

St. Joseph Catholic Mission Cemetery, Madeline Island *(Old Indian Cemetery)*

The St. Joseph Catholic Mission was established on Madeline Island in 1835, when Slovenian priest Frederic Baraga arrived on the island. He chose a site along Sandy Bay (Crescent Bay) at what was called Middlefort. This location was about halfway between Michel Cadotte's fur trading fort (Grant's Point) and the American Fur Company's new settlement known as New Fort or Fort Ramsey (the present-day location of La Pointe). Baraga had a log chapel and residence built, and selected an adjacent site for a cemetery. The first burial that he presided over occurred in August, 1835. It is quite probable that the cemetery site included older graves, as later archaeological studies have revealed several, earlier graves nearby. Baraga enlarged his residence so that he could operate a school, and replaced his church with a larger one in 1838.

Father Baraga moved the Catholic mission to the New Fort site in 1841. He disassembled his old church and had a new church building and residence built. Another cemetery was established adjacent to the new church. Both cemeteries were used for burials until the cemetery at Middlefort was finally full. Church death records indicate that the Middlefort cemetery was used until at least until 1900. According to administrators of Holy Family Catholic Church in Bayfield, the burial plat for the St. Joseph's Mission Cemetery at Middlefort has been lost.

The St. Joseph's Mission Cemetery at Middlefort is the final resting place for many late-fur trade and early settlement era persons of historical note. Michel Cadotte and Chief Buffalo are both buried in graves marked by headstones. Many Cadotte, Warren, Bell, Gordon, and Buffalo family members are buried there. People interred in the cemetery represent several different cultural/ethnic groups: Ojibwe, French-Canadian, Euro-American, and Métis. Many graves in the cemetery are marked by traditional Christian stones, crosses and decorative fences. Many Ojibwe graves were covered by traditional spirit houses where food and offerings were placed for the deceased until they had passed on to the spirit world. While early Ojibwe spirit houses were covered with birchbark, those in the cemetery showed the influence of Euro-American culture in that they were made of milled lumber and resembled Euro-American-style buildings. Some of these spirit houses are extant. The presence of the spirit houses has led to the cemetery being called by the misnomer, the Old Indian Cemetery. In reality, it is the burial place of people with varied ethnic origin, who associated themselves with the Catholic Church. (Many spirit lodges were placed over graves in the second Catholic cemetery but they are no longer extant.)

Today, the fenced cemetery is all that is left of the first St. Joseph Catholic Mission at Middlefort on Madeline Island. An interpretive sign and historical plaque mark the site. The extant cemetery fence is not original, and does not accurately reflect the true boundaries of the cemetery. Many graves are unmarked and undocumented, making identification impossible.

Shoreline erosion threatened the cemetery in the mid-20th century. A local congressman assessed the need for breakwater construction to halt shoreline erosion, but public funds could not be used for the church-owned property. In 1972, the Roman Catholic Church transferred title to the cemetery to the United States Government in trust for the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, allowing public funding of breakwater construction by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The cemetery was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1977.

The St. Joseph Catholic Mission Cemetery (Old Indian Cemetery) on Madeline Island has long been revered for its historical and sacred significance. It is a major attraction for summer visitors interested in learning about the island's history and it is a sacred site for descendants and relations of those interred within. It has often become the subject of controversy when the cultural traditions, beliefs, and actions of these varied groups and individuals are at odds or are misunderstood. The cemetery is currently closed to the public but may be respectfully viewed from outside the fence.

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Historical photographs of St. Joseph Mission Cemetery, Madeline Island Museum and Wisconsin Historical Society collections.

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Sheree Peterson

Curator of Collections

Madeline Island Museum

P.O. Box 9, La Pointe, WI 54850

715-747-2415

sheree.peterson@wisconsinhistory.org

www.madelineislandmuseum.org

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