

The Story of Jack-O'-Lanterns By Nate O'Meara

I absolutely love going to the pumpkin patch every October to choose the perfect pumpkin with a flat face and sinister-looking stem for my Jack-O'-Lantern!

As thousands of Americans engage in this odd ritual every year, it begs the question: Why do we carve pumpkins at Halloween? Halloween traditions are rooted in the 3,000-year-old Celtic festival of Samhain which was held traditionally on November 1st in Ireland. The Irish word Samhain means "Summer's End" as this end-of-the-harvest-beginning-of-winter celebration was marked by a time of disguise, feasting, bonfires, pranks, divination, games, and celebration of the ancestors. In the 7th century, Christian traditions were laid on top of this pagan holiday when the church declared November 1st to be "All Saints' Day" or "All Hallows." This made October 31 "All-Hallows Eve." They also made November 2nd "All Souls Day."

As the Irish immigrated in large numbers during the 19th century, they brought modern versions of Halloween traditions that were soon adopted by the larger American society. Back home, the rural Irish would carve Jack-O'-Lanterns from root vegetables (particularly turnips) since pumpkins were not grown in Ireland at the time. With a ghoulish face carved and a hollowed-out center illuminated with an ember, these "ghost turnips" were carried by traveling people or placed on windowsills to ward off unwanted spirits active on Halloween night.

In America, pumpkins, which is a common name Americans apply to many kinds of orange-colored squash in the plant family *Cucurbitaceae*, were an indigenous crop developed thousands of years ago by Native Americans who bred and selected wild species of gourds. In fact, the word "squash" is derived from the Narragansett word "*askutasquash*" which means "eaten raw or uncooked." When European colonists first arrived in the Americas, they were not much interested in the many varieties of pumpkins, yellow crooknecks, patty pans, Boston marrows, and turban squash cultivated by Native Americans. However, after being given seed and shown how to grow squash by native peoples, these early settlers soon realized that squash's storability was essential to feeding their families through harsh winters. By the time the Irish and their Halloween traditions were spreading across the United States, pumpkins were widely grown by farmers and soon became the crop of choice for Jack-O'-Lanterns due to their ease of carving.

But who was Jack and why did he need a lantern? In Irish folklore, there are stories about a mysterious drunkard and cheat named Stingy Jack who came to outwit the Devil on several occasions. Due to his wicked actions throughout his life, when Jack passed away, he was denied entry into Heaven. The Devil, also angered by how Jack had outsmarted him, cast his soul from Hell. As a result, the Devil damned Jack's soul to wander aimlessly over the earth trapped in the physical world with only an ember lit with hellfire and housed in a turnip to light his way.

Throughout the centuries, sightings of Jack's ghostly figure were called "Jack of the Lantern" eventually being shortened to "Jack-O'-Lantern." On particularly dark nights, sightings took the form of flashes of light over bogs--a visual phenomenon explained today by modern scientists as *ignis fatuus* or "foolish fire" thought to be caused by the chemical reactions of organic decay. At

some point, the Irish took up the practice of carving their own turnips like Jack's in hopes of scaring him and other unwanted spirits from their homes. Today, few of us are aware of the origins of this tradition when we go gallivanting off to pumpkin patches in search of the best pumpkin to carve before October 31st. Although it is fun to be immersed in all the costumes, candy, and trick-or-treating this time of year, take a quiet moment in your garden to think of Jack, your ancestors, and how we are still living out traditions rooted in antiquity.

For more family-friendly Halloween festivities, come out to the Arboretum this Saturday, October 28th, from 4 to 8 p.m. to see hundreds of carved jack-o-lanterns lit up throughout our grounds. The night will also feature activities for children, community tables, hot beverages, beer by Dark Sky Brewing and Mother Road Brewing, and spooky music. Tickets are available at thearb.org.

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