

ABOUT IRISH HISTORY

Saint John, New Brunswick's peaceful shores have been a welcome sight for hundreds of thousands of immigrants. This includes the Irish, who at one time made up half the city's population.

As Canada's (self-proclaimed) most Irish city, Saint John has over two centuries of Irish history beginning with the arrival of Irish American Loyalists around 1783. In the 19th century, Saint John was a major metropolitan city, offering jobs, family connections and employment opportunities. It only made sense for it to be a focal point for immigration. In 1815, after the Napoleonic Wars, thousands of unemployed Irish workers and ex-servicemen in the British Isles took advantage of cheap fares to Saint John associated with returning timber ships.

Active immigration from Ireland continued to establish Saint John as a centre for the growing immigrant trade in the early nineteenth hundreds. The largest influx of Irish immigrants arrived in Saint John between 1845 and 1854, during the Great Potato Famine.

Partridge Island, North America's first quarantine station and now a national historic site, played a significant role in the City's Irish immigration during the period known as the **Hungry Forties**. The island contains six separate graveyards where over 2,000 immigrants are interred - most were Irish who died during the 1847 typhus epidemic.

Many heroes surfaced during the Irish famine migration, one of whom was Dr. James Collins, a native of County Cork, Ireland who had immigrated to Saint John in 1837. In 1847, when Partridge Island had over 24,000 infected immigrants, Dr. Collins was hired to attend to the sick and dying. Of the eight doctors hired to work on the island, seven were Irish. Dr. Collins was only on the island a month before he, too, contracted typhus. On July 2, 1847, he became the only doctor to die on Partridge Island. A 20-foot Celtic Cross was unveiled in 1927 by two survivors of the famine years as a tribute to the Irish immigrants and Dr. Collins. It stands today as a reminder of the suffering Saint John's Irish endured.

After the city's Great Fire in 1877, much of the City was rebuilt by Irish tradesmen and craftsmen. A hardworking and deeply religious people, they contributed greatly to Saint John through their skilled workmanship.

Today, the city of Saint John celebrates its Irish heritage in a number of ways, the most popular being through the festivities of St. Patrick's Week in March. Seven days of Irish music, plays, and dinners are involved, and a seven-foot shamrock, claimed to be the largest in Canada, is used to promote the festival.

A wealth of information is available for visitors and residents wishing to trace their Irish roots. Irish Catholics could start with the Diocesan Archives on Bayard Drive. On Loch Lomond Road is St. Mary's Cemetery - the burial grounds for over 16,000 people of Irish descent. The Saint John Free Public Library in Market Square and the New Brunswick Museum Archives in Saint John also house information relating to Irish history and genealogy. Partridge Island is also pivotal and poignant part of the story of the Irish journey to North America.

The over 40 million North Americans of Irish descent who come to Saint John to trace their family roots will find a traditional Irish Gaelic greeting - Cead Mile Failte - one hundred thousand welcomes.