

# CATHOLIC HERALD

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**Descendants of those buried in St. Francis Xavier Cemetery attended a rededication ceremony July 31. (Photo by Colleen Jurkiewicz)**

Driving west on Pleasant Valley Road in Grafton, it isn't difficult to imagine the sights and sounds that must have greeted Fr. Michael Heiss as he came to this area for the first time on May 28, 1844.

Modern homes now dot the landscape, subdivided by paved roads and overhead power lines, but there remains a stillness about the countryside here, a serenity that harkens back to a time when people were scarce in these parts and the sight of a German-speaking priest on horseback must have been a welcome one to the seven Catholic families who had made their home here in the wilderness.

It was on that day, at the corner of what is now Pleasant Valley and Maple Roads, that Fr. Heiss offered Mass for these families, inaugurating a Catholic presence in the Grafton area that has endured to this day. And it was here, just a stone's throw west of that spot, that a few dozen people gathered 178 years later for the rededication and blessing of St. Francis Xavier Cemetery, the resting place of many of those who first brought the Catholic faith to these woods.

"As Christians, the care we show for our cemeteries and those who are buried in them reflect our faith in the resurrection of the body and in the communion of saints," said Fr. Nick Baumgardner, administrator of St. Joseph Parish, where parishioners have been working for several years to establish legal ownership of this once-abandoned cemetery.

It all began in 2012, when the town of Cedarburg sent some official paperwork for the cemetery to St. Joseph Parish, mistakenly assuming the parish owned the property. It did not, though the history of St. Joseph is closely entwined with the family histories of those buried in St. Francis Xavier Cemetery. A short distance up the road are the fieldstone ruins of St. Francis Xavier Church, built on the spot of that first Mass said by Fr. Heiss. St. Francis Xavier was built in 1867, replacing a log structure that dated to 1848, and served the families of the area for decades. But, as the population shifted toward what is now downtown Grafton, St. Joseph, established a few miles south, became

the larger parish. St. Francis Xavier became a mission parish of St. Joseph and was eventually closed in 1943 with the sale of the 40 acres upon which the church sat.

The cemetery became, in legal terms, “abandoned,” with the last recorded owners being the long-defunct German Catholic Union Society — so when St. Joseph parishioners decided to pursue official responsibility for the land, the process would include some historical sleuthing.

A cemetery committee was established, and members began to delve into genealogical research.

“We looked for graves that looked like they had been well-tended to give us clues as to who might have relatives in the area,” said Debbie Krueger, a member of the cemetery committee who is also active in the Grafton Historical society. Using websites like FindAGrave, MyHeritage and Ancestry.com, the committee was able to contact descendants of the deceased. Those descendants signed affidavits swearing that they were “interested parties” and listed the person to whom they were related. From this, a new cemetery society was established, and the deed was transferred to St. Joseph this summer.

In practice, St. Joseph has been providing care for the cemetery for some time now, but this new legal distinction will safeguard those efforts as well as provide a formal link between the parish and the cemetery.

“When we see a cemetery that is well taken care of, it’s a reminder of the dignity of the human person, of our responsibility to pray for the deceased, and of the fact of our own death and the need to be prepared for it when it comes,” said Fr. Baumgardner at the rededication ceremony.

Attendees of the ceremony included parishioners of St. Joseph Parish as well as descendants of those buried in the cemetery. Many descendants still live in the area and even belong to St. Joseph, but several others who signed affidavits were located around the country, as well.

“I was hopeful,” said Krueger about the process of locating descendants. “But because so many of the gravestones are so old, I just wasn’t sure how many people we would be able to track down. After we got a few responses it was really exciting and gave us the impetus to keep going.”

At Fr. Baumgardner’s suggestion, the rededication ceremony took place July 31, the feast of St. Ignatius of Loyola, a friend and companion of St. Francis Xavier.

Fr. Baumgardner is new to the parish, having just assumed the role of administrator in June, but he said he can already tell that this cemetery project reflects the parish commitment of being “the hands of Christ, open to all.”

“St. Joseph’s has a long tradition of welcoming and serving those on the periphery of society,” said Fr. Baumgardner. “And this is a perfect example of caring for something that is, in this case, literally on the periphery of our parish boundaries.”

