

In the early days of America, the Irish immigrants were not always welcomed. They were the first ethnic group to live in the slums of the cities. Furthermore, the Irish were also the first ethnic group that was publicly discriminated against for jobs. The only jobs they could get were low paying, back breaking work that few wanted. One profession that the Irish gravitated to was the Police Department.

In the late part of the 19th century and early part of the 20th century, police jobs were undesirable because of the low pay and few benefits. By the beginning of the 20th century, not only were the Irish fully immersed in the police departments, they were in charge of them! Over the years the Irish started many of the traditions that are still in existence today. These men were very proud of their Irish heritage and equally as proud of being a police officer.

One of the time honored views the public identifies with the Irish are the bagpipes. The Irish have made the bagpipes the adoptive instrument of the police departments. In the middle ages in Scotland and Ireland, the bagpipes were used to rally the troops into battle. The bagpipes were also used during the funeral ceremonies when burying their fallen comrades. In the early days when a police officer was killed in the line of duty, the Irish forefathers within these departments ensured that their fallen brothers were buried with full honors. In keeping with Celtic tradition, the Irish would play "the pipes" to bury their fallen. Today, that tradition transcends ethnic, racial and religious lines and the bagpipes are played at police funerals regardless of race, color or creed.

By the second half of the 20th century, the Irish in the police departments felt they were losing their identity and proud traditions. This was caused by two events in the 20th century; the depression in 1929 and World War II. New ethnic groups started to join the public safety ranks. The Germans, Italians, Polish and African-Americans joined the police and fire departments and eventually formed fraternal associations.

In 1953, members of the New York City Police Department formed the first organization for Irish-American police officers. Thus on March 16, 1953, the first Emerald Society was founded. The New York City Police Department Emerald Society was formed to help foster the spirit of Irish heritage within its members and to promote and preserve their accomplishments. Word spread about the new Irish organization and Emerald Societies and other units were formed in other areas.

Also during this decade, a new dimension dawned upon the Emerald Society, the establishment of an official police bagpipe band. Prior to 1960, there wasn't any formal organized police bagpipe bands in the United States. Once again, the NYPD Emerald Society rose to the occasion and formed the first fully uniformed and equipped bagpipe band. The Pipe and Drums of the Emerald Society of the NYPD made their debut appearance on March 17, 1960 as they marched down Fifth Avenue in the New York City St. Patrick's Day Parade.

Over the years, due to popularity, other police Emerald Societies have established bagpipe bands.

The last decade of the 20th century proved to be the most significant and also the most historical time in the Emerald Society movement. Unprecedented growth happened during this time. The primary reason for the significant growth was due to the formation of a nationwide organization called the National Conference of Law Enforcement Emerald Societies. The influence of the Emerald Society movement had grown from two states in 1958 to twenty-one states by 1998.

The crowning moment in the Emerald Society movement came with the formation of a national organization. The idea was the inclusion of all Public Safety Emerald Societies nationwide. The main goals were to bring the Emerald Societies together and to start new ones, improve communications between the societies, to work in concert with each other, to promote and preserve the accomplishments of the Irish-Americans in the Public Safety professions and to provide a unified voice for the Emerald Societies to the Congress of the United States as well as other governmental entities.

On May 14th, 1995, during National Police Week, an exploratory meeting was held in Washington, DC. Eighteen Emerald Societies from across the country gave unanimous consent to move forward in forming a National Emerald Society. After that historic meeting, in a spirit of brotherhood and remembrance, the Emerald Societies and Pipebands marched to the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial for a small memorial service. That marked the first Memorial March which became an annual event during National Police Week. The official establishment of the National Conference of Law Enforcement Emerald Societies (NCLEES) occurred on October 28th, 1995. On that date in the city of Philadelphia, twenty-one Emerald Societies unanimously passed a resolution approving the national by-laws, thus creating the national organization. On May 14th, 1996, in the nation's capital, the first National Executive Board was elected by the Board of Directors.

Since that momentous occasion in 1995, the National Conference has been moving forward with its directed mission. Each year during National Police Week, the National Conference sponsors the annual Emerald Society/Pipeband March and Service at the Law Enforcement Officers Memorial. The Memorial March and Service has become an integral part of the National Police Week activities.

Since its humble beginnings almost fifty years ago, the Emerald Society movement has reached new heights. The Irish have a long and proud history in the Public Safety professions. A glance through the roster of any police department in America will be filled with Irish names. Unfortunately, so are the walls dedicated to the men and women who have given their lives in the service of these noble professions. The Emerald Society is here to preserve that legacy and to ensure that America never forgets!