The History of St. Patrick's Day
Who was St. Patrick?

- St. Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, is one of Christianity's most widely known figures. But for all his celebrity, his life remains somewhat of a mystery.
- It is known that St. Patrick was born in Britain to wealthy parents near the end of the fourth century. He is believed to have died on March 17, around 460 A.D.
- At the age of sixteen, Patrick was taken prisoner by a group of Irish raiders who were attacking his family's estate. They transported him to Ireland where he spent six years in captivity.
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- After more than six years as a prisoner, Patrick escaped. According to his writing, a voice—which he believed to be God's-spoke to him in a dream, telling him it was time to leave Ireland.

- Soon after, Patrick began religious training, a course of study that lasted more than fifteen years. After his ordination as a priest, he was sent to Ireland with a dual mission—to minister to Christians already living in Ireland and to begin to convert the Irish.

- Familiar with the Irish language and culture, Patrick chose to incorporate traditional ritual into his lessons of Christianity instead of attempting to eradicate native Irish beliefs. For instance, he used bonfires to celebrate Easter since the Irish were used to honoring their gods with fire. He also superimposed a sun, a powerful Irish symbol, onto the Christian cross to create what is now called a Celtic cross, so that veneration of the symbol would seem more natural to the Irish.
History of the Holiday

• St. Patrick's Day is celebrated on March 17, his religious feast day and the anniversary of his death in the fifth century. The Irish have observed this day as a religious holiday for thousands of years.

• On St. Patrick's Day, which falls during the Christian season of Lent, Irish families would traditionally attend church in the morning and celebrate in the afternoon. Lenten prohibitions against the consumption of meat were waived and people would dance, drink, and feast—on the traditional meal of Irish bacon and cabbage.

• The first St. Patrick's Day parade took place not in Ireland, but in the United States. Irish soldiers serving in the English military marched through New York City on March 17, 1762. Along with their music, the parade helped the soldiers to reconnect with their Irish roots, as well as fellow Irishmen serving in the English army.
History of the Holiday

Today, St. Patrick's Day is celebrated by people of all backgrounds in the United States, Canada, and Australia. Although North America is home to the largest productions, St. Patrick's Day has been celebrated in other locations far from Ireland, including Japan, Singapore, and Russia.

In modern-day Ireland, St. Patrick's Day has traditionally been a religious occasion. In fact, up until the 1970s, Irish laws mandated that pubs be closed on March 17. Beginning in 1995, however, the Irish government began a national campaign to use St. Patrick's Day as an opportunity to drive tourism and showcase Ireland to the rest of the world. Last year, close to one million people took part in Ireland's St. Patrick's Festival in Dublin, a multi-day celebration featuring parades, concerts, outdoor theater productions, and fireworks shows.
The Leprechaun

- The original Irish name for these figures of folklore is "lobaircin," meaning "small-bodied fellow."
- Belief in leprechauns probably stems from Celtic belief in fairies, tiny men and women who could use their magical powers to serve good or evil. In Celtic folktales, leprechauns were cranky souls, responsible for mending the shoes of the other fairies. Though only minor figures in Celtic folklore, leprechauns were known for their trickery, which they often used to protect their much-fabled treasure.
- Leprechauns had nothing to do with St. Patrick or the celebration of St. Patrick's Day, a Catholic holy day. In 1959, Walt Disney released a film called Darby O'Gill & the Little People, which introduced America to a very different sort of leprechaun than the cantankerous little man of Irish folklore. This cheerful, friendly leprechaun is a purely American invention, but has quickly evolved into an easily recognizable symbol of both St. Patrick's Day and Ireland in general.
The Shamrock

• In fact the first written mention of this story did not appear until nearly a thousand years after Patrick's death.

• The shamrock, which was also called the "seamroy" by the Celts, was a sacred plant in ancient Ireland because it symbolized the rebirth of spring. By the seventeenth century, the shamrock had become a symbol of emerging Irish nationalism. As the English began to seize Irish land and make laws against the use of the Irish language and the practice of Catholicism, many Irish began to wear the shamrock as a symbol of their pride in their heritage and their displeasure with English rule.