

Irish Emigration to North America: Before, During, and After the Famine

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Overview

Examination of migration from Ireland to the US and Canada looking at the push (internal issues influencing emigration) and pull (external) factors and how these changed over time. The presentation will illustrate how to use historical information about migration routes, and Irish settlement patterns as clues for locating Irish ancestors.

Early Colonial Period (pre - 1717)

Situation in Ireland: Flight of the Earls (1607); Ulster Plantation by Scots and English (1609-1625); Rebellion of 1641; Cromwell's Transplanting (1650+); Battle of the Boyne (1690); Treaty of Limerick and Flight of the "Wild Geese" (1692); Penal Laws (1695-1710); Test Act (1703)

Chiefs and landed gentry dispossessed of their estates. People were affected by the land confiscations and often would not move to another part of the island. They suffered and were persecuted for their religious beliefs, were discouraged by frequent political disturbances and lost their businesses in the ruin of the woolen trade. Thousands of poor transported by Cromwell. Many Protestants transported especially during 1665-1675 and 1685-1699.

Migration: Irish peasants, men and women, deported by the tens of thousands to Barbados and Jamaica under Cromwell. "Wild Geese" - Irish regiments and brigades in the armies of France, Spain and Austria. 1600's boys from the Nore and Suir valleys served seasonally in the Newfoundland fisheries. Waterford businesses indentured young servants for two summers and the intervening winter.

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Late Colonial Period (1717 - 1783)

Situation in Ireland: Emigrant ports - Belfast, Londonderry, Newry, Larne and Portrush - busy especially when shipping agents looking for business.

5 Waves

1717-1718: Drought and rack renting. Opened route. 5,000 in 1717. To: New England, PA and SC

1725-1729: Drought (3 bad harvests), scarcity of provisions, rack-renting, silver shortage, To: Southeastern PA.

1740-1741: Famine (400,000 died in 1740) To: Beyond PA to southwest into the Great Valley; Shenandoah Valley of VA, opening into NC and SC Piedmont.

1754-1755: Drought; Effective propaganda from US - Appeals from NC

1771-1775: Rack-renting (esp. Marquis of Donegal in County Antrim), mass evictions (25-30,000 passengers, Presbyterians)

Migration: Initially from Bann and Foyle River valleys in Ulster to Boston and then New England. Small groups to PA and NC. With advancing waves Philadelphia becomes primary point of access into US. Constant push to frontiers into PA, turning into Great Valley and south into VA on towards NC and SC. After War of Independence movement through the Cumberland Gap into the hills of Appalachia. By 1776 estimated that half of Ulster had crossed the Atlantic, and one in seven of the US Colonists were Ulster-Irish.

In Canada after the English overran the French garrisons in the 1750's migration quickened. Newfoundland in 1753 had 5,000 Irish Roman Catholics out of total population of 13,000. Halifax, Nova Scotia had 1,000 of a total population of 3,000 in 1759. In 1761 Alexander McNutt began a scheme to settle Londonderry, Nova Scotia. British Government discouraging emigration to Canada but Irish population increased with influx of Loyalists.

Important: Colonial Irish does not mean your ancestor was Ulster-Irish. Many Anglicans, Catholics and Quakers also came to North America during the Colonial period.

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Pre-Famine Exodus (1783 - 1845)

Situation in Ireland: Agrarian terrorism; "Whiteboys" and "Defenders"; United Irishmen; Irish Volunteer Movement; 1782-1800 Grattans Parliament; Repeal of Woollen export laws (1780);

End of Subordination of Irish Parliament to English Privy Council - Legislative independence (1782); Period of prosperity for landed and middle classes; Trade restrictions lifted benefitting Dublin in particular (Custom House and Four Courts built); 1798 Rebellion (Ulster + Wexford); 1801 United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland created; 1803 Passenger Act; Impressment; 1829 Catholic emancipation.

