

Irish Immigration to America

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ABSTRAKT

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá historií irské imigrace do Ameriky, zejména s důrazem na Velký hladomor (1845-1850) jako zásadní faktor, který podnítil masovou emigraci. Zkoumá rané migrační vzorce způsobené ekonomickými a politickými tlaky v Irsku a zabývá se problémy, kterým irští přistěhovalci ve Spojených státech čelili, jako jsou nativismus, ekonomické problémy a kulturní asimilace. Dále pojednává o změnách v náboženském složení irských přistěhovalců, jejich společenském přínosu a politické angažovanosti. Tato práce nabízí náhled na imigrační a kulturní integrační procesy a podtrhuje vliv irské diaspory na americké sociálně-kulturní prostředí ve shrnutí jejich cesty od opovrhovaných přistěhovalců k vlivným členům společnosti.

Klíčová slova: irská imigrace, Velký hladomor, Nativismus v Americe, identita Irských Američanů, integrace imigrantů, náboženská diskriminace

ABSTRACT

This bachelor thesis examines the history of Irish immigration to America, with particular emphasis on the Great Famine (1845-1850) as a crucial factor that spurred mass emigration. It explores early migration patterns caused by economic and political pressures in Ireland and examines the problems Irish immigrants faced in the United States, such as nativism, economic problems, and cultural assimilation. It also discusses changes in the religious composition of Irish immigrants, their social contributions, and their political involvement. This thesis offers insights into immigration and cultural integration processes and highlights the influence of the Irish diaspora on the American socio-cultural environment in a summary of their journey from despised immigrants to influential members of society.

Keywords: Irish immigration, Great Famine, Nativism in America, Irish American identity, immigrant integration, religious discrimination

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I hereby declare that the print version of my Bachelor's thesis and the electronic version of my thesis deposited in the IS/STAG system are identical.

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INTRODUCTION

This bachelor thesis explores the extensive history of Irish immigration to America, with a particular focus on the critical period of the Great Famine (1845-1850), a devastating event that catalyzed mass emigration and permanently altered the demographic and cultural landscapes of both Ireland and the United States. This study investigates the early migration patterns that were primarily driven by severe economic deprivation and political oppression in Ireland, highlighting the repressive Penal Laws and the harsh conditions that pushed the Irish towards the perceived opportunities of America.

The aim of this thesis is to analyze the multitude of challenges faced by Irish immigrants upon their arrival in the United States, such as nativism, economic struggles, and the difficult process of cultural assimilation. It seeks to explore and highlight the significant shift in the religious composition of the Irish immigrant population, examining how this transition from predominantly Protestant to overwhelmingly Catholic affected their integration and social contributions within American society.

Additionally, this thesis intends to assess the political involvement of the Irish diaspora, investigating their growing influence and eventual integration into the fabric of American political life, culminating in significant figures such as President John F. Kennedy, who embodied the success of the Irish American community.

Through detailed historical research and analysis, this thesis will explore the broader themes of displacement, identity, and assimilation, highlighting the resilience, adaptation, and enduring influence of the Irish on America's socio-cultural landscape. The study not only aims to document the struggles and perseverance of Irish immigrants but also to celebrate their substantial contributions and the significant mark they have left on the American narrative. By explaining these patterns, this thesis contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics of immigration and cultural integration that continue to resonate in today's globalized world. This thesis aims to provide valuable insights into how the Irish community transitioned from a group of despised immigrants to become pivotal members of American society, shaping its culture and values across generations.

1 HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF IRISH IMMIGRATION

In 1690, at the Battle of the Boyne, King William of Orange led Protestant forces to victory over the Irish armies of James II, the toppled Catholic English king. The Protestant Ascendancy, a broad system of ideological, financial, and cultural dominance over Catholic Ireland, was imposed by Protestants and the British government in the years that followed their victory at the Boyne. Ireland's land was seized almost entirely and distributed to around 10,000 Protestant households. Just 10% of Ireland's territory was owned by Protestants in 1600. By the year 1778, this number was 95%.¹

Following the Battle of the Boyne, the enactment of the Penal Laws in 1695, 1697, and 1704 led to Irish Catholics losing nearly all their rights. These laws stripped Catholics, regardless of their social standing, of their political rights, effectively banned the practice of Catholicism, outlawed priests, and restricted their ability to own property, vote, serve as officers in the British Army or Navy, attend schools, or carry weapons. Furthermore, these laws even prohibited the use of the Gaelic language, deeply impacting the cultural and religious life of Irish Catholics.²

With the intentional destruction of the Irish economy, export trade was restricted. Before Catholic Emancipation took place in 1829, these laws were enforced for 140 years. Daniel O'Connell, a well-known Catholic lawyer from County Kerry in Ireland, played a major role in making Catholic Emancipation possible. Nevertheless Ireland had become a wretched nation by that time.³

1.1 Early immigration patterns

The first cases of documented immigration from Ireland to America date back to the 17th century, when an estimated 50,000 to 100,000 individuals departed to the West, a lot of them against their will, as convicts. The British courts often sent them to the West Indies islands to serve on tobacco or sugar plantations.⁴

During the colonial era, the Irish were the second largest ethnic group in America, following the English. A significant portion of these early immigrants originated from a

¹ "Irish Potato Famine: Before the Famine," The History Place, accessed February 11, 2024, <https://www.historyplace.com/worldhistory/famine/before.htm>.

² Timothy J. Meagher, *The Columbia Guide to Irish American History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 29.

³ "Irish Potato Famine: Before the Famine," The History Place, accessed February 11, 2024, <https://www.historyplace.com/worldhistory/famine/before.htm>.

⁴ Kerby Miller and Paul Wagner, *Out of Ireland: The Story of Irish Emigration to America* (Washington, D.C.: Elliott & Clark Publishing, 1998), 10.

province called Ulster in Northern Ireland and often had Scottish or English ancestry, leading them to be commonly referred to as "Scotch-Irish." This migration from Ulster was noteworthy not just for its scale relative to the local population but also in comparison to other European migrations, including those from Scotland and German-speaking areas. The migrants, primarily young men, and families from diverse backgrounds and predominantly Protestant Presbyterians, targeted specific ports on America's East Coast.⁵

In the late 1710s, a significant Ulster Presbyterian migration to North America began, driven by a combination of natural disasters and economic pressures in Ulster. This period saw severe droughts and a smallpox outbreak, with the expiration of long-term property leases and a sharp rise in rents by mostly catholic landlords. These hardships forced many to reconsider their future.⁶

This wave of migration was preceded by efforts in the 17th century to attract British farmers to Ulster, offering low rents and long leases aimed at settling a dangerous frontier. As the number of people looking for land increased, landlords maximized their profits by exploiting the situation. They either reduced the length of leases or incited bidding competitions to capitalize on the demand for their land. This practice appears to have directly triggered the initial major migration wave of Ulster Presbyterians.⁷

Seeking better opportunities, a large number of Ulster Presbyterians turned their sights to North America, particularly attracted to Pennsylvania, North Carolina, and South Carolina, with Philadelphia becoming the main entry point.⁸

1.2 18th-century migration

The migration in the 18th century marked an important turning point, as many sought relief from the economic strains and natural calamities back home, aiming for a chance at land ownership and a more prosperous future in the New World. This movement not only changed the lives of those who migrated but also had lasting impacts on the demographic and cultural landscapes of both Ulster and the American colonies.

⁵ "Irish Immigration and Relocation in U.S. History," The Library of Congress, accessed February 7, 2024, <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/immigration/irish/>.

⁶ Warren R. Hofstra, *Ulster to America: The Scots-Irish Migration Experience, 1680–1830* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 2011), 10–11.

