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AMERICA FOR AMERICANS: THE SOUTHERN KNOW NOTHING
PARTY AND THE POLITICS OF NATIVISM, 1854-1856

by

John David Bladek

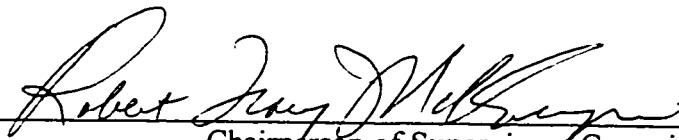
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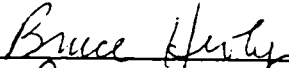
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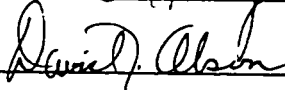
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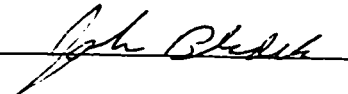
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Doctoral Dissertation

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Abstract

AMERICA FOR AMERICANS: THE
SOUTHERN KNOW NOTHING PARTY AND
THE POLITICS OF NATIVISM, 1854-1856

by John David Bladek

Chairperson of the Supervisory Committee: Professor Robert Tracy McKenzie
Department of History

From 1854 to 1856, the Know Nothing, or American Party, attempted to redefine the American political scene around an explicit anti-foreign and anti-Catholic appeal. This study deals with the southern half of the Know Nothing Party which has long been viewed by historians as a group of political opportunists who lacked any real commitment to nativism, but who tagged along with the popular northern movement as their only alternative to the decline of the Whig Party following the disastrous presidential election of 1852. This work attempts to re-evaluate the party's history and argues that southern Know Nothings were indeed staunch nativists and that their nativism formed one cornerstone of an ideology committed to slavery and Unionism as well as an opposition to political corruption, immigrants, and the Catholic Church.

The first chapter is a study of the origins of the Know Nothings in the South where they emerged from a coalition of forces held together by nativism and Unionism, galvanized by opposition to the Kansas Nebraska Act of 1854 and the stunning success of

nativists in the northern elections of that same year. The second chapter examines the Know Nothings' ideology and attempts to put their nativism into the context of republican ideology and the politics of the 1850s. The third chapter deals with the crucial gubernatorial election of 1855 in Virginia and the calamitous impact it had on the party as a national organization. The fourth chapter is a study of the breakdown of the national party over slavery and the impact of the politics of slavery on southern elections where the Know Nothings attempted to remove slavery from the open political debate. The fifth chapter deals with the takeover of the party hierarchy by "old-line" Whigs who reshaped the organization into a more narrowly defined Unionist party that lessened the previous emphasis on nativism. The sixth and final chapter examines the 1856 presidential election and the decline of the party after its abandonment by northerners and the downplaying of the nativist issue in the South.

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DEDICATION

The author wishes to dedicate this dissertation to his parents, Frank and Beatrice Bladek, who were always sure I was not a “Know Nothing,” and to Becky, without whose love this work has no meaning.

INTRODUCTION: "AN IDLE, ILLOGICAL AND ABSURD ORGANIZATION"

In the spring of 1855, Virginians were preparing to elect a governor by popular vote for only the second time in their history. The state that the nation's most venerated proponents and defenders of liberty called home had existed for most of its days under a Revolutionary-era constitution designed not only to protect its citizens' liberties, but the power of its elite planters as well. Under this constitution, the Old Dominion's governor, a relatively weak office, was chosen by the legislature, filtering the choice of the masses through the wise council of Virginia's leading citizens. In 1851, however, Virginia followed the rest of the nation and wrote a broadened suffrage for all adult white males into its new constitution, finally accepting the advice Thomas Jefferson had given. Thus by 1855 Virginia had entered a new era of democratic politics.¹

As only the second popular election for governor, the 1855 contest seemed new and exciting. Party rivalries had been intense since 1840, but the stakes appeared higher now that candidates would have to appeal to the broad range of the state's electorate--small farmers, laborers, and non-slaveholders as well as planters. Henry Alexander Wise, the Democratic candidate, made the most of the situation, or opportunity, in the spring of

¹ William G. Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion: Virginia and the Second Party System, 1824-1861* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996), 50-53, 278-281.

1855. Understanding the need for the voters to actually see and hear their man now that so many had a choice, Wise scoured the state, speaking at campaign rallies, drinking and eating at barbecues, and gathering the party faithful on an intensive tour that took in practically every county of the Old Dominion.²

At one of these barbecues, Wise took the stage to give an address, and prefaced his prepared remarks to the crowd with an attack upon the honor of his opponent, or rather the opposition as a whole, a new anti-Catholic, anti-foreign party called the Know Nothings. To the roar of the audience, Wise accused the new organization of hiding their true intentions behind a veil of secrecy designed to deceive the public. These Know Nothings, Wise asserted, hid in the shadows, an “evil, which loveth darkness, rather than light.”³ He further assaulted their manhood, calling his Know Nothing opponents cowards and challenging anyone of them to take the stage with him in a debate. Seeing no reaction, he repeated the dare, mocking his foes for their inadequate bravery and reveling in the crowd’s boisterous response. Buoyed by the cheers of loyal Democrats and satisfied that his invitation to debate had gone unaccepted, Wise, known as “Old Gizzard foot,” offered one more contemptuous remark about the “idle, illogical, and absurd organization,” and prepared to go on.⁴ Before he could launch into his speech,

² Barton H. Wise, *The Life of Henry A. Wise of Virginia, 1806-1876* (New York: MacMillian, 1899), 177, 187; Craig M. Simpson, *A Good Southerner: The Life of Henry A. Wise of Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 110-113.

³ Wise, *Life of Wise*, 169

⁴ James P. Hambleton, *A Biographical Sketch of Henry A. Wise, With a History of the Political*

however, he was interrupted by an elderly man near the back of the gathering who stood up and signaled for Wise's attention. Looking around him at the other men in the crowd, the old man raised his arms and shouted, "Sam⁵, stand up!" At the signal, nearly two-thirds of those present got to their feet in a show of solidarity. Henry Wise, watching from the platform, abandoned his speech and turned and left the stage.⁶

This story, although more than likely apocryphal, offers a nice introduction into the world of the southern Know Nothings. The party emerged from a secret society that had originated in New York City, but had quickly spread into the southern states during 1854. As a secret society whose members were sworn to secrecy, the Order⁷, another of its many names, seemed to appear in the South almost out of nowhere. The number of initiates was unknown, but at times they seemed to be everywhere and yet still remained mysterious. Pledged to oppose papal interference in American politics, Know Nothings replaced the Whigs as the opposition party in the South almost without a fight. By the time Henry Wise encountered them the organization and its nativist ideology were expanding quickly with few hindrances. The story of Wise's surprise at being overwhelmed at his own party's barbecue cleverly depicts the confusion the Know

Campaign in Virginia in 1855 (Richmond: J. W. Randolph, 1856), 129; *Richmond Enquirer*, February 1, 1855.

⁵ "Sam," usually thought of as Uncle Sam's nephew, a younger, stronger version of the patriotic icon, was a term often used to refer to the Know Nothings. "Seeing Sam" meant that you had been to a party meeting.

⁶ *Greensborough (NC) Patriot*, April 29, 1855.

⁷ The original organization the Know Nothings were descended from was known as the Order of the Star Spangled Banner.

Nothings bred and its impact upon the southern political scene, as well as the extreme confidence of this upstart party with the ridiculous name.

In recent years the studies of the politics of the 1850s have focused a greater amount of attention upon the Know Nothings, who had for over a century been generally relegated to minor passages in books focused on broader topics. What discussion there was primarily concentrated on the northern half of the party, with the notable exception of W. Darrel Overdyke's 1950 study, *The Know Nothing Party in the South*, which argued that the Know Nothings were first and foremost a strain of southern Unionism with only incidental nativist tendencies. Tyler Anbinder, in his recent work, *Nativism and Slavery*, offers the most detailed look at the Know Nothing Party and movement to date, but ignores the southern party altogether, arguing that it shared few beliefs with its northern half and in any event adds little to the explanation of the political disruptions of the 1850s.⁸

⁸ William J. Cooper, *The South and the Politics of Slavery, 1828-1856* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 363-369; and J. Mills Thornton III, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1978), 352-360, both describe the Know Nothings as being bludgeoned by the Democrats' slavery cudgel and spend little time on the party itself; David Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 254, 258 argues for the inevitability of the party's split on a national level because of their irreconcilable position on sectional issues, again using the Know Nothings to argue for the overriding importance of slavery politics; while Michael Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1978), 168-171; and Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), xii, 162-171, both concentrate on the northern half of the party, and give little attention to the importance of the South; Greg Cantrell, *Kenneth and John B. Rayner and the Limits of Southern Dissent* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 100-102, concentrates upon a southern Know Nothing leader, Kenneth Rayner of North Carolina. W. Darrell Overdyke, whose *The Know Nothing Party in the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950), 91-95, has dominated thinking on the Southern Know Nothings for half a century, takes the alternate path and leaves slavery entirely out of the equation. Overdyke portrays the southern Know Nothings as primarily a Unionist party from the very beginning and merely accepts their nativism as natural considering the high immigration rates, rather than

This study is an attempt to re-evaluate the southern Know Nothings in light of the broader scholarship on the political history of the 1850s. In doing this I discovered that the southern Know Nothings were a genuine nativist and anti-party movement with much in common with the Know Nothings in the North, and that slavery politics in and of themselves were not the driving force behind its members' ideology or actions. I also argue that although the party was short-lived and ultimately a failure, the southern Know Nothings contributed to the growing sectional split in American politics in the 1850s by furthering the radicalizing process within the South and by destroying their own national organization, which in turn opened the field to the explicitly anti-southern Republican Party. Thus despite their meager electoral successes they contributed significantly to the political breakdown that ultimately led to Civil War.

This study first places the Know Nothing Party into the mainstream of southern politics of the 1850s where their novelty as an organization has long relegated them to the margins. However, as the major opposition to the Democratic Party between 1854 and 1857, the Know Nothings were integral to the breakdown of the political party system and the eventual emergence of one party rule in the South. In 1854 the Know Nothings put the final nail in the Whigs' coffin and became the sole opposition party to the Democrats in the South. Once they assumed the Whigs' mantle the party attempted to end the destructive conflict over slavery by avoiding the institution's future in the West as

explaining it. My interpretation, although very much indebted to Holt, Anbinder, Cooper, Potter, and Cantrell on other issues, tends to agree somewhat more with Jean H. Baker's, *Ambivalent Americans: The Know Nothing Party in Maryland* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 24-56.

an issue in their campaigns. Following a disappointing loss in Virginia in 1855 however, the Know Nothings mistakenly blamed their defeat on their lack of a strong proslavery stand and attempted to rectify the matter by adopting one at their national convention. This only succeeded in exacerbating the conflict over slavery in the South, and forced the Democrats to rely even more heavily upon the protection of slavery as their primary message. Thus when the Know Nothings disappeared as the opposition, southerners were left with little alternative than to support a radicalized southern Democratic Party.

In addition to stressing the importance of the Know Nothings to southern politics, this study focuses on the disruptive impact the southerners within the Order had upon the party as a whole, and through it on national politics. Besides forcing through a proslavery platform at the 1855 party convention, southern activists drove antislavery northerners from the Know Nothings, and from there ultimately into the Republican Party. Thus strengthened by the addition of the northern nativists whom they had been unable to defeat previously, the explicitly anti-southern Republicans added further to the growing sectionalism of American politics.

Another issue this work addresses is the ideology of the southern Know Nothings. In their system of beliefs they were very much in the mainstream of American politics of the 1850s.⁹ Their nativist, anti-party rhetoric resembled in large degree that coming from

⁹ In this I essentially agree with Greg Cantrell, "Southerner and Nativist: Kenneth Rayner and the Ideology of 'Americanism'," *North Carolina Historical Review*, LXIX (April 1992), 131-147, but broaden the scope of the ideology beyond a single party leader and argue that republicanism was shared throughout the party and the political system, North and South.

northern Know Nothings. Despite this their nativism has more often than not been dismissed as a campaign ploy used in an effort to hide their Whig roots and to ride the coattails of the more successful northern half of the party. While it is true that the South never saw the numbers of immigrants the North did, and that the Catholic population of the South was fairly small, the southern Know Nothings were no less attracted to the movement because of its nativism than were northerners. Although Tyler Anbinder may argue that the southern party “ignored nativism,” southerners flocked to the Order when it spoke of the abuses of the Catholic Church and the danger of foreign immigration and in many cases before northern electoral victories, and left it almost as quickly when former Whig politicians in the party downplayed nativist sentiments.¹⁰ Even a cursory look at the writings of party members reveals an overwhelming concern with nativist issues.

Besides sharing nativism with their northern counterparts, southern Know Nothings also believed along with most Americans in republicanism. And although their particular brand of this traditional American ideology differed in specific rhetorical content from the other parties, the southern Know Nothings approached politics and political debate in much the same way Democrats or Republicans did. Each party identified villains conspiring to corrupt American virtues and rob Americans of their liberties. The Republicans identified their threat in the “slave-power conspiracy,” the southern Democrats attacked abolitionists, while the Know Nothings saw foreigners and Catholics in league with corrupt politicians as the primary danger to the American

¹⁰ Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, xii.

republic.

The fourth area of neglect the study focuses on is the idea of change over time. The southern Know Nothing Party was a short-lived entity, but in that short life it went through several incarnations, none of which in itself captures the party as a whole or the constantly fluctuating, unstable nature of its constituency and membership. It began its career as an explicitly nativist organization, shifted dramatically but briefly to a proslavery vehicle in response to the fears of Virginians who had lost an election in 1855, and finally emerged as a pro-Union party that downplayed both nativism and slavery and followed an old-line Whig in the 1856 presidential election, Millard Fillmore. These changes over the period from 1854-1856 have generally been ignored. The Order has been portrayed as one of these, generally one or the other of the latter two, but not all three at different times. This view offers not only a more complex look at the evolution of the southern Know Nothings, but a more accurate picture of the diverse nature of the party's following.

The Know Nothing Party attempted and failed to forge a new direction for American politics in the 1850s, both in the North and in the South. Their focus on nativism offered an opportunity to turn the nation away from the politics of slavery towards a system that did not rely upon sectional controversies to pave its course. Ultimately southern voters rejected this new direction, but the party they discarded contributed to the growing sectionalism in American politics nonetheless. Thus this

short-lived organization added more to the nation's politics and history than its otherwise insubstantial successes would suggest.

CHAPTER 1: "THE MARCH OF THIS YOUNG HERCULES": THE ORIGINS OF THE KNOW NOTHING PARTY IN THE SOUTH

The Know Nothing party originated in New York City in 1850 as a secret society known as the Order of the Star Spangled Banner, one of many nativist organizations throughout the North.¹ Local chapters, variously known as "councils," "lodges," and "wigwams," spread throughout much of New York state and into the eastern United States during 1853-54. Maintained as secret societies, local councils were initially founded with the intent of promoting nativist causes and backing anti-foreign and anti-Catholic politicians from the two major parties, rather than running in any organized fashion themselves. Growing distrust of the Whig and Democratic parties and their unwillingness to address such issues as immigration and temperance, however, prompted

¹ Tyler Anbinder's, *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 20-74, is the most recent study of Know Nothingism in the North and contains the greatest detail on the origins of the party; see also, Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850's* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1978), 156-162; Holt, "The Antimasonic and Know-Nothing Parties," in Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., ed., *History of U.S. Political parties: 1789-1860, From Faction to Parties*, vol. I (New York: Chelsea House, 1973), 609-706; Holt, "The Politics of Impatience: The Origins of Know Nothingism," *Journal of American History*, 55 (Sept. 1973), 319-320; David H. Bennett, *The Party of Fear: From Nativist Movements to the New Right in American History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 17-34; Ray A. Billington, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism* (New York: MacMillian Co., 1938; reprint, Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1964), 380-397.

Know Nothings to move into politics as an independent entity. The term “Know Nothing” was first disseminated by the *New York Tribune* in November of 1853 during the Order’s first attempt to run its own candidates as a third party ticket. There is some disagreement as to the origin of the appellation “Know Nothing,” but once it had been adopted by the *Tribune*, the name stuck.²

Despite, or perhaps because of its secrecy and Masonic-like fraternal association, the Order’s popularity grew tremendously from 1852-1854.³ But perhaps the greatest impetus to the Know Nothings growth came from the public reaction to the dramatic increase in the number of immigrants entering the country. The sheer number of foreigners arriving at American ports threatened to overwhelm the nation’s ability to assimilate the newcomers. In the decade from 1845 to 1854 some 2.9 million immigrants stepped ashore in the United States, proportionally the largest number in the nation’s history. This amount was so great, in fact, that it represented 14.5 percent of the

² *New York Tribune*, Nov. 10, 16, 1853. The generally accepted explanation today and at the time was that the term “Know Nothing” came from the response members gave when asked if they had any knowledge of or belonged to the organization. It was also generally accepted that *Tribune* editor Horace Greeley created the name. Tyler Anbinder, however, argues that Greeley merely applied a term already in use and that its real origins have been lost. Only after the party became more widely known did members begin to claim to “know nothing,” often as a joke, by which time the organization had already gotten its name, Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 21-22.

³ In Pennsylvania nativism was such a strong movement that many believed the combined force of nativist organizations including the Know Nothings held the “balance of power” in that state as early as the summer before the 1852 presidential election; William Sloanaker to William Alexander Graham, June 9, 1852, J.G. de Roulhac Hamilton, *The Papers of William Alexander Graham*, vol. IV., 1851-1856 (Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1961), 309-310.

country's total population in 1845.⁴ These huge numbers are only about a third of the total that entered in the decade preceding the First World War, however the percentage of the total population they represented was greater by some 4 percent. What made this deluge of immigrants appear to be a crisis was not only their absolute numbers, but the drastic acceleration in their arrival. In only one year before 1845 had the number of immigrants entering the U.S. ever exceeded 100,000, and in most years the totals were fewer than half of the 110,000 who disembarked in 1842. In the ten years following 1845 that figure was surpassed ten times, with 460,000 refugees entering the country in 1854 alone. These numbers were overwhelming for a nation relatively unused to such huge amounts of foreign born residents.⁵ Assimilation on this scale was totally new and untested.

In addition, controversies over public and parochial school education in cities like New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore heightened public awareness of the growing Catholic populations throughout the country and contributed to the group's membership. Battles over public tax funding of Catholic schools and over which version of the Bible, Catholic or Protestant, should be taught in the classroom, rocked local communities and turned anti-Catholic beliefs towards clearly political issues. Papal Nuncio Gaetano

⁴ William J. Bromwell, *History of Immigration to the United States* (New York: Redfield, 1856), 125-172; *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970*, 2 vols. (Washington: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1975), vol. I, 12; Maldwyn Allen Jones, *American Immigration* (Chicago: 1960), 92-116; David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis*, (New York: Harper and Row), 241; Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 3.

⁵ Bromwell, *History of Immigration*, 21-165.

Bedini's six-month tour of the U.S. in 1853-54 brought demonstrations and even full-scale riots to cities along his route and pushed anti-Catholic propaganda to new extremes. Bedini's extended visit conjured up images of conspiracies between public officials and the Pope's minions who were believed to be attempting to seize control of American schools. At the same time President Franklin Pierce's appointment of a Catholic, James Campbell, as Postmaster General seemed to lend credence to the belief that politicians would go to any length to get the immigrant and Catholic vote. Nativist organizations, especially the Know Nothings, capitalized on these events and steadily increased their strength and numbers. By May of 1854 the Order may have had as many as 50,000 members.⁶

Public school controversies pushed anti-Catholicism into the realm of politics. As a political threat, Catholics now seemed all the more dangerous. Local issues like public school funding and curriculum were often times more real and pressing than national controversies and they helped to underscore the fears that many Americans had for their republican institutions. Catholics receiving cabinet positions demonstrated to nativists that the Catholic Church's local influence, which they had fought for years, had grown to the point where it threatened the nation as a whole. For the Americans of the 1850s who feared growing Catholic influence in the country's government and cultural life, politics seemed to be the best way of confronting these perceived problems. As the most dynamic and fastest growing nativist organization in the country, the Know Nothings were in a

⁶ Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 22-31; Billington, *Protestant Crusade*, 380-397.

position to take advantage at the polls of public unrest. By capturing the voters' attention over issues the Whigs and Democrats were reluctant to touch, the Know Nothings' first forays into politics were wildly successful.

At first Know Nothing lodges nominated candidates from the two major parties, choosing to back those who best represented their nativist ideas or who were initiates to the Order. Generally these nominations were kept secret outside of the various lodges, or were advertised as independent tickets, and publicized as Know Nothing victories only after the elections were concluded. These tactics gave the Order a number of important electoral successes in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania during the spring of 1854 and fueled the organization's political efforts. During the following summer news of the Know Nothings dominated northern newspapers and even spread to the South.⁷ Its membership roles overflowing with fresh initiates, the Order prepared for the far more significant fall 1854 elections.

Even with its tremendous growth in the northern states in 1854, there seemed to be little reason why the Know Nothing organization should spread south of the Mason Dixon line. With the exception of a few important cities like New Orleans, Baltimore, and Louisville, immigration into the southern states was limited, as was the Catholic

⁷ Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 52-57; John R. Mulkern, *The Know-Nothing Party in Massachusetts: The Rise and Fall of a People's Movement* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990), 68-69; Michael F. Holt, *Forging A Majority: The Formation of the Republican Party in Pittsburgh, 1848-1860* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 144; for a few examples of southern reaction to early northern Know Nothing successes see *Nashville Union and American*, August 12, 1854; *Hannibal Whig Messenger*, July 13, 1854; *Daily Richmond Enquirer*, March 20, 1854; *Fayetteville Observer(NC)*, September, 1854.

population of the region.⁸ There were few, if any, indigenous nativist organizations which might have functioned as a link to the Order in the North. And other issues of importance to Know Nothings, like temperance, were not as popular in the South and had seldom been the springboard for political action that they were in the North. Yet in the spring of 1854 the newly formed party, just now bursting onto the northern political scene, began to find adherents in the South, and within a year would be a fully formed opposition party in many southern states.

The Know Nothing Party worked its way into the South along several different paths. To be successful political parties need both leadership and followers. These two groups must come together at the right time and place and under the correct circumstances. The breakdown of the second American party system and the increase in foreign immigration opened up a window of opportunity for a new opposition party in the South. The Know Nothings did not appear out of thin air when the moment was right, however. As much as contemporary reports seemed to indicate a spontaneous origin for the party, the process of creating a southern branch of the rapidly growing northern organization was more difficult. A leadership group had to grasp the opportunity as well as the ideology and come together with a grass root following that could vote them into

⁸ The South only received 475,000 immigrants out of 2.9 million between 1845 and 1854. This number, however, amounted to greater than 10% of the southern white male population of 4.5 million in 1845, and was a significant increase. In the cities the numbers were more striking. Baltimore alone added 58,000 immigrants in a ten year period. For the number of immigrants entering the South and the U.S. as a whole see William J. Bromwell, *History of Immigration to the United States* (New York: Redfield, 1856), 125-172.

office. For the Southern Know Nothings this process began with the struggle in Congress over the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska act. The growth of a following is somewhat more difficult to discern, and in the case of the secret-keeping Know Nothings, can at times only be inferred. Nevertheless, these two vital elements came together at a time when the Whig party was already fading and susceptible to the Know Nothings' knockout blow.

Passage of the Kansas-Nebraska act had been a crucial event in the downfall of the southern Whigs. Deprived of any national standing by the desertion of their northern brethren, the local state parties floundered without direction. Although they had been able to compete on the state level quite successfully for the past twenty years, the loss of their connection to a national party meant that they could no longer offer a viable alternative to the Democrats.⁹ The Whigs found themselves unable to convince voters that they could protect southern interests in Congress without the support of a northern wing. Always the minority party anyway, the southern Whigs now were in a position of almost complete impotence on a national level. And with the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska act and the renewal of the question of slavery extension into the territories, southern Whigs could no longer appeal to voters with their ability to work for southern interests in Congress. They no longer had any selling points worth presenting before the electorate, and their ability to protect slavery, an all-important litmus test, was lost

⁹ For a discussion of the southern Whig Party and Whigs in general see, Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979); Thomas Brown, *Politics and Statesmanship: Essays on the American Whig Party* (New York: Columbia University Press,

without northern allies. Although state parties differed greatly from the national organizations, they needed each other to survive. The loss of connection to a national organization for a southern party was a death knell. In the North, the Republicans could foresee winning a national election without national support because of their greater population base, but for southerners, this was an impossibility. Outnumbered in population and electoral votes, no strictly southern party could ever win a national election on its own. The Whigs had therefore little hope of competing even in state and local elections.¹⁰

But the strife-torn debate over the Kansas-Nebraska act gave an impetus to the growth of the Know Nothing party in the South for a very different reason than an increase in sectional animosity and the decline of the Whigs. The contested bill brought to the fore the issue, which propelled southern political leaders, both Whig and Democrat, into the Know Nothing, party. It exposed a nativist bent in important southern politicians and provided a controversy that convinced many people in the South that it was time for a new party, one willing to deal with neglected issues such as immigration and Catholic interference in republican government and liberties. On March 2, 1854, after two months of increasingly caustic deliberation over Stephen Douglas's bill, Delaware Senator John M. Clayton introduced an amendment to the Kansas-Nebraska measure limiting the right

1985); Arthur Charles Cole, *The Whig Party in the South* (N.P.: American Historical Association, 1914).

¹⁰Holt, *Crisis of the 1850's*, 148-149; Marc W. Kruman, *Parties and Politics in North Carolina, 1836-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 143; *Petersburg (Va.) Intelligencer*, July 10, 1854.

to vote in the newly organized territories to United States citizens. Clayton, a long-time Whig and former Secretary of State under President Zachary Taylor, worried that the vague wording on voting requirements in the act would allow the ever increasing immigrant population in the territories to control these future states' politics. As originally written the legislation only required territorial residents to have taken an oath declaring their intention to become a citizen and to support the Constitution. Alarmed at this vast extension of voting rights being granted to non-citizens, Clayton wished to narrow the wording to make certain that American citizens retained political power in their own country.¹¹

Clayton's amendment produced little debate and drew only four objections from the Senate floor. Clayton himself declined to discuss his motivations for offering the change, except that he wished to make the act "consistent with the Constitution" by restricting voting rights to white male citizens, 21 years of age. He had assumed that most senators had made up their minds on the matter already and just wanted to see a vote. The amendment narrowly passed by a 23 to 21 margin.¹²

When the Nebraska bill returned from the House of Representatives to the Senate for its final approval towards the end of May, William Richardson of Illinois had

¹¹ *Congressional Globe*, 33rd Congress, 1st session (March 2, 1854), Appendix, 297; John M. Comegys, *Memoir of John M. Clayton* (Wilmington: Historical Society of Delaware, 1882), 202.

¹² *Cong. Globe*, 33rd Cong., 1st Sess. Appendix, 298. At this point in time the roll call reflected no partisan interests at all. Every southern senator present voted along with Clayton while all but one northerner came out against a limited suffrage amendment.

reworded it, leaving out the Clayton amendment. Again, the bill allowed adult white males who had only taken an oath of intention of future citizenship to vote in the Kansas and Nebraska territories. James A. Pearce of Maryland moved to reinsert Clayton's version into the bill, arguing that citizenship had usually, although not always he admitted, been required for suffrage in new territories. And, he noted in a remark meant to catch the attention of southerners, because the bill was repealing the Missouri Compromise, it was also handing over the power to determine the future extension of slavery to "the alien who has been long enough in the territory to declare his intention to become a citizen."¹³ The idea was relatively new, but it would become a standard justification for southern Know Nothing attacks on foreigners.

John Clayton also expanded his explanation for the amendment that bore his name. When he had first introduced it, Clayton had been fairly certain of its passage and felt little need to explain what he believed to be obvious reasons for adopting the measure. This time around a great many Senators were willing to let the House version stand in order to prevent sending the whole bill back to the lower chamber for further approval and risking the possibility of even more drastic changes. With these sentiments working against him, Clayton spoke up with a more explicit and spirited defense of his amendment. He noted, as had Pearce, that aliens would have a strong voice in the adoption of new state constitutions. "The right to vote is the right to govern," he

¹³ *Cong. Globe.*, 33rd Cong., 1st Sess., part II, 1300-1301.

reminded the Senate, and to allow unnaturalized immigrants that right effectively denied it to American voters. Their votes would, in effect, “neutralize all the influence of an intelligent and true American citizen by killing his vote.” Clayton also believed that extending suffrage rights to foreigners was plainly unconstitutional. “Citizen and alien have been properly considered as correlative terms,” he said. “A citizen is not an alien and an alien is not a citizen . . . Give this right to foreigners, . . . and you surrender all that distinguishes him from an American.” He also argued that Congress had no right to extend citizenship rights in one part of the country while denying them elsewhere, as the constitution granted Congress the power to set “uniform laws of naturalization.” If aliens could vote in Kansas and Nebraska, why not everywhere else in the Union? And the problems with allowing aliens to vote were not only legal, Clayton asserted. The sheer numbers of people entering the country threatened to overwhelm the American political system. “In about ten days, more than twenty thousand such immigrants were landed at New York,” he noted. At that rate, they would be the power in the territories in a very short time.¹⁴

When the debate over Clayton’s amendment came up in the Senate in late May the odds of a majority of Senators voting for it had greatly diminished. With the Kansas-Nebraska bill finally making it through the House, the Senate majority favoring its passage was unwilling to risk further delay or possible derailment of the measure by

¹⁴ Cong. Globe, 33rd Cong., 1st Sess., Appendix, 761-762; Sion H. Rogers to William Alexander Graham, May 25, 1854, Hamilton, *The Papers of William Alexander Graham*, 515-516; *Baltimore American and Commercial Advertiser*, May 24, 1854.

backing Clayton. Reinserting his suffrage clause would have meant returning the entire bill to the House, and Stephen Douglas and his supporters had worked far too long and hard putting together a majority in both houses to risk giving northern Representatives another shot at changing or killing it. Senators who had voted for the Clayton amendment two months earlier and still favored it now chose to stand for the entire bill as it was, simply to get it passed and sent to President Pierce. At this point Clayton's attempt to amend the suffrage clause could only hurt the overall chances of organizing Kansas and Nebraska. Several Senators went as far as to suggest that Clayton intended to use his amendment to kill the whole measure. Considering his objections to the entire act, they may have been correct. While Clayton disagreed with the suffrage provisions, he also feared the sectional consequences of the act.¹⁵ With that in mind the Senate voted to keep the bill as it had come back to them from the House. The Senate defeated the move to reinsert the Clayton amendment into the measure by a vote of 41 to 7.¹⁶ Shortly thereafter the Senate passed the Kansas-Nebraska bill and sent it on to President Pierce who signed it on May 30, 1854.

