

VERMONT

*The
Proceedings of the
Vermont Historical Society*

HISTORY



SUMMER 1993

VOL. 61, No. 3



The Press and the Pulpit: Nativist Voices in Burlington and Middlebury, 1853–1860

Antebellum nativist sentiments in Burlington and Middlebury manifested themselves in ways atypical of many other New England towns.

By LUISA SPENCER FINBERG

The mass influx of Irish immigrants to America in the decades immediately preceding the Civil War prompted a relatively short-lived but severe political and social reaction throughout the northeastern United States. Previous decades had exhibited sporadic anti-Catholic hostility, but the arrival of hundreds of thousands of Irish immigrants in American cities from 1848 through 1850 provoked a new era of panic and antagonism. One significant manifestation of the nativist movement was the American party—popularly known as the Know-Nothings—that flourished between 1853 and 1855, threatening to overturn traditional party politics. Operating as a secret society, the Know-Nothings pledged to preserve Protestant values, to thwart papal influence, and to restrict immigration.¹

The nativist response to Irish Catholic immigrants was rooted in and fueled by evangelical Protestantism and political opportunism, but regional and local factors often accounted for the degree of hostility demonstrated toward Irish Catholics. In the Vermont towns of Middlebury and Burlington, the nativist response was remarkably tame compared with the tumult that occurred elsewhere in New England during the 1850s. Nonetheless, each town perceived the arrival of Irish Catholics as a threat to its traditions and its continued well-being. An examination of newspaper accounts and of town and church records suggests that the different reactions in Middlebury and Burlington to Irish immigrants can be

explained by local economic conditions and by the influence of individual political and religious personalities. The records also indicate that Catholicism, rather than immigration, was the preponderant issue.²

THE BURLINGTON PRESS AND BISHOP DE GOESBRIAND

While other towns maligned their immigrant populations through the press, Burlington newspapers chose to say almost nothing about local Catholics. By ignoring the important, even historic, personalities and events of the town's Catholic churches while at the same time exposing what the editors saw as Romish schemes to take over the nation and the world, the press perpetuated anti-Catholic sentiment without seriously alienating the town's much-needed immigrant labor force. Since Burlington's only hope for continued industrial growth lay with the immigrant laborers, the town was forced to temper its response.

On October 31, 1853, the *New York Daily Times* carried a front-page story describing the consecration of three Catholic bishops who would soon oversee the new dioceses of Brooklyn, New York; Newark, New Jersey; and Burlington, Vermont. It described the large crowds and the procession from Mulberry Street to Saint Patrick's Cathedral. It named the important church dignitaries and described their function in the elaborate pageant, and it included the full text of the sermon—running almost two columns—given by the papal nuncio, Monsignor Gaetano Bedini of Brazil.³

Affirming the importance of the event, the *New York Daily Tribune* also gave lengthy coverage to the “imposing ceremonies.” It described preparations for the event, where “the street about the Cathedral had been spread with fine tan bark . . . to protect [the procession] from being disturbed with the noise of vehicles on the pavement while the services were in progress.” Further on, the piece described Monsignor Bedini moving down the center aisle of the cathedral under a “crimson velvet canopy, nearly six feet square [and] lined with changeable green silk.”⁴

The consecration of Vermont's first bishop, Louis de Goesbriand, that October in New York was neither a last-minute affair nor a well-kept secret. Early in 1853, the First Plenary Council of Baltimore voted to install a diocese headquartered in Burlington. In July de Goesbriand was chosen to serve as bishop of Vermont.⁵ The consecration was scheduled to coincide with Monsignor Bedini's arrival in America, and local Catholic officials received the news within a few days. However, no mention of the appointment was made in the Burlington newspapers until almost six weeks later.

In 1853 the Burlington newspapers included the *Daily Free Press*, the *Burlington Courier* (a weekly), and the *Burlington Weekly Sentinel*.

Only the *Free Press* chose to cover the story and then just briefly. The September 5 edition noted that "the Pope, in his care of the world and 'the rest of mankind,' does not overlook Burlington it seems," and it identified de Goesbriand as the state's bishop designate.⁶ The *Courier* and *Sentinel* ignored the story entirely, never reporting on the appointment, the consecration, or the bishop's arrival in Burlington.

Free Press readers learned nothing more about de Goesbriand until October 22, when the paper misinformed them that his consecration would take place in New York the following day. The next *Free Press* account appeared on November 5, a week after the consecration, and in a brief paragraph the paper told of the price of admission to the ceremony (one dollar) and included a short but choice excerpt from the oath that de Goesbriand had taken: "Heretics, schismatics, and rebels to our said Lord, or his foresaid successors, I will to my power prosecute and oppose."⁷

Bishop de Goesbriand arrived in Burlington on November 6, and according to one Catholic newspaper he was greeted at the railroad station by a band, thousands of well-wishers who sang "Hail to the Chief," and a "ten pounder."⁸ In its "Religious Intelligence" column a week later, the *Free Press* described the crowd as a "large procession with music" and noted that the bishop had been installed the following Sunday "with much ceremony," but it did not mention de Goesbriand by name, nor did it say that he had been installed in Saint Mary's Church by Boston's well-known bishop, John Fitzpatrick, who had accompanied de Goesbriand on the trip from New York.⁹ Then the *Free Press* coverage ended, and the paper made no further mention of de Goesbriand or the Catholic parish until two years later.

The only other local press coverage of the events came in the *Burlington Courier* on November 24, when the paper spoke out against the treatment one "curious" observer had received when he had attended the installation ceremony at Saint Mary's Church on November 7. The editorial did not explain the significance of the ceremony, nor did it mention de Goesbriand or his status as Vermont's first Catholic bishop.

