

and emotionally they were back home in Ireland.” Kerby Miller may overstate the case, but his comments help us understand the continuing hold that Ireland and the famine have had on the imaginations of Irish Americans:

First, both collectively and individually the Irish—particularly Irish Catholics—often regarded emigration as involuntary exile, although they expressed that attitude with varying degrees of consistency, intensity, and sincerity. Second, this outlook reflected a distinctive Irish worldview—the impact of a series of interactions among culture, class, and historical circumstance upon Irish character. Finally, both the exile motif and its underlying causes led Irish emigrants to interpret experience and adapt to American life in ways which were often alienating and sometimes dysfunctional, albeit traditional, expedient, and conducive to the survival of Irish-American nationalism.⁶⁹

In the decades immediately following upon the famine, Irish nationalism and resentment of the British blossomed. Nationalism flourished as much in Irish America as in the old soil. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn was born near the end of the century in New Hampshire, and the politics to which she refers are of a later era, but her description of the hold of Ireland on the Irish diaspora is compelling: “The awareness of being Irish came to us as small children, through plaintive song and heroic story. ... As children, we drew in a burning hatred of British rule with our mother’s milk. Until my father died, at over eighty, he never said ‘England’ without adding, ‘God damn her!’”⁷⁰ The rise of an Irish nationalist movement fed the sense of exile, and together those fed a twin consciousness among Irish Americans: Over the generations they became relentlessly American, members of the White race, and very few went back compared to other immigrant groups like the Germans or English. But they maintained a psychic connection with Ireland that led to ongoing involvements, the sending of remittances to even distant relatives, and support for the Irish national cause from the mid-nineteenth century, across the twentieth, and into the twenty-first century.

More than any other immigrant group until the end of the nineteenth century, famine Irish migrants made their new homes in U.S. cities. Four out of five of the Irish-born U.S. population lived in the urbanized states of the industrializing Northeast. Nearly one-third lived in just ten cities (see Table 3.4).

At the time of the famine, the United States was still an agricultural country: 85 percent of the people lived in rural districts. The countryside was where the most attractive opportunities lay. Other groups of immigrants—English, Germans, Ulster Scots—had made a beeline for the hinterlands and taken up land for farming. Not so the famine Irish. Though they came from rural areas in Ireland and had themselves tilled the land, finances trapped them in East Coast cities. Once they hit Boston or Philadelphia or New York, their feet sought out a cheap place to live and a job at whatever wage was available. Thus there grew up vibrant, densely populated Irish neighborhoods in places like Five Points, Manhattan, and Boston’s wharf district. Many—women as well as men—found work in New England and Middle Atlantic factories. Others, particularly women, worked as domestic servants in middle-class Anglo-American households. Some men found jobs digging sewers and canals, or laying railroad track. A few made it out to California in the boom years of that new state. Later, Irish immigrants would figure prominently in the building of the first transcontinental railroad in the 1860s and other pick and shovel work throughout

Table 3.4 Irish-Born in Select U.S. Cities, by Number and Percent of Total City Population, 1860

City	Number	Percent of City Population
New York (incl. Brooklyn)	260,450	24
Philadelphia	95,548	16
Boston	45,991	26
St. Louis	29,926	19
Chicago	19,889	18
Providence	9,534	19
San Francisco	9,363	16
Pittsburgh	9,297	19
Jersey City	7,380	25
Cleveland	5,479	13
Total	492,857	
Total Irish-Born in the U.S.	1,611,304	

Source: Kathleen Neils Conzen, "Irish," in *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 531.

the West. But by far the majority languished in the cities of the East. There, peasants became city people (Figure 3.4). Historian Donald B. Cole described the Irish who came to Lawrence, Massachusetts:

Massed on the decks, the survivors [of the crossing] looked hopefully on the new world as the ship entered Quebec or Boston. Those landing at Quebec found new horrors as unemployment drove them to the long foot journey down through Canada to New England. After months of agony Irish men, women, and children trickled into the mill cities of the Merrimack Valley, one of them Lawrence. The Boston arrivals found the walk or train ride to Lawrence relatively simple. ... Once in the city the Irish flocked to Wards Two and Three, which were soon the most densely populated areas. South of the Common they lived in the mill boarding houses and to the north they settled on the "plains." Many also inhabited a shanty village along the river near the dam. ... The wooden huts above the dam were responsible for the label "shanty" Irish. These were shacks of slabs and unfinished lumber with over-lapping boards for the roofs. Above each roof rose a stovepipe chimney and piled high around the walls was sod for insulation.⁷¹

In such dismal conditions, immigrants from Ireland became the shock troops of the American industrial revolution. In Lawrence and dozens of other cities they found work in textile, shoe, and other factories, laboring seven days a week, ten to twelve hours a day, for pennies per day.⁷²



Figure 3.4 Irish squatters in Central Park.

Sephardim and German Jews

As many as a quarter million Jews migrated from Germany to the United States in the late colonial and early national eras. It would be possible to treat those people as merely a religious subset of the German migration to the United States in those years.⁷³ Certainly, their numbers did not put Jews among the largest groups of people migrating into the United States in this period. Yet it is important to highlight

the ties between this German Jewish migration and the other Jewish migrations that occurred before and after it. Some secularized Jewish radicals who fled the failure of the 1848 revolutions probably saw themselves as simply German immigrants, or as proletarian members of a worldwide working class, or even perhaps as humanists, citizens of the world. But many more people had a strong sense of themselves as Jews. Certainly they were treated that way in Europe, and they continued to be a people somewhat apart from other Whites, and indeed from other German immigrants, once they arrived in America.⁷⁴

The first Jews to come to North America were Sephardim: Spanish and Portuguese Jews fleeing persecution in Europe for the relative safety of America. Coming as early as 1654, they formed outposts of Judaism in places like Rhode Island and New Amsterdam (later New York). These were Orthodox Jews, but possessors of a culture far removed from the life of the Orthodox East European Jews who would come more than a century later. Most Sephardi Jews entered the world of commerce and finance in America. Several, like Haym Solomon and Aaron Lopez, were prominent financiers of the American Revolution. Others fought in that war. At the time of America's first national census in 1790, Jews numbered only 1500 out of 3.9 million Americans. By the early years of the nineteenth century, Sephardi immigration had all but stopped, and Sephardim were fast losing their distinct identity, blending either into the Gentile population or into the mass of Jewish newcomers.⁷⁵

