

MARCH IS IRISH AMERICAN HERITAGE MONTH

Irish American Heritage Month is heralded by Presidential and Congressional proclamations that celebrate the achievements and contributions of Irish immigrants and their descendants to the fabric of America. IAHM is also featured on national websites at the Library of Congress, the National Archives and the Smithsonian Institution. Today 39 million Americans claim Irish heritage! So, there is plenty of reason to celebrate the month of St Patrick, Irish American Heritage Month. Here's why.

In the 1400s the Irish were rebelling against English rule. The English wanted a loyal population so they confiscated Catholic properties and granted ownership to loyal Scottish and English migrants. This occurred primarily in Ulster, Ireland's northernmost province.

About five generations later the English ordered all subjects to convert to the official church of England. The Scots had strong Presbyterian roots and refused. They were labelled "dissenters" and suffered discrimination under the so-called Penal Laws. Thousands decided to leave for America.

The "Ulster Irish" arrived in the colonies as skilled workers, artisans, and merchants. Their first settlement was named Donegal in the Pennsylvania colony and later they populated the Shenandoah Valley. They assimilated, prospered and became active in government. In 1776, eight Irish Americans, three born in Ireland, signed the Declaration of Independence.

During the American Revolution, about 35% of George Washington's army was Irish with 1500 officers and 25 generals. Commodore John Barry is honored as he Father of the U.S. Navy. After the American victory, English leaders lamented the "loss of the colonies to the valorous Irish". Through the 1800s, eight U.S Presidents claimed Irish heritage: Jackson, Polk, Buchanan, Johnson, Grant, Arthur, Cleveland, and McKinley.

In the 1830s another wave of Irish immigrants began to arrive in America. These Irish had lived for generations under Penal Laws that officially deprived them of religion freedom, education, and owning land. In the 1840s the Great Hunger further decimated the Irish population and more than 800,000 fled, many to Boston and New York. These Irish were poor, unskilled, Gaelic speaking, and Catholic. They did not easily assimilate and faced religious and ethnic discrimination, from the Know-Nothings, a major political party based on an anti-immigrant philosophy.

Irishmen labored at menial jobs and in coal mines and canal and railroad construction. Irish women became domestic servants, exposing them to the finer aspects of life and raising their expectations for the American Dream.

In America's Civil War, these "new" Irish joined the military to gain acceptance in their adopted country. For many it was a "job" providing enlistment bonus money to send home. Others joined to learn the art of warfare in anticipation of a future fight for Irish independence. Few units are as famous as Thomas Meagher's Irish Brigade, especially here in Fredericksburg.

After the war, the Irish became a political force in major cities. William Grace and Hugh O'Brien were elected the first Irish-Catholic mayors of New York and Boston. The Irish became prominent in the labor movements and the Democratic party where they flourished in politically appointed public positions. Irishwoman Mary Harris "Mother" Jones organized the United Miners Union, George Meany was elected President of the American Federation of Labor and Peter McGuire is known as the "Father of Labor Day". This upward mobility assured the third generation would be better educated and more successful than their parents and grandparents. This is evident as since 1900 eight more U.S Presidents claim Irish heritage: Kennedy, Nixon, Reagan, Clinton, both Bushes, Obama and Biden. Further, ten Supreme Court Justices, seven Speakers of the House and 253 Congressional Medal of Honor recipients claim Irish ancestry.

So, there is plenty of reason to responsibly celebrate the month of St Patrick, Irish American Heritage Month, not only with parades and festivals, but also in schools and the media.

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