

When America Despised the Irish: The 19th Century's Refugee Crisis

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A Famine Forces an Unprecedented Migration.

Fleeing a broken island, which was a colony of England, nearly 2 million refugees from Ireland crossed the Atlantic to the United States in the wake of the Great Hunger. Beginning in 1845, the fortunes of the Irish began to sag along with the withering leaves of the country's potato plants. While the potato famine struck across Europe, no corner of the continent was as dependent on the crop for survival as Ireland, which even before the crisis was dealing with extreme poverty as a result of centuries of British rule. Packed with nutrition and easy to grow, potatoes were the only practical crop that could flourish on the tiny plots of land doled out to the Irish in Ireland by the wealthy British Protestant who owned the land. The Irish consumed 7 million tons of potatoes each year. They ate potatoes for dinner. They ate them for lunch. They even ate them for breakfast. The average adult working male in Ireland consumed a staggering 14 pounds of potatoes per day, while the average adult Irish woman ate 11.2 pounds.

Seven terrible years of famine decimated the Irish population. Barefoot mothers with clothes dripping from their bodies clutched dead infants in their arms as they begged for food. Wild dogs searching for food fed on human corpses. Desperate farmers sprinkled their crops with holy water, and emaciated figures stubbled fields with calloused hands searching for one, just one, healthy potato. Diseases like typhus, dysentery, tuberculosis and cholera tore through the countryside as horses maintained a constant march carting spent bodies to mass graves.

British Neglect Exacerbates the Irish Plight

The famine resulted from more than just the pestilence that was killing Irish potatoes. For centuries British laws had deprived Ireland's Catholics of their rights to worship, vote, speak their language and own land, horses and guns. Now, with a famine raging, the Irish were denied food. Under armed guard, food convoys continued to export wheat, oats and barley to England while Ireland starved.

British lawmakers who ruled over Ireland were reluctant to provide government aid to solve the humanitarian crisis. "Great Britain cannot continue to throw her hard-won millions into the bottomless pit of Celtic pauperism," sneered the Illustrated London News in March 1849. Charles E. Trevelyan, the British civil servant in charge of relief efforts, viewed the famine as a divine solution to Irish overpopulation as he declared, "The judgement of God sent the calamity to teach the Irish a lesson, that calamity must not be too much mitigated."

Ireland's population was nearly halved by the time the potato blight abated in 1852. While approximately 1 million died, another 2 million abandoned the land that had abandoned them in the largest-single population movement of the 19th century. Most of the exiles—nearly a quarter

of the Irish nation—washed up on the shores of the United States. They knew little about America except one thing: It had to be better than the hell that was searing Ireland.

A Mass Exodus Begins



Illustration of a famine-era “coffin ship” carrying passengers. (Credit: Illustrated London News/Hulton Archive/Getty Images)

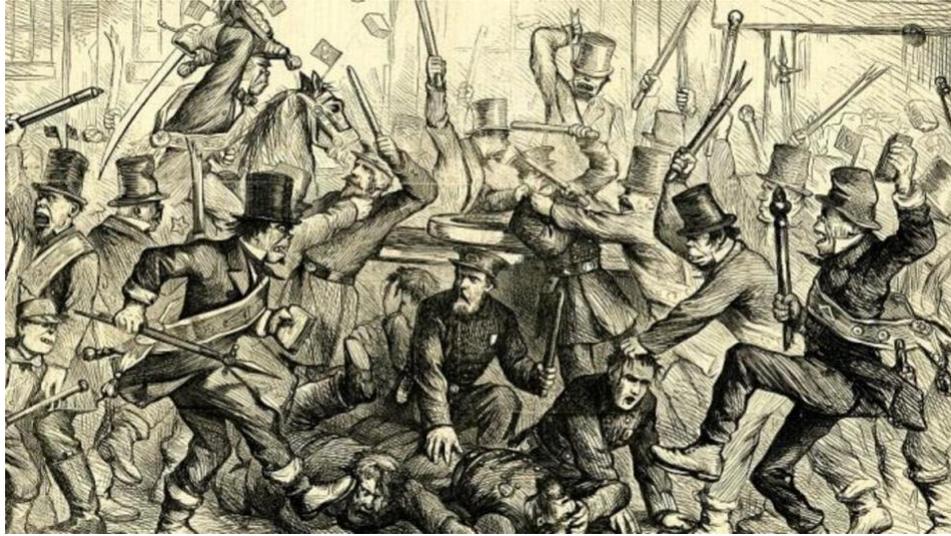
Most of the refugees boarded minimally converted cargo ships—some had been used in the past to transport slaves from Africa—and the hungry, sick passengers, many of whom spent their last pennies for transit, were treated little better than freight on a 3,000-mile journey that lasted at least four weeks.

Herded like animals in dark, cramped quarters, the Irish passengers lacked sufficient food and clean water. They choked on foul air. They were showered by excrement and vomit. Each adult was apportioned just 18 inches of bed space—children half that. Disease and death consumed these ships with nearly a quarter of the 85,000 passengers who sailed to North America aboard the aptly nicknamed “coffin ships” in 1847 died in route. Their bodies were wrapped in cloths, weighed down with stones and tossed overboard.

Largely poor, many exiles could progress no farther than within walking distance of the city docks where they disembarked. While some had spent all of their meager savings to pay for passage across the Atlantic, others had their voyages funded by British landlords who found it a cheaper solution to dispatch their tenants to another continent, than pay for their food at home.

In the opinion of many Americans, those British landlords were not sending their best people. These people were not like the industrious Protestant immigrants who came to America in large numbers during the colonial era, fought in the Continental Army and tamed the frontier. These people were not only poor, unskilled refugees, they were Catholic.

