

James Tracy, "The Know-Nothings in Quincy" *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* Volume 16, No 1 (January 1988).

Published by: Institute for Massachusetts Studies and Westfield State University

You may use content in this archive for your personal, non-commercial use. Please contact the *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* regarding any further use of this work:

masshistoryjournal@wsc.ma.edu

Funding for digitization of issues was provided through a generous grant from MassHumanities.



Some digitized versions of the articles have been reformatted from their original, published appearance. When citing, please give the original print source (volume/ number/ date) but add "retrieved from HJM's online archive at <http://www.wsc.ma.edu/mhj>.



THE RISE AND FALL OF THE KNOW-NOTHINGS IN QUINCY

James Tracy

In the late 1840s, a terrible fungus stalked Ireland's potatoes, the staple food of the island's people. The result was death for over one million men, women, and children. Another million, and more, fled their ravaged homeland to America's northeastern shores. "In the 1840s and 1850s, a total of 1.7 million Irish men and women entered the United States. At the peak of Irish immigration, from 1847 to 1854, 1.2 million came."¹ America had never received immigration of this magnitude before, and Americans' response to the immigrants, especially in the Northeast (where the Irish were concentrated), became increasingly one of fear and hostility. Many native Americans feared that the Irish, who were overwhelmingly Catholic, would subvert America's Protestant tradition. Also, the fact that the Irish were mostly unskilled and often willing to work for low wages threatened American laborers. "Impoverished workers complained to the Massachusetts legislature that the Irish displaced 'the honest and respectable laborers of the state . . . [because they] work for much less per day."²

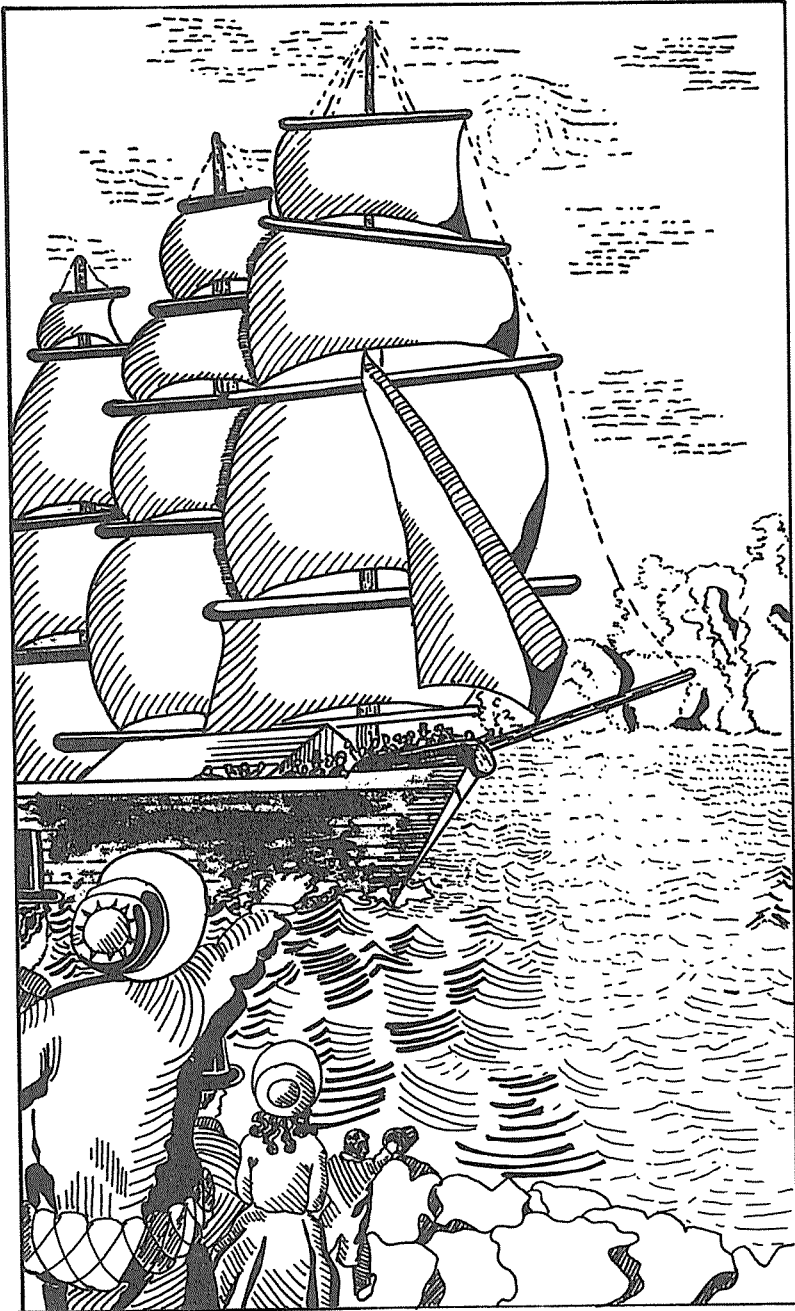
In Massachusetts, growing fear of, friction with, and prejudice against the Irish immigrants resulted in the most potent nativist movement in the state's history. In early 1854, the American Party (whose members met in secret, and were called "Know-Nothings" because they were not to admit publicly to any knowledge of the organization) was founded on an anti-Catholic platform. The immediate catalyst to the party's formation (and rapid success) was a state referendum in 1853, which was popularly perceived to have been defeated by the Catholic vote. Fear that the Catholic immigrants were voting together -- and voting effectively -- brought on a huge nativist reaction. In November of 1854, in the same year as it was founded, the American Party elected the governor, all forty state senators, and 351 of the state's 360 representatives.³

1. Mary Beth Norton, ed., A People and a Nation: A History of the United States (Boston, 1982), p. 289.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 290.

