

4Qs with Deanna J. Conheeny: President of the Board of Directors for the Museum of Newport Irish History on 46th Annual Newport Irish Heritage Month

Museum of Newport Irish History Leads Effort to Keep Irish Traditions Alive



by **Ryan Belmore**

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Deanna J. Conheeny. Contributed photo.

March is Irish Heritage Month, and Newport is gearing up to celebrate its rich Irish heritage and culture. The Museum of Newport Irish History, a non-profit organization established in 1996, is leading the effort to compile and sponsor the March calendar of community-wide events on its [website](#).

In a recent interview with What'sUpNewp, Deanna J. Conheeny, President of the Board of Directors for the Museum of Newport Irish History, spoke about the importance of this annual celebration to the community. "A large percentage of our community members are of Irish descent, and many are eager to keep alive these traditions and learn more about local Irish history," she said.

The 46th Annual Newport Irish Heritage Month, which begins today, March 1, features dozens of events throughout the month, including history lectures and tours, dance demonstrations, concerts, theatrical performances, children's events, and plenty of Irish food.

The highlight of the month is the St. Patrick's Day Parade, but there are other events that Conheeny is particularly looking forward to. "For me, it wouldn't be Newport Irish Heritage Month without 'Dancing at the Forty Steps' on the Cliff Walk," she said. "The outdoor event is an annual reenactment of the informal dances enjoyed here in the late 1800s and early 20th century by Newport's Irish immigrants, keeping alive traditions from their native land."



Museum of Newport Irish History

NewportIrishHistory.org

While the Museum of Newport Irish History is focused on celebrating Irish heritage during the month of March, it thinks about "all things Irish" year-round. The museum's Interpretive Center on Lower Thames Street opens for the 2023 Season Memorial Day Weekend through the end of October. The museum also maintains and beautifies the historic cemetery site at the corner of Barney and Mount Vernon Streets, which was the center of Irish community life from 1828 through the mid-1800s.

Conheeny invites everyone to visit the museum's website to learn more about Newport's Irish heritage, sign up for one or more of the March programs, and consider becoming a member. "Thanks for speaking with me,

Ryan,” she said. “I hope to see you out there in March!”

4Qs with Deanna J. Conheeny

President, Board of Directors for the Museum of Newport Irish History



Deanna J. Conheeny. Contributed photo.

This is the 46th Annual Newport Irish Heritage Month. How long have you been involved, and why is it important that this month and celebration continue annually?

“The Museum of Newport Irish History was established as a non-profit organization in 1996. We soon began to host events of Irish interest during Newport Irish Heritage Month. For example, in March of 1998, we offered our first bus tour of “Irish Newport,” which has become an annual favorite, thanks to the generous

sponsorship of Viking Tours of Newport, which provides one of their iconic red “trolley” buses. It was through the vision and foresight of the former Newport Irish Heritage Association that Newport Irish Heritage Month was established 46 years ago, to celebrate Newport’s proud Irish heritage and culture. When the organization disbanded in 2017, the Museum picked up the torch in terms of compiling and sponsoring the March calendar of community-wide events on our website. It’s gratifying to see the strong level of interest from community members and the large number of happenings sponsored by so many organizations and businesses this March. A large percentage of our community members — be they lifelong residents, or recent transplants — are of Irish descent, and many are eager to keep alive these traditions and learn more about local Irish history. The fact that the Museum has 900 members, and the local chapters of the Ancient Order of Hibernians and the Ladies Ancient Order of Hibernians are among the largest in the nation, says a lot about the importance of this annual celebration to our community. Of course, *everyone* is Irish on St. Patrick’s Day and Parade Day, and there is plenty of interest in these March happenings from our neighbors of all backgrounds.”

While many folks think about the Annual Newport Saint Patrick’s Day Parade when it comes to Newport Irish Heritage Month, there are dozens of events happening to honor and celebrate. What are some of the events or activities that you are most looking forward to?

