EXPLORING THE CITY

BY JIM MURPHY

The Irish Memorial

I't's early morning at Front and Chestnut Streets in Old City. If you're not looking for it, you could easily pass right by Philadelphia's powerful and poignant tribute to the millions of Irish immigrants who fled in "coffin ships" to the U.S. between 1845 and 1850… and to the million others who died in Ireland.

But look east toward the Delaware River and suddenly, out of the morning mist, you see them: 35 larger-than-life figures that make up the monumental Irish Memorial sculpted by Glenna Goodacre, which opened to the public on October 25, 2003. The Association of Philadelphia Tour Guides Handbook says the massive memorial, which commemorates *An Gorta Mor,* or the Great Hunger of 1845-1850, is the largest bronze work in Philadelphia.

Walk closer and move around the "wedge" that's about 12 feet high, 30 feet long and 12 feet wide, and you'll see the story of the Irish migration in a nutshell: the famine, sickness and starvation; the immigrants leaving Ireland; and finally, the weary-but-hopeful travelers stepping onto American soil in Philadelphia.

Creator Glenna Goodacre, who beat out more than 100 other artists to win the sculpture commission for the Irish Memorial, is also known for two other important works: The Vietnam Women's Memorial on the Mall in Washington, D.C., and for the bas-relief of Sacagawea, the Shoshone Indian who interpreted for Lewis and Clark, on the U.S. dollar coin.

A native of Lubbock, Texas, Goodacre says on LubbockOnline: "I wanted the monument to invite people to walk around it. So many people have picked out a face here or one there and told me it looks like Uncle Jack or Aunt Sue."

To me, the figure welcoming the immigrants to Philadelphia looks like a younger version of the late U.S. Senator Edward "Teddy" Kennedy.

After Goodacre created the "impressionistic" characters in a "mock monument," with 6-inch-tall figures, a California company enlarged it 16 times and set the figures in styrofoam. The foundry, Art Castings of Colorado, then spent a year sculpting the figures and the ship over the styrofoam steel core with 14,000 pounds of oil-based clay. Finally, it cast the statue and separated it into 400 pieces that were transported to Philadelphia and welded together here. The resilient silicon bronze used in this sculpture is easy to maintain and repair, says the Irish Memorial's website. A dark patina added to the bronze, along with a touch of green, will grow deeper over the years.

Placed near the memorial are eight information stations. While they provide a great deal of useful history, the engraved stations are hard to read (depending on the light) and appear to be placed in a rather random order.

The stations note that many of the Irish who came here were rural, uneducated people thrust into an unwelcoming city. Yet they continued to come in great numbers.

By 1850, 18 percent of Philadelphia's population was Irish. These new immigrants did the dirtiest jobs: digging canals and tunnels, building railroads and bridges, tending furnaces and more.

Some surprising facts:

- The potato blight that decimated the Irish crop originated in North America and travelled to Europe.

- While 500,000 Irish people were dying of starvation and disease in 1847, Queen Victoria's troops took millions of pounds worth of food at gunpoint from Ireland and shipped it to England.

- Some 263 immigrants who were natives of Ireland would go on to win the Congressional Medal of Honor, more than from any other foreign country.

Unfortunately, even though the Irish Memorial is just blocks away from two other important local sites — the Korean War Memorial and the Philadelphia Vietnam Veterans Memorial — many area residents I spoke to are unaware it exists.

The lessons it teaches us are meaningful: immigrants can come here, triumph over tragedy and use their innate talents in a free country.

The city's largest bronze work is unknown to many residents.

"Let this memorial serve as a beacon of hope to all who come here. To them we say in greeting *'Cead mile failte!'* One hundred thousand welcomes!"