3. Quincy Patriot, November 18, 1854.

Rise and Fall of the Know-Nothings in Quincy



As one historian has stated, "almost the entire state government of Massachusetts had been placed in the hands of the American 'Know-Nothing' party, a secret organization whose only overt platform consisted of bigotry, xenophobia, and proscription. Anti-Catholic and anti-Irish, the Know-Nothings seemed to be pro-nothing."⁴ In the mid-1850s, this "xenophobic" party appeared to be sweeping the nation. "They carried Massachusetts and Delaware state elections in 1854, and in 1855 they elected governors in New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, California, Maryland, and Kentucky. . . . By the end of 1855, there were Know-Nothing lodges in every state in the Union."⁵ Ironically, however, once installed in power, the Know-Nothing party in Massachusetts proved to be more concerned with reform to benefit the working-class than with anti-Catholic legislation. This was due to the fact that the nativist reaction of 1854 swept into power a working-class leadership which soon recognized that the American Party had provided a unique opportunity for the state government to benefit the common man.

Quincy was "ideally situated to attract and accept new immigrants. It was only a short distance from Boston, a major port of entry; there were favorable chances for employment; and there was land available so that the immigrants could plant their own gardens as they had done at home."⁶ Employment for the Irish was mostly in the town's granite quarries, which employed 421 people, all males. While the town's boot-making industry employed 475 people, many of these jobs required skills the Irish did not possess.⁷

By 1850, there were 761 Irish-born people living in Quincy, representing 15.4 percent of the town's population.⁸ This rose further

4. Virginia C. Purdy, "Portrait of a Know-Nothing Legislature: The Massachusetts General Court of 1855," Ph.D. dissertation, George Washington University, 1970, p. 1.

5. Purdy, "Legislature," pp. 17-18.

6. H. Hobart Holly, ed., Quincy: 350 Years (Quincy, 1974), p. 1.

7. "Manuscript of the United States Census of 1850," schedule four (Massachusetts State Archives, Boston).

8. Calculated from Ibid., and Census of the Several Cities and Towns in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts as Returned by the Assessors Thereof in 1840 and 1850 (Boston 1850).

Rise and Fall of the Know-Nothings in Quincy

to 1,218 people, or 20.6 percent of the population by 1855.⁹ These are startling facts when one considers that "the ratio of foreign-born to total white population of the state increased from 16.6 percent in 1850 to 21.8 percent in 1855."¹⁰ The Irish in Quincy were so numerous that they alone comprised a proportion of the town's population roughly equal to the proportion of all foreign-born in Massachusetts.

In addition, the American-born children of the Irish should be considered; to contemporary Americans the two were one and the same. Being largely of child-bearing age, Quincy's Irish displayed remarkable fertility. In 1855, of a total of 208 births in the town, 95 babies were born to Irish parents.¹¹ In other words, 20.6 percent of the town's population was producing forty-five percent of its newborns. When one considers this in light of the fact that only twenty-two Irish died in 1855 of a total of 133 deaths in the town, it is clear that there was a significant natural increase of the town's Catholic population in addition to the increase caused by immigration.¹²

Anti-Catholicism in Quincy no doubt grew with the Irish population, and when the Irish first showed their potential political strength in 1853, these sentiments were galvanized into mass political action. The issue at stake in 1853 was a proposed amendment to Massachusetts' constitution which would have increased the political representation of the state's rural areas. This seems a strange proposal when one considers that the state was rapidly urbanizing at the time. This incongruity has led many historians, including Samuel Shapiro in "The Conservative Dilemma: the Massachusetts Constitutional Convention of 1853," to conclude that the proposed constitution was the work of reactionary elements seeking to undercut the potential

9. Abstract of the Census of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Taken with Reference to Facts Existing on the First Day of June, 1855, with Remarks on the Same (Boston 1857).

10. Dale Baum, "Know-Nothingism and the Republican Majority in Massachusetts: The Political Realignment of the 1850s," Journal of American History LXIV (1978), p. 960, fn 5.

