

# The Early Formation of St. Patrick's Day Parade in New York

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The largest national festival in the world, celebrated in many countries with parades, concerts, plays, and other cultural events can be claimed by a small island located north-west of continental Europe, Ireland. The festival honors a man who reputedly brought Christianity to Ireland in the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE., St. Patrick (Freeman, 2009). His memory is celebrated on March 17<sup>th</sup>, his feast day. There are parades and events held around the world celebrating Irish culture, but the largest and most significant parade is the one held annually in New York City (Cronin and Adair, 2006). This paper explains how events in Irish history and the circumstances of the Irish immigrants in New York in the 19<sup>th</sup> century motivated them to form one parade to which they gave their time, money, and energy. The first section will briefly give an overview of the size and significance of St. Patrick's Day worldwide and then go into greater detail about the New York Parade. The next section explains the historical figure of St. Patrick and how the relationship between Ireland and England elevated the Irish Catholic church and St. Patrick into a unifying force for the colonized people of Ireland. Finally, this paper discusses how the parade in New York moved from small local processions in Irish communities to a major annual event in the 1850s. The large influx of Irish Catholics in 19<sup>th</sup> century shifted the message, the size, and the form of the festival. By looking at some of the groups and famous characters from those early parades, we can understand the motivations for the Irish immigrants in New York and we can get a glimpse at how the Irish navigated their relationship between their old homeland, Ireland, and their new one, America.

## Overview of St. Patrick's Day

On March 17<sup>th</sup> in New York and all over the world things start to turn green: beer, pizza crusts, rivers, the Statue of Liberty, even the Sydney Opera House. In fact, there are more than 400 landmarks in over 50 countries that turn green (St. Patrick's Day 2019 celebrated worldwide, 2019). Officials from the Irish government travel all over the world to embassies and consulates to attend parades and special events that have been organized for St. Patrick's Day (Burne, 2023). In the parade in New York there is always a strong presence of local, national, and international politicians. If we look at the parade in 2017 both the mayor of NYC and governor of New York State along with the Prime Minister of Ireland attended the parade (Wheelock, 2017). In 1948, the President of the United States, Harry Truman, attended the parade (National Archives, 1948). This is not only a significant day for Irish culture but also for politicians working to raise their profile.

The celebrations for St. Patrick are not only on the 17<sup>th</sup> of March. They take place in the weeks preceding it and the week following it. For example, in the New York area, there are over 50 local parades: Long Island in 2023 had 25 parades (Harmon, 2023) and New Jersey 32 (Jennings, 2023). Many of the people who take part in these local events will also join the larger New York St. Patrick's Day parade. This day is deservedly known for its big parade, but there are many other cultural events that take place on and around March 17<sup>th</sup>. Concerts of traditional and contemporary Irish music are held as well as the performances of Irish plays, readings of famous Irish writers, Irish dance classes, and workshops for learning the Irish language, Gaelic (Weaver, 2023).

This event is a celebration of Irish culture, but it has become something larger than that. In many cities around the world a piece of green clothing is worn by a larger percentage of the population than on a normal day (Mulraney, 2023). One can see buttons that say, "Everyone is Irish on St. Patrick's Day". In his traditional St. Patrick's Day message, Michael Higgins, who has served as Ireland's President since 2011, greeted "our extended family across the world. Wherever you may be, and in whatever circumstances, you are part of

Ireland's global family joining with us as we celebrate our shared Irishness, its culture, heritage, and history" (St. Patrick's day 2019 celebrated worldwide, 2019). In fact, many politicians often repeat that very phrase. In many ways the festival has moved beyond its Irish and Catholic roots. For example, in Montreal, which has one of the oldest and largest parades, the parade is seen more as a celebration of multiculturalism. All types of music and groups can take part in the parade (Cronin and Adair, 2006). In many public schools, teachers explain and celebrate St. Patrick's Day and place familiar Irish images like shamrocks and leprechauns on the wall (Melissa, 2023). Irish pubs around the world have live music, give away prizes, and have their busiest days as people from a various ethnic backgrounds join the fun ("Irish pubs busy," 2017).

Numbers don't tell us everything, but they do give us a sense of the scale of the event. In the United States, there are over 100 parades with the largest ones in New York, Chicago, Boston, and Savannah (Mulraney, 2023b). Around the world, it is celebrated in over 200 countries with several declaring it a national holiday (Mubashar, 2023). Some of the largest parades outside of the United States and Ireland can be found in England, Canada, and Australia (Farley, 2023). This is understandable as the largest ethnic Irish communities settled in those countries. In every city, the parade takes on a different character. As this paper will focus on the New York parade, a brief examination of the basic facts and an overview of the participants will give the reader a clearer picture of what the parade has become before we examine how it started.

### New York's St. Patrick's Day Parade

For the 2023 St. Patrick's Day parade, there were 250,000 participants and 2 million viewers along the parade route (Meko, 2023). It starts at 11 am on 44<sup>th</sup> St. and 5<sup>th</sup> Av. The marchers walk north up 5<sup>th</sup> Av. It will take about 2.5 hours to reach the end of the parade at 79<sup>th</sup> St. The parade finishes at 5:00 p.m. as the last marchers reach 79<sup>th</sup> street (Meko). The main reason the parade goes up 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue is that it must pass St. Patrick's Cathedral. The most important moment for many marchers is to receive the blessing of the

Archbishop of New York who stands in front of the cathedral and recognizes each group with a blessing. Since 1851, the parade has been led by the 69<sup>th</sup> Regiment based in New York (Goldenberg, 2023). This regiment is often called the “Irish” regiment as it was originally composed of Irish immigrants. Other groups joining the parade are various Irish societies of NYC, Catholic societies, the 32 Irish county societies, schools, colleges, Emerald societies, Irish language groups, labor groups, and a great variety of public workers such as police, fire, and sanitation workers (Meko, 2023).

