

## **The Journal of the American-Irish Historical Society (Vol. II)**

**By: Thomas Hamilton Murray**

### **SKETCH OF AN EARLY IRISH SETTLEMENT IN RHODE ISLAND.**

BY THOMAS HAMILTON MURRAY, WOONSOCKET, R. I.

Among the old-time, honored names in Rhode Island is that of **Dorrance**. It has figured prominently for a long period. About 1715–1720, George Dorrance and his two sons—George and James—came from Ireland to the colony and settled in what is now the town of Foster. They bought a large tract of land which subsequently became known as the Dorrance Purchase.

This tract was at that time supposed by some to be within the jurisdiction of Connecticut. When, however, the boundary between Rhode Island and Connecticut was finally settled, the Dorrance Purchase was decided to be a part of Rhode Island. The controversy lasted sixty-five years and was not definitely adjusted until 1728.

The territory thus acquired by Rhode Island was commonly known as Head Lots and included, as has been stated, the great Dorrance property. Later, it was comprised in the town of Scituate, R. I., and when, in 1781, Foster was set apart from Scituate, the Dorrance Purchase was comprised in the boundaries of the new town thus created.

Soon after their arrival from the old country, the Dorrances, with true Irish enterprise, erected a sawmill at a stream on their estate. This stream was called Quandock brook. Here they sawed lumber for building purposes for themselves, and also for their neighbors. Subsequently, a grist mill was added, and the locality became widely known as the Dorrance Mills.

The elder George Dorrance from Ireland was born in 1675. He died at his home on the Purchase in 1754, at the age of seventy-nine years, and was buried on the "Plains," near Oneco, Conn.

His son, Captain George, also from Ireland, settled on the northern part of the Purchase, on the road going west by "Tyler's store" into Connecticut. This was later named Brooklyn road. Captain George obtained his military title for valuable services rendered. He passed away in 1793 and was buried with his father. He left two

sons, George and Alexander, and some say a third, named John.

James Dorrance, the other son of the elder George from Ireland, was located in the central portion of the Dorrance Purchase and built a substantial dwelling. It fronted south and comprised two stories. In the center of the house was a huge stone chimney, measuring 10 × 18 feet. In each room was a large, old-fashioned fireplace. The great east room downstairs was ten feet wide and six feet high, constructed on the same plan as many in Ireland. There was a large oven in the back. Those were the days of the spinning-wheel, and of blazing logs whose flame mounted up the great chimney and shed light over the family group after nightfall.

They were a sturdy race—the Dorrance—and worthy representatives of Irish pluck, energy, and progressiveness. This James was one of the sons who came from Ireland. He died in 1779, while our Revolution was still in progress, at the venerable age of ninety-six years, a good instance of Irish longevity. He was buried with his father and brother and was sincerely mourned by all the country roundabouts. He left two sons, James, and Michael Dorrance.

The third George Dorrance, or grandson of the first George, the immigrant, had extensive military experience and was known as Major Dorrance. He erected a house near the old homestead. It was two stories high in front and one in the rear, with a “lean-to” roof. Like the other house just mentioned, it had an enormous stone chimney. Major Dorrance died in 1827 or 1828, aged seventy-seven years. He left the considerable property, but no children.

The most eminent member of this famous Dorrance family was John, who was born in about 1747. He entered Rhode Island College, now Brown University and was graduated in 1774. On that occasion, he delivered an oration on “The Necessity and Advantages of Cultivating our Own Language.” He also participated in a syllogistic dispute in Latin, taking the affirmative on the question: “Should the Dictates of Conscience Always be Obeyed?”

He was twice married. His first wife was Polly Whitman, daughter of Jacob Whitman of Providence, who owned the “Turk’s Head” property. His second wife was Mrs. Amy Clark, widow of Dr. John Clark and daughter of Commodore Esek Hopkins. John Dorrance had previously removed from Foster to Providence and lived at the corner of Westminster and Exchange streets, where the National Exchange bank was afterward located. He studied law and in 1794 was elected judge of the Court of Common Pleas for Providence county. This eminent position he also filled by annual

election until 1801. He was then defeated. The defeat was owing to the bitter opposition of Gov. Arthur Fenner, which arose over a lawsuit between the two.

Judge Dorrance was likewise a member of the General Assembly for several terms. In 1789 he was an assistant (senator) to Gov. John Collins, and, with George Sears, was appointed by the Assembly a committee to audit the accounts of "the late intendants of trade for the ports of Newport and Providence." In 1790 his name appears as a member of the Providence Society for the Abolition of Slavery. The Rhode Island American, Jan. 8, 1811, notes his election as a director of the Exchange bank of Providence. In 1792 or 1794 he was a candidate for congress and received a flattering vote.

Speaking of Judge Dorrance, Dr. Pardon Bowen declared that "he possessed an adequate law knowledge and was a man of the strictest integrity." The judge died on June 29, 1813. That excellent authority, the Providence Gazette, in its issue of July 3, the same year, had notice of his death, and after stating that "the Honourable John Dorrance" had departed this life, it went on to say: "Judge Dorrance was descended from Irish parentage, but was himself born in Foster, in this state. He received a degree from Rhode Island College and afterward became a tutor and since a member of the corporation of that institution."

Continuing, it states that he was of unblemished integrity and undeviating patriotism; that for many years he was a member of the state legislature from Providence, "both in the Senate as a representative." It likewise chronicled the fact that for the last sixteen years of his life, the citizens of the town (Providence), manifested their confidence in him by making and continuing him president of the town council.

The obituary notice referred to thus concludes: "His intimate knowledge of the science of jurisprudence made him the adviser of all who were in distress. His life was marked by an honesty that neither power nor wealth could swerve from its duty."

