america's emerald isle

Irish Language and Identity on Beaver Island, Michigan

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During the mid-19th century famine in Ireland, hundreds of evicted inhabitants of Arranmore, Donegal (Figure 1) emigrated to Beaver Island in northern Lake Michigan, located 30 miles from the mainland (Figure 2). The island's seclusion and other factors allowed these Irish immigrants to establish a community and lifestyle similar to that which they had left behind on Arranmore, specifically fishing and farming. The Beaver Irish community experienced great economic prosperity and flourished culturally. Interestingly, The Irish language was utilized in daily conversations, mass and confessions, and for conducting the business of the island (Connors 1999:290). It continued to be the dominant language on the island until the arrival of the Beaver Island Lumber Company in 1903 (Rotman 2012). The last native Irish speaker is believed to have died in 1979 (Rotman et al. 2012).

Today, over 150 years since the first Irish settler landed on the island, Beaver Islanders still very much identify with the Irish heritage of their ancestors. Dubbed "America's Emerald Isle," the island abounds with references to Ireland in place names, business establishments, and cultural events. This research highlights the motivations of modern Islanders to maintain an Irish identity and explores the possible role the abnormally long usage of the Irish language played in this maintenance.



gure 1: Arranmore Island, located off the coast of Donegal

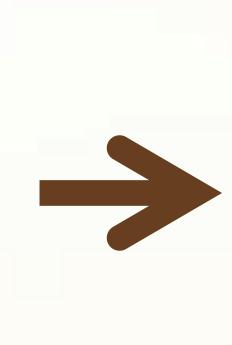


Figure 2:Beaver Island, Michigan

RESEARCH QUESTIONS • To what extent was the Irish language used by the first Irish inhabitants of Beaver

- Island?
- For how many generations did the use of the language persist? What social structures on Beaver Island allowed for the continued use of the language?
- Can any traces of the language be found on the island today? If not, what were potential factors that lead to the decline of the language?
- To what extent do Beaver Islanders identify with their Irish heritage today? Has this sense of heritage been **consistent** through generations?

research methods

- Archival material of the Beaver Island Historical Society including previously published articles and reports, as well as oral histories.
- Original interviews were conducted, typically of life-long residents or visitors of Beaver Island whose family had lived on the island for multiple generations.

Connors, Paul. America's Emerald Isle: The Cultural Invention of the Irish Fishing Community on Beaver Island, Michigan. Volumes I and II. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Department of History, Loyola University, Chicago, 1999.

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Rotman, Deborah L., and Ariel Terpstra, with contributions by Kasia Ahern, Kaitlyn Davis, Rhiannon Duke, Bianca Fernandez, Laura Fernandez, Adam Lake, Maria Rodriguez, Abby Statham, and Jackie Thomas. Irish Immigrant Experiences at the Gallagher Homestead Site (20CX201), Former Gaeltacht, Beaver Island, Charlevoix County, Michigan: Results of the 2010-2011 Archaeological Field Seasons. University of Notre Dame Archaeological Research Publication 11-01. Submitted to the Office of the State Archaeologist, Lansing, Michigan, 2012.

- Irish was the primary language spoken on Arranmore during the 19th century. Some immigrants to Beaver Island would not have known English and would have spoken Irish out of necessity.
- Father Peter Gallagher, pastor on Beaver Island for many years, said the Mass in Gaelic. Others who presided on the island but could not speak the language attempted to learn (Connors 1999).
- Most subjects interviewed only recall hearing short phrases in Gaelic (i.e. sign of the cross) if any at all. One interviewee said she knew her grandparents could speak the language but she never heard them do so.
- In the mid-2000s, the Beaver Island School looked into teaching basic Irish language to students. The program was not put in place but is currently being evaluated again.
- Evidence of sharing and following Celtic folklore on the island, specifically regarding fairy forts and the "second sense."
- Traditional Irish music has been the most consistent link to Irish heritage since first generation.
- In 2000 and 2006, Twinning Ceremonies took place on Beaver Island and Arranmore. Residents of both islands now regularly visit each other and islands were recognized by the Michigan State and US Congresses as "twin islands" (Figure 3).

Discussion and conclusions

- Most likely the Irish language was spoken longer on Beaver Island because settlers were not forced to learn English to find work. Nevertheless, Irish was quickly phased out as main form of communication, even if it was still used on occasion.
- Based on interviews, in the second and third generations it became less acceptable to display "Irish-ness" and more common to identify as American. This is probably when the language was lost.
- Irish traditions that remained were ones that the islanders had adopted into their own and associated more with Beaver Island than with Ireland. For example, music was Irish but songs relating to Beaver Island were written to accompany.
- Major resurgence of Irish identity more recent, beginning with the start of the twinning process. Since the ceremonies took place in both places, Islanders have new exposure to Ireland and are interested in further exploring their heritage.
- It is not clear that language played any role in the Irish identity of modern Beaver Islanders. Rather, traditions were passed on through generations and were considered "Beaver Island Traditions." Only recently have they been properly identified.





Figure 3: Monuments commemorating twinning ceremonies on Beaver Island (left) and Arranmore (right)

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