

Irish Immigration: Beyond the Potato Famine

How do shifts in population change a place?

Ireland sent immigrants to the American colonies early in their settlement. Charles Carroll was a signer of the Declaration of Independence. In the 1840s, the Irish potato sent waves of migrants who could afford passage fleeing starvation in the countryside. The Irish made up one half of all migrants to the country during the 1840s. From 1820 to the start of the Civil War, they constituted one third of all immigrants. Early in the century, the majority of Irish immigrants were single men. After the 1840s, the pattern shifted to families as a few family members came first and earned money to bring relatives later in a process known as chain migration. In later years, women provided the majority of new arrivals.

Irish Immigrants in America

So harsh were conditions in Ireland that the nation's population decreased substantially through the 19th century. From 8.2 million in 1841, the population dropped to 6.6 million in only ten years and to 4.7 million in 1891. From 1841 to World War II, some estimates conclude that 4.5 million Irish came to the United States.

While not all Irish migrants were poor, most were. Many did not have money to move beyond the eastern port where they landed, and their numbers soon swelled cities like New York and Boston. Many found the adjustments from their rural backgrounds to the impersonal urban environments very difficult. They crowded into low-cost housing creating problems for schools, disease and sanitation. Men took whatever jobs they could find, usually at very low pay, while women became domestic workers or other low paying jobs. Often they found themselves competing for jobs with African Americans for work that was the hardest, most dangerous and lowest paying. Employers used the Irish, as well as other newly-arrived immigrants and African Americans, to threaten replacement of workers if they advocated for better working conditions, which created ethnic tensions that sometimes broke out into violence.

In addition to economic pressures, the Irish also faced religious discrimination. Centuries of conflicts between Protestants and Catholics followed immigrants to the United States, and the Irish Catholic faced hostility from the longer-settled Protestants who feared that the growing numbers of Irish would translate into political power. And it did. As politicians learned to court Irish voters, urban political machines rewarded their supporters with public jobs like policemen, firemen, sanitation workers and road crews. Protestant groups gravitated toward the Republican Party that sometimes promoted discriminatory laws like voting restrictions or the prohibition of the sale and use of alcohol. In response, Catholic immigrants like the Irish became the heart of the Democratic Party in many Northern states.

The Irish in Iowa

In Iowa, the Irish were the second largest immigrant group, topped only by the Germans. They settled in large numbers in the Mississippi River towns like Dubuque and Davenport. The Catholic bishop in Dubuque encouraged Irish and German Catholic immigration to Iowa and directed new arrivals to communities in northeast Iowa where they could be served by Catholic priests. Within the church itself, there was often competition to bring an Irish or German priest to serve the congregation. The railroads needed manual laborers and recruited the Irish to lay the rails and maintain the trains in roundhouses, bringing workers to small towns. The Irish also settled together in towns like Emmetsburg and in rural neighborhoods. They often supported private schools so that they could teach their children in a Catholic environment.

During World War I, German-Americans were often the targets of abuse or discrimination. The Irish came under some pressures, too. They resented the centuries of domination by Great Britain, a U.S. ally. In the 1920s, Protestant-Catholic tensions produced a revival of the Ku Klux Klan to "protect American values" against the rise of "foreign threats" like the Irish and other immigrants, but the organization lost steam by the end of the decade. World War II did much to quiet ethnic tensions at home as America united to fight Germany and Japan.

Supporting Questions

What factors led to migration from Ireland to North America?

- "Cause of the Non-Commencement of the Rebellion in Ireland," November 15, 1848 (Document)
- "The Irish Mother," April 19, 1849 (Document)
- "Poor Ireland," June 21, 1849 (Document)
- "Curious Facts," May 9, 1851 (Document)
- Chapter XIX from "A History of the Irish Settlers in North America from the Earliest Period to the Census of 1850," 1852 (Document)
- "Emigrants leaving Queenstown [Ireland] for New York," 1874 (Image)

How did the migration of Irish people impact the United States and Ireland?

