

The Right Thing to Do

The story of a Quaker captain

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At Easter 2026 in Rockingham in Western Australia, the Catalpa Festival celebrated the 1876 escape of six Irish Fenian prisoners.

They and other Irish men had been sent to Fremantle near Perth in 1868 for insurrection against the British government. Whilst all other prisoners had been pardoned and set free, (it being illegal to hold political prisoners amongst other reasons), there were still prisoners who had been members of the British army being held in Fremantle prison.

Former prisoners, one an escapee, went to the United States and were instrumental in organising a rescue attempt. Funded by donations in the US, the *Catalpa* was purchased to go as a whaling ship to Australia to take the remaining prisoners aboard and away to freedom.

The Quaker connection of this story is George Anthony, an unassuming Quaker descended from America's founding families. He was an American whaler in New Bedford, Massachusetts, who took action because he said, "It was the right thing to do." He became the captain of the *Catalpa*.

On Easter Monday 1876 whilst most of the Fremantle Prison warders were at a regatta, the six escapees, who were on work details outside the prison, made their way quickly along the coast to Rockingham where they were picked up by a rowboat and taken to the *Catalpa* which lay outside the three-mile territorial limit.

The *Catalpa* was challenged by an alerted steamboat, the *Georgette*, armed with a 12-pounder gun. Captain Anthony hoisted the US flag and pointed out that the ship lay in international waters and that an international incident would be caused if they were fired upon, as the *Georgette* threatened to do.

After a few hours the *Georgette* gave up shadowing the *Catalpa* and returned to port. The *Catalpa* sailed back to America taking four months to do so. In all, Captain Anthony was away from New Bedford and his family for well over a year.

He wrote in his captain's log when he reached his home port 'So ends this day, a pleasant voyage...'. Described by the British as a pirate, Captain Anthony could no longer go to sea in safety and became a port official in New Bedford.

In February 1920, at the memorial to George Smith Anthony in New Bedford, Irish president Eamonn de Valera laid a wreath together with an Irish Tricolour to honour Anthony's role in the escape, which was celebrated as a significant victory for Irish freedom. De Valera also met Anthony's widow and family while in New Bedford.

Much has been written about the *Catalpa* rescue including a film, a play, poetry and songs. Material is also available on the Web such as <https://www.irishecho.com/2026/4/books-catalpa-rescue-was-irish-america-s-coming-of-age> and https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Catalpa_Expedition.

Thomas Keneally, the acclaimed Australian author, whose grandfather's uncle, John Keneally, was one of the Irish American fundraisers for the mission, is closely associated with this historical event through his work on the 2007 documentary drama *The Catalpa Rescue*.

The rescue had its 150th anniversary at Easter this year.