After about 1825, the Sephardim were rapidly overtaken by a wave of Ashkenazi immigrants—members of that other great arm of Judaism in Central and Eastern Europe. In 1840, the American Jewish population stood at about 15,000—a tenfold increase in five decades. In 1848, the population was 50,000; in 1860, over 150,000; and in 1880, over 230,000.⁷⁶ By that time, almost all American Jews were of Germanic origin; even those who came from Hungary, Austria, Bohemia, and western Poland spoke German rather than Ladino, Yiddish, or Hebrew and were influenced by German Jewish culture. The best estimate is that about one-quarter of Germany's 600-odd thousand Jews made their way abroad in the course of the nineteenth century. Some went to England, France, and elsewhere in Europe. But the majority went to the United States. They kept coming from the 1820s through the end of the century, although in the last couple of decades their numbers were dwarfed by rising numbers of Jewish immigrants from farther to the east (see Chapter 5).

These were years of emigration for many sorts of Germans besides Jews—Protestant sectarians, Catholics, Lutherans, political dissidents, and Germans who merely sought a chance at raising their standard of living. Many German Jews were caught up in the latter two movements. Most came to America seeking economic opportunity. Unlike the relatively well-to-do Sephardim, whose family connections stretched to merchant houses all over the Americas, the German Jewish immigrants of the mid-nineteenth century were mainly people of the middle and lower social classes. They came particularly from Bavaria, Baden, Württemberg, and the Palatinate. Many were merchants, peddlers, money lenders, or dealers in cattle or grain. As the agricultural economy declined, their fortunes did, too. Some left the countryside for German cities. This was common for non-Jewish Germans in the same period, but those Gentiles who migrated generally were young, single men going to work in mines and factories, whereas Jews who migrated within Germany did so mainly as whole families and went to work in trade and finance. Other Jews left Germany entirely. In this case, most often a young man would go to seek his fortune, working his way across Germany to Bremen or Hamburg, and then taking ship to

the United States. If he prospered, he would then send back to Germany for parents, brothers, and sisters.

Some Jews left Germany for specifically Jewish reasons, fleeing the humiliations and economic restrictions that were the lot of their people in Europe. The rise of German nationalism brought new difficulties for Jews all across Central Europe. Laws in various localities restricted Jews' rights to marry and to reside in the places of their birth. Between 1819 and 1848, riots targeted Jewish neighborhoods in Baden, Frankfurt, Munich, and other cities, burning homes and looting shops. In 1840, the *Israelitische Annalen* wrote from Swabia (in modern Baden-Württemberg): "The emigration fever has steadily increased among Israelites of our district and seems about to reach its high point. In nearly every community there are numerous individuals who are preparing to leave the Fatherland early next year and seek their fortune on the other side of the ocean."⁷⁷

New York was the largest port of entry, but there were others: New Orleans, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Boston. Peddling was an employment niche that German Jewish immigrant men quickly took over. Avraham Barkai described the scene:

[T]he Jews had indeed succeeded to "transplant Bavaria to America." Settling all over the land, preferably in regions of strong German settlement, they almost immediately went back to "carry a pack" and peddle their wares among the newly upgrowing farms like their fathers in the old homeland. Even learned artisans who initially started work in their skilled trade found it more profitable to return to peddling. Not, of course, as a permanent station, but as a favorable transitional way to earn a living and gain some capital during the early period of economic adjustment.⁷⁸

It was a simple mode of self-employment and kept them from being beholden to Gentile employers. It did not require much capital to start, and one need not speak English if one traded mainly with other Germans at first. As one picked up capital and knowledge of the new country, one could branch out. The Jewish peddler became a stereotype immortalized in doggerel and popular fiction. Jewish men hawked their wares not just in the seaboard cities but also throughout the South and West, and established small Jewish communities wherever they went.⁷⁹ They invented installment sales. They went first to inland cities where Germans congregated, like Cincinnati, St. Louis, and Milwaukee. But soon they were selling all over the South and West. Solomon Spiegelberg drove a team of oxen over the Santa Fe Trail in 1846, got a contract to provision the U.S. Army in its war on Mexico, and later with his brothers founded what became the territory's largest retail establishment. Adam Gimbel came from Bavaria to New Orleans in 1835 and sold this and that up and down the Mississippi. Then he opened a dry goods store in Vincennes, Indiana. In time, he and his sons owned a chain of stores in Milwaukee, Philadelphia, and New York. Bloomington's also had peddler origins. Other Jews with names like Kuhn, Loeb, and Seligmann became the core of New York's German Jewish financial aristocracy by the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Most immigrants did not achieve such spectacular success, but by the time the second generation turned to the third, most German Jews had entered the ranks of the middle class in urban America.

German Jews brought with them a jumble of theological persuasions, from strict Orthodoxy to radical free thought. One of these was Reform Judaism, the

cutting edge of Jewish intellectual liberalism in Germany. Anxious to be accepted into American (as into German) Gentile society, the Reformers tried to modernize Judaism, to deemphasize the ritual aspects and Mosaic imperatives that set their religion apart from Christians. They discounted the age-old notion that the Jews were a people somehow different from other peoples and presented Reform Judaism as just another denomination, like Presbyterianism.⁸⁰ Their rationale was that Judaism had always changed its face to accommodate the tastes and state of knowledge of the time. They also stressed that Jews had a special mission to reach all people, not just to recreate the historic nation of Israel, and so they must be flexible in their appeal. Orthodox leaders in America and especially in Europe looked upon the Reformers with horror. They felt that Reform struck at the very heart of proper Judaism: ritual adherence to Mosaic law. But in America, unlike Europe, the Reformers had a relatively free hand to change Judaism as they pleased, for there were no official ecclesiastical structures and few long-established Orthodox bodies to stand in their way. Reform Jews took over the Charleston synagogue in the 1820s, and others led by Rabbi Leo Merzbacher founded Temple Emanu-El in New York City in 1845. It is probably true that most American Jews remained more or less Orthodox, but by the time of the Civil War, most of the elite were adherents of Reform.⁸¹

