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Party and Politics: Ashburnham in the 1850s

Joseph F. von Deck

In political terms, the decade of the 1850s saw a complete disintegration of the old political party structure in Massachusetts. By 1850, three distinct parties had emerged -- the Whig, the Democratic, and the Free Soil, but those parties were sharply divided by disagreements with their own members.¹

During the debate over the Compromise of 1850, over the issue of the expansion of slavery into the territories which had been won in the Mexican War, the Whigs in effect committed political suicide on the national scene. On the state level, the party was in total collapse. Descendants of the old Federalist Party, it had politically dominated the Commonwealth of Massachusetts for a long period of time. Yet, by the 1850s, it was a party with deep divisions. Its strength survived despite the differences between the eastern Whigs, who were known as "cotton whigs," the western yeoman farmers, and the reformers, who for the most part were abolitionists.²

Its voting strength had been with the eastern or cotton Whigs, who were often called "Webster Whigs" after the Compromise of 1850. Its power lay in the city of Boston and the eastern towns and in cities which were developing because of the Industrial Revolution. The Whig Party of the time resulted from a shaky alliance between the conservative shipping interests and the emerging manufacturers. Both of those groups were tied to the South and to what was called "King Cotton," and both groups supported the need for a high protective tariff. Two elements lay at the base of its strength, the "general ticket rule," and the open

1. Albert B. Hart, ed., Commonwealth History of Massachusetts (New York, 1930), IV: 18-19.

2. *Ibid.*, IV: 75, 88, 93-95.

voting system. Under the "general ticket rule," which had been adopted in most of the eastern cities, a winner-take-all rule prevailed. If a party carried a city, it would be entitled to all of the delegates of that city to the General Court. Since the number of delegates a municipality might have depended on the number of citizens, a large city such as Boston had to elect many delegates. In this era, there was no such thing as district or proportional representation. That meant that a city such as Boston, that had a considerable minority Democratic or Free Soil vote, would be represented in the General Court only by Whigs. Secondly, given the open voting system of the period, each political party provided its own, often distinct, envelopes for voting, and a manufacturer could march his workers to the polls to guarantee that they would vote "correctly." Hence many votes that might have wound up in the Democratic or Free Soil column were won by the Whigs. The significance of this procedure lies in the fact that, before the plurality rule was adopted in 1855, all elective state officers required a majority of all the votes cast. In the event that there was no majority, the House of Representatives would decide the issue. Since the deck was stacked in favor of the Whigs, they often occupied "the corner office."³

A second wing of the party, a conservative wing, lay in the hinterland west of Boston. This group saw the rise of the "conscience" Whigs who were opposed to the expediency of Daniel Webster and to what was considered to be a "surrender" to King Cotton and to the South. Located in the small farming towns and based on the yeoman farmer of old Yankee stock, it was a wing of the Whig Party only because it was less suspicious of the Cotton Whigs than of the Democrats. It had little in common with either, although with the spread of the Industrial Revolution westward into the hilltowns, a new class of manufacturers more closely related to the eastern wing was emerging. Nevertheless, these western towns remained -- and continued to the present day -- highly suspicious and resentful of the increasing power of Boston.⁴

The third element within the Whig Party was the reformers. By 1850, the abolitionist faction had become increasingly disenchanted with the party, both at the state and national level, and had separated into the Liberty and Free Soil

3. *Ibid.*, IV: 474; Cornelius Dalton et al, Leading the Way: A History of the Massachusetts General Court, 1629-1980 (Boston, 1984), pp. 128 and 136.

4. Hart, Commonwealth Hist. of Mass., IV: 75.

parties. Even this reformist group had its divisions between the Free Soilers who would simply prohibit the extension of slavery into the new territories, and those who wanted to abolish slavery in the entire country. A few remained to work within the party, however.⁵

The Democrats were also a divided party. It was a party that had drawn its strength from the smaller and poorer towns of the state, towns that were away from the pale of Boston. Now, for the most part, it was the party of the newly-emerging artisan class of small tradesmen in the towns. These men were opposed to the long-held and traditional power of the yeomanry, who as the century progressed were moving away from their historic anti-Boston, anti-commercial posture, and moving closer to the Whig connection. The Democratic Party was also the party of the newly-developed industrial working-class, which with the immigration of large numbers of Irish, was beginning to have an increasingly foreign tinge. It would seem that, at least in some locations, the Irishman was allowed to vote. The 1858 voter list for Ashburnham, for instance, contains a half dozen names of the sons of Eire, as does the 1861 voter list.⁶

The state Democratic Party reflected many of the antagonisms of the national party. Dominated by the slave-holding South, on the national scene, it tended to support Southern interests. This did not set well with many northern Democrats, especially in Massachusetts. The result would be a party with mixed and limited appeal to the Massachusetts voter. As the Free Soil and abolitionist parties began to emerge, the defection by many of the liberal, reformer Democrats, left the Democratic Party as the weakest of the three parties in the Commonwealth.⁷

The Free Soil-abolitionists, for certain, had a large and active following in Ashburnham. North Ashburnham, in particular, was a hotbed of Abolitionist activity, with the presence of the Whitmores and the Wards. Further, it was an involvement of long duration, for Alvin Ward had displayed his political

5. William S. Heywood, History of Westminster, Massachusetts . . . (Lowell, 1893), pp. 375-376; Hart, Commonwealth Hist. of Mass., IV: 85-86 and 97; Dale Baum, The Civil War Party System: The Case of Massachusetts, 1848-1876 (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1984), p. 214.

