# THE SHIP THAT SAVED IRELAND

In 1847, as hundreds of thousands were dying during the Irish potato famine, an American warship laden with food crossed the Atlantic. It was a humanitarian mission that changed the world.

**BY STEPHEN PULEO**

Sheets of cold rain lashed the decks of the *USS Jamestown* and gale-force winds battered the three-masted American sloop of war through the swells of the North Atlantic. Captain Robert Bennet Forbes barked orders as his energetic but inexperienced crew scrambled to haul up the mainsail, a daunting task on this moonless night of raging seas on April 2, 1847. Weak light leaked from deck lanterns, but beyond the ship's raised prow and forward riggings, the darkness was total—"black as Erebus," as Forbes described it in the captain's log, referring to the mythological netherworld that serves as the passageway to Hades.


POLITCAL CARTOON BY THOMAS NAST

A political cartoon depicts American relief arriving for people suffering from the Irish famine of 1879-1880, several decades after the *Jamestown* embarked on its humanitarian voyage.

*The American relief effort in 1847 advanced the notion that gestures of philanthropy and brotherhood, rather than signs of a nation's weakness, were displays of quiet strength and moral certitude.*

For the sixth straight day since leaving the Charlestown Navy Yard, the ship and its crew were pounded by miserable weather as they fought their way toward Ireland. Snow, sleet, hail, and cold rendered all ropes "stiff as crowbars … and the men also," Forbes wrote. Wind and waves left the *Jamestown*, despite her solid oak frame, "bounding like an antelope" and unable to carry as much sail as he wished. Dense wet fog rendered visibility to near zero. Snow slickened the ship's decks, crew members lurched with seasickness, ice floes hampered passage, and worst of all, the *Jamestown* leaked badly, at times taking on as much as 10 inches of water an hour. Most of the water poured through the rudder case in the wardroom when the sea rose aft or the ship settled. Crew members were forced to pump often and, finally, bore holes in the wardroom deck to allow water to run off into the hold.

As midnight approached, the wind howled and every rope froze, but Forbes, a 42-year-old merchant and shipowner from Boston, remained unflappable in the captain's chair, determined to reach his destination ahead of schedule. Forbes and his crew were delivering tons of donated food to Ireland during the terrible famine year of 1847, and he was resolute in the righteousness of his mission. He had convinced the United States government to loan him a warship, persuaded Americans to donate food, and volunteered to lead this voyage that took him thousands of miles from hearth and family.

More than 5,000 ships would leave Ireland during the famine era, carrying passengers who were fleeing utter destitution in their home country. The *Jamestown* was the first to travel in the opposite direction, laden with food and supplies. The passage was the most celebrated and highly publicized component of a remarkable and unprecedented relief effort by the United States. It was the first time the US—or any nation, for that matter—extended its hand to a foreign neighbor in such a broad and all-encompassing way for purely humanitarian reasons.

Several months earlier, on December 16, 1846, a bone-weary Father Theobald Mathew dipped the nib of his pen into the ink and scratched the full measure of his despondency onto the page. The Irish priest aimed for precision with his writing, but he also needed to modulate his description of a truly appalling situation in his country. This was his fifth letter since August to Charles Trevelyan, assistant secretary at the British Treasury responsible for famine relief efforts, each more desperate than the last. Now, just days before Christmas, Mathew wrote with renewed urgency, hoping that his reputation for directness and honesty, and as a champion for the poor, would convince Trevelyan of his veracity.

Left: A portrait of Robert Bennet Forbes. Above: An illustration of Irish people suffering from famine.

