

A Memorial to
Thomas Francis Meagher
on the levee at
Fort Benton, Montana

June 28, 2009
1:00 pm



- Why a Memorial -

After a spectacular and colorful life, first as a patriotic leader in Ireland, then as a dauntless commanding general of the Irish Brigade in the American Civil War, finally as a progressive statesman on the early Montana Territorial political scene, this remarkable man met his fate in the late hours of July 1st, 1867 while on a river boat tied up at Fort Benton, Montana. Since that time nothing has been put in place to mark the site of the untimely death of one of the most active Montana men in the 19th century. So the Helena Hibernians, the Thomas Francis Meagher Division, is now planning to establish an appropriate memorial to their namesake.

The monument will be of a slim, black granite base, around 6' 7" tall, and comes from a local quarry with a heroic sculpted bronze upper torso and head of Meagher, about 2' 9" tall, in civilian dress of the time. A bronze plate will front the stone with an appropriate proclamation. The sculptor is Ron Herron, a Montana artist, who has done a number of extraordinary bronze works.

The site for this testimonial is a lovely spot on the levee, nearly directly across Main Street in Fort Benton from the Baker House, where Meagher spent his last hours prior to boarding the riverboat steamer, *G.A. Thompson*. The Missouri River and distant bluffs provide a fine Montana backdrop. Eventually, several benches will be placed near the site to provide a pause for reflection on what the memorial represents.

Dedication of the testament to Meagher will take place on Sunday, June 28th, 2009. Although the anniversary date of his death is July 1st, the date chosen is part of an annual three day Fort Benton observance of their Summer Celebration. The undertaking has the enthusiastic support of the Montana Historical Society.

Visit us at: <http://www.hibernian.org/meaghermemorial>



Site of Memorial

- Biography of Meagher -

THOMAS FRANCIS MEAGHER 1823-1867

Irish Patriot • American Civil War General • Acting Montana Governor



Born August 23, 1823, in Waterford, Ireland, Meagher was a leading figure in the mid-19th century Irish independence movement, due mainly to his brilliant mind and extraordinary oratorical abilities. In the Irish uprising of 1848, he took the leadership to liberate his people from English tyranny. Convicted of treason in an English court, he was eventually banished to Tasmania. Escaping in 1852, he fled to New York where he was welcomed as a romantic victim of English oppression.

When the Civil War erupted, Meagher formed a company of men of Irish descent which later became part of the Fighting 69th Regiment of New York. Then proposing the formation of the Irish Brigade, composed of Irish immigrants and Irish Americans, Meagher was appointed Commanding General by President Lincoln. This hard-charging unit, with Meagher at its head, proceeded to bring glory upon itself in battles at Fair Oaks, Mechanicsville, Gaines Mill, White Oak Swamp, Antietam, and Fredericksburg. Meagher's fame and military record prompted then President Andrew Johnson to appoint him Secretary of the Montana Territory in 1865. He eventually became Acting Territorial Governor, a post he held twice during the period from September 1865 to July 1867.

Meagher's tenure as Acting Territorial Governor occurred during bitter social and political turmoil. Lawlessness was common, and the Vigilantes who claimed to be protecting the innocent were at times little better than the unruly. In addition, legislatures and appointed Federal officials were constantly in conflict. In spite of it all, Meagher is credited with strong, sincere efforts to bring about political progress. Because of his strong character, as well as being a Democrat, a Catholic, and an Irishman, he faced a number of enemies that thwarted his efforts.

(continued)

After aggressive, thoughtful, and frustrated attempts to move the Territory toward political resolution, this colorful figure's career came to an abrupt, mysterious end. On July 1, 1967, while at Fort Benton on a mission for his newly adopted home, he was either thrown or fell from a docked vessel, his body never recovered. In years following, his reputation was considerably and unfortunately tarnished by political and contentious adversaries who controlled most of the press and political scene in Montana. But Meagher's memory continues to remain distinguished to the Irish in America and in his homeland. In fact, Montana has a county named in honor of this extraordinary man.



Photo courtesy of Gary Forney

Meagher Home

at Virginia City
Refurbished by the
Helena Hibernians



**Meagher Executive
Office in Virginia City**

Home to 1st Legislature

- The Pitch for Funds -

After getting better informed about Meagher and knowing the reasons for a memorial to his name and his status in Montana history, now's the time for us to ask for contributions to this worthy cause. The Hibernians of Helena are seeking to raise \$40,000 in order to appropriately honor the man with a monument at Fort Benton. We are asking for any donation you can and wish to make. For those who can afford it, and have Irish ancestry, for a \$200 donation or more we'll send you a beautiful, 8"x 10", art-crafted family crest of your heritage, suitable for framing, created in Celtic lettering by Marty Lord of Helena. Please use the attached envelope to forward your check, and mark the appropriate box for your family crest along with your address.

Donations are tax-deductible - payable to "Meagher Memorial"

In addition to having a dolmen-like, black granite stone with a sculpted likeness of Meagher, the Hibernians will have cast up to 50 miniature size bronze replicas of the original. This will constitute a limited edition signed by the sculptor that will eventually be offered for sale or provided as gifts for sizeable donations to the project.



