

McPherson James M. Ordered By Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction

Five Fugitives, Fugitives, and Nativists

where blacks enjoyed almost full civil and political equality, a coalition of Liberty men, Garrisonian abolitionists, and Conscience Whigs worked to remove the last vestiges of legal discrimination. They managed to repeal the anti-intermarriage law in 1843 but failed in their attempts to remove the ban on blacks in the militia. In 1855, they finally won passage of a law prohibiting school segregation. In 1846 an effort by Liberty men and antislavery Whigs in New York to abolish the discriminatory \$250 property qualification for black voters was defeated by Democrats, including many Barnburners who voted Free Soil two years later. The Free Soilers achieved one of their greatest successes in Ohio, whose black laws until 1849 were the most restrictive in the North. The election of 1848 gave the Free Soilers the balance of power in Ohio politics. They used this leverage to strike a bargain with the Democrats whereby the latter grudgingly voted to elect Salmon P. Chase to the Senate and to repeal laws prohibiting black migration into the state, testimony against whites in court, and attendance at public schools. These concessions were made in return for Free Soil votes that would enable the Democrats to control the legislature.

Before the Civil War, only the New England states (except Connecticut) allowed blacks to vote on equal terms with whites. During the 1850s, the Free Soilers and Republicans tried to enact black suffrage in a few other Northern states, but failed. Democrats made much political capital by calling their opponents the "nigger party" or "amalgamation party." So pervasive was racism in many parts of the North that no party could win if it endorsed full racial equality. Thus the Free Soil platforms of 1848 and 1852 failed to include the earlier Liberty party planks demanding equal rights. Free Soil and Republican campaigns for state black suffrage laws in the 1850s sometimes seemed halfhearted.

Apart from the question of political expediency, many Free Soilers also harbored prejudices and stereotypes that inhibited a commitment to racial equality. They could hate slavery and sympathize with fugitive slaves but at the same time favor the colonization abroad of black people to preserve America as a white man's country. The ambivalence of the Free Soil party—and later of the Republican party—toward racial equality was one reason why some abolitionists remained aloof from these parties.

Nativism and the Rise of the Know-Nothings

For a few years in the 1850s, ethnic conflict among whites rivaled sectional conflict as a major political issue. The immediate origins of this phenomenon lay in the sharp increase of immigration after 1845. In the 1820s, the number of immigrants had averaged fewer than 13,000 per year. The average quadrupled in the 1830s. But even this paled in comparison with the immigration of the late 1840s. Land shortages and labor surpluses in Europe, plus the potato blight in Ireland and the revolutions of 1848 on the Continent, caused millions to emigrate. High wages, cheap land, and the booming American economy attracted most of them to the United States. During the decade 1846-1855, more than three million immigrants entered the United States—equivalent to 15 percent of the 1845 population. This was the largest proportional increase in the foreign-born population for any ten-year period in Ameri-

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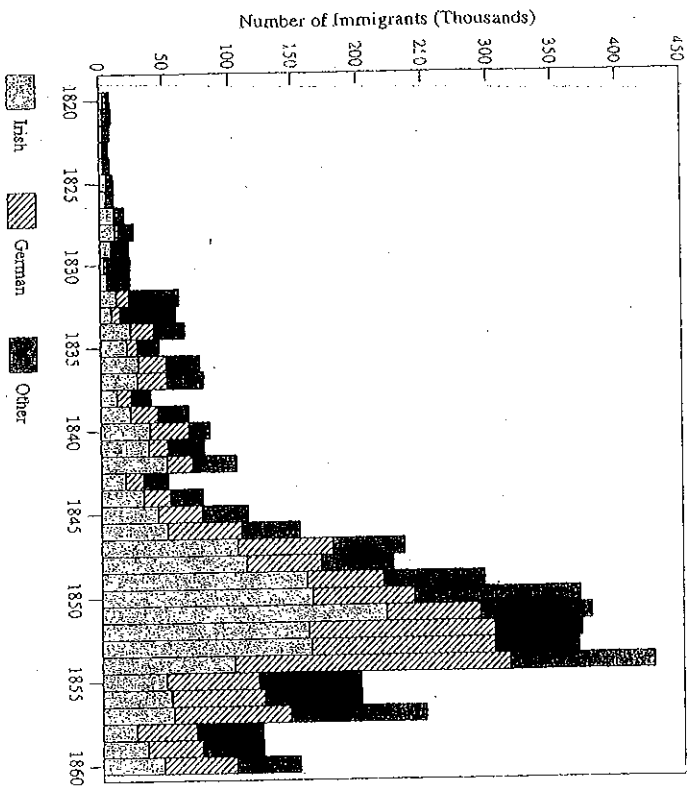
history. Because 87 percent of the immigrants settled in free states, their impact was felt mainly in the North, where several cities by 1855 had a foreign-born population approaching or exceeding half of the total population.

