

The rise of Immigrant Banks: The sale of prepaid and return tickets through the American migrant agent network 1896-1914

To date business history has focused a lot more on big business managerial corporations than on smaller entrepreneurial firms. Yet, as Gordon Boyce pointed out for the shipping industry major shipping companies only attained their scale thanks to the network of many smaller entrepreneurs supplying passengers to the shipping companies (Boyce, 1995, 3). Nevertheless, we know very little about the relations between passenger lines and migrant agents and how they organized the transatlantic transport. This article intends to fill that lacuna in the literature based on an analysis of the market of prepaid tickets and return tickets sold in the US using the archives of the Rotterdam based Holland America Line (HAL). For the American market the HAL relied on uniquely qualified immigrant entrepreneurs who took advantage of the opportunities created by the concentration of migrants in ethnic communities generating demands for specific products and services (Bodnar, 1985, 131-32; Massy, 1999, 39, Hoerder, 2002, 17). These services varied a lot, yet two were indispensable being basic banking transactions and the sale of ocean passage. As transatlantic migration became less permanent and savings became the primary goal of the move after the transition from sail to steam shipping; immigrant banks mushroomed (Hourwich, 1911, 632; Piore, 1979, 56; Wadhvani, 2002, 43; Wyman, 1993, 59). The analysis of the relation between shipping companies and their agents increases our understanding of these immigrant bankers, as labeled by Day, as '*emissaries to America within America*' (Day, 2002, 77-78). Moreover, it sheds new light on the business structure of these shipping companies and explains why they failed to show marked tendencies towards Chandler's characteristics of modern business enterprises; vertical integration and managerial revolution (Chandler, 1977, 192). Finally, in the broader context, the article underlines the pivotal role of the shipping companies in enabling, facilitating and stimulating transatlantic migration which has often been overlooked by migration historians.