

# Historian goes in search of the first Catholic Church in Rhode Island

BY DANIEL J. HOLMES

Rhode Island Catholic Correspondent

NEWPORT — According to historian Steve Marino, there is one topic which is bound to spark debate at any gathering of Catholics in the diocese.

"I have to be very careful about using any variation on the phrase 'oldest church in Rhode Island,' he says. "It can mean a lot of things to a lot of different people."

Part of the problem, of course, is that one must make a sharp distinction between a parish (an organized faith community) and a church (the building in which that community meets). Compounding the difficulty, however, is that parishes can move from one church to another, and that churches themselves sometimes change hands and even functions.

Marino's research into the subject has helped him to form a fairly compelling theory as to the location of the "first Catholic church in Rhode Island" (in this case defined as the first property in Rhode Island purchased by the Catholic Church for use as a house of worship).

In a recent lecture for the Museum of Newport Irish History, Marino identified Newport as having been the site of our state's first per-



Photo: Ann Arnold

**STEEPED IN HISTORY:** This park and cemetery on Barney Street in Newport holds a unique historical and spiritual significance for the Catholic faith community in Rhode Island.

manent Catholic community. Specifically, Marino pinpointed a spot at the intersection of Barney and Mt. Vernon Streets as the birthplace of what would eventually become the Diocese of Providence.

Newport's Catholic history is well-documented: the City by the Sea hosted the first Catholic Mass to be celebrated in Rhode Island (by French troops brought to the city during the American Revolution by Rochambeau's

Expédition Particulière). Despite these early beginnings, it wasn't until half a century later, in 1828, that the Diocese of Boston officially purchased a small lot at the intersection of Mt. Vernon and Barney Streets in Newport.

Unfortunately, Marino says, this particular lot is also situated at the crossroads of "controversy and mystery" – because the church itself seems to have been spirited away at some point in history. Today, the location contains only a small park and a historic cemetery (which the Museum of Newport Irish History has spent considerable effort restoring to its original charm).

Small historical cemeteries are fairly common throughout Newport, and it took Marino and the Museum a bit of detective work to determine that the Barney Street Cemetery was actually a churchyard sans church.

"There are several short articles from newspapers of the period which describe the sale of the lot and its transformation into a church," he explains. This journalistic record includes both bygone newspapers (such as The Rhode Island Republican) and extant journals (namely The Newport Mercury).

The story, as Marino recounts it, begins with the construction of a schoolhouse at the site

in 1809 — although it wasn't long before that building was blown off of its foundation by the Great September Gale of 1815.

"It seems like the schoolmaster, a man named Eleazer Trevett, just left the building where it landed and tried to run his school out of this disjointed building," Marino says. "Clearly, this wasn't the Taj Mahal."

Whatever the condition of the building may have been, something about it seems to have appealed to Father Robert Woodley. Woodley had been commissioned by Bishop Benedict Fenwick of Boston with establishing a church somewhere in Rhode Island (which was included in the Diocese of Boston at this point in history).

Although Providence and Pawtucket had also been considered for the location of the new parish, the demand for labor during the construction of Fort Adams (together with ongoing coal-mining operations in Portsmouth) had caused a surge in Irish immigration to Aquidneck Island, leading the priest to settle on Newport for his base of operations. But what could have motivated him to buy a ramshackle schoolhouse, gravely damaged by a hurricane

See **HISTORIAN**, Page 7

## SEMINARIAN

## Q&A

Get to know a little more about the men you are praying for as they continue to prepare for the priesthood



Matthew Boni

Age: 27

Year of Study: Pastoral Year

Home Parish: St. Joseph Church, Woonsocket

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### WHERE DID YOU GROW UP AND GO TO SCHOOL?

I am from Bellingham, Mass., but I since I have always been so close to Rhode Island, I would say that I grew up in the Woonsocket area. As a kid, I attended a few schools in the Greater Woonsocket Catholic Regional School System (GWCRS) and my high school was Mount Saint Charles Academy. I then went to the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester. I entered the seminary after I graduated from there.

### WHAT DOES THE WORD "VOCATION" MEAN TO YOU PERSONALLY?

For me, the word "vocation" refers to the way in which we are called to serve God in our lives. God gave us the gift of our lives and the best way to make the most of our life is to give it back to God. We do this by living our vocation. So for me, our vocation is the personal and unique way that we give our lives to God and follow his plan for us.

