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Returning to Ireland – The Wexford-Savannah Axis

June 25, 2015



While research takes some students only so far as their computer screens, ten honors students recently traveled to Southeastern Ireland to investigate the push and pull factors that contributed to migration from County Wexford, Ireland to Savannah, Georgia. In the second year of the ongoing transatlantic research project entitled the Wexford-Savannah Axis, honors students embarked on the Honors Inquiry in Ireland Study Abroad Program. Led by Dr. Steven Engel and Dr. Howard Keeley, honors students spent two weeks looking for answers to such questions as why Wexfordians immigrated to Savannah and what they left behind.



Partnered with the Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT), honors students analyzed primary sources at locations such as the Wexford County Archives, the newly-created Graves Archives at WIT, and even the National Archives of Ireland and the National Library in Dublin. Some answers, however, could not be found on paper.

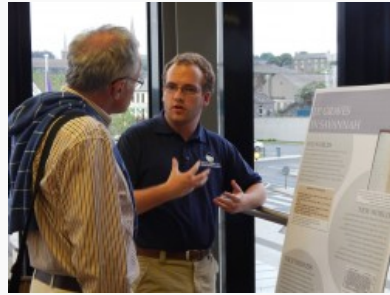
“This trip taught me that primary research isn’t just sitting in archives,” said Kayla Allen (engineering ‘18). “Primary research involves getting out there and seeing the places you’re studying for yourself.”

The hunt for Savannah iron mogul William Kehoe’s birthplace in County Wexford, for example, brought students to a small rural village called Monamolin, where they inspected nearby churches and cemeteries for proof of the Kehoe family’s residence in the area. While members of the Kehoe family may have attended church in Monamolin, records indicated that the Kehoes were tenant farmers in a nearby Irish townland called Mounthoward, which was the students’ next stop for the day. A brief chat with a local Mounthoward farmer

ultimately led the group to the exact spot where Kehoe’s home in Ireland once stood in a bucolic, otherwise known as a sprawling field near the sea.

"I began research on William Kehoe during last summer's trip," said Aleyna Rentz (writing and linguistic & English '17), "so visiting Mounthoward and seeing the exact spot where the Kehoes once lived made all the work I've done these past two summers, and all the work everyone involved in this project has done, feel important and worthwhile."

Although oral history proved instrumental in moving forward this year's research, time spent in the archives was just as valuable. Students spent several days looking through shipping records in the Graves Archives at WIT, which were recently created as a result of last summer's Honors Inquiry in Ireland program. Under the guidance of WIT professor Kieran Cronin, students looked for correspondence relating to the Graves shipping company's business with Savannah.



"As a history major, I found working in the archives to be an amazing experience," said Brittany Sealy (history '15). "I wish more undergraduates had the opportunity to utilize these types of resources."

Several weeks of meticulous work both stateside and in Ireland culminated in a successful presentation at the Dunbrody Famine Ship & Irish Immigrant Experience Visitor Centre in New Ross, Ireland. The presentation was attended by several notable individuals, including Paul Kehoe, TD and Chief Government

Whip from Co. Wexford, Malcom Byrne, Chair of the Wexford County Council, Tom Enright, Chief Executive of Wexford County Council, Anthony Connick, member of the Wexford County Council, Noel Whelan, Chairman of the JFK Trust, Willie Keilthy, Vice Chair of the JFK Trust, and Sean Connick, CEO of the JFK Trust. In addition to speeches made by Dr. Engel, Dr. Keeley, and Kieran Cronin, students Brittany Sealy and Aleyna Rentz shared the group's findings with a receptive audience. Afterward, honors students provided a more in-depth look at their research with posters stationed around the room.

"My favorite part of the trip was sharing our research with Ireland's natives," said Olivia Perdue (biochemistry '17). "They were genuinely interested in our findings, which made all of our hard work worth it."



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