### The 69<sup>th</sup> Regiment

The first group to go up 5<sup>th</sup> avenue, the 69<sup>th</sup> regiment, is composed of about 800 members. The first marcher is a solo piper. The groups that follow the lone piper are Battalion Staff, Guests of the Regiment, Battalion Color Guard, Regimental Wolfhounds (members of the 69<sup>th</sup> Regiment who won awards in the previous year), and then the parade’s first marching band, 42nd Infantry Division Band, who are members of the New York Army National Guard. The 69<sup>th</sup> regiment continues with Headquarters and Headquarters Company, then Companies A to H, Regimental Headquarters of the 69th Regiment with the Regimental Color Guard, Regimental Staff, and finally Children of the Fighting 69<sup>th</sup> and the Veteran Corps of the 69th Regiment. This last section is followed by Bergen County Police Pipes & Drums, NJ Pipe Major (“St. Patrick’s Day organization”, 2023).

These days the members of the regiment are from a great variety of ethnic backgrounds, but they hold the tradition of the regiment and the honor of leading the parade. One reason the 69<sup>th</sup> regiment have such a position of honor is that they have long been seen as a protector of the parade. The Irish Catholics were not always welcome in America, especially around 1851 when they (the 69<sup>th</sup>) first started marching in the parade. In addition, the immigrant community has always been eager to show their loyalty to the new country. Joining the military has been a traditional route of displaying patriotism.

Since the 69<sup>th</sup> Regiment is such a large group they have two marching bands accompanying them. All other groups are accompanied by one

marching band. In the 2018 parade, there were 148 marching bands; of these, 72 were high school or college bands from 14 states (“New York City St. Patrick’s”, 2020). In many years there is also a marching band from abroad. In addition to the school bands, there are the marching bands from the Fire and Police departments of New York, various military marching bands, traditional bagpipe bands, and pipe and drum groups. Each marching band has between 60 and 300 members (Venture, 2023). Since 1988, some marching bands also have traditional Irish dancers. While there are some bands that take part nearly every year, such as Cardinal Hayes High School in the Bronx, who have participated for over 70 years, the parade committee actively invites and accepts applications from bands all over America and the world (“Highlight: Cardinal Hayes High School”, 2017). For example, in 2009, the Tokyo Pipe Band joined the parade (“Tokyo’s tartan pipers”, 1999).

### The Ancient Order of Hibernians

Two groups that appear most frequently and have been central components of the parade are the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH) and the 32 Irish county societies (Ridge, 1988). In the NY parade there are about 20 regional divisions of the AOH that participate in the parade (“St. Patrick’s Day Organization” 2023). Traditionally, the AOH are the main organizers of the parade (Ridge, 1988). In fact, they ran the parade for almost 150 years. In some years, when the parade almost disappeared (1870s) it was the AOH who held it together and continued the tradition (Ridge). In 1993, they stepped back from organizing it as they got involved in a legal battle to ban the LGBTQ community from marching in the parade under an LGBTQ banner (Langan, 2018). These days, the group has two central issues. One is for a unified and free Ireland. This has been steadfast position since their founding. The other issue that has come into focus more recently is their strong support for the right of the unborn (McCormack, 2023). In other words, they strongly oppose abortion. This is a very politically divisive issue in America.

The AOH were at first a secret organization established in New York in 1836 and fully incorporated in 1851. By the mid-1850s, they were the most

important group involved in the organization of the parade (Ridge,1988). As McCormack (2023) explains in his history of the AOH, secret organizations have a long history in Irish society. When England passed a series of Penal Laws starting in 1691, the Catholics of Ireland were deprived of economic, political, and educational rights. In fact, between 1640 and 1660, many clergy were killed. This led to the birth and spread of many secret organizations that protected the clergy, helped teach the native Irish language, and assisted many tenant farmers against abusive labor practices. These groups were often outlawed and as a result often changed their names. One name used to describe various secret associations was the term Ribbonmen, or Ribbon societies. It was this organization of Ribbon societies in Ireland and in the U.K. that gave the Americans permission to establish a Ribbon society in New York and Pennsylvania. The term ribbon comes from the practice of tying a ribbon of green through a buttonhole to identify members. These groups were fraternal organizations and only allowed Irish Catholic members or later Irish Americans to join. The reason for secrecy was the danger presented by various anti-Catholic and anti-Irish groups such as the Know-Nothings. The Know-Nothings were a nativist political movement in the United States during the mid-19th century. They were officially known as the American Party, and their platform was based on a strong anti-immigrant sentiment. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Know-Nothing groups attacked Irish neighborhoods and even burned down Catholic churches (McCormack, 2023).

