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Joining White America: How The Irish Achieved Racial Assimilation

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The construct that we know as "race" is an important part of American culture today and over the course of much of our nation's history. Today's scientists universally agree that there is no biological or genetic validity in dividing up humanity into distinct races. Nevertheless, the fact that people groups have been racially codified - both legally and informally - is an inescapable reality of our nation's cultural history. In today's world, racial classification is typically based almost exclusively on the tone of one's skin and for that reason, tends to be fairly consistent. For example, a person with dark skin is generally considered to be a person of color, regardless of national or ancestral heritage. Conversely, if a person has white skin, they are generally immediately considered to fall into the "white" or caucasian racial category. Specifically in terms of the latter example, this viewpoint has not always been dominant in American public discourse and literature. The racial categorization of many ethnic and national groups, perhaps most notably the Irish but also other European groups, transformed dramatically in the course of the 19th and early 20th centuries. These groups, which were formerly considered "non-white" or at very least "less white" have now firmly entrenched themselves into majority white America. Any remnant of their cultural history that distinguishes them from the American homogeneity is described as an "ethnic", rather than a "racial" difference. Yet the word "ethnicity" was actually never used until recently, and racial scientists depicted such differences in racial terminology. This paradigm shift itself begs two fundamental questions. What was the nature and what were the catalysts behind any non-Anglo European immigrants' transition into whiteness? For example, what were the forces, both societal and voluntary, that allowed Irish-Americans to obtain the socio-economic benefits of being considered white? In order to answer this historical question, I shall first lay the groundwork for the racial environment in

which this change took place, and then I shall examine what race meant to Irish-Americans as a tool for self-empowerment at the cost of African-American and Asian-Americans who have still not been able to obtain whiteness.

I first came to raise these questions in my own mind during the summer before my junior year of college. I had the privilege of participating in an educational bus tour that travelled through the American South exploring the history of African-American civil rights through visits to museums, monuments, and memorials. While our group was at the National Museum of Civil Rights in Nashville Tennessee, we took a guided tour through its exhibits. I recall overhearing another visitor to the museum, who was not associated with our group, describing how Irish immigrants were also taken as slaves in America, echoing the situation of African-Americans in the 18th and 19th centuries. I remember reacting internally with indignation at this comment - it seemed inappropriate, not to mention ahistorical, to equate the racial discrimination and enslavement suffered by African-Americans to indentured servitude. Thankfully, my initial thoughts on the matter provided the seed that germinated the idea to undertake this research project. I wanted to challenge my preconceptions about the topic of Irish racial history in America, especially since it was not a topic about which I knew much at the time. I was thereby drawn into the topic of race in general because, although it permeates quite literally every aspect of American life, both past and present, most people are not interested in discussing it openly. Race, in much the same way as religion or politics, is a taboo topic in most casual public dialogue. Even in an academic context, race is often a subject that is broached with hesitancy, if it is broached at all. There are multiple reasons for this, but one of them is that it is difficult for Americans, particularly white Americans, to take a long look in the mirror and process the

reflection which greets them. The way that white Americans have used racial power reflects poorly on the realization of the ideals that the American people prides itself on promoting - liberty, freedom, equality. However, carefully seeking to understand the origins of whiteness, race, and racism, no matter how painful the revelations one finds, is a crucial step towards healing the scar, or Jim Wallis refers to it, the "original sin", of racism in our nation's history.[1]

To understand whiteness and the American concept of race, we must first examine its origins in the colonial British Empire. In broad terms, whiteness was created as a tool to justify the perceived - at least, perceived by the British - superiority of the British way of life and culture over those whom they were colonizing at the time, specifically the Irish. The concept that became referred to later on as "White" or "Anglo-Saxon" had its basic origins in the concept of "Britishness" that preceded it. Although the concept of Anglo-superiority was by no means new, Ireland provided a unique challenge in terms of justification for colonization. Both geographically near to Britain and ethnically akin to the Scottish, the Irish had enough similarities to challenge a mindset that differentiated the English (and Scots) from the Irish in a meaningful enough way that could justify their colonization.

One of the hallmarks of British colonial oppression was the establishment of social control over the native Irish population. In the case of Ireland, the tool that was utilized the most effectively to establish this social control was racialized oppression. According to Theorodore Allen, in his monograph *The Invention of the White Race*, the hallmarks of racial oppression include an "assault on tribal affinities, customs, laws, and institutions," all of which describe the systematic disempowerment campaign against the Irish people carried out throughout the

[1]Jim Wallis, *America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2017).

majority of the period from the 16th century to 19th century.[2] However, racialized control was not the first method that the British had attempted to use. First, the British government attempted to establish an English middle class in Ireland in order to force the Irish middle class out of positions of power within their own communities. Unfortunately for the British, the attempt to transplant its own middle class in Ireland proved too demographically thin to have any significant influence, and instead the transplanted British became more Irish rather than the Irish middle class becoming more English. The English attempted two more strategies - replacing Celtic law with British law, and establishing Protestant plantations - both of which failed miserably due largely to a lack of numbers. The native Irish population simply overwhelmed the British colonial presence and smothered its impact.[3]

With the failure of these attempts to subdue the Irish population, the British government turned to a new and most systematic strategy yet. The Protestant Ascendancy was a 70-year program of British governmental action that began in 1778 and effectively established Irish Catholics on the lowest rung of society's hierarchy. Through a system of penal codes, civil rights deprivations, and ideological attacks on Irish customs and traditions, the British colonial government penalized Irishness and subdued any Irish efforts to maintain traditional culture. According to Theodore Allen, the Protestant Ascendancy shared many characteristics with slavery - the complete stripping of culture, rights, education, and family structures. So why did the British not simply enslave the Irish en masse? Quite simply, the British army did not have the resources required for a full-scale enslavement of the Irish people. Yet through the system of the Penal Codes, Irish labor became so cheap that economically speaking there was very little cost