Reform Judaism began as an adaptation to the intellectual imperatives of German Enlightenment culture, but it also became an expression of American Jewish independence from Europe. Isaac Meyer Wise, the great leader of American Reform, called for a separate American synod (note the word borrowed from Christianity) in 1855, a call that resulted in an independent body of Reform leaders and congregations that diverged further and further from Orthodoxy. Two decades later, a Reform gathering in Pittsburgh set out these very modernist religious principles:

The God-Idea. We recognize in every religion an attempt to grasp the Infinite One, and in every mode, source or book of revelation held sacred in any religious system the consciousness of the Indwelling of God in man. ... *The Jewish People.* We recognize in Judaism a progressive religion ever striving to be in accord with the postulates of reason. We are convinced of the utmost necessity of preserving the historical identity with our great past. Christianity and Islam being daughter religions of Judaism, we appreciate their mission to aid in the spreading of monotheistic and moral truth. We acknowledge that the spirit of broad humanity of our age is our ally in the fulfillment of our mission, and therefore we extend the hand of fellowship to all who cooperate with us in the establishment of truth and righteousness among men. *Tora.* We recognize in the Mosaic legislation a system of training the Jewish people of its mission during its national life in Palestine, and today we accept as binding only the moral laws and maintain only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives, but reject all such as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization.

They sound a bit like Unitarians. Judaism was changing to fit the social ambitions of its assimilating adherents in their American environment.⁸²

Not only was the trend toward Reform. It was also toward upward social and economic mobility. The German Jewish population was not made up entirely of economic successes, but the second generation was making a place for itself in the

White American middle class by the 1880s, just when a new wave of very different Jews began showing up—but that is a story for Chapter 5.

Issues in European Migration

How are we to interpret all this? Are there big patterns and larger meanings to these movements of Europeans into the United States in the decades between the founding of the republic and the Civil War? Historians of immigration have raised a number of interpretive issues that are worth contemplating.

Individual Choice or Embedded in a Web of Industrial Capital?

Many Americans cherish a story (sometimes more than one) about the coming of their own family to America once upon a time. Usually it is a story with a heroic quality to it, such as a great, great grandfather choosing to leave his ancestral home for reasons noble, adventuresome, or pious. Or perhaps he was fleeing persecution, or avoiding the sheriff. But in any case, it is usually an individual story, even an adventure. A person or a family left the country of their birth and chose to come to the United States because things were bad for them where they were and because they envisioned America as a land of freedom or opportunity. And surely, many immigrants made individual decisions in more or less that way.

Historians, however, like to search for patterns in such individual actions. And patterns there were aplenty in the case of international migration. The most common way historians treat migration is to speak of “push factors”—those elements of the social situation in the sending country that make individuals want to leave—and “pull factors”—those features that draw them to a particular destination.⁸³ Perhaps understandably, the July Fourth rhetoric of American political triumphalism has tended to emphasize pull factors. People chose to come here because the United States is wonderful. Its economic bounty or promise of liberty compelled them to come. In the case of each of the European immigrant groups dealt with in this chapter, it is easy to see push factors. Irish emigrants fled famine. German Jews left under the sting of social discrimination. Gentile Germans and English folk were in less dire circumstances in the old country. For them, the push factors may have existed—a migrant might not have stood to inherit the family farm, for instance—but it is unlikely that, for the bulk of British and German migrants in this period, push factors were decisive. Rather, the pulls of high wages and cheap farmland were what drew these more middle-class migrants to the United States.

That makes sense, but was it really that simple? Or is it possible that there may have been something connecting the sending places and the receiving place? If that be true, then perhaps the push factors and the pull factors did not operate independently of each other, but were part of a larger, transnational web of causation. Dirk Höder and other scholars have described three such transnational webs operating in the nineteenth century (Figure 3.5). The Russo-Siberian System, between 1815 and 1915, drew 10 million people from European Russia (and other parts of Central and Eastern Europe) across the Eurasian land mass to inhabit the lands Catherine the Great had claimed in the latter eighteenth century. The Asia and Pacific System sent 14.5 million people, mainly contract laborers in plantation agriculture, back and

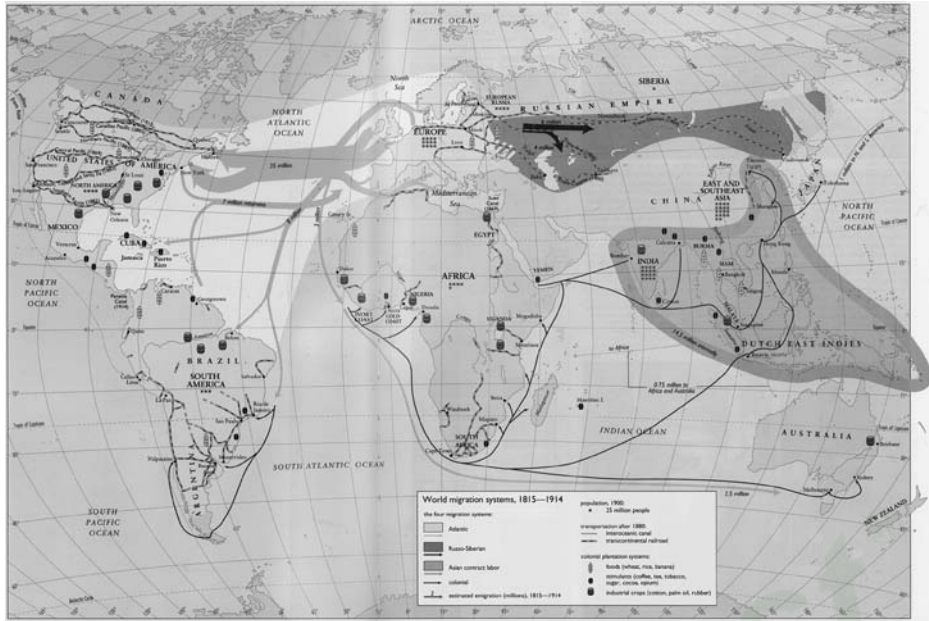


Figure 3.5 World migration systems.

forth across that part of the world. South Chinese went to Malaysia, the Philippines, and elsewhere. Filipinos went to Hong Kong. Indians went to Malaysia, the Dutch East Indies, and Fiji. Japanese went to Korea. And another million Asians spun off into North and South America. There they connected with the System of the Atlantic Economies. In that system, thirty-five million people migrated from Europe to North America, eight million to South America. Seven million went back. Another half million went along the pathways of European colonialism to Africa and Asia, and 2.5 million migrated to Australia.⁸⁴

The common thread operating in all three of these systems was colonialism, but the three systems presented different varieties of colonial connection. In the Russo-Siberian system, the colonialism was straightforward: Russians going across the continent, making it their own, and incorporating it into the Russian state, much like European Americans taking the North American continent in the nineteenth century (see Chapter 4). In the Asia-Pacific system, there were several European and American colonial powers (operating formally as in India and less formally as in China). The relationships between European colonizer and would-be colonizer countries, on one side, and Asian colonized countries on the other, provided the pathways for migration by Asians and islanders as well as Europeans. In the Atlantic system, there were elements of formal and less formal colonialism: Americans across the continent; British in Central America.

