

THE IMMIGRATION CHAPTER

Steve Fedak

Born Stefan Fedak in the thin-soiled village of Bednarka, he crossed aboard the SS George Washington in 1913 and went to Olyphant as a laborer, following the line that ran from Galicia's land hunger to Pennsylvania's coal wages.

Departure ♦ Crossing ♦ Arrival

One ancestor. Their journey.

Origentum

YOUR HISTORY, INTERPRETED.

JOURNEY RECORD

ORIGIN	Austria-Hungary (Galicia)
DESTINATION	United States
ARRIVAL YEAR	1913
PORT OF ENTRY	New York (Ellis Island)
VESSEL	SS George Washington
WHY THEY LEFT	Land hunger, poverty, and steel and coal wages

*Every line in this record began as a decision —
to leave, to cross, to begin again.*

THE PASSAGE IN STAGES

The likely legs of a journey the records do not fully preserve — the typical conveyances for a traveler of this village, era, and route. The exact trains and transfers are not documented.



OVERLAND

On foot or by horse cart to the railway

A local first leg in the years before the automobile — the exact conveyance is not recorded.



RAIL

By rail toward Bremen

Roughly 650 miles across the continent to the port of departure.



SEA

Across the Atlantic aboard the SS George Washington to New York

Roughly a week or more at sea in the steamship era.



FERRY

By harbor barge to the inspection station

A short crossing of the harbor, ship to island.



RAIL

Inland by rail to Carnegie

The last leg inland to his new home.

5 STAGES · AT LEAST 4 MODES OF TRAVEL · THE BETTER PART OF TWO
WEEKS IN TRANSIT

The World He Left

Bednarka, Galicia, 1892–1913

Steve Fedak entered the world in 1892 as Stefan Fedak, in Bednarka, a Lemko village set among the Carpathian foothills of Galicia. The land rose and folded around the settlement, green in the warmer months and snow-bound in winter. Fields lay on thin mountain soil, where the amount a household could grow was fixed by weather, slope, and the smallness of its plots. Bednarka belonged to Austria-Hungary, but Stefan's people were Lemkos, also called Carpatho-Rusyns: an East Slavic people without a state of their own, living along the mountain borderlands that today fall within southern Poland.

The Greek Catholic Church gave the village its calendar and one of its clearest forms of belonging. Its worship joined the Byzantine rite to communion with Rome: icons, incense, chanted responses, feast days, and fasts ordered the year. Stefan's given name came from the Greek *stephanos*, meaning a crown or victor's wreath. In a Greek Catholic household it also called to mind Saint Stephen, honored as Christianity's first martyr. Long before he became Steve in Pennsylvania records and speech, he was Stefan in a place where the sound of that name carried both family use and church memory.

Bednarka's land could not keep expanding as families did. Across Galicia, farms were divided among heirs until many plots were too small to support another household. Poverty and land hunger were therefore not separate troubles; each

sharpened the other. A young laborer born in 1892 could see the limits measured in strips of soil. The empire's annexation of Bosnia in 1908 added political strain to an already divided state, but for men in Lemko villages the daily calculation remained close to the ground: how much land there was, how many hands depended on it, and what a day's work could earn.

By Stefan's youth, Pennsylvania had entered that calculation. Young men from Lemko villages were already leaving for the anthracite mines near Scranton and the steel districts farther west. Olyphant became one of their receiving towns. Earlier migrants sent addresses, news, and sometimes tickets home; the wages paid by coal companies and steel mills stood far above what seasonal or village labor could bring in Galicia. In this chain, America was not an idea in the distance. It was a mine town named in a letter, a relative's address, or a sum of wages written on paper.

In 1913, at about twenty-one, Stefan joined that movement. Who paid his fare and who accompanied him are not recorded. Passage required money gathered in advance, however it was raised, and departure removed a working pair of hands from a household that had few to spare. The goodbye took place within the hard facts of distance: letters could cross the Atlantic, but an ocean passage was costly, and many who left Galicia never stood in their birth villages again.

