

## **THE IRISH IN RHODE ISLAND: THE PROTESTANT PIONEERS**

The Irish presence in Rhode Island dates from the late 1630s. Most early Irish Rhode Islanders were Protestants--mainly Baptists, Quakers, Presbyterians, or Anglicans-- and those few with Catholic antecedents soon lost their religious affiliation for lack of Catholic clergy within the colony. Among the handful of seventeenth-century Irish Rhode Islanders were Nicholas Power, an original Providence settler, Charles McCarthy, an original proprietor of East Greenwich in 1677, and Edward Larkin of Newport and Westerly, who served briefly in the colonial legislature.

In the early eighteenth century the colony's most notable Irishmen served as clergymen or schoolmasters. Among the former was Derry-born Reverend James McSparran (1680-1757), for thirty-seven years the distinguished rector of St. Paul's Church (Wickford), which served the spiritual needs of South County Anglicans. Another even more illustrious Irish scholar and clergyman was George Berkeley, the Anglican essayist and philosopher, who resided at Whitehall Farm in present-day Middletown during his eventful sojourn in America from 1729 to 1731. After the failure of his cherished but impractical project of establishing an Anglican college in Bermuda, Berkeley returned to Ireland, where he became the bishop of Cloyne.

Notable Irish tutors included Stephen Jackson (1700-1765), who left Kilkenny and settled in Providence. This teacher and prosperous farmer had a son, Richard, who became president of the Providence-Washington Insurance Company (1800-1838) and a four-term congressman. His son Charles, became a prominent industrialist and served as governor in 1845-46 after campaigning on a platform calling for the liberation of imprisoned reformer Thomas Wilson Dorr.

Other Irish schoolmasters were John Dorrance (1747-1813), a Providence civic leader, and the Reverend James "Paddy" Wilson of Limerick, first a teacher and then the colorful pastor of Providence's Beneficent ("Roundtop") Congregational Church.

Colonial Rhode Island's most famous Irish craftsman was Kingston silversmith Samuel Casey, and its most renowned businessmen (Irish or otherwise) were the Brown brothers of Providence--James, Nicholas, Joseph, John, and Moses. The Browns' mother, Hope Power, was the great-granddaughter of Nicholas Power who came from Ireland to Providence in the 1630s. His descendant and namesake served in the Rhode Island General Assembly and as a colonel in the state militia. Colonel Power's oldest daughter, Mary, was the mother of Nicholas Cooke, the state's Revolutionary War governor (1775-78).

During the American Revolution nearly three hundred Irish names appeared on Rhode Island's military and naval rolls, General John Sullivan was the commander and victor in New England's largest ever military engagement, the Battle of Rhode Island waged on August 29, 1778. The New Hampshire-born Sullivan's parents had migrated from Ireland in the 1720s.

John Carter (1745-1814) became a strong journalistic supporter of the Revolutionary cause. The son of an Irish naval officer killed in the service of the Crown, Carter came to Providence as a journeyman printer from Philadelphia, where

he had been apprenticed to Benjamin Franklin. From 1767 until 1814 he molded public opinion in Providence as the editor of the *Providence Gazette*. A major supporter of the ratification of the federal Constitution, Carter also served as Providence postmaster from 1772 to 1792. His daughter Ann (1769-98) married Nicholas Brown, II (son of the famous 18<sup>th</sup> century Providence merchant), who became the great benefactor of Brown University. The present-day and still-prominent Brown family is descended from this couple's only child, John Carter Brown.

Philadelphia merchant John Francis, an Irishman, came to Providence as John Brown's partner. They jointly sponsored Rhode Island's first trading expedition to China in 1787. Francis married John Brown's daughter Abigail, and their son, John Brown Francis, became Rhode Island's first Democrat governor from 1833 to 1838 and then served a year as U.S. Senator (1844-1845). His Warwick estate is still known as Governor Francis Farms.

Whereas John Carter was the child of an Irish naval officer, two notable Rhode Island commodores of the Early National Period were sons of an Irish immigrant mother. Newport's Oliver Hazard Perry (1785-1819), hero of the decisive Battle of Lake Erie (1813), and Matthew Calbraith Perry (1794-1858), who opened Japan to Western trade and influence, were the children of Sarah Wallace (Alexander) Perry, a native of Newry in County Down, and mariner Christopher Perry of South Kingstown, who met Sarah when confined to a British internment camp in Ireland, as a Revolutionary War prisoner. After the conflict, Perry sailed to Ireland to bring Sarah to America.

Clearly Protestant Irish made an indelible and beneficial mark on early Rhode Island and America.

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