In a letter to the *Courier* editor, I. S. Allen wrote that out of curiosity he had gone to see de Goesbriand's installation. As he stood in the vestibule the bishop entered the church, and when Allen did not show proper deference by removing his hat, a man named McWilliams knocked it off his head. Allen said that he picked up the hat, put it back on, and thereafter he received "a violent blow on the head. . . . Four or five others took hold of me and attempted to put me out the entry, but they did not succeed. They tore my clothes and gave me some blows." Allen closed his letter with a question to the readership:

Now I submit to the public whether such an outrage upon a peaceable citizen, ought to pass unnoticed; and whether the community will allow themselves to be insulted and abused whenever it may suit the caprice of the Catholic Church. Perhaps it might do in places like Montreal or Quebec, where the laws are executed according to Catholic views, but I doubt much whether citizens of this Republic, in this Nineteenth Century, will tamely submit to such treatment, though they should refuse to uncover their heads to even a Catholic Bishop.¹⁰

Alongside Allen's letter ran an editorial that opened with an explanation of the *Courier's* policy not to discuss religious topics. "We neither commence, conduct or permit the discussion of any points or questions strictly sectarian or merely ecclesiastical in this paper." But, said the paper, the substance of Allen's complaint was political, not religious.

It may be said that Mr. Allen went to the Roman Catholic Church from no good motive. Mr. A. was influenced by "curiosity." But suppose he went there from the worst motives. His actions are all that any human tribunal can touch. And when he breaks the law he will answer to the law. But he can never answer to any man or set of men in their individual capacity. Nor can all the Churches and Bishops in Christendom confer the right or power to remove a man's hat on American soil.¹¹

Allen's and the *Courier's* hostility toward Catholicism was only thinly veiled as "political" commentary. The church ceremony was a private affair, and though Allen was entitled to stage his protest out on the street, he had no civil right to do so in the church. The arguments defending Allen's right to wear his hat were only a pretext for exposing the presumed arrogance of Romanism and the threat it posed to American civil liberties. But this antagonism was mixed with fear, and the editorial questioned "not whether we shall tolerate the *Roman Catholics*, but whether they will tolerate us."

Much of the anxiety about a Catholic takeover related to concerns over the area's growing immigrant population. In 1850 the total population for Burlington-Colchester stood at 10,160, which included 3,850 (37.9 percent) Irish or French-Canadian immigrants.¹² Many of the French Canadians emigrated from Quebec to the Burlington area to escape poor crop production, overpopulation, low pay, and lack of industrial opportunities.¹³ Irish immigrants, who poured into American ports in the late 1840s as a result of the potato famine, came to Vermont as "pick and shovel" workers for the state's expanding railway network.¹⁴

Although both immigrant groups were largely Catholic, they did not function as a single, cohesive religious community. Since many of the French Canadians spoke only French, they were unable to take an active part in a church where the priest spoke only English. In 1851 the

congregation divided. The French Canadians left Saint Mary's Church to establish the parish of Saint Joseph, but until the arrival of the bilingual Bishop de Goesbriand in 1853, they were forced to rely on French-speaking lay preachers.¹⁵ This division in Burlington's Catholic community probably helped to allay native fears about the growing Catholic population. With the Catholics divided along cultural lines, they were viewed as distinct and therefore as posing no collective threat.

While town residents often blamed the growing burden of public assistance on immigrants and held them accountable for the town's intemperance problem, Burlington relied on its immigrants. Their presence alone accounted for the town's stable population (in the face of a statewide decline), and they were the labor power that lay behind the town's economic resurgence. As a harbor town with rail links to other major eastern cities, Burlington promised to become a major production and distribution center for lumber and its derivative industries. Because there were few native workers, the immigrant labor force became a critical element in Burlington's plans for continued prosperity.

When de Goesbriand arrived in 1853, native businessmen may have feared that their easy access to labor power among Catholic immigrants would be threatened: de Goesbriand was French by birth, but his appearance in Burlington with Bishop Fitzpatrick signaled his acceptance among Irish Catholics. The unification of Burlington Catholics under the watchful eye of a new bishop may have sent a message to local businessmen that things were about to change. Perhaps in an effort to thwart any success that de Goesbriand might have, town newspapers stopped reporting on local Catholic affairs.

Almost immediately after his arrival in Burlington, de Goesbriand took steps to encourage the Catholic community to take care of its own. The following spring he established Saint Joseph's Orphanage, which by September housed 148 children. By the next year the orphanage also served as a parochial school and a home for the aged and infirm.¹⁶

The bishop also struck out at Catholic intemperance. One visitor to Burlington who heard de Goesbriand preach recalled that it was

a most eloquent sermon [to the effect that] . . . something more than the Maine Law was required to keep the people sober. He had been preaching against intemperance on the previous Sunday, and now recapitulated. . . . He told them it was a vice that existed to a fearful and lamentable extent, that he had warned them long and remonstrated with them both publicly and privately, and if they still persisted he would denounce them guilty by name in the church. [He had recently denied one of the congregation] . . . the rites of Christian burial [because he had become a victim of intemperance.]¹⁷

It appears that de Goesbriand's first acts were designed to placate

Burlington natives. Since drunkenness and poverty were the most common complaints heard about the Catholic immigrants, he established a policy and a solution for each problem. With the opening of the Saint Joseph home, sick, elderly, and poor Catholic immigrants would no longer strain the town's public assistance programs, and through the bishop's initiation of a strict policy on drunkenness, the church could now coerce intemperate Catholics into obeying the liquor law. What non-Catholic residents knew of these measures, how they reacted to them, and whether they were effective is unclear.

While Burlington residents read nothing about local Catholics in the town newspapers, they learned a great deal about international Catholic conspiracies, popish plots to take over other American cities, the growing strength of the Roman church, and Protestant victories over Catholicism. Although the *Courier* had ceased publication early in 1854 and the *Sentinel* refused to discuss religion, the *Free Press* used its weekly "Religious Intelligence" column to inform its readers of Catholic and other religious affairs. From the weeks following de Goesbriand's arrival through mid-1855, the column regularly contained at least one—and often several—items on Catholicism.

