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Syracuse: a little more Irish than the rest of New York

By [Ryan Delaney](#)

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The "green on red" traffic light on Tipperary Hill in Syracuse has become a landmark of Syracuse's Irish culture.

Credit Ryan Delaney / WRVO

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It's said that on St. Patrick's Day, everyone is Irish. In Syracuse, that's a little truer. A sixth of the population claims to be of Irish ancestry, more than any other city in New York state.

It was the potato famine in Ireland and the rise of the salt industry in central New York both happening in the mid-1800s that brought so many Irish people to the city, according to Dennis Connors, curator of the Onondaga Historical Association.

"A lot of the Irish men that were coming over from Ireland were not necessarily skilled technically, but they had a willingness to work and strong backs, and so the salt industry provided a good opportunity for that," he said.

Decedents of those settlers rose to be more than laborers in Syracuse. Connors notes former mayor James McGuire, who served at the turn of the 20th century and later was influential in the Irish independence movement.

Many early Irish immigrants settled in a far west side neighborhood now known as Tipperary Hill, named for County Tipperary in Ireland. And it's stayed proudly Irish today. Connors says other Irish neighborhoods in cities like Buffalo have faded away, but not here.

"None of them, of course as we know, have a traffic light with green over the top, which has sort of become this symbol of how strong the Irish identity is with that particular neighborhood," Conner said.

Quick history: In the 1920s, the city installed a traffic light in the heart of Tipp Hill. Young Irish children got upset that the "British red" was on top of the "Irish green," so they threw stones at it to break the light. The city replaced it, but the children broke it again. The compromise was an inverted traffic light, now a landmark.

Central New York's geography bears some resemblance to the Emerald Isle, too, notes Ted Furze, president of the Central New York Irish-American Cultural Institute.

"What they liked was the rolling hills down south of the city. It reminded them a lot of Ireland and the green hills and so forth," he said.

And it's up on Tipp Hill that St. Patrick's Day has turned into more of a season. A few weeks before the holiday, a small parade under the traffic light delivers green beer to Coleman's Irish Pub. It's a warm up to the grand parade through downtown Syracuse.

The morning before, politicians and Irish figures, like Furze, help paint a green stripe down the parade route. Then the next day, tens of thousands of people brave the unpredictable March weather to watch the festivities. It's one of the biggest St. Patrick's Day celebrations in the country.

Two of the grand marshals this year were Kathy Schwanke and Mary Ann Fountain from Project Children. It's a program that for three decades brought young kids from Northern Ireland to Syracuse to get away from the violent separatist movement, Schawnke said.

"To help the children, to give them a little bit of respite from what was going on over there and thank God we don't have to do that anymore; we're good. They're good," she said.

With "The Troubles," as they were known, over, the program is being discontinued. But Syracuse still has many other ties to Ireland that hold strong.

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