

Old cemetery gets restored by volunteers

By Ryan Blessing
Daily News staff

NEWPORT — The newly restored St. Joseph's Cemetery on Barney Street has become a visible link to Newport's proud Irish heritage.

A dedication ceremony for the restored cemetery, sponsored by the Museum of Newport Irish History, was held Sunday as part of the Newport Irish Heritage Month celebration.

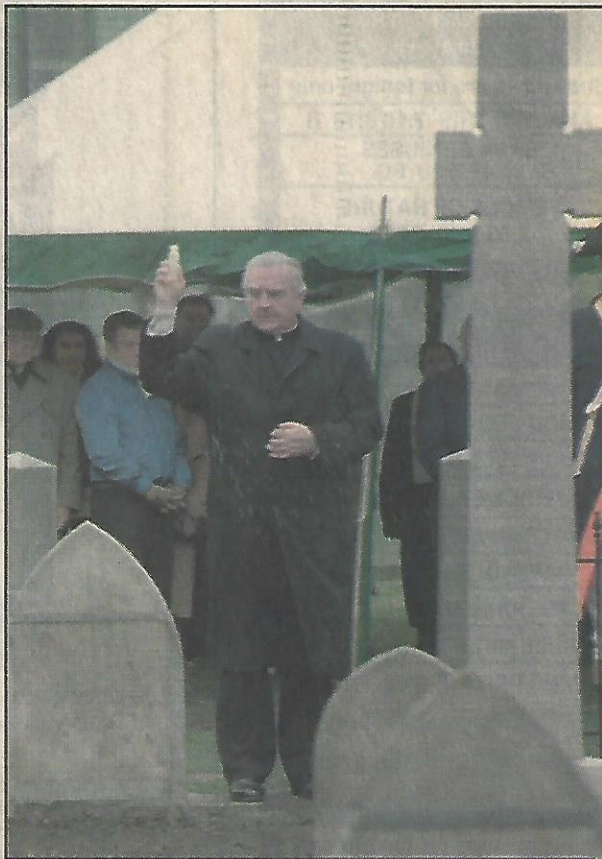
The small cemetery, known locally as the "Barney Street Cemetery," was established after 1828. It is the site of the first permanent Catholic church in Rhode Island.

Before the restoration project began last August, it was evident the cemetery had fallen on hard times. Over the years, headstones had fallen over or been knocked down, and an iron fence that once surrounded the plot had vanished. A stone-carved cross, built about 75 years ago, had been knocked down and was chipped and cracked.

Retired Fire Chief John Booth, a lifelong resident of Newport, coordinated the volunteer effort for the restoration, the first project for the Museum of Newport Irish History.

Booth said that after he retired he was looking for something to get involved with, but he didn't figure on putting as much work as he did into the cemetery.

"It was a fun project, and in the end all the hard work



Brendan Bush/Daily News photo

Auxiliary Bishop of Providence Robert Mulvee sprinkles holy water Sunday during the dedication of St. Joseph's Cemetery in Newport.

paid off," Booth said. Because the project took a lot of time, the restoration team was working on the cemetery until the last minute.

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"I'm relieved the hard work is over. We were working right up until noon yesterday (Saturday) on it, so it's nice to be able to rest and take a look at all the effort," Booth said.

The restoration work is not entirely complete, but very close. The cemetery still needs a rear section of fence, and sod needs to be placed around the headstones, but the major results of the restoration are clearly visible.

Vincent Arnold, president of the Museum of Newport Irish History, said the final touches will be done over the next month.

The 25 headstones were removed in the fall and taken to a local warehouse, where they were washed and scrubbed clean, Booth said. They were then returned to their original locations.

The new black fence that surrounds the restored headstones is a replica of a wrought iron fence of the 1850s. It was made by B & B Welding and Repair Inc. of Newport.

The stone cross was restored to its original likeness by Nick Benson of The John Stevens Shop in Newport.

The brief dedication of the cemetery drew a crowd of people, most of whom were involved with the project or were vocal supporters of it.

Auxiliary Bishop Robert Mulvee

of Providence led the dedication prayer. Mulvee said it was ironic that some of Newport's first Irish immigrants were buried on the same site where they were first able to worship.

"I know from their spot in heaven they thank you," Mulvee said before sprinkling the plot with holy water.

Members of the Newport Artillery Company served as the official honor guard for the ceremony, with bagpiper John Sullivan providing the music.

Arnold said the Museum of Newport Irish History plans to remain active throughout Newport County. A video history of the Irish in Newport is in the works, he said.

The organization, founded in 1996, recognizes and preserves the contributions of Irish men and women of Newport.

"We want to remain active in all aspects of Irish history and immigration as they relate to the Newport area," Arnold said.

Booth said he would like to learn more about the people buried in the cemetery, and if they had any descendants.

"A lot of them died very young, they were babies or children. But it's possible a few of the adults' descendants are still somewhere in Newport," he said.