From November 12 to December 31, 1853, the *Free Press* carried no fewer than fifteen items about the successes and failures of Catholicism elsewhere in the world. Burlington readers learned about Catholic boys in Maine who broke into a public school and destroyed Bibles, and they read about a Massachusetts man who had "publicly renounced Romanism and conveyed to the [Protestant Episcopal] Church the establishment long known as the Roman Catholic Orphan Asylum."¹⁸ On November 26 the paper addressed the strength of the Unitarian church in Boston: with twenty parishes, the paper explained, Unitarians held the preponderance "of wealth and social power" of that city. During December the *Free Press* reported on secret American Catholic societies organized by the pope and about a new Irish newspaper promoting "civil and intellectual elevation of the Irish, irrespective of priestly dictation." The paper also noted that Protestantism was growing faster than Catholicism in Canada; told of the twenty-four Catholic churches in New York and of the forty-two thousand Catholic clergymen in France; listed the number of Catholic convents, nunneries, and monasteries in Ireland; and confirmed that "32,000 persons [had] left the Romish Church in Ireland and become members of the Protestant Churches" during the previous six and a half years.¹⁹

One story that received extensive coverage in both the *Courier* and *Free Press* concerned a Catholic parish in Buffalo, New York. When the governing body of that church refused to deed church property over to

the diocese, the entire congregation was excommunicated. In June 1854 the *Free Press* ran excerpts from a Buffalo paper's reaction to the affair. "Ah, John, Bishop of Buffalo will find out, if he lives long, that the yoke which galls the neck of Roman Catholic Laity in Europe is very much weakened by the influence of an American atmosphere. It will grow weaker from year to year," the paper predicted, in spite of the efforts of the pope and the Jesuits. The *Free Press* also carried the text of the Bishop's excommunication order.²⁰

During the years of silence on local Catholic issues, the *Free Press* also frequently quoted from Vermont native and Catholic convert Orestes Brownson's *Quarterly Review*. Although many Catholics did not subscribe to Brownson's outspoken style, nativists frequently reprinted his essays because the writings confirmed their worst suspicions of Romish schemes. A typical Brownson quotation appeared in the *Free Press* in July 1854: "In real well-being, in the refinements of life, in the culture of the soul, in the higher civilization, or in true national and individual virtue and happiness we are far below the lowest Catholic state."²¹ In another piece the *Free Press* reported that Brownson had refused to debate St. Louis clergymen because, as he explained, his agreeing to do so would have indicated that "catholicity and Protestantism in some sense stand on the same level—a cession to heresy and error, and an indignity to truth, of which, I trust in God, I shall never be guilty."²² The paper neglected to say that the group of clergymen numbered thirty and that their challenge to Brownson was part of a national program to draw out and discredit Catholic leaders.²³

Brownson presented an interesting dilemma to the Burlington press. Given the newspapers' proclivity for ignoring local Catholic personalities, it seems probable that Brownson, as a native Vermonter who no doubt embarrassed his Yankee compatriots, would have been ignored as well. But instead, the local press aggressively pursued Brownson, making a mockery of his life and philosophy. According to the *Free Press*, Brownson's fatal flaw was that he had "boxed the religious compass, has belonged to every sect which claims the name of Christian, and is now evidently nearly ripe for Boodism. It is high time that he should turn pagan."²⁴

Brownson had, in fact, affiliated himself with a variety of religious and political institutions before his conversion to Catholicism. Raised as a Presbyterian, Brownson left that church in 1824 to become a Universalist. Two years later he was ordained as a Universalist minister, but by 1830 he had withdrawn from that church as well because of his "increasingly liberal" interpretations of the power of Scripture and the "divinity of Christ." For a time he followed the socialist movement and

helped to organize the Workingman's party. In 1836 Brownson established his own church in a Boston working-class neighborhood, and from that pulpit he condemned both Protestantism and Catholicism in favor of "the Church of the Future." In 1838 he began publishing *Brownson's Quarterly Review*, through which he expressed increasingly vocal opposition to inherited wealth, popular sovereignty, and organized Christianity. Then in 1844 he converted to Catholicism. His political and religious about-face shocked many northeasterners who had considered him a part of the liberal New England tradition. Until his death in 1876, Brownson devoted himself to "an uncompromising assertion of the claims of the Catholic Church and to trenchant attacks upon his enemies."²⁵ By 1853 Brownson was so closely associated with what Burlington journalists viewed as Catholicism gone mad that the *Free Press* regularly reprinted his essays only to expose what they saw as the fallacies and insanity of his position. The paper used him as a straw man.

Between 1853 and 1855, the *Free Press* picked its way through national and international news and presented what was essentially a nativist view of how the Catholic church was threatening—or being overcome by—Protestantism. There was no positive element to their portrayal of Catholicism, and readers who took *Free Press* coverage at face value had great reason to fear de Goesbriand and the official recognition that Rome had given the local Catholic churches.

The only voice in defense of Catholics came in the *Burlington Weekly Sentinel*. The paper had been silent on local religious issues, but on March 9, 1854, it challenged a Montpelier paper's report on "popery":

We regard the fears of our worthy editorial brother as wholly gratuitous and groundless. . . . We do not consider the increase of catholicism in the United States as any ground for alarm or any reason for making a political issue upon it. So far as we know, the catholics in this country are quite generally peaceable, industrious, law-abiding citizens; they came here under a constitutional guaranty that their religious privileges shall not be interfered with, but shall enjoy like freedom with others. . . . As we understand the matter, all the catholics in this country ask, is to be let alone. This they have the right to demand and we are sorry that any disposition is manifested to interfere with them.²⁶

Although a weekly publication, the *Sentinel* served both as an advertiser and as a political journal of local, state, and national affairs. Since it competed with the *Free Press* for readership and remained in publication until 1868, the *Sentinel* was obviously palatable to at least some Burlington residents. Whether its readership agreed with this particular position is difficult to determine, but the *Sentinel* seems not to have suffered for its stand on Catholicism.

Burlington public opinion on Catholicism, on the growth of the local Catholic church, and on Bishop de Goesbriand must have been mixed during this time. Local newspapers seemed to indicate that while a fearful and aggressive attitude among residents predominated, there were others who saw no gain in attacking the Catholic church. The virtual silence of the press on local Catholic issues between late 1853 and the end of 1855 possibly also reflected community indecision on how the new bishop would influence Burlington affairs.