### Irish County Associations

The other groups that are very central to the parade are the 32 Irish county associations. These groups have been participating in the parade for over one hundred years. The 32 Irish county groups basically have served the immigrant community since the 1830s. In the New York area, if you were from, for example, County Cavan in Ireland, when you arrived in New York and needed work, a place to stay, and friends to listen to your problems, you would connect with the County Cavan P & B Association. The “P” stands for protective and the “B” for benevolent. These two themes of protection and benevolence are central to the parade. The Cavan County group was

established in 1848 (Cavan P & B Association, 2018). This was during the dark years of the great hunger when over a million Irish arrived in America (1845–55). The need for protection and assistance was extremely acute in those years. The Cavan Society has organized annual events for over one hundred and seventy years. These events have helped members find work, find a place to live but most importantly provided them with a community of people from the same region in Ireland. Their website states that their goals have never changed: “foster friendship among members and to help them and their families in time of sickness and death.

### Brief History of St. Patrick and the England-Ireland Relationship

In this section we will look at the historical origins of the New York parade. The best place to start is to look at the star of parade, St. Patrick. Why did he become the chosen saint for Ireland? More importantly, why did he become such a beloved figure for Irish Catholics? Even when they have left their country, why do they feel the need to honor this saint so deeply? To grasp that we must understand the long and complex relationship between Ireland and England.

#### History of St. Patrick.

Saint Patrick is a deeply studied historical figure. There are many debates and disputes over his dates and the locations of his activities, but some basic outlines can be recognized. Around 400 CE he was born in Roman Britain (Freeman, 2009). When he was sixteen, he was captured by Irish marauders, put into slavery, and forced to work as a shepherd for six years in Ireland. After some years, he escaped, settled in France, and after 20 years as a monk returned to Ireland to convert the Irish to Christianity (Freeman). After those basic points, hagiography takes a strong hold over his biography. However, we can be sure of one fact: by the 8<sup>th</sup> century he was elevated to founding father of Irish Christianity (Cronin and Adair, 2006). Therefore, like all great religious figures, he was endowed with many special powers. The most common and colorful myth that survives is the explanation for the absence of snakes in Ireland. According to the legend, St. Patrick was

attacked by a group of snakes, but he somehow managed to force them all into the ocean. In Christianity, serpents are a symbol of the devil. By ridding the land of snakes, the story goes, he rid Ireland of all evil (Freeman, 2009).

Most importantly, on or near March 17<sup>th</sup> was the date when St. Patrick passed from this mortal coil. By the 7<sup>th</sup> century he was worshipped nationally and as early as the 8<sup>th</sup> century prayers to Saint Patrick were composed in the Gaelic language. Churches were named after him, religious sites in Ireland were connected to his activities, and pilgrimages were established to honor him. Beginning in the 9<sup>th</sup> century all churches were directed to honor Patrick in mid-March according to the Book of Armagh. By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the 17<sup>th</sup> of March was recognized as Saint Patrick's Day and celebrated with religious ceremony, drinking, and other festivities (Cronin and Adair, 2006).

#### Relationship between England and Ireland

It is impossible to understand the development of Saint Patrick's Day without looking at the relationship between England and Ireland, between colonizer and colonized. From the 12<sup>th</sup> century Anglo-Norman invasion, parts of Ireland have been under the feudal control of England. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the control was indirect rather than direct rule (Roche, 1978). This began to change in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century with attempts to establish the Protestant religion and English language throughout Ireland by encouraging Protestant and English-speaking settlers from Scotland and Northern England to emigrate to Ireland. In the latter half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the Protestant church was deemed official whereas the Catholic Church was illegal (Bartlett, 1982).

Two more events hardened this cultural and religious divide. Both events led to a more severe subjugation of the Irish Catholic population. The events also indicate how desperate the Irish were to throw off the yoke of English domination. The first was the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. The Protestant William of Orange, a Dutch royal who soon after became William III of England, defeated King James II who had fled London because of threats from militant Protestants (ibid). The Catholic King James was defeated by William. This led to more restrictions on the religious practice of

Catholics as well as limits on civil rights such as owning property and voting. These new laws were promulgated under the very hated Penal Code of 1691. The new laws did not recognize Saint Patrick's as a holiday and all celebrations of the Saint now became unofficial and illegal.

The second event came about 100 years later. Following the revolutions in France and America, militant republicanism spread widely in Ireland. The Irish Rebellion of 1798 was a sporadic and militarily unsuccessful attack against British forces in Ireland by the United Irishmen and their leader Wolfe Tone (Elliott, 2012). This battle led to brutal religious violence throughout the country. These two rebellions reveal the thirst for freedom in Ireland. It also hardened divisions in society between the Catholics and Protestants. In nearly every diary, song, or report, all evil, all bad luck or misfortune was blamed on the English and the Protestants (Cronin and Adair, 2006). In a world in which their language, their culture, and their economic choices were severely limited by the state, the Catholics held onto their religion as a lifeline to their identity. With the Catholic church as their sole solace, the figure of Saint Patrick was given greater devotion. Saint Patrick the person and the celebration of his feast day increased in importance as their everyday existence became more difficult.

### The Growth of the Parade

In the final section, we look at the early immigration from Ireland to the American colonies and the earliest appearance of a parade in New York. Before America became an independent country, it was also a colony of the English Empire. The earliest Irish to arrive in America were mainly Protestant Irish. This shifted by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, as more Irish Catholics chose to leave Ireland. The increase in the number of Irish Catholics in the major urban areas led to a shift in the message and the form of the parade. The parade became a public event rather than a private dinner. The main message of the marchers was for the English to leave Ireland. While the marchers could publicly express their political positions in New York, in other Irish diaspora they could not. In addition, efforts were made to protect poor Irish immigrants and to support the Irish Catholic

church. In the 1830s and 40s, there were many separate parades in New York Irish neighborhoods, but due to the historic event of the Great Famine beginning in 1845, there were many compelling reasons to bring those parades together into one large parade by 1850. This section will follow the shift from the earliest appearance of small processions for St. Patrick in New York into the major parade it became in the 1850s.

