

# RHODE ISLAND

NEWPORT ST. PATRICK'S DAY PARADE

## 'Day of goodness, for everyone'

Thousands of parade watchers swarm route in downtown Newport

By Tom Mooney  
Journal Staff Writer

NEWPORT — The first parade of Irish in this city occurred 176 years ago. It consisted of a few musicians leading a contingent of calloused-hand laborers and others through downtown for St. Patrick's Day on a march of far more significance than the gaily drawing thousands along Thames Street on Saturday. "They were making a statement in 1842," says Stephen Marino of the Museum of Newport Irish History.

Those Irish, who over three decades had built Fort Adams — the enormous stone fortress overlooking Newport Harbor — "were saying, 'Even though the Fort Adams era is over, [the job completed], we're in town and we're not going to go away.'"

In some ways, Marino says, that first parade was "their coming-out party" for an immigrant group that would eventually wield great social and political influence in Newport and throughout Rhode Island. (About 18 percent of Rhode Islanders claim Irish ancestry. About a quarter of Newport's 27,000 residents are Irish.)

While St. Patrick's Day is largely a religious day in Ireland, here it is part cultural celebration, part excuse to revel with friends on the tailcoat of winter.

Friends such as Tim Robenhymer and Jim McGrath, both 53 of North Kingstown, who kept up their St. Patrick's Day tradition by coming into the city early for the parade. Three generations of families sat down for breakfast before staking sidewalk claims in Washington Square along the route for the city's 62nd annual St. Patrick's Day procession.

This year, Robenhymer (his late mother was a Gillfillan) brought along his portable speaker and played Irish music from the band Gaelic Storm, waiting for the parade to begin, as his cousin and nephews played football in the street.

The day "is all about family, absolutely," Robenhymer said. "My daughter, she's 13, she's here. I've got cousins, nephews, great nephews and nieces here. It's just a great time together."

"It's the camaraderie," McGrath said. "The chance to take in the parade and have fun with a group of people we don't see on a regular basis. It's an old-fashioned kind of fun. ... Can we get you a beverage?"

Thousands of parade watchers swarmed along the parade route on a bright but cold March day.

The wailing sound of bagpipes led the procession. It bounced off



The Rhode Island Highlanders proceed down Thames Street in the 62nd annual Newport St. Patrick's Day Parade on Saturday. [PROVIDENCE JOURNAL PHOTOS / SANDOR BODO]



Above: Three-year-old June McGeachey, riding on the shoulders of her dad, Jason McGeachey, gets a handshake from Newport Fire Department mascot "Sparky" during the parade on Saturday. The McGeachey's are from Cape Elizabeth, Maine. Right: Z Doughty, of Voluntown, Conn., celebrates her birthday with her dog, Bailey, and friends at the parade.



the brick walls of District Court and sunk down into Washington Square, preceding the actual arrival of the Rhode Island Highlanders.

Then came a sharp-cornered squad of Rhode Island State Troopers, dressed in long, shiny-black leather coats and gloves, and an assortment of political dignitaries trailing behind them.

There were more bands of bagpipes and drums, most led by a color guard of flags pulling from their staves in the blustery wind.

Each time an American flag passed in front of him, 82-year-old John Vickers, a retired Army colonel from Portsmouth, snapped to attention and flicked a gloved salute along a sidewalk crowded with green plastic necklaces and leprechaun hats.

When a contingent of Coast Guard men and women passed in front of him, an officer noticed the embroidered, leaf-shaped embellishments on Vicker's Army cap, signifying he was an officer. He

walked over and shook his hand.

"The scrambled eggs up there gets their attention," Vickers said, pointing to his brim's cap. "It means a lot to have a service member recognize another."

There were young Irish step-dancers and fire trucks, Shriner clowns riding in toy cars, marching police officers and firefighters in dress blues, and four members of Immigration and Customs Enforcement who seemed to still the crowd momentarily.

Eventually, the parade passed by the Museum of Newport Irish History on Lower Thames Street, where the museum's president, Michael Slein, jumped out of his marching spot with the Ancient Order of Hibernians.

Slein started his day with Mass at St. Joseph's. He would end it by opening his house up to anyone wanting an Irish meal of corned beef.

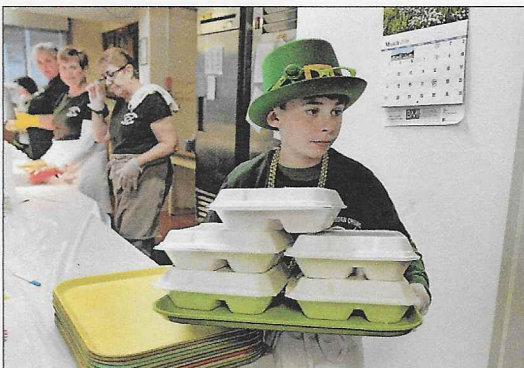
St. Patrick's Day, he said, "is a day of goodness, for everyone."

EAST PROVIDENCE

## A fry for fans of fish



Henry Petcavage, right, and Roger Thivierge, both of East Providence, dance to Irish music in the kitchen at St. Brendan Church in Riverside during the Fish Fry Friday event this week.



Nathan Carter, 10, of East Providence, moves orders to the counter for customers to pick up during the Fish Fry Friday event. [PROVIDENCE JOURNAL PHOTOS / GLENN OSMUNDSON]