



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
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St. Patrick-Symbol of Irishness

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The United States is made up of many people from different lands who came searching for a better life of religious freedom in one way or another. Most of these were ethnic groups immigrating in masses who strived to become blended into the American melting pot but also held onto traditions that ultimately set them apart from others.

The catholic Irish Americans embraced the celebration of St. Patrick's day. It is a partly festive, partly religious holiday celebrated annually on March 17th. Each year church services are followed by parades and

parties commemorating the life of their patron saint and his gift of Catholicism to Ireland. Most Americans know of the festive part and can identify the wearing of the green with Irish pride, music, dancing, songs, and heroes represented in the parades.

The public celebration of St. Patrick began in New Haven 157 years ago, although it is believed that many Irish immigrants celebrated amongst themselves well before that. "The public celebrations of the day, which began in 1842 have always been more than just marching, singing, and dancing. They have been in reality a chronicle of the lives and times of New Haven's Irish people, a history of their causes and concerns, their hopes and fears, their triumphs and failures".¹

The story of St. Patrick and the symbols associated with him (shamrocks, harps, shillelaghs, and the color green), have traveled and remained with the Irish since the first great waves of immigrants fleeing oppressive rule and desperately seeking economic opportunities landed in North America. Their land had been pervaded by English oppression, poverty, and horrific deaths brought on by the potato famine. The parade celebrates gaelic pride as well that found its way into a commingling of christianity and has persisted in New Haven and America when the Irish sought out land paved with gold during the 1840's and 1850's.

The proposed curriculum unit, St. Patrick-symbol of Irishness aims to familiarize students at West Hills Middle School with the story of Patrick, his abduction and escape, and finally his voluntary return to Ireland with a mission of christian conversion. They will study this through the history of the parade in New Haven and the symbols associated with it.

The history of the parade allows students to study early life for the immigrants and their contributions to society like fighting in the civil and revolutionary wars, gaining political clout, forming special organizations that have remained and influenced others, and planting the seeds of Catholicism firmly in American ground

amid a sometimes hostile protestant majority. "It is easy for those of us who march in or watch the gala parades of the 1990's to forget that there was a time when it was dangerous for Irishmen to march through the streets of New Haven".²

Students will be encouraged to produce skits and enact their own parade in which the significance of wearing the green and donning buttons that read "Irish for the day" will be appreciated more because they have been enlightened.

Saint Patrick

Ironically the patron saint of Ireland was not of Irish descent. It is thought that he was born in the British Isles around 385-460 A.D. Most of the biographical information comes from his own confession, which he wrote in old age. The Roman Empire was near collapse and raiders found it easy to prey on Britain. Many of the raiders crossed the Irish Sea from a land the Romans called Juverna. In English the word was Hibernia.

When Patrick was sixteen he was abducted and enslaved. Patrick believed he was being punished by God because he had broken the Commandments. While in captivity he prayed to God and swore allegiance to

him and his laws. Six years went by when Patrick had a special dream and heard a voice tell him to flee in a nearby ship. Patrick ran away and begged steerage on a ship and eventually ended up in Western Europe. He studied and prayed and eventually decided the Irish needed to be saved from Paganism. He was sent as a missionary and found the Celts living in clans and practicing an old religious form headed by Druids. They worshipped nature gods, offered sacrifices, and foretold the future.

Although Patrick introduced them to the Bible he allowed them to hold onto some old rites and customs. They had always honored their gods with Springtime fires so Patrick had the people light bonfires at Easter. The color green was not always the national color. It had special significance during pagan times because it symbolized spring.

Patrick was very successful with his conversion and is said to have used the three-leafed shamrock when explaining the Holy Trinity. The shamrock is a small green three-leafed trefoil that resembles a clover. It has since become an emblem of St. Patrick and Ireland as well.

When Patrick died, all of Ireland went into mourning. The church elders prayed over his body for twelve days. It is believed that his body is buried near the River Quoile in Downpatrick, County Down, in Northern Ireland. His contributions to Ireland included reading and writing. When he introduced the Bible and other sacred writings in Latin most of the Irish were illiterate and they had no written history. Ireland later became known as the "Island of Saints and Scholars".

Symbols

Shamrock-As mentioned above, the shamrock was of important significance because Patrick's legend says he used it to introduce the holy trinity. It is also a familiar plant that grows in Ireland and has become a symbol of both. The mild misty climate of Ireland keeps the shamrock fresh and green winter and summer. It has also been used as an emblem by the Irish volunteers which were the Irish volunteers in the British army.

