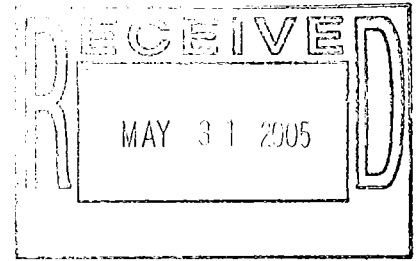


SAINT MARY'S CHURCH
103 Pine Street – P.O. Box 518
Pawtucket, Rhode Island 02862



May 26, 2005

Mr. Michael A. DiLauro
Assistant Public Defender
100 North Main Street
Providence, RI 02903

Dear Mr. DiLauro,

This is in response to your request for the location of the grave of John Gordon.

I realize your request was made in January 2004, but we have many genealogy requests and can only research the records as time permits. Requests are handled on a first come first serve basis.

According to our records, Mr. Gordon is buried near the old Main entrance at the corner of George and Grace Streets. There is no marker on the Grave.

I have enclosed some information on Mr. Gordon, which Fr. Ledoux researched on the internet.

Good luck in your genealogy research.

Sincerely,

Carol Keough

Mrs. Carol Keough
Parish Secretary

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Murder at the Sprague Mansion

Rhode Island's "Unsolved" Mystery

By Nicole Camarda



Roger Williams was exiled to Rhode Island after demonstrating his then-radical beliefs on religious freedom to the settlers in Massachusetts. Williams openly invited all races and religions to live in peace in Rhode Island and aimed for peace among the white man and the Narragansett Indians.

Knowing that Rhode Island was founded on those ideals and practices, it is hard to believe that at one time Rhode Island was a state full of

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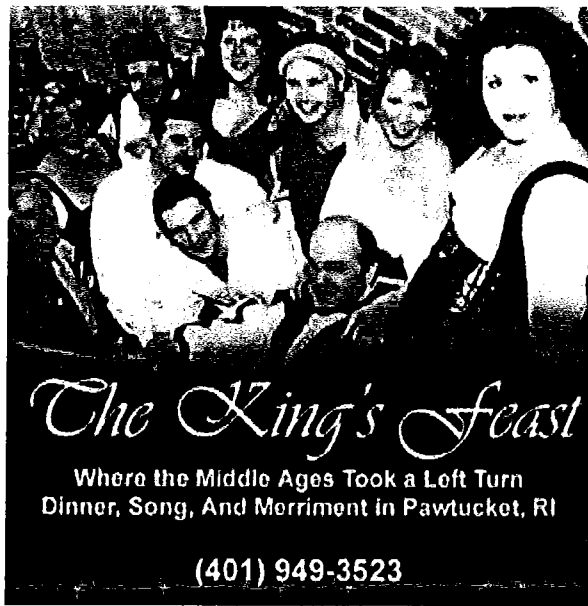
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hatred toward immigrants. It is a sad truth to accept. Perhaps the most scrutinized and belittled group were the Irish, being the first of many nations' refugees to Rhode Island. It is especially hard for us to believe this after years of taking part in St. Patrick's Day parties and events. But there was time when the Irish were the subjects of discrimination - not

celebration.

The Spragues were a prominent industrial family in Rhode Island. William and Amasa Sprague, brothers, ran a prosperous printing company. William Sprague, a governor of



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Rhode Island from 1860-1863, took a small cotton printing plant and made it into one of the great textile empires of the day. The mill was called "Sprague Print Works" and located in Cranston, Rhode Island, the administrative home of Cranston Print Works Company today. Access to waterways, new technology and natural resources made Sprague Print Works a thriving business until after the Civil War.

The brothers were sitting on a gold mine, and business was only getting better. Then, out of the blue, on New Year's Eve day in 1843, Amasa Sprague's dead body was found in the snow outside his mansion in Cranston.

What happens next is part of the greatest trials and mysteries

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Rhode Island will ever see.

Suspicion in the town immediately pointed fingers at Nicholas Gordon, an Irish immigrant. But why Gordon? Nicholas Gordon was the owner of a small pub close to the print works factory. Sprague's workers would frequent Gordon's business on their lunch hour. As a reaction to his workforce drinking during work hours, Amasa had gone to the city council and revoked Gordon's liquor license. Because Sprague was such a prominent figure in the area he had the power to do this, and because Gordon was just an immigrant, he had no choice but to accept the revoke.

Before this had happened, Gordon had written his family in Ireland of the good news of his business and sent for the entire family to move to Rhode Island and live with him. So by the time of the license revoking and the murder, the entire Gordon family was already in Rhode Island. One can see an obvious motive for Nicholas Gordon to murder Amasa Sprague.

