

Rhode Island Roots

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*Private Michael George Murphy,
photo from the author's collection.*

PRIVATE MICHAEL GEORGE MURPHY AND NEWPORT'S GREAT WAR MEMORIALS

“We live as long as we are remembered.”

Patrick F. Murphy

When asked to connect my family's history to the First World War, I remember my father's first cousin, Private Michael George Murphy, one of Newport's young men who served and died in what was then called “The Great War.” He was born on 14 February 1890 in Foilleye, Canalmore, Allhies, located on the Beara Peninsula in County Cork, Ireland, and was the third of ten children of John and Julia (O'Sullivan) Murphy. At 20, he left his family's home, and with his older brother, came through Ellis Island in May 1910.^[1] The shipping manifest indicates they were going to Butte, Montana where many Cork immigrants settled once the mines had closed in Ireland. He did not remain in Butte for long. Michael joined his aunt and uncle and other relatives on 28 Simmons Street in the Fifth Ward of Newport by 1915.^[2] When the United States entered World War I, Michael's life began a new chapter. His World War I draft registration tells us he was of medium height and build, with light brown hair and dark brown eyes. The record also states he had made the declaration for his United States citizenship.^[3]

Details about Michael's life as a soldier might have been lost to posterity if they had not been preserved in newspaper accounts. From “Somewhere in France,” during July 1918, Michael wrote a letter to his sister, Mary Ann Wilkey. This letter was published in the *Newport Daily News* on 3 August 1918. It appears in its entirety below because is a very moving account of a young man's hopes and dreams. Little did this soldier know how little time he had left on this earth.

My dear sister:

Just a few lines hoping you are well as I am first-rate and enjoying this life. I feel like writing tonight, so I am going to tell you from where I started. To begin with, it does not seem that I am close on a year in the army. “This is the life.”

1. New York, Passenger Lists, 1820–1957 [database on-line] *ancestry.com*. NARA microfilm T715, roll 1471, line 22, p. 139.
2. Rhode Island, State Censuses, 1865–1935 [database on-line] *ancestry.com*. 1915 R.I. State Census, Newport, Ward 5, E.D. 71, line 11, volume 2.
3. Michael George Murphy U.S. World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918 [database on-line] *ancestry.com*. Rhode Island, Newport roll 1852397.

I suppose you recall the date October 2, 1917 I left Newport (28 Summer Street) and went to Camp Devens where I remained two weeks and certainly enjoyed life with the Newport "bunch," then I was shipped to Camp Gordon and remained there all the winter months, and from there to Camp Upton, New York where I remained three weeks. I was sorry I could not go home before I was shipped across.

We had a "corking" voyage, and the people in Liverpool gave us a great cheering. It certainly did our hearts good. I tell you we "were right in town." Old glory was plying in every window. Men, women, and children were greeting the American soldiers.

England is certainly a pretty place, although we had only 36 hours to look it over. That length of time was really a rest. From there we moved to France. If you notice, I made quite a few moves, but I finally got to what I longed to see. In a few days I will be in the trenches. Then, watch us gain victory.

At present I am not many miles from the trenches. A few nights ago a German airplane came over the lines and dropped a bomb about 20 yards from our barracks, but didn't hurt a thing. It was a "bum" shot. Of course the rocks and dirt bounded around some, but she never dropped another bomb when our planes got after her, and you bet she came to the ground, and that is where they are all going to come. Don't that sound pretty good?

Your Brother,
Private M. G. Murphy

Michael Murphy was part of 82nd Division of the 319th Machine Gun Battalion of the American Expeditionary Force. He was killed in the last weeks of the war on 30 October 1918 during an offensive into the area in the northern part of France known as the Argonne Forest. He is buried with hundreds of his fallen comrades

in the Meuse Argonne Cemetery near the village of Romagne-sous-Montfaucon in France.

His story did not end with his death. The Veterans of Foreign Wars were an active group, especially in bringing to public notice the sacrifices that were made. On 19 September 1932, an article about the selection of sites for war memorials appeared in the *Newport Daily News*, p. 5, with the subtitle "Alderman Touring City Appear in Favor of Naming

Certain Places after Dead Veterans." The article stated that the city alderman suggested some places the veterans did not have on their list of public memorials including Bath Road boulevard parkway. Two months later, as the *Newport Daily*

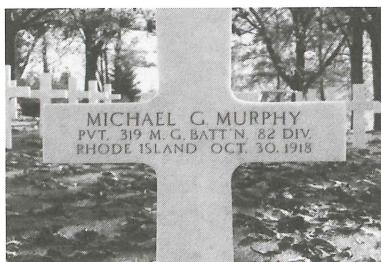


Photo by Dominique Didiot, from the author's collection.

News reported about F.D.R.'s election to the Presidency, there were two lengthy feature articles about the dedication of sites to the city's war dead. The following details come from the issues of Thursday, 10 November 1933, p. 6, and Monday, 14 November 1933, p. 14.

On Sunday afternoon 9 November 1932, at 2:45, a well-organized but very long ceremony began at Touro Park. Loud speakers broadcast stirring speeches, including this one by Mortimer Sullivan, Mayor of Newport, the orator of the day. First quoting opening lines of "Flanders Field," he said:[4]

Newport caught the torch and sent her men to the service and death in the great war. Newport is proud of her history and ancestry, but is equally proud of those men who a short 15 years ago went forth in a vigor to cross seas because a nation's neutrality was violated and America's traditions scorned.