### Early Emigration from Ireland

Despite the harsh experience in Ireland for Irish Catholics, most immigrants to first leave Ireland were Protestant. In fact, this may also have been the result of that harsh experience. Even though Catholics comprised roughly 75% of the population, two thirds of those who emigrated were Protestant (Miller, 1985). The Irish saw leaving as being sent into exile by the colonizers. Staying was a form of resistance. In addition, the Catholic population seemed particularly close to the land, language, and religion. They were reluctant to leave in large numbers at first. The Protestant Irish, who had recently (from the 1600s) been encouraged to settle in Ireland, were much more willing to leave Ireland. It seems they were not as connected to the land and traditions and, more importantly, may have had more resources to leave and more connections in their destination (Library of Congress, n.d.).

In the American colonies the Irish were the second largest ethnic group after the English. They were called Scotch-Irish and were Protestant as they had been part of the Plantation of Ulster (the northern province of Ireland), which began in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century as the organized colonization (plantation) by settlers (or planters) from southern Scotland and northern England (Miller, 1985). The settlers had to speak English and be Protestant. This was all part of England's continuing attempt to control their colony by destroying its culture. The reaction of the native Irish was generally hostile (BBC, n.d.). In the coming years, due to religious conflicts and poor economic conditions, many of these Protestant settlers were drawn to opportunities in the new British colonies of America (Library of Congress, n.d.).

Therefore, in the late 18th century, at the earliest events celebrating Saint Patrick's Day, nearly all members were Protestant. They enjoyed

dinners remembering their homeland and honoring their patron Saint (Cronin and Adair, 2006). Parades were hardly undertaken, and if so, they were small affairs. The earliest recorded parade was in New York in 1766. It was a short military procession in which a fife and drum corps escorted the officers to a dinner.

#### A Shift in Emigration, A Shift in Celebration of St. Patrick's Day

The number of Catholics in the states began to change in the early 19th century (Miller, 1985). By 1835, 30,000 Irish were landing and settling in New York annually and the majority were now Catholics. The number of Catholics in the Irish émigré group continually rose as the Irish slowly began to see the positives of leaving outweighing those of staying. As the number of Irish Catholics increased in the larger cities of the northeast, we can slowly see a change in the celebration of Saint Patrick (Cronin and Adair, 2006). For the elite and powerful the dinners continued, but their message changed. By the 1830s, with the number of Catholics increasing at such dinners, the topics changed. They now were: 1) St. Patrick and his life; 2) Freedom from British rule; 3) Helping Irish immigrants settle in America; and 4) A strong connection with Catholic charities to help poor Irish. In the earliest dinners for St. Patrick, the focus was mainly on remembering Ireland and honoring St. Patrick. Now, these events were becoming nationalistic and deeply connected to the church.

By 1831, we can see this dominant theme appearing in a parade in New York. The Hibernian Universal Benevolent Society (HUBS), a Republican group, i.e., promoting independence for Ireland, marched with “the richest and most splendid banners... with other appropriate insignia of the Emerald Isle and mottoes of most of the revolutionary characters” (Ridge, 1988, p.10). They marched from a hotel to Christ Church with banners and music, celebrated mass, and had dinner afterwards. The parade now had a clear republican political position. Not only had the message of St. Patrick's Day changed, but the form of the event was also changing.

## Motivations for Marching

There was a new desire among the immigrants to make the parade public. The growing number of small business owners, manual laborers, and craftsmen called for a more open celebration rather than a private dinner that did not capture the celebration they wanted (Cronin and Adair, 2006). Another way to understand the need for public demonstration of Irish culture is to look at the way the new immigrants left Ireland. Their departure from Ireland often took the form of an Irish wake (National Museum of Ireland, n.d.). A wake is a celebration of one who has passed away. It is attended by friends and family on the night before the funeral mass and burial. Departure from one's birthplace and separation from family, community, and land was seen as a type of death (IrelandXO, n.d.). It was a farewell that was understood as permanent on both sides. Reaching America and being accepted and integrated into a new community was a rebirth for the immigrants in a new land. By celebrating Saint Patrick's Day, the immigrants were able to reconnect with Irish culture, the culture they believed they had lost upon leaving their homeland. It was a celebration that needed to be shared with others who had experienced this painful departure. The immigrants also realized that they had certain freedoms in the USA not shared by their compatriots in the old country.

Irish Catholics upon arriving in the United States were finally allowed to march and to publicly express their anger at the United Kingdom's Irish policy. They could not do this back in Ireland and in other cities where the anti-Catholic and anti-Irish forces were too strong (Cronin and Adair, 2006). From the parades in the 1830s and onward, marchers held banners expressing their nationalism. They proudly displayed banners for revolutionary figures such as Wolfe Tone, who was the leader for the Irish Rebellion of 1798 against William of Orange. He was captured and died in jail in 1798 (Elliott, 2012). They expressed in both speeches and with banners their support for Daniel O'Connell, the leading politician for the Catholic majority in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Ridge, 1988). He was actively working for Catholic emancipation and the repeal of the hated Act of Union, which limited the rights of the Irish to vote, to work, to use their language,

and to get an education. Their countrymen back in Ireland could not march, or protest, or hold large parades. The new immigrants finally had the chance to express their newfound freedom. They were obliged to march for those who could not. Being aware that others could not march, they felt it was their duty and a responsibility.