⁷ Timothy J. Meagher, *The Columbia Guide to Irish American History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 25.

⁸ Kerby Miller and Paul Wagner, *Out of Ireland: The Story of Irish Emigration to America* (Washington, D.C.: Elliott & Clark Publishing, 1998), 10.

As the eighteenth century unfolded, this migration pattern intensified, and Philadelphia solidified its status as the preferred destination for many arriving Irish emigrants, although they were free to settle in any major Atlantic port. While some remained in the city, either by choice or under the conditions of indentured servitude, the majority pursued agricultural opportunities. They spread into the surrounding areas, including Maryland and Delaware, although the most desired location was southeastern Pennsylvania. Here, the newly arrived Irish emigrants found themselves competing with English and German settlers for the exceptionally fertile lands stretching from the Delaware River to the Blue Mountain on the quest for better living conditions and the pursuit of prosperity on American soil.⁹ The drive for affordable land led many Irish immigrants, with minimal financial means, to migrate to what used to be the southern and western frontiers of America. This migration was supported by landowners and colonial officials who wanted to sell or lease land and increase the white population in regions largely inhabited by black slaves or Native Americans.¹⁰

The migration flow from Ulster saw a steady increase over the 18th century, especially after the conclusion of the Seven Years' War in the 1760s, which meant more families embarking as paid passengers in search of new opportunities in America. However, the American War of Independence significantly disrupted this trend by impacting trans-Atlantic shipping and trade, reducing the previously growing migration flow. Despite these challenges, the Irish contribution to early American history remains a testament to their significant role in the development of the new nation, from its founding through its formative conflicts.¹¹

1.3 The Exodus before the Famine

Over a million individuals left Ireland in the three decades leading to the Great Famine of 1845–1850, mostly for financial reasons. However, the population of Ireland grew significantly during this time due to lower child death rates and increased fertility rates among the agricultural society, members of which frequently married young. This was made possible by improved diets. Poverty in the nation increased as a result of this population growth, which saw a rise from 4.7 million in 1791 to approximately 8 million by 1841.

⁹ Warren R. Hofstra, *Ulster to America: The Scots-Irish Migration Experience, 1680–1830* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 2011), 12.

¹⁰ Timothy J. Meagher, *The Columbia Guide to Irish American History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 37.

¹¹ Warren R. Hofstra, *Ulster to America: The Scots-Irish Migration Experience, 1680–1830* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 2011), 29.

Ireland was among the poorest countries in Europe by the 1820s, with over two million people living under the poverty line.¹²

Under these circumstances, a large-scale exodus was unavoidable. Every major Irish town had agents who were paid to gather and transport immigrants to Liverpool to board ships sailing to North America. Printed announcements of ships sailing to North America were distributed even in the most impoverished areas. Widespread enthusiasm for emigration was present across the nation, to the extent that even before the onset of the Great Famine, emigration had become an inherent part of Irish society.¹³

In the aftermath of the economic hardships following a smaller famine in 1741, a significant number of individuals sought a new life in the Americas through indentured servitude. This arrangement involved committing their labor for a typical duration of four years in exchange for passage, facilitated through formal contracts with ship captains. These captains either matched workers with employers in America or auctioned their contracts upon arrival. This practice, appealing mainly to young emigrants ready to adapt to new conditions, made up a considerable portion of Irish migration, with estimates suggesting that 60% of all migrants in the 17th century and 36% in the 18th century opted for this route.¹⁴

While indentured servitude offered a viable solution for those unable to afford the journey, it also exposed emigrants to vulnerabilities, placing them at their employers' mercy. Despite facing hardships and occasional mistreatment, the majority of indentured servants fulfilled their contractual terms, with some even receiving "freedom dues" — typically equipment or clothes — marking the completion of their service. This system served as a crucial mechanism for many Irish aiming to escape economic distress and pursue opportunities in the New World.¹⁵

1.4 Sailing to America

The journey to the Americas for Irish immigrants, whether free or indentured, was a prolonged and demanding one, usually taking anywhere from 7 to 15 weeks, heavily influenced by weather conditions. Usually, the emigrant's initial phase of travel was to Liverpool via an Irish port. For many years, Liverpool served as a central hub for

¹² Jay P. Dolan, *The Irish Americans: A History* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008), 35-36.

¹³ Jay P. Dolan, *The Irish Americans: A History* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008), 37.

¹⁴ Timothy J. Meagher, *The Columbia Guide to Irish American History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 32.

¹⁵ Jay P. Dolan, *The Irish Americans: A History* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008), 18.

transatlantic passenger voyages.¹⁶ There, the immigrants embarked on ships and left for the New World. These voyages across the Atlantic were often undertaken on vessels not primarily designed for carrying passengers but cargo. This led to cramped and insufficient living conditions. Accommodations were tight, with passengers packed into small sleeping quarters that lacked natural light or proper ventilation. Clean drinking water was scarce, and the quality of food, mainly potatoes, and bread, was typically poor and not substantially different from what they were used to, yet supplies could become significantly depleted if the journey was prolonged by harsh weather.¹⁷

Disease spread quickly in such confined spaces, with smallpox, typhus, and cholera being common and often resulting in high mortality rates among the passengers. An analysis of trips from Ulster to North America between 1771 and 1774 revealed that crossing times averaged about seven weeks, although they could range from as little as 27 days to as long as 17 weeks. One particularly horrifying voyage was that of the ship *Seaflower* in 1741, which faced such severe delays that passengers, driven by desperation, resorted to cannibalism before finally arriving in Philadelphia. This illustrates the extreme challenges faced by those making the transatlantic journey to start anew in America.¹⁸

In the early 1840s, ships going across the Atlantic Ocean from Northern Europe only sailed in the warmer months to avoid ice and storms. However, during the extremely cold winter of 1846, ships from Ireland kept sailing to the United States, even though many passengers were very weak and sick. The U.S. government, worried about the social and medical state of these immigrants, passed laws to make the tickets more expensive, hoping to reduce the number of people coming. The price for a ticket to New York went up to £7, which was an incredibly high price for a lot of Irish families suffering from famine. But, by the middle of April, all the tickets were sold out anyway, showing how desperate these families were to leave Ireland and try to start over in the U.S.¹⁹

Moving to America was a big change for many people, driven by the hope for a better life. The difficulties of leaving home were diminished by the opportunities ahead. In the U.S., Irish communities helped them adjust and become part of society, including finding jobs and building new lives. Despite some doubts about their success, the fact that just very

¹⁶ Jay P. Dolan, *The Irish Americans: A History* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008), 37.

¹⁷ Jay P. Dolan, *The Irish Americans: A History* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008), 19.

¹⁸ Timothy J. Meagher, *The Columbia Guide to Irish American History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 33.

¹⁹ "Coffin Ships: Death and Pestilence on the Atlantic," Irish Genealogy Toolkit, accessed February 22, 2024, <https://www.irish-genealogy-toolkit.com/coffin-ships.html>.

few of these migrants returned to Ireland shows that they tried to adapt and were happier with their new lives in America.²⁰

1.5 Assimilation and Integration

The integration of Irish immigrants in 18th-century America varied by religious background. A lot of Irish Catholics quickly assimilated due to their detachment from their own culture and the restrictions they could face for practicing Catholicism. Church of Ireland immigrants (which was an Anglican church denomination) sharing the same empire's established church easily merged into the American population. Irish Presbyterians, however, encountered a competitive religious environment, leading many to join other evangelical sects like Baptists and Methodists, especially in the face of the Great Awakening. This resulted in a significant decline in Presbyterian loyalty and an increase in Baptist and Methodist congregations.²¹

The distinct experiences of these three Irish religious groups — Catholics dealing with restrictions, individuals from the Church of Ireland benefiting from their status, and Presbyterians facing intense competition from other religious sects — resulted in the diminishing of their distinct group identities. Additionally, the predominantly agricultural origins of the Irish immigrants in the 18th century aligned well with America's largely rural environment, facilitating their integration into American society. This contrasted with the more challenging experiences of 19th century Irish Catholic peasants adapting to American life, which was becoming more urban by that time.²²

At least 10% of the Thirteen Colonies' population was Irish in 1776. They were notably involved in the American Revolution in various regions, especially Pennsylvania. Almost a century later, during the Civil War, over 200,000 Irish immigrants served in the army, with the vast majority fighting for the Union.²³

1.6 Urban Settlement and Political Activism

In the 1790s, Irish immigrants primarily settled in the Appalachian Trail region, which had already become a settlement area for the Ulster Irish during the 18th century. However, a

²⁰ Michael Glazier, *The Encyclopedia of the Irish in America* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 454.

