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# The Hibernian Society in Alexandria

Alexandria's long history with residents of Irish descent dates back to its founding. Alexandrians of Irish descent founded a Hibernian Society 200 years ago to aid impoverished Irish immigrants and to promote a sense of cultural identity. A letter to the Alexandria Gazette editor Samuel Snowden, published March 27, 1824, outlined the Hibernian Society's aims. The Hibernian Society also organized the first St. Patrick's Day Parade in Alexandria, a tradition that continues today.

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(?)"

The author argued that the newly formed organization was the most effective means of



PHOTO/KIMBERLEE BRYCE FOR THE BALLYSHANERS INC.

Pat and Bernadette Troy served as Grand Marshals of the 2018 Alexandria St. Patrick's Day Parade.

help to recent Irish immigrants.

"[Its duty] should be to procure aid or employment for those in want; to attend to their necessities; to visit them in their sickness; to manage and superintend their little effects, to have the departed interred in a Christian manner."

While the Irish community was one of the first immigrant communities in Alexandria, many communities joined them. Today, Alexandria City Public Schools has students from more than 119 different countries. Alexandria had one significant attraction for

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 South Royal St.

The Hibernian Society in Alexandria did not confine it-

self to helping recently arrived Irish immigrants. By 1836, the Hibernian Society started organizing a St. Patrick's Day Parade, a tradition that continues today. 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 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," the Gazette said.

The account concluded that the participants "parted in harmony and good feeling, praying only to meet again on the next Anniversary..."

This year's St. Patrick's Day marks not only the anniversary of the traditional death date of the patron saint of Ireland, but also keeps a 200-year-old Alexandrian tradition alive.

*Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.*