6. Hart, Commonwealth Hist. of Mass., IV: 76ff; 1858 Voter List.

7. Hart, Commonwealth Hist. of Mass., IV: 473 and 488.

orientation as early as 1835, when he named his youngest son, William Lloyd Garrison Ward. Colonel Enoch Whitmore was vehemently opposed to the institution of slavery, and had been active for years, along with his former partner, Deacon Gilman Jones, in the Massachusetts Abolition Society. In September of 1852, Enoch was elected as president of the Free Soilers of Ashburnham. This group was well-organized, with Charles Stearns, Dr. John Petts, and Amos Whitney as vice presidents, Simeon Merritt as secretary, and John A. Conn as treasurer. Marshall Wetherbee, Gilman Jones, William P. Ellis, John E. King, and Joseph P. Rice formed the executive committee.⁸

In Ashburnham, the vote for governor is perhaps indicative of the relative party strength during this period. With the rise of the Free Soilers in the 1840s, the Whigs in town were able to dominate, polling the highest total for eleven consecutive years, and for sixteen of the eighteen years from 1843 to 1860. One has the tendency here to see this power as one gained from the weakening of the Democratic Party, especially after 1848 and the conclusion of the war with Mexico, when the party, on the national scene, was divided between the expansionist Polk administration and the Free Soil and anti-annexationist Van Buren element. The 1848 election in Ashburnham saw the Democrats for the first time as the third party, which would seem to have been caused by the defection of the Free Soilers.⁹

It is obvious that national events had severe repercussions on the party voters, even in the towns. The Liberty Party of Samuel Sewell had polled a mere 15.5 percent of the votes in the election of 1844. After the Mexican War, that Free Soil-abolitionist element in town would attract about 30 percent of the votes. From 1848 to 1854, the town would be split three ways, almost equally, with the Whigs holding a slight plurality.¹⁰ The Compromise of 1850 struck a sour note in the north, upsetting a return to normalcy after the Mexican War. Local Whigs had captured 47.5 percent of the vote in 1849, with the Free Soilers as

8. Ezra S. Stearns, *History of Ashburnham, Massachusetts . . .* (Boston, 1887), p. 938; Kaino K. Waltari, *Focus on Old Houses of Ashburnham* (n.p., n.d.), pp. 11-12 and 23-24; Winchendon *Torchlight*, September 11, 1852, p. 2, col. 2.

9. Stearns, *Hist. of Ashburnham*, p. 225; Hart, *Commonwealth Hist. of Mass.*, IV: 94 and 96.

10. Hart, *Commonwealth Hist. of Mass.*, IV: 94 and 96.

the big losers, dropping nearly twelve percentage points. By the election of 1850, the issue was joined. The Compromise of 1850, which had been proposed by the Kentucky Whig, Henry Clay, supported by the Massachusetts Whig Daniel Webster, and signed into law by the Whig president, Millard Fillmore, devastated the Whig Party. Never again would it be a factor in national politics. Designed to save the Union from being rent asunder by the warring factions, the Compromise of 1850 merely postponed the agony.¹¹

The compromise may have been responsible for the defeat of the Whigs in 1850, after seven consecutive successful campaigns. Democrat Henry Wilson had proposed in September a coalition of Democrats and Free Soilers, with the intent of ousting the Whigs. What made the deal palatable was the candidacy of the anti-slavery Democrat, George S. Boutwell of Lunenburg, for governor.¹²

Of the several parts of the Compromise that Stephen A. Douglas finally walked through the Congress, the most bitterness resulted from the new Fugitive Slave Law. It was a pill that some Northerners could not swallow. Others felt that they had to accept it, since it was the law of the land. The Whigs came out in support of the Fugitive Slave Law, while the Free Soilers and Democrats denounced it. In the town of Ashburnham, the issue was squarely joined. In October of 1850, the inhabitants of all parties and denominations "met to express their abhorrence of that nefarious law." When the Reverend Elnathan Davis, "an able preacher . . . of positive ideas and enduring convictions," spoke of the need to obey the law, a prominent unnamed Whig then rose to denounce what he called the "bill of abominations." Others proposed the burning of the hated bill in the street. After much heated debate and discussion, the meeting voted: "Resolved, that we, the people of Ashburnham, believe the fugitive slave law to be unconstitutional, unchristian, and inhuman, and we look upon it with abhorrence, and upon them who passed it with utter contempt."¹³

11. Ibid., IV: 94 and 96; Stearns, Hist. of Ashburnham, p. 225.

12. Hart, Commonwealth Hist. of Mass., IV: 99.

13. Ibid., IV: 477; Stearns, Hist. of Ashburnham, p. 273; Winchendon Torchlight, September 11, 1852, p. 2, col. 1.

For the handful of fanatics, the way was clear. In February of 1851, a Black man named Shadrach was seized by slave-catchers in Boston, and he was brought before the federal commissioner. After legal efforts had failed to prevent his return to slavery, a mob "rescued" Shadrach from the effects of the fugitive slave law. The fugitive's route to Canada and freedom followed a line to the west and north from Boston to Watertown to Concord to Leominster. After a night in Leominster, he moved on to Fitchburg, and "thence to Alvin Ward in Ashburnham," and thence on to the border and Canada. Shadrach's escape just happened to coincide with an Anti-Slavery conference held in Leominster on February 14th and 15th, 1851.¹⁴

There is ample evidence to indicate that the radicals were the exception and not the rule. The issue seemed to divide some communities, and in some cases, quite sharply. The Cotton Whigs, economically tied to the Southern plantation, had tried continually to silence the strident voices screaming out against slavery, lest it alienate the South.¹⁵

In neighboring Fitchburg, when the Atheneum and the Trinitarian Church trotted through a series of anti-slavery speakers, including Frederick Douglass and the Grimke sisters, one of the local newspapers, *The Reveille*, deplored "sensible men . . . blinded by negro-worship" and "this false philanthropy, this indecent Garrisonism." The day had not been far remote when the editor of the *Liberator* had been mobbed in the streets of Boston, and when abolitionist speakers addressed crowds at the risk of life and limb.¹⁶

It is difficult to determine to what extent the rank and file of the ordinary citizenry had climbed onto the abolitionist band-wagon. Certainly there were more than enough opportunities to be exposed to the abolitionist virus. Speakers often addressed gatherings in the region: Cassius Clay of Kentucky, former slave Anthony Burns, who was reported to have

14. Waltari, Focus on Old Houses, pp. 23-24; Gates, Notebook, in Ashburnham Historical Society; Doris Kirkpatrick, The City and the River (Fitchburg, 1971), p. 260; Hart, Commonwealth Hist. of Mass., IV: 479; D. Hamilton Hurd, History of Worcester County, Massachusetts . . . (Philadelphia, 1889), II: 206.

