

Irish Immigrants

by Michael Stahl



Two very famous American comedians have something very interesting in common with a former American president. Stephen Colbert and Conan O'Brien, who, as of 2013, are considered two of the funniest Americans, host their own late night talk shows and are among the funniest men in the country. They each also have ancestors who were Irish and both have publicly commented on their Irish pride. President John F. Kennedy was often recognized as the first Irish-Catholic man to be the president, and he remains the lone Catholic president in American history. However, not only do all three men have Irish roots, but each of their respective families also left their homeland for America during one of the most devastating eras in the history of the small island country of Ireland: The Great Famine.

In the year 1845, the diets of one-third of the people of Ireland were entirely made up of potatoes. This illustrates the fact that Ireland was already a country that had greater than its fair share of poverty even before The Great Famine, which is often referred to as The Irish Potato Famine in countries outside of Ireland. When a disease often referred to as "potato blight" started to destroy potato crops, not only in Ireland, but also throughout Europe, the weight of worry quickly altered the Irish people's outlook. In 1845, roughly one-third of the potatoes grown in Ireland were lost and that was just the start. The next year, three-quarters of the crops were wiped out by the blight. The farming was so poor that year that in 1847 many pessimistic potato farmers did not even attempt to grow crops. 1848 saw one-third of the pre-famine average crop haul. And on-and-on it went.

The Great Famine lasted until 1853. Though the crops began to thrive in the countryside once again that year, the damage had been done. At the start of the famine, Ireland had a population of around 9 million people, but by its end, nearly twenty-five percent of the people were gone. It has been estimated that one million people or more died from starvation and diseases, while another million or so fled the country in that eight-year period. Half of the immigrant population that made its way into the borders of the United States was from Ireland in the 1840s.

One thing Ireland is known for is its bright green, hilly landscape. When the Irish left their homeland

for what they thought would be greener pastures in America, they did so by boat. Conditions were so poor on those vessels and the travel time was so long that the term "coffin ship" was coined because a great number of Irish people died on the voyage across the Atlantic Ocean. Those that survived were so poor that they had little choice but to stay in whatever city the boat they traveled on docked at. The urban areas where they ended up settling were very different from Ireland, for reasons beyond the geography and color of the landscape.

Though the Irish would quickly make up large portions of the populations of major American cities, such as New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Boston, where almost half the people were new Irish immigrants, the locals treated them with much hostility. Citizens of these areas felt a sense of entitlement to resources because they had been there longer and were more "American" than the Irish. The Irish were easy to pick out of a crowd, too. They spoke with heavy accents and brought over a very different style of clothing than what most Americans wore in those days. These characteristics, and the fact that many of them were uneducated and untrained in any trade or business, made their new neighbors and countrymen scorn them.

Noticing the influx of people entering the cities, building owners reconfigured their spaces, making smaller apartments out of bigger ones so as to accommodate more tenants. The Irish had to pay for their housing out of wages from low-paying jobs that required back-breaking work. Most of the Irish men, if they were able to get work at all, performed physical labor. America was expanding and needed new roadways, railways, bridges, tunnels, and canals. Many of the Irish immigrants took jobs in those industries as well as in mining. Still, landlords overcharged Irish tenants for small living spaces that often lacked ventilation and plumbing. Because money and food were so scarce, while housing was so expensive, women also had to join in as a tremendous part of the Irish workforce, taking servants' jobs as housekeepers, nannies, and maids.

To make matters worse, when hard economic times hit portions of the country, the Irish were the last to be employed. Many businesses that did need workers posted signs that said they were hiring, but added "Irish need not apply" if they did not feel too desperate for laborers. The sign became so widespread throughout the country that even when it was shortened to just "INNA," readers understood exactly what it meant. Examples like these of pure hatred towards Irish immigrants have drawn comparisons to the American treatment of blacks at that time, which was still before the Civil War had been fought and the Emancipation Proclamation written. Though arguments about the origin of the term "Black Irish" vary, some historians believe it was used to describe a kind of pecking order within the Irish community. The Irish had been migrating to America before the Great Famine and those who had been in the U.S. longer had more ample opportunity to gain financial security. Those who fled Ireland and starvation due to the potato blight, on the other hand, were viewed as members of the lowest class of people. Thus, when someone was labeled Black Irish, it was a hint at a class association with African Americans and not an observation of a poor Irishman's physical characteristics; regardless of wealth, the majority of Irish immigrants had light hair, eyes, and skin.