Judge Dorrance's death was deeply regretted throughout the state. He left a widow and "a large train of relatives." The deceased was prominent all through the Revolution, and by his patriotic activity rendered incalculable service to the cause of liberty.

There was also a Samuel in the Dorrance family at an early period. His name is found in the records in 1734. At the period of the Revolution, the records, 1775, show that George Dorrance, probably a grandson of the senior Irish immigrant, was an ensign in the lieutenant colonel's company of the regiment of Providence. In 1780, George Dorrance was appointed lieutenant of the second company of Scituate. In 1781, George

Dorrance, Jr., was a captain in a Scituate company. The same year Capt. George Dorrance had a company in a regiment raised by an Act of the General Assembly. In 1782, George Dorrance, Jr., was commissioned major of the Third regiment of militia in the county of Providence. There is not much doubt but that in all the operations throughout Rhode Island during the Revolution, these and other members of the Dorrance family took an active part.

Alexander, another grandson of the senior Dorrance from Ireland, settled in the northerly section of the Dorrance Purchase on the road running through the center of Head Lots and at right angles with the Brooklyn road. He died in 1840 leaving two sons, Palmer and Frink. Palmer Dorrance was born at the old homestead in Foster in 1804. He embarked in business at an early age, went to New York, and engaged in the rubber trade with Erastus Corning, his brother-in-law.

In 1831 he located in Providence and engaged in the boot and shoe business on Weybosset street, nearly opposite the present post office. In 1833 he returned to Foster, his native town, and was in business there until 1839, when he removed to the northerly part of Foster, bought the Colonel Hopkins property, and conducted a tavern and store for several years. In 1847 he removed to Apponaug, R. I., and was in the hotel business there, and at Natick and Buttonwoods, until 1854. At the time of his death, in 1873, he had engaged again in Providence.

The second James Dorrance, the grandson of the first George from Ireland, was born in 1762, and resided on the homestead in Foster until his death, at the age of seventy-one years. He had a son, Abram, who passed away in 1859, leaving no heirs. He used to say there was "stone enough in the old chimney to the wall in the farm."

Michael Dorrance, a son of the first James, who immigrated with his father from Ireland, was a native of Foster and erected a substantial dwelling on the southerly part of the Purchase. He left two sons, George and James. The former became a man of much prominence and was commissioned as a captain in 1834. Michael, the father, passed from the earth in 1874, being then seventy-three years of age. Michael's father-in-law, Mr. Placet, was the town treasurer of Foster from 1810 to 1828, and later represented the town in the General Assembly. For many years he was the cashier of the Mount Vernon National Bank and was also in charge of the Mount Vernon post office. He died at Foster in 1849.

In the preparation of this article, I have received much material from Casey B. Tyler, who is well acquainted with the history of the Dorrance and is likewise excellently

posted on that of many other prominent Rhode Island families. Mr. Tyler also sent me the following interesting facts relating to the subject of this sketch:

"I have had in my possession," he says, "a pane of glass which Susanna [Dorrance] Wells presented me many years ago, which she said came from the old country [Ireland] and was originally set in a lead sash and brought from Ireland by her great-great-grandfather, George Dorrance, and used in the same old house for many years until replaced by a wood sash and a 6 × 8 glass. This old pane of glass is yellowish and coarse and in a diamond shape, and measures four inches on each side. She also said that she kept a part of the sash for a long time, but the boys used it up making shots and bullets to hunt with. This Susanna Dorrance was born in 1799, married Jeremiah Wells, son of Benjamin Wells at Foster, and lived to a good old age, a very intelligent and highly-esteemed woman.

"Maj. George Dorrance, who lived in the other old house, and who died in 1827, aged seventy-seven years, without children, had many articles which came from Ireland with his ancestors. They were sold at auction in 1833 by Palmer Dorrance, one of the heirs-at-law. Among the rest was an old-fashioned solid mahogany double-bureau, which was purchased by John Tyler of 'Tyler's store,' who had the old brass trimmings taken off, and had it made into two nice bureaus with more fashionable trimmings.

"One of these bureaus was later owned by his granddaughter, Matilda Rathbun, in Mossup Valley, and highly prized. The other came into possession of his grandson, Albert Tyler, near the Centreville, R. I., depot. These two bureaus were altered by Israel Lyon in 1833, while he carried on the carriage business in the basement of the house in Foster, where his brother, Hon. Sheldon P. Lyon lived and died.

"An old-fashioned silver tankard, holding two quarts, with a cover 157like a Britannia teapot cover, was sold at the same time, and it was a well-known fact that Major Dorrance when first born, was very small, and was put into that tankard, and the cover shut down, although he was a man afterward six feet two inches in height. John Tyler always regretted not buying the tankard."

The Dorrance mills remained in the Dorrance family down to 1808. During the next few years, the mills changed hands several times. In 1813 they were sold to Peleg Place, whose daughters married Dorrance. Mr. Place occupied the mill property until 1824, the balance of the estate, or most of it, still remaining in the Dorrance family.

In 1824 Mr. Place sold the mills to Stephen Potter, who put up another building,

introduced “water looms,” and made cotton cloth for several years.

George Dorrance and Phebe (Place) Dorrance left several sons. One of them was named Thomas G., and another Albert L. The latter became an influential farmer on the homestead inherited from his grandfather. He died, leaving a widow and two daughters.

The Dorrance name is still found in Rhode Island, and Dorrance street, a leading thoroughfare in Providence, helps perpetuate it. Bearers of the name, descendants of the immigrants, are likewise found, some of them in Providence. The old dam at Dorrance mills was long since demolished. The original dwellings have long been ruins, the great chimneys being the last to go, but the history and the memories of the Dorrance Purchase still form one of the charms of that section of the state.