At about the same time as the Kansas-Nebraska bill was under consideration, a debate similar to the one on the Clayton amendment occurred over a proposed Homestead

¹⁵ Potter, *Impending Crisis*, 165-167; *Congressional Globe*, 33rd Cong., 1st sess., part II, 1305-1311. Clayton was opposed to the Kansas-Nebraska act and did vote against it on the final ballot. He and John Bell of Tennessee were the only southerners in the Senate to go against territorial organization. Both Clayton and Bell were greatly concerned not only about the generous suffrage provisions but also with the sectional animosity the bill seemed to stir.

¹⁶*Cong. Globe*, 33rd Cong., 1st Sess., part II, 132.

bill. This measure had wide ranging social, economic, and political goals, but in its simplest terms was intended to promote population growth in the western territories by giving out 160-acre homesteads for a nominal price to settlers who agreed to live and work on the land for five years. Like the suffrage clause in the Kansas Nebraska act, this proposition drew no distinction between citizens and aliens, allowing anyone who had taken an oath of intention to become a citizen access to homestead lands. Southern nativists spelled out their objections to this bill perhaps even more clearly than they had in the Kansas Nebraska debate. Clayton again led a movement to strike out the clause concerning immigrants to prevent, as he put it, aliens from being “placed on the same footing with citizens of the United states in the donation of public lands,” and thereby “cheapen[ing] and degrad[ing] the character of the American citizen.” According to Senator John B. Thompson of Kentucky, the purpose of the bill was to hand “homes and land to all the vagabonds, paupers, and criminals which the arm of public justice or political events compel to come to our shores.” He objected to “the industrious American pioneers hav[ing] been made to pay for their lands, [while] it is given away to the . . . ragamuffins . . . of the world, who are now flying and will fly to this country like buzzards to a carcass, which they will stick to till they eat it up.” Worse still, Thompson feared that the bill had been “devised by some person or another for political purposes, to build up for an approaching Presidential election a new party, a German party,” which would have “its center at Cincinnati or Louisville, and they are to control and govern the

American people, and require the public land to be given away to their countrymen.”¹⁷

The nation would have to wait until 1862 and a Republican majority to get a Homestead act,¹⁸ but the debate over the alien clause in the bill and Congress’s failure to include a suffrage restriction in Kansas and Nebraska drew a noted reaction from southern newspapers. Whig editors from various southern states began to take note of the threat posed by immigration. They argued that the influx of foreigners could no longer be viewed as simply a northern problem. Southerners must understand and not simply pass off concerns over foreigners as another symptom of “Yankeeism.”¹⁹ The whole country and its institutions were at stake. However, although they believed the issue was national, southerners viewed it in slightly different terms than northerners. Seen through the lens of southern interests, nativism took on a sectional slant, often times portrayed as another means of protecting slavery. Nativists raised objections to Congress’s willingness to give lands to “anybody that will go and take them, for the purpose of putting down slavery.”²⁰ The only foreseeable result would be that

Non-slaveholders, including Yankees, Irishmen, Germans, and others, allured by the boon held out to each emigrant by the Homestead bill, will pour into Nebraska and Kansas in infinitely greater numbers than the slaveholder, and consequently slavery, will be ruled out of those territories

¹⁷ *Cong. Globe*, 33rd Cong., 1st Sess., part III, 1363, 1365; *Daily Richmond Enquirer*, April 28, 1854; *Fayetteville Observer*, May 1, 1854.

¹⁸ A House version granting 160 acres of land to actual settlers passed in 1854, but the Senate could only agree on price adjustments for public lands; *Cong. Globe*, 1st Sess., 33rd Cong., part III, 1843-1844.

¹⁹ *Abingdon Virginian*, October 28, 1854.

²⁰ *Fayetteville Observer*, March 13, 1854.

by an overwhelming majority.²¹

For some, the threat was even more disturbing than the possibility of losing elections to candidates who openly favored immigrants. *Hannibal Whig Messenger* editor Smith S. Allen believed Congress' actions likely "to hatch a brood of fanatics hostile to the institutions of the country."²²

Besides providing an issue around which southern nativists could rally, Clayton's opposition to alien suffrage occurred at the right time. Had the controversy arisen a year or two earlier, before the Know Nothings had any strength in the North and the southern Whigs had split from the northern wing, it seems unlikely that nativism would have drawn enough support to begin building a party. The issue would undoubtedly have arisen, but a more likely outcome would have been its use by Whigs for partisan purposes. John Clayton could have turned the question of immigrant voting against the Democrats more directly as they benefited from the Irish Catholic vote to a far greater extent than the Whigs. That he did not is a good indication that he had given up on the Whigs as a viable party and hoped to use the nativist issue to form a new voting constituency. For Clayton and other southern nativists the coincidence in timing could not have been better. In one stroke Kansas-Nebraska devastated the Whigs and gave impetus to the nativists who vied to take their place. In addition, with the rise of an anti-foreign/anti-Catholic party in the North, southerners could build a national organization

²¹ *Louisville Weekly Journal*, March 22, 1854.

²² *Hannibal Whig Messenger*, August 3, 1854; Sion H. Rogers to William A. Graham, May 25,

to compete with the Democrats. The appearance of some sort of opposition in many southern states even without a nativist core was likely, but far from certain. Opposition to the Democrats in the border states and the upper South remained strong even after the demise of the Know Nothings, all the way up until the beginning of the Civil War in April of 1861. However, in the lower South, in states such as South Carolina, Alabama, and Mississippi, the Democrats faced little challenge after the disappearance of the nativist party. Had there been no Know Nothing opposition beginning in 1854, one party rule may have occurred even sooner in those states.²³

The issue of timing raises an important question about the origins of the Know Nothings in the South. Did the Whigs demise lead to the Know Nothings' emergence, or did the Know Nothings' play a role in the decline of the Whigs? The answer is far from simple, but is crucial to the issue of Know Nothing distinctiveness. Recent studies by Michael Holt, William Geinapp, and Tyler Anbinder all argue that northern Know Nothings were in large part responsible for the Whig's downfall in the North, yet the same claim has not been made for the South.²⁴ The southern Whigs were in far worse shape in 1854 than their northern counterparts, having suffered such huge losses in the 1852 elections when large numbers of Whigs abandoned their presidential candidate,

1854, Hamilton, *Papers of William A. Graham*, 515.

²³ Holt, *Crisis of the 1850's*, 219-259; Kruman, *Politics in North Carolina*, 181-221; Joel H. Silbey, *The Partisan Imperative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 175-176.

²⁴ Holt, *Political Crisis of the 1850s*, 159; William Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 129-166; Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 52-74.

Winfield Scott.²⁵ Whig voters had little alternative, however, unless they voted Democrat, something few seemed willing to do. The close timing of the Kansas-Nebraska debate and the emergence of a nativist party in the North offered disgruntled Whigs a new opportunity. However, the Know Nothings did more than gather in Whigs and nativist Democrats. During the first year of their existence in the South, the Order's growth, often only rumored and seldom proven with electoral success, would nevertheless provide the deathblow for the southern Whigs. Know Nothing numbers would grow so quickly that the Whigs seemed to vanish almost into thin air. In the crucial year of 1854, when there were few southern elections to gather the Whigs back together, the Know Nothings' appearance gave many the chance to join a national party on the rise while still opposing the Democrats. The decline of the Whigs offered the Know Nothings an opportunity they fully intended to use. The Know Nothings' capture of the nativist issue prevented the Whigs from capitalizing on it, and in turn finished off the old party.

For southern nativists 1854 was the crucial year. At the same time as they began railing against alien voting rights and the proposed Homestead act, they began to take note of the Know Nothings' spread in the North and to expound on the party's virtues. Beginning in the spring of 1854, Whig and independent newspapers began to notice the Know Nothings' exploits. They pronounced the Order the champion of "republicanism and Americanism" and the only party able to address the "deep and wide-spread feeling

²⁵ Potter, *Impending Crisis*, 240.

of hostility and discontent among the American born."²⁶ As the Know Nothings began to win elections in northern states, southerners cheered them on and pointed to the lessons that should be learned in the South. "Look at Pennsylvania . . . Listen to Vermont . . . Behold New Hampshire," went the call to southern voters. Here was a party, southern editors claimed, which held the potential not only to be national in its following, but also one that addressed the vital issues the other parties had been too corrupt to consider.²⁷

By mid-summer 1854, Whig papers in various southern states were actively campaigning for the Know Nothings and many would declare themselves official Know Nothing journals by the fall. Longtime Whig editors with nativist sympathies backed the new party in hopes of finding a vehicle for their concerns, while others were more probably looking for a new party that was not the Democrats. In Tennessee important Whig editor William G. Brownlow embraced the Know Nothings and their ideology with all the enthusiasm he was famed for. His *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal* became one of the leading Know Nothing papers in the country, North or South. Brownlow, known as the "fighting parson," was a Methodist minister who had held anti-Catholic sympathies for some time and readily took up the Know Nothing mantle in eastern Tennessee. In the Know Nothings he discovered a movement more accepting of his blatant Catholic and foreigner bashing and also of his temperance concerns than the Whigs had been. "Thank Heaven," Brownlow declared, "the proper spirit is now

²⁶ *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, March 30, 1854.

²⁷ *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, October 28, 1854.

spreading over the continent, and hereafter none but Americans will be put upon . . . the country.” Now that the Know Nothings were here, he proclaimed, there was hope for people “too long . . . made the victims of foreign immorality and crime.”²⁸

While Brownlow was more concerned with the influence of foreigners and Catholics upon American politics and morals, other Know Nothings stressed the party’s stance against the corrupt practices of the Whigs and Democrats. The old parties were “effete and rotten” and out of touch with the concerns of the American people.²⁹ The Order’s national journal, *The American Organ*, although it was certainly anti-Catholic and anti-foreign, placed its primary focus on attacking the corruption of the old parties. Edited by Vespasian Ellis, a former Whig from Maryland, the *Organ* more nearly reflected the southern Know Nothing point of view than of the party as a whole, although Ellis did his best to maintain the party’s nationality. Printed in Washington D.C., Ellis’s paper became the Know Nothing’s primary voice of opposition to Franklin Pierce’s Democratic administration, which it held up as the puppet of foreign Catholic interests and the culmination of years of political corruption. Ellis believed that the main purpose of the American Party, as the Know Nothings now preferred to call themselves, was to provide a vehicle through which native-born Americans could “administer their own government, . . . protect the rights which they have inherited, . . . and perpetuate the

²⁸ *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, October 28, 1854.

²⁹ *Charleston Mercury*, quoted in the *Missouri Republican*, June 7, 1855.

freedom and independence of their native land.”³⁰ The old issues of chartering banks, improving harbors and rivers, and distributing the proceeds of public lands had been settled and there was now little to distinguish between either of the two major parties. Both the Democrats and Whigs “maintain[ed] their respective organizations . . . for the mere sake of the spoils of power.” The new issues of immigration and Catholic influence would, Ellis believed and the Know Nothings counted on, “annihilate these two parties” and inaugurate an “era of patriotism.”³¹

Over the second half of 1854 the Know Nothing message did begin to dominate the political debate in the South, not only in Whig/Know Nothing newspapers but also in the Democratic response. Most of the traditional issues of conflict like internal improvements were superseded by the nativist/anti-party rhetoric of the Know Nothings. Even the recent controversy over the Kansas-Nebraska act seemed of little import but for its possible encouragement of immigration. So widespread was the Know Nothing’s impact on the political dialogue that no politician or party newspaper could afford to ignore them. At first, the Democratic reaction was to portray the movement as something of a joke. To illustrate the silliness of an anti-foreign organization one southern editor even advertised for his own party, the “National anti-credit party, the Pay-Nothings.” Democratic papers also generally passed off the Order as a “Whig trick” and credited any appeal they might have to the pitiful remnants of the defunct Whig party. “Know

³⁰ *Washington Daily American Organ*, August 25, November 28, 1854.

³¹ *Washington Daily American Organ*, November 28, 1854.

Nothingism is whiggery in the shape of a secret society, whose members are bound by shocking and horrible oaths to make war upon some of the cardinal tenets of Democratic Freedom."³²

The claim that the southern Know Nothings were only Whigs in disguise has been generally accepted.³³ The reasoning behind this argument rests on the ultimate fate of the southern Know Nothings. Eventually old-line Whigs who had different goals than changing the country's naturalization laws and limiting the political power of immigrants and Catholics would maneuver their way into the Know Nothings power structure, but they entered the picture during the second half of 1855 and only took effective control in 1856. Before then the Order in the South represented a real difference from Whig ideology and offered southern voters a very different alternative to the choices they had before the emergence of the Know Nothings.³⁴

The increasing popularity of the Know Nothings forced the Democrats to deal with their message directly, attacking the Order for its principles rather than just its pedigree. In September of 1854, at a political dinner in Norfolk, Virginia, the local party

³² *Baton Rouge Weekly Comet*, July 9, 1854; *Daily Richmond Enquirer*, June 13, 1854; *Nashville Union and American*, February 1, 1855; the relationship between the Whigs and Know Nothings is important and complex and is dealt with in detail in chapter 5.

³³ For recent works that take this position see; Marc Kruman, *Parties and Politics*, 160-179; Jonathan M Atkins, *Parties, Politics, and the Sectional Conflict in Tennessee, 1832-1861* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 198-199. I agree more with Thomas D. Jeffrey, *State Parties and National Politics: North Carolina, 1815-1861* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 246-250, who argues that the Know Nothings were distinct early on, but were gradually captured by old Whigs.

³⁴ For a more detailed look at Know Nothing ideology, see chapter 3, and chapters 5 and 6 for a discussion of the old-line Whigs' intrusion into the Order.

organization invited a number of prominent Democrats to speak on the new party and its ideology. This thinly veiled campaign tactic, designed to choreograph a Democratic response to the Know Nothings, received a rather lukewarm reply from all the participants except Henry A. Wise. Wise was well known throughout the state for his opposition to the ruling elite of the Democratic Party in Virginia and hoped to win the nomination despite their opposition to his candidacy. His *Manifesto* was a twelve thousand word, detailed point by point attack on Know Nothing rhetoric that set the standard for the Democratic response to this new challenge throughout the South. In the fall of 1854 Virginia's Democratic party was in disarray and split over the nominee for the coming spring 1855 elections. Even members of the state's dominant political clique, the so-called "Richmond Junta," left leaderless after the death of Thomas Ritchie that past summer, were ready to concede victory to the Know Nothings. Wise reasoned that a strong stand directly confronting the Know Nothings, rather than trying to avoid the issues the Order raised, might be enough to gain him the nomination in the November convention. With the support of the editors of the state's Democratic organ, the *Richmond Enquirer*, and Senator Robert T. M. Hunter, Wise believed he could defeat Virginia's Democratic aristocracy.³⁵

In his *Manifesto*, Wise portrayed the Know Nothings as a society bent on destroying the basic liberties of Americans by creating an atmosphere of fear and secrecy.

³⁵ Craig M. Simpson, *A Good Southerner: The Life of Henry A. Wise of Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 108; Barton H. Wise, *The Life of Henry A. Wise of Virginia*,

In the face of the Order's insidious questioning of who was a real American, Wise wondered, "does any man think anything? Would he think aloud? Would he write anything?" for fear of being labeled un-American. And if the Order, Wise argued, were allowed to force upon the nation its idea of Americanism, with its denial of voting rights and the freedom to run for office, they would be creating a class of people with the "exclusive privilege . . . to inherit the right of election to the offices of magistrate, legislator, or judge."³⁶

In reply to Clayton's assaults on foreigners immigrating to the western territories, Wise maintained that similar land policies were the means that had settled the nation. Without foreigners moving west most of the country would still be barely inhabited. Wise, however, in essence agreed with the Know Nothings in their accusation that both the Whigs and Democrats had become corrupt in their bid for votes and had "violated the election laws and laws of naturalization rushing green emigrants, just from on shipboard, up to the polls to vote." They had "honey-fuggled with both the Catholics and the foreigners." But he saw it as a problem of the parties, rather than of the foreigners and Catholics the Know Nothings wanted to punish.³⁷ Wise believed that the Know Nothings

1806-1876 (New York: MacMillan, 1899), 168-169.

³⁶ *Richmond Enquirer*, October 26, 1854; James P. Hambleton, *A Biographical Sketch of Henry A. Wise, With a History of the Political Campaign in Virginia in 1855* (Richmond: J.W. Randolph, 1856), 8, 14.

³⁷ The Know Nothings saw the problem as a combination of the negative influence of foreigners and Catholics upon American politics and culture and the willingness of the parties and politicians to be manipulated for the purpose of vote getting. While they certainly would have agreed with Wise that there was corruption, they refused to believe that immigrants were the unwitting dupes Wise claimed.

were using immigrants for the same purpose as the Whigs and Democrats, only they were attacking them instead of courting their vote. “Is not the donkey of Know-Nothingism now kicking its heels at the lap-dogs of the ‘rich Irish brogue’ and the ‘sweet German accent,’ for the fondling and pettings of political parties?”³⁸

Wise’s strategy demonstrates just how deeply the Know Nothing message had penetrated the southern political debate by late 1854. In Virginia, a long-time stronghold of the southern Democrats, a brand new party was dictating the direction of the gubernatorial campaign, one that had a hidden following and as of yet had no candidates. Throughout the South, Democrats lashed out at Know Nothingism, assailing their anti-Catholic and anti-foreign views. But their assaults were often aimed at northern Know Nothings, equating the nativist party and its beliefs with New England Puritanism. Know Nothings were the result when the “bigotry and sour visage of New England Puritanism perverted the principles of free government and banished all sunshine and happiness from society,” they argued.³⁹ For Democrats this was about the only target available, for despite the seeming momentum of the movement, southern Know Nothings remained a largely unknown quantity.

Because the Know Nothings required a strict oath of secrecy from all their initiates, their exact numbers are hard to ascertain. With no elections of any real

³⁸ *Richmond Enquirer*, October 26, 1854; Hambleton, *Political Campaign in Virginia in 1855*, 23-24. Wise is referring to Whig presidential candidate Winfield Scott’s attempts to lure the immigrant vote in the 1852 election; see William E. Gienapp, *Origins of the Republican Party* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 69.

³⁹ *Daily Richmond Enquirer*, Sept. 28, 1854.

importance in 1854, the party's electoral strength is just as hard to assess. "Any conjectural estimate of the present strength of the Know Nothings must be utterly unreliable in the absence of any basis of computation," the *Richmond Enquirer* claimed.⁴⁰ However, throughout the summer and fall of 1854 a large number of reports indicated that their membership was growing and their influence was becoming increasingly noticeable. In Louisville Kentucky, the Order had organized enough by July 1854 to expect victory in the municipal elections in August. When a local council first appeared is uncertain, but by mid-July, rumors of the Know Nothings' increasing strength abounded. The *Louisville Daily Courier*, an independent newspaper, ran cryptically worded ads throughout the month which told members of the Order whom they should support in the upcoming elections.⁴¹ Democratic candidates objected to the party's secrecy and accused Know Nothings of trying to deceive the voters by hiding behind independent labels. Their calls for the nativists to reveal themselves went unheeded, and Know Nothing candidates were victorious in four of eleven city-wide offices. After their successful entrance into Kentucky politics, party supporters bragged of the Order's secretive nature; "unseen they move, they are as ubiquitous as the familiars of the old fashioned inquisition."⁴²

Kentucky in general and Louisville in particular were Know Nothing strongholds

⁴⁰ *Daily Richmond Enquirer*, July 25, 1854.

⁴¹ *Louisville Daily Courier*, July 15, 19, 1854.

⁴² *Louisville Daily Courier*, August 4, 8, 1854.

from very early on in the party's existence in the South. Anti-Catholicism and anti-foreignism proved a more tangible draw for voters in the city than it did in many southern communities. In states like North Carolina, where there were few immigrants or Catholics, nativism, although very real, tended to take on a more abstract quality than in a city like Louisville where Catholics made up a significant percentage of the population.⁴³ Many southern Know Nothing politicians could get by with vague assertions of the threat of Papal authority and Jesuit interference in American institutions, but in Louisville nativism was reinforced by everyday contact with newly arrived foreigners.

Large numbers of German and Irish Catholics had settled in the Louisville area and the Church was a prominent institution in the city. Bishop Martin J. Spalding was to Kentucky Know Nothings what New York archbishop John Hughes was to northern nativists. Spalding had conducted a campaign for state funding of Catholic schools similar to the one Hughes organized in New York. It had engendered the same negative reaction from non-Catholics. Nativist fears of a conspiracy reached new heights when Papal nuncio Bedini stopped off in Louisville during his American tour. Bedini had come to the U.S. to help broker an agreement over church property rights in New York. After failing to reach any agreement, Bedini stayed on and visited parishes in various cities across the country. By the time he reached Louisville, his tour was widely reported and crowds of protestors greeted him at every stop. With impetus like this, the Know

⁴³The foreign-born population of Louisville was around 12,000, or one in three in 1855; see Wallace S. Hutcheon Jr., "The Louisville Riots of August 1855," *Kentucky Historical Society Register*, 69

Nothings found a ready audience in Kentucky. By 1855 there were as many as 50,000 members in the state.⁴⁴

The first slave state that Know Nothing councils organized in was Maryland. It was here that the American Party saw its greatest and longest success in the South. Far more than in any other southern state, the Know Nothings' popularity was not limited geographically or to urban areas with large immigrant populations. The party did well not only in Baltimore, which even more than Louisville saw a significant influx of immigrants, but also on the eastern shore and in the north of the state.⁴⁵ Nativist organizations in Baltimore pre-dated the arrival of the Know Nothings and merged with that group sometime in the spring of 1854. They won several local electoral victories in Hagerstown and Cumberland in the spring. That following summer councils seemed to have organized throughout the state and the press began to take notice.⁴⁶ In October, the Order carried Samuel Hinks into the mayor's office by a majority of some 3,600 votes in Baltimore, a former Democratic stronghold, and only two weeks after he had first

(April 1971), 150.

⁴⁴Philip Wayne Kennedy, "The Know Nothing Movement in Kentucky: The Role of M.J. Spaulding, Catholic Bishop of Louisville," *Filson Club Quarterly*, 38, (1964), 19-21; Hutcheon, "The Louisville Riots", 150-151; Sister Agnes Geraldine McGann, *Nativism in Kentucky to 1860* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of American, 1944), 3, 48-55; Darrel W. Overdyke, *The Know Nothing Party in the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950), 212-213; Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 24-29.

⁴⁵ Some 58,000 immigrants entered the port of Baltimore between 1850 and 1855; see Bromwell, *History of Immigration*, 125-172.

⁴⁶ Even as late as September a paper like the *Baltimore Patriot* could express total ignorance of the Know Nothings and their principles, cited in the *Louisiana Capitolian Vis 'a Vis*, September 6, 1854.

announced his candidacy.⁴⁷

The initial reports of Know Nothing lodges in Virginia indicate that the Order had moved into the Old Dominion sometime in the summer of 1854. The state's major Whig journal, the *Richmond Whig*, wondered at their absence from Richmond in early June, but by July several councils seemed to have formed with the blessing of the national organization in New York.⁴⁸ Major councils formed in Richmond, Alexandria, and Fredricksburg while smaller ones appeared throughout the state in places like Hampton. In October a Know Nothing candidate won the party's first election by capturing a seat on the Alexandria city council. Like much of the South, Virginia seemed an unlikely place to find a rapidly spreading nativist organization. Democrats published figures on the relative absence of foreigners in the state and attacked the new party as a northern invasion with little staying power. "In some cases . . . these skulking fellows have contrived to determine the result by voting as a unit, but of their increase we are altogether incredulous. They are already decaying, and soon an unpleasant odour will be the only memorial of the defunct body."⁴⁹ These attacks, however, did little to stop the formation of more lodges within the state. "There is hardly a school house or cross-roads

⁴⁷ William J. Evitts, *A Matter of Allegiances: Maryland from 1850-1861* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 64-67; Jean H. Baker, *Ambivalent Americans: The Know-Nothing Party in Maryland* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 109; *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, October 28, 1854.

⁴⁸ *Richmond Whig*, June 10, 1854; *Richmond Daily Enquirer*, July 25, 1854; Hambleton, *Political Campaign in Virginia*, 27-28; Philip Morrison Rice, "The Know Nothing Party in Virginia, 1854-1856," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 55 (1947), 61-75.

⁴⁹ *Daily Richmond Enquirer*, July 25, 1854.

or blacksmiths shop but the boys have an organization there,” reported one Know Nothing. S.G. Haven, a Whig congressman and Millard Fillmore’s eyes in the capital, estimated that there were 60,000 initiates in Virginia by early 1855. Abingdon claimed to be home to some 3000 members of the order, and the local paper crowed that “party lines are fading, neighbor, and you might as well attempt to dam ‘the father of waters’ as to arrest the march of this young Hercules.”⁵⁰

Tennessee also showed early signs of Know Nothing strength. According to Parson Brownlow, the Order first met in Knoxville sometime in September 1854. With the help of an official from an “adjoining state,” probably Kentucky, Brownlow put together a council and initiated some 400 new members within the next couple of weeks. The state committee had already organized in Nashville sometime earlier, although probably not by more than a month. Brownlow estimated that by the summer of 1855 there were as many as 50,000 initiates in the state, and even his most hated political enemy, Andrew Johnson, admitted in early 1855 that the Know Nothings probably had enough support to carry the gubernatorial election scheduled for the following summer.⁵¹

Around the rest of the South the Know Nothings appeared throughout the second

⁵⁰ *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, July 12, 22, August 12, October 26, 1854; S.G. Haven to Millard Fillmore, January 10, 1855, Millard Fillmore Papers, SUNY, Lake Oswego; *Abingdon Virginian*, December 9, 23, 1854.

⁵¹ *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, July 7, 1855; Andrew Johnson to David T. Patterson, February 17, 1855, Andrew Johnson Papers, LC. Johnson’s estimates of Know Nothing numbers were far fewer than Brownlow’s, counting only about 17,000. Johnson, however, suspected that temperance forces within the state, with whom Brownlow held considerable influence, would vote with the pro-temperance nativists and provide the margin needed for victory; for Johnson’s relationship with Brownlow see, Thomas B. Alexander, “Strange Bedfellows: The Interlocking Careers of T.A.R. Nelson, Andrew Johnson, and W.G. (Parson) Brownlow,” *East Tennessee Historical Society’s Publications*, 51 (1979), 54-77.

half of 1854 and on into 1855. In North Carolina, local councils began forming at approximately the same time they had in Virginia, but there are fewer reports of their activities until early 1855. Nevertheless by late summer many Whigs believed that their only chance of ever gaining another majority in the state lay in some sort of fusion with the new party, despite its relatively low profile. Although they were not yet widely known the Know Nothings were well enough organized to have elected a state-wide council and chosen representatives to travel to the Order's national meeting in Cincinnati in November 1854. Following that meeting the number of local units of the party increased dramatically. There were perhaps as many as 40,000 initiated members in the state by the following spring.⁵² In Louisiana, the Order had organized around a campaign for honest government, along with the traditional issues concerning public school funds and temperance. Riots during the March, 1854 elections in New Orleans helped fuel the movement for governmental reform and increased the Know Nothings' popularity. By the end of the year, they were winning their first victory in a state election. In August of 1854 in Missouri, although the Know Nothings had received almost no press. Luther M. Kennett, former mayor of St. Louis, mustered enough support from discontented voters, many of them nativists, to defeat Thomas Hart Benton for Congress. Although Benton was unpopular for many reasons, the press wondered that if the Order "could so annihilate a gentleman of the size of Col. Benton's conceptions of himself, we have a

⁵² Cantrell, *Southern Dissent*, 83-86; William W. Morrison to William Alexander Graham, August 11, 1854, Hamilton, ed., *The Papers of William Alexander Graham*, 528; Kruman, *Politics in North*

curiosity to know, . . . what they would do with us if we were to come between them and their Know Nothingism.”⁵³

Throughout much of the rest of the South, the Know Nothings were somewhat slower to organize. In several states local councils existed by as early as the fall of 1854, but beyond that there was little or no action on the state level. In Arkansas and Texas the Order had a small following by the end of 1854, but in neither state did the Know Nothings really put together a party until the following summer.⁵⁴ The same was true for states like Florida, Georgia, and Alabama. Here the Know Nothings had a significant presence in urban areas like Tallahassee and Mobile but were slow to build strength throughout their respective states. In Georgia, prominent Whig politician John M. Berrien joined the Order and helped bring a large portion of his old party with him. But powerful Whigs like Alexander H. Stevens and Robert Toombs put up a stronger fight against the American Party when the Know Nothings entered their state than did Whigs from the rest of the South, refusing to join and actively campaigning against the nativists. Their reluctance to abandon their dying Whig party consequently seriously hurt the Know Nothings' following in Georgia.⁵⁵

Carolina, 161-164; *Greensborough (NC) Patriot*, May 5, 1855.

⁵³ *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, March 27, 30, 31, May 8, 1854; *Baton Rouge Weekly Comet*, December 24, 1854; Marius Carriere, "Political Leadership of the Louisiana Know Nothing Party," *Louisiana History*, 1980 (21-2), 183-195; *Louisville Daily Courier*, August 12, 1854.