Equal in significance to the increase in the foreign-born population were changes in its composition. Before 1840, three-quarters of the immigrants were Protestants, mostly from the British Isles. Only one-fifth of them became unskilled laborers or servants, while the remainder were farmers, skilled workers, and white-collar or professional men. In the 1840s and 1850s, however, more than half of the immigrants were Catholics, two-thirds of whom came from Ireland and most of the rest from German-speaking countries. Moreover, the proportion of unskilled laborers among this much larger wave of immigration is double that among the earlier immigrants. Irish Catholics, who settled primarily in the large cities of the Northeast, became the poorest, most concentrated, and most visible of the immigrants.

Anti-immigrant sentiment, or "nativism," manifested itself less against the foreign-born in general than against Roman Catholics in particular. Indeed, some of the fiercest nativists were Scots-Irish Presbyterians and Welsh or English Methodists, who brought their anti-Catholic feelings with them from the old country. Anti-Catholicism had deep roots in Britain and in America. Bloody Mary, Guy Fawkes Day, the Glorious Revolution, and similar memories formed part of the cultural baggage of Anglo-American Protestantism. British Catholics had suffered deprivation of certain civil and political rights even after the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829. In the United States, the Protestant evangelicalism of the Second Great Awakening produced a heightened anti-Catholicism. Protestant perceptions of Irish and German drinking habits, the Irish and German tendency to vote for the Democratic party and to oppose equal rights for blacks, and the resistance of Catholics to the Protestant-dominated public schools further intensified the prejudices of evangelical Protestants and reformers.

Even before the post-1845 increase in immigration, ethnic and religious tensions had sometimes burst into violence: a Protestant mob destroyed a convent in Charlestown, Massachusetts, in 1834; riots between Protestants (including Scots-Irish) and Catholics in Philadelphia in 1844 left at least sixteen dead, hundreds injured, and two Catholic churches as well as thirty other buildings destroyed. Increased immigration exacerbated these tensions. Seventeen people were killed and fifty wounded in an 1854 election-day clash between Protestant gangs and Catholic Democrats in Baltimore; an election riot the same year killed ten in St. Louis; similar violence between natives and Irish immigrants in Louisville in 1855 left twenty-two dead.

Election-day riots were one outcome of nativism's having entered the realm of politics. In 1843 and 1844, so-called American parties had contested local elections in New York and Philadelphia. Several secret fraternal organizations of a nativist hue had been founded in the 1840s. One of these was the Order of the Star Spangled Banner, organized in New York in 1849. When questioned about this order, members replied, "I know nothing." By 1854, the "Know-Nothings" had achieved national prominence and had an estimated membership of a million. Their main goal was to restrain the growing political power of immigrants. Several states allowed foreign-born men to vote even before they were naturalized; in other states, the short five-year wait for naturalization meant that by the early 1850s the heavy immigration of the late 1840s

Immigration to the United States
1820 to 1860

was showing up on the voting rolls. Angry nativists accused Democratic machines in several cities of illegally enrolling alien voters prior to naturalization—and there was much truth in the charge. In Boston, the number of foreign-born voters increased by 200 percent from 1850 to 1855 while the number of native-born voters increased by only 14 percent. To counter this development, the Know-Nothings went into politics themselves, organizing under the American party name. They proposed to lengthen the naturalization period from five to twenty-one years; to permit only citizens to vote; and to restrict officeholding to native-born citizens.

