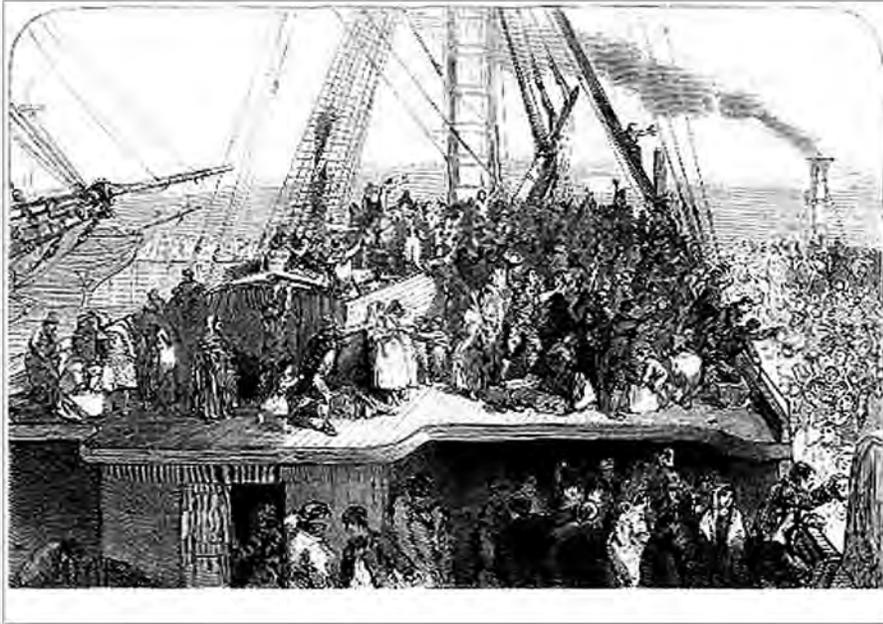


The Forgotten Burial Ground

BY KEVIN MCPARTLAND



Buried beneath the eighteenth fairway of Staten Island's Silver Lake Golf Course there exists a secret. Unknown except to the most observant of passersby, a forgotten burial ground exists. There, beneath the rolling hills lie the remains of seven-thousand Irish immigrants—it is a burial ground that, in spite of its size and the number of dead buried there, was never consecrated or remembered other than with a small plaque attached to a boulder on a path leading to the clubhouse. On the plaque are written the following words:

*The Forgotten Burial Ground
1849–1858*

Here lie the unmarked graves of Irish Immigrants who fled the great famine in search of freedom. Those who are buried here died from disease, alone and isolated, in the Tompkinsville Quarantine before ever tasting freedom. The 7000 dead, most of whom had no survivors who could afford markers, were buried anonymously. They will not be forgotten. 2002.

The story of these seven-thousand Irish dead begins in the 1840s during the famine or the Great Hunger, as it has come to be known. That was the most awful of times when many Irish, driven from their land by tyrannical English policies and landlords, sought salvation from their suffering in America. And so they came across the Atlantic, sick and destitute, headed for New York hoping for safe harbor—but some instead found only Staten Island's gruesome Tompkinsville Quarantine.

THE QUARANTINE

The Tompkinsville Quarantine had been opened by the City of New York in 1799. It was an institution well known on Staten Island for the sickness and dying that took place there. It processed hundreds of thousands of immigrants in its fifty-nine year existence, and would eventually become known as the Marine Hospital Quarantine. The site of the Quarantine was situated on thirty acres originally owned by Saint Andrew's Episcopal Church in what was then

Illustration:

During years of the Great Hunger, many emigrants fleeing Ireland faced harsh accommodations on ships taking them to America. This illustration of a ship departing Ireland, entitled simply "The Departure," was published in the London News during 1850.

Kevin McPartland lives on Staten Island. His articles and short stories have appeared nationally in the small press. He is currently writing his first novel.