²¹ Timothy J. Meagher, *The Columbia Guide to Irish American History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 37.

²² Timothy J. Meagher, *The Columbia Guide to Irish American History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 38.

²³ Kerby Miller and Paul Wagner, *Out of Ireland: The Story of Irish Emigration to America* (Washington, D.C.: Elliott & Clark Publishing, 1998), 11.

significant shift occurred as many Irish newcomers began to choose urban areas such as Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, or Baltimore for their new homes. This trend towards urban settlement intensified over the decades, moving the Irish population's focus from rural areas to the cities along the Atlantic coast. Among those who emigrated in 1790 were numerous politically active persons who had to flee due to their vocal resistance to British rule in Ireland, notably members of the United Irish exiles.²⁴

The Society of United Irishmen, established in Belfast in 1791, initially pursued constitutional reforms influenced by the American and French revolutions and a strong sense of Irish nationalism. It quickly evolved, however, advocating for Irish independence and embracing revolutionary methods to unite Irishmen across sectarian divides. Gaining traction among middle-class Catholics and Protestants alike, it extended its reach from Belfast to Dublin and the southeast of Ireland. The 1798 rebellion marked the society's attempt to realize its goals but ended in a harsh defeat by British forces. This led to many of its supporters, predominantly young, well-off individuals, fleeing to the United States in this era, with about half identifying as Presbyterians and around 28 percent as Catholics.²⁵

²⁴ Jay P. Dolan, *The Irish Americans: A History* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008), 31.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

2 THE GREAT FAMINE

The Great Famine during the years 1845–1850 stemmed from a potato blight known as *phytophthora infestans*, which repeatedly ruined the potato crops over seven years.

Likely having its origins in the Andes mountains of South America, the blight spread to North America, devastating a significant portion of the potato harvest along the East Coast in 1843 and 1844. It then surfaced in Belgium in June 1845, followed by its appearance in Ireland by September of the same year.²⁶ This blight also affected crops in Europe and America, but the impact was most severe in Ireland due to the population's extreme reliance on potatoes as a primary food source. Initially introduced in the sixteenth century as a vegetable for the upper class, by the eighteenth century, potatoes had become the main food for farmers and the impoverished.²⁷

The famine, one of the deadliest natural disasters in modern history, claimed the lives of approximately one million people, accounting for about one-eighth of the Irish population. During this catastrophic period, despite the severe food shortage within the country, exports of food continued under the harsh conditions of British rule. The dire situation was further exacerbated by the exploitation of the impoverished by landlords, who held control over a significant portion of the land and its resources. This calamity not only decimated the population but also set in motion a widespread pattern of emigration. Countless Irish, in search of better opportunities and driven by the desire to escape the aftermath of the famine, left their homeland. This mass exodus had a profound and lasting impact on Ireland's culture and society, shaping its identity for generations to come.²⁸

This tragedy was not evenly felt across the country; certain areas, particularly in the northeast (later Northern Ireland) and the farming regions south of Dublin, experienced lower death rates. This uneven impact, among other factors, contributed to the economic and social division between what would become Northern Ireland and the rest of the country, a divide that had its roots in economic changes from the late 18th century.²⁹

²⁶ Timothy J. Meagher, *The Columbia Guide to Irish American History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 61-62.

²⁷ Michael Glazier, *The Encyclopedia of the Irish in America* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 295.

²⁸ Mary M. Burke, *Race, Politics, and Irish America: A Gothic History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 77.

²⁹ Donald H. Akenson, *An Irish History of Civilization: Volume Two* (London: Granta Books, 2006), 3.

2.1 The political context of famine under British governance

The Great Famine in Ireland stands out as an unparalleled event in the modern European context. By the time of the 19th century, famines had largely vanished from Western Europe, with only rare exceptions. It also occurred under the governance of what was then the world's leading industrial and commercial power, as the 1800 Act of Union had politically integrated Ireland with Britain, creating the United Kingdom and resulting in the dissolution of Ireland's independent parliament in Dublin. During the years of the Famine, Ireland was directly administered from London.³⁰

2.2 The exodus during the famine

During the Famine years from 1845 to 1850, it's estimated that about one million people emigrated due to the famine conditions. While the exact distribution of these emigrants is not known for certain, it is believed that around 60% went to the USA, 30% stayed in Great Britain, and the remaining 10% dispersed across other countries. This pattern of emigration, with the United States being the primary destination followed by Great Britain and then other English-speaking regions, continued for the next fifty years.³¹

The primary factor influencing where emigrants chose to settle was the presence of earlier emigrants from Ireland. The connections formed through friendships, marriages, places of residence, and job opportunities established by prior settlers and their families had a strong pull on new emigrants, leading to "chain migration" that maintained existing settlement patterns. Even when newcomers moved around after arriving abroad in search of improved living conditions, their decisions were frequently guided by insights and information from the established networks of other Irish settlers.³²

Approximately 650,000 Irish landed in New York harbor throughout the Famine era, facing immediate challenges. Upon arrival, all passenger vessels were mandated to undergo a medical inspection, with any individual displaying fever symptoms transferred to a quarantine station on Staten Island, and all passengers of these ships were quarantined for 30 days. After arriving in the harbor, many Irish immigrants were confronted by "runners" speaking Gaelic, who offered "help." Many, feeling intimidated by America, accepted, while others were pressured into agreement. These "runners" recommended boarding houses in

³⁰ Michael Glazier, *The Encyclopedia of the Irish in America* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 295.

³¹ Donald H. Akenson, *An Irish History of Civilization: Volume Two* (London: Granta Books, 2006), 7.

³² Michael Glazier, *The Encyclopedia of the Irish in America* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 256.

lower Manhattan, which were described as affordable and comfortable, with free luggage storage. However, in reality, these places were dirty, overcrowded, and infested with diseases, charging much higher rates than initially stated. When the immigrants' money ran out, their belongings were taken for unpaid rent, and they were evicted, leaving them without a home or money.³³

Evidence of Irish slum areas in major cities like New York, Boston, and Philadelphia showed places struggling with unemployment, sickness, and a lot of alcohol consumption. These places had very high death rates, especially from tuberculosis, which was so common it was nicknamed “the Irish disease.” Drinking too much alcohol was indeed a big problem. This led to broken families, mental health issues, and continued poverty, causing many Irish to end up in mental health centers. Kids who suffered because of these tough conditions often ended up alone on the streets and were taken to city orphanages.³⁴

In response to the severe abuse faced by immigrants in America, particularly in New York City, the Commissioners of Immigration established Castle Garden (originally a defensive fortification) in 1855 as a safe entry point for newcomers. This was in direct reaction to the exploitation by “runners” selling fake tickets and directing immigrants to harmful labor contracts and boarding houses. Castle Garden, a guarded enclave, offered a controlled environment where immigrants were registered and had access to legitimate employment, ticket offices, and money exchange services. This initiative marked the USA's first significant step towards regulating immigration³⁵

³³ “Irish Potato Famine: Gone to America,” The History Place, accessed February 16, 2024, <https://www.historyplace.com/worldhistory/famine/america.htm>.

