

The History Place™

Irish Potato Famine

Coffin Ships



During the Famine period, an estimated half-million Irish were evicted from their cottages. Unscrupulous landlords used two methods to remove their penniless tenants. The first involved applying for a legal judgment against the male head of a family owing back-rent. After the local barrister pronounced judgment, the man would be thrown in jail and his wife and children dumped out on the streets. A 'notice to appear' was usually enough to cause most pauper families to flee and they were handed out by the hundreds.

The second method was for the landlord to simply pay to send pauper families overseas to British North America. Landlords would first make phony promises of money, food and clothing, then pack the half-naked people in overcrowded British sailing ships, poorly built and often unseaworthy, that became known as coffin ships.

The first coffin ships headed for Quebec, Canada. The three thousand mile journey, depending on winds and the captain's skill, could take from 40 days to three months. Upon arrival in the Saint Lawrence River, the ships were supposed to be inspected for disease and any sick passengers removed to quarantine facilities on Grosse Isle, a small island thirty miles downstream from Quebec City.

But in the spring of 1847, shipload after shipload of fevered Irish arrived, quickly overwhelming the small medical inspection facility, which only had 150 beds. By June, 40 vessels containing 14,000 Irish immigrants waited in a line extending two miles down the St. Lawrence. It took up to five days to see a doctor, many of whom were becoming ill from contact with the typhus-infected passengers. By the summer, the line of ships had grown several miles long. A fifteen-day general quarantine was then imposed for all of the waiting ships. Many healthy Irish thus succumbed to typhus as they were forced to remain in their lice-infested holds. With so many dead on board the waiting ships, hundreds of bodies were simply dumped overboard into the St. Lawrence.

Others, half-alive, were placed in small boats and then deposited on the beach at Grosse Isle, left to crawl to the hospital on their hands and knees if they could manage. Thousands of Irish, ill with typhus and dysentery, eventually wound up in hastily constructed wooden fever sheds. These makeshift hospitals, badly understaffed and unsanitary, simply became places to die, with corpses piled "like cordwood" in nearby mass graves. Those who couldn't get into the hospital died along the roadsides. In one case, an orphaned Irish boy walking along the road with other boys sat down for a moment under a tree to rest and promptly died on the spot.

The quarantine efforts were soon abandoned and the Irish were sent on to their next destination without any medical inspection or treatment. From Grosse Isle, the Irish were given free passage up the St. Lawrence to Montreal and cities such as Kingston and Toronto. The crowded open-aired river barges used to transport them exposed the fair-skinned Irish to all-day-long summer sun causing many bad sunburns. At night, they laid down close to each other to ward off the chilly air, spreading more lice and fever.

Many pauper families had been told by their landlords that once they arrived in Canada, an agent would meet them and pay out between two and five pounds depending on the size of the family. But no agents were ever found. Promises of money, food and clothing had been utterly false. Landlords knew that once the paupers arrived in Canada there was virtually no way for them to ever return to Ireland and make a claim. Thus they had promised them anything just to get them out of the country.

Montreal received the biggest influx of Irish during this time. Many of those arriving were quite ill from typhus and long-term malnutrition. Montreal's limited medical facilities at Point St. Charles were quickly overwhelmed. Homeless Irish wandered the countryside begging for help

as temperatures dropped and the frosty Canadian winter set in. But they were shunned everywhere by Canadians afraid of contracting fever.

Of the 100,000 Irish that sailed to British North America in 1847, an estimated one out of five died from disease and malnutrition, including over five thousand at Grosse Isle.

Up to half of the men that survived the journey to Canada walked across the border to begin their new lives in America. They had no desire to live under the Union Jack flag in sparsely populated British North America. They viewed the United States with its anti-British tradition and its bustling young cities as the true land of opportunity. Many left their families behind in Canada until they had a chance to establish themselves in the U.S.

Americans, unfortunately, not only had an anti-British tradition dating back to the Revolutionary era, but also had an anti-Catholic tradition dating back to the Puritan era. America in the 1840s was a nation of about 23 million inhabitants, mainly Protestant. Many of the Puritan descendants now viewed the growing influx of Roman Catholic Irish with increasing dismay.

One way to limit immigration was to make it more expensive to get to America. Ports along the eastern seaboard of the U.S. required a bond to be posted by the captain of a ship guaranteeing that his passengers would not become wards of the city. Passenger fares to the U.S. in 1847 were up to three times higher than fares to Canada. The British government intentionally kept fares to Quebec low to encourage the Irish to populate Canada and also to discourage them from emigrating to England.

Passenger Acts

American ships were held to higher standards than British ships by the U.S. Passenger Acts, a set of laws passed by Congress regulating the number of passengers ships coming to America could carry as well as their minimal accommodations. Congress reacted to the surge of Irish immigration by tightening the laws, reducing the number of passengers allowed per ship, thereby increasing fares. America, congressmen had complained, was becoming Europe's "poor house."

