



St. Francis Xavier Cemetery Cleanup

15 May 2026

Ecorse, Michigan





Introduction

- **Who:** volunteers from American-Canadian Genealogical Society, French Canadian Heritage Society of Michigan, Downriver Genealogical Society, Archdiocese of Detroit, and Parish of St. Andre Bessette
- **What:** cleaning up the old Catholic St. Francis Xavier Cemetery, which is no longer active but used for burials of predominantly French Canadian families beginning in early to mid 1800s
- **Where:** Ecorse, Michigan, just south of Detroit
- **When:** 15 May 2026
- **Why:** this cemetery was important to the Downriver French Canadian families, many of whom first arrived to the area in the 1700s

Objectives



This event was strategic for ACGS for a few reasons:



01.

Enhance the visibility of our organization through impactful presence, including to potential members



02.

Preserve an at-risk older cemetery in need of care and bring it to the attention of the community



03.

Strengthen relationships with other genealogical societies with some mission overlap



04.

Connect ACGS to American Canadian history beyond New England

About St. Francis Xavier Cemetery



- Established in 1848 officially, although there may have been earlier burials
- Ecorse and the Downriver area in Detroit were first settled by French Canadian families in the late 1700s and the township of Ecorse was formed in 1827 (prior to Michigan statehood in 1837).
- Originally connected to the Catholic Church St. Francis Xavier, founded in 1848, although Father Gabriel Richard (one of the most important men in Detroit history) had served the area as a mission he visited monthly beginning in late 1700s
- According to genealogist Dale Renaud, parish records were lost long ago, so he reconstructed the burials in this cemetery using the stones, death certificates, existing religious records, and more. He's the premier expert on this cemetery who has published a book with the names of those buried here.
- Renaud's research shows a total number of 2,443 of known burials in this cemetery with only 695 marked
- St. Francis Xavier Church closed/was combined with another parish to form St. Andre Bessette Church, who is responsible for the cemetery
- Maintenance on the cemetery has been uneven, with little attention from the parish and community

Surnames



Most common surnames buried in St. Francis Xavier Cemetery:

- LeBlanc (63)
- Salliotte (44)
- Labadie (42)
- Bourassa (39)
- Drouillard (38)
- Montie (36)
- Renaud (34)
- Riopelle (28)

Community Collaboration

In planning this cleanup event, support from other organizations and individuals varied, but some key help was provided by:

- **Archdiocese of Detroit:** Andy Kudwa, the Director of Parish Cemeteries, was instrumental in making this event a success. He communicated with the parish who oversees the cemetery, coordinated trash haul off and water tank delivery, purchased snacks for volunteers, and generally rallied the support of his organization.
- **French Canadian Heritage Society of Michigan:** Sent multiple emails to their members regarding the event, and some of their members were part of the volunteers at the cleanup.
- **Downriver Genealogical Society:** Although not an official partner, longtime genealogist and member of DGS who has extensively documented this cemetery, Dale Renaud, provided information and supported the event, and the society also shared the event with their members.
- **Jarrold Roll of SaveYourStones.com:** Allowed us to use his informative handout about gravestone preservation best practices to share with volunteers and provided a discounted shipping rate for purchasing cleaning supplies through his site.



Archdiocese of Detroit Report



“The day was successful because it combined Catholic stewardship, community partnership, local history, genealogy, and practical cemetery care... This confirms that the cemetery is not only a grounds-maintenance concern, but also a records-recovery and historical-preservation project.

“This project should be viewed as more than a one-day cleanup. It is a practical model for how the Archdiocese can invite parishes, genealogy groups, descendants, Catholic organizations, and volunteers to help stabilize legacy parish cemeteries while the Office of Parish Cemeteries continues building a structured long-term approach to records, maintenance, perpetual care, governance, and preservation.

“The cleanup confirmed both the value and the vulnerability of St. Francis Xavier Cemetery. **The site is beautiful, historically significant, and deeply connected to Catholic families in the Detroit area.** At the same time, it shows many of the common conditions found in legacy parish cemeteries: aging and weathered monuments, incomplete or damaged markers, records challenges, buried or obscured stones, brush accumulation, and limited ongoing resources.”

Cleanup Day



- Archdiocese of Detroit coordinated delivery of 50 gallon water tank for volunteers, which was donated by the lawn care company that serves the cemetery.
- Archdiocese also provided snacks for volunteers; ACGS provided bottled water and cleaning supplies that were safe for use on the stones
- Around 10 volunteers arrived right at the starting time of 2pm: 2 from the parish with no family connection to the cemetery, 2 from French Canadian Heritage Society of Michigan, 4 from ACGS (Janelle Asselin + family), 2 from Archdiocese of Detroit, and 2 from the Downriver Genealogical Society
- Tasks included:
 - Cleaned historic monuments and family markers using appropriate cemetery care methods.
 - Uncovered flat and partially buried markers that had been hidden by grass and soil.
 - Removed brush, branches, and debris from the cemetery grounds.
 - Trimmed and cleared around monuments.
 - Photographed and documented markers for future historical and genealogical use.
- An additional 10 volunteers joined throughout the event, including 5-6 people who had grandparents or close family connections to the cemetery and the priest from St. Andre Bessette Church

