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Brotherly Love
Murder and the Politics of Prejudice in Nineteenth-century
Rhode Island

Charles and Tess Hoffmann

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Preface

Beyond the personal tragedy that the 1843 murder of Yankee mill owner Amasa Sprague represented, its significance lies in the fact that three Irish brothers were arrested almost immediately for the crime. Two of the brothers, John and William Gordon, had immigrated to this country from Ireland only six months before; their older brother Nicholas had arrived six or seven years earlier. The Sprague family and the prosecution contended that Nicholas had sent for his brothers and incited them to murder Amasa Sprague because Sprague had made it impossible for Nicholas to get a tavern liquor license renewed by the Cranston (Rhode Island) Town Council. The Yankee residents of the small rural mill village where the murder took place, named Spraguesville after Amasa's father, sided with the Sprague family and searched for evidence that would point to the Gordons. Suspicious of foreigners in general and of Irish Catholic immigrants in particular, the villagers immediately focused on the Gordons as likely suspects, emphasizing the bitterness of the quarrel between Sprague and Gordon over the liquor license. The immediate arrest of the Gordon brothers on suspicion of murder even before any physical evidence against them had been found has suggested to contemporary and subsequent commentators that there was a prejudicial rush to judgment, resulting in a miscarriage of justice.

The social and political milieu in Rhode Island during the 1840s was complicated and fluid so that the circumstances surrounding the arrest and trials of the Gordon brothers were more complex than the ethnic and religious prejudice that underlay the attitudes of some Rhode Island Protestant Yankees against Irish Catholic immigrants. The murder and the trials took place in a period of change in Rhode Island when various and disparate forces were coming together to break down the semi-feudal

social order of the past. The old political order was based on a state constitution that dated back more than a hundred years before the American Revolution. This constitution actually, the Royal Charter founding the colony in 1663 suited the Yankee farmers in sparsely populated rural areas because it gave them more political power, and it was manipulated by the Yankee industrialists, particularly the textile manufacturers who established their mills in rural communities. Led by Thomas Wilson Dorr, the movement to replace the old Royal Charter with a more egalitarian constitution was based on the American Revolutionary belief that the powers and legitimacy of a state were derived from the people and the people had the right to overturn an existing government to achieve its will.

This movement for reform of the state constitution coincided with events in Ireland that led to a vast increase in the number of Irish immigrants to the United States in the 1840s, particularly in Massachusetts and Rhode Island, changing an old homogeneous Protestant Yankee culture to a heterogeneous one. In Rhode Island these immigrants, the majority of them very poor, had no political power, for under the old constitution suffrage was limited to native-born white males and, because of an additional real property requirement, to a landowning class. The reformers sought to enfranchise all adult white male immigrants who became naturalized American citizens. Conservatives became alarmed at the threat represented by the radical reformers joining forces with the disenfranchised immigrants in their attempt to establish a rival democratic government. The conservatives defeated Dorr's rebellion by a show of force and drove Dorr into exile.

The politics of prejudice in Rhode Island was a combination of political, social, and economic factors that were exploited by conservatives, led by Henry B. Anthony, editor of the *Providence Journal*, to oppose Dorr's reforms. Playing on the religious and ethnic fears and prejudices of native Americans against the Irish, Anthony raised the specter of Irish Catholics taking over the state. Dorr, upon returning to Rhode Island on October 31, 1843, was immediately arrested for treason.

Two months later, on December 31, Amasa Sprague was brutally murdered. Sprague represented the old stable social and political order that had been threatened by Dorr's reform movement. John, William, and Nicholas Gordon were convenient suspects, and all the investigation was

directed toward proving them guilty. These three Irish brothers were victims of the broader social forces that underlie our narrative.

