

Immigration and Transportation: A Match Made in America

By Michael W. Timpanaro

There has long been a strong connection in America between immigration and the transportation industry. The ties may seem obvious, but they are often overshadowed by discussions about the reasons for immigration or the trials and tribulations of the journey to a new world and a new life. However, the connection was mutually beneficial. Not only did the transportation industry offer a means of mobility to these new Americans as they traveled to their new homes, but once they arrived, it also offered them a means of employment.

Throughout the 19th century, individual states would advertise in Europe to entice people to immigrate to the United States. The states were looking for people to settle new areas and to work in the growing industries. Some of the larger industries also placed announcements overseas, including the growing transportation industries. These advertisements boasted of affordable land and abundant employment opportunities.

The canal industry was among the first to reach out to these new arrivals. Responding to the growing needs of industry for more rapid forms of transport and communication, the early 19th century experienced a sort of canal madness. This laborious system of connecting artificial and natural waterways demanded enormous amounts of manpower. For many new immigrants, excavating the trenches for these watery interstates was a gainful though arduous venture.

By the mid-nineteenth century there was a new transportation system to build. The industrial revolution was rapidly expanding in the east, placing greater demands on the transportation industry to fuel its access to markets and resources. Advances in rail technology were quickly outpacing the limits of the canal systems and as the evolution of the industry progressed, the growing pool of immigrant labor was once again called upon. The work was hard and dangerous and without the heavy machinery of today, enormous amounts of cheap labor were needed to clear the way, lay the track, build the bridges and excavate the tunnels.

The coming of the railroad revolutionized the transportation industry and the American economy. Unprecedented numbers of people and goods flowed across the country at record speeds. New lands in the west were opened up for settling, creating new opportunities for the endless stream of new immigrants. Towns sprang up to meet the growing demand for goods and services and in turn created still greater demands for the railroads.

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