

## Cemeteries memorialize past, focus hope on the resurrection

By Lee Strong  
Staff writer

The Battle of the Cemetery Lane will never appear in military history textbooks. But for Corning Catholics of the 1850s, the conflict was as emotionally real as any that would be fought in the Civil War just a few years later.

The battle concerned Catholics' efforts to establish their own cemetery in the Southern Tier city. As recorded in Father Robert McNamara's 1948 book, *A Century of Grace: The History of St. Mary's Roman Catholic Parish Corning, N.Y. 1848-1948*, the yearlong fight revealed some of the anti-Catholic sentiments of the time.

St. Mary's parishioners repeatedly had tried to purchase land for a cemetery, but those attempts were thwarted until the Catholics resorted to buying the land through a phony purchaser.

That was only the start of the conflict, since reaching the burial ground required funeral processions to pass down a lane on land owned by a Protestant. He refused them access to the lane, blocking it with a fence. Repeatedly the Catholics took down the fence, and repeatedly the owner put it back up.

Finally, the owner moved a small barn onto the lane. The Catholics dismantled it.

For that offense, the mourners were arrested, tried and forced to pay the landowner \$1,500.

The battle finally ended when the Corning Catholics bought another strip of land that gave them direct access to their cemetery. St. Mary's Cemetery remains open to this day, serving as one of the Diocese of Rochester's four regional cemeteries. The other regional cemeteries are St. Joseph's, Auburn; Ss. Peter and Paul's, Elmira; and St. Mary's/St. Patrick's, Geneva.

Few other Catholic cemeteries have been the sites of such battles, but all the parish and regional cemeteries in the Diocese of Rochester can trace their history back to the early days of Catholic migration into western New York.

According to Father McNamara, diocesan archivist, the first Catholic cemetery

in the diocese was created in 1823 at St. Patrick's Church in Rochester. The remains in that cemetery were moved to St. Patrick's Cemetery on Pinnacle Hill in 1839, and then again to Holy Sepulchre Cemetery. The land occupied by St. Patrick's was sold in 1960.

Several other cemeteries in the City of Rochester were similarly moved over the years to Holy Sepulchre — Ss. Peter and Paul, St. Joseph, Holy Family, and St. Boniface. After its creation in 1871, Holy Sepulchre became the cemetery for Catholics in what was then the City of Rochester.

Other diocesan parishes likewise created cemeteries, and 59 parishes operate them today. Our Mother of Sorrows Cemetery — opened in 1826 — is the oldest continuously operating Catholic cemetery in the diocese.

These cemeteries were necessary because of the Catholic attitude toward death, noted Robert Vogt, director of Holy Sepulchre.

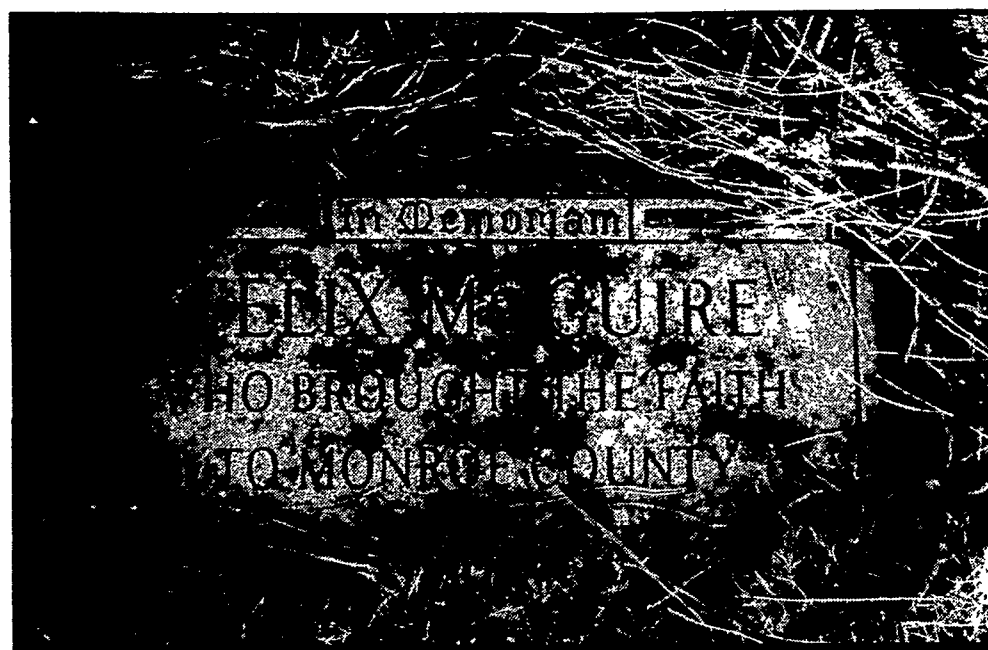
"The whole concept of the Catholic cemetery goes right back to the burial of Christ, and then to the catacombs," Vogt said.

