

# Irish immigrants and the new york draft riots of 1863 essay

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The New York Draft Riots of 1863 In the summer of 1863 New York experienced one of the most violent protests in the American history. The riots were mainly in reaction to the Union draft for the Civil War, which Abraham Lincoln enacted when volunteers began to run out. The riots lasted for five days, and the mob consisted of almost 50, 000 angry men who opposed to the Civil War, draft and Emancipation Proclamation. This paper will discuss how the Irish immigrants in New York affected the draft riots of 1863, and the reason behind their participation, exploring specifically the social, class and racial issues the Irish immigrants faced. The United States saw an influx of Irish immigrants due to the Great Famine (potatoes) in Ireland.

The Irish were misunderstood especially in New York because many of them came from the rural farm lands in Ireland. They were considered by many to be unskilled in manual labor and were not accustomed to city living. An article by the Geographical Journal noted that stereotypical Irish, “ were always to be found crowded into densely populated, distinctively Irish quarters characterized by poverty, low-skilled employment, poor housing, crime and drunkenness” in New York as well as major British cities. The Irish were heavily discriminated against, and but were able to find low wage jobs that would have been threatened if more ex-slaves traveled to New York.

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Man Jr. , a writer for the Journal of Negro History, bluntly states, “ The New York draft riots of July, 1863, had their origins largely in a fear of black labor competition which possessed the city’s Irish unskilled workers. ” The Irish anxiety grew as the war continued because if the slaves were freed and the <https://assignbuster.com/irish-immigrants-and-the-new-york-draft-riots-of-1863-essay/>

war ended the black southerners would move north and take their jobs for even less pay. The Emancipation Proclamation realized their fears. The Emancipation Proclamation, signed by Abraham Lincoln in 1862, solidified the reason behind the Civil War.

Leslie Harris argues in his book *The Shadow of Slavery* that, " The Emancipation Proclamation brought formal recognition that the war was being fought, at least in part, on behalf of black freedom and equality. " Southern Democrats began publishing articles to persuade people that emancipation would be detrimental to Northern society. During a Democratic meeting in New York General Leslie Homes stated, " Let the four millions of slaves in the South be set at liberty . .

and we should very soon have, not the great conflict so long predicted between free labor and slave labor, but a terrible conflict between white labor and black labor. " Pro-slavery newspapers continued to spread such propaganda, in an attempt to anger the poor and working class in the North. The editor of the *Herald*, a pro-slavery newspaper, wrote an article specifically towards Irish and German laborers saying that, " The North will be flooded with free Negroes, and the labor of the white man will be depreciated and degraded. Appealing to fear and racism, the pro-slavery Southern Democrats simply rallied the Irish and German immigrants towards protesting emancipation. The Emancipation Proclamation was the turning point for the social perspective of the war, because it officially told American's the war was resolving the issue of slavery. Hostility, fear and anger of emancipation erupted in July 1863 when the first group of men for

the Union draft was posted. The draft itself stated required, All male citizens between twenty and thirty-five and all unmarried men between thirty-five and forty-five years of age were subject to military duty.

The federal government entered all eligible men into a lottery. Those who could afford to hire a substitute or pay the government three hundred dollars might avoid enlistment. Blacks, who were not considered citizens [decided in the Dred Scott Case], were exempt from the draft. Since the Irish were too poor to pay three hundred dollars or hire a substitute they felt as though they were being singled out by the government. Ironically the unfairness of the Draft Law enabled the wealthier journalists and newspaper editors, who encouraged Irish rebellion, to avoid the draft. An article in the Journal of Negro History explains the opposition to the draft perfectly, " it seemed that the act bore especially heavily upon the poor...and it would force white workers to fight to free the slaves who would soon become rivals for employment. " This caused Irish to attack specifically the military forces, the wealthy, and the blacks in New York. The riots lasted for five days, beginning on July 13 until July 17 when Lincoln had to send extra police and regiments of soldiers from Pennsylvania to bring the mobs under control.

McPherson describes, on the first day of the riot, " mobs of Irish workers roamed the streets, burned the draft office, sack and burned the homes of prominent Republicans and tried to unsuccessfully demolish the New York Tribune building. " As time went on the riots got worse, by the end of the first day they were attacking any black people on the street, anyone who tried to calm them and even white employers who hired black workers. As

the mob moved through the city, intensifying their actions, they burned down the Colored Orphan Asylum. One account stated that, " the children numbering 233, were quietly seated in their school rooms... when an infuriated mob, consisting of several thousand men, women and children armed with clubs, brick bats etc. advanced upon the Institution.

The crowd took as much of the bedding, clothing and food and set fire to the building. " The orphanage burned down in 20 minutes and luckily all of the children were saved. The mob went on destroying black homes, and attacking black pedestrians, but the next day was even more gruesome. On the second day of the New York draft riots, the mob grew again in intensity and rage.

They now were targeting any white person who associated with a black person. Two women's homes were burned because they were married to black men, and another woman's home was burned because she was a prostitute who catered to black men. One account said, " Rioters also made a sport of mutilating the black men's bodies, and sometimes sexually... a sixteen year old Irish Man, dragged a body through the streets by its genitals. " The two first days of the rioting was the most violent and destructive because there were not enough police in New York to subdue 50,000 angry men, women and children.

Even with the help of the police and militia from Pennsylvania the rioters took over the city for another three days. The draft riot was as much in response to the emancipation as it was the draft itself. New York was not the only city to experience such outcry from white laborers.

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Similar riot type events occurred in Cincinnati, Chicago, Pennsylvania and other northern cities. McPherson describes the New York draft riots as “ the worst riot in American history. It vividly exposed the complex racial, ethnic and class tensions that lay close to the surface of American society. The initial toll after the five days of mayhem was 1, 200 deaths, but more research today shows that the toll was probably more around 120. Racism from the white pro-slavery journalists merely fanned Irish anger, and the result was catastrophic.

In the end Irish and German immigrants were blamed for the event, because they made up the angry mobs. After the riots were stopped and the city began repair an anti-Irish sentiment surged through the upper class New Yorkers. Lincoln still kept the draft imposed, and did not change any stipulation of the original Draft Act.

The Irish rioters created over 1 million dollars worth of damages to the city of New York, and killed over 120 people. The Irish rioters accomplished nothing but damaged their own reputation, families of the ones they killed and city structures in New York. Sources seem to agree that the majority of the rioters the New York draft riots were Irish immigrants, with some German immigrants participating as well. Irish men, women and children participated in killing, looting, burning and terrorizing the city for five days.

The resistance to the draft, Emancipation Proclamation and the Civil War in general led violent Irish protests that in the end did not bring about any change to the status quo. Although the Southern Democrats did not go out a ravage New York, they did encourage rebellion by publishing article and <https://assignbuster.com/irish-immigrants-and-the-new-york-draft-riots-of-1863-essay/>

newspapers that instilled fear and panic in the low wage workers of the North. Due to their racism, fear of labor competition, and opposition to the draft the Irish immigrants carried out the bloodiest protest in American