

Irish Gravesites in New York

By Finula Bourke



Riker's Island

The Irish-American connection is sometimes found in unusual places. One such place was Riker's Island.

Samuel Riker was a distinguished officer of the American Revolutionary War and a long-time prisoner of the British. His father, Abraham Rycken, emigrated from Amsterdam in 1638. Samuel inherited the family estate, which became known as Rikers Island.

Riker opened his home, at great risk, to Wolfe Tone, the Emmets, the Sampsons, the MacNevin's and to many of the other Irish patriots of 1798. General Wolfe Tone and other Irishmen plotted the fate of Irish history on this little island, and left his family in the care of the Rikers before making his last trip to France in 1796.

The Old Rikers Cemetery, which was subsequently moved, had the following gravestones:

Doctor William James McNevin, United Irishman, born in Galway, 1768, died in New York, 1841; Jane McNevin, widow of Dr. McNevin and daughter of Samuel Riker; William Sampson, United Irishman, born 1764, died 1838; Grace Sampson, widow of William, died 1853; Catherine Anne Tone, daughter of William and Grace Sampson, died 1864; Jane Purdy, daughter of Dr. McNevin, died 1856; Samuel Riker McNevin; died 1851; William McNevin, M.D., died 1854; Rose Patience McNevin, died 1839; John Campbell, Co. Antrim, died 1861; Margaret Riker, died 1769; Abraham Riker, died 1746.

The Obelisks of St. Paul's

Two large obelisks to the memories of Thomas Addis Emmett and Dr. William McNevin were later erected in St. Paul's Churchyard, in lower Manhattan, near City Hall. Emmett was an Irish Protestant born in Cork in 1764, exiled from Ireland for his activities in support of Irish Catholics.

He emigrated to New York, changed his medical profession for law and became Attorney General of New York State.

The Gaelic inscription on the obelisk reads: "Do mhiannaich se ardmath/cum tir a bhreith/do thug se clu a's fuair se moladh/an deig a bhais."

The English inscription reads: "In memory of Thomas Addis Emmet who exemplified in his conduct and adorned by his integrity the policy and principles of the United Irishmen to forward a brotherhood of affection, a community of rights, an identity of interest, and a union of power among Irishmen of every religious persuasion as the only means of Ireland's chief good. An impartial and adequate representation in an Irish parliament for this (mysterious fate of virtue) was exiled from his native land. In America, the land of freedom, he found a second country, which paid his love by referencing his genius, learned in our laws and in the laws of Europe, in the literature of our times, and in that of antiquity. All knowledge seemed subject to his use. An orator of the first order, clear, copious, fervid, alike powerful to kindle the imagination, touch the affections and sway the reason and the will, simple in his tastes, unassuming in his manners, frank, generous, kind hearted and honorable. His private life was beautiful as his public course was brilliant. Anxious to perpetuate the name and example of such a man, alike illustrious by his genius, his virtues and his fate, consecrated to their affections by her perils, his sacrifices and the deeper calamities of his kindred in a just and holy cause, his sympathizing countrymen erected this monument and cenotaph, born at Cork 24th April, 1764, he died in this city 14th November 1827."

A 35 foot granite monument was also erected to the memory of Dr. William McNevin, who came to New York from his native town of Galway on the 4th of July, 1805. McNevin, as mentioned above, was a leader in Catholic church activities and a great friend of Wolfe Tone. He married Jane Ricker, daughter of Samuel Riker. In this country, he

accepted the chair of obstetrics in the College of Physicians and Surgeons. He became Supervisor of Hospitals and was later appointed Physician of New York City. He was a Charter Trustee of the Bowery Savings Bank in its first year, 1834-1835.

The English inscription on the monument reads: "William James MacNeven, M.D., born in Ireland, March 21, A.D. 1763, died in New York, July 12, A.D. 1841/Who in the Cause of his native land sacrificed the bright prospects of his youth/and passed years in poverty and exile till in America he found a country which he loved as truly as he did the land of his birth/To the service of this country which had received him as a son/he devoted his high scientific acquirements with eminent ability.

"As professor of chemistry in the medical schools of this city, he was one of the first and ablest teachers in America. Of those discoveries and doctrines which raised chemistry into a science and prepared it for future illimitable extension/His calm deportment and habitual prudence covered the warmest and most generous affections shown as well in the relations of private life as in his ardent patriotism alike towards the country of his birth and that of his adoption."

Mount Carmel

The Mount Carmel Cemetery at 26th Avenue and 21st Street, Astoria, was a dumping ground when I first discovered it in 1975. The plot had been sold to builders. My efforts to have it restored paid off--the building permit was revoked and it has been kept in excellent condition since 1983.

Headstones, now standing erect, reveal dates from 1846, from many Irish counties--Westmeath, Cavan, King's Country, Tyrone, Queen's County, Louth, etc. One family represented is Lawless--Elizabeth Lawless died 1884, aged 60 years, William Lawless died 1875, 19 years, James J. Lawless, died 1876, aged 22 years, Thomas Lawless died 1877, aged 25 years; Joseph A. Lawless died 1885, aged 22 years.

An Irish Lighthouse Keeper

Roosevelt Island in the 1800s, belonged to a family called Blackwell. The island stretches from north to south for about one mile. It contained the city penitentiary, the workhouse, the Alms house, hospitals and a lunatic asylum. The name was changed to Welfare Island and later to Roosevelt Island.

The octagonal building, still standing on the island, was the lunatic asylum and a basion of horrors. Some of its inhabitants were poor Irish immigrants.

Elizabeth Cochrane Seaman, of Irish origin, was a writer who used the psuedonym "Nellie Bly." She pleaded with Joseph Pulitzer, founder of The New York Evening World and the Pulitzer Price, to have her committed to the insane ward of the asylum in 1888, so that she could report of the horrible conditions of the place. In 1888, her reports of her confinement at Welfare Island, appeared in the paper, and finally brought public attention to conditions in the asylum.

John McCarthy, an Irish immigrant and inmate of the asylum, was released with many others, soon after Nellie Bly's report appeared in the press. He remained on the island and built himself a mud cabin close to the Hellsgate end of the island. "Even birds are welcome, but not the British," was a warning he hung outside the hut.

James Renwick, the architect who designed St. Patrick's Cathedral, Grace Church, Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. and Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, N.Y. had a vested interest in the island. He met John McCarthy on his visits to the island and recognized the need for a lighthouse for passing ships, for which McCarthy had served as the human light. Renwick arranged to design the structure, if McCarthy would build. Today that lighthouse stands as an impressive monument to both men.

----Finula Bourke

Architecture

NYIHR members interested in architecture or the preservation of old buildings, may wish to send for The Preservation Press Spring 1987 catalog. The National Trust for Historic Preservation is "a private nonprofit organization chartered by Congress in 1949 to encourage public participation in

the preservation of sites, buildings and objects significant in American history and culture. Support is provided by membership dues, endowment funds, contributions and matching grants from federal agencies, including the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, under provisions of the National Historical Preservation Act of

1966. The current catalogue includes a book on "America's Architectural Roots: Ethnic Groups that Built America," in which the influence of "22 ethnic groups" on American architecture is explored in "heavily illustrated chapters." \$9.95 The Preservation Press, 1785 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.