Then, on a coordinated fire alarm signal, ceremonies began in each of the areas described below. A black tablet lettered in gold was placed in a prominent position and a wreath was laid at its foot. Relatives and friends were given designated positions of honor. A member of the clergy gave a benediction. Each honored soldier's description was presented in the same format.

Richmond Field, dedicated in honor of **Michael J.(sic) Murphy**, 319th Machine Gun Battalion, killed in action, 30 October 1918 and will henceforth be known as "Michael J. Murphy Memorial Field." Next of kin, an aunt, Mrs. Margaret Murphy 33 Simmons Street. Unveiling by Melville Wilkey, Jr. and Cecelia Condon. Priest, Father Archambault, St. Augustin's.

Vernon Avenue Playground, dedicated in honor of **Samuel M. Cottrell**, Co. 1, 314th Inf., 79th Div., killed 30 September 1918. Next-of-kin: sister, Catherine W. Cottrell, 30 Mt. Vernon St., Unveiling by a nephew, Samuel M. Cottrell Barker. Minister, Rev. Stanley C. Hughes, rector of Trinity Church.

Intersection Broadway and Bliss Road, dedicated in honor of **John H. Feltman**, Co. K. 103rd Inf., 26th Div., killed 18 July 1918. Next-of-kin widow Sarah N. Feltham, 245 Broadway. Unveiling by two sons Howard and David Feltman. Minister, Rev. Harry Fulton Cost, pastor of First Presbyterian Church.

Intersection of Broadway and Bull Street, dedicated in honor of **Benjamin Wheaton**, 120th Machine Gun, 32nd Div., killed 12 October 1918. Next-of-kin Mrs. E.A.G. Smith, mother, 15 Brooks Ave. Unveiling Edith Wheaton, Margaret Gordon, nieces. Minister, Rev. Ford, pastor of the Second Baptist Church.

Grass Plot, Market Square, dedicated in honor of **William A. Donovan**, killed in the torpedoing of *U.S.S. Jacob Jones*, 6 December 1917. Next-of-kin mother,

4. "Veterans Dedicate Sites to War Dead," *Newport Daily News*, 14 Nov. 1932, p. 14.

Bacheller Street, widow Anna L. Donovan, Malden, Mass. Unveiling by Robert and Edna Donovan, son and daughter. Priest, Father Coleman, St. Augustine's.

Intersection Kay and Ayrault Streets, dedicated in honor of **Caldwell Colt Robinson**, DSC, NC, 6th Marines, killed in action, 6 June 1918. Next-of-kin mother, Mrs. C.L. F. Robinson. Unveiling by Boy Scouts. Minister, Rev. Ernest Wismer.

Junction of Thames Street and Carroll Ave., **Timothy Shea**, Co. A, 328th Inf., 82nd Div. killed in action, Next of kin, Mrs. Mary Pendergast, 19 Dixon Street, Unveiling by friendly children. Priest, Father Deery, St. Augustine's.

Bath Road Parkway, 1st Plot Westward, dedicated in honor of **W. Clarke Barrett**, Co. G, 167th Inf., 82nd Div. killed in action, October 1918, Next-of-kin: father Barrett, 122 Gibbs Ave., Unveiling by Doris and Ada Barrett, nieces. Minister, M.E. Center.

Bath Road Parkway, 2nd Plot Westward, dedicated in honor of **William D.F. Stewart**, Co. F, 23rd Inf., 2nd Div., killed in action, 5 August 1918. Next-of-kin: sister, Mrs. L.P. Mahan, 4 Wesley St., Unveiling by Edith Braman, George Williams. Minister, Rev. J.B. Lyte

Bath Road Parkway, 3rd Plot Westward, in honor of **Morris Slup**, Co. I, 314th Inf., 70th Div., killed in action 25 September 1918. Next-of-kin, David Katzen, Unveiling by Boy Scouts. Rabbi Jacob Bernstein.

Bath Road Parkway, 4th Plot Westward, in honor of **Frederick C. Meyer**, Co. F, 321 Inf., 2nd Div., killed in action 9 October 1918, Next-of-kin, mother, Mrs. Joseph Mayer, 443 Broadway. Unveiling by Boy Scouts. Minister, Rev. Green, Trinity Church.

Bath Road Parkway, 5th Plot Westward, in honor of **Joseph V. Silvia**, Co. F 4th Engineers, killed in action 14 October 1918, Next-of-kin, parents, Mr. & Mrs. Joseph V. Silvia, 1 Bartlett Court, Unveiling by Helen and Frank Silvia. Priest, Father John F. Marren of St. Joseph's Church.

I remember seeing the plaque for my cousin, Private Michael G. Murphy, some sixty years ago. His memorial and the others have all long since disappeared.

©3 Patrick F. Murphy, a retired Probation Officer for the State of Rhode Island, is City Historian of Newport. He specializes in Irish and Irish-American genealogy. He can be reached by e-mail at ptrckmrphy@verizon.net