The temperance and education issues became linked to nativism (see pages 16 to 19). Maine's passage of a law banning the manufacture and sale of liquor set off a "Maine law" crusade that produced similar statutes in several other states during the 1850s. Many Irish and German Americans considered these laws an attack on their cultural autonomy. At the same time, a drive by Catholic leaders in some states to end the reading of the King James Bible in public schools and to secure tax support for parochial schools aroused fears of a Roman threat to American institutions. "Are American Protestants to be taxed for the purpose of nourishing Romish vipers?"

asked one nativist. Since Romanism was "diametrically opposed to the genius of American republicanism," the election of "true Americans" was necessary to "guarantee the three vital principles of Republican Government—*Spiritual Freedom, Free Bible, and Free Schools*."¹⁶

The Know-Nothings capitalized on this nativist ferment in the 1854 state and local elections. Old-line party leaders were dumbfounded by what they described as a "hurricane," a "tornado," "a freak of political insanity." A baffled Pennsylvania Democrat declared that "nearly everybody appears to have gone altogether deranged on Nativism here." A despairing Whig leader in New York confessed that "the new questions have destroyed everything like party discipline, and many staunch old Whigs are floating off they don't know where."¹⁷ The Know-Nothing hurricane swept away the old parties in Massachusetts, winning 63 percent of the vote and electing all the state officers, all the congressmen, and all but two members of the legislature. The new party polled more than 40 percent of the vote in Pennsylvania and 25 percent in New York. The next year it won control of three more New England states, made further gains in the Mid-Atlantic states, and moved southward to carry Maryland, Kentucky, and Texas, and to become the main rival of the Democrats in several other Southern states.

In the border states and in the South, Know-Nothings recruited former Whigs looking for a new political home. In the Northeast, they drew voters from both major parties but cut more into Whig than Democratic strength. While some native-born Democrats bolted their party because of resentment at its increasingly immigrant cast, the Whigs, having traditionally attracted the majority of middle-class and skilled working-class Protestants, were most susceptible to nativist appeals. Already crippled by the sectional conflict over slavery, the Whigs suffered a mortal blow in the nativist defections of 1854–1855.

Nativists and Free Soilers maintained an ambivalent relationship. On the one hand, the antislavery movement grew out of the same milieu of evangelical Protestantism as did nativism. The ideology of free-labor capitalism viewed both Catholicism and slavery as symbolic of backward, autocratic, and repressive social systems. "The Catholic press upholds the slave power," noted a Free Soil paper. "These two malign powers have a natural affinity for each other." A Know-Nothing convention in Massachusetts resolved that since "Roman Catholicism and slavery" were both "founded and supported on the basis of ignorance and tyranny . . . there can exist no real hostility to Roman Catholicism which does not [also] embrace slavery."¹⁸ Many Free Soilers voted for Know-Nothings in 1854. And in some states the "anti-Nebraska" parties that sprang up in reaction to the Kansas-Nebraska Act entered into coalitions with nativist parties. Most of the congressmen elected on antislavery tickets in the 1854 elections also received some degree of nativist support, and vice versa.

¹⁶ Tyler Arbinder, *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know-Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s* (New York, 1992), p. 25; Holt, *Political Crisis of the 1850s*, p. 162.

¹⁷Holt, *Political Crisis of the 1850s*, pp. 157–158.

¹⁸Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men* (New York, 1970), p. 231; Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade 1800–1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism* (New York, 1938), p. 425.

On the other hand, most abolitionists, Free Soil leaders, and antislavery Whigs denounced nativism both as a form of bigotry and as a red herring that distracted attention from the main goal of restricting slavery. "Neither the Pope nor the foreigners ever can govern the country or endanger its liberties," said one Republican, "but the slave-breeders and slaveholders do govern it." The editor of the Free Soil *National Era* (the newspaper in which *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was first serialized) described the Know-Nothing as a "detestable organization. . . as repugnant to the doctrine of equal rights as Slavery. . . You have no more right to disfranchise your brother man, seeking a home in this country, than you have to disfranchise your colored neighbor."¹⁹ In New York, William H. Seward had been fighting nativists for a decade or more. And from the Illinois prairie came some pertinent words from an antislavery Whig who was soon to join the Republican party: "I am not a Know-Nothing," said Abraham Lincoln.