⁵⁴ Harold T. Smith, "The Know Nothings in Arkansas," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, 34 (1975), 291-293; Ralph A. Wooster, "An Analysis of the Texas Know Nothings," *South Western Historical Quarterly*, 7 (1967), 414; McGrath, *Nativism in Texas*, 106-107.

⁵⁵ Alan S. Thompson, "Southern Rights and Nativism as Issues in Mobile Politics, 1850-1861,"

By the Autumn of 1854 only a few well known southern politicians had cast their lot with the Order. Many were as uncertain of the party's strength as the Democrats were, while others were reluctant to leave their former affiliations. John M. Clayton, whose stand against foreign voting rights in the territories had helped bridge the gap between southern nativist interests and the northern Know Nothing party, took the early position as party favorite in the South and helped put Clayton at the top of many southerners' list of desirable presidential candidates for 1856.⁵⁶ Clayton continued to speak out against foreigners and Catholics, and despite his denial that he wanted the presidency, seems to have done little to discourage his followers beyond the customary plea of disinterest. Even the highly partisan Democratic *Richmond Enquirer* admitted that Clayton was "a leader who [would] combine and direct their [the Know Nothing's] energies with great ability and the best possible effect."⁵⁷

Alabama Review, 35 (April 1982), 136-137; Arthur W. Thompson, "Political Nativism in Florida, 1848-1860: A Phase of Anti-Secessionism," *Journal of Southern History*, 15 (1949), 39-42; Anthony Gene Carey, "Too Southern to be Americans: Proslavery Politics and the Failure of the Know Nothing Party in Georgia, 1854-1856," *Civil War History*, XLI (March 1995), 22-40; Royce C. McCrary, "John MacPherson Berrien and the Know Nothing Movement in Georgia," *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 61 (1977), 34-36; Thomas W. Thomas to Alexander H. Stevens, May 5, 1855, reprinted in Ulrich B. Phillips ed., *Annual Report of the American Historical Association, 1911*, vol. II (Washington: U.S. Public Documents, 1913), 350; Alexander H. Stevens to Thomas W. Thomas, May 9, 1855, reprinted in Henry Cleveland, *Alexander H. Stevens in Public and Private* (Chicago: National Publishing Co., 1866), 459-471; Robert Toombs to T. Lomax, June 6, 1855 in Phillips, *Annual Report* 350-353; George Stapleton to John MacPherson Berrien, November 30, 1855, John MacPherson Berrien Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library.

⁵⁶ W. Wheelingham to John M. Clayton, July 18, 1854; G. P. Nelson to Clayton, July 4, 1854; F.N. Pettis to Clayton, July 19, 1854, D. Rodney King to John M. Clayton, July 3, August 10, 1854, Clayton Papers, LC; *Daily Richmond Enquirer*, Oct. 4, 1854; *Baton Rouge Weekly Comet*, June 30, 1854; *Abingdon Virginian*, December 9, 1854; *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, October 28, 1854.

⁵⁷ Clayton to D. Rodney King, August 8, 1854, published in the *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, November 11, 1854; D. Rodney King to John M. Clayton, August 10, 1854; A. Pollock to

Another early supporter of nativism in the Congress also emerged as a presidential hopeful. John Bell of Tennessee, who, like Clayton, had voted against the Kansas-Nebraska act and spoken out against foreign interests, although not with the enthusiasm of Clayton, became the favorite of William Brownlow and the *Knoxville Whig*. Bell took less interest in the contest than did Clayton and never actively sought the nomination. Bell occasionally gave a pro-Know Nothing speech and supported its candidates, but he did little to promote the party.⁵⁸ His rather lukewarm support for the Order did not deter his backers, but it does indicate how little established leadership the southern Know Nothings had during much of their first year of existence.

Sam Houston, a Texas Senator and former Democrat, lent a great deal of legitimacy to the southern Know Nothings. He joined the Know Nothings for many of the same reasons as former Whigs had, but the fact that he had been a Democrat helped the party deny accusations that it was the nothing but the Whigs in disguise. His condemnations of his old Democratic friends and claims that the Know Nothings represented the true legacy of Washington and Jackson helped lure many nativist

Clayton, October 20, 1854; D. Rodney King to Clayton, December (?), 1854, Clayton Papers, LC; *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, October 11, 1854; *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, October 28, December 2, 1854; *Daily Richmond Enquirer*, October 5, 1854. It was customary in the 19th century for anyone seeking election to the presidency to deny any interest in the office until a groundswell of support emerged and he was persuaded to take up the mantle of presidential candidacy. The belief that the office should choose the man rather than the man the office ran deep in republican ideology. The Know Nothings, in fact, adopted the principle into their platform. Despite this belief most presidential candidates had their own people work day and night to create that groundswell of support which they then could claim was too great for them to resist or deny.

⁵⁸ William G. Brownlow to John Bell, January 15, 1856, John Bell Papers, LC; *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, March 24, 1855; Joseph Howard Parks, *John Bell of Tennessee* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1950), 303-306.

Democrats who had previously been wary of a party that contained so many former Whigs. By November of 1854, many considered him to be the best choice for president because his popularity cut across so many different lines. He was a military hero of great note who embodied the romance of the West. The combination of his nativist beliefs and Jacksonian roots made Houston an extremely attractive candidate.⁵⁹

However, in this initial period of party organization in the South the Know Nothings' heart and soul did not come from the well known politicians who gave the Order a portion of respectability, but from lesser known figures whose beliefs and ambitions more closely matched those of the Know Nothing party as it had originated. Kenneth Rayner, a former North Carolina Whig, took up the Know Nothing banner sometime in mid-1854. Rayner was one of many southern Whigs who, disenchanted with the party when Winfield Scott was nominated for president in 1852, abandoned the party. The old Whigs no longer seemed to represent his views, and Scott's attempts to draw the immigrant vote had especially dismayed Rayner. For him the Whigs had become a corrupted shell of their former greatness and were just as guilty as the Democrats were in their attempts to curry the favors of foreigners. The Know Nothings seemed to offer

⁵⁹ S. G. Haven to Millard Fillmore, January 10, 1855, Fillmore Papers, SUNY, Lake Oswego; Amelia W. Williams and Eugene C. Barker, *The Writings of Sam Houston*, vol. VI (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1941), 194; Sister Paul of the Cross McGrath, *Political Nativism in Texas, 1825-1860* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1930), 106, 186-192; *New York Herald*, November 16, 1854; John Hoyt Williams, *Sam Houston: A Biography of the Father of Texas* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 295; M. K. Wisheart, *Sam Houston: American Giant* (Washington: Robert B. Luce, 1962), 565-566; Greg Cantrell, "Sam Houston and the Know Nothings: A Reappraisal," *Southwestern History Quarterly*, 96 (January 1993), 327-344; Llerena Friend, *Sam Houston: The Great Designer* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1954), 291-297.

Rayner an organization where his republican ideals would not be compromised for the sake of office-seeking. Their belief that “Americans should rule America” fit well with Rayner’s own thoughts on the growing power of the Catholic Church and the foreign-born and their corrupting influence on American government.⁶⁰

Rayner liked to claim that he was the first man to organize a Know Nothing council south of the state of Maryland. That assertion is up for debate, but it is clear that Rayner took a strong hand in the party’s movement into North Carolina where he quickly became that state’s most prominent spokesman and one of the South’s most active members of the national Order. He was one of the most able of the party’s representatives and an eloquent defender and proponent of their ideology. Rayner published a series of replies to Henry Wise’s attacks on the Know Nothings beginning in December 1854. These widely distributed letters are perhaps the best single document outlining the southern Know Nothing position and their wide-spread readership helped push Rayner from relative obscurity into the national spotlight and the party leadership.⁶¹

Perhaps Kenneth Rayner’s primary importance to the southern Know Nothings was his close relationship to the northern leaders of the party. In late November, 1854, the Know Nothings met for the first time as a national organization. Order initiates from

⁶⁰ Greg Cantrell, *Kenneth and John B. Rayner and the Limits of Southern Dissent* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 83-84; Cantrell, “Southern and Nativist: Kenneth Rayner and the Ideology of ‘Americanism’,” *North Carolina Historical Review*, LXIX (April 1992), 134-141.

⁶¹ Cantrell, *Southern Dissent*, 83-85; Cantrell, “Southerner and Nativist,” 34-41; Kenneth Rayner, *Reply of the Hon. Kenneth Rayner to the Manifesto of Henry A. Wise*, (Washington D.C.: American Organ Office, 1855).

most of the northern states and several in the South convened in Cincinnati to discuss nationalizing the party and standardizing its rituals, practices, and platforms. Rayner represented North Carolina and was accompanied by southern party leaders John Clayton and Sam Houston, as well as men like Garrett Davis of Kentucky and Joseph Segar of Virginia, relative unknowns, who like Rayner would represent the true nativist position within the southern branch of the Know Nothings.⁶² Rayner was concerned that sectionalism might tear apart the Know Nothings the same way it had the Whigs. His republican beliefs led him to view the maintenance of the Union as the single most important way of saving republican liberties. American freedoms went part and parcel with the nation as a whole. To make sure the party was dedicated to this principle Rayner proposed the addition of a third degree to the Order's ritual.⁶³ This third or "Union degree" called upon all Know Nothings to pledge a sacred oath to,

Ever bind together the states of the Union--forming a ring, in token of your determination that, so far as your efforts can avail, this Union shall have no end. . . Solemnly declare your devotion to the Union of these states; that in the discharge of your duties as American citizens you will uphold, maintain, and defend it [the Union]; that you will discourage and discountenance any and every attempt, coming from any and every quarter, which you believe to be designed or calculated to destroy or subvert it, or weaken its bonds; and that you will use your influence, so far as in your

⁶² *Baltimore American and Commercial Advertiser*, November 23, 1854; Cantrell, *Southern Dissent*, 84; Garrett Davis had been known in Kentucky since his campaign to have voting restrictions placed on foreigners in 1849 during the state's constitutional convention. His speech on that occasion was routinely reprinted in Know Nothing newspapers, see *Washington Daily American Organ*, December 11, 12, 13, 14, 1854.

⁶³ The first two degrees of the Know Nothing ritual called upon the initiates to take an oath of secrecy, swear that they are a native born Protestant and that they will only vote for other native born Protestants.

power, in endeavoring to procure an amicable and equitable adjustment of all political discontents or differences which may threaten its injury or overthrow. You further promise and swear (or affirm) . . . that you will vote for and support for all political offices, third or union degree members of this order in preference to all others. . . . To this you pledge your lives, your fortunes, and your sacred honors. So help you God and keep you steadfast!⁶⁴

Rayner first came up with the idea for the Union degree while making the trip from North Carolina to Cincinnati. Joseph Segar, who was with him, promised to support the measure, but upon their arrival at the convention response to Rayner's enthusiastic proposition was mixed. Rayner convinced the council to appoint a committee to look into the proposal, selecting Rayner as the chair. The North Carolinian managed to get support from enough committee members, both North and South, to send his Union degree on to the whole council. The Order adopted the new addition to the ritual almost unanimously and the whole convention took the oath. Rayner hoped that having all the Know Nothings take it would be enough to overcome the centrifugal forces which seemed to be pulling the nation apart. "It seems to me," he wrote New York Know Nothing Daniel Ullman, "that when 2 millions of men in this country have taken that third degree, that this union must be safe."⁶⁵

Rayner's confidence in his Union degree was no doubt sincere, but the initial doubts raised by both northern and southern Know Nothings were the first signs of

⁶⁴ American Party Ritual quoted from M. W. Cluskey, ed., *Political Textbook, or Encyclopedia* (Washington D.C.: Cornelius Wendel, 1857), 56.

⁶⁵ Henry Wilson, *The Rise and Fall of the Slave power in America*, vol. II (New York: Houghton, Mifflin, & Co., 1874), 421; Cantrell, *Southern Dissent*, 84-85; Kenneth Rayner to Daniel Ullman, January 22, 1855, Daniel Ullman Papers, New York Historical Society.

trouble for the new party's national following. The Know Nothings had seemingly come out of nowhere and by the November 1854 meeting seemed poised on the verge of becoming the nation's major opposition party. In the North the Order had been so successful in the fall 1854 elections that hopes ran high that they could even become the majority in that section. They had captured almost all the seats in the Massachusetts legislature and controlled that state's congressional delegation, and had achieved significant success in New York, Pennsylvania, and Indiana.⁶⁶ However, the Union degree implicitly held all Know Nothings to a pledge to prevent slavery agitation from harming the Union, and there were many initiates on both sides who were uncertain how they would respond when slavery was the issue. Many southern Know Nothings clearly saw immigration as a threat to slavery and promoted anti-foreign sentiments on those grounds. "Will it [the South] refuse the simple, honorable and perfect protection which Americanism affords . . . from the deluge of fanaticism and treason with which the abolitionists have sought to overwhelm it?" asked one southern editor. "I think opposition to foreign influence, indeed to immigration of foreigners into our portion of the union is necessary to the safety of the South and her institutions," wrote S. L. Stuart of Virginia. Henry Wilson, a free-soil Know Nothing from Massachusetts clearly saw the writing on the wall and fully expected a conflict with southern Know Nothings. However, by the end of 1854, the party's stance on slavery had yet to be fully determined,

⁶⁶ Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 57-74; Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850's*, 158-159.

and for the time being, most preferred it to remain that way.⁶⁷

Despite the initial uncertainty about the Union Degree, the Know Nothings picked up speed heading into the end of 1854 and on into early 1855. The national convention and the important congressional victories in key northern states like Massachusetts and Pennsylvania had given the party even greater momentum. As the Order's popularity and familiarity increased in the South, its ranks swelled with new initiates and previously hesitant politicians began to look towards the nativists with greater interest. Whigs and Democrats with nativist tendencies joined in ever-larger numbers, as did men who finally became convinced that the Whigs were no longer a legitimate organization.⁶⁸ The effect of the Know Nothings' growth not only increased their strength, it also generated deep concern within Democratic ranks while simultaneously dismantling the remnants of the Whig Party in many states.⁶⁹

Whereas men like John Clayton, Kenneth Rayner, and Garrett Davis had joined the Order primarily out of sincere convictions and real nativist inclinations, many of those who migrated to the Order in early 1855 were less enthusiastic about the party's nativism. They certainly shared a great many beliefs with the anti-Catholic crowd, but for many that was not enough to get them to join the party. These new men needed a greater certainty of victory before they offered their allegiances. Alexander H. H. Stuart, a Virginia Whig

⁶⁷ *Lynchburg Virginian* quoted from the *Greensborough (NC) Patriot*, April 7, 1855; S. L. Stuart to William M. Burwell, November 13, 1854, William M. Burwell Papers, LC; Wilson, *Slave Power*, 423.

⁶⁸ *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, December 9, 1854.

⁶⁹ Edward Jay Morris to John M. Clayton, February 21, 1855, Clayton papers, LC.

and the front runner for the gubernatorial nomination until the Whigs decided not to choose a candidate, thought long and hard before joining the Know Nothings. Stuart had assumed that he could get Know Nothing support for his candidacy, but when the state's Know Nothings announced in December, 1854 that they would nominate their own man and not support anyone who was not an initiate, he worried about joining the new organization. Stuart wanted the Know Nothings' votes but remained uncertain as to their real intentions as a party. He was advised to avoid joining in an obvious self-serving manner, but rather to get an "understanding" from the Know Nothings. Finally, although Stuart worried that the Know Nothings had no policy "in regards to the revenue, manufactures, public lands etc.," he joined the Order and took the oaths after former president Millard Fillmore counseled him to take up the party "which shall ignore constant distracting agitation of slavery, and take away the influence of demagogues of both parties, who pander to the foreign vote and corruptly chase for its purchase at every election."⁷⁰

Many other politicians uncertain of the Know Nothings' true beliefs also wondered about attaching themselves to the Order. "I will be greatly obliged to you for affording me the means of getting at the correct principles or platform of this new party." S. L. Stuart of Virginia wrote to William M. Burwell, a Maryland Know Nothing editor. "I don't care to take a step that I may be ashamed of, or that my sense of right will

⁷⁰ Alexander H.H. Stuart to Millard Fillmore, January 1, 1855; S.G. Haven to Fillmore, January 10, 1855, Fillmore Papers, SUNY, Lake Oswego; Fillmore to Stuart, January 15, 1855, Alexander H.H.

condemn me for.” He was quick to add, however, that he had “no hesitancy in saying I am heart and soul with this organization.” William C. Rives, another Virginia Whig, considered the Know Nothings “altogether too narrow . . . for a new and powerful political organization,” but he also thought of them “as a symptom of the improving health of the body politic,” and therefore worthy of support.⁷¹

Whigs left without a party after massive desertions to the nativist cause soon followed their fellow conservatives, although they were often motivated by a hatred of Democrats rather than a love of the Know Nothings. Zebulon Vance, a newcomer to politics, took the oath and became an American party member because he “believed its principles were correct,” and could join “without surrendering a single iota of Whiggery.” However he also pledged that he would “stand . . . opposed to Democracy, and shall so stand till Democracy amends itself or I grow corrupt.”⁷² John M. Botts of Virginia spoke for many when he claimed,

I think it quite manifest that there is about to be a total revolution in the political affairs of this country, and for my own part I am satisfied that no change is likely to be for the worse. And if the organization of the Whig party is to be broken up, it leaves no alternative for us, but to choose between the other two parties:--the ‘Know Nothings’ on the one hand, and the ‘Good-for-Nothings’ on the other; and having fought against the ‘Good-for-Nothings’ for twenty-one years, I am strongly inclined to fight

Stuart Papers, University of Virginia.

⁷¹ S. L. Stuart to William M. Burwell, November 13, 1854; William C. Rives to William M. Burwell, November 12, 1854, William M. Burwell Papers, LC.

⁷² Zebulon B. Vance to David F. Caldwell, February 19, 1858, Frontis W. Johnson, *The Papers of Zebulon Baird Vance*, vol. I, 1843-1862 (Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1963), xxxvi.

on the side of the 'Know-Nothings'.⁷³

As more and more men from the South joined the Order its seeming invincibility drew others into the fold. Fellow converts from throughout the South echoed Botts' words about a "revolution in the political affairs of the country".⁷⁴ They ignored the pleas from so-called "old-line Whigs" to renew the old party and put down the "do-nothings" and became initiates into the secret order.⁷⁵ By early 1855, the American Party in the South had seemingly reached flood tide in estimates of its future success. "The No [sic] Nothings are to succeed there is no doubt," a supporter wrote to John Clayton, while another exclaimed with great certainty that it would be "extremely difficult if not impossible to elect any candidate who does not pledge himself to the support of their principles."⁷⁶ Realizing the truth of this statement disenfranchised Whigs flocked to the party. "The Know Nothings . . . are on the increase," Robert Letcher wrote to Kentucky Senator John J. Crittenden, "Morehead joined a few nights ago. . . . They held a meeting in Louisville recently and had quite a boisterous time of it."⁷⁷ All three of these men, Letcher, Crittenden, and Charles S. Morehead, were Kentucky Whigs who had finally concluded that the Know Nothings were their best bet for political success. But they were

⁷³ John M. Botts speech quoted in *Fayetteville (NC) Observer*, November 30, 1854.

⁷⁴ William C. Rives to William M. Burwell, November 12, 1854, Burwell Papers, LC

⁷⁵ Chandler L. du Fould to John M. Clayton, February 15, 1855, Clayton Papers, LC; *Fayetteville North Carolinian*, July 10, 1854.

⁷⁶ John A. Rogers to John Clayton, January 19, 1855; D. Rodney King to Clayton, December (?), 1854, Clayton Papers, LC.

⁷⁷ Robert P. Letcher to John J. Crittenden, January 25, 1855, John J. Crittenden Papers, LC.

also representative of a new group of initiates, men who forced themselves to deal with the Know Nothings for political purposes but who had only marginal interest in their ideals as far as nativism was concerned.⁷⁸ Their influence would grow over time, but in early 1855 the more idealistic nativists like Kenneth Rayner, John Clayton, and Garrett Davis would still dominate the Know Nothing party in the South.

By the end of 1854, southern political culture had undergone a surprisingly rapid transformation. A new party, ideologically centered on nativism and antagonism towards the old parties and political corruption, dominated the political debate. Without a significant electoral victory, the Know Nothings had swept aside the southern Whig party and stood fully prepared to take on the dominant Democrats. Within six months of the passage of the controversial Kansas-Nebraska act, the Know Nothings had managed to place their demands for changes in the naturalization and voting laws at the top of the southern political agenda, overshadowing for a time the sectional strife born of the repeal of the Missouri Compromise. Whigs and Democrats alike flocked to the Order in such numbers that even in a traditionally Democratic state like Virginia they seemed on the verge of capturing the governor's mansion. Their hopes for a "revolution" ran high as they attempted to forge a truly national organization which could avoid the disaster that had befallen the Whigs. But to maintain their momentum the Know Nothings would

⁷⁸Letcher to Crittenden, January 25, 29, 1855, Crittenden Papers, LC; Albert D. Kirwan, *John J. Crittenden: The Struggle for the Union* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1962), 299.

have to win elections. There could be no alteration of the naturalization laws unless Know Nothings held office, and did so in enough numbers to at least compel a compromise from the other parties. The spring and summer of 1855 would provide the newly formed American Party with that chance in the South. Its eventual success rested upon the ability of nativists to continue to convince southern voters that the real danger to the nation's republican liberties came from the Catholics and foreigners in their midst.

CHAPTER 2: "AMERICANS MUST RULE AMERICA": REPUBLICANISM, SLAVERY, AND THE IDEOLOGY OF THE KNOW NOTHING PARTY IN THE SOUTH

The southern Know Nothing party had its origins in the timely combination of political party system breakup and surging nativism that swept the United States in the mid-1850s. This group of nativist politicians was able to take advantage of the political uncertainty because their ideology appealed to a traditionally American set of values known as republicanism. Using this widely held world-view as the basis of their rhetoric and policies, Know Nothings discovered a set of issues which strongly motivated American voters. While reliance upon traditional republican values linked Know Nothings to a common political culture, the primacy of their anti-foreign/anti-Catholic position set them apart and made them unique among American political parties.

Recent scholarship has focused more intently upon the role of this common belief system in American history and politics. For the most part these works have concentrated upon northern politics. In the case of the Know Nothings, the southern half of the party, with a few exceptions, has been largely ignored.¹ The southern portion of the Order has

¹ For works focusing on the role of republicanism in politics in general see; Robert E. Shalhope, "Republicanism and early American Historiography," *WMQ*, 3rd ser., 39 (1982), 334-356; Bernard Bailyn, *The Origins of American Politics* (New York: Knopf, 1967); Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1969); for republicanism, the second American party system and the politics of 1850s see; Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1978), 156-171; Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the*

generally been regarded as a watered down version of the northern party, sharing little of its fundamental ideology and reflecting barely more than the transparent attempt of desperate Whigs to avoid joining or voting for the hated Democrats.² These interpretations stress the seemingly lukewarm, out-of-place nativism and timid anti-Catholicism, as well as the prominence of former Whig politicians within the southern branch's power structure which the authors believe characterized the southern Know Nothings.

The southern Know Nothings, however, were far closer in their world-view to the northern wing than most believe. Much of the southern Know Nothings' nativist rhetoric was borrowed directly from northern politicians, and in most significant ways their beliefs were the same or at least closely related to those of northerners who shared the

Republican Party Before the Civil War (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); Marc W. Kruman, "The Second American Party System and the Transformation of Revolutionary Republicanism," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 12 (Winter 1992), 509-537; for studies specifically concentrating on the northern Know Nothings see; Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 103-126; John R. Mulkern, *The Know Nothing Party in Massachusetts: The Rise and Fall of a People's Party* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990); Holt, "The Politics of Impatience: The Origins of Know Nothingism," *Journal of American History*, LX (September, 1973), 309-331; James Oakes, "From Republicanism to Liberalism: Ideological Change and the Crisis of the Old South," *American Quarterly*, 37 (Fall 1985), 351-371, looks at republicanism in the South; and for a discussion of republicanism and/or ideology and the southern Know Nothings see; Kruman, *Parties and Politics in North Carolina, 1836-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana state University Press, 1983), 5, 88, 174-175; J. Mills Thornton, III., *Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana Sate University Press, 1978), 352-357; Greg Cantrell, *Kenneth and John B. Rayner and the Limits of Southern Dissent* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 77-117; Cantrell, "Southerner and Nativist: Kenneth Rayner and the Ideology of 'Americanism,'" *North Carolina Historical Review* LXIX (April, 1992), 131-147; Jean H. Baker, *Ambivalent Americans: The Know Nothing Party in Maryland* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 24-55.

² Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, xii-xiii.

Know Nothing appellation.³ The core of both groups' ideology and the key to their popularity lay in their appeal to traditional American republicanism. Republican ideology, as it had been passed down from the revolutionary era, had undergone a gradual transformation in the wake of economic, political, and social changes, but by the 1850s it still held a tremendous appeal for most Americans. Republicanism at its heart was a system of beliefs centered on the responsibility of citizens toward the nation and the protection of the Union. It stressed the danger of conspiracy and corruption as the greatest threat to the country, its institutions and liberties and generally used these as explanatory devices for any undesirable change in society. When forced to deal with social or economic issues, Americans of the first half of the 19th century generally sought out conspiratorial scapegoats. Jacksonian Democrats had attacked banks while the Republican Party blamed the "slave-power" for the nation's ills. The Know Nothings in turn exploited republicanism by mounting a campaign of opposition to Catholics and foreigners.

Like their northern counterparts, southern Know Nothings saw their nativism and anti-Catholicism in the light of traditional republicanism. Both of these groups were a threat to the nation and had to be opposed in an effort to safeguard American liberties. Their mistrust of the old parties and their fear of its corruption and excessive power reflected the Know Nothings' attacks on foreigners and Catholics. Attempts to reform

³ On this point I also disagree with Tyler Anbinder's assertion that "Know Nothings in the North and South disagreed about even the most fundamental aspects of their movement," see Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 103.

the naturalization laws and to prevent both unnaturalized immigrants and Catholics from voting or holding office smacked of an elitism which was characteristic of republican beliefs.

The South, however, was a diverse region, and the varying proportions of the twin threat the southern Know Nothings chose to emphasize were a reflection of their relative importance to each community. Which aspect of the Know Nothings' ideology played the most significant role in their politics depended upon which Know Nothing you were speaking with at the time. Know Nothing politicians in urban areas like Baltimore, New Orleans, Louisville, and St. Louis were more likely to concern themselves with the immediate threat they perceived from significant numbers of non-citizens.⁴ In areas less directly affect by immigration, Know Nothings still managed to weave together a threat to the southern way of life by exploiting anti-Catholic feelings. Their tenets, however, formed a coherent whole and allowed them to build a coalition of politicians and voters based upon that core of beliefs.

In one important area, however, southern and northern Know Nothings were not in general agreement. The existence of slavery colored the southerners' approach to politics in a manner that could not be totally reconciled with their northern counterparts.

⁴ Baker, *Ambivalent Americans*, 4-23; Philip Wayne Kennedy, "The Know Nothing Movement in Kentucky: The Role of M.J. Spalding, Catholic Bishop of Louisville," *Filson Club Quarterly*, 38 (1964), 17-35; Wallace S. Hutcheon Jr., "The Louisville Riots of August 1855," *Kentucky Historical Society Register*, 69 (April 1971), 150-172; Robert C. Reindors, "The Louisiana American Party and the Catholic Church," *Mid-America*, 40 (1958), 218-228; William J. Bromwell, *History of Immigration to the United States* (New York: Redfield, 1856), 137-172.

In some way all of the tenets of their ideology were linked to slavery. Their justifications for nativism and anti-Catholicism were in some manner connected to a defense of their peculiar institution. To maintain the party as a whole on a national level, their only solution was to ignore slavery as an issue and concentrate on their areas of agreement, a task which would prove far more difficult than southerners had hoped.

The southern Know Nothings' ideology, as well as that of their northern counterparts, beyond their general acceptance of traditional republicanism, was specifically based upon opposition to a triple threat: foreigners, Catholics, and corrupt politicians. Added to this was a pro-Union stance which linked their anti-messages to a positive defense of republican liberties and the nation's freedom protecting institutions. For southern Know Nothings, slavery in turn changed their basic attitudes to such an extent that it must be considered when dealing with each of the above beliefs. For every tenet of their ideology, Know Nothings in the South had a reasoning which related directly to slavery and its continued prosperity.⁵

At the heart of the Know Nothings' message was a call to reclaim "America for Americans." "The vital principle of the American party is *Americanism*," wrote Alexander H.H. Stuart in a series of letters to the *Richmond Whig* in defense of his Know Nothing party.⁶ Nativism of some sort had a long history in the United States, but the

⁵ Marius, M. Carriere, "Slavery, Consensus, and the Louisiana Know Nothing Party," *Mid-America*, 66 (1984), 51-63.

⁶ Stuart, who had been a prominent Virginia Whig and Secretary of the Interior under Millard Fillmore, published his tract on the Know Nothings under the pseudonym "Madison," reprinted in M.W. Cluskey, ed., *Political Textbook, or Encyclopedia* (Washington: Cornelius Wendel, 1857), 307-334, quote

Know Nothings were the first political party explicitly to make it the center of their ideology. Fear of foreigners and their influence translated easily into the rhetoric of republicanism and touched a responsive chord in many Americans. Often couched in positive terms like “Americanism,” however, this anti message did not seem as destructive as simple foreigner bashing. The 1850s saw this turn towards nativism in part because of the huge influx of immigrants from Europe, especially Ireland and Germany, between 1848 and 1854. This seemingly unstoppable wave of newcomers brought an increasing sense of urgency to what nativists perceived as an ongoing problem for the country. From 1848 to 1854 over 2.5 million new immigrants landed at U.S. ports and more than 460,000 of these in 1854 alone.⁷ This number was considerably smaller for the southern states. Only about fifteen percent of the total number of immigrants entering the country during this same period came in through southern ports, although a larger number eventually settled in slave states. Although these numbers are relatively small when compared to the incredibly large wave of people pouring into the North, they still represent a significant figure, especially in urban areas like Baltimore, St. Louis, New Orleans, and Louisville. New Orleans finished only behind New York City (a distant second) in the number of entrants, most of who were Germans, many of them headed for

on 307.

