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Caskets of Irish railroaders whose remains were excavated from a mass grave outside Philadelphia. AP Photo/Matt Rourke

Historian uncovers evidence of second mass grave of Irish immigrant railroaders in Pennsylvania who suffered from cholera, violence and xenophobia

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When commuters on the R5 SEPTA train that connects suburban Chester County to [Philadelphia](#) approach Malvern station, they might spot a square stone monument on the right side in a clearing surrounded by a thick stand of forest.

Above it, a sign paid for by the Amtrak [electrical workers union](#) and suspended from the trees reads:

BURIAL PLOT OF IRISH RAILROAD WORKERS: At this site, known as Duffy's Cut, fifty-seven Irish immigrant railroad workers from the counties of Donegal, Tyrone, Derry and Leitrim died of cholera and murder in the summer of 1832.

I'm a [historian](#) at Immaculata University, about one mile west of Duffy's Cut. In 2004, my colleagues and I were the ones to discover the mass grave when we excavated the site with the permission of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.

My students, who were about the same age as Duffy's workers in 1832, provided a great deal of the labor at the excavation.

More recently, in May 2025, we discovered human remains that suggest a second Irish immigrant railroader mass grave 11 miles west of Duffy's Cut, in Downingtown.



A SEPTA commuter train passes Duffy's Cut in Malvern, Pa. William E. Watson, CC BY-NC-SA

57 dead railroaders

Duffy's Cut was named after an Irish Catholic immigrant railroad contractor named Philip Duffy, who lived from 1783-1871 and was probably from County Donegal in northwest Ireland.

I learned about the site and its possible mass grave from Pennsylvania Railroad documents that survived in my family.

A 1909 file, labeled "History of Duffy's Cut Stone enclosure east of Malvern, Pennsylvania, which marks the burial place of 57 track laborers who were victims of the cholera epidemic of 1832," was compiled by future Pennsylvania Railroad president Martin W. Clement when he was an assistant supervisor. My grandfather, who was Clement's executive assistant and later director of personnel, obtained the file before the records were auctioned off in 1972, and my brother showed me the file in 2002.

The Philadelphia & Columbia Railroad, the predecessor of the Pennsylvania Railroad, wanted to shorten the travel time from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh from three to four weeks by Conestoga wagon to three to four days by rail, canal and river.

The file my brother had in his possession stated that the dead railroaders at Duffy's Cut were young men, recently arrived from Ireland. It also said the cost of mile 59 was vastly more expensive than the typical Philadelphia & Columbia Railroad mile. Laying a typical mile of P&C railroad cost US\$5,000 in the 1830s. But at mile 59, gouging the landscape with a "cut" to lay the tracks on level ground and bridging the valley with a fill – an earthen bridge – cost \$32,000. Although the work was especially difficult, the common laborers received about 25 cents a day.



Fragment of an Irish-made clay pipe unearthed near the Duffy's Cut mass grave. AP Photo/Matt Rourke

Most of the men had sailed from the city of Derry in the north of Ireland to Philadelphia from April to June of 1832 aboard the John Stamp. The ship pulled into the Lazaretto quarantine station on the Delaware River in Essington, Pennsylvania, before sailing on to Philadelphia.

No one on the John Stamp was reported to be ill. This was the height of the 1832 cholera epidemic that ultimately killed at least 10,000 people in the U.S.

Forty-seven laborers from the John Stamp ship joined 10 other Irish immigrant workers who were already living with Duffy in a rental house in Willistown, a mile south of the work site.

Yet almost as soon as they arrived to the work camp at mile 59, so did cholera, which had spread to Philadelphia from New York City.

Cholera in the camps

Americans could read about the spread of cholera across Europe in 1831 in the newspapers, but very little was known about the disease until decades later.

Cholera is a bacterial infection that spreads due to poor sanitary practices in which human feces get into drinking water, via excrement passed into streams or by seepage from outhouses to wells.

But in 1832, people believed cholera was linked to intemperance and vice, which were thought to weaken the body. According to the prevailing miasma theory, it caused outbreaks once airborne. Immigrants and the poor were thought to be especially susceptible to the disease and primary vectors for its spread.