#### Comparison to Other Irish Diaspora

Not all immigrants from Ireland were allowed to march and protest British occupation of Ireland. Liverpool, in northern England, is home to a large Irish immigrant population. In fact, it is estimated that upwards of 75% of the city's residents are of Irish ancestry (Cobb, 2013). While one can find examples of St. Patrick's Day parades, it was always a point of huge contention and violence (Cronin and Adair, 2006). Over the 19<sup>th</sup> century, outdoor activities, especially parades, were largely abandoned in favor of more indoor cultural events. Why was it so difficult to hold a parade in the city with the largest Irish population in England? It was because of the power structure of the city. The loyalist group, the Orange Order, who supported the English control of Ireland and who were violently anti-Catholic, held great power in the city. The Orange Order is a Protestant fraternal organization that originated in Northern Ireland in 1795. It was named after William III of Orange, a Protestant king who defeated the Catholic King James II in the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. The Orange Order was established to promote and defend Protestantism, as well as to maintain Protestant dominance in Northern Ireland. The Order has been associated with sectarianism and has been involved in many conflicts with the Catholic community in Northern Ireland and in other places (Cronin and Adair, 2006). This battle between Catholics (green) and Protestants (orange) has played out throughout the world in many immigrant cities.

This battle can be clearly seen in a comparison of the St. Patrick's Day events in two Canadian cities: Montreal and Toronto. Toronto was a much more English Protestant city with a very large Orange Order group (Vyhnak, 2016). There was great sectarian violence in Toronto. Between 1867 and 1878, there were twenty-two cases of sectarian violence. The parade was often

attacked by the Orange Order. This finally led to the parade being cancelled in 1877. It would be a hundred years later before the St. Patrick's Day parade took place in Toronto. Montreal is a completely different story. In Montreal, the dominant political power is held by the French community. They are largely Catholic. St. Patrick's Day parade has always flourished there and is one of the largest annual parades in Montreal. To review, the lines between these two colors (orange and green) had become very clear. It underlined for those Catholics in the United States the necessity that they obtain the right to march for those in other countries who were prevented from doing so. It is a simple calculation of who held power. If the groups supporting the Orange Order held majority power, no public parade would be held. In New York the Irish had the power to parade publicly and express their political views. A terrible famine that took place in Ireland over several years (1845 – 52) would encourage all those involved with St. Patrick Day activities to work together, to unite their efforts, and create the largest, most significant St. Patrick's Day parade in the world.

### The Potato Famine

In the 1840s, other marching societies started to form in New York (Ridge, 1988). These parades were small with a few hundred people at most. Each group had a separate parade route often connected with their local church. This slowly changed with a massive inflow of Irish immigrants. Beginning in 1846, news had reached America of the terrible suffering that Ireland was experiencing. The Great Potato Famine, 1845 to 1852, is also known as the Great Hunger. Out of a population of 8 million, an estimated one million people died of starvation or related diseases and 2 million left the country (Miller, 1985). It is a defining moment in Irish history, leading to a century of population decline. It also further cemented the already present hatred of the British colonizers. In New York, the parades continued, but many of the dinner celebrations for St. Patrick's Day parade were cancelled. Instead, they collected the funds and sent money and food to the sufferers in Ireland (Ridge, 1988). The results of the famine were enormous. It is estimated that between 1845 and 1855, 1.5 million Irish emigrated to the United States. Of course, not

all the people who arrived in New York stayed there but many did, and by 1860, nearly one-quarter of the city's population was Irish-born (Miller, 1985). The tragic circumstances of the Great Hunger would have a profound impact on the parade.

#### Four Key Groups in Forming the Parade in the 1850s

The enormous numbers of arrivals in New York inevitably led to an increase in the number of marchers and the number of marching societies. By 1849 several of these groups started to march together in one parade (Ridge, 1988). In 1849, for the first time an effort was made to counter the number of marchers. There were estimated to be 1,500 marchers that year (Ridge, 1988). It is clear by 1849 that most marching groups were coalescing around one parade. In these parades of the late 1840s and early 1850s, we can see four groups playing a dominant role: labor organizations, temperance societies, benevolent societies, and military groups. All groups were deeply influenced by the Potato Famine. Benevolent societies had participated over many years as the earliest parades always had the function of raising funds for orphans (Ridge, 1988). In 1849, the first workers' union, the Laborers United Benevolent Association, joined the parade (Ridge, 1988). 1850 marked the first appearance of one of the many temperance societies that would march in the parade (Cronin and Adair, 2006). In 1851, the 69<sup>th</sup> regiment led the parade to protect against anti-immigration movements (Goldenberg, 2023). These groups would play a central role in the parade for years to come. The growth of these groups is closely tied to the large numbers of very poor Irish immigrants who were arriving in these years. The Great Famine put larger demands on all these groups. The work and the messages of each association could only be amplified as the individual parades merged into one major parade in New York.