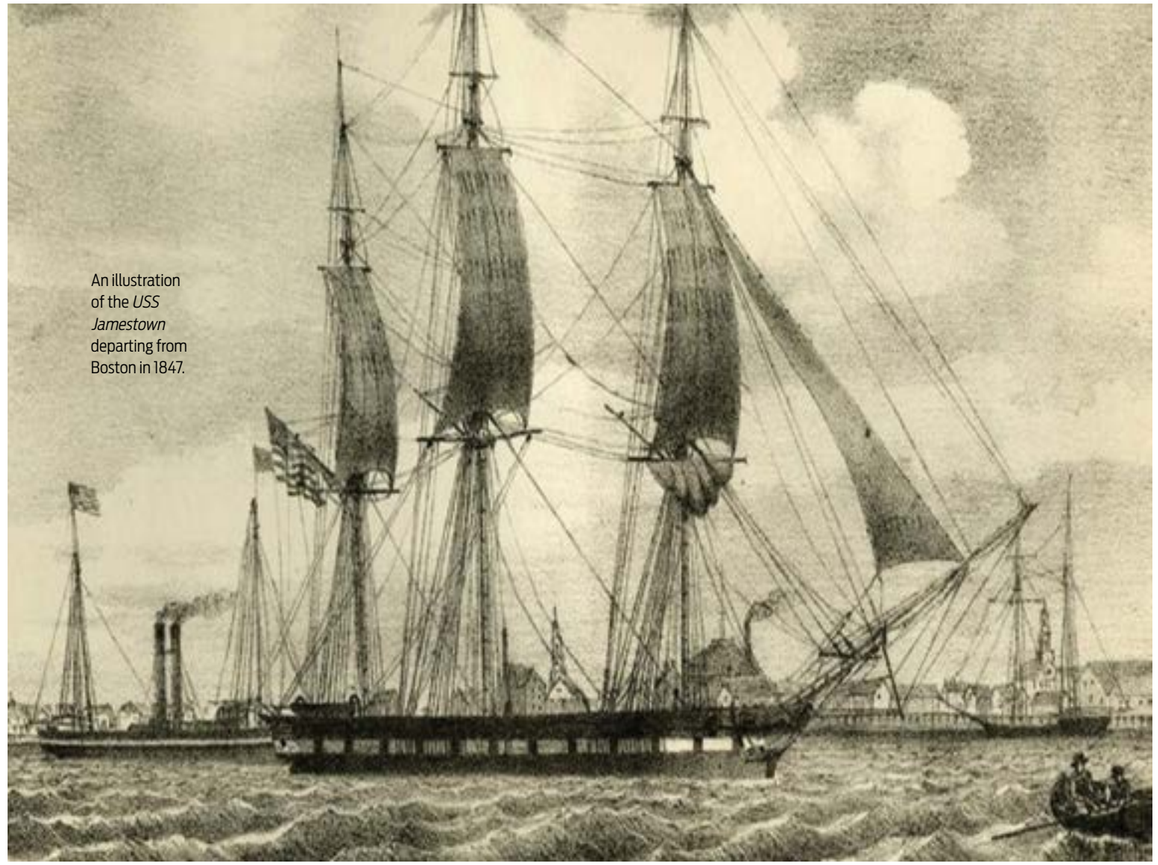
"I am grieved to be obliged to tell you that the distress is universal," he lamented at the outset of his letter. "Men, women, and children are gradually wasting away."

In the decade before the famine, Mathew, known best as Ireland's "Temperance Priest," had achieved fame on both sides of the Atlantic for his efforts to convince hundreds of thousands of Irish to sign his temperance pledge; in fact, history records his crusade against drinking and alcoholism as his signature achievement. But his work in the trenches during the worst of the famine—offering food, shelter, medical care, and comfort to those suffering from near-starvation and debilitating disease—would forever endear him to the Irish people, especially those from his home parish in Cork city.

The destruction of the potato crop had occurred—or, rather, revealed itself—almost overnight. Mathew himself was one of the first to observe and report on the disaster. In late July 1846, he was traveling from Cork to Dublin and saw fields of potato plants blooming "in all the luxuriance of an abundant harvest," a sight that heartened him after widespread potato-crop failure a year earlier had resulted in severe food shortages, but not full-scale famine. But six days later, August 3, during his return trip to Cork, Mathew's spirit was shattered when he "beheld, with sorrow, one wide waste of putrefying vegetation." The blight, caused by a fungus that thrived and multiplied in Ireland's damp climate, had reproduced with lightning speed. In many places along the road, "the wretched people were seated on the fences of their decaying gardens, wringing their hands and wailing bitterly against the destruction that had left them foodless."

