

Irish-Catholic Immigration to New Jersey

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November 29, 2004

New Jersey History 418-60

Professor S. Bowles

M 4:15 - 6:50 p.m.

Throughout New Jersey's history, immigration has always played an important role in shaping the state's image and traditions. The Irish-Catholics are just one of the many groups that have done just that. Faced with great difficulties because of their religion and ethnicity, these immigrants struggled to find their place in their new home. And once they found it, they never let go. Whatever the reasons were for immigrants to leave their homeland, one thing was for certain: America had what they wanted.

The first big wave of immigration to America was in the 1840s. Most of these people were from Germany and Ireland. There were many reasons why these immigrants left their homeland to come to the United States. For the Irish, the Potato Famine which lasted from 1845-1851, was the most common reason for them to leave. "The years of and immediately after the Great Famine saw hundreds of thousands of Irish come to the United States, almost 220,000 in 1847 and somewhat over 254,000 in 1851 (the latter being the peak figure in the entire history of Irish immigration)."<sup>1</sup>

The Potato Famine was one of the darkest times in Irish history. It cut Ireland's population nearly in half from eight million to five million in little under a decade. Nearly 1.5 million perished from hunger and disease, while the other 1.5 million migrated to America, England, or Canada. This is the only time in Irish immigration history that they left in order to survive and not by choice. "Emigration, then, was less choice than necessity in the middle of the nineteenth century."<sup>2</sup>

During the Famine, some of the relief funds that were sent to help Ireland came from America. This was not only done out of kindness. Some thought that by helping

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<sup>1</sup> Akenson, Donald H. *The United States and Ireland*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1973: 34-35.

<sup>2</sup> Quinn, Dermot. *The Irish in New Jersey: Four Centuries of American Life*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004: 75.

Ireland, the Irish would recover and wouldn't have a reason to leave and come to the United States. "The relief of Ireland meant, in effect, the relief of America, saving the latter from a tide of indigents washing up on its shore."<sup>3</sup> What is quite interesting is that Americans wanted foreign labor, but not foreign laborers.<sup>4</sup> Many people wanted to pay low wages, but didn't want new cultures or customs that came with the workers. The Irish were usually poorly paid and rarely had job security. They also had to endure long periods of unemployment which often forced them to become public wards.<sup>5</sup>

Had the Potato Famine not occurred, Irish immigration to New Jersey and America still would have been high. Economic opportunities were nowhere to be found in Ireland and many people were evicted from their homes. "The economic vitality of the United States undoubtedly was attractive, and even had there been no Famine and no depressions in Ireland, there would have been at least a steady stream of migrants from Ireland just as there was from the more prosperous European countries."<sup>6</sup>

Of the places to migrate to, the Irish mostly went to America during and directly preceding the Famine. Besides New York City, Philadelphia, and Boston, many cities in New Jersey were becoming heavily populated by the Irish. Places such as Paterson, Jersey City, Newark, and Trenton were nicknamed "little Irelands" due to all the Irish immigrants living there. Some settled in these cities because relatives or neighbors were already there. Others did so because there were jobs that needed to be filled. Irish men found low-paying work as day laborers or jobs on construction gangs.<sup>7</sup> Many of the city

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>5</sup> Curran, Thomas J. "Assimilation and Nativism," *International Migration Digest* 3, no. 1 (Spring, 1966): 17.

<sup>6</sup> Akenson, *The United States and Ireland*, 35.

<sup>7</sup> Shaw, Douglas V. *Immigration and Ethnicity in New Jersey History*. Trenton: New Jersey Historical Commission, Department of State, 1994: 18.

slums were also occupied by the Irish. This is because they had little money and couldn't afford proper housing. Also, it is suggested that they felt more secure with their own kind. "As the Irish began clustering together in American cities, inhabiting some of the worst slums the country has ever seen, they certainly must have felt the need for the comfort of their own numbers."<sup>8</sup>

Men tended to take unskilled jobs because they were used to agricultural work in Ireland and could not afford land in America. Most of these jobs were hard labor such as building canals and railroads. "Well over half [of the Irish] were among the working poor... Having recently immigrated and generally lacking industrial skills, most of the Irish eked out a bare existence with few comforts and no margin for times of adversity."<sup>9</sup>