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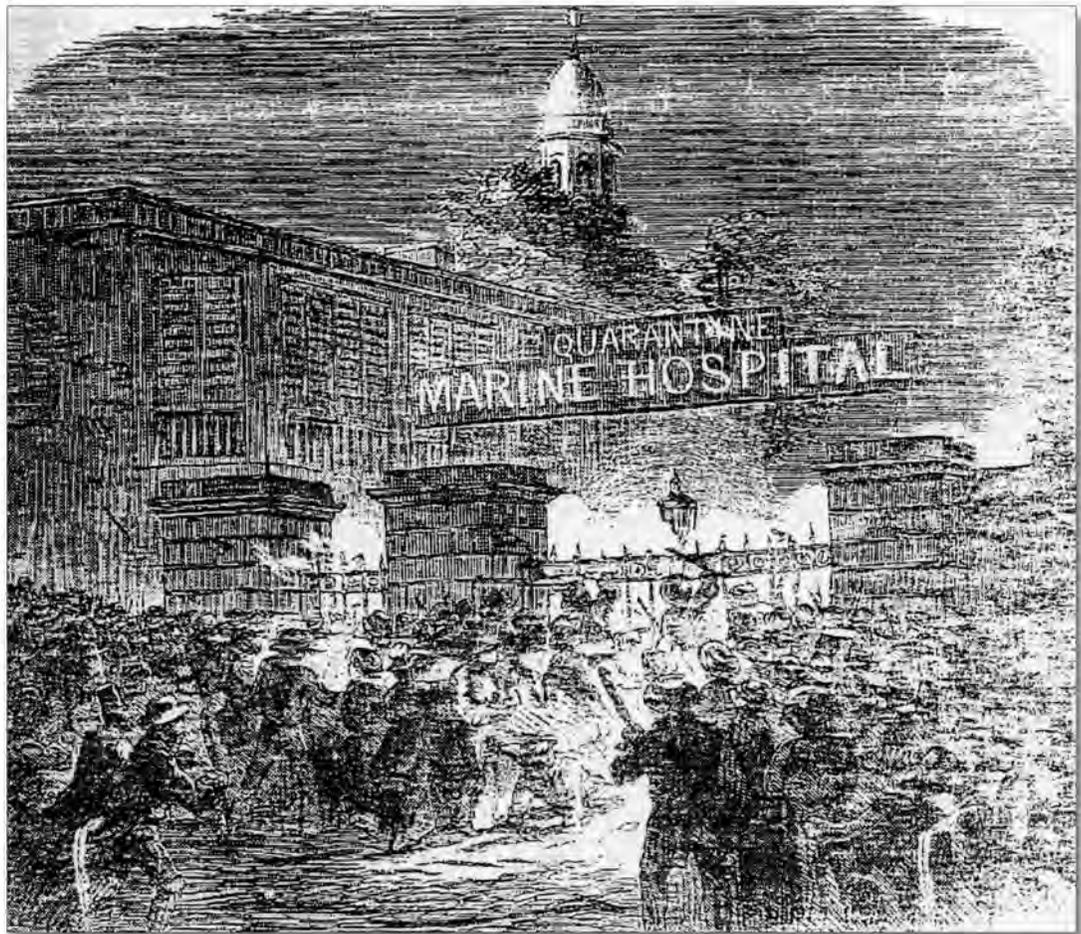


Illustration:

A quarantine was first opened on Staten Island in 1799. In 1801, it was located in Tompkinsville, where it would remain for over sixty years. By the middle of the 1800s the more elaborate Marine Hospital Quarantine actually consisted of several hospitals and other buildings, and was not well regarded by many local residents.

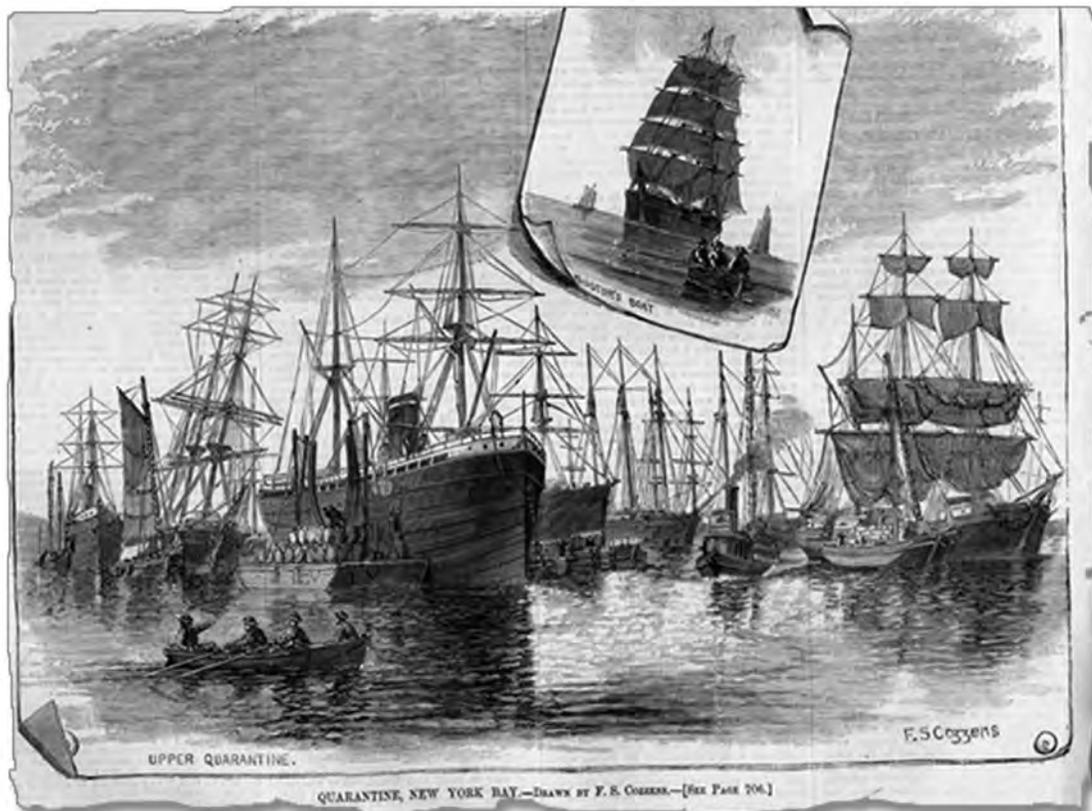
Several years later the Quarantine was attacked and burned. Courtesy of Staten Island Advance.