Committees on the Meagher Memorial at Fort Benton

Chair, Hank Burgess, Mike O'Connor, Dan Sullivan, Dan Gruber CPA
Advisory Committee: Bob Morgan, Gary Forney, Paul Wylie, Lenore Puhek

- Fort Benton -

Birthplace of Montana



Photo courtesy of Overholser Research Center - Fort Benton

The original fort was first established as a fur trading center in 1847, when Montana was an unexplored wilderness. The village really began to prosper with the growth of steamboat traffic, beginning in 1859. River traffic increased dramatically when Fort Benton

became the unloading place for all kinds of commodities for the new territory. The fort was sold to the Military in 1865.

Today, Fort Benton is a thriving, small Montana community with a great historical past and a desire to preserve all that it represents. There is continued effort to reconstruct the old fort and to enlarge the town's heritage complex and museum. Several fine monuments exist on the levee of the Missouri, including a marvelous heroic size statue of Lewis and Clark, as well as Shep, the famous sheep dog.



Baker House at Fort Benton

It was here in Fort Benton on July 1st, 1867 that Thomas Francis Meagher, on a journey to pick up military rifles for a militia being formed in Virginia City, Montana Territory, of which he was commanding officer, met a mysterious end that's never been solved.



Photo courtesy of Overholser Research Center - Fort Benton

- In Defense of Meagher -



Within the past few years, no less than eight significant writers have come to the aid of truthful history-telling to defend the honor and reputation of Thomas Francis Meagher. Thomas Keneally, in his The Great Shame, Gary Forney, in Thomas Francis Meagher, Richard S. Wheeler, in The Exile, Paul Wylie, in The Irish General, and The River's Edge by Lenore Puhk are all full length books that cover the life of Meagher, although Wheeler's work is fiction, based on historical facts, Keneally's tome covers much more than Meagher. Forney, Wheeler, Wylie, and Puhk are all Montana writers. Other writers with fact-based essays on the Irish-American hero, include

John Hearne, a Professor in Waterford, Ireland, Jon Axline, a Montana historian, and David Emmons, a History Professor from the University of Montana. All are well worth reading.

Here's a sampling of some of the above writers regarding the man:

Governor Green Clay Smith issued a memorial on July 3, 1867: "He was a man of high social qualities, great urbanity, a high order of intellect, a brave soldier, a true gentleman, and an honor to his territory and government." ~ Paul Wylie, p. 322

"Whatever may have been the faults of Thomas Francis Meagher, he was one of the most brilliant and talented Irishmen who have made this country their home." ~ Paul Wylie, p. 325

Thomas Francis Meagher noted "that without a legislature, Montana would be nothing more than a government farm parceled out among federal overseers, tax gatherers, and bailiffs". ~ Paul Wylie, p.254

"Meagher was of the wrong party, the wrong church, and was far too vocal in his opposition to the status quo in Montana." ~ David Emmons, History Professor, University of Montana

".....Thomas Francis Meagher fought to bring political order, establish his church, add a bit of elegance, and infuse others with his dream of a glorious future for Montana — a legacy worthy of consideration." ~ Gary R. Forney, p.221

"(Meagher) had a deep interest in Montana, wished fundamentally to do his work well, and that out of his work, warmth of feeling, and vigor of personality, he gained the affection of the people of Montana as no other early leader was able to do." ~ Merrill Burlingame, Montana writer & educator

- Helena Hibernians -

THE THOMAS FRANCIS MEAGHER DIVISION OF THE ANCIENT ORDER OF HIBERNIANS



Originally, the Hibernian movement was founded by laymen in 16th century Ireland to protect clergy of the Catholic faith from persecution by the English monarchy. This protection extended for several centuries and included teachers as well. The priests would say mass for their people in secluded areas on "Mass

Rocks", while the teachers would become known as "Hedgerow Schoolmasters" as they secretly taught behind the protection of hedgerows. In both cases safekeeping was supplied by Hibernians.

By the 19th century, the organization was extended to America to promote the interests and welfare of Irish immigrants in the new world. Beginning on the east coast in 1806, the spirit and organizing abilities of the Ancient Order of Hibernians moved across the continent, just as the Irish did, to offer aid and comfort to those in need. The Hibernians provided social and religious gatherings as well as assistance for the needy. They also helped these Irish to maintain their Celtic identity and culture.

Although there were many Divisions of the AOH in Montana in the late 19th and early 20th centuries for those people who came west and into our state, the movement declined with the Americanization of the Irish until only one Division remained, that of Anaconda, which survived up to the present day. A revival of Hibernianism began in Helena in 1982 with a new unit named the Thomas Francis Meagher Division, which soon had 120 members. Subsequently, five more Montana units sprang to life, until now the spirit and dedication of the Hibernian concept had a strong foothold.

The Helena Hibernians dedicated themselves, among other things, to reviewing the biography of Meagher for truth and honesty regarding his presence in Montana's history, a story intentionally and badly distorted over the decades after his death.

Thomas Francis Meagher Division of AOH
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Visit Us At:

<http://www.hibernian.org/meaghermemorial>

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