
Immigration's Menace to the National Health

Author(s): T. V. Powderly

Source: *The North American Review*, Jul., 1902, Vol. 175, No. 548 (Jul., 1902), pp. 53-60

Published by: University of Northern Iowa

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/25119272>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The North American Review*

JSTOR

IMMIGRATION'S MENACE TO THE NATIONAL HEALTH.

BY T. V. POWDERLY, COMMISSIONER-GENERAL OF IMMIGRATION.

MUCH has been said and much remains to be said of the evils likely to follow the admission of the alien criminal, pauper, anarchist and contract laborer who seek safety, an asylum or a workshop in the United States. The morals of the immigrant, the likelihood of his falling into distress and becoming a burden on our taxpayers, the possibilities of his carrying with him, or developing after landing, anarchistic tendencies, have all occupied the thought and attention of students of public questions; but the physical condition, the health, of the arriving applicant for the honor of American citizenship has not occupied the place in the discussion to which the gravity of that particular phase of the question entitles it. Many who study the immigration problem have in mind the immigrant as he presented himself at the port of landing in the early and middle decades of the last century, and they talk of him as he then was. They have before their mind's eye the sturdy Englishman, Irishman, Scotchman, Welshman, German and north countryman who came strong in limb and pure in blood. When opposition to immigration manifested itself in early days it was based on political or religious grounds; those who then wrote on the subject were actuated by a fear that the infusion of so much alien blood into our national system would pollute the stream of political life and weaken the strength of our institutions. They may have had cause for apprehension, they may have had reason to view the immigrants of their day with alarm, but it must not be forgotten that they were writing about an alien stream that had its source, or sources, in lands to which they looked with pride when tracing their own genealogy. The immigration of that day distributed itself over

the entire country. With the massing of aliens in the centres of industry, grew a demand for the regulation of the system under which immigrants gained access to the United States. The popular idea is that immigration laws, passed during the last two decades, are intended to restrict, or lessen, the number of arrivals. No law has been enacted to prevent the strong, the willing, the honest, the moral or the healthy from landing, only certain classes are denied the right to come among us and take up a residence here. The proscription of these classes is intended to sift, rather than to restrict, immigration. The immigration law of 1891 provides, among other things, that the following classes of aliens shall be excluded :

“ All idiots, insane persons, paupers or persons likely to become a public charge, *persons suffering from a loathsome or a dangerous contagious disease*, persons who have been convicted of a felony or other infamous crime or misdemeanor involving moral turpitude, polygamists and also any person whose ticket or passage is paid for with the money of another or who is assisted by others to come, unless it is affirmatively and satisfactorily shown on special inquiry that such person does not belong to one of the foregoing excluded classes, or to the class of contract laborers excluded by the act of February 26, 1885.”

The immigration authorities have experienced little difficulty in enforcing the provision by which idiots are barred, for very few of that class present themselves for admission. Insane persons, or those in whom the taint of insanity slumbers, have occasioned little or no anxiety or trouble at our ports, for cases in which aliens actually insane at the time of arrival have been barred, are rare. Persons who have been insane at home usually prepare for the passage to the United States at a time when the malady does not manifest itself externally; and, presenting a good appearance on arrival, aliens in whose systems the seeds of insanity lay dormant have frequently been admitted. Many instances may be cited to show that such persons have gained access to public institutions in one or the other of our States and have been deported within one year after landing. The deportation of an insane person, whether on arrival and before landing, or afterwards from the interior, is always effected without protest or opposition. Relatives and friends are usually pleased to be rid of them. Paupers, or persons likely to become a public charge, are easily dealt with; for, if likely to become a charge on the charity of the community, they may be deported without ques-

tion, unless relatives or friends guarantee under bond, in cases where bonds may be accepted, that they will not become public charges. If the record of conviction of a "felony or other infamous crime or misdemeanor involving moral turpitude" is present at the time of arrival of an alien, he may be sent back; but in most cases no such record is in evidence, or accessible to the immigrant inspector, and until the criminal instinct is manifested in some overt act later on, the alien may never be suspected of having been a criminal in his own country.

