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**Ambiguous Loyalties:
The Boston Irish, Slavery and
the Civil War**

Brian Kelly

Just after dawn on the morning of April 27, 1861, inhabitants of the heavily Irish immigrant enclave of Boston's North End were roused from their hovels by news that a sailing vessel from Savannah, Georgia, had tied up at Gray's Wharf displaying the "rattlesnake flag" of the Confederacy. The arrogance of the *Manhattan's* act must have seemed like a calculated affront to these adopted northerners: in the two weeks since Confederate guns had opened fire on Fort Sumter, public opinion had rallied solidly behind the Union cause, and a vicious mob attack on the 6th Massachusetts Regiment in the streets of Baltimore just days before the *Manhattan's* landing had raised pro-war sentiment in the Bay State to "fever heat."¹

As word of the ship's arrival spread through the narrow streets of the North End, a mob of several hundred assembled on the Wharf and issued a demand that the captain "lower the treasonable colors" and replace it with the Stars and Stripes.

¹ The Pilot, May 4, 1861.

Braving the neighborhood's wrath, the captain and crew initially brushed the demands aside, loudly defying the menacing crowd and threatening to open fire, but before long "the pressure became so threatening that the captain was intimidated" into complying. Thus roused, however, the mob was not so easily restrained. They "demanded custody" of the flag, and after the ship's crew reluctantly threw it ashore, "it first fell into the hands of the police, but the people put their own hands upon it, and . . . it was speedily torn into a thousand pieces, trophies of patriotic indignation" which were then paraded throughout the streets of the city.²

According to press accounts of the *Manhattan* incident, the mob which confronted the ship's crew was made up overwhelmingly of recent Irish immigrants. The reports are accompanied by a detailed account of a "full and enthusiastic" meeting of the Jackson Democratic Club on Hanover Street in the North End, where "the adopted citizens of Boston" passed resolutions declaring in the "solemn duty of every man . . . to forget all considerations of party, and to defend the national government and put down secession and treason wherever they may occur."³ The meeting in the North End was predominantly Irish, but was followed up in the days after with meetings of French, German and Italian immigrants.

The fury and unanimity of the response to the *Manhattan's* provocation is misleading as a gauge of the attitude of Boston's large Irish immigrant community to the Civil War, however. The deep anger over Confederate aggression at Sumter had completely transformed northern opinion, temporarily burying party lines and forcing even the most outspoken critics of the Lincoln administration to rally behind defense of national integrity. "The North is a unit," the pro-Democrat *Boston Post* declared. "It has but one will - but one purpose. Its great heart throbs to the 'music of the Union'."⁴

² *Ibid.*, April 27, 1861.

³ *Ibid.*, April 27, 1861.

⁴ *Boston Post*, April 27, 1861.

Even the Boston *Pilot*, which had for years conducted a vigorous campaign against “nigger-loving” abolitionists and consistently defended the ‘constitutional rights’ of southern slaveowners, was forced to bend before the storm of indignation that Sumter had let loose. “In Boston the war feeling is in the ascendant,” its editors wrote. “Political questions have been . . . dropped, and the universal sentiment of the city . . . is to defend to the last the flag of the Union.”⁵

Boston’s recent Irish immigrants were not immune to prevailing pro-Union sentiment and may, in fact, have been more susceptible than the general population. One historian’s suggestion that the scale of anti-Irish prejudice and the “especially weighty pressures . . . to proclaim love for their new homeland” may have “driven [the Irish] to vigorous expressions of super-patriotism” is borne out by their overrepresentation in the ranks of the Union Army.⁶ From the beginning, however, Irish immigrant support for the war effort was extremely conditional, and had largely spent itself within two years of the uproar over the *Manhattan*. The very neighborhood which had, in the weeks following Sumter, vowed to root out secession and treason “wherever they may occur” was, by the summer of 1863, the site of enthusiastic mass meetings which ended with cheers for Jefferson Davis and finally, in July of that year, broke out in open rebellion against the military draft.⁷

The curious trajectory revealed by the *Manhattan* incident and the Draft Riots provides some indication of the

⁵ The Pilot, April 27, 1861.

⁶ Gilbert Osofsy, “Abolitionists, Irish Immigrants, and the Dilemmas of Romantic Nationalism” American Historical Review 80 (Oct. 1975): 900. Figures on Irish enrollment in the Union Army can be found in William F. Hanna, “The Boston Draft Riot,” Civil War History 36: 3 (Sept. 1990): 263.

⁷ Dennis P. Ryan, Beyond the Ballot Box: A Social History of the Boston Irish, 1845-1917 (New Jersey, 1983): 137.

complexity of Irish immigrant sentiment towards the War. Through they were neither consistent stalwarts of the northern war effort nor pure-and-simple dupes of the slavocracy, the Irish were capable both of ardent support and sacrifice for the Union cause and of vicious hatred for the 'nigger' and his/her abolitionist sympathizers. The attention which historians have devoted to their prominent role in a series of revolts against the Lincoln administration at the low point of northern military fortunes during the summer of 1863 has tended to obscure the fact that *general* disaffection had by then begun to take hold among broad sections of the northern population. If the Civil War constituted a Second American Revolution, as a number of historians have argued convincingly, then it was - from the perspective of northern white workers - a revolution from above. David Montgomery has noted that for many wage earners the War had become a "nightmare that [gave] them little reason to endorse the revolutionary measures of the Republicans,"⁸ and the heavy representation of Irish immigrants in nascent lower class discontent was therefore, at one level, simply a reflection of their position at the bottom of northern society.

Few historians would deny the importance of class or economic grievances in fitting the Irish for their prominent role in opposition to Republican war policy. To leave the explanation here, however, would be to miss (or to avoid) the central paradox of the Union homefront: that that section of the northern white population which stood closest in social terms to the slave was among the least inclined to take up the anti-slavery cause and the most receptive to demagogic appeals in defense of the South's peculiar institution.⁹

⁸ David Montgomery, Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862-1872 (New York, 1967): 91.

⁹ One proviso is important here. While Irish immigrants often performed the role of foot soldiers for northern pro-slavery forces and were perhaps the most visible ethnic component in events such as the Boston and New York draft riots in 1863, the leadership of these movements was more likely to be found among northern merchants and in the upper ranks of the Democratic Party. See the

The seeming contradiction has perplexed not only historians of the Civil War, but contemporary observers as well, and none more than the abolitionists who wrestled with it as a matter of practical necessity. "(H)owever true to liberty an Irish man's heart is [at home in Ireland]," complained a bewildered James Canning Fuller, "on his emigration to America, circumstances and influences by which he becomes surrounded, in too many cases warp his judgment, and bias his heart."¹⁰ After a series of riots in Philadelphia in which Irish immigrants were conspicuous for their role in attacks on Blacks, William Lloyd Garrison commented on the "strange and shocking spectacle" of seeing "those who have been forced by oppression and want to become exiles from their native . . . combining to crush and drive out of our borders a portion of the native population."¹¹ The Irish, wrote an exasperated Garrison in 1845, were a "mighty obstacle . . . in the way of negro emancipation on our soil."¹² What follows is an attempt to untangle this vexing problem in the social history of the Civil War through a close study of Boston's Irish immigrant community during the years between 1845 (when emigration from Ireland begins to rise dramatically under the strains of famine) and the high point in resistance to the Lincoln administration during the draft riots of July 1863.

discussion of the attacks on the John Brown Memorial Meeting (pp. 12-13) and especially Philip Foner's Business and Slavery: The New York Merchants and the Irrepressible Conflict (Chapel Hill, 1941).

¹⁰ The Liberator, April 8, 1842, cited in Theodore W. Allen, The Invention of the White Race: Racial Oppression and Social Control (London and New York, 1994): 177.

¹¹ Garrison, cited in Osofsky, "Abolitionists, Irish Immigrants and Romantic Nationalism," 900.

¹² *Ibid.*, 906.