- "Ireland," November 27, 1851 (Document)
- Chapter XXV from "A History of the Irish Settlers in North America from the Earliest Period to the Census of 1850," 1852 (Document)
- "The Foreign Element," February 8, 1855 (Document)

How did Americans respond to immigrants?

- "Wanted - An American or English Girl" Newspaper Advertisement, August 24, 1842 (Document)
- "Coachman Wanted" Newspaper Advertisement, May 14, 1852 (Document)
- "The Irish Problem," November 5, 1854 (Document)
- "Which Color is to be Tabooed Next?" 1882 (Political Cartoon)

[*Printable Image and Document Guide](#)

Additional Resources

"The Irish in Iowa," *Palimpsest*, Vol. 45, No. 2, February 1964

The Palimpsest was a historical magazine published the State Historical Society of Iowa beginning in 1920 until it was renamed Iowa Heritage Illustrated in 1996. This February 1964 edition focuses on the history of the Irish in Iowa, such as the "Exodus to America," "Encouragement to Move West" and "The Irish in Politics."

“Cause of the Non-Commencement of the Rebellion in Ireland,” November 15, 1848



Courtesy of Library of Congress, “Cause of the Non-Commencement of the Rebellion in Ireland,” *The Iowa Capital Reporter*, pp. 1, 15 November 1848

Description

This article from 1848 describes the progression of rebellion in Ireland and the factions that developed between those who wanted to use violence and those who did not. The author explains the causes for both the rebellion and the conflict. The author hints at chaos created by the conflict within Ireland, as well as conflict with the royal government in London.

[Full Transcript of “Cause of the Non-Commencement of the Rebellion in Ireland” Newspaper Article](#)

[Transcribed Excerpt from “Cause of the Non-Commencement of the Rebellion in Ireland” Newspaper Article](#)

[Printable Excerpt of “Cause of the Non-Commencement of the Rebellion in Ireland” Newspaper Article](#)

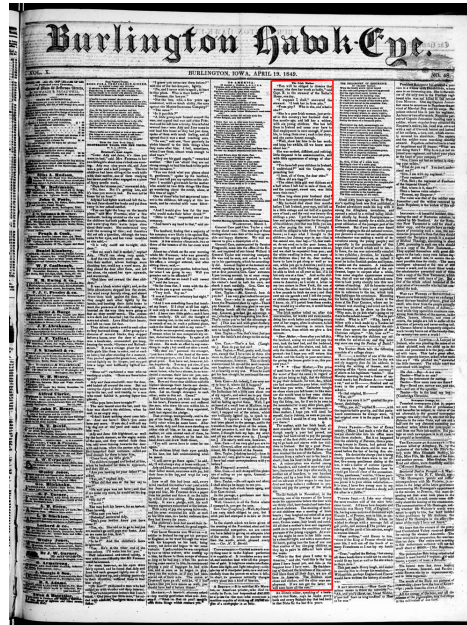
Source-Dependent Questions

- What is the author’s purpose in writing this article? Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.
- How does the author let you know that you can believe this report?
- The author accuses the British government of taking away specific rights of the Irish people. List two or three rights the author says the Irish people have lost. Which of these rights do you think was the greatest loss for them?
- The author describes two groups, the Repeal Association and Young Ireland. Each group had different ideas about how to gain freedom for Ireland. What impression of life in Ireland do you get from the author’s description of these groups and their goals? How does the response from the British authorities impact your thoughts?
- The original article was published in *Spirit of the Times*, a weekly newspaper published in New York City for an audience of sportsmen. Why do you think people in New York City and in Iowa might be interested in an article about Ireland?

Citation Information

“Cause of the Non-Commencement of the Rebellion in Ireland,” *The Iowa Capital Reporter*, pp. 1, 15 November 1848. Courtesy of Library of Congress

“The Irish Mother,” April 19, 1849



Courtesy of Library of Congress, “The Irish Mother,” Burlington Hawk-eye, pp. 1, 19 April 1849

Description

This 1849 article appeared in the *Burlington Tri-Weekly Hawk-Eye*. It tells the story of an Irish mother who left her children in poverty in Ireland to go to America and earn money so the whole family could immigrate. The article relates a heart-warming end to the story as the family is reunited.

