St. Patrick's Day History

St. Patrick's Day is celebrated to honor Ireland's patron saint.

Saint Patrick was born Maewyn Succat in the Roman British Isles during the 5th Century. His father was a deacon and his grandfather a priest. At sixteen he was kidnapped by pirates and sold into slavery in Ireland. He remained captive for six years, working as a shepherd. He turned to religion for solace and prayed daily. After six years he heard a voice telling him to return home. He escaped his master and travelled to the coast where he found a ship and journeyed home.
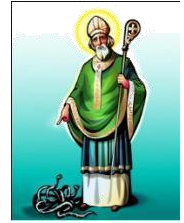
Back home Succat had a vision beckoning him to help the Irish people by converting them to Christianity. After studying and preparing for several years, he took his vows as a priest and adopted the Christian name Patrick.

Patrick returned to Ireland on a mission to convert the Irish people to Christianity. Patrick was able to bring about a major shift to Christianity by converting the people in power, the nobles, who set an example for the people to follow. He also established hundreds of schools and monasteries throughout the Irish countryside.

One popular myth has Patrick driving the snakes out of Ireland. The truth is there were no snakes in Ireland and this is probably a metaphor for Patrick ridding Ireland of Paganism.

Legend also credits Patrick with teaching the Irish about the Holy Trinity by using the three-leafed shamrock to illustrate the Christian teaching of "three divine people in one God." Because of this the shamrock has become the major symbol of St. Patrick's Day.

Patrick's mission in Ireland lasted about thirty years. He died in the fifth century on March 17th. Since then Irish Christians have marked the day as a Holy day.

During the middle ages Irish Catholics would attend church on March 17th to honor the feast of St. Patrick. St. Patrick's Day falls within the season of Lent, a time for fasting and self denial in preparation for Holy Week. St. Patrick's Day was considered a one day reprieve during this time and Irishmen were able to eat, drink, and celebrate.

The first St. Patrick's Day celebration in America took place in Boston in 1737 organized by the Charitable Irish Society. Today New York hosts the nation's largest St. Patrick's Day parade, begun in 1762.