One fact that is unique to Irish immigrants was the ratio of men to women that came to America. There were more Irish women that migrated to the United States than men. These women would take jobs as domestic servants and send back most of their money to family members back in Ireland.<sup>10</sup> Many could afford to do so because they were provided food, clothing (uniforms), and shelter working as maids. Women also played an important role in shaping future generations by joining convents. If women didn't get married and have children, they devoted their lives to God. "It was they [nuns] who founded schools, built hospitals, and taught the rising generation (boys and girls alike) to be both Catholic and American."<sup>11</sup>

Since there were more Irish women to men, the Irish men were able to marry their own kind in America. As a result, their traditions were passed down to future

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<sup>8</sup> Williams, William H.A. *'Twas Only an Irishman's Dream*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press: 1996: 93.

<sup>9</sup> Shaw, *Immigration and Ethnicity in New Jersey History*, 19-20.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>11</sup> Quinn, *The Irish in New Jersey: Four Centuries of American Life*, 89.

generations. This had quite the opposite effect in Ireland. Because so many left their homeland, there were fewer women to marry in Ireland. It would take over a century (1960s) before Ireland started to greatly increase its population. “In a strange way America was more “Irish” than Ireland itself.”<sup>12</sup>

When one thinks of the Irish, religion is one of the most likely things to pop up in one’s mind. Before the 1840s, most of the Irish that came to America were mainly Protestant and from Ulster. Once the Famine hit Ireland, almost all of the immigrants coming to America were Catholics. The Irish were not particularly religious until the Famine. Many saw this disaster as a sign from God, punishing them for not practicing their religion. As a result, mass attendance in Catholic churches greatly increased after the 1840s. Immigrants then brought their belief practices over to America.

Many of the Protestants began to worry when these immigrants arrived. “Their [Protestant-Americans] nineteenth century descendants, schooled in these traditions, viewed the Catholic Church as an alien force that threatened the foundations of religious freedom and democratic order.”<sup>13</sup> Until 1844, Catholics weren’t even permitted to run for public office in New Jersey.<sup>14</sup> Protestants felt that if a Catholic was elected, he would act as the Pope’s puppet. Instead of doing what is good for the majority, a Catholic would do what the church told him to do.

Even though Catholics faced religious persecution, they managed to hold on to their beliefs and within a few decades of arriving in New Jersey built hundreds of churches. “In 1855, there were 40,000 Catholics in the state, served by 35 priests, 17 of

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>13</sup> Shaw, *Immigration and Ethnicity in New Jersey History*, 23.

<sup>14</sup> State of New Jersey, “The Constitution of 1776,” [database on-line] (1996, accessed 21 November 2004); available from <http://www.state.nj.us/njfacts/njdoc10a.htm>; Internet.

them from Ireland. By 1872, there were 170,000 Catholics, 117 churches, 62 priests, and a seminary, Seton Hall College. In 1880 there were 184 priests and 142 churches."<sup>15</sup>

Religion had both positive and negative effects for the Irish. It gave them something to believe in when life wasn't very pleasant. On the other hand, it was the cause of much hostility from native-born Americans. "The church served both as a cause of their alienation from American society and as an instrument of cultural self-affirmation."<sup>16</sup>

Religion also effected education for immigrants. When the Irish first arrived, most of the schools were Protestant orientated. Many Catholics were uncomfortable having their children taught Protestant beliefs. "Students learned their history from a Protestant point of view and used the Protestant Bible as a text. ...As Catholics became more numerous in New Jersey they objected to such teachings."<sup>17</sup> Also, before the Civil War, many Protestants tried to convert Catholic children in their (Protestant) schools. As a result, Catholics began to build parochial schools in their neighborhoods. In the 1850s, Catholics asked city governments for a part of the local school tax to support their schools. They were unsuccessful largely due to Protestant protests. Throughout the mid-eighteenth century, the issue over schools was a heated debate.

A large and influential denomination of Christians...has come out in decided reprobation of the whole system of public schools, and commenced an effort to substitute...parochial schools, "in which the usual branches of a sound elementary education are taught; with the addition of daily religious instruction from the Bible under the superintendence of a Christian teacher."<sup>18</sup>

Many times fights would break out in neighborhoods due to religious differences.