³⁴ Jay P. Dolan, *The Irish Americans: A History* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008), 91.

³⁵ Donald H. Akenson, *An Irish History of Civilization: Volume Two* (London: Granta Books, 2006), 337.

3 RELIGIOUS AND EMPLOYMENT PATTERNS

Irish emigrants to America came from a diverse range of religious backgrounds, including Catholics, Anglicans, and non-Presbyterian Protestants. Among these, Anglicans and non-Presbyterian Protestants tended to integrate more smoothly into American society, which predominantly had English ancestry, unlike the Presbyterians or Catholics, mostly with Irish ancestry. This difference in assimilation speed highlights the complex link between an Irish emigrant's religion and their identity in the U.S.³⁶

Irish Presbyterians, often engaged in the linen trade and urban life in places like Belfast, were more connected to the broader markets of the British Isles and empire compared to the mainly rural Irish Catholic peasantry. This connection exposed them earlier and more significantly to economic opportunities, information about England or North America, and the possibility of emigration, fostering a more confident outlook on finding a better life in America. Additionally, while Presbyterians, with their roots in Lowland Scotland, primarily spoke English, a significant portion of the Catholic Irish community continued to speak Irish until the demands of the market and further economic integration necessitated a shift to English in the late 18th or 19th centuries.³⁷

Ulster Presbyterians, who migrated to America before the Irish Catholics, displayed more progressive and forward-thinking attributes. They were open to change and sought new opportunities in America, in contrast to the Irish Catholics, who, due to strong community ties and a preference for traditional ways, remained in Ireland. This divide persisted until the potato famine in the 1840s forced many Catholics to emigrate.³⁸ The characteristics of the Catholic Irish, such as their focus on community, reliance on others, acceptance of fate, and adherence to tradition, further highlight the differences in their approach to life and change compared to the more individualistic and change-embracing Presbyterians. This contrast underscores the Presbyterians' enthusiasm for new beginnings abroad, while Catholics maintained their traditional practices until dire circumstances necessitated emigration.³⁹

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, a significant influx of Irish immigrants, surpassing earlier groups, arrived in America from Ulster as well as from the east, south, and

³⁶ Warren R. Hofstra, *Ulster to America: The Scots-Irish Migration Experience, 1680–1830* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 2011), 12.

³⁷ Timothy J. Meagher, *The Columbia Guide to Irish American History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 31.

³⁸ Warren R. Hofstra, *Ulster to America: The Scots-Irish Migration Experience, 1680–1830* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 2011), 10.

³⁹ Timothy J. Meagher, *The Columbia Guide to Irish American History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 30.

west regions of Ireland. Unlike the earlier settlers, who were mainly protestant Presbyterians, these new arrivals were predominantly Catholic and left because of the unbearable conditions in Ireland. This era marked a distinct shift in the religious composition of Irish immigrants. Up to 90% of the emigrants who moved to the United States during and after the famine were of the Catholic faith. While Irish Catholics had begun settling in the New World even before the American Revolution, the early 19th century saw their mass migration to various countries, with the United States being a major destination.⁴⁰

3.1 Employment and Military Service

Some immigrants looked for land to farm on, and a lot of them joined the American army to get away from poverty and make regular money. This resulted in many Irish people serving in the military, continuing even after the Civil War. By 1870, a third of the soldiers in California were Irish, which was a lot more than their proportion in the whole population.⁴¹

In 1863, during the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln introduced a draft requiring men aged 20 to 45 to join the Union Army. To avoid being drafted, one could either pay \$300 or find someone else to serve for three years. This situation mainly impacted poor whites, who, in many cities, were mostly Irish. Additionally, during the Civil War, many people in the North did not favor the Irish because they often did not support ending slavery, as they were worried that freed African Americans would take their low-paying jobs.⁴²

The Irish immigrants to the United States in the 19th century were often drawn to the West for employment opportunities, venturing as far as the Pacific coast. Many, including those who had served in the military, found work in mining for metals in the western regions or constructing railroads that connected new territories to the nation's industrial and urban core.⁴³

At that time, there was a saying that "*Under every railroad tie, there is a buried Irishman.*" which underscores the hazardous nature of the work and the high cost paid by

⁴⁰ Kerby Miller and Paul Wagner, *Out of Ireland: The Story of Irish Emigration to America* (Washington, D.C.: Elliott & Clark Publishing, 1998), 11.

⁴¹ Malcolm Campbell, *Ireland's Farthest Shores: Mobility, Migration, and Settlement in the Pacific World* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2022), 35.

⁴² Michael Glazier, *The Encyclopedia of the Irish in America* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 51.

⁴³ Malcolm Campbell, *Ireland's Farthest Shores: Mobility, Migration, and Settlement in the Pacific World* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2022), 36.

Irish laborers in the construction of the nation's railroad system, as well as in coal and metal mining.⁴⁴

A significant number of Irish males found employment in roles related to maintaining horses for public transportation, serving as either stable personnel, blacksmiths, or, in some cases, carriage drivers. In the industrial field, they predominantly filled the roles of janitors and sweepers within mills or factories. These positions were known for offering minimal wages and requiring the least amount of expertise, often being the types of jobs that American workers would generally avoid.⁴⁵

This dynamic showcases the critical yet challenging roles Irish immigrants played in the economic development of the United States, often taking on the most demanding jobs to pave the way for future generations.

Meanwhile, Irish American women frequently found employment in textile factories, domestic roles, or as servants. A significant part of their earnings was used to fund the emigration of their relatives, often siblings, to America, playing a crucial role in bridging the Atlantic for their families. Despite receiving little inheritance back home due to societal norms that favored male inheritance, these women consistently sent money back to Ireland, supporting their families and the very social system that had limited their prospects. By the 1870s, they were sending over \$1 million annually to Ireland, a figure that nearly tripled by the time of the Irish Revolution of 1919-21. This financial support from women working abroad was vital in sustaining the small farms in western and southwestern Ireland, representing a commitment to their families despite the hardships they faced both at home and abroad.⁴⁶

By the turn of the 20th century, the employment landscape for Irish-Americans had shifted significantly from the low-skilled jobs that characterized their experience throughout much of the 19th century. They were now more commonly found in occupations requiring higher skills, often within sectors known for strong union presence and offering superior wages. In the 1900s, Irish-Americans were represented in skilled occupations at rates exceeding their overall population share. They held prominent positions, especially in managerial roles within major industries such as steel production, ironworking, and mining.

⁴⁴ "Irish Immigration and Relocation in U.S. History: Joining the Workforce," The Library of Congress, accessed February 23, 2024, <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/immigration/irish/joining-the-workforce/>.

⁴⁵ Michael Glazier, *The Encyclopedia of the Irish in America* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 51.

⁴⁶ Donald H. Akenson, *An Irish History of Civilization: Volume Two* (London: Granta Books, 2006), 333.

