

HISTORY OF IRISH IMMIGRATION

Primary Source: [Irish Immigration and Relocation in the U.S.](#)

Introduction

In colonial times, the Irish population in America was second in number only to the English. Many early Irish immigrants were of Scottish or English descent and came from the northern province of Ulster. Pushed out of Ireland by religious conflicts, lack of political autonomy, and dire economic conditions, these immigrants, who were often called “Scotch-Irish”, were pulled to America by the promise of land ownership and greater religious freedom.

Many Scotch-Irish immigrants were educated, skilled workers. Even those who financed their emigration by becoming indentured servants were well equipped to lead successful, independent lives when their period of servitude ended. The Scotch-Irish settled predominantly in the middle colonies, especially in Pennsylvania where Philadelphia was a major port of debarkation. Over subsequent decades, the Scotch-Irish migrated south following the Great Philadelphia Road, the main route used for settling the interior southern colonies. Traveling down Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley, then south into the North Carolina Piedmont region, they reached South Carolina by the 1760s.

Irish-Catholic immigrants came to America during colonial times, too. For example, Charles Carroll immigrated to America in 1706. His grandson, Charles Carroll of Carrollton, signed his name to the Declaration of Independence.

Irish-Catholic Immigration to America

Ireland’s 1845 Potato Blight (or Great Famine) is credited with launching the second wave of Irish immigration to America. The fungus which decimated potato crops created a devastating famine. Starvation plagued Ireland and within five years, a million Irish were dead while half a million had arrived in America to start a new life. Living conditions in many parts of Ireland were very difficult long before the Potato Blight of 1845; however, and a large number of Irish left their homeland as early as the 1820s.

Ireland’s population decreased dramatically throughout the nineteenth century. Census figures show an Irish population of 8.2 million in 1841, 6.6 million a decade later, and only 4.7 million in 1891. It is estimated that as many as 4.5 million Irish arrived in America between 1820 and 1930. Between 1820 and 1860, the Irish constituted over one third of all immigrants to the U.S. In the 1840s, they comprised nearly half of all immigrants to this nation. Pre-famine immigrants were predominately male, while in the famine years and their aftermath, entire families left the country. In later years, most Irish immigrants were women.

Adaptation and Assimilation

The Irish immigrants left a rural lifestyle in a nation lacking modern industry. Many immigrants found themselves unprepared for the industrialized, urban centers in the U.S. Though these immigrants were not the poorest people in Ireland (the poorest were unable to raise the required sum for steerage passage on a ship to America), by American standards, they were destitute. They often had no money beyond the fare for their passage, and, thus, settled in the ports of their debarkation. In time, the total of Irish-Americans exceeded the entire population of Ireland. New York City boasted more Irishmen than Dublin.

The Irish established patterns that newcomers to the U.S. continue to follow today. These patterns include housing choices, occupations entered, financial support to families remaining in the homeland, and chain immigrations which brought additional relatives to America. Impoverished Irish immigrants often crowded into subdivided homes that were intended for single families. A lack of adequate sewage and running water in these places made cleanliness next to impossible. Diseases – including cholera, typhus, tuberculosis, and mental illness – resulted from these miserable living conditions. Irish immigrants sometimes faced hostility from other groups in the U.S. because they were accused of these spreading diseases.

Joining the Workforce

Irish immigrants often entered the workforce at the bottom of the occupational ladder and took on the menial and dangerous jobs that were often avoided by other workers. Many Irish American women became servants or domestic workers, while numerous Irish American men labored in coal mines and built railroads and canals.

As Irish immigrants moved inland from eastern cities, they found themselves in heated competition for jobs. West Virginia coal operators fired union laborers and gave the jobs to Irish, Italian, and African-American workers. This competition heightened class tensions and, at the turn of the century, Irish Americans were often antagonized by organizations such as the American Protective Association and the Ku Klux Klan.

The Irish often suffered blatant or subtle job discrimination; some businesses took advantage of Irish immigrants' willingness to work at unskilled jobs for low pay. Employers were known to replace (or threaten to replace) uncooperative workers and those demanding higher wages with Irish American laborers.

