Ships of Our Ancestors

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Between 1892 and 1924, 83,000 ship arrivals were recorded at Ellis Island, providing passage for over 12 million immigrants. While the U.S. had more than 100 ports of entry, fully 50% of passengers arrived at Ellis Island. Until the age of flight, immigrants arrived by sea, first on sailing ships and after the middle of the 19th Century, on steamships. This presentation focuses on the ships on which our ancestors traveled, discussing the shift from sail to steam and the governmental regulations which made ship travel safer and more civilized. It will address the experience of our ancestors in getting to the port of embarkation, being processed for passage, and life aboard the vessel.

The major European ports of departure for the U.S., with more than 1,000 departures arriving at Ellis Island are shown below. It is likely that your ancestor left Europe from one of these ports.

Antwerp, Belgium	Boulogne, France	Bremen, Germany
Cherbourg, France	Genoa, Italy	Gibraltar,
Glasgow, Scotland	Hamburg, Germany	Le Havre, France
Liverpool, England	London, England	Naples, Italy
Palermo, Italy	Queenstown, Ireland	Rotterdam, Holland
Southampton, England		

Other European ports of departure with more than 200 departures included

Amsterdam, Holland	Barcelona, Spain	Bergen, Norway
Brest, France	Christiana, Denmark	Copenhagen, Denmark
Cuxhaven, Germany	Gothenburg, Sweden	Hull, England
Libau, Latvia	Lisbon, Portugal	Londonderry, N. Ireland
Marseille, France	Newcastle, England	Patras, Greece
Piraeus, Greece	Plymouth, England	Trieste, Italy

Hundreds of different passenger ships, flying the flags of numerous steamship companies and nations, made the journey. Most traveled the same route over and over again. So, if you know the ship's name but have been unable to find your relative on any passenger list for the ship, you may be able to figure out their likely port of departure. And, if you know only the port of departure, you have a pretty good chance of guessing the steamship company, though figuring the specific ship might be more difficult.

The trip to America included the not insignificant task of arranging passage, getting to the port of embarkation and clearing with the steamship company who did not want to have to bring the passenger back to Europe (at their expense) if rejected at Ellis Island. At the turn of the 20th century, there was a distinct disparity in accessibility to trains between Eastern and Western Europe. Trains only traveled between the major cities in Eastern Europe and so just getting to the train station could be a challenge. This talk will provide a perspective of how our ancestors accomplished this.

