

Established in late 2019, the Irish Culture Center of Virginia, Inc. was incorporated as a 501c.(3) charitable organization to support the Virginia Ancient Order of Hibernians with the means to finance projects designed to further the Irish culture, heritage, traditions and history through education and visual, tactile memorials. We found the word “Center” created the illusion of a “brick and mortar” facility and resulted in donations of Irish book collections and antique Irish dance costumes for display cases. We placed these gifts into storage awaiting the opportunity to acquire real estate where these treasures can be displayed. In the meantime, we successfully petitioned the Commonwealth of Virginia to “do business as” the Irish Culture Society.

Updated December 2025

In spring 2025, the Irish Culture Society of Virginia engaged accomplished Virginia sculptor Thomas Marsh to design a memorial to honor Irish émigré and American patriot Colonel John Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald significantly contributed to the fabric of America. He built Alexandria, VA into an international port, served heroically in the Revolutionary War as infantryman and George Washington’s aide de camp, served as Alexandria’s mayor, and served his faith in founding the first Catholic church in Virginia.

The bronze raised relief sculpture was installed at the Basilica of Saint Mary in Alexandria on December 6, 2025. It depicts St. Patrick Day 1788 when Fitzgerald accepted the first donation toward building the church from George Washington. The sculpture was blessed by Very Rev. Father Hathaway.

Society Vice President Terry Riley and Basilica of Saint Mary Archival Manager Virginia Nyce were co-project managers. They deserve great credit for shepherding the project from signing the contract to installation through frequent consultations with sculptor Thomas Marsh and Father Hathaway during the critical design, construction, delivery, installation, and ceremonial phases of the project.

This dedication marks culmination of four years fund raising supported primarily by the Gen. Meagher, Col. Cunningham, Father Kelley, Herbert-Cady Divisions, the Virginia State Board, and many individual Hibernians.

The Society has a second project in the works and has started to raise funds. This one will honor the Irish Brigade’s courageous actions in the 1862 Battle of Fredericksburg at Marye’s Heights. This sculpture will provide a visible and tactile means to stimulate recognition of the incredible impact the Brigade’s valor had on the assimilation of Irish immigrants into American society. Through their blood and sacrifices, fighting side-by side with American born soldiers, the Brigade proved their loyalty to the United States and dispelled the widespread Know Nothing claims that Irish Catholic immigrants were not loyal Americans. We’ll be raising about \$115K for a life size bronze statue of this Irish Bde infantryman.



(L to R) Rev. James R. Searby, Parochial Vicar; Terry Riley, Society Vice President; Very Rev. Edward C. Hathaway, Rector; Bill Halpin, President Irish Culture Society; Vince Eikmeier, Virginia AOH President; Jay McCarthy PSP, Society board member



Hibernians at the reception following the dedication



Postscript Worthy of Note: In a 1787 letter to Thomas Jefferson, Washington wrote:

“a Gentleman who is a native of Ireland - Colo. John Fitzgerald. The active Services of this Gentleman during the War — his long residence in the Country—and intermarriage in it . . . all entitle him to be considered as an American”.



Our next memorial project recalls the challenges Irish immigrants faced after harrowing escapes from the Great Hunger. They arrived in primarily Protestant America and considered to be ignorant, unskilled, relegated to live in ghettos, and worst of all, they were Catholic. A consensus developed that the Irish were loyal only to the Catholic Pope and could not be integrated into American society.

This prejudice was exacerbated in the 1850s with the rise of the “Know Nothing” political movement. It wasn’t enough for nativists to be philosophically anti-Catholic, they demonstrated hate by burning churches, convents, and Irish ghettos from Boston to St. Louis. Know Nothing legislators tried to pass laws designed to block the Irish from achieving the “American dream”¹.

Most historians agree the Irish Brigade’s valor during the U.S. Civil War launched the Irish acceptance in mainstream America. The Irish Brigade fought in every major campaign of the Army of the Potomac, including Antietam, Chancellorsville, Fredericksburg, the Wilderness, Spotsylvania Courthouse, and Gettysburg. The Brigade’s battlefield successes and heroism throughout the Civil War (11 were awarded the Medal of Honor) dispelled loyalty based prejudices and proved the Irish fighting side-by-side with native born U.S. soldiers in defense of the Union were true and loyal Americans.

The December 1862 Battle for Marye’s Heights in Fredericksburg, VA may be the Brigades most recognized engagement. Our memorial to the Brigade is envisioned



as a life-size bronze statue of a Civil War Infantryman distinguished as Irish Brigade by the sprig of green boxwood attached to his kepi. At Fredericksburg, the brigade’s colors were in New York for repair. General Meagher had every brigade soldier stick a boxwood sprig in his kepi to assure everyone knew this unit was the Irish Brigade. In 2015 28th Massachusetts Regiment reenactors approached 44SP01 for help funding the statue. However, the 28th abandoned the project and some AOH brothers were engaged in funding a memorial to be built in Ireland.

By 2025, the Sons Union Veterans of the Civil War, Irish Brigade Camp#4 had “inherited” the project and approached the AOH (44SP01) for support. At the August 2025 Virginia Biennial Convention, the Virginia State Board endorsed the project as an Irish Culture Society of Virginia venture.

¹ Know Nothing bigotry was the theme of the 2020 movie *Gangs of New York*.

The Society, in collaboration with Camp#4, will plan the project, coordinate with Fredericksburg city officials, and solicit donations. We believe the Ancient Order of Hibernians nation-wide and the general Irish diaspora will respond generously. We rely on the generosity of individuals and organizations who believe in the value of preserving Irish culture and traditions.

Donations of cash and/or real estate are tax deductible. With your continuing help, we can ensure that the spirit of Ireland thrives—not just as a memory, but as a vibrant presence in our communities. We are a 501c.(3) nonprofit so your donation is fully tax-deductible; our EIN is 843551738.

We will continue and expand our other offerings - including traditional music workshops, Irish language opportunities, cultural festivals, and related outreach programs.

Please donate via the PayPal link on our website (<https://irishcultureva.org>) or you can mail a check to:

The Irish Culture Society of Virginia
236 Beachside Cove
Locust Grove, VA 22508