In fact, for years the church mandated that Catholics be buried in a Catholic cemetery unless no such cemetery was available. Vatican II changed the regulations slightly, permitting burial in public cemeteries (according to Canon 1240 of the 1983 Code of Canon Law).

But the preferred burial site still remains a Catholic cemetery, Vogt noted.

"The church is not backing out of it," Vogt said, citing a statement released in 1990 by the bishops of the diocese of New York state. In that statement, the bishops acknowledged that circumstances have changed and that burial in Catholic cemeteries was no longer mandated. Nevertheless, Catholic cemeteries are seen as an extension of the community found in parishes. They do not serve simply as memorials to the past, but also as a focus of hope in the promise of resurrection. Thus, the bishops declared, "The usual and proper place for the burial of Catholics is still the Catholic cemetery in view of the values contained in the Church's burial tradition."

In the City of Rochester, Bishop Bernard McQuaid created Holy Sepulchre to provide a common burial ground for all city Catholics. Vogt noted that creating such a



Rebecca S. Roth

The headstone of Felix McGuire — credited with having arranged for the first Mass ever offered in Rochester (circa 1818) — is one of the many historical treasures in Rochester's oldest parish cemetery, Our Mother of Sorrows on Paddy Hill in Greece.

cemetery was apparently a priority for the first bishop of Rochester, as he purchased 110 acres for Holy Sepulchre within a year of his arrival in the city.

Until Bishop McQuaid's arrival, Vogt said, the Irish and the German parishes had set up separate cemeteries. "When Bishop McQuaid came here, I think he felt that it shouldn't be the Irish vs. the Germans," Vogt remarked. "He didn't want an Irish Catholic cemetery and a German Catholic cemetery. He wanted a Catholic cemetery."

When he created Holy Sepulchre, Bishop McQuaid called upon the talents of Patrick Barry, a nationally recognized horticulturalist who was the partner in the Rochester-based Ellwanger and Barry Nursery, to help plan the cemetery grounds. As a result, the cemetery grounds are home to a wide range of tree varieties.

The cemetery also has All Souls' Chapel, built in 1876, which became the site of an annual ritual in which the bishop would visit the cemetery, sing the Office of the Dead, and then bless all the graves.

This annual event attracted thousands of people, Father McNamara noted. At first people traveled to the cemetery by railroad, embarking at the Dewey Avenue entrance. Bishop McQuaid worked to develop a line on Charlotte Boulevard (now Lake Avenue), which ran through the center of the cemetery grounds. A trolley line was eventually put in in 1887, helping to make Lake Avenue a major thoroughfare, the priest noted.

The blessing ceremony continued to attract large crowds — as many as 15,000

people — until the Second World War, when gas rationing forced many people to stop driving to Holy Sepulchre, Father McNamara said. The practice slowly died out after the war, with the last ceremony taking place in 1965.

In areas outside the City of Rochester, parishes set up their own cemeteries. The four regional cemeteries were among the first — created in four of the diocese's older parishes, Father McNamara noted. When new parishes spun off from these four early parishes, parishioners continued to use the four original cemeteries, giving rise to their status as regional, rather than parish, cemeteries.

Other newly founded parishes created their own cemeteries, however. "You'd be surprised in some of these small rural parishes how important the cemetery is," noted Vogt, who serves as the diocese's delegate to the National Catholic Cemetery Conference and as an unofficial consultant for the cemeteries in the diocese.

When a parish opens a cemetery, it takes on a responsibility, Vogt observed. Cemeteries cannot be moved as easily as a rectory or a church building, he said. Nor can they simply be closed: parishes have an obligation to maintain the cemeteries even after burials in them cease.

New York state law mandates that 10 percent of the monies from the sale of burial plots be placed in a trust fund, Vogt said. The interest earnings from that trust help pay for the upkeep of the cemetery. But in many rural parishes, the revenue from plot sales is so infrequent that the par-

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