Our focus, however, is on the fundamental level of narrative who did what, when, whereas the story of the murder of Amasa Sprague unfolds. The whole village of Spraguesville was involved in the case, and the villagers were witnesses at the three trials of the Gordon brothers. For example, Abner Sprague, Amasa's cousin, was the last man other than the murderer to see him alive. Michael Costello, an Irish servant in the Sprague household, stumbled upon the body as he made his way home from work. Dr. Israel Bowen, the local doctor and nearest physician, identified the corpse. Nathan Pratt, a boarder at a nearby boardinghouse serving the mill workers, found the murder weapon. David Lawton, a village resident, discovered the bloodied coat worn by one of the murderers. The investigation was a community effort directed by U.S. Senator William Sprague, the victim's brother. The mosaic of circumstantial evidence was pieced together by the prosecution from the testimony of scores of witnesses residing in the village, each contributing his or her bit to the pattern. William Sprague fitted the pieces together.

Nicholas Gordon had challenged Amasa Sprague's power and influence both politically and personally. The prosecution's theory was that the two younger brothers acting out of blind brotherly love killed Sprague to avenge their older brother's sense of wrong. This perverted brotherly love was contrasted by the prosecution with the idealized brotherly love of Amasa and William Sprague. Brotherly love was a motif played upon by both the prosecution and the defense counsels.

In the existing climate of anti-Irish, anti-Catholic prejudice the accusation of the Gordon brothers would obviously appease a natural sense of community outrage at the brutal murder of its wealthiest and most influential citizen. But if the Gordons were innocent, as many commentators have since concluded, then who was guilty? The solution to the 150-year-old mystery is forever locked in the secrets of a community that itself died in 1873 when the Sprague industrial empire went bankrupt. But it is possible to speculate on an alternative story of motive and conspiracy in the murder of Amasa Sprague. This alternate theory is offered in the spirit of conjecture rather than fact; after all this time, the truth remains a mystery.

Whoever actually murdered Amasa Sprague, it was John Gordon who

was found guilty and hanged, satisfying the state prosecution but not necessarily the public conscience. Gordon was the last man to be executed for murder in Rhode Island. In 1852, partly because of a perceived miscarriage of justice in the Gordon case, Rhode Island abolished capital punishment. All the major arguments for capital punishment—deterrence, retributive justice, preservation of the basic social order, and a hoped-for moral redemption of the murderer—were evident in the state's trial and speedy execution of John Gordon. All the main arguments against capital punishment—the doubtful evidence of deterrence, the dubious ethics of retribution by the state, the possibility of racial-ethnic discrimination, and the danger of executing an innocent person—were equally evident in the case. Whatever the pros and cons of all the other arguments for and against capital punishment, what stands out in the Gordon case after all these years is that a miscarriage of justice occurred because of ethnic and religious prejudice against Irish immigrants in the 1840s. By the time capital punishment was abolished in Rhode Island, it was too late for John Gordon. He had been dead seven years, the current average in the United States between conviction and execution for murder.

GUEMES ISLAND, WASHINGTON
FEBRUARY 1993

Chronology

June 27, 1842. The Rhode Island constitutional crisis known as the Dorr Rebellion ends in the defeat of the Dorrite troops. Thomas Dorr flees to exile in New Hampshire.

November 21st, 1842. A new state constitution is ratified, effective May 1, 1843. Under its provisions naturalized citizens who owned property worth \$134 and who had resided in the state for at least two years were qualified to vote.

June 1843. Ellen Gordon, her three sons (William, John, and Robert), her daughter, Margaret, and her granddaughter (William's daughter) arrive in Boston from Ireland. They join Nicholas in Spraguesville, a mill village in the town of Cranston.

July 24, 1843. Nicholas Gordon's liquor license is denied renewal by unanimous vote of the Cranston Town Council after Amasa Sprague, the mill owner, and others oppose it.

October 31, 1843. Ex-governor Dorr is arrested under an indictment for high treason against the state of Rhode Island.

December 31, 1843. Amasa Sprague is murdered.

January 1, 1844. Nicholas and John Gordon are arrested and charged with suspicion of murder. Their house is searched.

