

HISTORIC DISCOVERY?



Jacqueline Marque/Daily News photo

Jack Dyer stands on the second floor of the house he owns on Newport's Sherman Street that might be the original church used by the congregation that became St. Mary's. If he is right, the structure was probably the first Catholic church in Rhode Island.

Owner suspects old building is long-lost site of early church

By Wendy M. Fontaine
Daily News staff

NEWPORT — The broken glass window at a vacant house on Sherman Street may be a portal to the past, a link to the times when Irish immigrants were mining coal quarries, constructing Fort Adams and coming into their own in a city called Newport.

The house at 19 Sherman St., a typical two-story home painted light blue and white, may be the original building for St. Mary's Church, according to a local architect and historians. It is believed to be two centuries old, used first as a schoolhouse and later as a church. It likely dates back to the early 19th century, when the Irish were coming to the city to work as coal miners, masons and laborers.

Some people believe the structure was the

first Catholic church in Rhode Island and one of the first in all of New England.

"All things point to that, but I can't do an absolute paper trail to nail it," said Richard Long, an architect who helped the Doris Duke Foundation restore the city's Colonial homes. "It will take about two more weeks of research."

"There is no DNA test for this building," said its owner, real estate developer Jack Dyer. "There is no person who has lived 200 years to be a witness. But the weight of the evidence is enormous."

Dyer purchased the lot where the house is located and another lot behind it last May with plans to develop the two old homes there into condominiums. He had finished renovating one of the homes and was about to begin

renovating the second when Long, who is Dyer's architect, discovered there was much more to the building than what could be seen from the street.

Inside the dilapidated structure, there were peculiarities. There were fireplaces inside but no chimneys, which indicated it was used as a public meeting place rather than as a residence. Two posts on the back end of the house were so irregularly spaced along the wall that Long considered it was evidence of a bell tower having been located there.

Also, the ceilings were high, the basement was situated strangely, the timbers were very old and there was evidence of a steeple.

"Neither of us had any inkling of its significance" until work was about to begin on its de-

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molition, Dyer said. "The kind of construction that is in this (house) is mortis and tendon."

A complicated history

Evidence suggests the building was originally located on Barney Street. It was operated by Eleazor Trevette as a schoolhouse beginning in 1809. It may have been a school for black children. Trevette also ran a school for black children a few blocks away on Clarke Street.

In 1828, the Catholic Diocese purchased the school and converted it into a church for the city's Irish immigrants. The congregation, called St. Joseph's Church, grew rapidly and a new church was soon needed, said Vincent Arnold, a local historian and president of the Museum of Newport Irish History.

A larger, more Gothic-looking structure was built in 1837 at the corner of Barney and Mount Vernon streets. The new church could hold several thousand people, far more than could be accommodated at the old location, Arnold said.

The Catholic Church purchased other property in 1848 — a lot on Spring Street. The new parish was renamed St. Mary's Church and was dedicated in 1852.

The former church at Barney and Mount Vernon streets was torn down in 1863. As for the original structure, it was probably moved from Barney Street but no public records could trace its destination, Dyer said. Essentially, it had disappeared.

Arnold said moving houses from neighborhood to neighborhood was a common practice in the 1800s, but finding documentation to trace the relocation of a building is often difficult.

"Buildings were moved and transported consistently, but the evidence of it is hard to find," he said. "The land evidence records we are working with normally won't show the moving of a building like this."

Preservation efforts begin

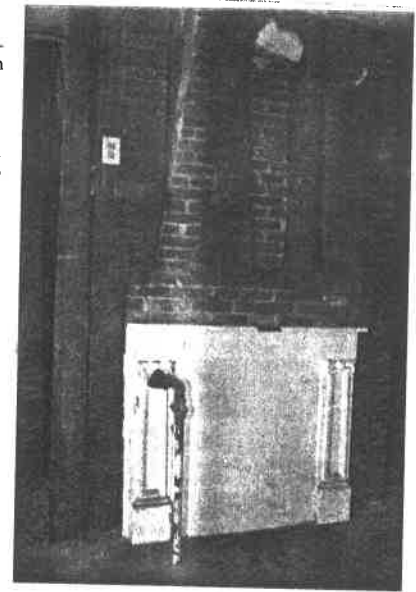
After the discovery at his Sherman Street property, Dyer began looking for an organization interested in preserving the integrity of the building. He first spoke with members of the Museum of Newport Irish History and later with a former classmate of his daughter, a St. George's School graduate named Richard Randolph. Randolph, a 20-year-old student at Colby College in Maine, is interested in protecting the building's possible history as a school for black children and has contacted the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People about the property, Dyer said.

Arnold said his group is doing research to see if the site is indeed the state's oldest Catholic church.

"It is quite probably the building because it is so near the original site and the interior structure of the building is the right type," he said. "It makes sense that it should be the building."

Robert J. McKenna, vice president of the museum and a former Newport mayor, said he is excited about the prospect that the building could be the original parish.

"It's exciting and a mystery and something that is an important part of Newport's history," he said. McKenna said the site could be considered as a location for the Irish history museum, which has been looking for a home.



Jacqueline Marquie/Daily News photo

Historic mantel pieces in Jack Dyer's Sherman Street property have been stolen. The building is believed to be the first Catholic church in the state.

Dyer has asked U.S. Rep. Patrick J. Kennedy, D-R.I., for help in finding organizations interested in preserving the history of the building and providing funding for its restoration. Rick McAuliffe, Kennedy's district director, visited the property Friday and met with Long and Dyer.

The prospect that the building could be the original St. Mary's Church is significant to Kennedy both professionally and personally. His uncle, John F. Kennedy, married Jacqueline Lee Bouvier Kennedy at St. Mary's Church on Spring Street in Sept. 12, 1953.

Larry Berman, a spokesman for the congressman, said the building may be eligible for the U.S. Department of the Interior's Save America's Treasures program, which has in the past provided funding for Touro Synagogue and Salve Regina University's Ochre Court.

"Our initial goal is to get the department to come down and take a look at it," Berman said Friday after the visit.

Historians say that if the evidence proves to be true, the findings at 19 Sherman St. would be vital to the history of the city, the Catholic community and Irish-American culture. Frank Boyle, a communicant of St. Mary's Church, said the congregation is preparing to renovate its current home and celebrate its 150th anniversary. It would be a blessing if the original church could be located and preserved, he said.

"We certainly would be delighted to know where it is at this point in time," he said. "It was the work of people who many years ago gave a lot to this parish."