[Transcript of “The Irish Mother” Newspaper Article](#)

[Printable Excerpt of “The Irish Mother” Newspaper Article](#)

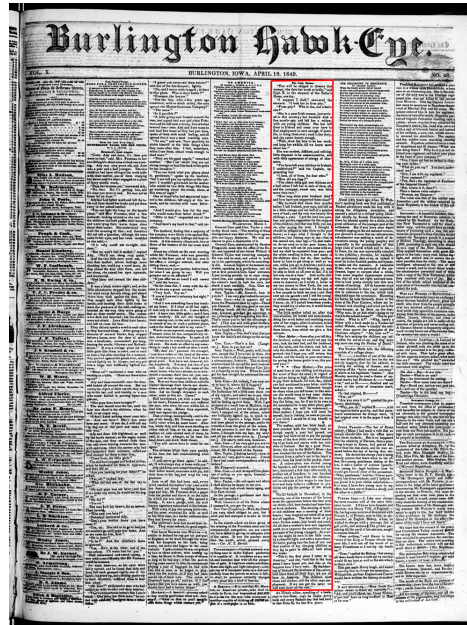
Source-Dependent Questions

- According to this newspaper article, what caused this mother to leave her children and immigrate to America? Why was the family in such dire straits?
- What alternatives did the mother think about to solve her problem? Do you agree with her decision to leave her children and immigrate to America? Explain your reasoning.
- According to this article, who is to blame for the family’s situation? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.
- What do you think is the author’s purpose in telling this story? What in the text leads you to your conclusion?

Citation Information

“The Irish Mother,” *Burlington Tri-Weekly Hawk-eye*, pp. 1, 19 April 1849. Courtesy of Library of Congress

“Poor Ireland,” June 21, 1849



Courtesy of Library of Congress, “Poor Ireland,” Burlington Hawk-Eye, pp. 2, 21 June 1849

Description

This article from the *Burlington Tri-Weekly Hawk-Eye* in 1849 gives a dark picture of Ireland. The author states that the information being relayed is a month old and that conditions in Ireland are as bad as they have ever been. He states that starvation and disease are the leading causes of death in the country.

[Transcript of “Poor Ireland” Newspaper Article](#)

[Printable Excerpt of “Poor Ireland” Newspaper Article](#)

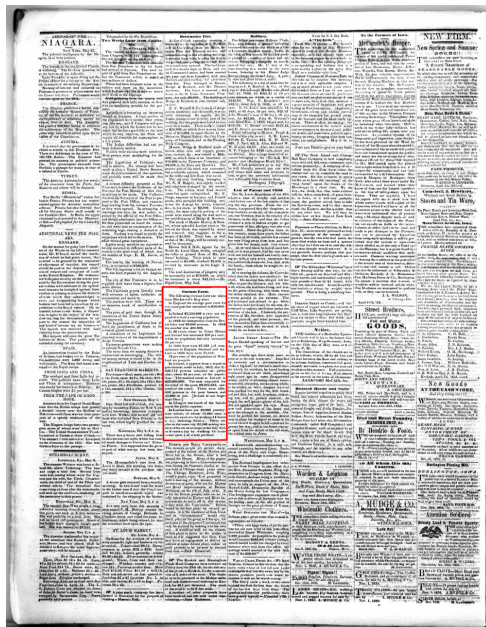
Source-Dependent Questions

- According to the article, [“The Foreign Element,”](#) the number of people emigrating from Ireland was decreasing. What in this article might explain that decrease?
- What does the author of this article tell you about their source(s) of information? Does this make what they are telling you more believable? Why or why not?
- What adjectives would you use to describe conditions in Ireland based on reading this article?

Citation Information

“Poor Ireland,” *Burlington Tri-Weekly Hawk-Eye*, pp. 2, 21 June 1849. Courtesy of Library of Congress

“Curious Facts,” May 9, 1851



Courtesy of Library of Congress, “Curious Facts,” *Des Moines Courier*, pp. 2, 9 May 1851

Description

This article published in the *Des Moines Courier* is from 1851. It is taken from the British publication, *Blackwood's Magazine*. The article highlights statistics about the British Isles relating to crime, hunger, immigration and poverty.

