

LESSON WRITER: Jennifer Frieman

DATE: October 2010

COURSE/GRADE: U.S. History, Grades 8 & 9

UNIT: Immigration

LESSON TITLE: Was Emigration the “Right” Decision During the Irish Potato Famine?

TIME NEEDED: One to two 45-minute class periods

LESSON OVERVIEW:

Students will compare/contrast Irish peasants’ situations in Ireland during the Great Potato Famine of the mid to late 1840s and their situations as new arrivals in the United States.

Students will analyze the pros and cons of immigrating in response to the famine and will evaluate whether the immigrants made the “right” decision in leaving Ireland for America.

OUTCOMES: At the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- analyze primary source documents and images
- describe conditions in Ireland during the Great Famine of the late 1840s
- describe conditions for Irish immigrants in the United States in the mid to late 1800s
- evaluate the immigrants’ success in improving their situations through emigration

OBJECTIVES:

Focus Question for the Lesson: Did Irish peasants make the “right” decision in leaving Ireland during the Great Potato Famine to settle in the United States?

Maryland State Curriculum Content Objectives:

Grade 8

8.2.A.1.d Explain the interaction of cultures prior to the Civil War

8.2.B.1.b Examine how the diversity of the United States represents a blending of cultures and ideas from around the world

8.2.B.2.a Analyze consequences of immigration including assimilation and Nativism

8.3.C.1.b Describe the effects of the influx of immigrants on the United States

8.5.B.4.a Identify the push and pull factors responsible for immigration to the United States, such as the forced migration of Africans and Western European migration

Grade 9

5.1.3.b Evaluate the impact of industrialization on regional development, settlement patterns and quality of life

5.1.3.c Evaluate the government and public response to immigrants as a result of industrialization, such as nativism, the Americanization Movement, and immigration restrictions

5.1.3.e Describe the relationship between industrialization and urbanization, such as increased socio-economic stratification, innovations in technology and transportation on urban life

MATERIALS:

- “Life in Ireland” Primary Source Packets (Primary Sources A-E) – 1 per student pair, enough for half the class at a time
- “Life in the U.S.” Primary Source Packets (Primary Sources F-J) – 1 per student pair, enough for half the class at a time
- Worksheets – 1 per student
 - Do I Go or Do I Stay?
 - How Was the Quality of Life . . .
- Chalkboard
- Overhead or LCD projector
- Blank White Paper
- Colored Pencils or Markers

PRIMARY SOURCES:

Source A: Blackwood, Frederick Temple (Marquis of Dufferin and Ava) and Boyle, George Frederick (Earl of Glasgow). *Narrative of a journey from Oxford to Skibbereen during the year of the Irish famine*. Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1847. pp. 12-14.

Source B: “Destitution in Ireland – Failure of the Potato Crop.” *Pictorial Times*, August 22, 1846.

Source C: “Mullin’s Hut, at Scull.” “Sketches in the West of Ireland.” *Illustrated London News*, February 13 & 20, 1847.

Source D: “Famine and Starvation in the County of Cork.” *The Illustrated London News*, January 16, 1847.

Source E: “Boy and Girl at Cahera.” “Sketches in the West of Ireland.” *Illustrated London News*, February 13 & 20, 1847.

Source F: *Reports of the Industrial Commission on Immigration, Vol. 15*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1901. pp 458-460.

Source G: Yard of tenement. New York, NY. 1900-1910. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Detroit Publishing Company Collection. LC-D4-36490.

Source H: “The Future of New York Housing Reform.” *Public Opinion: A Comprehensive Summary of the Press Throughout the World On All Important Current Topics*, Vol. XXI. July 1896-December 1896. New York: The Public Opinion Company, 1896. p. 797.

Source I: Massachusetts Department of Labor and Industries. *Fourth Annual Report of the Bureau of Statistics of Labor, Embracing the Account of Its Operations and Inquiries from March 1, 1872, to March 1, 1873*. Boston: Wright & Potter, State Printers, 1873. p. 376.

