

The Parish Ghost of Cumberland

Photography by: Lance C. Bell



During the Civil War Father Brennan, of St. Patrick Church, had a number of painful experiences, the most painful of which was the execution of a young soldier with whom he was acquainted in his capacity as spiritual director. In July 1864, Francis Gillespie, of the Fifteenth New York Regiment, was hung near Rose Hill Cemetery, in Cumberland, after trial by court-martial. The circumstances of the case were such as to excite sympathy for the soldier, but not sufficient to excuse or extenuate the horrible deed of which he had been guilty. Gillespie had been charged

with violating some army regulation, and his lieutenant, Will Shearer had given orders to “hang him up by the thumbs.” The soldier was left hanging in excruciating torture until he was almost dead. He swore vengeance on the lieutenant; and when the regiment was traveling from Parkersburg to Cumberland, Gillespie deliberately shot Shearer dead. Father Brennan was summoned to prepare the young man for death. It was said that Gillespie ascended the scaffold without twitching a muscle. “I forgive everybody from the bottom of my heart, and I pray God to forgive me. May the stars and stripes never be trampled on.” Gillespie was but 24 years of age, and left a young wife, in Syracuse, New York. The condemned

soldier had entrusted to Father Brennan tokens of affection to be delivered to near relatives; and “there is a tradition among Cumberland people that the night after the execution Father Brennan heard the military tread of a soldier in the hall, and opening the door, he was confronted by his dead penitent, who rebuked him for being too slow in carrying out his promise.”

Editors note: This story was brought to our attention by Msgr. Thomas R. Beven, Pastor of St. Patrick Parish, Cumberland, Maryland. Msgr. Beven noted, “This story has been part of the tradition of the history of the church of St. Patrick for over one hundred years.” The Parish is 213 years old and is a history into itself.

