

Honoring the Memory of Father Peter Whelan

On Friday, February 10, 1871, the second page of Savannah's *Morning News* carried four notices, each placed by an Irish organization: the Hibernian Society; the Irish Union Society; the St. Patrick's Total Abstinence Benevolent Society; and the Workingmen's Benevolent Association. In all cases, the purpose was to instruct members to assemble that day at the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist (then on Drayton Street) in time to escort to the "Cathedral Cemetery," approximately two miles to the east, the mortal remains of "Rev. Father Whelan," whose funeral mass was scheduled to commence at 10:00 am.

On its third page, the newspaper offered an editorial comment. Having acknowledged Whelan as one of the "brightest ornaments" of the Catholic Church, it went on to insist "that his loss [would] be generally felt and deplored" because, thanks to a "life of purity and active benevolence," he had "endeared himself" to Savannah's citizenry as a whole. The piece also presented an overview of the formal order of procession to the cemetery. The "Sisters of Mercy, [together] with orphans under their charge" were to be fourth among twenty discrete entities. And the twelfth position was to be filled by the Hibernian Society. Both groups are still extant.

The next day's edition of the *Morning News* reflected on the "funeral obsequies," characterizing the procession to the cemetery as "the longest ... ever seen in Savannah." In the majority-Protestant city, it seemed that few failed to honor the Catholic priest. "All around the route," the newspaper reported, "the people lined either side of the way, embracing every age and sex." The commentary's penultimate sentence stated, "And so has passed away an honest man, a sincere Christian, an exemplary Priest of the Church, and a devoted patriot, who had not an enemy upon all the earth, but who counted his friends by thousands."

Aged 69, Peter Whelan breathed his last on February 6, 1871. Precisely 150 years later — i.e. on February 6, 2021 — a substantial crowd gathered around his tombstone in the Cathedral Cemetery (now generally known as Catholic Cemetery) to recall and honor his exceptional career.

The principal speaker was Irish-born Rev. Monsignor William Oliver O'Neill, who retired from active ministry in 2013, after 46 years of service to the Diocese of Savannah, the last 17 of which were as rector at the cathedral. Noted for his facility with language (whether English or Irish), the monsignor was particularly well suited to the task of memorializing Whelan, for he can claim a special connection to that beloved man's place of origin: the county of Wexford in southeastern Ireland. O'Neill trained for the priesthood at St. Peter's Seminary in Wexford Town (the county seat), and he has maintained close ties to the region.

Monsignor O'Neill's engrossing address included an anecdote about the discovery of Fr. Whelan's childhood home. When visiting with Jimmy Curtis at his farmstead in a district called Loughnageer in south-central County Wexford, Bill Murray (a fellow Wexfordian) spotted, over the fireplace, a vintage portrait photograph. Immediately, he recognized it as being identical to one he'd seen during a trip to Savannah. Bill's American hosts had proudly explained that the sitter was Peter Whelan, who having held the pastorate at Locust Grove, Georgia's original Catholic parish, rose through the ranks of the clergy to become Vicar General of the Savannah diocese, which then covered all of Georgia and a portion of Florida. Indeed, Whelan served as the diocesan administrator between the September 1854 death of Savannah's first bishop (F.X. Gartland, from Dublin) and the August 1857 installation of its second (John Barry, from Oylegate, County Wexford).

Referring to the subject of the photo his Loughnageer parlor, Jimmy Curtis noted that he was the man's great-great grand nephew and, furthermore, that the man had grown up in the house. It was said that he had become a priest somewhere in America, but the location was unknown. (In fact, Whelan was ordained in Charleston, South Carolina.) Once the narrative had been pieced together, Curtis helped organize the

erection of two stone plaques in honor of Fr. Peter Whelan's ministry in Savannah: one at the farmstead; the other beside the local parish church in the village of Clongeen. In time, Curtis, his wife, and one of their daughters made a pilgrimage to Savannah, where they laid a wreath at Whelan's grave. (In 2019, we lost both Jimmy Curtis and Bill Murray. May they rest in peace.)

In his speech to mark the 150th anniversary of Whelan's passing, Monsignor O'Neill alluded to how, during the Civil War, the priest served as chaplain to the Montgomery Guards, a predominantly Irish unit associated with the First Georgia Volunteer Regiment. Pushing 60 years of age, he was with the Guards in Fort Pulaski when, in April 1862, Union forces bombarded the complex, precipitating its surrender.