In Chapter 1, I described the international labor migration model proposed by Lucie Cheng and Edna Bonacich. It would seem to be an appropriate device for attempting to understand the dynamics within each of these three systems of economic connection and movement of peoples. Cheng and Bonacich's model posits a core, industrializing country—say, Britain—and one or more places that are tied to it in a subordinate way. They have agricultural economies that supply crops, raw

materials, and migrants as the industrial core has need of them. At its simplest, this model would have predicted American workers would have left home to migrate to England and take work in booming British textile mills in the nineteenth century. The people were moving the other way, so something seems amiss. As we shall see in Chapters 4 and 5, the Cheng and Bonacich model works fairly well for some groups such as Chinese and Japanese moving from Asia to the United States in the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and quite well for Mexicans, Filipinos, and Central Americans moving to the United States in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. But it seems less well suited to explain European migration streams to the United States in the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century.

Instead, let us follow historian William Van Vugt and recognize that the British and American economies were indeed intimately connected, but in more complex ways than the Cheng and Bonacich model allows. Imagine a single North Atlantic economy headed by the industrializing regions of the English Midlands, with secondary centers in the Ruhr Valley and New England. As Britain's industrial transformation changed its own landscape and Ireland's, and cut loose large numbers of farm people (some of the middling sort, some desperately poor), industrialization was also turning loose significant numbers of people in Germany. This economic system then reallocated those laborers to factories in England, Germany, and the American Northeast, as well as to farms across the United States. John Bodnar, preeminent American historian of U.S. industrial labor immigration, described it this way:

The movement to America of millions of immigrants in the century after the 1820s was not simply a flight of impoverished peasants abandoning underdeveloped, backward regions for the riches and unlimited opportunities offered by the American economy. This tremendous population shift depended not only on the growth of American industrial capitalism but on transformations occurring in immigrant homelands as well. People did not move randomly to America but emanated from very specific regions at specific times. ... Economic changes in the immigrant homeland rather than American industrial growth accounted for the cycle of each immigrant stream. ... The immigrant did not encounter capitalism for the first time in American cities; he had already encountered some of its manifestations prior to departing. ... [C]apitalism intruded. ... as transportation networks expanded from industrial cities, cheaper manufactured goods flooded rural markets undercutting the economic base of independent artisans and household producers. ... [T]he rise of industrial cities created a huge new market for agricultural produce. Agriculture conducted on a large scale ... moved from a subsistence base to ... cash crops.⁸⁵

Many of the people thus cast off the land became the working class of Europe's cities. Millions more ended up going to the United States.

Recruitment and Chain Migration

Migrants did not just choose to go to America. In addition to being propelled along the sinews of an interlocking international economic system, they were actively

recruited and conducted. There was money to be made in international labor migration. Sailing and steamship companies, land speculators, employers in the United States, and a host of others had an interest in expanding the migration stream, as it would bring them customers, buyers, and workers. They advertised in newspapers throughout Britain, Ireland, and Germany in this period—and later in other parts of Europe as well. Some large employers and transportation companies sent agents to Europe to recruit migrants. A hot market sprang up in guide books for would-be emigrants. Some were aimed at the general population, others at specific groups with particular destinations in mind. One of the most popular, *Wiley & Putnam's Emigrant's Guide*, promised reliable instruction for everything from the initial decision to emigrate to securing a job and a place to stay in America. The opening chapter's contents read:

Who should emigrate. The choice of a ship. Dishonest runners. Extract from the circular of the New York Emigrant Society. How to know whether a passenger-agent is respectable or otherwise. The difference in ships. Good and bad points about a ship so plainly stated that an emigrant can choose a ship for himself. A ship should be of good height between decks—should have good conveniences for cooking—good water-closets. When a ship is properly loaded. The character of the captains and officers important. Facts illustrative of the difference between a bad captain and a good captain. Emigrants should speak well of a good ship and good treatment.

The guide listed what food to take, names of shipping agents in various cities, how to handle conflict with other passengers, and a host of other necessities.⁸⁶ Similar guides were written in German for both Jewish and Gentile readerships. Specialized guidebooks instructed Mormons how to make their way by covered wagon to the valley of the Great Salt Lake and told Europeans how to reach the California goldfields.

Once recruited, migrants entered migration chains. These have been a near-constant feature of large voluntary movements of people in modern world history. A few people from a particular place—a town, a village, a rural district, an urban neighborhood—in a particular sending country or region would go abroad and have a good experience. They would write to relatives and friends back home, tell of their success, and suggest that those people come, too, perhaps offering to help pay passage. Some of those people would then join them in the new place, have success, and write back to others. And soon a link was established between the old place and the new.

