



A Legacy of Faith and Community:

**A History of the Cemetery of the
Basilica of Old Saint Patrick's Cathedral**

By Richard Daniel McCann

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Saint Patrick's Cathedral on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, as well as its predecessor on Mott Street in the Lower East Side neighborhood of Nolita, bear testament to the genesis and struggle of the Catholic Church not only in New York City, but of the nation. These historic edifices reflect the penultimate expression of Catholicism's triumph over the bigotry and hostility of an earlier time in the United States. Tracing the bold line of ascent from Catholicism's earliest wood-framed houses of worship to the majestic stone structures that replaced them clearly expresses the history of Catholicism come of age.

Given the illustrious history of both church buildings, people are surprised to learn that these locations were originally intended not for the building of magnificent houses of worship, but for burial sites. The graveyard of Old Saint Patrick's came into existence in 1801, followed by the building and completion of New York's first Roman Catholic Cathedral in 1815. Similarly, the property known as the "Middle Road," site of the present-day Saint Patrick's Cathedral on East 51st Street and Fifth Avenue, was purchased for use as a burial ground in 1826 but deemed impractical for its intended use because it was so far above the line of

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settlement. It is necessary to look back at events around the time of the American Revolutionary War in New York City to develop a clearer understanding of how the cemetery of Old Saint Patrick's came into being.¹

Roman Catholicism had been outlawed in New York, just as in the other English colonies in pre-Revolutionary War America. In the period between 1642 and 1763, laws passed by colonial legislatures reflected proscriptions against Catholic worship. The most extreme example was a 1647 Massachusetts law that stated, "any priest, seminarian or missionary connected to the See of Rome would be put to death."²

Up until the Revolution in New York, Catholic priests were forbidden to administer the last rites and sacraments, including the traditional obsequies for the dead. Prior to 1783, Catholics were forced to utilize the burial ground attached to Trinity Church on Broadway as a final resting place.³

¹ Most Reverend Michael Corrigan, D.D., "The Catholic Cemeteries of New York." In the Catholic Historical Society: *Historical Records and Studies*, Volume 1., 369. 1900.

² Marian T. Horvart, PhD., *Let None Dare Call it Liberty: The Catholic Church in Colonial America*: [http://www.traditioninaction.org/History/B001_Colonies.html]: retrieved [March 7th, 2019].

³Most Reverend Michael Corrigan, D.D., 370.

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Finally, in 1785, after numerous failed attempts, a plot of land was successfully purchased from Trinity Church located on the corner of Barclay and Church Streets, measuring 100 X 125 feet. On this site, Saint Peter's Roman Catholic Church was built. The simple red brick building was to occupy an area of 48 X 81 feet, with the remainder of the property to be set aside for a cemetery. This was the first official Roman Catholic burial ground in New York State.⁴

With the beginning of the new American Republic and recognition of the significant role played by Catholics in the fight against British tyranny, pervasive anti-Catholic discrimination temporarily eased. By 1796, Saint Peter's was already experiencing the effects of its growing parish's outstripping of existing facilities. This was no less true of the cemetery. As a means of limiting burials, the Trustees imposed a \$4.00 per family assessment. While justified as financial support of the parish, the assessment's real purpose was to ensure that only Saint Peter's parishioners would be interred on its grounds. The need for a larger worship site necessitated the use of either existing cemetery ground or the acquisition of new land elsewhere.

⁴Ibid., 370.

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Ever aware of the dilemma, the trustees of Saint Peter's decided to purchase nine lots for cemetery purposes at the northwest corner of Prince and Mulberry Streets on May 23rd, 1801. This was followed in January 1803 with the purchase of additional lots on the northeast corner of Prince and Mott Streets. A third acquisition consisting of two additional lots on Mulberry Street and one on Mott Street was concluded on June 11th, 1811. The dimensions of the new land were as follows: 1) Purchase of 1801 – Length of 220 feet on Mulberry Street, with an eastward width of 100 feet; 2) Purchase of 1803 – Length of 250 feet on Mott Street with a westward width of 100 feet; 3) Purchase of 1811- Length of 20 feet on Mulberry Street, 80 feet north of the previous purchase of 1801, and 20 feet north on Mott Street adjoined the purchase of 1803. On July 21st, 1818, Cornelius Heeney donated one lot measuring 20 X 95 feet adjoining the second parcel of lots purchased on Mulberry Street. The final purchase was settled on June 10th, 1824, with the adding of three additional lots of Mrs. Jewell's property fronting on Mulberry Street. The dimensions of this land were 60 X 95 feet and situated in between Heeney's donation of 1818.⁵

⁵ *Ibid.*, 371.

