Protecting Providence

By James Leach

Genre: Historical Drama / Survival Drama

Based on True Events

Logline: After a violent storm shipwrecks a group of colonial travelers on the Florida coast in 1696, a Quaker merchant must lead his family and fellow survivors through hostile territory, starvation, disease, and a crisis of faith on a desperate journey toward Saint Augustine.

Synopsis

In 1696, Philadelphia merchant **Jonathan Dickinson** leaves Port Royal, Jamaica, aboard the Reformation with his wife **Mary**, their infant son, and a diverse company of passengers and crew bound for the American colonies. Among them are devout Quaker elder Robert Barrow, Captain Alexander Kirle, and **Solomon**, a Black sailor whose knowledge of Spanish will prove crucial to their survival.

While sailing through the Florida Straits, the Reformation is caught in a violent storm and driven onto the coast near present-day Jupiter, Florida. The survivors stagger ashore with little food, few usable weapons, and several seriously injured companions. Their relief at surviving the wreck quickly disappears when armed Native warriors arrive.

The castaways are accused of being "Nickaleers"—*English enemies of the Spanish*—and are robbed, stripped of possessions, threatened, and forced from place to place along the Florida coast. Jonathan attempts to hold the frightened survivors together through his Quaker faith, even as he begins privately questioning whether Providence has abandoned them.

Solomon becomes their most valuable intermediary. Speaking Spanish, he repeatedly attempts to convince their captors that the castaways are connected to the Spanish rather than their English enemies. The deception offers them a fragile measure of protection, but their treatment changes dramatically from one Native community to another. Some threaten and abuse them; others provide fish, shelter, clothing, and even nourishment for Jonathan and Mary's starving infant.

As the survivors struggle northward, hunger, exposure, disease, and exhaustion take their toll. Jonathan's belief that God will provide is challenged repeatedly by Mary and by his own growing doubts. Robert Barrow, however, continues turning to Scripture, insisting that their suffering has

purpose even when that purpose cannot be understood.

Eventually they reach the settlement of an Old Chief who treats them with compassion and agrees to send one survivor ahead for help. Solomon volunteers to make the dangerous journey toward Saint Augustine.

Weeks of uncertainty follow until Spanish soldiers arrive carrying a letter from Solomon. He has succeeded. The government at Saint Augustine has ordered the castaways rescued regardless of their nationality.

Their ordeal, however, is not finished.

Forced to abandon their canoes and travel through freezing marshes and brutal coastal terrain, the weakened survivors begin to fall. Benjamin Allen dies from exposure, and several enslaved members of the company perish along the route. Jonathan and Mary struggle desperately to keep their infant son alive as cold, hunger, and exhaustion threaten to finish what the shipwreck began.

At last, the survivors reach Saint Augustine, where Governor Laureano de Torres welcomes them into his home. For the first time in weeks they receive warm clothing, food, medical attention, and shelter. Jonathan recognizes that their salvation has come through people the English colonists might ordinarily consider enemies or strangers—Spanish Catholics, Indigenous communities, and Solomon himself.

The survivors eventually continue north through Carolina and secure passage home. Before leaving, they gather what little money they possess to repay the Spanish soldiers who helped save their lives.

In late January 1697, Jonathan, Mary, their child, and the gravely ill Robert finally reach Philadelphia. Robert dies only days later, having lived long enough to see his prayer answered.

Jonathan survives to rebuild his life, raise a family, and eventually serve as Mayor of Philadelphia. His account of the ordeal preserves the story of those who survived—and those who did not.

Protecting Providence is ultimately not a story about faith preventing suffering. It is about faith being tested by suffering—and the unexpected people through whom salvation arrives.