

Québec City – The Forgotten Port of Entry

By Robert Vineberg

In the absence of a physical reminder, our collective memory of the past often fades away. In Pier 21, Canada is blessed to have preserved a concrete example of an immigration port of entry from the age of the ocean liner. However, the very existence of Pier 21 leads most Canadians to believe that Halifax was the major sea port of entry for Canada. In fact, with the exception of the five or six years immediately after the Second World War, the Port of Québec landed at least twice as many immigrants as did Halifax in almost every year since Confederation! Indeed, from 1869 to 1889, 538,137 immigrants landed at Québec while only 91,910 landed at Halifax.¹ Even in the last years of the operation of the seaports as immigrant ports of entry Québec still had more landings than did Halifax. From 1966 to 1971, 81,793 immigrants landed at Québec while only 36,386 landed at Halifax.²

While the Quarantine Station at Grosse Isle is being preserved by Parks Canada, unfortunately, nothing remains of the large immigration facilities at the Louise Basin in Quebec City. The basin is now a marina for pleasure craft. However, in 1887, the facilities had just been enlarged to deal with the growing flow of immigrants. The Minister of Agriculture was proud enough of the new facilities to describe them in great detail in the 1889 Annual Report of the department:

The arrangements for the landing at and forwarding of immigrants from Quebec are now so complete that the following description may prove of interest:-

For the convenience of steamers carrying immigrants to be landed at Quebec, there are magnificent deep water wharves at both sides of the river. Immigrants intending to travel by Canadian Pacific Railway, are landed at the Louise Embankment breakwater wharf, which is about 800 feet long, and at low tide has 36 feet of water. On this wharf is a baggage shed, 400 feet long, where baggage can be handled and loaded, but for the convenience of immigrants who walk on a planked platform to the immigration building where the immigration, railway and other offices are, the Canadian Pacific Railway generally runs the baggage up on railway lorries and spreads it out on the platform in front of the building to be sorted and checked as fast as the immigrants procure railway tickets. It is then loaded into baggage cars and a special immigrant train, usually composed of colonist sleeping cars, is always ready to start, so that there is no unnecessary detention. The immigrant has only to exchange or purchase his railway tickets, claim and get checks for baggage, procure provisions for the journey at the counter, and step from the platform into a colonist sleeper in which he goes through without change, to Manitoba, and even British Columbia. There are rarely more than

400 passengers and their baggage on one train, so that frequently the immigrants by a single vessel require two, and sometimes three special trains,

The Immigration Hall erected by the Dominion Government in 1887, is a good two story building 400 feet long, with a wide veranda all around, and fixed seats where people are secure from sun and rain. It is admirably situated, almost surrounded by flowing water, pure fresh air in abundance, and plenty of spare ground adjoining. During the two years it has been in use, all who have passed through have given free expression to their satisfaction with the building and conveniences provided for the weary passenger, after spending ten or twelve days in the limited space available for air and exercise on board ship.

On the ground floor at one end, are sufficient double and single offices to accommodate all the officers connected with the various branches of the Immigration Service, viz:- Dominion and Provincial Agents, Port Physician, Customs, Ticket, Telegraph and Telephone Offices, all easy of access to any person either in, or outside the buildings.

The Main Hall, about 250 feet long, has ample room for 1,000 passengers with their hand-baggage, is well lighted by large windows, and many side doors afford easy means of communication with the veranda. In the hall is a long counter and shop, kept by a person appointed by the Government, where immigrants can procure provisions for the journey at moderate rates. For the guidance and information of immigrants, price lists of articles for sale and tables of the Canadian currency value of foreign money, are posted up in the several parts of the hall; these are printed in French, German, Scandinavian [sic] Russian and other foreign languages. Arrangements have been made to exchange money brought by immigrants into Canadian currency....

At the west end is a dining-room, seating 200 at once. As tea, coffee or milk with bread and butter costs 10 cents, and a full hot meal of meat and vegetables, 25 cents, everyone can be satisfactorily accommodated. A large kitchen, supplied with a new modern range, adjoins the dining-room.

The wing is divided into two apartments (male and female, entirely separate). Each contains six bath-rooms and a number of wash basins, and always furnished with soap and towels.

On the second floor, are two large rooms, that can accommodate 300 people each: fixed seats run all around these rooms, and they will be found useful in case of over crowding from any cause. On the female end there are 15 bed-rooms and quarters for a matron and assistant. On the men's end there are 4 bed-rooms. These may be used by people

who wish to rest a day or more before starting on a long rail journey, or those awaiting remittances from friends, &c., &c....

Counting the space of the verandas under roof, the whole premises have ample accommodation for 3,000 people.³

The accompanying photos, Figures 1 and 2, show the exterior of the facilities and an interior view of the main hall. The Quebec facility was enlarged again just before the First World War and is shown in Figure 3.

The landing and onward dispatch inland of some 3,000,000 immigrants through the Port of Quebec is an important part of Canada's immigration history and deserves to be recognized as such.

Notes

1. Minister of Agriculture, *Report of the Minister of Agriculture of the Dominion of Canada for the Calendar Year 1889, Immigration*, Queen's Printer, Ottawa, 1890, pp 5 and 28.
2. Manpower and Immigration Canada, *Immigration Statistics, 1966, 1967, 1968, 1969, 1970 and 1980*.
3. Minister of Agriculture, *Report of the Minister of Agriculture of the Dominion of Canada for the Calendar Year 1889*, Queen's Printer, Ottawa, 1890, pp xxvii and xxviii.



Figure 1: Immigration Hall, Louise Embankment, Port of Quebec, c. 1890.

Credit: *Library and Archives Canada*, a021357



Figure 2: Interior of Immigration Hall, Louise Embankment, Port of Quebec, c 1900.

Credit: *Library and Archives Canada*, a048697



Figure 3: Immigration Hall, Louise Embankment, Port of Quebec, 1914

Credit: *Library and Archives Canada*, a021672

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