the town of Castleton. The Quarantine was located on the waterfront and bounded by Slosson Terrace on the north and present-day Victory Boulevard on the south. Its location was about a quarter mile south of the Staten Island Ferry Terminal and the recently built stadium that is home to the Staten Island Yankees.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the Quarantine consisted of several hospitals, four piers, two graveyards, and some battered shanties for graves registration. The largest hospital building in the enclosure was three stories high, 136 feet wide by 28 feet long, and had wings 37 feet by 28 feet at each end. A hospital building near the water was three stories high, 50 by 45 feet, with wings at each end 66 by 26 feet. These two buildings were designed to accommodate four-hundred patients. The smallpox hospital was two stories high, 8 by 28 feet, with a piazza running along the front and

rear. It was designed to accommodate fifty patients. There were twelve other buildings on the grounds: a health officer's residence, a deputy health officer's residence, an assistant physician's house, a steward's and farmer's house, a workhouse, a house for barge men, a boathouse, office, a carpenter's shop, an ice and coal house, a wagon house and a barn.

Carelessness always seemed to be prevalent in the management of the institution, and diseases were frequently transmitted from the institution to the locals by employees of the Quarantine going out among the people, and by (it was believed at the time) "miasmatic transmission" through the atmosphere. In the first year of the Quarantine's existence, twenty-five cases of yellow fever occurred to locals residing outside the Quarantine, all but one of which proved fatal. In 1848, the number of persons sick from infectious diseases and living



just outside the Quarantine was 180 people. The legislature of the Island in April, 1849 requested immediate removal of the Quarantine, with talk of it being relocated to a sparsely populated section of Sandy Hook, New Jersey—but this talk was never acted upon.

NOXIOUS EFFLUVIA AND THE REACTION

In 1856 another outbreak of yellow fever outside the institution's walls aroused the ire of the local populace, and during March, 1857 another resolution to remove the Quarantine was passed by the legislature. The resolution was denied by federal immigration commissioners. It was then that a doctor by the name of E.C. Munday was named health officer of the Quarantine. Munday appointed a guard employed to maintain surveillance over the Quarantine and prevent its employees from mixing with the local populace. At a meeting on July 15, 1858 Dr. Mundy voiced the following opinion: "We have located in our midst a lazaretto, whence emanates those noxious effluvia which produce disease and death."

Apparently as a consequence of this remark, on the night of September 1, 1858 and during the following day, about thirty men from the area around the institution entered the Quarantine enclosure. After removing patients from several of the hospitals, they set fire to all buildings connected to the institution and burned them to the ground. In the local press, it was noted that in spite of the mayhem not a single life was lost and no one was seriously injured. After the incident Governor John A. King of New York State declared Staten Island to be in a condition of revolution, and sent to the Island regiments of militia who encamped on ground just north of the Quarantine.

IRISH IMMIGRANTS AND THE QUARANTINE

The vast majority of the immigrants held at the Tompkinsville Quarantine at the time of its destruction were from Ireland. They were men, women, and children taken to there after disembarking from what were known as "coffin ships." Many Irish arrived from their voyages across the Atlantic destitute and ill. The diseases

Illustration:

After destruction of Tompkinsville buildings, federal commissioners decided to use floating ships in the harbor for quarantine purposes. During the 1860s several ships were used for this purpose. Eventually, some ill immigrants were sent to Ward's Island and Blackwell's Island, while others were treated on the quarantine ships. The Marine Hospital grounds on Staten Island were eventually sold. The illustration of quarantine ships here appeared in Harper's Weekly during the 1870s. Courtesy of Rootsweb.com.

they suffered from included smallpox, yellow fever, and dysentery. At times, lower New York Bay would be dotted with hundreds of these vessels waiting to unload their starving and sick passengers to the Quarantine.

