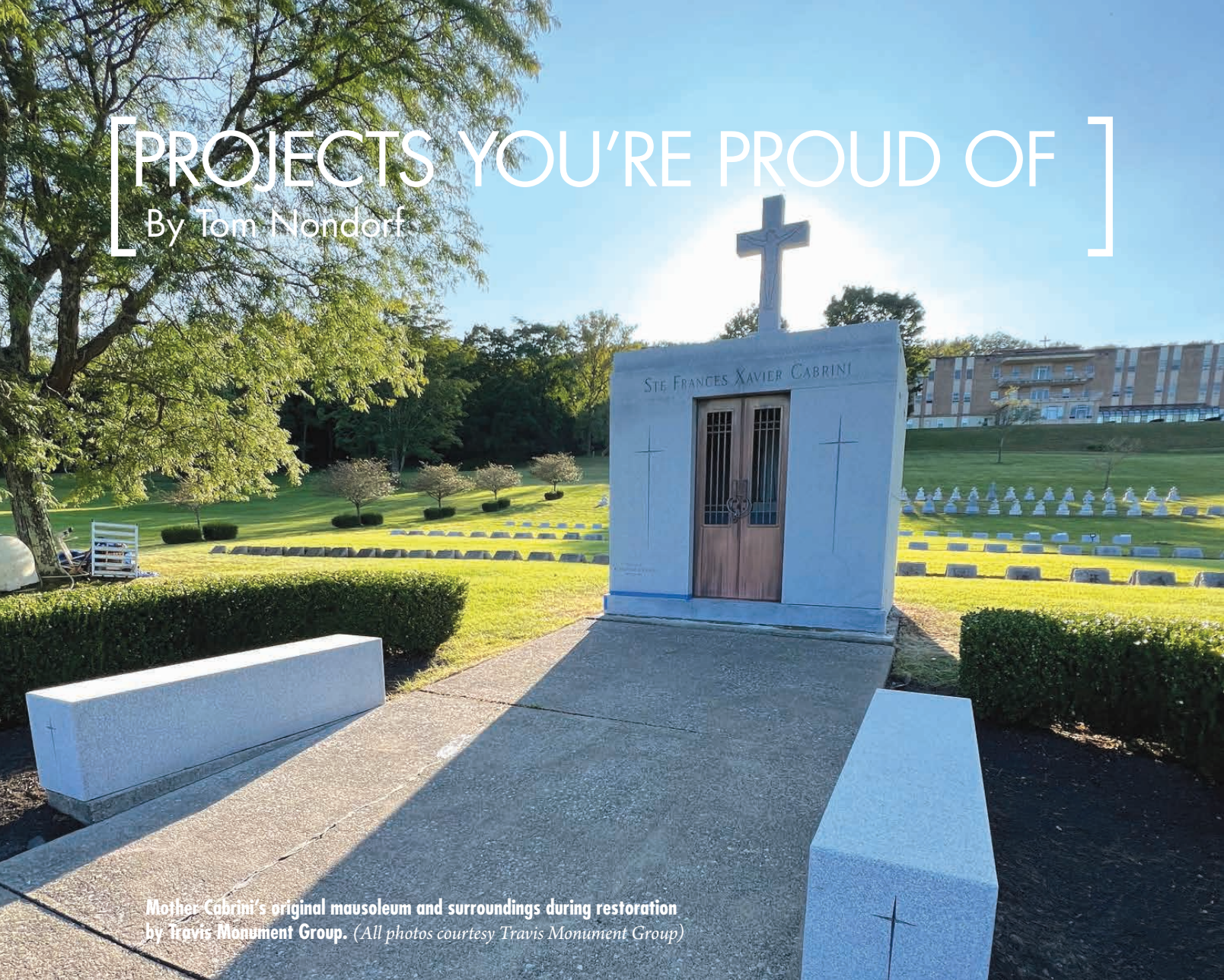


# PROJECTS YOU'RE PROUD OF

By Tom Nondorf



Mother Cabrini's original mausoleum and surroundings during restoration by Travis Monument Group. (All photos courtesy Travis Monument Group)

## The Restoration of Mother Cabrini's Original Resting Place, West Park, New York

**S**aint Frances Xavier Cabrini, known to many as Mother Cabrini, is a venerated figure inside and outside of the Catholic faith, especially in the United States, where she was the first naturalized U.S. citizen to be canonized into sainthood, in 1946.

Mother Cabrini was a champion of the downtrodden, and the organization she founded, the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, provided shelter, care, and schooling for orphans and others in need. This was before she even arrived in this country. At the urging of Pope Leo

XIII, she moved to the U.S. in 1889 to assist the immigrants coming here, particularly Italian Americans. She founded orphanages and hospitals in different parts of the country. Cabrini became a U.S. citizen in 1909.

