

The Ancient Order of Hibernians

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The Ancient Order of Hibernians is the oldest Catholic lay organization in America. Formed in New York in 1836, it is the fusion of several organizations derived from a common source born in anger centuries earlier in Ireland. Since the sixth century Ireland had been subjected to a series of invasions by those who would master the Irish and alter their Gaelic life style. Inflexible opponents like the Vikings were fought until their power was broken; others, like the Normans, were absorbed until they became as *Irish as the Irish themselves*. Through it all, the Irish maintained their heritage: language, traditions, and religion. The 16th century however, brought their greatest challenge.

A Protestant Reformation swept Europe in the 1500s, sparked by the Church of Rome's growing materialism and marked by Royal intrigues over the Church's wealth. The result was the banning of Catholicism, seizure of Church assets, and violence in many countries. In England, the Reformation made inroads from the reigns of Henry VIII to Elizabeth I, who declared the Church of England the State religion. At the time of this declaration Elizabeth considered Ireland part of her empire, even though the Irish did not agree. The Papacy launched a counter reformation, and Ireland became a battlefield between the two forces as the Irish, who had embraced the Church introduced by St. Patrick, became the target of a campaign to reduce Rome's power by converting the masses to Protestantism. Those Anglo Lords in Ireland who had provided a base for assaults on the Irish heritage, now supported assaults on Catholicism, and in the conflict great tracts of land were seized and given to Crown supporters who professed the "State" religion.

The Irish fought the theft of their lands, and the persistence with which they clung to their traditions and religion drove the English to extremes in repression. Penal laws disenfranchised Irish Catholics from the political, social, and economic life of their own country; they became an underground society practicing their religion in secret. Not surprisingly, clandestine groups were formed to protect the values under attack. In various locales, secret societies were identified with attacks on oppressive landlords, and each of these societies included in its avowed purpose the protection of their Church and its clergy. As time and government prevailed, some societies were suppressed, but most immediately reorganized under a new name combining the two strongest motives that bind men together . defense of faith and fatherland. By the mid-1800s these societies were collectively known as *Ribbonmen*, although history provides us with the names of some of the earliest contributing groups like the *Whiteboys*, *Rockites*, *Terry Alts*, and *Defenders*. We even have limited details of some. We know, for example, that the motto of the *Defenders* was *Friendship, Unity, and True Christian Charity*, but the secret manner in which these groups operated left few records for modern analysts. As a result, a true history of their deeds may never be written.

Today's AOH, with its motto *Friendship, Unity, and Christian Charity*, is the most recent link in the evolution of those ancient ideals and, as such, is the successor to the secret societies of old. Although use of the name *Hibernians* by one of the societies can only be traced back to 1641, the AOH can claim continuity of purpose and motto unbroken back through the centuries to the Defenders, and indeed to the very beginning of militant opposition in 1565. The birth of that organization to America came in the same manner as its birth in Ireland.

As the Irish immigrants arrived in American cities, they were often alone and in need of lodgings and work. They sought fellow County men for assistance and, in many cases, found

those who had been involved in the same secret societies as they had in Ireland. They renewed old alliances in America forming new societies based on the structure of the ones they'd left behind. Only this time they were more fraternal than militant and dedicated to assisting their own. Some kept the names of the societies to which they had belonged in Ireland like the Hibernian Sick and Funeral Society, and the St Patrick's Fraternal Society, while others took names denoting their purpose, origin or allegiance like Boston's Charitable Irish Society, Pennsylvania's Friends of Ireland, and New York's Corkonians, O'Connell Guards, and Roche Guards, among others.

Then in the 19th century, the rise of the Native American or face="Georgia">*Know Nothing* Party ushered in an era of unparalleled bigotry in America. Anti-Catholic, anti-Irish sentiment had originally come to the British colonies with the representatives of the Crown and that prejudice was manifested up to the time of the American Revolution. The service of the Irish in Washington's army mitigated the intensity of that intolerance to a degree, but the basic bigotry had already taken root. The great number of Irish Catholics who arrived diseased and destitute at the time of Ireland's Great Hunger gave new fuel to those fires of bigotry which were still smouldering. The massive influx of Irish, fleeing starvation in their native land, focused Know Nothing hatred on that unfortunate group, and on the Catholic Church which they supported. Employers closed their doors to Irish workers, and legislation, reminiscent of the penal laws, was sought against the immigrant population who, it was stated, diluted American principles.

