

Sylvester Cahill: A Summary View of the Life And Public Career of Cranford's First Mayor

by Robert Fridlington

Sylvester Cahill was the first of the New Yorkers to discover the little village of Craneville in New Jersey and the first of them to make his home there. He was called “the founder of Cranford” and was honored by being chosen the township’s first Mayor. But his celebrity was not to last. Before many years had passed he was denounced and vilified, and today he is largely forgotten. The only monument to his memory in the town he helped create is a short street bearing his name – but only his first name.

By his own account, Cahill was born at Kilkenny, Ireland, on Christmas Day, 1815, although some who knew him believed he had shaved several years off his real age. Trained as a shoemaker, he came to the United States as a young man and did quite well in his new home. Resourceful and enterprising, he established a successful shoe business in New York City, and he married Mary Bigelow of Marlborough, Massachusetts.

By the time he came to Cranford, Cahill was at least forty-five years old. In a picture of the period, almost certainly taken right after the Civil War, Cahill gazes into the camera with a calm dignity. The Cahills had no children of their own, but they brought up a son of Sylvester’s brother, Hugh. Although the boy was a nephew, he was known to all as Sylvester, Jr., and for about thirty-five years he lived as the Cahills’ son, managing their property, and participating with Sylvester Sr. in a number of business ventures.



Mary Cahill

(Photo from the Cranford Historical Society Archives)



Sylvester Cahill

(Photo from the Cranford Historical Society Archives)

How the senior Cahill became acquainted with the village of Craneville is not known, but he was struck by the beauty of the place. On April 1, 1861, just one day before the attack on Fort Sumter unleashed the Civil War, Cahill and his wife Mary purchased 51 acres of the Ebenezer Hart farm in Craneville for \$10,000. Bounded by the river and by the present Union, Orange and Manor Avenues, the area would later be known as Roosevelt Manor.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the little hamlet where the Cahill property lay was known as Craneville (or as Cranesville), taking its name from the Crane family. It was a remote and quiet place. Even the coming of the Elizabethtown and Somerville Railroad (the forerunner of the Jersey Central) in 1838 did little to change the tempo of life. Although trains would stop on signal, the railroad did not build a passenger or freight station here until 1864. (The “station” was actually a small wooden shed.)

Cahill’s real estate development in Craneville was interrupted by the Civil War. There are conflicting accounts of his activities during the war years. At least two sources state that he was in the Army, but that appears unlikely. His obituary in the *Cranford Chronicle* said that during the war he had several general stores in the South, which sounds unusual, although a local oral tradition says he was a sutler, or civilian provisioner, in Union Army camps. His obituary in the *Daily Journal*, tells yet another story, stating that he had engaged in a mercantile pursuit in Charleston, South Carolina, but it does not say when. Whatever his activity during the war, the *Chronicle* appears to be correct when it says he “made a large amount of money”.

The end of the War found Cahill back in Craneville where he added to his holdings by purchasing land from Benjamin Garthwait on the upper end of Elizabeth Road and Cranford Avenue. For this tract of about 21 acres he paid \$4,000. Two years later he bought from Claud Grippo 26 acres on the east side of Union Avenue from Elizabeth Road to the river. The price was \$9,600. The three parcels, all of which were east of the river and in the Township of Union, gave Cahill nearly 100

acres of land in Craneville at a cost of about \$23,700, and it made him the largest landowner in the community. In addition, he owned property in Jersey City and Brooklyn.

Cahill's arrival in Craneville brought in his wake other newcomers from New York and Brooklyn. In 1864, Mary Cahill's brother, Alden Bigelow, bought from Josiah Crane 37 acres, mostly apple orchard, on the west side of the Rahway River, and he was soon joined by his two brothers, William and Charles, and by two business associates, Miln Dayton and Allen L. Eastman. Although located across the river from the Cahill property, Bigelow's land was in the Township of Westfield. The same year that Bigelow bought out Josiah Crane, the Jersey Central Railroad built its station at the village, enticing a new type of resident, the commuter.

Almost overnight the character of Craneville was transformed from a rural crossroads into a bustling suburban village. Fine new houses sprang up as more and more New Yorkers moved into the area. The new suburbanites, who commuted to the city, now dominated village life, and one feature of the community that they did not like was the village's name – Craneville. It was too homespun, too rustic. Everyone, except some of the older village inhabitants, thought something more dignified was needed. The name they chose was "Cranford", which carried on the Crane name, after a fashion, and yet was, dignified enough to make the new aristocracy happy. A few years later, in 1869, it all became official when the local post office adopted the name Cranford.

For those who expected to cash in on their investment in Cranford there was much to be done in order to make the village attractive to outsiders. Two areas of concern took precedence. First was the school system. The old Red Schoolhouse, built in 1805, was woefully inadequate, and there was, moreover, a growing recognition that the little village had grown into a separate community. In 1867 a new school district was established in Craneville, taking in areas on both sides of the river and including portions of Westfield, Clark and Union.

When Cahill died, one newspaper said that "it was due almost solely to his efforts that Cranford has now (1895) a neat modernly appointed public school house." What his efforts were and how much they affected the developing school system is difficult to assess. This "modernly appointed" school referred to the one built twenty-seven years before at the corner of Holly Street and Springfield Avenue. A four-room building, it served all of Cranford's educational needs until 1884 when a two-room addition was completed. This building would be razed in 1898 for the new brick Grant School.

The second area of concern was public safety. In the late 1860s the village experienced something of a crime wave, with a marked increase in house burglary, chicken thievery, harness theft, and even horse stealing. Some of this lawlessness was the work of the army of tramps that plagued every town in this era, but some was the work of professional criminals. Because the village was not an organized political entity and spilled over into several different townships, it had no effective police protection at all.

In early 1869 Cahill and seven other leading men of the village asked the State Legislature for a charter for the Cranford Thief Detecting Society, and on April first the Legislature incorporated the Society for a period of twenty years. Included in the small group of original incorporators were Cahill's brothers-in-law, Alden B. Bigelow and Charles D. Bigelow, and subsequent membership was just as illustrious. With this act the state created a private police organization operating entirely on its own and not responsible to any local governing body. They were primarily – and perhaps exclusively – interested in preventing crime in the better neighborhoods in town, the neighborhoods

where virtually all of them lived. Each member was provided with a shield, belt, club, and whistle, and many of them carried revolvers.

The group's influence extended far beyond its police function, however. Organized two years before the township was born, the Thief Detecting Society provided the foundation on which the future government would be built, and its gentlemen members would provide the town with its political and economic leadership for the next generation. Although defined by race and class, the Society did cross the lines of religion and party politics, aiding greatly in a sense of civic identity.

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