After a life of giving to others, she left this world in 1917 at the age of 67, the same number of institutions she is credited with founding in her lifetime. Mother Cabrini was beatified in 1938, canonized into full sainthood in 1946, and is fittingly the patron saint of immigrants.

Her original wish was for her remains

to be placed on the cemetery grounds of the Sacred Heart Orphanage – a facility she founded in 1890 for immigrant Italian girls – overlooking the Hudson River in West Park, New York. The canonization process, however, required her exhumation and examination by a delegation from Vatican City. Her head and heart ended up in places important to her history in Italy, and the bulk of her skeletal remains were moved to a shrine created for her in Washington Heights in northern Manhattan, the site of Mother Cabrini High School (now a Success Academy Charter School).

Today, you can view and pay tribute to Mother Cabrini's remains (supplemented with wax recreations of her head and hands) in the enclosed glass altar of the St. Frances Xavier Cabrini Shrine at 701 Fort Washington Ave.

But 90 minutes up the Hudson, in West Park, the site of her original tomb remains a crucial part of her story. In 2024, the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, looking to refurbish the tomb and its surroundings, engaged the team at Travis Monuments from about an hour away in Nyack, a job their vice president, Anthony Minozzi, was more than honored to take on.

With a sense of Mother Cabrini's history (Minozzi recalled his father-in-law had a little pin of Mother Cabrini he used to wear every day) he felt he was doing work for a higher power and saw the restoration as a chance to use his expertise in tribute to someone "who had done so much for so many." Minozzi also sympathized with Mother Cabrini as someone who was, for part of her life, not taken seriously because of her size and stature, so to work on the little corner of the world that was her original resting spot and, in fact, her first

choice to spend eternity, was a thrill.

But it was also not without challenges. The first was getting the gig.

It started, Minozzi said, with a photo he received via email of the interior of Mother Cabrini's mausoleum (a replica built in the 1970s). The photo showed a glass crypt with a casket in it, and the Missionary Sisters' people said, "Can you clean this up, restore the interior, and clean up the exterior?"

Minozzi loves taking on projects, but putting on the hard sell is not in his nature. "I'm not the type of individual that tries to convince anyone to do anything, I believe in living my life a certain way, just whether in a business or personal sense, I try to educate someone on what I think is the best case and the reasons why and let them find their own way," he said. "So, I spent time with the property manager, Michael Tambasco, and with the other people in the organization to educate them and give them a little background on what was happening to the mausoleum over time and why, so they could make good decisions on how to restore it so that it was a cost-effective restoration."

This approach served him well in earn-



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**A look at the floor inside the mausoleum.**



**The state of Mother Cabrini's casket.**



**Mausoleum, post-restoration, doors open.**

ing the trust of Tambasco as well as Sister Diane Olmstead, his primary contact with the nonprofit Missionary Sisters organization.

Once the Travis proposal was accepted, the next tricky part was getting access to the property because the original orphanage on the property had closed years ago, and the property around the cemetery was sold to another religious organization that operates a monastery. "There was a permanent easement allowed for anyone that wants to visit their loved ones that are in the cemetery that's on the grounds of her old school," Minozzi said. "In New York, it's an odd arrangement to have a cemetery on private property. Cemeteries are usually municipal in New York, and they're either governed by the county or by the state, but mostly local government."

Minozzi and his crew wanted to make sure their visits aligned well with the needs of those leading the monastic life. "There are monks there that live very quietly," he said. "We don't want to disturb them, but they want to know when people are on their property, so we have to give them a heads up; we have to let them know when we're coming." So, communication was a key element in managing the project, as well as respect for the room, so to speak. Minozzi was very pleased to say he had an experienced crew that understood the gravitas of the job.

Then, right around the time work was authorized to begin, he received some news that provided a whole new challenge. One of the mother superiors of the Missionary Sisters organization passed away, and this was going to bring a lot of visitors to the area, some from as far away

as Italy and The Vatican.

"The time frame went from eight-to-10 weeks down to two weeks," Minozzi said. "That was a lot to do in two weeks, so that complicated things a bit. But they asked us if we could get 50%-60% done in the two weeks, just get it as best we can. I'm happy to say we got about 80% of the entire project done in two weeks." One reason why is he ran two crews to the property at the same time to expedite the work.

The main scope of the project was restoring the mausoleum itself, which had weathered over time, with visible stains in the granite. The sisters wanted a complete restoration, so that meant taking the crypt apart to refinish the floor and walls, lightly sandblasting surfaces to remove the unsightly staining and expose the clean portion lurking beneath. This was followed by controlled power washing.

