

Descendants want unmarked cemetery to be maintained

By **Jacques Kelly, The Baltimore Sun**

JULY 18, 2010

Under a hillside of thistle and milkweed secluded within Northeast Baltimore's Clifton Park rests an unmarked neighborhood of the dead.

Hidden from view and overtaken by nature, the mid-19th-century St. Vincent DePaul Church Cemetery is the burial ground for some 2,000 Baltimoreans. But only a few broken limestone markers remain.

The descendants of the Irish, German and Italian families buried here, using Internet message boards, are joining forces to bring recognition to the graveyard troubled by criminal, financial and maintenance issues for the past 65 years.

"It is heartbreaking to see the place today. I want to reclaim my Irish ancestors' graves," said Stephanie Arthur Town, a former Charles Village resident whose great-grandparents are buried in what are now unmarked graves. "It's just not a dignified setting. I consider cemeteries to be hallowed ground."

Now, a group of descendants and amateur genealogists has united with the purpose of getting the site cleared and maintained.

"We are modest in our goals. We want to work with [St. Vincent's Church] and the park people to have a plan for keeping it cleared," said Michael John Lewis, a San Francisco resident who is a member of the St. Vincent Study Group and the great-great-grandson of a County Kilkenny-born tailor buried in the cemetery.

The study group's 27 members want to have an arborist note which trees are worth saving and use herbicides to tame years of uncontrolled weed growth. They are mainly asking for recognition of the abandoned cemetery, which hasn't been the site of a burial for decades.

"It's just sad. These were living, breathing people once," said Michael J. O'Brien, a Buckingham, Pa., retired research scientist whose great-grandmother, Margaret Stafford, an Irish immigrant from County Wexford, rests somewhere within the cemetery.

St. Vincent's Church, on Front Street in downtown Baltimore, retains ownership of the cemetery's 5 acres. Its pastor, the Rev. Richard Lawrence, who will be taking the group's concerns to his parish council, said, "These people could be a real help. In fact, I got a check from one of them recently." He foresees matching the funds the new group raises to make improvements, which could initially cost \$2,500.

A spokeswoman for Gregory A. Bayor, director of the city's Department of Recreation and Parks, said he is reviewing the group's proposals and is interested in the project.

The cemetery sits toward the Belair Road side of Clifton Park and abuts its golf course. The only visible clue about the cemetery is a small patch of broken stones by the side of the road primarily used by park trash-hauling vehicles.

"On my last visit in spring 2008, a group of park workers were amazed when I told them my family was buried in the park," said Lewis. "They would not believe me until I showed them an old map of Baltimore that clearly showed the boundaries of St. Vincent's Cemetery within Clifton Park.

"On the same trip, I found remaining stones beside the access road. A park worker did tell me that over the years, workers have hauled up stones from the site, put them along the access road and allowed people to take them away."

It is not the only burial ground in that area to have vanished. The Laurel Cemetery, which opened in 1851 on Belair Road and was once Baltimore's largest African-American cemetery, was plowed up for a shopping center in the early 1960s. The bodies were taken to Carroll County.

During the 1960s, the St. Vincent cemetery, owned by a congregation that describes itself as the oldest Roman Catholic parish in continuous use in Baltimore, was hard hit by vandalism.

The cemetery was officially closed in the early 1980s, partially at the suggestion of the Baltimore City Health Department, and the grave markers were destroyed. The congregation petitioned the courts to take over the rights of the graveholders and won.

Lawrence said that an "Irish gang" based in Northeast Baltimore used the cemetery for initiation rites and that police officers told him the gang inductees would force open a mausoleum, remove a corpse and place it on the Clifton Park golf course. The prospective gang member would then spend the night in the empty tomb.

The pastor said the unwalled and unguarded cemetery was also subject to grave tampering.

"There was never a perpetual care fund for the cemetery," Lawrence said.

Lawrence regards the online community of St. Vincent descendants as being akin to the families who once visited graves on Memorial Day and All Souls' Day and did their own weeding and plot tending. News stories in The Baltimore Sun over the years said the church was "too poor" to move the interred bodies to another location.

Cemetery advocates are looking for additional information and access to all church records relating to the cemetery.

"I've been searching for the names of those buried there for 30 years," said Joyce Erway, a former Baltimorean whose husband, Guy, owned radio station WAYE. Erway is an amateur genealogist who has researched her Shanley roots. She says her grandfather was buried there in 1943 and she has verified burial records on 843 people.

"All we wanted were the records," she said. "It's been a long struggle. The church didn't pay a lot of attention to us."

The study group, which Lewis said is "growing and growing," hopes to change that. Lewis said, "Actually, our most important memorial may be our website. We are collecting the names so people can check if their ancestors are buried here."

The St. Vincent's descendants group has also reached out to other people with an interest in abandoned burial grounds.

"From our experience, all it takes is a few motivated people," said James Lanier, a board member of the Ellicott City-based Coalition to Protect Maryland Burial Sites. "A riding mower and five or six people can work maintenance wonders over a six-month period. You have to raise public awareness, too."

jacques.kelly@baltsun.com

- [Text NEWS to 70701 to get Baltimore Sun local news text alerts](#)

Copyright © 2021, The Baltimore Sun, a Baltimore Sun Media Group publication | Place an Ad

Missing comments? We've turned off comments across Baltimore Sun while we review our commenting platform and consider ways to improve the system. If you purchased points through the Solid Opinion platform and would like a refund, please let us know at circsupport@tronc.com.