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AN EARLY IRISHMAN OF WATERBURY, CONN.

BY MARTIN SCULLY OF WATERBURY.

A good deal of research has been indulged in during the past ten or fifteen years, with a view to ascertaining for a certainty the name of the Irishman who first visited the territorial limits of Waterbury, Conn.

So far the question seems to be an open one, the preference having been ascribed to various persons by different writers. Half a dozen or more of the old Irish settlers of the town who came here over half a century ago and who have resided here continuously since tell conflicting stories in relation to this subject, and as they were the only source from which much information on this matter could be obtained, the question has never been fully decided, each naming a different person as being the first to lead the way for his countrymen into this section of the state.

I recently conceived the idea of making some investigation on this point from sources other than those which have heretofore been brought into use, with the result that I have succeeded in obtaining information in relation to this issue, which will be of interest to future historians, of the first Irish residents of this town, and cannot but help settle the much-disputed question on this point.

As nearly as data can at present be collected, the first known Irishman to see this part of the country was **Joseph Rourke**, a soldier who served in one of the companies attached to a regiment in command of General Putnam in the Revolutionary War. He was with Putnam through most of his campaigns and took such a liking to that dashing soldier that he refused to serve under the command of any other captain. It was this fascination that led him to follow Putnam to his home in Brooklyn, this state, and he was seriously wounded in the retreat of the Revolutionary troops from Horseneck to Stamford, Conn., in 1779.

During his service in the Revolutionary army, Rourke met and formed the acquaintance of a son of **Gideon Hotchkiss**, the great-great-grandfather of Judge George H. Cowell of this city, and in 1784 he accompanied young Hotchkiss to the family residence, then situated about three miles southeast of Prospect Centre. Remaining here for about

twelve or thirteen years, he learned of the intended uprising in his native country, which culminated in the rebellion of 1798, and left on the old stage line for Derby, Conn., thence by way of the Sound for New York, with a view of reaching the scene of the conflict in time to render what service he could to the cause of the Irish patriot party. Whether he reached the scene of operations and met the fate of many of his countrymen who had dared throw down the gauge of battle to the enemies of Ireland will never be known, but sufficient information has been obtained to satisfy me that the story of his visit to these parts is founded on fact.

Judge Cowell can tell many reminiscences of the man's characteristics which he often heard related by his maternal grandmother. "There is nothing strange about this," said Judge Cowell, when asked about the matter; "everybody knows that the Irish people had been fleeing to all parts of the world to shun the persecution to which they were subjected at home for centuries prior to that time, and it is the most reasonable thing in the world to believe that some of them should show up in these parts. It is a well-established fact that there were a large number of Irishmen in the Revolutionary War, not only in rank and file but as captains and generals. Were not several of the signers of the Declaration of Independence Irishmen?"

"Joseph Rourke was not the only one of his race who came along here after the close of the Revolutionary War, but he is the only one I have a good recollection of hearing talked of when I was a boy. What made the old people remember him so well was the fact that in addition to being a brave soldier he was an excellent shoemaker and earned his living during his stay here by going among the farmers, repairing and making new footwear, and the most handsome footwear ever worn in this state by the forefathers of many of the old American families of this section was put up by Joseph Rourke.

"He was in the place," continued the judge, "for a good many years, and made a practice of leaving every year a couple of months before the winter season, telling his friends that he wanted to reach New York in time to attend divine service on Christmas day. In those days Christmas was not the great religious festival in New England that it is today, and the people were practically ignorant of the real meaning of the tenets of the Catholic faith. Rourke never tried to deny his religion, and it was a common thing for the farmers for miles around to gather at the house where he was making a pair of boots and hear him tell of the inhuman cruelties perpetrated on his countrymen on account of their faith, and in my opinion, he was the first man that told the old settlers of this town the Catholic meaning of the word 'Mass.' After an absence of a few months, he was sure to return and remain until the following Christmas, when

he was off again. Finally, he expressed a determination to revisit the scenes of his early boyhood and use his genius in defense of his native country, and that was the last the townspeople ever heard of him.”

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