

St. Patrick's Day: What brought the Irish to Syracuse in the first place?

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1992 St. Patrick's Day Parade on S. Salina St. The Gumby balloon greeting Syracuse from the Syracuse Newspapers building. File Photo by Dick Blume - Mar. 14, 1992

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What put the Irish in Syracuse?

Two words: potatoes, salt.



A group of Irish salt workers in Syracuse around 1870. Onondaga Historical Association

Several big waves of Irish immigrants came to this area during the 1840s as a result of the devastating effects of the Potato Famine in Ireland, particularly in the country's rural areas, said Dennis Connors, curator of history for the Onondaga Historical Association.

The immigrants were attracted to this area primarily because of the then-exploding salt industry around Onondaga Lake, which had taken off with the completion of the first phase of the Erie Canal in 1825 and the Oswego Canal.

"The salt industry was taking off in leaps and bounds before the 1840s and the Irish immigrants found work here as a result," he said.

Connors noted laborers on the initial Erie Canal were primarily the state's earlier settlers - the Scotch, English and Dutch. He noted when the canal was "massively enlarged" during the 1840s and 1850s, Irish immigrants were included in the mix and ended up settling throughout the state.

The main attraction for staying in Syracuse, Connors stressed, was the salt industry. The early arrivals were mostly young, single men. They came here, worked hard, lived fairly meagerly and in time became established.

Other family members followed and the city's Irish roots became established. Syracuse's Irish population back in the mid- and late-1800s was concentrated in two areas: the far north end of Syracuse (which became known as the First Ward) and on the west side in what was then part of the town of Geddes. That area, now in the city, is called Tipperary Hill.

"Both were fairly close to the salt works on the lake," Connors said.

Of the two areas, Tipperary Hill maintained a stronger Irish presence, due to such institutions as St. Patrick's Catholic Church, Niby's Pub, Coleman's restaurant/tavern and the Blarney Stone bar. "They reinforced the Irish nature of that neighborhood," Connors said.

The Irish had an advantage over Italian and Eastern European immigrants because they spoke English. In time, they found employment as police officers and firemen, and in other areas throughout the city's business sector. They eventually became part of the city's political scene.

"It appears that the first Irish-American mayor of Syracuse was Dennis McCarthy, elected in 1853 as the 6th mayor of Syracuse," Connors said. "He was not born in Ireland, but was of Irish ancestry."

Connors said there were some other mayors later in the 19th century who were of Irish ancestry - the most notable being James K. McGuire, who was in office from 1896 to 1901. He was active in supporting the Irish independence movement.

In regard to St. Patrick Day parades, Connors said, there's records of celebrations back in the 1800s, but "they weren't like the elaborate affairs that we have today. There were bands, people marching. Then at some point a regular St. Patrick's Day parade faded away as the Irish population got diluted," he said.

The idea for a city-wide St. Patrick's parade was resurrected in 1982 by television newscaster Nancy Duffy. It has been held each year for the past 32 years. Since its inception, the parade, which begins at noon Saturday, has supported Project Children and the St. Patrick Hunger Project.

This year's theme is "32 Parades for 32 Counties," a salute to the 32 counties in Ireland. For more, see the parade's website at syracusestpatricksparade.org.