Many politicians sought to gain votes off of the newfound hatred of the Irish-Catholic immigrants. "Nativists" had campaigned decades prior, though mostly on anti-Native American platforms. When the Irish came and the subsequent prejudice against them became commonplace, Nativists were reenergized. After creating the "American Party," they actually gave speeches promising that if they were elected into various offices, they would find a way to close up American borders to keep the Irish from entering. The incredible irony about Nativists is that none of them were really native at all; they had simply been in the U.S. a couple of generations longer than the Irish, and some even less than

that. Nevertheless, they were so volatile that they held violent demonstrations from time to time and lead attacks on Catholic churches. Some Irish immigrant deaths have been attributed to such outbursts of violence against them.

For the Irish to gain favor in America, it would take violence-both sanctioned by the government, and not. The Civil War created a ripe opportunity for these political conflicts to come to a head. During the war, there were drafts that required men to fight. Draft riots erupted in New York City because Irish immigrants insisted that the rules of the draft would draw an unfair number of Irish into service. Still, incredibly, about 140,000 Irishmen enlisted in the Union Army. After the Union victory, some formerly prejudiced Americans began to view the Irish as assets to the country, for they had proven their loyalty on the battlefields.

Slowly, but surely, the Irish began to fit into America a little more comfortably. They began many of the early trade unions, founded police departments, and fire departments, too.

By the twentieth century, Irish Catholics became a force to be reckoned with in politics. Boston elected an Irish mayor, James Michael Curley. In the 1920s, one of New York State's governors, Al Smith, was Irish. Both he and Mr. Curley set the stage for the rise of John F. Kennedy to the White House.

History shows that, from the Great Famine to the coffin ships, from the prejudice to the Civil War draft, Irish-Americans have been a resilient bunch. It's no wonder that the Notre Dame mascot is called The Fighting Irish.

famine

fam · ine

Advanced Definition**noun**

1. an extreme and widespread shortage of food.
-

These are some examples of how the word or forms of the word are used:

1. Scholars differ on how to tally the number of deaths under his relatively brief rule, including everything from **famines** to people exiled to arctic prisons, but most estimates fall between three and 30 million people.
2. About a third of these immigrants were Irish people trying to escape a **famine** that struck their country in the mid-1840s.
3. U2's Bono describes himself as a spoiled-rotten rock star. However, he uses his fame to deal with an awfully big problem--Africa's AIDS epidemic and debt crisis. After a benefit concert in Africa in 1985, Bono spent a month working in Ethiopia during a major **famine**.
4. The Ibrahim sisters-Nimo, 16, and Fadumo, 18-came to the United States in 2000. They were born in Somalia, a country in Africa. While they were still very young, civil war and **famine** came to Somalia. More than a million Somalis were in danger of starving. They had to escape.

immigrant

im · mi · grant

Definition

noun

1. a person who moves from the country where he or she was born to another country.

My parents are immigrants from Poland.

Advanced Definition

noun

1. one who moves permanently to another country from his or her native land.

adjective

1. of or pertaining to immigrants.

Spanish cognate

inmigrante: The Spanish word *inmigrante* means immigrant.

