



“Look for the Golden Stairs.” That’s what immigrants to Boston were told as their ships docked at the pier. So many Irish

climbed the steps to Immigration Hall in the 19th century that Boston became known as the Capital of Irish America. Hardworking

Irish enlivened the city with traditional food, music, and help-your-neighbor politics. Because they also brought poverty and Catholicism, though, Boston’s Irish suffered almost as much discrimination in their new land as they had in the country they had fled.

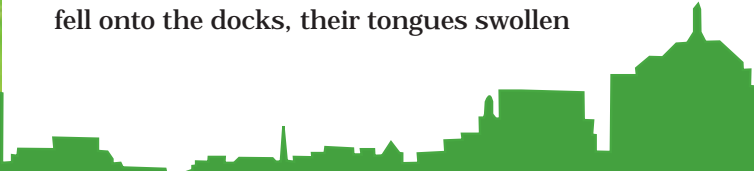
Irish began moving to Boston before the American Revolution. Some came for economic opportunities. Thousands of others were deported by the British to populate the colonies. Boston’s Irish held the colonies’ first St. Patrick’s Day celebration in 1737. When General Sullivan drove the British fleet from Boston on March 17, 1776, he used

“St. Patrick” as his code word.

The largest numbers of immigrants arrived between 1845 and 1850. These were the Famine Irish. Fleeing the Great Hunger, about 75,000 desperate refugees paid about \$15 to board leaky “coffin ships” that could take a month to cross the Atlantic. So many people died on the journey, the ocean was called The Bowl of Tears. Many who survived fell onto the docks, their tongues swollen



Erin Go Bragh! (Ireland Forever!)
An Irish family enjoys a St. Patrick’s Day Parade.



The Capital of

with ship fever. Others were quarantined and died on Deer Island, never reaching the mainland.

Yet poor, uneducated, and starving immigrants kept coming. In 1850, one-third of Boston's population was Irish, and local citizens feared their town, called the Dublin of America, would become the "poor house of the world." Mobs attacked Catholic churches. While the *Boston Pilot* ran notices to help family and friends find each other, another newspaper demanded that the "miserable gang be sent back at once." Want ads seeking workers stated, "No Irish need apply."

The newcomers worked hard in dangerous conditions. For 50 cents a day, they laid Boston's roads, tunnels, and subway tracks. Many died, leaving poverty-stricken widows and children. Women cleaned wealthy Bostonians' homes and tended their babies. Irish laborers did jobs others refused and expanded the town into a major city. Gradually, they moved from tenements near the wharves to suburbs.

Because they were also loyal Americans, they began to gain the respect of native Bostonians. The Irishmen of the Ninth Regiment fought so bravely for the Union in the Civil War, their regimental flag hangs in the Massa-



View from the float!

These Boston children help celebrate all things Irish.

*/// Boston, not Dublin or Belfast,
is the greatest Irish city
in the world. ///*

by Cynthia Levinson

Irish America

This sculpture was erected in downtown Boston to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the Irish Famine.

chusetts State House. Irish-American musicians wrote patriotic songs, including “You’re a Grand Old Flag.”

Still, traditional Bostonians, called Brahmins, worried. Irish politicians were becoming powerful by providing jobs and charity to constituents in their wards in exchange for votes. One candidate even told his supporters on Election Day, “Vote early and vote often!” As Brahmins feared, local ward bosses eventually controlled city government, and the first Irish Catholic was elected mayor in 1885.


When the son of a Famine Irishman became the city’s third Irish mayor in 1906, a journalist wrote, “Boston, not Dublin or Belfast, is the greatest Irish city in the world.” This mayor, John F. Fitzgerald, was the grandfather of President John F. Kennedy and Senator Edward Kennedy.

Boston’s Irish still enliven the city. Thousands



The Legend of St. Patrick

by Cynthia Hatch

 The Irish, or wannabe Irish around the world, wear green clothes every year on March 17 to honor St. Patrick. Who was St. Patrick, this patron saint who legend says drove all of the snakes out of Ireland?

To learn about St. Patrick, we need to travel back more than 1,500 years and across the Atlantic Ocean to England. Back then, England wasn’t the place we know today. England was ruled by a powerful empire — Rome. Roman Britain, as England was called, was wealthy. It had cities, governments, laws, and religion. Yet, across a narrow sea, things were very different in a place called Ireland.