#### *Temperance Societies*

By the 1850s the St. Patrick's Day parade had become a major event in New York. With the increased number of immigrants streaming into New York, the number of marchers and participants dramatically increased. In the ten

years between 1849 and 1859, the number of marchers increased tenfold, from 1,000 to 10,000: an increase of 900% (Ridge, 1988). With the arrival of those escaping the Great Hunger, the image of the Irish began to change. The newly arrived were seen as poor and sick with low levels of education (Miller, 1985). The new immigrants had escaped from awful living conditions. Moreover, the areas hardest hit by the potato crop failure were in Gaelic speaking areas; thus, a high percentage of the immigrants at this time lacked English-speaking ability (Miller, 1985). The parade had an additional role. It was to present the Irish as upstanding citizens, not as drunken hooligans which many newspapers had characterized them as (Cronin and Adair, 2006). The temperance societies played a major role in trying to shape public opinion. The largest temperance group was founded by Father Mathew from Cork, Ireland (Cronin and Adair, 2006). This group was called the Roman Catholic Total Abstinence and Benevolent Society. It was a profound social revolution. In Ireland, between 1838 and 1849, over 3 million signed the “pledge” (Fahey, 2003). The pledge was to abstain from alcohol. Father Mathew came to New York in 1849 and initiated many societies. In the US, over 500,000 signed the pledge book (Fahey, 2003). His influence was lasting. In the parade of 1861, there were three temperance societies marching, the largest being the one founded by Father Mathew with 600 marchers, a very large contingent (Ridge, 1988).

The temperance societies helped the parade put forth a positive image of the Irish. Another motivation for the organizers and participants was to show that they can hold a well-run parade that showed the positive qualities of this immigrant group. The newly arrived immigrants were in a process of shaking off years of colonization and its affects. The British had often described the Irish in very negative terms as a justification for their subjugation (Hayton, 1988). The image put forward ranged from barbarian, wild, and less than human to comical figures. Such condescending attitudes are typical of colonizers to justify imperialism. This is one of the main reasons that the temperance societies played such an important role. Of course, the temperance societies were not founded only to help with the image of the Irish. Father Mathew’s group and others were focused on

helping poor laborers escape the violence and danger of their daily lives. In areas where a large percentage signed the pledge, crime and poverty were reduced (Maguire, 1863). However, for the parade officials, the temperance groups were very welcome. On March 17<sup>th</sup>, the organizers of the parade set clear guidelines to march in straight rows, to dress in one's best clothes, and above all to avoid drunken behavior (Ridge, 1988). In fact, these rules must be followed by present day marchers and the rules are strictly enforced (2023 Marching Guidelines, n.d.). The new immigrants had been influenced by the centuries of English occupation and the portrayal of the Irish as less than human. In this new land of opportunity, the Irish were determined to show that their unfavorable characterization by not only British but also the American press was unfair and unwarranted. One large parade was very attractive for temperance societies to help spread their message and attract more members to their cause.

### *Labor Groups*

The famine and the very slow reaction of most British officials to the problem increased the existing anger of the Catholics toward the ruling Irish Protestant class and the main political power over Ireland, the British government (Miller, 1985). The Tenants' Rights Movement became a rallying cry. In the 1850s this was a political and social movement that sought to secure better rights and protections for Irish tenants who were living on land owned by wealthy landlords (Bartlett, 1982). The abuses of the landlords in Ireland created among the immigrants a strong sense for the rights of workers. Advocacy for various causes can be seen as one of the primary functions of the parade. The parade was a voice for those in Ireland but also the new immigrant workers in America. We can see this manifested in many of the worker's organizations that assembled on St. Patrick's Day as the parade grew in the 1850s. In 1851, at least three labor groups formed the parade line, the Operative Masons, the Quarrymen's Protective Society, and the Laborers United Benevolent Society (Ridge, 1988). These groups were not Irish ethnic unions, but their membership was largely Irish. By the end of the 1850s over 15 labor groups took part in the parade (Ridge, 1988). The major

roles played by these labor groups were finding work for the massive number of new arrivals and protecting workers from unscrupulous bosses.

### *Benevolent Societies*

From the earliest events held to honor St. Patrick collections have been taken to remember those who are not well off. This often took the form of raising money for Irish orphanages in New York. In 1831 the annual custom of a collection was taken up for the benefit of the St. Mary's Institute for Orphans (Ridge, 1988, p.11). With the Great Hunger and the arrival of truly destitute immigrants, the benevolent societies expanded their activities. For example, one group, the Erin Fraternal Benevolent Society (founded in 1823) joined the St. Patrick's Day parade in 1851 (Ridge, 1988). With one major parade, these groups gained greater visibility. It was an ideal time to raise money and increase membership (Cronin and Adair, 2006). These societies helped to provide shelter, food, and give care to the new arrivals, considering that a significant number arrived with illness. With the work of the benevolent societies becoming more necessary, their work would become highlighted by forming into one large parade. This is another reason the benevolent societies were open to the move into one large parade. These groups, like the parade, expanded exponentially throughout the 1850s. In the 1861 parade, we can find at least six large benevolent societies marching (Cronin and Adair, 2006). Help for the poor and those in great need was also taken up by the specific county organizations that began to form at this time (discussed above).