[Transcript of “Curious Facts” Newspaper Article](#)

[Printable Excerpt of “Curious Facts” Newspaper Article](#)

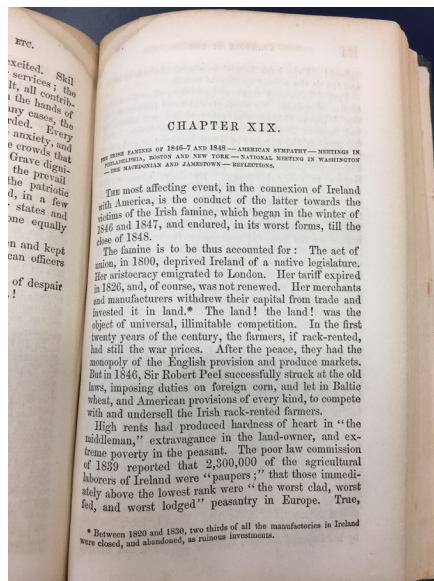
Source-Dependent Questions

- Why do you think the author(s) titled this article, “Curious Facts?”
- Based on the statistics quoted in the article, what can you deduce are the biggest problems facing people in Ireland?
- Why do you think the authors chose to print the facts that they did? What is the connection between, for example, immigration and crime? Starvation and crime? Rent and starvation? What patterns do you notice regarding these curious facts?
- How might statistics like these help you understand why people leave their homeland and immigrate to a new country?

Citation Information

“Curious Facts,” *Des Moines Courier*, pp. 2, 9 May 1851. Courtesy of Library of Congress

Chapter XIX from "A History of the Irish Settlers in North America from the Earliest Period to the Census of 1850," 1852



Courtesy of State Historical Society of Iowa, McGee, Thomas D'Arcy, "A History of the Irish Settlers in North America from the Earliest Period to the Census of 1850," 1852

Description

Thomas McGee wrote this book in 1852 describing the experiences of the Irish in the United States. McGee was in a unique position to write this book. He was involved in a plot to create a revolution in Ireland, but moved to the United States when it failed. After a time, he became disillusioned with republicanism and then moved to Canada where he supported British rule.

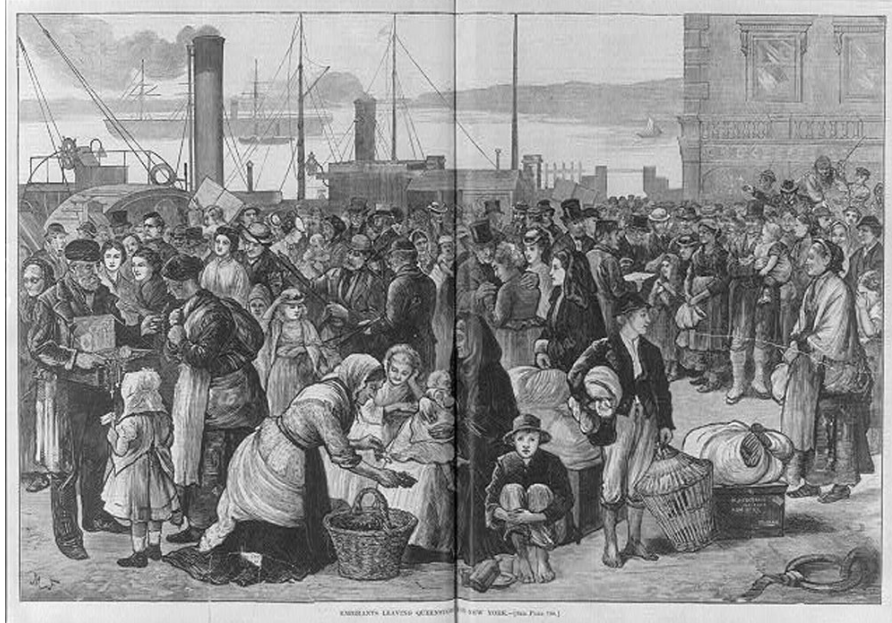
[Full Transcript of Chapter XIX from "A History of the Irish Settlers in North America from the Earliest Period to the Census of 1850"](#)

