

The Irish Immigrant Experience

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Irish immigrants arrive at Ellis Island, New York, early 20th century. Image courtesy of Library of Congress

In the colonial times of the early 1600s, the Irish population in America was second in number only to the English. They were pushed out of Ireland by religious conflicts, lack of political autonomy and poor economic conditions. These immigrants came to America because of the promises of land ownership and greater religious freedom.

Irish-Catholic immigration to America

After the first wave of Irish immigrants in the 1600s, Ireland's 1845 potato famine is often given as the reason for the second round of Irishmen to move to America. A fungus had wiped out potato crops in Ireland and led to massive starvation. Within five years, a million Irishmen were dead.

Ireland's population decreased dramatically throughout the 19th century. An estimated 4.5 million Irishmen arrived in America between 1820 and 1930. In the 1840s, Irish immigrants made up nearly half of all those coming to the United States.

In time, the number of Irish-Americans exceeded the entire population of Ireland, with New York City boasting more Irishmen than Dublin, Ireland.

Adaptation and assimilation

The Irish immigrants often had no money beyond the fare for their passage to America. So, they settled in the first cities in which they arrived.

Irish immigrants crowded into homes, living in tiny, cramped spaces. Cellars, attics and alleys became home. A lack of sewage and running water made cleanliness next to impossible and there were diseases of all kinds.

When the Irish families moved into neighborhoods, other families sometimes moved out. They were prejudiced against the Irish. They thought that the Irish would bring disease, violence, alcoholism and crime.

Joining the workforce

Irish immigrants often entered the workforce by taking low-status and dangerous jobs that were avoided by other workers. Many Irish women became domestic workers. Many Irish men labored in coal mines and built railroads and canals.

The Irish often suffered job discrimination. Meanwhile, some businesses took advantage of Irish immigrants' willingness to work at unskilled jobs for low pay. Over time, many Irish were able to get higher-level jobs as policemen, firemen and teachers.

Second- and third-generation Irish were better educated, wealthier, and more successful than were their parents and grandparents. The Kennedy family's story is one such example. The first Kennedy who arrived in the United States in 1848 was a laborer. His grandson, Joseph P. Kennedy, was able to go to college. He made the fortune that enabled his future generations to achieve great political success, including future President John F. Kennedy.

Religious conflict and discrimination

Ill will toward Irish immigrants was often made worse by religious conflict. Centuries of tension between Protestants and Catholics found their way into United States cities. Conflicts often resulted in violence, the destruction of property and even death.

Anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic sentiments in the 1840s produced groups such as the American Party, also called the "Know-Nothings," which fought foreign influences and promoted "traditional American ideals." This mindset led to "Know-Nothing" candidate Millard Fillmore becoming president in 1856.

Racial tensions

During much of the 19th century, Irishmen and blacks were pushed into competition with each other. There are striking parallels in the culture and history of the two groups.

Over time, they advanced in common fields such as sports, entertainment, religion, writing and publishing, and politics. They even suffered through similar social problems, including alcoholism, violence and broken homes.

Rather than being united by their common hard life, they were divided by the need to compete.

Irish identity, influence and opportunity

But, there was also a celebration of the Irish-American spirit. Their organizational ability coupled with the large number of Irish living in U.S. cities, made the Irish a powerful political force.

The Irish transformed politics in American cities by putting local power in the hands working-class men. They built powerful political machines capable of getting the vote. From New York to San Francisco, the Irish dominated big city politics.

Irish influence resulted in increased power for the Democratic Party as well as the Catholic Church. William R. Grace became New York City's first Irish-Catholic mayor in 1880. Four years later, Hugh O'Brien won the same position in Boston. Political power made it possible for Irishmen to get jobs, food and heating fuel.

Irish politicians continued to gain the national spotlight through jobs as judges and other federal positions. These appointments served as first steps to the future success of Irish-American elected leaders such as Chicago Mayor Richard Daley and President John F. Kennedy.

Mutual influence

The Irish who entered the United States from the 16th to 20th centuries were changed by America, just as they changed this nation. They achieved lives that would not have been possible in Ireland, supporting their families and bringing a better life to their fellow Irish in the United States and in Ireland.

Irish immigrants contributed to the American culture in many ways. They became political and religious leaders. They achieved special success in journalism, entertainment and sports.

In time, the Irish completely assimilated in America, while maintaining their Irish heritage.

Quiz

- 1 Which piece of evidence BEST explains the cause of the second wave of Irish immigrants to America?
- (A) They were pushed out of Ireland by religious conflicts, lack of political autonomy and poor economic conditions.
 - (B) A fungus had wiped out potato crops in Ireland and led to massive starvation. Within five years, a million Irishmen were dead.
 - (C) In time, the number of Irish-Americans exceeded the entire population of Ireland, with New York City boasting more Irishmen than Dublin, Ireland.
 - (D) The Irish immigrants often had no money beyond the fare for their passage to America. So they settled in the first cities in which they arrived.
- 2 Which section of the article BEST explains the growth of Irish political power in the United States?
- (A) "Joining the workforce"
 - (B) "Religious conflict and discrimination"
 - (C) "Irish identity, influence and opportunity"
 - (D) "Mutual influence"
- 3 Which selection from the article contains two ideas that would be MOST important to include in a summary of the article?
- (A) The Irish often suffered job discrimination. Meanwhile, some businesses took advantage of Irish immigrants' willingness to work at unskilled jobs for low pay. Over time, many Irish were able to get higher-level jobs as policemen, firemen and teachers.
 - (B) Centuries of tension between Protestants and Catholics found their way into United States cities. Conflicts often resulted in violence, the destruction of property and even death.
 - (C) Over time, they advanced in common fields such as sports, entertainment, religion, writing and publishing, and politics. They even suffered through similar social problems, including alcoholism, violence and broken homes.
 - (D) The Irish who entered the United States from the 16th to 20th centuries were changed by America, just as they changed this nation. They achieved lives that would not have been possible in Ireland, supporting their families and bringing a better life to their fellow Irish in the United States and in Ireland.

- 4 How does the section "Adaptation and assimilation" reflect a central idea of the article?
- (A) by explaining the poor sanitation conditions present in American cities
 - (B) by describing adversity and prejudice faced by Irish immigrants
 - (C) by explaining how Irish immigrants overcame prejudices of their neighbors
 - (D) by describing the closeness of Irish families who moved to America's cities