Four days later Mathew expressed the worst in a letter to Trevelyan: "The food of a whole nation has perished." The *Times of London* concurred: "From the Giants Causeway to Cape Clear, from Limerick to Dublin, not a green field is to be seen." Indeed, on September 2, the *Times* declared that "total annihilation" had befallen the Irish potato crop. At this point, more than one-third of the entire Irish population depended exclusively on the potato for food and as a cash crop, but among poor tenant farmers, the proportion was even higher; a strong potato crop was their only hope for sustenance, for nourishment, for life itself.

Even pre-famine, survival had been precarious in Ireland, as tenant farmers and peasants scratched out a living raising and selling potatoes, or perhaps traded a pig or a cow for other goods. Food shortages were a near-constant peril, and temporary migration was a lifeline for many Irish families engaged in agricultural work, particularly those from western counties; seasonal trips to the grain-growing areas of the eastern counties, and to England, were commonplace. In the first half of the 19th century, seasonal migrants, often accompanied by their livestock, walked along Ire-



An illustration of the *USS Jamestown* departing from Boston in 1847.

PHOTOGRAPHS: FORBES PORTRAIT COURTESY OF FORBES HOUSE MUSEUM. MILTON, MA.; ILLUSTRATION FROM THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES

ILLUSTRATION COURTESY OF FORBES HOUSE MUSEUM. MILTON, MA.

land's dusty roadways in search of work and food.

Since Mathew's August letter, the downward spiral had progressed with alarming speed. Now, he wrote to Trevelyan, more than 5,000 "half-starved wretched beings from the country" were begging on the streets of Cork city; "when utterly exhausted, they crawl to the workhouses to die." He estimated that more than a hundred people a week were dying in his parish alone. And because of the frightful calamity that had swept the countryside, where food was all but nonexistent, thousands of peasants straggled into the city in search of something to eat, further straining scarce resources. Ten to 12 people died each day from starvation in the village of Crookhaven, where the community organized a collection to purchase a public bier upon which to place the bodies of those whose families could not afford coffins. Mathew was filled with dread, not only for the current state of affairs, but for the unknown depth of the abyss that lurked ahead.

"This country is in an awful position," he stressed to Trevelyan, "and no one can tell what the result will be."

Mathew, an Irish priest, comforts a poor family during the famine.

*"I am obliged to tell you that the distress is universal. Men, women, and children are gradually wasting away."*

FATHER THEOBALD MATHEW

Like almost every captain, Forbes had relished the idea of piloting his vessel into Cork Harbor, the deepest and one of the largest in all of Europe—some said large enough to accommodate the entire British navy. But Forbes discovered to his dismay that it would be impossible for a large sailing ship to enter the inner harbor against a strong ebb tide and stiff northerly winds. He waited overnight until the steam-powered British ship *Sabrina* arrived early on the morning of April 13, 1847, attached her tow rope, and tugged the *Jamestown* "slowly and peacefully" across the broad expanse and bright waters of the inner harbor.

"Never did we see our beautiful harbour to such advantage as at that moment," the *Cork Examiner* proclaimed. From the *Jamestown*'s decks, gliding behind the *Sabrina*, Forbes and his crew stood in awe at the scene before them. Thousands of people lined the hillsides and the wharves. Men and children cheered wildly, women "waved their muslin," and many people wept openly. An Irish band onshore played "Yankee Doodle," while men in small boats waved their hats and shouted their greetings as the ship passed. The town of Cove and County Cork had expected its arrival, but to actually see the big American sloop, the first foreign warship to enter a British harbor since the War of 1812, produced a mixed reaction of joy, gratitude, and disbelief. When news reached Cork city that the *Jamestown* had dropped anchor, bells rang out across the city to welcome it. Forbes and his crew were greeted by a jubilant reception committee "before the anchor had fairly bitten the soil."