15. Kirkpatrick, The City and the River, pp. 261-262; Hart, Commonwealth Hist. of Mass., IV: 322-323.

16. Hart, Commonwealth Hist. of Mass., IV: 322-323; Kirkpatrick, The City and the River, pp. 261-262.

been "superior . . . to expectations," Wendell Phillips, Theodore Parker, and Horace Greeley, who was described as wearing "a seedy hat." Locally, there was a Worcester North Anti-Slavery Society that met in the nearby towns, but there is no record of Ashburnham's attendance or participation. Its voting slate, however, does stand as testimony to a strong anti-slavery feeling, especially after 1848, but not as strong as in some other local towns. The strength of this vote indicates clearly that nearly a third of the town's voters stood and were counted with the anti-slavery candidates. The percentage of the Free Soil vote for the years from 1848 to 1853 was 33.97, 22.22, 32.97, 28.87, 31.64, and 29.47. For a comparison, however, in 1848 neighboring Westminster gave the Free Soil candidates 47.5 percent of the vote.¹⁷

As a result, the Democratic-Free Soil coalition won a narrow victory at the polls in 1850. In Ashburnham, it was the closest election in the town's history. The Whigs polled 95 votes (34.72 percent), the Free Soilers, 91 (32.97 percent), and the Democrats, 90 (32.2 percent). According to the agreement, the Democrats won the state elective offices, and after a four month fight, twenty-six ballots, and a final majority of one, the Free Soilers saw their champion, the brilliant anti-slavery orator, Charles Sumner, elected to the United States Senate. Democratic Senator Ivers Adams of Ashburnham voted against him.¹⁸

The coalition would attempt some much-needed reforms, and when reform attempts failed in the legislature, a Constitutional Convention was called for 1853. Free Soiler Simeon Merritt would represent Ashburnham at this convention. Two issues were pressing in the early 1850s: the question of the secret ballot, and the question of majority versus plurality voting. The dominant Whig faction was opposed to secret balloting. The current method whereby the individual voted openly gave the Whigs, who were assured of the support of the eastern factory owners, a way of guaranteeing the vote of the millhands. An 1851 law, enacted by the Democrat-Free Soil coalition, requiring the use of unidentifiable envelopes, cost the Whigs at the polls. When they regained control of the General Court in 1852, the

 17. Stearns, Hist. of Ashburnham, p. 225; Heywood, Hist. of Westminster, pp. 375-376.

18. Stearns, Hist. of Ashburnham, p. 225; Hart, Commonwealth Hist. of Mass., IV: 99 and 477; Fitchburg Sentinel, April 4, 1851, p. 2, col. 3.

legislature passed a law making use of the unmarked envelopes optional on request. That request of course, identified the voter and redounded to his disadvantage, especially if he were employed by a Whig factory owner.¹⁹

The envelopes could even become a local issue. In the November 1853 election, there was some debate as to whether they should even use the envelopes. In the following election, in 1854, at the height of the Know-Nothing furor, the selectmen "of this coalitionist town" directed "that each voter must use the envelopes all together or not at all, and cannot vote both ways." Ballot splitting was not permitted.²⁰

Coalitions necessarily contain strange bedfellows. This one would come apart with the election of 1852, despite a second narrow victory over the Whigs in 1851. The issue that had aligned the two factions had declined in importance, at least in the public eye. The public often has a short memory, and by 1852 the Fugitive Slave Law had receded into the background vis-a-vis other issues. 1852 was a presidential election year, and the coalition came apart when the Democrats sought unity on what had become the party line as well as the belief of their candidate, Franklin Pierce, that the Compromise of 1850 was the final solution to the slavery question. At that point, the Whigs regained political control over the state of Massachusetts.²¹

Another Whig victory came at the Convention of 1853. The fight was over democratic reforms that were intended to reduce the power of the Whigs by breaking their grip on the city of Boston, by reforming judicial tenure, and by establishing a plurality rule in elections. Here the astute leadership of the Whigs facing the now-divided coalition was able to modify some of the proposals. Their victory came in November. Surprisingly the Free Soilers lined up in opposition, since they believed that some of the reforms did not go far enough. The Democrats had been told to stop the agitation and to break their recent alliance with the Free Soilers. While the party fell into line, many reformist Democrats resented the "ukase" from Caleb Cushing. The Whigs

19. Dalton, Leading the Way, pp. 128-129; Fitchburg Reveille, March 9, 1852, p. 2, col. 6.

20. Town Meeting Records, 1857-1881, pp. 239-240; Fitchburg Reveille, November 30, 1853, p. 2, col. 3.

21. Hart, Commonwealth Hist. of Mass., IV: 481-482.

now joined in opposition, and the reforms never had a chance. The rejection of the amendments by the electorate was absolute. Strangely, Ashburnham voted in favor of each of the amendments, by a margin of 203 to 146. Perhaps it was the eloquence of Senator Charles Sumner, who on October 27, 1853, had visited the town to speak on this new constitution, that had influenced the results.²²