My own argument takes issue, first and foremost, with a number of recent studies which have downplayed or completely dismissed class antagonisms as being central to understanding the estrangement of Irish immigrants from the abolitionist cause. "If [abolitionists] loved mankind," declared a resolution of the Workingmen of Massachusetts in 1861, "they could find here at home objects more than sufficient for the exercise of all their assumed virtues."¹³ Such expressions certainly cannot explain the sum of northern anti-war sentiment. Nor should any honest account ignore the fact that the horrors of "white industrial slavery" were frequently brandished in a wholly opportunist fashion by those - most often Democratic Party politicians - who sought to paper over the harshness of black chattel slavery in the South. But to dismiss the prevalence of such rhetoric or the resonance which a class appeal struck among lower class whites as mere window dressing for white supremacy, as a number of recent studies have done, seems to me a serious error.¹⁴ That northern workers discerned a contradiction between abolitionist sympathy for slaves in the South and indifference toward the poor in their midst is not surprising, nor did such a discovery necessarily lead them in reactionary directions.

For the fifty thousand or so newly arrived Irish immigrants in Boston at the outset of the Civil War,¹⁵ this class antagonism was exacerbated by their experience of anti-Catholic bigotry from the early 1850s onwards. The flood of immigration

¹³ Address of the Workingmen of Massachusetts to Their Brethren Throughout the United States, cited in Hermann Schluter, Lincoln and Slavery: A Chapter from American Social History (New York, 1965): 134.

¹⁴ See, for instance, Allen, Invention of the White Race: 164-165 and 184-188; Noel Ignatiev, How the Irish Became White (New York, 1995).

¹⁵ William F. Hanna, "The Boston Draft Riot," Civil War History 36: 3 (Sept. 1990): 262.

from Europe at mid-century had sparked a powerful nativist reaction across the United States, and nowhere was it more successful or aggressive than in Massachusetts. From the perspective of the Irish immigrant, class, ethnicity and religion were completely fused; they were poor *because* they were Irish and Catholic. This article attempts to unravel the complicated social and cultural legacy which the Boston Irish had accrued in the decade leading up to the War, and to show how that mixed inheritance guided them through the events of the War itself.

The arrival of some fifty thousand half-starved Irish immigrants to the city of Boston during the decade of the 1850s marked the beginning of a fundamental transformation in the city's social and economic life. Before 1830, new arrivals to the city had never exceeded two thousand. In 1840 their numbers had increased to just under four thousand, but by 1849 - just two years after the onset of the potato blight in Ireland - that number had multiplied sevenfold to twenty-nine thousand.¹⁶ An overwhelming majority of these immigrants were Irish, so that by 1855, Boston's Irish population had gone from a mere handful before the famine to over fifty thousand, or a third of the city's total population.¹⁷ It was this meteoric rise which led Theodore Parker to complain that the city of the Puritan fathers was being transformed into "the Dublin of America."¹⁸

Aside from the unprecedented scale of the influx, there were a number of distinctive features of the Irish immigration. The most striking of these was the sheer poverty of the new arrivals. The Irish exodus of the mid-1850s had less to do with the lure of upward mobility than with the desperate struggle to escape starvation at home. Unlike the more prosperous Irish Protestants who had emigrated to Boston from Ulster at the turn of the century, the bulk of the newcomers were Ireland's

¹⁶ Oscar Handlin, Boston's Immigrants (New York, 1959): 56.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸ John R. Mulkern, The Know-Nothing Party in Massachusetts (Boston, 1990): 14.

“poorest peasants,” most of them from the southwest counties of Galway, Clare, Kerry and Cork - all areas which had been hardest hit by famine.¹⁹ Many of them left for America “with barely the passage money; and they . . . often landed . . . [without] a single penny.”²⁰

Lacking the wherewithal to move beyond the confines of Boston, the Irish were trapped in a city whose economy could not possibly absorb them. While the decade before the arrival of the Irish had seen the first stirrings of industrialization, the Boston economy was still, in the 1840s, based more on finance and commercial trade than on manufacturing. What few industries did exist were mainly small-scale skilled enterprises, and until the period of the Civil War the city was almost completely lacking in large concentrations of industrial capital and, thus work opportunities.²¹ Possessing neither the skills nor the capital which might enable them to penetrate the local economy, the Irish were barred from all but the margins of economic life.

The only sphere of the economy left open to the new immigrants was unskilled labor, and for several decades the majority of Boston’s Irish hovered between casual employment in the most menial jobs and outright destitution. They were “unquestionably the lowest in the occupational category”²² of any ethnic group in Boston, including Blacks. Irish men completely dominated unskilled and casual labor in the city, and served as dock laborers, stable boys and house servants, while Irish female ‘help’ became a regular fixture of every respectable Brahmin home.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

²⁰ Dr. Cahill’s Letter to Ireland, cited in Handlin, Boston Immigrants: 65.

²¹ Handlin, Boston’s Immigrants: 61.

²² *Ibid.*, 76.

With few exceptions, the unskilled work which the most fortunate of the newcomers were able to secure provided little in the way of long-term financial security. Stark poverty engulfed nearly the entire Irish community, and one contemporary account described their situation as being "perfectly wretched." "This whole district," wrote the City's Health Commissioner, "is a perfect hive of human beings, without comforts and mostly without common necessities."²³ The rapid influx of tens of thousands of immigrants had created a shortage of housing, and several neighborhoods of the city experienced a building boom during the 1850s. In the North End and Fort Hill, vacant warehouse buildings were hastily partitioned to make room for the newcomers. Cellars which had previously been thought unfit for occupancy became homes for extended families, and flimsy 'sheds' and 'shanties' were constructed to house those unable to secure proper housing. "Huddled together like brutes, without regard to sex, age, or sense of decency," the Irish were confined to hovels where, according to municipal authorities, "despair, or disorder, intemperance and utter degradation reign supreme."²⁴

Health and sanitary conditions barely figured in the conversion of new housing, with the result that the Irish neighborhoods were hard hit by sickness and disease throughout the forties and fifties. When a cholera epidemic seized Boston in 1849, it left its mark almost exclusively among the immigrant poor. More than five hundred of the seven hundred fatalities in that year were among the Irish. Sea Street in the North End was the site of forty-four deaths, and one particular address in the same neighborhood suffered "no less than thirteen fatal cases." When cholera reemerged in the city five years later, it showed the same demographic concentration, although with a less severe impact. Sea Street, for example, accounted for only nineteen deaths the second time around, attributed by medical authorities

²³ Report of the Commission on Internal Health, City of Boston Documents, 1852: 13.

²⁴ Report of the Commission on Internal Health, City of Boston Documents, 1861.

to the vacating of cellars "which in the former year were crowded with inhabitants." An outbreak of smallpox a decade later likewise impacted most severely upon those "from the poor localities of the north end of the city."²⁵

Poverty and hopelessness brought a number of attendant social problems, many of which Boston experienced for the first time beginning in the late 1840s. By 1850, immigrants accounted for ninety-seven percent of the residents at the Deer Island Almshouse, seventy-five percent of the prisoners in the county jail, ninety-seven percent of Boston's truants and vagabonds, and fifty-eight percent of its paupers.²⁶ Newspaper accounts attributed the leap in crime rates to the arrival of the Irish and the newcomers were castigated as being immoral and uncivilized. The pressures of acculturation in unfamiliar and increasingly hostile surroundings took its toll on the mental health of many immigrants, and the State "expanded its facilities by building two new hospitals and Boston erected an asylum of its own, largely to care for Irish laborers, for among other groups the incidence of lunacy was much lower."²⁷

The shattering of Boston's ethnic homogeneity and the concomitant pressures which the arrival of tens of thousands of Irish poor exerted on the city's economy gave rise to increasing resentment on the part of native Bostonians. "The great and continual influx of Foreign Paupers among us," city officials complained in 1852, "has become an alarming evil, and one which should arrest the attention of all citizens." The city's fathers drew a distinction in their report between "the honest poverty of our own or our adopted citizens" and "the poor, the vicious and degraded, who are constantly being shipped like

²⁵ Communication of Dr. Henry G. Clark, City of Boston Documents, 1861.

²⁶ Ryan, Ballot Box: 23, see also Mulkern, Know-Nothing Party: 14, and Edith Ware, Political Opinion in Massachusetts During the Civil War and Reconstruction (New York, 1916): 16.