While Whelan was among the members of the garrison transported to Governor's Island, New York, for incarceration, his religious office earned him parole. Although he was under no obligation to remain with the Georgia prisoners, he did so, tending in particular to the rank-and-file, a duty that extended to procuring — from Catholic parishes and other sources in Manhattan — food and clothing for the men. Upon receiving the gift of a new suit for himself, he promptly presented it to one of the needy captives, declaring, "When I give for Christ's sake, I give the best."

The signing of a prisoner-exchange agreement in June 1862 permitted the Fort Pulaski veterans to return home. However, between mid-June and late September of 1864, as the war dragged on, Whelan was to be found not in Savannah, but, rather, inside the stockade that demarcated the Confederate prisoner-of-war camp commonly known as Andersonville, near Americus, in west-central Georgia. Under a burning sun, he cared for the Union army inmates, whose numbers exceeded 33,000, even though the place had been designed to accommodate only a third of that quantity. Fleas and rats proliferated, as did such medical conditions as scurvy, diarrhea, and dysentery. The camp hospital maintained a gangrene ward. One prisoner, a Sergeant David Kennedy, labeled Andersonville a "hell on earth, where it takes seven ... occupants to make a shadow."

Even after concluding his full-time ministry to (in his words) "allay misery" and "gain souls to God" at Andersonville, Fr. Whelan remained engaged. In January 1865, he traveled from Savannah to Americus — a distance of over 200 miles — to purchase flour with \$16,000 in Confederate currency, borrowed from Henry Horne, a Catholic who operated (in Macon, Georgia) a combined "confectionary, fruit store, [and] pastry bakery." To provide sustenance for the inmates, the County Wexford priest had the flour baked into "Whelan's bread." Later, by means of newspaper columns, Whelan engaged in a public dispute with the Adjutant General's Office in Washington, DC, over its thwarting of efforts to reimburse Horne for "money expended for the relief of [Union] prisoners at Andersonville."

Savannah's *Daily News and Herald* of June 4, 1866, printed Whelan's statement (directed at the Adjutant General) that many of "the Federal prisoners at Andersonville" owed to him (i.e. Whelan) "the preservation of their lives." He averred, "My duties as a Catholic Priest brought me daily ... in close contact with the sick and dying, when I had to inhale effluvium for hours and hours, and be covered, as with a coat, with vermin." It is little wonder that, in his own lifetime, Whelan became known as the Angel of Andersonville.

Complementing Monsignor O'Neill's commemorative address, the current Bishop of Savannah, Most Rev. Stephen D. Parkes, offered remarks that posited Fr. Whelan as an example of the neighborliness and indiscriminate giving that Jesus mandates in Chapter 25 of St. Matthew's Gospel. Near the beginning of the ceremony, that scripture had been read by the Bishop Emeritus, Most Rev. J. Kevin Boland. Organized with assistance from the diocesan archivist, Ms. Katy Lockard, and attended by, among others, representatives of Savannah's present-day Irish societies, the ceremony was an appropriate celebration of Whelan, a son of County Wexford, whose selflessness, generosity, and "character for integrity" were universally acknowledged.



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With the US, Irish, and Wexford flags behind him, Monsignor William Oliver O'Neill delivered a compelling address at the commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the death of Father Peter Whelan. Close by is Whelan's grave, an element within the priests' section of Catholic Cemetery, Savannah.



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John Patrick Fogarty (center), General Chairman of the Savannah St. Patrick's Day Parade Committee, stood alongside Vice Chairman Ashley M. Norris (left) and other members of the organization at the Whelan commemoration on February 6, 2021.



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At the Whelan Commemoration, held in Catholic Cemetery Savannah, on February 6, 2021, the bishop emeritus of the Savannah diocese, Most Rev. J. Kevin Boland, sat behind the current bishop, Most Rev. Stephen D. Parkes (right), and the chancellor of the diocese, Rev. Pablo Migone (center), who served as host for the event.