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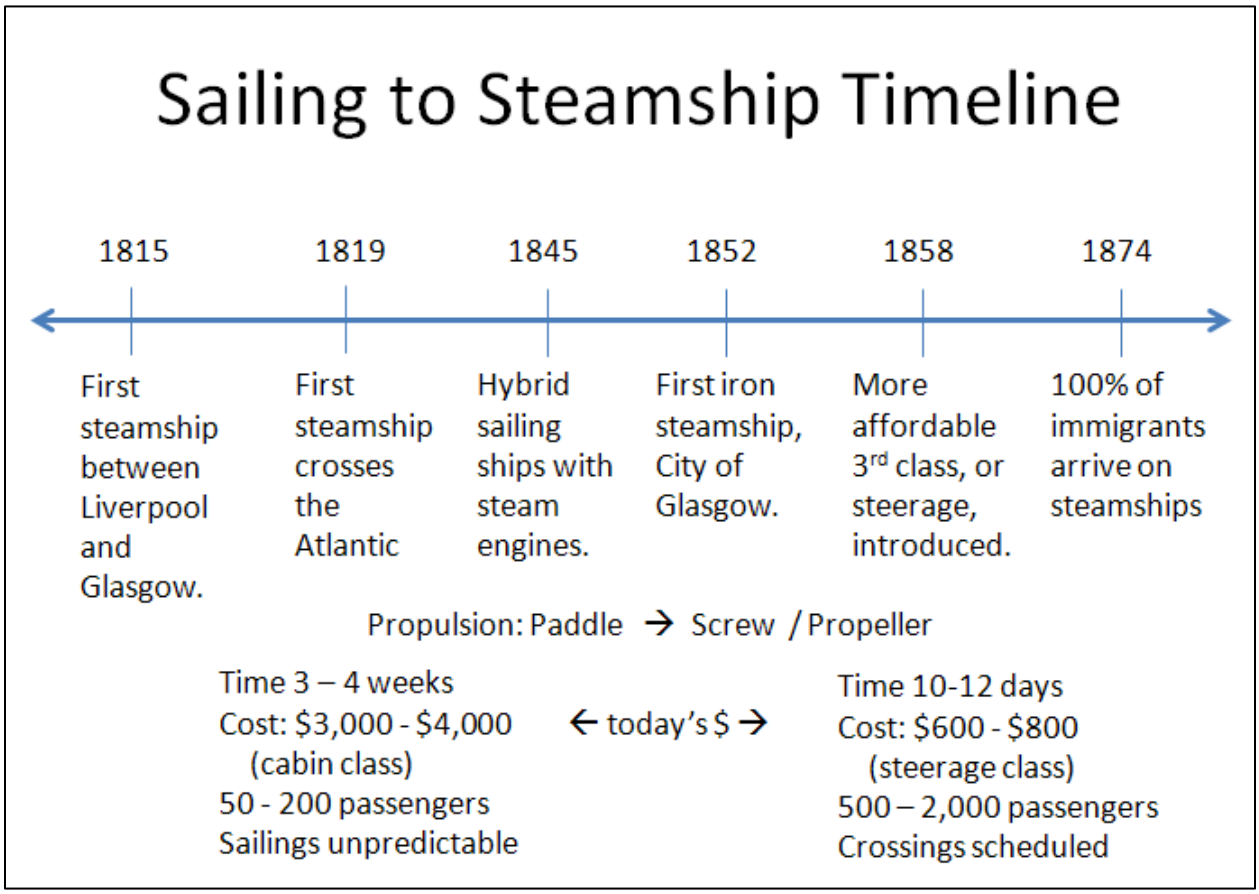
Ship travel of the later 19th century was far safer, more convenient and less expensive than the earlier ship travel. All passengers traveled in cabin class prior to 1858. It was only then that steerage was introduced, bringing the cost more into line with what our ancestors could handle. This talk will discuss the changes in ship travel from the earliest immigrants until the end of the era of the great transatlantic passenger ships, giving a perspective of what it was like if your ancestors came here in the 1840s, 1880s or after the turn of the 20th century.

From sail

To steam



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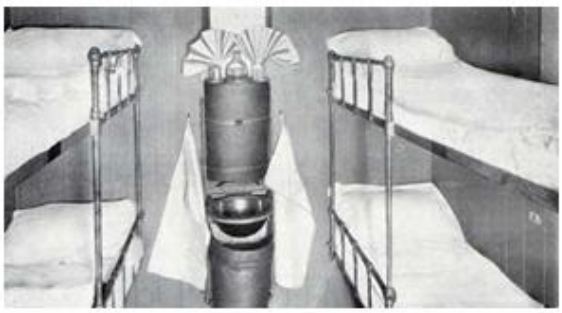
As ship travel became safer, faster and cheaper it also became more passenger focused, providing better amenities, even to passengers traveling in steerage. The horror stories of what it was like to travel in steerage are for the most part exaggerated, especially for the era during which most of our ancestors took the trip.