Shillelagh-An old Irish word for a short club made out of oak. Shillelagh was the name of a famous oak grove that grew in County Wicklow, Ireland. The famous game of hurling also uses a shillelagh for playing. In the old days, an Irishman would not wander far from home without one. During the times of the Penal Laws inflicted on the Irish by England, many of the oak trees were chopped down and timber was sold in England. The people of Ireland had to turn to burning peat for fuel because wood was so scarce. Today, most shillelaghs are made of blackthorn due to the near extinction of the oaks.

Harp-An instrument that has become a symbol of Ireland. It was used in ancient times to sing of ballads, myths, and legends. Today the harp appears on Irish coins, flags, the national coat of arms, the presidential flag, and the royal arms of the United Kingdom.

Leprechauns-An ancient character found in fairytales. The leprechauns survived time and Christianity and can be found in myths during pagan times.

Irish flag-There are three vertical stripes of green, orange, and white. The Irish tricolor flag is carried in all St. Patrick's day parades. The green stands for the Gaelic and Catholic majority. The orange is for Ireland's Protestants. The white is a symbol of the peace between the two. In Easter week of 1916 the flag became a symbol when the Irish rose up against the British. The flag reminds Americans that St. Patrick's day is as patriotic as well as a religious holiday.

New Haven

On April 17, 1842, the Hibernian society made their first appearance publicly after the death of President Harrison. In December of the same year they met and planned for their first parade in honor of St. Patrick. It would include a special mass to be held at Christ's church, which was located at Davenport Avenue and York streets. A special oration was also planned for the afternoon. William Erigena Robinson was asked to give the oration. A special banner was commissioned from John L Mitchell. The parade was a success and was well received by the city newspapers. They extolled the mannerly order of the procession and spoke highly of the Irish amid speculation that they were loud, raucous, and disorderly. The Palladium noted, "Those jealous persons who have been taught to associate Irish character naught but the elements of ignorance and vice, would have looked in vain in their sedate procession for any marks other than belonging to well ordered and respectable citizens; and could each heart have been seen, we doubt not that it thrilled as patriotically for the land of its adoption, as it wept fervently for the sorrows of its own beloved 'isle of the ocean'.

"1843 was the only year within the time of a century and a half that the parade was canceled, rescheduled, and canceled again because of inclement weather".³ Two huge snowstorms prevented the celebration of St. Patrick from getting underway. This is an excellent record considering the weather is often tough during the

parades. The date has never been changed because it is the anniversary of Patrick's death. New Haven observers actually celebrate and hold their parade one week earlier now so they can participate in a larger parade in New York.

The festivities have been more than a showcase of ethnic pride and support for a hero. The parade has often served as a platform to express sorrow for Ireland, its people, and hope for peace on the Emerald Isle. Army heroes have been showered with praise and affection when marching. And Army recruiting has been known to manifest itself at the highly charged orations. "The Irish benefited psychologically from seeing some of their own people rise to power and affluence in a hostile society. They also benefited by seeing Ireland's green flag hoisted above city hall on St. Patrick's Day, at a time when the same flag could not be raised in British ruled Ireland.

The parade has expanded through the years but has always held the mission of celebrating Irish culture and pride as well as presenting Irish leaders and heroes to the masses of Irish Americans. A certain pride has also arisen in the country from which the immigrants came and the culture they left behind. When the resurgence of Gaelic history, language, and music began, the parade served as a platform as well. Banners with Gaelic symbols are carried and music and song embellish the procession. At the famous brunches, oratories, and dinners, guests are invited from Ireland as well as the Irish Americans of affluence and often they speak in the Gaelic tongue.

War and battle among the Irish and the British as well as duty served in America have also had representation in the parades. The Fenian Brotherhood, a group who unsuccessfully planned to overthrow the Canadian Government, marched through the New Haven streets amid glorious cries of support and even managed to recruit members into their organization.

During the Boer War, a lot of Americans sympathized with the South African victims of British imperialism. Irish Americans found the war provided an outlet to vent their hatred and hostility for Britain. Irishmen carried the Boer flag alongside their flag of Ireland in parades from coast to coast. Their actions served to collect funds for the Boers and to ignite their fellow countrymen in outrage to Britain's efforts to control others as they had long done to Ireland.