On the other hand, the more physically demanding and lesser-paid manual tasks were increasingly taken up by the latest wave of immigrants from Europe, including Italians, Hungarians, and Slavs.⁴⁷

3.2 Migration during 1880-1920

The mid-1870s economic downturn in the U.S. significantly reduced immigration, affecting young Irish individuals by limiting their opportunities for progress and contributing to social unrest in Ireland from 1878 to 1881. As the American economy recovered, immigration resumed its upward trend, which was especially noticeable around the turn of the century. Post-famine, the practice of passing the family farm to only one child became prevalent, forcing siblings to choose between remaining in Ireland with minimal prospects or emigrating. Compounded by a decline in industrial jobs in Ireland, except for the north, and the monopoly of Protestant workers in Belfast, who held over the best manufacturing positions, Catholic Irish from the south were compelled to leave their homeland in search of better opportunities abroad.⁴⁸

The late 19th and early 20th centuries marked a significant shift in the pattern of Irish emigration, characterized by a notable increase in female migrants and a larger number of individuals originating from the western regions of Ireland, particularly Connaught, Kerry, and Donegal. This period saw young single women becoming a prominent part of the Irish immigrant community, with their numbers by the 1880s balancing or even surpassing the number of male migrants. However, this trend of fluctuating migration faced interruptions due to the Great War (1914-1918) and the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921), as the requisitioning of passenger ships for military purposes and the threat of sea mines and torpedoes significantly restricted transatlantic travel, temporarily impacting the flow of immigrants.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ J.J. Lee and Marion Casey, *Making the Irish American: History and Heritage of the Irish in the United States* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2007), 360.

⁴⁸ Timothy J. Meagher, *The Columbia Guide to Irish American History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 95-97.

⁴⁹ Michael Glazier, *The Encyclopedia of the Irish in America* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 255.

4 NATIVISM AND HOSTILITY

4.1 Religious Discrimination

In New England towns, people often used to burn portraits of the Pope publicly. However, when Catholic France supported the American Revolution, some people started to change their views. Despite this, in the 1770s, seven out of the thirteen colonies that became states, like New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Connecticut, either completely banned Catholics from holding public office or, in places like New York, made immigrants swear to give up their loyalty to the Catholic Church's authority if they wanted to become U.S. citizens.⁵⁰

The Catholic Church in America was perceived as the church of the poor. Its presence became more noticeable as large churches were built with money from its many members. This, along with the quick growth of slums in cities because of immigrants, brought up concerns about the social and economic pressures on wealthier residents. During this time, the stereotypes about the Irish drinking too much and not working hard enough to get out of poverty were created. While the law prohibited employers from excluding individuals from professions due to their nationality, job postings that stated, “None need apply but Americans,” were still frequent.⁵¹

4.2 Perceptions of Irish Immigrants

Despite some overstatements by nativists, the challenges of poverty and resulting social issues among the American Irish were significant. Renowned for their rowdy behavior, the American Irish's participation in frequent and sometimes dramatic acts of group violence during the 19th century was undeniable. This aspect of Irish-American life was viewed by nativists as a threat to U.S. stability and raised questions about the Irish's compatibility with the values of a democratic republic. The explanation for this violence often resorted to attributing it to inherent traits in the Irish character, supposedly visible in their physical appearance, essentially framing it as an ethnic issue.⁵²

⁵⁰ “Anti-Irish Sentiment in New York Before the 1830s,” New York Almanack, accessed March 11, 2024, <https://www.newyorkalmanack.com/2021/01/anti-irish-sentiment-in-the-northeast-before-the-1830s/>.

⁵¹ Michael Glazier, *The Encyclopedia of the Irish in America* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 51.

⁵² J.J. Lee and Marion Casey, *Making the Irish American: History and Heritage of the Irish in the United States* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2007), 371.

As these views persisted, American-born citizens also grew increasingly concerned about the impact of new arrivals on job markets and political landscapes. They were concerned that immigrants accepting lower pay could reduce earnings for everyone else and that their increasing numbers and social power could influence election results. Another big worry was the religion of these immigrants, which was mostly Catholic, different from the Protestant beliefs that were common in America. Even though America was supposed to be a place where different religions were accepted and tolerated, this acceptance was mostly limited only to other kinds of Protestant groups.

Presbyterians and Anglicans were generally accepted in most American colonies, whereas Catholics faced significant restrictions and dangers, with Pennsylvania being a notable exception where Catholics could openly practice their faith. In Maryland, for example, Catholics could only worship in private, and in other colonies, Catholicism was outright banned, leading to persecution. This harsh treatment discouraged Catholic immigration and made it difficult for Irish Catholics to establish supportive communities in America.⁵³

4.3 Origins of Nativism

In the early to mid-19th century, particularly from the 1830s and peaking in the late 1840s, a movement called nativism grew stronger in America, mainly in big cities in the North with lots of European immigrants. With the rise in Irish immigrants and the growing percentage of Catholics among them, the scepticism among American Protestants increased.

A New York senator, Erastus Root said of the Irish immigrants: *“Most of them are paupers, strangers, sojourners, loafers, and other cattle, who contribute not one cent to the maintenance of the Government, and are not found save on days of the election, and never afterwards.”*⁵⁴

4.4 The “Bible Riots” in Philadelphia

In the mid-1800s, Philadelphia was a growing city, with neighborhoods like Kensington and Southwark becoming new homes for many Irish Catholic immigrants. These areas turned into busy communities, largely due to the immigrants' contributions to industries such as weaving. However, the influx of Irish Catholics caused tensions with the American-born

⁵³ Timothy J. Meagher, *The Columbia Guide to Irish American History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 31.

⁵⁴ “Anti-Irish Sentiment in New York Before the 1830s,” *New York Almanack*, accessed March 11, 2024, <https://www.newyorkalmanack.com/2021/01/anti-irish-sentiment-in-the-northeast-before-the-1830s/>.

Protestant residents. These tensions were not just about jobs but mostly about deep differences in religious beliefs and practices.⁵⁵

The peak of these tensions came in 1844 with the "Bible Riots." The core issue was the use of Protestant Bibles in public schools, which Catholic residents opposed. This disagreement led to violent clashes, especially in Kensington, causing destruction of houses, burning of churches, and loss of at least 20 lives and around 100 severely injured people.⁵⁶

These events highlighted the urgent need for change in Philadelphia. In response, several significant actions were taken. To address the religious disputes, a Catholic education system was approved, allowing for education in line with Catholic teachings. Moreover, the city saw the formation of a unified police force and the creation of a paid fire department. These measures were aimed at improving public safety and order, reflecting a major shift in how the society managed its services and addressed its diverse population's needs.⁵⁷

4.5 Know-Nothing Party

In the 1850s, the United States witnessed the rise of the Know-Nothing Party, a political group driven by strong anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic sentiments, particularly targeting Irish and German immigrants. This movement initially began as a secretive society named the Order of the Star-Spangled Banner in New York in 1849, which itself was an evolution of the Order of United Americans established in 1845. The members of this society were required to be American-born Protestants and not married to Catholics. They believed that they were protecting American civil and religious rights against what they perceived as the intrusive policies of the Roman Catholic Church, immigrants, and other foreign influences.⁵⁸

As this society transitioned into a more formal political entity, it became known as the Know-Nothings, a name derived from members' practice of claiming that they didn't know anything about the group's activities to maintain secrecy. By 1852, the group officially emerged, now renamed the American Party. Its platform focused on limiting immigration,

⁵⁵ "Exploring Anti-Irish Attitudes," The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, accessed March 17, 2024, <https://www.portal.hsp.org/unit-plan-items/unit-plan-25>.

⁵⁶ "The Kensington Riots of 1844," PhilaPlace, accessed March 9, 2024, <https://www.philaplace.org/story/316/>.

⁵⁷ "Exploring Anti-Irish Attitudes," The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, accessed March 17, 2024, <https://www.portal.hsp.org/unit-plan-items/unit-plan-25>.

