RESURRECTION DAY

Officials dedicate restored historical Irish cemetery

THE PIPES ARE CALLING: Bagpiper John Sullivan plays for the guests at Sunday's ceremonies marking the restoration of the St. Joseph-Barney Street cemetery. Top, members of the Newport Artillery Company stand at rest. Below, the Celtic cross that was restored by stonecarver Nicholas Benson at the John Stevens Shop.

Journal photo/FRIEDA SQUIRES

By SAM NITZE
Journal Staff Writer

NEWPORT — About 40 people gathered at the edge of the St. Joseph-Barney Street cemetery on Sunday afternoon, many of them wearing tweed hats and long coats against the cold.

Despite the somber mood evoked by the elements — the heavy gray sky, the damp earth, the wind rushing through leafless branches — the assembled group had not come to mourn a passing, but rather to celebrate a new beginning.

The occasion was the blessing and dedication of the historical site's recently completed restoration.

The Barney Street cemetery was part of the first Irish-Catholic parish in Rhode Island, St. Mary's, which was organized by priests from Boston in 1828. The first parishioners were Irish immigrants who came to toil in the Portsmouth coal mines and, later, to help build Fort Adams.

The Museum of Newport Irish History, established in 1996, undertook the restoration of the neglected burial ground last August as its first major project, according to museum president Vincent Arnold.

After a tune from bagpiper John Sullivan, Arnold welcomed the crowd to the ceremony and introduced his guests. Among them were David S. Gordon, mayor of Newport; Dan Snydacker, executive director of the Newport Historical Society; and the Most Reverend Robert E. Mulvee, Bishop of Providence.

"I'm delighted to be here on this delightful, Irish-weather day," Bishop Mulvee began when his turn came to speak, drawing chuckles from the shivering crowd.

"When we pause and think why the Irish who lie buried here came to these shores, it was partly for religious freedom... to be able to turn to God in their own way," he said. "And now they lie where they first came to worship.... Having restored this resting place for the dead, we raise our hearts to heaven."

The white marble gravestones, many of which just months earlier lay toppled in the dirt, now stood upright and clean, bearing names like Foran, McCormick, Flanagan and Sullivan. A new cast-iron fence surrounded

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HELPING HANDS: John Booth and his wife Carolyn, of Newport, look over the newly restored St. Joseph-Barney Street cemetery. Booth, with the help of many others, helped with the work to bring back the historical yet neglected burial ground.

Cemetery

Continued from Page C 1

the plot. Fresh, dark soil blanketed the ground over the graves, and grass seed had been sown.

Work at the cemetery began in August, when a Celtic cross, buried since the 1970s, was unearthed. The cross, originally erected as a memorial in the 1920s, was taken to the John Stevens Shop to be restored by stone carver Nicholas Benson, Arnold said.

A group of volunteers, headed by former Newport fire chief John K. Booth, removed all the gravestones, marked their places, and took them to a warehouse. Booth said he and the other volunteers washed the stones and had new steel bases made. When

the restoration work was completed, the stones were replaced on their respective graves, he said.

The rejuvenated Celtic cross was centered among the gravestones, near the front of the cemetery. Beneath it a plaque reads, "This Celtic cross was restored by the people of St. Mary's parish in memory of those interred here. March 1999."

Parishioners paid for the restoration of the cross, Arnold said, and the cleaning of the gravestones and the rest of the work was financed mostly by private donations and a gift from the North Family Trust in East Providence.

The work is not totally finished, Arnold said, noting that within a month a gate will be attached to the new fence and a sign displaying historical information will be set up.

Still, the cemetery is in better shape than it has been in a long time.

"This is a special moment because this was an abandoned site," said Ed Connelly, who lived in Newport for 25 years before moving to Jamestown. "This adds a new dimension not only to the neighborhood, but also to the spirit of connecting to the rich, Irish heritage of this town."

Arnold said the Museum of Newport Irish History, which covers all of Newport County, is an organization but not yet a physical place. The museum is looking for a home and compiling the letters and photographs that will eventually constitute the exhibit. 00

Arnold said plans are also in the works to make a video history of the Irish in Newport.