²⁷ Handlin, Boston's Immigrants: 126.

cattle to our shores, to become objects of charity and support." The report ended with a lament that the city did not have the authority to deport these paupers back "from whence they came."²⁸

The Know-Nothing movement that emerged in Massachusetts during the early 1850s combined a populist reaction against the domination of the state's Whig elites with a xenophobic campaign against Irish Catholics. According to historian John Mulkern, the movement drew its strength from the ranks of native workers and mechanics who "had to live cheek by jowl with impoverished foreigners and face daily the challenge that Irish Catholics posed. . . . They blamed the Irish, as well as the politicians and wealthy elites for having blocked 'true reform' and for having forced American working people to seek employment under disadvantages."²⁹

The populist appeal of the Know-Nothings rested not merely on the potency of ethnic prejudices, however, but on the social dislocations accompanying the transition to an industrial economy. Industrialization rendered the Whig message of social harmony increasingly obsolete and their opposition to progressive labor legislation widened the chasm between local elites and a mechanic class which felt its independence giving way to wage labor. By 1854, Boston was alone among the major cities of the country in its refusal to pass ten-hour day legislation,³⁰ and this was attributed, not unreasonably, to the domination of the Whig Party by business interests.

One of the important side effects of nativism was the atrophy it injected into still-fragile working class organizations. "(T)he state's labor movement," according to David Montgomery, "was thoroughly destroyed by the pitting of native trade unionist against immigrant factory hand and the divorcing

²⁸ Report Concerning Foreign Paupers, City of Boston Documents, 1852.

²⁹ Mulkern, Know-Nothing Party: 67.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

of both from middle class reformers”³¹ When Irish laborers organized a trade union in 1856 they did so outside the ranks of established labor organizations, and although largely excluded from the craft organizations which dominated the local labor movement of the time, the Irish figured prominently in a number of strikes.³² Even the ultra-conservative *Pilot* featured regular strike coverage and its letters page was often filled with exchanges over the ‘labor question.’ One reader penned a vigorous defense of Lynn shoe strikers against “the monopolists of this enlightened nineteenth century [who] consider the poor only as stepping stones to palaces of grandeur and luxury.”³³ Increasing competition between native and foreign born workers and the lowering of wages due to a flooded labor market reinforced the perception among many that the Irish were to blame for the precarious position that native mechanics found themselves in. Moreover, the role assumed by the Catholic hierarchy in blocking progressive legislation reinforced the popular association of Catholicism with despotism, to provide the pretext for an aggressive assault upon the Irish community as a whole. Lyman Beecher referred to the Irish as a “dead mass of ignorance and superstition” and as “priestdriven human machines,”³⁴ and nativists complained that men “fresh from the bogs of Ireland” were “led up to the desk like dumb brutes, their hands guided to make a straight mark” to “vote down intelligent and honest native citizens.”³⁵

It must be acknowledged that the Catholic hierarchy was quite consistent in its opposition to the most progressive legislation of the age, and that the complaints lodged by social

³¹ Montgomery, *Beyond Equality*: 120.

³² Mulkern, *Know-Nothing Party*: 67.

³³ *The Pilot*, April 14, 1860.

³⁴ Carl Wittke, *The Irish in America* (Baton Rouge, 1966): 119.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 116.

reformers were not without substance. Those who had followed the tumultuous events in Europe during the 1840s were aware that the Church had placed itself on the side of reaction and against attempts by republicans to establish democratic regimes. The archconservative Bishop Hughes of New York denounced reformers as "infidels and heretics" and the editor of the *Pilot* wrote in 1851 that "whenever you find a free-soiler, you find an anti-hanging man, woman's rights man, an infidel frequently, bigoted protestant always, a socialist, a red republican . . ."³⁶ Church opposition to free public education branded it an enemy of progress in the eyes of many, and on occasion, the official response to Protestant charges of Catholic intolerance only fueled the fears of natives. A Catholic newspaper in St. Louis had written in 1851, for instance, that "The Church is of necessity intolerant. Heresy she endures when and where she must," but if Catholics should ever gain a large majority, "religious freedom in this country is at an end - so say our enemies - so say we."³⁷

One need not subscribe to the monolithic representation of the Irish community popularized by nativists to allow that the Church hierarchy exerted tremendous influence in shaping the social outlook of lay Catholic immigrants. Such a relationship was not preordained, however, but must be understood as a defensive reaction to the intense prejudice which the Irish encountered. The identification of Irish peasants with the Catholic Church had been forged out of a shared persecution at the hands of the British Government and its land agents in Ireland. It had been strengthened, for those who emigrated, by the fact that the Church was the one familiar institution that the Irish carried to America. There, it provided a sense of familiarity in what must have seemed an extremely disorienting environment to peasants whose conception of the world had previously not extended beyond the borders of their family plot or the local village.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 129.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 118.

It was not merely spiritual, but also physical relief that bound the immigrant population to the Church. State-directed welfare relief had barely existed prior to the arrival of the Irish, and the introduction of tens of thousands of destitute immigrants put severe strains upon the minimal structure of private relief. The quasi-religious character of those few agencies which did exist repulsed Catholics with their "proselytization under the guise of benevolence,"³⁸ and under the direction of the Church, a number of institutions were established to assume the burden of providing for the immigrant community. In place of the Protestant-dominated Boston Provident Association the Church established its own Mutual Relief Society, and with financial help from one of a handful of prosperous Catholic immigrants, including Andrew Carney, the Saint Vincent's Female Orphan Asylum was established and, later, the Carney Hospital.

When the Know-Nothing legislature installed at the State House initiated an "attack on [immigrants'] civil and political rights" that "went beyond anything found elsewhere in the country,"³⁹ they unwittingly sealed the relationship between the hierarchy and lay Catholics. The Know-Nothings introduced a number of unsavory measures, among which was a hysterical investigation into 'Nunneries' and the deportation of hundreds of Irish paupers "across the Atlantic with less ceremony and formality . . . than goes to the sending of a tub of butter, or barrel of apples, from Fitchburg to Boston."⁴⁰

The effect of all of this was to make it unlikely that a significant number of Catholics would cast their lot with native reformers against the Church hierarchy. Nativism virtually guaranteed that the few voices of progress within the Irish Catholic community would be marginalized and that their appeals over the heads of the Church would fall on deaf ears. The assumption of a reactionary homogeneity among the Irish

³⁸ Montgomery, *Beyond Equality*: 166.

³⁹ Mulkern, *Know-Nothing Party*: 102.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

underestimated the degree to which sections of the Irish community had been influenced by the revolutionary ideas that had circulated in Europe during the 1840s. The *Boston Pilot* was for a period edited by veterans of the Young Irelanders, an Irish republican organization that took a strong anti-slavery stand. Under the influence of radicals, the paper became "intolerable to the Church" and the hierarchy launched a rival publication, the *Boston Catholic Observer*, in 1847. For two years the *Pilot* and the *Observer* "bitterly fought out the issues of Irish conservatism and radicalism" until the *Pilot* 'recanted' in 1849 and turned conservative.⁴¹ Even after the more progressive editors had been displaced, however, letters appeared from time to time representing views at odds with the pro-slavery position. One correspondent replied to a *Pilot* editorial about Blacks' 'natural' capacity for slavery with an articulate defense of black emancipation and argued that "[Black] ignorance is a result of the white man's injustice . . . it is hard to rob a man of his treasure and then turn round and reproach him for not possessing it."⁴²

Among the reformers and abolitionists, only a small minority recognized the incongruity of the Know-Nothing position and rejected nativism altogether. Anti-slavery Free Soiler Edward L. Pierce complained of the nativists that "When the freedom of an empire is at issue, they run off to chase a Paddy,"⁴³ and Boston reformers warned the Irish that the *Pilot* was "trying to lead Irishmen into the jaws of a Boston aristocracy as remorseless as the one they had left Ireland to get rid of,"⁴⁴ but whatever hearing such sensitive appraisals may have merited was drowned out by the din of an hysterical campaign of religious and ethnic persecution.

⁴¹ Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants*: 180.

⁴² *The Pilot*, May 10, 1862.

⁴³ Mulkern, *Know-Nothing Party*: 69.

⁴⁴ Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants*: 204.

