

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

The first English colony was founded in the United States in the 1600s. This started the colonization of America. This meant that large amounts of people were leaving the countries where they were born to live in what would become the United States. These people are called immigrants.

Most of the earliest immigrants to the United States were English, followed by the Irish.

The Irish left Ireland for many reasons, including religion, politics and poor living conditions. They came to America with hopes of owning land and having religious freedom.

Irish-Catholic immigration to America

A fungus affected Ireland's potato crops in 1845, which made a second large wave of Irishmen move to America. The disease ruined Ireland's potato crops and most of the country was starving. Within five years, a million Irishmen were dead.

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

In time, there were more Irish-Americans than Irish people in all of Ireland. New York City had more Irishmen than Ireland's capital city Dublin.

Adaptation and assimilation

The Irish often had no money when they came to America. So, they settled in the first cities in which they arrived.

They crowded into homes, living in tiny, cramped spaces. A lack of sewage and running water made diseases spread.

When the Irish families moved into neighborhoods, sometimes other families moved out. They feared that the Irish would bring disease and crime. These people were prejudiced against the Irish.

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 household 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 the Irishmen's willingness to work for low pay. During much of the 19th century, Irishmen and blacks competed with each other for work.

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. One example is John F. Kennedy, who came from a line of poor Irish immigrants, but his family gained wealth over time. Kennedy became president in 1961.

Religious conflict and discrimination

Negative feelings toward the Irish were often made worse by disagreements about religion. This sometimes resulted in people being harmed or property being damaged. Most Irish were Catholic and many Americans then were Protestant.

Anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic ideas in the 1840s produced groups such as the American Party, also called the "Know-Nothings." This group was against foreigners having power. Their ideas led to "Know-Nothing" candidate Millard Fillmore becoming president in 1856.

Irish identity, influence and opportunity

But, there was also a celebration of the Irish-American spirit. Over time, the Irish had become a strong force in the United States.

The Irish transformed politics in American cities by giving power to working-class men. From New York to San Francisco, the Irish dominated city governments. They gained national attention as judges and other jobs in the federal government.

This resulted in increased power for the Democratic Party as well as the Catholic Church. Power within the government made it possible for Irishmen to get jobs, food and heating fuel for their homes.

Mutual influence

The Irish who entered the United States from the 1600s through the 1900s were changed by America. But at the same time, they changed this nation, too.

They achieved lives that would not have been possible in Ireland, while contributing 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 and their ways were integrated into America.