Source J: Riis, Jacob A. “Dens of Death,” *The Battle with the Slum*. New York: The MacMillan Company, 1902. pp. 21.

SELECTED VOCABULARY:

- blight
- economic opportunity
- emigrate
- excerpt
- immigrate/immigrant
- primary source
- tenement

PROCEDURE:

MOTIVATION

Ask students to think about some reasons why families leave their current homes and move to new areas. List student responses on the board/overhead. *[Possible responses include: to take a better job, to accommodate a change in family situation such as a marriage or divorce, to find a better climate; to move to a more affordable area; for adventure, etc.]* Ask students which of the listed reasons they believe is probably the most popular. Guide them toward “to take a better job.” Ask whether any of the students has ever made such a move with their family. How did they feel about the move? Excited? Nervous? Afraid of the unknown?

Ask students to think about some issues one might consider when deciding whether to move to pursue a better job with more pay. What might be the pros and cons? What are the uncertainties? Again, make a quick list student of responses on the board/overhead. *[Possible negative responses include: you can't be sure whether you'll like the new job; you can't be sure you'll like the new area; you'll have to leave friends and family; etc. Possible positive responses include: the extra income may really improve your lifestyle; you may love the new area; you get to explore places you've never seen; etc.]* Discuss the fact that, in order to decide to make the move, one would have to believe that the pros outweigh the cons and moving would improve one's life in a substantial way. Otherwise, there would be no reason to move.

Explain that, during today's lesson, students will explore and evaluate Irish peasants' decisions to leave Ireland to escape the Great Potato Famine of the late 1840s and immigrate to the United States. Explain that in the nineteenth century, Irish peasants were tenant farmers on land owned by wealthy English landlords, who demanded high rents and were merciless about collecting them. In addition, the English persecuted the Irish peasants because they were Catholic instead of Anglican. The peasants depended very heavily on the potato for food; it was the staple food for about 90% of the Irish population. In 1845, a new type of potato disease called a “blight” attacked potatoes in Europe. Between 1845 and 1852, the blight destroyed almost the entire potato crop in Ireland with devastating effects because of how heavily the peasants depended upon the potato for food. As a result, about 1 million Irish peasants decided to emigrate from Ireland to the United States in search of better economic opportunity.

Divide the class into pairs of students, and distribute the Worksheet titled “Do I Go or Do I Stay?” Reiterate the point that, in order to decide to go to the U.S., an Irish peasant would have had to believe that his/her life in America would be better than it was in Ireland. Ask each pair to take 3 minutes to predict and list the ways an Irish person's life might be better in the U.S.

than in Ireland during the late 1840s. Then they should create a list of ways that his/her life might be better by remaining in Ireland.

PROCEDURE:

Guided Practice:

Tell students that they will be examining a variety of primary sources that help us understand what life was like for Irish peasants during the Great Famine and another set of sources that help us understand what life was like for Irish settled in the United States. Using these primary sources, we will determine whether Irish peasants made the “right” decision in emigrating from Ireland to the United States to escape the famine. If necessary, define “primary source” for the students.

Distribute a copy of the Worksheet Titled “How was the Quality of Life . . .” to each student. To model primary source analysis, project Primary Source A on the overhead or LCD projector and complete the worksheet for that source as a class. Tell students that they should record their observations about the quality of life as it is depicted in each source. Students should consider living accommodations, health, the availability of food, the opportunity to earn a living, conditions for raising children, etc. Encourage students to explore even the smallest details in image sources and to think about issues such as perspective in documentary sources.

Independent Practice:

Direct students to work in pairs, but each student should complete his/her own worksheet. Distribute a “Life in Ireland” packet containing primary sources A-E to one half of the class, and a “Life in the U.S.” packet containing primary sources F-J to the other half of the class. Give the students approximately 15 minutes to analyze their sources and fill in their worksheets.