[2]Theodore Allen, *The Invention of the White Race* (London: Verso, 2012).
[3]Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, 29-65.

differential from slavery, and indeed the costs of capturing and containing the Irish popluation would have outweighed the advantages of the absolute physical control that chattel slavery afforded.[4]

In the absence of slavery in the traditional sense, the tools of the Protestant Ascendancy were largely achieved through new legal structures, which dismantled the Irish people's access to civil rights, political self-determination, literacy, social power, and accumulation of capital. All of these characteristics point to the hallmarks of racial oppression - indeed there are eerie similarities to the ways that the American government enforced the enslavement of African Americans. Property laws are an important part of the legal barriers enforced against Catholics, who could not acquire land from a Protestant, could not lease for more than 31 years, and even the few Catholic landowners had no hereditary rights to their estates. Attacks on Irish civil rights helped to ensure that Irish people could not challenge or violate the predatory property laws through established legal means. Catholics were deprived of their rights to bear arms, practice law, serve on a jury, hold positions of authority, serve in the military, or to vote in any election - all in their own homeland. In terms of attacks on Catholic education, it also became illegal to teach any Catholic outside of one's immediate family to read or write, and Catholics were excluded from many apprenticeships for skilled craftsmanship. The final of the four-pronged legal attack on Catholic civil liberties was levelled against the traditional Irish family structure and customs. An Irish woman, who had been legally disinherited of her husband's estate at his death, could receive the English common law portion of a third of his estate only after she converted to Protestantism. And if any children converted to Protestantism, their father no longer

[4]Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, 71-76.

maintained legal control over them, provided he remained Catholic. As part of this undermining of traditional paternal legal authority over his family, Protestant lords could seize female Catholic children from lower classes as "concubines". Finally, children could be taken from their parents and placed in the Charter School system, which sought to re-educate Catholic children with Protestant principles by forcing them to disavow Popish authority and Catholic teachings. The combination of all of these legal handicaps proved highly effective in reducing the status of the Irish Catholic population into a subordinate social class in their own nation.[5]

The question, or rebuttal, that logically follows from Penal Codes and Protestant Ascendancy as tools of racial oppression, often has been: "Were not these a form of religious, rather than racial, discrimination?" Although the laws were explicitly anti-Catholic, the British government was well aware of the fact that the Protestant Ascendancy was aimed at subduing the Irish *people*, not the Irish *religion.* Indeed, while Irish Catholics could have simply converted to Protestantism, this would have spelled a certain cultural and social death of the Irish people, a fact of which the British were well-aware. For this very reason, the rate of conversions to Protestantism during the Protestant Ascendency in Ireland was about three out of every one thousand citizens. Ironically it was crucial to the success of the Protestant Ascendancy that the Irish not convert. For the purposes of the British colonizing process, Catholicism simply served as a central aspect of Irish social, spiritual, and cultural identity that very few of them were willing to give up.[6]

Because of the Penal Codes and Protestant Ascendancy, the English colonial powers were able to strip the Irish people of civil rights and political self-determination and relegate

[5]Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, 81-105.
[6]Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, 77-79.

them into a subordinate social status even in a nation in which the Irish made up the vast majority of the population. Through this effort, the Irish were essentially transformed into the "other" in a way that placed them below the English in every way - politically, socially, and culturally. By enforcing systemic legal codes the British constructed both a dominant identity of Britishness as well as an inferior identity of Irish culture and people.

An important aspect of British supremacy was the belief that the English people were the freest and most liberty-loving people group in the world. This belief had been a part of British identity long before the colonization of Ireland. British literature long painted alternative forms of government found in other nations, such as absolute monarchy in Spain and France, as barbaric and uncivilized. Crucially, however, English elites began to depict these differences using racial terminology. According to the discourse promoted by British rulers, Britain boasted the freest society in the world because its citizens were the most capable of governing themselves. Under this view, a democratic republic was established on the basis of civic engagement, which necessitated its male citizens to demonstrate wisdom and sound decision-making. This fitness for self government is crucial to the development of racialized language and the "othering" of those who the British, and the British citizens in America, viewed as racially inferior.[7] British colonial literature spoke of the need to shepherd lesser peoples into the British democratic ideal. Language of this type was applied to numerous people groups that the British encountered - Irish, Native-Americans, and later on, Indians, Africans and East Asians.[8]

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[7]Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003): 25.

[8]For a quintessential example of this type of language being allied to Indians, look no further than "The White Man's Burden" by Rudyard Kipling. Although it was published several decades after the Protestant Ascendency ended, it demonstrates a continuation of the paternalistic colonial mindset.

Indeed, in the United States' founding documents, a "fitness for self government" was and remains an explicit qualification for actively participating in the new republic. The founding fathers were under the impression that only European (specifically English) male landowners had a sufficiently significant stake in society and an inherent capability for disinterested rationality - as evidenced by their achieved social standing and amassed wealth - in order to responsibly self-govern. The denial of voting rights in the United States Constitution for all who were not English men of at least some means was not accidental.[9]

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, while Britain was colonizing Ireland, the new American republic was struggling to establish itself as a secure, self-sufficient nation. The Constitutional Convention, which established America's legal framework, wished to ensure the democracy's success, and ensuring the individual responsibility of its male citizens was an important aspect of that task. Therefore, the distinguishing racialized traits that the British were using to "other" those in their colonial sites were equally applicable in North America when discriminating against those being conquered. A republic demands a high moral standard from all of its citizens. Therefore, if certain racial traits were considered superior, those possessing those traits possessed the ideal virtues for such a government. An important factor to consider as part of this mindset is the assumption that certain traits were innate to people of certain national origins. This is an important characteristic of the construction of race. Without a belief in essentialism, there are no racial overtones to supposed cultural superiority. In light of anxiety among American elites about self-governance, Congress passed the Nationality Act of 1790, which laid out a path to citizenship through naturalization for certain immigrants. The

