

Emily Schearer
Lesson Plan for Ide@s

Lesson Title: Irish Famine: An Exploration of Primary Sources

Subjects: □□ 19th Century History, Immigration

Standards: Social Studies: B.8.1 B.8.4 B.8.7 B.12.1 B.12.3
(<http://dpi.state.wi.us/standards/>)

Grade Levels: 10-12

Teacher prep time: 45-60minutes (review sources)

Suggested time: 60-75 minute period

Costs: None

Resource Description/Summary:

In the 19th century, Ireland was a nation of farmers. The majority of the farmable land in Ireland was owned by the English and Anglo-Irish ruling class, and the rest of the population subsisted on small plots of land they were allowed to farm in exchange for labor. Due to the social and political conditions of the time, a large number of Irish peasants were living in a state of poverty, and the conditions for these people only worsened with the mid-century potato famine. Between 1845 and 1852 the country of Ireland faced great hardships brought on by widespread crop failure. During this period the potato was a staple of the Irish diet.

In the fall of 1845, a fungus, known commonly as potato blight, began infecting potato crops causing them to rot. The fungus spread rapidly throughout the country, causing a food shortage throughout the nation. Although the nation had experienced crop failure in the past, the fungus that infected the crops in 1845 continued to spread and destroy potato crops for the next several years causing widespread starvation, death, and mass immigration. The following activity compares several sources of information about the potato famine in Ireland, and some additional sources provide information about Irish immigration caused by the famine.

Objectives:

1. Analyze the conditions in Ireland during the famine period through the use of primary source material.
2. Compare and contrast the perspectives on the famine and Ireland in different primary sources.

Resources:

UW-Madison Digital Collections: Annals of the Famine in Ireland

<http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/History.NichoAnnal>

“Asenath Hatch Nicholson, born in Chelsea, Vermont, in 1792, was an involved eyewitness to the great Irish famine in 1847-1848.” This source provides an American woman’s account of the conditions in Ireland during the famine.

Views of the Famine

<http://adminstaff.vassar.edu/sttaylor/FAMINE/>

Steve of Vassar College compiled this series of newspaper clippings from Ireland and England relating to the Irish Potato Famine. The Illustrated London News, Punch and The Cork Examiner are great sources for English and Irish perspectives on the famine.

Additional Resources:

Quinnipiac University: The Great Hunger Archive

<http://www.thegreathunger.org/html/main/indexa.htm>

Ireland's Miseries by Rev. Edward Marcus Dill, A.M., M.D., Missionary Agent to the Irish Presbyterian Church, is just one of the primary source books digitized by the University of Quinnipiac. The book is divided into four parts, and contains a great deal of historical source material and observations that can be incorporated into this lesson.

Wisconsin Historical Society: 19th-Century Immigration

http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/turningpoints/tp%2D018/?action=more_essay

The History Place: Irish Potato Famine

<http://www.historyplace.com/worldhistory/famine/>

This resource provides a broad overview of the famine, conditions leading up to it, immigration to North America, and conditions in Ireland after the famine years. A good resource for providing additional background information if necessary.

Suggested Activity:

1. Using the students' textbooks, review the background facts and history behind the Irish Potato Famine as a class.
2. Brainstorming activity: Identify some of the conditions and causes that lead up to the famine. Write them on the chalkboard for the class.
3. Discuss the significance of historical perspectives: Differing viewpoints on the same event can often provide insight into some of the social and cultural conditions surrounding the event. In this case, British, American and Irish perspectives on the Irish Potato Famine and the living conditions of the Irish are examined to reveal differences in social classes, and culture.
4. Select three excerpts from the resources suggested above for inclusion in this lesson. The following three excerpts are merely recommendations; feel free to select other sections of appropriate text.

-<http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/History.NichoAnnal>
p.26-27, 35-36. In this section, Nicholson criticizes the British upper-class for contributing to the impoverished state of Irish peasants. She is sympathetic to the state of the peasants, but in some cases the tone and choice of her words reveals feelings of superiority.

-<http://adminstaff.vassar.edu/sttaylor/FAMINE/Punch/Potato/Loaf.html>

<http://adminstaff.vassar.edu/sttaylor/FAMINE/Punch/Burden/Burden.html> These two cartoons from the London magazine *Punch* (or the London Charivari) minimize the effects and severity of the famine, and depict Ireland/Irish people as

a burden to England's economy. Although many of the eye-witness accounts from English visitors during the famine were often sympathetic to the condition and needs of the Irish people (Dufferon and Clanbourne <http://adminstaff.vassar.edu/sttaylor/FAMINE/Journey/Frontispiece.html>), the cartoons from *Punch* are representative of a prevailing attitude among certain groups in England during the time.

-<http://adminstaff.vassar.edu/sttaylor/FAMINE/Examiner/Archives/Dec1847.html>
This link contains famine-related articles from the *Cork Examiner*, an Irish newspaper, from December of 1847. News briefs and letters to the editor paint a picture of harsh conditions and unfair treatment by landlords. Articles from ` December 17th are excellent examples.

5. Read the short excerpts with your students (or give them time in class to read them). The historical language in some of the texts may be difficult for some students, so you may want to address this with them.
6. After reading the articles, students will pair up and discuss with their partner. Prompt them to figure out WHO the articles are talking about (and who wrote them), WHAT specific aspect of the famine is being discussed, HOW the articles are different and similar (attitudes, language, do they depict the Irish in a positive/negative way).
7. After students have had the chance to discuss (about 25-30 min), come back together as a class and ask each group to share their findings.

Concluding the lesson:

In order to conclude the lesson, write some of the students' major findings on the board and relate them to the greater social context of the period. Since the Irish Potato Famine was a major catalyst for Irish immigration to North America. The lesson can either be wrapped up or extended with a brief lecture on the wave of immigration to the United States that occurred as a result of the famine.