[Transcribed Excerpt from Chapter XIX of "A History of the Irish Settlers in North America from the Earliest Period to the Census of 1850"](#)

Source-Dependent Questions

- How does the author connect political events like the Act of Union and an expired tariff to famine in Ireland?
- What is the author's opinion of the ruling class? How do you know?
- How would you describe the state of Ireland's poor?
- The author states that, "In August authentic cases of death by famine ... thrilled the country, like an ill-wind." What can you infer about the author's meaning of the word "thrilled?"
- What is the author's opinion of the United States? How do you know?
- How do you think the events described in this excerpt led Irish people to immigrate to the United States?

“Emigrants leaving Queenstown [Ireland] for New York,” 1874



Courtesy of Library of Congress, “Emigrants leaving Queenstown [Ireland] for New York,” 1874

Description

This engraving from 1874 depicts a scene of the Irish preparing to embark on a ship headed to New York. The artist shows people of all classes of society and various levels of enthusiasm about the voyage. The 1874 scene shows that people continued to leave Ireland and immigrate to America after the potato famine.

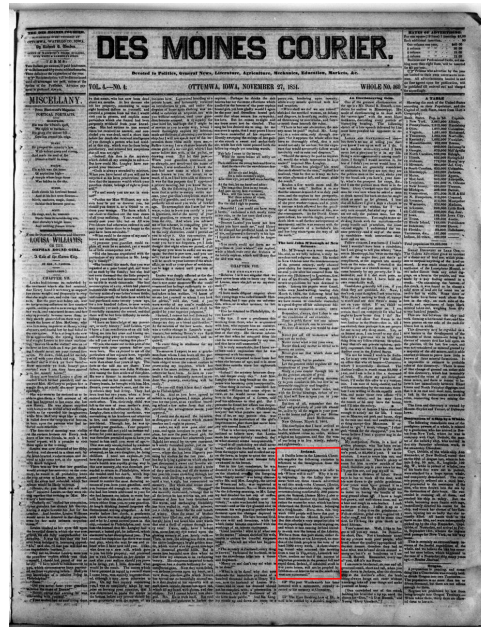
Source-Dependent Questions

- How would you describe the expression on the face of the boy in the foreground of the image? Compare it with expressions on the faces of others in the image. Does anything else about the boy stand out to you?
- Notice what the people in the image are carrying. How does this compare with what you might carry if you were moving to a new country?
- Divide the image into sections and study each section individually. Does anything in the image give you evidence about why these people are immigrating? Why or why not?

Citation Information

“Emigrants leaving Queenstown [Ireland] for New York,” 1874. Courtesy of Library of Congress

"Ireland," November 27, 1851



Courtesy of Library of Congress, "Ireland," *Des Moines Courier*, pp. 1, 27 November 1851

Description

This newspaper article from 1851 describes a desperate situation in Ireland, which is rapidly losing population. The letter originally appeared in the *Limerick Chronicle* and was reprinted in the *Des Moines Courier*.

[Transcript of "Ireland" Newspaper Article](#)

[Printable Excerpt of "Ireland" Newspaper Article](#)

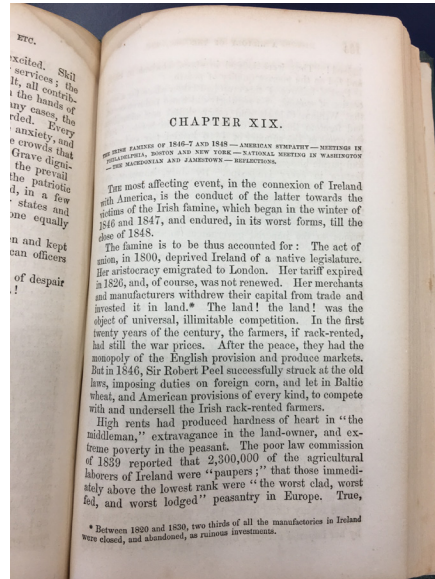
Source-Dependent Questions

- What does the migration of people from Ireland mean to Ireland, according to the author? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.
- How long does the author believe the migration from Ireland will continue?
- Why do you think the author felt the need to describe the ships sailing from Ireland?
- What adjectives would you use to describe the author's feelings about the future of Ireland?