Coffin ships would sometimes be detained for up to a month, as quarantine officers met with ships' doctors to discuss the types of diseases on board. Next, body counts of the dead were performed, and the bodies were then carried off the ships and transferred by tenders to one of the two Quarantine graveyards. Sick

internment. Such reports proved too much for the institution's reputation and burial ground. Consequently officials from the Quarantine began to look for other places to bury the dead, eventually selecting a weed choked parcel of land near present-day Clove Road, some two miles from the Quarantine.

HORRIBLE PROCESSIONS

In 1856 it was reported in local newspapers that through the streets and lanes of Tompkinsville, under the cover of darkness, there were taking

Photo: Thanks to the efforts of Caitlin Tormey and others, this rock and plaque on the Silver Lake Golf Course were placed in 2002 as a memorial to the Irish immigrants who died in the Quarantine and who were buried on this site. Courtesy of Kevin McPartland.



passengers would then be transferred to one of the Quarantine's hospitals. It was reported in local newspapers during the 1850s that the two Quarantine graveyards were filling up rapidly with the steady flow of Irish dead. There were also reports of rumors about mounting of a local protest by native Staten Islanders because reports of un-Christian burials taking place within the confines of the Quarantine. Some reports said disgruntled employees from the institution said that the Irish dead were being disposed of in long shallow graves, with some coffins left exposed to the heat of day pending

place "horrible processions." The reports told of the dead being taken to what was thought to be church burial grounds or makeshift potters fields. But many locals suspected it was to burials sites in the tract of land just off Clove Road that the midnight hearses were bound for. Eventually in 1858, the same year as the fire that destroyed the Quarantine, a rectangular graveyard known as Marine or Hospital Cemetery, about four acres in size, appeared on borough maps. The first documentation of the Cemetery told of thirty-three headstones there in 1888. But, many persons asked, why would a four-acre cemetery

contain only thirty-three graves? Was it because most of the Quarantine's Irish were penniless and couldn't afford tombstones?

The best available information about this mystery comes from a *Staten Island Advance* story detailing the "tombstone mystery." A New York City Parks Department official was quoted as saying the described tombstones were removed from the tract of land when the golf course was being built in 1927. How long the Cemetery was functional or how many bodies were buried there is not exactly known, but many historians refute the idea of only thirty-three bodies and believe the number more likely to be seven-thousand bodies.

In more recent years, it was reported by Stephanie Schmidt, researcher and director of the Alpine, New Jersey-based Great Famine Association, that the Marine Cemetery was one of several sites that were probably used at some point for the Quarantine dead. Sequine's Point, between present-day Lemon Creek and Wolfes Pond parks, was also a burial ground for some Quarantine dead. But it was the Marine Cemetery that remained the focal point of much historical controversy and investigation over the years due to the suspected number of Irish dead buried there, and its transformation in 1929 into the eighteenth fairway of Silver Lake Golf Course.

For decades the remains of those tired and sick Irish travelers lay sodded over beneath the finely manicured fairway of the golf course, with nothing to mark their graves or reveal their plight, until a young Irish-American girl, Caitlin Tormey, then an eighth-grader in 1998, was drawn to their plight by a social studies project. Her interest had been piqued by articles published in the *Staten Island Advance* describing the Marine Cemetery and the Golf Course, a public course operated by American Golf Corporation and owned by the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation.

A MEMORIAL TO THE DEAD

Caitlin Tormey's interest became so great that she began a crusade to have a memorial built to the seven-thousand Irish dead. She managed to gather hundreds of signatures from interested individuals and groups. She also managed to raise \$3000 dollars, from individual donations,

and (from a local business) donation of the plaque and the boulder on which it is mounted.

The idea of the monument was met with indifference by some individuals and enthusiasm by others. There were quotes in the *Staten Island Advance* by some golfers at the Course, who said that as long as the monument doesn't get in the way of play it was all right with them. One regular was heard to say "just put it off to the side—I don't want it to interfere with the ball. It shouldn't be on the fairway unless it's flat. Then we can use it as the 150-foot marker."

Others were more sensitive and enthusiastic. In particular the local chapter of the Ancient Order of Hibernians and several Irish American activist groups were delighted with her efforts to erect the monument. After years of her persistence and tenacity with local politicians and the Parks Department personnel, the small monument was finally laid in place in 2002—a great credit to Caitlin Tormey's pride and spirit. But for many in the Irish American community of Staten Island the monument, although a good start, is a far cry from what it should be. In interviews for this article, it was found that most Irish American golfers agreed that the small plaque monument is not enough considering the magnitude of the number of persons buried beneath the fairway. As was stated so eloquently by a retired sanitation worker and golfer named John Beirne, "it simply does not reflect the scope of the suffering and pathetic end these seekers of freedom from the famine endured."

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