11. Quincy Annual Reports, 1855 to 1872, in City Clerk's Office, Quincy, Massachusetts.

12. Ibid.

political influence of the Irish.¹³ "In the early 1850s," according to Shapiro, "the representative system" of Massachusetts "was in pressing need of repair. . . . The constitutional provision which guaranteed representation in the legislature in some years to towns with as few as forty voters . . . gave undue political power to the declining rural areas of the state."¹⁴ Whereas this imbalance should have suggested the need to increase the cities' share of representation, Shapiro argues that "the influx of Irish Catholics during the 1840s and 1850s [had] intensified and added a nativist tinge to . . . [the traditional] rural hatred of the city," and so, when a constitutional convention met in 1853, it produced "a plan to restore annual representation to the tiniest towns and cut Boston's already unfairly small delegation by one-third."¹⁵

The evidence in Quincy, however, does not support that interpretation of the motives behind the referendum. Rather, the evidence suggests that the referendum represented an attempt by Democrats and Free Soilers to outmaneuver the Whigs for control of the state. Despite the fact that the Democrats had forged an alliance with urban Catholics, Boston remained a Whig stronghold, and "most of the demands for constitutional reform came from Free Soilers and Democrats," who enjoyed their strongest support in rural areas.¹⁶

Indeed, the overwhelming content of the debate on the referendum which appeared in, and dominated, Quincy's weekly *Patriot* in 1853 was concerned with party rivalry and maneuvering, not with anti-Catholic sentiment. This focus, however, shifted violently in the aftermath of the referendum's defeat. Almost immediately, the Catholics were perceived as having defeated the referendum by defecting from the Democrats to the Whigs and voting as a bloc. The Irish and the Whigs, after all, had in common the fact that they were urban-based. Thereafter, and throughout 1854, fear of the Catholics dominated all discussion in the *Patriot*. This abrupt shift of focus to the Catholic vote, and to Irish Catholics in general, is where Quincy's evidence suggests that the referendum of 1853 acted as a catalyst in transforming mounting anti-Catholicism into political

13. Samuel Shapiro, "The Conservative Dilemma: The Massachusetts Constitutional Convention of 1853," *New England Quarterly*, XXXIII (1960).

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 207-208.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 213-214.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 210.

Rise and Fall of the Know-Nothings in Quincy

action. Nonetheless, the obsession with Catholics in 1854 only points up the near-total absence of such concern in the *Patriot* prior to the referendum of 1853.

Typical of the party rivalry of the *Patriot's* letters in 1853 is this *ad hominem* by "Jackson": "Remember that Whigs vote as Whigs, never as men."¹⁷ On the other hand, a certain "Quincy", evidently a Whig, lambasted the Democrats on their proposal, never mentioning Catholics. "Quincy" argued that "bad as the present Constitution is..., the one proposed for our acceptance is worse, and we hope too outrageous to be accepted. The basis of representation is the great feature of the proposed Constitution, by it what used to be the popular branch of government is made to represent land [i.e., be based upon town representation] and not people. It is in truth a 'rotten borough system.'"¹⁸ Significantly, the closest any letter in the *Patriot* got to even mentioning the Irish prior to the referendum was the comment by "A Democrat" that Boston already had an unfair advantage under the present constitution because "many of the inhabitants of Boston . . . are transient, emigrants on the wing to other sections of the country. . . , who go to swell the aggregate of her population, and thus to increase her representative power."¹⁹

Party rivalry, then (and not anti-Catholicism), was paramount in Quincy's debate over the referendum. Party competition was so intense that it may have led to some Whig underhandedness. Just prior to the referendum, "Jackson" wrote: "Remember that more than one hundred Democratic voters have been left off the check list, all accidentally, of course!"²⁰ While this sounds like an outrageous claim, the statistics do show an unusually light voter turnout in 1853.²¹

This voting trough between 1852 and 1854 seems especially suspect in light of the fact that a meeting of Quincy Democrats in

17. *Patriot*, October 25, 1853.

18. *Ibid.*, September 3, 1853.

19. *Ibid.*, October 1, 1853.

20. *Ibid.*, October 25, 1853.

21. Gubernatorial voter turnout ranged from 589 in 1850 to 671 in 1851, 703 in 1852, 599 in 1853, and 689 in 1854; in 1853, only 593 votes were cast on the referendum. Voting results compiled from Quincy Town Records, vols. 3-5, 1836-1879, microfilm reel 845727, in Mass. State Archives, Boston. As governors were elected annually, gubernatorial votes provide a convenient gauge of voting patterns.

September of 1853, which resolved "that we approve of the proposed Amendments," was, according to the *Patriot*, "the largest primary caucus held in this town for many years."²² While the Democrats were not the majority party in town, they and the Free Soilers comprised roughly fifty percent of town gubernatorial votes in the years from 1847 to 1852. That the referendum was resoundingly defeated by Quincy voters in a year when an unusually large Democratic caucus in town, together with the Free Soilers, supported it, suggests that the hundred-odd votes which fell off between 1852 and 1854 may have been Democrats. The evidence supports "Jackson's" assertion of Whig shenanigans. If this is so, then the howls of protest over the Catholic swing vote after the referendum are all the more significant. Such was Quincy's anti-Catholic hysteria in the wake of the amendment's defeat that the issue of foul play with the town's check-list was never again mentioned in the *Patriot*, obviously being considered far less important than the statewide defection of the Catholic bloc to the Whigs. This was because, from the Democrats' perspective, "the opposition [and perhaps even dirty tricks] of the 'Cotton Whigs' was taken for granted, but the 'treason' of the Irish Democrats was unforgivable."²³

The referendum was defeated statewide in 1853. In Quincy, it was given a resounding rout as sixty percent of the turnout voted against it.²⁴ Significantly, this margin of defeat was considerably larger than the "narrow margin" found statewide, which may be due both to the size of Quincy's Irish population and to the mysterious loss of Democrats from the voting lists.²⁵ It is inconceivable that the Irish, roughly twenty percent of the town's population, comprised the full sixty percent majority in town. Nonetheless it is reasonable to assume that they constituted a potent swing vote. After all, Quincy's Irish and Whigs alike would have voted in solidarity with Irish and Whigs across the state to defeat the referendum. Both groups having their greatest numbers in urban areas and especially in Boston, their larger interests would have been served by protecting urban political representation.

