

# Barney Street Cemetery reflects Newport's 19th-century Irish influx

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**EDITOR'S NOTE:** *This is the third installment in a series investigating the history and character of small, historic local cemeteries.*

NEWPORT — In the twilight, with lights from the surrounding houses just beginning to flicker on, Jack McCormack secured a sign to the fence that surrounds the cemetery on Barney Street, advising visitors to keep dogs outside the gate.

McCormack's initiative on Thursday evening was a wrinkle in the long and storied efforts of volunteers who worked and continue to work to preserve St. Joseph's Cemetery, known by many people as the Barney Street Cemetery.

McCormack is a board member of the Museum of Newport Irish History, a small Thames Street establishment chock full of documents and pictures. The late president of the museum, Vincent Arnold, and other board members catalyzed the restoration of the historic cemetery in August 1998. Museum members have been tending to it, along with other volunteers, ever since. Retired Fire Chief John Booth was a prominent figure in the coordination of the volunteer effort for the restoration, according to current museum members.

The plot of land the cemetery now occupies used to be the site of a schoolhouse. The schoolhouse, built in 1809, eventually was repurposed as a church. The land was purchased by the Diocese of Boston in April 1828 and the church was dedicated to St. Joseph. The cemetery was established sometime after 1828 as an adjunct to the church, which was razed in 1864. Northwest of the cemetery on Broadway stands the current St. Joseph's Church, built in 1885.

Mike Slein, president of the Museum of Newport Irish History, wrote in an email to The Daily News that the old St. Joseph's was the first Catholic Church in Rhode Island and was established to serve the needs of the growing Irish population on Aquidneck Island.

There are approximately 26 stones in the cemetery; before the restoration project, most were toppled over, buried and cracked. Today, most of the stones stand erect, some supported by braces and screws. Many are crafted from white stone and are shaped in a pointed arch similar to Gothic church architecture; many have carved crosses, and some bear text that indicates which Irish county the deceased came from.

A tall, smooth Celtic cross that stands in the cemetery was first erected in the 1920s but toppled over. It was unearthed in the 1970s and restored by stoneworkers at the John Stevens Shop in Newport.

One headstone commemorates Ellen King; the text on her stone reads that King was from County Galway in Ireland. She died in 1850 at the age of 28. Her son, James, is commemorated on the stone as well; he was 22 months old when he died in 1847.

Headstones demarcate a few other young women and children. There are men as well. The stone commemorating Edmond Barry reads it was erected by Barry's brother, Patrick, in his memory. Other stones follow this theme as well: text that includes the names of the people who donated the stones for their loved ones.

Steve Marino, a board member with the Museum of Newport Irish History and tour guide at Fort Adams, posits some of the people commemorated at the St. Joseph's-Barney Street Cemetery were those looking for work at Fort Adams. He called the construction of Fort Adams "one of the largest construction projects in the United States" at the time.

Construction began on the coastal fort in 1824 and provided steady and good-paying work for Irish immigrants, Marino said. But there are still mysteries regarding the lives of the people commemorated in the cemetery, and volunteers and members of the Irish history museum still work today to bring those mysteries to light.

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