

Irish history museum unearths Celtic cross at historic cemetery

By John Noonan
Daily News staff

NEWPORT — The Museum of Newport Irish History officially kicked off its restoration and preservation efforts Wednesday by unearthing a Celtic cross placed at the Barney Street Cemetery in the 1920s as a memorial.

Elliott "Skip" Carter, chairman of the committee overseeing the restoration, said the museum's founders set their sights on the historic cemetery even before there was a museum. The Museum of Newport Irish History was formed in May 1996.

Carter said the need for the historic cemetery's preservation was a frequent topic of conversation among friends with Irish ancestry who would later become inspired to start the fledgling organization.

"We're going to make it more visible and more viable," Carter said, adding that the museum is seeking volunteers to increase support for the project.

Vincent Arnold, president of the museum, estimated that the year-long restoration would cost between \$10,000 and \$12,000, including

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money for a cast-iron fence to line the perimeter of the cemetery during the restoration.

The cross, now crumbled and broken, will be restored by Nicholas Benson of the John Stevens Shop on Thames Street. Other burial stones in fair condition will be uncovered and raised, too, Carter said.

Some members of the museum initially speculated that the cross may have been carved and donated by Benson's grandfather, world-renowned Newport stonecutter John Benson, but museum president Vincent Arnold said further research by the family now indicates that is unlikely.

Officially the St. Joseph's Cemetery, the burial site was the first Irish Catholic cemetery in Rhode

Island. It is also the founding site of St. Mary's Catholic Church, a national historic site now on Spring Street.

Arnold said the museum also plans to work with Salve Regina University on the effort. Students participating in archaeological digs will help seek artifacts from a late 1700's schoolhouse constructed on the premises which was later converted to a church in 1828.

"It will be an asset to the community and it's also of historical significance to the community," Arnold said.

Membership to the Museum of Newport Irish History is open to anyone with an interest in Newport County's history.



John Noonan/Daily News photo

Museum of Newport Irish History members and volunteers unearth a Celtic cross at the Barney Street Cemetery Wednesday and prepare to transport it to John Stevens Shop for restoration.

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