During the Civil War, parades were held in New Haven, other large towns, and recruits held their own observances if they were unable to participate in their newly adopted hometowns. Office holders and political aspiring people realized the parade was an event to participate in to gain political clout and constituents. Many joined the procession whether they were Irish or not, to show their support for their Irish brothers and to gain support from them. Today you will see the governor, mayor, representatives and senators walking the downtown streets of New Haven along with other Irish organizations. Some have endearing places among the Irish like Bruce Morrison who helped bring about the great lottery of the 1980's which helped some Irishmen and their families to immigrate to New Haven and other cities in Connecticut when illegal immigrants from Ireland were coming in large numbers and about to be deported.

The parade and its activities have also let women be more vocal about women's liberation issues. The infamous St. Patrick's dinner which can be attended by men only, was demonstrated against for a number of years.

Eventually pressure from demonstrators led political leaders to stop attending for fear they would lose votes. Some would not march with more boisterous men who would not concede to the women. And eventually they put a woman in the parade as grand marshal although no women were invited to the dinner. Pressure finally

beat out stubbornness and women were not banned from the dinner although many Irishwomen would not go out of respect and a mutual understanding that has persisted.

Some people have looked at the growing parade and its activities with disdain and would rather see the money used to finance it go to better use, but most see the parade as an outlet to of importance. According to Carl Wittke, "the majority of Irish Americans, including many of the clergy, regard the day as important for the perpetuation of the cult of remembrance for the land of their origin".

Dramatic Reenactments

Students will read excerpts from three books that explain what life was like for the Irish immigrants. The stories will serve as a catalyst to dramatic performances geared to a better understanding and appreciation for

the Irish in New Haven as well as other large cities in the Eastern United States where immigrants tended to live. Angela's Ashes is a memoir by Frank McCourt that describes life in New York as well as Ireland for his poor family. Students will read the first chapter that deals with life in New York and conditions for the Irish there. Saving New Haven , by MarkJ. Mininberg describes the immigrant in New Haven who clung to the lower rungs of the social ladder but gained access to the middle class through politics and notably the first Irish mayor, John W. Murphy. The third book from which excerpts will be taken is The Irish In America by Carl Wittke chronicles the arrival, city life, and discrimination against the Irish.

Students will create characters and dialogue to tell the story of the Irish. Through role play and interaction with prominent Irish leaders in New Haven they will create a play that also uses symbols that have persisted throughout the long ordeal of the great migration and develop a sense of the parade, its importance to a displaced yet proud group of people, and its persistence through so many years with an ever growing audience.

A field trip is planned to the Ethnic American heritage Center at Southern Connecticut State University. There they have census numbers dating to the first arrival of a large number of immigrants, old directories that indicate professions and addresses of the Irish surnames, copies of registers of municipal workers, and cultural displays about the Irish. The director has outlined workshops that include role play and other dramatic games to enhance the students knowledge. JeanneHickney-Roche, the director, is also president of the Irish Historical society and editor of the shanache (a monthly literary publication that details and explains Irish history and serves as an updating source to family members looking for relatives). Students will be invited to look for relatives of others and learn how the process is begun and completed. The data compiled from the ethnic center will enable students to add historical facts to their fictitious dramatic scenes and enable them to realize the enormity of the experience Immigrants to New Haven have faced and braved for many years to achieve their middle class status that was not easily won.

An understanding of history, role-play through descriptive narratives, and research of the time will enable the students to finally begin the process of planning their own parade. A committee must be formed, a guest speaker, artistic developers, and a grand marshall are just some of the tasks that will make the parade a success.

The students will be divided into groups that will serve as committees Relegated to different tasks. Props, music, artwork, and publicity are just a few of the areas the groups must handle. A special committee will also work with the RESPECT committee at the school to encourage workers and students along the Long Wharf to observe the final parade. The RESPECT committee is a separate group at West Hills Middle School that encourages school pride and works with the student body on different projects.

One of the largest projects that the students will undertake is the building of a float that represents their school as well as their knowledge of the Irish immigrant experience. The float is destined for the actual St. Patrick's day parade in New Haven. Public schools are encouraged to participate so it is a plan easily set in motion. Parents, students, and an art instructor will develop a visual concept to share the students knowledge with parade goers.

There are a number of people who will share historic lore about the parade so the students reflection of Irish immigration can be accurate. I have acquired stories and articles from widows of past chairmen of the parade and they will be shared with the students as well.