Before Stefan could board the SS George Washington, he first had to reach the German coast. Bremen was the region's main emigration port and was roughly 650 straight-line miles from Galicia; the actual rail route would have been longer and winding. His exact route is not documented, but men traveling from villages such as Bednarka would have moved through stations, border controls, and

crowded rail cars before reaching the North German Lloyd facilities near Bremen and the ship berths at Bremerhaven.

At Bremen, emigrants using the German lines were commonly housed in company halls and processed before boarding. They passed a medical inspection, took a compulsory bath, and had their baggage disinfected by steam. This was not simply German orderliness. Steamship companies could be fined and forced to pay the return fare when the United States rejected a passenger, so they screened people before carrying them across the ocean. The shipping company also prepared the passenger manifest when the ticket was purchased. Thus the first American questions were already waiting on European paper before Stefan saw the Atlantic.

DID YOU KNOW?

Lemkos were divided among several official labels because they had no state of their own. In church, civil, and immigration records, the same community might be described as Rusyn, Ruthenian, Austrian, Galician, or by the name of a neighboring nationality.

“For Stefan Fedak, Bednarka’s thin mountain soil and Pennsylvania’s coal wages belonged to the same calculation: one fixed the limits of staying, and the other gave a working man a reason to leave.”

Eight Days of Water

Aboard the SS George Washington

Stefan crossed in 1913 aboard the SS George Washington. The ship's name is preserved, though the specific sailing details, dimensions, and passenger count for his crossing are not supplied here. From the German coast to New York, liners of this period usually required seven to ten days to cover roughly 4,500 Atlantic miles. Added to the overland approach from Galicia, Stefan's passage from Bednarka to New York covered about 5,000 miles in all.

As a young laborer leaving a poor farming district, Stefan would almost certainly have traveled in third class or steerage; that was the passage such earnings generally bought. On newer liners after 1905, steerage had improved from the vast open sleeping rooms of the previous century. Enclosed cabins might hold two to six berths, though older vessels still used compartments holding more than 200 people. A single set of washrooms could serve an entire compartment, and access to the open deck was limited to a few hours when the weather allowed.

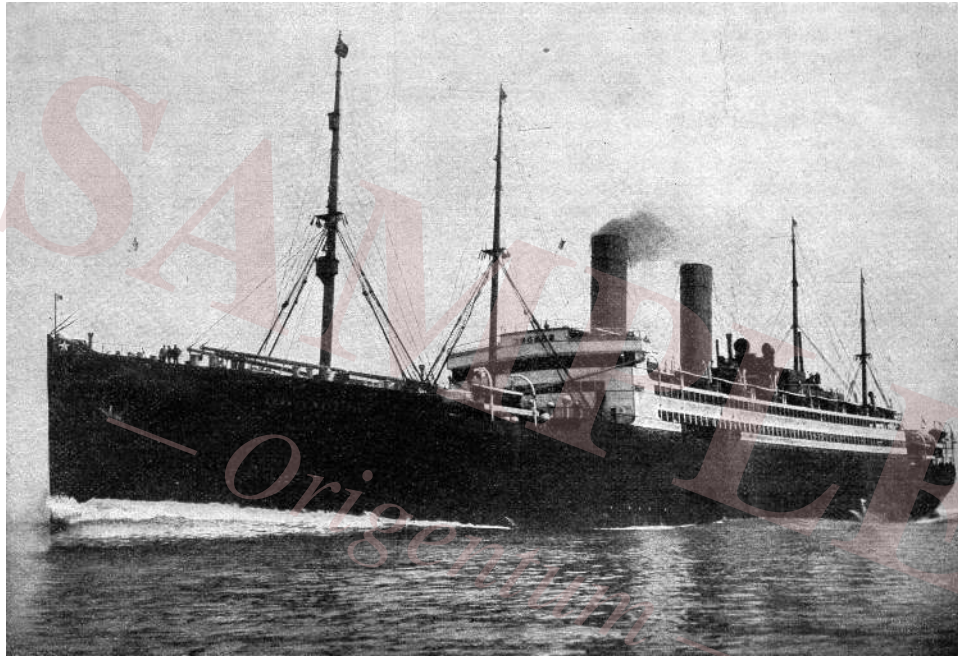
Below decks, the physical world was close and repetitive: metal or wooden berths, wet wool hung near sleeping spaces, disinfectant left from embarkation, and air moved through mechanical vents. The dining whistle divided the day. Each passenger received a tin mess kit and washed it after eating. Hanging lamps and mess tables shifted when the hull rolled, and the first days on the open North Atlantic commonly brought seasickness through the steerage compartments.