When all students have finished their work, reconvene as a class. Ask the students who analyzed the “Life in Ireland” packet: In general terms, how would you describe life in Ireland for peasants during the Great Famine? Were living accommodations good or bad? Was health good or bad? Was the availability of food good or bad? Were opportunities to make money good or bad? Try to discourage students from providing too much detail. Rather, ask for their general impressions. Next, ask the same questions of the students who analyzed the “Life in the U.S.” packet. Comment on the fact that life in neither location seems especially positive.

Redistribute the primary source packets so that students have the opportunity to see the other group of sources. Allow another 15 minutes for the pairs to analyze the sources and complete the worksheets.

Come together as a class to discuss students’ findings and begin to draw some conclusions.

- Ask: What were some of the similarities and differences between life for peasants in Ireland during the Great Famine and life in the United States as newly arrived immigrants?
- Ask: Was life in the United States better than it had been Ireland?

Explain that conditions were so horrible in Ireland during the Great Famine that the Irish population shrunk by about 20-25% due to death and emigration. Families were evicted from

their homes, shabby though they might have been, for not paying rent. With their staple food, the potato, rotting in the fields, entire villages starved. And diseases such as typhus ran rampant. About 1 million people died from starvation and disease.

- Ask: Considering all we have learned today, did Irish immigrants make the “right” decision in coming to the U.S.? In other words, reflecting back on the “Should I Stay or Should I Go?” worksheet we completed during the Motivation, was life “better” in Ireland or the U.S.?
- Ask: What would you have done if you had known what life would be like in the U.S.? [Point out that many, if not most, of the emigrants would not have really known what conditions were like for new arrivals in the U.S.]
- Ask: Is there any other information you would like to see before deciding whether immigrants made the “right” decision?

ASSESSMENT:

Have students develop a pamphlet or advertisement directed at Irish peasants enduring the Great Famine to either encourage them to immigrate the United States or discourage them from doing so. In their work, students should explain why life in the United States will be better, the same, or worse than life in Ireland, and they should cite at least 3 pieces of evidence from the primary sources they analyzed to support their argument.

CLOSURE/EXIT SLIP:

On an Exit Slip, have students respond to the following question: “If I had been a peasant living in Ireland during the Great Famine, I (choose one) WOULD/WOULD NOT have emigrated to the United States BECAUSE”

LESSON EXTENSIONS:

- Take students to Baltimore’s Irish Railroad Workers Museum to discover how Irish immigrants lived in Baltimore in the mid- to late-nineteenth century.
- Explore primary sources that detail the “coffin ships” in which the Irish traveled to America. Compare accounts of conditions in these ships to slave ships that carried enslaved Africans across the Atlantic during the Middle Passage.
- Visit the website of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum (www.tenement.org) for a closer exploration of the living conditions of immigrants in New York City.
- Explore what life was like for Irish in America and Ireland 50-75 years after the Famine. Were long-term prospects better in Ireland or America?

DO I GO or DO I STAY???

HOW MIGHT LIFE BE BETTER BY GOING TO THE U.S.?

HOW MIGHT LIFE BE BETTER BY STAYING IN IRELAND?

DIRECTIONS: As you analyze each source, record your observations about the quality of life, considering such issues as living accommodations, health, food, opportunity to earn a living, conditions for raising children, etc.

HOW WAS THE QUALITY OF LIFE . . .

<u>IN IRELAND?</u>	<u>IN AMERICA?</u>
<u>Source A:</u>	<u>Source F:</u>
<u>Source B:</u>	<u>Source G:</u>
<u>Source C:</u>	<u>Source H:</u>
<u>Source D:</u>	<u>Source I:</u>
<u>Source E:</u>	<u>Source J:</u>

PRIMARY SOURCE A
(pg 1 of 3)

Conversing on these subjects, we reached a most miserable portion of the town; the houses were mere hovels, dark and dismal in the inside, damp and filthy to the most offensive degree. So

Blackwood, Frederick Temple (Marquis of Dufferin and Ava) and Boyle, George Frederick (Earl of Glasgow). *Narrative of a journey from Oxford to Skibbereen during the year of the Irish famine*. Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1847. pp. 12-14.