⁷ Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1938; reprint, Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1964), 122-127; Marcus Lee Hansen, *The Atlantic Migration, 1607-1860* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), 3-225; Bromwell, *Immigration*, 137-172; *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970*, 2 vols. (Washington: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1975), vol. I, 106.

Missouri or the western territories. By 1855 one of every three residents of Louisville was foreign born.⁸

For the Know Nothings the flood tide of foreign born presented a number of problems, all of which posed a direct threat to the nation and its republican government and values. One strongly held conviction was that the new immigrants were by and large paupers who would undoubtedly either end up on the public dole, or worse yet, turn to crime to survive. Know Nothings pointed out the statistics showing the relatively large number of foreigners among those receiving public support and of those convicted of a crime. The belief that European governments were dumping criminals and providing “means to their refuse and pestilential populations to emigrate” was widespread. “Our country is becoming a Botany Bay,” claimed Whig turned Know Nothing Senator John M. Clayton of Delaware. “The annals of crime have swelled as the jails of Europe have poured their contents into the country.” One outspoken Know Nothing editor complained that Botany Bay had been abandoned as “the great receptacle of the felon tribe” which was “now disgorged on the shore of . . . [the] Republic.” Others demanded laws “to prohibit foreign felons and paupers” from entering the country. “Our people have too long been made victims of foreign immorality and crime.” This belief was so strong the “President’s Charge,” the highest level of the Know Nothing oath, put opposition to the “introduction of foreign paupers and criminals’ at the top of its list of duties for new

⁸ Bromwell, *Immigration*, 137-172; Walter D. Kamphoefner, *The Westfalians: From Germany to Missouri* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 77-79; Hutcheon, “Louisville Riots,” 151.

members of the Order.⁹

Southern Know Nothings tended to doubt that newly arrived immigrants were capable of comprehending American notions of liberty and republicanism, for they were “profoundly ignorant of the true principles of our government and institutions.” This was in sharp contrast to their opinion of earlier groups. “The emigrants of Gen. Washington’s day, and of even five and twenty years ago, were of widely different character to those who have crowded upon us more recently,” wrote a Virginia editor. “The former were men of property, of education, of enlarged patriotism.”¹⁰ Those who were entering the country, or had done so in the past decade “cannot be expected to understand the complicated machinery of our political system,” claimed Charles Gayerre in an address to the voters of Louisiana. Democracy was an intricate and subtle idea, according to the Know Nothings, and it could not be entrusted too readily to the uninitiated. “To qualify a people for a republican government,” Alexander Stuart wrote, “They must not only have intelligence and virtue, but they must undergo a system of training and instruction in the principles of liberty and in the practical working of free institutions.” In contrast they argued that the minds of immigrants were in actuality “filled with a vague and indefinite

⁹ Cluskey, “Madison Letters,” 325; Frederick Rinehart Anspach, *Sons of the Sires: A History of the Rise, Progress, and Destiny of the American Party* (Philadelphia: Lipincott, Grambo & Co., 1855), 68; *Brownlow’s Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, December 9, October 8, 1854, April 28, 1855; *Abingdon Virginian*, December 9, 1854, March 3, 1855; The President’s Charge, Know Nothing Collection, Library of Congress; North Carolina Know Nothing Platform cited in *Greensborough Patriot*, November 2, 1855; Louisiana Know Nothing Platform, cited in *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, August 8, 1855; Tennessee Know Nothing Platform, cited in *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, May 19, 1855.

¹⁰ *Abingdon Virginian*, March 3, 1855.

idea of liberty. Liberty to them is a sort of chaotic idea. It is not the liberty of law, but the liberty of unrestrained license.” Those of “foreign birth, who were reared under influences widely different from those under which the American mind matures,” were thought to be unable to “sympathize with American interests” because they were not “actuated by those sentiments which thrill the native bosom.” Thus the Order dedicated itself to disseminating the “startling truth” of the “ignorance of the masses who [sought] refuge under [America’s] free institutions,” arguing that “the quickest and easiest process to absorb and Americanize the mass of foreigners is by teaching them the value we place upon our citizenship and by the wise guards we place around it.”¹¹

Know Nothings also questioned the loyalty of recent immigrants. How could people who had lived their whole lives as subjects of foreign monarchs transfer their allegiances immediately upon setting foot on American soil, they asked. Party initiates argued that immigrants brought with them their own interests that were incompatible with those of American citizens. In addition, the sheer number of foreigners often “compelled” native-born Americans to “give way to some foreign interest.” Southern Know Nothings feared that a naturalized citizen “remain[ed] divided between his native land and his adopted country.” When push came to shove, no foreign born person could be trusted not to side with the “country where he first drew breath.” Many had come,

¹¹ *Greensborough (NC) Patriot*, April 21, 1855; Charles Gayarre, *Address to the People of Louisiana on the State of Parties* (New Orleans: Sherman Wharton Co., 1855), 18; Cluskey, “Madison Letters,” 323; William R. Smith, *The American Party and its Mission* (Washington: American Organ Office, 1855), 4; Anspach, *Sons of the Sires*, 41; Anna Ella Carroll, *The Great American Battle: or the Contest Between Christianity and Political Romanism* (New York: Miller, Orton, and Mulligan, 1856), 93; *Baltimore American and Commercial Advertiser*, January 12, 1855.

Know Nothings argued, “to support the Church and government of Rome under a professed allegiance to your government, America.”¹²

What made these issues problematic for the Know Nothings and, they argued, for all Americans, was that so many of the “unfit” people were voting. In the 1850s federal naturalization laws required a five year period of residence before a legal immigrant could be granted the citizenship papers required to vote. The practice in reality was very different. The Kansas Nebraska act of 1854 gave non-citizens the vote in those two territories, and where naturalization was required, enforcement was often lax, allowing immigrants to cast ballots right alongside native-born or naturalized Americans. Know Nothings argued that even when voting officials strictly adhered to the process, too many men who did not understand American democratic traditions were participating in elections. Know Nothings were convinced that foreigners had become the determining factors in the nation’s elections. They accused both the old parties, Whigs, and Democrats of pandering to the foreigner vote. “The *foreign* population have *now the power to decide the election of President of the United States*, in any contest between the two former rival parties,” wrote Vespasian Ellis, the fiery editor of the Know Nothings’ national paper, the *American Organ*. “At the lowest calculation,” another editor asserted, “one-twelfth of all the votes cast at the last presidential election were the votes of

¹² *Richmond Whig*, February 2, 1855; Gayarre, *Address to the People of Louisiana*, 19, 21; Carroll, *Great American Battle*, 93.

foreigners.”¹³

Although both the Whigs and Democrats took broadsides from the Know Nothings over their manipulation of immigrant voting, the Democrats were the primary target. “Almost the entire foreign vote is usually cast on the same side,” the Know Nothings agreed. The Democrats, they argued, had become so dependent on the votes of immigrants and Catholics that they had become almost a foreign party. “Can any one doubt,” cried Thomas A. R. Nelson, a prominent Tennessee Know Nothing, “that the Democratic party is in league with all the dangerous elements that have disturbed . . . our once peaceful and happy country and that they stickle at nothing when votes are at stake?” The Democrats had willingly allied themselves with ignorant and disloyal foreigners who “shout hosannas to Democracy and drive from the polls peaceful American citizens who oppose them.”¹⁴ Unable to assure victory by “purchasing what votes could thus be procured from the native or naturalized population,” the Democrats

sent their hirelings to bring to the ballot box, from every tippling establishment and sponging house, from the sewers of the street, and from the stalls of the market place, from every nook and corner, from far and near, all the foreigners that could be picked up, to pit their votes, by fraud or by violence, against those of our best citizens.¹⁵

And these immigrants, “thinking that it is a great privilege to vote, without knowing

¹³ *Congressional Globe*, 33rd Congress, 1st Sess., Appendix, 297; *Washington Daily American Organ*, November 13, 1854; *Greensborough (NC) Patriot*, April 21, 1855.

¹⁴ *Washington Daily American Organ*, November 13, 1854; Thomas A. R. Nelson to William G. Brownlow in Brownlow, *Americanism Contrasted with Foreignism, Romanism, and Bogus Democracy* (Nashville: n. p., 1856), 115.

¹⁵ Gayerre, *Address to the People of Louisiana*, 7.

exactly why, are ready to sell themselves to the first demagogues that hold out to them the slightest inducements,” tricked by those “politicians who think all good citizenship is comprised in voting the regular ticket.” Those who would disagree with the Know Nothings’ analysis did so out of “idle conjecture and the result of ignorance, or else” it was “the deliberate and premeditated assertion of men interested in securing the foreign votes of this country.”¹⁶

The problem of political corruption was recognized by Know Nothings both North and South and formed the basis of their anti-party attitudes. Their republican belief that the government should be controlled by the people, in this case defined as “native Americans,” led them to the obvious conclusion that outsiders were gaining control of the nation and they were doing it with the help of a formerly loyal political party. Southerners took this logic one step further in their analysis of the breakdown of their liberties. For them, the flood of new immigrants presented a threat to the future of slavery.

The danger to slavery came in various forms. Many southern Know Nothings saw the overpopulation of free laborers entering the country as an impending hazard to their peculiar institution. Not only did they want to “protect American labor against European pauper labor,” and “to give employment and bread to our own people in preference to seeing it wrested from them by the vagabonds of other countries,” they also wanted to

¹⁶ *Greensborough Patriot*, April 21, 1855; *Baltimore American and Commercial Advertiser*, January 12, 1855.

avoid an even more sinister danger. “What southerner,” read one widespread Know Nothing pamphlet, is “so dull of comprehension as not to understand that the cheapening of free labor is destructive to slaveholding interests?” Too many free laborers in the North chasing too few jobs would in all likelihood force them to spread South in search of work and eventually come into direct competition with slave labor. Free labor would become so cheap, the argument went, that “the negro must give way to them.” The irony of this argument is clear when one considers that northern free soilers took the opposite view of slavery, arguing that slave labor drove out free labor wherever the two competed directly.¹⁷

Those newly arrived immigrants who did not settle in the South also presented a problem for southern slaveholders. The question of balance in the United States Congress had long been an issue for southerners. By the 1850s, most had long since given up the hope of keeping up with the free states in the House of Representatives. Know Nothings, although they did not believe the South could be restored to parity in the number of representatives, did wish to avoid falling behind any further.¹⁸ The much greater numbers of immigrants entering the North was creating just this situation. Many feared that eventually the “whole government [would] be thrown into the hands of the

¹⁷ *Lexington (VA) Gazette*, March 10, 1855; John Hancock Lee, *The Origin and Progress of the American Party in Politics* (N.P., 1855, reprint New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), 223; S. L. Stuart to William M. Burwell, November 13, 1854, William M. Burwell Papers, LC; Foner, *Free Soil*, 40-72.

¹⁸ Samuel F. Rice, *Americanism and Southern Rights* (Montgomery: Barrett & Wimbish, 1855), 3-6; William C. Rives to William M. Burwell, Burwell Papers, LC.

North.” Convinced that “ninety-nine hundredths of those who come to our shores are violently opposed to slavery,” and that “nearly all the foreign vote can be controlled by a ‘higher law’ influence,” the Know Nothings provided ample reason why southern voters should be wary of immigrants even if they did not have to live with them.¹⁹ “Consider, also,” asserted John MacPherson Berrien, a Georgia Whig turned Know Nothing, “that these emigrants, shunning the South . . . and flocking to the North, from their abolition tendencies, . . . at every apportionment . . . will . . . place the Constitution and the institutions of the South at the mercy of fanaticism.” The “hope of the South,” was “to arrest this influx of foreigners into the North. . . . A majority of votes in Congress will give us security--nothing else will,” wrote the *Lynchburg Virginian*'s editor. And the only way to do that, asserted North Carolina Know Nothing Edwin Reade, was to “join the American Party, and strike down foreignism, which is the main cause of abolitionism.”²⁰

Just as Know Nothings saw the movement of free laborers to the South and their voting in the North as a threat to slavery, they envisioned these same immigrants now landing in New York and New Orleans as the probable new inhabitants of the western

¹⁹ Amelia W. Williams and Eugene C. Barker, *The Writings of Sam Houston, 1813-1863* vol. VI (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1941), 227; *Washington Daily American Organ*, November 13, 1854; Vespasian Ellis' mention of a “higher law” is in reference to William H. Seward's speech in which he professed his belief that there was a “higher law” concerning slavery than the Constitution.

²⁰ Berrien quote from the *Savannah Republican*, cited in *Greensborough Patriot*, October 5, 1855; *Lynchburg Virginian*, cited in *Greensborough Patriot*, April 7, 1855; Reade quote in *Greensborough Patriot*, May 23, 1855.

territories bordering on slave states. After the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska act in 1854, this prospect seemed all the more real. The act allowed for suffrage for all adult male inhabitants of the territories who took an oath of allegiance to the Constitution, whether they were citizens or not. Therefore, aliens would be allowed to vote immediately in Kansas without waiting for any five-year naturalization period. And with popular sovereignty adopted as the means for deciding the future legality of slavery in the territory, Know Nothings believed that the immigrants, whom they knew to be abolitionists, would soon hold the upper hand in the elections there and would be the deciding factor in the adoption of state constitutions. Non-Americans would therefore decide whether or not slavery expanded into the West. "Of course non-slaveholders," prophesied George Prentice, Know Nothing editor of the *Louisville Journal*, "including . . . Irishmen, Germans, and others, . . . will pour into Nebraska and Kansas in infinitely greater numbers than the slaveholder, and consequently slavery will be ruled out of those territories by an overwhelming majority."²¹

John M. Clayton's attempts to have voting restrictions placed on immigrants was defeated in both the House and Senate before final passage of the act, but he won a great deal of praise from his fellow Know Nothings as "one who is not willing to exchange his birthright for a mess of foreign pottage."²² Clayton's failure to attach his anti-alien

²¹ Brownlow, *Americanism Contrasted with Foreignism*, 58; *Louisville Weekly Journal*, March 22, 1854.

²² Brownlow, *Americanism Contrasted with Foreignism*, 58; W. Wheelingham to John Clayton, July 18, 1854; G. P. Nelson to Clayton, July 4, 1854; F. N. Pettis to Clayton, July 19, 1854; quote from D. Rodney King to Clayton, August 10, 1854, John M. Clayton Papers, LC

suffrage clause to the bill led the southern Know Nothings to force through a plank in their national platform in 1855 calling for the repeal of “all acts of Congress making grants of land to unnaturalized foreigners, and allowing them to vote in the territories.”²³

A few Know Nothings saw an even greater threat to slavery developing in the West. German immigrants throughout the South, but especially in Missouri, raised concerns. Besides voting for free-soil candidates, many refugees from the revolutions of 1848 published radical newspapers which called for reforms the Know Nothings found particularly frightening and which only managed to enhance their reputations as trouble makers.²⁴ The German Social Democratic Association in Richmond, Virginia published a set of resolutions demanding the abolition of slavery as well as a number of socialist reforms that the Know Nothings described as “false and poisonous teachings,” and “foul and incendiary doctrines.” Warnings went out alerting people in Memphis and Louisville to the dangers of German anti-Know Nothing organizations. The *Richmond Whig's* editor believed that “German foreigners, who are born and bred abolition incendiaries, . . . deserv[e] not the friendly regard of gentlemen and patriots, but the halter of the

²³ *New York Express*, June 16, 1855; Know Nothing Platform (1855), reproduced in Michael F. Holt, “The Antimasonic and Know-Nothing Parties,” in Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., ed., *History of U.S. Political Parties, 1789-1860, From Faction to Parties*, vol. I (New York: Chelsea House, 1973), 702.

²⁴ Bruce Levine, *The Spirit of 1848: German Immigrants, Labor Conflict, and the Coming of the Civil War* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 181-209; Steven Rowan, *Germans for a Free Missouri: Translations from the St. Louis Radical Press, 1857-1862* (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1983), 3-45; Eliot Shore, Ken Fones-Wolf and Jame P. Danky eds., *The German-American Radical Press: The Shaping of a Left Political Culture, 1850-1940* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 331-48.

hangman.”²⁵

Another threat seemed to come from the widespread popularity of militia companies among German immigrants. These para-military organizations played an important social role for the new German communities in the U.S., but the Know Nothings saw them in a different light. Newspapers in much of the South called for the disbanding and outlawing of the militias for their “mischievous tendency to perpetuate national association, distinction, and peculiarity.” And in a society that lived in fear of hearing that “firebell in the night,” the immigration of former armed rebels and their subsequent organization into militia companies produced a distinct feeling that danger was “hover[ing] over and around them.”²⁶

Both the Know Nothing oath and the platforms of the southern state parties called on all initiates to resist socialism and “Red Republicanism” as a threat to the nation’s liberties and institutions. These dangers were generally thought of as being foreign in origin and nature, with their proponents almost always being non-Americans. Sam Houston, Texas senator and Democrat turned Know Nothing, railed against his former party for its celebration of Louis Kossuth’s visit to the U.S. in search of financial support for his revolutionary activities. Houston was dismayed by the lack of concern shown over Kossuth’s encouragement of transplanted German radicals in America. The danger this

²⁵ *Richmond Whig and Public Advertiser*, January 30, February 6, 1855; *New Orleans Creole* and *Nashville Gazette* cited in *Greensborough Patriot*, August 31, 1855.

²⁶ *Baltimore American and Commercial Advertiser*, January 19, 1855; *Richmond Whig*, February 2, 1855.

“demagogue and unprincipled renegade” represented was obvious to Houston and his fellow Know Nothings. Others agreed with Houston’s stand against Kossuth, pointing to his attempt to organize German voters in support of American intervention in Europe. He had called upon immigrants to “stand in solid phalanx to control the policy of the government.” Humphrey Marshall of Kentucky saw the Hungarian revolutionary’s attempts to manipulate the United States into an interventionist position by encouraging foreigners to vote politicians opposing intervention out of office as “an eminent example of the impudent interference that must come from our allowing foreigners unrestricted rights of citizenship.”²⁷

Alabama Know Nothing Congressman William R. Smith presented the most explicit examination of the radical threat to slavery from German immigrants. “The foreigner believes,” Smith stated on the floor of the House, “that America is the natural rendezvous for all the exiled [sic] patriots . . . of the earth and that they meet . . . here to form plans . . . to revolutionize all creation.” Smith pointed to such radical groups as the German Social Democratic Association and the American Revolutionary League as two of the most dangerous immigrant organizations in the nation. Their publications called for agitation by their fellow Germans in both Europe and the United States, Smith pointed out, and their “solidarity with all revolutionary interests,” was a threat the South could not

²⁷ President’s Charge, Know Nothing Collection, LC; a typical southern platform was the Virginia State Platform (1855), reproduced in Holt, “Antimasonic and Know Nothing Parties,” 699-700; Williams, *Writings of Sam Houston*, 216-218; *Louisville Weekly Journal*, April 7, 1854; *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, September, 26, 1855; *Louisville Daily Courier*, June 30, 1855.

afford to ignore. In his mind revolutionary interests were equated with abolitionism.²⁸

Smith raised the alarm over immigrant money raising for the “accumulation of the revolutionary fund.” European radicals like Gottfried Kinkel, the famous German revolutionary, roamed the Midwest “delighting audiences with [their] eloquent speeches and plausible plans . . . and raising fifteen and twenty thousand dollars a night from the sage inhabitants of the western states,” Smith warned, “all to be used . . . in aid of the American Revolutionary League.”²⁹ This money more than likely went to the formation of German militia companies, and represented quite a different danger than simply voting for free-soilers.

They could go and equip themselves with American rifles, furnish themselves with American powder, and American bullets, and go in American cars to any portion of the country, and be ready at any time, to exhibit themselves as an armed force, in the heart of the country.³⁰

Smith’s analysis of the danger of unlimited immigration shows quite clearly how the southern Know Nothings saw German radicalism as even more threatening than did their northern counterparts. While Know Nothings throughout the country believed militia organizations should be outlawed, in the South they took on a far more ominous meaning. The possibility of armed insurrection by foreigners and their slave allies made

²⁸ *Cong. Globe*, 33rd Cong., 2nd Sess., January 15, 1855, 265-266; Smith, *American Party and Its Mission*, 4-5.

²⁹ Smith, *American Party and Its Mission*, 5; Levine, *Spirit of 1848*, 84, 87; Gottfried Kinkel was a professor at the University of Bonn where he inspired Carl Schurtz to join the revolution in 1848. Kinkel was captured leading a group of students in a demonstration and held in Spandau prison. Schurtz, who later became known as a staunch Republican, gained fame for his daring rescue of Kinkel from the prison in 1850, after which they both made their way first to England and then the United States; Richard O’Connor, *The German Americans: An Informal History* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1969), 155-160.

the immigration and naturalization issue all the more pressing. Southern Know Nothings believed that the present policy was a “course calculated to hatch a brood of fanatics hostile to the institutions of our country.” Smith himself doubted that it was “even probable that the second generation of such insane fanatics should be so improved as to be capable of voting with discretion.” They posed a danger “throughout the whole Union, wherever the Germans go.”³¹

The solutions for all these myriad problems of unlimited immigration were straightforward and generally agreed upon widely throughout the various party organizations both North and South. Know Nothing platforms from around the country called for the adoption of a national, universal, twenty-one year waiting period for naturalization and voting privileges. This was to prevent foreigners from voting before they had a chance to learn of American liberties and institutions first hand. This duration equaled that which native-born men had to wait before casting their ballot. Foreigners would also not be eligible to hold any political office. The only groups that the Know Nothings would exclude from entering the country altogether were criminals and paupers. Anyone not too poor to buy passage on a ship or who had not been convicted of a crime would still be able to enter the country, but they would have no political rights. These policies were not the result of bigotry, however, argued Kenneth Rayner. “When we speak of foreigners,” the North Carolinian claimed, “we mean foreign to the government,

³⁰ Smith, *American Party and Its Mission*, 2.

not foreign to the soil.”³²

Besides their objections to immigrants in general, the Know Nothings saved a special place in their pantheon of anti-republican corruption for the Catholic church. For many in the party, Romanism was the true enemy of American liberty, and they eagerly took on the duty of warning the nation of this “Great American Battle.” Northern Know Nothings tended to view Catholicism as the primary threat posed by immigration. Anti-Catholicism motivated much of the Order’s early successes in the North and was often more important in winning elections than promises to reform the naturalization laws.³³ The Pope in Rome and his Jesuit minions in America became the chief targets of the Know Nothings’ diatribes and often times of their violence. The South, with its smaller Catholic population, would seem an unlikely place to wage a political war against the Pope, but as with their attacks on foreigners, southern Know Nothings proved that the object of one’s opposition need not necessarily live next door. In the South, Know Nothings did approach the subject of the Catholic church in a more circumspect manner than did northerners, but charges that their anti-Catholicism was an unimportant aspect of their ideology carry the argument too far. Hostility towards the Catholic Church was a

³¹ *Hannibal Whig Messenger*, December 14, 1854; Smith, *American Party and Its Mission*, 4.

³² Williams, *Writings of Sam Houston*, 226-227; National Know Nothing Platform (1855), and Virginia Know Nothing Platform (1855), in Schlesinger, *History of Political Parties*, 699-705; President’s Charge, Know Nothing Collection, LC; *Washington Daily American Organ*, November 13, 1854; Tennessee Know Nothing Platform, cited in *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, May 19, 1855; Cluskey, “Madison Letters,” 307-310, and “American Party Ritual,” 47-57; Smith, *American Party and Its Mission*, 2; Gayarre, *Address to the People of Louisiana*, 21, 24-25; *Natchez (MS) Courier*, cited in *Washington Daily American Organ*, May 26, 1855; Kenneth Rayner, *Reply of the Hon. Kenneth Rayner to the Manifesto of the Hon. Henry A. Wise* (Washington: American Organ Office, 1855), 7.

cornerstone of the Know Nothings' ideology and popularity in both the North and South.³⁴

Even with their lower profile, Catholics did not escape the 1850s in the South free from the virulent assaults so prominent in the North. Southern Know Nothing rhetoric is replete with anti-Catholic argument; no Know Nothing speech was considered complete without at least one reference to the destructive nature of the church upon American institutions and independence. Southern members of the Order employed much the same language and constructed their arguments in a similar manner to their northern counterparts. Three popular southern propagandists, in fact, produced some of the Order's most widely circulated anti-Catholic works. Anna Ella Carroll, a Maryland native, penned the *Great American Battle*, which concentrated heavily on what she referred to as the "contest between Christianity and political Romanism." Her work was called a "textbook to the cause," by Know Nothing leaders. Tennessee's Parson William G. Brownlow, who published his own newspaper, was well known for his virulent opposition to Catholics. His *Americanism Contrasted with Foreignism*, a book compiled from the voluminous editorials published in his *Knoxville Whig*, became a popular anti-Catholic standard.³⁵ And Frederick Anspach, a Lutheran minister from Maryland,

³³ Carroll, *The Great American Battle*; Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 110.

³⁴ Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, xii; Arthur W. Thompson, "Political Nativism in Florida, 1848-1860: A Phase of Anti-Secessionism," *Journal of Southern History*, 15 (1949), 49; Reindors, "Louisiana American Party," 218-219.

³⁵ Anna Ella Carroll was the daughter of a Maryland Whig politician who was greatly influenced in her anti-Catholic attitudes by Dr. Robert J. Breckenridge, a Presbyterian minister. However her publications

produced the most famous piece of Know Nothing political literature, an extended sermon on the meaning of true Americanism and the evils of romanism entitled *Sons of the Sires*.

It was no mistake that much of the assault upon the Catholic Church's practices was led by Know Nothings with some connection to various Protestant ministries. Members of the clergy were prominent in the Order, many joining in the search for an effective vehicle to oppose Catholics. Their attacks upon the Pope and Jesuits took on the form of a crusade and carried on the tradition of American anti-Catholicism. Know Nothing attacks were often just plain bigotry, mired in an abysmal understanding of the church's rituals. "To be a Roman Catholic . . . in the first place, is to be something unworthy of the name of man," proclaimed one Know Nothing editor. Brownlow referred to the church as "the most immoral and outrageous institution on the face of the earth--it is rotten and corrupt through its very fabric." Among the church's various crimes were its lack of respect for "female virtue. . . . the sanctities of private life, . . . the beauty and divinity of the marital institution and the nobility and exaltedness of woman." Was there a reader, Brownlow asked, who would "not rather see, . . . a wife, a sister, a

on the Know Nothing movement brought her far less fame than her later law suit against the U.S. government in which she claimed to have been the originator of the plans for the Union Army's campaign in Tennessee in 1862; see Janet L. Coryell, *Neither Heroine nor Fool: Anna Ella Carroll of Maryland* (Kent, Oh: Kent State University Press, 1990), 14, 70-109; James Biser Whisker, ed., *Anna Ella Carroll (1815-1893): American Political Writer of Maryland* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 1-5; William G. Brownlow was a prominent Tennessee Whig/Know Nothing and Methodist minister. He later served as Reconstruction governor of Tennessee and was well-known for the vigor and nastiness with which he confronted all his opponents, including his long-time political foe, Andrew Johnson; see Thomas B. Alexander, "Strange Bedfellows: The Interlocking Careers of T.A.R. Nelson, Andrew Johnson, and W.G. (Parson) Brownlow," *East Tennessee Historical Society's Publications*, 51 (1979), 54-77.

mother, or even a valued female friend, . . . placed beneath the cold sod than in the living graves of Romanism?" Know Nothing attacks often hinted at the secret immoralities, the more lurid the better, that went on behind church walls. Nunneries were generally referred to as "brothels whose inmates become the unresisting and callous victims of priestly licentiousness and cunning."³⁶

The Know Nothing's rhetoric dealt a great deal with the history of political interference exercised by the Pope and his Jesuits mercenaries. Speeches often detailed examples of Romanist anti-republicanism running from attacks on the *Magna Carta* to the St. Bartholomew's day massacre.³⁷ Most of this was provided for background and effect, however. For southern Know Nothings, the real threat from the Catholic church came from its political power. It represented a foreign authority seeking to gain control of the nation through its adherents within the country. No one could be considered a true and loyal American, they argued, who also maintained an oath to obey a foreign master, namely the Pope. Just as Germans were believed to hold their revolutionary beliefs above any feelings of patriotism for their adopted state, so Catholics were assumed to harbor secret, or not so secret, infidelities towards their new home. Know Nothings saw the

³⁶ Billington, *Protestant Crusade*; Nelson to Brownlow, *Americanism Contrasted with Foreignism*, 116; *Salisbury Watchman (NC)*, November 2, 1854; *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, December 16, 1854; Rayner, *Reply to Wise*, 18-19; Lurid accounts of Catholic nunneries hardly began with the Know Nothings. The best selling book ever in the United States until the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was Maria Monk's, *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery of Montreal*, with its scandalous, but by modern standards tame, descriptions of the secret sexual crimes carried on behind closed doors; Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 9.

³⁷ Smith, *American Party and Its Mission*, 15; Nelson to Brownlow, *Americanism Contrasted with Foreignism*, 118; Rayner, *Reply to Wise*, 19.

church's hierarchical system of authority and their sacred vows as evidence of foreign influence of American and immigrant Catholics. They believed that it had become "manifest to Americans that the bishops and archbishops held absolute control over the minds of their spiritual subjects." "Every Roman Catholic in the known world is under the absolute control of a secret society," claimed Brownlow, a society bent upon political dominance wherever it existed.³⁸ The implications of this control were much the same as the general organization of immigrants into voting blocs. Not only did the Pope exercise undue power over American policies through Catholic voters, the old political parties had become corrupted in the pursuit of their ballots.

