

The Byrne family of LaSalle-19th -Rebels, Immigrants and Entrepreneurs

William Byrne

In 1837 LaSalle was a wild frontier town. Inhabited mainly by workmen employed in constructing the Illinois & Michigan Canal, the town was all too frequently the site of drunken brawls, riots, and general mayhem. One man decided to take matters in hand and enlist help to civilize the place and make it fit for families to live in. That man was William Byrne. He appears in Illinois history seemingly out of the blue in the mid-1830's, but the truth is stranger than fiction.

William, known locally as Billy, was a commissioner for the I&M Canal and owned the contract to build the canal locks between Marseilles and LaSalle. A man of some influence and wealth at this time, Billy's story was one of rags to riches- and eventually back to rags. He was born sometime around 1780-85 in the tiny village of Leixlip, which lies in the rolling hills a few miles northwest of Dublin, Ireland. It was probably there that he learned his trade of stonemasonry, since one of the major canals linking Dublin with the River Shannon in the west was constructed at this time and it runs right through Leixlip.

By his own admission, he received very little education. Catholic children were effectively banned from attending school. Billy made his mark rather than signing his name, but he must have possessed engineering skills and business acumen. What we know of his early life comes from an article in the Chicago Tribune for which he was interviewed in 1870, in which he claimed he was 100 years old¹. He was probably around 96 or 97.

As a young man he said he had joined the United Ireland movement, fighting against the British army in the 1798 Uprising. This was one of the first attempts by the Irish to secure some independence from Britain after centuries of oppression. Kildare's proximity to Dublin meant that it was the site of several crucial battles and Byrne boasted that he was in the thick of it. The Chicago Tribune journalist reported:

"He fought at "The Lines" on the borders of Kildare and Dublin, and at Prosperous, a town in the former county. He relates with great gusto how he killed a "Hessian," and captured his horse."

The Battle of Prosperous was a highpoint of the uprising. On 24th May 1798, John Esmonde led about 200 rebels there to capture the British garrison in the small cotton-weaving town. Almost the entire garrison was wiped out and the building burned to the ground. By mid-June Esmonde had been executed and the rebellion fizzled out. Byrne was captured by the British and tried by a kangaroo court. His sentence was to be viciously flogged. This certainly happened- the scars he bore on his back were personally witnessed by Father Thomas Shaw, pastor of St. Patrick's Church² and the journalist who interviewed him for the Chicago Tribune in later life.

Help came from an unexpected quarter. A member of the local gentry, Major Thomas Marlay of the 1st Foot Guards, intervened and Byrne escaped hanging or transportation to the penal colonies in Australia. Despite being a British officer and a Protestant (he was the nephew of George Marlay, bishop of

¹ The Chicago Tribune. Sunday March 6, 1870. Downloaded 12 Jun 2023.

² Shaw, Rev. Thos. A. Story of the LaSalle Mission, First Part. Chicago, Illinois, n.d.

Dromore), Marlay appears to have had some sympathy for the rebels. According to Byrner's account, Marlay sheltered fifteen insurrectionists in his own home, Weston Park, until the turmoil had subsided.

After the failure of the rebellion, Byrne returned to employment as a stonecutter, firstly helping build a lighthouse off the coast of Wexford. While it was being built, a storm lashed the coast of Wexford and several of the men building the structure were swept away to sea. About 1804 Billy married Sarah Harris and a daughter, Ann, was born to them while still in Ireland. Ann was born with a developmental disability, and I will discuss her fate, which is documented in LaSalle County's probate records.

In search of a better life, and toleration for his religion, he moved to Newfoundland and Prince Edward's Island, where he worked for two years, again building lighthouses. Byrne was nothing if not tough, for a stonecutter's work was physically demanding and building lighthouses was extremely dangerous work. He indicated that he worked on several lighthouses before moving to Pennsylvania around 1815.

