

Alexandria Times

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Alexandria
COMMUNITY MEDIA

Alexandria's Hibernian Society

Alexandria's long history with residents of Irish descent dates back to its founding.

More than 200 years ago, Alexandrians of Irish descent founded a Hibernian Society to aid impoverished Irish immigrants and to promote a sense of cultural identity. A March 27, 1824, letter to the Alexandria Gazette editor, Samuel Snowden, outlined the Hibernian Society's aims. The Hibernian Society also organized the first St. Patrick's Day Parade in Alexandria, a tradition that continues to this day.

The anonymous letter writer called "upon every Irishman, who loves his country, to come forward and give his name and his assistance to this infant Society."

Well before the Irish Potato Famine, the author asked the Gazette's readers, "How many poor families land upon the shores of America, fleeing from want and wretchedness and home, and seeking here, in the land of plenty and freedom,

an asylum, a home[?]"

While the Irish community was one of the first immigrant communities in Alexandria, other communities joined it. Today, Alexandria City Public Schools has students from more than 145 different countries. Alexandria had one significant attraction to recent arrivals from Ireland compared to other regional cities – the Church of Saint Mary, now The Basilica of St. Mary, was the first Catholic church in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

In 1795, parishioners initially located the church at the corner of Church and South Washington Streets. In 1826, two years after the founding of the Hibernian Society in Alexandria, the church moved to its current address of 310 S. Royal St.

The Hibernian Society in Alexandria did not confine itself to helping recently arrived Irish immigrants. By 1836, the Hibernian Society organized a St. Patrick's Day Parade. The

March 26, 1836, edition of the Alexandria Gazette describes that year's parade on March 17 as "every way creditable, and an account of it worthy to be recorded."

The Gazette's account reported, "The Hibernian Society met, and having made their arrangements, walked in procession from the room over the Hydraulions [a firehouse], down Royal Street, each of the members bearing on his breast ... badges of green ribbon, an Eagle, a Harp and a Shamrock."

Seventeen years later, the tradition continued. The Gazette's March 2, 1853, edition noted that the meeting of the Hibernian Society took place at St. John's Academy.

Besides the election of officers, the paper chronicled, "Arrangements were made for celebrating the 17th of March, and Rev. J.P. Donelan, of [Maryland], was elected as orator for the occasion."

St. Patrick's Day was not always celebrated in Alexandria.



PHOTO/HANNA LEKA

Alexandria's Irish community dates back to its founding.

Notably, Alexandrians went to Washington, D.C. in 1876 and 1878 to celebrate the holiday and watch the parade in the nation's capital. But the parade had returned by 1921.

The Gazette wrote that the Catholic Club would celebrate St. Patrick's Day in the Lyceum. The paper notified the public that, "The entertainment has been deferred until 9 o'clock, after the parade."

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