22. *Patriot*, September 17, 1853.

23. Baum, "Realignment," p. 962.

24. Percentage calculated from the *Patriot*, November 19, 1853.

25. *Ibid.*

Rise and Fall of the Know-Nothings in Quincy

In reporting the results of the election, the *Patriot* was quick to draw attention to the Catholic vote, striking, in light of subsequent events, an ominous tone. "The new Constitution has gone by the board and the coalition [which favored it] dispersed. . . . The Whig party as a party opposed it. . . . In this town the vote was light. The vote of the Catholics alone determined the cause against the Reformers--so called. . . . The new Constitution being dead and the election defeated, what is to be done?"²⁶

Immediately, and throughout the succeeding months, a host of letters appeared in the *Patriot* which focused exclusively on the role of the Catholic vote in the referendum's defeat. A certain "B" presented himself as a Whig and admitted "frankly" that the Whigs used unethical methods to defeat the constitution, stating "That we bought the Catholic Vote, I will not deny." However, "B" argued that these were only tactics borrowed from the Democrats. "The Locofocos, ever since the election," he said, "have kept up an uninterrupted howl because the Whigs bought up the Catholic vote for the purpose of defeating the revised Constitution. Now my advice to them is to stop their unearthly growls and remember that only one year previous, the Catholic vote by a similar arrangement was given to Pierce for President."²⁷ Shortly thereafter, however, a letter appeared by "An Adopted Citizen" (presumably a Catholic), suggesting that "B" was not a Whig at all, but rather a sore loser trying to fan anti-Catholic flames. "He writes as a Whig, but as all Whigs are not fools, I think he may be found in some other party. . . . The story itself of buying the Catholic vote is absurd, notwithstanding the malice running through it. It is one of those nursery tales sometimes used to frighten children."²⁸ In January of 1854, however, a Democrat wrote a more honest letter of disappointment over the Irish defection, saying "the victory which they aided in achieving was over the Democratic party..., a party that have [sic] offered and given to Erin's unfortunate and oppressed exiles, a quiet place by its hearthstones."²⁹

There was disappointment, bitterness, and even deliberate attempts at revenge in the letters which flooded the *Patriot* in the aftermath of the referendum, the extremes of emotion which, when

26. *Patriot*, November 19, 1853.

27. *Ibid.*, December 24, 1853.

28. *Ibid.*, January 7, 1854.

29. *Ibid.*, January 28, 1854.

coupled with the absence of any concern with the Irish in the letters leading up to the referendum, suggest genuine shock and outrage in Quincy over the Catholic "defection." It is precisely this bitterness which opened the floodgates of nativism and gave rise to the American Party. Indeed, as Dale Baum states, "when the Know-Nothing movement emerged the following year [after the referendum], many considered it to be controlled by the disgruntled reform elements of the now-destroyed coalition, seeking political revenge."³⁰ In this regard, Samuel Shapiro is accurate when he says that "the defeat of the constitution was a key factor in the triumph of the Know-Nothing party . . . in 1854."³¹

Significantly, it was while letters were still pouring into the *Patriot* in early 1854 decrying the Catholic role in defeating the constitution that open discussion of Know-Nothings first appeared in the paper. In fact, the growth of the American Party was troubling enough to a certain "Excelsior" as early as March of 1854 to prompt him to write a letter, entitled "Know Nothings," in which he began: "Young man, beware how you connect yourself with a society whose object is far from a christian one -- whose influences are as poisonous to a civilized community as are drugs to a man's system."³² "Excelsior's" article prompted a letter from "Tom Muddie," apparently a pseudonym for a Know-Nothing insider, who responded with a vicious attack: "Let us draw a portrait of a man, who, we think, would write as [Excelsior] did. . . . Well, he has a thin pointed nose, sunken eyes, large mouth, long ears (a la jackass). . . ." Muddie continued in this manner for an entire paragraph, ending: "I will close by whispering in his ear, the know nothings are around and so is Tom Muddie."³³

These letters show that, in Quincy at least, knowledge and discussion of the Know-Nothings was quite open. Moreover, by the autumn of 1854 even Quincy's upper crust was aware of the secret society's potency. Despite Baum's statement that "the papers of diarists and letter writers in Massachusetts during the period rarely give any hint that nativism was more than a ripple on the surface," Charles Francis Adams' diary shows that by September of 1854 he was

30. Baum, "Realignment," p. 962.

31. Shapiro, "Dilemma," p. 224.

32. *Patriot*, March 18, 1854.