### *Military Organizations*

Even before the 61<sup>st</sup> Regiment began to lead the parade in 1851, there had been several Irish volunteer military units. These volunteer companies were not under any state regulations. They were formed in local areas to protect the new immigrants from several anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic groups (Ridge, 1988). These groups were very popular, and they had two clear functions. One was to protect local Irish neighborhoods and the other was to train young men in military skills for an eventual attack on the British in a

fight for the liberation of their homeland. Such groups had marched through the 1830s and 1840s in individual parades connected with local churches. They had colorful names and uniforms: The Irish Dragoons, the Napper Tandy Light Artillery, the Montgomery Guard, and the Emmet Guard. Their names were taken from Irishmen with distinguished service in the American military such as Montgomery and from leaders of Irish rebellion of 1798 like Emmet and Tandy. These groups always marched in front of the civilian groups. They presented a formidable presence at the head. When the various parades unified in 1849, all these military groups began to march in the one main parade (Ridge). As the number of Irish rapidly increased between the years of 1847 and 1855, there were many attacks on Irish areas (Cronin and Adair, 2006). There was always a fear of the Know- Nothing Group attacking the parade, but with the large presence of formal military and volunteer military groups, an attack never took place on the parade.

#### Political Influence

The dramatic increase in immigrants created another dynamic in New York and several other cities in America. By the mid 1850s, the parade effectively shut down New York's traffic on March 17<sup>th</sup> (Cronin and Adair, 2006). The numbers that assembled were a strong show of latent power. The organizers were signaling to local political figures, who needed voters, that the Irish represented a powerful group. If labor groups and Irish social groups could gather members together in large numbers on this day, then they could form a powerful voting bloc. Instead of earlier separate parades in local areas, the Irish began to organize and assemble one large parade to project their growing power. It was no matter of time before non-Irish politicians in New York began to review the parade on the specially constructed stages (Ridge, 1988). In 1853, the mayor and the entire City Council appeared before the parade. The necessity of politicians to court the Irish vote would only increase with the number of immigrants flowing into the city. With increased attention, more publicity from the press, larger numbers of participants and viewers, new dramatic floats, colorful banners, and musicians marching up 5<sup>th</sup> avenue, the parade had transformed into an event that had to be taken

seriously.

### 1850s: Consolidation and Growth

Over the 1850s, the parade not only became bigger but also became more centrally organized (Ridge, 1988). A grand marshal was chosen each year from 1851. From 1853, the parade was organized by the Convention of Irish Societies. This became a yearlong task. The format of the parade became more recognizable. The audience expected to be impressed and entertained by the music and pageantry of the event. Thousands of Irish in the New York area would come to meet a friend and hear Irish music. It was a special moment for them to connect with their culture, with their countrymen. (Cronin and Adair, 2006). And come out they did; over the 1850s, there was a 900% increase in the number of marchers, from 1,500 to 10,000 by the end of the decade (Ridge, 1988). As the size of the parade grew, so did the number of viewers, those who cheered the marchers from the sides. The parade was an attempt to highlight the success of the Irish in American society. As America began the vicious war to preserve its unity, the Civil War, many Irish Americans used the parade to further expand this theme of love of the old country and love of the new one. The next sections look at two major characters from the early 1860s and how they displayed loyalty to old and new lands.

### Michael Corcoran

The Irish always displayed their patriotism with American flags and speeches dedicated to their new homeland. They often expressed their gratitude to be in a land of freedom where they could march, practice their faith, work, and vote freely (Cronin and Adair, 2006). Such sympathies were expressed annually and vociferously. In the 1860s, many Irish volunteered for the Union Army (Cronin and Adair, 2006). Those Irish who were members of the American military always marched first in the parade. There was always a clear demarcation between military and civilian groups (Ridge, 1988). The three predominantly Irish state militias were the 69<sup>th</sup>, the 9<sup>th</sup> and the 72<sup>nd</sup> (Ridge, 1988). One story from the 1860 St. Patrick's Day parade clearly

outlines the complex motivations of the 69<sup>th</sup> regiment (Demeter, 2002). In 1860, the commander of the 69<sup>th</sup> regiment was Michael Corcoran, who had escaped from Ireland after the unsuccessful 1848 Rising in Ireland. He was also one of the founders of the Fenian Brotherhood, a secret revolutionary group with the sole purpose of freeing Ireland of English rule by means of arms.

In the fall of 1860, the Prince of Wales was visiting New York. The political elite of New York decided to honor the prince with a grand military parade of local militias. The commander of the 69<sup>th</sup> regiment refused to march as the prince was a great grandson of George III, whom the Americans had revolted against less than 100 years earlier. He also refused as the prince was the son of Queen Victoria ((Demeter). After years of famine with negligible help from Britain, with tenants being kicked off their land, and continued oppression of the rights of the Catholics, the Queen was truly detested by Irish Catholics. As a result of his refusal, he was brought up on court martial charges. Perhaps because of the impending Civil War, Corcoran was pardoned. Five weeks after the parade in 1861, the 69<sup>th</sup> regiment was taking part in the first battles of the Civil War in Virginia. In the 1862 parade, the local press reported that “the crowning feature of the day in 1862 was the appearance of the gallant Sixty-Ninth, the same that fought so nobly at the Battle of Bull Run” (Ridge, 1988, p. 32). Reports along the parade claimed that the 69<sup>th</sup> received the most thunderous applauses. Michael Corcoran was seen as a great patriot for Ireland and for the United States.

