

Working on the Rails: Irish and Italian Laborers on Pennsylvania's Railroads

"We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us. Did you ever think what those sleepers are that underlie the railroad? Each one is a man, an Irishman, or a Yankee man. The rails are laid on them, and they are covered with sand, and the cars run smoothly over them. They are sound sleepers, I assure you. And every few years a new lot is laid down and run over; so that, if some have the pleasure of riding on a rail, others have the misfortune to be ridden upon. And when they run over a man that is walking in his sleep, a supernumerary sleeper in the wrong position, and wake him up, they suddenly stop the cars, and make a hue and cry about it, as if this were an exception. I am glad to know that it takes a gang of men for every five miles to keep the sleepers down and level in their beds as it is, for this is a sign that they may sometime get up again."

-Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*. Boston, 1865.

American author Henry David Thoreau reflected upon the country's dramatic growth during the 19th century. He saw a nation begin to push beyond its colonial roots in the east and form a national identity tied to the open expanses of the west. All around him new technological innovations altered the way people worked, lived, and interacted. One of the most profound developments during this time was the emergence of the railroad. Dramatically transforming the physical, social, and economic landscape, railroads provided a faster, more direct means of connecting and moving people and goods. They provided greater access to once remote areas and fostered expansion while ensuring national cohesion. For many, each stretch of track laid meant progress and advancement, but Thoreau lamented the changing world. In addition to the simplicity of life that seemed to have been lost by an insatiable desire for change and improvement, railroads were a reminder of the tragic human expendability brought on by the rise of industrialization. Thoreau's reference to railroad sleepers, the ties that tracks are fastened to, echoed a 19th-century adage that under every railroad tie an Irishman was buried. They symbolized the railroad laborers—often immigrants—who were relegated to the lowest positions and performed the most tedious, repetitious, and dangerous tasks. Thoreau reminded the railroad rider who might marvel with fascination at this new technology of the human cost of progress.

The constant stream of unskilled laborers brought about by the influx of large numbers of Irish immigrants in the 19th century contributed to the perceived expendability of railroad workers. The Irish, who came eager to work but with few industrial skills, engaged in the least desirable and most dangerous jobs in the mining, textile, and transportation industries. Heavily involved in the construction of canals in the early part of the 19th century, the Irish were expected to transition into the rapidly growing railroad industry. The mass migration of famine victims in the 1840s and 1850s provided a steady pool of laborers who, armed with picks and shovels, worked at a furious pace laying down tracks and expanding lines. As railroads quickly superceded water travel, fierce competition between railroad lines within and among states created a flurry of track building. The Irish became pioneers in a sense, venturing into an industry that was in its formative stages and with no legal protection to safeguard them from abuse or unfair wages.

The Irish found work on the railroads through a variety of methods. They were generally not directly recruited by the railroad company, but by independent contractors who were responsible for the construction of certain sections of track. Contractors sometimes recruited their laborers by placing advertisements in local Irish community newspapers; however, not all newspapers encouraged or supported this line of work for their fellow countrymen. The severe working conditions and abuses experienced by railroad laborers led the *Catholic Herald*, a newspaper published by the Philadelphia archdiocese, to publish a warning in 1839 against their Irish readers engaging in this type of work. Oftentimes, the Irish were left with few employment options as discrimination on the part of native-born workers as well as the low skill level of Irish workers influenced the types of jobs that they could and did engage in. Most did not have the flexibility to choose their type of work, especially when they arrived in Philadelphia poverty stricken during the famine years. In some cases employment agents recruited immigrants as they exited passenger ships in New York and transported them to Pennsylvania to work on the canals and railroads. While this method of recruitment might provide immediate employment opportunities, it presented certain dangers for newly arriving immigrants as they easily fell victim to labor schemes. Individuals posing as labor agents promising to transport immigrants to work on the railroads and canals for a fee swindled money out of men who were desperate to find work. Many immigrants following the promise of employment arrived in Pennsylvania penniless to find that no opportunities immediately awaited them.