33. *Ibid.*, April 15, 1854.

Rise and Fall of the Know-Nothings in Quincy

apprehensive about the Know-Nothings.³⁴ On September 23, he wrote: "In the street I met with F. W. Bird" and had a "conversation with him on the political prospects, which he considered exceedingly gloomy, and not without justice. He apprehends much from the influence of the new society."³⁵ Adams even appears to have known who the leaders of the American Party in Quincy were. While he was uncertain in September as to whether the American Party would choose to ally itself with Henry Wilson on the Free Soil ticket, he wrote in his entry of November 11: "I asked Mr. [Wyman] Abercrombie [who was elected to the General Court from Quincy as a Know-Nothing in 1854] what the probable course of the new order would be. He said that he had no doubt they would run their own tickets."³⁶ Prior to the landslide of 1854, then, Quincy's elite appears to have been well aware of the threat posed by the American Party, and even to have had access to its leadership.

Debate on the Irish continued, and intensified, in the *Patriot* throughout the fall of 1854, though much of it was either ridiculously cryptic or absolutely incoherent. Nonetheless, as the November election drew near, more reasoned letters began to appear from both sides. The most articulate spokesman for the Catholic cause was "Ciare," who in October described the Know-Nothings as hypocritical and anti-democratic. "They urge against the Catholics that their system is secret," he said, "therefore they form a secret society. . . . The theory of our political institutions is that people are capable of self-government, that they can decide who are fit and proper men for office, and that they have sufficient virtue to choose such men, therefore the know-nothings do not submit their candidates to public criticism, nor make known even their names to the whole people."³⁷

"Tom Muddie," for his part, in a jeremiad which appeared in the last issue of the *Patriot* printed before the election, wrote with uncharacteristic clarity about his concerns. For this reason, the article deserves attention as an insight into the pre-election grievances of Quincy's Know-Nothings. Six major points can be distilled from this letter, and five are clearly anti-Catholic: [1] "Our foreign pauper law

34. Baum, "Realignment," p. 961.

35. Charles Francis Adams Diary, September 23, 1854, microfilm reel 73, Adams Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.

36. *Ibid.*, November 11, 1854.

37. *Patriot*, October 21, 1854.

is loose" and "Massachusetts has more foreign paupers than . . . New York and Pennsylvania together." Therefore [2], "our state tax of \$300,000 has been brought upon us by foreign paupers" ("Are not three-fourths Catholic?" he asked.). Moreover [3], "look at the fat, sleek priests, who build splendid cathedrals and churches . . . while we poor, good-natured Americans are taking care of their criminals and paupers. What makes matters worse, is the fact that [4] they . . . are striving to take the political power of the country in their own hands." Also [5], "our naturalization laws are wrong (What American wants his vote balanced by that of a newly imported Irishman?)." Finally [6], "our military laws are wrong (Who wants to do duty by the side of an ignorant Greek?)."³⁸

These were the Know-Nothing concerns, at least as enumerated by "Tom Muddie" on the eve of the election. It would also appear from this letter that he still was angry about the defeat of the previous year. He implicitly referred to the referendum vote when he predicted that in 1854 "the old Bay State will be redeemed from the hands of the few, self-constituted, almighty men; office-seeking, foreign-vote-buying demagogues." He concluded his letter with a prophetic flourish: "Depend on it, brothers, if we do our duty -- and I know we shall -- we shall give the foe a perfect Waterloo defeat."³⁹

In November of 1854, the American Party swept the Massachusetts elections in a monumental landslide. In Quincy, Know-Nothing candidates also won every elected town office in March of 1855.⁴⁰ This sweep, from local roots to the highest branches of state government, was an astonishing achievement for a party which was less than a year old. As the following table shows, the Know-Nothing victory was so potent that it shattered recent voting patterns in Quincy.

38. *Ibid.*, November 11, 1854.

39. *Ibid.*

40. *Ibid.*, March 5, 1855.

Rise and Fall of the Know-Nothings in Quincy

TABLE A: QUINCY GUBERNATORIAL VOTE FOR MAJOR PARTIES (BY PERCENTAGES)⁴¹

Year	Know-Nothing	Whig	Democrat	Free Soil	Coalition
1847		48.0	43.0		
1849		48.0	28.5	23.0	
1850		46.0	32.0	21.0	
1851		45.0	37.0	N/A	
1852		40.8	26.8	N/A	32.0
1853		44.0	26.0	19.0	
1854	79.6	6.4	1.7		

This table dramatically reveals the scale of the Know-Nothing achievement in Quincy. "Tom Muddie" could not have been more accurate when he predicted "a perfect Waterloo defeat" for the American Party's competitors. Quincy's Whig, Democratic, and Free Soil parties were decimated by the Know-Nothings of 1854.