We see chain migration at work in the period under discussion in this chapter among German, English, Irish and other immigrants. Anna Maria Schano wrote from New York, back to her family in Germany in 1850:

I've saved up to now in the time we've been married some 40 dollars in case, not counting my clothes. Dear parents and brothers and sisters, I certainly don't want to tell you what to do, do what you want, for some like it here and some don't, but the only ones who don't like it here had it good in Germany, but I also think you would like it here since you never had anything good in Germany. I'm certainly glad not to be over there, and only those who don't want to work don't like it here, since in America you have to work if you want to amount

to anything, you mustn't feel ashamed, that's just how you amount to something, and so I want to tell you again to do what you want, since it can seem too trying on the journey and in America as well, and then you heap the most bitter reproaches on those who talked you into coming, since it all depends on whether you have good luck, just like in Germany. Dear parents, you wrote me that Daniel wants to come to America and doesn't have any money, that is certainly a problem. Now I want to give you my opinion, I've often thought about what could be done. I thought 1st if he could borrow the money over there, then when he has saved enough over here then he could send it back over, like a lot of people do, and secondly, I thought we would like to pay for him to come over, but right now we can't since it costs 28 dollars a person and I also want to tell you since my husband wrote to you, the money we want to send you, whether you want to use it to have one or two come over here or if you want to spend it on yourselves, you just have to let us know so that we have an idea how much you still need, and you'll have to see to it that you have some more money, too, since we can't pay it all. ... Dear parents and brothers and sisters, if one of you comes over here and comes to stay with us we will certainly take care of you, since we are now well known, and you needn't be so afraid of America, when you come to America, just imagine you were moving to Stuttgart, that's how many Germans you can see here.⁸⁷

The same pattern held for other migrant groups. For that reason, some localities and some extended families, over a period of years or perhaps decades, essentially moved en masse to America. Others nearby, in similar circumstances but without an American connection, remained where they were or migrated to European cities instead.⁸⁸

One feature of the migration chain is return migration. Links to the homeland brought people over, but they also kept one connected to the place one left. The triumphal narrative of American immigration posits that people who migrate to the United States do so with the intention to stay forever. They cast off the chains or poverty of the old country and put on the freedom and prosperity of the new. They embrace cultural change so that they become new people in the American mold. Surely, sentiments something like these must have characterized some immigrants in every age. But for many more, surely there was ambivalence about the venture. Many migrants—in every age and from almost every group—came to America with the initial intent to return to their original homes, perhaps a bit richer than when they left. A prime goal of many was to assemble the wherewithal to buy some land back home. Others who hoped to live permanently in the United States found it did not work out as well as they had dreamed. Oftentimes they had more difficulty with language and strange American customs than they had anticipated. Frequently they encountered opposition from other European Americans whose ancestors had come a generation or two earlier. Sometimes they just decided they liked their former home better.⁸⁹

Over the course of the nineteenth century, one out of five immigrants to the United States from Europe returned whence they came. William Van Vugt tells of Eli Beckley making ten trips back to England to import horses after his initial migration to Illinois in 1854. "The mid-century immigrants would make return visits for almost any imaginable reason: to preach a funeral sermon, for health reasons (which surely included homesickness), to find suitable brides, to see family, or to fight in the

Crimean War.” He estimates that, between 1870 and World War I, 40 percent of English and Scottish immigrants returned home permanently. Charles Dickens wrote about a trip of his own back to England following a book tour in the United States in 1842: “We carried in the steerage nearly a hundred passengers: a little world of poverty. ... Some of them had been in America but three days, some but three months, and some had gone out in the last voyage of that very ship in which they were now returning home. Others had sold their clothes to raise the passage-money, and had hardly rags to cover them; others had no food, and lived upon the charity of the rest. They were coming back, even poorer than they went.”⁹⁰

From Puritan exiles in Massachusetts to twenty-first-century Korean entrepreneurs riding jumbo jets, going and coming have ever been part of the immigrant story, although they have not been acknowledged in the dominant paradigm of immigrant assimilation. Of the groups we have witnessed in this chapter, only the Irish and Jews failed to go back to their former homeland in significant numbers. In the Irish case, the old country’s economy just would not support them. Instead of an actual return, Irish Americans substituted a psychic one—ongoing involvement in the Irish national cause and a plaintive song of exile. In later chapters we will see other immigrant groups following both these patterns. We shall see Chinese, Italian, Greek, and other migrants maintaining strong ties to the homes and families they left behind, sending remittances to support the people back home, and significant numbers of them eventually going back themselves. From time to time we will see others such as Hmong maintaining the mood of exile, even though the rate of actual return is slight.

Changes in Transportation Technology and Travel Conditions

One of the things that made return migration practical was improvements in transportation technology. The trip from Liverpool to New York took about five weeks by sailing ship. If the weather was bad, it could take as much as fourteen weeks. Conditions had not improved much since Gottlieb Mittelberger’s crossing (see Chapter 2). By mid-century most ships had two or three classes, but the better cabins were beyond the means of most immigrants, who ended up in steerage. Their accommodations were cramped: “besides two tiers of berths on the sides, the vessel was filled with a row of berths down the centre, between which and the side berths there was only a passage of about three feet. The passengers were thus obliged to eat in their berths. In one were a man, his wife, his sister, and five children; in another were six full-grown young women, whilst that above them contained five men, and the next one eight men.”⁹¹

Most travelers probably had good passages, despite certain hardships. There were times of excited anticipation, especially at the beginning of the journey: “The morning was fine, and the ebbing tide in a few hours carried us out of the river. During the day the wind, though light, continued favorable, and we had, literally speaking, a pleasure sail. Every heart was light and every face wore a smile.” But before long it became pretty grungy: “It was scarcely possible to induce the passengers to sweep the decks after their meals or to be decent in respect to the common wants of nature; in many cases, in bad weather, they would not go on deck; their health suffered so much that their strength was gone, and they had not the power to help themselves. Hence the between-decks were like a loathsome dungeon. When

the hatchways were opened under which the people were stowed, the steam rose and the stench was like that from a pen of pigs. The few beds they had were in a dreadful state, for the straw, once wet with sea water, soon rotted, besides which they used the between-decks for all sorts of filthy purposes." The water was foul. The food was rotten, or at best monotonous. Cholera and "ship fever" ran through the steerage cabin. For some, it was worse. Harriot Veness wrote: "We were very sick for three weeks [on account of a storm] coming over. We had the misfortune to lose both our little boys. We were very much hurt to have them buried in a watery grave."⁹²

Steamships began to make transatlantic passages in the 1840s. The conditions in their steerage were no better, but the crossing took a fraction of the time: about twelve days. As late as the latter 1850s, 95 percent of migrants still traveled under sail. Gradually over the next three decades the migrant traffic shifted from sail to steam, so that by the time of another large surge in immigration late in the century most people had to endure only much shorter voyages. Significantly improved conditions on shipboard would not come until the twentieth century.⁹³

