



THE NEWSLETTER OF THE MUSEUM OF NEWPORT IRISH HISTORY

Published by the Museum of Newport Irish History
P.O. Box 1378 Newport, RI 02840 (401) 848-0661

VOLUME 24

SUMMER 2008

SUMMER SPRUCE-UP AT BARNEY STREET CEMETERY

On Saturday, August 23 a team of volunteers dug, divided and replanted the many day lilies that surround the Barney Street Cemetery's iron fence. The day-long project was kicked-off early by John Booth, Danny Finn, and Bob Finn, who dug up the plants and prepared the soil. Museum members Mike Slein, Dottie Sanchez, Jack McCormack and Ann Arnold May divided and replanted the lilies, with assistance provided by two generous neighbors. Special thanks to Museum supporter and cemetery neighbor, Brian Pelletier, for supplying water and horticultural advice, and to John Booth for his assistance in securing a donation of two yards of mulch from T.J. Brown Landscaping.

Right: A view of the completed work.

Bottom: Volunteers survey lilies to be divided and re-planted.



HERALDRY REVISITED

A series of articles on Irish coats of arms and their related heraldry has been published in this newsletter over the past two years. Articles on the Sullivan/O'Sullivan family (Fall/Winter 2006-07), the Murphy Family (Summer 2007), and the O'Neill Family (Spring 2008) can all be found in the Museum's on-line newsletter archive at www.NewportIrishHistory.org. The article, "What is a Coat of Arms?", can be found on page 4 of the Fall 2007 newsletter.

In this issue we are reprinting an excellent article on heraldry from the April 2007 (Volume 28, Number 2) issue of *The Septs*, a quarterly journal published by the Irish Genealogical Society International, based in Golden Valley, Minnesota. Author Gabrielle Meachair Woeltje is a native of Co. Tipperary and a former school teacher, who now focuses on her writing. Her article, entitled "A New Look at Heraldry!", begins on page 4, and is reprinted in its entirety with her permission and that of the publication.

Note: To learn more about *The Septs* and the Irish Genealogical Society please visit www.IrishGenealogical.org

THE O'NEILL FAMILIES – CONTINUED

The Spring 2008 Newsletter featured an article on the famous O'Neill families. Space did not allow the inclusion of details of the early O'Neill names and families in New England and Newport. To enrich the story, we offer now the following historical information:

From Michael J. O'Brien's book *A Hidden Phase of American History* (Dodd, Mead; New York, 1919):

- There were 178 O'Neills listed in the Revolutionary Army
- Of those, Captain Bernard O'Neill, and Captain John O'Neill were members of the Regiment de Dillion, French-Irish Brigade.

Michael J. O'Brien's *Pioneer Irish in New England* lists a John in 1664, an Edmund in 1682, and Mary in 1688, all in the Hartford area. O'Brien lists a John at the Battle of Bunker Hill.

In Newport County it appears the O'Neills arrived much later, and we could find no listings from the 1600s, and only one from the 1700s, the latter from Newport Historical Society files. That earliest mention of an O'Neill, from Newport Historical Society records, was of a James "O'Neal", wedded to Judith Mitchell in 1747.



O'Neill listings increase in the 1800s, according to Census records:

- From the U.S. Census of 1840: James, age 40 and Timothy II, age 30 (both in Tiverton, part of Fall River, Mass., at that point).
- From the Newport Census of 1850: Henry, age 37, a shoemaker; Margaret, 24; Catherine, 20; a Catherine, age 30; John, 30; and Tim aged 22.

Another John O'Neill, born in 1826 in Dingle, Co. Kerry, arrived in Newport in 1852, after first residing in Newburyport, Mass. For the last 53 years of his life he lived on Lee Avenue, off Spring Street in Newport. O'Neill's 1910 obituary cites his heroics in saving three men who were stranded in below-zero weather near "The Reef"¹ when their skiff was "stove in" on the rocks. O'Neill and another man rowed to their aid. They were rewarded with \$20 in gold. John's son, Patrick H. O'Neill, established the O'Neill Funeral Home in 1889. The business, now called "O'Neill-Hayes", remains in the family today. As a boy in the 1860s, the author Henry James lived in the handsome stone building at 465 Spring Street, that today houses the funeral home. The circa 1834 building is known as the "Robert P. Lee House".² The picture of this building that appears in this article is provided courtesy of O'Neill-Hayes Funeral Home.



¹ The Reef was a Queen Anne-style stone "cottage" that once stood at Brenton's Point on Ocean Drive, currently the site of Brenton State Park. The house was completed in 1885. After being vacant for many years and vandalized, it was set afire in 1961. Its ruins were demolished in 1963 (Carey, Jane. *Newport History* - Journal of the Newport Historical Society, Vol. 77, Spring 2008, p. 56).