Burlington residents knew that other New Englanders perceived the Irish Catholic immigrant threat as cataclysmic, but they were also aware that Burlington's situation was different. While immigration had been heavy at the beginning of the decade, it had not created competition for jobs, and by 1860 the number of Irish Catholic immigrants had even declined.²⁷ The absence from Burlington papers of jokes or cartoons mocking "Paddy" and classifieds that excluded Catholics indicates that local concerns about immigrants differed from those of other northern cities.

Local press coverage of Catholic affairs outside Vermont mirrored the biased reporting found in many other New England newspapers of the time and affirmed that many Burlington natives disliked and feared Catholics. But the conspicuous, calculated silence of the press on local Catholic affairs revealed a greater fear: that the alienation or loss of the immigrant labor force could turn back the tide of Burlington's prosperity.

On December 8, 1855, the *Free Press* lifted its two-year ban. That day the paper reported that "the 'Festival of the Immaculate Conception' was celebrated today with imposing ceremonies in the Catholic Church. Pontifical Mass was performed by the Rt. Rev. Bishop de Goesbriand. . . . The Bishop is a good speaker. Rt. Rev. Bishop Rapp of Cleveland will officiate at the Catholic Church tomorrow."²⁸ Catholic coverage remained scant during the next decade, but the paper had ended its silence.²⁹

The local press reaction indicates that numerous considerations probably figured into Burlington's moderate nativist response. Hysteria generated elsewhere must have altered the way Burlington viewed its own Catholic immigrant community, but local economic concerns probably tempered that reaction. By maintaining silence in the newspapers, the Protestant community was able to protest the arrival of an official Catholic presence in Burlington without damaging its relationship with local Catholic immigrant workers.

NATIVISM AND THE KNOW-NOTHINGS IN THE MIDDLEBURY PRESS

Press coverage in the *Middlebury Register* largely reflected the changing opinions and political fortunes of its owner, Middlebury lawyer

J. H. Barrett, who acquired the paper in 1849. While Barrett was later identified as an officer of Vermont's Know-Nothing party, his political sentiments before 1855 are unclear. Items and subjects addressed in his paper between 1849 and 1854 do not suggest that he was unusually outspoken about Catholics or Irish immigrants. The stories before January 1855 reflect the typical fare of other state newspapers.

In 1850 a single story in the *Register* related the "heart-rending" situation created by the recent famine in Ireland, and another in 1851 described the horrors of Catholic nunneries. That latter story recounted how young women who were forced by their parents to "take the veil" were prohibited from seeing other human beings "excepting once a year, when, in the presence of the abbess, they may have an interview with their father or mother, but they must not tell the secrets of their prison house."³⁰ Nunneries had remained a popular topic for sensational news since the publishing of the 1834 anti-Catholic tract *Six Months in a Convent* and the rumors of Catholic kidnapping and abuse of young women that led to the burning of the Ursuline convent in Charlestown, Massachusetts, the same year.³¹

Such stories played to the American obsession with secret societies, which had grown out of the anti-Masonic movement of the 1830s. Catholic priests who read the mass "in a low voice and in Latin" were guilty, according to Vermont Episcopal bishop John Henry Hopkins, of effectually disguising "the pungent and bitter ingredients" of Catholicism and surreptitiously imposing them on an ignorant and unwitting congregation.³² By the 1850s, Catholics, Masons, and Mormons were jointly conceived to be a threat to the nation's social order because of their secrecy and their perceived opposition to justice and democracy. In fact, however, there existed few similarities among the three groups.³³ It is ironic that the same charges of secrecy and ritualism were later leveled against the Know-Nothings, the self-styled vanguard of native American rights.

Until early 1855, the only other *Register* story that referred to Catholicism — and then only indirectly — was an article that compared the oratory skills of Boston clergyman and nativist Theodore Parker with those of Orestes Brownson. The paper noted that but for Brownson's "changeableness," (a reference to his 1848 conversion to Catholicism), the Vermont-born journalist and polemicist ranked among the most forceful voices of the day. Just two years later, the *Register* would vilify Brownson for his powerful defense of the pope as the proper authority to decide "whether the Constitution of the country is or is not repugnant to the laws of God."³⁴

One other significant article appeared in the *Register* on April 12, 1854, in which the editors commented on the growth of the Know-Nothings

in New York. Noting that they were primarily an anti-Catholic organization and that their members engaged in such ritualistic practices as passwords and signs, the Middlebury editors condemned the group by predicting that if the Know-Nothing party continued its rapid growth and if "secret societies" like those were to "become the political powers in America, [then] we may well tremble for our liberties."³⁵

The first indication that the *Register* was assuming a new political posture appeared in the issue of January 17, 1855. After profusely praising the skills and intelligence of Massachusetts Know-Nothing governor Henry Gardner, the article spelled out many of the proposed state constitutional amendments that the governor supported. They included banning the use of any language other than English and the requirement of a twenty-one-year waiting period for naturalization.³⁶

Two weeks later, and after identifying two other Vermont papers as Know-Nothing organs, the *Register* applauded a recent editorial in the *Bennington Banner* that sympathized with Know-Nothing fears of foreign domination and papal control. Describing the *Banner's* position as "discriminating and sensible," the *Register* eased into its new position, without directly claiming any association with the Know-Nothings.³⁷

That same edition of the *Register* also included a letter, signed "American," that hailed a speech given by Episcopal bishop John Henry Hopkins more than two months earlier, in which the bishop recommended that Congress enact more stringent naturalization laws. The letter stated that Hopkins supported a twenty-one-year waiting period for a foreign-born resident to gain citizenship or suffrage. It also said that Hopkins believed that Roman Catholics and other "infidels" should be permanently denied voting rights if they refused to accept the Bible "as the rule of duty to God and to government." "American's" letter quickly moved from the subject of Hopkins's speech into the fiery rhetoric characteristic of Know-Nothingism:

Heathenism, with its varied forms of idolatry, in concert with Atheism, Deism, Mormonism, and Romanism are coming in upon us in every direction, threatening a mighty avalanche upon our green growing institutions. How shall we escape the sweeping ruin? Already have popery, infidelity and paganism formed an alliance and are making common cause against the Bible, the magna charta of our rights and the palladium of our liberties. While I would not literally palsy the arm nor wither the tongue of the foe of liberty, I would protect, if I could, myself and my country from his blighting touch and envenomed tooth.³⁸

The letter functioned as an informal manifesto of the Know-Nothing party, and it also contrived to link its sentiments with those of Bishop Hopkins. While it is unclear who misrepresented the contents of the

.....

bishop's speech, articles that appeared in the Burlington *Free Press*, as well as some of Hopkins's own papers, suggest that "American" may have embellished the bishop's remarks to strengthen his own position.³⁹ Given the course of *Register* coverage during the next year and that Barrett later identified himself as a member of the Know-Nothing party, it seems likely that the paper's owner, J. H. Barrett, either wrote or solicited the letter from "American."