1854 became the watershed year. The political issues were complicated by two elements: the Kansas-Nebraska Act that organized and opened up those territories to settlement, and the Know Nothing controversy. With the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska bill, under the leadership and maneuvering of Illinois' Senator Stephen Douglas, came the parting of the ways, at least in political terms, for Massachusetts. The worst fears of Free Soil and anti-slavery New Englanders were coming to be realized. The territories would now be open to what they called "the slavepower conspiracy."²³

Massachusetts was aghast, as was Ashburnham. At the annual town meeting, which was held on March 6, 1854, thirty-six year old Charles F. Whitmore rose and offered a resolution, which was adopted with only eight dissenting votes. It was "That we, the legal voters of Ashburnham . . . do most solemnly protest against the Bill now before the Congress to give Territorial Governments to Nebraska and Kansas." The motion and resolution was adopted. Other towns remonstrated with petitions, and in Fitchburg Senator Stephen A. Douglas was hanged in effigy.²⁴ Two weeks later, on March 23, at the request of the local town committee, Henry Wilson, who later became Senator and Vice President, came to Ashburnham to deliver an address at the town hall on the Nebraska bill.²⁵

The Kansas-Nebraska Bill crystalized northern opinion into action. Determined that the slave holders should not have control of Kansas, the Emigrant Aid Society was formed by Amos Lawrence and Eli Thayer, to assist free-soil farmers in claiming a

22. *Ibid.*, IV: 482-483; Town Meeting Records, p. 296; Fitchburg Reville, October 29, 1853, p. 2, col. 2.

23. Hart, Commonwealth Hist. of Mass., IV; 485-486.

24. Stearns, Hist. of Ashburnham, p. 957; Town Meeting Records, p. 309.

25. Allan Nevins, Ordeal of the Union (New York, 1947), II: 125.

stake in the new territory. Along with the settlers went a collection of "Beecher's Bibles," for the edification of their pro-slavery neighbors in Missouri. On March 13, 1855, a crowd of over a thousand gathered at the depot in Fitchburg to offer their support to some forty people who were leaving for Kansas. Ashburnham would send its contingent, too. One of the departing Fitchburgers was George W. Hunt, whose forty-two year-old wife was Ashburnham's Nancy Adams, a distant relation of State Senator Ivers Adams. They moved to Kansas in 1856. Henry H. Hadley, who was fifteen at the time and who later was a resident of North Ashburnham, would be in Kansas in 1856; twenty year-old Charles L. Ward, a distant cousin of Alvin Ward, who housed Shadrach on his trip to freedom in Canada, would also be in Kansas at that time, and Charles served in the 5th Iowa Cavalry during the Civil War. In 1857, sixteen year-old Quincy A. Petts, the youngest son of Free Soiler Dr. John Petts, would move to the Jayhawk state. He would later serve in the 2nd Ohio Infantry. Finally, Albert H. Andrews, Ashburnham's last resident lawyer, was living in Chicago when the controversy arose. He raised a company of sixty men and rode to aid the free soilers in the the Kansas conflict.²⁶

The race to determine the destiny of Kansas, whether it would be a free state or a slave state, led to the bleeding of Kansas. On May 21, 1856, at three o'clock in the afternoon, eight hundred pro-slavery "irregulars," led by former Senator David Atchison, sacked the free-state town of Lawrence, Kansas. Ashburnham residents who were present during the attack on Lawrence were Henry Hadley and George Hunt. While local newspapers decried the activities of the proslavery forces, no mention was made of the incident at Pottawatomie, in which John Brown led an attack on slave staters in Kansas. The only mention of Brown was an item that stated that Colonel Edwin V. Sumner had been sent to disperse Captain Brown's company.²⁷

A few days before the sack of Lawrence, Charles Sumner rose in the United States Senate and delivered his oration, "The Crime Against Kansas." A turgid speech, filled with invective and sexual references to the "harlot slavery," it contained a personal

26. Kirkpatrick, The City and the River, pp. 265-267; Hart, Commonwealth Hist. of Mass., IV: 487; Stearns, Hist. of Ashburnham, pp. 585, 771, 847, and 940.

27. Stearns, Hist. of Ashburnham, pp. 585 and 791; Alice Nichols, Bleeding Kansas (New York, 1954), pp. 104-109.

attack against his gentlemanly colleague, Andrew P. Butler of South Carolina. It was a poor effort by Sumner, who was capable of far better oratorical rhetoric. The next day, while he was working at his desk in the Senate chamber, Butler's nephew, Representative Preston S. Brooks, attacked the Free Soiler with his cane and beat him senseless. Sumner would take three years to recover, and as a reminder and protest Massachusetts left his seat vacant and unfilled during his recovery. Local voices were raised in protest of the attack on Sumner. On Monday evening, June 2, at an impromptu public meeting, the citizens of Ashburnham, "irrespective of political party," passed a series of resolutions condemning the "cowardly ruffian" and vowing to "welcome the crisis, asking no delay, giving no quarter . . . till the decision shall be settled." In the fall elections of 1856, one Ashburnham voter cast a ballot for Charles Sumner for governor. It was a symbolic gesture. It is obvious that the senator had the respect of local Free Soilers; for example, when his youngest son was born in November of 1855, Newell Marble named him Charles Sumner Marble.²⁸

As a result of the Kansas-Nebraska debate, the old party allegiances dissolved. Northern Whigs were deserted by their Southern comrades, who supported the Democratic bill, thus emasculating the party as a national entity. Many local Whigs were equally disillusioned by the failure of the Massachusetts Whig Party to make overtures to the Free Soilers. But the Free Soilers were divided along the previous lines, despite their recent activities. The local Democrats, equally dispirited by the Cushing "ukase" to support the administration that was giving its blessing to Kansas-Nebraska, were in disarray. As Richard Henry Dana noted: "The Whig party has lost its tone, the Democratic party never had any, and the Free-soil party has been lowered by the coalitions and managements of Wilson and others, until it has lost or impaired its power of doing good."²⁹

It was to be another vehicle that provided the home for all those dissenting party members who were seeking an ideological sanctuary, a vehicle that assumed the form of suspicion and hatred of the foreigner, and its manifestation would be the

28. James McPherson, Orderal by Fire (New York, 1982), p. 93; Nevins, Ordeal of the Union, II; 437-443; Stearns, Hist. of Ashburnham, p. 807; Town Meeting Records, p. 353; Fitchburg Sentinel, June 6, 1856, p. 2, col. 6.