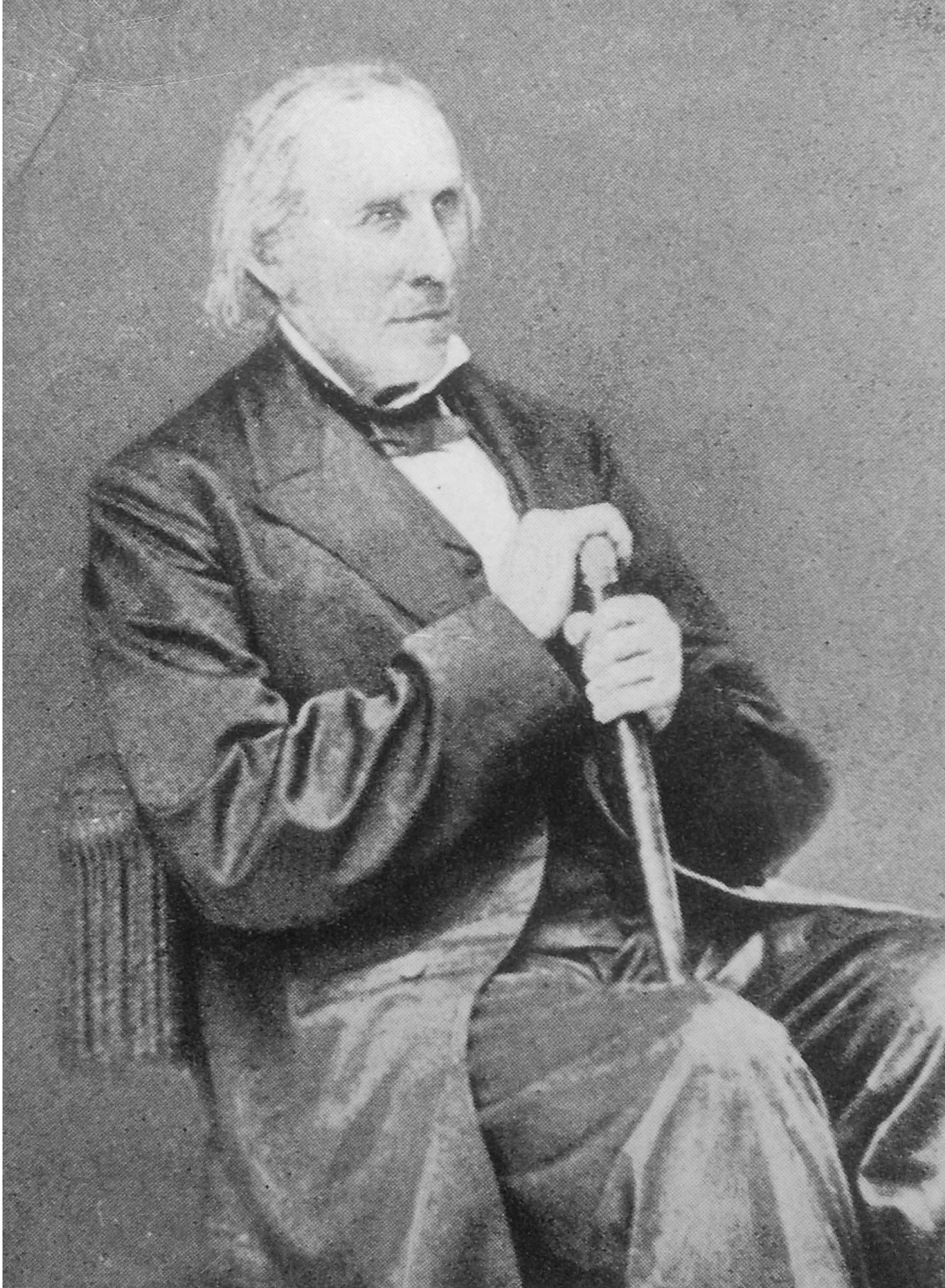


Image courtesy of Georgia Southern University, Savannah

An undated portrait photograph of Father Peter Whelan, who came to be known as the Angel of Andersonville.



Image courtesy of the Curtis family of Loughnageer

The plaque erected at the entrance to Fr. Peter Whelan's home place, a farm in Loughnageer, County Wexford, Ireland. He was the fourth of six children born to Marcella Colfer and William Whelan.



Image courtesy of Menapia Education and Research

The memorial plaque to Fr. Peter Whelan, located on the grounds of the Roman Catholic parish church in Clongeen, County Wexford. Monsignor William Oliver O'Neill was among the Savannahians present for its unveiling on August 18, 2013.



Image courtesy of Menapia Education and Research

Fr. Peter Whelan's name was added to a family tombstone in the graveyard attached to the now ruined Owenduff Church, Yoletown, County Wexford.