

EMIGRATION TO AMERICA - PART II

Not all Irish came to America with little more than a dream. Some stepped off the boat strong and healthy with a little money to spend. Those folks quickly sized up the situation in the cities as less than ideal and struck out for a more pleasant place to settle. Many went west to California while others made their homes in the industrial areas of the Midwest and some went south.

In the southern United States, many newly transported Irishmen became traveling traders. According to Cherokee law, the Irish traders were not allowed to conduct their business with the Cherokee people unless they were "part of the family." So, out of practicality and in the name of capitalism, the Irishmen took Cherokee brides so that they could freely trade with all of their new "relatives." The result of such couplings of Irish paternity and Cherokee maternity created offspring with an interesting combination of physical features. They are frequently tall, lean and broad-shouldered. Although their hair is dark and straight, their skin color is very pale and often their eyes are light blue, green or gold. They have high cheekbones, strong jaws and fiery dispositions to match. To this day in the south, you can still find descendants of this blending of Irish and Cherokee. Some people say this may be where the expression "Black Irish" comes from.

Irishmen had a tough time finding jobs as their main job in Ireland had been growing potatoes. Usually the jobs available were hard, dangerous labor, such as construction, and paid low wages. When work did come eventually, it was the kind with which heroes were made. The young American nation needed to grow and the Irish lads were ready to build. Their hands, sweat, strong backs, blood and sometimes their lives were the gifts they gave to their new country as they worked on the railroads, bridges, buildings, dams and canals. Simply put, no one worked harder at the building of America than her Irish sons.

Miles of railroad track in the U.S. went from 3,000 to 30,000. The Irishmen laid ties and rails from one end of the country to the other and although the work was horribly difficult and infinitely dangerous, many Irishmen chose that life over one in the city tenements. At least they had fresh air to breathe (except in the tunnels) and clear, open spaces. Many men died blasting mountains and digging tunnels through solid rock. They also dug the labyrinth of subway tunnels below and around New York City. Miles and miles of subway passages were hollowed from the earth by these laborers providing for 710 miles of track. Today, one out of nine of all Americans using mass transit to reach their workplaces ride through tunnels dug by Irish laborers.

One of the engineering wonders of its day was New York City's Brooklyn Bridge, which was built chiefly with Irish labor. Many Irishmen died in its construction, but because of the Brooklyn Bridge, New York was able to expand through Brooklyn into Queens and onto Long Island raising both the city's population as well as its work force and economic status. The Irish donated their hard-earned money generously to build churches in their areas. Although their donations were meager, they were plentiful, and some of their structures were beautiful, such as New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral. Not only were the monetary donations Irish, but much of the labor involved in the building of St. Patrick's was done by Irish hands.

as well. After a day's work, an Irish man or woman could enter one of the many elegant churches for a quiet hour of prayer knowing that, at least in part, it belonged to them.

The Irish women had brought with them many marketable skills. From an early age, Irish girls were taught to cook, sew, clean and take care of the other children. Many of the Irish women worked outside the home serving the British on their estates. They were quite familiar with the workings of a staff inside a great house and the personal needs of its mistress. At that time, even middle-class Americans had at least one female domestic to help with the housework and to care for their children. Unlike their rambunctious men, Irish women had a reputation for having quiet, gentle spirits. They soon developed a reputation for being excellent domestics and every New York lady and Boston socialite were raving about her Irish help.

By the 1860's, ocean-going vessels powered by steam were in full swing, and tickets aboard these ships were affordable to more of the emigrants. Often the money for the journey was provided by a relative in the United States who had previously made the crossing. The more comfortable and safe trip was reduced to a relatively short 10 days. The Irish continued to make the trip until there were more here than there. The flood of Irish immigrants eventually slowed, but the Irish are still coming to America where they have added and continue to add so much of their particular magic to our melting pot.



See [The Complete Idiot's Guide to Irish History and Culture](#)

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