

## Closing the book on John Gordon

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Almost 170 years following the grizzly slaying of a wealthy and politically powerful Cranston industrialist, the murder still remains unresolved. Yet, just one day after Amasa

Sprague's body was found lying near the footbridge over the Pocasset River separating Cranston from Johnston; two Irish Catholic immigrants were arrested for their part in committing the deed.

"Within three days, nearly the entire Gordon family, including the family dog, was arrested," according to a new book by Paul F. Caranci, a North Providence historian and third generation Rhode Islander.

"In a larger sense, the John Gordon case represented the whole culture of the time," said Caranci. "His family came to this country to realize their hopes and dreams of a better life only to find they couldn't trust the government to let them do that. It was the death of innocence for many people who came with the same dreams."

Caranci admits his upbringing didn't contain the outright bigotry faced by the generations who came before him. But he has heard the stories and it was his fascination with the details of history that led him to the John Gordon story.

"Of course I'd heard the story before but I had no idea just how big an injustice Gordon represented," he said. "It wasn't until I saw Ken Dooley's play about the case that I realized just how important it was historically and how unjust it was."

Caranci is no stranger to the ethnic history of Rhode Island. He and his wife Margie founded the Municipal Heritage Group in 2009. He is also on the Board of Directors of the Heritage Harbor Museum and the Rhode Island Heritage Hall of Fame. Paul has been Rhode Island's Deputy Secretary of State since 2007 and has been elected to the North Providence Town Council, where he served from 1994 to 2010. This is Caranci's second book. The History Press published North Providence: A History & the People Who Shaped It was published last year.

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“Three brothers were formally charged with the murder and, in a trial remembered for the actions of a corrupt judge and a bigoted society, one was found guilty.”

Caranci said Dooley’s play got him behind a groundswell of efforts to have John Gordon officially pardoned by the governor in 2011. He acknowledges it’s obviously too late for John Gordon to care about it, but he felt that the state and the people should own up to this stain of injustice on the state’s history, if only to prevent it from happening again.

“Representative Peter Martin [D-Dist. 75] was responsible for getting the legislature and the governor to finally pardon John Gordon,” said Caranci. “I guess people didn’t think it was that important before but after you learn about the case, you can see that it was something that we had to do. It was Ken Dooley’s play that convinced me that he should be pardoned.”

John Gordon, a 29-year-old Irish Catholic worker from Cranston, was sentenced to death and then hanged on Feb. 14, 1845.

What made the murder of Amasa Sprague and the execution of Gordon significant in Rhode Island history is that Gordon was the last person legally executed in Rhode Island and his death marked an instance of the clear and present bigotry so extreme in Rhode Island at that time that few people outside of the Irish American community recognized it for what it was: one of the most corrupt and unjust court proceedings in the history of the country.

“For many Italian Americans, the Sacco and Vanzetti case in Boston was a similar instance where the prejudice was obvious,”

said Caranci.

The two Italian immigrants were tried for an armed robbery and killing in the 1920s. The prejudice in that case should have allowed the men to escape death but it didn’t. More than just being Catholic and immigrants, Sacco and Vanzetti were both self-declared anarchists, which pretty much sealed their fate in a time of extreme national paranoia.

If John Gordon’s death really wasn’t the only reason that the state abandoned capital punishment, it certainly was a good enough reason. If Gordon hadn’t been executed, there would have been time for public sentiment to come around for him. As it was, the relentless efforts of Job Durfee and Providence Journal editor Henry

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Bowen Anthony to have Gordon found guilty and killed as soon as possible. Judge Job Durfee is the personification of arbitrary privilege and establishment above justice government. Only 40 percent of the white male population could vote at the time and Durfee and Anthony were at the top of the establishment at the time. Thomas Dorr's efforts toward a wider suffrage in Rhode Island were already in the air and Durfee and Anthony perceived that, and the growing number of immigrants in Rhode Island, as a threat.

"It's funny how all of that is reflected in the issues of immigration that we face today," said Caranci. "It just goes to show that prejudice goes on and only the last names of the immigrants change. First it was the Irish, then the Italians and others who had to overcome prejudice."

Caranci says it was John Gordon who had the bad luck to be Irish when Amasa Sprague was murdered in Cranston.