These are some examples of how the word or forms of the word are used:

1. About a third of these **immigrants** were Irish people trying to escape a famine that struck their country in the mid-1840s.
2. Thankfully, today's **immigrants** have housing laws to protect them. They are less likely to endure shoddy housing and disease as the price they have to pay for liberty.
3. The United States is often called a melting pot. That's because the parents or grandparents of most of the people who live in the United States came from other countries. People who move from one country to another are called **immigrants**.
4. The United States of America has long been the world's chief receiving nation for **immigrants**. An **immigrant** is a person who leaves his/her country to settle and remain in a new country. Over the years, many millions of people have uprooted and left family and friends to move to America.
5. The population in New York was the most diverse of anywhere in the young colonies. If you listened in on dinner table conversations along the Hudson River, you would hear more than 12 languages! Most of the **immigrants** from other countries who came to the middle colonies were skilled at a craft.
6. My sister Rebekah and I were determined to fill in the blank space on our family tree. So, we set out to Ellis Island in New York City. Most **immigrants** arrived there from 1892 to 1954. We hoped they would have the records we needed to learn more about our family history.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Which event made one million Irish people leave Ireland in the mid-1800s?

- A. the Black Death
- B. World War I
- C. the American Civil War
- D. the Great Famine

2. Some Americans began to view the Irish as assets to the country. Which cause created this effect?

- A. 140,000 Irishmen enlisted in the Union Army during the Civil War and proved their loyalty on the battlefields.
- B. The Irish were overcharged for smaller apartments when they moved to American cities.
- C. The Irish traveled to America in "coffin ships" and many died on the voyage across the Atlantic Ocean.
- D. By the twentieth century, Irish Catholics became a force to be reckoned with in American politics.

3. Read the sentences: "Many businesses that did need workers posted signs that said they were hiring, but added 'Irish need not apply' if they did not feel as though they were too desperate for laborers. Examples like these of pure hatred towards Irish immigrants have drawn comparisons to the American treatment of blacks at the time, which was still before The Civil War had been fought and the Emancipation Proclamation written."

This evidence supports which of the following conclusions about how the Irish were viewed in America at this time?

- A. The Irish were well-respected members of society.
- B. The Irish were considered to be the part of the lower classes of society.
- C. The Irish were hated more than the blacks in society.
- D. The Irish were considered slaves.

4. What can be concluded about the effect of the Irish on American history?
- A. The Irish had a very minimal effect on American history.
 - B. The Irish had a major effect on American history, from the Civil War to current politics.
 - C. The Irish had an effect only in American cities like Boston, New York, and Philadelphia.
 - D. The Irish only had negative effects on American history.
5. What is the main idea of this passage?
- A. While Irish immigrants have faced many challenges in America, they have overcome these challenges and contributed much to American society.
 - B. The Great Famine is a warning that crop yields can determine your future.
 - C. Racism in the 1800s and 1900s was not limited to those that were identified as black or African-American.
 - D. The best politicians and comedians of American history have been Irish, despite unique difficulties in their lives.

6. Read the sentences: "By the twentieth century, Irish Catholics became **a force to be reckoned with** in politics. Boston elected an Irish mayor, James Michael Curley. In the 1920s, New York State's Governor Al Smith was Irish. Both of them set the stage for the rise of John F. Kennedy to the White House."

What does the author mean by the term "**a force to be reckoned with**"?

- A. a negative force
- B. a debate team
- C. a powerful or influential force
- D. a judgmental group

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

The term "Irish need not apply" became very popular on store signs; _____, store owners shortened the term to "INNA" and readers still understood its meaning.

- A. as a result
- B. before
- C. however
- D. because

8. Describe at least two challenges the Irish faced when they moved to American cities. Use information from the passage to support your answer.

9. What benefits did the Irish enjoy when they began to fit into America a little more comfortably after the American Civil War?

10. The author notes that "Irish-Americans have been a resilient bunch." A person who is resilient is strong and able to recover from unpleasant or damaging events.

Using information from the passage, explain why Irish-Americans can be considered a "resilient bunch."