² Onorato, Ronald, J. *The AIA Guide to Newport*, R.I. Architectural Forum, 2007, p.58.

MUSEUM SUPPORTERS ENJOY FUNDRAISER AT THE FIREHOUSE

Museum members and friends attended a special performance of the one-woman show, "The Search for Intelligent Life in the Universe", at the Firehouse Theater on Monday, August 4. At the conclusion of the performance by local actress Michelle Donovan, attendees enjoyed hors d'oeuvres, sweets and beverages. Over \$400 was raised to benefit the Museum's development fund, for the installation of a permanent exhibit at Fort Adams. Many thanks to all those who helped with refreshments, set up and cleanup, and to the proprietors of the Firehouse Theater, Jack and Donna Maytum.

A NEW LOOK AT HERALDRY!

by Gabrielle Ní Mheachair

The Milesians, who are regarded as the first Celts to invade Ireland, carried a banner of an escutcheon, a dead serpent, and a wand. This banner is reminiscent of the story of their great ancestor, Gaedheal Glas. While traveling through the desert he was bitten by a poisonous snake. Moses cured him and declared that he and his descendants would live in a land free from such creatures. When the wound healed a green scar remained ; henceforth Gaedheal was known as Gaedheal Glas (*glass* being the Irish for green). The Milesians considered Gaedheal Glas one of their ancestors.

According to Dr. Daithi O' hOgain, "The ultimate origin of the Irish people is put down to Scythia. The people of that area were descendants of Noah's son Japheth; and the first important person among them was Fenius the Ancient, who was one of the leaders of different nationalities who went to build the tower of Babel. Fenius was a great linguist and, when the languages were separated at Babel, he alone retained the knowledge of them all. His grandson was Gaedheal Glas who, we are told, fashioned the Irish language (Gaedhilg) out of the whole seventy-two tongues then in existence."¹

"No serpent nor vile venom'd thing
Can live upon the Gaelic soil,
No bard nor stranger since has found
A cold repulse from a son of Gaedheal."²

The twelve tribes of Israel carried banners to distinguish between their tribes. The Celts copied this tradition, and it continued among the Milesians till the reign of Ollamh Fola, who lived about seven centuries before the Birth of Christ (680 BC). Ollamh Fola instituted the first, "Parliament" in Ireland. It was held at Tara and called Feis Teamhar (The Festival of Tara). At this triennial meeting the kings, nobility, druids, historians, and judges came together to address the political, social, religious, and historical affairs of the land. The High King ordered coats of arms for the chief of each family. At the assembly this shield hung on the wall behind each chief's seat. Laws, justice, genealogy, and history were discussed, examined, and sanctioned. This traditional gathering continued down through the centuries until the arrival of the Anglo-Normans in the twelfth century.

It is very difficult to interpret a family Coat of Arms today. The original may have changed through the generations depending upon which son carried the lineage. Also, individuals often made changes, most especially before the introduction of strict laws by Henry V, limiting the issue and use of Coats of Arms. Later still, during the reign of Henry VIII, officials were hired to validate, deny, and record the Coats of Arms in use at the time. Some facts have remained unchanged throughout the generations. Using the Ó Meachair coat of arms as an example here is how one may attempt to interpret a coat of arms.

The Coat of Arms of the Ó Meachair is blue. The color blue refers to loyalty, splendor and truth. The color yellow (gold), which is used for the lion, the sword, and the crescents symbolize generosity and intellectual superiority. Lions are the most common animals used in heraldry. They are a symbol of

strength, nobility, and agility. Often times the lion symbol is used to represent Jesus Christ. The most common image portrayed by the lion is the symbol of kingship. On the Ó Meachair shield the lions are combatant. This is not surprising as the Ó Meachair always fought for the right to retain their land. Though the lion is the king of beasts it is not the king of the birds. Thus, in order to balance a Coat of Arms the eagle, the king of all birds, was often added to the coat of arms as its crest.

The Ó Meachair shield has as its crest a falcon standing ready for flight, belled and hooded. The falcon stands upon a green mound, which brings the deeply personal issue of land to the shield. The two crescent moons below the lions and on the wing tips of the falcon are symbols used by second sons upon their shields.

The Ó Meachair Clan is a sub sept of the O Carroll Clan. In fact their coats of arms are very similar. The O Carroll Coat of Arms also has two lions rampart with a sword. It too has a hawk rising from its helmet. The war cry of the O Carrolls was *Seabhac Abú* (the hawk to victory). This too was the battle cry of the Ó Meachairs. Since the Ó Meachair clan is a descendant line from the O Carrolls, it does not seem unusual that they have a similar coat of arms and war cry.