Construction of the Schuylkill canal began about this time, and Byrne, who was always looking for new opportunities, made his way to Philadelphia. There he teamed up with three partners, a man named Provest and Michael Byrne (no relation), and signed a contract for quarrying and masonry on the Schuylkill and Susquehanna Canal. He later commented that public contracts were very profitable in those days and each partner made \$10,000 profit- a sum worth about \$264,000 today.

He invested his earnings from the public contract shrewdly in two granite quarries, which also made him a tidy profit. At least five children were born to the family during this period in Philadelphia, and their baptisms were duly recorded.

Byrne recalled that he was appointed Superintendent of Bridges and Mason Work on the great national highway between Baltimore and Wheeling, known as the Cumberland Road, though I have not been able to find any documentary evidence to confirm this statement. Another son, Joseph was born in Maryland about 1830, and the family established firm ties with the Vincentian missionaries who were headquartered in nearby Emmitsburg, Maryland. All the children, except Ann, were later schooled at the mission there. John, his oldest surviving son, entered the Emmitsburg seminary and became a priest, while one of his granddaughters, Eliza, entered the convent of the Daughters of Charity in 1864 and remained in the order until her death in 1937 under the name Sister Mary Virginia.

In August 1830 Byrne partnered with Michael Byrne and Mr. LeBaron to take over the construction of Monocacy aqueduct, part of the Chesapeake and Ohio canal project. Begun in 1828, the aqueduct's construction had been plagued with difficulties. The aqueduct had been designed by Benjamin Wright, with whom Byrne later collaborated on the I&M Canal in LaSalle, but the previous contractor had been fired. Byrne and his partners completed the project and a stone embedded in the aqueduct records William Byrne as one of its builders.

Federal land grant acts had been passed by Congress in the late 1820's to help finance the project, a development of which Byrne must have been keenly aware. Sometime in the mid-1830's, Byrne made the journey across the country from Pittsburgh, thence to St Louis, and finally to LaSalle, probably via the Ohio, Mississippi, and Illinois rivers. The date of his arrival is uncertain, but it is certain that Byrne was attracted by the prospect of involvement in the construction of the Illinois & Michigan Canal. Construction began on July 4th, 1836.

Billy was not only an entrepreneur but also a community leader. He was tasked by the local Catholic population to sail down the Illinois and Mississippi rivers to St Louis and beg Bishop Rosati to send priests to LaSalle. Bishop Rosati belonged to the Vincentians, who were also based in Emmitsburg, and he may have already known of the Byrne family. At any rate, he was impressed by Byrne's appeals and inspired by the possibility of evangelization in the virgin territory of Northern Illinois.

Bishop Rosati appointed Fathers John Raho and Aloysius Parodi to this novel and dangerous mission. The intrepid priests arrived by boat in Peru on the night of March 29, 1838. A welcoming crowd of over 500 people- Catholics and Protestants alike- were led by Billy Byrne, who greeted the clerics and lead them in procession over a mile to his own house, which stood on a bluff overlooking the spot where the canal and river met. A descendant of Byrne told me that the spot is on the corner of Joliet Street and Canal Street in LaSalle, and is the site of a tall flagpole now.

Billy apparently arranged for the Canal company to donate lots 1 and 2 in Block 99 in LaSalle. These two lots were the subject of a preemption claim by Father Montuory in 1848. In the claim the priest wrote that in the spring of the year 1838 the congregation had erected on lot 1 a log church 60 feet by 24 feet as well as a dwelling house. In 1839 an addition to the dwelling house was built, a garden put in, and a stable built which encompassed lot 2.³ The church was originally called Holy Cross but when a new stone church was built in 1852, to the east and further up the hill, it became St. Patrick's. The church flourished and Billy offered his skills in the design on the first school built for the parish in the 1850's. A stone church, in a location further up the hill from the river, was erected between 1848 and 1852 and no doubt Billy was one of the stalwarts who helped moved the old wooden pews up the hill to the new church.

