

**IRELAND AND THE  
GREAT POTATO FAMINE  
(1840S)**



# IRELAND AND THE GREAT POTATO FAMINE (1840S)

## Description

Through the investigation of primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the details of Ireland's Great Famine of the 1840s, what caused it, the government's response to the tragedy and how the famine helped cause the Irish Diaspora.

## Subjects

World History  
European History  
US History  
Science

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

90 minutes

## Tour Links

- Custom's House Quay, Dublin
- Irish Gamine Museum, Strokestown
- Ireland Park, Toronto, Canada

## Essential Questions

- What was the Great Potato Famine in Ireland?
- What caused the Great Potato Famine?
- How did the government respond to the famine?
- What effect did the famine have on the Irish population?
- What legacy did the Great Famine leave on Ireland's culture and people?

## Academic Summary

"The duty of publishing reports of the inquests held on persons who have 'died by starvation' has now become so frequent, and such numbers are daily reaching us from every part of the county, that the limits of our space to not admit of their publication. Our reporter sends particulars of 15 of such cases from Bantry yesterday, and mentions that 20 more had occurred during the week, but inquests could not be held; and we received this morning from Mallow reports of 11 inquests held by Mr. Richard Jones on persons who had died from want of food. Communications pour in from every district, a tithe of which we could not find room for, stating similar appalling facts. Our reporters are daily occupied in attending meetings throughout the county, and there are as many applications to that effect as would require a corps equal to the Times, and a sheet of equal size, to present a daily record of."

*"The Distress" in the Southern Reporter (County Cork Newspaper), 10 Feb 1846*

DINGLE-- The Rev. Mr. Gayer of Dingle in a letter says, 'The people there are dying by inches; that he wonders they are so patient as to lie down and die without breaking open the Government stores, and that two-thirds of the population will perish if food be not cheapened there.

"The name of the reverend writer is familiar to our readers in connexion with a recent press prosecution. His 'wonder' at the patience of the stricken wretches speaks volumes for their condition.

"CROOKHAVEN -- A correspondent writing to us from this locality says, 'There have been 16 deaths from starvation in this locality in the last seven days, all leaving widows and orphans.

"TRACTON -- The affecting letter of the Rev. Mr. Corkran will be read with deep interest. It informs us that 16 deaths from starvation have occurred in ten days. This within a dozen miles of the southern capital of Ireland!

"Stretched on a bed of straw lies a dying husband and father; and grouped around that couch are a wretched wife and children, who devour wild weeds themselves, that they might leave the only remaining morsel of food to the dying man!

"Is this tide of horro to roll on unchecked? Will the Imperial rulers of this slavish province wait until one-half of the 'Irish savages' be swept away? For to this it will soon come."

*Cork Examiner (newspaper), 10 Jan 1847*

The harvest had been poor for a few years, but never this bad. Only a few days out of the ground and the potatoes began to blacken and rot. Blight was everywhere. Misery and starvation crept across the Irish countryside like a plague from Exodus. Ireland, a nation of approximately 8 million on the eve of the disaster, lost ¼ of its people during what became known as the "Great Famine" of 1845-1849. One million died, many of starvation or sickness. Another million left for better opportunities in America, Canada or elsewhere, in an exodus called the "Irish Diaspora." Irish history was at a crossroads.

Through the investigation of primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the details of Ireland's Great Famine of the 1840s, what caused it, the government's response to the tragedy and how the famine helped cause the Irish Diaspora.

## Objectives

1. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain the Great Potato Famine and how it affected the people of Ireland in the late 1840s.
2. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain how the government responded to the Great Potato Famine in Ireland.
3. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain the legacy of the Great Potato Famine for Irish people today, both in Ireland and around the world.

## Procedures

### I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: Should the government help out in the case of a natural disaster? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of documents and readings from the websites listed (5 min)

### II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – The Great Famine (20 min)
- Video – Letters and images from the Great Irish Potato Famine (10 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the articles and sources on the Great Potato Famine, taking notes as appropriate. (20 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles and sources for homework before class.
- Group Activity – Socratic Seminar: Great Potato Famine (15 min)

### III. Closure

- Exit Ticket / Assessment: Explain in detail the Great Potato Famine, how the government responded to the crisis, what happened to the population of Ireland as a result of the famine, and how the Irish today see the legacy of the famine.

## Extension

### **On tour: Great Famine Memorial at the Customs House Quays, Dublin**

While on tour, students can visit Great Famine Memorial at the Dublin Dockyards, where they can see for themselves the haunting bronze casted figures of famine victims walking towards an unnamed ship as they try desperately to flee the misery of Ireland. The memorial, built in 1997 by the Irish artist Rowan Gillespie, is really half of a trans-Atlantic piece, the other half of which is in Ireland Park, on the shores of Lake Ontario in Toronto, Canada (the Canadian memorial was finished in 2007).

