

Irish Immigration

in the 1800s

Imagine a life like this. People are starving. They have little money. Jobs are hard to find. This is what life was like in Ireland in the 1840s. Times were so hard that many people chose to leave. They boarded ships to find a better life in a new land.

Background on Ireland

Ireland is part of a group of islands called the British Isles. In the 1800s, Ireland was ruled by Britain. Most Irish people were farmers. But they did not own the land. The Irish farmers grew the food they needed.



Irish potato farmers

During the 1840s, a disease killed the potato crops in Ireland. The Irish had very little food. Many Irish people immigrated to other places, such as North America.

Look at the map below. It shows the route people traveled from Ireland to North America.

Irish Immigration Route





Key Concept 1 People choose to immigrate for many different reasons.

Leaving Ireland to Make a Better Living

In the 1840s, many Irish left their homes to **immigrate**. Most people left to make a better living. There was a **famine** in Ireland. People were starving.

immigrate
to come to a new country to live

In the 1800s, the Irish farmers did not own the land they farmed. They rented farms from the owners of the land. There was little money left to buy things.

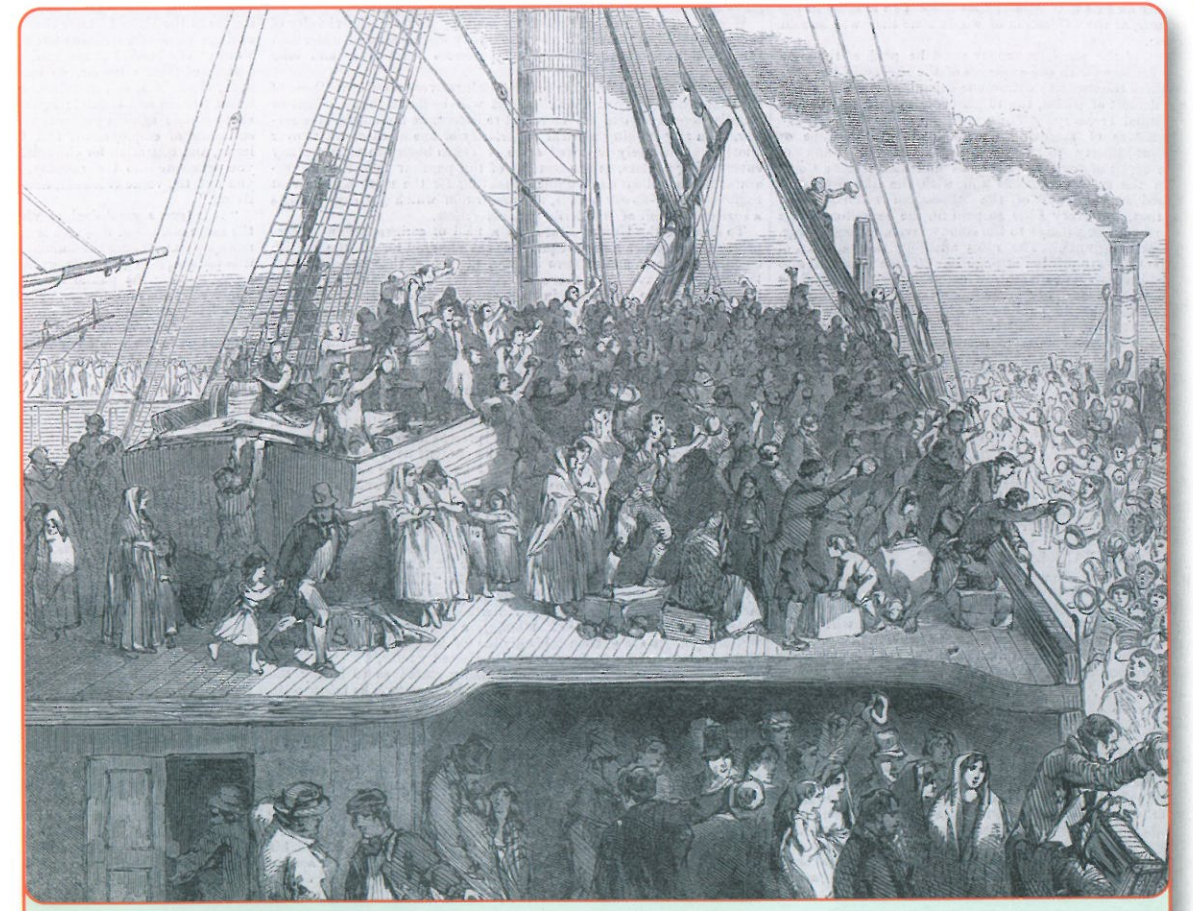
The Irish farmers grew mainly wheat, barley, and potatoes. The land owners sold the wheat and barley to other countries. Potatoes were the main food for the Irish.