Migration: Immigration decreased during War of Independence, but in 1783 started again with 5,000 from Ulster and another 1,000 from Dublin. Ulster emigration ports in order of popularity: Londonderry, Belfast, Newry, Sligo, Larne and Killybegs. Approx. 5,000 per year. Until 1800 majority to Delaware ports of Philadelphia, Newcastle and Wilmington. New York increasing in popularity, with some movement to Baltimore and Charleston. Continued strong movement into PA down the Great Valley into Carolinas, but also now into TN, KY and OH.

Irish Settlement into Upper Canada heavy following 1798 Rebellion, some coming as political refugees. Northern Ireland immigrants came in substantial numbers as early as 1817 and settled in Prescott, Kingston, Cobourg, York (Toronto) and London. Heavy increase after the famine of 1822, many under group settlement plans. By 1826 Thomas Talbot had settled 20,000 Protestants primarily from Tipperary, in the Lake Erie area. 1823-1825 Peter Robinson settled a large group of Roman Catholics from County Cork, in the Peterborough area. Others located in what was known as the Bathurst District - present Lanark, Renfrew and part of Carleton. 1825 large settlement started in the Rice Lake area of Northumberland County. The Irish were generally capable of paying their own way, with increasing numbers of professional men and moderately well-to-do. Most newcomers rural in background - set to work clearing the land, tilling the fields, and building roads, sawmills and homes. As success of settlements got back to Ireland immigration flow increased. By mid-19th century Irish more numerous in Canada than English or Scots. Late 19th century higher proportion emigrated to US and thus percentage of total population decreased.

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The Famine Years (1845 - 1851)

Situation in Ireland: Massive failure of potato crop 1846 & 1847. Relief works, 1846 Labor Rate Act, 1847 Soup Kitchen Act, landlord bankruptcies, 1849 Encumbered Estates Act and evictions.

Migration: Into Canada through the quarantine stations at Grosse Isle near Quebec and Partridge Island outside Saint John, New Brunswick. Into U.S. - New York City becomes primary port of entry. Total emigration 1845-1855: 1.5 M to USA; 340,000 to British North America; 2-300,000 to Great Britain; 5,000 to Australia. 30% of those going to Canada and 6% of those to USA died on journey.

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From Famine to Partition (1851 - 1922)

Situation in Ireland: Development of the Irish Republican Brotherhood in Ireland and the Fenian Brotherhood in North America. Land League seeking agrarian change, esp. 1878-1881 - Captain Boycott of Co. Mayo. Home Rule movement. 1916 Easter Rising. 1922 Formation of 26-county "Irish Free State" and 6-county Northern Ireland.

Migration: Highest areas of emigration from west Munster (Kerry, Cork & Clare) and parts of Connaught (Leitrim & Galway). During the US Civil War Union recruiters encouraged Irish laborers to emigrate. During this period increasing numbers of young marrieds and single women, plus many widows and parents emigrating to join families. Between 1851-1891 - 4 million emigrants sailed from the shores of Ireland

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Two Irelands: Northern Ireland and the Free State (1922 - 1949)

Situation in Ireland: 1922-23 Irish Civil War. 1937 Constitution - Free State becomes Ireland (Eire). Eire remains neutral during WWII. 1949 English Crown severs link with Republic of Ireland. Ireland no longer part of the British Commonwealth.

Migration: Emigration drops to its lowest in decades, slowing greatly during and after the Great Depression. Movement continues into established Irish-American communities.

Modern Emigration (1949 - Present)

Situation in Ireland: 1950's and 60's stability in Irish politics, attempts at good-neighbor policy with Northern Ireland, decreasing emphasis on the Irish language. In Northern Ireland political preferences given to Protestants, encouragement of Catholic emigrations. August 1969 sectarian fighting breaks out in Bogside (Catholic section of Derry) and army rule imposed. 1972 Bloody Sunday killings followed by suspension of Stormont Parliament. Ongoing struggle but appears to be political and military peace.

Migration: Movement of mostly young educated professionals from Northern Ireland and Eire into established Irish communities in North America.

Shipping Lists 1890-1960

Indexed outbound shipping lists, from the UK to North America, for 1890-1960, with images at www.findmypast.co.uk; while inbound shipping lists from North America to the UK for the same period at www.ancestry.com. Many of our ancestors made multiple trips across the Atlantic so check for additional journeys.

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