



Grosse Île Quarantine Station, Québec, Canada

Canada's Grosse Île Quarantine Station played a bigger role in our family's immigration story than Ellis Island did.

Ellis Island looms large in America's immigration story. It was our country's busiest immigration station, processing about 12 million immigrants arriving at the Port of New York and New Jersey during the years it was operational. But the immigrant processing station there was only operational from 1892 to 1924. In 1924, Ellis Island was converted to an immigrant detention center, housing only those immigrants with paperwork problems and those who were to be detained or deported. It closed for good in 1954.



Approaching Ellis Island. Today, Ellis Island is part of the Statue of Liberty National Monument, a National Park System unit. The main building houses the Ellis Island Immigration Museum.

Many immigrants to the United States came through Canada. Most of those that arrived through eastern Canada passed through Canada's Grosse Île Quarantine Station, established on the island of Grosse Île in the St. Lawrence River, downstream from the Port of Québec (City). Grosse Île has been nicknamed Canada's Ellis Island.

Around 1830, an average of 30,000 immigrants were arriving in the Port of Québec at Québec City every year, mostly from the British Isles, including about two-thirds from Ireland. At the time, Europe was dealing with cholera and smallpox epidemics, and immigrants were bringing those diseases with them to Canada.

In 1832, a quarantine station was established on the island of Grosse Île. Before 1847, sick passengers on arriving ships were set to hospital wards that had been established on remote parts of the island, whereas healthy passengers fulfilled their quarantine periods housed in sheds. With a huge increase in arrivals in the late 1840s due to the Irish Potato Famine, tents were set up, although many new arrivals had no shelter at all.

As that emergency subsided and as understanding of disease and treatments increased, station facilities improved and became more professional, from hospitals and housing to nutrition and disinfecting the belongings of new immigrants.

Our ancestors who passed through Grosse Île include the following:

- John and Jemima Russell Wasson, along with their son John, who was born at sea (1842)
- Jane McNeil and her children John, Jane, James, Helen (Ellen) and Duncan (early 1840s)
- Emma Embretsen Bakke (Smebakk) (1903)

Grosse Île Quarantine Station remained in operation until 1932. Today, the station is preserved as part of Parks Canada's Grosse Île and the Irish Memorial National Historic Site.

Photos of the Grosse Île Quarantine Station



Approaching Grosse Île Quarantine Station, now a Parks Canada National Historic Site



This British battery is the only remaining structure on Grosse Île that was here when John and Jemima Wasson arrived at the station.



Built in 1850, the electrician's house is one of the station's oldest surviving structures.



The Disinfection Building opened in 1892. Immigrants and their luggage were disinfected here after they arrived at Grosse Île. Emma Bakke and her belongings would have gone through the disinfection process here.



Each immigrant's possessions were put in a cage-like case and then put into a steamer for disinfection.



Immigrant shower in the Disinfection Building



Located at the eastern end of the island, some distance from the main immigration facilities, is the Lazaretto. It was used to house those who needed to be quarantined from the general immigrant population. It was built in 1847, so it was on Grosse Île when Emma Bakke arrived. Emma Bakke was not quarantined here, though, and likely never saw the Lazaretto.

Prepared by Mark David Wasson
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