[9]"A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774 - 1875," Library of Congress, Statutes at Large, http://rs6.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llsl&fileName=001/llsl001.db&recNum=226: 103-104.

naturalization emphasized the need for immigrants to "become" American by learning Anglo-Saxon cultural values and freeing themselves of the corrupt influence of their former nation. The naturalization procedure was reserved only for "free white persons". That phrase was left so vague as to cause significant confusion throughout the next several decades in terms of who qualifies as "white". Although this was the first significant instance of the term "white" being used in a legal context in America, the concept of race was still relatively new and not well-established in the public or legal eye. Certainly, we can deduce that it was specifically intended to exclude African-Americans, even free persons of African descent. In fact, according to the racialized belief in national or cultural traits of the time, many believed that Africans were innately unable to be completely free. The majority of Americans believed that it was in African-Americans' very nature to be led and thus could never be trusted to be autonomous, much less vote responsibly in a republic.[10]

African-Americans were not the only people group who were discriminated against on the basis of theorized intrinsic qualities that affected their ability to self-govern. Historical accounts and surviving literature from the early 19th century indicates that similar bigotries also applied to European immigrants. One important difference, however, is that characterization of European immigrants was focused primarily on character imparted by nationality, whereas for African-Americans the belief was that their undesirable characteristics were fully innate and immutable. According to this belief, a European immigrant with poor character could be molded to become American, whereas an African immigrant could not - his or her character was fixed.[11]

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[10]Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*, 13-38.
[11]Dale T. Knobel, *Paddy and the Republic: Ethnicity and Nationality in Antebellum America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988): 40-66.

Over the first few decades of the 19th century, European immigration continued to increase, as did the prevalence of stereotypes of immigrants. Historian Dale Knobel provides an excellent treatise on the development of such stereotypes in *Paddy and the Republic*.[12] Knobel argues that stereotypes created "projective caricatures", models that shaped how the public viewed people of a certain national background. Knobel explores numerous literary sources of the time, including stage plays, newspapers, books, and other popular media, to examine the types of language applied to immigrants. Although Knobel focuses on Irish stereotypes, hence the title of the monograph, he also describes two other stereotypes - Germans, and "immigrants" as a general term. According to Knobel's research, popular literature tended to depict German immigrants in positive terms. Because the Anglo-Saxon majority emphasized similarities with German culture - especially Protestant German culture - stereotypical caricatures of Germans accentuated their industriousness and morality. In contrast, "immigrants" as a broad term was invariably negative. The designation "immigrant" was used to emphasize difference from the American ideal and highlight undesirable cultural traits. The stereotype of Irish-Americans, commonly known at the time as "Paddy", was also almost universally cynical.[13] "Paddy", short for Patrick, which was a common Irish name, became a common pejorative used to stereotype Irish-Americans.[14] "Paddy" was described in popular discourse as unintelligent, overly emotional, and immoral. When this stereotype was in its early stages, from the first few decades of the 19th century to the early 1840s, it was focused on internal character traits. Popular perception among Anglo-Saxons held Irish-Americans as emotional, hot-headed, and driven by

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[12]Knobel, *Paddy and the Republic: Ethnicity and Nationality in Antebellum America.*

[13]The precise frequency of "Paddy" being used in a positive light was only about 1 in 20 (5%). Knobel, *Paddy and the Republic: Ethnicity and Nationality in Antebellum America,* 30-35.

[14]"Paddy" was used in a similar manner to "Guido" for Italian immigrants, "Shylock" for Jewish-Americans, and "Sambo" for African-Americans.

their irrationality. This view was promoted by representations of Irish-Americans in popular culture, news, and other media. Additionally, whenever an Irish-American committed a crime, particularly a violent one, his or her nationality - and the preconceptions attached to that nationality - became the most important form of characterization, which only served to expand the pervasiveness of those assumptions.[15]

The nature of the Paddy stereotype changed throughout the course of the 19th century in response to shifts in the way that the American public viewed the ethnic "other". In the 1840s, social scientists expressed disappointment in the limited degree of immigrant assimilation and began to theorize an explanation. Their belief in malleable national character gave way to a biological and increasingly racial understanding of ethnic otherness. American character was viewed as only attainable by those of American blood, marking the development of Americanism as a racial concept. "Paddy" underwent changes to match this cultural turn - the focus of the stereotype shifted from internal character to immutable traits and physical characteristics. While many of the supposed characteristics remained very similar to the internal traits that had represented Paddy in the previous decades - hostility, emotionality, and unintelligence - they were now viewed as a result of deficient genetics rather than poor upbringing. A pertinent example of this shift is the role that Catholicism played in Paddy's character. In the early part of the 19th century, the commonly-held belief in America was that Catholicism, a dishonest and deceptive religion, was foisted by the Catholic hierarchy onto the gullible Irish populace and thereby corrupted the Irish moral compass. By the mid 1840s, this view shifted. Catholicism was

[15]Knobel, *Paddy and the Republic: Ethnicity and Nationality in Antebellum America,* 66-103.

no longer viewed as a cause of Irish character, but a product of it.[16] The innately untrustworthy Irish were drawn to Catholicism, as it satisfied their moral depravity.[17]

