

The History of the Ancient Order of Hibernians and Ladies Ancient Order of Hibernians

By: J. Michael Finn, Ohio State Historian

The Ancient Order of Hibernians is the oldest Catholic lay organization in the United States. The fraternal Order traces its roots back to a parent organization that has existed in Ireland for over 400 years. Although the name Ancient Order of Hibernians can only be traced back to 1641, the Order claims continuity of membership and motto (Friendship, Unity and Christian Charity) unbroken to the Defenders of 1565. The Order evolved from a need in the late 1500s to protect the lives of Catholic priests. These priests faced immediate death for keeping the Catholic faith and sacraments alive in occupied Ireland following the reign of England's King Henry VIII and the subsequent Tudor monarchs. The early Hibernians served as guards, protecting priests who were forced to celebrate Mass in secret in the Irish glens and mountains in violation of the English law. This same law offered five English pounds for the head of a "massing" priest (the same bounty as that offered for the head of a wolf). Through the efforts of the Hibernians, the Catholic faith was preserved and Ireland remained a Catholic nation.

As the Irish sought their freedom in America in the early 1800's, the Order was again called upon to defend the Church from attack. The nativist Know-Nothing Party was attacking Catholic priests and burning Catholic Churches. The Irish in America recognized a familiar enemy and they resorted to a familiar tactic. They banded together in unity in their adopted land to protect the Catholic Church and their fellow Catholics.

On May 4, 1836 at St. James Church in New York City, they founded a new American organization. This organization was known as the **Ancient Order of Hibernians in America**, and true to their Irish heritage, they stood together to defend the Church, often at the risk of their own lives. They worked to keep newly arrived young Irish women out of prostitution; they worked to prevent young Irish men from being exploited by the sport of boxing; they worked to prevent the Irish race from being ridiculed by mocking performances on the entertainment stage.

In 1894 a women's organization was founded that is now known as the **Ladies Ancient Order of Hibernians**, and it has worked, since its inception, toward the same goals and ideals as the men's organization. Both the men and women's organizations are bound together by common bonds and they regard each other as brothers and sisters.

In time the Hibernians grew stronger. The Order switched its focus to include supporting charitable activities of the Church, assisting new Irish immigrants in finding employment, supporting peace and freedom for all of Ireland, and preserving the Irish culture.

The Hibernians have not abandoned their roots and even today they are defending the Church against attacks by those who would see its teachings ridiculed and its organization destroyed. The Order supports the Church's teachings on the dignity of all human life and is active in the Right to Life movement. The Hibernians remember their

early roots. The Hibernians are still called upon to protect the Church. Such was the case in 1992, when, at the request of Cardinal O'Connor, hundreds of Hibernians stood guard over St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City when it was threatened.

Ancient Order of Hibernians and Ladies Ancient Order of Hibernians in Ohio

It is not known with certainty where or when the first AOH division was founded in Ohio. There is solid evidence of an AOH division that was founded in Youngstown as early as 1869. John Gallagher (1845-1924), one of the pioneer citizens of Youngstown, served as its founder and first president. There is also evidence of a division participating in the Cincinnati St. Patrick's Day parade in 1869. Cuyahoga County and Montgomery County also had early Hibernian divisions.

The first AOH division in Dayton was chartered in 1878. In 2003 they celebrated their 125th anniversary. They are the oldest continuously operating division in Ohio and the 2nd oldest in the country.

The AOH register for 1884 indicates that there were 74 AOH divisions in Ohio located in 36 counties. Also, there were 3 companies of Hibernian Rifles, at that time. The counties with the largest number of AOH divisions in 1884 were as follows: Clark (5 divisions); Cuyahoga (8 divisions); Hamilton (8 divisions); Mahoning (5 divisions); and Trumbull (5 divisions).

At the 1904 State Convention, held in Youngstown, State President and future Attorney General of the State of Ohio, Timothy S. Hogan reported that the Order in Ohio had 6,013 members in 78 divisions. His report to the convention contained his hopes for the Hibernians of the future when he said:

“I trust that our successors may accomplish more and that through their patriotic efforts this Order may soon embrace within its folds every Catholic of Irish descent who loves Ireland, who hope for its ultimate freedom, who feels a pride in his race and who believes that the Irish people, in whatever land or in whatever clime they may be found, are the peers of those with who they come in contact.”

The first division of the Ladies Ancient Order of Hibernians in Ohio was founded in May 1894 in Columbus, soon after the founding of the national organization. Mrs. John T. Hart was the first division president. The first division began with 60 members. By 1911 there were 2,500 members of the LAOH in Ohio. Adelia Christy of Cleveland was the first LAOH national officer from Ohio. She served as National Secretary. The State President in 1911 was Eva DeVanney of Dayton.

In 2005 we Ohio Hibernians gather together in Youngstown, Ohio for our 75th Biennial Convention. May our Order continue to grow and prosper as we remember the history of those men and women who came before us and on whose shoulders we all stand.