That night, from the ship's deck, Forbes and his crew marveled at the scores of bonfires blazing upon the hillside and the hundreds of lamps that shone from virtually every cabin window onshore, the light spilling across the water and illuminating the bay with a soft golden glow. Musical tones—"fairylike," as one townsperson would describe them later—and the cries of rejoicing children, both carrying well on this clear night, drifted toward the ship, sounds of hope at last from a community whose citizens had subsisted on little more than despair for nearly a year.

Forbes, whose life credo was defined by doing his duty, often in the toughest of circumstances, summed up the gravity of the emergency that had prompted him to lead the *Jamestown* mission and commanded such a rapid response from the United States: "It is not an everyday matter," he wrote, "to see a nation starving."

When Forbes and Mathew shook hands and embraced outside of the American consul's office in Cove, it was a providential moment for the starving residents who witnessed it. Both men had achieved nearly saintlike status among the poor Irish: Mathew, tending to his flock, sharing his bread and coin, opening his kitchen and bedrooms, praying over the fever-ravaged, risking his own health—his very life—for families he had long known and loved, a gladiator leading a relentless and courageous fight against famine and fever, from altar and alleyways, from hovels and hospitals; Forbes, the benevolent, mysterious, "illustrious" stranger—the "Merchant Prince," one publication called him—a man of accomplishment and high standing in his home country, risking his own life on the high seas for people he did not know. While the rest of the world remained silent or turned its back, while the British government harrumphed and dithered, Mathew and Forbes were doing everything in their power to save Ireland.

Breathless, Forbes and Mathew dashed into a neighborhood store and made their way to the back door to get away from the starving crowd that had surrounded them outside the front entrance, begging for food. Hoping to provide some relief to the poor but perhaps not yet understanding their desperation, Forbes distributed a few pieces of silver that he had brought from home. Within minutes, the throng swelled and aggressively pressed in on the two men, dozens of voices pleading and clamoring for help. Soon the money was gone and Mathew and Forbes feared they would be crushed. The doorway of the store offered their only escape from a once-hopeful crowd whose desperation had transformed it into a mob.

ILLUSTRATION FROM WORLD HISTORY ARCHIVE ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

For a stunned Forbes, the incident was the culmination of a day that had shaken the well-traveled man deeply. He had seen poverty and hopelessness in other parts of the world, but nothing like this. He had read about the dire situation in Ireland and perhaps imagined the suffering as the *Jamestown* plowed through the Atlantic waves toward Ireland—but there was simply no way to prepare for what he encountered.

"I saw enough in five minutes to horrify me," he wrote later, "hovels crowded with the sick and dying—some called for water … and others for a dying blessing." At one point, he and Mathew ventured off a main street into an alley, which he later described as "not the Valley of the Shadow of Death" but the "valley of death and pestilence itself." Forbes was aghast that "every street corner is filled with pale, careworn creatures, the weak leading the weaker; women assail you at every turn with famished babies imploring alms." Mathew, like Dickens's Ghost of Christmas Present, next led Forbes to a Cork soup kitchen, where he witnessed a scene that staggered him: "Hundreds of spectres stood without, begging for some of the soup which I can readily conceive would be refused by well-bred pigs in America," he wrote.

Forbes also knew that Mathew had spared him from viewing the worst

An 1848 illustration of tenants evicted from their homes during the famine.

