

# How St. Patrick's Day Was Made in America

St. Patrick may be the patron saint of Ireland, but many St. Patrick's Day traditions were born... in the United States.

By [Christopher Klein](#)

## 1- St. Patrick's Day tradition

Every March 17, the [United States](#) becomes an emerald country for a day. Americans wear green clothes and quaff green beer. Green milkshakes, bagels and grits appear on menus. In a [leprechaun](#)-worthy shenanigan, [Chicago](#) even [dyes its river green](#).

Revelers from coast to coast celebrate all things Irish by hoisting pints of Guinness and cheering bagpipers, step dancers and marching bands parading through city streets. These familiar annual traditions weren't imported from [Ireland](#), however. They were made in America.

In contrast to the merry-making in the United States, March 17 has been more holy day than holiday in Ireland. Since 1631, [St. Patrick's Day](#) has been a religious feast day to commemorate the anniversary of the 5th-century death of the [missionary credited with spreading Christianity to Ireland](#). For several centuries, March 17 was a day of solemnity in Ireland with Catholics attending church in the morning and partaking of modest feasts in the afternoon. There were no parades and certainly no emerald-tinted food products, particularly since [blue, not green](#), was the traditional color associated with Ireland's patron saint prior to the 1798 Irish Rebellion.

## 2- The Origin of St. Patrick's Day

[Boston](#) has long staked claim to the first St. Patrick's Day celebration in the American colonies. On March 17, 1737, more than two dozen Presbyterians who emigrated from the north of Ireland gathered to honor St. Patrick and form the [Charitable Irish Society](#) to assist distressed Irishmen in the city. The oldest Irish organization in North America still holds an annual dinner every St. Patrick's Day.

Ironically, it was a band of Redcoats who started the storied green tradition of America's [largest and longest St. Patrick's Day parade](#) in 1762 when Irish-born soldiers serving in the British Army marched through lower Manhattan to a St. Patrick's Day breakfast at a local tavern. The March 17 parades by the Irish through the streets of [New York City](#) raised the ire of nativist, anti-Catholic mobs who started their own tradition of "[paddy-making](#)" on the eve of St. Patrick's Day by erecting effigies of Irishmen wearing rags and necklaces of potatoes with whiskey bottles in their hands until the practice was banned in 1803.

## 3- The Reason of St. Patrick's Day

After Irish Catholics flooded into the country in the decade following the [failure of Ireland's potato crop in 1845](#), they clung to their Irish identities and took to the streets in St. Patrick's Day parades to show strength in numbers as a political retort to nativist "Know-Nothings."

"Many who were forced to leave Ireland during the Great Hunger brought a lot of memories, but they didn't have their country, so it was a celebration of being Irish," says Mike McCormack, national historian for the [Ancient Order of Hibernians](#). "But there was also a bit of defiance because of the bigotry by the Know-Nothings against them."

McCormack says attitudes toward the Irish began to soften after tens of thousands of them served in the [Civil War](#). "They went out as second-class citizens but came back as heroes," he says. As the Irish slowly assimilated into American culture, those without Celtic blood began to join in St. Patrick's Day celebrations.

## 4- St. Patrick's tradition meal

The meal that became a St. Patrick's Day staple across the country—[corned beef and cabbage](#)—was also an American innovation. While ham and cabbage was eaten in Ireland, corned beef proved a cheaper substitute for impoverished immigrants. McCormack says corned beef became a staple of Irish-Americans living in the [slums of lower Manhattan](#) who purchased leftover provisions from ships returning from the tea trade in [China](#).

"When ships came into South Street Seaport, many women would run down to the port hoping there was leftover salted beef they could get from the ship's cook for a penny a pound," McCormack says. "It was the cheapest meat they could find." The Irish would boil the beef three times—the last time with cabbage—to remove some of the brine.

## 5- From one Continent to the Other

While St. Patrick's Day evolved in the 20th century into a party day for Americans of all ethnicities, the celebration in Ireland remained solemn. The *Connaught Telegraph* [reported of Ireland's commemorations](#) on March 17, 1952: "St. Patrick's Day was very much like any other day, only duller." For decades, Irish laws prohibited pubs from opening on holy days such as March 17. Until 1961, the only legal place to get a drink in the Irish capital on St. Patrick's Day was the Royal Dublin Dog Show, which naturally attracted those with only a passing canine interest.

The party atmosphere only spread to Ireland after the arrival of television when the Irish could see all the fun being had across the ocean. "Modern Ireland took a cue from America," McCormack says. The multi-day [St. Patrick's Day Festival](#), launched in Dublin in 1996, now attracts one million people each year.

The Irish are now adopting St. Patrick's Day traditions from Irish America such as corned beef and cabbage, McCormack says. There are some American traditions, however, that might not catch on in Ireland, such as green Guinness. As McCormack says, "St. Patrick never drank green beer."