2023



2023

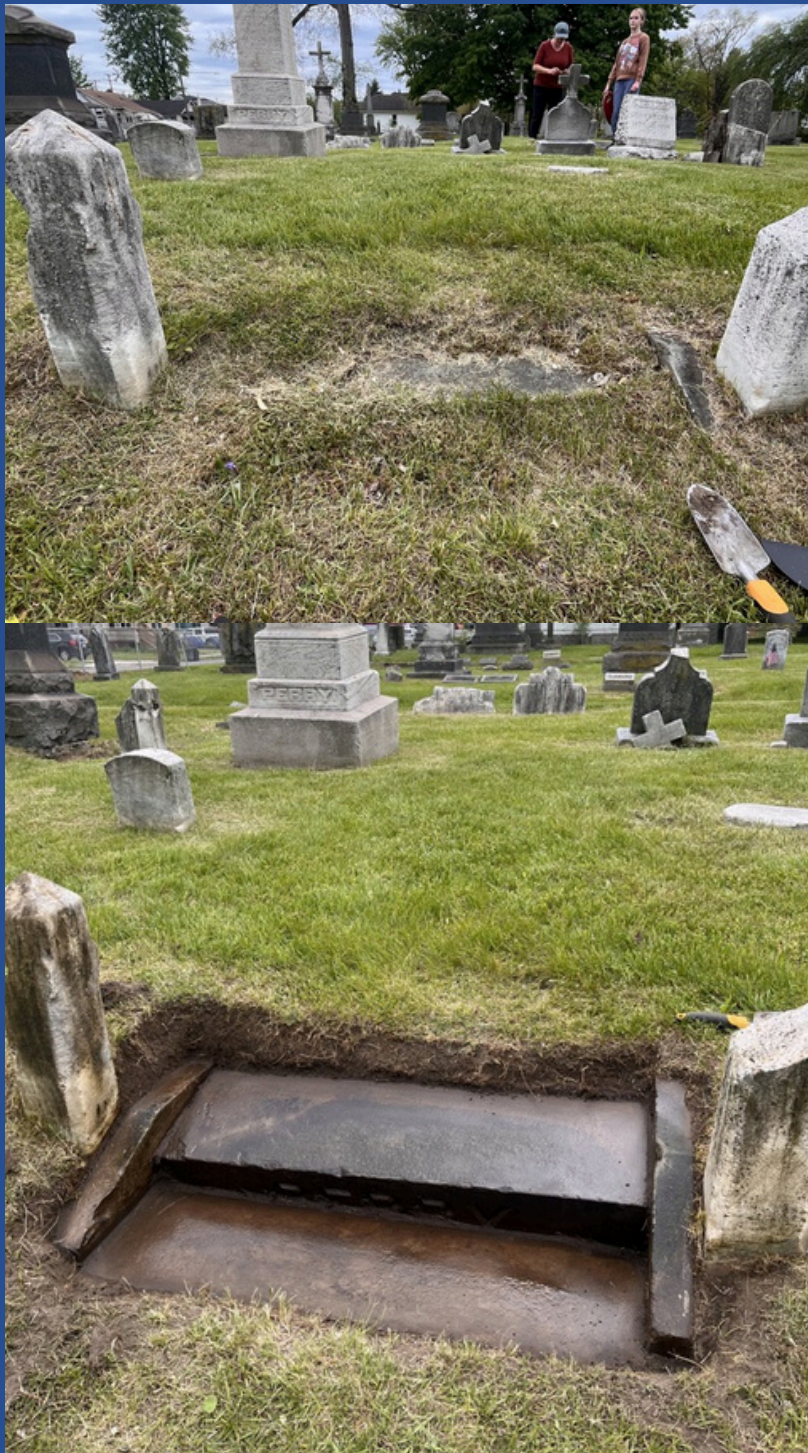


2026

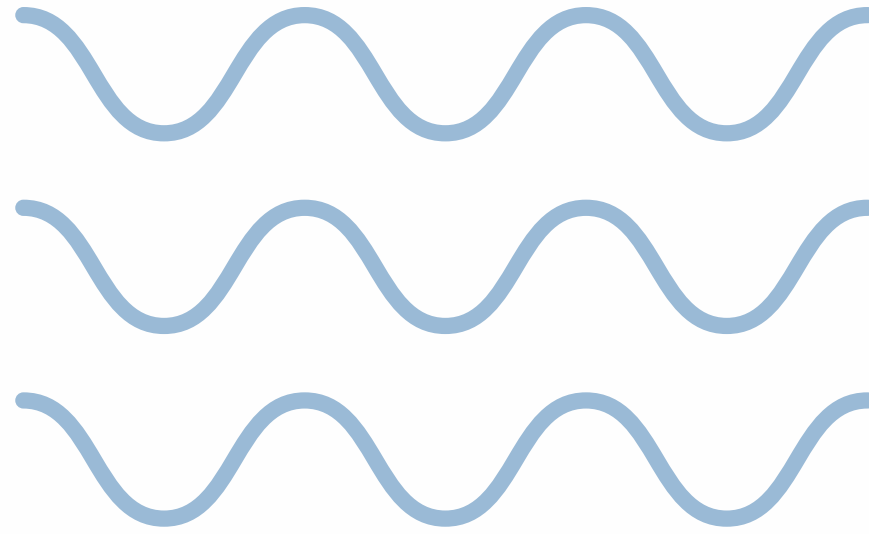


Before and After

Cleanup Day



Conclusion



01.

Positive Impact

ACGS was able to help preserve a cemetery that is important to American Canadian history in the Detroit area and inspire the local community to work together.

02.

Connections

Stronger connections were created with the French Canadian Heritage Society of Michigan, the Downriver Genealogical Society, and the Archdiocese of Detroit that could be useful to ACGS's mission and objectives going forward

03.

Awareness

Through this strategic event, ACGS was able to connect with individuals and organizations in Michigan who might not otherwise know our mission includes the heritage of this area

