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**A Biography of an Early Savannah Merchant
Dominick O'Byrne**

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Abstract

Dominick O'Byrne Esq. was an Irish immigrant who lived in Savannah from 1820 to 1850. He increased his wealth through wise business and real estate decision. His local business was primarily lumber. He was an active Catholic and a Hiberian. He was an Alderman for the last year of his life. He died of tuberculosis at age 67.

"It seems like only Yesterday that I sailed from out of Cork
A wonder from old Ireland Isle, I landed in New York,
There was not a soul to greet me there,
a stranger on the shore,
But Irish luck was with me and riches came galore."

from Dear old Donnegal¹

Who was Dominick O'Byrne? He was a successful Savannah lumber merchant. He was a loyal Irish immigrant. He was a loyal Catholic. He was all of these things and more.

Dominick O'Byrne was born around 1783 in County Mayo, Ireland.² His wife, formerly Margaret Gillespie, was born in the nearby county Leitrim.³ In 1798, an Irish rebellion devastated large parts of Ireland. While Dominick would have been about 15, there is no evidence that he was involved in the fighting. However boys his age were combatants.

¹All The Best From Ireland , (Mount Royal, Canada: Madacy, Inc.) , sound cassette.

²There are some contradictory information in the census's. The 1830 Federal census says that Dominick was between 40 and 50 years old. The 1850 Federal census says he was 57 years old. His obituary in 1850 says he was 67 years old. It is most likely that the 1850 Federal census was the one that was inaccurate. The record does not show his birthplace, but his cousins who immigrated to Savannah came from county Mayo.

³1860 Georgia Federal Census , "Chatham County" , 51-52.

Dominick O'Byrne arrived in New York on June 24th, 1818 on the schooner *Sea Ann*.⁴ He was 35. Dominick O'Byrne moved to Savannah on October 15, 1820. Savannah experienced a devastating fire earlier in the year.⁵ When Dominick arrived, the city was experiencing a yellow fever epidemic.⁶ These dual plagues would have made Savannah a less than desirable place to settle. However, Dominick found opportunity in the city.

Early in his residence in Savannah, Dominick O'Byrne started a lumber business. Within ten years of coming to Savannah, Dominick began to making trips to New York.⁷ His family accompanied him on a few trips, but he travels alone most of the time. Hence the trips were probably for business. Savannah had a sizable lumber trade with New York. Dominick also started to trade in slaves.⁸

How did Dominick O'Byrne acquire his wealth? His early purchase of a home and slaves hint that he probably arrived with some money. He also began to buy and sells slaves within ten years

⁴Marion R. Hemperley, "Collections of the Georgia Historical Society other documents and notes Federal Nationalization oaths," 1 Georgia Historical Quarterly , 14 (December 1967) : 454-487.

⁵John D. Duncan, "The Great Fire of 1820," class lecture for History of Savannah and Georgia, Savannah, Georgia, 4 November 1991, (Savannah: 1991 Class Notes).

⁶"Board of Health," Daily Georgian, 5 September 1820 , 3.

⁷Daily Georgian, 9 September 1829 , 2.

⁸Chatham County Deed book QQ , 502.

of arriving in Savannah.⁹ He bought his first property on Franklin square for \$1,553.63.¹⁰ Later he purchased land on Olgethorpe square then Telfair square.¹¹ He purchased land around the Scarbough House. A few years after he died, his wife purchased the Scarbough house.¹²

He had impressive real estate holdings. The best account of his holdings is in the 1846 Chatham County tax digest. He is listed as having 20 properties.¹³ He held land in Heathcote ward, Yamacraw ward, Washington ward, and Franklin Ward. He had land on Indian street, Pine Street, and West Broad street. He owned land on Hutchison Island across the river. He owned land in Cherokee county. His real estate was valued to the highly respectable total of \$51,350. His most valuable properties were the two wharfs by Canal street worth \$17,000. His property on Heathcote ward was valued at \$7,000.¹⁴

⁹Chatham County Deed book QQ, 502.

¹⁰"State of Georgia Deed Sold to Dominick O'Byrne" [Deed to lot 9 in New Franklin Ward], 13 February 1825, O'Byrne Family Papers, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Georgia.

