



Leaving the Emerald Isle: Irish Immigration to Philadelphia

In 1847, Hannah Curtis Lynch wrote to her brother John Curtis, asking him to send her money: "the people are in a starving state," she pleaded. John was across the Atlantic, in Philadelphia, while Hannah remained in Ireland, struggling against hard times and longing to be sent for and join her family members in America. Between 1846 and 1851, more than 1 million people left Ireland for the United States, and a steady stream of over 800,000 more would arrive between 1860 and 1880. The Great Famine dramatically shaped the physical and cultural landscape of both Ireland and America for decades.

The history of Irish immigration to Pennsylvania is the story of a largely rural people who, facing starvation and economic depression in Ireland, migrated by the thousands to major cities such as Philadelphia throughout the 19th century. Years of suffering, forced evictions, and widespread starvation spurred a mass migration out of the country. This immigration was in part a result of a natural disaster -potato blight- exacerbated by discriminatory British policies. A North American fungus ravaged Irish potato crops and left the population to suffer starvation while fields lay covered with rotten potatoes. The devastating effect of the "Great Famine" was made worse by harsh British penal laws, which targeted Irish Catholics and relegated them to subservient social and economic positions. These laws prohibited Irish Catholics from voting, holding public office or professional positions, and attending institutions for higher education, severely restricting their ability to earn money outside of farming. They also set restrictions on the amount of land that the Irish could rent and dictated how the land was to be used. The decimation of the potato crop as well as harsh British economic policies left Irish tenants with little means of earning money. As landlords demanded rent from tenants who had no means of paying back their debts, mass evictions became common practice. In the face of all these hardships, the Irish received little economic assistance, as the British thought that the market would correct itself.

Many impoverished Irish emigrants faced a physically and emotionally demanding voyage across the Atlantic in what have been called "coffin ships"

because of their cramped and disease-infested condition. As for many other immigrant groups, it was common for Irish men to go to America ahead of their family members to find work, then send money to their relatives to help pay for their passage. Unique to Irish immigration, however, was the large number of young, single women who made the transatlantic journey on their own.

Settling into Philadelphia city life required a major social adjustment. A predominately rural people, the Irish had to adapt to urban life while simultaneously becoming active participants in the city's growth.

Within the city, the Irish carved out a community for themselves by constructing churches, building schools, founding hospitals, fire companies, and beneficial associations, and forming political organizations—all important means of adding stability and cohesion to immigrant lives. The Irish community had at its center the Catholic Church, a unifying force for many immigrants. Catholic parishes and schools were supported by even the poorest community members. Catholic newspapers ran missing person ads in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia to help reunite families separated through immigration. The Irish community actively responded to the immigrants' social and economic needs and challenges. Benevolent societies organized to relieve poverty and protect Irish workers from employment scams that sought to prey on newly arriving immigrants. Additionally, these societies sent money to Ireland to provide famine relief.

The great wave of Irish immigration coincided with a period of rapid industrialization and economic growth that made unskilled work readily available. Expanding transportation networks and growing manufacturing centers employed Irish immigrants in the construction of canals and railroads and in mills and factories located in Philadelphia neighborhoods such as Kensington and Southwark. As stigmatized immigrants, the Irish encountered a job market that restricted them to positions of low-skilled labor. Though the prevalence of explicit signs reading, "No Irish Need Apply" is currently debated among historians, there were prevailing attitudes of the time that reflected, less overtly, that exact sentiment. Though relegated to the low-skilled trades, the Irish protected their labor niche from newer immigrant groups that might compete with them, sometimes even resorting to violence to safeguard their jobs.

Irish women engaged predominantly in domestic work. Domestic service, though socially frowned upon, offered many young, single Irish women food, clothing, shelter, and a fairly good salary. The high demand for domestic help and

the low supply of women willing to engage in such labor gave Irish women more economic opportunities than their male counterparts. Native-born American employers often wrestled with conflicting feelings towards Irish immigrant servants. On the one hand, prejudice and distrust of the Catholic values held by women residing in their Protestant homes led to fierce criticism of Irish laborers. However, employers were also mindful of their dependence on the domestic service of the Irish and were fearful of losing their help. Ambivalence towards Irish domestic labor came not only from the native population but from within the Irish community as well. Domestic service jobs, though they kept women safe and relatively well cared for, also had their drawbacks. Fear that women would choose economic independence over family values spurred criticism from some within the Irish community as critics argued that domestic service impacted the rates of marriage and childbirth for Irish women. Also, the risk that employers might try to impart their Protestant values on young women raised concern.

Irish men engaged in arduous menial labor such as canal and railroad building. Clearing trees, laying tracks, and digging ditches, these men were also pioneers engaged in the beginnings of what would be called a transportation revolution in this country, with Pennsylvania at the helm. They engineered new and innovative technology and skills that would lay the foundation for future generations of workers. However, working for the transportation system also had significant drawbacks. This line of work negatively impacted the family structure as men lived away from their families for long periods of time while they built canals and laid railroad tracks, residing in work camps under fairly harsh conditions. Aside from the isolation and loneliness, work on canals and railroads could be dangerous. Living in unsanitary conditions with poor provisions and exposure to the elements left many susceptible to illness, and the blasting of tunnels and building of bridges created hazards for workers. It was not uncommon for husbands to go to work for the canals or the railroads and to never return. By the 1870s, the variety and number of jobs available to the Irish increased as industries grew and diversified. Additionally, improvements in transportation aided in providing more accessible employment opportunities to Irish immigrants.

The Irish population in Philadelphia grew rapidly over a short period of time, exceeding the number of any other immigrant group and straining relationships between the Irish and the native citizens. In the context of Protestant revivalism and a growing temperance movement, Irish Catholic immigrants became the target

of negative religious and moral rhetoric. Anti-immigrant political parties such as the Know-Nothings or the American Republican Party helped perpetuate beliefs that Irish immigrants' true motive for settling in America was to assert or extend the authority of the pope and corrupt America's democratic principles. Such religious and cultural clashes escalated to the point of violence during riots in Philadelphia in May and July 1844.

Fueling anti-Irish attitudes was the view that the Irish were a nonwhite, racially inferior group, a view informed by existing British attitudes that saw Irish physical and social attributes as dangerous and subhuman. These attitudes were an important foundation for British colonization of Ireland in the 16th and 17th centuries and had endured across the empire. Additionally, the Irish regarded themselves as racially separate; they described themselves as of the Celtic race and maintained an ethnic identity separate from the larger community in both Ireland and America.

In Philadelphia, the Irish were often closely associated with free African Americans, both in terms of their perceived racial attributes, as well as their patterns of life and work. Many Irish settled in neighborhoods that were populated by African Americans and competed with African Americans for the same low-skilled jobs. Images and descriptions of the Irish immigrant mimicked the qualities and language assigned to the black population, negatively affecting relations between these two groups. The Irish attempted to define themselves as separate from African Americans and to assert their dominance over the black population through rioting and activism against abolition.

As the Irish immigrants settled into American life, they kept strong connections to their native land. The dream of returning to Ireland was never far from the hearts and minds of immigrants. Many participated in Irish liberation movements throughout the 19th century. The solidarity of the Irish immigrants and their strong nationalist ties to homeland created cohesion within their communities but also perpetuated distrust by segregating them from the larger community. Some historians argue that the Irish were a stigmatized group that established a strong sense of community and identity because of and in spite of the external prejudice inflicted upon it. Others argue that the Irish, who brought their distrust of authority and Protestantism with them from Ireland, considered themselves as an ethnically distinct group and actively separated themselves from the larger society. This "clannish" tendency made them a target for nativist hostility and distrust.

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