While Oscar Handlin, in *Boston's Immigrants*, states that "everywhere the success of the [American] party rested upon thousands of new men drawn into politics for the first time," speaking of an eight percent increase in the number of voters, the evidence in Quincy indicates that there *was* an increase in voters, but that the landslide vote certainly cannot be attributed to those new voters.⁴² If the Know-Nothings were outsiders who had not been active voters until swept up in the nativism of 1854, one would expect a continuation in 1854 of the relatively stable voting pattern for Whigs, Democrats, and Free Soilers which had marked the years from 1847 to 1853. Moreover, the new Know-Nothing voters would have caused a great surge in overall voter registration. Neither was the case in Quincy. While 1854 overall voter turnout was well within Quincy norms, Table A shows that the other parties experienced a devastating loss of support. Quincy's Know-Nothings, then, were defectors who had been active in other major parties in town.

41. Voting results compiled from Quincy Town Records, Vols 3-5, 1836-1879, microfilm reel 845727. Only major parties are presented, and therefore percentages in the table do not total one hundred percent. Reliable voting results could not be found for 1848.

42. Oscar Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants, 1790-1865: A Study in Acculturation* (New York, 1972), p. 201.

Indeed, there is ample evidence in Quincy of Know-Nothings who in previous years had been identified with each of the three major parties. The two state representatives elected from Quincy in 1854, for instance, were a former Whig and a former Democrat.⁴³ In addition, Charles Francis Adams wrote in his diary on November 15, 1854, that at the train station he "met several of the new society in a state of extraordinary exultation at their political victory -- the peculiarity of which was that most of them were old Whigs rejoicing at the downfall of their associates of last year."⁴⁴ Adams, moreover, noted on the previous day that concerning his own Free Soil party, "four-fifths . . . has left the standard of freedom to enlist itself against a shadow."⁴⁵

Certainly the referendum vote of 1853 was a key element in this mass defection. Democrats and Free Soilers, frightened and bitter over the Catholic vote against the referendum, may well have been attracted to a party which promised to deal firmly with the Irish. Moreover, many Whigs also may well have shared in the anti-Catholic mood which pervaded 1854, and may have believed that their party had, indeed, "bought" the Catholic vote, or at least felt uneasy with an alliance between their party and the Catholics.

When the results came in, "Muddie" was beside himself with joy. "What a time, hurrah 'everybody'. Hail Columbia, yankee land, yankee doodle dandy. What's the noise-cannon firing, fireworks burning -- hip, hip, hurrah. What in the world ails the boys? Are they crazy? Oh -- ah -- we see, -- the ignorant 'know-nothings' and quiet 'do-somethings' have gained a victory. The allied forces have melted before them like dew before the sun."⁴⁶ Charles Francis Adams, as might be expected, was despondent. On the day after the election, he wrote in his diary that "there has been no revolution so complete since the organization of the government. The consequences

43. Thomas C. Webb had run for the General Court as a Whig in 1853, while Wyman Abercrombie had run for the same position on a Coalition ticket in 1852 and on the Democratic ticket in 1853.

44. Adams Diary, November 15, 1854.

45. *Ibid.*, November 14, 1854.

46. *Patriot*, November 18, 1854.

Rise and Fall of the Know-Nothings in Quincy

can scarcely at this time be foreseen. To the Anti-slavery movement they can scarcely fail to be disastrous."⁴⁷

The elections of 1854 put the American Party solidly in power in Massachusetts. In the election's wake, Irish Catholics feared the actions that Know-Nothing politicians might take. To some extent, these fears were realized. The state legislature in 1855 engaged in anti-Catholic activities which at times made a mockery of civil liberties. "Certainly the most notorious event was the appointment of a joint Nunnery Committee to travel about the state at state expense to learn at first hand what went on in Roman Catholic convents. The committee . . . descended on the convents unannounced. The investigators poked into closets and looked under beds -- and in one case into a bed, where a young girl was lying ill. Though the committee numbered seven, a group of eighteen turned up to investigate the Catholic girls' school of Roxbury."⁴⁸.)

While this pathetic sort of harassment took place in 1855, it is surprising, given the rhetoric of the previous year, that there was actually very little of it. The ultimate irony of the American Party in Massachusetts is that up to the 1854 election, while its sole platform consisted of narrow-minded bigotry, the actions of its officials in 1855 showed a shift of focus toward reform legislation. The reactionary American Party, in short, became the vehicle for progressive working-class reform.

The explanation for this paradox apparently lies in the socio-economic status of those who were attracted to the American Party. In this regard, it is helpful to analyze the Quincy Know-Nothings who held state and local offices in 1855 in the context of major economic strata in town. Table B shows a breakdown by wealth class of a random sample taken from Quincy's census manuscripts of 1850, while Table C places the fifteen Know-Nothing officials who appeared in Quincy's 1850 census into these categories.

47. Adams Diary, November 14, 1854.

48. Purdy, "Legislature," pp. 84-85; for a thorough description of the Nunnery Committee, see John R. Mulkern, "Scandal Behind the Convent Walls: The Know-Nothing Nunnery Committee of 1855," Historical Journal of Massachusetts, XI (January 1983), pp. 22-34; see also Ronald P. Formisano, The Transformation of Political Culture: Massachusetts Parties, 1790s-1840s (New York, 1983), pp. 331-343.