However, given the facts of these extremely biased trials, the answer to "who done it?" remains in the air even today. It is up to you to make your own decision about this case.

Police immediately arrested Gordon and anyone else in his family they could find. They even arrested his elderly mother and the family dog. The first trial put brothers John and William on the stand, as they were tried together before Nicholas even had a trial.

Because this was a capital crime, it was heard by the entire Supreme Court of Rhode Island at the then-statehouse on Benefit Street. There were some pieces of "evidence" but no real tangible proof that any of the Gordons really committed this crime. There were no eyewitnesses to the murder.



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The main witness against the Gordons was a woman named

Susan Field, a prostitute living in a brothel at 20 Benefit Street. She made all kinds of accusations with no solid proof. When asked to point out the brothers, she pointed them out wrong saying John was William, and vice versa.

Unsaid at the time, the owner of that brothel was a man named Samuel Staples whose brother just happened to be an associate judge on the Supreme Court. So it is difficult to say if there were other motives behind her testimony. John had no real alibi while William claims he had been out with friends.

The jury was made up of all upper class Yankee men, definitely a trial "by a jury of your peers."

Lots of trivial details entered the court room. A coat was found at the scene of the crime - some said it was Gordon's, some said it wasn't. There was a broken rifle found near the body and there were claims that a rifle was missing from the Gordon home. There was a footprint in the snow near the crime scene and prosecuting lawyers claimed it was Gordon's boot print and size.

It is hard to imagine "evidence" like this being used in court, but back then was a completely different world than we live in today. Without a doubt if this murder took place today, there would be scientific proof as to who committed the crime. But, in 1843 juries went with what was given to them and their gut instinct.

The prosecuting attorney even told the jury that Irish men are known to stick by their family, especially brothers. The judge also said to the jury that if they came across any contradiction in the stories, then to think of "the better half" of who testified. We can't even imagine a judge saying something like that today, basically telling his jury not to listen to the Irish.

The trial lasted nine days and it took 75 minutes for the jury to come up with a verdict. The Yankee jury came back with a guilty verdict against John Gordon, yet found William unanimously not guilty.

Nicholas had his first trial in October 1844, and this time there were about 100 witnesses to the same crime that earlier had almost no witnesses.

Gordon had brought an attorney from Boston down to represent him.

In addition to murder, Gordon was held and tried on conspiracy charges. He had valid answers for all questions asked. When asked why his rifle was missing, he explained that it was hidden because in Ireland it is illegal to own a weapon.

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Rhode Island

The jury came back split and a second trial was set for April, but John Gordon's hanging was in the meantime. The defense team sent a proposal to postpone the hanging until after Nicholas' trial, but there was a 36/27 vote not to postpone. John Gordon was hanged on February 14, 1845. This wasn't a public hanging, but about 60 Rhode Island elites were invited to attend. John marched up to the scaffold with a Catholic priest, John Brady. It is customary to for Catholics to confess their sins to a priest before death, so it is not too presumptuous to assume that John Gordon told his priest the truth of what happened. But interestingly, the priest told Gordon, "Have courage, John. You are going to appear before a merciful and just judge. You are going to join other countrymen who have been sacrificed by bigotry. Forgive your enemies."

John Gordon died in 20 minutes at the age of 29. He was the last person to receive the death penalty in Rhode Island. It was abolished in 1852. His coffin was carried past the Sprague mansion, and the state house on Benefit Street.



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He is allegedly buried at St. Mary's Cemetery in Pawtucket.

Nicholas' second trial was held that April and the jury could not agree on a verdict. It was a vote of 9 for acquittal, and 3 for guilty. He was released on \$10,000 bail. He was never convicted for conspiracy, yet his brother was executed for murder.

The justice system of the time was clearly unjust. This murder will forever remain an unknown in Rhode Island history.

Years later, after the collapse of the Sprague textile empire, the mansion was sold and used variously as a boarding house or foreman's residence. The threat of demolition in 1967 activated the Cranston Historical Society to acquire the property and it is now open to the public. The building houses furniture from the Carrington Collection of the Rhode Island Historical Society. As

the center of one of the largest 19th-century industrial empires in America and the residence of Cranston's most famous family, the Sprague Mansion is the best known historic structure in the city.

Today, you can visit the Sprague Mansion and even take a tour through the amazing home. The Sprague Mansion is on the corner of Dyer and Cranston Street, in Cranston. The admission is \$5.00 per person. Tours are by appointment. School tours are available. The mansion is also available for events and banquets, parties and showers. More information, call Mrs. Kelley, Resident manager at the Sprague Mansion. For questions on rentals and/or tours, call 401-944-9226.