The barrier which nativism erected between the Irish community and the cause of social reform in Massachusetts, and the siege mentality that vitriolic anti-Catholicism evoked among the poorest segment of Boston' population led them, ironically, into a semi-formal alliance with the most conservative current in American politics. The depth of nativism drove Irish immigrants into the fold of the Democratic Party, which made an explicit appeal to immigrants and denounced the Know-Nothing crusade.⁴⁵ "Abused, hounded, attacked by their neighbors in the name of saving the land from 'Catholic bigotry,'" Montgomery writes, "the Irish withdrew as far as possible from the community around them and dealt with it only through the mediation of the priest and the Hunker Democrat."⁴⁶

Separatism, or 'clannishness' as the nativists dubbed it, was the inevitable result of anti-Catholic bigotry, and the lengths to which the Irish community went in isolating itself are testimony to their sense of alienation. After 1850, Boston's Irish community was geographically segregated in several densely packed neighborhoods, the most prominent of which were Fort Hill and the North End. The insularity of these communities is illustrated by the fact that the Boston Irish married their own ranks even less frequently than Blacks during this period.⁴⁷ By the mid-1850s, "Two distinct cultures flourished in Boston with no more contact than if three thousand miles of ocean . . . stood between them."⁴⁸ Without foreseeable prospects of escaping the desperate poverty that engulfed them, vilified and harassed by the dominant Brahmin culture, and abandoned even by that section of Boston society which considered itself progressive and enlightened, the Irish were forced back upon themselves and their loyalty to the

⁴⁵ Wittke, The Irish in America: 130.

⁴⁶ Montgomery, Beyond Equality: 120.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁴⁸ Handlin, Boston's Immigrants: 146.

conservatism of the Catholic hierarchy was solidified. If in later years they would merit the reputation of being a bulwark against progress, it was largely the rabid chauvinism of the Know-Nothings which had fitted them for the role.

If, in the view of their most outspoken representatives, the Irish were too civilized to associate on equal terms with Blacks, the qualities which set them apart were not readily apparent to those at the top of society. The low esteem in which both groups were held is evident in the contemptuous remarks of an English visitor to America, who reckoned that the United States "would be a grand land if only every Irishman would kill a negro, and be hanged for it."⁴⁹ Nor was it clear to Blacks themselves that the bottom rung of the northern social ladder was rightfully theirs. "My master is a great tyrant," a slave is reported to have commented in 1850, "he treats me as if I was a common Irishman."⁵⁰ Both Handlin and Ryan argue that Blacks fared better than the Irish in the local economy, and one historian recounts that "Negroes joined Yankees in condemning the Irish for being Priest-ridden, paupers, drunkards, and rioters, and in an effort to protect what little property they owned on Elm Street, some of them signed a petition in the 1850s to keep the Irish from encroaching on their neighborhood."⁵¹

The most that can be said about the relative position of Blacks and the Irish in mid-nineteenth century Boston, however, is that it was not clear which of the two groups were on the bottom. Boston's Black community enjoyed the advantage of having had a continuous presence in the city going back before the Revolution, and over the years a small black middle class had established itself, but the Black population remained small right through the period of the War. Dennis Ryan's assertion that the Irish landed in a city which "preferred Negroes to

⁴⁹ Edward A. Freeman, cited in Allen, Invention of the White Race: 29.

⁵⁰ Wittke, The Irish in America: 125.

⁵¹ Ryan, Ballot Box: 130.

Catholic immigrants"⁵² is misleading on two counts: it grossly underrates the stigma of race - from which free northern blacks were by no means exempt - in a society where racially based slavery still held sway; and it ignores the vast difference in the size of the two communities. As late as 1850, Blacks numbered less than two thousand, and their proportion of the city's total population never exceeded two percent until after the turn of the century.⁵³ The Irish, on the other hand, constituted fully one-third of the city's residents at the time. One need only imagine the reaction that a rapid influx of fifty thousand Blacks would have provoked to see the fallacy of measuring 'preference' in this way.

This competition at the very bottom of the economy helps to explain the hostility between Boston's Black and Irish communities. Although they made up a negligible proportion of the workforce, Blacks were - like the Irish - disproportionately restricted to unskilled labor. There the Irish used their overwhelming numbers to attempt to regulate employment to their advantage, though their ability to do so during this period should not be overemphasized. Trade union organization of any kind was extremely weak, and even more so among immigrants. Whatever influence immigrant workers could muster paled in comparison to the buffeting that the entire workforce was subjected to by larger economic forces, particularly during the War.⁵⁴

It did not help matters that a number of the same individuals who took pride in their benevolence towards southern slaves and Boston's free Black population were either nativists or oblivious to the wretched conditions under which many white wage workers lived at their own doorsteps. Although it is true

⁵² *Ibid.*, 131.

⁵³ Figures are from the National Parks Service, The Black Heritage Trail: Black Population in 19th Century.

⁵⁴ Raymond H. Robinson, "The Boston Economy During the Civil War," Ph.D. Dissertation. Harvard University, 1957.

that individual abolitionists opposed nativism on principle, and that a number of them - Wendell Phillips, for example - extended their opposition to slavery into a general critique of the conditions of laborers and the poor, for the most part the anti-slavery movement was unable or unwilling to link the cause of black chattel slaves with that of northern wage workers."⁵⁵ Early attempts by Garrison and others to link the anti-slavery cause with Irish nationalism fell short of success,⁵⁶ and the perception that abolitionists "championed the rights of slaves hundreds of miles away in Dixie" but "maintained a sphinx like silence"

⁵⁵ Osofsky, "Abolitionists, Irish Immigrants and Romantic Nationalism," 908-9; Eric Foner, "Abolitionism and the Labor Movement in Ante-bellum America," in Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War (New York, 1980): 57-76.

⁵⁶ Osofsky's argument that the Abolitionists "attempted for an entire generation to reach out for Irish sympathy and support" and that they "engaged in one of the most vigorous attacks on American nativism and Know-Nothingism" (p. 890) is subject to several qualifications. The first of these was made cogently by the author himself, who argues that a "middle-class, individualistic conception of personal freedom hindered any adequate [Abolitionist] response to the economic conditions of the Irish" and left them "unable to view the immigrants' attitude on slavery as other than a moral failure. (p. 911)" Two others must be added: Garrison's principled attempt to link Abolitionism to the Irish Repeal movement through Daniel O'Connell's Address of the People of Ireland to Their Countrymen and Countrywomen in America preceded the beginning of large-scale Irish immigration by at least five years. On the question of nativism, while the identification of Abolitionists with Know Nothingism by the proslavery press was highly dubious, principled declarations against anti-immigrant prejudice did not preclude individual Abolitionists from dipping into the anti-immigrant broth (see Beecher's quote, above). The absorption of the nativist rump into the Republican Party made such an identification easier during the War years.

regarding the plight of northern workers was exploited skillfully by the Catholic and Democratic Party press.⁵⁷

The tone for the Catholic position was set by Bishop Hughes of New York, who argued that "the abolitionists have not the right to touch slavery in the United States."⁵⁸ While the Church held back from a position of explicit support for the institution of slavery, the hierarchy vilified abolitionists as revolutionaries intent on overthrowing the Constitution.⁵⁹ Like their Democratic Party counterparts, the Catholic press played on the fears of immigrant workers by raising the specter of freed Blacks pouring North to displace white laborers. The *Cincinnati Enquirer* warned that "the hundreds and thousands, if not millions of [freed] slaves will come North and West, and will either be competitors with our white mechanics and laborers, degrading them by their competition, or they will have to be supported as paupers and criminals at the public expense."⁶⁰

Locally, the *Pilot* became the leading pro-slavery organ, trumpeting the constitutional 'rights' of southern slaveowners, inciting violence against the abolitionists, and hammering away at the 'natural inferiority' of Blacks. Its pages from the mid-1850s onward were frequently devoted to protesting against transgressions on the rights of slaveowners and lauding the mildness and paternalism of the South's peculiar institution. "On each side of the line," its editors wrote in 1860, "the rights of individuals have been and will be violated, but under very different circumstances. The Southerner comes here in pursuit of his property . . . and gets mobbed. The abolitionist goes South as an emissary of an insurrection, and gets lynched. We hold the Southerner more excusable than the Northerner in their

⁵⁷ Ryan, *Ballot Box*: 131.