Nativism

One of the responses to all this immigration, from White Americans who were born in this country, was a nativist movement. Protestant, English-descended people saw themselves as the truest sort of Americans from early in the colonial period. Some had a long-standing suspicion of non-English Whites—for example, Ben Franklin's fulminations against Pennsylvania Germans. As immigration grew in the 1830s to 1850s, nativism grew with it. It reached a high point—one of several in American history—with the launching of the American or Know Nothing Party in the 1850s on an explicitly anti-immigrant platform.⁹⁴ John Higham summarized "the ideological core of nativism. ... Whether the nativist was a workingman or a Protestant evangelist, a southern conservative or a northern reformer, he stood for a certain kind of nationalism. He believed—whether he was trembling at a Catholic menace to American liberty, fearing an invasion of pauper labor, or simply rioting against the great English actor William Macready—that some influence originating abroad threatened the very life of the nation from within. Nativism [was] intense opposition to an internal minority on the ground of its foreign (i.e., 'un-American') connections."⁹⁵

The upsurge of Irish, German (and, unacknowledged by the nativists, British) immigration came at the same time much of the United States was in the throes of the Second Great Awakening, a generation-long revival of Protestant religious excitement and intimacy with God. It was perhaps natural that in an era of enthusiasm about Protestantism, some people should express hostility to the great rival of their church.

Among the charges against the Roman Catholic Church was that its members would never be free citizens of the United States but slaves to the pope. Samuel F. B. Morse, the telegraph inventor, published in 1835 *Imminent Dangers to the Free Institutions of the United States through Foreign Immigration*, which was mainly a diatribe against the supposed evils of the Catholic Church. Thomas Whitney contrasted "Romanism" with "American Republicanism" (not to be confused with the Republican Party, which was born in this era and did not oppose immigration) in 1856:

American Republicanism cultivates intelligence among the people. Romanism suppresses intelligence.

American Republicanism recognizes and secures to all men the right of trial by jury. Romanism adjudicates in the somber dungeon of the inquisition. ...

American Republicanism ensures the freedom of the press, and the right of free speech. Romanism silences, or else muzzles the press and forbids discussion. ...

American Republicanism secures the full liberty of conscience to all its people, and to the stranger within its gates. Romanism pronounces liberty of conscience to be a wicked theory.

American Republicanism permits every human creature to read and study the Word of God. Romanism forbids it. In a word, American Republicanism is FREEDOM; Romanism is *slavery*.⁹⁶

Beyond the fantasy of sinister foreign control over American citizens, anti-Catholics had lurid tales to tell about deeds done in darkness in Catholic precincts. They alleged that German and especially Irish Catholics brought crime and disease to U.S. cities, and that they stole the jobs of native-born people. In 1836, some anti-Catholic activists helped a woman named Maria Monk write *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery of Montreal*, where she told tales of priests tunneling into nuns' cloisters and forcing themselves on the women, of the resultant babies being strangled by church authorities, and of her own supposed escape with a priest's child in her womb. It all turned out to be fabricated, but it sold a lot of copies, prompted a sequel, and whipped up a frenzy against Catholic immigrants.⁹⁷ Similar tales formed the backdrop for violence against Catholics. On the night of August 11, 1834, egged on by Lyman Beecher, the most famous Protestant preacher in America at the time, a Boston mob burst into the Ursuline convent in nearby Charlestown and burned it to the ground. At least a dozen other church buildings were torched in the next two decades, and an anti-Catholic riot in Philadelphia in 1844 killed thirty people and injured hundreds.

By the mid-1850s, the anti-Catholic crowd had gathered themselves into what they called the American Party, with which they hoped to replace the fading Whigs. They operated like a secret society and it was said they would not talk for the record, hence others called them "Know Nothings" derisively. Their central issue was to enact federal restrictions on immigration and naturalization. Specific provisions varied, but generally they included a twenty-one-year wait for naturalization and a bar on serving in any but the lowest government offices. Other proposals included banning immigrants who were paupers, insane, feeble-minded, or had criminal backgrounds or certain diseases.

The Know Nothings flashed boldly across the American political landscape in the 1850s. They elected governors in six states and took control of nine state legislatures. Yet it is important to remember that the nativists did not prevail. The Know Nothings flamed out; in 1856 Millard Fillmore ran for president on both the Know Nothing ticket and the Whig, and both parties died in the process. Out of their ashes came a Republican Party that was committed to "Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men":

immigration would go unrestricted, the government would provide public lands to would-be farmers cheap or free, and slavery would be overturned.⁹⁸

The nativist movement of the mid-nineteenth century has always been portrayed as an anti-Catholic and especially, as we shall see in the next section, an anti-Irish movement. That is true, in the sense that anti-Catholicism was the focus of the Know Nothing party and people like Morse and Whitney. But those same years saw the beginnings of a not wholly unrelated movement against Jews. European Christians had long harbored some pretty appalling prejudices against Jews. As European Jews were emancipated and began to ascend the social and financial ladders over the course of the nineteenth century, they came in for increasing anti-Semitic abuse. The European prejudices had their echoes on the North American continent. But the American expressions of anti-Semitism were muted by comparison. Three states required voters to swear on the Christian Bible, which effectively eliminated Jews from voting. Yet two of those states (Rhode Island and New Hampshire) overturned the ban in 1842—at the height of anti-Catholicism—and the other (North Carolina) joined them in 1868. In that same era, David Yulee of Florida (1846) and Judah P. Benjamin of Louisiana (1852) were elected to the U.S. Senate. And rabbis gave the opening prayers to the Virginia House of Delegates and constitutional convention. So Jews seem to have been accorded places of civic legitimacy in American society, and despite personal prejudices and some social discrimination, they were not made a specific target of anti-immigrant hostility in this period. That would wait until after the Civil War.⁹⁹

The issue in all this was: Who was fit to become a full member of American society? Since the Naturalization Act of 1790, one had to be White. Now, it seemed, there was increasing sentiment that one must be Protestant as well. There was also an undercurrent of offense taken by Anglo-Americans at the insistence by some Germans on separate German-language schools. Some Irish and German Catholics established Catholic parochial schools, and in some cases they suggested that the public help fund those schools on the same basis that it funded schools with Protestant leanings. This offended a lot of Anglo-Protestants. Jews continued to inhabit a kind of second-class status. Yet these were all discussions—even disagreements and attacks—within the community of White people. Catholics and Jews were marginal to America's Anglo-Protestant self-definition, but they were within the realm of Whiteness. Blacks, Indians, Mexicans, Chinese were all entirely outside.¹⁰⁰

Despite the failure of the Know Nothings and their platform, nativist ideas were not spent. Nativism—not with its own party but as a minority strain within both major parties—reached full flower after the Civil War. In 1882, when immigration patterns were still much as they had been in the 1850s (a new burst of immigration from new places was just beginning), *Atlantic Monthly* editor Thomas Bailey Aldrich published the poem “Unguarded Gates,” which read in part:

Wide open and unguarded stand our gates,
And through them presses a wild motley throng—
Men from the Volga and Tartar steppes,
Featureless figures of the Hoang-Ho,
Malayan, Scythian, Teuton, Kelt, and Slav,
Flying the Old World's poverty and scorn;
These bringing with them unknown gods and rites,
Those, tiger passions, here to stretch their claws.

