

# **Volunteers help beautify cemetery, install memorial to victims of Great Irish Famine**

Approximately 40 volunteers participated in a spring cleanup of the St. Vincent de Paul Cemetery grounds in Baltimore April 28 prior to the installation of a commemorative gravestone honoring the victims of the Great Irish Famine of the 1840s.

Six students from The Catholic High School of Baltimore and two teachers were among the volunteers who thoroughly weeded the area and prepared the site for the new Irish Hunger Memorial gravestone.

Colleen Guler, a world civilization and AP government teacher who has taught at Catholic High for 15 years, has recruited dozens of students to help with the ongoing beautification of the burial grounds since 2010.

"This is a corporal work of mercy," Guler said. "I tell my students that making a sacred place sacred again is a rewarding feeling."

Bonnie LeVeque and Clare Healy, two freshmen, were in charge of brushing off the dirt from tombstones and pulling out weeds. Both are interested in the preservation of the history of the cemetery.

"Working on this project has given me a chance to do more stuff around and be part of the community," said LeVeque, who drives through Clifton Park every morning with a friend in order to get to school. "Also, I get service hours for school."

Parishioners from St. Vincent de Paul Church and organizations such as the Ancient Order of Hibernians in Towson, the Police Emerald Society and the Irish Railroad Workers Museum helped in the cleanup, organized by the Friends of St. Vincent Cemetery (FOSVC).

Mary Pat Clarke, Baltimore City Councilwoman for the 14th district, congratulated

the volunteers on their “very important work for the beautification of our city.”

St. Vincent de Paul Cemetery is in the heart of Clifton Park, which is known historically as the summer estate of philanthropist Johns Hopkins. St. Vincent de Paul Church purchased the cemetery property from the Hopkins estate in 1853. For centuries, the cemetery was subjected to vandalism, abuse and neglect due to political, social and financial issues that prevented its administration from providing the necessary level of care to the property.

“Awesome!” exclaimed Father Raymond Chase, pastor of St. Vincent de Paul, as he arrived at the burial grounds. “This is such an important opportunity for us as a parish to teach about heritage and social justice.”

Stephanie Town, president of FOSVC, a nonprofit created in 2012 with a mission to restore order and dignity to the final resting place of their members’ ancestors, is the force behind the restoration. The organization is committed to make all 5.3 acres of St. Vincent Cemetery into a “rolling field of green that finally complements Clifton Park,” Town said.

Hundreds of Irish immigrants to the United States ended up in Catholic cemeteries with unmarked gravestones after succumbing to diseases related to starvation and poor sanitary conditions while traveling during the Great Famine of the 1840s.

Bill Fahey, a 90-year-old retired captain of the New York City Fire Department donated a commemorative gravestone that was placed in the sacred ground of the St. Vincent cemetery. He has worked with the Committee for the Commemoration of Irish Famine Victims (CCIFV), an Ireland-based organization, to dedicate and plant memorials in the United States and Ireland to identify the often-unmarked graves of thousands of Irish famine victims. He is also leading a petition to the Vatican to beatify the victims of the Irish Hunger, making the point that they died for their faith.

Dominican Father Hugh Vincent Dyer, chaplain to the Johns Hopkins Catholic Community, offered a prayer at the end of the ceremony and stated that, as Catholics, we should never forget those who hungered because “Jesus Christ gives himself to us as food in the Eucharist.”

*For more information on how to participate in this effort and for donations, visit [www.stvincentcemetery.tripod.com](http://www.stvincentcemetery.tripod.com) or contact St. Vincent de Paul Church at 410-962-5078.*