GLOBE FILE IMAGE / THE ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS, DEC. 16, 1848

"haunts of misery"—the urban cellars and dark, fetid apartments in which entire families perished. As dockworkers were unloading the *Jamestown* at Cork Harbor in Cove, as Forbes shook his head in sadness along the byways of Cork city, conditions among the Irish were worse than ever. Evidence of despair was everywhere. In Galway, a relief worker noted that "people are heartless and depressed, and in many instances lie down and die by whole families." From County Mayo came a report that peasants were desperately trying to gain entrance to any workhouse still open because if they died there, their corpses would be buried in coffins, which they could no longer afford. People were dying so quickly in counties across Ireland that virtually no one attended funerals—normally a sacred rite among Irish Catholics—either because family members of the deceased were already dead or because burials were so commonplace that they no longer warranted prayerful reflection, especially from mourners whose singular focus was on finding food to survive. Friends and loved ones clinging to life had neither the energy nor the desire to seek spiritual deliverance for those already gone.

Back home in America, the *Jamestown*'s celebrated mission provided the catalyst that injected further momentum into a nationwide famine-aid movement. After the ship's departure from Boston on March 28, the floodgates opened wide. As spring bloomed and temperatures warmed, as frozen canals thawed and snowdrifts melted from rutted wagon trails and dirt-packed roadways and clogged railroad beds, Americans from large cities to tiny frontier towns shifted into action. They set aside their differences to collaborate on an unprecedented countrywide demonstration of voluntary philanthropy on behalf of Ireland. The plight of a ravaged foreign country and its desperate people pierced America's hardest hearts and opened its most obdurate minds.

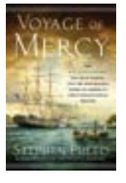
By July 4, 1848, fifteen months after the assistance had begun, Americans had donated more than 9,900 tons of food to sustain Ireland. They sent barrel upon barrel of corn, peas, wheat, meal, flour, rice, biscuits, oats, oatmeal, barley, rye, bread, breadstuffs, hominy, hops, beans, arrowroot, vinegar, pork, bacon, beef, ham, venison, dried peaches, dried fish, and—yes—potatoes. Beyond that, Americans donated nearly 650 crates of clothing that they had sewn and tailored by hand, as well as supplies such as soap, candles, hats, eating implements, pots and pans, and other sundries.

The wellspring of direct aid from the United States to Ireland became a first-ever national deluge of generosity that shocked the world, and, in many ways, changed it. Prior to 1847, the bulk of interaction between nation-states consisted mainly of warfare and other hostilities, mixed with occasional trade; the entire concept of international charity existed neither in the moral consciousness nor as part of the political strategy of monarchs or elected leaders. If anything, such a gesture toward a foreign nation would likely have been viewed as a sign of weakness. The American relief effort in 1847 advanced the notion that gestures of philanthropy and brotherhood, rather than signs of a nation's weakness, were displays of quiet strength and moral certitude.

Never before had the people of one nation offered assistance to those of another on such a grand scale, a gesture that would serve as the model for America's future humanitarian efforts. The *Jamestown* mission's public-private blueprint has guided America's international charitable relief for more than a century and a half—a model that has established the United States and its citizens as leaders in international aid, enabling Americans to assist millions of people around the world who would become victims of famine, war, flood, earthquake, and other natural and man-made disasters.

In 1847, 114 ships from US ports delivered food, clothing, and provisions to starving Ireland. US citizens shipped so much grain to Ireland that corn prices dropped on the British market, which further assisted the poor Irish as the year went along. American ships sailed with their precious cargo into the Irish ports of Belfast, Cork, Donegal, Dublin, Galway, Limerick, Londonderry, Sligo, and Waterford, and also to Liverpool, England, from which food and supplies were distributed to Ireland and Scotland.

For the Irish, the most enduring symbol of this broad charitable initiative—the one for which they were most grateful—was the mission that started it all as the whole world watched with curiosity and wonder: the voyage of the *Jamestown*.




*Stephen Puleo is a historian, public speaker, and the author of six previous books. This story is adapted from his forthcoming book,* Voyage of Mercy: The USS Jamestown, the Irish Famine, and the Remarkable Story of America's First Humanitarian Mission, *by Stephen Puleo (St. Martin's Press).*