The *Register* continued to provide coverage of political progress of the Know-Nothings in the rest of the state, but it denied that the party had a following in Middlebury.⁴⁰ On March 18 the paper carried an editorial clarifying the Know-Nothing position on slavery. It proposed that if Vermont joined other states with a Know-Nothing majority, it could still maintain its firm anti-Nebraska and antislavery extension stance. On the same page appeared a letter from "Alpha," who suggested that neighboring New England states were turning in strong Know-Nothing votes yet still remaining against slavery.⁴¹

Throughout the spring, the *Register* expanded its coverage of local and national Know-Nothing news; it referred to speeches by Washington and Jefferson that suggested foreigners were untrustworthy and misguided, and it stepped up its assault on the "Romish church and its designs."⁴² The paper was always careful to acknowledge an outside source for its articles, and it regularly denied that it was a Know-Nothing paper or that its owner or editors were members of any secret society.

On June 20 the editors of the *Register* declared what other Vermont newspapers like the *Brandon Post* and the Burlington *Free Press* had been suggesting for more than a year: J. H. Barrett had been, and remained, a voice for and officer of the state Know-Nothing — now called American — party. The editorial named Barrett and other Vermonters as delegates to the recent American party national convention in Philadelphia, during which the membership had split into northern and southern anti- and proslavery factions.⁴³ The party fracture also resulted in the northern delegation's decision to open its affairs to the public.⁴⁴ The editorial spelled out the American party intention to enact stringent naturalization laws and to require Bible reading in the public schools. It also declared the party's determination to promote the "great work of Americanizing America" by preserving and upholding "the three vital principles of a republican government, spiritual freedom, a free Bible and free schools."⁴⁵

Even though the Know-Nothings found support in Middlebury, there is only marginal evidence that their small, short-lived success in the town represented anything more than the political opportunism of a few local residents. Throughout the state and the nation, the crisis that resulted

.....

from the demise of the Whig party created a political vacuum that the Know-Nothing party temporarily filled.⁴⁶ For most Vermonters, the Whig platform had been too weak on the issue of slavery, and the state party began to crumble in 1848, when the national Whig convention chose Zachary Taylor, a slaveholder, as its presidential candidate. The competing Free Soil party initially attracted many disgruntled Whigs because of its staunch antislavery position, but it lost popular support when it attempted a coalition with northern Democrats in order to solidify a majority.⁴⁷ In the wake of what amounted to a virtual breakdown of the two-party system, the Republican party emerged as a new antislavery coalition. Its ascendancy, however, was neither swift nor assured, and between 1853 and 1856 the American party drew strong support in the Northeast, particularly in New York and in the southern New England states.

The strength of the Know-Nothings in other states lay in that party's ability to arouse both latent fears of Catholic domination and hatred of the throngs of Irish immigrants who, according to Boston clergyman Theodore Parker, were "idle, thriftless, poor, intemperate and barbarian. . . . Of course they will violate our laws[;] these wild bisons, leaping over the fences which easily restrain the civilized domestic cattle, will commit great crimes of violence."⁴⁸

While Vermont absorbed significant numbers of Irish immigrants in the late 1840s and while Burlington's Irish population exceeded 33 percent in the 1850 census, the percentage of Irish in Middlebury never surpassed 17 percent and even dropped to 12.4 percent by 1860.⁴⁹ To an even greater extent than in Burlington, Irish immigrants shored up the sagging population in Middlebury. In the 1830 census the town population stood at 3,468, making Middlebury the second largest town in the state, but that number had decreased to 3,168 by 1840. Largely because of the arrival of several hundred Irish in the late 1840s, the town recouped its losses of the previous decade, and by 1850 Middlebury's population stood at 3,517.⁵⁰

According to census data, many of Middlebury's Irish lived communally, either in rooming houses or in multifamily homes. Many Irish girls and women served as live-in domestic help, and men worked either as farmers, common laborers, or artisans.⁵¹ As mentioned above, there is little indication in local newspaper accounts that the Middlebury Irish community sparked hostility among the town's native-born citizens. One prominent citizen, Samuel Swift, took pride in observing that his community was "peaceable and orderly" and that its courts had proportionately "less business" than any others in the state. The area, he said, possessed "general social equality" and was free of the corruption and of the "moral pestilence" of many American cities:

.....

We have no such large collections of the refuse population of Europe — its paupers and criminals — broke loose from the restraints of law and government at home, that they may riot here in their imaginary freedom from all restraints; who nightly disturb the peace of the community with riots and quarrels and murders; and who are ready at the call of designing politicians, to control our elections.⁵²

Although Swift's remarks suggest that Middlebury was not plagued by the "blight" of immigration, the subtext of his comments echoed the nativist belief that immigrants were, in large part, the dregs of European society. These same sympathies were expressed and expanded upon by Vermont minister W. H. Lord, who in 1855 published and distributed a tract entitled "National Hospitality." Lord acknowledged that many immigrants were criminals and paupers and that Irish immigrants in particular were enslaved by the despotism of the Catholic church, but he also suggested that their latent productivity could be developed as a national resource. They could, he believed, provide what the nation needed most: an abundant labor force "to dig the soil and gather its fruits, [and] to provide our families with servants." Lord proposed that immigrants be treated as a commodity. "By estimating the average productive value of southern slaves," he suggested, the nation could boost its productivity by more than \$1 million annually if it continued to permit a steady influx of foreign manual laborers. He also projected that this populous army of workers could eventually help to dilute the political power of the southern slave states. The tract voiced one feature common to much nativist rhetoric: a willingness to compromise the rights of one group to break the bonds of another. Lord was not critical of all immigrants, and he ultimately concluded that the genetic legacy of the United States could only improve by mixing native blood with that of hard-working and industrious northern Europeans.⁵³

For Middlebury residents, as for many Vermonters, there appeared to be a fundamental difference between the issues of Irish immigration and those of Catholicism. The line between the two was often blurred by the press and politicians, and one bias was often construed to imply the other. Generally, however, it was the Catholic church, and specifically the power of the papacy, that rankled Vermonters most. Tracts and sermons on creeping "Romanism" had circulated within the state since the early 1800s, and their numbers only increased with the onset of the nativist movement.⁵⁴ By 1855, stories of the exploits (as well as the impending demise) of the Catholic church in America became common newspaper filler, and they undoubtedly had a deleterious effect on local Protestant churches.