⁵⁸ *The Pilot*, April 1, 1862.

⁵⁹ Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants*: 217.

⁶⁰ James McPherson, *Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York, 1982): 274.

respective attitude towards each other”⁶¹ The paper featured regular correspondence from readers in the South and printed sympathetic portraits of the lives of slaveowners. A reprint of a Kentucky politician’s speech wherein he related his ‘Experience as a Slaveholder’ typified the tone of the *Pilot*’s coverage. “I have not seen a slave chastised in twenty years,” reported the Senator, “and it is a very rare occurrence They are clothed well, fed well, they are housed well.”⁶² Like many northern Democratic papers of the period, the *Pilot* frequently complained that Southern black slaves were better off than northern white workers. “What can be more untrue than that the slave receives no compensation for their labor? They are clad, housed and supported, and allowed certain privileges by which they can add to their personal comfort, and they are never reduced to want, as white laborers . . . frequently are.”⁶³

The chorus of sympathy which the plight of northern “white slaves” evoked in the columns of conservative newspapers led many in the abolition movement to dismiss the claims of northern workers as a mere diversion from the central issue of the day. The ex-slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass, whose visit to Ireland in 1846 had caused him to remark that “I see much here to remind me of my former condition,”⁶⁴ was one

⁶¹ The allusion to the “mobbing” of southern slaveowners is apparently a reference to an incident in Boston in May of 1854, when a mob of black and white abolitionists freed a fugitive slave, Anthony Burns, who was being held in Boston pending deportation back to his owner. See McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom: the Civil War Era (New York, 1988): 119-120. Quote from The Pilot, April 14, 1860.

⁶² The Pilot, February 8, 1862.

⁶³ The Pilot, June 23, 1860.

⁶⁴ Frederick Douglas to W. L. Garrison, February 26, 1846, in Philip S. Foner, The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass, Vol I: The Early Years (New York, 1950): 141.

of a handful who were able to cut through conservative posturing without dismissing the grievances that made the argument resonate among the immigrant poor. “*Far* be it from me to underrate the sufferings of the Irish people,” Douglass wrote. “They have been long oppressed”⁶⁵ Nevertheless he believed

that a large class of writers in America . . . are influenced by no higher motive than that of covering up our national sins, to please popular taste, and satisfy popular prejudice; and thus many have harped upon the wrongs of Irishmen, while in truth they care no more about Irishmen . . . than they care about the whipped, gagged and thumb-screwed slave. They would as willingly sell on the auction block an Irishman, if it were popular to do so, as an African. . . . [Such men] are a stench in the nostrils of upright men, a curse to the country in which they live.⁶⁶

The charge of duplicity certainly applied to the editorial outlook of the *Pilot*. Behind the concern over the welfare of the Irish poor was an unwavering policy in favor of slavery. The paper supported the return of fugitive slave Anthony Burns to his “rightful owner” in 1854. It condemned John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry as a “symptom of an incurable disease in the public mind”⁶⁷ and supported the Kansas-Nebraska Act on the grounds that it was the constitutional right of “every man . . . to take his property . . . including slaves into the territories.” When a pro-slavery mob disrupted a John Brown memorial

⁶⁵ Lecture on Slavery, December 1, 1850, in Foner, Life of Frederick Douglass, 2: 138.

⁶⁶ Frederick Douglass to W.S. Garrison, February 26, 1846, in Foner, Life of Frederick Douglass, 2: 139.

⁶⁷ The Pilot, January 7, 1860.

meeting in December of 1860, the *Pilot* was "proud" to confirm its approval. "The interruption," its editors reasoned, "while a violation of the right of freedom of speech, cannot be well objected to. [It] saved the city from vile misrepresentation."⁶⁸ The *Pilot's* position on suppression of the abolitionists was not restricted to condoning vigilantism, however; the paper called for martial law for "the trampling down of the abolition brawlers who infect the North."⁶⁹

Underlying the legalistic and moral arguments put forward by the editors of the *Pilot* were a series of basic assumptions about the 'natural inferiority' of Blacks, backed up by a reactionary interpretation of Catholic doctrine on the subject. "The history of Negro slavery," the editors asserted, "does absolutely prove that *the negro race is happier in slavery than in freedom.*"⁷⁰ "Nature intended him to be the slave of the white man and nothing else. Every feature of his mind, of his disposition, and of his person, indicates this."⁷¹ Among other things, the *Pilot* argued that Blacks themselves would reject emancipation because "They love their masters as dogs do, and servile plantation is the life intended for them."⁷²

By the eve of the Civil War, the set of conditions which had sealed Boston's Irish immigrant community off from the city around them had been well established. Still mired in poverty at the outset of the 1860s, they were a volatile section of the

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, December 15, 1860. Apparently the sympathy Frederick Douglass had expressed for the Irish did not spare him from being the object of their wrath. Douglass was forced to flee the meeting, "but only after he had defended himself as if he were 'a trained pugilist'." (Ryan, Ballot Box: 131).

⁶⁹ The Pilot, May 3, 1862.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, May 31, 1862. (Italics in the Pilot.)

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, May 10, 1862.

⁷² Cited in Ryan, Ballot Box: 131.

city's population. Culturally marginalized and looked upon from the outside with a mixture of fear and contempt, the Irish established a cultural universe which operated largely outside the institutional life that native Bostonians viewed themselves as part of. In the absence of a progressive or secular alternative - a circumstance not entirely of their making - the twin pillars of the Democratic Party and the Catholic Church hierarchy came to dominate the political outlook that the Irish carried into the tumultuous events of the Civil War. It was only one element of that heritage, however. While we can perhaps dismiss the concern expressed by the *Pilot's* editors for 'white industrial slaves,' the very fact that the conservative critique of abolitionism - and later of the Republican Party generally - wrapped itself in class terms suggest a recognition that the unfortunate African-American slave was but a lightning rod for a much wider set of grievances.

The anti-abolitionist mob which broke up the John Brown anniversary meeting in December of 1860 was composed, in the main, not of the Irish poor, but of "men of respectability though not distinction . . . nearly all of whom have uncollected debts [in the South] and many of them mortgages on slaves."⁷³ One member of the mob was reported to have said of Wendell Philips, "Damn him! He has depreciated stocks 3 million dollars by his slang," and Thomas Wentworth Higginson recalled some years later that the anti-slavery campaign "was not strongest in educated classes . . . [but was] far stronger for a time in the factories and shoe shops than in the pulpits or colleges."⁷⁴

Support for the Democratic Party and sympathy for the 'rights' of the South thus made bedfellows of two very different constituencies in Boston during the late 1850s. As in New York City, Northern merchants - particularly those with commercial ties to the South, were the backbone of the Democratic Party

⁷³ New York Tribune, December 7, 1860, cited in Ware, Political Opinions: 86.

⁷⁴ Schluter, Lincoln, Labor and Slavery: 38.

leadership. Boston, wrote the abolitionist Wendell Phillips, was "choked with cotton and cankered with gold,"⁷⁵ and it was not only Boston, but more significantly the booming textile and shoe towns of Lowell, Lawrence, and Lynn (based on Boston capital) which were dependent on uninterrupted trade with the South. The South was, after all, not only the source for many of the raw materials required by the factory towns north of Boston, but also "the great market" for finished manufactured products.⁷⁶ The better off merchants, wrote one observer, "gravitate very strongly toward [Southern] sympathies, they are apt to think themselves aristocratic and gentlemanlike, and they look up to the idle slaveowners with respect as being more permanently idle than themselves."⁷⁷

One can hardly imagine a more incongruous host for such a perspective than the Irish community. The Democratic Party's appeal among immigrants had less to do with its explicit defense of slavery than its image as a party of the common people. Its rejection of nativism made it the only logical choice for beleaguered Irish Catholics and, in the absence of a challenge from the left, the Party's rhetorical commitment to the grievances of Northern white workers gave it license to indulge in open appeals to white supremacy.