29. Hart, Commonwealth Hist. of Mass., IV: 488.

American, Party, also known as the Know Nothing Party. Politically, it was a bolt out of the blue. The election of 1853 had given no hint of the coming cataclysm. In that year, the Whig vote of 60,600 topped the Democrats (41,400) and the Free Soilers (29,000) by a comfortable margin. The American Party did not receive a single vote in 1853. By 1854, there had been a change; the new American (Know Nothing) Party tallied 81,500, the Free Soil count had dropped to 6,400, the Democrats to 20,100, and the Whigs received only 27,200 votes. The Know Nothing sweep was complete. It captured every elective office, the entire State Senate, and every seat but three in the House of Representatives. Even Ashburnham turned from its usual allegiance to send a renegade Democrat, Edward S. Flint, in as a Know Nothing.³⁰

The phenomenal success of the party must be explained. Partly, it was the coalescence of all of the dissident elements of the traditional parties. There is a hint of the "throw-the-rascal-out" philosophy present in the movement, in that there was a very strong strain of reformism present. This is demonstrated by the make-up and the activity of the first Know Nothing legislature. Ironically, the new party even attracted elements that might be characterized as anti-reformist, in that it contained in its ranks anti-prohibitionists as well as prohibitionists. In Massachusetts, the popular Know Nothing movement had a strong anti-slavery orientation. This could explain the presence in the Know Nothing ranks of such locals as Joseph P. Rice and Edward S. Flint, men who were relatively free from the Nativist taint. Also, it was the outgrowth of a Nativist reaction to the flood of immigrants, mostly Irish, German, and French-Canadian, most of whom were Catholic, that had poured onto the eastern shores in the 1840s. This Nativist reaction is usually seen as the most prominent feature of the movement. It is difficult to determine which of these elements was dominant, however. Certainly in Ashburnham the reformist element seemed stronger than the Nativist, although the latter was clearly present.³¹

 30. *Ibid.*, IV: 490; Town Records, p. 315. See also Bruce E. Mazlich, ed., Essays on American Ante-Bellum Politics, 1840-1860 (College Station, Texas, 1982), pp. 181ff.

31. Dalton, Leading the Way, pp. 141-142; Hart, Commonwealth Hist. of Mass., IV: 146-147 and 488-489; Dale Baum, "Know Nothingism and the Republican Majority in Massachusetts' Political Realignment of the 1850's," Journal of American History LXVIII (1981), p. 961; Bruce Mazlich, Essays on American

Many of the British emigrants had been exported by their parishes, to rid their communities of paupers. It was cheaper to send them to America than to support them at home. Upon arriving in the United States, these people often were placed on the relief rolls. In 1857, of the 21,905 paupers in the state, 8,300 were foreign-born. This is not surprising, since the immigrant, entering a strange country, was often relegated to the bottom of the social and economic barrel. The result was to force the immigrant, especially the Irish, to accept any job available, often at the lowest wage. In New England, the Irish displaced Blacks as the servant class; in Ashburnham in 1860, there were several instances of Irish women serving as domestics. In economic hard times, the immigrant found himself to be the last hired and the first fired. That explains their appearance on the relief rolls. Due to their difficult financial situations, the Irish were forced to put their children to work, or worse. In New York City, young Irish girls made up the largest number of prostitutes in the city in the 1850s; and there is evidence of that activity in the northern section of Worcester County.³²

Criminal activity is often related to poverty. In New York City for the May to July 1858 period, of the 17,328 people arrested, only 2,690 were native-born. The other 84.5 percent were foreign-born. A typical day in the Fitchburg district court, June 7, 1861, saw all four cases involving local Irish men and women. Thomas O'Brien, Ann O'Brien and Bridget Larkin were each fined one dollar plus court costs of \$5.55 for drunkenness; and a group of young men, Jeremiah and John Flinn (sic), Joseph Brennan, and Michael O'Connor, were charged with stealing oranges from a cart. Only Brennan was fined for the crime. In 1863, Ashburnham sent to the State Reform School at Westboro its only delinquent of the period, James Fitzgerald, the son of Patrick Fitzgerald, of Ashburnham Depot, and the younger brother of Patrick, who was serving with the 6th New Hampshire Infantry.³³

Ante-Bellum Politics, pp. 181, 187, and 189. An excellent view of the Know Nothings is found in Baum, The Civil War Party System, pp. 28ff.

32. Hart, Commonwealth Hist. of Mass., IV: 145; Fitchburg Sentinel, February 5, 1858 (p. 2, col. 1), August 14, 1858 (p. 2, col. 3), and June 14, 1861 (p. 2, col. 6); Nevins, Ordeal of the Union, II: 283; Mazlich, Essays on American Ante-Bellum Politics, p. 171.

