Encouragement of Immigration to the Middle West During the Era of the Civil War

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In recent years the trend in historical writing and teaching is to emphasize social and economic conditions and to study politics less intensely. History is now taken to mean the record of all aspects of life in the past. Not only are presidents, congresses, and laws important, but education, journalism, literature, religion, customs, agriculture, and industry are given full space in books and in classroom sessions. On the whole, this would seem to be a commendable tendency, for an understanding of a block of yesteryear must be derived from more than an investigation of what happened in a national or state capital.

The principal difficulty is that too many aspirants to historical knowledge do not realize the fundamental connection between political and social developments. Each unit is considered in its own small area so that much of the significance of an age escapes the student. The remedy lies in a comprehension of the influence of the parts upon each other in order to see the whole as it was. For example, the English joint-stock trading company and a colonial government, western land speculation and the American Revolution, southern plantation economy and states' rights must be examined for intertwining elements.

One illustration of this fertile and not very well-tilled field is the story of immigration of European peoples to the United States. Especially during the middle of the nineteenth century were there political, as well as social and economic, factors which affected the movement of several million men and women to the youthful, prosperous American nation. The problem is to detect the combination of circumstances which produced this result.

By 1850 the chief national groups that were contributing large numbers of immigrants to the New World were the British (English and Irish), Germans, and the Scandinavians (Norwegians, Swedes, and Danes). Migration from northern Europe far exceeded that from central and southern

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areas, and it was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that this situation changed. During the fifties the totals of persons coming from Ireland and the German states were the largest and nearly equal, while in the sixties the Germans were considerably more numerous. A sharp increase in Scandinavian immigration occurred during the latter decade.¹

The Irish tenant farmer had been exploited by absentee landowners for years. His lot was a pitiable one, in which he lived on the brink of disaster, suffered acutely from demands of heartless landlords, and looked starvation in the face if there was a crop failure. In 1846 and 1847 the terrible potato famines accentuated these long-standing troubles, and from this time many Irish peasants set out for the United States to improve their fortunes. Upon their arrival the great majority settled in eastern cities where they served as mill hands, factory workers, and longshoremen. Some went to the Middle West and were employed in canal and railroad building. Wherever they were, the Irish-Americans had the reputation (often unjustified) of using liquor intemperately, engaging in political chicanery, wasting their financial resources, and being excessively devoted to Catholicism.²

One spectacular cause for German immigration was the ill-fated revolution of 1848. After an unsuccessful attempt to induce the Prussian king to lead a German federation of liberal hue, many intellectuals and middle-class leaders were impelled to flee for their safety.³ In America these Forty-eighters soon were doing well—Carl Schurz, prominent politician and Civil War general, is an example. The bulk of German immigrants, however, were rural folk, who came over to take up a piece of land and become industrious farmers. Their destination was often Illinois, Indiana, or Wisconsin, and some localities today can trace their social characteristics to this period.

In Norway and Sweden the economic motive to migrate to America was strong. The peasants had for a long time been oppressed by a fairly rigid class system, which kept

them in a near-poverty condition. Small wonder that the Scandinavian was convinced by so-called America letters from a relative or friend who had already made the trip that he ought to come to Wisconsin or Minnesota where there was fertile, cheap land! Furthermore, in Sweden, there were many who were dissatisfied with the national church system. Although there was little persecution, religious dissent was sometimes dealt with rather harshly. The Scandinavian influx was not great until the sixties and reached its peak in the eighties.

It was not an easy journey from northern Europe to some interior point in the United States. The steerages on ships were usually ill-ventilated, filthy, and overcrowded. Passengers often had to supply and cook their own food under unfavorable conditions. Not only was the trip uncomfortable, but it might be fatal if one contracted any of several diseases prevalent on the miserable tubs that wallowed slowly across the ocean. When he debarked at Castle Garden, the official depot at the foot of Manhattan Island, or at a similar place at Boston or New Orleans, the immigrant was a very confused person. Setting foot on the streets of New York, he was overwhelmed by hordes of sharpers who were out to fleece him of his small capital by overcharging him for a boardinghouse room and a railroad ticket. If he were fortunate, he would have the fifteen dollars or so that was required to buy the fare to Chicago or Milwaukee and would not linger until he had spent his last penny in the big city. From New York he might take rough accommodations on a train, often in a seatless boxcar, in order to reach the Middle West. One commonly used route ran by way of Albany, thence on the Erie Canal to the Lakes, and finally to Chicago.