The influx heightens religious tensions.



Thomas Nast cartoon depicting violent Irish mobs attacking police officers. (Credit: The New York Historical Society/Getty Images)

Conflict between Protestants and Catholics in the United States had already broken out in violence before the potato famine. Anti-Catholic, anti-Irish mobs in Philadelphia destroyed Irish houses and torched Catholic churches in the deadly Bible Riots of 1844. Wild conspiracy theories took root that women were held against their will in Catholic convents and that priests systematically raped nuns and then strangled any children born as a result of their union.

While the number of German immigrants entering the United States nearly matched that of the Irish during the 1850s, the Irish were particularly vilified by the country's Anglo-Saxon Protestants. The country's oldest citizens could still personally remember when America was an English colony and effigies the popes were burned in city streets.

In the new Irish exiles, however, many Protestant Americans saw a Catholic plot at work. Some Protestants feared the pope and his army would land in the United States, overthrow the government and establish a new Vatican in Cincinnati, Ohio. They believed the Irish would impose the Catholic law as the law of the land.

Much of the anxiety was economic. The Irish filled the most low-paying and dangerous jobs, often taking smaller salaries than those accepted by Protestant Americans.

Not only did working-class Protestant Americans see the cheaper workers taking their jobs, some of the Irish refugees even took up arms against their new homeland during the Mexican-American War. Drawn in part by higher wages and a common faith with the Mexicans, some members of the St. Patrick's Battalion had deserted the U.S. Army after encountering ill-treatment by their bigoted commanders and fought with the enemy. After their capture, 50 of these Irish deserters were executed by the U.S. Army for their treasonous decisions.

A nativist backlash begins.

In 1849, a clandestine fraternal society of native-born Protestant men called the Order of the Star Spangled Banner formed in New York. Bound by sacred oaths and secret passwords, its members wanted a return to the America they once knew, a land of “Temperance, Liberty and Protestantism.” Similar secret societies with menacing names like the Black Snakes and Rough and Readies sprouted across the country.

Within a few years, these societies coalesced around the anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant American Party, whose members were called the “Know-Nothings” because they claimed to “know nothing” when questioned about their politics. Party members vowed to elect only native-born citizens—but only if they weren’t Roman Catholic. “Know-Nothings believed that Protestantism defined American society. From this flowed their fundamental belief that Catholicism was incompatible with basic American values,” writes Jay P. Dolan.

With the motto “Americans must rule America!”, the Know-Nothings elected eight governors, more than 100 congressmen and mayors of cities including Boston, Philadelphia and Chicago in the mid-1850s. They found their greatest success in Massachusetts where in 1854 the American Party captured all state offices, the entire State Senate and all but a handful of seats in the House chamber. According to Dolan, once in power in Massachusetts the Know-Nothings mandated the reading of the Protestant Bible in public schools, disbanded Irish military units while confiscating their weapons and deported nearly 300 poor Irish back to England as *Public Charges*. They also prevented immigrants who had earned their citizenship from voting unless they had spent 21 years in the United States.

President Millard Fillmore ran on the American Party’s 1856 presidential ticket. Throughout his political career, the 13th president had persistently courted the votes of nativist Yankees fearful of the changes brought by the Great Hunger refugees, and he blamed “foreign Catholics” for his defeat in the 1844 New York gubernatorial election.

In 1854, an anti-Catholic mob in Ellsworth, Maine, dragged a Catholic Jesuit priest John Bapst—who had circulated a petition denouncing the use of the Protestant Bible in local schools—into the streets where they stripped him and sheltered his body in hot tar and feathers. That same year, the Know-Nothings in Bath, Maine, smashed the pews of a church recently purchased by Irish Catholics before hoisting an American flag from it and setting the building ablaze. When the bishop of Portland returned to the city a year later to lay a cornerstone for the church’s replacement, another mob chased him away and beat him.

The violence turned deadly in Louisville, Kentucky, in August 1855 when armed Know-Nothing members guarding polling stations on an election day launched attacks against German and Irish Catholics to prevent them from voting. Immigrant homes were ransacked and torched. Between 20 and 100 people, including a Catholic priest were killed. Thousands of Catholics fled the city in the riot’s aftermath, but no one was ever prosecuted for crimes committed on “Bloody Monday.”

Abraham Lincoln was among the many Americans disturbed at the rise of the nativist movement as he explained in an 1855 letter: “As a nation, we began by declaring that ‘all men are created equal.’ We now practically read it ‘all men are created equal, except negroes.’ When the Know-Nothings get control, it will read ‘all men are created equal, except negroes and foreigners and Catholics.’ When it comes to this I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty...”

The good news for Lincoln and those Americans with similar views is that the Know-Nothing Party cratered quickly after reaching its high-water mark. The party splintered as the slavery question superseded the immigrant menace with flashpoints such as the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the Dred Scott decision and the uprising at Harper’s Ferry steering the country to armed conflict.

The Irish find their footing—at the ballot box.

A generation after the Potato Famine, the Irish controlled powerful political machines in cities across the United States and were moving up the social ladder into the middle class as an influx of immigrants from China and Southern and Eastern Europe took hold in the 1880s and 1890s. “Being from the British Isles, the Irish were now considered acceptable and assimilable to the American way of life.” (Dolan)

No longer embedded on the lowest rung of American society, the Irish unfortunately gained acceptance in the mainstream by dishing out the same bigotry toward newcomers that they had experienced. County Cork native and Workingmen’s Party leader Denis Kearney, for example, closed his speeches to American laborers with his rhetorical signature: “Whatever happens, the Chinese must go.”