After threats and attacks on Irish and Church property in several cities, the Irish immigrant resorted to a familiar tactic. Those societies which had formed as fraternal organizations added a militant dimension to their charters, and stood in defense of Church and community.

As they had done in Ireland, some of these organizations banded together. As the *Know Nothings* expanded nationwide, the need for a national protective society for the Irish increased. On St Patrick's Day, 1836, a group from the Hibernian Benevolent Society of Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania, traveled to New York's annual parade and a meeting with leaders of the St. Patrick's Fraternal Society to discuss a national merger. Many in both organizations had been member of *Ribbon Societies* in Ireland, and they agreed that the time had come for an American version of that organization. The members of the Hibernian Benevolent Society returned to Pennsylvania and three months later the Ancient Order of Hibernians was founded simultaneously in Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania and at St. James Church in lower Manhattan near the infamous Five Points tenements. True to their purpose, they stood guard to defend Irish and Church property. After their formation, actual attacks were few and far between, but the long, cold, and lonely nights of vigil were many. At about this time, the *Ribbon Societies* in Ireland also adopted the name Ancient Order of Hibernians, and the Order now had connections with the mother country. The early AOH in America remained a secret society, and little is known of its activities except that it provided a monetary stipend to immigrants who arrived as members of the Irish societies, assisted Irish immigrants in obtaining jobs and social services, and, quite naturally, became nurseries for the preservation of their Irish heritage in America.

As the heroism of the Irish Brigade and other Irish units in the American Civil War had America cheering for the exploits of the sons of Erin in American uniform, the honesty, devotion, and natural charm of the Irish girls, who had found employment as domestic help, were winning admirers on the home front. The natural result of this new regard was a decrease in the prejudice against the Irish, and the Know Nothing Party, recognized for the bigoted body it was, faded away. It would emerge again in organizations like the Ku Klux

Klan, and other groups dedicated to ethnic hatred and anti-Catholic propaganda, but never again would America support a national army of zealots. The AOH, on the other hand, grew stronger. It followed Irish immigrants as they worked their way across the country. As the need for militant support of their Church dwindled, the AOH shifted its purpose to charitable activities in support of the Church's missions, community service, and the promotion and preservation of their Irish cultural heritage in America.

Today they stand, not only as the oldest Catholic Lay organization in America, but as the largest Irish ethnic society in the world with Divisions across the United States, and close ties with the AOH in Ireland, England, Scotland, and Wales. In America, the Division is the basic unit of the Order. Divisions are combined into County Boards, which are in turn governed by State Boards, and an overall National Board elected every two years. Annual dances, concerts, and parades sponsored at all levels of the Order raise millions for charity while providing a showcase for the positive contributions the Irish have made in every walk of American life.

The many Divisions and Hibernian Halls across the country have traditionally provided a welcome for new immigrants. Here, the unique art, dance, music, and other interests of the Irish are fostered and preserved, making the AOH a home away from home for many. Together, they are at the forefront of support for issues concerning the Irish such as Emigration Reform, MacBride Legislation, and the Right to Life. They have served their Church well, yet, they never forgot their ancestral homeland, and can always be found actively lobbying, praying, and working for the total independence of a united 32 county Ireland . as their constitution avows: *"by all means constitutional and lawful"*.

The initials AOH may tell the story best. Those who say it means *"Add One Hour"* are describing the easygoing, no rush attitude of many of its members, while *"America's Only Hope"* has been used to define the loyalty of the Irish to the principles of their adopted land. In any case, the Order is best described by the statement, *"To be Irish is a Blessing, To be a Hibernian is an Honor."*