

(THE RHODE ISLAND IRISH FAMINE MEMORIAL)

This memorial is dedicated to the victims and survivors of the Great Irish Famine of 1845-1851. It also pays tribute to their immigrant descendants who, generation after generation, have so greatly enriched the life of America in general and of Rhode Island in particular.

The Great Famine was the most important event in Nineteenth Century Ireland. In the seven terrible years between 1845 and 1851, the potato crop, on which a large majority of the Irish people depended for their survival, failed completely or partially during each harvest season. The result of this devastating crop failure, caused by a disease commonly called "the Blight," was that at least one million men, women, and children died of outright starvation or of the epidemic diseases which came with it. Owing to the Famine, the population of Ireland, a northwest European island country slightly smaller than the State of Maine, was reduced by death or emigration from an estimated 8.5 million people to only 6 million.

At the time of the Famine, and for centuries before it, Ireland was not an independent country free to determine its own destiny. By virtue of English military conquest, Ireland had become part of what came to be known as the British Empire. In the process, many Irish Catholics were forced to become tenant farmers or landless laborers who survived by growing their potatoes on small, poor quality plots of land.

When the potato crop first failed late in 1845 Britain's Conservative Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel, ordered food supplies sent to Ireland for distribution to the hungry at low cost. Peel believed that he had some moral obligation to help Ireland in the time of its supposed temporary distress. But this conviction was not altogether shared by the Liberal Lord John Russell who succeeded Peel as British Prime Minister in 1846. Russell and Sir Charles Trevelyan, his chief economic advisor for Ireland, believed that their government should take only a limited part in relieving disasters like the Great Famine. They thought that the private charity of individuals and philanthropic organizations should shoulder the burden of Famine relief. Accordingly, religious groups such as the Society of Friends (the Quakers) came forward to offer unconditional aid to Ireland.

Above all, Russell believed in protecting the rights of private property owners and in the promotion of a free market economy in both Britain and Ireland. In fact the Government believed so strongly in the economic principle of noninterference in trade that it allowed the export from Ireland of abundant supplies of meat and grain during all the Famine years. Policies such as these outraged public opinion around the world and forced the British Government, eventually, to provide direct Famine relief.

Early in 1847, "Black '47" as this year is known in Irish history, the British Government reluctantly established soup kitchens throughout Ireland to feed people at public expense. Remarkably, these soup kitchens provided food for three million people per day during the

months of their operation. Thus Britain demonstrated that it could deal effectively with the Famine when it was forced by undeniable circumstances and world public opinion to do so. But at the first opportunity, Russell and Trevelyan closed the soup kitchens and left Ireland to look after itself during the remainder of the Famine. The subsequent deaths of hundreds of thousands of Irish people were the responsibility of the British Government and the direct result of its callous indifference to Ireland's plight, especially between 1847 and 1851.

During the later years of the Famine many survivors were too weak or sick to work and so they could not pay the rent which they owed to their landlords. It is estimated that nearly fifty thousand entire families were evicted from their homes for nonpayment of rent between 1849 and 1851 alone. For most of these people, emigration was the only alternative to death from starvation or disease on the roads or in the grim and deadly government-sponsored "workhouses" in Ireland.

So it was that many thousands of sick, hungry, dispossessed people -- often bringing with them little more than the clothes on their backs -- boarded ships bound for the United States or other countries. These vessels, often called "coffin ships," were sometimes small, unseaworthy, unsanitary and greatly overcrowded. Numerous deaths from malnutrition and disease were not uncommon among the Irish passengers bound for America in the wake of the Great Famine. It is not surprising that an Irish poet, John Boyle O'Reilly, called the Atlantic Ocean "The Bowl of Tears." A new and uncertain life awaited the survivors of this difficult voyage. To our benefit, many of them chose to make that life here in Rhode Island.