Unlike Britain, Ireland had remained unchanged since the time of its ancient peoples, the Celts. The Romans never invaded Ireland or changed its peoples, laws, or religion. Instead, Ireland remained divided up into many chiefdoms. The common Irish people farmed the land or worked for rich landowners. Others lived in small towns surrounded by high walls.

Back in Roman Britain A.D. 385, a son was born to a Roman Briton family. His name was Magonus Succatus Patricius. As best we know, Patrick had a good childhood. He was educated and well cared for, and he traveled around his village of Bannaventa Burniae in the west of Roman Britain.

During the late 300s to the early 400s, Irish raiders, or pirates, snatched thousands of Britons and took them back to Ireland to work as slaves. When Patrick was 16, his life changed forever when Irish raiders kidnapped him from his father’s home. Transported by boat to Ireland, Patrick was soon sold to the highest bidder. For the next six years, Patrick was enslaved. He was put to work herding sheep in the woods and on a mountain in the northeast of Ireland. Far away from his family and friends in Britain, he had little chance of escaping Ireland.

Scared and alone in the cold and snowy mountains, Patrick prayed for help. Then one night, when Patrick was asleep, a voice spoke to him. It said that he would soon return to his home in Britain. To get there, he had to walk 200 miles and meet a



Green hats and goggles?

It must be St. Patrick's Day!

of kids march in the annual St. Patrick's Day parade, which attracts a million observers. The *Boston Irish Reporter* and the Boston Irish Tourism Association announce events, such as plays, concerts, storytelling, and festivals. The

Boston Irish Heritage Trail highlights historic sites, including the Irish Famine Memorial and the JFK Library. Neighborhood pubs serve Dublin coddle (sausage and potatoes). Bakeries sell traditional soda bread. The Irish Culture Center in nearby Canton has a traditional thatched-roof cottage and offers lessons for kids in Irish language, legends, Celtic artwork, and dancing.

Ten-year-old Celia Dolan, whose mother is from Ireland, studies step and céilí (KAY-lee) dancing. She likes soft-shoe reels but her favorites are the hard-shoe hornpipe and travel jigs. Celia also has played Irish football, which is like soccer with hands, and hurling (see page 34). She plays instruments, too, including the tin whistle and the hand-held, one-sided bodhrán (B-OW-raan) drum.

Like many Boston Irish, Celia says, "I'm proud of my culture!"

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ship that was waiting for him. For the next few weeks, Patrick walked across Ireland. When he reached the shore, he saw the boat from his dream. Although not liking Patrick at first, the captain soon allowed the frightened runaway aboard. Over three terrible days and nights, Patrick and the ship's crew sailed until the ship reached the shores of France, or Gaul, as it was called back then. Instead of meeting his family in Britain, Patrick and the seamen wandered through a desert for the next 28 days with little or nothing to eat or drink.

Three long and hard years later, Patrick made it back to Britain and returned to his family. Yet Patrick was no longer the youth raiders had snatched ten years ago. The many days and nights of praying had changed him. Some time later, Patrick again heard a voice speaking to him in his

dreams. The voice asked him to return to Ireland.

When Patrick woke up, he knew that he must return to Ireland and convert the Irish pagans to Christianity. Convincing the Irish to give up their pagan practices wasn't an easy task. The Irish locked Patrick up, threw stones at him, and did even worse. Yet Patrick never gave up.

Back in those times, Christians believed snakes were evil omens. It isn't surprising to learn that Patrick's journey to convert the pagan Irish soon turned into a few tall tales. In them, Patrick is still Patrick, but the pagan Irish became snakes. One story tells how Patrick climbed to the top of a mountain and beat a drum day and night to drive all of the snakes into the sea. Another tells of Patrick ringing a magical bell more and more loudly to scare the snakes off a cliff and

into the sea. The best-known tale tells of Patrick tricking the biggest, oldest, sneakiest snake in Ireland. Unlike his slithery brothers and sisters, this snake stuffed leaves in his ears so that the bell wouldn't drive him into the sea. To get rid of this last snake, Patrick had to trick him into trying to stuff himself into a small wooden box. At first, the snake thought he wouldn't fit in the tiny box. But the snake was too proud, and Patrick flattered the snake into proving that he could squeeze himself into the small space. As soon as the snake wrapped his tail inside, Patrick slammed shut the lid and threw the wooden box into the sea.

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