Polygamists, unless practising polygamy, or acknowledging that it is their intention to practise it, are not excluded. In the case of a polygamist, much depends on the state of facts presented to the inspector. The alien may admit that he is a believer in polygamy and be landed, for such avowal is usually accompanied by a declaration of his belief in some form of religion which sanctions polygamy. The Constitution declares that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." The alien polygamist is usually an intelligent person; furthermore, he is apt to be well coached by some missionary of polygamist tendencies, and while admitting that he is a believer in polygamy will, in the same breath, deny that he is practising or intends practising polygamy.

The aliens, therefore, who give the immigration authorities the most trouble are those who come "suffering from a loathsome or a dangerous contagious disease"; and, of these, persons afflicted with Favus and Trachoma are most numerous. In other cases, excepting idiots, and these are so few as to give little trouble or concern to the government officials, admissions or confessions of the alien are required, but where Favus and Trachoma are present the alien presents the evidence to the Marine Hospital Surgeon who inspects all arrivals, it being external and difficult of concealment. The definition of Favus, as given in the Standard Dictionary, is: "A contagious disease of the skin, especially of the scalp, producing yellow flattened scabs and baldness, scald-head, honeycomb ringworm." The same authority defines Trachoma as: "A disease of the eye, characterized by hard pustules or granular excrescences on the inner surface of the eyelids, with inflammation of the membrane."

Until recently, the people of the United States were not familiar with either Favus or Trachoma; and until the tide of

immigration swelled up, and began to flow in on us from the countries of southern Europe and the Orient, these diseases were not very prevalent. Even now, many well-informed persons inquire what is meant when an immigrant is described as one suffering from Favus or Trachoma. When I assumed the duties of Commissioner-General of Immigration, I was ignorant of the nature of these afflictions. While the law expressly prohibited persons suffering from such diseases from landing, it was also held that, until an alien had been examined, pronounced entitled to admission and actually passed inward to this land of liberty, he was constructively on ship-board and, as a consequence, not landed. The hospitals in and around New York city were crowded with sick and disabled immigrants during the months of August and September, 1897, as a result of the burning of the Ellis Island Immigrant Station and Hospital in June of that year. Examining the reports sent in from these hospitals, I noticed that a great number were held to be treated for Favus and Trachoma, and for the first time I learned what these diseases actually were.

It was not to punish the steamship companies or the unfortunate aliens that the determination was reached by the Commissioner-General of Immigration to prevent, as far as possible, not only the landing of diseased aliens, but their embarkation at foreign seaports with the intention of landing in this country. The following, from the report of the Commissioner-General for the fiscal year ended June 30th, 1898, in which he refers to the bringing of persons "afflicted with a loathsome or a dangerous contagious disease" to the United States, will explain in part what was done to make the law effective:

"The last-named class represents virtually a new departure in the work of the Bureau, since the rejections on that ground rose from a single immigrant last year to 258 for the present fiscal year. This does not show, as may appear at first sight, laxity heretofore on the part of immigrant officials, but displays their increased efficiency in detecting and excluding cases of contagious diseases which are less obvious upon examination and of the nature of which less is known outside the medical profession than of the more generally recognized and easily detected forms of contagion.

"Most of the exclusions upon this ground represent aliens afflicted either with favus, a disease of the scalp, or trachoma, commonly known as granular eyelids. The former is confined almost exclusively to young persons, and, unless a careful inspection is made, the afflicted person

may be admitted without detection. Protracted treatment is required in order to effect a cure, but experienced physicians contend that the disease is likely to become virulent, even after a course of hospital treatment.

