



Members of a fire department honor guard march in the 60th annual St. Patrick's Day Parade in East Islip, N.Y., March 2, 2025. The feast of St. Patrick, patron of Ireland, is March 17. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)



Bryan McGovern

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March 17, 2025

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St. Patrick's Day usually conjures images of partying, Catholicism, Irish nationalism and, perhaps most famously, the color green: green clothes, green shamrocks, green beer and green rivers.

So my students are often surprised when I tell them that St. Patrick's Day was once a solemn feast day when you'd be far more likely to see the color blue. In fact, there's even a color known as St. Patrick's blue.

### **'True blue'**

Historians [don't know much](#) about St. Patrick. But they believe he was born in the fifth century as Maewyn Succat.

He wasn't Irish; rather he was born in Wales, the son of a Roman-British official. He was, however, captured by Irish pirates and enslaved in Ireland. After six years he went back to Britain but returned to Ireland as one of the missionaries to convert Irish pagans to Christianity. At some point he adopted the Latin name Patricius. In the 10th century, the first evidence of St. Patrick being a beloved figure in Ireland emerged.

In the early 17th century, Luke Wadding, an Irish priest, persuaded the Catholic Church to make March 17 a feast day for St. Patrick.

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Back then, feast days were far from raucous affairs: Catholics typically went to Mass and then had a quiet dinner at home to celebrate. Other denominations, including Anglicans and Lutherans, recognized the day as well. But any commemorations would include the color blue. The Dublin Evening Post reported that in a 1785 St.

Patrick's Day ceremony in Dublin, a group of men identifying themselves as patriots "marched in a grand procession round the garden, dressed in true blue, and carrying along with them a number of curious pageants."

Constance Markievicz, who fought in the 1916 Easter Rebellion for independence and was the first minister of labour in the Irish Free State, maintained that blue was "the old colour of Ireland." To connect the past to the nationalist movement, she used blue as the background for the Irish Citizen Army's flag.

In 1934, Irish politician W.T. Cosgrave asserted that blue is "in perfect, traditional, national accord with our history and in close association with the most revered and venerated memory of our patron Saint."

## **Out with the old, in with the new**

Since the 12th century, Ireland had been a colony of Great Britain. Like the American Colonists who rebelled against the British crown, a group of rebels called the United Irish launched an insurrection in 1798 in a quest for independence.

Led mostly by middle-class Protestants and in coordination with some Catholics, the United Irish adopted the "wearing of the green" to represent Irish nationalism and their fight against British imperialism.



A stained glass window in St. Patrick Catholic Church in Junction City, Ohio (Nheyob/Wikimedia Commons)

The rebellion failed, and the British government made Ireland part of the United Kingdom in 1801 to prevent future revolutions. The government also bestowed greater rights to Protestants over Catholics.

Ireland became more sectarian over the course of the 19th century, and nationalism became more associated with Catholicism. In some ways, the two became interchangeable.

With nationalism ascendant and Catholics outnumbering Protestants, green was widely embraced, particularly since it had been worn by the United Irish.

### **Green crosses the pond**

Before the 1840s, most Irish immigrants to America had been Protestants, many of whom had been the descendants of Scottish settlers in Ulster and would later become known as the Scots Irish. Like those that would succeed them, they celebrated St. Patrick's Day to commemorate their connection to Ireland.

In the earliest recorded American celebration of the day, banquets toasting Ireland and St. Patrick took place in Boston in 1737. By the 1760s, annual parades were being held in New York and on the island of Montserrat to celebrate Irish culture and identity.

Irish immigration to the new world increased dramatically after the Great Hunger of the 1840s, when the potato crops failed and over 1 million indigent Catholics arrived in the U.S. Facing discrimination from American Protestants who claimed they were more loyal to the pope than to the U.S., they viewed St. Patrick's Day as a link to the history and culture of Ireland. Celebrations were a badge of pride and dignity, and they called for Irish independence to demonstrate they, too, believed in republican principles.



A girl who was part of a procession holds the flag of Ireland on St. Patrick's Day in Dublin March 17, 2021. (CNS/Reuters/Clodagh Kilcoyne)

Irish nationalist groups active in the U.S. — the Fenians, Clan na Gael and, later, Irish Northern Aid — participated in these American St. Patrick's Day parades, proudly wearing green to demonstrate their nationalism and the connection to past nationalist groups such as the United Irish.

In Ireland, however, St. Patrick's Day remained a solemn day of observance with little revelry. The Irish government didn't recognize St. Patrick's Day as a public holiday until 1903, and the first parade in Dublin wasn't held until 1931. Even pubs remained closed on March 17 until 1961.

Since 1922, when 26 of the 32 counties of Ireland became semi-independent, the tricolor flag of Ireland has been the official flag. Green represents the Catholics, orange represents the Protestants, and the white in the middle symbolizes peace. Yet green remains the color associated with St. Patrick's Day and Ireland throughout the world, largely due to the Catholic diaspora and its association with nationalism.

However, blue still plays a symbolic role in Ireland: Since 1945, the flag representing the president of Ireland has a gold harp with a dark blue background — the color known as St. Patrick's blue.

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