Over time, many Irish Americans climbed occupational and social ladders through politically appointed positions such as policeman, fireman, and teacher. Second and third generation Irish Americans were on average better educated and more affluent than were their parents and some entered the circles of power.

Religious Conflict and Discrimination

Ill will toward Irish immigrants because of their poor living conditions, and their willingness to work for low wages was often exacerbated by religious conflict. Centuries of tension between Protestants and Catholics found their way into U.S. cities and verbal attacks often led to mob violence.

Anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic sentiments in the 1840s produced groups such as the nativist American Party, which fought foreign influences and promoted "traditional American ideals". In the Questions for Admittance to the American Party (1854), inductees committed to "...elect to all offices of Honor, Profit, or Trust, no one but native-born citizens of America, of this Country to the exclusion of all Foreigners, and to all Roman Catholics, whether they be of native or Foreign Birth, regardless of all party predilections whatever."

Racial Tensions in the Nineteenth Century

During much of the 19th century, in areas with large Irish American and African American populations, the two groups were often pushed into conflict. The Conscription Act of 1863 exacerbated tense relationships. This act made all white men between the ages of twenty and forty-five years eligible for the draft by the Union Army. Free African American men were

permitted to “volunteer” to fight in the Civil War through the provisions of the Emancipation Proclamation. Other inequities in draft eligibility between African Americans, monied whites, and working-class whites, of whom many were Irish, increased racial tensions.

Several cities suffered draft riots in which enrollment officers and free African Americans were targeted for violence. The largest such incident began on June 11, 1863, in New York City when more than 100 people were murdered by an angry mob. After burning down a draft office and attacking police officers and well-dressed whites, this mob of white workers, including many Irish Americans, focused its energy on killing African American bystanders.

Irish Identity, Influence, and Opportunity

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Irish Americans became a powerful political force in U.S. cities. Building on principles of loyalty to the individual and the organization, they helped build political machines capable of getting the vote. Though remembered most for their perceived corruption, these political machines created social services long before they were politically mandated by national political movements.

Political machines held sway in several major American cities, from New York to San Francisco. New York's Tammany political machine was under Irish American control for more than fifty years. William R. Grace became New York City's first Irish American mayor in 1880. Four years later, Hugh O'Brien won the same position in Boston. The political machines provided avenues for Irish Americans to get jobs, deal with naturalization issues, even get food or heating fuel in emergencies.

Irish Immigration in the 20th and 21st Centuries

Emigration from Ireland continued throughout the 20th century. Irish immigration to the U.S. has been motivated, traditionally, by a lack of employment opportunities at home; several events, however, shifted Irish emigration towards other countries, particularly England. These events include the Great Depression, World War II, and a series of new U.S. immigration legislation. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, more Irish young people are emigrating to Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, as well. Interestingly, as Ireland's economy has developed, the nature of the new immigrants changed. Irish immigrants now tend to be better educated than their predecessors but, in many cases, also undocumented. There is a concern in Ireland of a young population ‘brain drain’.

After World War I Irish immigration to the U.S. was relatively high. New laws limiting immigration during the 1920s, though, caused numbers to decline; immigration totals for the 1930s were particularly low. After World War II the number of Irish immigrants rose; however, the 1960s saw emigration from Ireland fall dramatically because of new quota laws restricting northern Europeans (Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965). This trend has continued through the early 21st century.

During the severe Irish recession of 1980–85 a resurgence in Irish immigrants resulted in a large undocumented Irish population in the U.S. Most of this population was later legalized because of special legislation that targeted the Irish. A second similar surge of Irish immigrants occurred in the mid-2000s due to a recession caused by Irish bank failures. The number of Irish-born legal immigrants, however, continues to be historically low (e.g., 2000: 1,296; 2010: 1,507; 2020: 1,466). For reference, the total immigration during the mid-1800s (Great Famine) was approximately 2 million over ten years. The peak year was 1851: 221,253.

Famous Irish Americans

This is a selected list of famous Irish-Americans. An internet search will uncover many more.