33. Fitchburg Sentinel, June 7, 1861; Town Report, 1864, Town of Ashburnham, p. 2; Nevins, Ordeal of the Union, II: 283.

During that period of temperance reform, it was the penchant of the Irish for alcoholic beverages that outraged the righteous Yankees. One Fitchburg resident noted the celebration of the Sabbath by the sons of Eire:

Not satisfied with drinking and carousing, it is becoming quite common of late, especially among our "adopted citizens" to practice with firearms on the Sabbath. Passing one of these noisy localities I observed a man was "blowing a jig" on a flute, while some of his companions were having a regular "breakdown;" nearby two or three daughters of Erin were trying to persuade "Jimmy" to come home, but he replied that he had only "a little drop taken," that this was a "free country." Near him was another who had taken "just one drop too much" and was so weak he could not lay on the ground without holding onto the grass.³⁴

In one Fitchburg court session, in 1858, fifteen of the eighteen cases on the docket involved the Irish, with nine cases of drunkenness and four for selling liquor.³⁵

Know Nothingism seemed to have grass roots origins. Many native-born artisans, and especially local manual and farm laborers, when they saw their employment and livelihood threatened by the influx of the foreigner, provided a popular base for the movement. It did, however, attract the 'better' elements of society as well. While the secrecy and tactics -- some of which were reminiscent of the later Ku Klux Klan, would ultimately doom the Know Nothings, they would remain a force in local and state politics until the Civil War. It is the complexity of the movement that has proved so baffling to the historian.³⁶

At a later period, the prejudice, ignorance, and bigotry that fostered the movement would prove embarrassing to many

 34. Fitchburg Sentinel, July 14, 1854, p. 3, col. 1, quoted in Kirkpatrick, The City and the River, p. 239.

35. Fitchburg Sentinel, September 10., 1858, p. 2, col. 3. quoted in *ibid*, p. 239.

36. Dalton, Leading the Way, pp. 141-142; Kirkpatrick, The City and the River, p. 241. Contrary to Baum's findings, most Ashburnham Free Soilers supported the Know Nothing ticket.

people and communities. On one hand, some of the smaller towns were more tolerant, or less intolerant, probably because in the smaller farming towns the immigrant arrived in relatively small numbers, and therefore he posed less of a threat to the lower stratum of society. The Ashburnham town history does not even mention the phenomenon. The record, however, has not been expunged. The town vote for Know Nothing candidates stands out as evidence of that intolerance. In 1854, the party received 134 votes, 44.81 percent of the total; in 1855, it polled 108, or 27.98 percent; and in 1856, Know Nothing candidates received 251 votes, or 72.54 percent. In that election, Know Nothing Joseph P. Rice defeated Republican Addison A. Walker for the seat in the General Court, by a vote of 189 to 141. Even after the Republican-Whig combination supported Nathaniel P. Banks in 1857, the Know Nothings still attracted support from 91, or 22.69 percent, of the local voters. Finally, the evidence that the Know Nothing support lasted in the town can be found in the town vote on the Two Year Amendment in May of 1859. This provided that no foreigner could vote until two years after his naturalization, and it was supported by the town meeting, 56-27. To keep the record straight, it should be noted, however, that the Know Nothing vote in Ashburnham was never a majority. Even in the landslide year of 1854, 160 voters, or 55 percent, cast their ballots for candidates from other parties. In 1856, since the Republicans did not run a candidate for governor, the percentage cannot be construed as Know Nothing, but rather as opposition to the Democratic candidates.³⁷

By 1855, the newly-established Republican Party had begun to emerge. The appearance of this new political entity resulted in an even further muddying of the political waters. As the election rolled around, the new party had gained a considerable following in Ashburnham. Reuben Townsend, a member of the Whig town committee, announced his support for the new party, and he was elected to the Republican town committee. On Thursday, November 1, 1855, "the largest and

37. Stearns, Hist. of Ashburnham, p. 225; Town Records, pp. 315, 330, 353, and 356; Fitchburg Sentinel, May 13, 1859, p. 2, col. 2. Baum's observation (p. 45) that only sixteen percent of the voters participated in the referendum is an example of a questionable interpretation. The vote on the referendum in Ashburnham, and probably in many other towns, was taken at a town meeting, not as part of a general election. Historically, attendance at town meetings was generally a fraction of the total number of ballots cast in an election.

most enthusiastic political meeting ever held" in Ashburnham, including some fifty Republican delegates from Fitchburg, assembled to hear Republican speakers on the eve of the election. Several "reliable" citizens predicted a surprise for the American-Know Nothing Gardnerites, with a handsome "plurality for [Julius] Rockwell next Tuesday." As it turned out, these predictions were correct. Rockwell polled 164 votes, to Gardner's 108, and Democrat Beach's 96.³⁸

Curiously, the town voted for the Know Nothing-Beach fusionist candidate, Ohio Whitney Jr., as delegate to the General Court. A local paper had some interesting comments regarding his true political colors.

It is a matter of some doubt to what party Ohio Whitney Jr belongs. He is the one hybrid chosen in Worcester County. He was formerly a Democrat. Saturday evening previous to the election, he stated to the American [Party] caucus that he was a true Know Nothing and stood by the Springfield platform; and Monday he informed his old associates that he was as good a Democrat as ever. He professes to be a temperance man, but secured the only liberal vote in town, by intimating that if elected, he should favor repeal of the present law.³⁹

It would seem that the new party may have been the haven for which many Massachusetts voters had been looking. For the disenchanted Whigs, such as Reuben Townsend, it offered an alternative to the decaying organization controlled by the Cotton Whigs of Boston. For the dissident Democrats, fed up with the kowtowing of the national party to Southern interests, it offered a viable option. While Free Soilers could have been defectors from either party, Ashburnham's Free Soilers seemed to have a heavy Democratic tinge, even to the extent of referring to themselves as "free Democrats." In addition, this new untested and untainted party carried a respectability that the flash-in-the-pan Know Nothings did not have. With its strong Free Soil and reformist stand, the new party became an omnibus -- it could be

38. Fitchburg Reveille, November 3, 1855, pp. 2 and 4, November 7, 1855, p. 2, col. 1.

39. Fitchburg Reveille, November 10, 1855, p. 2, col. 3.

all things to all people. But it would take some time for the various discordant elements in the party to achieve political harmony.⁴⁰