How can any one who abhors the oppression of negroes, be in favor of degrading classes of white people? Our progress in degeneracy appears to me to be pretty rapid. As a nation, we began by declaring that "all men are created equal;" we now practically read it "all men are created equal, except negroes;" when the Know-Nothings get control, it will read "all men are created equal, except negroes, and foreigners, and Catholics;" when it comes to this I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty—to Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocrisy.²⁰

For reasons detailed in the next chapter, the political power of the Know-Nothings in the North collapsed in 1856. By then the American party was mainly a Southern party, a way station for Southern Whigs who did not yet know where else to go. But while it lasted, the Know-Nothing phenomenon had wrenched the normal patterns of politics in the Northeast completely out of shape. It delivered the coup de grace to the Whig party. In the long run, however, the Kansas-Nebraska Act proved to be more important than nativism in producing a fundamental political realignment, for it gave birth to an antislavery party that soon became the dominant political force in the North.

¹⁹Pomeroy, *Free Soil*, p. 234; Richard H. Sewell, *Balists for Freedom: Antislavery Politics in the United States 1837-1860* (New York, 1976), p. 268.
²⁰Lincoln to Joshua Speed, August 24, 1835, in Roy P. Basler (ed.), *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J., 1953-1955), II, 323.

Kansas and the Rise of the Republican Party

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We are playing for a mighty stake; if we win we carry slavery to the Pacific Ocean; if we fail we lose Missouri, Arkansas, and Texas and all the territories: the game must be played boldly

—David R. Atchison, senator from Missouri, 1854

The Kansas-Nebraska Act

On January 4, 1854, Senator Stephen A. Douglas, chairman of the Committee on Territories, reported a bill to organize the area west and northwest of Missouri as Nebraska territory. This action set off a new and fateful controversy over slavery in the territories. The origins of the Nebraska bill stretched back nearly a decade. Land-hungry pioneers pressed for territorial organization to extinguish Indian titles and to open the fertile acres for settlement. Interests supporting a railroad from the Midwest to California likewise clamored for establishment of a territory, to facilitate surveys and the acquisition of a right of way. In February 1853, the House passed a territorial bill. Since Nebraska was north of 36°30', the Missouri Compromise banned slavery there.



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

STEPHEN A. DOUGLAS. One of the most talented men in public life, the 5-foot, 4-inch Douglas was called "the Little Giant." Combative in his public style, he was skilled at behind-the-scenes political compromise. He attained national leadership of the Democratic party by the mid-1850's, but his ambition for the presidency was thwarted by Southern opposition and by his fellow Illinoisian Abraham Lincoln. Douglas was a hard drinker as well as a hard worker; in 1861, the combination killed him. He was forty-eight.

sacred pledge" (the Missouri Compromise); as a "criminal betrayal of precious rights, as part and parcel of an atrocious plot to exclude from the vast unoccupied region immigrants from the Old World and free laborers from our own States, and convert it into a dreary region of despotism, inhabited by masters and slaves."⁴ This became the Free Soil theme in the bitter congressional debates that followed and in hundreds of protest rallies held throughout the North.

With energy and skill, Douglas piloted the Kansas-Nebraska bill through the Senate. He maintained that the Compromise of 1850, by introducing popular sovereignty in territory north of 36°30', had implicitly repealed the Missouri Compromise. Although this was a specious argument—the 1850 legislation applied only to territory acquired from Mexico, not to the Louisiana Purchase—it was to become Southern and Democratic orthodoxy. Douglas also insisted—as he had in 1850—that Nature would prevent slavery from gaining a foothold in the new territory. This was questionable, for the eastern third of present-day Kansas possesses about the same

⁴Nevins, *Ordeal*, II, 112.

climate and soil conditions as the Missouri River basin in Missouri, where most of that state's slaves resided and raised hemp and tobacco, which could also be grown in Kansas.