By 1913, the steamship company supplied steerage food. The fixed menu was plain: soup, black bread, boiled potatoes, herring, stew, and sometimes stringy beef. It was an improvement over nineteenth-century crossings, when passengers often carried and cooked their own provisions, but it offered little variety during a week or more at sea. The dining room smelled of broth, damp clothing, tin dishes, and the sharp trace of herring. When rough weather closed the deck, the same compartment had to serve for sleeping, waiting, and breathing.

The North Atlantic determined the motion of those days. Mess kits slid if they were not held. Lamps swung above the tables. On calmer stretches, the permitted hours on deck opened a view with no field edge, church roof, or mountain ridge to stop it. Behind the ship lay the German port and the long rail line back toward Galicia; ahead lay the narrow entrance to New York Harbor.

The first fixed shapes would have appeared as the George Washington approached the American coast and entered through the Narrows. In the harbor stood the Statue of Liberty, seen from the ship before any passenger landed at Ellis Island. Steerage passengers often pressed toward the rails during this approach, though not every arrival knew what the statue represented. Beyond it were tugboats, ferries, piers, warehouse roofs, and coal smoke lying over one of the busiest harbors in the world. Stefan had reached New York, but he had not yet been admitted to the United States.

“The SS George Washington carried Stefan across roughly 4,500 miles of Atlantic water, after an overland approach from Galicia that had already taken him the breadth of a country or more.”



SS George Washington. Photograph via Wikimedia Commons

The First Test

Ellis Island, New York, 1913

Because Stefan most likely traveled in steerage, he would have remained under immigration control after the George Washington entered the harbor. First- and second-class passengers were usually inspected aboard ship and allowed to proceed directly into New York. Steerage arrivals were transferred to a barge for Ellis Island. Stefan would have crossed that last strip of harbor water with the liner behind him and the island's red-roofed main building ahead, while engines churned the dark water among ferries and working boats.



Immigrants just arrived from Foreign Countries-Immigrant Building, Ellis Island, New York Harbor. Underwood & Underwood - Library of Congress - Public domain

Inside the island building, the route led from the baggage room toward the stairs and the second-floor Registry Room. Trunks, baskets, bundles, and featherbeds filled the ground-floor space. Then came the climb. Uniformed surgeons of the U.S. Public Health Service stood where they could watch each person ascend. The medical reading took about six seconds: posture, gait, breathing, skin, and

alertness were judged while the line kept moving. A limp, cough, or labored breath could bring a chalk mark and removal to a side pen.

Stefan would then have passed the eye inspection. A surgeon used a buttonhook to lift an eyelid and look for trachoma, the leading medical cause of deportation. The instrument moved from person to person under the bright inspection light. Chalk letters identified those sent aside: E for eyes, H for heart, L for lungs, Sc for scalp, and X for a suspected mental condition. A mark did not always mean exclusion; some people were examined further, treated in the island hospital, and later admitted. But contagious diseases such as trachoma and tuberculosis could impose a mandatory bar.

Those who cleared the medical line entered the Registry Room beneath the flat plaster ceiling used in 1913, five years before the tiled vault familiar from later photographs was installed. Tall arched windows lit rows of metal railings, wooden benches, and wire barriers. Voices carried across the hall in dozens of languages. The air held disinfectant, wet wool, harbor damp, coal smoke, and the closeness of several thousand bodies on a busy day. The clang of a gate or railing cut through questions called from the inspection desks.

At the legal inspection, an officer would have located Stefan on the George Washington's manifest and put to him the substance of about twenty-nine questions, often through an interpreter. The list covered his name, age, occupation, marital status, nationality, last residence, literacy, destination, passage payment, money carried, earlier American visits, health, criminal history, and the person he intended to join. Inspectors did not create or change names; they checked each arrival against a list already prepared in Europe.