An examination of the voting kaleidoscope of the 1850s decade exposes some curious developments. The early years of the decade had seen a Free Soil-Democratic coalition to counteract the Whig domination in the state. By 1852, that coalition was falling apart, and the dissident elements sought refuge in the newly-developed American party. In 1854, the vote for the Know Nothing Gardner demonstrated a defection of voters from the Democratic, Whig, and the Free Soil parties. Compared to the 1853 election, the Whigs lost 53 percent of their vote; the Democrats, 64.2 percent; and the Free Soilders, 51.5 percent -- all those votes were placed into the ballot box of the American (Know Nothing) Party. In 1855, the Republican Party produced its first show of strength in the town, which was carried by Rockwell. Nevertheless, the party remained a distant second in the state, with the Know Nothings being victorious.⁴¹

Through the final years of the decade, the Democratic Party seemed to retain a solid core of loyal voters in Ashburnham, 96, 85, 91, and 64 for the years from 1855 through 1858. Men like Charles Winchester and Ivers Adams lived up to expectations. The town's record for the Democratic Party entitled it to two delegates to the Democratic State Convention, while most other local towns of its size only had one delegate. This would remain constant through the war years and into the post-war era of Republican domination. By 1858, however, even Ivers Adams had joined the American Republicans.⁴²

It was the presidential election of 1856 that saw the first true upsurge of Republican sentiment. In the town elections of March 4, the Republicans swept the state and prevailed over the Democratic-Know Nothing coalition. The only Democrats who survived were Ohio Whitney, Jr., who was all things to all people,

40. Winchendon Torchlight, September 11, 1852.

41. Stearns, Hist. of Ashburnham, p. 225; Fitchburg Reveille, November 10, 1855, p. 2, col. 2. These figures are very close to those cited for the state.

42. Stearns, Hist. of Ashburnham, p. 225; Fitchburg Reveille, August 22 1855 and October 22, 1858, p. 2., col. 2. This would seem to confirm Gienapp's conclusion about voter loyalty, in Mazlich, Essays on American Ante-Bellum Politics, pp. 56-57.

and John I. Cummings, a Breckinridge Democrat in 1860. In June, after the party had nominated John C. Fremont as its standard bearer, Fremont Clubs began to be established. Fitchburg, which would host the Republican state convention in August, led the local vanguard. The *Fitchburg Reveille*, a Whig organ, announced for the new party. The first week in July the Fitchburg Republican Club held an enthusiastic meeting in approbation and elected several vice presidents to enlist the neighboring towns. The vice president for Ashburnham was Ohio Whitney Jr. A week later a Fremont Club was established in Ashburnham.⁴³

To look at the club organization is to comment on the state of flux of Massachusetts politics, if one can presume that this hilltown was typical. Chosen as President was Ohio Whitney, Jr., who formerly was a Democrat and Know Nothing. One vice president was Joseph P. Rice, who had been a Whig, Free Soiler, Know Nothing, and American Republican. Other vice presidents were George Winchester, who had been a Democrat, Enoch Whitmore, who had been a Democrat, Free Soiler, and abolitionist, Addison A. Walker, who had been a Whig and Republican, Edward S. Flint, who had been a Democrat and Know Nothing, George S. Burrage, who had been a Whig, and Ebenezer Frost, Levi W. Russell, and Daniels Ellis Jr., who probably had been Democrats. Selected for the Board of Directors were Marshall Wetherbee, who had been a Whig and Free Soiler, Jerome W. Foster, who had been a Whig and Know Nothing, and Francis D. Whitney, whose previous affiliation is unknown.⁴⁴

On Sunday, August 3, 1856, the Republican State convention was held in Fitchburg. Delegations came from everywhere. Winchendon and Templeton sent 150 each, Gardner sent 400, and the Ashburnham delegation arriving by carriages numbered some 300. Not content with this, on Friday, August 7, "one of the most successful political demonstrations ever held in Worcester County," the Young Men's Ratification Convention met in Fitchburg to approve the work of the other convention. "Among the first to arrive was the Ashburnham delegation -- which came in 65 carriages drawn by from one to five horses and

43. Stearns, *Hist. of Ashburnham*, pp. 951-952; *Fitchburg Reveille*, March 8, 1856, p. 2, col. 2 and July 11, 1856, p. 2, col. 2.

44. *Fitchburg Sentinel*, July 18, 1856, p. 2, col. 2.

containing from two to twenty persons each." Accompanied by bands and banners, this procession was over a mile long.⁴⁵

On Monday, August 25th, Ashburnham's Fremont Club, some 290 strong, held its own assembly. A new spirit was on the march. On September 12th, the ladies of Ashburnham presented to their Fremont Club a fine new thirty star flag. As Henry Lawrence reported on this "pleasant and propitious" event, "a procession was formed at the Town Hall, and escorted by the Fitchburg Cornet Band, marched around the square to the headquarters of the club, in front of which a stand had been erected." On the platform, the thirty states were represented by young ladies dressed in white, and by one young lady dressed in black to represent mourning Kansas. The flag was presented by Mrs. Rebecca H. Walker:

We present this flag to you in hope and confidence
that you will not falter when duty calls you to
action next November. And then

"We'll spurn every fetter, we'll break
every rod,
And Kansas shall bloom like the
garden of God,
When we plant the white banner of
freedom upon't,
And cry, to the rescue, free men and
Fremont!"

The Fremont Club president, Ohio Whitney, Jr., accepted the banner, and was at his oratorical best:

But, my friends, notwithstanding the goddess(sic) of
liberty is mourning over the oppressions of the
fairest positions of our union -- notwithstanding
Kansas virgin soil is being made more fertile with
the blood of liberty loving men -- notwithstanding
all this darkness -- these clouds, a light is seen
beyond, and by its aid a remedy is made known.
Its power exists in the ballot box. And the freemen
of the north who have been deceived quite too long

45. Ibid., August 15, 1856, p. 2, col. 2.

by designing men, are coming up as one to exercise this power.

