Of Ireland’s thirty-two counties, none has sent more people to Savannah than Wexford, whose nickname is the Model County. Occupying the southeastern corner of Ireland, that maritime county was the birthplace of John Barry, “Father of the American Navy,” who received his commission as Commodore from President George Washington in 1797. The following year, Wexford became the center of the United Irish Rebellion, an audacious effort to create a sovereign Irish republic. Heroes of the period include Father John Murphy and Robert Emmet, in whose honor the Strand or Irish Green beside Savannah’s Bay Street was renamed in 1902. Located near the historically Irish Old Fort neighborhood, Emmet Park contains the Celtic Cross that recognizes Savannahians of Irish descent.

The Wexford-Savannah Axis research platform seeks to reveal many stories linking Wexford and Ireland’s “sunny southeast” with Savannah. Even famous narratives, such as that of Father Peter Whelan, can be told more fully and disseminated to the rising generation. A son of Wexford and sometime Vicar General of the Savannah diocese, Whelan ministered to Confederate troops during the Union attack on Fort Pulaski; and his Good Samaritan service to the prisoners of war at Andersonville is also well known. But how did his youth in Wexford and neighboring Kilkenny predisposed him to such extraordinary service? The Ireland in which Whelan emerged was dominated by Daniel O’Connell, the “Liberator,” and his acolyte John England, who would become the first Catholic Bishop of Charleston, South Carolina, and whose call for a Catholic priesthood in the American South attracted Whelan.

Much migration research focuses on what happens once settlers arrive in the new country, but our Wexford-Savannah Axis initiative explores matters holistically. For starters, we’re inquiring into the role of the Graves Shipping Company, which was based in New Ross, Co. Wexford, and opened an office on Bay Street. We’re also exploring how the white-hot campaign for land reform in Wexford may have “trained” some emigrants who became active in Savannah politics from the 1850s.