For Stefan, even the question of nationality could resist a single answer. Bednarka lay in Austria-Hungary; Galicia was the province; Lemko or Carpatho-Rusyn described his people; and Ruthenian was another label officials used. Related families can therefore appear in different records as Austrian, Hungarian, Slovak, Russian, Ukrainian, Rusyn, or Ruthenian. An interpreter had to carry Stefan's answers across that gap. Ellis Island maintained a large corps for such work, and the young Fiorello La Guardia, later mayor of New York, was among those who interpreted there.

In 1913, Stefan would also have been expected to show about twenty-five dollars and a railroad ticket to his destination. These served as proof that he was not likely to become a public charge, an exclusion rule in force since 1882. His occupation as a laborer would have been weighed as evidence of earning ability. The literacy test did not begin until 1917, and national-origins quotas did not arrive until 1921 and 1924. Stefan therefore entered while the door remained comparatively open to migrants from Galicia, though medical and legal inspection could still close it person by person.

For those who passed, the full process commonly lasted three to five hours. About two percent of Ellis Island arrivals were turned back. A person detained for further examination could spend the night in a dormitory and appear before a Board of Special Inquiry; the steamship company paid the return fare if exclusion followed. Detained arrivals received food such as beef stew, potatoes, bread and herring, or stewed prunes on rye. The date and season of Stefan's arrival are not given, but New York's weather could enter the building as winter cold at the doors or summer heat held beneath the high ceiling.

Once cleared, Stefan would have descended toward the practical offices that stood between inspection and the rest of the country. There was a money exchange for turning European currency into dollars, a telegraph office for wiring an address, and a railroad ticket counter. Fruit, candy, drinks, bananas, sandwiches, and ice cream were sold nearby; newcomers sometimes found these foods as puzzling as the signs above them. A boxed lunch could be purchased for the train.

Stefan was not remaining in Manhattan. To reach Olyphant, he would have taken a railroad barge across to a New Jersey terminal at Jersey City or Hoboken and boarded a train northwest. The run to Pennsylvania's anthracite country was about 130 rail miles from New York Harbor, a few hours after the ocean passage and inspection. The tracks followed industrial towns and river valleys toward Lackawanna County. At the far end stood Olyphant, where coal wages had already drawn other Carpatho-Rusyn families from villages like Bednarka.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Ellis Island hospital complex eventually included contagious-disease wards, operating rooms, kitchens, and staff housing. Patients who could be treated sometimes remained on the island for weeks before receiving permission to enter the country.

A Place in the Coal Country

Olyphant First, Carnegie Later

Stefan's first American home was Olyphant, Pennsylvania, a borough on the Lackawanna River about six miles northeast of Scranton. It stood in the anthracite belt, where black mine waste, breaker buildings, rail sidings, and company structures shaped the town. The Lackawanna Coal Company was its chief employer. Eastern European and Carpatho-Rusyn newcomers settled near people who could direct them toward a room, a meal, and the next hiring place. Stefan's first night and first non-ship meal are not described, but Olyphant itself tells us what waited outside the door: coal dust, whistles, closely spaced houses, and streets tied to the work schedule.

Stefan had been recorded as a laborer, and Olyphant offered labor on an industrial scale. Men worked in deep mines or at the breakers, where coal was sorted and waste rock removed before shipment. It was work far removed from Bednarka's mountain plots, yet it answered the economic reason for his departure: wages paid in cash by an employer tied to a national market. The town was a classic chain-migration stop, where a new arrival could follow an address and enter a workplace already known to men from the same region.

Greek Catholic parish life helped make the new place legible. Rusyn churches such as Saints Cyril and Methodius served as houses of worship and centers for baptisms, marriages, funerals, feast days, and news from home. English governed

company offices and public business, while Rusyn speech could continue in kitchens, boarding houses, and church gatherings. Stefan became Steve as his given name took its common English form. Over time, children raised in Pennsylvania would hear and use more English than their parents, moving the family's daily language toward the country in which they were born.