By the middle of the nineteenth century the volume of immigration had reached large proportions. During the thirties about six hundred thousand alien passengers arrived in the United States; in the fifties, 2,598,214; in the sixties, 2,314,824. This was, of course, an important cause for the increase in the total population of the country from twenty-

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5 Wittke, *We Who Built America*, 113-125. Many immigrants arrived at Quebec and from there came into the Middle West. Marcus L. Hansen, *The Atlantic Migration, 1607-1860* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1940), 298-299.
three million in 1850 to thirty-eight million in 1870. The peak year in the two decades was 1854 when the total arrivals reached 427,833. Then the annual figures declined until after the Civil War. Even in 1870 the number did not equal that of 1854. During the war, 1861-1865, there was a sharp slump; in 1861 only 91,918 were counted.

There were probably several reasons for the falling off of the immigration after 1854. For a couple of years the Crimean War in Europe reduced the available shipping to carry passengers, stimulated wage levels which had hitherto been depressed, and drew manpower into military service. But conditions in the United States were also important. An economic recession in 1854 and a more severe one beginning in 1857 probably caused many Germans and Irishmen to pause and consider before hazarding migration when the outcome might be unemployment and suffering. During the Civil War the uncertain destiny of the Union may have contributed to the decline in immigration. Again the diversion of shipping to war duty was possibly an obstacle.

It was a strange coincidence that in the same year in which immigration totals declined so greatly the apex of American nativism was reached. By 1855 the Know-Nothing movement was in full bloom. Founded on the proposition that aliens threatened existing institutions, the antiforeign sentiment of the eighteen fifties seems to the present-day observer to be unrealistic and un-American. Nevertheless, many people, especially Eastern workingmen, were convinced that the immigrant tide depressed wage levels and caused widespread unemployment. It was said with some basis of truth that a high percentage of undesirables (paupers, criminals, and prostitutes) were alien-born. If one were to believe the nativist argument, he would conclude that the Irish were shiftless and corruptible, and that the German Fortyeighters were radicals scheming to involve the United States in a world revolution.

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* Nevins, *Ordeal of the Union*, II, 281-286.
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The rise and fall of the Know-Nothing party was rapid. Building on antiforeign and anti-Catholic prejudice, Charles B. Allen of New York formed a secret, "patriotic" society, the Order of the Star-Spangled Banner, in 1849. For a while it was a local and unknown organization, but in 1854 it capitalized on the Kansas-Nebraska crisis, which was splitting up old party alignments. For a brief period, then, the Know-Nothings were able to elect their candidates to state and national offices. Although they held the balance of power in Congress in 1855, they were unable to push through their coveted measures to restrict immigration. Proposals to prevent the ingress of potential criminals, paupers, and mentally unfit were rejected. A measure to extend the required period of residence for naturalization to twenty-one years also failed. Soon afterwards, the party disintegrated chiefly because it was divided on a sectional basis with respect to the bitter slavery controversy.

The main strength of the Know-Nothings had been in the East and in the border states. Nativism was never a powerful force in the Middle West. The obvious reason for this condition was that these states were still in the early stages of their growth and could absorb immigrants with less social and economic dislocation. From 1850 to 1870 Wisconsin's population increased from 305,391 to 1,054,670; Iowa, from 192,214 to 1,194,020; Minnesota, from 6,077 to 439,706; Illinois, from 851,470 to 2,539,891; and Indiana, from 988,416 to 1,680,637. The great migration of Europeans to this region contributed heavily to such a breathtaking development. Since a large population meant wealth, prosperity, and prestige for a state, it is easy to see why the Middle West energetically encouraged immigration.