These were prosperous years for the Byrne family. Billy was heavily involved in the Illinois Democratic Party in the 1840's. The Ottawa Free Trader for June 9, 1848, lists him as a LaSalle delegate to the state convention, along with his son-in-law Ambrose O'Connor. Tragically, O'Connor died of cholera the following year, leaving Billy's daughter Sarah Jane a widow. His other daughter Elizabeth had married to David L. Gregg, another up-and-coming name in the Democratic party. Gregg served as Illinois Secretary of State in the 1850's and ran for governor in 1854 but was unable to overcome the widespread prejudice against Catholics. President Franklin Pierce, however, rewarded his talent by appointing him to an important diplomatic post in Hawaii, continuing to serve under Lincoln until 1863. Gregg's letters are an important source for the early history of US-Hawaii relations. Gregg remarried after Eliza's death in 1848 but was fond enough of the Byrne family to make a detour to Baltimore to visit his former brother-in-law John before departing for Honolulu.⁴

As any Irish father would have been, Billy must have been incredibly proud of his son John's decision to enter the priesthood. Ordained a priest in June 1849, John had a reputation as a brilliant scholar. Further indication of the family's involvement in the Democratic party is evidenced by the fact that Father John was the celebrant at the marriage of Stephen A. Douglas to Adele Cutts in Washington D.C. on November 20th, 1856. In 1857 John was appointed coadjutor bishop of Pittsburgh but resigned a few months later, opting to take up a professorship at a Philadelphia seminary. He was later appointed director at Mount St Mary's Seminary in Emmitsburg in 1860 but on died 11th December 1864. He is buried in the cathedral cemetery in Philadelphia.

³ https://www.ilsos.gov/departments/archives/teaching_packages/I_and_M_canal/27.pdf

⁴ Joerger, Pauline N. King, *A Political Biography of David Lawrence Gregg*. New York, 1982.

Billy Byrne's fortunes continued to prosper until the Civil War. His descendants confirmed that he owned a store next to his cabin where his own canal workers could use their scrip to buy provisions. The 1860 census listed him as a street commissioner, and he owned land jointly with his youngest son Joseph in Minnesota, which was then a territory. In 1857 the *Daily Illinois State Register* listed him as a town supervisor for LaSalle. But the Civil War was to bring years of tragedy and loss for the Byrne family.

Billy's youngest son, Joseph, was born in Baltimore, Maryland around 1831, but moved to LaSalle as a very young child and grew up there. Educated by the Vincentians, Joseph was something of an entrepreneur like his father and had become a riverboat captain on the Mississippi. In 1852 he married a young widow, Margaret Taylor nee Carey, in McDonough County, Illinois. According to census data, she already had four children by her first marriage to George Taylor who is listed as a merchant in McDonough County in the 1850 census. A daughter, Sarah Jane, known as Sallie, was born in St Louis in 1853, followed by two sons who apparently died in infancy. The family split time between St Louis, Missouri, and a homestead claim in northern Minnesota. The 1857 Census of Minnesota lists Joseph and his family living in Wabasha County with his step-children and, interestingly, his father. Perhaps Billy helped to bankroll the enterprise. A Homestead Patent dated 5 September 1861 proves Joseph's later claim that he had purchased land there.

But Joseph had interests in another much more dangerous sphere of life- politics. He took an active part in the Presidential election of 1860, campaigning for the Democratic party. His father later claimed that he was a prominent politician and a correspondent of the *Daily Missouri Republican*.⁵ On 13th September 1860 that newspaper published an advertisement for the "Douglas Civil Guards Co No 9" notifying members to appear at a rally on 14th September at the corner of Fourteenth and Cass Avenue. Everyone was urged to appear in their best apparel, sporting batons and rosettes, as "there is business of great importance to be transacted...Our object is the perpetuity of the Union." A brass band was to be in attendance, along with several speakers. The ad was signed "Joseph F Byrne, Captain." The Douglas Civil Guard was the Democratic counterpart to the Republican "Wide Awakes."