Massachusetts Democrats and their allies in the Irish community blamed the sectional crisis that gripped the country in the mid-1850s upon an abolitionist campaign of aggression against the constitutional rights of Southern slaveowners. Until Confederate guns battered Fort Sumter in April of 1861, Northern Democrats advocated compromise with the South and did not contemplate the possibility that the South would proceed with secession. A petition submitted to Congress on the eve of the attack by a group of Boston merchants urged "mutual conciliation and compromise." According to the document's

⁷⁵ Ware, Political Opinion: 89.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 123.

signatories, preservation of the Union was of "vastly more importance than the establishment of this or that subject of controversy."⁷⁸ The editors of the *Pilot* had scoffed at the suggestion that a Lincoln victory in the 1860 election would lead the South to secede, assuring its readers that "[when] it comes to be really a question, the planters and merchants of the South - the business men will decide what is to be done."⁷⁹ It ushered in the New Year with a new masthead and a "Proclamation for 1861': The Union - It Must Be Preserved! The Pilot Knows No North, No South!"⁸⁰

The firing on Fort Sumter threw all of this into temporary disarray. Northern sentiment was solidly hostile to the South, and, as we have seen, even the most rabid pro-Southern advocates were converted to defense of the Union. The confrontation with the *Manhattan* illustrates the depths of pro-war sentiment even among a section of the population that had been weaned on a steady diet of anti-Republicanism. "A patriotism of the genuine revolutionary cast animates the hearts of all," reported the *Post*, "and away go . . . a whole train of prejudices and passions."⁸¹

Above all, what allowed the temporary convergence of political enemies around the defense of the Union was the submerging of the slavery question. Many abolitionists were initially content to ride the wave of anti-southern sentiment without raising the potentially divisive issue of slavery. Schluter reports that on the eve of the War "the question of slavery played no part" and that the Republicans themselves "were silent in regard to abolition, they contented themselves with protesting over extension."⁸² The people of Massachusetts,

⁷⁸ Boston Herald, Jan. 19, 1861.

⁷⁹ The Pilot, November 3, 1860.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, Jan. 8, 1861.

⁸¹ Boston Post, April 27, 1861.

⁸² Schluter, Lincoln, Labor and Slavery: on 33 and 129.

according to Edith Ware, "had no clear conception of the evils of slavery, nor were all aware that this inherited curse was at the bottom of the strife; but all did understand the attack upon the Union and were stirred by it."⁸³

The essential point about the circumstances under which the War began is that the trajectory of events allowed the Boston Irish to share in the patriotic fervor without shedding any of the political baggage they had picked up over the previous decade and a half. Thus the *Pilot* could enthusiastically endorse a defensive war waged to preserve the Union without compromising its position on slavery or the evils of abolitionism, and could offer conditional support to the Lincoln administration without sacrificing its right to rail against the Republican Party. The basic conservatism of the Catholic hierarchy, which had previously led it to attack abolitionists for challenging the existing social order was, after Sumter, turned against the Confederacy, and the Church could execute such a maneuver without abandoning its intrinsic conservatism on the social questions raised by the War. Lay Catholics, according to the Church, were to answer the Union call to arms, not out of anti-slavery zeal, but out of "loyal submission to legitimate rule."⁸⁴

The Boston Irish enlisted in the Union Army in great numbers, and the North End in particular was heavily represented.⁸⁵ The state contributed two Irish regiments, the 9th and 28th Massachusetts Volunteers, known as the *Fag an Bealachs* ('Clear the Way'). The core of both regiments were the five all-Irish volunteer militias that had been disbanded under the Know-Nothing government in 1855.⁸⁶ The valor of Irish

⁸³ Ware, Political Opinion: 71.

⁸⁴ The Pilot, April 27, 1863.

⁸⁵ Hanna, "The Boston Draft Riot," 263.

⁸⁶ Lenahan O'Connell, "Notes on the Irish in the Civil War," in Bulletin of the Eire Society of Boston, 18: 7 (April 3, 1960).

troops was frequently commented upon, but officers also expressed frustration at the lack of discipline among them, at their clannishness, and at their propensity to conduct the war "on their own terms."⁸⁷ Whatever the frustrations with the Irish in the Union ranks, however, there is no denying the toll that the War took on Boston's Irish community. William F. Hanna comments:

The tragedy of the war found its way quickly to the North End because all three of the Irish outfits⁸⁸ suffered heavily throughout 1862 and 1863. On the Peninsula the 9th Regiment suffered more than two hundred casualties. Similarly the 28th, which had seen almost one-quarter of its members fall at Antietam, was transferred to the famed Irish Brigade and arrived just in time to be slaughtered at Fredericksburg, where almost 40 percent of the regiment were killed or wounded. Finally, Mahoney's Guards, after valiant action and heavy losses on the Peninsula and at Antietam and Fredericksburg, had joined the rest of the 19th Massachusetts in helping to repulse Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg,

⁸⁷ Report of Colonel James McQuade, Commanding Officer, 2nd Brigade, May 1863, Anti-Slavery Collection, Boston Public Library. When McQuade reprimanded two Irish soldiers for going AWOL he explained to an investigative commission that he had "made up his mind long ago that Irish soldiers cannot be governed by military doves" but "needed to be handled as severely as justice will permit." He described one of the men under punishment as "the chief of a small but vicious faction who vegetate and develop in the purlieus [sic] of a place in Boston called 'North-End.'"

⁸⁸ The third unit referred to here is Company "E" of the 19th Massachusetts Regiment, previously known as Mahoney's Guards.

where the regiment saw more than half its members killed or wounded.⁸⁹

If the grim realities of the battlefield went a long way to puncture the initial wave of war euphoria among Boston's Irish immigrants, they were compounded by an increasingly dire situation on the homefront for those left behind. The initiation of hostilities led inevitably to a rupture in North-South trade and a general industrial depression which impacted severely on the Boston economy. "Men with plenty of money held on to the money bags," reported the *Herald*, "as if no more was ever coming in."⁹⁰ One Boston citizen wrote to a friend in South Carolina that "Some factories have curtailed their production either by dismissing a part of their hands, or working them on short time."⁹¹ A sharp and visible rise in poverty was the result. The Overseers of the Poor received "more applications for relief than they can possibly provide for," one report complained, and "Police stations . . . are nightly crowded with lodgers . . . [many of whom] stated that they were traveling after a day's work."⁹²

Increasing poverty produced both spontaneous and organized resistance to unemployment, and the Irish figured prominently in the growing movement. In July of 1861, city officials had to disperse a group of unemployed workers in Roxbury,⁹³ and a week later a "general stampede" occurred when rumors spread among unemployed laborers that the city would

⁸⁹ Hanna, "The Boston Draft Riot," 263.

⁹⁰ Boston Herald, February 21, 1861.

⁹¹ Letter of January 8, 1861, published January 11, 1861 in Advertiser, cited in Robinson, Boston Economy: 25.

⁹² Boston Herald, December 28, 1860, cited in Robinson, Boston Economy, 25.

⁹³ Transcript, July 19, 1861.

hire them as dockhands at one dollar a day. "Only after standing around City Hall for a considerable time did the 'two hundred Irishmen, eagerly expecting to be set immediately at work' realize that a jokester had deceived them."⁹⁴ Unemployed workers demonstrated to be put to work on public works, apparently with some success, and employed workers in a number of establishments struck against reductions in hours.⁹⁵

Economic hardship provided the wedge with which the Democratic Party and critics of the Lincoln administration attempted to revive their political fortunes. Calls for compromise with the South reemerged after the initial enthusiasm roused by Sumter began to wear thin. Two distinct currents contested for the domination of the Democratic Party; 'War Democrats' who, despite their badgering of the Lincoln administration, called for victory over the South, and the 'Peace Democrats' - or Copperheads - who espoused a negotiated compromise and return to the pre-war sectional framework (i.e. with slavery intact) as the only alternative to protracted and bloody conflict.

The relative influence of these two currents varied according to Northern fortunes in the war. In the wake of Sumter, the *Pilot* pursued an aggressive pro-war course, but as the war bogged down and resentment at the burdens imposed by the war effort developed, the paper came to espouse a Copperhead position. When the Lincoln Administration announced plans to enlist Black troops in the Union Army, the *Pilot* denounced the plan as "a lasting disgrace to the nation." And in an article which addressed the question "What are the Peace Democrats?" the editors responded, "Call them Copperheads - or any other ungentlemanly term you like; they are the only true representatives of Republican freedom today in this country, and time will vindicate the justice of their conduct."⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Ibid., July 16, 1861, cited in Robinson, *Boston Economy*: 254.

