

[1845: John Gordon, the last hanged in Rhode Island](#)

This article is from ExecutedToday.com

February 14th, 2012 Headsman

Last year, the Rhode Island General Assembly approved a measure [posthumously pardoning](#) John Gordon — who on February 14, 1845 was the last man executed in that state.

Gordon's hanging, for the murder of a prominent industrialist who had bad blood with Gordon's brother, was long notorious in Rhode Island as one secured on highly uncertain evidence in an atmosphere of anti-Irish prejudice. [Executed Today](#) is pleased to welcome on this occasion University of Rhode Island labor historian **Scott Molloy**, author of [Irish Titan](#), [Irish Toilers](#) and a major advocate of the Gordon pardon.

ET: Can you set the scene — what's going on in Rhode Island at this time, and what are the tensions surrounding Irish immigrants?

SM: Rhode Island was the site of the first factory in America in the 1790s, called [Slater Mill](#). It really changed the face of Rhode Island and eventually the rest of the US.

In Rhode Island, curiously, as more and more people left the farms to work on the mills, they had an unusual requirement that really didn't make any difference years earlier: in order to vote, you had to have so much land. (Specifically, \$134 worth of land.)

By 1840, not only were the usual suspects not able to vote — women, people of color, Native Americans — 60% of native-born white male Rhode Islanders were also unable to vote. It meant that just a handful of people ruled the state, compared to the time of the American Revolution when just about every white male could vote. And immigrants in particular — and in those days, that was the Irish — were basically precluded from voting. You had a residency requirement, a property qualification. It made Rhode Island almost unique in New England, almost like a southern state.

A group of reformers came to the forefront, a guy named [Thomas Wilson Dorr](#), a blueblood aristocrat, Harvard-educated, one of the best legal minds of the country. He threw his lot in with the reformers to try to get people the right to vote. It really [polarized the state](#) in 1842.

The Irish were sympathetic, but Irish priests tried to keep them out of it because they wanted to acclimate. But because a lot of the animosity toward

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people having the right to vote was directed at Irish immigrants. People blamed the Irish even though the Irish didn't get particularly involved in the Dorr War. Often times they got blamed for everything whether they did it or not. And of course we face the same situation with immigrants today.

What was the crime and how did the Gordons come to be the focus of the prosecution?

In 1843, a Yankee industrialist out in [Cranston](#) by the name of Amasa Sprague was found on New Year's Eve 1843 bludgeoned to death in what today we might call a hate crime. He had a gold watch still on him, he had money in his pocket, and he had been beaten to death.

Amasa Sprague was a very influential guy. [His older brother](#) who helped run the mill with him and was the US Senator from Rhode Island had the local city council lift the liquor license from the Gordon family's business, which for all intents and purposes ended their livelihood. This was Nicholas Gordon's shop: John Gordon had only just crossed over from Ireland.

When Sprague was found dead about six months after the license was lost, they focused on the Gordon family. The authorities formed a posse and they went after this Irish family.

How did anti-Irish sentiment manifest itself at trial?

The juries in all three trials had no Catholics and no Irish that I'm aware of. There was a lot of religious and socioeconomic animosity.

At the time, the Supreme Court of the state would sit in on the whole trial just because it was a capital trial, and the trial judge would say in the transcript — which is [still available](#) (pdf) — he basically says to the jury, if you find testimony that contradicts itself between a Yankee and an Irish witness, you should give the Yankee testimony more credence.

Doesn't the fact that John Gordon's brothers were not convicted militate against the notion of overwhelming anti-Irish prejudice?

You can't go overboard on these things. The juries — all three of them — they found one Gordon innocent and in the other case they had a hung jury. I don't want to say they were completely prejudiced, because they weren't, but almost everything else in Rhode Island at that time was stacked up against them. The earlier Irish who came in the 1820s and 1830s were a little bit better off, a little bit better-educated [compared to later Irish immigrants after the potato

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famine]. The animus against the Irish was still intense; the Irish were seen as criminal, unskilled, uneducated, ignorant. The Protestant majority at the time, mostly of English heritage, kind of brought that over with them even though they had been there for a long time.

So how did the legal proceedings play out?