Citation Information

"Ireland," *Des Moines Courier*, pp. 1, 27 November 1851. Courtesy of Library of Congress

Chapter XXV from "A History of the Irish Settlers in North America from the Earliest Period to the Census of 1850," 1852



Courtesy of State Historical Society of Iowa, McGee, Thomas D'Arcy, "A History of the Irish Settlers in North America from the Earliest Period to the Census of 1850," 1852

Description

Thomas McGee was an Irish immigrant to America who wrote about the experiences immigrants had. He eventually moved to Canada because he didn't think the Irish would ever be treated fairly in the United States. His book chronicled the state of the Irish.

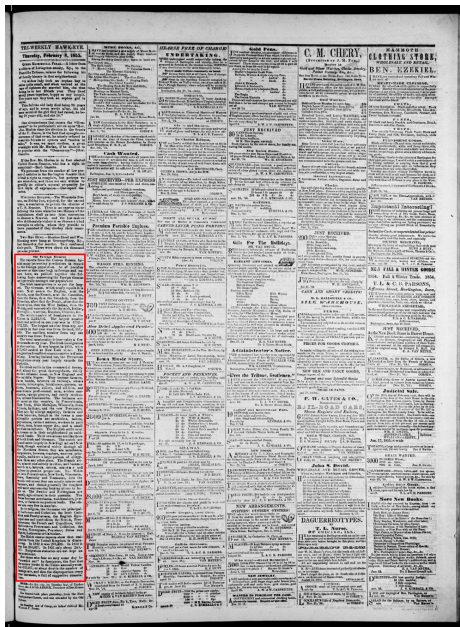
[Full Transcript of Ch. XXV from "A History of the Irish Settlers in North America from the Earliest Period to the Census of 1850"](#)

[Transcribed Excerpt from Ch. XXV of "A History of the Irish Settlers in North America from the Earliest Period to the Census of 1850"](#)

Source-Dependent Questions

- What role does the author say the Irish have had in the wealth of the United States? What does the author offer as proof?
- In what ways have the Irish visibly impacted the United States?
- "Iowa excels them all" is what the author says. What is the author referring to?
- How does the author think immigrants can prosper in America?
- Based on this text, what would you say is the greatest impact of the Irish on America? How does this text either support or contradict what the author of "[The Foreign Element](#)" says?

“The Foreign Element,” February 8, 1855



Courtesy of Library of Congress, “The Foreign Element,” Burlington Tri-Weekly Hawk-Eye, pp. 3, 8 February 1855

Description

This *Burlington Tri-Weekly Hawk-Eye* newspaper article from 1855 details the statistics regarding immigrants from Germany and Ireland. It gives information regarding the jobs immigrants performed.

[Transcript of “The Foreign Element” Newspaper Article](#)

[Printable Excerpt of “The Foreign Newspaper Article](#)