¹¹"Bank of Georgia Deed Sold to Dominick O'Byrne" [Deed to lot 27 in Olgethorpe Ward], 3 May 1839, O'Byrne Family Papers, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Georgia.

¹²"Scarbough House Holds Record of Past Glory," Savannah Morning News, 4 September 1927, 9 (B).

¹³1846 Chatham County Tax Digest.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

In 1832, Dominick O'Byrne won land in the Cherokee Indian land lottery.¹⁵ The state of Georgia had seized the territory after gold had been found on the Cherokee land. The land was divided into lots and distributed by lottery. Dominick's property is in what is now Union County.¹⁶ It is unclear if this lot is the same as the lot mentioned in the 1846 tax digest.

He also owned slaves. According to the 1850 slave schedule Dominick O'Byrne owned 17 slaves. This would have made him one of the largest slave owners in the area excluding plantations owners. Five male slaves were between 35 and 50. They would have been experienced laborers for his lumber business. 5 females were between 20 and 50. They would have been wives of the males and/or house servants. Dominick O'Byrne also had 7 juvenile slaves. 5 of the 7 juveniles were mulattoes.¹⁷

Dominick O'Byrne was an alderman of Savannah in the last year of his life.¹⁸ No major political action is attributed to him, but

¹⁵James F. Smith , The 1832 Cherokee Land Lottery of Georgia, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1838; reprint, Vidalia, Georgia: Georgia Genealogical Reprints, 1968) , 51.

¹⁶The land possibly very valuable. The site was near a river in the center of the county. The importance of this is that cities building and gold panning was done around the rivers.

¹⁷1850 Federal slave schedules "Chatham County".

¹⁸Daily Georgian (Savannah) , 23 September 1850 , 2.

his obituary says he reluctantly entered politics.¹⁹ What caused him to enter politics is unknown, but this was the time of the anti-immigrant Know-Nothing party. As a respected first generation Irishman he might of felt compelled to fight this movement. After he died in 1850, his son Dominick Austin O'Byrne entered politics. He ran for alderman in the 1854 election under a party opposed to the Know-Nothings.²⁰ It is likely that his father influenced the values in his son.

Dominick was also a lawyer when he died. He became a lawyer some time near the end of his life.²¹ However, several of his sons and grandsons became lawyers. Dominick Austin O'Byrne was a Judge of the Court of Ordinary in Savannah.²² Dominick also had a large practice after the civil war.

¹⁹Daily Georgian (Savannah) , 2 September 1850 , 2.

²⁰Herbert Weaver, "Foreigners in Antebellum Savannah," Georgia Historical Quarterly, (March 1953) : 1-12.

²¹It was not hard to become a lawyer in the early 1800's. A person just had to be a respected man of society. He just had to convince the local judicial bar that he was qualified. Dominick's lack of advertising indicates he was probably not one of the leading lawyers of Savannah. However his descendants were leading lawyers in the city of Savannah.

²²"Description" , O'Byrne Family Papers, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Georgia.

However Dominick's main source of wealth was in the lumber trade.²³ John F. O'Byrne inherited his fathers lumber business when his father died.²⁴ The business was at Old O'Byrne's wharf on Canal Street near the present day Eugene Talmadge bridge.²⁵ Lumber would be taken down river and processed by the lumber mills near the river. The finished wood would be ship elsewhere. The lumber shipped from Savannah to New York in 1850-1851 was 1.38 million feet.²⁶ The frequent trip to New York may indicate that the O'Byrne family had a sizable portion of this trade. New York was the largest destination for lumber out of Savannah.²⁷

While it is difficult to get a good understanding of O'Byrne's business, it is much easier to appraise the values he tried to instilled in his children. He was one of the leading Catholics in the city.²⁸ He treasured education and he took pride in supporting the Irish cause.

²³David Gallaway, Directory of the Savannah City For The Year 1850, (Savannah Georgia: Edward Councill printing, 1849) 30.

²⁴Daily Georgian, 15 January 1851 , 1.

²⁵David Gallaway, Directory of the Savannah City For The Year 1850, (Savannah Georgia: Edward Councill printing, 1849) 30.

²⁶Joseph F. Greenough, "The city of Savannah, Georgia," Hunt's Merchant Magazine , July 1853, 63.

²⁷Since Dominick O'Byrne frequently went on trips to New York, he probably had a large share of the sizable New York lumber trade.