The flag was raised, followed by several speeches including ones by the Reverend Josiah D. Crosby and J. S. Perry. Later that evening, another meeting filled the Town Hall to hear addresses by J. S. Perry again and E. A. Norcross of Fitchburg.⁴⁶

But things were still in a fluid state. The election of 1856 saw five slates of candidates presented to the Massachusetts voters: Republican, Democratic, Whig, American-Know Nothing, and American Republican. On October 13, a People's Convention met in Worcester. One of the vice presidents of the convention was Ohio Whitney, Jr., who was nominated for the state senate. When the Democratic County Convention met a week later, it was addressed by Whitney, who made "an appropriate speech, touching on the political questions of the day, and was enthusiastically cheered throughout." Curiously, Whitney was also on the Republican slate for state senator.⁴⁷

When the election rolled around, "Pathfinder" Fremont carried Ashburnham by a whopping 344 votes, while the Democrat James Buchanan polled 81 votes, and the Know Nothing Millard Fillmore's had only 15. On the state level, Gardner, the Know Nothing, won easily in the governor's race, with 251 votes to Democrat Beach's 85. An interesting fact revealed by the vote was that there were approximately a hundred more votes cast for the presidency than for the governorship. Since Beach's Democratic vote indicated that he had received the support of the core of local democratic voters, the vote might show the beginning of the erosion of Know Nothing strength in town.⁴⁸

By 1857, the party lines had become more sharply drawn. On Saturday, October 3, 1857, the Ironsides Club, the friends of Nathaniel Banks, whose aim was to gain the corner office for their man, held a lively meeting at the Ashburnham Town Hall, Jerome

46. *Ibid.*, August 9, 1856, p. 2, col. 1; and September 17, 1856, p. 2, col. 3.

47. *Ibid.*, October 17, 1856, p. 2, col. 2; October 21, 1856, p. 2, col. 3; and October 31, 1856, p. 2, col. 6.

48. Stearns, *Hist. of Ashburnham*, p. 225; *Fitchburg Reveille*, November 10, 1856, p. 2, col. 2; and Baum, *The Civil War Party System*, p. 37. The decision of Republicans not to run a state ticket against Gardner and Beach helped to confuse the issue in Massachusetts.

W. Foster headed the organization as president, with a host of vice-presidents: J. P. Rice, Addison A. Walker, William P. Ellis, Alfred Whitmore, Charles W. Burrage, Daniels Ellis, Jr., Edward S. Flint, Silas Nims, Eliot Moore, and Levi W. Russell. The secretary was attorney A. H. Andrews, and the finance committee consisted of Ebenezer Hart, Joseph H. Whitney, and Alfred Whitmore. In the election, it was a Republican state victory, with the western counties voting heavily Republican. Nathaniel P. Banks, with 176 votes, easily outdistanced his opponents, as the Know Nothing, Gardner, had 91 votes, and the Democrat, Beach, had 73 votes. Nevertheless, local interests retained their political factions. Not until 1859 would the state emerge as a two party state. By then, the great national issues had finally submerged local differences under the great wave that had created the new party, the one element that the diverse and discordant factions had in common: the theme of Free Soil and all that it implied -- opposition to the extension of slavery into the territories, opposition to the dominant Southern interests in the nation's capital, opposition to slave expansion in Kansas or Nebraska, opposition to the fugitive slave law, and to the Dred Scott decision.⁴⁹

The 1860 election would be a foregone conclusion. On October 19th, there was a strong Republican demonstration in Fitchburg. The Ashburnham delegation -- 80 strong -- was led by Captain Joseph P. Rice. Ohio Whitney, Jr, and Jerome W. Foster were chosen as vice presidents for the occasion.⁵⁰

On the eve of the election, on Thursday, November 1, 1860, Senator Charles Sumner and Moses Kimball addressed a group of Republicans at a rally at the Town Hall. The Ashburnham "Wide-Awakes" were present and partook of a collation to celebrate their anticipated victory. Dressed in their oilcloth capes, and wearing black enameled military fatigue caps with olive eagles, the procession of torchbearers made an impressive sight on the streets of Fitchburg.⁵¹

49. Stearns, Hist. of Ashburnham, p. 225; Fitchburg Reveille, November 4, 1857, p. 2, col. 2; Fitchburg Sentinel, October 9, 1857, p. 2, col. 2 and November 6, 1857. These 1857 figures would seem contrary to Baum's analysis (p. 43), and more in line with the traditional historical interpretation of partisan realignment.

50. Fitchburg Sentinel, October 22, 1860, p. 2, col. 2.

51. Ibid., November 2, 1860, p. 2, col. 3.

Nor would they be disappointed; their victory was complete. In town, Republican John A. Andrew got 282 votes to Democrat Beach's 99, to become Governor of Massachusetts. Attorney Albert H. Andrews was sent as the delegate to the General Court for the Winchendon-Ashburnham district. On the national scene, Abraham Lincoln, the "rail splitter" from Illinois, polled 280 votes, more than twice the combined total of his three opponents. Democrat Stephen A. Douglas held Ashburnham's solid 99 Democratic votes, while John C. Breckenridge, the Southern Democratic candidate, netted only 12; and the Constitutional-Union standard bearer, John Bell of Tennessee, garnered 29. There could be no mistaking where the sentiment of the town lay. The Republicans were on a roll. Their dominance in town, and in the state, would remain virtually unchallenged over the next half-century.⁵²

52. Stearns, Hist. of Ashburnham, p. 225; Fitchburg Sentinel, November 9, 1860, p. 2, col. 4.