



Jeffrey Sauger/Daily News photo

Vincent Arnold, left, and Skip Carter display drawings and documents about the Barney Street Cemetery during the Newport Museum of Irish History's fund-raiser Friday at the La Forge Restaurant. The Irish history group plans to restore the 19th-century Irish cemetery.

Museum of Irish History raises funds for cemetery restoration

By R.E. Reimer
Daily News staff

NEWPORT — The Newport Museum of Irish History, formed just a year and a half ago, has no place to call home — yet.

But the fledgling museum does have 128 members. And it has already embarked on a \$10,000 project to restore an early 19th-century Irish cemetery — which most people mistake for a Newport park.

Members and friends gathered Friday night for the Irish History Museum's fund-raiser at the La Forge Restaurant.

They paid \$10 apiece to listen to live traditional Irish music, eat hors d'oeuvres and hear former Gov. J. Joseph Garrahy speak about the Irish influence here and throughout the state.

They also saw a display of documents and drawings about the Barney Street Cemetery — originally the site of the first permanent Roman Catholic church in Rhode Island.

For most, the cemetery looks like an empty, grassy corner lot at Mount Vernon and Barney streets. It appears to be a plot of undeveloped land, maybe a city park where people walk their dogs and kids play ball.

But it isn't, say Irish History Museum president Vincent Ar-

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nold of Middletown and museum board member Skip Carter of Portsmouth.

A simple sign is the only indication that the property — 150 feet by 150 feet — is an historic cemetery.

But hidden deep below the sod are 25 graves with the bodies of 30 Irish immigrants who came to Newport.

Also buried from sight is a large Celtic cross of stone. Arnold said it had been carved and donated by world-renowned Newport stonecutter, the late John Howard Benson, in the 1920s.

But with time, the cross had toppled and broken, eventually getting buried.

"We plan to erect it and save

it," Arnold said of the cross. "And we plan to uncover a few of the burial stones, put up a fence around the cemetery and put up a sign about its history."

"That's the reason for this fund-raiser," Carter said.

No one's certain, but it appears the Barney Street Cemetery dates to the early 1830s. The museum is planning an archaeological study of the site, Arnold and Carter said.

The Newport Museum of Irish History was an idea kicked around two years ago by a half-dozen locals with Irish ancestry. They wanted to preserve and show the history of Irish immigration to Newport County from the 1600s to the present.

The museum was officially formed in May 1996, Arnold said. Its membership is open to anyone with an interest in Newport County's history.

For information, write the Newport Museum of Irish History, P.O. Box 1378, Newport, R.I. 02840. Membership is \$10 a person, \$20 a family and \$35 for a business. A life membership is \$100.

The museum plans Irish heritage walking tours, a quarterly newsletter, and in the future it plans to have a storefront location for its displays and reading and video materials.