

## GREAT IRISH FAMINE

**THE EVENT:** Devastating potato blight that caused mass starvation

**DATE:** 1845-1852

**LOCATION:** Ireland

**SIGNIFICANCE:** One of the single-most influential events in U.S. immigration history, Ireland's great potato famine induced a massive wave of Irish emigration to Great Britain, Canada, and the United States, where Irish immigrants quickly became the nation's second-largest ethnic group. Most of the immigrants settled in the large urban centers of New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and San Francisco.

The history of Irish immigration to the United States goes back well before the nineteenth century, but the Great Irish Famine that began during the late 1840's brought the greatest number of Irish immigrants to America. Before the famine began, Ireland was already a desperately poor country. The only European country controlled by another country, it had been ruled by Great Britain for many centuries. Ireland had virtually no significant manufacturing sector. Most Irish were farmers who worked tiny plots of land, paying stiff rents to British landlords and living in primitive mud and stone huts.

By 1844, Ireland's population had swelled to 8.4 million, most of whom had lives built around potatoes. In 1845, the *Phytophthora* fungus, believed to have arrived from America, infected Ireland's potato crops and quickly spread throughout the country. Great Britain's response was minimal, but as the fungus ravaged the crops every year, successive British governments determined that providing aid to the Irish would only create greater dependency. By 1851, British neglect had contributed to the deaths of 1.1 million people who perished from starvation or from famine-related diseases. Meanwhile, another 1.5 million Irish people were immigrating to North America and England.

### ARRIVAL IN AMERICA

Most refugees from Ireland's famine arrived in the United States nearly destitute. They settled in cities, where they had few skills needed in the

industrializing urban economies. About 650,000 Irish immigrants arrived in New York alone. Because of their outdated clothing and distinctive accents, they were easily identified and made victims of various unscrupulous schemes. Landlords promising comfortable rooms left them in overcrowded, vermin-infested tenements. Others, promising railroad and boat passage to other parts of the nation, sold them phony tickets.

The immigrants took whatever unskilled jobs they could find, working on the docks, pushing carts, or digging canals and laboring on the railroads. Their lives were so harsh that their mortality rates remained high. For example, 60 percent of children born to Irish immigrants in Boston died before the age of six. Adult immigrants lived an average of only six years after their arrival in the United States. When these immigrants arrived, they were a comparatively docile and law-abiding population. However, many of them turned to crime out of boredom, desperation, and anger. Young Irish immigrants in New York City formed criminal gangs, and the area known as Five Points became a cauldron of all manner of criminal activity.

### IRISH STEREOTYPES

Invidious stereotypes of the Irish were quickly imported from Britain. Cartoons on both sides of the Atlantic depicted the Irish as brutish, simian, bellicose, and always drunk. With employment opportunities limited, the Irish turned to crime and drink, which only exacerbated the public perception of them as troublemakers and public scourges. As suspicions increased, a common sentiment was expressed in the "No Irish Need Apply" signs that limited their economic and social opportunities.

In an overwhelmingly Protestant country, the Roman Catholic Irish were further reviled. During the 1850's, such prejudice was institutionalized in the creation of the Know-Nothing Party, a nativist political group that sought to curb immigration and the spread of Roman Catholicism. The party's largest victory came in 1854, when it elected candidates to every state office in Massachusetts.

With the outbreak of the U.S. Civil War, many Irish immigrants served valiantly in both armies; however, because of their tenuous social position, many Irish were targets for military conscription. Resentment of such practices erupted in 1863 in



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the New York draft riots, when Irish created a major civil disruption over having to fight in a war to free slaves whom they regarded as competition for the few jobs the Irish could secure.

The Irish also imported some of their secret societies that were established to undermine British rule in their homeland. One of these was the Molly Maguires, who were active in the coalfields of Pennsylvania during the 1870's. They were alleged to have used coercion and intimidation against owners and other miners; historians, however, disagree on the extent of their criminality.

### ASSIMILATION

Fearing discrimination and abuse, the Irish banded together in their parishes and led major efforts to build churches, parochial schools, and major private universities where they and their children felt comfortable. Catholicism, a minor religion before the arrival of the Irish, grew to become the largest single denomination by the early twentieth century, and much of that growth and visibility was due to the devotion of the Irish.