### FAVORITE HOBBIES AND/OR FUN FACT ABOUT YOURSELF:

I enjoy playing or watching all different kinds of sports. Since the restrictions related to the pandemic were put in place, I have been trying to read more, and I have also begun to enjoy gazing at the stars and planets in the night sky and learning more about what God has created beyond this world. That may turn into a new hobby for me.

### HOW DID YOU DISCERN YOUR VOCATION TO THE PRIESTHOOD?

I remember learning about the different Christian vocations when I was a senior in high school. From that day on, I was simply open to the possibility that God could be calling me to be a priest. Many people had just simply invited me to think about priesthood, and so I did. As I progressed through my college years, I noticed I was becoming much more interested in theology and ministry and less interested in math and science, which is what I thought I wanted to do with my studies. I was also becoming more proficient in the Spanish language and was learning about the cultures and Catholic traditions of Spanish-speaking countries. I was able to do a ministry internship at a parish in the Diocese of Providence which encouraged

me more to pursue the priesthood. I kept hearing about the need for priests in our diocese, especially bilingual priests, and I thought that maybe God wants me to be one of them. The idea of becoming a priest just kept getting stronger and stronger, and so toward the end of my time in college, I began the application process to the seminary.

### WHAT IS SOMETHING THAT READERS MAY NOT KNOW ABOUT WHAT IT IS LIKE TO BE A SEMINARIAN?

Many people ask me how long it takes to be a priest, and they are usually surprised at how long it takes when I tell them that I will be in the seminary for six years before being ordained a priest. What some people may not realize is how quickly the time goes by when we are in formation and follow our daily routines. At least that is the case for me. Ordination day is not as far away as it might seem.

### WHAT WOULD YOU SAY TO A YOUNG MAN DISCERNING THE PRIESTHOOD – OR MAYBE HASN'T EVEN CONSIDERED IT AT ALL?

I would say that you are not crazy if you feel attracted to the priesthood. It is a very real possibility that God is calling even someone like you to be a priest, no matter how inadequate or unworthy you may feel. Also, vocational discernment is done one step at a time, and so there is no need to be anxious about it. For some, the next step is to simply attend a discernment retreat. For others, the next step is to fill out the application. You should ask: "Is God asking me to take the next step?" – whatever it may be. Remain open to God's will, speak to him in prayer, reflect on your spiritual experiences, and seek spiritual guidance from other priests. If you do so, God will lead you to where he wants you to be.

### HOW DO YOU FEEL WE CAN BEST SUPPORT SEMINARIANS?

Your prayers mean a lot to us. Our vocations are in the hands of God so your prayers certainly help us on our journey towards the priesthood. I also think you can support seminarians through your commitment to your faith. It is very encouraging to us seminarians when we go to a parish and see

many people who are in love with God, have a hunger for the sacraments, and are joyful about their faith, it is encouraging to us. It shows us that being a priest will be worth it.

### WHAT IS THE MOST SURPRISING PART ABOUT BEING A SEMINARIAN?

I have been surprised by the overwhelming amount of support and encouragement I have received since the day it was first announced that I was accepted to the seminary. I did not realize just how happy people, not only Catholics, would be to find out I was studying to be a priest. I didn't expect people to give the same amount of support to their seminarians as they do to their priests. It has been very encouraging for me to see this.

### ARE THERE SPECIFIC LIFE CHANGES THAT YOU HAVE HAD TO MAKE TO BE SUCCESSFUL AT SEMINARY FORMATION?

Obviously, my prayer life has had to become the dominant priority in my life. The community life that we find in seminary and the schedule that we follow have helped develop better prayer routines. I noticed that the way I pray seemed to change as I progressed in seminary formation. The way a man prays when he is thinking about entering the seminary is different than the way he prays when he is preparing for ordination.

### IS THERE ANY PERSON OR SAINT WHOM YOU CREDIT WITH INTERCEDING ON YOUR BEHALF TO GOD FOR YOUR VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT?