Since 1836, Episcopalians, Methodists, Congregationalists, and Baptists alike had struggled to rekindle the spirituality lost in the wake of the Second Great Awakening. Church records indicate that all Protestant denominations suffered serious declines in membership and

that short-lived revivals achieved nothing more than temporary increases in attendance.⁵⁵ At the annual Congregational Convention in 1854, the convention secretary bemoaned the church's inability to maintain its ground in the "contest with 'the rulers of darkness,'" noting that statewide membership had fallen off by thirty-five hundred in the previous ten years. Two years later he reported that the twenty-year decline numbered five thousand. Churches often could not support their pastors, and by 1857 nine of the fourteen Congregational church pulpits in Addison County were empty.⁵⁶ At Saint Stephen's Protestant Episcopal Church in Middlebury, membership fluctuated wildly; in 1853 it stood at about three hundred persons, but by 1859 the congregation numbered only 146.⁵⁷

Contributions to Protestant church missionary funds had also dried up, and church officials feared that they were woefully ill prepared to "check the influence of the Papacy and various other evils."⁵⁸ Episcopal bishop Hopkins wrote to the state parishes in 1852 that even in the church's jubilee year of 1851, the missionary fund had received only \$157.91 in contributions. How, he asked, was the church expected to carry on its fight against "the march of Romanism?"⁵⁹

All signs of revivalism and conversion received grateful acknowledgment in the annual church records, particularly when the convert was a Catholic.

One bigoted Romanist, a young woman of mind, and of more than ordinary culture for her nation, gives pleasing evidence of a saving change. For weeks her resistance to the work of grace was marked and violent. She had been solemnly pledged, by her father, before leaving Ireland, that she would never abandon her religion. She had been taught from her childhood that the Protestant Bible was from hell, and that all Protestants were most dangerous heretics. Her conflict was severe. She resorted to rites and ceremonies and writings of her church, but they brought her no relief. She finally sent for the Protestant minister, in great agony of spirit, saying she had been a great sinner—had wished she could burn every Bible and destroy all Protestants; and feeling she was lost. On being directed to the great gospel remedy for sin, she threw herself into the arms of Christ and wept. She found great peace in believing, and blesses God that her footsteps were directed across the ocean to this land of pure Christianity.⁶⁰

Within the Protestant Episcopal church, the issue of conversion—in this case loss of membership *to* the Catholic church—had, since 1845, been an ecclesiastical issue of both international dimension and one that carried significant consequences for local Vermont parishes. The incident that triggered the crisis was the 1844–1845 censure of several Oxford University theologians who had agitated for the restoration of High Church principles to the Church of England. Following their dismissal from the university, several of the leading figures of the movement joined the Catholic church.⁶¹

Within the Vermont Episcopal church, the Oxford Movement became the basis for one of the church's most wrenching and emotionally divisive crises of its early history. Bishop Hopkins defended the position of the Church of England, but another Episcopal priest, William Henry Hoyt, secretly sympathized with the principles of the Oxford Movement, and as a result, in 1846 he, his family, and several other members of his congregation converted to Catholicism.⁶² The scandal created an uproar within the Episcopal church, particularly because Hoyt was a wealthy, well educated, and highly esteemed member of the church and the community. A graduate of Dartmouth, Andover Theological Seminary, and General Theological Seminary, Hoyt first served as a professor at Bishop Hopkins's seminary in Burlington in 1836. The following year he bought and returned many of the bishop's personal possessions that were auctioned off at a court-ordered sale when the seminary went bankrupt. Thereafter Hoyt served as an Episcopal priest in St. Albans and Middlebury. After his conversion to Catholicism, he returned to Burlington, where he became a lawyer and editor of the *Burlington Sentinel*. (Later, following the death of his wife in 1875, Hoyt moved to New York City, where he became a Catholic priest.)⁶³

In an attempt to discredit Hoyt publicly, and to quiet scandal, Hopkins published his own interrogation of Hoyt, attempting to show how Hoyt had deceived Hopkins and had demonstrated contempt toward the established authority of the Episcopal church. This censure came before Hoyt joined the Catholic church, and it was in response to rumors that Hoyt had attended a mass at the Catholic church in Burlington. "The melancholy truth," Hopkins wrote, was that Hoyt had become "the topic of extensive fear and alarm in this community. The Romanists, for sometime past, have been proclaiming, it is said, your speedy adoption of their faith, and your best friends talk about your course with sorrowful forebodings." Hopkins's ultimate rebuke, however, was reserved for the "deluded" leaders of the Oxford Movement, whose "Romanizing tendencies" would lead to the total subversion of divine truth. Hopkins ended his pastoral letter by censuring Hoyt for "going into a worshipping assembly of Roman Catholics, and signing himself in their holy water with the sign of the cross, and in all other respects conforming outwardly to their superstitions and idolatrous ritual." The repudiation also resulted because Hoyt had been insolent and had created a scandal and "uneasiness, and alarm and sorrow" within the Vermont Episcopal community.⁶⁴

The public censure of Hoyt was not the first time that Hopkins had taken on the doctrines and personalities of the Catholic church. Following his arrival in Burlington in 1832, Hopkins regularly sparred with Burlington Catholic priest Jeremiah O'Callaghan, with Philadelphia's Catholic archbishop Francis P. Kenrick and other church clerics, and with

.....

