

## The Philadelphia Nativists Riots

On Friday, May 3, 1844, the American Nativist Party, (aka American Republican Party), set up a platform in the almost one hundred percent Irish Third Ward of Kensington, a Philadelphia suburb. Speakers delivered tirades against the Irish, the Pope, the Catholic Church, and the immigrants. The theme was that "a set of citizens, German and Irish, wanted to get the Constitution of the U. S. into their own hands and sell it to a foreign power. " The crowd jeered and began to tear down the platform. The Nativists retreated temporarily.

Philadelphia was a hotbed of nativism for years. The American Nativist Party allied itself with the American Protestant Association in propagating a conspiracy theory: the Pope was planning to take over America. The Irish were considered the most dangerous immigrants since they had demonstrated loyalty to the Pope through centuries of persecution and might rise on a signal from Rome for either a bloody conquest or a political takeover at the ballot box.

Leaving the most virulent anti-Catholic rhetoric to some evangelical Protestant clergy in the American Protestant Association/ the American Nativist Party claimed that its overriding concern was good government. It opposed immigrants only because they corrupted the republican principles of the founding fathers. The Nativists drafted a three-plank party platform:

- (1 ) to extend the period of naturalization to twenty-one years;
- (2) to elect only native born to all offices;
- (3) to reject foreign interference in all institutions, social, religious, and political.

The Nativists who retreated from Kensington on May 3 returned on May 6, now three thousand strong. Speakers raised the flag and ranted about foreign religious influence in politics. Few Irish were in attendance since they had been told at Sunday Mass to go about their business and avoid confrontation. When a speaker called the Irish "scum unloaded on American wharfs," the only disruption was humorous: an Irish carter, with an innocent air, dumped a load of dirt a dozen feet from the platform.

Heavy rain sent the crowd scurrying around the corner to take shelter in Nanny Goat Market. When a speaker jumped onto a stall and continued with inflammatory remarks, fighting broke out. The odds of only 30 Irish against 3000 Nativist were improved when other Irish started sniping from buildings. Many were injured on both sides and two Nativists were fatally wounded.

The sheriff and his deputies, who carried only clubs, not guns, were ineffective. The Nativists broke into houses, tore apart furniture, destroyed buildings, beat residents, and drove Irish families into the woods at night. Two more Nativists were killed during attacks on a seminary and a church.

The next day the Nativist press called on all good Americans to defend themselves against the "the bloody hand of the Pope." Handbills asked every Nativist to come prepared to defend himself. The Nativists again marched on Kensington and gunfire was met with gunfire. The invaders spent the night burning down houses block by block. On Wednesday they brought their arson tactics to the weavers' streets. Some Irish Protestant weavers, who had first sided with their brothers of the loom rather than their brothers of the Orange

Lodge, had second thoughts. To protect their homes and shops, and to show that they were "patriots," they displayed American flags and Native American insignia in their windows.

Flushed with victory, the Nativists again attacked and burned to the ground St. Michael's Church and rectory, as well as a convent of the Sisters of Charity. They cheered a falling steeple, while a fife and drum group played "Boyne Water. " With little left to burn in Kensington, they marched back to Philadelphia and burned down St. Augustine's Church. On the way they passed a German Catholic Church and never touched it.

Rioting in Irish Kensington was one thing, but rioting in elite Philadelphia was another, especially when the Mayor was stoned as he tried to calm the mobs. Martial law was enforced for a week. Troops guarded churches.

Dublin-born Bishop Francis Kenrick tried to defuse the situation by closing all churches on the Sunday after the attacks. Declaring that it was better to let all churches burn than shed one drop of blood, he counseled Catholics to take no action and offer no resistance. He also asked his flock to trust the better instincts of the government leaders who were making arrests and having jury trials. The bishop had illusions. The all non-Irish and non-Catholic juries acquitted every Nativist and convicted Irish Catholics. The grand jury blamed the Irish for the riots; the alien and ignorant customs of the lowborn Irish were a provocation to good clean-living Americans.

Following several threats from hostile crowds, the parishioners of St. Philip Neri Church in Southwark, another Philadelphia suburb, got permission from the governor to form a militia and draw twenty muskets from the arsenal. Thousands of enraged nativists marched on Southwark a day after they had shown their strength with a gigantic July 4 parade; a parade that was very pro-American, very anti-Irish, and very anti-Catholic.

St. Philip's was doomed. The sheriff confiscated the arms of its Irish defenders. He didn't dare confiscate the arms of the Nativists, or the cannons they brought from the docks. The sheriff accepted the offer of the Nativist leaders to guard the church if the defenders left. This was like letting the fox guard the chickens.

The Irish were badly beaten as they were evacuated. The crowds thronged in, set fires, slashed holy pictures, destroyed valuable paintings, and desecrated holy objects. The militia general who belatedly tried to stop the destruction had his troops fired on and killed. A later commission of inquiry blamed the general for favoring immigrants and trampling on the rights of native Americans.

As the attacks continued in Philadelphia, Nativists threatened New York City. Tyrone-born Bishop John Hughes told the Nativist Mayor that he was sending Irish volunteers to defend the churches and that, if one Catholic church was burned, "New York would be another Moscow." "Dagger-John" was known to be a man of his word and no churches were burned.

Yet, the Nativists were not defeated. Winning control in eastern cities, they reformed in the 1850's as the Know-Nothings. The Party itself died out, but Nativist sentiments did not. The heirs of the Nativists can be found today in groups that are anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant, and anti-Irish.

(written by Margaret E. Fitzgerald, PhD & originally printed in 1992)

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