January 2, 1844. Ellen Gordon and her two sons William and Robert are also arrested. Ellen and Robert are later released.

January 12, 1844. John and William Gordon are bound over for grand jury investigation on murder charges.

January 15, 1844. Nicholas Gordon is bound over for grand jury investigation on an accessory before the fact murder charge.

January 17, 1844. William Sprague, Amasa's brother, resigns his seat in the U.S. Senate in order to take charge of the murder investigation and

of the A. & W. Sprague Company, which runs the Cranston Print Works as well as other enterprises.

February 29, 1844. Dorr's treason trial is set for April 26 in Newport.

March 27, 1844. John and William Gordon are indicted for the murder of Amasa Sprague, Nicholas as an assessor before the fact. The trial is set for April 8.

April 17, 1844. John Gordon is found guilty of murder. William is acquitted. Nicholas is to be tried separately.

April 19, 1844. John Gordon's petition for a new trial and his sentencing is postponed by the court until October.

May 7, 1844. Dorr is found guilty of treason.

June 25, 1844. Dorr is sentenced to life imprisonment at hard labor in solitary confinement at the state prison in Providence.

June 27, 1844. Dorr is taken to the state prison where the two Gordon brothers are still imprisoned.

October 10, 1844. John Gordon's petition for a new trial and a postponement of sentence are denied by the state supreme court. He is sentenced to be hanged February 14, 1845.

October 22, 1844. Nicholas Gordon's first trial ends in a "hung jury" (eight for conviction, four for acquittal). He is bound over to be tried again.

November 2, 1844. Nicholas Gordon, although not convicted, is stricken from the list of qualified voters by the Cranston Town Council.

January 14, 1845. John Gordon's petition to the Rhode Island General Assembly for reprieve and suspension of sentence until after Nicholas's second trial is rejected by a vote of 36 to 27.

February 10, 1845. John Gordon petitions the governor for a stay of execution. His petition is accompanied by affidavits from William Gordon and Simon Mathewson (a juror in Nicholas Gordon's first trial). The petition is denied.

February 14, 1845. John Gordon is hanged in the yard of the state prison, Providence.

February 16, 1845. The large funeral procession for John Gordon moves through Spraguesville and the streets of Providence to the North Burial Ground.

April 17, 1845. The second Nicholas Gordon trial again ends with the jury unable to agree (three for conviction, nine for acquittal). Nicholas is

released on bail provided by members of the Irish community and over the prosecution's objections.

June 27, 1845. Dorr is freed from prison by act of the state legislature, which is signed by the newly elected governor.

October 22, 1846. Nicholas Gordon dies in Providence, leaving debts totaling \$1,322.65.

June 18, 1850. William Gordon is imprisoned for debt. Writ is also brought against Ellen Gordon.

February 1852. The Rhode Island legislature votes to abolish capital punishment, substituting life imprisonment and loss of all civil rights. The death penalty remains in force for murder committed by anyone serving a life sentence.

December 27, 1854. Thomas Wilson Dorr dies at age forty-nine.

October 19, 1856. William Sprague dies of typhoid fever, in the midst of building his largest mill at Baltic, Connecticut.

October 1873. The Sprague industrial empire collapses in bankruptcy, the largest business failure in the nation's history at the time.