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THE IRISH IN RHODE ISLAND

Some Irish-Catholic immigrants came to Rhode Island before the Great Famine. Several thousand worked on public construction projects like **Fort Adams** and the **Blackstone Canal** in the 1830s. Despite backbreaking labor, they earned only a thin slice of economic salvation in exchange for a heavy loaf of discrimination. The state's Yankee population, descendants of earlier English settlers, despised the Irish here as much as they had within the confines of the British Isles. Ancient prejudices reappeared.

In 1842 a civil upheaval in Rhode Island—the **Dorr Rebellion**—aimed to expand the right to vote to most white males, including Irish immigrants, by ending a property qualification that disqualified a majority of citizens. The reformers lost and it took more than a century to eliminate all voting barriers. The editor of the *Providence Journal*, also a United States Senator, wrote that Irish-Catholics in the state remained foreigners and vassals of the Catholic Church. He concluded that they “cannot be assimilated.”

The **Famine Generation** that sought refuge here in the 1840s and 1850s, impoverished and unskilled, supercharged the existing dislike of the Irish by their increasing presence. “**No Irish Need Apply**” signs pock-marked many of the state's factories and workshops, segregating these immigrant families into dead-end jobs, poverty, and drinking. Our ancestors filled the poor houses, orphanages, and unmarked graves.

As their numbers grew, however, the Irish reset their social compass in this new land. They built magnificent places of worship, established literary and temperance societies, and flooded the Democratic Party with organizers and orators. They marched proudly in an almost unbroken succession of **St. Patrick's Day** parades, joined nationalist and independence groups to assist Irish freedom, and welcomed revolutionaries and politicians from the “Old Sod” who made obligatory stops here on national tours.

Irish women found sustenance as seamstresses, textile mill operatives, domestic servants, and teachers. They became Trans-Atlantic lifelines, sending donations back home to support the struggle for independence and finance the emigration of relatives. Irish men continued to toil as laborers, factory hands, rubber workers, iron molders, and even coal miners. Both genders joined an array of labor unions that provided economic security on the long punishing journey to social respectability

Before the dawn of the twentieth century, the Irish became the largest ethnic group in Rhode Island, the nation's first state with a Catholic majority. Legendary political figures stood on the shoulders of their common countrymen to bring power, patronage, and pride to the state's urban corridors. During the 1930s the offspring of the **Great Famine** faced the **Great Depression**. Nationally, they supported President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. Locally they participated in the **Bloodless Revolution in 1935** that constitutionally unseated the same politicians in charge of the state since the **Dorr War in 1842**. A constellation of Hibernian figures, weaned on the legend

of the Irish diaspora but trained in American ways, broke the final barriers of discrimination and eventually filled every political office and occupational niche.

In 1906 a famine refugee, **Patrick J. McCarthy**, became the first and only immigrant mayor of Providence. He often ended his speeches with an impromptu rendition of the Irish patriotic song, *The Wearing of the Green*. When he died in 1921, McCarthy was buried under a Celtic cross in St. Francis Cemetery in Pawtucket. Inscribed on a copper plate embedded in the headstone was a remarkable story.

McCarthy recounted that “landlordism and the penal laws” forced his family from Ireland. The Mayor, in death, thanked his adopted homeland for accepting him. He concluded with an unusual plea—a voice from the tomb. He beseeched Irish descendants to never forget the sacrifices of Gaelic pioneers in the state: ***“May their history be written that future generations may learn of the heroic efforts and suffering of Irish Catholics at home and abroad for faith and fatherland.”***

As you read these words in this hallowed place, you help fulfill McCarthy’s last wish: to keep the story of our ancestors fresh and alive in spirit though the bodies have turned to dust. We pay homage to Mayor McCarthy who made it in Rhode Island in his own lifetime—and the tens of thousands who waited in ethnic purgatory for a descendant to carry the Irish-American dream to fruition. They toiled incessantly so that we, their progeny in Rhode Island, could reach the promised land. This monument, and the energy and research that made it possible, marks the fulfillment of that vision.

The greater the glory to Irish-Americans in Rhode Island today, who, in the name of their forebears, stand against intolerance, discrimination, and hunger suffered by the latest immigrants to our shores.

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