In the sixties the federal government recognized the desirability of increasing the number of incoming foreigners and took some action to that end. Realizing that the alien

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10 Eighth United States Census, 1860, Statistics of Population, 598-599, 604; Ninth United States Census, 1870, Statistics of Population, 3. After 1860, although the total population of the east north central states increased, the trend in internal migration was a movement from this region to the trans-Mississippi states. In other words, Minnesota and Iowa gained from Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio. See Fred A. Shannon, The Farmer's Last Frontier (New York, 1945), 36-39.
influx had fallen off and that army enlistments had created a shortage of industrial and agricultural labor, officials, such as Secretary of State William H. Seward and President Abraham Lincoln, urged Congress to pass laws to encourage immigration. The result was the Contract Labor Law of 1864, which empowered a commissioner to establish regulations for contracts between American employers and immigrants whose passage money was advanced in return for a promise to work for a specified time. A superintendent of immigration was assigned the duty of guarding the arriving alien from unfair transportation rates in his journey into the interior.

Of course, the Contract Labor Law was especially designed to aid the eastern manufacturer in filling up the ranks of his labor force, now depleted by military requirements and demanding expansion due to stepped-up industrial production. Nevertheless, there were aspects of the policy which, it was hoped, would induce immigrants to take up lands in the western states. Federal Land Commissioner J. M. Edmunds had urged the passage of the law because he believed that "millions of active, able-bodied men" would be drawn into the Mississippi Valley where they could have farms "of the richest soil." And, according to the 1864 measure, a contract advancing passage to America could operate as a lien on any land acquired in the future by the immigrant. Private land and transportation companies were later organized to take advantage of this provision.

After 1864 there were efforts in Congress to amend the Contract Labor Law so as to make it more readily enforceable in cases where immigrants had disregarded their contracts. But every such attempt at technical improvement failed. Soon criticism arose as to the conduct of the federal agents appointed to enforce the statute. The commissioner of immigration was suspected of collusion with the American Emigrant Company, a corporation engaged in importing con-


12 United States Statutes at Large, XIII, 397-398.

13 House Reports of the Committees, 38 Cong., 1 Sess., no. 56, p. 7.

14 Congressional Globe, 38 Cong., 2 Sess., 326, 1220; ibid., 39 Cong., 1 Sess., 2314; House Reports of the Committees, 39 Cong., 1 Sess., no. 48 (serial no. 1272), 2.
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tract labor. There was a revival of the belief that European countries were dumping their undesirable peoples onto the United States. Consequently, in 1868 the Contract Labor Law was repealed.

Another measure which was supposed to attract immigrants was the Homestead Act of 1862. But this act was not very effective in making one hundred sixty-acre plots of land available practically free of charge to the individual farmer. Clever speculators were able to engross many square miles of the best part of the public domain so as to leave only the less desirable areas for homesteading. Taking up entries under each of several laws (such as the Desert Land Act, The Timber Culture Act, and the Timber and Stone Act), making use of dummy-entry men and false swearing, and sometimes conniving with officers of government land offices, the speculators skimmed the cream off the top. Furthermore, the prospective homesteader, in this case the immigrant, had to have some capital in order to buy the requisite equipment and supplies for the first year. Obviously, many immigrants were not financially able to do this. It would seem, then, that the Homestead Law may have attracted immigrants from Europe, but it furnished only qualified opportunity for them when they arrived in the Middle West.

Much work in encouraging immigration was done by private agencies. One of the most active enterprisers after 1863 was the American Emigrant Company, which secured a commission for directing alien passengers to steamship companies and railroads. Other clients of the company were American employers who wanted contract laborers either in manufacturing or in agriculture. By an extensive campaign this corporation recruited groups of immigrant laborers for farmers and western railroads. In one instance, an agent of the American Emigrant Company was also a state commissioner of immigration. Thomas E. Souper of Missouri.

