

Origins of the National Conference Of Law Enforcement Emerald Societies

By: Patrick F. O'Brien

The origins of the National Conference of Law Enforcement Emerald Societies (NCLEES) can be traced back to earlier organizations in the New York and New Jersey area. The Irish American public safety experience is the story of America.

The first Emerald Society was started on March 16, 1953, by New York City Police Department. The first president was Henry J. Fitzgerald. The New York City Correction Department started the first Correction Emerald Society on November 17, 1955, with James W. Muley as the first president. The New York City Fire Department started the first fire Emerald Society on March 17, 1956, with Eugene O'Kane as its first president. These Emerald Societies were created to promote and preserve the Irish heritage and traditions within their respective department, as well as to honor the accomplishments of Irish Americans in law enforcement and the fire service

The Grand Council of United Emerald Societies (GCUES) was formed on June 29, 1956 (reorganized February 18, 1975) out of the New York City area and marked a significant step towards uniting all under a single banner. William J. McGowan (NYPD-ES) served as the inaugural President. By 1958, the Grand Council had grown to encompass 65,000 members across various Emerald and Irish societies. Due to the large number of Irish organizations in different professions in the New York area, there was a need for organizations to communicate and network with each other. The Grand Council encompasses emerald societies of various occupations including; police, fire, correction, board of education, sanitation, transit, utility and telephone professions. The cornerstone of GCUES lies in its commitment to effective networking, communication, engaging in political action and supporting its organizations and parades. Most of these organizations were from the tri-state metropolitan area surrounding New York; however, today they have expanded and have affiliates in Arizona, California, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Washington DC and one organization operates nationwide.

In 1994, the Grand Council of Police and Fire Emerald Societies of New Jersey was formed. This is a statewide organization focused on the police and fire professions. Each county within the state has a chapter and members were comprised of the police and fire professions.

The origins of the National Conference of Law Enforcement Emerald Societies have an interesting history, winding through various northeast cities and states. A path traveled through Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Washington DC.

Since the inception of Police Week in Washington DC in 1982, large numbers of Emerald Society members and Pipe bands attended the various activities in the nation's

Capital. Patrick O'Brien, a member of the Police Emerald Society of the Washington DC Area attended these events each May. At various ceremonies, government leaders would give high praise to the exceptional work of law enforcement within various ethnic groups in public safety. However, the Irish was never mentioned; although, half the names on the wall of the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial were of Irish descent. O'Brien felt there was a need to have national organization in Washington DC to preserve the legacy, culture and accomplishments of the Irish Americans in public safety professions.

In 1993, O'Brien was the President of the Police Emerald Society of Washington DC and solicited the help of Vice President Brian Manion of starting a national organization of public safety emerald societies. In 1994, Pres. O'Brien and V.P. Manion asked the help of Thom Hoban (Philadelphia E.S.) and William "Billy" O'Brien (Boston ES) of starting a national emerald society. In the 1990's, Thom Hoban and William O'Brien were the "roaming ambassadors of the emerald societies" visiting different cities and attending various emerald events. To get this "national emerald society" off the ground, O'Brien and Manion solicited the help of the Police Emerald Society of Washington DC (PESWDCA). They secured funding from the board for the "national emerald society" concept of uniting public safety Emerald Societies. The first phase was on May 14, 1994, with a gathering of various members of emerald societies at "Kelly's Irish Times" pub on Capitol Hill in Washington DC. The purpose of the gathering was to gauge the interest of starting a national emerald society. Later that evening, Police Piper Jimmy O'Connell (Illinois Emerald Society Pipes and Drums) made his initial appearance and played at the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial at midnight.

The founding meeting was held on May 14, 1995, at the Hyatt Regency on Capitol Hill in Washington DC. Eighteen Emerald Societies were in attendance and tentatively approved national by-laws and moved forward with the national organization. Thomas Creegan (NYPD-ES) made a proposal, which was subsequently adopted that the organization be named the: "National Conference of Law Enforcement Emerald Societies." Louis Walker (Nassau Co. PES) was a strong advocate of the idea and helped garner support for the young national organization. Michael Donegan (Legal Counsel for NY Emeralds Grand Council) was an early supporter and became the first legal Counsel for NCLEES.

Also in attendance at this initial meeting was Mike Mitchell (Florida Pipes and Drums Corp), who made a presentation of a commemorative display case of public safety pipe bands. It was Mitchell's vision to have an annual pipe band memorial march in Washington DC during Police Week. After the meeting, the display case was carried over to National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial (NLEOM) in which a small service was conducted. After the service the display case was presented to Craig Floyd, the Chairperson of the NLEOM. Through Mike Mitchell's idea and efforts, this became the origins of the National Memorial March and Service.

Later that evening, Piper Jimmy O'Connell (Illinois Emerald Society and Pipe Band) continued the tradition of playing his bagpipes at midnight at the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial during Police Week. Jimmy O'Connell will forever be known as the original "Midnight Piper". The Midnight Piper has been incorporated as part of NCLEES events during Police Week. Over the years, the Midnight Piper has been expanded to three nights and has become a signature event during Police Week.

On October 29, 1995, in a meeting in Philadelphia, 21 Emerald Societies officially approved the Constitution and By-Laws of the National Conference of Law Enforcement Emerald Societies.

Over the years, NCLEES has been recognized by the United States Congress, City of Omaha, Nebraska, City of San Francisco, and the City of Boston. Many members of Congress, Chiefs of Police and local leaders have attended and spoke at NCLEES events.

Through the vision of Patrick O'Brien, the National Conference of Law Enforcement Emerald Societies has become a recognized national organization of individual Emerald Societies and a strong part of the fabric of the public safety community.

As of 2026, NCLEES has 88 chapters in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom. Due to our long and proud history in the public safety professions, during Police Week in 2024, NCLEES was honored at a reception at the Irish Ambassador's residence in Washington DC. honoring Irish American law enforcement officers.

Through the efforts of the following dedicated individuals help establish the success of NCLEES of the years to include: Barney Ferguson & John McLaughlin & Raymond McGowan (NYPD-ES-NY), Michael Newton (Baltimore ES-MD), Joseph Dowling & Brian Manion (PES-DC), Louis Walker (Nassau Co. ES-NY), Michael Donegan (NY-GCUES), Thom Hoban (Philadelphia ES-PA), William O'Brien (Boston ES-MA), Dennis Long & Robert Sullivan (Jersey City-ES-NJ), Brian J. Sharkey (NYCD-ES-NY), Mike Flannery and Jimmy O'Connell (Illinois-Chicago ES).

The cornerstone of NCLEES is to unite Emerald Societies under a national banner. To recognize the accomplishments of Irish Americans in the public safety fields. To preserve history and culture of Irish Americans in this country. Finally, to uphold and defend the Constitution of the United States of America.

The adopted motto of the Emerald Societies is: Keep the Irish Tradition alive!

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