In street and alley what strange tongues are loud,
 Accents of menace alien to our air,
 Voices that once the Tower of Babel knew!
 O Liberty, white Goddess! is it well
 To leave the gates unguarded? On thy breast
 Fold Sorrow's children, soothe the hurts of fate,
 Lift the down-trodden, but with hand of steel
 Stay those who to thy sacred portals come
 To waste the gifts of freedom. ...¹⁰¹

Such racist, xenophobic ideas have proved hard to put away, no matter that they have never had any basis except in fear and unreason. There is a direct line from Samuel F. B. Morse and Thomas Whitney in the mid-nineteenth century, through Thomas Bailey Aldrich to Madison Grant and Lothrop Stoddard in the early twentieth century (see Chapter 6), and on to Pat Buchanan and Richard Lamm in the early twenty-first century (Chapter 9).

Were the Irish Ever Not White?

If full citizenship was to be limited to White people, and if some American citizens, so defined, wanted to keep out Irish or German Catholics, did that mean that the Irish and German Catholics were not White? So it has been alleged, more or less. There is a large, rapidly growing literature on Whiteness, and much of it springs from a consideration of the place of Irish immigrants in the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century.¹⁰² The term "White," used as both an adjective and a noun to refer to people of European descent and to distinguish them from Africans and Native North Americans, goes back in English usage as far as 1604. By the end of that century, White was the common appellation for European-descended people in North America. Winthrop Jordan wrote: "[T]here seems to have been something of a shift during the seventeenth century in the terminology which Englishmen in the colonies applied to themselves. From the initially most common term *Christian*, at mid-century there was a marked shift toward the terms *English* and *free*. After about 1680, taking the colonies as a whole, a new term of self-identification appeared—*white*."¹⁰³

As we have seen, English-descended people regarded themselves as central to the American identity. But right from the start they had room for other European-descended people as citizens of the thirteen colonies and of the new nation. Some scholars have stood up in recent years to assert that Irish people were not White in the first three-quarters of a century of the American republic. They point to real disabilities suffered by Irish people—some discrimination, even mob violence—and contend that popular culture portrayed Irish in the same way it portrayed Blacks. Yes, there is one famous cartoon from 1876 where an Irish man with simianized features is set on a scale in balance with a Black man (Figure 3.6).

But in that case, Thomas Nast was not saying that Irish people were Black. Rather, he was saying that Irish American support for the Democratic Party in the North balanced out the votes of newly freed African Americans in the South, and he was implying that he didn't think much of either group. Nast did draw the Irish figure with ape-like features, and neither it nor the portrait of the Black man opposite is a sympathetic portrait.¹⁰⁴ But this is one of only a very few such portrayals

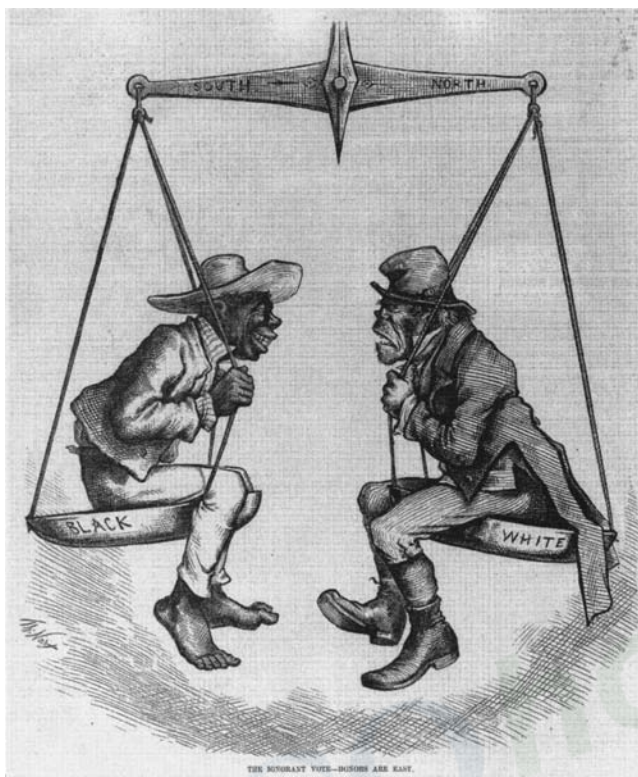


Figure 3.6 A cartoon by Thomas Nast, *Harper's Weekly*, 1837.

in America of Irish as physically distinguishable from other Whites. There were many such bestial images in British depictions of Irish people, but few in America. A legitimate argument can be made that the colonial relationship between Britain and Ireland resulted in the creation in British minds of the idea of an Irish Other that had racial qualities to it. But it is not, in my judgment, possible to do the same in the American context.¹⁰⁵

The test is not how a person or group is caricatured by cartoonists who oppose that person or group. Democratic-leaning cartoonists in the first decade of the twenty-first century made the American president look like Alfred E. Newman. The test is how a person or group is portrayed by those who are sympathetic. Did such people draw Irish Americans as not looking White? Artists who sympathized with the situations of Native Americans, African Americans, and Chinese Americans in the latter nineteenth century nonetheless portrayed them as racially other, as physically different from Whites, in fact as looking unlike any living Indian, Black, or Chinese (Figure 3.7). By contrast, artists who sympathized with Irish people showed them as looking just like other Whites (Figure 3.8). There were a great many cartoons that looked like this in American publications in the nineteenth century, and very few that looked like Nast's caricature.

The actual record of discrimination against Irish Americans exists, but it is much thinner than for any people of color. Irish were White in America.



