

An Outdoor Museum: Historic St. Francis Xavier Cemetery

One of Parkersburg's older and more historic cemeteries is the St. Francis Xavier Catholic Cemetery located at the intersection of 14th and Dillaway Streets.

The cemetery was established in 1872 when the Catholic congregation purchased the 3 acre plot from Dosithee Dillaway for whom Dillaway Street is named. In 1872, this area was outside the city limits of Parkersburg and this plot of ground was considered way out "in the country". The parish paid \$1200.00 for the property in installments to Dillaway.

Recent efforts have given these ancestors in faith an attractive burial space.

Often times when I visit an old cemetery, I enjoy researching the persons buried within. Sometimes it's an unusual or artistic monument that draws my attention. Sometimes it's the family name or a marker for a veteran. Then using Find-A-Grave, newspaper obituaries and Wood County on-line records I will research the "dash", their life between when they were born and when they died.

There are some fascinating people buried in this old cemetery. We know that thirty-five documented Civil War veterans from both the Union and Confederate armies are buried here.

One is Colonel John "Cass" Rathbone who outfitted and armed his own unit during the Civil War. The Rathbone family

developed the Burning Springs oil fields in nearby Wirt County. Colonel Rathbone was also instrumental in the establishment of the Visitation Academy in Parkersburg.

Captain Michael Egan is also buried here. Captain Egan wrote a most fascinating book about his Civil War exploits. Entitled "The Flying Gray Haired Yank" it is a must read for those interested in local Civil War history.

The remains of John Showalter, a Confederate soldier who was a member of McNeill's Rangers also lie in this cemetery. Veterans of other American wars are also interred here.

Other interesting burials:

John and Gerald Beckett: Perhaps Parkersburg's most famous city characters. Also known as Pete and Re-Pete or Fric and Frac, they walked the streets and roads of our area for years.

Michael Kelly: The founder of the Kelly Foundry which manufactured iron and steel products. Some of their sewer grates can still be found around Parkersburg. Kelly was most generous and donated considerable sums for the construction of St. Xavier church in 1870.

Charles Flachbarth: A Defense Department attorney from Washington, DC, who later moved to Parkersburg. He was the great-grandson of the builder of the Brooklyn Bridge in New York, John Roebling.

James Reynolds Mehen: A confederate veteran of the Civil War

Mehen served as the first paid fireman of the Parkersburg Fire Department. He also was the city's first police captain and first detective and later became police chief. Later in life he was a U S Marshall and special police officer for the B and O railroad. Some historians say he was Parkersburg's version of Wyatt Earp.

Frances Ihrig: Before her death this wealthy woman, known as the "Oil Queen of West Virginia", commissioned a grave monument featuring a sculpted likeness of herself and her son Tony. Tony died at the young age of 14 of "tuberculosis of the leg and hip" and is buried next to his mother. Estranged from her husband, in her will she asked that her executor hire 2 private guards to watch over her body until she was buried to prevent her husband from viewing her remains. She also asked that her gravediggers not soil the grass adjoining her grave when they dug her final resting place.

Father Edward Hickey: He served as pastor of St. Xavier from 1880-1909. No pastor before or since has served a longer term as pastor of the church. Known as a great orator, his Sunday evening lectures were popular social events in Parkersburg at the time and were widely attended by Catholics and non-Catholics alike. He was instrumental in the founding of Parkersburg Council #594 of the Knights of Columbus and St. Joseph Hospital.

Hildegard Schaefer: The unfortunate widow of Parkersburg's most notorious murderer Joseph Eisele, AKA John Schafer. Later in life she married German brewer Aloysius Schaefer.

Find-A-Grave lists 1,250 burials in Saint Xavier cemetery. Many lie in unmarked graves or their monuments have not withstood the test of time. Buried here are individuals who in their lifetimes made significant contributions to their families, their community and their church.