The 20th November 1860 edition of the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* included a report about Joseph in its social news column. The newspaper reported that Byrne, "an efficient and popular riverman" had left for Memphis the previous Wednesday to be in the employ of the Memphis and New Orleans Packet Company. It noted that "Byrne will find a host of friends in Memphis." Coming just a few weeks after Lincoln's election, Joseph's movements were bound to raise suspicions with the authorities. Control of the Mississippi River was to become a central objective of Grant's Army of the Tennessee. Knowledge of the river and contacts between St Louis and Memphis might prove valuable to the Confederate efforts in the region. In CIA terms, Joseph must have been an "asset".

St Louis now found itself in an ambiguous position. Missouri was a slave state but never seceded from the Union. Federal forces were keen to take control of the city due to its prime location on the Mississippi River and the positioning of a large arsenal within its limits. In March and May 1861 violent stand-offs occurred between Union paramilitary (former Wide Awakes) and civilians, 28 of whom were killed. The Union declared martial law there in April 1861, and anyone suspected of supporting the Confederacy faced potential arrest, trial, and imprisonment. These events galvanized Secessionist sentiment in St Louis and were probably a factor in Joseph's subsequent actions. But he would be playing a dangerous game- anyone suspected of supporting the Confederacy could be imprisoned without trial.

⁵ Chicago Evening Argus, 21st December 1869.

On 21st December 1861, Joseph was arrested as a Southern spy and incarcerated in the notorious Myrtle Street prison, a two-story brick building which had formerly been a slave pen. Like most prisons of that era, it was usually overcrowded and extremely unpleasant. Joseph's wife Margaret and other associates were interrogated by the Provost Marshall (Military Commander). Joseph wrote a desperate plea to the Provost Marshall of St Louis on 21st December 1861:

"First that I am willing at any moment to take the oath of allegiance to the United States. Secondly that my name is Joseph F. Byrne...I was a staunch advocate of the cause of S.A. Douglas, I supported his principles whilst living and venerated and respected them since dead."

Byrne then gave a detailed account of his movements since 18th April 1861- a week after the firing on Fort Sumpter. He maintained he had taken a steamboat to St Paul and then staked a claim at Diamond Lake, Minnesota. In July he left there for LaSalle and picked up his little daughter who had been staying with his parents. He said he then spent time in LaSalle recruiting for Cushman's regiment (the 53rd Illinois Infantry) until December, when he returned to St Louis via Cairo, Illinois. Cushman even furnished a reference for him. He maintained that he was a friend of Frank Blair, an influential political figure and Union major general. In a subsequent note he pleaded that his family were now in dire straits, "Please bear me kindly in mind & do give me some position(sic) by which I will be able to furnish them with bread and butter."

Byrne was released from prison on 27th December 1861, according to an article in the *St Louis Globe Democrat*. But in September 1862 he was rearrested and sent to prison in Alton, Illinois. Allegedly he had been caught recruiting for Sterling Price's Missouri State Guard. He wrote an impassioned letter on 21st September pleading that he had been unjustly arrested, and on 14th October he was released on parole- that is, he was part of a prisoner exchange.

Just before Christmas 1862 Byrne was arrested for a third time and was listed as a Confederate prisoner of war. His wife Margaret Byrne had had enough and was now ready to blow the whistle on the whole ring of Secessionists in St Louis. On 22nd December she testified about her husband's involvement with a society widow, Mrs. Rebecca Sire, and her circle of secessionist sympathizers. A St Louis physician, Brooks Stephens, also approached the authorities with information:

"I am a physician by profession office cor[n]er of 4 & Market. I know Joseph F. Byrne of St. Louis. I am informed that he has been a prisoner at Alton, and is now on parole in this city. He was at my office about a week ago and boasted he had a commission in the Southern army (or a promise of one) & was going to Memphis either this evening or tomorrow on the *Glasgow*, and would carry such information as (would) lay St Louis in ashes, or might so result, and then he would "ride over the heads of these damned dogs in Federal offices here". Dr Stephens also testified that Byrne had been supplied with clothing by Secession sympathizers in St Louis, and these supplies were now stored at Forsyth's warehouse at corner of Olive & Commercial Alley.

