



Irish in Michigan (Discovering the Peoples of Michigan)

Seamus P. Metress, Eileen K. Metress

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Irish immigration to the United States can be divided into five general periods, from 1640 to the present: the colonial, prestarvation, great starvation, post-starvation, and post- independence periods. Immigration to the Great Lakes region and, more specifically, to Michigan was differentially influenced during each of these times. The oppressive historical roots of the Irish in both Ireland and nineteenth century America are important to understand in gaining an appreciation for their concern with socioeconomic status.

The Irish first entered the Great Lakes by way of the Ohio River and Appalachian passes, spreading north along the expanding frontier. After the War of 1812, the Irish were heavily represented in frontier military garrisons. Many Irish moved into the Detroit metropolitan area as well as to farming areas throughout Michigan. In the 1840s, a number of Irish began fishing in the waters off Beaver Island, Mackinac Island, Bay City, Saginaw, and Alpena. From 1853 to 1854, Irish emigrants from the Great Starvation dug the Ste. Marie Canal while others dug canals in Grand Rapids and Saginaw.

Irish nationalism in both Michigan and the United States has been closely linked with the labor movement in which Irish Americans were among the earliest organizers and leaders. Irish American nationalism forced the Irish regardless of their local Irish origins to assume a larger Irish identity. Irish Americans have a long history of involvement in the struggle for Irish Freedom dating from the 1840s.

As Patrick Ford, editor of *Irish World* has said, America led the Irish from the "littleness of countyism into a broad feeling of nationalism."

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