This prejudice had real-world effects on Irish-Americans' ability to find jobs. Since many employers' perception of Irish workers was tainted by popular stereotypes, it became common for Irish-Americans to be excluded from job searches. The now-infamous phrase "No Irish Need Apply" was first used in America in the early 19th century to discourage Irish from applying to certain positions. The precise extent of such exclusions is difficult to determine. According to witness testimonies, many of these notices were simply posted on a door or in a window, which in a pre-photographic age would have little chance of surviving to the present day. Another common source of "NINA" ads was local newspapers. Unlike national papers, local papers from the 19th and early 20th centuries are rather rare, although in the surviving archives there are numerous examples of NINA ads. In 2002, Richard Jensen challenged this narrative and stated broadly that there was no significant discrimination against Irish-Americans. He cited a lack of NINA ads in surviving archives as evidence for his argument and challenged anyone to find even one appropriate example of such an advertisement.[18] However, in his article, he eschewed the broader scope of evidence to the contrary in favor of making sweeping and poorly-sourced generalizations about Irish-Americans' place in American society. Oxford University's *Journal of Social History*, which published his original article, subsequently published a rebuttal written by a 14-year old junior high student named Rebecca Fried.[19] Fried was able to provide a swath of examples of NINA ads in newspapers and other primary sources. She also pointed out the other

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[16]Knobel, *Paddy and the Republic: Ethnicity and Nationality in Antebellum America,* 30.
[17]Knobel, *Paddy and the Republic: Ethnicity and Nationality in Antebellum America*, 69-103.
[18]Richard Jensen, "No Irish Need Apply: A Myth of Victimization," *Journal of Social History* 36:2 (2002): 405-429.
[19]Rebecca Fried, "No Irish Need Deny: Evidence for the Historicity of NINA Restrictions in Advertisements and Signs," *Journal of Social History* 49:4 (2015): 829-851.

aforementioned issues with Jensen's arguments and gave a compelling counter-argument to Jensen's claims.

It is also worth noting that anti-Irish stereotypes, while most commonly used to describe Irish of the male working class, were also applied frequently to female Irish. Irish-American women were commonly hired as domestic servants, and were seen as a threat to American values within the home, just as Irish men were a threat outside the home. As April Shultz describes in an excellent article on the topic, working for wages was against societal expectations for women in America. Female Irish domestic servants' willingness to hold wage positions, especially when combined with preconceptions about Irish hotheadedness, was seen as rebellious and threatening to American morals. As a result, contemporary news cartoons and art depicted the Irish female servant - stereotypically referred to as "Bridget" - as simian, emotional, and strong-willed.[20]

In the decades from the 1840s to 1920, rapidly-increasing industrialization in America led to a boom in labor demand. Factory owners began to demand a greater quantity of cheap labor than the preexisting supply was able to meet. This led to drastic increase in the demand for immigrant workers, and European immigration skyrocketed as a result. Because the 1790 naturalization law explicitly excluded nonwhites from citizenship and the legal protections that went along with it, most of the immigrants who arrived during this period had light skin and were from European nations. In light of the concerns about immigrants' potential influence on American democracy, especially immigrants from "less civilized" nations like Ireland, Italy, and Greece, majority white Protestant Americans began to question existing perceptions of "whiteness" in an effort to delineate between immigrants who were able to govern themselves

[20]April Schultz, "The Black Mammy and the Irish Bridget: Domestic Service and the Representation of Race, 1830-1930," *Eire-Ireland* 42:1 (2007): 58-81.

effectively and those who were not. The preexisting delineations between non-whites and whites were complicated by the increasingly nebulous definition of whiteness. Concerns over white purity were a response to the broad terminology regarding the word "white" in the 1790 naturalization law. Although by the most basic definition, all European immigrants could be considered white, there was increasing concern that increased stratification of various "white" identities was necessary in order to racially differentiate between good Americans and immigrants considered unfit for participation in the American democracy.[21]

Another important component in the increasing panic about the purity of the American population is the concept of states as biological entities, rather than political or social units. This assumption was influenced by the development of popular and widely-trusted racial science, particularly craniology. Craniology, the study of racial characteristics that could be gleaned by studying the dimensions of the skull, gained traction through the 1840s, and by the 1850s, was widely accepted in the scientific community. The American public now had what they viewed as an objective and biological explanation for the inferiority that they had only previously been able to describe in unscientific terms. The stereotype of "Paddy" began to adapt to these pseudoscientific discoveries. Descriptions of the Irish after craniology was popularized emphasized physical characteristics - dark eyes, ape-like facial structure, and bright red hair - that served as markers to the Irishman's emotional and mental flaws.[22]

In light of the popularization of racial science, specifically craniological disciplines, it is easy to understand the American population's fears about the purity of the American racial state. No longer did the Anglo-Saxon American population view the Irish as a people group who were

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[21]Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*, 140-170
[22]Knobel, *Paddy and the Republic: Ethnicity and Nationality in Antebellum America*, 69-104.

tainted by their weak government and oppressive religion, they now saw them as a distinct racial group. Furthermore, race was seen as an immutable characteristic, and neither individuals nor groups could escape their racial reality. With Irish-Americans' place in America firmly established by the time of the Civil War, the stage was set for their unlikely transition from an independent race into part of white America.

As I have established in the last few paragraphs, by the mid 19th century, the American public viewed race as a concrete reality. This created the central paradox of the Irish-American racial experience: In a context in which race was an unchangeable attribute, how did an entire not-fully-white people group become white? The key to this improbable change lies in the commodification of whiteness. To explain the transition into whiteness, whiteness must be explained as a commodity that could be - and was - obtained.