PRIMARY SOURCE A
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universal and virulent was the fever, that we were forced to choose among several houses to discover one or more which it would be safe to enter. At length, Mr. Townsend singled out one. We stood on the threshold and looked in; the darkness of the interior was such, that we were scarcely able to distinguish objects; the walls were bare, the floor of mud, and not a vestige of furniture. The poor have pawned nearly every article of furniture which they possess, in order to obtain food; the number of tickets at the brokers is almost incredible; many have thus parted with the means of future subsistence, as in the case of some fishermen, who have pawned their boats and nets, and so deprived themselves of the power of deriving benefit from the fish, which abound along the coast. We entered another at no great distance: over a few peat embers a woman was crouching, drawing her only solace from their scanty warmth; she was suffering from diarrhoea: there seemed scarcely a single article of furniture or crockery in any part of the hut. The woman answered the enquiries of Mr. Townsend in a weak and desponding voice; and from what we could gather, there appeared to be several other human beings in different corners of the hovel, but in the darkness we were totally unable to distinguish them.

This case is cited, not as an instance of extreme destitution, but as a proof of the miserable condition to which some, who were once in flourishing

Blackwood, Frederick Temple (Marquis of Dufferin and Ava) and Boyle, George Frederick (Earl of Glasgow). *Narrative of a journey from Oxford to Skibbereen during the year of the Irish famine*. Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1847. pp. 12-14

PRIMARY SOURCE A
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circumstances, have been reduced; for the woman, we were told, was the wife of a respectable tradesman, who but two months before was carrying on a thriving business; and the same reverse of fortune had been experienced by others likewise. Mr. Townsend assured us, that in each of the surrounding huts we should witness the same or similar scenes, aggravated, perhaps, by the prevailing epidemic.

Blackwood, Frederick Temple (Marquis of Dufferin and Ava) and Boyle, George Frederick (Earl of Glasgow). *Narrative of a journey from Oxford to Skibbereen during the year of the Irish famine*. Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1847. pp. 12-14.

PRIMARY SOURCE B



DESTITUTION IN IRELAND. — FAILURE OF THE POTATO CROP.

“Destitution in Ireland – Failure of the Potato Crop.” *Pictorial Times*, August 22, 1846.

PRIMARY SOURCE C



MULLIN'S HUT, AT SCULL.

“Mullin’s Hut, at Scull.” “Sketches in the West of Ireland.” *Illustrated London News*, February 13 & 20, 1847.

PRIMARY SOURCE D

FAMINE AND STARVATION IN THE COUNTY OF CORK

Very lamentable accounts are given from various parts of the county of Cork. From gantry, Skibbereen, Crookhaven, Castletown, and Tracton, the reports present the same gloomy features. The intelligence from these scenes of misery is summed up by the *Cork Examiner* as follows:--

. . . "In Tracton, deaths, it appears, are occurring too. Mr. Corkoran, P.P., in a letter to Mr. Redington says: '*Over sixteen deaths occurred in my parishes for the last ten days. I am morally certain that each and every one of them was occasioned and accelerated by want of food and fire. Buckley, of Ballyvorane, and Sullivan, of Oysterhaven, died suddenly. Buckley dropped dead on the works, after a journey of three miles before day. His wife will make affidavit, that he had not sufficient food the night before he died, and that she and the rest of her family lived thirty-six hours on wild weeds to spare a bit of the cake for him. (In this case, a Coroner's verdict was given without sight of the body.) This horrifying economy is practiced by scores of families in this district. Similar effects must be expected from similar causes. I fear we must bury the dead coffinless in future. My God! what a revolting idea! Without food when alive, without a coffin when dead.*'"

The Rev. Robert Traill, chairman of the Schule Relief Committee, county Cork, states that 15,000 persons in that wide district are destitute; of this 5000 are entirely dependent on casual charity; fifty deaths have resulted from famine and "hundreds" are so reduced that not food or medicine can restore them! The deaths, he adds, now average 25 daily!!