Despite his pleas, it was evident that Joseph Byrne was in the service of the Confederacy. Confederate records show that he recruited for the Missouri State Guard for at least six months, between 11 Aug 1862 and 18 Mar 1863 and was paid \$79 for his efforts.⁶ He was sent south on March 4th 1863, probably as part of a prisoner exchange, but returned north without permission and rearrested. He was

⁶ <https://www.fold3.com/publication/35/us-civil-war-service-records-cmsr-confederate-missouri-1861-1865>. (M322)

released Nov 20th 1863 on oath and a \$2000 bond, only to be re-arrested & committed to Myrtle St Prison in St Louis the next day. By then, the Mississippi River was under Federal control as far south as Vicksburg.

At this point the paper trail turns cold. Joseph Byrne died in St Louis on 26th February 1867 of pneumonia and was buried in the City Cemetery. The war had destroyed his family. His wife had certainly left him by 1863 as he testified then that he was separated from her. It is unknown what happened to her and his daughter Sallie.

The war years must have been a great trauma for Billy and Sarah Byrne. Most of their children had predeceased them and they were powerless to help their remaining errant son. Billy did not mention the episode at all in his later interview with the Chicago Tribune and claimed that Joseph was now a priest in the South. However, Elmer Baldwin confirmed in his History of LaSalle County (1877) that Joseph had died in St Louis.

One daughter remained at home- a woman whose presence had been hidden up until now from the outside world. Ann Byrne was probably their oldest child, born in Ireland in 1805. The first record of her existence is the 1850 Federal census, which did not give her relationship to Billy and Sarah. In December 1853, Billy petitioned the court in Ottawa to have his daughter declared incompetent and to appoint a guardian, since she had an interest in certain real estate in the county. He declared that Ann was about 47 years old "is now and has been since her birth an idiot". He petitioned the court for a trial, a jury was summoned, and the trial took place that same afternoon. The members of the jury included a local doctor and a druggist. Ann was declared a lunatic 'and that she does not enjoy lucid intervals.' A prominent LaSalle businessman, Alexander Campbell was appointed as her conservator. Despite the verdict, Ann continued to live with her parents until 30th August 1867, when she arrived at the LaSalle County Asylum in Ottawa. This date probably coincides with the death of her mother. She spent the rest of her life there, dying on 28th November 1891 aged 86- thus outliving all her siblings. In 1895, Alexander Campbell returned to court to state that Ann had never inherited any money or real estate, he was not aware of any family left and asked to be discharged from his duties as conservator.

After his wife's death and Ann's committal to the asylum, Billy decided to move to Chicago. Perhaps he wanted to start afresh where his surviving children would not be the subject of gossip. The Sisters of Charity, who operated a school in LaSalle, had recently opened Providence Hospital in Lakeview, near the northern city limits. The Chicago Tribune listed it as one of the best hospitals for long-term care at that time. Billy was to spend his few remaining years there, dying on 1st June 1873. It was during his time there that he was interviewed by a journalist from the Chicago Tribune, and that article forms the basis for what we know of his life before he came to LaSalle.

After a Requiem Mass on June 4th at his beloved St. Patrick's church in LaSalle (where the entry in the register lists him as "our William Byrns") he was buried in St. Vincent's Cemetery in LaSalle. An 1875 article in the Chicago Tribune reported that Billy himself had picked out the stone for his obelisk, 11 feet high and 2 feet square, when he was building the Canal, and had shown it to the visiting statesman Daniel Webster in 1839.⁷ The report goes on to say that a group of Billy's loyal friends gathered a team of six horses and removed the obelisk from where it had lain for 36 years and re-erected it in the cemetery, where it can be seen today.

⁷ A Well-Seasoned Tombstone, Chicago Tribune 17th February 1875