# Web Links

## Lesson Plan Websites

- [www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/historyonline/irish\\_potato\\_famine.cfm](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/historyonline/irish_potato_famine.cfm)  
The Irish Potato Famine (website) from Digital History at the University of Houston
- [www.irishhistorylinks.net/History\\_Links/The\\_Great\\_Famine.html](http://www.irishhistorylinks.net/History_Links/The_Great_Famine.html)  
The Great Famine (website) – from Irishhistorylinks.net. Tremendous amount of resources on the Great Famine, including links to both primary and secondary sources. Highly recommended for both teachers and students. Website contains 9 separate sections: Overviews of the Famine, Famine Emigration, Contemporary Reports of the Famine, Blight and Fever, Relief Programs, Local Effects of the Famine, Economics, Agriculture and Land-holding, other Famine Resources and the Genocide Question.
- [www.iisresource.org/Documents/Bk04\\_U2\\_L9\\_10\\_11\\_12\\_Famine\\_No\\_GH.pdf](http://www.iisresource.org/Documents/Bk04_U2_L9_10_11_12_Famine_No_GH.pdf)  
“Ireland 1801-1921: Lesson Plans, worksheets and other resources – The Irish Famine.” From Gary Hillyard, Ashfield School, Kirkby-in-Ashfield (UK).
- [irishpotatofamine.net/](http://irishpotatofamine.net/)  
“The Great Irish Potato Famine” – Images and Stories from the Irish Potato Famine (website). Primary and secondary sources, including videos on the famine.
- [www.nbcnews.com/science/scientists-identify-mystery-killer-behind-irelands-potato-famine-6C10057354](http://www.nbcnews.com/science/scientists-identify-mystery-killer-behind-irelands-potato-famine-6C10057354)  
“Scientists identify the mystery killer behind Ireland’s potato famine” (NBC News article) – 2013 article behind the science of the blight from Alan Boyle, Science Editor at NBC News.
- [www.wesleyjohnston.com/users/ireland/maps/historical/famine\\_1847.gif](http://www.wesleyjohnston.com/users/ireland/maps/historical/famine_1847.gif)  
Severity of the Great Famine in Ireland, 1845-49 (map) – Map based on the “Seventh Report of the Relief Commissioners”, London 1847. This color map shows the percentage of people taking up rations by county in 1847.
- [www.wesleyjohnston.com/users/ireland/past/famine/emigration.html](http://www.wesleyjohnston.com/users/ireland/past/famine/emigration.html)  
Effects of the Famine: Emigration (website) – article on emigration from Ireland as a result of the famine. Includes a graph of where the people moved.
- [www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/irishfamine.htm](http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/irishfamine.htm)  
Eyewitness to History: The Irish Potato Famine, 1847 (website) – primary sources
- [socrates-cave.wikispaces.com/file/view/The+Great+Famine.ppt](http://socrates-cave.wikispaces.com/file/view/The+Great+Famine.ppt)  
The Great Famine PowerPoint from Jeffrey Tkachuk at Spiritwood HS in Saskatchewan, Canada
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=5uNMGzSL42U](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5uNMGzSL42U)  
The Great Famine: Part 1 of 2 (BBC 1995) – BBC video
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=QJGQVQvtekM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QJGQVQvtekM)  
The Great Famine: Part 2 of 2 (BBC 1995) – BBC Video. These videos (Parts 1 and 2) are about 50 minutes each, but well worth watching. The BBC did a great job of telling the story of the Great Famine, and even looked at the causes and consequences of the famine on the Irish people. There is also a section in Part 2 on the British government’s response to the crisis.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=AwxWwMp8gdw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AwxWwMp8gdw)  
Letters and Images from the Great Irish Potato Famine (video)
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video) – great 2 minute

video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA – highly recommended for teachers.

## **Background Information**

- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great\\_Famine\\_\(Ireland\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Famine_(Ireland))  
“Great Famine (Ireland)” – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phytophthora\\_infestans](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phytophthora_infestans)  
“Phytophthora infestans” – Wikipedia article on the potato blight
- [www.passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/ireland/dublin](http://www.passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/ireland/dublin)  
On the Road: Dublin – from Passports Educational Travel
- [www.passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/ireland/country\\_profile](http://www.passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/ireland/country_profile)  
On the Road: Country Profile of Ireland – from Passports Educational Travel

## **Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans**

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/ireland/st-patrick](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/ireland/st-patrick)  
Early Christian Ireland – St. Patrick
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/ireland/irish-potato-famine](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/ireland/irish-potato-famine)  
Great Potato Famine in Ireland 1845-1849
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/ireland/irish-rebellion-of-1798](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/ireland/irish-rebellion-of-1798)  
Irish Rebellion of 1798
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/ireland/medieval-ireland-st-brendan-voyage-to-america](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/ireland/medieval-ireland-st-brendan-voyage-to-america)  
Medieval Ireland – Voyage of St. Brendan
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/ireland/easter-rising-of-1916](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/ireland/easter-rising-of-1916)  
Modern Ireland (1916 - Present) – Easter Rising 1916
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/ireland/good-friday-agreement-of-1998](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/ireland/good-friday-agreement-of-1998)  
Modern Ireland (1916 – Present) – Good Friday Agreement 1998

## **Key Terms**

- Blight
- Diaspora
- Disease
- Emaciated
- Emigration
- Famine
- Ireland
- Migration
- Subsistence

