

ST. MARY'S CEMETERY

The first Roman Catholic masses in Fairport were celebrated in 1849 by Father Michael Guilbride in the home of Smith Brennan, which was located on or near the towpath. By 1852 a congregation had been established as a mission of St. Anne's of Palmyra. Within twenty years, the congregation of the Church of the Assumption of Our Lady was worshipping in a large wooden building on High Street, and in another ten years, the growing congregation had built a substantial brick structure on the same street. This thriving community was in need of a consecrated burial ground. A Catholic cemetery on Pinnacle Road had opened in 1839, and some of the German Catholic churches had their own cemeteries, but the need for more space was apparent not only in the wider diocese, but also locally. In 1870, Bishop McQuaid purchased land for a "well arranged and properly conducted cemetery" on Charlotte Boulevard in Rochester, which was consecrated in 1871 as Holy Sepulchre Cemetery. The next year, a Catholic cemetery was established on a secluded hillside off of Turk Hill Road in Perinton.

St. Mary's Cemetery, run by Assumption of Our Lady Parish in the Village of Fairport, was dedicated in 1872 by Bishop McQuaid. The land for the cemetery lay between farms owned by Frank Traw (Trau) and J.R. Murphy, and may have been donated by the former. The cemetery has always been cared for by dedicated members of the parish. One gentleman, Mr. Peter Doyle, spent countless hours mowing, trimming, and developing the site for over 30 years.

The first burials in the cemetery were members of the Brennan family, three of whom died in 1872: Maria who was 23, Sarah, 48, and Anna Marie, 10 weeks. Multiple deaths in a year and the deaths of infants and children are but two of the observations that can be made from reading through the cemetery lists and reading gravestones. In the Biracree family, five of nine plots are those of infants and children. On the other hand, there is no lack of gravestones showing ages well into the 70's and 80's. Guiseppe LaPietra died at age 80 and Bridget Lucas lived to 88. If one could survive childhood, childbirth, and workplace accidents, the chances of a long life increased.

A large majority of the families in St. Mary's are Irish or Italian, reflecting the immigration pattern of the United States as a whole during the 19th century. The Irish came first with the canal and the subsequent expansion of the area. By the latter part of the century, the factories of the newly industrialized towns and cities were attracting more and more people from eastern and southern Europe, which includes Italy. A number of St. Mary's burial records note births in County Kilkenny while others simply note Ireland or Italy or Germany. Many of the families are large, sometimes having fifteen or twenty burials in a family plot. The Burns, Murphy, and Kennedy family plots have over 20 graves each. Many of the Irish and Italian surnames, such as Ryan and Kennelly and Finnigan; DiRisio and Fiandacca and Pomponio, are familiar in the town and village. Although first names differ from generation to generation, a core of names seem to last, like Catherine, Michael, Thomas, Mary, Joseph, and John; others, like Antonio or Giovanni, have been Anglicized; others are rarely seen today, like Aloysius or Agatha or Erasmo. At least one surname was changed from Pidnikowski to Pierce.

Visits to Perinton cemeteries are travels in history. Pioneers and immigrants, veterans from our wars, founders of businesses and community activists, educators and politicians, children and the very old – they are all there. St. Mary's, a quiet, secluded hilltop cemetery, is one stop on the journey.