A struggling family in Ireland during the famine

During the 1840s, a disease struck the potato plants. The potatoes turned black and rotted. The disease rotted potatoes for three years. There were no potatoes to eat. People could not afford to buy other food. Most farm workers could not pay their rent. They lost their homes and their farms.

A million people died during the famine. Some people starved to death. Other people died of diseases because they were so weak. Another one and a half million people left Ireland. Leaving was their only hope. They crossed the ocean on sailing ships.



Irish immigrants wave goodbye as their ship leaves for North America.



Key Concept 2 People who immigrate face many challenges.

The Challenge of Immigration

It is never easy to immigrate to a new land. The Irish faced **challenges** on the journey from Ireland. They faced more challenges when they reached their new home.

challenges
things that make
life more difficult



The Journey from Ireland

Many ships carrying **immigrants** sailed from Ireland to Canada. It was a journey of 3,000 miles (4,828 kilometers). It took 40 to 70 days.

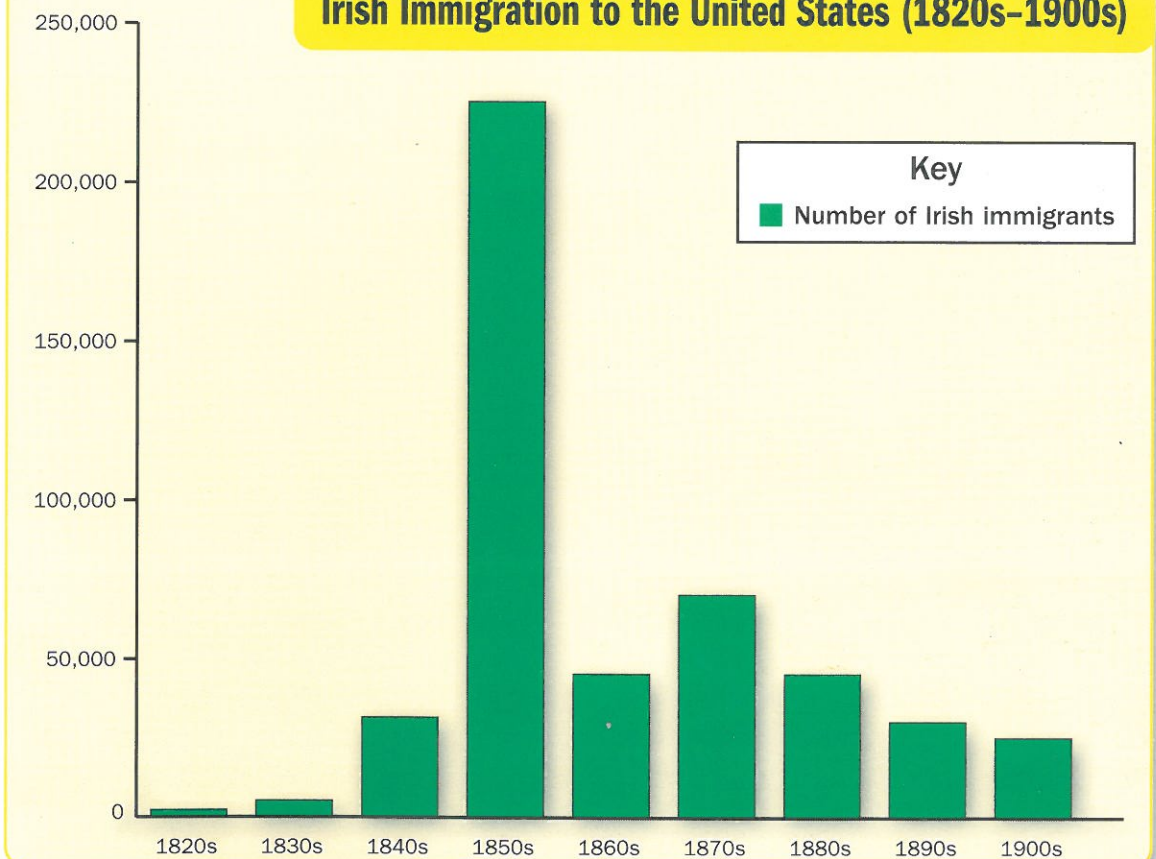


Irish people on a ship bound for North America

Many of the ships that immigrants traveled on were not built for passengers. They were built to carry wood from Canada to Europe. When the ships went to Canada to get the wood, they carried Irish people. Hundreds of people were crammed into the ships' holds. A ship's hold is the space below deck where goods are carried. The holds were dark. They had very little air.

The journey was terrible. Passengers often got very sick. Many died from hunger or disease. The ships soon became known as "coffin ships." This is because so many people died on them.

Irish Immigration to the United States (1820s-1900s)



Challenges in a New Land

The Irish who survived the hard journey now faced other challenges. Most were poor and had only worked on farms. They had a hard time finding places to work and live.

Many Irish people first went to Canadian cities. There, they crowded into cheap boarding houses. Sometimes up to ten people lived in one room. People who had nowhere to go lived on the streets. Many people still suffered from diseases.



Irish immigrants arriving in Canada

Thousands of Irish immigrants walked from Canada to the United States to find work. They went to cities such as Boston, New York, and Chicago. **Overcrowding** became a problem in these cities as well.

Some Americans worried about the overcrowding. They thought that work would become hard to find. They worried that the Irish would take their jobs. As a result, many people decided not to hire Irish immigrants. It took a long time for the Irish to be accepted in their new country.



