

# MARCHING ON

BY MEGAN SCHMIT

WHILE NEWPORT'S FAMOUS PARADE HAS BEEN POSTPONED TO SEPTEMBER, THERE'S STILL PLENTY OF HISTORY, HERITAGE, AND HUMAN CONNECTION TO CELEBRATE RIGHT NOW



Photo courtesy of Discover Newport

This parade isn't about just being Irish, it's about community.

-Dennis Sullivan, Chairman of  
Newport St. Patrick's Day Parade Committee



Dennis Sullivan remembers watching the Newport St. Patrick's Day Parade when he was a kid, describing a small but spirited procession sporting a single bagpipe band. It was a far cry from the one tourists and townies know today, which draws thousands of spectators to watch pipe and marching bands, fife and drum corps, reenactment groups, social and fraternal organizations, nonprofits, and police and fire units all making their way from City Hall on Broadway, down Thames Street, and finally to the traditionally Irish neighborhood known as the Fifth Ward.

"We've been having a parade in the city since the early 1800s, it just hasn't been continuous," explains Sullivan, chairman of the official Newport St. Patrick's Day Parade Committee, the organization responsible for turning the once-sporadic event into an annual tradition starting in 1956. When Sullivan joined in 1991, after getting involved through the Hibernians, an Irish Catholic culture and heritage group, the parade was still rather small and relied almost 100 percent on advertisers for funding. "Nobody would go off the path for ads," remembers Sullivan, who decided to pitch the parade to businesses on Bellevue Avenue. While not part of the parade route, Sullivan knew the impact of the event reached far beyond the mapped path.

"There's nothing more that ties Newporters to Newport," Sullivan points out, adding that it's rare for there to be an event that both locals and out-of-towners enjoy. "It's a chance to connect the community to itself and all that the city has to offer."

For the past 20 years, Sullivan, in collaboration with other committee members, has transformed the St. Patrick's Day Parade into what *Yankee Magazine* and *USA Today* recognize as one of the best St. Patty's celebrations in New England. It's gone from a one-hour-long procession to over two, a single pipe band to ten, and the booklet has expanded with three times the advertising. There is a custom logo designed each year, bands from overseas, collection jars sitting along the route, branded merch, family activities, and personalized green-and-orange barricades. There are also prestigious delegations, like the annual dedication, "Big Daddy" award for the largest financial supporter, and title of Grand Marshal.

"People say it's one of the highest honors," Sullivan says of the Grand Marshal designation. He points to Ralph Plumb, owner of Brick Alley Pub, who keeps the sash and programs from the year he marched hanging in the bar, and whose son subsequently got involved and started an annual clean-up the day after the parade. "It means different things to different people," explains Sullivan, "whether it's celebrating Saint Patrick or getting together with friends over a beer." But one thing is clear: The parade has become a hallmark of Newport life, honoring the city's history and heritage.



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-Dennis Sullivan, Chairman of Newport St. Patrick's Day Parade Committee



Photos courtesy of Discover Newport

## SLÁINTE!

Like Dennis Sullivan says, so much of celebrating St. Patrick's in Newport is about catching up with friends and neighbors over a beer (preferably, a Guinness). Keep the tradition alive at these Irish pubs.

**Brick Alley Pub & Restaurant,**  
140 Thames Street

**Buskers Pub & Restaurant,**  
178 Thames Street

**Celtica,**  
95 Long Wharf

**The Fastnet Pub,**  
1 Broadway

**O'Brien's Pub,**  
501 Thames Street

**The Tavern on Broadway,**  
16 Broadway



“The Irish footprint runs deep in Newport County and beyond,” says Mike Slein, president of the Museum of Newport Irish History. “St. Patrick’s Day Mass and Parade pay tribute to the Irish diaspora contributions of the past and current.” He lists just a handful of the major contributions of the region’s Irish ancestors: coal mining in Portsmouth for over 100 years, 1828’s founding of the first Catholic Parish in Rhode Island, constructing Fort Adams and the Bellevue “Cottages”, and the 15 Irish mayors governing Newport from 1895 to 2016.

The museum, located in the heart of the Fifth Ward, the area south of the lower Thames commercial district, is an interpretive center dedicated to recounting the vibrant legacy of Irish immigrants in the region from the 1600s to present day. The space is brimming with maps, photographs, and artifacts, but the museum isn’t just about these physical remnants of the past: it hosts a variety of guest speakers and lectures, produces videos documenting Irish history, maintains the historic Barney Street Cemetery, publishes a quarterly newsletter, oversees an extensive roster of members, keeps an archival library, and spearheads the calendar of events for Newport Irish Heritage Month.

Ann Arnold, who handles membership and communications for the museum, explains that in the past, she has compiled a series of Irish-themed events from participating organizations throughout Newport County, all anchored by the month’s biggest event: the parade. Arnold scrolls through last year’s event listings, still posted on the website, comprising music and dance performances, trolley tours, and even a family-friendly Green Eggs & Ham Brunch at the Hibernian Hall. When Arnold reaches March 12, suddenly the events are marked “CANCELLED” in red, including the St. Patrick’s Day Parade and related ceremonies. Even this timeless tradition – which went on even during a blizzard one year, Sullivan notes – was forced to stall in the face of a pandemic.

## SPECIAL EVENTS

**All month long:** The Museum of Newport Irish History will offer “by appointment only” visits for no more than two individuals at a time, to learn about Irish immigration to Newport County from the 1600s to today. [NewportIrishHistory.org](http://NewportIrishHistory.org)

**March 16:** The Museum of Newport Irish History presents *How the Irish Saved the Blackstone Canal* with guest speaker Chuck Arning, a retired Interpretive Ranger for the National Park Service and current consultant for history museums and historic sites. [NewportIrishHistory.org](http://NewportIrishHistory.org)

Stay tuned for more information on the Newport St. Patrick’s Day Parade on **September 25!** Visit [NewportIrish.com](http://NewportIrish.com).



