

TOPIC: Results of the Great Irish Famine

Aim: What were conditions like on Irish emigration ships to the new world?

Standards: United States History (1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4); Language Arts (3).

Do Now Activity: Read passage A about a ship taking Irish immigrants from Liverpool, England to New York and answer questions 1-3.

Motivational Activity: How do immigrants arrive in the United States today? Do all immigrants come to the United States in the same way? (Discuss legal and undocumented immigrants and "boat people" from countries like Haiti, Cuba and Vietnam) What was the trip like for Irish immigrants during the famine years?

Activity: Read and discuss passage A about a ship taking Irish immigrants from Liverpool, England to New York.

Key Questions:

Why did the doctor throw the chamber pots overboard?

Why did the doctor demand that sick people come to see him?

Why was the storm so frightening?

How were people buried at sea?

In your opinion, why did Catholic passengers object to funeral services being conducted without priests?

In your opinion, why did people call these ships "coffin ships"?

What could have been done to improve conditions on these ships? In your opinion, why wasn't it done?

Activity: Read and discuss passage B by Robert Whyte about a ship taking immigrants from Ireland to Quebec, Canada.

Key Questions:

Do you think the Captain was right or wrong when he threatened to shoot people who were demanding the ship's food? Explain.

Why does the author describe illness on the ship as "awful"?

Why were the passengers upset when they arrived at the immigration station in Quebec, Canada?

Summary Question: In your opinion, why were the emigration ships from Ireland to North America called "coffin ships"?

Application: In your opinion, would this kind of treatment of refugees be accepted in the world today? Explain.

Homework: Current events. Locate a newspaper article about people who are refugees today. What has been their experience as refugees? How is it similar to and how is it different from the experience of Irish refugees on the emigration ships?

ACTIVITY SHEET - Irish Emigration to America in the Famine Years  
(adapted from Peter Gray, *The Irish Famine*, NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995)

A) Vere Foster was a British diplomat. He described conditions aboard a boat taking Irish immigrants from Liverpool, England to New York during the Great Irish Famine.

November 17. The doctor this evening heaved overboard a great many of the chamber-pots belonging to the female passengers, saying that henceforward he would allow no women to do their business below, but that they should come to the filthy privies on deck. I heard him say, "There are a hundred cases of dysentery in the ship, which will all turn to cholera, and I swear to God that I will not go amongst them; if they want medicine they must come to me."

November 22. A violent gale became perfectly terrific; for a few minutes we all expected momentarily to go to the bottom, for the sea, which was foaming and rolling extremely high, burst upon the deck with a great crash, which made us all believe that some part of the vessel was stove in. The wave rushed down into the lower deck, and I certainly expected every moment to go down. Some of the passengers set to praying; the wind blew a perfect hurricane, so that it was quite out of the question to attempt to proceed on our proper course.

November, 25. Another child, making about 12 in all, died of dysentery from want of proper nourishing food, and was thrown into the sea sown up, along with a great stone, in a cloth. No funeral service has yet been performed, the Catholics objecting to the performance of any such service by a layman.

### **Questions**

- 1- Why did the doctor throw the chamber pots overboard?
- 2- Why was the storm so frightening?
- 3- How were people buried at sea?

B) Robert Whyte tells the story of his trip from Ireland to Quebec, Canada in 1847. Nothing is known of his later life except that he settled in the United States.

June 16: The past night was very rough, and I enjoyed little rest. No additional cases of sickness were reported, but there were signs of insubordination amongst the healthy men who complained of starvation and want of water for their sick wives and children. A deputation came to acquaint the captain with their grievances, but he ordered them away, and would not listen to a word from them. When he went below the ring leaders threatened that they would break into the provision store. In order to make a deeper impression on their minds, he brought out the old blunderbuss from which he fired a shot, the report of which was equal to the report of a small cannon. The deputation slunk away muttering complaints.

June 25: It was awful how suddenly some were stricken. A little child, playing with his companions, suddenly fell down, and for some time sunk in deadly torpor, from which when he awoke he commenced to scream violently and wreath in convulsive agony. A poor woman who was warming a drink at the fire for her husband also dropped down quite senseless and was borne to her berth.

July 28, Grosse Isle, Quebec: By 6 AM we were settled in our new position before the quarantine station. The poor passengers were dressed in their best clothes and were clean, though haggard and weak. They were under the impression that the sick would be immediately admitted to the hospital and the healthy landed upon the island, there to remain until taken to Quebec by a steamer. I could not believe it possible that here, within reach of help, we should be left as neglected as when upon the ocean. That after a voyage of two months' duration we were to be left still enveloped by reeking pestilence, the sick without medicine, medical skill, nourishment or so much as a drop of pure water. The river, although not saline here, was polluted by the most disgusting objects thrown overboard from the several vessels.

### **Questions**

1- Do you think the Captain was right or wrong when he threatened to shoot people who were demanding the ship's food? Explain.

2- Why does the author describe illness on the ship as "awful"?

3- Why were the passengers upset when they arrived at the immigration station in Quebec, Canada?