British shipping laws, by contrast, were lax. Ships of every shape and size sailed from Liverpool and other ports crammed full of people up to double each ship's capacity. In one case, an During the trans-Atlantic voyage, British ships were only required to supply 7 lbs. of food per week per passenger. Most passengers, it was assumed, would bring along their own food for the journey. But most of the poor Irish boarded ships with no food, depending entirely on the pound-a-day handout which amounted to starvation rations. Food on board was also haphazardly cooked in makeshift brick fireplaces and was often undercooked, causing upset stomachs and diarrhea.

Many of the passengers were already ill with typhus as they boarded the ships. Before boarding, they had been given the once-over by doctors on shore who usually rejected no one for the trip, even those seemingly on the verge of death. British ships were not required to carry doctors. Anyone that died during the sea voyage was simply dumped overboard, without any religious rites.

Belowdecks, hundreds of men, women and children huddled together in the dark on bare wooden floors with no ventilation, breathing a stench of vomit and the effects of diarrhea amid no sanitary facilities. On ships that actually had sleeping berths, there were no mattresses and the berths were never cleaned. Many sick persons remained in bare wooden bunks lying in their own filth for the entire voyage, too ill to get up.

Another big problem was the lack of good drinking water. Sometimes the water was stored in leaky old wooden casks, or in casks that previously stored wine, vinegar or chemicals which contaminated the water and caused dysentery. Many ships ran out of water long before reaching North America, making life especially miserable for fevered passengers suffering from burning thirsts. Some unscrupulous captains profited by selling large amounts of alcohol to the passengers, resulting in "totally depraved and corrupted" behavior among them.

Refuge in Britain

The poorest of the poor never made it to North America. They fled Irish estates out of fear of imprisonment then begged all the way to Dublin or other seaports on the East Coast of Ireland. Once there, they boarded steamers and crossed the Irish Sea to Liverpool, Glasgow, and South Wales. It was a short trip, just two or three hours and cost only a few shillings. Pauper families sometimes traveled for free as human ballast on empty coal ships. Others were given fare money by landlords hoping to get rid of them cheaply. Relief funds intended for the purchase of food were sometimes diverted to pay for the fares.

For many Irishmen, crossing the sea to England was a familiar journey since they regularly worked in the harvest fields of England as seasonal laborers. But for their wives and children, it was a jarring experience. Crewmen scorned and herded them like animals onto crammed decks until the boat was dangerously overloaded. In one case, a crowded steamer heading for Liverpool arrived with 72 dead aboard. The captain had ordered the hatches battened down during a storm at sea and they had all suffocated.

Despite the dangers, the Irish knew that once they landed on Britain's shores they would not starve to death. Unlike Ireland, food handouts were freely available throughout the country. The quality of the food was also superior to the meager rations handed out in Ireland's soup kitchens and workhouses.

The Irish first headed for Liverpool, a city with a pre-famine population of about 250,000, many of whom were unskilled laborers. During the first wave of famine emigration, from January to June of 1847, an estimated 300,000 destitute Irish arrived in Liverpool, overwhelming the city. The financial burden of feeding the Irish every day soon brought the city to the brink of ruin. Sections of the city featuring cheap lodging houses became jammed. Overflow crowds moved into musty cellars, condemned and abandoned buildings, or anywhere they could just lie down. Amid these densely packed, unsanitary conditions, typhus once again reared its ugly head and an epidemic followed, accompanied by an outbreak of dysentery.

The cheap lodging houses were also used by scores of Irish waiting to embark on ships heading for North America. Three out of four Irish sailing for North America departed from the seaport at

Liverpool. Normally they had to sleep over for a night or two until their ship was ready to sail. Many of these emigrants contracted typhus in the rundown, lice-infested lodging houses, then boarded ships, only to spend weeks suffering from burning fever out at sea.

On June 21, 1847, the British government, intending to aid besieged Liverpool, passed a tough new law allowing local authorities to deport homeless Irish back to Ireland. Within days, the first boatloads of paupers were being returned to Dublin and Cork, then abandoned on the docks. Orders for removal were issued by the hundreds. About 15,000 Irish were dragged out of filthy cellars and lodging houses and sent home even if they were ill with fever.

By the fall of 1847, the numbers of Irish entering Liverpool had slowed considerably and the housing crisis abated. Glasgow, the second major port of entry, also resorted to deporting the Irish due to similar overcrowding and fever outbreaks. The Irish then headed into the Lowlands and Edinburgh where yet another fever outbreak occurred. Everyone feared fever and thus shunned the Irish no matter how much they pleaded for help. Working men also viewed them as rivals for unskilled jobs.

To avoid deportation, the Irish moved further into the interior of England, Scotland and Wales. But wherever they went they were unwelcome. For the unfortunate Irish deported back home, the worst was yet to come.