

Children of Liberty?



France's gift to the United States, the Statue of Liberty faces out to the Atlantic Ocean. Did you know that Lady Liberty's smaller sister looks back at her from France?

Our earliest known Atkinsons sailed from England four years before an eighteen-year-old Victoria was crowned Queen of England.

British parliament had passed "The Factory Act" to regulate the labour of children, as young as nine years of age, in mills and factories.

The United States was being run by her seventh president, a veteran of their American Revolution, a general named Andrew "Stonewall" Jackson.

There was no Canada, as we currently know it, no Prime Minister or recognizable form of parliament, and no GST. Ontario and Quebec were known as Upper and Lower Canada respectively; Toronto was called York, but more commonly called "Muddy York" and the first prime minister did not take office until 1867, when a Scottish barrister named John Alexander Macdonald from a fledgling Ontario Street practice in Kingston, Ontario reluctantly accepted the position.

When our ancestors got off the boat in New York City, that welcoming maternal figure of so many immigrants, Lady Liberty, was not there with her torch aloft. She had not taken up residence on Bedloe's Island to greet immigrants to the United States until 1886, when President Grover Cleveland accepted her from the French.

And Ellis Island was just that, an island no more than an empty piece of real estate! It had not yet been designated as a federal immigration station until 1890, and it was another two years later before the bustling trickle of 22 million immigrants were directed through it!

Prior to Ellis Island, newcomers went through Castle Garden, a pioneering collaboration of New York State and New York City. Ten million arrivals came through this first official immigration center from 1855 to 1890. Both these locations are now museums with respective websites.

Before Castle Garden, colonizers were channeled through Battery Park, because prior to 1855 there was not an official immigration-processing center. Shipping companies presented passenger lists to the Collector of Customs, and travellers made whatever declarations were necessary before going on their merry way -- but our family members were not processed here either, because British Consul, James Buchanan, had written a letter excusing them, their luggage and personal effects. Mr. Buchanan was British Counsel in New York from 1816 to 1843.

A microfilmed copy of this Buchanan letter is in a special collection of "Upper Canada Sundries A-5." It is stored at the Kathleen Ryan Library of Queens University in Kingston, Ontario, but I was unable to arrange a suitable timeframe to view it.

Kale Liam Hobbes
October 2005