⁵⁸ "Falvey Library Exhibits: Know Nothings," Villanova University, accessed March 23, 2024, <https://exhibits.library.villanova.edu/chaos-in-the-streets-the-philadelphia-riots-of-1844/know-nothings>.

banning foreign-born individuals from voting or holding public office, and proposing a 21-year residency requirement for U.S. citizenship.⁵⁹

Gaining significant political traction, the Know-Nothing Party managed to control several state governments, passing strict laws against Catholics and immigrants. Its influence was so pronounced that in the elections of 1854, the party won seventy-five seats in Congress and seemed to aim for the presidency. This development alarmed many Irish immigrants, who feared the reimplementation of the oppressive Penal Laws they had fled in Ireland, now in the supposed "Land of Liberty."⁶⁰

In 1855, the Know-Nothing Party managed to take over the city government of Chicago for a short time. Even though German immigrants were also coming into the city in large numbers, it was the poorer Irish who faced most of the negative reactions. Levi Boone, running for mayor that year, harshly criticized the Irish Catholics, saying, "*Who does not know that the most depraved, debased, worthless and irredeemable drunkards and sots which curse the community are Irish Catholics?*" With limited access to public life in the city, the Irish immigrants had no choice but to rely on their own community and hope for things to get better.⁶¹

However, the Know-Nothing Party's prominence was short-lived. Caught in the sectional disputes that disrupted all national institutions, the American Party began to disintegrate after 1856. Members who opposed slavery gravitated towards the emerging Republican Party, aligning with its antislavery stance, while those in the South joined the Democratic Party, which continued to support slavery. This division reflected the broader national conflict over slavery, leading to the eventual dissolution of the Know-Nothing movement as its members chose sides in the escalating dispute that would lead to the Civil War.⁶²

4.6 Media Stereotypes of Irish-Americans

In the development of Irish-American identity in the U.S., the portrayal in media significantly influenced public views. Initially, Irish-Americans faced negative stereotypes

⁵⁹ "Know-Nothing Party," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed March 24, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Know-Nothing-party>.

⁶⁰ Kerby Miller and Paul Wagner, *Out of Ireland: The Story of Irish Emigration to America* (Washington, D.C.: Elliott & Clark Publishing, 1998), 55.

⁶¹ James R. Barrett, *The Irish Way: Becoming American in the Multiethnic City* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2012), 4.

⁶² "Know-Nothing Party," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed March 24, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Know-Nothing-party>.

in media, notably through the character "Paddy," portrayed as a drunken, confrontational figure, which later extended to negative depictions of Irish women and children as well. These stereotypes, especially prevalent in late-19th-century humor in magazines like *Puck* and *Harper's Weekly*, depicted the Irish as inferior. However, the early 20th century saw a change, with characters like "Happy Hooligan" and "Jiggs and Maggie" providing somewhat less harsh, yet still stereotypical, views of Irish-Americans. These characters blended humor with commentary on the Irish-American experience, touching on issues of identity, class, and assimilation.⁶³

There was a discussion about whether the Irish should be restricted from the rights granted by the Fifteenth Amendment, which allowed voting regardless of race or color. People thought the Irish were different from both African Americans and the usual "white" population. Coming to America with fewer skills and less money compared to Germans, the Irish often ended up competing for low-wage jobs with African Americans. It wasn't unusual for people to compare the Irish, often labeled as the "savage Irish," to both African and Native Americans.⁶⁴

4.7 Response to Nativist Hostility

The hostility from nativists prompted the Irish to work together. This tough situation helped them figure out how to be seen as "white" and "American," which was important for making it through the challenges of city life during the industrial era. They realized that to do well, they needed to see and portray themselves as both American and Irish. This approach of combining their past from Ireland with their current life in America would later be used by many other ethnic groups trying to fit into American society.⁶⁵

The discrimination against Irish and Catholics in America was deeply rooted in long-standing prejudices from British history, reflecting a broader feeling of cultural superiority. This attitude was brought from England to the early American colonies. These negative feelings towards both Irish people and Catholics became especially strong in the 1850s when these sentiments resulted in the emergence of the Know-Nothing Party.⁶⁶

⁶³ Arthur Gribben, *The Great Famine and the Irish Diaspora in America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 230.

⁶⁴ James R. Barrett, *The Irish Way: Becoming American in the Multiethnic City* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2012), 4.

⁶⁵ James R. Barrett, *The Irish Way: Becoming American in the Multiethnic City* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2012), 5.

⁶⁶ Jay P. Dolan, *The Irish Americans: A History* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008), 97.

4.8 Irish-Americans' Identity Shift

Many Americans believed that their freedom and success were directly connected with being Protestant. They thought Catholics were controlled by a Pope from a distant country who didn't agree with and didn't support American democratic ideals that protected their newly gained independence. They also felt that Catholics didn't have enough education to vote properly and could be easily tricked by dishonest politicians.⁶⁷

When accused by Protestants of being superstitious, uneducated, and overly dependent on their clergy, Irish Catholics countered by insisting they followed the only true religion and were even meant to spread this faith in the New World. They viewed Protestants as lacking genuine faith, seeing them as heretics with a history of oppressing true believers. Ultramontane Irish-American Catholics, who were strongly supportive of the Pope, defended their American identity through their emphasis on social conservatism. They argued that Catholicism brought needed order and discipline against the disorder they associated with Protestant democracy, which they believed led to radical beliefs and societal chaos. They claimed that Catholic values were essential for a stable and orderly American society.⁶⁸

In America, Protestant Irish began to distance themselves from the negative stereotypes linked to Catholic Irish and the discrimination from the Anglo-American majority. They decided against identifying with a broad Irish heritage and instead aligned with an American-Protestant identity, emphasizing their loyalty to the U.S. This decision made the distinct Irish viewpoint less visible in American history, leading to the term "Irish" becoming associated with disloyalty and Catholicism, while "Scots-Irish" represented a more respected Protestant character.⁶⁹

By the early 19th century, the chance for unity among the Irish in America was further eroded, largely due to the rise of nativist anti-Irish sentiments. These sentiments were already strong even before the influx of Famine-era refugees in the late 1840s. Early Protestant Irish

⁶⁷ "Anti-Irish Sentiment in New York Before the 1830s," New York Almanack, accessed March 11, 2024, <https://www.newyorkalmanack.com/2021/01/anti-irish-sentiment-in-the-northeast-before-the-1830s/>.

⁶⁸ David A. Wilson, "The Whiteness of Ireland Under and After the Union. Comment: Whiteness and Irish Experience in North America," *Journal of British Studies* 44, no. 1 (2005): 159, <https://doi.org/10.1086/424985>.

⁶⁹ Janet Nolan, "Silent Generations: New Voices of Irish America," *American Literary History* 17, no. 3 (2005): 597, <https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajl034>.

Americans expressed doubts about the education and moral qualities of these Catholic newcomers, deepening the divide.⁷⁰

Irish Protestants, who had significantly contributed to America's early development, were cautious not to lose their respected status by associating with the newly arrived Catholic immigrants from Ireland. Choosing to maintain their social standing, they leaned into a Protestant identity to avoid being affected by the widespread anti-Irish and anti-Catholic biases. As a result, some of them managed to assimilate into the Anglo-American Protestant upper class, leaving the Irish identity in America almost exclusively to Catholics. As a result, in the New World, being Irish came to be defined more by religion than by ancestry, with Irishness tied to Catholicism and Protestant Irish Americans deliberately moving away from their Irish roots.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Janet Nolan, "Silent Generations: New Voices of Irish America," *American Literary History* 17, no. 3 (2005): 599, <https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/aji034>.

⁷¹ Janet Nolan, "Silent Generations: New Voices of Irish America," *American Literary History* 17, no. 3 (2005): 600, <https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/aji034>.

5 IRISH IN THE U.S. AFTER WWI

Following World War I, the U.S. distanced itself from global roles, notably by not joining the League of Nations. Domestically, the period saw a surge in anarchist activities, labor disputes, and racial tensions, contributing to a desire among nativists for a return to a perceived golden age of American virtue and self-reliance.