Naturalization, if Steve pursued it, would have followed a formal path of declarations, residence requirements, petitions, witnesses, and an oath rather than occurring at Ellis Island. His 1913 arrival also placed him in America only months before Europe entered war in 1914 and Galicia became a battleground. Later, the Great Depression struck the coal and steel industries that had drawn men like him across the Atlantic. These national events met the family through work: shifts, layoffs, prices, and the changing demand for heavy labor.

Olyphant was the first stop, not the last. Steve later settled in Carnegie, Pennsylvania, in the steel country southwest of Pittsburgh. The reason and date of that move are not supplied, but the order is clear: first the anthracite town of Olyphant, then the western Pennsylvania steel district. He remained connected to Carnegie through the end of his life and died there in 1977, sixty-four years after the George Washington brought him into New York Harbor.

“Olyphant placed Steve Fedak in the anthracite belt; Carnegie later placed him in steel country, where he lived out the American part of a life begun in Bednarka.”

The Names That Followed

Anna, Andrew, John, Walter, and Michael

In America, Steve married Anna Fedak. They raised four sons: Andrew, John, Walter, and Michael. Those names are the clearest measure of what followed the 1913 crossing. A young laborer who had left Bednarka became the father of an American branch of the family, and the sons grew within the industrial Pennsylvania world that carried Steve from Olyphant to Carnegie.

His own name marked the distance in a quieter way. He had been born Stefan Fedak. *Stefan* came from the Greek word for a crown or victor's wreath and carried the memory of Saint Stephen in the Greek Catholic tradition. In America, Stefan became Steve, not through an Ellis Island renaming but through ordinary use in an English-speaking country. The sound remained close while the form became shorter, easier for an employer, clerk, neighbor, or child to say.

The family retained another old-country marker in its faith. Greek Catholic worship had anchored Lemko life in Bednarka, and Rusyn parishes performed the same practical work in Pennsylvania mining and steel towns. The calendar of fasts and feast days, the use of icons, and the foods prepared around church observances could survive even as English replaced the language in which older prayers and family instructions had first been heard. Such customs often last longest in action: a dish made on a fixed day, a candle placed before an icon, a child named for a saint or relative.

Work also passed into the family story, not as an abstract virtue but as the structure of Steve's American life. He arrived listed as a laborer and went first to a coal town, then lived in a steel district. Money in that setting came by the shift and could disappear when mines slowed, mills cut crews, or the Depression reduced demand. Andrew, John, Walter, and Michael were raised within the household economy built from those facts.

Steve lived from 1892 to 1977. His lifetime connected the Carpathian foothills under Austria-Hungary to the coal breakers of Olyphant and the steel country around Carnegie. He crossed before literacy tests and national quotas narrowed admission, then remained long enough to see two world wars, the Depression, and the industrial growth after 1945. At the end stood not a statistic from Ellis Island but Anna and four named sons—the family through whom his great-grandchild can still trace the line back to Bednarka.

“The distance from Stefan’s Bednarka to Steve’s Carnegie can be read in ports and rail miles. Its human measure is Anna, Andrew, John, Walter, Michael, and every branch that came after them.”

Questions for You

Their journey belongs to history. These questions belong to you.

REFLECTION

What details about Stefan's life in Bednarka, such as community customs or family traditions, can you uncover to better understand his motivations for leaving?

REFLECTION

In what ways do the challenges and opportunities that your family faces today reflect the experiences of Stefan and his journey from Galicia to Pennsylvania?

REFLECTION

How does Stefan's story resonate with your own experiences of migration, change, or adaptation in your life?

Where to Look Next

Specific records and archives worth pursuing to carry this research further.

1

Ellis Island Passenger Manifests — Steve Fedak arrived in the United States through Ellis Island in 1913; the manifests can provide further details on his immigration process. — <https://www.libertyellisfoundation.org>

2

FamilySearch for Origin-Country Records — Exploring records from Galicia can help uncover more about Stefan's family background and life in Bednarka before immigration. — <https://www.familysearch.org>

3

The Society for Rusyn Evolution — This resource offers insights into the Lemko community and cultural background that shaped Stefan's life in Galicia. — <https://www.rusynsociety.com>

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This chapter was researched and written drawing on what the records preserve and what the absences imply. It is offered in the spirit of honoring a journey — informed interpretation, not a vital record.

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