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While the newly purchased land had been intended for use as a cemetery for Saint Peter's parish, the increasing Catholic population of New York presented new infrastructure challenges. The first two decades of the nineteenth-century in New York City witnessed the building of new Catholic Churches in Manhattan to serve the needs of the growing Catholic community. Even though the 16,000 Catholics of the city were scattered, the need for new worship sites was prescient, and a proposal for a Cathedral church to be constructed on the grounds of a portion of the land acquired by Saint Peter's for its cemetery was formally put into the works. Generous donations for the new church were made by Andrew Morris, Cornelius Heeney, and Matthew Reid. On Easter Monday, April 13th, 1809, the Board of Lay Trustees were duly elected: Dominick Lynch, Andrew Morris, Thomas Stoughton, Michael Roth, Patrick McKay, John Hinton, James Walsh, Miles J. Clossey and Bernard Dornin. At a meeting in the vestry of Saint Peter's Church held on May 24th, 1809, the trustees passed a series of resolutions, one of which was that the name of the church was to be named in honor of Ireland's patron, Saint Patrick. Additionally, the dimensions of the new church were to be 120 X 80 feet. Specifically, with respect to the cemetery, the following resolution

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was adopted: “Whereby the building of the foundation would interfere with sundry graves in the aforesaid burying ground, it was resolved that Mr. Idley be instructed to have removed with all possible care, decency and expedition, such graves as would be incommoded thereby, and their contents deposited in fresh graves, with the assistance of Reverend Mr. Kohlmann and the relatives be invited to attend, if they please.”⁶

During the construction Saint Patrick’s, the following Faithful departed were re-interred in accordance with the aforementioned resolution of the trustees: Philip Kelly, died July 2nd, 1801; Peter Eisenberg, died October 21st, 1801; Susan Kelly, died January 1st, 1803; Annie Carroll, died August 27th, 1803; John Dougherty, died June 25th, 1807; John McAndrew, died August 8th, 1807; John McAndrew, died July 17th, 1808; Bridget Fisher, died July 4th, 1811; Francis Marit, died February 9th, 1812; John Hart, died February 18th, 1813.⁷

The cornerstone of the first Saint Patrick’s Cathedral was dedicated

⁶ Most Reverend John M. Farley, D.D., *History of St. Patrick’s Cathedral* (New York: Society for the Propagation of Faith, 1908), 51-52.

⁷Most Reverend Michael Corrigan, D.D., 374.

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On Thursday, June 8th, 1809, by the Very Reverend Anthony Kohlmann, Vicar-General of the Diocese of New York. The structure was finally completed in 1815. Starting in the 1820s, Old Saint Patrick's would start receiving the remains of the Faithful in the 85-foot-long chambered vault, which had been constructed under the church. The vault consisted of thirty-five family crypts and five vaults for clergy, the first being Bishop John Connolly, second diocesan bishop of New York, and the last being former pastor Monsignor Nicola Marinacci, who died at the age of 103 and laid to rest inside his own special crypt in September of 2014.

With the completion of the new church, the peaceful and powerful beauty of the combined Gothic style and cemetery area conveyed to Catholics and non-Catholics alike the growing prominence and respectability of Roman Catholicism. Despite the aesthetic qualities of the new church, Catholics were still scattered, and to ensure there would be attendance, Saint Peter's Church alternated two Sundays a month so that people could go up to Saint Patrick's for Mass.