"The difficulty in dealing with those afflicted with favus is that the separation of families is likely to follow the deportation of the afflicted immigrant, and this has occasioned immigration officials no little embarrassment and uneasiness. The question whether it would be better to deport such a person immediately on arrival and thus sunder family ties or, by delay of treatment, risk introducing this disease among the children of Americans, has been under discussion for some time, and it was decided to protect the children of the United States, even though hardship should follow the deportation of afflicted persons. With that end in view the following circular was issued:

"TREASURY DEPARTMENT,

"OFFICE COMMISSIONER-GENERAL OF IMMIGRATION,

"WASHINGTON, D. C., October 19, 1897.

"To Commissioners of Immigration, Collectors of Customs, and Immigrant Inspectors:

"In view of the prevalence among arriving immigrants of favus, a loathsome, contagious disease, you are hereby instructed to make a careful examination in order to insure the detection of all such cases and their immediate return to the country whence they came, if possible, by the steamship upon which they arrive, otherwise as soon as practicable by a steamship of the same line, at the expense of said line.

"If the certificate of the examining physician in this country indicates that the disease existed at the time of alien's embarkation, or that symptoms had developed at that time which the transportation company's physician might, with reasonable care, have detected, steps should be taken for the prosecution of such company, as provided by section 6 of the act of March 3, 1891.

"If any minor alien, suffering with said loathsome disease, is accompanied by its parents, one parent should be returned with such alien as its natural guardian and protector.

"All cases of aliens afflicted with favus now confined in hospital by direction of the United States immigration officials whose expenses are not borne by their friends or relations must be returned, as soon as they are able to travel, to the country whence they came, at the expense of the steamship company which brought them here.

"T. V. POWDERLY, *Commissioner-General*.

"Approved.

"L. J. GAGE, *Secretary*."

The persons afflicted with Trachoma were comparatively few, and a doubt existed as to whether it should be classed as a contagious disease. To settle the disputed point the Supervising Surgeon-General of the Marine Hospital Service was appealed to for an opinion; the following is quoted from his answer:

“I have to refer you to an article on Contagious conjunctivitis, written by Dr. Miles Standish, of Boston, who is considered the very best authority. The article is as follows:

“‘After these infections of the conjunctiva, the next most dangerous form of contagious conjunctivitis is the so-called granular lids, or trachoma. If this is of bacterial origin, the micro-organism has not as yet been recognized; nevertheless it will spread slowly through an orphan asylum, tenement house, or any other place where the poor are crowded together, unless special means are taken to prevent this result, leaving its victims handicapped for life and often nearly blind. Fortunately it is diminishing in this country, and is, compared with a few years ago, seldom seen except among recent immigrants from the eastern end of the Mediterranean, Polish and Russian Jews, Armenians, and others from that locality; and I may say in passing that the presence of acute trachoma in the conjunctiva of immigrants should be a good and sufficient reason for turning them back whence they came. A large proportion of these cases within a few months after their arrival become incapacitated and are public charges. And not only this, but were it not for the new cases thus introduced into the great tenement localities of our large cities, it is my opinion that the disease would soon become extremely rare in this part of the country.’

“I have to add that I concur in the opinion of Dr. Standish as to the contagiousness of trachoma.”

The agents of the steamship lines in Europe and Asia were notified that they should not sell tickets to persons suffering with either Favus or Trachoma, and in a large measure the traffic in diseased immigrants fell off. There were those, however, who paid little heed to the notice, and, trusting to the chance of passing their victims through without question, they continued to book them to points in the United States as before. When a member of an arriving family of aliens was discovered to be afflicted with disease of the scalp or eye and was ordered deported, the friends or relatives of the barred immigrant at once resorted to every means at their command to have the order of deportation set aside and the immigrant landed. Members of Congress, Senators, Cabinet members and the diplomatic representatives of foreign governments were appealed to to use their influence with the Commissioner-General of Immigration and the Secretary of the Treasury to have the diseased person sent to a hospital or landed. The sympathetic heart of the American people was appealed to, and the Bureau of Immigration was severely criticised for its determination to prevent the introduction of alien diseases to this country. Senators and Members of Congress who