Catholic convert and journalist Orestes Brownson.⁶⁵ With his characteristic intellectual zeal, Hopkins engaged his opponents in theological debate, and it was not until the mid-1850s that he displayed anything other than what appeared to be doctrinal concerns. At that point, however, his writings began to reflect the nativist rhetoric of the day.

In an 1854 address delivered in Hartford, Hopkins declared that while the future of America was being threatened by chaos and violence, "Romanism" only "lifts up her imperious head, and laughs at the general confusion."⁶⁶ Elsewhere, he proposed that a Romanist invasion of the United States might well be occurring:

Is there any certainty that this Protestant majority will always be found in every State? Is there no danger that in some of them there will be a strong papal ascendancy? Is it at all unlikely that the increasing loss of papal influence in many parts of Europe will bring to our shores a vast accession of foreign Romanists, which may give a decided preponderance to their religion . . . and finally enable them to set up their exclusive claims?⁶⁷

Hopkins was convinced that there was a fundamental conflict between the Catholic doctrine and the American Constitution, and he proposed that the naturalization laws be revised to acknowledge that difference. Universal suffrage, he said, was "the grand exponent of the genius of our nation," but it implied that the public possesses "a competent degree of virtue and intelligence." Such was not the case with the "large class of low foreigners" who were inextricably bound to and subjugated by the priesthood. "The native is born amid influences favorable to the institution of the republic," but for the "crowds of foreigners . . . what can a few years of mere residence do towards accomplishing in them the fitness for citizenship?" Hopkins said that the Know-Nothing opposition to Catholicism was justified and that the "greatest evils to be apprehended were from the influence of the Roman faith."⁶⁸

Antebellum nativist sentiments in Burlington and Middlebury manifested themselves in ways atypical of many other New England towns. There was little public outcry, no civil unrest, and no attempt to restrict the rights of immigrants. Fiery nativist rhetoric made a brief appearance on the editorial page of the *Middlebury Register*, and the Know-Nothings scored major political victories statewide in 1855, but there is little evidence that Middlebury and Burlington were swept up by the furor that possessed other northeastern towns. This does not mean, however, that Vermonters were neutral about Catholicism. If some community and manufacturing leaders viewed Irish immigrants as economic assets, many other residents believed that Catholicism would bring about the downfall of America's cherished political and religious institutions.

EPILOGUE

The Civil War brought a brief respite from Protestant concerns about Burlington's Catholic population, but in 1867 the Protestant churches of Burlington jointly sponsored a townwide religious canvass. The results revealed that almost two-thirds of the active church members in Burlington were Catholics. Since the majority of town citizens were at least nominal Protestants, the churches conducting the canvass issued a call for evangelization efforts. The purpose was clearly stated in the canvass report: Catholicism was growing because Rome was "incessantly active" and systematic in its proselytizing effort. Protestants should awaken from their inactivity, the report declared, because "inactivity is death. We should awake to the great fact that there is an unavoidable contest between these two systems. The long war of truth with error must still go on, and America promises to become a conspicuous battle-field. In that contest," the report concluded, "let us remember that Protestantism or Romanism must at last go down."⁶⁹

These same sentiments had been expressed even before the 1849-1850 wave of Irish immigration hit Vermont, and they did not wither with the demise of the American party or die in the course of the Civil War.

NOTES

¹ The American party was dubbed "Know-Nothing" because of its policy of denying its own existence. When asked about their American party affiliation, members responded that they knew nothing about it. Still the best work on nativism is Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860* (New York: Macmillan, 1938). An excellent short treatment, with emphasis on the American or Know-Nothing party, is in James M. McPherson, *Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: Knopf, 1982), 68, 82-84.

² The antebellum nativist movement in Vermont has received little scholarly attention, but parts of the story have been well told in T. D. Seymour Bassett, "Urban Penetration of Rural Vermont, 1840-1880," 2 vols. (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1952), and in William Lucey's two essays, "The Diocese of Burlington, Vt., 1853," *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia*, 34 (1953): 123-154, and "The Position of Catholics in Vermont," *ibid.*, 213-235.

³ "Catholic Consecration," *New York Daily Times*, 31 October 1853, 1.

⁴ "The Pulpit," *New York Daily Tribune*, 31 October 1853, 5.

⁵ Paul Bresnehan, "The History of Catholic Social Service in the Diocese of Burlington, Vermont" (M.A. thesis, Catholic University, 1959), 8-9.

⁶ "Items at Home and Abroad," *Free Press*, 5 September 1853, 2.

⁷ "Religious Intelligence," *Free Press*, 5 November 1853, 4. The paper emphasized that this was a translation of the bishop's oath taken in Latin.

⁸ Lucey, "Diocese of Burlington," 123.

⁹ "Religious Intelligence," *Free Press*, 12 November 1853, 2.

¹⁰ "Toleration, -Mr. Allen's Letter," *Burlington Courier*, 24 November 1853, 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Mary Elizabeth Beattie, "Émigrés and Industrialization in Burlington and Colchester, Vermont, 1850-1870" (M.A. thesis, University of Vermont, 1985), 51-52.

¹³ David J. Blow, "The Establishment and Erosion of the French-Canadian Culture in Winooski, Vermont, 1867-1900," *Vermont History* 43 (1975): 60.

¹⁴ T. D. Seymour Bassett, "500 Miles of Trouble and Excitement: Vermont Railroads, 1848-1861," *Vermont History* 49 (1981): 133-134.

