

Detective story: How genomics found the culprit in Ireland's Great Famine

More than 1 million people died over the course of Ireland's Great Famine between 1845 and 1852. We know, of course, that a blight had wiped out an entire species of potato — a staple of the Irish diet. But precisely what strain of the blight pathogen it was, exactly, had remained a mystery ... until now.

Now, scientific and historical two-for-one, researchers have used dried potato leaves from herbariums to sequence the genome of the pathogen that caused the Great Famine. The culprit was a single strain of the fungus-like pathogen *Phytophthora infestans* — and not the common strain that was long the prime suspect. This marks the first time scientists have used dried leaves to decode the genome of a plant pathogen.

Those worried about a resurgence of the dreaded potato blight can breathe a sigh of relief: the strain of potato blight in question is extinct.

The study opens up a new avenue of genomics research using dried leaves from herbariums, which have proven to be a good source of DNA.

Read more about the discovery in these stories:

- [“How Genomics Solved The Mystery Of Ireland's Great Famine,”](#) Lydia Zuraw | NPR
- [“The Great Famine: Decoded,”](#) Ann Gibbons | Science NOW
- [“Mystery cause of Irish potato famine finally solved,”](#) John Platt | Mother Nature Network
- [“Irish potato famine pathogen identified,”](#) Helen Briggs | BBC News