

European Immigrants



<http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/courses/ed311/kafai/Team%204/USAEireland2.jpg>

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In one sense, everyone living in North and South America is descended from immigrants. Even the ancestors of “Native Americans” came from Asia. But in 1492, Christopher Columbus opened up an absolute floodgate of immigration, primarily European, which lasted for several hundred years. First the Spanish, then the French, Dutch, English, and Portuguese sent explorers, soldiers, missionaries, merchants, and colonists to the New World. The movement of Europeans to America is one of the largest human migrations in history.

During the Revolutionary War the population of the United States was just shy of 4 million; by the Civil War, it was nearly 32 million. A high birth rate and intense immigration explain the rapid increase in population.

Abraham Lincoln was born in 1809; as a young adult and politician he was well acquainted with immigrants who, like his family, were moving west in search of land and economic opportunity. He was also cognizant of the fact that many immigrants moved into larger eastern cities looking for factory work.

One of the largest influxes of émigrés occurred from 1840 to 1860. Over 3 million people, mostly from Ireland and Germany, came to America. Many of these immigrants were victims of the potato famine. They brought with them

their customs, religions, languages, clothing styles, and varied ways of life.

Many of the Irish and Germans moved into older eastern cities; some moved to newer western cities (such as Cincinnati and St. Louis). Many new arrivals took difficult jobs for low pay. Men, women and children worked in the burgeoning factories. This displaced previously arrived Americans and contributed to the rapid growth of squalid living conditions in the nation’s urban areas. Cities became overcrowded; crime, pollution, and disease spread quickly.

This increase in foreigners also ignited strong anti-immigrant sentiments among some elements of the American-born population. These “nativists,” eventually cobbled together the Know-Nothing Party, a discriminatory organization that disliked Irish, Germans, Africans, Catholics, Jews, Indians, and anybody else that was not white, protestant Christian, and of English descent.

Abraham Lincoln abhorred (disliked) the members of the Know-Nothing party. He could not understand how people, especially northerners who claimed to dislike slavery, could participate in the denigration of other white people. As president, Lincoln would encourage immigration as the country’s economy needed workers in the factories, on the farms, and in the mines.