Working for the railroads was a grueling, labor-intensive task, especially in the industry's infancy. A contract to lay track meant that a gang of railroad laborers worked from sunrise to sunset clearing the ground, cutting down trees, removing stumps or other impediments that interfered with the roadbed, cutting rock where necessary, leveling the ground, building drainage, assessing the land for erosion, blasting tunnels, and building bridges or walls to protect the track from floods or landslides. The working conditions of these early trackmen as they ventured into the remote regions of the state were harsh and dangerous. Workers' wages certainly did not match the level of labor required or the risk incurred. Wages were dependent upon the amount of money the contractor obtained from the railroad company. It was not uncommon for contractors to hire double the number of hands necessary to complete a job to drive down individual wages and increase the work pace. Contractors sought to gain the most profit, so there was little incentive to provide adequate pay or proper provisions for laborers. In addition to accidents, death from exposure and disease were common as laborers lived in close quarters in makeshift labor camps and were removed from their families and community networks. Inadequate nutrition, minimal supplies, and poor medical care made death from illness and disease a constant threat. Abuse and exploitation by contractors frequently led to violent riots on the rails, further fueling nativist perceptions of the Irish as a rowdy and disorderly group.

An infamous case of tragedy on the tracks occurred in 1832 at Duffy's Cut in Malvern, Pennsylvania. A group of fifty-seven Irish immigrants contracted by Phillip Duffy to work on a stretch of rail for the Philadelphia and Columbia Railroad died of cholera in August of that year. Cramped living conditions helped to rapidly spread the disease through the work crew. Those who did not initially succumb to the disease tried to seek shelter and aid from the larger community but were shunned. Fear of the spread of cholera coupled with the rising anti-Irish and anti-Catholic sentiment in the wake of increased migration created a situation in which these laborers were forced to suffer alone and without any medical relief. When the fifty-seven men died, they were hastily buried along the tracks on which they labored.

By the latter part of the 19th century, many Irish immigrants moved into higher positions within the railroad industry or moved into other industrial professions. Immigration from eastern

and southern Europe provided a new generation of railroad trackmen. Italian immigrants replaced the Irish as the major ethnic group working on the Pennsylvania rails. Under the supervision of a foreman, trackmen in groups of between 10 and 20 men maintained sections of the track and inspected roadbeds to ensure the safety of train travel. Italians engaged in masonry work on bridges and tunnels and specialized in quarrying and blasting.

Newly arriving Italian immigrants in the late 19th century typically obtained jobs with the railroads through the *padrone* system. During the early years of Italian immigration to Pennsylvania, *padroni*, or labor agents, were a vital part of the settlement process. In addition to securing employment, *padroni* sometimes paid for passage, provided food, and obtained housing accommodations for the worker. In turn, the Italian laborer paid a portion of his wages to the *padroni* as a fee for his services. By the early 20th century, as more Italians settled in Pennsylvania and Italian communities strengthened, *paesani*, or fellow townspeople, influenced the employment newly arriving Italian immigrants sought. Italians viewed work on the railroad as a stepping-stone towards more specialized industrial jobs or public works projects. It was not uncommon for *paesani* to “hold” spots for their fellow countrymen. As one Italian laborer moved into a semiskilled position or into another industry, his position was filled by someone he recruited. These methods continually satisfied the railroad industry’s demand for labor while also providing Italian immigrants with ready employment. However, this “new” labor group posed two issues for railroad companies. The railroads were mindful of the turnover among its Italian workers and felt that its track laborers were less experienced due to this job mobility. This inexperience could prove costly to the company and to the employee due to the hazards and dangers of track maintenance and construction work. Additionally, Italian laborers, as compared to the Irish, were non-English speaking. The Pennsylvania Railroad began to offer English-language courses and training to its employees in an attempt to improve safety and encourage sustainability. This was part of the railroad company’s initiative to help Americanize its foreign-born workforce. As mass numbers of eastern and southeastern Europeans immigrated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, campaigns to help newly-arriving immigrants assimilate to American culture took shape. Settlement houses, public schools, and places of employment took steps to teach American culture, values, and language to these new immigrants. The Pennsylvania Railroad’s profiling of Italian workers who obtained their American citizenship and the connection it made between language, success, and citizenship demonstrates the company’s interest in Americanizing its workforce.

Pennsylvania’s rails took on larger national significance as it became a major thoroughfare for immigrant traffic and new settlers who ventured east to west throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. The completion of the transcontinental railroad and the growth of western lines were largely made possible by the labor of thousands of immigrants who migrated in search of new opportunities, encountered fierce discrimination, and made major contributions to the American transportation system. Immigrant hands helped lay the foundation for the fast-paced growth of the early railroad companies and set the scope and pace for future development. Though these immigrant laborers were at the center of a growing enterprise, they too often remain as inconspicuous as the sleepers on a railroad line. Essential to the operations of the line, they are often marginalized in the telling of railroad history.

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