The Know Nothings were especially concerned with what they saw as the corruption of the Democratic party in general and the Pierce administration in particular by Catholic operatives. Both were so beholden to the church and so dependent upon their votes that the Order considered them to be "semi-papal organizations."³⁹ As the Know Nothings saw it, Franklin Pierce owed his election in 1852 directly to the Catholic vote. Brownlow went so far as to accuse Pierce of cutting a deal with New York Archbishop John Hughes in which the Archbishop promised Pierce the Catholic vote in his archdiocese in return for appointing a Catholic to a cabinet position. Pierce responded by appointing James Campbell, a Catholic from Pennsylvania, as Postmaster General.

³⁸ Rayner, *Reply to Wise*, 5; Anspach, *Sons of the Sires*, 30; *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, January 27, 1855.

³⁹ Carrol, *Great American Battle*, 282-283; Andrew Jackson Donelson Speech in *Salisbury Watchman*, June 5, 1855; *Washington Daily American Organ*, November 13, 1854; Brownlow, *Americanism Contrasted With Foreignism*, 7.

Leon Soule, a foreign-born Catholic from New Orleans, was also given the minister's position to France, further arousing the Know Nothings' ire. It was this additional commission which the Know Nothings believed had actually won the election for Pierce, for Winfield Scott, the Whig candidate, had only promised one office to Hughes and was subsequently outbid by Pierce and the Democrats.⁴⁰ Kenneth Rayner and Vespasian Ellis took this same accusation a step further. Rayner hinted that he had learned from the former minister to Spain, Daniel M. Barringer, of a secret "understanding" between Pierce and the papal nuncio in Madrid that a Catholic would be named to the cabinet. He did not indicate what exactly Pierce hoped to receive from the Pope's emissary, but nonetheless believed that the President had carried out his part of the bargain.⁴¹

Roger Taney, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and a Maryland Catholic also provided a target for Know Nothing attacks against the power of the papacy over the American government. Taney, they argued, could not be trusted with his position because his vow to Catholicism outweighed his oath to the United States and the Constitution. Leon Soule was condemned for his role in putting together the Ostend Manifesto, a secret policy statement by the three American ministers in Europe regarding the possible purchase of Cuba from Spain. In the Senate, Catholic Stephen R. Mallory of Florida was attacked for his role in the passage of the Naval Retiring Bill, a "Jesuitical

⁴⁰ *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, February 3, January 27, 1855; Williams, *Writings of Sam Houston*, 205; *State Gazette (TX)*, August 18, 1855.

⁴¹ *Washington Daily American Organ*, cited in *Kinston (NC) American Advocate*, August 2, September 7, 1855.

attempt to destroy the American navy.” James Campbell was accused of installing papal spies within the Post Office and intercepting and destroying Know Nothing publications. And Know Nothing newspapers regularly printed lists of foreign-born Catholics working throughout the government and holding such posts as Superintendent of State Department buildings and pardon and passport clerk. Taken separately, each case amounted to very little. But when looked at in their entirety, the whole picture seemed to indicate that the Pierce administration was made up of papal stooges and that the Catholic church exerted a great deal of control over American government, and thereby threatened American liberties.⁴²

Southern Know Nothings did differ from northern members of the Order in one important aspect in their dealings with Roman Catholics. Unlike their counterparts, they were willing to draw distinctions between native and foreign-born Catholics. Southern Know Nothings argued that their attacks on Catholics were entirely political in nature and not aimed at preventing freedom of religion.⁴³ Although men like Brownlow did condemn the church out of a genuine intolerance and prejudice, most of the party’s rhetoric was aimed at Catholics’ political influence. In certain states, like Louisiana,

⁴² Brownlow, *Americanism Contrasted with Foreignism*, 90; *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, January 27, April 7, 14, 1855; David Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 189-190; Carroll, *Great American Battle*, 272; *Washington Daily American Organ*, December 26, 1854.

⁴³ *Rayner, Reply to Wise*, 6; Virginia Know Nothing Platform (1855) in Schlesinger, *History of Political Parties*, 699; North Carolina Know Nothing Platform, cited *Greensborough Patriot*, November 2, 1855; Tennessee Know Nothing Platform, cited in *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, May 19, 1855; Louisiana Know Nothing Platform, cited in *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, August 8, 1855; Anspach, *Sons of the Sires*, 30.

Catholics were allowed to join the Order, and eventually southern members forced the party to drop its proscriptions against native-born Catholics. Most southern Know Nothings separated Catholics into two distinct groups: "Protestant Catholics," and "Roman Catholics." The difference between the two groups was their beliefs concerning the temporal powers of the Pope. The Know Nothings objected to Catholics belonging to the "ultramontane," or Italian branch of the church. This group, the "Roman Catholics," "maintained that the power of the Pope [was] supreme in temporal as well as spiritual things." The so-called "Protestant Catholics," those following the Gallican, or French branch of the church, "recognized the supremacy of the Pope in all ecclesiastical matters, but utterly repudiated it in all temporal or political affairs." In effect, this differentiation meant that southern Know Nothings accepted American-born Catholics as long as they took the Know Nothing oath rejecting all Papal authority over politics and recognizing the supremacy of the Constitution. Foreign-born Catholics were generally assumed out of hand to be under the Pope's thumb, but independent-minded American Catholics were eventually admitted into the Order if they so wished as most southern state parties worded their platforms so as to only condemn Catholics who did not recognize the separation of church and state.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, January 27, 1855; George Robertson, *The American party: Its Principles, Objects, and Hopes* (Lexington: n.p., 1855), 20-21; Brownlow, *Americanism Contrasted with Foreignism*, 87, 118;; Cluskey, "Madison Letters," 325-328; Louisiana Know Nothing Platform, cited in *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, August 8, 1855; North Carolina Know Nothing Platform, cited in *Greensborough Patriot*, November 2, 1855; Tennessee Know Nothing Platform, cited in *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, May 19, 1855; Virginia Know Nothing Platform (1855), cited in Schlesinger, *History of Political Parties*, 699-700; Mississippi Know Nothing Platform, cited in

Much to the objection of northern Know Nothings, Louisiana's state Order early on allowed a large number of Catholics to join the party. In June 1855, at the national convention in Philadelphia, a struggle over admission of the Louisiana delegation brought out the differing stand of the two halves of the party. Northerners refused to seat the delegation because of the presence of Catholics. This showdown prompted other southern delegations to spell out their ideas concerning native-born Catholics and to push for their admission. In Louisiana, Creole Catholics composed much of that state's leading political class and for the Order to have excluded them would have seriously affected the party's ability to compete with the Democrats. Both Charles Derbingy and Louis Texada, the party's candidates for governor and lieutenant governor in 1855, were Catholics, as were many other important party leaders. On a Know Nothing majority vote over the objections of Democrats, the Louisiana state legislature in 1856 even elected a Catholic priest as chaplain.⁴⁵

But even in Louisiana not all Catholics were tolerated. There too the distinction was made between the native-born who did not "acknowledge the temporal supremacy of the Pope," and the newly arrived German and Irish Catholics, who were attacked in the

Washington Daily American Organ, May 26, 1855; Thompson, "Political Nativism in Florida," 49; the acceptance of the so-called "Protestant Catholics was not universal among southern Know Nothings, however; see House debate in , *Congressional Globe*, 34 Cong., 1st Sess., (January 7, 1856), 166; *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, January 19, 1856, Cluskey, "Madison Letters," 305-306.

⁴⁵ *New York Express*, June 9, 1855; Nelson to Brownlow, *Americanism Contrasted with Foreignism*, 118; Reindors, "Louisiana American Party," 222-225; *New Orleans Bee*, cited in *New Orleans Daily Delta*, June 15, 1855; *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, July 6, August 4, 1855; *Louisville Daily Courier*, July 18, 1855; *South Carolinian*, cited in *Salisbury Watchman*, August 23, 1855; *Baton Rouge Gazette* cited in *Daily Crescent*, January 29, 1856.

local press just as virulently as in states whose organizations absolutely excluded Catholics. George A. Pike, the Know Nothing editor of the *Baton Rouge Weekly Comet* and a self-proclaimed “Protestant Catholic,” spoke for many when he charged the church with concentrating all its “wealth and power in one head, whilst the congregation to whom the power rightly belongs is left powerless.” In Louisiana Know Nothing Catholics were at one time able to praise their party’s ideals and condemn Jesuits as the “touch of death, crafty, base, mean, treacherous and devilish.” They spoke of Catholicism as a “noble, imposing, sublime and religious creed,” while condemning Jesuits and their political interference in American liberties as a “designing, scheming, and dangerous secret political order.”⁴⁶

A third key component to the ideology of southern Know Nothings, and which they shared with northern party members and supporters, was in their assessment of the state of the old political parties. Their attacks on the corrupt, self-serving politicians of the old Whig and Democratic parties reflected their strongly held republican ideals. Rotten political parties were subverting republican government nationwide in a desperate effort to stay in office, “held together . . . by the cohesive power of the public plunder.” So powerful was the lure of office, Know Nothings charged, that old party hacks had sunk to the point of fawning over foreign and Catholic voters and allowing their wants to determine public policy. Everywhere the Order presented itself as a reform party fighting

⁴⁶ Nelson to Brownlow, *Americanism Contrasted with Foreignism*, 118; Reindors, “Louisiana American Party,” 222-225; *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, August 6, 1855; *Baton Rouge Weekly Comet*, July 16, November 12, 1854, November 25, 1855; *Capitolian Vis-A-Vis*, September 13, 20, 1854.

to return the nation from its “departure from [the] simple and rational rules of republicanism and American citizenship.”⁴⁷ The country was in the throes of a potential disaster and its citizens on the verge of losing their liberties and their constitutional freedoms not only because the Pope and his Jesuit mercenaries, in league with hordes of radical immigrants, had their sights set on controlling America, but because greedy grasping politicians had allowed and even encouraged un-American influences to corrupt the political system.⁴⁸

Southern Know Nothings saved some of their finest invective for their fellow Americans. In the South this usually took the form of an attack on the dominant party, the Democrats, but the idea ran deeper than just campaigning against a rival party. The Know Nothings objected to the whole system of party politics as it had come to function in the 1850s and the Democrats were the most obvious purveyor of that anti-republican system. Democrats nominated their candidates by “secret juntas [sic], midnight cabals, and all the thousand devices of practised demagogues,” Know Nothings charged, and their politics were “characterized by trick, artifice and humbug.” Know Nothings were determined “everywhere to take from the professional politicians the government of states and cities and confide it to men . . . [of] common honesty.” The party was founded upon

⁴⁷ Joseph B. Hinton to William Alexander Graham, June 23, 1852, cited in J.G. de Roulhac Hamilton, ed., *The Papers of William Alexander Graham* vol. IV, 1851-1856 (Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1961), 320-322; *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, March 30, 1854.

⁴⁸ Holt, *Political Crisis of the 1850s*, 163-169; Cantrell, *Rayner*, 89-92; Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 122-125.

the idea, they argued, of “restor[ing] the elective franchise to proper hands, and to see that demagoguery does not rule under the tempting name of Democracy.” The old republican ideal of the fittest men holding office, rather than those who made a career of reaching and colonizing elected positions, topped the Know Nothing agenda of reform. Party platforms throughout the South as well as the North contained various wording of the belief that the “office should seek the man, and not man the office.”⁴⁹

Know Nothings were not opposed to political parties per se, for they believed, as did most Americans of their era, that parties had functioned in the past as protectors of the Union and its republican institutions. Ever since the beginnings of the second American Party system, parties had prevented self-seeking individuals from dominating a political system based upon individual loyalty. With parties regulating the nomination of candidates, republican virtues could be safeguarded as long as the parties themselves retained their virtue.⁵⁰ The Know Nothings were the first group in 19th century America to lose faith in the old parties’ ability to continue in their appointed role of protectors of liberty. They did not go so far as to condemn the existence of party politics, but believed that the impact of holding office for too long had corrupted the Whigs and Democrats to the point where foreign influences were threatening Americans’ control of their own nation. Know Nothings often referred to their political forebears in glowing terms, reminding voters how far the present parties had strayed from the examples of the past.

⁴⁹ *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, February 17, 1855; H.W. Davis, *The Origin, Principles, and Purposes of the American Party* (N.P.: n.p., 1855), 8; *Louisville Daily Courier*, May 10, 1855; Know Nothing National Platform (1855), cited in Schlesinger, *History of Political Parties*, 701-705.

“Can any sane man believe,” Sam Houston asked, “that Gen. Washington or Gen. Jackson would have united with any association, or order not purely American?” But Houston had become “suspicious . . . in these days of utilitarian politics. He no longer believed that the Democrats were the party of Jackson and were committed to the ideals of “Constitution and Union.” He therefore, like many other Democrats and Whigs alike, abandoned his old party to join the Know Nothings in the hope that their desire to restore American rule would renew the nation’s republican values. “No course was left for the disciples of Washington, Jefferson, and Jackson, “ wrote Andrew Jackson Donelson, former Democrat and adopted son of Andrew Jackson, “but to seek the maxims of the pure days of the republic.”⁵¹

Adding to the Know Nothings’ belief that the old parties were no longer able to function as the protectors of American liberty was their concern that the Whigs and Democrats had become too much alike in their political positions. For republicanism to function properly, voters had to be given a distinct choice. Opposing parties needed to represent ideas and policies differentiated enough to ensure that the government did not fall under the control of too few a number of people operating under too narrow a political agenda. Prior to the 1850s, there had been a definite area of disagreement between the Whigs and the Democrats. Concrete issues such as the national bank, the

⁵⁰ Kruman, “Second Party System and Republicanism,” 509-537.

⁵¹ *State Gazette* (TX), August 18, 1855; Andrew Jackson Donelson to H.V.M Miller, July 17, 1856, Andrew Jackson Donelson Papers, LC.

protective tariff, distribution of land sale funds, and internal improvements had separated the two parties and their followers into clearly defined camps of opposition. But by 1850, most of those issues had been solved or become obsolete, leaving both the Whigs and Democrats in search of new areas of contention to promote to ensure their own political survival. Their failure to come up with any question of importance around which parties could function on a national basis had rendered the two organizations as out of date as their old policies.⁵² By 1854 Know Nothings had become convinced that the opposing factions “had merged into the same homogenous substance. Party names [had] ceased to describe the actual relations of men to measures.” With the two old parties seemingly identical, the need to fashion programs which represented the interests and desires of the people was no longer a prerequisite for gaining office. The Whigs’ and Democrats’ plans did not reflect the wishes of their constituents, but rather those of the elite politicians whose only wish was to “maintain their respective organizations . . . for the mere sake of the spoils of power.” The former “conflict of principles and measures had degenerated into mere selfish plots and intrigues for the aggrandizement of personal and selfish ambition.”⁵³ Know Nothingism was in part a response to the belief that the voters

were no longer called to the polls to decide on the adoption and application of certain political theories or doctrines; but that they were mere dice and cards with which skillful gamblers were playing to determine the winner between . . . men who would call themselves a Whig, or a Democratic administration, but who, under either name, were destined to carry the same identical

⁵² Holt, *Political Crisis of the 1850s*, 103-138; Davis, *Origin of the American Party*, 8-12; *Washington Daily American Organ*, November 14, 1854.

⁵³ Davis, *Origin of the American Party*, 8; *Washington Daily American Organ*, November 14, 1854; Gayette, *Address to the People of Louisiana*, 3.

measures into execution.⁵⁴

The result of this loss of responsiveness by the Whigs and Democrats, the Know Nothings argued, was not that new issues of great import were lacking, but that the political system was not addressing them. Thus the Know Nothings stepped into the breach, offering a clear choice for voters by taking on the problems of foreign immigration and political Catholicism, two questions which were “vastly important in their bearing upon the future welfare of the country--and which must . . . annihilate” the old parties. “A new era is at hand,” declared Vespasian Ellis, one that would see the return of old time republicanism.⁵⁵

The final essential component to the southern Know Nothings’ ideology was their belief in the indispensability of the Union. While always significant in their beliefs, Unionism took on an increasingly large role in Know Nothing campaigns until the presidential election of 1856 when it came to overshadow all other concerns. Earlier historians have suggested the Unionism was the heart of southern Know Nothing ideology from the start.⁵⁶ This is something of an exaggeration, for not only does it ignore or downplay the importance of nativism for southern Know Nothings, it neglects the connections between the various core beliefs of Know Nothingism and the southern

⁵⁴ Gayerre, *Address to the People of Louisiana*, 3-4.

⁵⁵ *Washington Daily American Organ*, November 14, 1854.

⁵⁶ W. Darrel Overdyke, *The Know Nothing Party in the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950), 292; Thompson, “Political Nativism in Florida,” 56.

nativists' desire to protect the Union. Nevertheless, unionism did play a significant part in the Order's rhetoric, one that would grow as questions of slavery broke the party into sectionalized segments.

For many southern Know Nothings the preservation of the Union was just as key to maintenance of republican liberties as changing the naturalization laws or preventing Catholics from holding office. Well known politicians from both the Whig and Democratic parties such as John J. Crittenden, Sam Houston, and Andrew J. Donelson became Know Nothings in part to press their unionist stances. Other important party leaders like Kenneth Rayner of North Carolina, Henry Winter Davis of Maryland, and John M. Berrien of Georgia spoke out strongly in favor of union. So important was this idea that Rayner's "Union degree" to the Know Nothing oath was specifically intended to pledge all initiates of the order to "solemnly declare your devotion to the Union . . . [and] discourage . . . every attempt . . . to destroy or subvert it." Accepted by the national party at its first convention in Cincinnati in 1854, the oath was later taken by Know Nothings throughout the nation.⁵⁷

For Sam Houston the loss of the Union equaled an end to liberty both North and South. There could be no "liberty without union," or "union without liberty," he claimed, "they are one and inseparable." If the Union were to fall, Know Nothings prophesied,

⁵⁷ Williams, *Writings of Sam Houston*, 223-225; Cantrell, *Rayner*, 84-85; Cantrell, "Southerner and Nativist," 133; *Speeches and Address of Henry Winter Davis* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1867), 39-62; Royce C. McCrary, "John MacPherson Berrien and the Know Nothing Movement in Georgia," *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 61 (1977), 34-42; Union Degree cited in Cluskey, *Political Encyclopedia*, 56.

there would be no guarantees for the continuance of American freedoms. The “stake for which we contend,” Rayner argued, “is constitutional liberty . . . [and] the great issue is . . . whether the ‘blackness of darkness’ which would follow the dissolution of this Union, shall cover the land.” Henry Winter Davis saw secession in much the same light. “It would be an act of suicide,” he noted in front of the House, and evidence of “insanity.”

Dissolution means death--the suicide of Liberty without the hope of resurrection--death without the glories of immortality . . .--dead liberty left to the horrors of corruption, a loathsome thing, with a stake through the body, which men shun, cast out naked on the highway of nations . . . while we, her children, stumble about her ruined habitations, to find dishonorable graves wherein to hide our shame.⁵⁸

For southern Know Nothings the Union represented the embodiment of American liberty and freedom. Within the Union liberty was free to thrive, without it, there could be no republican institutions or freedoms. And for these Know Nothings, upholding the Union meant that slavery could continue to exist under the protection of the Constitution. It provided a legal basis for the South’s “peculiar institution” which would weather all storms. To best protect the Union, southern Know Nothings saw their role as one of guiding a middle course between the fanatical abolitionists and free soilers on the one hand, and the fire-eating southern secessionists on the other. They “look[ed] at the southern fanatic and the northern abolitionist in the same unfavorable light,” exclaimed Maryland Know Nothing Congressman Augustus Sollers, “and would place them side by

⁵⁸ Williams, *Writings of Sam Houston*, 222; Cluskey, *Political Encyclopedia*, 481-484; *Speeches of Henry W. Davis*, 58.

side, and hang them high as Hamon [sic].”⁵⁹ Soller’s message was common in Know Nothing speeches. The greatest enemies of the Union, and therefore liberty, were the twin “ultraisms of the day,” abolitionism and secessionism. “And there is an undisguised effort to destroy the bonds of our sacred Union,” warned Andrew J. Donelson, “by forming hostile geographical lines and by permitting a false conception of the real purpose of party to produce excesses which are impairing the force of the laws.” The nation would not “have peace or quiet,” wrote Vespasian Ellis, “till both sections of the Union shall discountenance and send into retirement those red-mouthed agitators who taint the political atmosphere with their postiferous [sic] breath.”⁶⁰

The Know Nothings liked to believe and argued that their particular brand of republicanism was a throwback to the days of the founding generation. Their talk of the corruption of parties and elitist notions of voting rights at times sounded more like the politics of the revolutionary era than the debates over banks, tariffs, and internal improvements that marked the second American party system. They filled their speeches with references to the founding fathers and their ideals that had been so drastically betrayed by the current crop of political hacks and unscrupulous “wire-pullers.” Lacking a history of their own as a party the Know Nothings appropriated the nation’s most sacred

⁵⁹ *Congressional Globe*, 33rd Cong., 2nd Sess., 183; *Baltimore American and Commercial Advertiser*, January 5, 1855.

⁶⁰ Andrew J. Donelson to Simion Baldwin, August 3, 1856, Donelson Papers, LC; *Washington Daily American Organ*, December 12, 1855.

myths and heroes, even taking the name “American” for themselves. The Order’s guardian angel was a mystical figure named “Sam.” This was not “Uncle Sam” however, as Kenneth Rayner was quick to point out, but “his first-born and dutiful son” who had “come to his father’s relief.”⁶¹ This imaginary figure directly connected the newly created party to a traditional character who stood for American values and liberty, the protector of republicanism. But by making their Sam into Uncle Sam’s nephew, the Know Nothings were able to present themselves as something both new and old, the “Sons of the Sires,” simultaneously representing the best of the past and the promise of a new generation.

Not satisfied with a mythical figure, however, the Know Nothings also relied upon some real historic figures to give them a legitimate foundation in the past. For the Know Nothings, George Washington was a kindred nativist whose warning against becoming involved with foreign powers became a rationalization for attacking non-natives at home. The revolutionary hero and nation’s first president became a nativist after the Know Nothings’ own hearts. They frequently quoted from Washington’s letters written during the revolutionary war, using his words to remind the voters to “let none be on guard but Americans.”⁶² Names like Washington and Andrew Jackson were invoked so often one editor remarked that he was certain both men “would have joined [the Order]

⁶¹ Rayner, *Reply to Wise*, 21; *Louisville Daily Courier*, April 10, May 3, 1855.

⁶² *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, September 12, 1855 Brownlow, *Americanism Contrasted with Foreignism*, 3; *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, November 11, 1854; Cluskey, “Madison Letters,” 317-320.

but for the inconvenience of doing so in a post mortem condition.” Despite criticisms like this, however, southern Know Nothings continued to see their movement as a revitalization of old values. They considered themselves a wake-up call for Americans in a troubled era, a “new tea party” for a new independence movement.⁶³

Notwithstanding the Know Nothings’ claims that they were a modern representation of revolutionary republicanism, their ideology was very much in tune with mid-nineteenth century thinking. Their rhetoric was couched in terms of an imminent threat to the very existence of the country, their opponents in league to destroy the liberties and freedoms which were the American birthright. This sort of political language was common during the Jacksonian era and was certainly not limited to the Know Nothings in the 1850s.⁶⁴ Conspiracy was the normal idiom through which Americans had grown to understand the political arena and a crisis of the republic the usual cry of politicians seeking office. The Know Nothings did not just portray opposition parties as proclaiming an alternate policy, but as real threats to the future of the nation. Southern Democrats argued that abolitionists and the Republican Party were out to destroy southern rights and thereby were placing the nation’s institutions in jeopardy. The Republican party coalesced around the belief that there was a “slave-power conspiracy” through which southern slaveholding politicians had gained control of the Federal government and endangered the freedoms of northerners as well as non-

⁶³ *New Orleans Daily Delta*, August 9, 1855; Carroll, *Great American Battle*, 90, 98.

slaveowning southerners.

A closer look at the similarity of argument between the Republicans and the southern Know Nothings shows just how much a part of the American political tradition the nation's first avowedly nativist party was. In his famous "House Divided" speech in 1858, Abraham Lincoln described for his listeners a complicated conspiracy through which certain powerful people sought to expand the boundaries of slavery until the institution existed everywhere in the nation. The primary actors for the "slave-power" were "Stephen, Franklin, Roger, and James," Stephen Douglas, Franklin Pierce, Roger Taney, and James Buchanan. Lincoln wove together an intricate collusion linking the authors of the Kansas Nebraska act and the Dred Scott decision, as well as two consecutive Democratic administrations. All four men had worked together in a common cause: the expansion of slavery. Douglas came under attack for his primary role in the Kansas Nebraska act's passage an action that had repealed the Missouri Compromise and eliminated the strongest restriction upon the extension of slavery. The Illinois senator, Lincoln argued, had more than simply acted in concert with southern interests, he had betrayed his constituents by falling under the influence of a conspiracy to rob Americans of their liberties by forcing free labor to compete directly with slave labor in the West. President Franklin Pierce too, had pushed for organization of the territories without the old constraints on slavery. Moreover, to Lincoln and the Republican Party the removal of limits on the spread of slavery had only benefited one segment of American society, the

⁶⁴ Kruman, "Second Party System and Republicanism," 525-530.

“slave-power. Besides his role in the Kansas Nebraska debacle, Pierce had also orchestrated the country’s attempts to annex Cuba and to expand the American slave empire into the Caribbean. First slavery would move into the West, then it would seek new sources of income and expansion in Cuba, vastly increasing the power of slaverholders, a power that already predominated in the nation’s government.⁶⁵

After moving into new areas, Lincoln maintained, the “slaver-power” would attempt to control all of the United States, including those states which had outlawed slavery within their own boundaries. Roger Taney, presiding over the Supreme Court, along with the four other southern members, had blatantly ruled in the Dred Scott case for just these ends. The implications of the decision, whole-heartedly supported by Democratic President James Buchanan, were clear. If residence in a free territory did not make a slave free, than neither could dwelling in a free state protect a man from falling into the bonds of servitude. The Constitution was the last word regarding slavery, and because it allowed for slavery, no other jurisdiction could outlaw the institution, or prevent slaveholders from residing there with their property. Piece by piece the “slave-powers” willing conspirators had erected the edifice, a “piece of machinery” for the protection and future prosperity of slavery, an institution whose very existence not only deprived a whole race of its freedom, but also threatened the liberties of those who would challenge their masters. And this scheme, as Lincoln put it, was “a common plan or draft

⁶⁵ Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), vol. II, 461-469; Gary Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: the Words that Remade*

drawn up before the first lick was struck.”⁶⁶

The conspiracy the Know Nothings swore their faith by had many of the same actors, and posed a similar threat. Their conspiracy was centered around the old Democrat and Whig parties' manipulation of the foreign and Catholic vote. Southern Know Nothings insisted that both the Whigs and Democrats had become dependent upon the votes of foreigners to maintain their electoral strength, and accordingly they had begun to court actively those voters and to turn their policies towards ensuring immigrants' party loyalties. The Kansas Nebraska act contained a clause which allowed non-citizens to vote in the territories, an obvious attempt to encourage the support of foreigners. Franklin Pierce had negotiated with Archbishop Hughes of New York and a papal nuncio in Spain in order to ensure the Catholic vote in the 1852 election. In return Pierce had appointed Catholic James Campbell to his cabinet, as well as an assortment of minor officials throughout his administration. He had then proceeded to remove Know Nothings who might oppose him from appointed positions. Roger Taney, another Catholic also functioned as an emissary of the Pope deep within the structure of American government, turning the highest court in the land into a tool of Papal authority.

For Southern Know Nothings this conspiracy, while it might keep certain corrupt politicians in office, threatened to put the reins of American government in the hands of foreigners and to deprive native-born Americans of their liberties. In addition, the

America (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 112-120; Foner, *Free Soil*, 73-102.

⁶⁶ Blaser, *Collected Works*, vol. II, 462, 466.

abolitionist tendencies of the foreign-born put slavery in jeopardy by increasing the abolitionist vote and northern power in Congress. This same process also tended to push fanatical southern Democrats closer to secession, which was the ultimate danger to the Constitution and republicanism.

It is through the lens of republican ideology that this conspiracy takes shape and becomes a coherent whole. Different Know Nothings might stress different aspects of their creed at varying times. While John Clayton might speak of the importance of preventing non-citizens from voting in the territories, William Brownlow would rail against Catholics, William Smith would warn of German radicals, and Kenneth Rayner might plead for the indispensability of the Union. Which portion of their ideology was the most important depended upon which Know Nothing was speaking, but their beliefs were tied together to define a broadly based, well-thought out conspiracy with each part forming a necessary portion of the entire structure. As a group, southern Know Nothings were held together by the belief that this conspiracy was a real and legitimate danger. However broad a coalition they represented, their common ground was the intricacies of this conspiracy and the threat it represented to the Union.

Ultimately their ideology was conservative in nature, constructed to redefine the concept of Americanism that would remove forever the dividing lines of sectionalism. Anyone who had been born an American, unless they were Catholic and refused to renounce the Pope's temporal authority, would be included within their ranks. There

would be no distinction between North and South, only between American and non-American. They proclaimed a struggle against the fanaticism that was cleaving the nation in two, and pronounced the foreigners and Catholics to blame. They promised a return to the days of revolutionary republicanism and patriotism and an end to the strife caused by slavery agitation. The Know Nothings promised to replace one form of distinction with another, their version of "Americanism." In this they stood squarely within the confines of traditional American politics.

CHAPTER 3: "VIRGINIA IS MIDDLE GROUND": THE KNOW NOTHING PARTY AND THE VIRGINIA GUBERNATORIAL ELECTION OF 1855*

By the beginning of 1855 the Know Nothing Party had established itself as a significant force in southern politics. Without having won any important elections, or even campaigned openly on its nativist ideals, the Order had managed to replace the Whigs as the major opposition to the Democrats throughout much of the South, bringing both Whigs and Democrats into its fold. And as the number of Know Nothings grew, so too did their hopes for political power. The party showed a tremendous amount of promise and its members and followers held high expectations for their success in the upcoming year. The Order had risen "with a glimmering dawn over the eastern hills, gradually, but rapidly spreading its light over the land," wrote the editor of the *Richmond Whig*, but he also wondered, "shall it suddenly vanish like the meteor, or hold on its appointed course like a planet? Who may tell?"¹ The question was not simply one raised by a disgruntled Whig who saw his own party "vanish," but raised the important issue of how a political organization without any of its adherents holding consequential offices and with only a handful of even minor electoral victories could claim the opposition mantle once held by the Whigs. For all the Know Nothings' promise and promises, by

* A similar version of this chapter was published in the *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 106 (Winter 1998), 35-70.