-
- ¹³ Lucey, "Diocese of Burlington," 144-146.
- ¹⁶ Bresnehan, "History of Catholic Social Service," 10-11.
- ¹⁷ Bassett, "Urban Penetration of Rural Vermont," 2: 355.
- ¹⁸ *Free Press*, 26 November 1853, 19. The "Religious Intelligence" column always appeared on the second page.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 26 November 1853; 10, 17, 24, 31 December 1853.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 24 June 1854.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 8 July 1854.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 21 January 1854, 2.
- ²³ Billington, *Protestant Crusade*, 255.
- ²⁴ *Free Press*, 17 January 1854, 2.
- ²⁵ *Dictionary of American Biography*, s.v. "Brownson, Orestes Augustus," by Ernest Sutherland Bates.
- ²⁶ *Burlington Weekly Sentinel*, 9 March 1854, 2.
- ²⁷ Beattie, "Émigrés," 91.
- ²⁸ *Free Press*, 8 December 1855, 2.
- ²⁹ This assessment of later coverage is based only on a quick look at later indices for the *Free Press*, but Lucey's research seems to confirm this finding.
- ³⁰ *Middlebury Register*, 5 March 1850, 2; 19 March 1851, 1.
- ³¹ Billington, *Protestant Crusade*, 91; Oscar Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), 186-190.
- ³² J. H. Hopkins, *The American Citizen: His Rights and Duties according to the Spirit of the Constitution of the United States* (New York, 1857), 86-87.
- ³³ David Brion Davis, "Some Themes of Counter-Subversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic, and Anti-Mormon Literature," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 47 (1960): 206-212.
- ³⁴ *Register*, 19 January 1853, 1; 15 August 1855, 2.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 12 April 1854, 2.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 17 January 1855, 2.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 31 January 1855, 2.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*
- ³⁹ *Free Press*, 23 November 1854, 2; 28 February 1855, 2; Hopkins, *The American Citizen*, 83-87. Hopkins was convinced that there was an essential conflict between Catholic doctrine and the U.S. Constitution, but he fell short of suggesting that Catholics should be denied the right to vote.
- ⁴⁰ *Register*, 14 March 1855, 2.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 18 March 1855, 2.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 9 May 1855, 2; 23 May 1855, 2; 30 May 1855, 1; 6 June 1855, 2.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 20 June 1855, 2.
- ⁴⁴ *Free Press*, 12 July 1855, 2.
- ⁴⁵ *Register*, 20 June 1855, 2.
- ⁴⁶ See William E. Gienapp, "Nativism and the Creation of a Republican Majority in the North before the Civil War," *Journal of American History* 72 (1985): 534-535; Michael Holt, "The Politics of Impatience: The Origins of Know-Nothingism," *Journal of American History* 60 (1973): 309-331.
- ⁴⁷ Edward P. Brynn, "Vermont's Political Vacuum of 1845-1856 and the Emergence of the Republican Party," *Vermont History* 38 (1970): 114-122.
- ⁴⁸ Dale T. Knobel, *Paddy and the Republic: Ethnicity and Nationality in Antebellum America* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1986), 87.
- ⁴⁹ P. Jeffrey Potash, *Vermont's Burned-Over District: Patterns of Community Development and Religious Activity, 1761-1850* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Carlson, 1991), 119; Thomas Jordan and P. Jeffrey Potash, "The Unending Journey: Burlington's Irish, 1840-1870," *Chittenden County Historical Society Bulletin* 22 (1987): 1; U.S. Census for 1850 and 1860. In determining the number of Irish in Middlebury, I have used the same criteria as Jordan and Potash. That number includes both Irish-born residents and those children of Irish who were born either in Canada or the United States.
- ⁵⁰ Samuel Swift, *Statistical and Historical Account of the County of Addison, Vermont* (Middlebury, Vt., 1859), 131; Potash, *Vermont's Burned-Over District*, 108.
- ⁵¹ U.S. Census for 1850 and 1860.
- ⁵² Swift, *Statistical and Historical Account*, 123-124.
- ⁵³ W. H. Lord, *A Tract for the Times: National Hospitality* (Montpelier, Vt., 1855), 33-40.
- ⁵⁴ See Uzziah Burnap, *Priestcraft Exposed* (Chester, Vt., 1830), and Jeremiah Odel, *Popery Unveiled* (Bennington, Vt., 1821).
- ⁵⁵ See, for example, *Journal of the Proceedings of the Sixty-Ninth Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Vermont* (Burlington, Vt., 1859); *Minutes of the General Convention of Vermont* (Windsor, Vt., 1857), 38; *Minutes of the Thirtieth Anniversary of the Vermont Baptist Convention* (Brattleboro, Vt., 1855), 18.

-
- ⁵⁶ *Minutes of the General Convention*, 1854, 19; 1856, 26; 1857, 17.
- ⁵⁷ *Journal*, 1853, 36; 1859, 33.
- ⁵⁸ *Minutes of the Vermont Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Northfield, Vt., 1855), 14.
- ⁵⁹ J. H. Hopkins, *A Pastoral Letter Addressed to the Several Parishes* (Burlington, Vt., 1852), 14.
- ⁶⁰ *Minutes of the General Convention*, 1854, 15.
- ⁶¹ *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), s.v. "Oxford Movement," by T. S. Bokenkotter.
- ⁶² *Diary*, William Henry Hoyt, 1, 2, 19, 20, 30 January 1846, Special Collections, Bailey / Howe Library, University of Vermont, Burlington; Thomas Scott Preston, *Address Delivered at the Funeral of William Henry Hoyt* (New York, 1884).
- ⁶³ Sister of Charity of Providence, *Light in the Tower* (Montreal, 1950); *Free Press*, 15 December 1883, 2.
- ⁶⁴ J. H. Hopkins, *A Pastoral Letter, Addressed by the Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the State of Vermont to the People of His Diocese, on the Subject of His Correspondence with the Rev. William Henry Hoyt [sic]* (Burlington, Vt., 1846), 12, 42-46. The Hoyt affair did in fact become sensational news, the story being reported in many Vermont, Boston, and other New England papers. See *Christian Messenger*, 17 December 1847, 163.
- ⁶⁵ *Dictionary of American Biography*, s.v. "Hopkins, John Henry," by Edward Dwight Eaton.
- ⁶⁶ Hopkins, *An Address Delivered Before the House of Convocation*, 12.
- ⁶⁷ Hopkins, *The American Citizen*, 83-84.
- ⁶⁸ *Free Press*, 23 November 1854, 2.
- ⁶⁹ Edward Hungerford, *A Report on the Moral and Religious Condition of the Community, Being an Address Before a Union of Churches, in the City of Burlington, Vt.* (Burlington, Vt., 1867), 21.