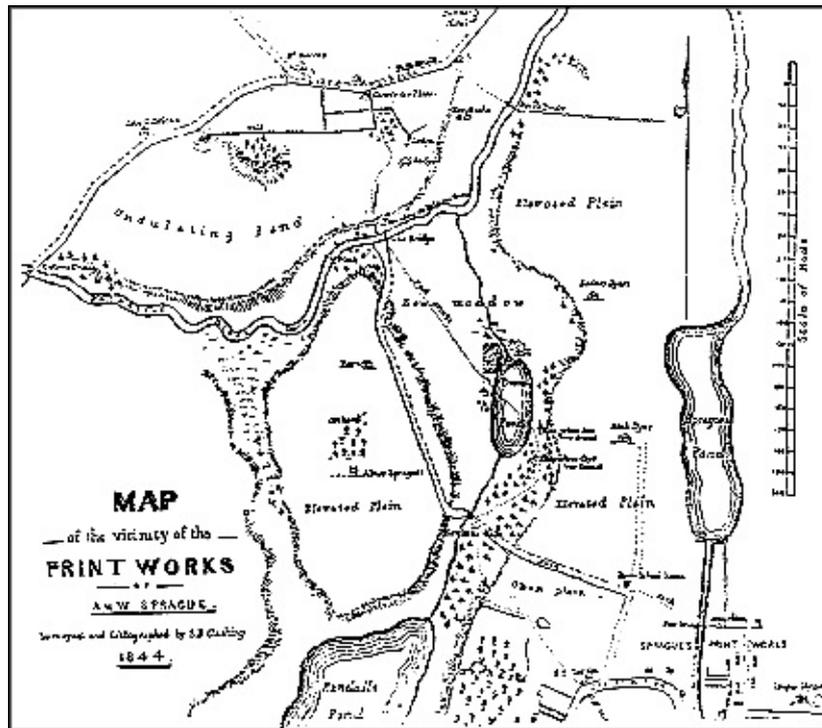
Chapter One

The Murder

On a very cold New Year's Eve in 1843, Michael Costello, who was employed as a servant in the mansion house of wealthy textile manufacturer Amasa Sprague, left work about sundown, probably no later than 4:15 P.M., to return to his boardinghouse on the old Plainfield Turnpike, about a mile away. Since the mansion house was on the Cranston Road, he would have taken it rather than the private road that ran north to the Sprague mill complex with its calico cloth printing works, company store, and numerous duplexes and boardinghouses for the factory workers, all owned by Amasa Sprague and his brother William. A few hundred yards west was Nicholas Gordon's house which had an addition that contained a store and, until recently, a tavern patronized by the workers. Turning right before reaching the Gordon house, Costello walked north on the road to the schoolhouse where he turned left, following the cartway (also known as the driftway) across a swampy area called Hawkins' Hole and up the hill to the footbridge over Pochasset Brook which formed the border between the Rhode Island towns of Cranston and Johnston.

It probably took him about fifteen minutes to reach the footbridge over the brook. There were several inches of snow on the ground, and the packed snow on the wooden bridge was slippery. His dinner pail in his left hand, Costello grasped the railing with his right hand and moved carefully. In the middle of the bridge he saw blood on the snow. He followed the trail of blood to the far end of the bridge; five or six yards beyond he saw the body of a man spread-eagled face down on the snow. Costello stopped and stared at the body. There was no one about. Sensing he could do nothing for the man who lay there, he ran to the nearest house on the Plainfield Road and raised the alarm. 1

A group of men accompanied him back to where the body lay. By now,



Map of the vicinity of the print works of A. & W. Sprague, 1844.
S. B. Cushing, surveyor.

although there was still light in the sky, the sun had set. On close examination they saw that the man had been beaten to death, but the head had been so disfigured that the murdered man's face was unrecognizable. In the fading light, young Thornton, a neighbor's son, thought the victim was his father. But someone else said it was Amasa Sprague because the frock coat resembled the one he habitually wore. By then, Dr. Israel Bowen had arrived from the town of Johnston with another group of neighbors. They turned the body over, face up, and the dead man was identified by Dr. Bowen as Amasa Sprague.

Sunday afternoon, December 31, 1843, had begun normally for Sprague as he sat down to a hearty dinner with his wife, Fanny, and their

four children, Mary Anna, Almira, Amasa, and William. The only worry on his mind at the moment was the welfare of the stock free-grazing at his farm which was about a mile from the house. There was no barn there in which to shelter them. With at least six inches of old snow on the ground and the promise of a clear, cold night, he had decided to visit the farm and check on the stock himself rather than depend on the young tenant farmer who lived on the place. This did not surprise his wife, since he often walked there in the afternoon after dinner, even on Sundays, a fact well known in the village.

