sweden



SAL's Stockholm (1900-1947; with SAL 1915-1928)

again increased the emigration for a short while. SAL's first – and for the first five years only – ship was the S.S. Stockholm. Stockholm was a relatively small ship, 12 835 gross tons, carrying 2 103 passengers (282/21/1 800) and it was also rather slow with a service speed of 15 knots.

There were of course many more shipping lines and many, many more ships – and far from all sailed from northern Europe to New York. There were lines also e.g. from Italy and even from South America.

Many ships were designated both “S.S.” (later “M.S.”) and “R.M.S.”. The abbreviation RMS stands for “Royal Mail Ship” and designated a ship used by the British postal service. On board such ships there was a mailroom where the mail was sorted by the Royal Mail's own mail sorters. These mail sorters were responsible for the mail which they were expected to protect more or less with their lives – which they also did; according to witnesses the mail sorters on board the Titanic worked at saving the mail sacks rather than themselves although unfortunately they succeeded with neither task.

The Ship's Manifest

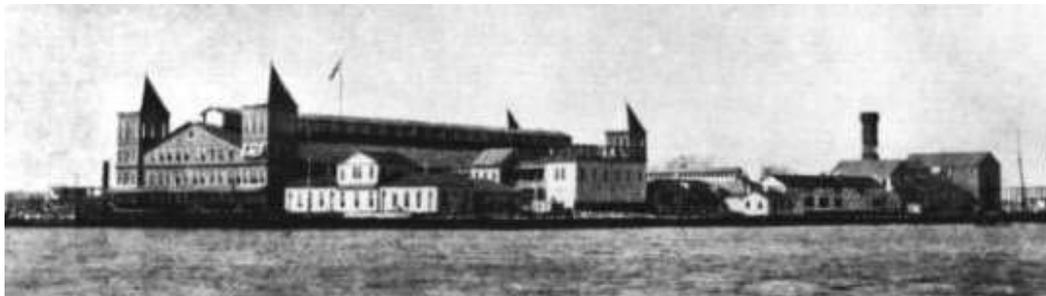
Every ship must present a ship's manifest with all passengers on board; the passengers were supposed to have been questioned and undergone a

The Arrival



Castle Garden

Before August 1855 all immigrants arrived at the usual Manhattan docks. In 1855 New York decided to establish a special centre in a more isolated place, where all immigrants could be processed. This was seen as important for two reasons: one because it was easier to check that no immigrants went off and e.g. carried a contagious disease, partly out of care for the immigrants so that at least during the first confusing hours they weren't robbed or defrauded. A station was established in Castle Garden in Battery Park, but the immigration increased and the station was soon too small. In 1892 the immigration station on Ellis Island was opened. The station was built in wood and burned to the ground 14 June 1897. It would take 2 ½ years before it was re-built (inauguration 17 December 1900), now in fire-proof stone. Meanwhile the immigrants were processed at the so-called Barge Office in Battery Park; an establishment with a significantly smaller capacity than Ellis Island which consequently meant longer waiting times.



Ellis Island (1892-1897)

The ships went first to the quays where first and second class passengers disembarked. These passengers were only subjected to a very minimal inspection since the American authorities thought that such passengers probably did not bring contagious diseases and also had enough money not to be a charge on the American society. Certain immigrants were "smuggled" into the US by travelling (above all) second class; it was probably often elderly and/or sickly family members who emigrated together with their entire family, and the rest of the family normally went steerage.

At the immigration centre all immigrants – i.e. steerage passengers – were checked before they were allowed to enter. For a "normal" immigrant the process took three to five hours, but that could be after waiting up to some 14 hours before even disembarking at Ellis Island since the immigration centre closed at 17.00 hrs and ships arriving later had to wait until the next day with all passengers on board. The US issued stricter and stricter immigration laws, all aimed at letting in only immigrants who would be able to provide for

themselves. You could not be ill – neither physically nor mentally – and you could not have a criminal record either. Women and children had to “belong” to a man who had come of age (husband, brother, father etc.) and if they in spite of this travelled alone they were not let into the States unless someone came to meet them. Many women married on Ellis Island only to be able to enter the States. There is also a suspiciously high number of “cousins” meeting the women – name and relation was noted on the ships’ manifests. However, only about 2 % of all applicants were refused. This was of course due to the fact that the shipping lines – just as the airlines today – early on were made responsible if they transported passengers who were refused entry.



Ellis Island (after 1900)

On Ellis Island there were all the facilities an immigrant could possibly need: sale of boxed lunches, a restaurant, special waiting halls for people continuing by train, luggage storage rooms, sale of train tickets and currency exchange. Until 1902 there was a certain amount of racketeering, and corruption was not rare among the officials. However, in 1901 President Theodore Roosevelt had had enough and appointed a manager who in only one year managed to completely change Ellis Island so that everyone was correctly treated. The interpreters are worth a special mention. Ellis Island employed a very large number of interpreters; all interpreters spoke at least three-four different languages and some were fluent in upwards of a dozen languages and dialects. The prevalent idea of Ellis Island as a place where names and records were corrupted by an uninterested and only English-speaking immigration official is completely false; it was in fact most often the immigrants themselves who wanted to anglicise – or otherwise change – their names.

Mass immigration ended in 1924 due to much stricter immigration laws. The importance of Ellis Island also decreased because immigrants had to go through all formalities already in their country of origin. The station was however not closed until March 1955; in 1954 only 21 500 immigrants had passed through Ellis Island, which can be compared to e.g. 1921 when 500 000 immigrants were processed.

Ellis Island was abandoned, closed down and forgotten until President Lyndon Johnson in 1965 officially proclaimed Ellis Island to be a part of the Statue of Liberty National Monument. It was however only in 1982, on the initiative of President Ronald Reagan, that a foundation was created to restore

both the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island. The Statue of Liberty was re-inaugurated on the American National Day 04 July 1986 (100 years after the original inauguration) and Ellis Island was opened 10 September 1990.



Ellis Island today

A sort of equivalent of Ellis Island was **Angel Island** outside San Francisco. Angel Island was used as an immigration centre 1910 – 1940 and handled Asian, mainly Chinese, immigrants. However, only some 175 000 Chinese entered the States since the aim of Angel Island was to stop the Chinese immigration, unlike Ellis Island where the longed for workers were checked to be up to acceptable standard. At Ellis Island three hours was a fast process, at Angel Island three weeks was fast. Many Chinese spent six months on the island, some remained for two years. The Japanese immigrants fared somewhat better and there were of course also immigrants of European origin from Australia and New Zealand as well as the occasional Russian entering by this port. These “European” immigrants were treated the same way on Angel Island as on Ellis Island.

Sources

Research project Göteborgs-Emigranten (Per Clemensson, Ulf Beijbom)

Titanic.com

Ellis Island Immigration Museum; The National Park Service, Statue of Liberty National Monument and Ellis Island

The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation (American Family Immigration History Center)

Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation

Pictures

Orlando, Rollo – Research project Göteborgs-Emigranten

Campania – Cunard Line (www.geocities.com/Cunard_Line/Campania.html)

Virginia – American Family Immigration History Center

Lusitania – Ships & Ships (Aleksi Lindström)

Titanic – Titanic.com

Cedric, Stockholm – KinShips

Ship's manifest Cedric – American Family Immigration History Center

Castle Garden, Ellis Island (after 1900) - Göteborgs-Emigranten

Ellis Island (1892-1897), Ellis Island today – The National Park Service