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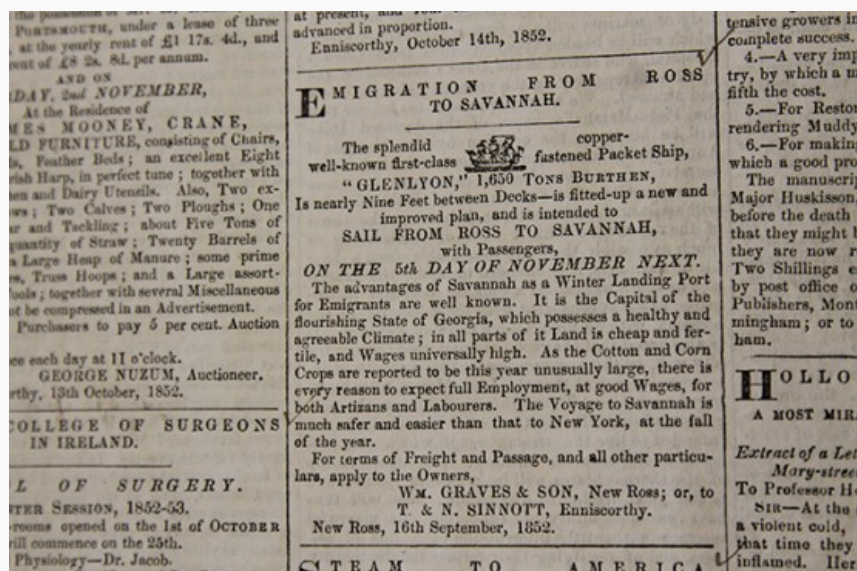
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Honors Students Travel to Ireland to Research Wexford – Savannah Axis

June 24, 2014



Savannah, Georgia is well-known for its Irish-American population, exemplified by the fact that each March it hosts the second largest St. Patrick's Day in North America. This summer, a group of 11 honors students from Georgia Southern University traveled to Ireland to explore more deeply the complex network that developed in the 19th Century between County Wexford in the southeast of Ireland and Savannah. In this inaugural year of the Wexford – Savannah Axis research project, these honors students carried out archival-based research on both sides of the Atlantic to explore this Southern pathway of Irish migration.

"What was unique about this summer research project was its transatlantic nature. We were working to narrate a complete story, not just an aspect of the tale. As undergraduates, this opportunity is incredible," anthropology major Sarah Ryniker said.

The initial stages of the research this summer involved students working in Savannah with naturalization records, shipping records, city directories and newspaper sources at the Georgia Historical Society.

Then, they traveled to Ireland to better understand the impulses to emigration utilizing sources at the National Archives of Ireland, the Wexford County Archives, the Wexford Library and the Waterford County Archives.

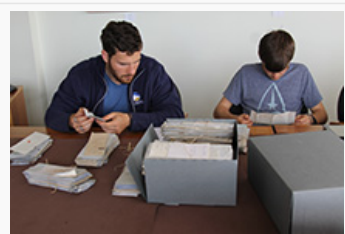
"The professionals we worked with in Ireland have been doing research their entire lives," writing and linguistics major James Devlin said. "They took undergraduate students with almost no experience in primary research and treated us as equals."

One important source of information at the National Archives of Ireland were the papers of William Graves and Sons, a County Wexford shipping firm that provided passage to a large number of the Irish who left Wexford and came to Savannah. For example, the students discovered correspondence from the 1840s and 1850s



Honors Research at Georgia Historical Society

between Savannah cotton merchant Andrew Low and William Graves that demonstrates the commercial links between Wexford and Savannah.



Honors Research at National Archives in Dublin

“It was so amazing to see references to Savannah in papers and letters in Ireland that date back all the way to the 1850s,” journalism major Lauren Gorla said. “In my research experience, I’ve never had the chance to work firsthand with primary resources so this trip definitely gave me a new appreciation of that type of research.”

The students also delivered two presentations of their research findings to audiences in Ireland, including a presentation to the John F. Kennedy trust at the Dunbrody Famine Ship and Irish Emigrant Experience. Representing the Kennedy family at the event was filmmaker, Rory Kennedy, the youngest child of former Senator Bobby Kennedy.

“Being able to present original research in front of Rory Kennedy and other important figures in Ireland was certainly not a typical freshman year experience,” English/writing double major Aleyna Rentz said. “It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”

The students learned from their presentation as well. “The presentation at the Dunbrody Centre was a wonderful way to see how our hard work had paid off,” English major Lydia Biggs said. “Having important people, like Rory Kennedy, listen to and later ask more about our research made me realize just how groundbreaking and significant our findings are.”

In addition to the research intensive components of the experience, students traveled throughout the southeast of Ireland to better understand the context of the place from which so many of Savannah’s Irish departed. This summer experience led by Dr. Howard Keeley, Director of Georgia Southern’s Center for Irish Research and Teaching and Dr. Steven Engel, Director of Georgia Southern’s University Honors Program, offered a genuine experiential education by interweaving undergraduate research and study abroad opportunities.

About working with Dr. Engel and Dr. Keeley, international studies/French double major Maria Amiel said, “During our trip, we had the opportunity to form close relationships with both professors and even referred to them by first name while in Ireland. We even joked about them being our ‘two dads away from home.’ This provided us with a more comfortable environment, making it easier for us to ask questions and be involved with both professors.”

“We have been delighted with the results thus far on our research into the migration of peoples from Wexford to Savannah,” said Dr. Howard Keeley. “Our research on both sides of the Atlantic has proven a deep relationship between these two regions. Furthermore, we are proud to have involved undergraduate students in this project. It has created a dynamic learning atmosphere for all involved in the project.”

The Wexford – Savannah Axis research project brings together Waterford Institute of Technology and the John F. Kennedy Trust in Ireland along with Georgia Southern University and the Georgia Historical Society in the U.S.



Honors Students at Dunbrody Centre with Rory Kennedy



Dr. Steve Engel leads an Honors Class in Ireland

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