"In 1843, Gordon was a victim of societal hatred, bigotry and injustice," said Caranci. "Today he is thought of as an innocent man, an Irish Catholic martyr who, more than any other single person or event is responsible for the end of the death penalty in Rhode Island."

It would be hard to argue with Caranci there, not so much for the truth of his assertion but for the vast amount of research he cites to back it up. Caranci's own public career would probably shock and dismay Job Durfee. Durfee couldn't or wouldn't imagine it for a man whose "name ends in a vowel."

Paul F. Caranci is a third generation resident of North Providence and has been a student of history for many years. He is a founder of the Municipal Heritage Group and on the Board of Directors of the Heritage Harbor Museum and the Rhode Island Heritage Hall of Fame. He has been Deputy Secretary of State since 2007 and was elected to the North Providence Town Council from 1994 to 2010. Understandably, Caranci isn't too kind to Job Durfee.

In case you are not familiar with Job Durfee, look him up. His is a story that goes far toward deflating the pride that so many Rhode Islanders have in citing Roger Williams and freedom of conscience. There was not much conscience afoot at Gordon's trial and even less at the Providence Journal.

Henry Bowen Anthony was a future governor and senator in Rhode Island and was the editor of the Providence Journal at the time of Amasa Sprague's murder. Job

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and Anthony were comfortable with the idea that 60 percent of the male white population couldn't vote, based on rules that established the state was a British colony.

As presiding Judge in the John Gordon trial, Durfee actually told the jurors they did not have to believe anything that the Irish witnesses for the defense said because they were by their nature unable to tell the truth. As the leading news source for Rhode Island, Anthony provided the public with plenty of "facts" about Gordon's guilt, many of which were asserted without a shred of truth to them. "The Hanging

and Redemption of John Gordon: The True Story of Rhode Island's Last Execution" seeks to recreate the mood of Rhode Island that created the circumstances that destroyed a family.

Nicholas Gordon was the first of his family to come to America from Ireland, a British colony at the time. He worked hard and earned his citizenship and his voting rights after opening a small store on land he was able to purchase. He also convinced the Town Council to grant him a license to sell alcohol, something that provided the income he needed to keep that promise but a substance that Amasa Sprague regarded as evil. His family followed him to America seven years later. A few months later, all that hope faded with the murder of Sprague.

Everyone knew of the animosity between Sprague and the Gordon family.

The book takes the reader on a journey of the events. It describes the killing of Sprague in forensic detail and chronicles the trial leading up to John Gordon's execution.

"You get the true sense of sitting in the courtroom as witness after witness provide perjured testimony amounting to only circumstantial evidence against the Gordons," said Caranci, but his own prejudice seems to shine within his description of Gordon's last minutes, which is actually the testimony of sympathetic observers he gave an uncritical ear to.

"Despite his innocence, John Gordon harbored no ill-will toward his persecutors," Caranci said. "Rather, standing as a true example of Christian love, he forgave his enemies and the

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men who were about to end his life, asking the small crowd of onlookers allowed to witness his execution to pray for him.”

Governor Lincoln Chafee exonerated John Gordon in June 2011. A new monument was installed at St. Mary’s Cemetery in Pawtucket.

“Somewhere in that cemetery, in an unmarked grave not far from that memorial, lay the remains of John Gordon, a true martyr to Rhode Island hatred, bigotry and corruption,” Caranci wrote.

Retired Professor and Historian Laureate of Rhode Island Patrick T. Conley provides the book’s preface and compliments Caranci’s retelling of Gordon’s story.

“He has the honor of providing its finishing touch. He has done so not only by drawing upon previous research but also by visiting the scenes of the crime and by thoroughly examining the public documents entrusted to his care. His thoughtful, well-crafted, meticulously detailed book is not only a compelling, forensic brief for the defense but also a record of John Gordon’s final triumph over a legal system once blinded by bigotry and a chief justice [Job Durfee] who epitomized it.”

There will be a publishing party at the Fabre Line Club at 200 Allens Ave. on April 25. Call 274-1787 for more details.

The book will be available at Amazon.com and other outlets. For additional information, contact Paul F. Caranci by phone at 639-4502 or by e-mail at [municipalheritage@gmail.com](mailto:municipalheritage@gmail.com).

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