Figure 3.7 Distorted Indian, Chinese, and Black caricatures, *Harper's Weekly*, 1879.

Making a White Race

What we see happening in the first decades of the republic is the culmination of a process that began in the 1600s, when Europeans began to define themselves as White—first against Native peoples and then against Africans. By the middle of the nineteenth century at the very latest, consensus had been reached that to be of European descent made one White, and that one must be White if one aspired to full U.S. citizenship.

Jon Gjerde tells this story in his brilliant work of historical ethnography and imagination, *The Minds of the West*:

My mother is a daughter of the middle border. Born in 1908, she was reared by a Danish father and a Yankee mother on a farm in southwestern Minnesota. She cherishes still the memories of her Danish grandmother who lived with the family and remembers well being schooled in Methodist ways by her mother. When she came of age, she chose to marry the son of a Norwegian

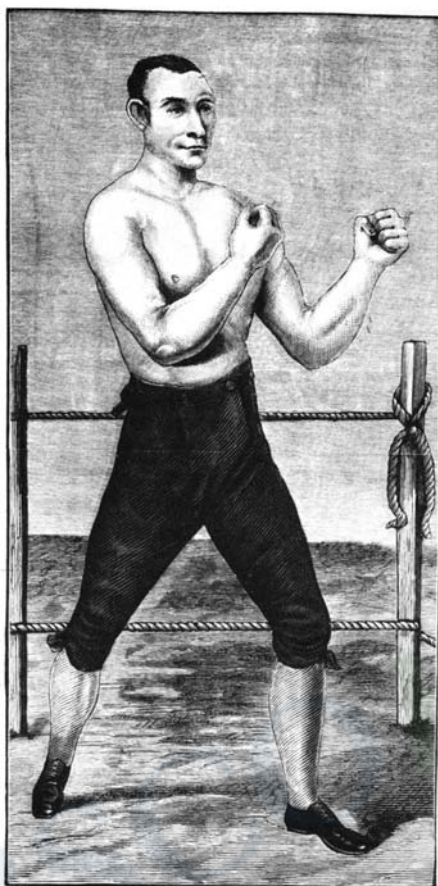


Figure 3.8 Irish American prizefighter.

Lutheran pastor who had been raised in deeply rural Norwegian communities of the American Northwest. It probably came as little surprise to her when her son some years later wed a German American Roman Catholic. In sum, she lived in a region where ethnic and religious identities were clearly defined but where interaction between people ... was relatively common and boundaries were often breached. Her narrative is emblematic of the rural Middle West.¹⁰⁶

So it is indeed. Gjerde does not acknowledge it here, but this is a story about the formation of the White race. His mother and the others whose lives he portrays in the book show the ease with which people of various European ancestries blended together socially and familiarly. There are no African Americans in Gjerde's mother's Middle West, no Indians or Asians or Mexicans. There are just White people, but they are not labeled White. Instead, they are labeled Swedes, Danes, Dutch, Norwegians, Germans, and lots of other things. Their Whiteness is masked by the discussion of their ethnic particularities. And their ethnic particularities (including religious identities from Mennonite to Catholic to Presbyterian) matter to them as badges of identity. Gjerde's people mark those identities all the time in discourse

casual and purposeful. Except that those identities don't ultimately count for much. Nearly everyone in this story is, like Gjerde's mother, in fact ethnically mixed. Their friends come from lots of different kinds of White people and include no people who are not White. The people in *Minds of the West* have other ethnic labels, and they have lots of knowledge about the places with which those labels are associated, but they are just White people.

From very early on, the American imagination celebrated the myth of the melting pot. America would be a land where all the world's peoples were welcome to come and where they all merged into a new people. J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, himself a French immigrant, made the classic melting pot statement in 1782 (see page 5). It is a powerful vision of blending and creating a new identity based on interaction among peoples and response to republican political institutions. But it is a vision limited to White people.

Even among such White people, practically speaking, differences were drawn. Crèvecoeur's rhapsody did not admit what was happening on the ground. In practical fact, not all Whites were blending together equally. From the very beginning, as we have seen, Anglo-Americans assumed primacy. What was happening was not the melting pot but, as sociologist Milton Gordon explained, "Anglo-conformity." From the beginning there was "a central assumption [of] the desirability of maintaining English institutions (as modified by the American Revolution), the English language, and English-oriented cultural patterns as dominant and standard in American life"¹⁰⁷ (Figure 3.9).

Compare Figure 3.2 to Figure 3.1 at the beginning of this chapter. What happened in the first half of the nineteenth century, demographically speaking? The overall U.S. population exploded, from less than 7 million to nearly 24 million. Perhaps 3 million of those people were immigrants of European origin. The rest came from natural increase. The number and proportion of Native peoples declined sharply, and African American numbers rose modestly. The United States was indeed becoming a White man's country—in terms of who made up the largest part of the population as well as who set the cultural agenda for society—just as the nation was marching across the continent and ingesting it. The latter is the story of Chapter 4.

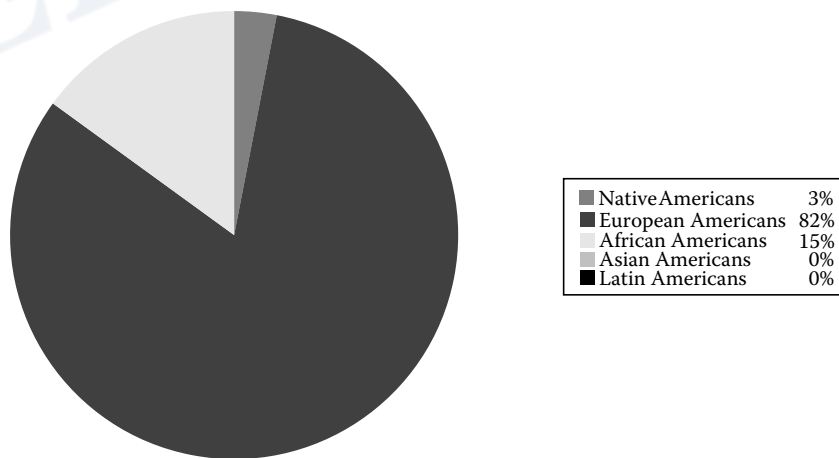


Figure 3.9 Population in 1850 of the territory that would become the United States (23.9 million people).