

IRISH HISTORY

This month's article was submitted by guest-historian Captain Stephen Cole of the Binghamton Fire Bureau

Have you ever wondered why the Fire Service is so entrenched with Celtic traditions and customs? Or why there are so many Irish Catholics in the profession? As many of you reading this may know, October is Fire Safety Awareness month. It is not only a time we check our smoke/ Carbon Monoxide detectors, yes, you should have both on every floor of your residence, but also the month we in the Fire service honor all those that have made the ultimate sacrifice. We traditionally do this in many ways, as those who lay their lives down in service of others so rightfully deserve. One of the traditions is a full Catholic mass which starts and ends with the bagpipes. There are other traditions, but those two are very big examples of how the Celtic culture has integrated into the fire service, but WHY?

To better understand this, we must journey back to the birth of America and the colonial days. According to a 1790 census, 82% of the population was English, 7% was Scottish and only 1.9% were Irish. These were not Irish Catholics; most were actually Scots who immigrated to the Ulster area of Ireland before immigrating to America. Many times, they were referred to as "Scotch-Irish", but the big difference was they maintained their "Scottish Presbyterianism." In doing so, these Scotch-Irish were able to meld into Colonial America amongst the English better than the Irish Catholic immigrants in the 1800's. Irish Catholic immigrants relocated to America in mass because the Great Potato Famine in 1845, which forced Irish families out of Ireland and into many of the big cities we now know as New York City, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago and even Binghamton. Many Irish immigrants were met with significant resistance and were forced to join the Union and the Confederate Armies during the Civil War, then when the war ended, they were left to find work. Having very little trade/technical skills; being poor and uneducated, and also discriminated against, they were forced to do the work the middle and upper class did not want to do, that was usually the dirty and most dangerous jobs. After some rather large conflagrations, there was a big push to form paid fire departments to better protect these big cities by insurance companies. Having some training in the military, many Irish Catholic immigrants took these jobs as a means of making ends meet. Being so dangerous, these "jobs" became more than that, they became families, and they celebrated and mourned with each other, forever steeping the fire service with these Celtic traditions they brought with them. This dangerous job of firefighting, protecting citizens from fire, turned into a profession of honor, courage, bravery and service. This "calling" was then passed down, and still is, from generation to generation. It is not uncommon to hear or see multiple generations of the same family in the same fire department. In closing, understand this is of course a very brief explanation; I encourage you to read the articles I reference at the end to dig deeper. I am truly honored to call myself an Irish-Catholic American

Firefighter.

Sources: "Fir Na Tine": Honoring our Irish American 'Men of Fire';

Kevin Freier, 2024

"Irish-American Firefighters and Bagpipes"; David Hedrick, 2025