15 Congressional Globe, 39 Cong., 1 Sess., 4040-4042; United States Immigration Commission, Reports, XXXIX, 22.
16 United States Statutes at Large, XV, 58.
18 This viewpoint has been advanced in Fred A. Shannon, "The Homestead Act and the Labor Surplus," American Historical Review, XLI, 637-651.
assumed both duties in 1865. There were complaints that there was some connection between the company and the federal commissioner of immigration during the days of the Contract Labor Law. At any rate, the company probably had helpful and influential friends, for it used Chief Justice Salmon P. Chase, Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles, and Senator Charles Sumner as references of recommendation.19

The railroad companies were frequently engaged in inducing European farmers to come to the Middle West and settle along their lines. The federal government had generously aided railroad construction by large land grants from the public domain. In order to turn these areas into paying assets, the companies offered to sell plots to immigrants on long-term credit. The buyer often had seven years to retire the principal at six per cent interest.20

The Illinois Central Railroad conducted an ambitious colonization project. After 1857 its runners in New York City were distributing handbills to arriving immigrants at Castle Garden, and an office was maintained nearby. The pamphlets that were put in the hands of the alien were enthusiastic about the merits of the railroad lands. One "guide" announced: "The climate of Illinois is salubrious. Upon the prairies there is always a refreshing breeze, and those stifling, enervating heats, characteristic of the valleys and wooded regions are unknown."21 Agents were dispatched to Canada, Sweden, Germany, and England to spread the gospel. From 1862 to 1866, Francis A. Hoffman, lieutenant-governor of Illinois, worked for the company on a commission basis in selling lands to Germans. His sales amounted to at least eighty thousand acres.22 A Lutheran pastor, T. N. Hasselquist, organized a Swedish settlement at Paxton, one hundred miles south of Chicago and succeeded in selling over thirty-six thousand acres.23

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20 Atlantic Monthly (Boston, 1857-1967), VII (April, 1861), advertisement on back cover.
The midwestern state governments also encouraged immigration so as to increase their population and wealth. During the Civil War era one of the most active states was Minnesota. The secretary of state was commissioner of immigration and distributed literature describing the state's natural advantages. A state-wide contest in which prizes were offered for essays setting forth useful information about Minnesota was begun. These were then printed in the advertisements that were sent to Germany, Sweden, and Norway. Even counties and congressional districts had boards of immigration which were responsible for making lists of friends and relatives in foreign countries. These names were then combined into a mailing list, and pamphlets were sent to them in huge quantities.

Hans Mattson, the commissioner of immigration, executed his duties zealously. He visited Sweden and arranged transportation for several groups. Although he met opposition from the upper class, who feared the depletion of the country's population, Mattson reported impressive achievements. As a result of the work from 1867 to 1869, he said that there was one continuous settlement along a railroad line from Wright to Stevens County.

Wisconsin established an office of commissioner of emigration in 1852 and a board of immigration in 1867. Here, too, an elaborate network, reaching down to local units, was built up. A special appeal was directed to Germans and Scandinavians, many of whom were, of course, coming to Wisconsin in the fifties and sixties. Keen competition with Minnesota quickly developed.

For a time, Iowa lagged behind her neighbors. One cause for this was a strong strain of nativism that stood in the way. In 1860, however, a commissioner of immigration was appointed and instructed to reside in New York City. He informed arriving passengers about the soil, climate, and

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VI (1936), 78-86. For further information about Hasselquist see O. Fritiof Ander, T. N. Hasselquist, the Career and Influence of a Swedish-American Clergyman, Journalist and Educator (Rock Island, Illinois, 1931).

24 Laws of Minnesota (1863-1864), 64-67.
26 Acts and Resolves Passed by the Legislature of Wisconsin (1852), ch. 432.
27 General Laws of Wisconsin (1867), ch. 126.
industry of Iowa and advised them as to the cheapest and most expeditious route to get there. Soon enthusiasm concerning official encouragement flagged and the commissioner’s activities ceased in 1862. The Burlington and Missouri Railroad complained in 1869 that the state used “poor and slight, if indeed any means, to call attention to her vast resources, and thus attract people to her . . . fertile plains.” In the next two decades Iowa directed a more alert policy.

