

The Gaelic Athletic Association

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.



Founded in 1884, the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) was created to revitalize Irish national pastimes – such as hurling – that were in danger of dying out. The resurgence of traditional Irish sports that followed contributed deeply to a broader sense of Irish nationalism growing within the country, which at the time was still part of the United Kingdom.

The GAA had seven founding members, but the driving force behind its establishment was Michael Cusack. An Irish teacher from the vicinity of The Burren in County Clare, Cusack was what is called a ‘romantic nationalist.’ He was active in the fight of the Gaelic revival to preserve the Irish language and deplored the decline of Irish customs and games that had accompanied British occupation.

To remedy this situation, Cusack met with six other likeminded men in a hotel in Thurles, County Tipperary, on November 1, 1884. Together they founded the Gaelic Athletic Association for the Cultivation and Preservation of National Pastimes – a title later shortened to the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA).

This date (November 1) was chosen because of a story that stated *Samhain* (pronounced sow-in) was the day when the mythological Irish warriors called the Fianna had lost their power. The GAA was intended to bring a sense of national pride back to the Irish public, who were suffering from intensely low morale. Many of the seven founding members were part of Irish Republican organizations like the Fenian Brotherhood and the Irish Republican Brotherhood.

Once the GAA was established, it received backing from Thomas Croke – the then Archbishop of Cashel – as well as Michael Davitt and Charles Stewart Parnell. In 1886, the county committees were established, and a year later, the first All-Ireland Championships were held, Tipperary winning in hurling and Limerick in Gaelic football.

The GAA succeeded in restoring Irish pride in their native pastimes. To this day, hurling and Gaelic football are Ireland’s most popular sports – and played its own part in the wider cultural shift that led to the Irish revolutionary period from 1916 on. This aspect of its history was not without bloodshed; in 1920, during the Irish war of Independence, 13 spectators and a player were killed in a raid at a Gaelic football match at Croke Park, following the IRA’s assassination of 12 British military personnel and two civilians. The Irish Republican Brotherhood (the predecessor of the Irish Republican Army) frequently used GAA matches as recruiting grounds.

The Gaelic Athletic Association today promotes Gaelic games such as Hurling, Football, Handball, and Rounders (similar to baseball) and collaborates with sister organizations to promote Ladies Football and Camogie. The Association also promotes Irish music, song, and dance and the Irish language as an integral part of its objectives. The GAA has remained an Amateur Association since its founding. Players, even at the highest level, do not receive payment for playing and the volunteer culture remains one of the most important aspects of the GAA.