

First Catholic Church Site To Be Newport Park Area

The site of the state's first Roman Catholic church and probably its first Catholic cemetery — at Mount Vernon and Barney Streets — is being developed by Providence Diocese into what will be a historical neighborhood park and cemetery.

The first church was opened in 1828, but the gravestones in the cemetery are about 200 years old.

For years the corner parcel of land has been surrounded by a high wooden fence and the land has been overgrown with trees, shrubbery, weeds and grass. Debris was tossed over the fence and children, screened by the fence from any supervision, used it as a playfield.

The cemeteries division of the diocese, under which the old cemetery has been placed, said yesterday through Joseph Auriello of Farrington, its superintendent, that the parcel is being rehabilitated and beautified.

Many of the trees have been cut down and the area bulldozed. The old cellar has been filled in and the area graded. About 20 old gravestones have been removed to the St. Columba's Cemetery workshop in Middletown for cleaning and deciphering.

Summer rye will be planted to give immediate beautification to the lot. In the fall, permanent grass will be sown which, with the remaining trees, will create a small parklike area for the neighborhood. The tombstones will be returned, after the grass is established, and laid flat in the proper places shown on a diagram of the old cemetery.

A plaque giving its history will be placed at the site. Workers from St. Columba's will maintain the historic spot.

Not only will this give the neighborhood an open parklike area, Auriello said, but he feels that children, playing in the open in-

stead of behind a solid fence, will cause no further damage there.

Through this plot of land, Newport can claim the honor of being the cradle of the Catholic church in Rhode Island.

During the War of Independence, in 1778, mass was offered by chaplains of French Admiral D'Estaing in the south room of the Colony House on Washington Square. After the departure of the French allies, there were still Catholics in Newport. In 1791 Bishop Carroll of Baltimore and Father Thayer of Boston conferred the Sacrament of Baptism in Newport.

In February 1827 the Rev. Patrick Byrne of Boston visited Newport and congregations in Fort Adams and in the coal mines in Portsmouth, prepared over 150 for the reception of Holy Communion. Encouraged by Father Byrne's report, Bishop Fenwick authorized the Rev. Robert D. Woodley of Providence to attend Newport as an outmission.

In 1828 Father Woodley purchased and fitted up a small building on Barney Street previously used as a school for colored children as the first Catholic church in Rhode Island. In October 1828 Bishop Fenwick visited preached and confirmed 11 persons. During his sermon he urged the purchase of additional land for future needs.

In 1830, the Rev. John Corry succeeded Father Woodley in care of the Newport mission. The latter, relying on his rapidly increasing congregation, began the erection of a more pretentious edifice on Mount Vernon Street, which was dedicated Aug. 20, 1837. It was known as St. Joseph's and had a seating capacity of between 700 and 800.

In the fall of 1837 Father Corry was succeeded by the Rev. C. Lee, who in turn was succeeded by the Rev. James O'Reilly in 1839.

When Father O'Reilly left for New Bedford, Bishop Tyler appointed as Newport's resident pastor the Rev. James Fittor who became very popular here with all classes of townspeople. He considered the Mount Vernon Street edifice unsafe, and forecasting the future of Newport, obtained the Spring Street site for St. Mary's, Our Lady of the Isle, Church. He received the cooperation of many Newport citizens, irrespective of creed or class, in the construction of St. Mary's.

The cornerstone of St. Mary's Church was laid June 14, 1849. The Catholic population here at the time was 586. The church was dedicated in 1853 by the Rt. Rev. Bernard O'Reilly, bishop of Hartford, and the old St. Joseph's Church was closed.

The present St. Joseph's parish was established in 1885.

*THIS IS THE LOT & HOUSE AT 71 THIRD ST. WHICH HAD A BELFRY ON THE ROOF. LATER REMOVED

To Irish History Museum, P.O. Box 1378 Newport, R.I. 02840
It is now owned by Joseph Sheekay 71 Third St. Newport, R.I.