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<sup>15</sup> Lurie, Maxine N. and Marc Mappen. *Encyclopedia of New Jersey*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004: 413.

<sup>16</sup> Akenson, *The United States and Ireland*, 37.

<sup>17</sup> Shaw, *Immigration and Ethnicity in New Jersey History*, 26.

<sup>18</sup> Green, Howard L. *Words that Make New Jersey*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1995: 118-119.

Lucius Q. C. Elmer, "To the Governor of New Jersey," February 1, 1848, NJSL.

The newspapers would usually side with the Protestants and blame the Catholics for the violence. One such example was in September 1854 when some Protestant societies were marching through Newark. A riot broke out when someone through a stone at the crowd. St. Mary's German Church was then robbed and seriously damaged. An Irishman was killed as well. Bishop Bayley, in charge of the Newark diocese, recorded the event. "...they [Protestant] immediately made an assault upon persons in the crowd [Catholics], and then proceeded to attack the German Catholic Ch. which was close by, and destroyed everything they could lay their hands on. The most false statements were immediately published throwing the whole blame on the Irish Catholics..."<sup>19</sup>

Religion was just one form of discrimination the Irish faced in New Jersey and in other states as well. Job opportunities were greatly limited. Many times the Irish were turned away simply because they were Irish. Many shops had signs hanging in their window stating: "No Irish Need Apply". Many American workers thought that immigrants would drive down wages because they were desperate for work. This did not last too long because the Irish took many of the unwanted jobs. "Occasionally, the nativists did preach to the American worker the threat posed by the immigrants, but since the immigrants took jobs that the natives shunned, the warnings made little headway with the American workers."<sup>20</sup>

Three reasons Americans viewed the Irish as a menace were: 1.) they worked menial jobs and consider inferior as a result, 2.) they were clannish, and 3.) the Irish Catholics voted as a political unit as the behest of their priests.<sup>21</sup> These were difficult

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<sup>19</sup> Quinn, *The Irish in New Jersey: Four Centuries of American Life*, 83.  
From the diary of Bishop James Roosevelt Bayley, September 6, 1854.

<sup>20</sup> Curran, "Assimilation and Nativism": 18.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

accusations to overcome. The Irish had to take menial jobs because that was all that was available to them. They stayed with their own ethnicity because they felt safe with their own kind. Lastly, because of their religious beliefs, they were thought of as puppets which followed whatever their church officials told them to do.

One example where the Irish came together was the trial of James Donnelly. He was accused of murdering Albert Moses in Monmouth County in 1857. Donnelly was tried and executed, but became a martyr to the Irish. He was refused appeals on numerous occasions, many believing it was due to anti-Catholic beliefs among the courts. Donnelly's death would play an important role in New Jersey politics for decades to come. In 1877, General McClellan won the governorship against William Newell by gaining the majority of Irish voters. McClellan stated, "That Newell's action toward poor Donnelly was prompted by his intense hatred of foreigners no honest man... can question."<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps the most notable political cartoonist in American history, Thomas Nast helped promote the stereotypical Irishman. Thomas Nast lived in New Jersey for many years during his career. He portrayed the Irish as ape-like buffoons who always enjoyed getting drunk and a good fight. "The most conspicuous stereotype of the Irish was the consumption of alcohol."<sup>23</sup> Pat and Bridget were the two common caricatures found in *Harper's Weekly* and *Puck*. The main qualities attributed to the Irish were:

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|--------------------------|---|
| 1. inferior mentality    | 10. given to crimes of violence             |
| 2. primitive morality    | 11. susceptible to bribery by politicians   |
| 3. emotional instability | 12. high birth rate threatening to majority |
| 4. overassertiveness     | 13. occupationally unstable                 |

<sup>22</sup> Quinn, *The Irish in New Jersey: Four Centuries of American Life*, 87.

McClellan's speech during the election for Governor of New Jersey in 1877.

<sup>23</sup> Williams, William H. A. *'Twas Only an Irishman's Dream*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press: 1996: 149.