Nativist sentiments in the 1920s led to immigration laws of 1921 and 1924, introducing quotas that significantly limited immigration from eastern and southern Europe for the first time in U.S. history. While these laws had a smaller effect on immigrants from Ireland, Great Britain, and northern Europe, they marked the end of the significant growth of Catholic Immigrants by severely impacting Italian and Slavic immigration.⁷²

5.1 Prohibition Era

The era also witnessed the establishment of national prohibition, seen as a moral crusade primarily driven by Protestants, including Baptists and Methodists, through organizations like the Anti-Saloon League and the Women's Christian Temperance Union. They aimed to eliminate the liquor trade, as they believed it was a source of societal vice. However, prohibition resulted in unintended consequences, including the rise of bootlegging and organized crime, as Americans sought illegal means to obtain alcohol. This period underscored the cultural divide between the predominantly rural, Protestant "drys" and the more urban, immigrant "wets," highlighting the complexities of enforcing moral legislation on a diverse population.⁷³

5.2 Ku Klux Klan

In the 1920s, Irish Americans were challenged not only by Prohibition but also by the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, leading to cultural and political conflicts. The Democratic Party was split over whether to support the Klan, with Irish American leaders advocating against it. The Klan's discrimination extended to various minority groups, creating an opportunity for alliances against it. Despite its sizeable membership in New York State, the Klan struggled to assert itself in New York City, posing a threat mainly in suburban areas to immigrants, African-Americans, and the Catholic Church.⁷⁴

⁷² J.J. Lee and Marion Casey, *Making the Irish American: History and Heritage of the Irish in the United States* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2007), 588.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ James R. Barrett, *The Irish Way: Becoming American in the Multiethnic City* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2012), 272-273.

In Chicago, tensions were high as the Ku Klux Klan faced direct opposition. The Klan attracted many from the Anglo-Saxon population and often held meetings in Masonic halls. By early 1922, it was claimed to have the highest number of members of any city in the U.S., with estimates of around fifty thousand by the end of 1922, although Klan claims were even higher. The city contained over twenty Ku Klux Klan facilities, with more in the suburbs and efforts to organize even in schools. The Klan was particularly strong in areas where Protestant communities neighbored large Irish Catholic, African American, and Jewish populations. Despite Chicago's predominantly blue-collar character, the Klan's ranks included a large number of businessmen, salespeople, foremen, and professionals.⁷⁵

The Ku Klux Klan achieved its highest membership of around three million in 1923 before experiencing a gradual decline. Despite this, it continued to influence politics significantly in the rural South and Midwest throughout the 1920s. Images of Klan members wearing hoods and marching through Washington D.C. introduced another disturbing aspect to the political landscape of the United States.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ James R. Barrett, *The Irish Way: Becoming American in the Multiethnic City* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2012), 273.

⁷⁶ J.J. Lee and Marion Casey, *Making the Irish American: History and Heritage of the Irish in the United States* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2007), 589.

6 CHALLENGES AND ADAPTATION

The majority of people who left the country during the famine period were poor, unskilled workers. The rest mainly consisted of slightly more prosperous farmers.

Ireland's immigrants left behind an agricultural way of life in a country lacking modern industries. Numerous immigrants realized that they were unprepared for the industrialized, metropolitan areas of the United States. While not the most impoverished group in Ireland—as those unable to afford the journey remained behind—by American measures, these immigrants were considered extremely poor. Struggling Irish immigrants typically resorted to living in overcrowded conditions, squeezing into single-family homes that were divided into small, confined areas. They used to live in basements, attics, and makeshift accommodations in alleyways.⁷⁷

6.1 Irish societies in the U.S.

Irish immigrants and their descendants founded numerous social, support, and charity groups across the U.S. Almost every city had Irish American clubs, often focused on organizing social events like dances, picnics, and sports competitions. These groups also offered financial aid for unemployment and funeral costs to their members. Some societies aimed to guide Irish immigrants away from alcohol, while others focused on maintaining Irish culture and traditions in America. By the early 20th century, several of these organizations, including the Irish Catholic Benevolent Union and the Ancient Order of Hibernians, had expanded into significant national entities.⁷⁸

During the 1880s, a large number of Irish Americans, encompassing both skilled and unskilled workers, became members of the Knights of Labor, America's pioneering national labor union, under the leadership of Terence Powderly, whose parents were Irish immigrants. Furthermore, by the early 20th century, Irish Americans played a major role in both leading and participating in the American Federation of Labor.⁷⁹

Simultaneously, the urban Irish population, growing in numbers and increasingly Catholic, faced their challenges by cultivating a unique subculture rooted in their neighborhoods, saloons, and churches. These spaces became vital for gathering, discussing,

⁷⁷ “Irish Immigration and Relocation in U.S. History: Adaptation and Assimilation,” The Library of Congress, accessed March 26, 2024, <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/immigration/irish/adaptation-and-assimilation/>.

⁷⁸ Kerby Miller and Paul Wagner, *Out of Ireland: The Story of Irish Emigration to America* (Washington, D.C.: Elliott & Clark Publishing, 1998), 96.

⁷⁹ Kerby Miller and Paul Wagner, *Out of Ireland: The Story of Irish Emigration to America* (Washington, D.C.: Elliott & Clark Publishing, 1998), 94.

and organizing efforts to safeguard their employment, elevate their social status, and uphold their religious beliefs. Initiatives such as forming trade unions, creating social clubs, backing the Democratic Party's urban machines, and expanding Catholic institutions like churches, schools, and hospitals were instrumental. Within these community structures, enthusiasm for Irish independence naturally intensified, fueled by the Irish immigrants' historical backgrounds, their marginalized position in American society, the principles of American republicanism, and a heightened appreciation for nationalism following the Mexican-American and Civil Wars.⁸⁰

This period of adaptation and community building among Irish immigrants and their descendants underscored the importance of unity and organization around national and Catholic identities, playing a crucial role in advocating for Irish independence and molding the landscape of America's religious and cultural diversity.

6.2 Cultural and Political Identity

After the Great Famine, Irish-Americans developed a strong anti-British sentiment, known as Anglophobia, influenced by previous discrimination they faced, historical conflicts with Britain in Ireland, and concerns over British influence in the U.S. It helped bring the Irish-American community together, giving them a shared way to look at and understand events.⁸¹

This bitterness inspired numerous campaigns aimed at helping with dismantling the Irish landlord system and achieving independence from British control. Movements like the Fenian Brotherhood, emerging primarily within Irish neighborhoods in New York City around 1858-67, were driven as much by this animosity towards England as by a patriotic love for Ireland.⁸²

Irish-American newspapers were vocal against closer U.S.-Britain relationships and the push for Anglo-Saxon values, seeing it as a betrayal of America's diverse identity. They opposed the idea that the U.S. was an Anglo-Saxon nation and stood against British influences in American education and the military. Through patriotic language, these newspapers argued that opposing Britain was in America's best interest. They criticized Irish-American leaders who didn't stand against Britain, suggesting such actions were a

⁸⁰ J.J. Lee and Marion Casey, *Making the Irish American: History and Heritage of the Irish in the United States* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2007), 215.

⁸¹ Arthur Gribben, *The Great Famine and the Irish Diaspora in America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 227.