The quinquessence of the Senate debate was captured in an exchange between George Badger of North Carolina and Benjamin Wade of Ohio. Badger: "If some Southern gentlemen wishes to take the . . . old woman who nursed him in childhood, and whom he called 'Mammy' . . . into one of these new Territories for the betterment of the fortunes of his whole family—why, in the name of God, should anybody prevent it?" Wade: "We have not the least objection. . . to the senator's migrating to Kansas and taking his old 'Mammy' along with him. We only insist that he shall not be empowered to sell her after taking her there."⁵

Douglas drove the bill to Senate passage on March 3 by a vote of 37 to 14. Northern Democratic senators voted 14 to 5 for the bill. The struggle in the House was harsher and more prolonged, for Northern Democrats there had to face the voters in November. At one point in the House debate, some congressmen drew weapons, and bloodshed was narrowly avoided. The House finally passed the bill on May 22 by a vote of 113 to 100. Northern Democrats divided 44 to 44 on the measure, a sure sign of trouble for the party in the North. In the combined vote of both houses, Southerners provided 61 percent of the aye votes and Northerners 91 percent of the nay votes. It was clearly a Southern victory, a "triumph of Slavery [and] Aristocracy over Liberty and Republicanism," in the bitter words of a Northern newspaper.⁶

But it was an expensive triumph. As Horace Greeley later remarked, the bill created more abolitionists in two months than William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips had created in twenty years.

The Rise of the Republican Party

Throughout the North during the spring and summer of 1854, angry meetings protested the "Nebraska outrage" and organized new political coalitions. In some states Free Soilers took the lead; in others, antislavery Whigs. Anti-Nebraska Democrats in the Northwest and nativists in the Northeast contributed significant strength to these coalitions. The new organizations took various names: Anti-Nebraska, Fusion; People's; Independent. But the name that caught on was Republican, which linked the struggle of 1854 with the country's first battle for freedom in 1776. Many towns later claimed credit for having held the first "Republican" meeting. The honor seems to belong to Ripon, Wisconsin, where an anti-Nebraska rally in the Congregational church on February 28, 1854, adopted the name Republican. A meeting of about thirty antislavery congressmen in Washington on May 9 suggested that the anti-Nebraska coalition appropriate this name. A state convention in Michigan on July 6 officially chose the name Republican for the state party.

⁵James Ford Rhodes, *History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850* . . . 7 vols. (New York, 1893-1906), I, 452-453.

⁶James A. Rawley, *Race and Politics: "Bleeding Kansas" and the Coming of the Civil War* (Philadelphia, 1958), p. 36.

In 1854, several other state organizations also adopted the name. In some states, however, Whig leaders refused to give up their old allegiance and still hoped to turn their party into the vehicle of the Northern political revolution. William Seward's Whigs fought the 1854 campaign under their own name in New York. In Illinois, Abraham Lincoln stayed with the Whig party. But the Whigs faced two handicaps in their efforts to control the anti-Nebraska movement: in some states the conservative, "cotton" wing of the party wanted no part of a coalition with Free Soilers and bolting Democrats; in others, the latter groups refused to subsume themselves under the name of Whig. Although former Whigs would eventually become the dominant element in the Republican party, they would lose their identity as Whigs in the process. By the end of 1855, the Whig party had quietly expired.

Under whatever name, the anti-Nebraska parties repudiated rewards from the political realignment of 1854. The elections that fall were a disaster for the Democrats. Perhaps as many as a quarter of the Northern Democratic voters deserted their party. A startling sixty-six of the ninety-one free-state Democratic incumbents went down to defeat in the congressional elections. Only seven of the forty-four representatives who had voted for the Kansas-Nebraska bill won reelection. Having carried all but two Northern states in 1852, the Democrats lost all but two in 1854. As a result, the party became even more a Southern party. In the next Congress, Southern Democrats would outnumber their Northern colleagues by two to one. With the exception of the abnormal years of the Civil War and Reconstruction, Northern Democrats did not again reach parity with their Southern colleagues in Congress until 1931.