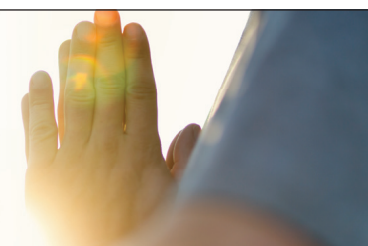
I think I owe a lot to St. Ignatius of Loyola. As a student at a Jesuit college, I learned much about his life and his advice on prayer and discernment. I think he was really watching over me throughout my college years and helped to guide me in my discernment.

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# Historian

From page 5

only a decade earlier? Marino has a theory for that as well.

"Woodley was no dope," Marino says. "Although the bishop said he was 'greatly disappointed' by the purchase, and even privately told Woodley that he thought the deal seemed like a rip-off, Woodley knew that the location was what made it perfect. You can take a stroll anywhere in Newport and end up at the corner of Barney Street and Mt. Vernon Street — and people did."

According to Marino, the bishop's opinion of the parish improved substantially after he visited it in November of 1828 to celebrate Mass. The church (which had only celebrated its first Mass a few months earlier) was still a source of novelty in Newport, and Bishop Fenwick was reportedly delighted when he noticed that a great deal of "strangers and Protestants" had wandered in to ob-

serve the service.

This sense of cultural exchange holds a special relevance to Marino: despite his work with the Museum of Newport Irish History, Marino himself is neither Irish nor native to Newport. Although he lives in the city now, he is originally from Connecticut, and spent most of his career as a historian teaching in that state. What attracted him to the story of the Barney Street Church, he says, is the same thing that attracted him to the study of history in general: the opportunity to learn the stories of not just places and events, but of the people who lived before us.

"It reminds me of a rhyme my older sisters taught me as a child," he says. "You probably know it — they'd interlace their fingers and recite 'here's the church, here's the steeple, open the door and see all the people.' That's really what this project was about — opening the door of Rhode Island's first Catholic church in order to see all the people: the people who worshipped there, the people who were married there, the peo-

ple who baptized their children there, and buried their dead in the churchyard outside."

At least 24 of those people are interred in the cemetery on Barney Street — but what happened to the church which they helped to found? According to Marino, there are a few possible answers. What we know for sure is that the schoolhouse constructed by Trevett was replaced with a purpose-built church in the 1830s; this church, consecrated as St. Joseph's Parish, remained in use until 1850s, at which point St. Mary's on William Street replaced it as the nucleus of Newport's Catholic community. St. Joseph's was sold in 1863 and demolished in 1864; since then, only the dead have resided in the lot on Barney Street.

A somewhat greater mystery concerns the precise fate of Eleazer Trevett's original schoolhouse. Several sources have suggested that the building (which had already demonstrated its portability during the hurricane of 1815) may have been relocated. Organizations ranging from The

Point Association to the Newport Historical Society to Rhode Island Monthly have identified the building currently at 71 Third Street as being Trevett's schoolhouse-turned-church (which is now a private residence).

There is at least one competing theory, however, which has proven very popular with St. Joseph's Church on Broadway (which is sometimes considered a successor to the long-lost original parish of St. Joseph on Barney Street). Parish records suggest that the building was actually relocated to Sherman Street rather than Third, a theory which was supported (though not conclusively proven) by research conducted by Salve Regina University history professor James Garman in 2001. The building in question is certainly much closer to the original churchyard than Third Street is (a distance of only 250 feet rather than a mile). Marino quotes Garman, however, in saying that "no smoking gun links the property at 19 Sherman Street directly to the first Roman Catholic church in Newport."

Despite this lingering mystery, it seems clear that the lot on Barney Street holds a unique historical and spiritual significance for the faith community. The park and cemetery are open to the public, and certainly merit a visit from any Rhode Island Catholics with an interest in the history of the Providence diocese. Indeed, as Marino notes, there are likely several Rhode Islanders whose own family history may be linked to the site as well.

"There are definitely descendants of these people still in the state, and if you have any information about ancestors who may have worshipped and received sacraments here, we'd really love to hear from you," he says. "This isn't a done deal. We're still researching and this is still very much a work in progress."

To learn more, please view a recording of Marino's recent history lecture, accessible by visiting [tinyurl.com/y2s8xpt8](http://tinyurl.com/y2s8xpt8); or in print, accessible through the "Lectures" tab on [newportirishhistory.org](http://newportirishhistory.org).