⁸² Arthur Gribben, *The Great Famine and the Irish Diaspora in America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 180.

betrayal of both Ireland and the U.S. This stance against Britain played a big role in defining Irish-American identity and how they engaged with American society, emphasizing the idea of integrating their Irish heritage with the American society.⁸³

Many Irish Catholics in the U.S. might not have been deeply invested in Irish-American nationalist movements. However, when Irish-American nationalists faced criticism for being "un-American" because of their political views, they argued that true American identity was based on democratic, republican, and anti-British principles—an identity shaped by belief rather than birthplace. They claimed their strong stance against Britain, and their support for republicanism made them seem more authentically American than some natural-born U.S. citizens.⁸⁴

Irish-American nationalists often highlighted their significant role in the American Revolution, arguing that the revolution might have failed without their involvement. They contrasted themselves, portraying Irish soldiers as brave and instrumental in winning America's independence, against "native sons of America," whom they sometimes labeled as lacking courage. This stance served as a form of "reverse nativism," where they redefined American identity to include their contributions and ideals.⁸⁵

Growing up in immigrant families, the American-born children of Irish immigrants became known as the second generation. They blended Irish and American cultures, significantly transforming the Irish community in America. By 1900, there were approximately 3.37 million American-born individuals of Irish descent, largely surpassing the 1.6 million immigrants born in Ireland. In every major U.S. city with an Irish population, these second-generation Irish were significantly more numerous than the Irish-born immigrants. By the 19th century's end, the Irish population in the U.S. exceeded that of Ireland itself by half a million.⁸⁶

From 1845 to 1921, the steady influx of Irish immigrants into the United States helped preserve a strong Irish-American identity. This period saw the growth of Irish communities, bolstered by new arrivals and the bond between Irish immigrants and their descendants. The

⁸³ Arthur Gribben, *The Great Famine and the Irish Diaspora in America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 228-229.

⁸⁴ David A. Wilson, "The Whiteness of Ireland Under and After the Union. Comment: Whiteness and Irish Experience in North America," *Journal of British Studies* 44, no. 1 (2005): 158, <https://doi.org/10.1086/424985>.

⁸⁵ David A. Wilson, "The Whiteness of Ireland Under and After the Union. Comment: Whiteness and Irish Experience in North America," *Journal of British Studies* 44, no. 1 (2005): 159, <https://doi.org/10.1086/424985>.

⁸⁶ Jay P. Dolan, *The Irish Americans: A History* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008), 92.

Roman Catholic Church became a key symbol of Irish identity in the U.S., supporting the Irish independence movement and influencing discussions on ethnic and religious issues in both the British Isles and the U.S. The unity and organization around Irish national and Catholic identities played an important role in achieving Irish independence and shaping America's religious diversity by the 1910s.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ J.J. Lee and Marion Casey, *Making the Irish American: History and Heritage of the Irish in the United States* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2007), 214.

7 SOCIAL INFLUENCE AND INVOLVEMENT

As time passed, the Irish American community experienced significant advancement in both social and occupational spheres. By the dawn of the 20th century, perceptions of the Irish had evolved beyond the stereotype of the drunk, impoverished newcomers. They had moved out of the inner-city ghettos and taken up roles as educators, clerks, and officers in law enforcement and firefighting services. Generations following the initial immigrants achieved higher levels of education and wealth, contributing to notable upward mobility within the community. The post-World War II economic expansion further propelled many within the Irish American community into the upper-middle class.⁸⁸

Walt Disney, one of the most influential figures in the history of the entertainment industry, held Irish ancestry. The Disney family traces its origin back to a settlement in Kilkenny, Ireland. Walt's great-grandfather, Arundel Disney, was born in Kilkenny in 1801, but he later moved to Ontario, Canada, with his family. Walt Disney deeply valued his Irish background, which was evident in his decision to spend his honeymoon in Ireland and his choice to wear a Claddagh ring, a traditional Irish symbol of love and friendship.⁸⁹

Henry Ford, the revolutionary industrialist known for the creation of the Ford Model T and the assembly line method of mass production, also had deep Irish roots. His ancestors were from Ballinascorthy, West Cork, a place where his grandfather and earlier generations were born. It is now known as the "Ford Farm," which is open to visitors. Despite his father, William, relocating the family to Detroit, Michigan, in the late 19th century, Henry Ford frequently revisited his ancestral home. In recognition of his contributions and connection to the area, a memorial featuring a Model T statue was unveiled in Ballinascorthy in 2000.⁹⁰

A prime example of this social progression is the Kennedy family, which began with an ancestor who arrived in 1848 as a laborer. His descendants progressively improved their socio-economic status, with Joseph P. Kennedy's financial success laying the groundwork for his descendants' political achievements, including John F. Kennedy's presidency.⁹¹

Despite their growing influence in politics, integration with America's social elite remained out of their reach. It is argued by some scholars focusing on the Irish in America

⁸⁸ Michael Glazier, *The Encyclopedia of the Irish in America* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 52.

⁸⁹ "10 Famous Irish Americans," Celtic Titles, accessed March 17, 2024, <https://www.celtictitles.com/blog/famous-irish-americans/>.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ "Irish Immigration and Relocation in U.S. History: Joining the Workforce," The Library of Congress, accessed February 23, 2024, <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/immigration/irish/joining-the-workforce/>.

that true and widespread acceptance only came with the election of John F. Kennedy as president in 1960. This event marked a significant turning point, signaling the fading of anti-Irish sentiment in the United States and illustrating the remarkable journey of the Irish American community from marginalized immigrants to influential members of society.⁹²

During his 1963 state visit to Ireland, JFK revisited his family's ancestral home, a journey he had already made earlier as a young man. In a globally broadcasted speech, he highlighted his ancestor's courage and hard work. This moment helped with transforming his image from being seen as a privileged urban elite to representing the classic American success story, offering inspiration and a reason to be proud of the committed immigrants who played a significant role in building America.

⁹² Michael Glazier, *The Encyclopedia of the Irish in America* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 52.

CONCLUSION

The history of Irish immigration to America, as explored in this thesis, unfolds the fascinating journey of the Irish diaspora. It began in the 17th century with early migration driven by economic hardship and political unrest, escalating significantly during the Great Famine of the mid-19th century. This catastrophic event, serving as a pivotal catalyst for mass emigration, forced over a million Irish to seek a better life in America, altering the demographic and cultural landscape of both Ireland and the United States. In their homeland, oppressed by religious persecution, poverty, hunger, and disease, the Irish dreamt of a dignified existence elsewhere. Yet, upon their arrival in the so-called dream country, they encountered conditions almost as harrowing as those they fled, facing nativist hostility, economic hardship, and the struggle to assimilate while maintaining their cultural identity.

This examination reveals not only their struggles but also their resilience. Despite the initial adversities, the Irish community's tenacity, determination, and hard work gradually transformed their lives and the American sociocultural landscape. A significant shift occurred in the religious composition of the immigrants, from predominantly Protestant to overwhelmingly Catholic, marking a crucial transformation in the Irish-American community. This shift significantly influenced the social and political dynamics, leading to the establishment of institutions and societies aimed at supporting each other and preserving Irish culture and heritage.

The thesis further investigated the political involvement and influence of the Irish in America, highlighting their participation in the Civil War and the emergence of prominent political figures, culminating in the election of John F. Kennedy. This marked a significant milestone in the integration of Irish Americans into American society, symbolizing their success story.

In conclusion, this bachelor thesis does not merely recount the hardships faced by Irish immigrants but also celebrates their significant impact on shaping the United States. From the earliest settlers to the famine refugees and beyond, the Irish have deeply embedded their culture, values, and aspirations in the American narrative, achieving the American dream through resilience and relentless pursuit of a better future. Their journey from marginalized immigrants to influential members of society underscores the historical significance of the Irish diaspora and offers insights into immigration and cultural integration patterns that resonate in today's globalized world. The Irish-American community, proud of their

ancestral roots, continues to honor their heritage, contributing significantly to the diverse tapestry of American life.

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