Systematically marginalized by a hostile culture, the Irish quickly realized that citizenship and their vote were among their most powerful weapons. The Irish understood the efficacy of ward politics, starting small and local and eventually taking over city halls and state governments. The Irish were also eager to take civil service jobs that offered relative security. There were certainly abuses, the most egregious being the Tammany Hall corruption in New York, but the Irish soon dominated Massachusetts politics, the apogee of which came with the election of John F. Kennedy to the presidency in 1960 and the creation of the closest thing to a political dynasty in the United States. In the twenty-first century, the Irish can be found in all professions and are among the most successful ethnic groups in America.

David W. Madden



As this 1880 cover of Harper's Weekly shows, the problem of insufficient food continued to afflict Ireland well after the great potato blight. (Library of Congress)

### FURTHER READING

Gribben, Arthur, ed. *The Great Famine and the Irish Diaspora in America*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999. A collection of twelve essays commemorating the 150th anniversary of the famine that considers life in Ireland, historical perceptions of the events, and the creation of the Irish American identity.

Laxton, Edward. *The Famine Ships: The Irish Exodus to America*. New York: Henry Holt, 1996. A careful, detailed history of the often unseaworthy



“coffin ships” that transported destitute Irish to Canada and America.

Miller, Kerby. *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. The most authoritative study of Irish immigration to Canada and America and the ways in which the displaced transplanted their culture to the New World.

Miller, Kerby, and Paul Wagner. *Out of Ireland: The Story of Irish Emigration to America*. Washington, D.C.: Elliott & Clark, 1994. A photoessay companion to the 1995 PBS documentary of the same name that considers not only the famine but also the entire experience of Irish immigration to America.

Woodham-Smith, Cecil. *The Great Hunger: Ireland, 1845-1849*. London: Penguin Books, 1991. One of the most authoritative histories of the causes and results of the famine, considering its political, economic, and social consequences.

**SEE ALSO:** Anti-Catholicism; California gold rush; Canada vs. United States as immigrant destinations; Fenian movement; History of immigration, 1783-1891; Irish immigrants; Molly Maguires; Natural disasters as push-pull factors; New York City; Push-pull factors.

## GREEK IMMIGRANTS

**SIGNIFICANCE:** Although Greeks have accounted for a relatively small percentage of the total immigrants to the United States, they have formed strong ethnic communities that have kept alive their language, traditions, and religion. Persons of Greek ancestry account for 0.4 percent of the current population of the United States.

Significant numbers of Greeks did not begin immigrating to the United States until the 1880's. However, the first Greek immigrants arrived during the 1820's, when the Greek war of independence from the Ottoman Empire left Greece with a large foreign debt, and the lack of industrialization forced inhabitants to look elsewhere for employment.

After the Turks captured Constantinople in 1453, Greece became part of the Ottoman Empire.

### PROFILE OF GREEK IMMIGRANTS

Country of origin	Greece
Primary language	Greek
Primary regions of U.S. settlement	East Coast states, Midwest
Earliest significant arrivals	1824
Peak immigration periods	1900-1917, 1970's
Twenty-first century legal residents*	7,429 (929 per year)

\*Immigrants who obtained legal permanent resident status in the United States.

Source: Department of Homeland Security, *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, 2008.

Inspired by the late eighteenth century revolutions in North America and western Europe, as well as their own sense of Greek nationalism, a group of Greek loyalists planned a rebellion against the Ottoman state. They gained the support of numerous countries, including Great Britain, France, and Russia. Greece became an independent nation after signing the Treaty of Adrianople in 1832.

### IMMIGRATION BEGINS

Following the end of its war of independence, Greece faced a number of internal economic challenges. The country was slow to industrialize through the nineteenth century. As late as 1879, more than 80 percent of its people still lived in rural communities. Currants were Greece's chief export product, and their price declined so much that many Greek farmers went bankrupt and were unable to pay their taxes. This poor economic climate prompted many Greeks to emigrate.

With the encouragement of the Greek government, young men began leaving the country during the late nineteenth century in the hope of gaining employment in the United States. Large-scale Greek immigration to the United States began in 1880, with the largest numbers immigrating during the early twentieth century. Between 1900 and 1920, more than 350,000 Greeks immigrated to the United States. About 95 percent of the immigrants who came between 1899 and 1910 were men. In