On a bright October morning, a small group stood reverently in a circle before a cluster of headstones on a green hill. The white dome of the Capitol was just visible in the distance, but to the quiet group, present-day cares were far from mind; their thoughts and prayers were occupied instead with names from the past.

As they closed the Office of the Dead, the ancient prayer of the Church offered for the repose of the souls of the deceased, the group returned to subdued but excited chatting about the great figures memorialized before them.

"He’s here!" Nelson H. Minnich, professor of history and Church history, had exclaimed earlier that morning, pointing at an ornate stone bearing the name of Monsignor Henri Hyvernat (1858 – 1941). For Minnich, discovering the resting place of this prominent scholar had been long in coming.

The pilgrims that day included Monsignor Robert Trisco, professor emeritus of Church history, William J. Wagner, professor of law and director of the Program of Studies in Jurisprudence; and Rev. Berard L. Marthaler, O.F.M. Conv., professor emeritus of religion and religious education (pictured at right).

The group had been organized by Minnich to discover if there was any truth to rumors of a lot at Mount Olivet Cemetery in Northwest Washington, D.C., about four miles from campus, owned by The Catholic University of America.

"I was always curious. I had heard a story [about this lot] that was owned by CUA and I used to ask around and couldn't get an answer," Minnich says. "People had vague notions or had never heard of it."

Several clues had piqued Minnich's interest over the years, chief among them a New Catholic Encyclopedia entry by historian J. T. Ellis on Monsignor Peter K. Guilday (1884 – 1947) that gave credence to the rumors:

"According to his [Guilday’s] wishes, his funeral took place from the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, and he was buried in a University lot in Mount Olivet Cemetery in Washington," the article reads.

"It was nice to honor the man who founded the journal. He was also crucial in setting up the Church history program here at The Catholic University of America," Minnich says. "We owe a huge debt to these people."

Monsignor Hyvernat was an internationally famous Orientalist and scholar of ancient Assyrian and Semitic languages who served as a professor at CUA for 52 years, beginning at the University’s opening in 1889 until his death in 1941.

As they closed the Office of the Dead, the ancient prayer of the Church offered for the repose of the souls of the deceased, the group returned to subdued but excited chatting about the great figures memorialized before them. Two of the University’s greatest historical figures, Monsignor Guilday and Monsignor James McMahon, were honored in the ceremony.

Finding Monsignor Guilday’s grave was a moment of special significance for Minnich, who is the current editor of the Catholic Historical Review, a scholarly journal founded by Guilday in 1915.

"Our faculty are part of a living tradition," Minnich adds. "We’re standing in the shadow of these scholars."

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Thanks to William John Shepherd, associate archivist, and Jane Stoeffler, reference archivist, of the American Catholic History Research Center and University Archives for their help with the research of this article.

Based on the 1901 Annual Report of the Rector, it is likely that the University acquired the original lot that year, the date of the interment of Monsignor James McMahon. An Irish-born priest who spent 40 years of ministry in New York, he became wealthy through investment in real estate and donated the funds for the construction of McMahon Hall at his death. Though he never served on the CUA faculty, he retired to the campus for the last 10 years of his life.

McMahon's grave is the oldest in the original lot, and it may have been purchased specifically for him. The University had hoped that he might be buried near the campus building named for him, but complications, according to the report, made this impossible.

"He [McMahon] was buried with all honors which the University could give, and his remains have been placed in the Mount Olivet Cemetery, where a lot of land has been purchased on which a suitable monument should be erected," the report says.

The second and third University lots were purchased together in 1957 and both have only one memorial each: Joseph Ferson, interred in 1971, and David Gilson, who, in 1991, was the last person buried in a University lot. Both were University librarians of many years who died suddenly and had few surviving family connections.

The famous figures who have reposed in the University’s lots for decades provide a link between the University’s long history and the present day.

"[The well-known theologian] Jaroslav Pelikan referred to tradition as the ‘living faith of the dead,’" Wagner says. "Our faith is a communion of saints; it’s a faith that we possess by virtue of the testimony of those who have gone before us."

"Our faculty are part of a living tradition," Minnich adds. "We’re standing in the shadow of these scholars."