"Famine and Starvation in the County of Cork." *The Illustrated London News*, January 16, 1847.

PRIMARY SOURCE E



BOY AND GIRL AT CAHERA.

“Boy and Girl at Cahera.” “Sketches in the West of Ireland,” *Illustrated London News*, February 13 & 20, 1847.

PRIMARY SOURCE F
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The Sixth Ward at this time could lay claim to the most exclusively foreign population of any district in the city. Americans constituted less than 5 per cent of the whole number. Of the foreign population, the Irish constituted 74 percent; the remaining 26 per cent were mainly German Jews and Italians. The German Jews dealt in old clothing and made Baxter street their headquarters; the Irish kept junk shops, liquor stores, groceries, etc.; the Italians were ragpickers, and organ grinders.⁴ By this time about one-third of the tenant houses in the ward were of the "barrack" type, containing from 10 to 50 families each. The remainder were very old wooden structures, some quite small, containing 4 to 8 families in as many rooms. Many of these houses were used as lodging houses, as many as 30 persons being packed into a single room. . .

. . . The Thirteenth Ward, to the east of the Tenth Ward, was densely crowded with the working classes, the majority of whom were Irish; Germans ranked next, and Americans last. Only one-fourth of the buildings were tenant houses. The ward showed a high rate of sickness and mortality, owing to the overcrowded and ill-ventilated dwellings and to the ignorant and careless habits of the people themselves . . .

. . . Next to be considered are the social and moral aspects of the life of the foreign population thus widely distributed over the city. The tenement houses in which most of them found their homes were certainly little calculated to develop high social and moral types, and indeed brought to bear influences working directly the other way.

Physical devitalization led to moral degeneracy. The general lowering of vitality due to the foul air, darkness, and filth of the tenement is accompanied by a depression of spirits, a reduction of energy and ambition. The tenement dweller is not only incapacitated for work, but loses interest in it and in the progress of his family; resorts to strong drink to stimulate his system, while this in turn reduces his physical health still further and incites him directly to all kinds of vice and crime.

The state of physical and moral degradation brought about in the tenement house became so distinct a type that all observers and investigators remarked it, and some one of them in a Hash of genius bestowed upon it the significant, if not elegant, name of "Tenant-house rot . . ."

. . . Overcrowding of itself led to grave evils; and the whole set of influences at work in the tenement were well summed up by the well-known philanthropist, Mr. Charles L. Brace:

Reports of the Industrial Commission on Immigration, Vol. 15. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1901. pp 458-460.

PRIMARY SOURCE F
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In many quarters of the city family life and the feeling of home are almost unknown; people live in great caravansaries, which are hot and stifling in summer, disagreeable in winter, and where children associate together in the worst way. In many rooms privacy and purity are unattainable, and young girls grow up accustomed to immodesty from their earliest years. Boys herd together in gangs, and learn the practices of crime and vice before they are out of childhood. Even the laborers' families who occupy separate rooms in these buildings have no sense of home. They do not own the house nor any part of it, nor have any interest in it. All that valuable industry which in the country a mechanic or laborer applies in odd hours to his little homestead is here lost. The workman spends his leisure hours in the grogshops or at the corner groceries. The general effect of the system is the existence of a proletariat class, who have no interest in the permanent well-being of the community, who have no sense of home, and who live without any deep root in the soil, the mere tools of demagogues and designing men.

Reports of the Industrial Commission on Immigration, Vol. 15. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1901. pp 458-460.

PRIMARY SOURCE G



Yard of tenement. New York, NY. 1900-1910. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Detroit Publishing Company Collection. LC-D4-36490.