The story of an attempted official campaign by Indiana is an interesting one. Although, in the fifties, a large number of Irish and Germans settled here, Indiana received less foreign immigrants than any other state in the Ohio Valley. Many communities were heavily populated by Irish canal and railroad workers or by German farmers, but at the close of the Civil War some observers believed that the state was losing out in competition with adjacent regions. Governor Oliver P. Morton expressed this view in his message to the legislature in January, 1865. He pointed out that too many immigrants were passing through Indiana and settling elsewhere despite the fact that large areas were still undeveloped and offered excellent agricultural opportunities.

As a remedy, Morton urgently recommended the establishment of a bureau of immigration that would distribute information about Indiana’s natural resources and institutions throughout Europe. Anticipating what was needed, the Governor announced that he had already directed the preparation of a circular containing such material, and he then submitted it for the representatives’ approval. Neither this appeal nor one made to the special session of November, 1865, were heeded by the general assembly. In his legislative message of January, 1867, Morton reiterated his proposals, but his efforts were again fruitless.

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29 Quoted in Richard C. Overton, Burlington West (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1934), 251. The Burlington Railroad was active in promoting colonization in Iowa during these years.
30 Logan Esarey, History of Indiana (2 vols., Dayton, Ohio, 1924), II, 629-631.
Solely by executive authority, on January 18, 1866, Acting Governor Conrad Baker appointed John A. Wilstach “Commissioner for the encouragement of emigration to the State of Indiana.” Wilstach, resident of Lafayette and author of studies of Vergil and Dante, supervised an exhibition of Indiana products and minerals at the World’s Fair in Paris in 1867. A bill to reimburse Wilstach for his expenses was then introduced in the senate by John A. Stein of Tippecanoe County. The senators thought that an appropriation of five thousand dollars was unwarranted, and the measure failed. Nevertheless, they were kind enough to confirm the commissioner’s appointment—without pay.

Governor Baker had not conceded defeat, for in his message to the assembly in 1869 he referred to the desirability of a “small annual expenditure, for the purpose of attracting immigration to the State.” He argued that this outlay, “if judiciously disbursed, would soon be repaid by the increase of taxable persons and property which would result therefrom.” A bill making these provisions was coolly received in the house of representatives. It was amended so that a board of immigration would consist of the governor together with the president and the secretary of the state board of agriculture, but they were not to be compensated for these services. Even this lukewarm provision failed passage.

At Glasgow, Scotland, the United States Consul, Isaac Jenkinson, observed the indifference of Indiana in the inducement of immigration. He wrote Governor Baker in March, 1870, that Indiana was little known in that important port of embarkation although the advantages of Wisconsin were

33 Unfortunately little information about Wilstach’s work as commissioner of immigration has been discovered. Biographical data can been found in *Appleton’s Cyclopaedia of American Biography* (6 vols., New York, 1888-1889), VI, 558.

34 *Journal of the Senate of the State of Indiana, 1867, II, 786-788, 904-905, 975-976.* The House approved a concurrent resolution confirming the appointment. *Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Indiana, 1867, II, 1223-1224.*

35 *Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Indiana, 1869,* p. 62.

36 *Ibid.,* 597-655. The General Assembly in its special session in May, 1869, adopted another measure to encourage immigration to Indiana. The franchise was liberalized for persons of foreign birth by requiring only six-months residence in the state and a declaration of intention of becoming a citizen. *Laws of the State of Indiana, Special, 1869,* p. 60.
widely advertised. Jenkinson offered to distribute information about the state if it were forwarded to him.37

Late in 1870 most of the midwestern states and some from other sections sent delegates to a convention at Indianapolis to discuss problems relative to immigration. The meeting was suggested by a joint letter signed by the governors of Minnesota, Iowa, Nebraska, Missouri, Kansas, Michigan, and Wisconsin, and addressed to Governor Conrad Baker on October 18. The objective was a discussion of reforms needed to protect immigrants during ocean passage and after arrival in the United States. In the course of the meeting a sectional cleavage in views regarding immigration was manifest.

