

April 12, 2001

Dear Editor:

Knowing my interest in Irish-American history, a friend sent me a copy of Edward Carberg's letter to the editor published under a picture of James Sullivan and the caption, "1st Catholic Governor."

James Sullivan was of Irish descent, but he was not Catholic and he spent a good part of his public life making certain, by words and actions, that no one mistake him for one because of his name. As Massachusetts Attorney General from 1797 to 1807, he kept in the public eye by his vitriolic and zealous opposition to "Popery" and his persistent and passionate persecution of "papists." He prosecuted Rev. Jean Lefebvre de Cheverus for performing a catholic wedding and indicted Father Francis Matigon on similarly spurious charges. In 1806, he made the arduous journey to Northampton and took personal charge of the prosecution of Dominic Daley and James Halligan for the murder of Marcus Lyons; a trial that resulted in their conviction and execution despite a paucity of evidence. Sullivan's proof was best summed up by the title to James Curran's play about the trial, "They're Irish, They're Catholic, They're Guilty!"

It was long after Sullivan made the hanging of Daley and Halligan the centerpiece of his successful campaign for Governor, that the real murderer made a deathbed confession.

The bigotry against catholics and Irishmen in the early 1800s was not "supposed" as Mr. Carberg suggests but a historical reality that needs to be remembered if we are to benefit from its ugly lessons. Even the illustrious Sam Adams was prone to it, witness his letter to the Boston Gazette:

"I have been long apprehensive that what we have above everything else to fear is Popery...Much more is to be dreaded from the growth of Popery in America than from Stamp Acts or any other Acts destructive of civil rights...be on your guard against Popery!"

Sullivan's intolerance of Catholics was not unusual for the times but it was extreme and he chose to make it the distinctive feature of his public, political and professional persona. Let's be fair to his memory and remember him as he was – a despicable, hate-spewing, catholic-bashing bigot who mounted the steed of racism and rode it into the Governorship of Massachusetts and the pages of history.

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5-17-01
03/27/00