#### Thomas Meagher and The Fenians

Another central character from this same period clarifies the importance of the New York Irish community and St. Patrick's Day parade as a center of Irish nationalistic politics. Thomas Francis Meagher was one of the most popular Irish American figures in the world (Wylie, 2007). He was an Irish nationalist and leader of the Young Irelanders in the Rising of 1848. The Young Irelanders sought to overthrow British rule in Ireland. The events of the Great Hunger moved them towards the Rising of 1848. They were

disgusted by the lack of action by the British and the scandalous export of food from Ireland to England while a million people died. The disease affected the potato plant only, the plant that provided most of the nutrition for the poor. Other crops were fine. Boats full of lamb, butter, pork, and other food items left Irish ports daily while the people starved. These young revolutionaries did not want to settle for mere reform of certain laws nor a repeal of the hated Union Act of 1801. They wanted independence from England and were willing to engage in a violent overthrow of the government. The famine had woken these revolutionaries to the brutality of colonization. In 1848, Meagher was arrested and sentenced to death, but this decision was later commuted, and he was sent to a penal colony in Australia. He escaped and ended up in New York city in 1852 (Wylie).

In New York, Meagher and other exiles helped to establish the Fenian Brotherhood in 1858 (Wylie). This American group of revolutionaries was the sister organization of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB). At the first Fenian Congress in the U.S., in Chicago in 1863, the Fenians expressed “intense and undying hatred towards the monarchy and oligarchy of Great Britain” that had “ground their country to the dust, hanging her patriots, starving out her people, and sweeping myriads of Irishmen, women, and children off their paternal fields, to find refuge in foreign lands” (Neidhardt, 1975). It is important to note that Thomas Francis Meagher was on the review stand of the New York parade in 1861 (Ridge, 1988). He watched as a militia contingent under the pseudonym “Phoenix Zouvers” marched by. In fact, this group was the Fenian Brotherhood. The New York parade was sanctioning the use of force in Ireland in the battle for independence. The Fenian Brotherhood used an alias because the organizers did want to openly support an armed, secret organization that supported a violent overthrow of English rule of Ireland (Cronin and Adair, 2006). This would anger and create problems with groups like the Orangemen. While clearly signaling support for such groups, they were allowing plausible deniability if they were attacked for doing such a thing. In summary, New York became a center for such revolutionary groups. They were supported and given money for their activities directly following the termination of the St. Patrick Day parade.

After the 1861 parade, Thomas Meagher joined the Union Army and became a brigadier general (Wylie, 2007). He led the Irish Brigade, which was made of Irish immigrants and Irish Americans who fought for the Union Army during the American Civil War. The brigade was originally formed in 1861, and it consisted of five regiments: the 63rd, 69th, and 88th New York Infantry, as well as the 28th Massachusetts Infantry and the 116th Pennsylvania Infantry. The Irish Brigade was made up of mostly Catholic immigrants from Ireland, many of whom had recently arrived in the United States. They were known for their bravery and became famous for their fighting in the Battle of Fredericksburg in December 1862, where they suffered heavy losses while charging Confederate positions. This brigade continued to fight valiantly throughout the Civil War. The 69<sup>th</sup> regiment who still lead the St. Patrick's Day parade today, have kept that Irish origin tradition, even though today most members are neither Irish nor Catholic. With this story of Francis Meagher, we can see the important roles of the parade. It allowed the Irish to show their loyalty, devotion, and readiness to fight for Ireland's freedom. At the same time, it showed their loyalty to their new homeland. Soldiers marched in the parade before going off to war and after leaving the battle.

During the parades of 1864 and 1865 six military regiments marched but the Fenian Brotherhood were not marching, as they were preparing for military actions in both Ireland and Canada (Ridge, 1988). However, they were very active in raising money and recruits. In 1866, the parade terminated at Union Square, which was also the location of the Fenian Brotherhood's headquarters of Irish Republic in exile. Their main goal was to establish a Republic of Ireland. After the parade, there were not only speeches delivered but bonds for the future Republic were sold. These bonds could be redeemed when the Republic was established but that would not be for another 55 years. The Fenians were unsuccessful in their attempts at overthrowing the British government but most of the revolutionaries in the next century, who were successful, claim that the example of the Fenians' revolutionary spirit and their desire to push for direct military confrontation with England was a direct inspiration for their actions in fighting the English

in 1916 and further in 1920.

## Conclusion

As the parade grew dramatically, it was not without many problems from within the Irish community and from without. On the inside, some members complained that the parade was too martial and political and not focused on honoring St. Patrick and the Catholicism he brought to Ireland (Ridge, 1988). Others argued that no money or effort should go into the parade but only to throwing the English out of Ireland and overturning the hated Union Act of 1801, which made the Irish second-class citizens in their own country. Despite these internal battles and external ones as well, the parade continued. In the coming decades the New York parade was weakened and almost stopped but one thing kept it alive for over two hundred years. For the hundreds of thousands of Irish who arrived in America in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, for those who labored in coal fields and wealthy people's homes, this was a day to come together to feel proud of the country they had to leave. For those Irish, there was a lot of shame in being poor, in seeing signs saying *No Negroes, No Irish*. Because of the Great Famine, the ever-present issues of protection from anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic nativist groups became more pressing. The enormous numbers of impoverished arrivals also highlighted the need for more assistance for both arrivals and those suffering in Ireland. The horror of the Great Famine brought together many different groups from different areas to make one great parade. This was a day to show their new country that they were earnest, loyal, and strong. Most importantly, they wanted to show that they loved their old country and the new one as well. The love for the old country was the message of freedom for their country. The message for the new country was deep and sincere gratitude for being given freedom to express themselves, for the ability to work, live, and practice their own religion without fear of reprisal. The parade allowed them to express their deepest held beliefs which they had been unable to do for generations. The parade enabled the Irish to present themselves to their new country and to each other.

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**keyword** St. Patrick, Irish immigration, New York parade