

Newsroom

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Georgia Southern University Director of Irish Studies Explains Why Many St. Patrick's Day Traditions Are More American than Irish

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Next week, when rivers and fountains are dyed green, parades are held, and green beer is served, people will be celebrating St. Patrick's Day in a way that is as much American as it is Irish, according to Georgia Southern University Director of Irish Studies Howard Keeley, Ph.D.

"Traditionally, St. Patrick's Day in Ireland is a sober, religious holiday observed by the island's Catholic and Protestant communities alike," said Keeley. "Until relatively recently, Irish law banned pubs from opening on March 17th."

Keeley reveals that while the Irish have honored St. Patrick, one of their *threepatron* saints, for centuries, St. Patrick's Day became a public holiday only in 1903, when the entire island of Ireland was still under British rule. Ireland's capital city, Dublin, did not inaugurate a St. Patrick's Day parade until 1931. By contrast, most historians agree that the Charitable Irish Society of Boston—an immigrant association—created the world's first such parade in 1737.

Keeley points out that the early nineteenth century saw significant numbers of impoverished Irish Catholics arrive in Savannah, Ga. Savannah's St. Patrick's Day Parade, which is now the second largest celebration in the U.S., dates back to 1831. "It was organized by the Hibernian Society of Savannah, a benevolent group of Irish Protestants dedicated to aiding their less-fortunate fellow countrymen," Keeley explains.

In general, the Irish in America have used March 17th as a way to assert community pride and solidarity. Irish dominated the copper industry in Butte, Montana in the early twentieth century and Keeley points out that the Anaconda Mining Company would close many of its mines for the St. Patrick's Day holiday. In Northeastern States, Keeley says, the evening of St. Patrick's Day was long associated with dances, given for the many Irishwomen or "Bridgets" in domestic service from Boston to New York.

"The idea of large parades, street festivals, and parties for St. Patrick's Day is fundamentally American," says Keeley. The Irish in Ireland are increasingly adopting the American model, however—partly in an attempt to make Ireland a March tourist-destination.

Keeley concludes that St. Patrick's Day is, to an important degree, a celebration of Irish-America; even as it acknowledges how Patrick, who was born in Britain, helped reshape Ireland, where he had been enslaved as a youth. From Savannah to Buenos Aires to Sydney, according to Keeley, the celebration of St. Patrick's Day is a major point of connection between Ireland and its "fifth province": a term popular in Ireland for the millions of people of Irish descent throughout the world.