PRIMARY SOURCE H

The death-rate in New York that year was 36.38, and of the total number of deaths, 73 per cent were children. In 1859 the death-rate rose to 27.15 of the population of 1857, while the deaths in 1855 and 1856 exceeded the births by 47 per cent, and the mortality of children five years old and under was 58 per cent of the total deaths. Quoting from that year's report: " The pith and burden of the whole matter is that the great mass of the immigrant poor are compelled to live in tenements that are unfit for human beings, and under circumstances in which it is impossible to preserve health and life."

In 1865 the Bureau of Sanitary Science or Council of Hygiene, composed of the best medical minds in the city, completed and published a sanitary survey, thus demonstrating the necessity of immediate reformatory action. Where one tenement was clean, twenty were found in disorder and disgustingly unclean. Nor were these wretched conditions peculiar to the worst constructed dwellings, where insalubrity consequent upon uncleanliness is unavoidable, but were common, not so say universal, among the better grade of houses, wherever the inmates happened to be of the ignorant, degraded, half-civilized class, because the long-continued deprivation of pure air and sunlight, with the presence of filth and malaria, so reduced the vital energy of persons exposed to these deleterious influences, as not only to render them peculiarly susceptible to fatal diseases, but also to a degree of mental and moral obliquity and obtuseness, which strongly tended to their demoralization. To effect the desired results, when mere moral influence failed, was the function of the law. No one had a social, moral, or legal right, by any neglect or overt act, so to use his own as to damage his neighbor. The Report for 1869 called attention to the unsanitary condition of the " squatter " shanties which were found between 42d and 44th streets, east of Third avenue, 55th and 59th streets, south of Central Park, and on the West Side between 60th and 80th streets. They were extremely unhealthy, the death-rate being fearfully high. The inhabitants, of whom there were about four or five thousand, mostly women and children, were Irish and Germans, who preferred living rent free amidst filth and malarial disease to paying a landlord for no better privileges in a tenement house.

"The Future of New York Housing Reform." *Public Opinion: A Comprehensive Summary of the Press Throughout the World On All Important Current Topics*, Vol. XXI. July 1896-December 1896. New York: The Public Opinion Company, 1896. p. 797.