Cholera causes extreme diarrhea and vomiting that lead to rapid electrolyte loss. In 1832 it was fatal in about 50% of cases. In the Delaware Valley, cholera cases mounted from July into August 1832. Philadelphia registered its peak number of cases, 173, on Aug. 6 and peak number of deaths, 76, on Aug. 7. The hardest-hit areas in the region were working-class neighborhoods and canal and railroad work camps.

A typical crew on a P&C mile numbered 100 to 120 men. However, the work by Irish immigrants was segregated along sectarian lines on the railroads in the U.S., as it was in the Belfast dockyards at the same time. The other half of the workers at mile 59, according to Canal Commission reports, were Irish Protestant immigrants who worked for an Irish Protestant contractor and did the less dangerous work of laying tracks. They did not die of cholera.



The author, second from left, and his team at the dig site at Duffy's Cut in 2011. William E. Watson, CC BY-NC-SA

Signs of a massacre

To excavate the site, we partnered with the Chester County Emerald Society, a law enforcement group that cleared our work with the county district attorney, and the coroner, in case we found human remains. The University of Pennsylvania Museum provided ground-penetrating radar, as well as archaeological and anthropological assistance for the dig. Staff trained my students in how to properly excavate and handle artifacts and bones.

Our research team uncovered seven sets of remains between 2009 and 2012 in the remaining eastern portions of the fill. The skeletons had been buried in coffins sealed with an exceptional number of nails, perhaps to contain the cholera.

Analysis at the UPenn Museum showed evidence of violence to each of the skulls – with one skull showing both an ax blow and a bullet encased in the skull. Researchers found no evidence of defensive wounds on any skeleton, suggesting that the men might have been tied up before being killed.

After our team analyzed the remains, we came to the startling conclusion that the men didn't die from cholera – they were massacred.

I believe that fear of cholera, an epidemic that some clergymen in America and England called “a chastisement for the sins of the people,” and anti-immigrant sentiment fueled violence against them by native-born populations.

After forensic examinations of the remains, five of the skeletons were reburied during a ceremony at West Laurel Hill Cemetery in Bala Cynwyd in 2012. My team determined the identities of two of the deceased – 18-year-old John Ruddy from County Donegal and 29-year-old Catherine Burns, the daughter of one of the workers, from County Tyrone – and their remains were returned to their home counties in Ireland in 2013 and 2015.



Bishop Michael J. Fitzgerald takes part in a funeral at West Laurel Hill Cemetery in 2012 for the five 19th-century Irish immigrants whose remains were excavated from the Duffy's Cut site. AP Photo/Matt Rourke

A second mass grave in Chester County

Historical records led us to what we believe is a second mass grave in Chester County.

An article in the Nov. 7, 1832, issue of the Village Record newspaper in West Chester reported that one man from Duffy's Cut fled westward down the unfinished track line to another Irish immigrant railroader crew "near the line of East Bradford and East Caln."

This was P&C mile 48 in Downingtown, Pennsylvania. It was under the direction of Irish immigrant contractor Peter Connor, whose crew of 100 to 120 men was reported to have all died around the same time as Duffy's crew.

Forty years later, Charles Pennypacker's 1909 "History of Downingtown" recorded that the dead Irishmen in Downingtown were carted north to a field where they were buried in a mass grave on the property of present-day Northwood Cemetery, "in the eastern part of the cemetery, near the gully."



File photo from March 24, 2009, shows bones recovered from the mass grave at Duffy's Cut. AP Photo/Matt Rourke, File

On May 15, 2025, the Duffy's Cut team unearthed the first human remains from the Downingtown crew in the exact place reported by Pennypacker. This work has just started.

Up and down the East Coast, there are numerous mass graves of anonymous workers who died of epidemics and overwork in the 1820s and 1830s. Most of those people will never have their stories told.

At Duffy's Cut, and now at the Downingtown site, we hope to humanize some of the hardworking immigrants who died building a crucial part of America's industrial landscape.

Visitors can view artifacts found at Duffy's Cut at the Duffy's Cut Museum in the Gabriele Library at Immaculata University in Malvern, Pa.

Read more of our stories about Philadelphia and Pennsylvania.