¹ *Richmond Whig and Public Advertiser*, January 2, 1855.

January of 1855 the Order in the South still did not amount to much more than a promise. Despite claims that the Know Nothings were well on their way to “sweep[ing] the South,” and assurances that they would “reform the national policy, purify political morals, purge the public service, and reinvigorate all the departments and branches of the government,” as well as capture the Presidency in 1856, the American Party had only proven its electoral popularity in the North.² Victories there had provided much of the impetus for party growth in the South, but had yet to transfer into concrete achievements. Southern boasts of the Order’s power were based on the optimism of party leaders and newspaper editors, rather than on the polls. And while there were those who believed the party “must prevail” because its “leading principles” were “right,” others knew that without electoral victories their expectations of a political revolution were premature at best.³

The Know Nothings in the South had been presented with relatively few opportunities to test their electoral drawing power in 1854. Most southern states held their gubernatorial and congressional elections during odd numbered years, as opposed to northern states where these major elections were generally held in even numbered years.⁴

² M.B. Hodgson to Millard Fillmore, January 25, 1855, Millard Fillmore Papers, SUNY Lake Oswego; *Richmond Whig*, May 4, 1855; Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850's* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 101-102.

³ *Fayetteville (NC) Observer*, November 30, 1854; William C. Rives to William M. Burwell, November 12, 1854, William M. Burwell Papers, Library of Congress; *Richmond Daily Enquirer*, July 25, 1854; Isaac Newton to Millard Fillmore, March 27, 1855, Millard Fillmore Papers, SUNY, Lake Oswego; George Stapleton to John MacPherson Berrien, November 30, 1855, John MacPherson Berrien Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina.

⁴ Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, South Carolina and Missouri were the only slave states to hold their congressional elections in even numbered years, and Arkansas’, Florida’s, and South Carolina’s took place before the Know Nothings had organized in those states. Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana,

Only in Missouri and Delaware had there been elections in 1854 which occurred late enough in the year for Know Nothing candidates to appear on the ballot. Know Nothing Elisha D. Cullen captured Delaware's only congressional seat while fellow Order initiate Peter F. Causey was victorious in that state's gubernatorial campaign. Luther M. Kennett of Missouri won a seat for the party when he defeated long-time Democrat, now independent, Thomas Hart Benton. Former Whigs such as Augustus R. Sollers of Maryland and Leander M. Cox of Kentucky adopted the new party as their own and brought with them the congressional seats they had won in 1853 as members of their former party.⁵ But beyond these few offices and a small number of municipal posts, the southern Know Nothings had little to brag about and even less real political power which they could actively wield.

American Party members from the South looked forward to the elections of 1855 as the chance to prove that their strength was real and that they were indeed a force to be reckoned with. With the national party convention meeting in June in Philadelphia, southerners were eager to show their northern counterparts in the Order as well as southern voters that the party could be national in its scope. Without a bi-sectional basis for the party they feared their new organization would go the way of the Whigs and become irrelevant in southern politics. To accomplish their goal, however, they would

Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia all voted during odd numbered years. Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia each held their gubernatorial elections in 1855.

⁵ *Baltimore American and Commercial Advertiser*, January 5, 1855.

need evidence that they could compete directly and effectively with the Democrats. Most of the southern elections were scheduled for late summer or autumn and took place after the party convention. The only significant polling scheduled before the convention was set for the end of May in Virginia. Know Nothings saw the Old Dominion as the perfect testing ground for the real strength of the southern party. A victory in this traditionally Democratic state only two weeks before the national party meeting would put the southern delegates on an equal footing with the northerners, and provide the stimulus to carry the Know Nothings through the remainder of their southern elections, thereby solidifying the Order's position as the major opposition party in the nation.

Virginia became the key state for the southern Know Nothings for a number of reasons. Virginians were proud of their heritage and never missed a chance to remind their fellow Americans of their place in the revolution and that Washington, Jefferson, and Madison had all called the state their home. The Old Dominion was also the South's most populous state and a leader in southern politics. "The influence of Virginia has hitherto been paramount with her sister States of the South," claimed one pro-Know Nothing editor, "the other slave States will accept her imprimatur and second her action." Know Nothings believed that a victory here would provide the spark which might ignite an American party fire throughout the rest of the South. "In this State hangs the fate of Americanism as a national movement. Let Virginia endorse it, and the whole South will follow her lead," predicted the *Richmond Whig*. And logically, Know Nothings believed, if the South went for the American party, then their national victory would be all that

much closer. "Virginia is middle ground, on which the great battle for the Constitution is to be fought," the *Abingdon Virginian's* Know Nothing editor proudly proclaimed. "The eye of every Union loving man is now turned toward Virginia. ...If you are successful, you will ... encourage Union loving men, in all our whole country, to take courage and plant their influence under the banner of the true American principles and preserve our happy Union."⁶ The timing of the elections was also critical. With Virginia solidly Know Nothing in May, the late summer elections in Tennessee, Kentucky, Louisiana, Alabama, North Carolina and Georgia could be run on the strength of a nationally viable party.

In Virginia the Know Nothings believed they had a better than even chance of victory. The state had been solidly Democratic ever since Andrew Jackson had been elected president, however 1855 presented the first time in years the Democrats appeared vulnerable. The "Richmond Junto," the party's unofficial organizing committee was in disarray following the death of Thomas Ritchie, its nominal head and elder statesman throughout the second party era. Former editor of the *Richmond Enquirer* and of the *Washington Union* when he died, Ritchie had been the glue that held together the various factions within Virginia's Democratic party and had also been instrumental in uniting southern Democrats in general with their northern colleagues. Without his guiding hand, the state's Democrats had openly quarreled with each other and the Pierce administration over patronage appointments. Ritchie's heir apparent as leader of the state party, Senator

⁶ *Richmond Whig*, May 4, 1855; *Abingdon Virginian*, May 5, 1855.

Robert M. T. Hunter, was unable to draw his state's Democrats together into their old unified position. Hunter fancied himself as more than simply Virginia's first Democrat; he was also simultaneously attempting to take on John Calhoun's position as the South's national spokesman after the death of South Carolina's political giant. When the state's leading Democrats repudiated Hunter's homestead bill, arguing that it favored the newer western states and territories over the older, established states in the East, Hunter found himself defeated at home and in the Senate.⁷ Suddenly his status in his own state was no longer certain, let alone his predominance among southern Democrats. For Virginia's Know Nothings the Democrats' troubles provided the opportunity they needed to finally capture the governor's mansion and bring an end to the strangle-hold Ritchie and the "Junto" had had on the Old Dominion. They called upon all the opposition parties in the state to unite under their banner to defeat the "Richmond Junto" and inflict a "fatal blow to the usurped power and ill-disguised craft of that central clique, which for years has controlled the elections and monopolized the offices of the state."⁸

The all important campaign for governor in Virginia got under way late in 1854, an early starting date for an election which was not scheduled to take place until May 24,

⁷ Craig M. Simpson, *A Good Southerner: The Life of Henry A. Wise of Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 106; Henry H. Simms, *Life of Robert M.T. Hunter: A Study in Sectionalism and Secession* (Richmond: William Byrd Press, 1935), 100-101; *Richmond Examiner*, August 29, 1854.

⁸ *Lynchburg Virginian*, January 30, 1855. Recent scholarship questions the existence of the Junto; see F. Thornton Miller, "The Richmond Junto: The Secret All-Powerful Club--or Myth," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 99 (1991), 63-80.

1855, over five months later. With their prayers that the Know Nothings might simply “disappear and leave no trace” going unanswered, and worried about how their own party disarray might affect the election, the Democrats met in late November, 1854.⁹ By the time they came together at Staunton to select their candidate, the Know Nothings had just adjourned their first national convention in Cincinnati and appeared to be gaining momentum throughout the state and the rest of the country. Virginia’s Democrats were still uncertain what form the new party might take, but in light of its startling successes in the northern fall elections, its rapid growth in Virginia cities and towns like Richmond and Norfolk, and new evidence of its growing nationality, they were determined to put together their campaign early enough to conduct a thorough canvass.

The state seemed to have been overwhelmed by the new party during the second half of 1854. As if out of nowhere the Know Nothings had emerged to threaten the Democrats. They, like their Know Nothing counterparts, were convinced that the Virginia campaign would be the turning point for the new party. “All eyes are now turned towards Virginia,” wrote the editor of the *Washington Union*, “whose beacon-fires have ever gleamed brighter and brighter as the democratic horizon became obscured by the flitting shadows of faction, or darkened by the thick rolling clouds of restless opposition.” For southern Democrats, Virginia held the key to overcoming the “deep red tide of fanaticism” and preventing it from “spend[ing] its force and fury upon the entire

⁹ *Richmond Daily Enquirer*, August 3, 1854; James P. Hambleton, *A Biographical Sketch of Henry A. Wise* (Richmond: J.W. Randolph, 1856), 28.

South.” For if “the Know Nothings are defeated,” predicted a Democratic editor, “it will prove the seal of death upon their unholy plans.”¹⁰

No clear-cut leader stood out amongst the field for the Democrats. Henry A. Wise, a former congressman who could not get along with Virginia’s Democratic leadership, had published his Manifesto, a twelve-thousand word, detailed point by point attack on Know Nothing ideology which would set the standard for the Democratic response to this new challenge throughout the South. He hoped that a strong stand against the Know Nothings would put him in a dominant position once the convention met despite the opinions of party leaders.¹¹ Hunter then threw in his support for Wise after he endorsed the Senator’s Homestead legislation. Still Wise was not the favorite of the old party elite, having once been a Whig who violently opposed Andrew Jackson and his stand on the national bank. However, with the help of the *Richmond Enquirer’s* editors and a shrewdly timed rules vote that did away with the two-thirds majority requirement for nomination while leaving thirty counties unrepresented, Wise managed to parlay Hunter’s endorsement and the popularity of his Manifesto into a victory on the third ballot. He defeated Shelton F. Leake, who was generally better liked by the party regulars. Leake was far more consistent in his application of Democratic ideology than

¹⁰ N. A., *Facts for the People of the South* (Washington: Washington Union Office, 1855), 35; *Romney (Virginia) Argus*, January 16, 1855.

¹¹ Craig M. Simpson, *A Good Southerner: The Life of Henry A. Wise of Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 108; Barton H. Wise, *The Life of Henry A. Wise of Virginia, 1806-1876* (New York: MacMillan, 1899), 168-169; *Richmond Enquirer*, October 26, 1854; James P. Hamblen, *A Biographical Sketch of Henry A. Wise, With a History of the Political Campaign in Virginia in 1855* (Richmond: J.W. Randolph, 1856), 8, 14.

Wise, unfortunately he was as unexciting as he was steady. Many delegates believed Wise's fire would stand a better chance in the general election, and if not, the party would no longer need to worry about this firebrand commonly referred to as "old gizzard foot."¹²

Once Wise had secured the nomination he hit the campaign trail in early January, 1855 with an enthusiasm Virginians had not seen for many years, if ever. From the beginning of the canvass, Wise intended to keep the Know Nothings on the defensive. Using his Manifesto as a guide, Wise attacked the Know Nothings for their beliefs in what was to become an ideology-centered debate. Democratic plans and policies never came up as the topic of discussion. Even the Kansas-Nebraska act, a delicate subject for southern Know Nothings, did not become a major campaign issue. For Know Nothings, Kansas-Nebraska was the instrument which the Democrats had provided to foreigners to rule the territories by allowing non-citizens the vote. It was also the prime cause of sectional tension and the greatest danger to the security of the Union. That said, however, southern Know Nothings could not openly call for the repeal of an act that opened up the West to slavery and ended all restrictions from the Missouri Compromise placed on the movement of slaves into the territories. Although many Know Nothings objected to the act, they believed they could not argue their superior ability to protect southern interests and still stand against greater freedom for slave-holders. They also felt certain that

¹² Simpson, *A Good Southerner*, 16-17, 108; Wise, *Life of Wise*, 170-173; Hambleton, *Political Campaign*, 28-30; *Richmond Enquirer*, December 4, 1854.

bringing up the issue would only further exacerbate the sectional tension they were determined to end.

Instead of simply responding to the Know Nothings' charges that the Democrats pandered to the foreign vote, promoted Catholic rule, were riddled with corruption, and no longer stood for any ideals, Wise attacked the Know Nothings' construction of "Americanism." Echoing his earlier writings, both Wise and the Democrat's main organ, the *Enquirer*, presented the Americans¹³ as "anti-American" in their stance on immigration. "The Know Nothings' oaths grossly violate the Constitution," Wise claimed. In addition, their conception of what comprised a true "American" was inconsistent with traditional southern beliefs. This new nativism, Wise argued, was an import from the North, an attempt to "foster, encourage, uphold and advance a Northernism untried upon southern soil." The *Enquirer* also struck the cord of the Know Nothings' incompatibility with Virginia's social realities. In a state with few immigrants or Catholics, the Know Nothings seemed somewhat out of place. "Whatever it may be in other states, in Virginia at least it is an absurd, unnecessary and negatory movement. . . . In this state especially, Know Nothingism is an idle, illogical and absurd organization, without motive, principle or purpose."¹⁴ Wise also accused the Know Nothings of promoting the very crimes they vilified in the Catholic Church, accusing them of

¹³ The Know Nothings' official party name was the American Party. I use "Know Nothing" here for the most part because in 1855 it was still the most common term, and is less confusing than "American."

¹⁴ Hambleton, *Political Campaign*, 129, *Richmond Enquirer*, January 8, February 1, 1855.

“combating proscription and exclusiveness with proscription and exclusiveness, secrecy with secrecy, Jesuitism with Jesuitism.”¹⁵ “Its indictment against the Papacy recites its own crimes against humanity,” the *Enquirer* wrote. “The Church of Rome was never more intolerant, the Council of the inquisition never more proscriptive, than this perfidious friend of Protestantism, this treacherous champion of religious liberty.”¹⁶

By the time Wise began his campaign, Virginia’s Know Nothings had yet to select a candidate and had decided little except that they would nominate their own man rather than supporting a Whig party nominee for governor. Former Whigs and Democrats battled for position in the organization while others debated whether or not to support a candidate who was relatively unknown and did not contain the tinge of party affiliation.¹⁷ Former Whigs still hoped that their previous associations would bolt them to the party’s leadership. John M. Botts and Alexander H.H. Stuart, who had been the Whigs’ two front runners, found themselves without a party to nominate them. Both were still contemplating whether or not to take the Order’s oaths as of January, and the longer they sat on the fence as far as nativism was concerned, the less chance they stood of securing the Know Nothings’ support. Stuart, Millard Fillmore’s Secretary of the Interior, was as yet uncertain what direction to take. He wrote Fillmore that he had “no doubt that by joining I could get the nomination and be elected,” but he knew that his current position

¹⁵ Hambleton, *Political Campaign*, 22.

¹⁶ Hambleton, *Political Campaign*, 140-141.

¹⁷ S.G. Haven to Millard Fillmore, January 17, 1855, Fillmore Papers, SUNY, Lake Oswego.

outside the Order “cuts me off from support from that quarter.” Still he hesitated because he believed that the “truth is the American party is . . . not fully developed. . . . It is yet in the womb, and no one can tell what appearance it may present after partition. . . . It may have three eyes, or a curved spine, or a club foot.”¹⁸ Physical deformities aside, Botts and Alexander’s own party had given up any thoughts of making independent nominations and had consented to back the American candidate. Whig newspapers that refused to become officially Know Nothing still endorsed the nativists, even before they knew who would be on the ticket.¹⁹ Thus left with no alternative, Botts and Stuart could only hope that they retained enough clout with their old Whig, now Know Nothing, supporters for one of them to win that party’s nomination.²⁰

Not scheduled to convene their convention until March, Virginia’s Know Nothings were unable to organize any purposeful answer to Henry Wise and his increasingly strident attacks upon the Order and their beliefs. As Wise traveled throughout the state on the most extensive campaign tour the governor’s race had ever seen, the Americans remained strangely idle. The Know Nothing press kept up its assaults upon Catholics and foreigners while occasionally defending themselves against Wise’s denunciations, but made no attempt to use the Democrats’ weaknesses against

¹⁸ Alexander H.H. Stuart to Millard Fillmore, January 1, 1855, Fillmore Papers, SUNY Lake Oswego; Fillmore to Stuart, January 15, 1855, Alexander H.H. Stuart Papers, University of Virginia.

¹⁹ *Richmond Whig*, January 2, 1855; *Richmond Penny Post*, January 18, 1855.

²⁰ Alexander H.H. Stuart to Millard Fillmore, January 1, 1855, Alexander H.H. Stuart Papers, University of Virginia; S.G. Haven to Fillmore, January 10, 17, 1855, Fillmore Papers, SUNY, Lake Oswego; *Richmond Enquirer*, January 3, 5, 1855; *Richmond Whig*, January 3, 1855.

them. This strategy had worked so well during the second half of 1854 that they saw no need to alter it. However, in late 1854 it had been the Democrats who were on the defensive. The Know Nothings' new nativist rhetoric and anti-party ideals had converted many Virginians because they seemed to address important issues the old parties had ignored. But faced with defending their ideology rather than using it for an offensive campaign was somewhat more difficult. The Know Nothing press concentrated on justifying their anti-immigrant/anti-Catholic policies rather than aggressively decrying the Democrats as they had done several months earlier. Even so, they may have been correct in the assumption that their ideas could carry the state, even after Henry Wise had found so compelling and hard to defend a weakness as the southern Americans' "safety" on slavery.

Questioning the opposition's ability to defend the "peculiar institution" was a long tradition for southern political parties.²¹ Slavery had been a key component in the both the Whigs' and Democrats' partisan machines. Unlike issues such as banking, and internal improvements, on which Whigs and Democrats held fundamental disagreements, slavery was a point of seemingly limited contention because both parties were strongly pro-slavery. However, the need for partisanship pushed both organizations to attack the

²¹ This pattern was quite familiar to old Whigs in the organization, as they had been skewered any number of times in the past by the Democrats' cries of abolition; see William J. Cooper, *The South and the Politics of Slavery, 1828-1856* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 1-4; Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1978), 43; Joel Silbey, *The Partisan Imperative: The Dynamics of American Politics Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 119.

other over their ability to defend slavery from outside interference. Their questionable stand on the issue had contributed to the Whigs' demise in the South, so it should have come as little surprise that the Democrats went right back to it in their campaign against the Know Nothings. Democrats had generally attacked the Whigs as weak on slavery, condemning them because they were allied with what the Democrats portrayed as an abolitionist northern Whig party. They employed the same tactic against the Know Nothings, but with far more virulence than ever before.

Wise had made no mention of slavery in his Manifesto, but beginning in early January 1855, the Democrats struck the Know Nothings with the charge of abolitionism. Ironically, the Americans were seemingly vulnerable to the charge in large part because of their efforts to nationalize the party. While southern party leaders were generally slave-holders themselves and clearly opposed to any slavery agitation, their need for a link to the northern wing left them open to charges that they were in league with the free soil elements of the Order.²² Senator Henry Wilson and Governor Henry Gardner, both Know Nothings from Massachusetts, were the favorite targets for southern Democrats. Well known for their free soil advocacy, the two were the most outspoken anti-slavery members of the party. Wilson's simultaneous opposition to the fugitive slave law and papal authority made him the most denounced man in Virginia, by the Democratic press

²² According to Tyler Anbinder, anti-slavery was as strong a draw for northern voters to the Know Nothings as their nativist beliefs, see Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 99-101; Unionism, however, was also a strong ideological point for the Know Nothings, and the party's so-called "Union degree," an oath to uphold the Union and oppose all agitation over anything which might threaten it, i.e. slavery, was written and espoused by a southerner, Kenneth Rayner of North Carolina.

at least. No issue of a Democratic newspaper was complete without an editorial diatribe aimed at the Massachusetts Senator and upon Virginia's Know Nothings for associating with him. "There is an intimate alliance between the Know Nothings and the Abolitionists of the North," claimed one southern Democrat, "and . . . the great object of the unhallowed union is to strike down the institutions of the South."²³ The Order's stated objectives were clearly "temporary, [but] . . . hostility to the institutions of the South [was] an undying hatred of the most implacable character." The Know Nothings, Wise and the rest of Virginia's Democrats argued, were in fact controlled by abolitionists by a larger measure than the Whigs had been. "Are you willing to act with such an enemy of your rights?" asked J. Alexander, a Democratic editor.²⁴

The two-pronged assault Wise and Virginia's Democratic Party launched upon the Know Nothings showed that they had learned from the Americans' tactics. The Know Nothings had gained popularity through the use of rhetoric laden with traditional republican ideology. In foreigners and Catholics, as well as corrupt, office seeking partisan politics, they had identified a dire threat to the future of the American republic, its liberties, and self-government. The idea that there was a conspiracy among foreigners, the Catholic Church, and the Democratic Party to destroy self-government was one that appealed to many Americans. Conspiracy was a common thread running through republican thought and one that was part and parcel of the politics of the 1850s. The

²³ *Richmond Enquirer*, January 17, 18, 1855.

²⁴ *Facts for the People of the South*, 20; *Charlottesville Jeffersonian Republican*, April 19, 1855.

Republican Party used the idea of a “slave-power” conspiracy with at least as much effectiveness as the Know Nothings employed their brand of republican rhetoric. In Virginia, the Democrats turned the tables on the Know Nothings first by accusing them of being un-American in their nativist beliefs and their secret society, and then by linking them to free-soil politicians from the North. By attacking the Know Nothings’ secrecy and then pointing out the anti-slavery tendencies of Massachusetts members, the Democrats managed to create their own conspiracy, this time involving abolitionists from the North and their Know Nothing allies in the South. “When the secret lodges are broken up,” Democrats argued, “there will remain a solid and compact body of abolitionists and their dupes who will at once proceed to carry out the work of the fanatics that lead them.” Thus Virginia voters were presented with the choice of determining which conspiracy was the greater threat to their rights, the union of Catholics, foreigners, and Democrats, or the Know Nothings and the free-soilers.²⁵

Perhaps the most obvious effect of the Democrats’ charges of abolitionism was to immediately put the Know Nothings on the defensive. A considerable amount of time and newspaper space now had to be spent addressing the Democrats’ charges, all of it at

²⁵ The literature concerning the role of conspiracy as a motivation for Northern politics is somewhat more extensive than it is for the South, but it seems clear that politicians and voters in both sections were stirred by remarkably similar arguments. However, in 1855 southerners could still identify conspiracies within their own section. This allowed for a competitive two-party system within the South. After the eventual failure of the Know Nothings and the eclipse of their version of republicanism, Southerners, especially in the deep South, were left with only a northern conspiracy as an opposition to the Democrats. See Holt, *Political Crisis*, 219-259; Silbey, *Partisan Imperative*, 116-126; Marc W. Kruman, *Parties and Politics in North Carolina, 1836-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 181-221; for the quote see *Facts for the People of the South*, 20.

the expense of their own message.²⁶ Far worse, as the Know Nothings saw it, was that it brought slavery into the campaign. The uncertainty many Know Nothings had felt about broaching the subject at their national convention in Cincinnati the previous November was now much closer, and their politics of avoidance would be severely tested.

Virginia's Know Nothings, however, did manage to answer the Democrats without coming up with any real stand on slavery issues other than to state that they were "as sound and reliable in everything that relates to the interests and welfare of the South as Southern Whigs or Southern Democrats. . . . No one hates and despises Northern Abolitionism . . . more sincerely and heartily than we do," responded the *Richmond Whig*, and "we do not believe the Know Nothing party at the North are any more Abolitionists than either of the other two parties." Wise's charges, the editor concluded, were a "desperate trick to sustain a desperate candidate," and an attempt to "divert public attention from other questions and grave issues." The Know Nothings remained convinced that "the question of slavery" must be "distinctly eschewed and avoided as a topic of discussion in our councils."²⁷

Despite their lukewarm response to the Democratic accusations of abolitionism, the Know Nothings continued to gain confidence in their strength and began to get

²⁶ See, for example, the *Richmond, Penny Post*, *Richmond Whig*, *Abingdon Virginian* for February through May, 1855. Rarely is there an issue of any Know Nothing newspaper, or even Whig paper backing the Order, which does not contain an editorial denouncing Democratic charges of abolitionism. By the end of the campaign in May these responses are more numerous than attacks on foreigners or Catholics.

²⁷ *Richmond Whig*, March 2, 1855; *Washington Daily American Organ*, March 26, January 16, 1855.

electoral confirmation of their ability to draw voters. Local elections in Virginia were held throughout the winter and spring leading up to the gubernatorial and congressional elections at the end of May, and the American party did especially well in urban areas. In late January they were victorious in Parkersburg and Fairfax County Courthouse, electing councilmen in city-wide polls. Even more encouraging were the results from Alexandria. In March the Know Nothing mayoral candidate defeated his Democratic opponent by more than five-hundred votes out of a thousand total. These results in large part were to be expected, given that urban areas were more likely to be home to immigrant populations, but the Know Nothings were inspired by these outcomes nonetheless. "It is an indication of what may be expected in almost every county in the state," the *Richmond Whig's* editor bragged. "Wise stock is at a sad and awful discount, and getting worse everyday."²⁸

After two and one-half months of sustained assault from Wise, the Know Nothings finally met at Winchester to nominate a candidate of their own. The meeting was held in secret and little is known about the actual proceedings. Despite the Democrats' claims that the Know Nothings were nothing more than Whigs in disguise, the convention seems to have been made up of almost equal numbers of ex-Whigs and Democrats. The convention designed the ticket to appeal to the broadest possible electorate, and therefore avoided nominating either Stuart or Botts, the most prominent ex-Whigs in attendance. Thomas S. Flournoy, a former Whig and outspoken nativist,

²⁸ *Richmond Enquirer*, January 27, March 9, 1855; *Richmond Whig*, March 13, 1855.

won the nomination for governor. Although not the first choice of the old Whigs at the convention, Flournoy was well-known enough, Know Nothings hoped, to garner much of the Whig vote. James M. H. Beale, former Democratic congressman, was added to the ticket as Lieutenant Governor for his popularity with Democrats in the western part of the state, while John M. Patton, another Democrat, was nominated for Attorney General.²⁹

The platform adopted at Winchester closely resembled those coming out of similar conventions throughout the South. Historians have argued that the southern Know Nothings were not as nativist in their motivations as the northern Order, but the Virginia platform does not bear out that point.³⁰ It was a clearly nativist document that was very much in line with policies generated by northern Know Nothings. The majority of the platform was taken up by Know Nothing concerns shared both North and South, and which formed the backbone of the party's ideology. The first eight planks dealt with various nativist demands, ranging from limiting office-holding to native-born Americans and outlawing non-citizen electoral rights, to calling for a return to the "doctrine of availability" for choosing political candidates. The platform demanded the lengthening of the period before which an alien could be naturalized (although it only asked for "a sufficient length of time" rather than the twenty-one years often seen in Know Nothing platforms), and the restriction of the immigration of the "criminal and pauper." Another

²⁹ *Fayetteville Observer*, March 23, 1855; *Richmond Whig*, March 16, 1855; Lewis E. Harvie to R.M.T. Hunter, March 17, 1855, in Ambler, *R.M.T. Hunter Correspondence*, 163.

³⁰ Tyler Anbinder, in *Nativism and Slavery*, xii, argues that the southern Know Nothings for the most part "ignored nativism."

plank attacked the power of the Catholic Church and old party politicians, saying that “any sect or party which believes . . . that any foreign power, religious or political, has the right to control the conscience . . . of a freeman,” is “totally at war with the principle of freedom of opinion.”³¹ Of the entire platform, almost two-thirds was devoted to issues associated with nativism and Know Nothing anti-party beliefs.

Despite the severity of the Democrats’ charges of abolitionism, the platform dealt with slavery only peripherally. The convention added a state’s rights plank which stated that the “sovereignty of the States should be supreme in the exercise of all powers not expressly delegated to the Federal government,” and called for the “non-intervention” of the federal government in the “municipal affairs” of the states. This last was a mild reference to state’s rights, but made no mention at all of Kansas or the territorial question of slavery. The Know Nothings intended to keep sectional animosity to a minimum and therefore avoided the controversy except to back the status quo by referring only to federal power over the states, not the territories.