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|----------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 5. lazy and boisterous           | 14. superstitious          |
| 6. religious fanaticism          | 15. lazy                   |
| 7. fondness for gambling         | 16. happy-go-lucky         |
| 8. gaudy and flashy in dress     | 17. ignorant               |
| 9. close to anthropoid ancestors | 18. musical. <sup>24</sup> |

One of Thomas Nast's most famous works was that of "The American River Ganges", which depicted Catholic priests as crocodiles coming on to American shore to devour school children.<sup>25</sup> He was trying to show that the Catholic Church was growing in numbers and trying to influence Americans, especially by establishing parochial schools. In another magazine, *Puck*, cartoonists often blamed the Irish for their [Irish] poverty. If they would work hard and not worry about independence for Ireland, they would become prosperous. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, these magazines were less concerned with the Irish threat and more worried about the new wave of immigrants coming to America.

Politics were always an important part of Irish identity. Though, many times they faced adversity. In the 1840s, a party called the Know-Nothings was formed. They were anti-Catholic and immigration and believed in keeping America "pure". The Know-Nothings enjoyed some political success in New Jersey.<sup>26</sup> The greatest accomplishment for the party was when William Newell was elected governor of New Jersey in 1856. "...in each of his annual addresses to the legislature...urged legislation increasing the time required for naturalization, limiting the voting rights of foreign-born citizens, and enforcing Protestant definitions of education and morality."<sup>27</sup> Their power would not last for long and by the start of the Civil War, the Know-Nothings had disappeared from

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<sup>24</sup> Appel, John J. "From Shanties to Lace Curtains: The Irish Image in *Puck*, 1876-1910," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 13, no. 4 (Oct., 1971): 369.

<sup>25</sup> Refer to pg.14 to see "The American River Ganges".

<sup>26</sup> <sup>26</sup> Lurie, Maxine N. and Marc Mappen. *Encyclopedia of New Jersey*, 443.

<sup>27</sup> Quinn, *The Irish in New Jersey: Four Centuries of American Life*, 86.

politics.

The Irish voting population almost always sided with the Democratic Party. During the Civil War, many Democratic candidates ran on a campaign that questioned why the Irish should fight to free slaves who will take their jobs. This gained a lot of support from Irish voters. General McClellan received a huge majority of New Jersey's vote in 1864 largely due to Irish-Catholic support. Still, by trying to please Irish voters, the Democrats hurt themselves as well. "The strength of the Democrats lay in their Irish base; that was also their weakness."<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps the city known most for political controversy in New Jersey involving Irish-Catholics and Protestants was Jersey City. Before the 1860s, the city was mainly run by Protestant officials. When the Irish and Germans joined forces in 1861, the Democratic Party took control of the city. In addition, an Irish-Catholic was appointed police chief and added many Irishmen to the force. This would not last for long. As Irish influence over Jersey City grew, native-born Protestants tried to regain their power. They successfully did so by redrawing the voting districts to favor Protestants. "As many Irish voters as possible were crammed into one large crescent-shaped district, soon known throughout the state as "The Horseshoe".<sup>29</sup> By the 1870s, the Protestants had regained control of Jersey City and were back to their old ways. Sunday drinking laws were again enforced and the Irish were removed from the police department. This occurred in other cities as well, such as Newark. "While similar controversies affected other New Jersey cities, nowhere else did the defenders of the old order resort to such extreme measures."<sup>30</sup>

Once the second wave of immigration (Italians, Poles, and Russians) began in

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>29</sup> Shaw, *Immigration and Ethnicity in New Jersey History*, 32.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 32.

America, discrimination against the Irish started to decline. This was also due in part to Irish second- and third- generation success. They were moving up the social ladder and were finally starting to be accepted by society. The Irish started enjoying their newfound success with trips to the Jersey Shore. A town such as Spring Lake was dubbed the “Irish Riviera” due to the large number of Irish in that area. “In the early years of the twentieth century the Jersey Shore gained a new clientele: second- or third-generation Irish immigrants who had attained a more elevated social status than their parents or grandparents.”<sup>31</sup>

The Irish had a major influence on New Jersey’s culture. Once again religion became a central theme. When Irish immigrants arrived in their new country, they began to set up parishes. Since these immigrants came from different parts of Ireland, the American Catholic Church set up parish boundaries. “In this way Irish Catholics could be Irish as well as Catholic.”<sup>32</sup> The Irish language was also emphasized in the first few years of arrival, but to no avail. Gaelic schools were set-up to teach future generations, but the Irish were much more interested in freeing Ireland from British rule. Gaelic, however would never be the bond that united the Irish.<sup>33</sup> The Irish also brought to America traditional song and dance. Many enjoyed playing the fiddle while other family members or friends jigged. Their influence can even be seen today when everybody’s Irish on St. Patrick’s Day.