⁹⁵ Robinson, *Boston Economy*: 280.

⁹⁶ *The Pilot*, April 4, 1863.

Growing resentment at the burden of war began to be crystallized into active support for the Democratic Party as the Lincoln Administration began increasingly to adopt revolutionary measures aimed at weakening the Confederacy. Party spokesmen attempted to link frustration at economic hardship to opposition to Lincoln's increasingly bold attacks on slavery. General George McClellan, a pro-slavery Democrat who had been relieved of his command over the Army of the Potomac in November of 1862, became increasingly the object of Northern Democratic Party affection "in proportion," as the *Worcester Spy* put it, "as he fell under the displeasure of the government."⁹⁷ His visit to Boston in February of 1863 was the first in a chain of events leading directly to the Draft Riots that summer.

The conservative Archbishop of New York, John Hughes, had succinctly summarized the sentiments of Irish immigrants when he wrote that Catholics "are willing to fight to the death for the support of the Constitution, the government and the laws of the country. But if they are to fight for the abolition of slavery, then, indeed, they will turn away in disgust from the discharge of what would otherwise be a patriotic duty."⁹⁸ The loyalty of the Irish to the war effort had initially been secured under the defensive slogan of 'Defense of the Union.' It had been worn thin by the military sacrifice and economic burdens that the war imposed on an already impoverished community. The shift in war policy that the Lincoln administration began to adopt from the beginning of 1863 exacerbated the growing tensions between Irish Catholics and the Republicans, and finally led to open clashes which challenged the authority of the federal government.

Although personally opposed to slavery on moral grounds, Lincoln had hoped that the secessionist rebellion could

⁹⁷ Worcester Spy, February 7, 1863, cited in Ware, Political Opinion: 121.

⁹⁸ Cited in McPherson, Ordeal by Fire: the Civil War and Reconstruction (New York, 1982): 273.

be defeated without challenging the South's peculiar institution and "held at bay the Republicans and abolitionists who were calling for an anti-slavery policy."⁹⁹ Events compelled him, however, to move towards revolutionary measures, and on New Years' Day, 1863, Lincoln announced the Emancipation Proclamation. Regarding the President's proposal to enlist three thousand Black troops in the Union Army, the *Pilot* responded

One Southern regiment of white men would put twenty regiments of them to flight in half an hour. Twenty thousand negroes on the march would be smelled ten miles distant. No scouts need ever be sent to discover such warriors. There is not an American living that should not blush at the plan of making such a race the defenders of national fame and power; and every American living, if he has any independent patriotism in his heart, will cry it down.¹⁰⁰

It is difficult to determine what effect these words had upon the Boston Irish. There are no reports of organized demonstrations following the announcement of the Emancipation Proclamation. Although it can be assumed that the bellicose racism issuing forth from the pages of the *Pilot* resonated to some degree among Boston's Irish immigrants, in sharp contrast to corresponding events in New York, the Draft Riots which followed later that summer in Boston did not have a specific racial component to them. There, disturbances which began with attacks on draft agents degenerated into vicious pogroms against Blacks. What can be said with some certainty is that whatever resonance these sentiments found among the Irish had been prepared over a period of fifteen years and exacerbated by the conditions imposed by the War. First and foremost, they were a

⁹⁹ James McPherson, Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution (New York, 1991): 31.

¹⁰⁰ The Pilot, April 4, 1863.

product of the conscious manipulation of class and ethnic alienation by the Democratic Party and the editors of the *Pilot* .

Several days after making a 4th of July appeal to recently discharged 'nine-months' veterans to reenlist in the Union Army, Massachusetts Governor John Andrew received an anonymous letter from one such veteran. The writer, who claimed to represent the views of twenty-eight men who had met to discuss the speech, warned Andrew that "we have all come to the conclusion that if you want white men to fight for the d--d Negroes you must look somewhere else for them We are satisfied and the whole army are satisfied that 'you' and your infernal abolition devils . . . are the whole cause of this damnable war." The letter ended with a vow that the men would "do all we can to discourage enlistment in this damnable war" and a threat to "join an organization that is already established in this city that can [and] will by force of arms" disrupt recruitment.¹⁰¹

Whether this particular body of men carried through on their threat, or whether *any* organized group had an impact on subsequent events, is a question that the historical record cannot answer definitively. What is certain is that the letter to Andrew expressed sentiments that were becoming increasingly popular in Boston and throughout the North in the summer of 1863. The draft law which went into effect throughout the loyal states in the first week of July was blasted by the Democratic press as yet another example of Republican encroachment on civil liberties and widely perceived as a manifestation of class injustice, of further evidence that Republicans were pursuing a "rich man's war, but a poor man's fight". In particular, the commutation clause, by which individuals could buy themselves out of military obligation, antagonized those at the bottom of society.¹⁰² Not surprisingly, the Irish became prominent in draft

¹⁰¹ Anonymous Letter to Governor John Andrew, July 4, 1863, Massachusetts State Historical Archives, Executive Department Letters.

¹⁰² Eugene C. Murdock, One Million Men: The Civil War Draft in the North (Madison, 1971): 6.

resistance throughout the North,¹⁰³ and Boston was to be no exception.

The eruption of riots in New York on the 13th of July sent tremors throughout the citadel of abolitionism. William Lloyd Garrison wrote a friend that he feared the New York example was "very likely to be imitated in degree, at least, in all our great cities." After remarking upon "symptoms that a riot is brewing in this city," Garrison noted ominously that "The whole North is volcanic."¹⁰⁴ Governor Andrew began making preparations for a possible outbreak in Boston almost immediately upon hearing of events in New York, which he rightly considered as "symptomatic of a wider disease,"¹⁰⁵ and when rioting finally broke out in Boston on the afternoon of the 14th, a messenger sent to inform the Chief of Police about the disturbances found him "huddled with Mayor Frederick W. Lincoln making contingency plans for just such an event."¹⁰⁶

Antagonism between the Irish poor and the police and government officials was endemic during this period, as the figures cited earlier on the Irish proportion of the criminal population suggest, but in the days leading up to the Riot there were clear signs that tensions were escalating towards an explosion. When two police officers had attempted to arrest an Irishman, William Nolan, in Porter Street in East Boston on the evening of the 6th of July, "a crowd of three or four hundred Irish people collected," severely beat the officers, and temporarily rescued Nolan from arrest.¹⁰⁷ A meeting hosted by

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*,: 45-57.

¹⁰⁴ William Lloyd Garrison to O. Johnson, July 13, 1863, Anti-Slavery Collection, Boston Public Library.

¹⁰⁵ Cited in Ware, *Political Opinion*: 126.

¹⁰⁶ Hanna, "The Boston Draft Riot," 265.

¹⁰⁷ *Boston Journal*, July 6, 1863.

draft-eligible Catholic priests in the North End ended with cheers for Jefferson Davis.¹⁰⁸

Finally, the tinder was lit on the “foggy, and unpleasantly warm, sort of a dog-day”¹⁰⁹ of July 14th, when an agent of the Provost Marshall’s office attempted to deliver draft notices on Prince Street in the North End. When he approached the wife of a conscript in the door of her home, she began hurling abuse at him, and an argument ensued which drew the neighbors out. When Provost Marshall Howe threatened to have the woman arrested, she struck him in the face.¹¹⁰ A crowd of several hundred gathered, comprised mainly of women and children, but including male workers from the nearby Gasworks, and police were dispatched to help the officials effect their escape. According to one eyewitness, the mob “surged to and fro like the waves of the ocean.” They seemed initially to be “prompted more by a love of fun than a desire for serious mischief.”¹¹¹ The crowd in the streets ebbed and flowed over a period of several hours, making its way to Haymarket Square and then on to Police Station One before returning to Cooper Street at around eight o’clock in the evening. There they were met by federal troops who had been dispatched by Governor Andrew and taken up positions inside the Cooper Street Armory.