As the race in Virginia entered its final months the campaign began to heat up. The state’s Know Nothings had assumed that once their own man entered the race the Order would quickly regain any ground it had lost while Henry Wise had the field all to himself. And for a time Flournoy’s candidacy did seem to invigorate the party and its position in Virginia. Within days of the Know Nothing convention the state’s Democrats

³¹ *Richmond Whig*, March 16, 1855; Virginia State Know Nothing Platform cited in Holt, “The Antimasonic and Know-Nothing Parties,” 699-700.

were reminded how much opposition there was to Wise's candidacy inside their own party. Former Democratic governor William Smith spoke out in favor of the Know Nothings and in support of their nativist platform, claiming that "our highest duty to the South is to discourage immigration." Like many Know Nothings Smith feared the added clout anti-slavery foreigners gave to the northern congressmen who already outnumbered their southern counterparts. "What is to be our policy," Smith asked and then answered, "[to] stop this enormous disproportion" which "I deprecate . . . as a great calamity."³²

In addition to gaining the support of renegade Democrats, the Know Nothings continued their successes in local municipal elections. The Order was victorious in Norfolk, Wheeling, and Fredericksburg, a traditional stronghold of the Democrats. They also managed to carry large majorities in Portsmouth and Lynchburg and to elect the mayor of Annapolis. In Richmond, the state capital and Virginia's largest city, the Know Nothings out-pollled the Democrats by nearly a three to one margin. In much of the state, and certainly in urban areas, the Know Nothings were improving on the majorities the Whigs had held and capturing former Democratic towns with an ease that alarmed the Democracy.³³

Emboldened by these results Know Nothings began making grand predictions about the size of their impending victory. Common estimates gave Flournoy a probable majority of up to twenty thousand votes in a state where no more than one hundred and

³² *Richmond Whig*, March 16, 13, 1855.

thirty-two thousand people had ever voted in one election before. One prominent Know Nothing and political sage estimated that the Order could count on 67,000 votes from nativists forces, which he judged to be composed of some 42,000 former Whigs voters and 25,000 Democrats. These defections from the other parties, added to the likelihood that Whigs who had not already joined the nativist cause would more than likely either vote Know Nothing or stay away from the polls rather than vote Democrat, added up to a Know Nothing majority of some 8,500 votes and a clear cut victory for Flournoy.³⁴ Accurate or not, these predictions illustrate the extreme assurance the Know Nothings displayed in Virginia. "With these Virginians," Isaac Newton remarked to Millard Fillmore, "One would suppose that Henry A. Wise could not get a single vote of a native born citizen."³⁵

Despite the rosy predictions of the press, however, Flournoy's campaign was much less than it seemed. Henry Wise was conducting the most extensive, thorough canvass of Virginia in the state's history.³⁶ His non-stop speaking tour covered most of the Old Dominion and took in both traditionally strong Whig as well as Democratic counties. With the shifting political lines, Wise had to be certain to leave nothing to

³³ *Richmond Whig*, March 23, April 10, May 11, 1855; *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, April 5, 1855.

³⁴ William W. Morrison to William Alexander Graham, April 2, 1855, in J.G. De Roulhac Hamilton ed., *The Papers of William Alexander Graham*, vol. IV, 1851-1856 (Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1961), 595; John L. Newby to John Crittenden, May 12, 1855, John Crittenden Papers, LC; *Richmond Whig*, May 10, 1855.

³⁵ Isaac Newton to Millard Fillmore, March 27, 1855, Fillmore Papers, SUNY, Lake Oswego.

³⁶ This was, in fact, only the second popular election for governor in the state's history. Until 1851 Virginia's governor was chosen by the state legislature, one of the last in the nation to do so.

chance, for he could not be sure of any votes. Flournoy, on the other hand, was overcome with the extreme confidence the rest of his party enjoyed. The Know Nothings' candidate for governor wrote a letter of acceptance following his nomination and then retired to his front porch for the remainder of the campaign. John Patton, candidate for attorney general, spoke once before the election, the only such speech given by the Know Nothing ticket. Leaving the party newspapers to carry on the debate with Wise, Flournoy allowed the Democrats to remain on the offensive. Much of the campaign, in fact, boiled down to a newspaper war. For the state's two most prominent newspapers, the Democrats' *Enquirer*, and the long-time Whig organ, the *Richmond Whig*, this was politics as usual. The two papers had an ongoing feud, and *Enquirer* claims of *Whig* abolitionism were old hat by now. In one notable instance this rivalry even led to violence. In 1846, former *Whig* editor John H. Pleasants challenged the son of *Enquirer* editor Thomas Ritchie, Thomas Ritchie Jr. to a duel. It turned out as most contests between Democrats and Whigs in Virginia; Ritchie killed Pleasants.³⁷ But in a state where a large percentage of voters did not subscribe to newspapers, or perhaps even read, the Know Nothings missed the best chance they would ever have to expound their message. Although the party had spread rapidly, the Order was still not widely dispersed in Virginia's rural counties, whose populations largely outnumbered the Know Nothings' urban enclaves. Wise, on the other hand, did his best to let the people throughout Virginia know what he thought of

³⁷ William G. Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion: Virginia and the Second Party System, 1824-1861* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 222.

anti-foreign and anti-Catholic politics.³⁸

Alarmed by Flournoy's decision not to engage in debate with Wise or to offer a counter to his accusations against the Order in even a single campaign speech or appearance, Know Nothings from outside of Virginia put together in Flournoy's stead a number of responses to Wise's Manifesto. One of the best known was Frederick Anspach's reply in his history of the Know Nothing movement, *Sons of the Sires*. Anspach dismissed Wise's characterization of his party as "the offspring of a cloudy brain, or a disturbed spirit," produced in Virginia's 'dismal swamps.'" Kenneth Rayner also penned a rejoinder to Wise that was widely circulated throughout Virginia and the rest of the South.³⁹ Rayner, one of the most prominent southern members of the Order and an early contender for the party's presidential candidacy, traveled north from North Carolina to speak in Flournoy's absence, but his limited number of stops could not compete with Wise's extensive travels throughout Virginia.

To make matters worse, the *Richmond Enquirer* uncovered a speech Flournoy had given several years earlier in which he blamed Virginia's economic backwardness on its reliance on slave labor. The Know Nothing candidate had claimed that it was impossible

³⁸ Simpson, *A Good Southerner*, 110; Wise, *Life of Henry Wise*, 186-187; *Richmond Enquirer*, June 12, 1855; *Washington Daily American Organ*, June 8, 1855; John Patton's speech reprinted in Hambleton, *Political Campaign in Virginia*, 178-192.

³⁹ Frederick Rinehart Anspach, *The Sons of the Sires* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Garmbo & Co., 1855), 81-223, quotes from 184, 183; Kenneth Rayner, *Reply of the Hon. Kenneth Rayner to the Manifesto of Hon. Henry A. Wise* (Washington D.C.: American Organ Office, 1855). Anspach, who published his work under the name "An American," was a native of Maryland, while Rayner hailed from North Carolina.

for any slave-based economy to thrive or achieve widespread prosperity. This revelation seemed to give credence to Wise's charges that Virginia's Know Nothings were indeed an abolitionist invasion, a "base and pestilential importation from the North," and the southern embodiment of the "united isms of abolition, nativism, religious intolerance, and the secret societies."⁴⁰ Flourney's economic characterization of Virginia was close enough to the Northern Republican Party's preaching on the dangers of slavery as an economic institution to compromise seriously the Know Nothing candidate's position.⁴¹ Wise and the Democratic newspapers used Flourney's speech for all it was worth. Before this discovery they had concentrated their venom at people like Henry Wilson and Henry Gardner and at the local Know Nothings' connections through the national party to the two Massachusetts free-soilers. Now Wise could accuse Flourney not just of supporting abolition by relation, but through his own words and actions.

By the end of May most of Virginia was ready to end what was rightly called the most hotly contested election since the presidential contest of 1840.⁴² When the votes were finally tallied, Wise emerged the victor by a 10,000 vote majority over Flourney, winning in 91 of 144, or 63% of the state's counties and 53.2 percent of the total popular vote. Know Nothing candidates for Lieutenant Governor and Attorney General James

⁴⁰ *Richmond Enquirer*, April 2, January 18, 1855; *Facts for the People of the South*, 3; Simpson, *A Good Southerner*, 110.

⁴¹ For a detailed discussion of the Republican party's ideology and beliefs concerning slavery, see Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970),

⁴² *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, May 16, 1855.

Beale and John Patton were defeated by similar margins. The 156,488 vote total was the largest in any Virginia state election until after the Civil. Flournoy's support had been enough to assure him of a victory in any previous election, but the high stakes in 1855 had sent a record number of people to the polls.⁴³ The Know Nothings were just as disappointed in the returns from the rest of Virginia's elections. In the 13 races for the state's seats in the U.S. House of Representatives, only John S. Carlile from a district in the western portion of Virginia managed to secure a position for the Order. In the state Senate Know Nothings were victorious in only 18 of 50 races, leaving the Democrats with a 14 seat majority. The Democratic preponderance in the House of Delegates was just as large. There Virginia's long dominant party held 98 of 152 seats, an impressive majority in that house of 44 votes over the Know Nothings.⁴⁴

Flournoy ran best in traditionally Whig counties along the Tidewater and in such strong Whig urban areas as Richmond and Alexandria. In the Piedmont Know Nothings managed to carry the Democratic counties of Bedford, Culpeper, and Fauquier, but balanced that out by losing Charlotte and Patrick. West of the Blue Ridge only the normally Democratic county of Morgan switched to the nativist ticket, while Wise gained four former Whig counties. Flournoy's greatest suffering, however, occurred in the west where the gain of Brooke and Jackson counties was more than offset by the concomitant

⁴³ Hambleton, *History of the Political Campaign*, pp. 355-359; Congressional Quarterly, *Guide to U.S. Elections* (Washington D.C., 1975), p. 434.

⁴⁴ Hambleton, *History of the Political Campaign*, pp. 359-362; Congressional Quarterly, *Guide to U.S. Elections*, p. 600.

loss of six counties captured by the Whigs in the previous election: Boone, Cabell, Logan, Putnam, Taylor, and Wayne.⁴⁵

Despite the Know Nothings' gains in traditionally Democratic counties, the Whig areas that went Democrat were more than compensation for Wise. The shift shows a certain amount of political realignment, but the Democrats managed to stay on top. Flournoy's limited campaign seemed to have its effect, or rather Wise's extensive canvass did. The Democrats' advances in the western portion of the state were most likely linked to Wise's untiring attention to the region, which he feared might go Know Nothing because of their lack of support for slavery, as well as the popularity he had built there as a champion of reform during the constitutional convention of 1850-51 in which he was the foremost eastern Democrat to support broadened suffrage.⁴⁶ Wise also favored internal improvements, which no doubt helped him get the votes of Whigs who felt uneasy with the nativists and who might otherwise have stayed away from the polls had a different Democrat been running. The impact of internal improvements, specifically railroad building, may also have influenced the outcome of the election in another way. Immigrant laborers working on the Tennessee and Virginia Railroad in the southwest, rather than handing the region to the Know Nothings by giving the locals a reason to back

⁴⁵ Hambleton, *History of the Political Campaign*, pp. 356-358; *Daily Richmond Enquirer*, 20 Jan. 1852; Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion*, pp. 98-107, 121, 131; Kenneth W. Noe, *Southwest Virginia's Railroad: Modernization and the Sectional Crisis* (Urbana and Chicago, 1994), pp. 88-89.

⁴⁶ Simpson, *A Good Southerner*, 78-86; Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion*, 276.

the nativist ticket, may have simply outvoted them, choosing Wise for themselves.⁴⁷

Flournoy's lackluster effort and the lack of penetration by the Know Nothings into areas outside of their urban newspaper enclaves contributed as well in the southwest where they were unable to make any headway in the traditionally Democratic counties of Tazewell, Smyth, and Washington. These three counties had German populations of 20% and were likely candidates for Know Nothingism, but their voters saw nothing of the Order during the campaign.⁴⁸

In retrospect, the Know Nothings' showing in Virginia should have come as no surprise. Of all the southern states in which the Know Nothings believed they had a legitimate opportunity to capture the governor's mansion, Virginia was the one with the longest tradition of Democratic support. While there were those who saw either fraud or foreign influence behind the Know Nothings' defeat, many believed their failure lay in the fact of long time Democratic supremacy. The Democrats' domination of the state had gone on too long and was too overwhelming for the Know Nothings to overcome in the new party's first important election. Many argued that the Know Nothings should be pleased with their competitive showing and that a victory was "a revolution in party politics too great to be expected in so short a period."

Many Know Nothings outside of Virginia agreed with that state party's judgment

⁴⁷ Vespasian Ellis reported a claim, supposedly made by an "intelligent Democrat," that 10,000 Irish non-citizen laborers in Virginia working on the public payroll had voted as a block for Henry Wise; *Washington Daily American Organ*, May 27, 1855.

⁴⁸ Hambleton, *History of the Political Campaign*, pp. 356-358; Noe, *Southwest Virginia's Railroad*, pp. 88-89; Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion*, pp. 148-149.

on their electoral loss. Parson William G. Brownlow, the fiery and disagreeable Tennessee Know Nothing and newspaper editor, believed that, although “the battle had been more fiercely contended than any former election held since the formation of the government,” the Order had been up against insurmountable odds from the very beginning. Virginia was a state historically dominated by the Democrats to the point where they had, “under all circumstances, maintained its invincibility,” claimed Brownlow.⁴⁹ Virginia’s Order, he admitted, had taken on too great a challenge in its first important election.

Besides their historical domination, Know Nothings argued, Virginia’s Democrats also had the benefit of help from President Franklin Pierce’s administration with all its accompanying patronage powers and money. The sheer weight of this influence could not be matched by the young party. The “foreign element” had also dispensed cash as well as votes in Wise’s behalf. Reports of Irish laborers brought into the state to vote the Democratic ticket coincidentally equaled Wise’s majority. In addition, Brownlow argued that Virginia’s *viva voce*, or voice vote system of balloting, which required every man to state openly in front of election officials and other voters the candidate for whom he was casting his ballot, had intimidated many Know Nothings. Apparently, they had feared voting their minds when faced with the threat of violence from Democratic county election officials. The implication by Brownlow was that frightened Know Nothings had

⁴⁹ *Richmond Whig and Public Advertiser*, June 5, 1855; *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, June 2, 1855; *Greensborough (NC) Patriot*, June 2, 1855.

either abstained or voted Democrat rather than let their neighbors know they belonged to or supported the Order. Perhaps they had carried their secrecy oaths to the logical extreme where they prevented members from even voting for each other to avert the chance of being discovered. Even Massachusetts' "excreble [sic]" legislature was blamed for the Know Nothing defeat in Virginia. "The acts and doings of that graceless set," claimed the *Wilmington North Carolina Herald*, had given the Virginia Democrats more than enough propaganda "to shock the minds of southerners. . . . They seem to have set out with the deliberate purpose of violating the Constitution, of stultifying themselves, and of shocking common decency and sense."⁵⁰

Northern Know Nothings were somewhat less kind in their judgements about the Virginia elections than were their southern counterparts. The *New York Express* neatly summed up much of the northern opinion about the recent setback in Virginia, calling the election important only in the role it played in "the resuscitation of the so-called Democratic Party." From the *Express's* point of view, "Virginia [had] become a secondary state in the Union," and its old significance in national politics had long ago vanished. "Illinois, and even Georgia, of the second class states, are more important, and

⁵⁰ *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, June 2, 1855; *Salisbury Watchman*, May 31, 1855; Know Nothings held an absolute majority in the Massachusetts legislature, with party members sitting in every seat in the upper house, and 375 out of 378 in the lower house. This majority gave them the leeway to conduct such reforms as creating an oversight committee for Catholic convents, which in turn directed surprise inspections of nunneries. More significantly, the Massachusetts legislature elected Henry Wilson to the U.S. Senate. Wilson was well known for his antislavery beliefs and only a recent convert to nativism. Perhaps most galling to southerners, however, was the passage of a personal liberty law in Massachusetts designed to defeat the fugitive slave law from the 1850 Compromise; see John R. Mulkern, *The Know Nothing Party in Massachusetts: The Rise and Fall of a People's Party* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990), 87-113.

have more real influence in the Union.” Besides its diminishing predominance, Virginia had always been a Democratic state and it would remain one, the *Express* argued, agreeing with the conclusions of many southern Know Nothings. “Virginia, for seventy years, has voted one way, . . . and until she is crossed and recrossed by railroads--and manufactures are mixed up with agriculture,--so she will vote. The prejudices of her farmers are unconquerable, . . . and she holds to unlearning nothing, however she may learn.”⁵¹

Two Virginians, Alexander Stuart and John M. Botts, were the most candid of the southerners in their portrayal of the party’s defeat. For Stuart, the Know Nothings had no one to blame but themselves. “In our . . . gubernatorial election the state was lost by the policy of the Americans,” he asserted. “They seemed to take pleasure on warring on the Whigs for the purpose of proving that the American movement was not a Whig trick.” Botts in turn laid their failure at the party’s own feet. He blamed the Order’s beating on their reticence in nominating a candidate until Wise had had three months to campaign unopposed. And although Botts did not name Flournoy, he clearly saw the Know Nothing’s gubernatorial candidate as the primary reason behind their loss. “Surrendering the State . . . to such a man as Mr. Wise, . . . and to depend upon newspapers alone,” Botts argued, “when probably one-half of those who heard him did not see a newspaper during the campaign, and a very large portion of them could not have read one, if they

⁵¹ *New York Express*, May 29, 1855.

had seen it, was a species of management that at least should be avoided in all time to come.” Lastly he took aim at those Whigs who voted for Wise, whom he claimed must have numbered over twenty-thousand. “Mr. Wise owes his election,” wrote Botts, “not to the Democrats, but to the Whigs.”⁵²

Stuart’s and Botts’ characterizations of the Virginia election were in large part accurate. Most informed observers, even Democrats, felt certain that the Know Nothings held a significant edge in the election as of the beginning of 1855. Their failure to mount any real campaign when Henry Wise was attempting to speak to every voter personally left the Know Nothings in a hazardous position. They relied upon a general public knowledge of their platform, a dangerous maneuver for a new party claiming to stand on new issues and against the old party ethics. Had they taken the care to select a gubernatorial candidate willing to take on Wise directly, and had been more careful not to alienate their Whig supporters, a victory was certainly within their grasp. The strength of their appeal is clear; even without a major effort in the election they managed to equal the polling of the victorious Democrats in the 1852 presidential election.⁵³

The impact of the Democrats’ charges of abolitionism is difficult to ascertain. Wise and the *Richmond Enquirer* were more vociferous in their attacks than in previous elections, but the same tactic was standard fare in most southern elections during the second party era. In the following year Democratic accusations of abolitionism through

⁵² A. H. H. Stuart to Fillmore, July 9, 1856, Fillmore Papers, LC; *Greensborough (NC) Patriot*, June 2, 1855; *Washington Daily American Organ*, June 8, 1855.

association would link southern Know Nothings more directly to the growing anti-southern Republican party in the North, thereby exacerbating the fears of southern voters by bringing the threat of northern extremism home into their own state. But by the spring of 1855 the Republicans were not the threat they would be a year later and their position as the opposition party to the Democrats was far from secure. In Virginia the Know Nothings ran strongly in counties with the greatest percentage of slave ownership. Had the voters feared the Know Nothings as abolitionists the polls should have shown counties with large numbers of slaveholders and those with significant slave populations casting heavy majorities for the Democrats, which was not the case. Even in Southampton County, the site of Nat Turner's rebellion some twenty-four years earlier, the Know Nothings captured forty-six percent of the vote and suffered most at the hands of non-slaveholders.⁵⁴ This seems unlikely in a county with real experience with slave revolts if the Order's safety on slavery was their most serious concern.

In the end, the Know Nothings seemed to have failed to get their message to enough voters. This failure, however, was to have large implications for the party as a whole. Within two weeks of the Virginia elections the Know Nothings would hold their first truly national meeting, and the lessons from the Old Dominion would loom large. Once there Virginia's delegates, convinced not that they had lost because of a lackluster canvas, but because they had failed to answer the Democrats' charges of abolitionism,

⁵³ *Lynchburg Virginian* cited in *Washington Daily American Organ*, March 26, 1855.

⁵⁴ Hambleton, *History of the Political Campaign*, pp. 358; Daniel W. Crofts, *Old Southampton*:

pressed their message on the rest of the southern contingent. The party had yet to feel the real impact of slavery. It would come from the Know Nothings themselves.

CHAPTER 4: "THE ROCKS AND SHOALS OF SLAVERY": THE KNOW NOTHINGS AND THE STRUGGLE FOR NATIONALIZATION

The loss of the Virginia election left many of that state's Know Nothings questioning their political strategies and looking for new answers. They had placed such an extreme emphasis upon the race in the Old Dominion and put such great importance on a victory by Thomas Flourney over Henry Wise that their defeat was bound to leave a tremendous feeling of frustration. Throughout the rest of the South, their fellow Know Nothings put the best face they could upon the Virginians' unexpected failure in an effort to prevent a mass party abandonment like the one which had brought the Whigs down. Attempting to portray the election results as a temporary reversal, they looked ahead to the next round in the summer and fall of 1855 with an optimism seemingly undiminished since the beginning of the campaign season. "Sam" was still present in all his "glory," promised Parson William Brownlow, and would emerge from his disappointment in Virginia stronger than ever.¹

Whatever the cause of the Virginia defeat, a significant portion of that state's Know Nothing leadership, led at the Philadelphia convention by William M. Burwell, a long-time Whig editor and fanatical proslavery man, concluded that the real reason the Order had lost was because they had been unable to satisfactorily answer the Democrats'

charges of abolitionism. Wise, Burwell determined, had misrepresented and abused them so successfully by linking the southern party to free-soilers in Massachusetts, especially Governor Henry Gardner and Senator Henry Wilson. With these two well-known free-soilers hung around their necks, Virginia's Know Nothings found themselves facing the same predicament the old southern Whigs had, a northern branch of the party unacceptable to southern interests. They had done their best to convince voters that the party was as sound "upon the questions at issue between the North and South" as the southern Democrats, but with the obvious antislavery rhetoric of the Massachusetts Order being publicized everyday by Virginia's Democratic press and by Wise on his campaign tour, Virginians believed that they had been unsuccessful in their attempt to show themselves to be safe on the questions of slavery and southern rights, and would remain so until they worked out a national solution to the problem. Spurred by this conviction, Burwell would use his considerable influence amongst both southerners and northerners to push the party towards what he believed was a more reliable proslavery position.²

This change in direction proved to be a mistake for two reasons. First, after the experience of the 1854 Cincinnati national convention in which northern delegates had been initially reluctant to adopt Kenneth Rayner's Union degree for fear that it would trap them into supporting southern slavery wording in the national platform, southerners

¹ *Brownlow's Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, June 2, 1855.

² *Lynchburg Virginian* cited in *Washington Daily American Organ*, March 26, 1855.

should have been more cognizant of northern resistance to their moves.³ While some party leaders like Kenneth Rayner realized the sensitivity of northern delegates, his and others' advice for moderation went unheeded by the majority of the southern Know Nothings who had been swayed by Burwell. Moreover, once southern extremism came out, northern men fell in behind Henry Wilson to support their sectional demands. After that happened, the middle position the party had stood for prior to the convention was left with too few backers to have any chance at all, and with its loss the Know Nothings' national pretensions quickly vanished.⁴

Second, the belief that an explicit statement on slavery was necessary for the southern elections, or had been in Virginia, was a miscalculation. The results in Virginia indicated that the party had an extremely strong base, stronger than the Whigs had previously been able to put together. Unfortunately and inexplicably, they had taken their victory for granted and hence left the field to Henry Wise. During much of the campaign the Know Nothings disappeared for the large majority of Virginia's voters. Had they maintained a more active canvas, the contest would have undoubtedly been closer, especially with the large number of voters switching parties and the number of new voters in 1855. Granted, the style of campaigning Wise conducted was very new to Virginia and took the Know Nothings by surprise, but their status as newcomers should have been motivation enough to attempt a broader canvass. There is little if any indication from the

³ Wilson, *Slave Power*, 421-422.

⁴ A.T. Burnley to John J. Crittenden, June 2, 1855, John J. Crittenden Papers, LC.

election results that the Order's avoidance of the slavery issue hurt their chances in Virginia. On the contrary, their desire to keep slavery out of the political realm probably gained them more voters than an explicit stand on slavery would have. A proslavery campaign would have only succeeded in making them look more like the Democrats, and their attempts to forge a new party identity free of the entanglements and failed politics of the old Whigs would have been severely undermined. Their attempts to end political agitation over slavery gave voters a distinct choice in the election, while deciding to swallow the Democrats' bait by making slavery an open issue again only served to put southern Know Nothings into the untenable position of forging a national party which would be at odds from the very beginning. It also gave the Democrats a definitive edge by allowing them to keep alive a conflict over the Kansas-Nebraska act which had died down since its passage the previous year, an issue which the Know Nothings could only deal with if they turned up their own rhetoric to out do the Democrats at their own game.⁵ By doing this they defeated their own desire to create a truly unique party that offered voters a clear choice on election day. If all the Know Nothings were was a copy of the proslavery Democrats, why not just vote for the party you already knew? While many have argued that the Know Nothings' split over slavery in 1855 was inevitable, it seems clear that it came because of a mistaken interpretation of the election results in Virginia and the southern Know Nothings' insistence upon acting on that error.

⁵ T. Rufus King to William Burwell, November 8, 1855, Burwell Papers, LC.

Burwell and his fellow Virginians, many of whom had played little or no role in the gubernatorial election, but had since taken command of the state's convention delegation, intended to use the upcoming national party convention, scheduled for the first part of June in Philadelphia, to solve their party's weaknesses before the remainder of the southern state elections in the summer and fall. Unlike the earlier attempt to nationalize the Order in Cincinnati the previous November, the Philadelphia meeting would include representatives from a majority of the states, both North and South, and the Know Nothings' leading figures would be in attendance, working out a national platform for the first time. Know Nothings from all over the nation hoped that this convention would finally mark the party as national in scope, the true inheritor of the Whigs' position as the major opposition to the majority Democrats. In turn, that national position would be used to catapult a Know Nothing into the presidency in 1856. "No gathering of the kind in the country was ever of half the importance," William Brownlow declared. "They will present us with a platform upon which every patriot, North and South, East and West, and elsewhere, can proudly take his stand."⁶

But if the party convention was to have the effect southern Know Nothings hoped, they would have to work hard to make certain that their concerns were answered. A number of conservative Whigs within the Order were concerned about the party's organization, and their order of business would be to dramatically change the nature of that organization. Up until this point, the Order had functioned as a secret society which

⁶ *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, June 9, 1855.

demanding that initiates take a series of oaths to support only native-born American Protestants and to uphold the Union. Most southerners believed that secrecy had helped the Order in its initial stages when it struggled as a small minority organization. They had dismissed Democratic criticisms of their clandestine meetings as the “great scare crowd objections urged to frighten old women and children, and to alarm the timid and weak minded.” Now that the Know Nothings had achieved major party status and officially become the “American Party,” many were convinced they should function as a regular political organization and be rid of the secrecy requirements and the Order’s arcane rituals. Wise had pilloried them in Virginia over their concealment of their membership and ceremonies, portraying the Order as a “dark lantern conspiracy,” while in Tennessee, the Know Nothing candidate for governor, Meredith P. Gentry, had refused to join the party because of its secrecy requirements. Other prominent former southern Whigs like Howell Cobb and Alexander Stephens of Georgia had shunned the new party in part because of its hidden nature. What had once been a necessity had grown to become a handicap. Now was the time, the South’s Know Nothings agreed, to “let the secrecy be laid aside, and . . . every man come out boldly and avow himself a member of the new party.” From here on out maintaining the Order’s early exclusiveness could only do harm.⁷

⁷ *Greensborough Patriot*, April 29, 1855; *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, June 9, 1855; Hector Orr to John M. Berrien, December 15, 1855, John M. Berrien Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library; Robert Toombs to T. Lomax, June 9, 1855, in Ulrich B. Phillips ed., *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1911*, vol. II (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1913), 350-353; Pepper Norris to John M. Clayton, December 17, 1855,

By June of 1855 there was little left of the Order's secrecy anyway. The preceding April the *Pittsburgh Gazette* had published an "unquestionably genuine" copy of the Know Nothing ritual. A *Gazette* reporter had recovered one of the "children's toy books" and discovered the "much used" First and Second Degree oaths, as well as the "nearly new, . . . but little used" Third, or Union Degree.⁸ After the *Gazette* printed the secret oaths, newspapers around the South published them but would not attest to their accuracy. Whigs supporting the Know Nothings but who were not initiates had never seen the oaths before, while Know Nothing editors who had taken the pledges were prevented from acknowledging the Order's rites because of their oaths of secrecy.⁹ After this public release, there seemed little point to keeping the Order's workings hidden from the general populace. In any case, Southern Know Nothings believed that once it was known, the Union Degree and its explicit call for initiates to "discourage and discountenance any and every attempt . . . designed or calculated to destroy or subvert . . . the Union" could only help their chances for election.¹⁰

The second reform effort, spearheaded by Burwell and the Virginia delegation, was to definitively "frame a bold, manly, explicit national states rights platform . . . which

John M. Clayton Papers, LC.

⁸ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, April 26, 1855; Democratic newspapers in the South had published their own best guesses, some surprisingly accurate, of the Order's ritual before the *Gazette*, but they never had first hand access to the official party booklets given only to initiates; see the *Daily Richmond Enquirer*, February 26, 1855.

⁹ *Louisville Daily Courier*, May 17, 1855; *Salisbury Watchman*, May 31, 1855.

¹⁰ "Union Degree" quoted in M.W. Cluskey, ed., *Political Textbook, or Encyclopedia* (Washington: Cornelius Wendel, 1857), 56.

openly proclaims its unalterable devotion to and support of the Constitution, the Union and the rights of the South.” For anyone who was listening, this call clearly indicated a determination to make the party safe for slavery.¹¹ By dedicating themselves to a platform protecting slavery, albeit by attempting to put the institution in a position out of political debate, this plan drastically shifted the previous policy of ignoring the slavery question altogether. Up until this point in campaigns across the South, Know Nothings had limited their campaigns to denying Democrats’ charges that they were abolitionists simply because of their connections to men like Gardner and Wilson. Burwell felt certain, however, that this avoidance of the issue had failed them in Virginia and he was bound and determined to force the national party into a stronger stance on slavery which would give them the underpinnings upon which to run their future elections within their own section.

Although Burwell and his Virginians were committed to a stronger stance on slavery, the remainder of the southern delegates, who began arriving in Philadelphia the first week of June 1855, were divided roughly into two camps over the issue. The first of the two, led by Kenneth Rayner of North Carolina and Vespasian Ellis of the *American Organ*, was prepared to go along with the northern faction calling for the restoration of the Missouri compromise line, but with the admission of Kansas and Nebraska as either slave or free states, leaving settlers in the territories “to do as they please about slavery.”

¹¹ *Richmond Whig*, June 1, 1855; Henry Wilson, *The Rise and Fall of the Slave Power in America* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1874), vol. II, 423.