Minozzi brought in a bronze restoration person with 40 years in the trade to work on restoring the mausoleum doors.

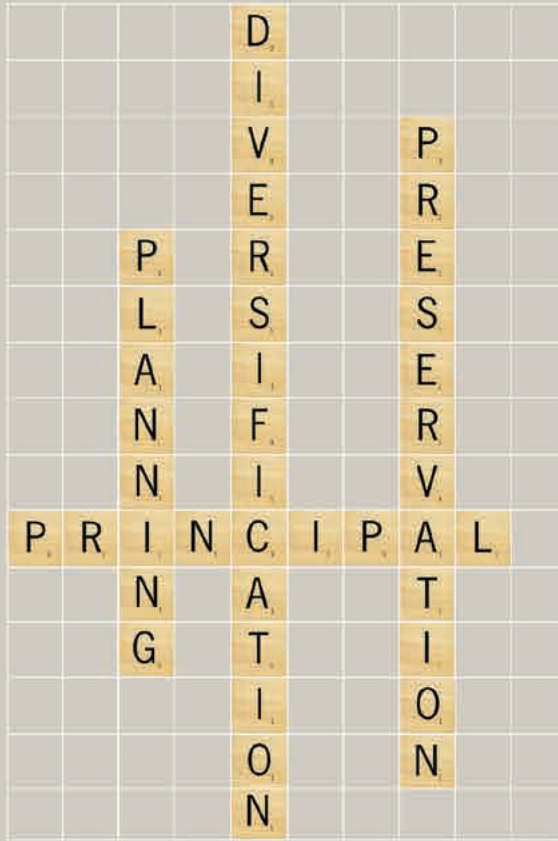
Then they focused on the exterior of the mausoleum and the cleaning of 120 marble monuments nearby. Having earned the trust of the Cabrini organization with the quality of the work so far, Minozzi was able to convince them to add a sealant to the marble, to reduce the need to do a full restoration again in the near future. The revived appearance should now last twice as long, he said.

One downside, if there can be any, to doing beautiful restoration work is anything you do not restore on a property stands in stark relief to the shiny things you cleaned up. The Travis improvements ended up looking so good, the sisters wondered if it was possible to restore about 250 granite headstones nearby as well, including level-



**Casket and interior, post-restoration.**

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ing and realigning them.

One could make a play on words about “mission creep” as the Cabrini job kept growing ever larger for the Travis team, but Minozzi saw the added tasks as a reflection of the faith the sisters had in him and his people.

This was never more evident than when they asked about work on the casket itself. The centerpiece of this Cabrini mausoleum is a casket that once held Mother Cabrini’s remains. Minozzi was asked what he could do to spruce it up since it, too, had known the ravages of time.

“I explained to them that we’re not a casket restoration company, we’re granite and marble and bronze, so I can restore the mausoleum itself. It’s a granite mausoleum,” Minozzi said. “And I had to explain to them that I’m not comfortable handling a casket that’s that old because it is a category 2 relic since her remains were once in that casket. I don’t want to possibly lift the casket that doesn’t have the structural integrity to stay together while removing it, but they gave us permission to lift it, and they accepted the responsibility.” They didn’t want the casket fully restored, per se, just gently cleaned, and at this point, they trusted nobody as much as Minozzi to get the job done. As trepidatious as he was, Travis’s bronze specialist found a way to restore the casket to something resembling its former glory.

Just because the scope of the job said one thing, didn’t mean Minozzi wasn’t going to push that extra mile. He repaid the sisters’ faith in his team with good faith efforts to keep his customers happy.

“The difference is striking in the way that it was to where it is now.” Minozzi said. “The patio, the walkway, we didn’t even talk about those as part of the job, but we did them. We acid washed all of the concrete; we acid washed the granite benches. We triple acid washed and sandblasted the exterior of the building to get it as white and light as it could be. The bronze door, the property manager called me and said, ‘It looks like you put in new bronze doors!’ They asked me to realign five monuments; we realigned every one. He asked me to level seven or eight monuments. We did them all.”

They even revitalized a statue that was not part of the original plan. The idea of giving extra for the client became somewhat contagious among the crew, maybe because of the higher power involved.

“I wanted to do it for Mother Cabrini,” Minozzi said. “And I wanted to do it for the greater good that was being served by the sisters engaging with us with such trust. I wanted to show them that they made a good decision in choosing us. And that there is no bad that comes from that. I just don’t think that doing that will ever do you wrong.”



Headstones no longer blackened by time.