NEWPORT'S EARLY IRISH COMMUNITY: WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

BY ANN ARNOLD, BOARD MEMBER
MUSEUM OF NEWPORT IRISH HISTORY

Barney Street Cemetery / Photo provided by the Museum of Irish History.

A lovingly maintained, but little-known historic Newport cemetery sits at the corner of Barney and Mount Vernon Streets. A short stroll from Washington Square, it is tucked behind Touro Synagogue and the Newport Historical Society headquarters. Referred to by locals as the "Barney Street Cemetery," it is the oldest Catholic burying ground in the State of Rhode Island and the final resting place of many of Newport's earliest Irish immigrants. Some gravestones have been lost to time and there are, undoubtedly, some graves that were never marked. The oldest extant burial marker is from 1830; the most recent is from 1853, and in many cases the place in Ireland from which the deceased immigrated is carved into the stone.

How did this cemetery come to be, and why is this site important to Newport's rich history? While today one finds only a small, well-tended cemetery at the corner of Barney and Mount Vernon Streets, in April, 1828, when the land was purchased by Father Robert Woodley, a Catholic priest of the Diocese of Boston, the plot was occupied, not by a cemetery, but by a rustic wooden structure. The small building, originally constructed as a schoolhouse in 1809, would be repurposed as the house of worship for Rhode Island's very first permanent Roman Catholic mission – what today, we would call a "parish" – to serve the town's growing number of Irish immigrants, many of whom were involved in the construction of Fort Adams at the southern end of town, overlooking Newport's harbor. Soon, the land adjacent to the schoolhouse, that became Rhode Island's first Catholic church, was used for burials of the faithful.

These early Newport Irish Catholics were in good company, as this neighborhood was already home to numerous and diverse houses of worship, serving Jewish, Baptist, Quaker, Anglican, and other denominations – all part of Newport's "Lively Experiment" in religious toleration. The little church at Barney and Mount Vernon Streets quickly became the center of Irish community life in Newport and Rhode Island's very first Saint Patrick's Day parade stepped off from this site in 1842.

The expanding congregation soon outgrew the little schoolhouse, so two adjoining lots were purchased, upon which a much larger wooden building was constructed. The new church was dedicated to Saint Joseph, in 1837, which is why the cemetery is officially named "Saint Joseph Cemetery." At some point, the little schoolhouse was moved off the lot and repurposed as a residence, though historic documentation of the specifics has never been found.

The parish continued to expand, fueled by immigration, eventually outgrowing the 1837 building on Barney Street. Plans were then made to construct a larger, grander replacement church. Irish-born architect Patrick C. Keely designed the beautiful Gothic Revival church, which stands at the corner of Spring and William Streets. Construction began in 1848, and the church was completed and dedicated to "The Holy Name of Mary, Our Lady of the Isle," in 1852, effectively changing the name of Rhode Island's first Catholic parish from St. Joseph's to St. Mary's. A new, much larger cemetery to support the growing parish was established in 1848 on Kingston Avenue, adjacent to the Common Burying Ground, ultimately rendering the cemetery on Barney Street obsolete. The 1837 wooden church also became obsolete, so it was sold and dismantled in 1864, and its wood repurposed.

The next one hundred years were quiet. By 1960, the cemetery was nearly forgotten as the site of Rhode Island's first Catholic church. The neglected site became an eyesore, overgrown with vegetation, its wooden fence falling over in spots. The Diocese of Providence stepped in, cleaned up and beautified the site in 1962. The work, which was reported upon in the local press, included clearing the overgrowth, re-grading the lot and planting grass. Gravestones were taken up and laid flat in an effort to protect them. Within a few decades, however, this historic site would again fall into obscurity, where

Museum Board members standing around the new sign / Photo credit Jennifer Carter

it remained until the late 1990s when the little cemetery would find a new champion.

Today, through a special arrangement with the Diocese of Providence, the cemetery is maintained by the Museum of Newport Irish History, a 501c3 non-profit, membership-driven organization, established in 1996. The organization's first public project was to raise funds to restore the cemetery. Over the next couple of years, the museum cleaned and restored the gravestones, many of which were buried and broken, installed a wrought iron fence with a gate and granite posts and planted perennial flowers and trees. Thanks to dedicated volunteers and generous donors, the project culminated in the cemetery's rededication in March, 1999. A granite boulder with a bronze plaque providing a brief history of the site was installed on the Barney Street side of the lot in June, 2000. In the fall of 2021, a new historical information sign providing additional detail on the history of the site was installed on the Mount Vernon Street side of the lot.

A dedicated team of Museum of Newport Irish History volunteers maintains the beauty and dignity of this historic and sacred place through periodic work sessions, and financial donations cover any expenses. The museum continues to build its understanding of the history of the site via ongoing research, and recordings of videos and lectures regarding the site may be accessed on the museum's website, newportirishhistory.org

The public is invited to visit the cemetery and learn more by attending one of three site tours to be offered during the **45th Annual Newport Irish Heritage Month**, in March 2022. Local historian and guide, Steve Marino, will present the 30-minute free tours, weather permitting, at 12:30 p.m. on Sundays, March 6, 20, and 27. Please visit the museum's website for details.

o learn more about the Museum of Newport Irish History, to join, volunteer or donate, please visit the website or write to newportirishhistory@gmail.com

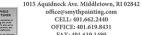*With thanks to Steve Marino, local historian, and a member of the Museum of Newport Irish History board of directors, for his contributions to this article.*