

TRAVEL

WHEN IRELAND STARVED:

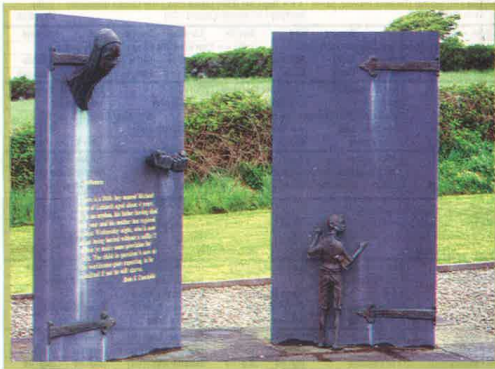
An Irish famine pilgrimage



PHOTO BY JULIENE OSBORNE-MCKNIGHT

The Famine Ship (above) Memorial at Murrisk, County Mayo, Ireland.

The Famine Memorial (below) at Ennistymon Workhouse, County Clare, Ireland. Photo by Juliene Osborne-McKnight



The Irish Famine Memorial by Glenna Goodacre on Penn's Landing in Philadelphia.

PHOTO BY MARA KATE MCKNIGHT



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If you are American of Irish ancestry, there is a high probability that your ancestors came to America in the mid 1800's during the Potato Famine, known in Ireland as the An Gorta Mor, the Great Hunger. In homage to those ancestors, many American travelers to Ireland follow a pilgrimage trail that takes them to Famine sites and memorials.

By the 1800's Ireland was occupied by British landowners. The Irish worked for these landowners as tenant farmers and paid rent for the privilege of living on land that their clans had owned for thousands of years. The Irish were not permitted to go to school, vote, or speak the Irish language and they lived on potatoes — three times a day! Why a diet of potatoes only? Potatoes are nutritious, inexpensive to plant and a half acre of them can feed a family for a year.

In the mid eighteenth century, the potato crop became infested with a fungus and failed. The result was that one million Irish starved to death and another million were forced to leave Ireland for the U.S., Canada and Australia.

Your Famine pilgrimage can begin right here in Philadelphia with the Famine Memorial on Penn's Landing. Designed by renowned sculptor Glenna Goodacre, the haunting sculpture shows the starving victims in Ireland at one side of the memorial with the immigrants to America on the other side. Other North American Famine memorials are at Bristol, Bucks County, Quinnipiac University and Gross Ile, Quebec, which was a Famine quarantine station. Our own Penn's

landing memorial has its partner on the Quay in Dublin, where sculptured emaciated Irish walk toward the ships that would take them away. The ships, called Coffin Ships, transported starving, overcrowded and underfed Irish on a harrowing journey across the ocean. Generally, about half of the passengers died en route and were dumped into the Atlantic.

The ship Jeannie Johnston (now docked in Dublin) has actually sailed to numerous ports along the East Coast of the United States. Jeannie Johnston is anomalous in the history of the Famine because the ship never lost a single passenger, its captain and doctor being fastidious about the cleanliness of the ship. You can also visit the coffin ship Dunbrody in New Ross, County Wexford.

Famine memorials also abound in Ireland. At Ennistymon in County Clare, an orphaned child knocks on the door of a workhouse, bearing a letter from a constable to say that he has no one and nothing and will surely starve if they do not let him in. More than 20,000 Irish died in that very workhouse.

At Murrisk, in County Mayo, a sculpted ship faces west toward America, its

rigging composed of the skeletons of Irish famine victims.

Not to be missed is Strokestown Famine Museum. The vast estate was owned by the Pakenham Mahon family, who denied their tenants' pleas for help during the Famine. Major Dennis Mahon was assassinated in 1847 (a Famine year called Black 47 for the horrors of starvation). The mansion was simply abandoned with all of its furniture and accoutrements intact. In the 1970's, a local company looking to buy the property found all of the documents and letters begging for help and the Irish National Famine Museum was born.

The tour of the house is eerie, frozen in a cruel and dangerous time, but the museum, which takes up the entire former stables of the estate, tells the story not only of the Irish, but of famines going on, even now, in the world.

The Famine pilgrimage is a tribute to the strength and endurance of our ancestors and way to pay our respects to those who never made it to America.

Julienne Osborne-McKnight is the author of four historical novels from MacMillan and of the newly released *The Story We Carry in Our Bones: Irish History for Americans* available at Barnes & Noble or amazon.com.