Edna Barth, the author of Shamrock, Harps, and Shiielaghs sums up the celebration of St. Patrick's day the best: "It is not enough to be simply a part of the blend that we call American. Each ethnic group needs something to set it apart and to keep alive its own traditions. For Irish-Americans, the celebration of St. Patrick's day helps serve this purpose".

Student Bibliography

1. Watts, J.F., The Irish Americans. New York: Chelsea House Publishers. 1996

Part of a series on the Immigrant experience, this volume deals exclusively with the history of the Irish in America with well told facts and historical stories presented in a juvenile manner of literature.

2. Mininberg, Mark. Saving New Haven. New Haven, fine arts Publication.

Students will find this book useful because it details political history of New Haven through the life of New Haven's first Irish mayor, John Murphy.

3. Barrett, Andrea. Ship Fever. New York, N.Y. W.W. Norton and Company, Inc. 1996

This book is intended for mature audiences but one story in this historical collection of fictitious short stories, Ship Fever, contains facts about the voyage of the Irish to the United States and Canada. It also describes the discrimination they met when they first arrived.

4. Shumway, Floyd and Hegel, Richard. New Haven An Illustrated History. California, Windsor Publications Inc.

An illustrated book on the history of New Haven with a small but important chapter on the Irish who made New Haven their home.

5. Barth, Edna. Shamrocks, Harps, and shillelaghs. New York: Clarion Books 1977

This book details the story of St. Patrick's life and explains the symbols used in the celebration of St. Patrick's day parades and how

they gained importance to the Irish people.

Teacher's Bibliography

1. Barrett, Andrea. Ship Fever New York: W.W. Norton and Co.1996

A collection of short stories with historical facts mingled with Fiction that details the passage off or Irish immigrants to the new World.

2. Mininberg, Mark. Saving New Haven. New Haven, CT: Fine Arts Publication.

A biography of New Haven's first Irish American Mayor, John Murphy with an extensive history on the Irish in New Haven from the time of their arrival to political gains and economic unity.

3. Wittke, Carl. The Irish In America Baton Rouge: Louisiana state University press, 1956

An historical account of the Irish experience in America that explores the trials and tribulations the Irish went through to gain acceptance in a Protestant world.

4. Shumway, Floyd. New Haven-An Illustrated History. California, Windsor Publication, Inc. 1981

A pictorial history of New haven from the arrival of the Puritans to present day. The book includes information on the Irish In New Haven.

5. McCourt, Frank. Angela's Ashes New York, N.Y. Scribner 1996

A memoir of the author who was born in depression-era Brooklyn to Irish immigrants. Although the book deals most with his eventual return to Ireland and the events that took place there, the introduction and the first chapters detail life for Irish immigrants in New York.

6. Miller, Kirby. Out Of Ireland Washington, D.C. Elliot and Clark Publishing 1994

A companion piece to the film Out of Ireland with detailed history of the Irish Americans and the cause of their mass immigration to the United States and Canada. The book also has amazing photographs that include poverty stricken Irish during the potato blight as well as photos taken of the infamous 'coffin ships'.

Lesson plan #1

Answer the following questions using the information you have gathered from your research.

1. what great catastrophe led to mass immigration to the U.S. from Ireland?
2. What were the conditions under which the Irish sailed to the U.S.?
3. How were the Irish perceived by the puritans and others living in the U.S.?

4. What occupations did the Irish embrace in the New World and why?
5. Where did Irish immigrants tend to live (city or country) and why?
6. What cultural differences set them apart from other Americans?
7. What symbols and traditions did the Irish keep as part of their American heritage and how did they influence others?
8. Describe the first St. Patrick's day parade and compare it to the parade today.
9. How has politics played a role for the Irish in New Haven?
10. How are politicians revered by the Irish in their parades?

Lesson Plan #2

Materials: Large sheets of construction paper Poetry Stencils of symbols traditionally used in Parade

Objective; Students will be required to produce their own poetry that describes the St. Patrick's day parade

Procedure: The poems will be fixed to the symbols and put on display to enlighten other students and parents during the school celebration.

Lesson plan # 3

Read the following symbols and describe their origin and importance to the Irish.

- 1.shamrock
- 2.harp
- 3.shillelagh
- 4.leprechaun
- 5.serpents
6. Irish flag and its colors(green, white, and orange)
7. Pipe
- 8.Fiddle
- 9.Top hat

10. Poteen and potatoes

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