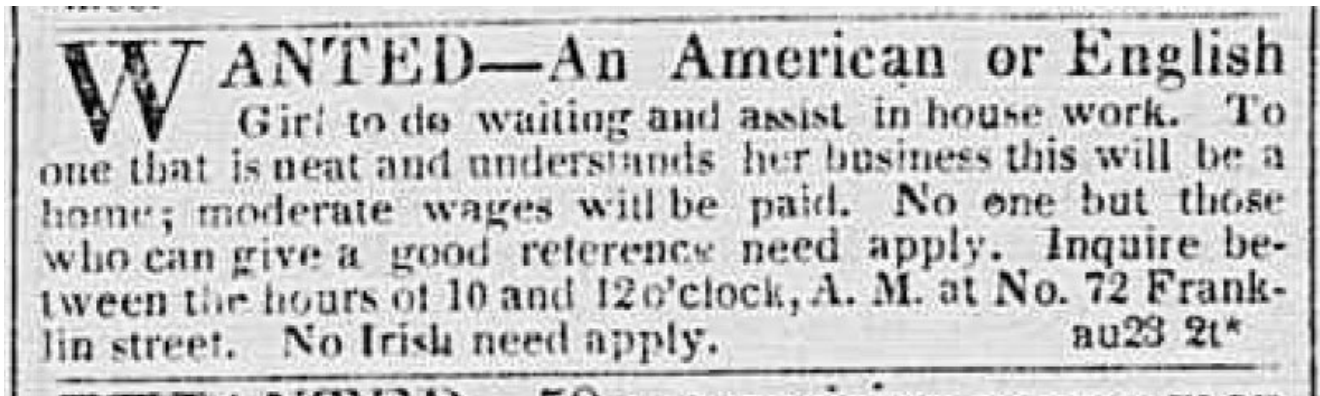
Source-Dependent Questions

- What prediction does the title “The Foreign Element” lead you to make about the author’s opinion toward immigrants? Do the author’s words support your prediction? Cite evidence from the text.
- Given the list of jobs immigrants perform, what can you infer about the importance of immigrant labor in the United States?
- The author of this article says that “The Irish settle in the commercial towns ... chiefly on the Atlantic coast” and [Thomas McGee](#) says that “The six states carved out of the north-western Indian territories since the beginning of this century, have been the favorite goals of all recent emigration...” Which source do you think has the most compelling evidence to support its claim? Explain.

Citation Information

“The Foreign Element,” *Burlington Tri-Weekly Hawk-Eye*, pp. 3, 8 February 1855. Courtesy of Library of Congress

“Wanted - An American or English Girl” Newspaper Advertisement, August 24, 1842



Courtesy of Library of Congressm “Wanted - An American or English Girl,” *New-York Daily Tribune*, pp. 1, 24 August 1842

Description

This “Wanted” advertisement from the *New-York Daily Tribune* in 1842 is for a servant to do housework. It specifically says that people from Ireland should not apply.

[Transcript of “Wanted - An American or English Girl” Newspaper Advertisement](#)

[Printable Excerpt of “Wanted - An American or English Girl” Newspaper Advertisement](#)

Source-Dependent Questions

- The Irish potato famine occurred in the late 1840s. This ad is from 1842. What can you infer about the timeline of Irish immigration to America from the date of this newspaper?
- Using this source and the advertisement [“Coachman Wanted,”](#) what attitude toward the Irish do you see? What, if anything, do you think this tells you about prejudice regarding immigrants?

Citation Information

“Wanted - An American or English Girl,” *New-York Daily Tribune*, pp. 1, 24 August 1842. Courtesy of Library of Congress

“Coachman Wanted” Newspaper Advertisement, May 14, 1852



Courtesy of Library of Congress, “Coachman Wanted,” *New-York Daily Tribune*, pp. 1, 14 May 1852

Description

Wanted advertisements in newspapers throughout the Antebellum period explicitly told jobseekers who was and who was not an acceptable applicant. This ad is noteworthy because, during the tumultuous 1850s, it shows several distinct prejudices.

[Transcript of “Coachman Wanted” Newspaper Advertisement](#)

[Printable Excerpt of “Coachman Wanted” Newspaper Advertisement](#)

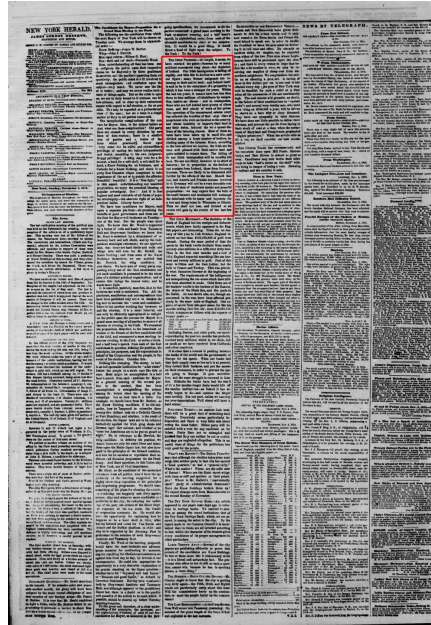
Source-Dependent Questions

- The ad specifically seeks out African-American applicants. Given what you know about the United States in 1852, speculate as to why.
- How does this ad and the [“Wanted - An American or English Girl” ad](#) demonstrate a prejudice against certain groups of people?
- How would you feel if you were an immigrant from Ireland looking for a job, but were told that “No Irish need apply.” Speculate about how such limits may have impacted the lives of Irish immigrants. Give at least two specific examples.

