

Dooley to enter R.I. Heritage Hall of Fame

By Sean Flynn

Staff writer



NEWPORT - When Ken Dooley was growing up in Cranston, he sometimes heard his grandmother singing an ode with the refrain, “**Poor Johnny Gordon**,” a song about the last man executed by the state of Rhode Island in 1845.

After a career in publishing, including running his own company, Dooley researched what happened to Gordon, an Irish immigrant accused of murdering a Cranston industrialist, **Amasa Sprague**, in 1843.

Dooley, a Newport resident now, discovered that the jury included no Irish-Catholics, all the evidence was circumstantial, and the chief justice of the state Supreme Court instructed jurors to disregard the testimony of Irish witnesses over that of native-born Americans.

“I was convinced he was innocent,” Dooley said.

He wrote and produced “**The Murder Trial of John Gordon**,” a play that ran for 21 performances at the **Park Theatre** in Cranston beginning in January 2011. Former state **Rep. Peter Martin** of Newport said he saw the play seven times because he was so moved by Dooley's work.

“We started the process to introduce a bill asking the governor to grant a pardon,” Martin said. “We didn't want it granted as a favor, but because there was indisputable proof that Gordon did not receive a fair trial.”

There was a hearing before the **General Assembly's Judiciary Committee** during which attorneys, historians and representatives from the **American Civil Liberties Union** and **Catholic Church** testified.

Gov. Lincoln Chafee signed the pardon later in 2011.

That's the kind of impact Dooley has had in many of his endeavors.

For the many accomplishments of his career, he will be inducted into the **Rhode Island Heritage Hall of Fame** with eight other honorees in May.

"It's quite an honor," Dooley said Friday, before talking about the many other projects he has worked on or has upcoming.

Martin welcomed Dooley's upcoming induction.

"Ken has certainly earned the right to be recognized by the hall of fame for all he has done," he said.

Dooley was the screenwriter and executive producer of a film that was to be called "**Bellevue Avenue**," set to go into production in 2013. He planned to portray life among Newport's wealthy class during the Gilded Age. However, at the last minute, the financiers pulled back.

"Hopefully, someday," Dooley said. "A lot of people really liked it."

Scott Molloy, a professor of labor relations at the University of Rhode Island, was a consultant for the film project and was tasked with making sure the historical details were correct. Malloy provided biographical information about Dooley for this article.

Dooley was born in Providence in 1931, grew up in Cranston and graduated from **La Salle Academy** and **Providence College**.

"Ken spent much of his career employed by the media giant, **Prentice Hall** in New Jersey, as an executive vice president of the Bureau of Business Practice from 1960 to 1977," Malloy wrote. "He oversaw 600 employees and issued 125 newsletters about health, safety and personnel relations, as well as books and films. As part of that assignment, he founded **Madison Productions**, where he produced 75 training and motivational projects." Dooley also completed award-winning documentaries in the mid-1980s about the lives of sports legends **Arnold "Red" Auerbach** of the Boston Celtics and **Vince Lombardi** of the Green Bay Packers.

Dooley remains passionate about his subjects and said in the phone interview Friday that he was upset that some people in Boston criticized efforts to honor Auerbach during Black History Month in February this year.

“He hired the first black NBA player, hired the first black NBA coach, Bill Russell, and was the first to have an NBA team with five black starters,” Dooley said. “He was the Branch Rickey of the NBA.”

Rickey was the Brooklyn Dodgers co-owner who broke Major League Baseball's color barrier by signing black player Jackie Robinson after World War II, first for a minor league team and then with the Dodgers.

Dooley co-founded his own publishing company, **Institute for Management**, in Old Saybrook, Connecticut, in 1977. He expanded his earlier work about basketball into a biography called “**MBA: Management by Auerbach**,” which sold more than 100,000 copies in 1992.

Dooley, who became friends with Auerbach, said the former Celtics coach asked him to remove the part in the book that compared him to Rickey.

“It's true, though,” he said.

Dooley has served as a senior editor for **Progressive Business Publications** in Malvern, Pennsylvania, a leading publisher of management newsletters - one of his many writing-related jobs.

Dooley has been involved in other projects in recent years.

Robert “Bob” Thorpe, an older brother of one his Cranston friends, **Gil Thorpe**, joined the **39th Fighting Squadron of the Fifth Air Force** in World War II. The 20-year-old Thorpe was shot down on May 28, 1944, over New Guinea, crashing into the sea. The Air Force declared him “missing in action” and then “killed in action” after the war. The family never knew what happened to him.

Dooley, after his retirement, met Gil Thorpe again after a 40-year separation and started to dig. Using the Freedom of Information Act, with assistance from Martin, Dooley put together a 1,300-page dossier about Bob Thorpe's death. He found out that **2nd Lt. Thorpe** had been immediately captured by Japanese forces on the island, interrogated, tortured and beheaded.

“The heinous commander was arrested after the conflict and tried before the **Yokohama War Trials**,” Malloy wrote. “The officer pleaded guilty and hauntingly praised the courage of young Bob Thorpe. He was hanged

exactly five years to the day after the brutal murder of the Cranston airman. No one, including the family, knew about this turn of events.”

Dooley and Martin worked together so that Bob Thorpe was awarded the state's highest military honor in 2013 and a stone marker at the state's **Veterans Memorial Cemetery** in Exeter.

Dooley wrote a Guest View op-ed on the Thorpe story that was published in **The Daily News** on Sept. 13, 2014. At the time, he was working on a book on the topic, called “**Relentless Pursuit**,” which was published in 2015. Martin contributed to the book.

“If Ken's work ever ceases, a flagstone he installed at the **Irish Famine Memorial** to John Gordon tells all about him,” Malloy wrote. “It reads, 'Forgiveness is the Ultimate Revenge.’”

The induction ceremony for Dooley will take place Saturday, May 5, at the **Crowne Plaza Hotel** in Warwick, beginning at 6 p.m.

Other honorees include former Rhode Island U.S. Reps. Patrick Kennedy and Ronald Machtley, Judge Francis J. Darigan Jr., longtime newscaster Patrice Wood, Ronald Picerne, James P. Riley, Rudolf E. Tanzi and attorney Spencer Viner.

Reservations for the event can be made by calling 556-6174 or emailing somravanh@gmail.com.

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