Photo by Allan Millora, courtesy of the Museum of Irish History

Chuck Arning, this month’s guest speaker at the Museum of Newport Irish History, will give a lecture on Irish ties to the Blackstone Canal

Photo courtesy of the Museum of Irish History

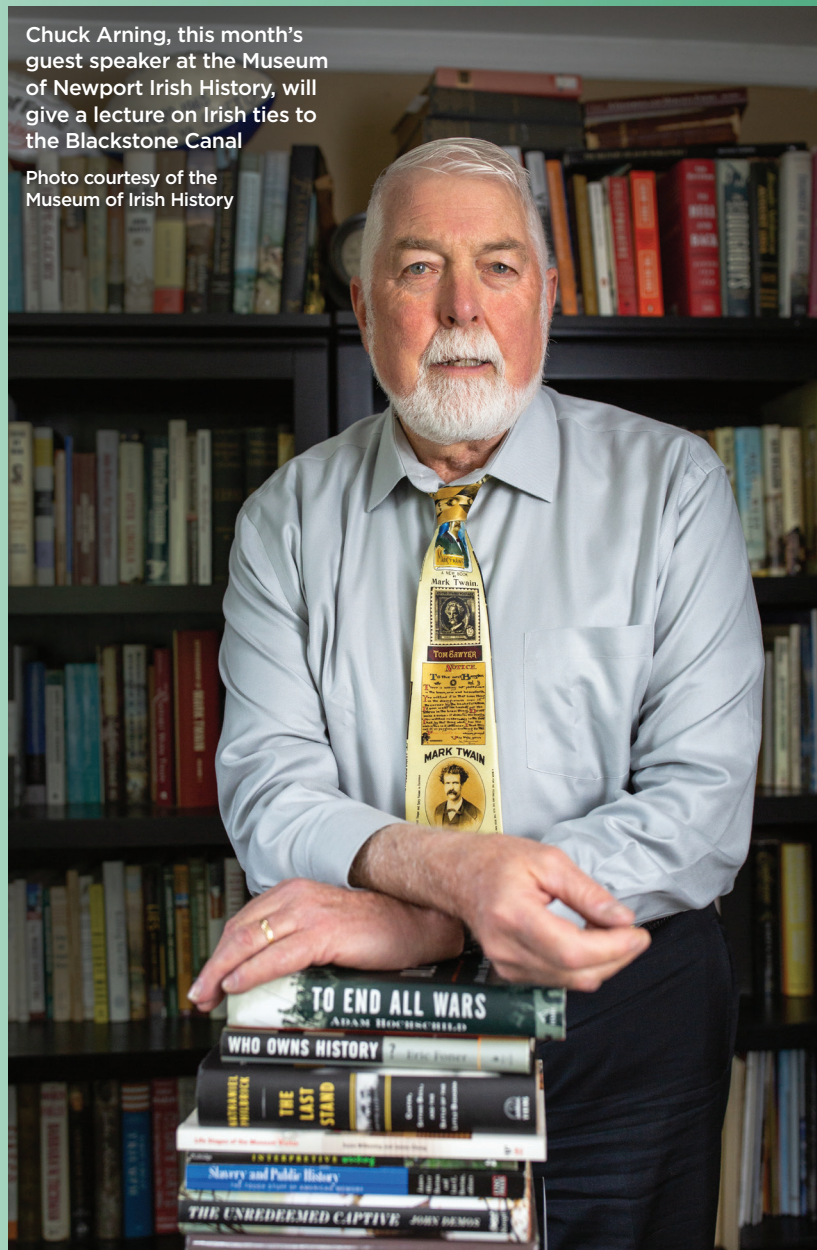


Photo courtesy of Discover Newport

The Irish footprint runs deep throughout Newport County and beyond.

–Mike Slein, President of Museum of Newport Irish History



Photo by Allan Millora, courtesy of Museum of Irish History

“It was earth shattering for just about everyone in the hospitality industry,” begins Kathryn Farrington, VP of Marketing for Discover Newport. She is speaking about the financial hit lodging, retail, and restaurants took in the wake of the parade’s cancellation last year.

“Last year, no one really knew about COVID,” Sullivan admits, remembering those early days in March 2020 and the back and forth before finally deciding to pull the plug on the parade. Now, armed with more knowledge of the virus, the committee has been moving forward with plans for a parade on September 25.

“We chose that month for a few reasons,”

Sullivan says. First, the committee was dictated by when they could even hope to have a parade, and settled on late summer as a tentative safe date. Then, they factored in the businesses. “We’re not helping them in the heat of summer,” explains Sullivan, referencing Newport’s busiest tourist season that stretches from June through August. “Instead, we picked a date when they need the help.” And third, the committee was sensitive to not infringe on the other events occurring at the tail end of summer and early fall, including the Newport Boat Show, Broadway Street Fair, and Festa Italiana.

“Normally, we wouldn’t factor in hospitality and tourism,” says Sullivan. “We’re governed by tradition.” Yet, part of the beauty of the parade is also its ability to evolve. Even last year, they were gearing up for a special barricaded section to offer an unobstructed view for those in wheelchairs. The barricades were going to be painted in green and red, in honor of the board member’s Italian mother who inspired the section. Sullivan hopes they will be able to debut it this September, and that the colors will remind people that “this parade isn’t about just being Irish – it’s about community.”