

# History Myths Debunked

The Whole Truth and Nothing But the Truth

## Myth # 82: Signs saying "No Irish Need Apply" were common.



(<https://historymyths.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/thumbnail-1-asp1.jpeg>)

Rachel Sims wrote "I'm not sure if this is myth or fact because I've heard that its a myth and then I've heard its a fact. You know when Irish immigrants came to the United States and tried to find work? Were there truly signs in the store windows that say, "No Irish need apply?"

At St. Patrick's Day on March 17, everyone in American enjoys being a little bit Irish. With the day fast approaching, it seems a good time to address this myth.

This myth has a core of truth to it, although it is exaggerated in collective memory. There were many nineteenth-century newspaper advertisements like the one above that stipulated "No Irish Need Apply." But according to historian Richard Jensen in a 2002 article in the *Journal of Social History*, signs on businesses saying "No Irish Need Apply" were rare or nonexistent.

*"The fact that Irish vividly 'remember' NINA signs is a curious historical puzzle. There are no contemporary or retrospective accounts of a specific sign at a specific location. No particular business enterprise is named as a culprit. No historian, archivist, or museum curator has ever located one; no photograph or drawing exists. No other ethnic group complained about being singled out by comparable signs. Only Irish Catholics have reported seeing the sign in America—no Protestant, no Jew, no non-Irish Catholic has reported seeing one. This is especially strange since signs were primarily directed toward these others: the signs said that employment was available here and invited Yankees, French-Canadians, Italians and any other non-Irish to come inside and apply. The business literature, both published and unpublished, never mentions NINA*

*or any policy remotely like it. The newspapers and magazines are silent. The courts are silent. There is no record of an angry youth tossing a brick through the window that held such a sign. Have we not discovered all of the signs of an urban legend?"*

Jensen, in my opinion, overstates his thesis here. Certainly there were signs on businesses saying "no colored allowed" and "no Chinese," or more often, "whites only." This photo from the Library of Congress collection shows a bar with a sign on the wall that reads, "Positively No Beer Sold to Indians."



(<https://historymyths.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/8c15746r1.jpg>) But there's a difference between serving and employing. Many whites-only establishments that refused to serve certain ethnic groups still hired them as laborers.

Why were the Irish discriminated against? They were Catholic, a religion that frightened many Protestants, and the stereotype that they were lazy, dirty drunks was widespread. Some thought of them as a separate, inferior race, one that caused poverty. Their biggest crime, perhaps, was that they took jobs from native-born Americans because they would accept lower wages—the perennial anti-immigrant lament we still hear today. Employers were often eager to hire Irish because they cost less. Sure, some employers refused to hire Irish, black, or other minorities; some establishments refused to serve them. Anti-Irish sentiments were strongest in the middle part of the nineteenth century, when this song, "No Irish Need Apply," was popular. Listen to it here: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gXkgUqD4\\_EY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gXkgUqD4_EY)

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(<https://historymyths.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/001t1.gif>)

**Conclusion:** The Irish Catholics faced discrimination. "No Irish Need Apply" newspaper advertisements existed. Workplace signs were not common, but Irish were effectively barred from "better" occupations and shunted into low-paying factory work and domestic service.



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