After the American Civil War ended and African-Americans were freed from chattel slavery, there was speculation among racial scientists that Irish-Americans and African-Americans would integrate and become a unified people group.[23] Although African-Americans were no longer enslaved in the traditional sense, backlash to reconstruction in the South only exacerbated systematic discrimination and structural racial oppression. In most parts of the United States, Irish-Americans and African-Americans composed the least affluent and powerful portion of the general population. Indeed, there were similarities in the racial language with which two groups were described. Popular stereotypes of both groups focused on simian qualities, emotionality, and most importantly, lack of fitness for self-government. There are documented examples of African-Americans being referred to as "smoked Irish" and

[23]Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2015): 2.

Irish-Americans being referred to as "n-----s turned inside out."[24] The union of these two groups appeared to be a mutually-beneficial proposition. As history shows, however, this assimilation did not take place. The reason for this is closely related to the commodification of whiteness. Rather than embracing their non-white status and aligning themselves with other non-whites, Irish-Americans adopted the racist framework of whiteness, aligning instead with the dominant white majority.

The complicated history of Irish/Black relations in America dates back to the early 19th century when Irish immigrants first encountered African-American slaves in their new country. Slavery was banned in the entire British Empire (including Ireland) in 1833, and most of the Irish population in their homeland had strongly abolitionist attitudes towards the American slavetrade. Irish culture strongly valued freedom and prized equality for oppressed peoples, and many American abolitionists found strong allies in Ireland. Indeed, Ireland was a popular destination for American anti-slavery speakers and campaigners, as they were met with large crouds and ample financial support. Ireland's most influential public figure of the early to mid 1800s, Daniel O'Connell, a politician who fought against British colonial oppression in Ireland, was an outspoken critic of American slavery.[25]

One might expect that Irish people who immigrated to the United States in the immigration boom in the 1840s would share this anti-slavery conviction and serve as stalwart allies in the abolitionists' fight against slavery. However, the reality was much different. Irish-Americans were almost universally anti-abolitionist and typically allied themselves with the

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[24]Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, 40-41.
[25]Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, 160-175.
Bruce Nelson, "'Come Out of Such a Land, You Irishmen': Daniel O'Connell, American Slavery, and the Making of the 'Irish Race," *Eire-Ireland* 42:1 (2007): 58-81.

Democratic party, which was the pro-slavery party at the time. The difference of opinion concerning slavery between Irish in Ireland and Irish immigrants to America (and their descendants) was a significant cause of tension between the geographically-separated kin groups. Daniel O'Connell wrote several speeches to be shared with Irish-Americans that condemned their support of slavery and complacence with the unjust status quo. However, these pleas were met with hostility and rejection. Despite O'Connell and his Irish contigent's best attempts, Irish-American leadership, including the Irish Catholic hierarchy in the United States, refused to speak out against slavery or support the abolitionist cause.

The contrast between the Irish and Irish-American opinion on slavery was objectively a dramatic one. One must look no further for evidence of this than the newfound hostility among a people formerly united in their desire for Irish independence from Britain. Daniel O'Connell and his Ireland-dwelling compatriots found themselves at odds with Irish in the United States over the issue of slavery. The issue of slavery in America was so divisive among the overseas Irish independence movement, which had been the primary political aspiration for the Irish people for decades, that one must wonder what factors caused this drastic difference in opinion.

Theodore Allen outlines two primary motivations for this phenomenon, which he refers to as the "Sea Change".[26] The first motivation was American Catholic influence on Irish-Americans. The Catholic Church in America was disproportionately popular among European immigrants - especially Irish and Italians - and emphasized respect for authority as one of its key tenets. John Hughes, the Irish-born archbishop of New York and founder of Fordham University and staunch opponent of Daniel O'Connell on the topic of slavery, saw abolitionism

[26]Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, 177.

as an inappropriate stance for Catholics to take, since it was a divisive viewpoint with which many Americans disagreed. Hughes wanted European immigrant Catholics to assimilate with the American people, and felt that supporting abolitionism would hamper that goal.[27] Furthermore, abolitionists were primarily staunch anti-Catholics, which incited conflict between them and Irish immigrants. The second motivation for the "Sea Change" was Irish immigrants' connection to the Democratic Party. Beginning in the 1830s, the Democratic Party began to enact voting policies which motivated white working class men to join. Rather than maintaining the existing property restrictions on voting, the Democratic Party changed the qualifications for voting in party elections to simply being a "man", a term which they defined as any man who was white. Rather than defining exactly which groups were to be considered white, the party instead indicated which ethnic groups should be excluded, such as African and Asian-Americans. These revised voting laws attracted to the Democratic Party huge numbers of European immigrants, who were less likely than Anglo-Saxons to own property and more likely to be excluded in the Republican party on preexisting racial categorization. In terms of the slavery debate, most of the Democratic constituents either lived in the south or were working-class northerners, commonly known as Copperheads. As a result of its heavy southern influence, the Democrat party established a strong pro-slavery stance, which carried over even to its northern constituents, including the Irish-Americans. Even more important than party loyalty was the fact that the Democratic establishment treated Irish-Americans and other European immigrants as fully white in order to bolster their partisan strength in the immigrant community.[28]

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[27]Nelson, "'Come Out of Such a Land, You Irishmen': Daniel O'Connell, American Slavery, and the Making of the 'Irish Race," 73-74

[28]Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, 177-197.