Alfred Smith: Governor of New York
Andrew Jackson: 7th United States President
Andrew Johnson: 17th United States President
Andrew W. Mellon: Banker, capitalist, and Treasury Secretary under President Harding
Anthony Kennedy: United States Supreme Court Justice
Barack Obama: 44th United States President
Ben Hogan: Hall of Fame PGA Golfer
Benjamin Harrison: 23rd United States President
Bill Clinton: 42nd United States President
Bing Crosby: Singer and actor
Bruce Springsteen: Singer, songwriter, and musician
Buster Keaton: Vaudevillian and actor
Caroline Kennedy: Ambassador
Carroll O'Connor: Actor
Charles Carroll III: Only Catholic to sign the Declaration of Independence; Senator
Chester A. Arthur: 21st United States President
Conan O'Brien: Television host, comedian, writer, and producer
Daniel P. Coughlin: First Roman Catholic Chaplain of the U.S. House of Representatives
Daniel Patrick Moynihan: Senator
Donald O'Connor: Dancer, singer, and actor
Dorothy Day: Journalist and peace activist; founder of the Catholic Worker movement
Ed Sullivan: Journalist and television producer
Edward R. Murrow: CBS correspondent
Ethel Barrymore: Actress
Eugene McCarthy: Senator
Eugene O'Neill: Playwright
F. Scott Fitzgerald: Novelist
Father Edward J. Flanagan: Founded Boys Town, USA
Fulton John Sheen: Archbishop and television host (The Fulton Sheen Program)
Gene Kelly: Actor and entertainer
George Clinton: Governor
George M. Cohan: Singer and songwriter
George Meany: President of the American Federation of Labor
Georgia O'Keefe: Painter
Grace Kelly: Actress
Gregory Peck: Actor
Grover Cleveland: 22nd and 24th United States President
Harrison Ford: Actor and producer
Helen Hayes: Actress
Henry Ford: Automobile manufacturer
Jack Dempsey: World Boxing Heavyweight Champion
Jack Welch: Business executive and author
Jackie Gleason: Actor
James Buchanan: 15th United States President

James Cagney: Actor
James Knox Polk: 11th United States President
Jefferson Davis: President of the Confederate States of America
Jimmy Carter: 39th United States President
Jimmy Dorsey: Jazz musician, composer, and big band leader
Joe Biden: 47th Vice President of the United States
John and Lionel Barrymore: Actors
John F. Kennedy: 35th United States President
John Ford: Director
John Hancock: Signer of the Declaration of Independence
John Huston: Director
John L. Sullivan: Professional boxer
John McCloskey: First American Cardinal
John Philip Holland: Submarine designer
Joseph P. Kennedy: Businessman, SEC Chairman, Ambassador to England (first Catholic)
Judy Garland: Singer and actress
Lionel Barrymore: Actor
Margaret Mitchell: Novelist
Marrion Morrison (John Wayne): Actor
Mary Tyler Moore: Actress
Matthew Brady: Civil War photographer.
Michael J. McGivney: Roman Catholic priest and founder of the Knights of Columbus
Mychal F. Judge: Catholic priest and Chaplain of the Fire Department of New York; first certified fatality of the 9/11 attacks
Pat Conroy: Novelist and memoirist
Raymond Chandler: Novelist and short story writer
Richard J. Daley: Mayor
Richard Nixon: 37th United States President
Robert F. Kennedy: Senator
Robert McNamara: Secretary of Defense
Ronald Reagan: 40th United States President
Rosemary Clooney: Singer and actress
Sandra Day O'Connor: First female Supreme Court justice
Ted Kennedy: Senator
Theodore Roosevelt: 26th United States President
Tip O'Neill: United States Speaker of the House
Tom Clancy: Novelist
Tommy Dorsey: Jazz musician, composer, and big band leader
Ulysses S. Grant: 18th United States President
W. C. Fields: Comedian, actor, and writer
Walt Disney: Film producer, director, screenwriter, and animator
William F. Buckley Jr.: Writer and editor
William J. Brennan, Jr.: U.S. Supreme Court Justice.
William McKinley: 25th United States President
William Randolph Hearst: Editor and publisher
Woodrow Wilson: 28th United States President