

Sacred Heart Catholic Church:

The recording of the headstone the lie beneath it

Matthew Simmonds

September 21, 2010

In mid August I was asked by the Town of Placentia to accompany Brendan Collins under the Sacred Heart Catholic Church in the town square. Brendan has an avid interest in history of the local area and is presently pursuing his family tree. It is local knowledge that there are several tombstones under the church. These are of great interest to Brendan not only from the local history aspect but he believes that they may shed some light on his genealogy.

On August 23 I met Brendan Collins for the first time and with the introductions out of the way we proceeded under the church. Once the key was acquired at the rectory Brendan and I went to the boiler room where access hatch to the crawlspace under the church was located.

The crawlspace beneath the church consists of four to five aisles that run the length of the church from east to west. These are supporting walls for the pillars and floor inside the church. Underneath the boiler room, in the east end of the church, there is about four feet of. In the east end of the walls of the aisles there are small openings to allow access from one aisle to the next. The ground here consists of cobblestone, not the most suited material for crawling on. It was decided that we would search the most northerly aisle to locate any tombstones (the furthest one away).

As we proceeded up the most northerly aisle the headroom quickly diminished. About 10 or so meters west we had reached what must be the remains of the original stone wall before the church was extended. This wall was roughly 1.5 meters wide and extended the width of the church as it was encountered in all the aisles. The wall was intentionally left high enough to provide support for the floor above except a small section of wall in each aisle was removed to provide access to further crawlspace ahead. This was the worst area for crawling with just 50 centimeters in headroom and having to crawl on mortared jagged rubble. Once we were through the wall the headroom did not improve much, though we were back to cobblestone which was slightly more comfortable to crawl on.

It was in this most northerly aisle where we found several headstones. We attempted to photograph the headstones. We had little success with this; it was pitch black under the church with the only light provided by our flashlights. To make this more difficult there was only approximately 50 to 75 centimetres of head room. I did not have the height to capture the whole headstones in one picture and if I moved back so that the headstone fit in the camera frame the angle was so low that the inscribed lettering was no longer legible. We approximated our location to be roughly under or near the altar.

It was exceptionally muggy and hot under the church and absent of moving air to bring any comfort. We decided to return to the boiler room and planned to make a second trip. This time to go more prepared

with kneeling pads, water, brushes and a notepad now knowing what is involved and what the working conditions are like. I also decided that charcoal rubbings of the headstones would be a good addition to the photographs. Brendan and I settled on returning on the 29 of August.

We returned to Sacred Heart Catholic Church as agreed and better equipped. We proceeded to the furthest aisle where we located several headstones on the previous trip. Once at the headstones we started with the charcoal rubbings. The rubbings were not as successful as hoped primarily due to the confined working conditions. The headstones were extremely dusty; with the air so still the dust lingered, found its way into our eyes and noses and eventually settled on the headstones again. As a result the masking tape was ineffective in holding the paper in place for the rubbings. The only way to reach all the headstones with the charcoal was to lie on my front and reach as far as I could. This resulted in accidentally shifting the paper out of place (as the tape would not work) blurring the lettering. Finished rubbings of charcoal have to be sprayed with an adhesive of sorts that holds the charcoal in place and prevents the charcoal from smearing once the work is finished. Hairspray is commonly used for this and it was attempted under the church. Not surprisingly, in a closed space with no moving air it quickly began to overwhelm us so it was not used anymore. This meant that rolling up the rubbings and dragging them from aisle to aisle until we had finished our search only caused them to smear even more.

Between the two visits I familiarized myself with the many settings on the camera and worked out which ones would be best for the conditions of the church. This time around I was better able to capture better photographs of the headstones. Unfortunately, due to a fault with the memory card these photos along with many others were lost.

In this aisle and the adjacent one there are a total of 6 complete headstones with fragments of 5 or 6 others. Several of the complete ones are extremely large, approximately 5'-6' long x 4'-5' wide. They fragmented headstones originally would have been somewhat smaller than the large complete ones here. They are all in excellent condition, lying under the church for decades they have not been subjected to the elements and are perfectly legible. Unfortunately, the builders of the new church reused one of the complete headstones and several of the fragmented ones in the construction of the supporting walls for the pillars and floor above. The larger headstones were constructed out of slate while the smaller ones appear to be limestone. In one case a headstone is engraved with the engravers name and point of origin.

The text of the headstones are as follows:

This stone was erected by Martin and Jame(s) Collin to the memory of their brother Patrick Collin who was a native of Cronna Co. Of Kilkenny Ireland wo departed this life on the 10th day of April anno domino 1814 in the 26th year of his life.

Erected by the Rev. Andrew Elisy? To the memory of his niece Magareth? Rocke who departed this life July 10th 1825 aged 6 years 16 months.

Sacred to the memory of Mr John Walsh in aid of Fiddown County of Kilkenny who departed this life of 4th December 1823 aged 32 years.

Here lie the body of John Carew of Carrick who died Oct. 16th 1884 aged 46 years.

In memory of James B Sawyer who died March 19th 1859 Aged 32 years (J.H. Murpphy Haik?)

A native ofIreland who.....1831 messis.....secured.....trade of his.....dence.....by whome.....

This last headstone is incorporated into a wall so only the text on either side of the headstone was visible. The indicates where the wall obscured the text.

We searched the remaining aisles, having to crawl all the way up one aisle then all the way back again to the openings in the wall to crawl up the next aisle. No other headstones were located. However, all the aisles we searched ended at yet another stone wall and as near as Brendan and I could determine the aisles we explored only covered half of the floor plan of the church. It is possible there are more headstones under the western half of the church.

I would like to thank the Town of Placentia for providing me this rare opportunity to go where most people are not permitted. Also I would like to thank Brendan for his interest in local history and genealogy which spurred this little project on and for his hours spent crawling on hands, knees, and stomach under the church. Finally I would like to thank the those in Sacred Heart Catholic Church that allowed us to pursue this avenue of local interest.