

History
UNFOLDING

THE IRISH IN AMERICA



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The Irish in America: The Great Famine and the Great Migration

Introduction

The “Ould Sod” and the New World

There were Irish immigrants in America in the colonial era. But the Irish only began to be a major force here in the 1840s and '50s. It was in those years that more than a million of Ireland's eight million people suddenly uprooted themselves and sought refuge in the New World. It took a tragedy of unimaginable proportions to convince such massive numbers to abandon their homes and take to the sea and a new life. That tragedy was the Irish potato famine, or what came to be called the “Great Hunger.”

The sudden blight that destroyed Ireland's potato crop and pushed an already stressed population over the edge was made even worse by failures on the part of Great Britain about which historians still argue today. Whatever the causes of the disaster, the results in the end enriched the United States immeasurably. This was not always clear to non-Irish Americans at the time. The slums in which many of the Irish settled were festering centers of crime and degradation. But in time, the Irish triumphed over these conditions and established thriving communities that contributed to American life in countless ways.

This booklet/visual image set tells the story of the Irish famine and the great wave of immigration to America in the mid-1800s. It does this through 12 visual displays that focus on some of the key themes in this dramatic story. The illustrations are presented in four lessons. Each lesson uses three visual displays to explore one broad topic in the overall story. Briefly, the four lessons are as follows:

Famine

The focus here is on the potato famine, the human suffering it caused and the social inequalities and political divisions that made that suffering even more severe.

Exodus and Arrival

This lesson takes a look at the traumatic experience of leaving Ireland and adapting to America and at some of the options available to the Irish once they arrived.

The Irish in America

Here we sample the rich variety of adaptations made to American life by poor Irish laborers, union organizers and agitators and respectable middle-class families. Divided over some things, such as their feelings about the Civil War, they were united by an intense loyalty to the memory of Ireland and to the Catholic Church, which played a fundamental role in their social, educational and spiritual life.

Irish Immigration, American Responses

The response to the Irish was often hostile—at least at first. Seen as an alien presence in the larger cities, their political activities and religious affiliations provoked an ugly nativist response. But over time, the Irish thrived anyway and won the acceptance and respect of most of their fellow citizens.

Using Photos, Cartoons, and Other Visuals to Teach History

Many textbooks are full of colorful visuals. However, all too often these visuals function primarily as window dressing. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable. Only occasionally do the visuals in textbooks do more than offer simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, they pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help young people master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as historical documents. The lessons in this booklet focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, their emotional power, and their ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general, as well as their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

How to Use This Booklet

The booklet is divided into four lessons, with three illustrations per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

A BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET This page provides brief summaries explaining the three illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

DIGITAL IMAGES The booklet's PDF allows you to project the images for use in your class discussions.

DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY SHEETS

Each sheet displays one illustration. It includes a sequence of questions to help you plan an all-class discussion while using the projected images. The questions take students step by step through an analysis of the illustration. If you wish, you may reproduce these pages and hand them out. In addition to the discussion questions on the illustration itself, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. Some of these can be made into individual assignments. Others will work best as small-group or all-class activities.

The Irish in America: The Great Famine and the Great Migration

OBJECTIVES

1. Students will better understand the scale of the famine that ravaged Ireland and the 1840s.
 2. Students will debate some of the natural and social causes and consequences of the famine in Ireland.
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Famine

Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Illustration 1

Rich in nutrition and easy to grow, potatoes were eaten at every meal in Ireland in the early 1800s. Other crops and livestock were raised mainly for export. Potatoes fed the nation. Ireland was already poor when a sudden fungal disease wiped out the potato crop in the late 1840s. Potatoes rotted in the ground and in storage bins. A catastrophic famine set in. These drawings give a sense of the desperation of the poor as they searched in vain for good potatoes to eat. The Great Hunger, as it was called, was one of the great tragedies of the nineteenth century. In six years, the population of Ireland declined from eight to six million. About a million people died from the famine itself. Another million emigrated to the United States, Canada, Australia and Great Britain.

