

**WHICH CAME TO BOSTON FIRST,
ST. PATRICK'S DAY OR EVACUATION DAY?
By Marie Coady**

There are some who have implied that the Irish took advantage of the fact that Evacuation Day in Boston coincided with St. Patrick's Day in Ireland and usurped the event for their holiday instead. After all, if Boston was going to celebrate the retreat of the British Army from Boston on March 17, what better way to mark the occasion than with a parade in honor of St. Patrick? It made sense.

Except when you look at the facts, that theory doesn't hold water, or should I say green beer. Fact is St. Patrick's Day came first and the records prove it.

According to all accounts, the very first St. Patrick's Day parade was held in Boston in 1737 a full thirty-nine years before the British and their Tory sympathizers retreated from Boston on March 17, 1776.

That first St. Patrick's Day parade was a spontaneous affair. Seems the members of the newly formed Charitable Irish Society were meeting in a local tavern on March 17, the very day the Irish in their homeland were celebrating St. Patrick's contribution to Irish society. So they decided to mark the occasion by parading through the streets of downtown Boston and encouraging anyone in their path to join them.

The Charitable Irish Society of Boston was founded "to cultivate a spirit of unity and harmony among all resident Irish and their descendants in the Massachusetts Colony and to advocate socially and morally the interests of the Irish people and their cultural heritage. More importantly they were also dedicated "to alleviate suffering, and to aid such of its members or other worthy recipients as by the vicissitudes of fortune might be deserving of its charity".

The Charitable Irish Society is the oldest Irish Society in America and is still active. Today their headquarters are housed on Pinkney Street in Boston and their mission statement is as follows:

"The origins of Boston's Irish community stretch back to the early 18th century when considerable numbers of Ulster Presbyterians came to New England in search of economic opportunity and the religious and political freedom which the Penal Laws denied to Dissenters and Roman Catholics alike. Merchants and artisans of Ulster stock founded the Charitable Irish Society in 1737 with the express purpose of assisting fellow Irish immigrants in the traumatic process of settling in a strange new city and country. Now in its 265th year and the oldest Irish organization in North America, the Charitable Irish Society remains committed to its original Mission."

“The Charitable Irish Society and the Ancient Order of Hibernians collaborates with the Irish Immigration Center and the Irish Pastoral Center in the "Catch the Spirit" Citizenship campaign that was organized by the national coalition of Irish Immigration Centers.”

“In an effort to recognize and encourage continued collaboration the Charitable Irish Society instituted the Annual Silver Key Awards in 1997, which honors individuals who have made significant contributions to the immigrant community. The award ceremonies will be linked with an annual fund-raiser and the proceeds will be dedicated to assisting various programs and individuals in need.”

All of which proves when the Irish get hold of an idea, neither time nor wild horses will keep them from their mission.

Did you ever wonder why St. Patrick's Day fell on March 17th? It wasn't St. Patrick's birthday. It wasn't the day he died. It was really just another day. But then when did the Irish ever need a reason to have a parade?

Actually the history of the occasion can only be explained by the fact the Irish felt that February and March were such miserable months weather-wise, that it was a way of marking the arrival of spring. More to the point, the Irish had a saying back then that “February kills the sheep and March the people” and that anyone whose health was failing “Would never go up the March hill”. So it made sense to mark the end of a trying season with a celebration. And besides, St. Patrick would have approved.

There's more proof that St. Patrick's Day came before Evacuation Day, or should I say on Evacuation Day. In a letter included among the personal papers of the Commander in Chief of the Continental Army and future first president on the United States, George Washington, there is irrefutable testimony that St. Patrick not only came first, but that he played a huge role in Evacuation Day.

General Orders issued by Washington from his headquarters in Cambridge, MA, on March 17, 1776 stated that the password for the day that would keep spies from infiltrating their ranks would be “St. Patrick”. Anyone not knowing that password would not be allowed to pass through the checkpoints surrounding Boston.

Secrecy was of the utmost importance, because the Colonial forces had accomplished a significant feat earlier that month. Through the efforts of Col. Henry Knox and a band of courageous volunteers, cannon captured when rebel forces took Ft. Ticonderoga earlier that year were hauled all the way from the Hudson Valley to Boston.

Knox and his men arrived to the cheers of the troops and installed the cannon on Dorchester Heights. From there they bombarded the British fleet in Boston Harbor convincing the British they did indeed have the wherewithal not only to defend Boston, but to destroy their fleet and make it impossible for them to retreat.

The continuous bombardment caused Abigail Adams to complain in a letter to her husband John that the noise was constant and deafening and didn't allow her to sleep. But it did convince the British they'd better get going while the going was good.

That exodus gave the locals something to celebrate. And Washington's choice of "St. Patrick" as a password for that momentous day was his way of recognizing the contribution made by the large numbers of Irish volunteers in his army.

It could be said that St. Patrick not only drove the snakes out of Ireland, he drove the British out of Boston.

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