1. Which event made one million Irish people leave Ireland in the mid-1800s?

- A. the Black Death
- B. World War I
- C. the American Civil War
- D. the Great Famine**

2. Some Americans began to view the Irish as assets to the country. Which cause created this effect?

- A. 140,000 Irishmen enlisted in the Union Army during the Civil War and proved their loyalty on the battlefields.**
- B. The Irish were overcharged for smaller apartments when they moved to American cities.
- C. The Irish traveled to America in "coffin ships" and many died on the voyage across the Atlantic Ocean.
- D. By the twentieth century, Irish Catholics became a force to be reckoned with in American politics.

3. Read the sentences: "Many businesses that did need workers posted signs that said they were hiring, but added 'Irish need not apply' if they did not feel as though they were too desperate for laborers. Examples like these of pure hatred towards Irish immigrants have drawn comparisons to the American treatment of blacks at the time, which was still before The Civil War had been fought and the Emancipation Proclamation written."

This evidence supports which of the following conclusions about how the Irish were viewed in America at this time?

- A. The Irish were well-respected members of society.
- B. The Irish were considered to be the part of the lower classes of society.**
- C. The Irish were hated more than the blacks in society.
- D. The Irish were considered slaves.

4. What can be concluded about the effect of the Irish on American history?
- A. The Irish had a very minimal effect on American history.
 - B. The Irish had a major effect on American history, from the Civil War to current politics.**
 - C. The Irish had an effect only in American cities like Boston, New York, and Philadelphia.
 - D. The Irish only had negative effects on American history.
5. What is the main idea of this passage?
- A. While Irish immigrants have faced many challenges in America, they have overcome these challenges and contributed much to American society.**
 - B. The Great Famine is a warning that crop yields can determine your future.
 - C. Racism in the 1800s and 1900s was not limited to those that were identified as black or African-American.
 - D. The best politicians and comedians of American history have been Irish, despite unique difficulties in their lives.
6. Read the sentences: "By the twentieth century, Irish Catholics became **a force to be reckoned with** in politics. Boston elected an Irish mayor, James Michael Curley. In the 1920s, New York State's Governor Al Smith was Irish. Both of them set the stage for the rise of John F. Kennedy to the White House."

What does the author mean by the term "**a force to be reckoned with**"?

- A. a negative force
- B. a debate team
- C. a powerful or influential force**
- D. a judgmental group

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

The term "Irish need not apply" became very popular on store signs; _____, store owners shortened the term to "INNA" and readers still understood its meaning.

A. as a result

B. before

C. however

D. because

8. Describe at least two challenges the Irish faced when they moved to American cities. Use information from the passage to support your answer.

Answers may vary and should include any of the following: Locals treated the Irish with hostility. Landlords would overcharge Irish tenants for small living spaces that often lacked ventilation and plumbing. Irish men had to perform physical labor, if they were able to get work at all. Money and food was scarce and the Irish were the last to be employed. The Irish faced the discrimination of Nativists who also led violent demonstrations against the Irish.

9. What benefits did the Irish enjoy when they began to fit into America a little more comfortably after the American Civil War?

They were able to form many of the early trade unions and found police and fire departments. Students should also note that by the twentieth century, Irish Catholics became a powerful force in American politics.

10. The author notes that "Irish-Americans have been a resilient bunch." A person who is resilient is strong and able to recover from unpleasant or damaging events.

Using information from the passage, explain why Irish-Americans can be considered a "resilient bunch."

Answers may vary and should be supported by the passage. Students should explain that the Irish who made it to America at all had to survive a period of famine in Ireland, and the perilous crossing of the Atlantic on "coffin ships" first. Then, Irish-Americans endured many hardships in America, from the discrimination and hostility that others treated them with, to the economic disadvantages they had to survive through as a lower and unwanted class of society. However, with perseverance the Irish were able to improve their social standing and increase their influence in society. After 140,000 Irishmen enlisted in the Union Army during the Civil War, they began to be seen as an asset to America and were able to fit into America a little more comfortably. They were able to form many of the early trade unions and found police and fire departments. Students should also note that by the twentieth century, Irish Catholics became a powerful force in American politics.