TABLE B
REAL ESTATE OWNED BY A SAMPLE OF
TEN PERCENT OF QUINCY'S ADULT MALES (1850)⁴⁹

WEALTH CLASS	REAL ESTATE OWNED
0 TO 64 PERCENT	\$0
64 TO 74 PERCENT	\$60 TO \$ 800
74 TO 90 PERCENT	\$1,000 TO \$ 2,000
90 TO 100 PERCENT	\$2,500 TO \$40,000

TABLE C
ECONOMIC STANDING OF 1855 KNOW-NOTHING OFFICIALS⁵⁰

WEALTH CLASS	OCCUPATION	REAL ESTATE OWNED
0 TO 64 Percent	Boot manufacturer	\$0
	Boot maker	\$0
64 to 74 percent	Clergyman	\$600
	Gentleman	\$800
74 to 90 percent	Stone cutter	\$1,000
	Stone cutter	\$1,000
	Paper hanger	\$1,000
	Butcher	\$1,400
	Merchant	\$2,000
	Book Binder	\$2,000
	Cabinet maker	\$2,000
90 to 100 percent	Stone contractor	\$2,500
	Shoe/leather dealer	\$3,500
	Yeoman	\$4,000
	Yeoman	\$6,000

49. Compiled and calculated from Manuscript census of the United States, 1850. Tax records would provide a more accurate basis for analyzing wealth, but Quincy's tax records for this period have been lost.

50. Compiled and calculated from Manuscript census of the United States, 1850.

Rise and Fall of the Know-Nothings in Quincy

It is clear from these tables that Quincy's Know-Nothing leadership consisted of self-employed craftsmen, small manufacturers, petty merchants, and farmers. Although some of them owned property, it is clear that they were drawn from a more middle-class, non-professional element than the usual city officials. This was true statewide, as well. "The majority of the [state] legislature consisted of small property holders . . . [and] a larger than normal number of propertyless members in 1855. . . . The lawyers who represented the kind of businessmen C. F. Adams knew personally were not among its members."⁵¹ Know-Nothingism, then, attracted an overwhelmingly "working-class" native-American membership, with working-class being defined to include members of the middle-class.⁵² This is not surprising, when one considers that the working-class would have been most threatened by a flood of unskilled labor. Significantly, the defections to the American Party in 1854 were too rapid for the traditional upper-class political elite to be able to wrest control of the new society. As a result, the Know-Nothing leaders in 1855 were laborers, and once in power they quickly realized their opportunity to address local concerns of the working-class which had hitherto been ignored by the other parties.

"The Whigs worried about the relation of their mills to their Southern raw material sources, [while] the Free Soilers concerned themselves entirely with national issues, and the Democrats played presidential games."⁵³ The Know-Nothings, on the other hand, directed their energies to passing legislation to help the common people of Massachusetts. For example:

the legislature abolished imprisonment for debt except in cases where the debtor fraudulently concealed some of his property. . . . The House passed a bill to benefit the horseless and carriageless by removing the toll from the Charles River Bridge for foot passengers. In the Senate a bill was introduced to provide for courts to appoint counsel for destitute prisoners. . . . A bill to revive the mandatory secret ballot was defeated only by

51. Purdy, "Legislature," pp. 228-229.

52. See Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic* (New York, 1984) for a definition of the working-class which includes this constituency.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 234.

the vote of the president in the Senate after a tie, and a bill for the repeal of the death penalty reached a second reading in both houses.⁵⁴

In fact, the state legislature proved to be so reform-oriented "the [Boston] *Atlas* complained on January 29, 1855 that 'they believe there is no evil under the sun that legislation cannot touch.'⁵⁵

At the local level, town officials in Quincy proved to be concerned with concrete improvements in public services. Never once was mention of the Irish entered in the minutes of 1855 town meetings. Instead, the major issues addressed by Know-Nothing officials in Quincy were to sell an antiquated school house, to investigate a lot of land as a potential site for a new school, to establish an armory for the "Niagara Engine," a new piece of fire-fighting equipment, and to buy two-hundred feet of hose for the fire department.⁵⁶

The Know-Nothings who swept into power on the wave of nativism following the referendum defeat, proved far tamer than the fevered rhetoric of 1854 would have suggested. This was due to the fact that the upper-class political leadership of previous years had been unexpectedly shunted aside by the groundswell of 1854, and working-class men found themselves in a position to pass long-desired reforms at the state level and to improve public services for the citizenry at the local level. As a result, the Irish issue, while obviously not forgotten (as evidenced by the Nunnery Committee), became of lesser importance to the Know-Nothing representatives in 1855.

It is possible that if it had survived long enough, the American Party would have been remembered most as a progressive party. It is also possible that the American Party would have become an anti-slavery party. This is not as odd an assertion as it may appear to be. The 1855 legislature did show concern over the Fugitive Slave Law ("whose execution the people of Boston had witnessed and the men of Worcester had tried to prevent"), passing "resolutions for the governor to remove Judge Loring who had presided at fugitive slave

54. *Ibid.*, pp. 95-97.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 235.