Citation Information

“Coachman Wanted,” *The New-York Daily Tribune*, pp. 1, 14 May 1852. Courtesy of Library of Congress

“The Irish Problem,” November 5, 1854



Courtesy of Library of Congress, “The Irish Problem,” *The New York Herald*, pp. 4, 5 November 1854

Description

This article from *The New York Herald* in 1854 describes a decline in immigration from Ireland. The author hints that this could potentially lead to a shortage of labor in the United States. The author, however, believes that unrest in Germany will likely lead to a rise in immigration from Europe and that a labor shortage will be avoided.

[Transcript of “The Irish Problem” Newspaper Article](#)

[Printable Excerpt of “The Irish Problem” Newspaper Article](#)

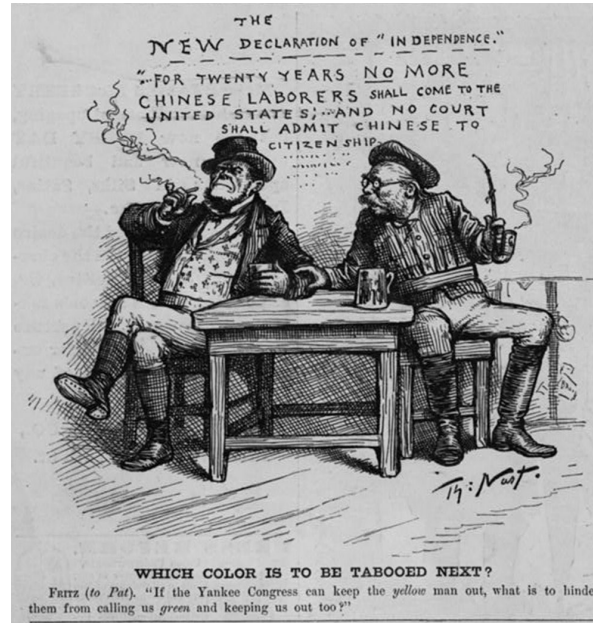
Source-Dependent Questions

- How does the author describe the condition of Ireland? How does this article from 1854 compare with the description of Ireland from the [1851 article](#). Cite evidence from the text(s).
- According to this author, what do Irish immigrants provide to the United States?
- Why does the author believe the decline in immigrants from Ireland will not hurt the United States in the long run? Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.
- Based on this article and other sources in this set, what can you conclude about the importance of immigrant labor to the United States?

Citation Information

“The Irish Problem,” *The New York Herald*, pp. 4, 5 November 1854. Courtesy of Library of Congress

“Which Color is to be Tabooed Next?” 1882



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Nast, Thomas, "Which color is to be tabooed next?" Harper's Weekly, 1882

Description

This political cartoon by famed political cartoonist, Thomas Nast, was published in 1882 in response to the [Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882](#). It shows two men of Irish descent wondering about what group might be excluded next.

[Transcript of "Which Color is to be Tabooed Next?" Political Cartoon](#)

Source-Dependent Questions

- The [Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882](#) stopped all immigration of laborers from China for a 10-year period. What does the caption imply about this law and what might happen?
- What stereotypes of Irishmen does Thomas Nast use in this cartoon?
- Why do you think Nast used Irishmen in a political cartoon about immigrants from China?
- Refer to the advertisements "[Wanted - An American or English Girl](#)" and "[Coachman Wanted.](#)" How does Nast's cartoon reflect the prejudice shown by the employers who placed those advertisements?

Citation Information

Nast, Thomas, "Which Color is to be Tabooed Next?" *Harper's Weekly*, 1882. Courtesy of Library of Congress