After slavery was abolished, a significant source of discord between Irish-Americans and African-Americans arose due to the surge in labor competition between the two groups. Irish-Americans viewed the influx of freed slaves from the south and the subsequent migration of many free blacks to the north - the event known as the Great Migration - as direct job competition. Working class Irish-Americans were concerned that their industrial jobs would be taken by the new arrivals to the job market. As a result, many Irish-Americans turned to racial identity as a way to differentiate themselves from the new arrivals to the job market. One of the most important ways that they accomplished this was through job acquisition. As part of their process to establish their position in the labor market as completely distinct from free African-Americans (either former slaves or black workers who had been in the north for much longer), Irish-Americans drove African-American workers out of jobs that they previously held in order to monopolize certain industries and establish themselves as the sole labor market for those jobs. An increasingly significant portion of Irish-Americans refused to work in the same jobs as African-Americans as part of the strategy to establish their labor dominance by "othering" the labor competition. Many Irish-Americans were more than willing to work alongside free African-Americans in the antebellum period but the increasing socioeconomic competition in the 1870s and 1880s caused them to resist close association with black workers in the interest of racially differentiating themselves in the eyes of the White capitalist elite. The Democratic Party's role in labor unions also played a significant role in excluding African-Americans. Irish-Americans made up a significant portion of unionized workers and even union leaders. As a result, Irish in unions used their influence to solidify their power over the labor market and exclude African-Americans from participating in job competition. This

structural exclusion also carried over to political organizing. Irish-Americans were very successful in building political power structures on the back of their labor control. Influential Irish community figures were able to gather massive voting blocs of Irish and other immigrant and poor white workers. This success had a compounding effect, with Irish-American labor power and political power becoming more complete as each area gained influence. Particularly in urban centers, Irish-Americans grew adept at growing political dynasties, establishing themselves as a unified political power in cities such as Chicago, Boston, San Francisco, and New York. The Irish population was able to establish prominence among the working class by installing members of their community in positions in city halls. In cities where the Irish were able to install themselves politically, they were also able to establish their presence in police and fire departments. In fact, in Philadelphia, the Irish fire departments essentially functioned as a militia which engaged in turf wars with other fire departments. Irish-Americans utilized this political influence - as well as the practical power associated with making up a significant portion of the police force - to further their community's interests in major urban centers. Irish Americans' burgeoning political dynasties were another tool that helped them further distance themselves from African-Americans, who were far less successful in establishing political control due to widespread repression at the hands of both Irish-Americans and Anglo-Saxon whites.[29]

The surge in racial violence resulting from the emancipation of black slaves and their addition to the job market provoked further tension between African-Americans and Irish-Americans. Before the Civil War, there were very few instances of Irish-Americans

[29]Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, 194-197; Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, 92-115.

participating with whites in organized racial violence against African-Americans. Immigrants, especially Irish, rarely participated in race mobs. But this changed dramatically as fear of labor competition with labor unions from free blacks increased, and perhaps the most significant example of this violence occurred just a few months after the Emancipation Proclamation was passed in September 1862. In March 1863, the U.S. senate passed the Civil War Military Draft Act, which conscripted all male citizens between the ages of 20 and 45 to serve in the Union Army. There were several significant aspects of the order that particularly affected poor Irish-Americans. First, in addition to citizens, immigrants who had applied for citizenship were also eligible for the draft, which included much of the Irish-American population. Second, there was a buyout option for those who could afford it - it cost 300 dollars to hire a replacement to serve in one's place. 300 dollars was much more than poor laborers could afford, which meant that lower-class workers were most affected by the draft. Additionally, free blacks, as non-citizens, were not included in the draft. This final facet of the bill was perhaps the most influential in provoking Irish-American violence. Over the course of five days in July of 1863, a mob of poor laborers consisting primarily of Irish-Americans rampaged through New York City protesting the draft. In addition to their reticence to risk their lives, Irish-Americans feared that their absence from the labor market would lead to free blacks taking their jobs while they were away fighting the war. The riot, which is now referred to as the New York Draft Riot, terrorized African-Americans, destroying businesses who employed black workers and lynching any African-Americans who stood in their way. The Draft Riot marked an increase in similar, albeit smaller, incidents and led to increased Irish-American participation in racialized violence against African-Americans. Not only was racial violence a tool to establish societal dominance over

African-Americans, but also a tool to establish their own position as part of the white working class.[30]

Perhaps the most explicit example of Irish-Americans racializing themselves according to the Anglo-Saxon ideal of fitness for self-government is the language that Irish nationalists adopted to support their case for liberation from Britain. Campaigners of Irish heritage, both in their homeland and abroad, had been calling for liberation ever since Britain colonized Ireland. What makes this significant for the racialization of Irish in America, however, is the adoption of Anglo-Saxon language concerning racial statehood. This type of language was pervasive through Irish dialogue, as evidenced by the primary sources of the time. In the course of my research, I found that terminology surrounding "The Irish Race" and the traits of the Irish appeared consistently in many different genres of Irish literature, not only explicitly nationalist works. *The Fighting Race and other Poems and Ballads*, first published in 1911, features descriptions of Irish racial character in several different poems, several of which were either only tangentially related or completely unrelated to the subject of Irish nationalism. The author, Joseph Clark, speaks of Irish bravery and fortitude in the title poem in decidedly genetic, thereby racial, terminology: "From the loins of the grand old Celtic race, our father and theirs came stalwart and twin. Wherever we've met on the round world's face, our souls knew their souls for clansman and kin."[31] The language that had been used to condemn immigration and fuel fears of white impurity was subsequently adopted by Irish-American nationalists but adapted for their own purposes. Rather than rejecting the terminology of racial fitness for government, Irish-American

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[30]Alessandra Lorini, "Class, Race, Gender and Public Rituals: The New York African-American Community in the Civil War Era," *Storia Nordamericana* 7:2 (1990): 117-137.
Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, 94-95, 125-147.
[31]Joseph Ignatius Constantine Clark, *The fighting race, and other poems and ballads* (New York: American News Co., 1911): 26.