“Yes, the parade in honor of St. Patrick is the highlight for many, myself included. As you said, there are dozens of Irish happenings this March, in addition to the parade. Truly, there is something for everyone, including, but not limited to, history lectures and tours, dance demonstrations, concerts, theatrical performances, children’s events, and, of course, food. There are so many opportunities to enjoy corned beef and cabbage in March! I would encourage your readers to visit the “Events” page on our website, NewportIrishHistory.org, to view the [entire calendar](#), which we update as new events are submitted. Links and contact information is provided for each event’s sponsor. For me, it wouldn’t be Newport Irish Heritage Month without “Dancing at the Forty Steps” on the Cliff Walk. The outdoor event is an annual reenactment of the informal dances enjoyed here in the late 1800s and early 20th century by Newport’s Irish immigrants, keeping alive traditions from their native land. In terms of the weather, we’re hoping for some “Luck of the Irish” on Sunday, March 26 at 3:00 p.m. at The Forty Steps. Folks can get a flavor of this event by checking out the photos and video on our [website’s “Events” page](#).”

While folks think about “all things Irish” in March, the Museum of Newport Irish History thinks about “all things Irish” year-round. What are some of the activities and events that the Museum of Newport Irish History has planned for 2023?

“So true! We’re a year-round operation, with a very engaged membership and public offerings most months of the year. Our Interpretive Center on Lower Thames Street opens for the 2023 Season Memorial Day Weekend, through the end of October, but we will be open for nine days in March, for Irish Heritage Month. Folks can check out the schedule on the home page of our website, NewportIrishHistory.org. The Center

opened in June 2011, so more than ten years ago. As I speak, we're in the midst of a "refresh" of the exhibits in preparation for the season ahead, so it will be a bit of a work in progress when folks stop by during March. Our docents do a wonderful job sharing the story of the Irish in Newport, and I encourage everyone to visit when they have a chance. During the warm weather months, we're also busy maintaining and beautifying the historic cemetery site at the corner of Barney and Mount Vernon Streets. Because their church once stood at this location, this place was the center of Irish community life from 1828 through the mid-1800s. Here's a great piece of related Newport Irish history trivia: Rhode Island's very first Saint Patrick's Day Parade stepped off from this site in 1842! This month, we're pleased to be bringing back our popular tours of the Barney Street Cemetery, so community members can come and learn its fascinating history, and its mysteries as well. Two tours will be offered, Sunday, March 5, and Sunday, March 19 at 12:30 p.m. There is no fee, but folks should make a reservation on the ["Events" page of our website](#). In the fall, we'll commence our 22nd Annual Lecture Series, which is another core activity of the organization. We offer five or six history talks each year, kicking off in September and running through at least March. We live-stream our talks so members and friends, near or far, can participate if they are unable to attend the lecture, Q&A, and reception that follows at the Wyndham Newport Hotel. The last talk of the 2022-2023 Series will be Wednesday, March 29 at 6 p.m. Readers should visit the ["Lectures" page](#) on our website to read the talk overview and speaker bio, to reserve for either in-person or Zoom, and also to view recordings of past talks. There is a \$5 fee to attend in person, but we'll waive that for any new members who join the Museum to attend the talk."

Anything else that you would like to share?

"Newport's cemeteries are a treasure trove of historical and genealogy information, and folks from near and far often reach out to the Museum to help them learn about their Newport Irish ancestors. Newspaper obituaries and cemetery records are often the keys to helping them "find" their relatives. I'm delighted to share that we are introducing a tour of Saint Mary's Cemetery this month, on Sunday, March 26 at 12:30 p.m. This place sort of picks up where the much earlier and smaller Barney Street Cemetery leaves off. Rhode Island's (and Newport's) very first Catholic parish outgrew the Barney Street site, fueled by immigration from Ireland, so a new much larger, and grander church was constructed. That church, dedicated in 1852 to "*The Holy Name of Mary, Our Lady of the Isle*," stands today at the corner of Spring Street and Memorial Boulevard West. St. Mary's Cemetery was in operation soon after Saint Mary's Church on Spring Street was completed. There is no fee to take the tour, but we would appreciate reservations. Please visit the "Events" page on our website and click [the "Historic Cemetery Tours" link](#). I'll close by inviting all your readers to visit our website to learn more, sign up for one or more of our March programs, check out the entire [Newport Irish Heritage Month calendar](#) and, consider becoming a [member](#). Thanks for speaking with me, Ryan, and I hope to "see you out there" in March!"