Immigration from Europe: The Irish and Germans

BETWEEN 1820 AND 1860 almost 2 million people from Ireland and about 1.5 million people from the German-speaking states of Europe immigrated to the United States. Irish and German immigrants began coming to America in colonial times, but the early Irish were mostly Protestants from the north of Ireland who settled on the frontier, while the Germans were mainly religious refugees who clustered in Pennsylvania. In contrast, almost all the new Irish immigrants and about half the Germans were Roman Catholics; many were unskilled laborers, and even many of the Irish spoke an unfamiliar language. Differences in language, religion, and culture set the newcomers apart in a country that was still mostly British in ancestry and Protestant in religion. Some Americans bemoaned the new “foreign” influence on their “native culture,” while others feared they would lose their jobs to immigrants willing to work for low wages. The Irish, especially, faced bitter prejudice: “No Irish Need Apply” was commonly added to help-wanted signs. For many Irish, however, the choice was immigration or starvation. During the potato famine of the mid-1840s, almost a quarter of Ireland’s population emigrated, sailing for America on crowded, disease-ridden “coffin ships.” Some German immigrants were political refugees from failed revolutions in 1830 and 1848, but most were small farmers lured by cheap western land or shopkeepers and craftsmen seeking prosperity in America’s growing cities.

Facts and Figures

The Numbers

Irish: Approximately 1.6 million between 1820 and 1860. In the 1840s the Irish made up close to half of all immigrants to the United States.

Germans: More than 1.5 million between 1820 and 1860. The 1850s was the single biggest decade for German immigration, with some 951,000 reaching the United States.

Why They Came

Irish: Most emigrated to escape grinding poverty in Ireland—or to avoid outright starvation in the years of the potato famine. Many Irish also resented British rule of their country and were attracted by the political and religious freedom offered by the United States.

Germans: Industrialization, overpopulation, and loss of farmland led many people away from German-speaking Europe (which then included not just the states of Germany but Austria and parts of Switzerland and other nations). Others were political liberals discouraged by the failure of revolutions and reform movements.

Where They Settled

Irish: Mostly large East Coast cities: New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. Some settled inland after working on canals and railroads.

Germans: East Coast cities, but many went west: by the Civil War, Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Louis, and Cincinnati all had large German-American communities, complete with German-language newspapers and community associations (vereins).

Culture and Customs

Irish: Many Irish immigrants were devout Roman Catholics, and social life in Irish-American communities often revolved around the parish church. The Irish also had a gift for politics, and by the 1860s they held considerable political power in cities like New York and Boston.

Germans: The Germans brought with them a love of music and a taste for beer, and they enjoyed both in the beer gardens that sprang up in every city with a big German-American population. They also brought a love for sports: German immigrants founded the first organized gymnastic society in the U.S. in 1828.

Discrimination

Irish: Anti-Catholic prejudice, fear of competition for jobs, and stereotyping of the Irish as prone to violence and drunkenness all contributed to strong anti-Irish discrimination.

Germans: German immigrants typically faced less outright discrimination than the Irish did, but in many communities they were resented for their differences in language and traditions.

Timeline

1820 Immigration from Germany and Ireland increases as landowners in both countries begin “enclosing” small farms into more profitable grazing land.

1830 A movement for more democratic government is put down in several German states, sending political exiles to the U.S.

1847 “Black ‘47”—the height of the Irish potato famine. More than 105,000 Irish flee to America to escape starvation.

1848 The failure of another liberal revolution in several German states leads thousands of students and other political activists—the “Forty-Eighters”—to leave for the United States.

1849 Castle Garden, on the southern tip of Manhattan Island, becomes the main receiving station for immigrants from Europe.

1860 Some 2.5 million immigrants have arrived in the U.S. in the previous decade, including nearly a million Germans. The rest are mostly English or Irish.

The Potato Famine

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Ireland’s poor became dependent on the potato for food as landowners “enclosed” small farms to grow grain and graze cattle for export to England. In 1845 a blight (plant disease) reached Ireland—ironically, borne by American seed potatoes. Starvation and sickness spread across Ireland as potatoes rotted in the field, but the British government refused to halt the export of grain from Ireland to England. By the time the famine ran its course, almost 1 million of Ireland’s population of 8 million was dead, and close to a quarter of the Irish people had emigrated overseas.