

STEERAGE CONDITIONS ON THE JOURNEY ACROSS THE ATLANTIC FOR THE ELLIS ISLAND IMMIGRANTS

WHEN IMMIGRANTS ARRIVED AT ELLIS ISLAND, they had just endured a long, difficult journey across the Atlantic. The majority of immigrants traveled to America in steerage.

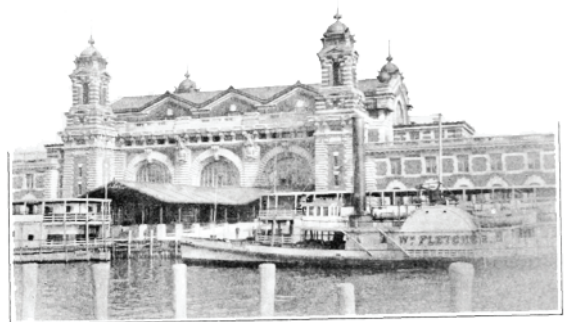
Steerage was the lowest deck of a ship, originally made to hold cargo. Conditions in steerage improved over time, but in the earlier part of the 19th century, immigrants traveled by sailing ships. On these vessels, steerage was a dark, cramped space where passengers spent as little time as they had to. Beds lined both sides of the steerage compartment, with a long common area in between. This was to be the passengers' dining room, recreation area, and even restroom. Passengers were required to bring their own food and cooking utensils for the journey, which often took a month or two.

During the day, passengers spent most of their time on the upper deck. If the weather was bad, however, passengers were forced to stay in steerage. During storms, the crew would close ventilation to the steerage compartment, and passengers could not stay on the upper deck for their own safety. This created a foul-smelling, closed-in environment for the passengers, who could not leave steerage until the storm passed.

Food was not provided on sailing ships. Families had to cook in the ship's kitchen and had to share it with the crew and the other passengers. Around meal times, long lines would form as people waited their turn to cook for their families. Often times, the journey was delayed due to bad weather and families ran out of food.

Sanitation was also poor. There were no doctors on the ships, so sickness spread quickly in the wet, crowded space. Toilets were scarce, and there was never enough fresh water to go around. Passengers used pots and buckets to collect rainwater during storms to use for cooking, cleaning and bathing.

As more and more people came to America, technology advanced and companies began to provide better accommodations for steerage passengers. Steamships became popular, and they were able to provide better conditions for their travelers. On some steamships, passengers were allowed their own private space in steerage consisting of one or two beds, a toilet and a washbowl. Meals were provided and were served in a mess hall. To pass the time, people would gather on the main deck and play games, play music, dance and get to know one another. Steamships were much faster, and the average length of the journey from Europe to New York decreased from a month or two to a matter of weeks.



Answer the questions below on a separate sheet of paper~

1. Write a paragraph about the longest trip you have ever taken. Was it in a car, on a plane, on a train or something else? Who were you with? How much space did you have? How did you pass the time?
2. What do you have in your kitchen right now that would stay fresh for two weeks? How about two months?
3. Imagine you're a Norwegian parent thinking of joining your friends in America. They have sent many letters home describing the conditions of the ships and their great new life in Michigan. Does the journey seem worth it to you? Why or why not?