They put two of the recently immigrated brothers up for conspiracy for murder, but not the oldest brother. So John Gordon and his brother William go on trial first.

The jury came back with a guilty verdict for John Gordon, who didn't have much of an alibi, but a not guilty verdict for William, who did have an alibi. So you've got a conspiracy conviction with only one conviction.

Then they put Nicholas Gordon on trial, and the jury comes back deadlocked. His second trial is not going to be until the spring of 1845. In the interim, his brother John was to be hanged, [Valentine's Day 1845](#) — rather than wait to see what happened at Nicholas Gordon's trial and whether there even is a conspiracy.

The defense petitions [the governor](#) and the general assembly to hold off the execution until after the trial of the oldest brother. The governor washes his hands of it, and the general assembly votes very narrowly to go ahead with the execution.

So they hang him, and what's interesting in that part of it is an itinerant, traveling Catholic priest — a guy named Father John Brady — hears John Gordon's last confession.

Well, they invite the elite of providence inside the prison to watch the hanging. (There's about 1,000 Irish outside the prison in support of John Gordon.) When they put the noose around his neck, the priest is with him, and the priest berates the elites and authorities, and he says, John, you are going before a just God who has seen way too many of your countrymen.

I always argue in my writings that this guy, he's an immigrant, he's uneducated, he's just been in America for a few months. I just can't believe that this guy would ever lie to the priest hearing his last confession, and the priest would never berate the elites unless he'd heard a confession of innocence. After John Gordon's hanging, his brother Nicholas goes on trial as planned, and they come back with another hung jury — this time, with a majority voting him

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as innocent. They were going to try him again except about 18 months later, Nicholas dies of natural causes.

I've seen a lot of people describe growing up hearing unambiguously that this was a wrongful execution. Is that how it was perceived right from the start? How universal was/is that perception?

There was such a collective feeling of guilt about this that in 1854, Rhode Island [abolished the death penalty](#) and John Gordon was the last person ever executed there.

There's one flaw in the law. This was added late in the 20th century, that anyone convicted of killing a prison guard during an escape could still be killed. And there was an incident, I remember it as a kid maybe 30 years ago, but they still didn't condemn even that person to death. But Rhode Island has never changed that.

None of us who ever testified ever said categorically that John Gordon was innocent, because we just can't prove that. But we did say that he never got a fair trial, just like [Sacco and Vanzetti](#) in the 1920s.

We did in our research was come up with two or three suspects who had much better reason to assassinate Sprague. But there were no witnesses to the case. It was all [circumstantial evidence](#). I have to say, every time I look at the case — there are some pieces of evidence that would make the Gordons look very guilty. There are other aspects of it that make them look very innocent. If it was in today's world, the police would interrogate them as people of interest. It's not as cut-and-dried as some people make it. All I know is that they got an unfair trial.

Gordon was posthumously pardoned last year. How did that campaign get going, and how receptive were folks in the capitol?

The problem was a lot of people had forgotten the case. I had been writing for a number of years op-ed pieces in the Providence Journal, and mentioned John Gordon from time to time.

But it was a guy named Ken Dooley, and he grew up a couple miles from the murder site near Cranston, and he was a playwright. He came back home and remembered his grandmother singing some little ditty of a song 70 years ago saying something like "Poor Johnny Gordon", and so he [researched it](#), and he wrote [a play](#).

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And they put it on in Cranston, and over the course of the month several thousand [people](#) saw it. [A state representative](#), an Irish guy, saw the play four or five times and then introduced that into the general assembly trying to obtain a posthumous pardon — just to say that the evidence didn't support the execution.

And [Gov. Chaffee](#), who comes from an ancient Yankee family in Rhode Island, signed the damn thing. It was that play that this guy wrote and we were all amazed that this kind of came out of the blue. We held a lot of events around it — had church services, put up ceremonial headstones. I always tell people that I want this on my headstone: that I had a hand in getting John Gordon pardoned.

There are some excellent resources already available online concerning the Gordon case, including:

- [Rep. Peter Martin's resources page](#). Rep. Peter Martin sponsored the pardon bill.
- [Murder by Gaslight's close narration](#) of the crime and ensuing criminal cases.

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