Immigration to New Jersey has always been an important part of the state’s history. The Irish were the first set of immigrants to arrive in the 1840s and make their mark. They faced many forms of discrimination due to their religion and ethnicity. Even

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<sup>31</sup> Quinn, *The Irish in New Jersey: Four Centuries of American Life*, 151.

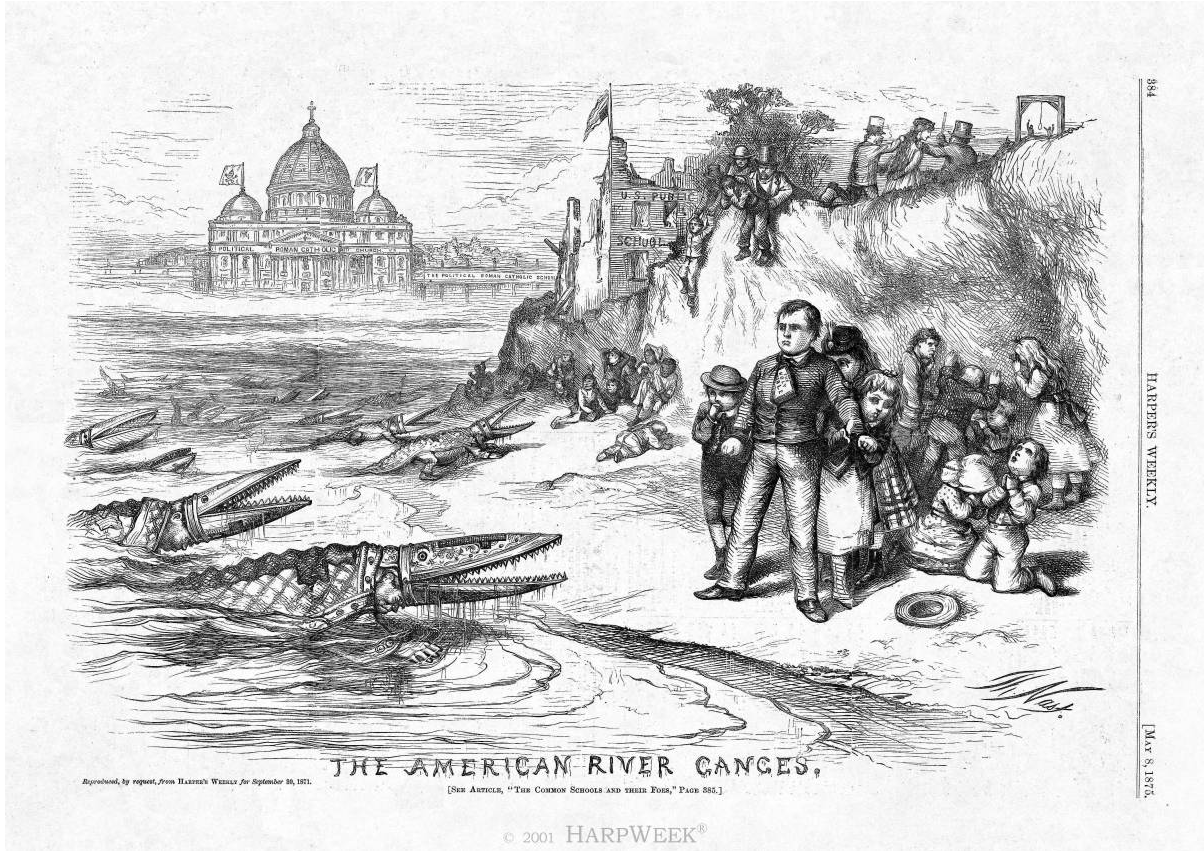
<sup>32</sup> Shaw, *Immigration and Ethnicity in New Jersey History*, 29.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

so, they managed to overcome these prejudices through politics and the right to vote. No matter the reason for these immigrants leaving Ireland, once they started their life in America very few ever went back.

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“The American River Ganges” by Thomas Nast. *Harper’s Weekly* September 30, 1871.