The new Republican party was the chief beneficiary of the Democratic disaster. But this was not immediately apparent. Not all anti-Nebraska men were yet Republicans. In several states the Know-Nothing won more votes than the Republicans. But in 1855-1856, the latter scored a major coup by outmaneuvering the Know-Nothings to gain most of their antislavery adherents. Some antislavery men who had supported the Know-Nothings in 1854, especially in Massachusetts, had done so with the intention of taking over the movement and converting it into a new antislavery party. A meeting of the National Council of the American party in June 1855 gave them a chance to take the first step in that direction. Delegates from twelve free states walked out after the meeting adopted resolutions endorsing the Kansas-Nebraska Act. In February 1856, a second Northern bolt took place when another American party convention voted down a resolution calling for repeal of the Kansas-Nebraska Act.⁷

Meanwhile in the winter of 1855-1856, a protracted struggle over the election of a Speaker of the House further strengthened the Republicans at the expense of the Know-Nothings. About two-thirds of the one hundred or so anti-Nebraska congressmen elected in 1854 now classified themselves as Republicans, though some of

⁷The best account of this complex story is Tyler Arbinder, *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know-Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s* (New York, 1992), esp. chaps. 8-9. For somewhat different interpretations, which emphasize the persistence of nativism in the Republican party, see William S. Greenup, *The Origins of the Republican Party 1852-1856* (New York, 1987), and Michael F. Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party* (New York, 1999), chaps. 23-26.

these had been elected with Know-Nothing support. The Republican caucus nominated Nathaniel P. Banks of Massachusetts for Speaker. Banks, formerly a Know-Nothing, was now a Republican. Since neither the Republicans nor the Democrats had a majority in the House, the Know-Nothings held the balance of power and prevented either party from winning a majority. Day after day, week after week, the balloting dragged on. Finally the House changed its rules to allow election of a Speaker by a plurality. Banks thereupon won on the 133rd ballot with 103 votes. About 30 of these votes came from Northern Know-Nothings, who thereby declared themselves Republicans. This marriage was consummated in June 1856 when the "North Americans" endorsed the Republican presidential nominee, John C. Fremont. For them, slavery had proved to be a more potent negative image than immigration. The Republicans thereby absorbed most Northern nativists into their ranks.

In the process, Republicanism took on some of the cultural baggage of nativism. The Republicans became the party of reformist, antislavery Protestantism. They also became the party of dynamic, innovative capitalism, whose ideology of modernization attracted mainly the native-born Yankees of the upper North. A map showing Republican strength in the 1856 presidential election (see page 106) is remarkably congruent with a map of New England settlement patterns, of antislavery and temperance societies, of a high density of public schools and literacy, and of areas that opposed black laws and favored black suffrage but contained few, if any, black residents. Although the Republicans officially spurned nativism, many party members inherited a hostile view of slavery and Catholicism as dual manifestations of repression, ignorance, and backwardness.

Southerners and Catholics returned the hostility. Their epithets of "Black Republicans," "Yankees," and the "Puritan party" summed up in turn a host of negative symbols associated with the Republicans: abolitionism and racial equality, material acquisitiveness and sharp practice, hypocrisy, bigotry, and an offensive eagerness to reform other people's morals or to interfere with their property. The Butternuts of the southern Midwest (see pages 23 to 25) shared these anti-Republican attitudes. Most of the Democrats who left their party after Kansas-Nebraska and eventually became Republicans lived in the upper North; the Butternuts remained loyal Democrats and, along with Catholics and Southerners, continued to form the backbone of the party.

Bleeding Kansas

The Republicans took over the Free Soil commitment to the principle of the Willmot Proviso as their central tenet: no slavery in the territories, no more slave states. When the antislavery forces lost the congressional battle for a free Kansas, they vowed to carry the struggle to the territory itself. "Since there is no escaping your challenge," Senator Seward told his Southern colleagues, "I accept it in behalf of the cause of freedom. We will engage in competition for the virgin soil of Kansas, and God give the victory to the side which is stronger in numbers as it is in right." On the other