

STATE OF RHODE ISLAND

IN GENERAL ASSEMBLY

JANUARY SESSION, A.D. 2011

SENATE RESOLUTION

MEMORIALIZING THE GOVERNOR OF THE STATE OF RHODE ISLAND
TO PARDON JOHN GORDON

Introduced By: Senators McCaffrey, and Lynch

Date Introduced: February 16, 2011

Referred To: Senate Special Legislation

1 WHEREAS, On New Year's Eve in 1843, Amasa Sprague, a Yankee factory owner, was
2 beaten to death. He had been bludgeoned so brutally that his face was barely recognizable; and

3 WHEREAS, At the time, Rhode Island was rife with anti-immigration hysteria and
4 hatred. Local Yankees, who had maintained tight control on industry and politics in the state, felt
5 unjustifiably threatened by the Irish Roman Catholics, who were the first group to immigrate to
6 Rhode Island in large numbers; and

7 WHEREAS, The Spragues were wealthy and powerful, and held posts such as governor
8 and United States senator. Amasa Sprague oversaw the family's textile empire; and

9 WHEREAS, The Gordon brothers, Irish immigrants, ran a store and tavern. Authorities
10 maintained the Gordons plotted to do away with Amasa, after he engineered the suspension of
11 Nicholas's liquor license, to curb drinking by Sprague factory workers; and

12 WHEREAS, Anti-immigrant emotions inflamed the case, and after a trial based solely on
13 circumstantial evidence and false testimony, John Gordon was found guilty of murder in the
14 shooting and bludgeoning death of Mr. Sprague; and

15 WHEREAS, On Valentine's Day, February 14th of 1845, John Gordon was hanged for a
16 murder he did not commit. He became the last man to be executed in the state. Seven years after
17 his death, Rhode Island abolished the death penalty; and

18 WHEREAS, The conviction and subsequent hanging of John Gordon was racially
19 motivated and discriminatory and stands as a black mark on our great state's judicial history;

1 now, therefore be it

2 RESOLVED, That this Senate of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations
3 hereby requests The Honorable Lincoln Chafee, Governor of the State of Rhode Island, to
4 posthumously pardon John Gordon for the 1843 murder of Amasa Sprague; and be it further

5 RESOLVED, That the Secretary of State be and he hereby is authorized and directed to
6 transmit a duly certified copy of this resolution to The Honorable Lincoln Chafee, Governor of
7 the State of Rhode Island.

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