Lesson 3– The Irish Potato Famine of 1846

Objectives - Students will:

- determine the reasons why Irish citizens immigrated to the US,
- examine an 1847 newspaper clipping and infer New Yorkers' opinions of the new immigrants,
- create a cause and effect chart,
- write a letter to a New York newspaper describing the conditions in a town in Ireland.

Materials

- Student Activity Sheet 3 – New York Sun

Background Information

During the winter of 1845-1846 a severe blight struck the Irish Potato crop. Potatoes, the staple of the Irish diet as well as a means of barter and paying rent, turned black and rotted in the ground. Those that ate the rotted produce became ill, spreading diseases such as cholera and typhus. Without potatoes to pay their landlords, peasants were evicted with no means of sustenance. Thousands crowded into "workhouses", but found no relief. In order to survive, there was only one choice. Leave Ireland!

DESTITUTION IN IRELAND. — FAILURE OF THE POTATO CROP.

In the six weeks it took to cross the Atlantic Ocean, thousands of Irish died of dysentery, typhus and malnutrition. In one year alone, 1847, more than 40,000 Irish immigrants died aboard ships. Between 1846 and 1851 more than one million Irish immigrated to the United States and Canada. The majority that came to the United States (75%), landed in New York City. In the year 1847 alone, approximately 52,000 Irish landed in NYC. Germans were the only immigrant group to top this number, with 53,000 immigrants arriving that same year.

By the time the Famine had ended, the population of Ireland had dropped from eight million to five million. Many have blamed Great Britain for their role in this famine, charging them with indifference to the suffering and starvation that occurred under their reign.

Teaching Sequence

1. Understanding the Famine
   a. Lead a discussion on the Irish Potato Famine, describing the hardships faced by Irish peasants. Define blight, a disease that withers and destroys plants, and explain how the potato was the staple for the Irish diet.
2. Reading a newspaper excerpt
   a. Distribute Activity Sheet 3. Allow students time to read the quote and answer the questions.
   b. Have volunteers read their responses to the class.

Extension Activities

- Create a cause and effect chart.

Cause	Effect
Potato blight	
Poverty	
Immigration	
Life in United States	

- Students write an editorial to a New York newspaper describing the conditions in your town in Ireland. (Students need to look at a map of Ireland and choose a real town)

- Students research diseases that many immigrants contracted such as
    - "ship fever" – also known as typhus
    - dysentery
    - cholera
    - malnutrition

- Read the quote:

  "*Ireland is in your hands, in your power. If you do not save her, she cannot save herself. I solemnly call upon you to recollect that I predict with the sincerest conviction that a quarter of her population will perish unless you come to her relief."*

  - Daniel O'Connell to the British House of Commons, 1847.

  Ask students to write what they think the quote means. Did Mr. O'Connell's prediction come true?

Vocabulary

paupers – very poor people.

melancholy – sad, gloomy

cargo – the freight carried by a ship or plane

miseries – great pain or distress

to and fro – from one place to another

Activity Sheet 3

New York Sun

Between Decks in an Emigrant Ship –
"Feeding Time: A Sketch from Life" Harper's Weekly

The following newspaper clipping written in 1847, describes the conditions aboard a passenger ship arriving in New York from Ireland.

Excerpt from May 19, 1847 *Cork Examiner*
SUFFERINGS OF EMIGRANTS IN NEW YORK—The paupers who have recently arrived from Europe give a most melancholy account of their sufferings. Upwards of eighty individuals, almost dead with the ship fever, were landed from one ship alone, while twenty-seven of the cargo died on the passage, and were thrown into the sea. They were one hundred days tossing to and fro upon the ocean, and for the last twenty days their only food consisted of a few ounces of meal per day, and their only water was obtained from the clouds.
The miseries which these people suffer are brought upon themselves, for they have no business to leave their country without at least a sufficient quantity of food to feed them while making the passage. —*New York Sun*

1. Based on this document and what you have learned about the famine, why are the passengers in this ship called paupers? _____
_____
_____
_____

2. How many passengers were aboard this ship when they first set sail from Europe? How do you know this? _____
_____
_____

3. How long was this ship at sea? _____

4. How long did the passengers go with little food and only rainwater to drink? _____
Why do you think this happened? _____
_____
_____
_____

5. What does the writer of this article feel about Irish immigration? _____
_____
_____
_____
_____