On November 25, representatives of twenty-two states and two territories convened in the chamber of the house of representatives at the Indiana capital city. Governor Baker was chosen as the permanent presiding officer. Edward Young, chief of the United States Bureau of Statistics, summarized the history of immigration and emphasized the value to the country of each arriving alien. Governor John M. Palmer of Illinois was present and gave a lengthy address in which he called for better enforcement of laws to protect immigrants from fraud and other forms of injustice. Palmer hinted that greater diligence on the part of the national government might be needed.

This was a source of a bitter controversy. The inland states thought that New York and Massachusetts were permitting inexcusable mistreatment of people who arrived at their ports. They held that there were many instances of profiteering in the sale of railroad tickets and that state authorities co-operated with unprincipled private agents by permitting these deplorable conditions. Another complaint referred to a New York head tax of two dollars and a half, levied on each immigrant arriving at Castle Garden. It was maintained that this was a violation of constitutional law since, in 1849, in the Passenger Cases the Supreme Court had invalidated such taxes. New York replied that the tax was a rightful exercise of the state's police power. The income,

37 Jenkinson to Baker, March 17, 1870. "Correspondence of Governor Conrad Baker," Indiana State Library, Indianapolis, Indiana. This part of Baker's correspondence is in a folder marked "Immigration" and is in the Archives Division.
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collected in this manner, was needed to care for paupers and physically handicapped, many of whom were foreign-born.38

On the second day of the Indianapolis convention the committee on resolutions reported what became the official statement of the states’ ideas. These resolutions called for additional federal laws to protect the foreigner during ocean passage and after arrival at an eastern port. Existing laws, it was thought, ought to be enforced more vigorously. The president of the United States should be requested to negotiate with foreign countries to secure joint jurisdiction over conditions on emigrant ships. All monopolies and combinations which deprived the alien of cheap and safe transportation to the interior were condemned. State capitation taxes on immigrants were called “odious and unjust.” In order to fulfill federal responsibilities in these matters a bureau of immigration ought to be established.

Only one member of the resolutions committee, E. R. Mead of New York, dissented from these proposals and presented a minority report in which he advanced the eastern viewpoint. The correct principle of public policy, he contended, must be an assurance that the immigrant could take care of himself. What was to be feared was the creation of a burdensome pauper class composed of foreign-born peoples. Mead rang the changes of stock arguments against federal action encroaching on state rights. He was worried about the swarm of government officials and the vast expenditures necessary to carry out the plan recommended by the majority.

New York’s delegates were so upset by the turn of events that they walked out of the convention just before roll call for voting on the resolutions. The Massachusetts delegates, also angered, were present but refused to vote. Both states conceded that the immigrant needed protection, yet they believed that the states, not the federal government, should assume responsibility. They were decisively outnumbered, however, and the resolutions were passed by a heavy majority.39

the decision of the Supreme Court in the Passenger Cases may be found in 7 Howard 283. This was a very controversial issue, and the court divided 6-4 with Chief Justice Taney dissenting vigorously.

38 Indianapolis, Indiana, Daily Journal, November 24, 1870. The Indianapolis Journal published several articles revealing the need for federal action affecting immigration and commending the work of the convention. See Indianapolis Journal numbers for late November, 1870.
A permanent committee was appointed to present the recommendations of the convention to Congress. In the next few months a concerted effort was made to effect federal legislation, but the outcome was disappointing. Congress did not pass a general law affecting immigration until 1882, and then the intent was to limit the ingress of paupers and mentally deficient persons.

The significance of the 1870 convention was not in what it accomplished immediately. Instead, it would seem to be in the revelation of midwestern attitudes about immigration. It was, furthermore, an excellent example of the way in which a social and economic issue was closely connected with political action. This was, as a matter of fact, the situation during the whole period of the Civil War years.

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40 Immigration folder in "Correspondence of Governor Conrad Baker." On March 7, 1871, the Minnesota legislature sent Congress a memorial urging federal protection of immigrants. Senate Miscellaneous Documents, 42 Cong., 1 Sess., no. 2 (serial no. 1467), 1-2.

41 Stephenson, History of American Immigration, 142-143.