By 1833, the graveyard of Saint Patrick's had reached maximum capacity. In 1832, the New York City Health Board imposed a prohibition on intramural burials

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and good citizens, both Catholic as well as Protestant, observed these restrictions with an eye toward upholding the good and welfare of the public. With the outbreak of Asiatic cholera, 3,500 hundred deaths resulted in the need for acquisition of a new burial ground. Five Saint Patrick's trustees were tasked with finding suitable, additional burial space for the parish, and purchased for the sum of \$37,050 dollars from Alderman Charles Henry Hall a plot of land located between 11th and 12th Streets between First Avenue and Avenue A. The conveyance was officially recorded on August 29th, 1832.⁸

The 11th Street Cemetery was used until 1848. In the meeting of the Saint Patrick's Board of Trustees dated September 9th, 1845, it was announced that the Alsop Farms, consisting of 115 acres in Newtown Township, Long Island, had been appropriated for a burial ground. At a special meeting of the Board of Trustees held on July 31st, 1848, it was resolved that the cemetery of Newtown Creek, recently consecrated in part, should be called Calvary, and placed at the disposal of the public.⁹

⁸ Ibid., 375.

⁹ Ibid., Quoted on 375.

The cemetery grounds and underground vault of Old Saint Patrick's Cathedral are the final resting place for Catholics of every rank and distinction, including the following: Patrick and Elizabeth McCloskey, parents of the first Cardinal-Archbishop of New York and first Cardinal of North America, John McCloskey; John Michael O'Connor, Captain of Artillery, U.S. Army, War of 1812; Honest John Kelly, member of Congress and leader of Tammany Hall; John McKeon, Captain of Artillery, U.S. Army, War of 1812; Thomas Eckert, Brigadier General, Union Army, head of the Union Telegraph Bureau, Civil War; John Brady, Justice of the New York State Supreme Court; Thomas Brady, Attorney and Educator, tutor to John Cardinal McCloskey; James Topham Brady, noted New York criminal defense attorney; Gregory Dillon, founding member of the Emigrant Savings Bank; Charlotte Melmouth, noted nineteenth-century Shakespearean actress; Captain Pierre Landais, United States Naval officer, American Revolutionary War; Captain Joseph Lametti, Captain of Artillery, U.S. Army, War of 1812; Dominick Lynch, founding member of both Saint Peter's and Saint Patrick's parishes; Dominick Lynch II, prominent wine distributor; Valentine Derry, Irish expatriate and veteran of the Rising of 1798 against British rule in Ireland;

Charles Del Vecchio, officer of the Catholic Benevolent Society of New York; Colonel James Mullany, Veteran of the War of 1812, and Quartermaster of the United States Army (1816-1818); John B. LaScala, Benefactor of the New York Orphan's Asylum; Patrick Nealis, veteran of the American Revolutionary War. Doctor Robert W. Hogan, founder of the Irish Emigrant Society; Peter Harmony, prominent cotton manufacturer; Edmund Fitzgerald, New York City Alderman; John Gottberger, distiller and distributor of cordials, and a member of the Carroll Hall slate of candidates proposed by Bishop Hughes during the 1842 New York State Assembly elections; John Hart, veteran of the War of 1812, and Sexton of Saint Patrick's church; Daniel Keeline, one of the original twenty-two Catholics who petitioned the French consulate to officially organize the Catholic Church in New York City, and open Saint Peter's Church. William Devine, General, United States Army, Mexican War (1846-1848).

Though the time-honored ritual of burial in the graveyards of New York City Catholic Churches may be a remnant of the past, Saint Patrick's Old Cathedral has once again assumed a lead in making provision for suitable final resting places for our beloved deceased. With cremation now assuming a more prominent alternative

to traditional burial, Monsignor Donald Sakano, Pastor Emeritus Old Saint Patrick's and Parish Manager Christopher Flatz, enlisted the expertise of Frank Alfieri, President Revenue Works Inc. to conduct a feasibility study to introduce columbaria in both the catacombs and cemetery for the placement of cinerary urns containing the cremated remains of the Faithful into permanent niches. These efforts resulted in the revival of the Old Cathedral tradition of Christian burial on church grounds for Catholics from the neighborhood, New York City and beyond. Now, as in the past, Old Saint Patrick's Cathedral continues its mission of serving the needs of its Faith community, not only in this life, but the next. If you are interested in reserving your place in the Basilica's rich history by securing a niche in one of our columbaria you can call (212) 226-8075 ext. 1008 or email frank@oldcathedral.org for more information. There is very limited availability so act quickly.

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