

Irish Famine Commemoration this week

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In a photo taken shortly after the Irish Famine, people cure herrings in Downings, Rosapenna, County Donegal. A powerful visual imagery exhibit is on display at St. Alphonsus Church, 2029 Constance St., New Orleans, as part of the International Irish Famine Commemoration in New Orleans. (Photo from Ciara Breathnach)

New Orleans is known for its celebrations and festivals. But a commemoration this week is a bit unconventional. The Irish government selected New Orleans as the international city for the [International Irish Famine Commemoration](#) being held Nov. 6-9 to mark what is known as the “great hunger” that killed a million Irish between 1845 and 1852.

Irish immigrants formed one of the largest European ethnic groups in Louisiana, particularly New Orleans, said [Laura Kelley](#), an adjunct instructor at Tulane University who teaches a class called Irish in New Orleans.

By 1850, one in five residents were from Ireland and New Orleans had emerged as the city with the largest Irish population in the South. The Irish came to New Orleans primarily for the economic opportunities associated with the thriving port city, but also because the city was predominantly Catholic.

“New Orleans embraces other cultures. We feel there is room to celebrate other groups who want to call New Orleans home,” Kelley said. “New Orleanians are proud of our diverse cultural backgrounds.”

Forty million Americans with Irish ancestry live in the United States today, she said.

A [Tulane University symposium](#), “Ireland and New Orleans: From the Famine to Katrina ? Stories of Recovery” Nov. 6-7, organized by a committee led by Kelley, features lectures by Tulane faculty members Richard Campanella and Terrence Fitzmorris, as well as Kelley and scholars from Ireland. Heather Humphreys, Irish Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, will give the keynote address for the Famine Commemoration at 4 p.m. on Friday (Nov. 7).

In addition to the symposium, there will be a street party, many other events and a [gala](#) hosted by most of the Brennan's restaurants and featuring Celtic rock band Black 47, Tara O'Grady and traditional Irish music. A portion of the proceeds of the gala will benefit charities dedicated to providing famine relief and relieving hunger, and will support Irish Network New Orleans's annual scholarship program. Students may obtain a discount for the gala by entering the code IFCSTUDENT.

“We like to say everyone has some Irish in them -- either you've got Irish heritage, or you married into an Irish family, or you're a friend of Ireland.” — Adjunct instructor Laura Kelley