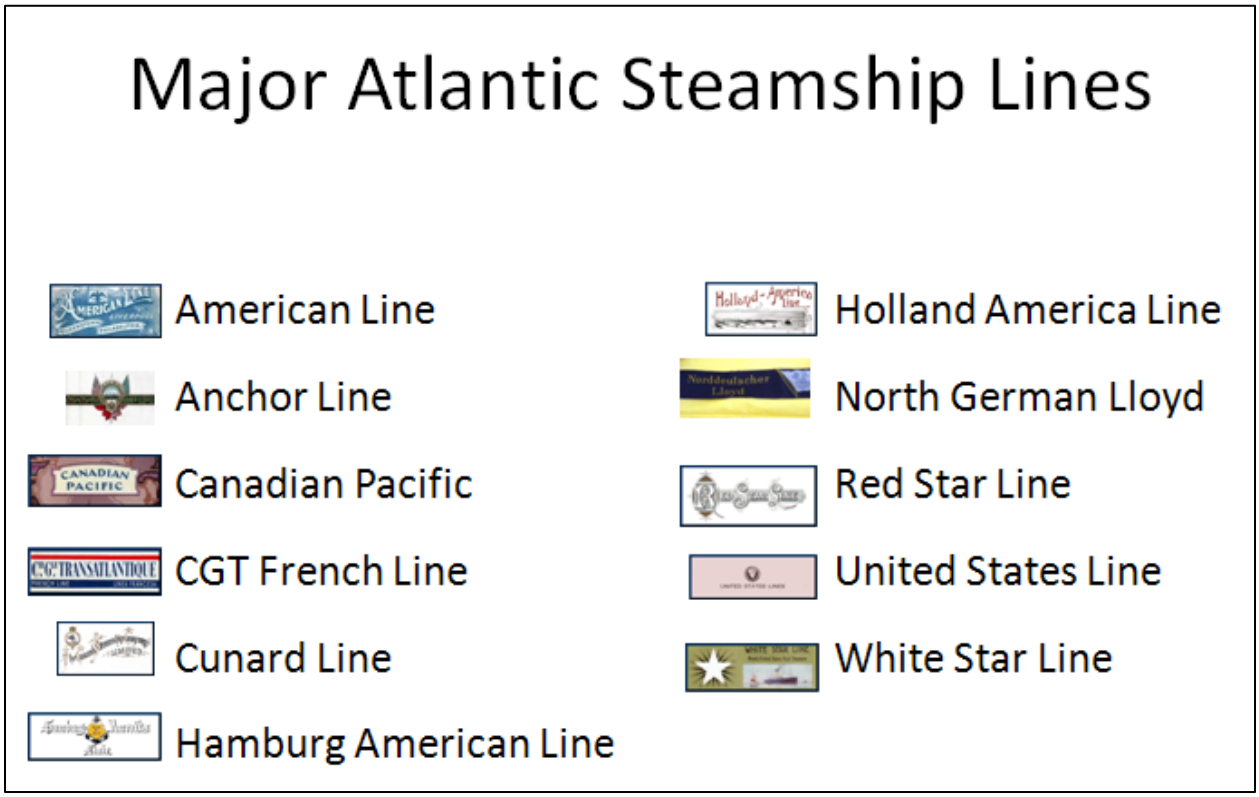
Here are steerage accommodations on Cunard's Franconia in 1912 - probably not what you expected to see.



4 Berth Room

Dining Room

The talk will provide an overview of eleven of the most significant steamship lines (there were well over 80) and the unique nature of each.



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As for these vessels, here is a list of all those that made at least 150 transatlantic crossings and the primary European ports from which they sailed (oops, “steamed”).

Steamship	# Crossings	Primary Port(s) of Departure
Adriatic	212	Liverpool, Southampton, Queenstown
America	150	Naples, Bremen, Genoa
Baltic	224	Liverpool, Queenstown
California	162	London, Glasgow
Campania	273	Liverpool, Queenstown
Carmania	160	Liverpool, Queenstown
Cedric	222	Liverpool, Queenstown
Celtic	232	Liverpool, Queenstown
Columbia	298	London, Glasgow
Etruria	194	Liverpool, Queenstown
Finland	186	Antwerp
Furnessia	190	London, Glasgow
Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse	193	Southampton, Bremen, Cherbourg
Kaiser Wilhelm II	229	Southampton, Bremen, Genoa, Cherbourg
Kaiserin Auguste Victoria	151	Southampton, Hamburg, Cherbourg
Kroonland	187	Antwerp
La Bretagne	196	Havre
La Gascogne	168	Havre
La Lorraine	183	Havre
La Savoie	204	Havre
La Touraine	237	Havre
Lapland	155	Antwerp
Lucania	196	Liverpool, Queenstown
Majestic	291	Liverpool, Southampton, Queenstown
Mauretania	157	Liverpool, Southampton, Queenstown
New York	298	Southampton, Cherbourg
Nieuw Amsterdam	153	Rotterdam
Noordam	167	Rotterdam
Oceanic	188	Liverpool, Southampton, Queenstown, Cherbourg
Philadelphia	220	Southampton, Cherbourg
Rijndam	175	Rotterdam
Rotterdam	222	Rotterdam
Saint Louis	285	Southampton, Cherbourg
Saint Paul	277	Southampton, Cherbourg
Teutonic	228	Liverpool, Queenstown
Umbria	206	Liverpool, Queenstown
Vaderland	159	Antwerp
Zeeland	173	Antwerp

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