²⁸J.J. O'Connell , Catholicity in the Carolinas and Georgia, (New York, New York: Dand J. Sadlier & Company, 1879) , 511.

When he died in 1850, he had nine children. However two early news article hint that he lost a child earlier in his life.²⁹ His children were spaced out almost every two years. In 1850, he had five sons and four daughters.³⁰ Later records mentions most of these kids growing up to become adults in Savannah.

Dominick believed in education and hard work. He specifically reserves funds for his kids education in his will. He wanted his sons to go to college and his daughters to receive a proper education under his wifes' direction.³¹ The 1850 census states that his son Michael W. O'Byrne was a customs inspector and another son, John F. O'Byrne, was a lumber merchant. Later John O'Byrne became took over his fathers business. Dominick and Michael O'Byrne become lawyers. In 1860, his son James is listed as a college student.³²

He was a member of the Hiberians society.³³ The Hiberians society were primarily non-Catholic when Dominick O'Byrne arrived.

²⁹He leaves on a family vacation with 4 kids and returns with 3. Daily Georgian (Savannah) 14 June; 29 September 1830.

³⁰1850 Georgia Federal Census , "Chatham County" , 259.

³¹Dominick O'Byrne "Last will and Testament of Dominick O'Byrne" , Will Book H, Reference 401 , Chatham County Probate Office , Savannah, Georgia.

³²1860 Georgia Federal Census , "Chatham County" , 51-52.

³³The Hiberians of Savannah are made up of 150 leading Irish-Americans. In the 1800's, the Hiberians were militantly pro-Ireland and anti-England. The Savannah Hiberians were involved in local politics and

However the group was very anti-British.³⁴ The early Hiberians gave relief to the newly arriving Irish immigrants.³⁵ The Hiberians also participated in early politics. Several of Dominick O'Byrne's sons were Hiberians. Dominick O'Byrne's grandson Michael O'Byrne was president of the Hiberians in 1912-1925.³⁶

Bishop O'Connell mentioned him as one of the cities leading Catholics.³⁷ Dominick O'Byrne's wife Margaret played music in the Catholic Church. She is mentioned as an accomplished Harp player by the historian William Harden.³⁸ Several of their children were married in the church. He even had a granddaughter, Sister Mary Dominica O'Byrne, who became a nun.³⁹ His grandson Michael O'Byrne was on the building committee for Saint Johns Catholic church.⁴⁰

business. "Hiberians offered Irishmen, Help, Humor," Savannah Morning News , 17 March 1963 , p. 10.

³⁴"Hiberians offered Irishmen, Help, Humor," Savannah Morning News , 17 March 1963 , p. 10.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶"Hiberian Society Reaches 125th Anniversary", Savannah Morning News , 17 March 1937, 8-9.

³⁷J.J O'Connell , Catholicity in the Carolinas and Georgia, (New York, New York: Dand J. Sadlier & Company, 1879) , 511.

³⁸William Harden, Reflections of a Long and Satisfactory Life, (Savannah, Georgia: Review Printing Company , 1934) , 51.

³⁹"Description" , O'Byrne Family Papers, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Georgia.

⁴⁰William Harden, A History of Savannah and South Georgia, volume 2, (Atlanta Georgia: Cherokee Publishing Company, 1981) , 612.

He died on the 21st of September 1850. His remains were escorted by "the largest concourse of citizens" ever "witnessed on any similar occasion".⁴¹ His obituary praises his good fortune and his humble nature. He is praised as a loyal American who never forgot the land of his birth. His illness was long and painful, but he endured it bravely. He is currently interned in the O'Byrne family vault in Catholic Cemetery.⁴² He died of consumption or tuberculous.⁴³

What kind of man was Dominick O'Byrne? He was a successful first generation Irish immigrant. He made his money and he left his values on his children. What more can a person ask for?

⁴¹Daily Georgian (Savannah) , 2 September 1850, 2.

⁴²Workers Projects Administration, Catholic Cemetery General Index to Keeper's Record Book 1852-1938. volume II,(Savannah, Georgia: W.P.A. Project, 1939).

⁴³R. J. Taylor, Register of Death in Savannah, Georgia volume VI 1848 - June 1853, (Savannah, Georgia: J.R. Foundation, 1989) , 58.

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