56. Quincy Town Records.

Rise and Fall of the Know-Nothings in Quincy

cases in Boston."⁵⁷ Indeed, "some Free Soilers, like Henry Wilson, genuinely hoped to make Know-Nothingism the vehicle for a strong antislavery program."⁵⁸

Despite the great potential shown in 1855, the American Party proved to be short-lived, unable to build upon the gains of 1854. This was largely due to the fact that the party's inexperienced leadership was unable to compete with the old political hands of other parties, many of whom coalesced around the Republican Party in the late 1850s. Consequently, the American Party showed a steady decline after its 1854 victory. Table D shows the growth of the newly-established Republican Party in Quincy, until it eclipsed the American Party in 1858.⁵⁹

TABLE D
PERCENT OF QUINCY GUBERNATORIAL VOTE, 1854 TO 1858

	1854	1855	1856	1857	1858
Know-Nothing	79.6	56.0	50.5	44.3	27.9
Democrat	1.7	27.5	28.5	27.9	35.0
Republican	1.0	12.0	N/A	27.9	37.0

Even in its decline, the American Party proved to have stronger support in Quincy than in the state as a whole. "Abraham Lincoln and [John] Andrew polled over sixty percent of the popular vote for President and governor respectively in Massachusetts in 1860" while, in Quincy, Lincoln received only forty-eight percent and Andrew got only 46.5 percent.⁶⁰ Conversely, Bell, the Bell-Everett ticket's candidate for president in 1860 (seventy percent of whose votes Baum estimates came from 1854 Know-Nothings), fared better

57. Purdy, "Legislature," p. 234.

58. Baum, "Realignment," p. 961. In this regard, an unsigned letter appeared in the Patriot of December 2, 1854, which included the following: "There is a marked similarity between some of the teachings of the Romish church and the doctrine taught by the Protestant pro-slavery church, to her dark-complexioned converts, which fact accounts for the unity of action of the two churches, in all matters relating to the enthrallment of the mind or bodies of men, or the enslavement of both."

59. Compiled from Quincy Town Records, reel 845727. The Republicans ran no candidate for governor in 1856.

60. Baum, "Realignment," p. 977; Quincy Town Records.

in Quincy than he did statewide. While Bell "received barely 13 percent of the state's popular vote for President in 1860," in Quincy he received twenty-four percent of the vote.⁶¹ However, while the American Party died harder and slower in Quincy than in Massachusetts as a whole, even there it quickly faded from the political scene.

Quincy Know-Nothingism arose in the anti-Catholic hysteria following the defeat of the 1853 referendum. The potency of the reaction to the referendum's defeat was due to the fact that concern over the influx of unskilled Irish had been building for years. The Catholic swing vote of 1853 merely opened the floodgates of nativism. Know-Nothingism grew rapidly in 1854, attracting laborers from all parties who perceived an economic as well as a social and religious threat in the Irish Catholic immigration. As a result this groundswell bypassed the state's political elite, and the Know-Nothing legislators quickly perceived in 1855 that they had a unique opportunity to pass long-desired legislation to benefit workers, their self-interest thus being better served than by focusing on anti-Catholic actions.

The Know-Nothings, then, cannot be dismissed as mere ignorant bigots who by some accident of history, some lapse of democratic sanity, gained brief prominence. The American Party in 1854 enjoyed the support of an overwhelming number of politically-active people in Quincy who felt legitimate concern over the implications to themselves and the life they had known of unchecked Irish immigration. Moreover, the American Party, as has been shown, had more dimensions than has often been supposed, supporting progressive measures and even flirting with an anti-slavery Stance.

61. Baum, "Realignment," p. 979; Quincy Town Records.

EMERSON AND THE CAMPAIGN OF 1851

Leonard G. Gougeon

Generally speaking, Ralph Waldo Emerson did not hold politics or politicians in high esteem. In 1844 the Transcendental poet, philosopher, and social reformer said of politics, in his essay by that name, "virtuous men will not rely on political agents. They have found out the deleterious effects of political association."¹ Later he would say of politicians, "Senators and presidents have climbed so high with pain enough, not because they think the place specially agreeable, but as an apology for real worth, and to vindicate their manhood in our eyes. . . . Surely nobody would be a charlatan, who could afford to be sincere."²

Despite this distinctly negative attitude, however, in the spring of 1851 Emerson did consent to become an active political campaigner for John Gorham Palfrey, Congressional Free Soil candidate from Emerson's own Middlesex District. Emerson spoke on at least nine separate occasions while "stumping" for Palfrey, using his vitriolic antislavery address, "The Fugitive Slave Law," as his text. It was his first and only foray into the realm of partisan politics and it brought him the wrath of the editorial hatchet men and political ruffians who inhabited the somewhat tawdry realm of Massachusetts party politics at the time.

An article in the *Boston Semi-Weekly Advertiser* thoroughly castigated the gentle bard for everything from his treasonous disunion sentiments to his pantheistic religious views, and warned the reading public that Emerson was not "a reliable authority on questions of morals, or a safe guide in the affairs of life."³ An article in the *Liberator* on the same date described an effort on the part of certain "rowdies" to upset Emerson's campaign presentation in Cambridge, where "a considerable body of students from Harvard College did

1. The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. by Edward Waldo Emerson (Boston 1903-1904), XI: 138.

2. *Ibid.*, III: 218.

3. Boston Semi-Weekly Advertiser, May 23, 1851.