took part in the debates preceding the passage of the law of 1891 and voted for it, besieged the Bureau of Immigration at the request of constituents whose friends or relatives had been ordered deported. Some were in earnest; others, becoming indignant, characterized the action of the immigration authorities as "an outrage"; while a few made a show of sincerity and indignation in presenting their arguments, and wound up by whispering to the Commissioner-General that they "would rather such aliens should be debarred, but there are many of their countrymen in my district, and I must make them believe I am doing my best for their friends."

On several occasions those who came to plead the cause of aliens, barred because they were suffering from Favus or Trachoma, asserted that the disease had been contracted in the steerage, during the voyage from the old country. They claimed that because no evidence of disease was discovered on the other side, before the immigrant sailed, it must have been communicated to the sufferer on the way over, and for that reason the person so afflicted should be landed. The one particular reason which determined the Commissioner-General of Immigration to prevent the landing, for any length of time or for any purpose whatever, of persons who had Favus or Trachoma was the importance of preventing the introduction of the germs, seeds or whatever else they may be called, of these diseases to the steerage of the immigrant ship. No other place under the sky is so well calculated to serve as a propagating bed for disease as the place where hundreds, and thousands, are crowded together for six or seven days, in an atmosphere that at best is unwholesome, while subsisting on food that contains no more nutrition than the law actually requires. Keep the disease out of the steerage, and it will not come out of the steerage to plague the children of America. Vice may come in the cabin or the steerage, in rags or fine raiment, and escape detection, but the diseases under discussion proclaim their presence and are their own detectors. That aliens who bring these diseases are for the greater part children does not lessen the gravity of the situation; on the contrary, it adds to it; for they go at once where large numbers of American children congregate, to the public schools and the crowded streets, to the tenement houses and attics of our large cities. That death does not follow contact with either disease is no reason why we should invite it

to our shores. Statistics are not necessary to prove that disease is always dangerous; figures are not required to demonstrate that it should be avoided or warded off. No man would invite a person afflicted with a contagious disease beneath his roof, to mingle with the members of his own family. Rather would he shield his family from contact with disease; and as the nation is but a larger family every citizen should do his part, use his influence, to safeguard the homes of the poor of the United States against disease from abroad. If in future we should have occasion to trace the cause why our people are hairless and sightless through Favus and Trachoma, we should have ourselves to blame, for with proper precaution they may be warded off. One may complacently settle himself down in his comfortable chair, in his own home, and say: "It is no affair of mine if these children are afflicted, they do not associate with me, or mine." It is his affair and if he is conscious of the fact that disease is spreading in the community, it is a crime against society for him to remain silent and inactive. The men who, in the past, made the world better were obliged to disagree with others and with the world as they found it. It is not by tolerating evil, and submitting to those who advocate its continuance, that evil is checked. If we remain indifferent simply because these diseases do not prove fatal to life, we evade our duty; for the health of the nation is imperilled while one man is diseased. The old cry, "America is the asylum of the oppressed of the world," is too threadbare to withstand the assaults of disease. There is a danger that the oppressed may, through the burdens they fasten on others, become oppressors. At any rate, there exists no reason why the United States should become the hospital of the nations of earth, even though it does afford an asylum for those who come here to escape oppression.

Could the buried ruins of dead empires speak, they would no doubt tell that ignorance of the laws of health, indifference to the spread of disease, assailed their roots and hastened their decay.

The oldest hour this world has ever known is passing while these words are being read; and, if experience counts for anything, this should be the wisest hour of all time. If we would profit by that past, by the experience of other nations, then every advance of loathsome, dangerous or contagious disease should be challenged at sea coast and border line, and denied admission to the United States.

T. V. POWDERLY.