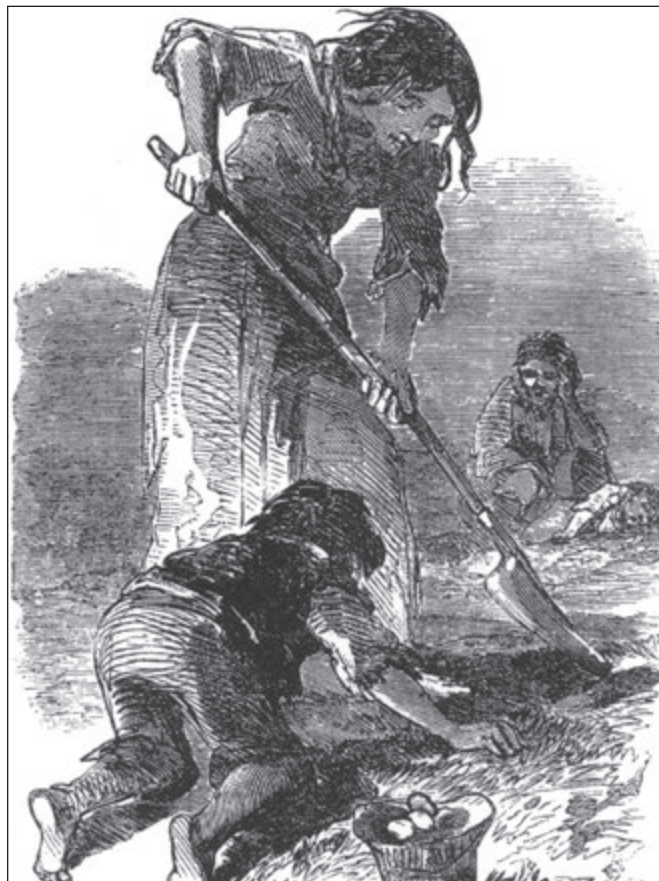
Illustration 2

In the 1840s, Ireland was a part of Great Britain. Millions of Ireland's poor were agricultural laborers, tenants of absentee landlords. Some of these landlords actually lived in luxury in England, only visiting their estates in Ireland perhaps once or twice a year. Even during the famine itself, many of them continued to sell grain and meat abroad. Such landlords often dealt badly with their tenants. At a whim, for example, in order to use their land for grazing purpose, they would force tenants out of their homes and off of the lands. Such tenant evictions were often tragic, as this illustration makes painfully clear.

Illustration 3

Historians still debate how much of the blame should be placed on Great Britain for the horrors of the potato famine. Great Britain can't be faulted for the fungus that wiped out the potatoes. But most historians agree that the British were slow to act in responding to the crisis and did far too little to improve conditions and provide relief to those who were starving. In some English quarters there was an outright callousness toward the suffering of the Irish. Some even claimed that the famine was due to a defect in Irish character. In this harsh British cartoon, titled "The Workingman's Burden," a gleeful Irish peasant is shown carrying his famine relief money while riding on the back of an exhausted English laborer.

Lesson 1—Famine Illustration 1



Both images courtesy of the Library of Congress

Discussing the Illustrations

1. Each year, from 1845 to 1850, a fungal disease wiped out the entire harvest of what was a key crop in the nation of Ireland at that time. What crop was that?
2. The failure of the potato crop proved deadly for the people of Ireland. Can you explain why?
3. These two illustrations show starving victims searching the ground for good potatoes. They were among a series of illustrations by artist James Mahony who was commissioned in 1847 by the Illustrated London News to visit the Skibbereen district and make drawings of the misery he found. How would you have reacted upon seeing these images in the Illustrated London News?
4. These images at first led to an outpouring of private giving, but this charitable response did not last long. Why do you suppose that was so? In what ways are images of famine such as these like television images of famine today? In what ways, if any, are they different in their impact?

Follow-up Activities

1. It's been said the potato fed the Irish nation. In 1845, the potato was the main item in the diet of about 4.7 million people. Some three million—mostly poor agricultural laborers—ate it almost exclusively. Why was this? Other crops were grown and livestock was raised. Read more about the role of the potato in Ireland. Find out exactly what other food sources existed there during the famine, and write a report that answers the following question: Why didn't, or why couldn't, the Irish turn to these other sources of food once the potato crop failed?
2. The Irish Potato Famine inspired many songs. Perhaps the most famous of these recounts the suffering in the district of Skibbereen in County Cork. Skibbereen has been called the famine's "ground zero." Find out more about Skibbereen and the suffering that occurred there. Give a brief talk to the class. Be sure to find the words to "Old Skibbereen," and include a recitation of the song (it reads much like a poem) as part of your presentation.

Irish Immigration, American Responses

Illustration 3



Both images courtesy of the Library of Congress