Nationalists instead argued that the Irish Race was capable of governing itself, and should therefore obtain political self-determination. This racial framework was consistent with Anglo-Saxon nativists' desire for racial statehood - both groups believed that nations should be based on homogenous people groups rather than cultural ideals. More precisely, they believed that national and cultural ideals could not be ensured without racial homogeneity. An important contrast to both of these groups is the Black Nationalist movement, which shared much of the same language but very little of the same success. Black Nationalists also adopted racialized language to justify their hopes for political self-determination and right to their own nation.

The similarity between Black and Irish nationalism is not merely coincidental. Marcus Garvey, a founding figure in Black Nationalism, admired Irish nationalism and cited the similarities between the movements numerous times. Garvey saw similarities between the subjugation of Irish at the hands of Britain and the subjugation of blacks at the hands of the wider Anglo-American world. In fact, he named his Harlem meeting hall "Liberty Hall" after a famous meeting hall for Irish nationalists in Dublin. Both movements emphasized liberation both in the homeland (Africa and Ireland) and in America.[32]

If the Irish Nationalist movement and the Black Nationalist shared similar goals and some of the latter's most important figures vocally drew comparisons between the movements, then why was the Irish independence movement successful, and black independence was not? Both groups adopted the racialized language of the dominant racial group, i.e. Anglo-Saxons, and asserted their race's fitness for self-government, but had wildly different levels of success. By the 1950s, Irish-Americans had been fully assimilated in the white majority - their racial

[32]Colin Grant, *Negro with a Hat: The Rise and Fall of Marcus Garvey*. (London: Jonathan Cape, 2008) 173-175.

categorization had become a non-issue. Certainly some Irish experienced discrimination, but that was typically on solely religious grounds. Anti-Catholic prejudice has endured even to the present day, but as of the 1950s it no longer had racial undertones. Meanwhile, segregation against African-Americans was still rampant and Irish-Americans participated in the discrimination alongside those of British, German, and Italian heritage. Why were Irish-Americans able to assimilate into the dominant racial group in America while African-Americans were not?

In the end, the answer to this question may be far simpler than one might expect from America's complicated history of race. Despite the fact that Irish-Americans were discriminated against racially throughout the entirety of the 19th century and part of the 20th century, the fact remains that they had white skin, and that characteristic made their eventual assimilation significantly more palatable to white America. The Irish were not considered white at the time of their arrival, but they were able to successfully adopt the language of whiteness to their own advantage. Additionally, they were able to assert not only their fitness for self-government but also their value to the American people. As we see by comparison to African-Americans, who attempted many of the same strategies and served as equally beneficial members of society, this may not have been possible for the Irish without the white-skin privilege that they enjoyed from the very beginning.

Up until this point in this paper, most of the evidence that I have presented is overarching structural and historiographical work. However, as with any historical hypothesis concerning themes and systemic factors, it is important to test the notions I have put forth against the reality of the past. Therefore, I gathered together about a dozen geographical case studies about Irish

nationalism, race, and interactions between African-American and Irish-American communities. With an eye for how these topics speak to the arguments put forth in my paper, I examined the real-world evidence. The first article, "Irish-American Nationalism in Butte, 1900-1916" by Catherine Dowling, examines the Irish Nationalism movement in Butte, a city with a significant (27%) Irish population during this time.[33] Although Irish Nationalism was a popular cause among Butte's Irish-American inhabitants, the nature of their nationalism was markedly different from the nationalism of their counterparts in the Irish homeland. Dowling argues that Irish-Americans in Butte focused on replacing negative stereotypes of the "Irish Race" with positive ones. By establishing Irish racial character as hardworking and devoted to freedom, Butte's Irish citizens hoped that they could gain acceptance in their new home, which was initially hostile to their presence. The second article, written by William Leonard, examines the life of Robert Morris, an African-American lawyer who practiced in Boston in the mid to late 19th century.[34] Many of Morris' clients were Irish-Americans who could not find any other legal council. White Protestant lawyers typically refused to represent Irish-Americans, and Morris developed a reputation among the Irish population in Boston as a trustworthy alternative. Leonard states in no uncertain terms that Morris' relationship with Irish-Americans was unusual and improbable - most of the time, these two communities clashed over socio-economic and racial issues like labor and slavery. In Morris' later life, his religion may have been a factor in fostering this goodwill (he converted to Catholicism midway through his career), however this does not explain his early success with Irish-Americans even while he was still Protestant. While

[33]Catherine Dowling, "Irish-American Nationalism in Butte, 1900-1916," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 39:2 (1989): 50-63.
[34]William Leonard, "Black and Irish Relations in Nineteenth Century Boston: The Interesting Case of Lawyer Robert Morris," *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* 37:1 (2009): 64-85.

it describes an anomalous situation, this article serves as a pertinent reminder that the broad trend of African-American/Irish-American conflict is prone to exceptions, and in Morris' case, a significant one. The third article that I examined was "The Race Line in Rockford to 1930" by Chris Jaffe.[35] Jaffe asserts that Rockford, Illinois had a definitive white/black racial binary from the time of the Civil War to 1930. The Irish population in Rockford was accepted into the white side of the split from the time they arrived in the city. Rockford's elite rarely discriminated against Irish-Americans and if they did, it was on religious or economic grounds rather than racial. Since their whiteness was rarely (if ever) questioned, Irish-Americans in Rockford did not need change their behavior to be accepted by Rockford's society: "Rockford's Irish never needed race to advance themselves." Jaffe compares Rockford's Irish immigrants to Chicago's Italian immigrants as described by Thomas Guglielmo in *White on Arrival*. According to Guglielmo, Italians in Chicago were never viewed as non-white, so they did not need to use racial means to assert their own whiteness. Jaffe also acknowledges that the experience for Irish immigrants in Rockford contrasts with many other parts of America - Irish immigrants were commonly discriminated against on racial grounds, which led them to assert their own whiteness. In the fourth article that I analyzed, Brian Page examines how whiteness was commodified by the Memphis democratic party to gather support from Irish-Americans.[36] Beginning in 1868, the most significant Republican voting bloc in Memphis consisted of the city's African-American and Irish-American citizens. Although Irish-Americans were very rarely Republican in the rest of America, the city's Republican party courted their support by appealing to working-class