The increasing cold must have been very much on his mind, because when he set out for the farm shortly after three o'clock, he stopped first at the print works furnace room to talk to Edward Coil, who was in charge of the fires. Sprague wanted to be sure there was enough heat maintained in the boilers for the steam engine to run the complicated printing machines on Monday morning, given that they were idle on Sunday. 2

Sprague left the furnace room about 3:30 P.M., having talked with Coil for only a short while. He took the private path just west of the print works, the more direct route. The driftway was often used during the week by the villagers as a shortcut to the Plainfield Turnpike, and it was used on Sundays by local hunters poaching small game. Amasa was next seen by his cousin, Abner Sprague, around 3:30 P.M. on the path halfway between Hawkins' Hole and Abner's farmhouse, about 100 yards north of the swamp. Abner was the last man to see Amasa alive, other than the murderer or murderers, for Amasa never reached his farm.

To the men gathered around Sprague's body, the timing of the murder and the severity of the blows seemed to suggest an angry confrontation and a vicious assault rather than a coldly planned, premeditated murder. Whatever the motivation, there was no doubt in Dr. Bowen's mind that Sprague had been murdered. He had been struck on the left side of the head with a blunt instrument with enough force to fracture the skull and rupture the brain membrane. Another heavy blow on the right side of the head, also fracturing the skull, could equally well have caused death. Amasa was a large and powerful man, athletic in appearance and physically fit. He could not have been attacked without a struggle, and there was evidence in the trampled snow around the body that he had defended himself against the attack. But a gunshot wound on his right forearm near the wrist, which had broken the small bone of the arm, suggested that he had first been disabled and then

beaten to death.

Darkness was setting in, and the search for evidence was about to be postponed until the morning when one of the villagers, Stephen Mathewson, found a pistol under the bridge on the Johnston side, only a few yards from the body. The pistol was turned over to Robert Wilson, coroner for the town of Johnston. Its percussion lock had been snapped in an attempt to fire it, but the gun had failed to fire and evidently had been thrown under the bridge.

The coroner had been contacted immediately by Dr. Bowen so that he could hold an inquest on the spot. Wilson, only thirty-four years old, had a heavy responsibility placed on him, for this was no ordinary death; a prominent citizen had been brutally murdered. By six o'clock Wilson had contacted the town sergeant who rounded up a jury, and the coroner empanelled them at the scene of the murder. The only light came from a small lantern that cast an eerie glow on the scene, highlighting the wounds but throwing everything else into shadow and darkness. The body was examined briefly by the jury, enough to determine the cause of death. Only then was the body of Amasa Sprague released to his friends and neighbors. A teamster carried it home in his wagon.

Robert Wilson and the jury adjourned to Dr. Bowen's house on the Plainfield Road, across from the Carpenter place that had been Amasa's destination. One of the jurors, Albert Waterman, examined the pistol and, taking his pen-knife, drew the wad of paper from the charge. The gunpowder and ball were put into a phial to be handed later to the examining officer at the state prison. The wad of paper was a piece of the *Boston Pilot*, an Irish Catholic newspaper. In the absence of any clues or evidence pointing to any particular person, the jury could only conclude that Amasa Sprague had been murdered by a person or persons unknown. No motive for the murder could be ascertained; the fact that a valuable gold watch and sixty dollars in cash were left untouched on the body ruled out robbery. The coroner concluded that some unknown person had come up behind Sprague and knocked him off the bridge with a heavy blow to the head. The murderer probably had an accomplice, as the pistol and the struggle in the snow suggested.

The body of Amasa Sprague was taken to his house and placed on the floor in one of the front parlors. The head and shoulders were slightly elevated to give the body a more peaceful appearance, but there was no hiding the fact that Sprague had been brutally beaten about the head and face. The position of the gunshot wound suggested that Amasa raised his