Overcrowded housing in New York



Key Concept 3 People who immigrate contribute to the life and culture of the society they join.

Joining American Society

The United States is a country made up of immigrants. As with all immigrant groups, the Irish have helped American **society**.

society

people living together in a group or nation



Irish in the Workforce

One way the Irish helped American society was through hard work. In the early days, they took all kinds of hard jobs. The Irish dug canals. They built roads and railroads. They worked in factories, mills, and coal mines. These jobs helped America grow.



Irish clam diggers on a wharf in Boston, 1882

As time went by, early Irish immigrants helped the Irish who came later. They helped the new immigrants find jobs and places to live.

Irish immigrants also built churches, schools, and hospitals. These new buildings helped everyone in the cities where the Irish lived.

Over time, the number of Irish Americans grew. They were able to vote Irish people into **local governments**. The Irish who worked for local governments helped other Irish get good jobs. Many Irish got jobs as police officers and firefighters.



Mary Harris, known as "Mother Jones," was an Irish immigrant. She fought for the rights of working-class Americans.

Irish Culture in the United States

The Irish brought some of their **culture** to the United States. They introduced Americans to their unique style of music and dance. Each year, Irish Americans show their pride by holding parades on St. Patrick's Day. There are festivals with Irish music and dance.

culture
the traditions,
language, dress,
ceremonies, and
other ways of life
that a group of
people share



The Irish Contribution

Irish Americans have done well in politics, sports, business, and many other fields. Georgia O'Keeffe was an artist in the early 1900s. She was born into an Irish American family in Wisconsin. Some Irish Americans have even become president. John F. Kennedy was the great-grandson of Irish immigrants. Over 30 million Americans today claim **descent** from Irish immigrants.



Irish dancers in a St. Patrick's Day parade in Chicago



Think About the Key Concepts

Think about what you read. Think about the pictures and the graph. Use these to answer the questions. Share what you think with others.

1. Why did the immigrants discussed in this book leave their country?
2. What were some challenges the immigrants faced when they arrived in the United States?
3. How did the immigrants overcome the challenges they faced?
4. How did the immigrants contribute to the culture of the United States?