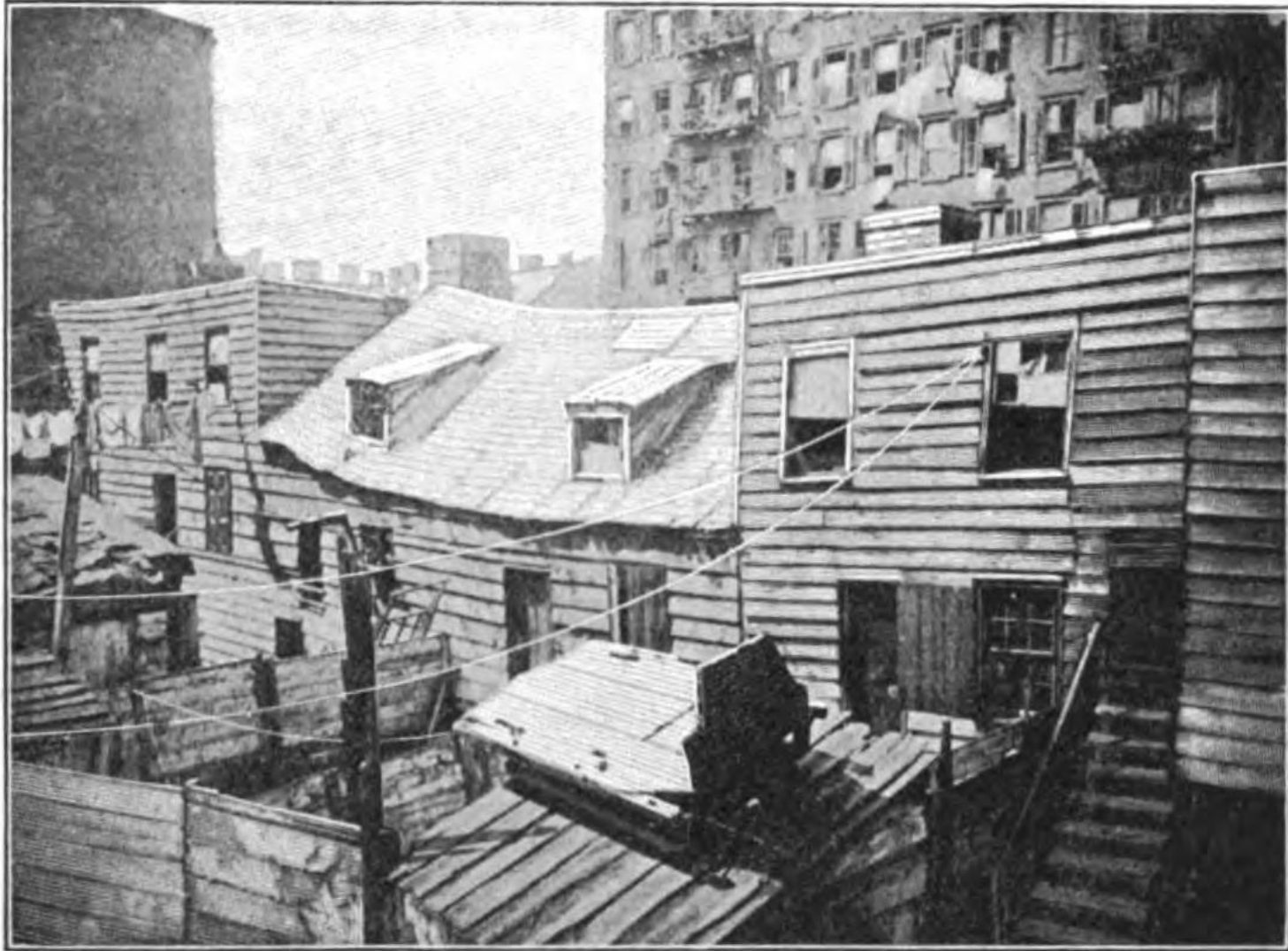
PRIMARY SOURCE I

8. Tenement house No. 42 Pingree Street, near the water's edge, is owned by Patrick Mullen, of Boston, and leased for five years, to Michael Hogan. Valuation \$1,400. Tax \$23.80. Aggregate rentage \$48.00 per month. This is a very old two and a half story house, completely out of repair, containing 24 rooms, and divided into 8 tenements, 34 persons living in them, all Irish. There are 3 rooms to each tenant, the main room being about 12 feet square, and 7½ feet post, in both stories. The cellars parted off, and but 6 feet stud, are always wet, especially in the spring, from the rise of the tide, which overflows the intervening space between the sea-wall and house. The windows are all out, and boards substituted. Cellar stairs steep, and used at great risk.

Furniture generally very poor, and scant. In one tenement, of five persons, an old ragged bed stands in the kitchen, in the midst of all the filth; old barrels occupy the corners, windows stuffed with old clothing. The furniture, consisting of a stool, a rocking-chair, two old, common chairs, one without a back, a four-foot, old dining table, very dirty, and two old chairs in the bedroom. In another apartment, containing eight persons, two of the male occupants carry on shoemaking, in the kitchen. The floor was covered with leather scraps, and everything was dirty in the extreme. The air was fully impregnated with the smell of burnt leather, and intolerable. The door-steps outside were in pieces, and the door itself, well covered with juvenile knife-carvings and hieroglyphics. A double privy stands in the rear, the interior of one next the street completely exposed to view by the knocking off of its boards.

Massachusetts Department of Labor and Industries. *Fourth Annual Report of the Bureau of Statistics of Labor, Embracing the Account of Its Operations and Inquiries from March 1, 1872, to March 1, 1873.* Boston: Wright & Potter, State Printers, 1873. p. 376.

PRIMARY SOURCE J



Riis, Jacob A. "Dens of Death," *The Battle with the Slum*. New York: The MacMillan Company, 1902. pp. 21.