[35]Chris Jaffe, "The Race Line in Rockford to 1930," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 103:1 (2010): 7-42.
[36]Brian D. Page, ""An Unholy Alliance": Irish-Americans and the Political Construction of Whiteness in Memphis, Tennessee, 1866-1879," *Left History* 8:1 (2002): 77-96.

solidarity against the Democratic elite. Memphis' African-American political organizers specifically reached out to immigrant populations, with a high level of success. The Republic party gained power in Memphis on the back of this powerful coalition. The "Unholy Alliance" was only broken when the Democratic party drew Irish-American support away from the Republicans. The Democrats promised solidarity just like the Republicans had, except this solidarity was racial rather than economic. The Democrats offered Irish-Americans a chance to firmly solidify their place among Memphis' whites. The Democrat campaign was successful, and the cross-racial alliance between Irish and African-Americans was broken and the Republican party lost power.

Summarizing the lessons learned from the case study analysis, I would characterize them as fitting into my broad argument while providing regional exceptions. Perhaps the most surprising insight from the articles was the cross-racial coalition in Memphis between African-Americans and Irish-Americans. In light of the broad conflict between these two groups in the rest of America, their unlikely alliance is more anomalous than indicative of a previously-unconsidered trend. Indeed, the coalition's sudden and unceremonious dissolution due to the Democratic party successfully wooing Irish-Americans to their side mirrors the pattern from other parts of America despite it occuring in Memphis several decades later. The story of Robert Morris, the African-American lawyer whose clients were mostly Irish-Americans, provides another exception to the narrative of conflict. Whatever the reason for Morris' success with Irish clients, it seems that many saw him as an abnormally-trustworthy individual that did not necessarily fit in with their perceptions of African-Americans in general.[37]

[37]Leonard, "Black and Irish Relations in Nineteenth Century Boston: The Interesting Case of Lawyer Robert Morris," 65.

More broadly, the scope of my research points towards an important geographical trend that affected Irish-Americans' assimilation strategies. Generally speaking, midwest and western Irish communities focused primarily on creating distance from African-Americans by gaining control over labor markets and winning the labor competition. Irish communities on the East Coast placed more of an emphasis on racial superiority and sought to assimilate by establishing themselves as white. While both of these components existed in tandem the majority of the time all throughout the United States, there is geographical distinction in terms of how much each strategy was used relative to the other. One potential reason for such a phenomenon is the prominence of Anglo-Saxon identity in the North-East, especially in New England. Racial consciousness was much more preeminent in the eastern part of the nation, which meant that appealing to racial - especially biological - superiority over African-Americans was the most effective strategy for Irish-Americans to adopt. Without completing an exhaustive research project focusing narrowly on geographical differences in assimilation tactics, I cannot with absolute certainty assert this hypothesis, but from the evidence that I uncovered, it seems likely that such a correlation between geography and methods of assimilation exists.

One of my first discoveries after I decided this topic for my senior project was the prominence of Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White* as the most well-known existing piece of literature on this topic. While *How the Irish Became White* is famous, it is also controversial among historians and social scientists. Ignatiev's detractors reject his premise that the Irish were ever non-white, which thereby nullifies the entirety of his subsequent argument.[38] Additionally, there is skepticism among certain scholars - especially among conservative

[38]Richard Jensen falls into this category of historians skeptical of Ignatiev's thesis - he rejects the idea of anti-Irish racial prejudice entirely.

academics - that the structure of whiteness played such an important role in immigrant assimilation. According to Ignatiev, the Irish-American experience is part of a larger pattern of white supremacism in America - the social supremacy that Irish-Americans sought to attain according to the methods detailed in the preceding paragraphs. Ignatiev's entire argument hinges on this assumption. In light of this controversy, one of the primary goals of my research project was to examine the accuracy of Ignatiev's claims by testing his thesis against the historical evidence. Throughout the course of my research I examined primary sources written by Irish-Americans, all of the significant secondary and historiographical works on the topic, and a variety of case-studies from throughout America. All of these sources guided the conclusions that I have drawn throughout my essay. Pertaining to the examination of Ignatiev's thesis, I found that the vast majority of the historical record confirms not only the path to assimilation taken by Irish-Americans but also the broader claims about the importance of white supremacy in America. This is the most important takeaway from my research that can be useful to the current world. The role that whiteness has played, and continues to play, in establishing American culture cannot be overlooked. However, in a culture that is increasingly interested in "colorblindness" and ignoring the origins of our deeply racialized society, it is crucial that historians uncover the fallacy of this mentality. By uncovering the historical record of racism and white supremacy in American history and then tracing the threads through the following years, historians can dispel the comforting illusion of American tolerance and expose the systemic racism that is the basis of American society today. This is why the issue of Irish assimilation into the system of white supremacy is not simply a historical curiosity - it speaks to the very building blocks of the American nation. From the racialized conception of fitness for self government

included in America's founding documents to Irish-American participation in racial violence against African-Americans, the thread of white supremacy is easy to follow in this narrative. This thread did not break when the Irish were able to assimilate into white culture, either, it simply became a commodity that the Irish began to enjoy as well.