Though I am guilty of the following crime and am the proud holder of a beautiful watercolor of the Ó Meachair/Maher/Meagher/ shield, I feel it is important that the general public understand the true nature of a family shield. Michael Ó Comain has written a wonderful book, *The Poolbeg Book of Irish Heraldry*, detailing the truth of Irish Heraldry. He explains that, in the past century a thriving business has grown selling family shields to any bearer of the name or name variant. The purchaser of this shield is generally of the opinion that it belongs to the family and is a link with a past relative or clan. However, the truth of the matter is that shields are not unique to a name or a clan. A shield is unique to an individual.

In the past some prestigious individual applied to the Chief Herald of Ireland, or England for the honor of holding a shield or heraldic achievement. This heraldic achievement was granted to the individual and recorded according to law by the Chief Herald. The shield belonged to the applicant, or grantee, and it became the hereditary property of his immediate family or bloodline for as long as the direct line should exist. The shield was not the property of anyone who happened to bear the same name as the grantee.

Since heraldic achievements are considered property, one could legally challenge the usurpation of one. However, such suits are highly improbable since there are few chieftains of direct bloodline left to challenge this behavior, and those who do exist are magnanimous enough to allow their namesakes a sense of pride in a heritage that honors them.

“What they are in effect doing by assuming these derelict arms is assuming the chieftainship of that name, without acceptable proof to substantiate the claim. Although there exists in Gaelic armory a tradition of expressing one’s wish to be known as related to a particular, perhaps famous, family, to



do so by the use of an undifferenced coat of arms without provable descent most certainly has no legal sanction. Quite apart from any legal considerations, to misappropriate another's arms shows, in the would-be armiger, a scant respect for his true ancestors and though he may not be prosecuted he may well be ridiculed.”³

Family Mottoes

Family mottoes varied and did not necessarily belong with the coat of arms. They were usually war cries used by the clan in battle. Some may have been related to the family name, or expressed the clan's religious stance, or exploits in battle. Some were simply the clan's hopes or dreams on a particular day. When a new chief was elected his personal agenda could cause a change in the clan motto. Most mottoes in Britain and Ireland were recorded in Latin. French mottoes may be a more modern twist on the Latin. This seems to have been the case with the Ó Meachair clan. The following are three different mottoes attributed to this clan.

Deus Protector Noster (God is our Protector)

In Periculis Audax (Bold in Danger)

Toujours Pret (Always Ready)

¹ ÓhOgain, Dr. Daithi. *Myths, Legends and Romance: An Encyclopedia of the Irish Folk Tradition*, Prentice Hall Press, 1991, p.296

² Hyde, Douglas. *A Literary History of Ireland*, Ernest Benn Ltd., 1980, p.45

³ O Comain, Micheal. *The Poolbeg Book of Irish Heraldry*, Poolbeg, 1991, p.31

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MICHAEL F. CROWLEY LECTURE SERIES RESUMES IN OCTOBER

The Museum's popular lecture series will kick-off October 14 with Dr. Scott Molloy, an award-winning professor at the University of Rhode Island Labor Research Center. Dr. Molloy will speak about his new book, *Irish Titan, Irish Toilers: Joseph Banigan and Nineteenth-Century New England Labor* (University of New Hampshire Press, July 2008). In his book, Molloy explores the life of Joseph Banigan, one of New England and America's most successful 19th Century industrialists. Banigan was an Irish Potato Famine refugee, who established himself in Rhode Island as an entrepreneur, and became New England's first Catholic millionaire. Additional information about this lecture will be mailed in an upcoming flyer.

SAVE THE DATE! **NEW MEMBERS NIGHT** **Dinner & Irish Theater**

Last September's Irish dinner theater evening was a sellout, and also generated many new Museum memberships. This "recipe" for a great evening with old and new Museum friends, great Irish theater and fine food, will be repeated this year. This year's event will be held at the Best Western - Mainstay Inn in Newport, where a larger group can be accommodated. Please mark your calendars for Saturday, September 20, and watch for the flyer to arrive in early September.

NEW MEMBERS WELCOMED

The Museum recently welcomed the following new members:

FROM NEWPORT:

Alysa & Matt Boyle
Steve and Mary Coaty
Stephen Ferris
William Harrington
Jennifer Kane
Greg McDonnell

FROM MIDDLETOWN:

Lila O'H. Farley
Judy Kelley
Barbara M. Renahan
Ann P. Sheeley

FROM PORTSMOUTH:

Annette Jarvis

FROM ELSEWHERE:

David Comerford, Providence, RI
Guy Leighton, Spring Lake, NJ
Gary N. McCloskey, Andover, MA
Paula Shea, Winter Haven, FL
Mr. & Mrs. Joseph Tracy,
E. Greenwich, RI

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