By nightfall the mood of the crowd turned violent, its numbers having increased to between five hundred and a thousand people. “Young rowdies were seen entering the North End in twos and threes, like moths towards a flame, and a rumor was

¹⁰⁸ Ryan, Ballot Box: 137

¹⁰⁹ Report of the “Draft Riot” in Boston, July 14, 1863, Major Stephen Henry Cabot, Boston University Special Collections.

¹¹⁰ The Boston Riot, July 14, 1863. A Plain Statement of Facts. Anti-Slavery Collection, Boston Public Library.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, Anti-Slavery Collection, Boston Public Library.

circulating that an attempt would be made to seize the armory."¹¹²

They dug up bricks from the sidewalks, broke the windows of the Armory and called the soldiers cowards. To repel the attack the troops fired blank cartridges but they had no effect, and in fact, added fuel to the flame. The women came out in large numbers, some of them holding their babies up in their arms and daring the soldiers to fire at them. Finally gaining courage, the rioters crowded up against the doors of the Armory and tried to break them open.¹¹³

The Commander in charge of the troops holed up in the Armory had ordered two six-pounder guns placed in front of doors facing Cooper and North Margin Streets, and as the crowd attacked the Cooper Street door with axes and sledgehammers, knocking out the two upper panels, he gave the order to fire. The effect of the shot, an official report later recounted, "was electrical."¹¹⁴ An eyewitness reported that "dead and wounded lay on every side,"¹¹⁵ and the Adjutant General's Report confirmed that "several persons were killed and more wounded, how many, probably, will never be known as they were carried away by friends and kept hidden."¹¹⁶ A nearby resident later recalled that

¹¹² Hanna, "The Boston Draft Riot," 266.

¹¹³ Emma Sellew Adams, "A Remembrance of the Boston Draft Riot," *Magazine of History* 10 (1909): 37.

¹¹⁴ Adjutant General's Report, 1864, Massachusetts State Historical Archives.

¹¹⁵ Adams, "A Remembrance . . .," 39.

¹¹⁶ Adjutant General's Report, 1864, Massachusetts State Historical Archives.

"[during] the next few days there were many funerals,"¹¹⁷ and local newspapers reported at least twelve fatalities, among whom were several children.

From Cooper Street, those left standing moved towards Dock Square and Faneuil Hall, and made several attempts to break into gun shops, but were repelled by the police. James Campbell, later tried on charges of murder for the death of an elderly man who had been shot earlier on Cooper Street, was shot by police outside of Dunn's gun store and was arrested. The mob's leaders, all with Irish surnames, were likewise apprehended. By midnight of the 14th, the momentum of the riot had been turned back and troops were deployed around the city to prevent further trouble. Authorities were relieved that the worst of the events seemed to have passed, but there were understandable fears that the conflagration could re-ignite quite easily, and city and state officials took "strong precautions" to defuse the situation. Governor Andrew deployed a military force throughout expected trouble spots in the city, to back up police under the Mayor's command.

There are clear indications that some among the rioters were eager to follow up the events of the 14th with another confrontation, and that word of the riot in the North End had given confidence to others elsewhere in the State to attempt to bring matters to a head. Outside of Boston a plot was discovered whereby "there was to be a combined effort of the lower classes in Fall River, Wareham and Bridgewater and other adjoining towns to burn and pillage New Bedford." According to someone on the scene, "One man was heard to say he would head a mob to burn the negro House in the West end" but was prevented from doing so by "twenty Negroes who patrolled, armed with revolvers, around his house, intending to shoot him if he came out."¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ Adams, "A Remembrance . . . ," 40.

¹¹⁸ Joseph Ricketson to Deborah Weston, July 19, 1863, Anti-Slavery Collection, Boston Public Library.

The city itself felt the aftershocks from the rioting for several weeks. On the afternoon of the 15th, a "slight effect" at a riot in Kneeland Street was quickly suppressed.¹¹⁹ Two days later there was a confrontation in Cooper Street when a group of 'roughs' attempted to take the guns away from soldiers on guard duty.¹²⁰ On the same day rumors circulated in East Boston that "attacks were to be made upon the houses of certain residents," which "created a good deal of feeling in the early part of the evening," until the "foreign population" was dispersed by a Catholic priest.¹²¹ Emma Sellew Adams, who had witnessed the entire riot from her home in the North End, reported that "[not] many nights later, we saw two men, wearing large cape-coats, come out of the opposite house. Their wives handed each a gun, which was immediately hidden under their coats, and the men started off, apparently bound to a secret meeting place"¹²² And Governor Andrew received word from the Black abolitionist lawyer John S. Rock that "enemies of good order" were "organizing for an outbreak on the withdrawal of the military."¹²³

That all of this came to nothing is attributable not only to the prompt and efficient use of troops and police, but to the energetic work done by the Catholic clergy in the wake of the Cooper Street riots. In an address before the City Council several days later, Mayor F. W. Lincoln paid special thanks to "the good influences exerted by Fathers Healy and Brady (of the North End) and other of the Roman Catholic clergy, who

¹¹⁹ Daily Advertiser, July 15, 1863.

¹²⁰ Transcript, July 16, 1863.

¹²¹ Boston Journal, July 6, 1863.

¹²² Adams, "A Remembrance . . . ," 40.

¹²³ John S. Rock to Governor Andrews, July 20, 1863, Executive Department Letters, Massachusetts State Historical Archives.

laboured to preserve quiet among their congregation,"¹²⁴ and their efforts were replicated in every immigrant neighborhood in the city. Within two weeks the likelihood of tensions reaching riot levels had been diminished by the combined efforts of the clergy and civic authorities. But the events of that night had not been erased from the memory of the Irish community. They were, instead, added to the long list of injustices which the Boston Irish perceived themselves as having suffered since coming to America. "The rioters in this city have kept quiet," wrote Father Hilary Tucker, "Still there is a threatening and sullen look in the countenances of everyone that bodes no good. The general sentiment is that great injustice has been done to the poorer classes."¹²⁵

The Draft Riot of July 1863 represented the high water mark of open dissension against the Republican war effort among the Boston Irish. The coordinated response of local and state authorities prevented the events at Cooper Street from recurring or from spreading to other parts of the city. The question of whether the rioting was a spontaneous reaction to the outbreak of street fighting in New York or the end result of an organized conspiracy must remain open. But in either case, the scattered forces challenging the authorities were very quickly overwhelmed, and whatever momentum the movement might potentially have gathered was dissipated before it became threatening.

One of the key factors in the return to stability was the role of the Catholic clergy, who walked the streets counseling their flock to remain indoors and avoid confrontation. But this is also a curious aspect of the July events. In the North End, for instance, the priests who were thanked for their role by Mayor Lincoln were the same individuals who, only several nights before, had overseen boisterous meetings denouncing the

¹²⁴ Mayor's Address to City Council, City of Boston Documents, July 23, 1863.

¹²⁵ Cited in Thomas H. O'Connor, Fitzpatrick's Boston, 1846-1866 (Boston, 1984): 210.

draft.¹²⁶ Part of the explanation for this change of heart may be that the hierarchy, having led their followers to the brink of insurrection, recoiled after the bloodshed during the night of the 14th. In the end, the Church's espousal of "loyal submission to legitimate rule" set limits on the lengths to which clerical authorities would indulge popular sentiment. This may also explain why the *Pilot* held back from associating itself directly with the rioting. The newspaper, which had trumpeted the grievances of the Irish poor in the face of the Republican administration for three and a half years, was conspicuously sober in its reaction to the riot, visibly distancing itself from the rage that had filled Cooper Street on the night of the 14th.

There may have been something more fundamental behind the turn of events, however. Although the public posture of both the Church and the *Pilot* reflected in various ways the resentment felt by the Irish poor, neither felt as acutely the grievances of the residents of the North End or Fort Hill. The immigrant poor made a fine stage army, to be summoned to battle against the abolitionists and the four million black slaves whose cause they espoused, but at the first sign that their grievances could generate a social upheaval beyond the control of those who had grown accustomed to speaking for them in public, the Irish were confined to quarters. What the rioting may have done above all else was to expose the gap which existed between the public 'representatives' of the Irish and the ordinary immigrants.

¹²⁶ Father Brady of the North End was apparently the host of the meeting which ended with cheers for Jefferson Davis. See Ryan, Ballot Box: 127.