They believed that this would both set them apart from the Democrats on the issue and protect slavery as well without unnecessarily dividing the party. Although by allowing for popular sovereignty in Kansas restoration of the 1820 Compromise was little more than lip service and of no practical value because there was no territory open to slavery other than Kansas and Nebraska. Albert T. Burnley of Kentucky, who was not an official delegate to the convention but attended as an advisor of John Crittenden, believed that southerners could get their way on everything if they so chose, but that taking that course would have led to almost certain defeat for northern Know Nothings in their next elections.¹² For the sake of nationality and sectional peace, Rayner and his fellow moderates were prepared to return to the situation created by the 1850 compromise, except for Kansas and Nebraska. In those two territories they went as far as to reject Kansas' admission as a slave state under the situation as of the summer of 1855, when they believed pro-slave forces in Kansas were illegally manipulating elections and the constitution in their favor, thus making a mockery of popular sovereignty.¹³ They too believed that the party had to make a statement in reference to slavery in the platform, even if they intended to use it to put the issue on the back burner as far as national politics were concerned.

The other southern faction, led by William M. Burwell, insisted that the party accept a proslavery plank and forget about any repeal of the Kansas-Nebraska act.

¹² A.T. Burnley to John Crittenden, June 2, 1855, Crittenden Papers, LC.

¹³ *Greensborough (NC) Patriot*, June 23, 1855.

Although a majority of these delegates had been opposed to the revocation of the Missouri Compromise, either on nativist grounds or because it stirred up slavery agitation, they were now unwilling to see southern rights turned back to the days when geography limited slave owners legitimate claim to take their property into large portions of the West. They believed that only a strong pro-slavery, states-rights statement could overcome the advantage the Democrats had shown in Virginia.¹⁴ Their intention was to declare the present laws as the final word on slavery, thus ending agitation over the matter by fiat. Like Burnley, Burwell was certain the southerners had enough strength to push his plank through because the more seriously divided northern delegations lacked the cohesion to stop it, but he was unwilling to give anything to help northern Know Nothings with their voters. Many hoped along with Burwell that free-soilers like Henry Wilson would bolt the convention as they had threatened, thus cleansing the party of its abolitionist taint. With that accomplished they believed the Know Nothings would be safe enough on slavery to challenge the Democrats again.¹⁵

The convention revealed its disharmony early on the first day of its meeting on June 5. The national council, the Order's governing body chaired by its president, New Yorker James W. Barker, met on the first day to go over the various state delegations' credentials. Southern members attempted to exclude several states, including Ohio and Massachusetts, on flimsy formalities in an effort to announce their displeasure over those

¹⁴ T. Rufus King to William M. Burwell, November 8, 1855, William M. Burwell Papers, LC.

state's antislavery representatives. In response, northerners held up the seating of the Arkansas delegation led by Albert Pike for a similarly trivial reason. Eventually all the delegations challenged on minor questions of protocol were admitted, but not before both sides managed to anger the other over their premature attempt to make a stand on their own version of the party platform.¹⁶

A far more ugly confrontation, and one that challenged the basic tenets of the Order, emerged over the admission of the Louisiana delegation. Their leader, Charles Gayerre, as well as several other members were Catholics and had joined the Order in direct violation of one of the party's central tenets, the exclusion of Catholics from all political power. Gayerre gave an impassioned defense of his fellow delegates and the place of American Catholics within the Order. He attacked the Know Nothings' rejection of native-born Catholics as a self-defeating and hypocritical attempt to violate the Constitution with the implementation of a religious test. He had no objection to limiting the political rights of foreigners, but Gayerre argued that American Catholics were no different from American Protestants in their attachment to their country and its liberties and institutions, but that an attempt to turn them into an inferior class of citizens would create a real enemy the Know Nothings would find difficult to defeat. After almost a full day of debate on this controversial subject, the convention eventually voted 78 to 44 to exclude the Catholic delegation from Louisiana, but admit a second, competing

¹⁵ *Richmond Whig*, cited in *New York Times*, June 4, 1855.

¹⁶ *New York Express*, June 8, 1855; *New York Times*, June 8, 1855.

delegation which, although it represented a minority of the state councils, was composed entirely of Protestants.¹⁷ Despite the support of several southern delegations, the convention remained too anti-Catholic in make-up to throw out its religious restrictions after only a single day of debate. Many still believed, especially northerners, that Catholics must be completely excluded, regardless of their claims of loyalty to the Constitution. And although many southern Know Nothings had clearly indicated for months previous to the convention that their objections to Catholicism were entirely political, they could not muster enough votes to seat Gayerre's delegation.

With the Louisiana controversy out of the way and the terms of the party's religious toleration openly defined for the first time, the convention delegates celebrated a night of consensus and agreement. At their grand banquet the Know Nothings toasted "the Union, . . . America ruled by Americans, . . . [and] religious liberty," and listened to speeches by party leaders like Kenneth Rayner and William Barker throughout the night. The festivities were limited to those subjects upon which a majority of the delegates, both North and South could agree. Coming as it did on the heels of attempts from both sections to prevent the seating of rival delegations, talk of the "poetry of patriotism" only postponed the confrontation men like William Burwell and Henry Wilson were determined to start. The remainder of the convention would be dominated by more

¹⁷ *New York Express*, June 9, 1855; Charles Gayerre, *Address on the Religious Test to the Convention of the American Party Assembled in Philadelphia on the 5th of June 1855* (New Orleans, 1855).

difficult topics.¹⁸

Following the weekend banquet and “after a great deal of immaterial talk by immaterial men on immaterial things,” as Albert Burnley put it, the convention met on Monday morning, June 11, to organize fully and select a committee to draft the all important platform. It would be the party’s first attempt to unify all the councils nationwide under one statement of belief and their only chance to prove to the rest of the country that the Order was indeed a national party, free from the divides of sectionalism. One delegate from each state was named to The committee was composed of one delegate from each state, thirty-one in all. From the committee’s first meeting the platform discussion was marked by acrimony and little in the way of compromise. The delegates had no trouble agreeing upon wording of the nativist and anti-Catholic planks and ended the Order’s secrecy requirements with no significant opposition. The difficulty came when the committee reached the 12th plank of the platform. The Indiana, Ohio, and Massachusetts delegates insisted that this so-called 12th Section include a demand for the restoration of the Missouri Compromise line as a necessity for their upcoming elections, while the southern delegates refused to recommend any version of the platform which did not include William Burwell’s plank explicitly stating the party’s intention to leave slavery alone in the territories, in effect accepting the Kansas-Nebraska act as the final word. Several compromise solutions were submitted, including one written by Albert

¹⁸ *New York Express*, June 8, 9, 1855; *New York Times*, June 8, 9, 1855; *Washington Organ*, June 13, 1855.

Burnley and George Prentice of Kentucky “embracing the re-establishment of the Missouri Compromise line of 1820, and its extension to the Pacific--leaving Kansas and Nebraska in consideration of the faith of the Government already plighted to their settlers,” but also adding a new clause to the fugitive slave law which would allow for a trial by jury in a court from where the fugitive had fled. Despite Burnley’s hope that this alternate plank would placate the northern delegation by accepting the Missouri Compromise and the southerners by explicitly backing the legality of the fugitive slave law in such a way as to supersede northern state personal liberty laws, no majority of northerners or southerners agreed to this plan, nor to any single version of the platform. Burwell worked untiringly to defeat any compromise, assailing Wilson and his supporters as “abolitionists and disorganizers,” and blaming them for the Virginians’ defeat.¹⁹ Unable to come to any agreement, when the committee submitted its work to the whole convention on the afternoon of June 11 there were two separate 12th Sections. One was composed by Burwell and supported by most of the southern delegates as well as New York, 17 members in all, while the second was championed by Massachusetts and had 14 supporters, primarily from the North.²⁰

With two distinct platforms in front of them, the struggle in the platform

¹⁹ Henry Wilson, *The Rise and Fall of the Slave Power in America* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1874), 425; *New York Express*, June 9, 1855.

²⁰ *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, June 16, 1855; A. T. Burnley to J.J. Crittenden, June 12, 1855, Crittenden Papers, LC; *New York Express*, June 11, 1855; *New Orleans Daily Delta*, June 13, 1855; Vespasian Ellis to Millard Fillmore, September 17, 1856, Millard Fillmore Papers, SUNY Oswego.

committee now passed to the convention as a whole. The majority report, pushed through by Bruwell of Virginia and his northern ally, T. J. Lyons of New York, stated that the “best guarantee of common justice and of future peace [was] to abide by and maintain the existing laws upon the subject of slavery, as a final and conclusive settlement of that subject in spirit and in substance.” Hence there would be no backing of a repeal of the Kansas Nebraska act. The minority report, only differing in the 12th Section, called for the unconditional restoration of the Missouri Compromise and was signed by the remainder of the northern delegates. The rest of that day and the next the delegates grew increasingly strident in their stands on their respective positions, each attacking each other for their extremism on the slavery issue. Both Vespasian Ellis and Kenneth Rayner offered compromise planks similar to Burnley’s, each of which accepted the Missouri Compromise line if not a total repeal of Kansas-Nebraska. Rayner argued that no resolution to the nation’s problems was possible without abandoning the slavery question as an issue of political contention, and that it was best left entirely alone. The party was neither proslavery nor abolitionist, he asserted, and it must ignore the whole question. However, a majority of the northern delegates, led by Henry Wilson, refused to accept anything less than a complete abrogation of the Kansas Nebraska act, while a majority of the southerners continued to back a more explicit proslavery version. William Burwell went as far as to claim that the nativist planks meant nothing to him and were only a means to get the northern delegates to compromise on the proslavery issue. Having granted that concession, Burwell was adamant in his refusal to accept any measure other

than his own version of the 12th section. This stubbornness on both sides caused Albert Burnley to remark that he had never seen “such a pitiful convention. It is full of fools and demagogues--most of them forgetting all the nationality which ought to belong to them,” and instead “trying to make a little miserable personal popularity at home to enable them to be elected constables.”²¹

Burnley feared that the struggle over the platform was “cutting the party in two equal halves . . . and destroying their efficiency and hopes of success.” His estimates of the 12th section vote were born out when the convention finally put the various versions of that controversial plank to a vote late on June 13. The northern supported minority plank would have passed despite the universal opposition of the southern delegates, except that Burwell had managed to get the backing of seventeen delegates from California, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Minnesota, thus putting down the measure by an 84 to 54 count. Kenneth Rayner’s compromise proposal received 46 yes votes, only seven of which, including Rayner’s and Vespasian Ellis’s, came from southerners. With the unwillingness of the southern delegations to compromise becoming increasingly evident, and the corresponding stubbornness of the northern men rising in retaliation, it now appeared that “uniting the conflicting elements of fanaticism . . . [would] require superhuman strength.” President J.W. Barker of New York, who supported the majority report and had done his best to control the debate in its favor

²¹ *New York Express*, June 13, 1855; *New York Times*, June 13, 1855; *Louisville Daily Courier*, June 20, 1855; *New Orleans Daily Delta*, June 13, 1855; *Washington Daily American Organ*, June 15, 1855; A.T. Burnley to J.J. Crittenden, June 12, 1855, Crittenden Papers, LC; Wilson, *Slave Power*, 424-

throughout the convention, decided to stop trying for a compromise solution and put the southern backed majority plank up for a vote. With an almost unanimous southern backing and the support of eleven northern delegates from California, New York, New Jersey, Rhode Island, and Pennsylvania, the 12th section containing William M. Burwell's proslavery and states' rights wording was adopted by an 80 to 59 majority.²²

The following day a majority of the northern delegates who had supported the minority plank bolted the convention and met at the Girard House in an attempt to register their opposition to the majority platform. They backed their own version of the 12th section, but refused to secede officially from the Know Nothing convention. Although the northern bolters did not declare themselves a new party, Burnley's anxieties had been born out, as the convention had neatly split in two. The main Know Nothing convention was now far more harmonious, however it was composed of delegates who, although they represented enough electoral votes to win a presidential election, mostly came from states with Democratic majorities. Burnley could now see little hope of the party carrying anything but local elections, and perhaps not even those now that the Democrats had the Know Nothings' embarrassing convention to publicize during the next

425.

²² There were approximately 150 delegates at the convention, divided evenly between North and South. A.T. Burnley to J.J. Crittenden, June 12, 1855, Crittenden Papers, LC; *Louisville Daily Courier*, June 20, 1855; *New York Express*, June 13, 14, 1855; *New York Times*, June 13, 14, 1855; *New York Tribune*, June 15, 1855; *New Orleans Daily Delta*, June 13, 1855; *Baton Rouge Weekly Comet*, June 17, 1855; Wilson, *Slave Power*, 427-430.

round of voting.²³

The vote tallies on the three separate propositions indicate clearly that it was the southern delegates' refusal to compromise that doomed the convention. Thirty-nine northerners had accepted Rayner's intermediate measure, and a similar percentage of southerners voting for it would have been sufficient for its passage, but swayed by the untiring effort of William Burwell to defeat any compromise position, they stayed with the proslavery plank. To make matters worse, the southerners' almost unanimous backing of the majority report put the northern delegates in the position of appearing to back down on the most controversial portion of the platform if they supported the southern version. Adoption of the compromise measure would have been far less likely to lead to the bolting of better than half the northern members, as it would have clearly been a non-sectional measure. Henry Wilson and the Massachusetts delegation's exit, as well as Ohio, Maine, and Indiana's may still have taken place, but their leaving would have fallen far short of the almost fifty-fifty split the Order suffered in Philadelphia. With only a minority of the northern delegates departing, the Know Nothings could have ended their convention as the national organization they had hoped for and attempted to conduct local campaigns that concentrated on their republican appeal rather than on an ever escalating competition with the Democrats over the protection of slavery, a contest which they could not win.

²³ Burnely to Crittenden, June 12, 1855, Crittenden Papers, LC; S.G. Haven to Millard Fillmore, June 29, 1855, Fillmore Papers, SUNY, Oswego; *New York Express*, June 15, 16, 1855; *New York Times*, June 15, 1855; Wilson, *Slave Power*, 431-432; Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 169.

After Wilson and his fellow dissenters bolted, the main convention took on a more southern slant, as men like Burwell had hoped from the beginning. With his version of the 12th section decided upon, the Know Nothings adopted the remainder of the platform without any further trouble.²⁴ The American party's official national platform began with an acknowledgment of "that Almighty Being who rules over the universe," and then called for "the cultivation and development of a sentiment of profoundly intense American feeling, . . . [and] admiration for the purer days of our National existence." It incorporated a rewording of Kenneth Rayner's Union Degree which declared the "maintenance of the union of these United States as the paramount political good." Unlike Rayner's oath, however, the platform's pro-Union measure also added a states-rights assertion which called upon Americans to learn a "habit of reverential obedience to the laws," a clear reference to the Kansas-Nebraska act. The majority of the rest of the platform outlined the Know Nothings' nativist ideals, calling for the "radical revision and modification of the laws regulating immigration . . . [and] naturalization," as well as the "repeal, without retroactive operation, of all acts of Congress making grants of land to unnaturalized foreigners and allowing them to vote in

²⁴ The final version of the 12th Section declared "it the best guarantee of common justice and of future peace, to abide by and maintain the existing laws upon the subject of Slavery, as a final and conclusive settlement of that subject, in spirit and in substance. . . . It is hereby declared . . . that Congress possesses no power, under the Constitution, to legislate upon the subject of Slavery in the states where it does or may exist, or to exclude any State from admission into the Union, because ins Constitution does or does not recognize the institution of Slavery as a part of its social system; and expressly pretermittin any expression of option upon the power of Congress to establish of prohibit slavery in any Territory;" *New York Express*, June 16, 1855.

the territories.” The platform also attacked “the wild hunt after office,” and the “aggressive policy and corrupting tendencies of the Roman Catholic Church.” Finally, the Know Nothings officially ended their secrecy requirements, calling for the Order to be “henceforth everywhere openly avowed.”²⁵ Overall, the platform was still very much a nativist document.

Except for the controversial 12th section, the Know Nothing platform looked very much like the state documents produced by states such as Virginia, Tennessee, Kentucky, North Carolina, Louisiana, and the remainder of the southern states. Each of the states had adopted platforms that attacked the evils of foreign immigration and the Roman Catholic Church. They had also campaigned for political reform and an end to corruption and office seeking, the issues that had first attracted converts to the Order. However, by forcing through William Burwell’s proslavery plank the southern Know Nothings had taken the national party in a direction they had not previously ventured even on the state level. Before the loss in Virginia no southern state party had taken a strong proslavery stand, preferring to “adhere firmly to the elements and principles of their organization, ignoring every issue not involved in hostility to foreignism.”²⁶ In Philadelphia they chose to put their political future in the hands of a proslavery appeal which could directly challenge the Democrats’ popularity, yet by drawing so much attention to the controversial change and the friction it caused within the national organization, they

²⁵ Know Nothing Platform quoted in *New York Express*, June 16, 1855; Cluskey, *Political Textbook*, 45-46.

began to downplay those aspects of the Order which made them unique and offered a real choice for voters. Suddenly their appeal to voters' republicanism was shunted aside to copy the Democrats' popularity. Explicitly taking on a proslavery position put southern Know Nothings into a position where they were starting to look like pale imitators of the majority Democrats. For a party that had struggled from its inception to avoid the stigma of being a "Whig trick," the disguised descendants of a failed political organization, surrendering their distinct allure did not promise to gain any new votes. It did, however, hold the possibility of losing them.

With the split in the party, the national convention had not turned out as well as many had hoped. However, for many southerners, the bolting of Henry Wilson and other antislavery delegates was far less troubling than it would seem to have been, considering the large loss of potential votes it promised. Following a mass party meeting in Independence Square, southern Know Nothings returned home to trumpet the success of their nationalization efforts and to convince voters that "Americanism was never stronger than today, and whatever may be the alienation of certain sections, it will be but temporary."²⁷ State conventions were called throughout the South to ratify the Philadelphia meeting's platform and to officially adopt the national Order's planks for the upcoming elections.²⁸ Reactions to the national platform were mixed, but most Know

²⁶ *Louisville Daily Courier*, June 25, 1855.

²⁷ *Louisville Daily Courier*, June 25, 1855.

²⁸ The Louisiana state organization refused to accept the anti-Catholic 9th section of the platform, but like many northern state committees that objected to the 12th section, adopted the remainder of the

Nothings tried to pass their own enthusiasm on to the voters. “We greatly mistake the people of the South,” wrote a Virginia Know Nothing editor, “if they do not rally around the Philadelphia platform with unequal unanimity. The resolutions it embraces upon the subject of slavery are such as to command them to the warm and cordial acceptance of every honest and patriotic heart.” W.N. Haldeman of the *Louisville Courier*, although he would have preferred that slavery remain unmentioned, felt confident that the platform would “doubtless be received and, in the end, earnestly endorsed by the American masses, both North and South.” The Kentucky Know Nothing was so assured of the success of the nationalizing convention that he believed that “if now the new party will only exercise a modicum of sense in the selection of candidates, the Presidential race in 1856 may be counted on as a certainty.” Fellow Kentucky editor George Prentice, who along with Albert Burnley had fought so hard for a compromise position at Philadelphia, referred to the Know Nothing platform as a “splendid Temple of Liberty, at whose altar every true patriot may worship, . . . a common ground, and a comprehensive faith, where the Americans, the Democrats, and Whigs may all unite.”²⁹

In some cases the events in Philadelphia seemed to have had the desired effect. The editor of the *North Carolina Watchman* officially joined the party following the convention split. “Since the expurgatory process of the Know Nothings . . . in separating

document; *New Orleans Daily Delta*, June 24, 1855; *Bulletin (Louisiana)*; and *Exponent (Louisiana)* cited in *Louisville Daily Courier*, July 18, 1855.

²⁹ *Greensborough Patriot*, June 23, 1855; *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, July 6, 1855; *Abingdon Virginian*, June 30, 1855; *Louisville Daily Courier*, June 25, 19, 1855; *Louisville Journal*, July 5, 1855.

from the Abolitionists and removing the secret feature from the Order, we are more favorably inclined to their enterprise, . . . which, as it now appears is less objectionable than we ever imagined it could be.” Others agreed that the bolting of the northern delegates had helped the Order. “This is the best thing, as well for the party, the Union and the South, that could have happened,” wrote a Georgia editor. “The rank fungus of abolitionism has been cut off, and the party is left stronger than it was before. . . . Like a strong man purged of disease, it will gain fresh strength and renewed health.” Even Vespasian Ellis, who had been behind Rayner’s compromise and clearly wanted to avoid slavery as an issue, backed the new platform. “Had this platform been adopted one month earlier,” Ellis wrote, “the American party would have swept Virginia from the Atlantic to the Ohio.”³⁰

Now that the southern Know Nothings had gotten what they wanted from the national convention, a platform which they believed they could use to nullify the perceived advantage the Democrats had on the issue of slavery, the opportunity to prove their suspicions was at hand. Over the next several months, various southern states would be electing governors and congressional delegations. The Know Nothings hoped that they would now be able to wrest at least a significant number of seats away from the Democrats and boost their chances for electing the next president. Ironically, now that southerners believed they had wrested control of the party away from the free-soilers,

³⁰ *Salisbury (NC) Watchman*, July 12, 26, 1855; *Savannah Republican*, cited in *Washington Daily American Organ*, June 19, 1855; *Washington Daily American Organ*, June 16, 1855.

many had no intention of playing up the slavery issue at home any more than they had previously. Once the party had taken an explicit stand on slavery, and rid themselves of Henry Wilson, Know Nothings in states like Kentucky, North Carolina, and Tennessee, believed that their state campaigns might be conducted without regard to slavery. By taking a strong stand nationally, they hoped that they could now go on with their original intention of avoiding the subject of slavery altogether. Hence, they could have the best of both worlds, control of the national party over slavery, and a distinct message at the state level. With this strategy they achieved varying degrees of success. In the deep South states of Alabama and Georgia, Know Nothings relied more heavily upon a proslavery message even in their state elections and fared less well than in the upper South.

The Order in Kentucky was, except for Maryland, perhaps the South's strongest. Conservative estimates of actual party membership were around thirty-five thousand initiates, with many more likely to vote Know Nothing that upcoming August.³¹ Unlike Virginia, Kentucky had a history of Whig majorities and the state's Know Nothings believed they could wean enough former Whigs over to the American party to carry an American into the governor's mansion. Numerous, well-attended and "boisterous" rallies boosted initiates hopes for success, as did the widespread belief in the opposition's weakness. "The Democracy cannot muster at the polls a corporal's guard, and the Whigs, of course, will not attempt any opposition," one Know Nothing editor claimed on the eve of the party's nominating convention. Although some of the Americans' Whig advisers

³¹ Robert P. Letcher to John J. Crittenden, January 25, 1855, John J. Crittenden Papers, LC.

were not so certain of the Know Nothings' strength, the party convention met in late February, 1855, with a good deal of enthusiasm and a certainty of victory.³²

The Know Nothings met in Louisville on February 22, on a day marked by general confusion. Delegates were unable to come to any kind of agreement on candidates as former Whigs and Democrats struggled to put their own men up for nomination, while a third group of younger politicians more nearly wedded to their nativist beliefs promoted as their candidates three judges who were considered to be "new men" without strong ties to the old parties.³³ These were the first real signs of trouble between previous partisan enemies, and the beginnings of a struggle for supremacy in the Order in Kentucky.³⁴ After two days of wrangling, however, delegates were able to compromise and decided upon a former Whig with strong nativist leanings, one of the "new men," for governor, and an ex-Democrat for lieutenant governor. William V. Loving was the favorite of the younger delegates and popular enough with the old Whigs to carry the nomination, while Democrat J.G. Hardy was selected to round out the ticket and appeal to nativists from his old party. Although not everyone was pleased with the convention's selections, most were still assured "that the Know Nothings [had] the power

³² *Louisville Daily Courier*, February 24, 1855; Robert P. Letcher to John Crittenden, January, 25, 29, 1855, Crittenden Papers, LC.

³³ *Louisville Daily Courier*, February 23, 24, 1855.

³⁴ The battle over the party's "soul" and leadership in Kentucky continued for the next year, up until the national party met in Philadelphia in February 1856, to nominate Millard Fillmore for President. This story will unfold in greater detail in chapter 5.

to elect their ticket . . . beyond all doubt or dispute.”³⁵

The Know Nothing position appeared to be so strong, in fact, that most American party initiates were certain that both the Whigs and Democrats could only offer “feeble” opposition, while others were unsure if “either of the old parties” could even “make and unite upon a ticket.” The Whigs would not, while the Democrats determined to nominate an anti-Know Nothing Whig for their candidate. In the face of mounting evidence of the statewide weakness and a growing number of local victories by the Americans, some without opposition, Democrats turned to ex-Whig Charles Slaughter. Slaughter was popular among certain factions of the old Whig party and held a personal disgust for the Know Nothings and their anti-Catholic preaching. Married to a Catholic himself, Slaughter offered the Democrats an opportunity to attack the Americans’ bigotry with a man who was personally shunned by the Order.³⁶

In early June William Loving decided to turn down the Know Nothing nomination because of ill health. Rather than call another convention or have the local councils vote on his replacement, the state’s executive committee chose Charles S. Morehead to replace Loving at the head of the ticket. This central organizing committee had been composed of mostly former Whigs and had taken control of the party’s machinery during the February convention. They intended to push allies of John Crittenden into the power positions in the state’s Order to secure his nomination for president in the 1856 elections.

³⁵ *Louisville Daily Courier*, February 27, 1855; Sister Agnes Geraldine McGann, *Nativism in Kentucky to 1860* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1944), 86.

Although their pick for governor had been defeated by the Know Nothings' relative newcomers during the state convention, they now had the opportunity to once again put their own man up for the state's top office.³⁷

In Kentucky the Know Nothings held a considerable edge over the Democrats from the very beginning of the campaign and felt no need to bring up slavery as an issue. Kentucky's delegation had been the most compromising of the slave states in attendance at the convention and they represented a state party which, as a whole, desired to keep the slavery question out of politics. Despite the party's new national platform, Morehead was assailed by the Democratic press as a free-soiler, but the Know Nothings throughout much of the campaign continued to concentrate on nativist issues without engaging in a war of words over which party could best defend slavery.³⁸

The extent of nativist antagonisms in the state became more pronounced when election day finally arrived. Louisville had seen small scale election riots the past spring, but efforts to add more polling places in areas heavily populated by immigrants and protection for voters were turned down by the Know Nothing-led city government. On Monday, August 6, the city was swept by riots that originated at the polls and spread outward. Know Nothing newspapers blamed the violence upon Irish and German immigrants who were trying to intimidate native American voters at the polls.

³⁶ *Louisville Daily Courier*, May 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, 10; McGann, 87-88.

³⁷ *Louisville Daily Courier*, June 9, 1855.

³⁸ *Louisville Daily Courier*, June 28, 1855; McGann, *Nativism in Kentucky*, 77.

Democratic sources accused the Know Nothings of exactly the same tactics. The evidence leans more towards the Know Nothings as the originators of the riots. Their officials were in control of the polling places and they were generally inhospitable towards anyone attempting to vote who did not carry the yellow Know Nothing ballot ticket. Some twenty-one men were killed, many more injured, and numerous fires set in immigrant areas of the city during the rioting, which only came to a halt after pleas for peace from Catholic Bishop M.J. Spalding, Know Nothing Mayor John Barbee, and Know Nothing editor George Prentice. Smaller riots took place in other Kentucky cities, including Lexington.³⁹

The election results were as expected by the Know Nothings. Charles Morehead was elected governor by a four-thousand vote majority and a total of 51.6 percent of the vote over his Democratic opponent, Beverly L. Clarke, who had replaced Charles Slaughter in the race earlier in the summer. Know Nothings also captured six out of ten congressional seats by generally greater margins of victory than Morehead. John P. Campbell, Warner L. Underwood, Humphrey Marshall, A.K. Marshall, Leander M. Cox, and Samuel F. Swopes all went to Washington for the upcoming congressional session.

The results in Kentucky were auspicious for the Order in the South, but the party had held a considerable majority before the Virginia elections and the convention and the state was not known for the strength of its Democratic Party. The impact of the new

³⁹ *Louisville Journal*, August 7, 1855; *Louisville Daily Courier*, August 6, 7, 8, 1855; Philip Wayne Kennedy, "The Know Nothing Movement in Kentucky: The Role of M.J. Spalding, Catholic Bishop of Louisville," *Filson Club Quarterly*, 38, (1964), 17-35; Wallace S. Hutcheon Jr., "The Louisville

platform is difficult to judge because of this and therefore Kentucky was not the best place to test the new strategy, but the lack of any real controversy over slavery in the campaign indicates the Democratic candidates saw no advantage to be gained by playing the slavery card, and the election results point to the general satisfaction of the voters with the Order's stand on slavery, which was to ignore it as a political issue. Thus in the case of Kentucky, the Know Nothing's original strategy of avoidance in this traditional Whig state at least did not hurt their campaign.⁴⁰ Nativist issues seemed to have been the key for the Know Nothing's success, as they were able to draw a distinct line between themselves and the Democrats. Unfortunately the local party condoned, if not sanctioned, the intimidation that led to violence and quite probably skewed the voting results in Louisville where rioting effectively prevented many immigrants from casting ballots.

In Tennessee the state party never held an official nominating convention for 1855, but rather backed by default candidate Meredith P. Gentry, who had nominated himself in December, 1854. Gentry, who had once been described by John Quincy Adams as the "greatest natural orator in Congress," was a former Whig who, along with William G. Brownlow had opposed Winfield Scott's Whig candidacy in 1852 and unceremoniously left the party. The Knoxville parson and editor enthusiastically backed his old apostate friend for governor. Gentry was not, however, an initiate of the Order,

Riots of August, 1855," *Kentucky Historical Society Register*, 69, (April), 1971, 150-172.

⁴⁰ Between 1849 and 1855 the Whigs and Democrats had evenly split the state's House seats, but the Know Nothing were able to turn that into a 6-4 majority. The Democrats had only won the governor's race once since 1836, in 1851 by a bare majority of 0.7%. Congressional Quarterly, *Guide to U. S. Elections* (Washington D. C., Congressional Quarterly, 1975), 408, 589, 595, 597, 600.

and his self-proclaimed candidacy needed all the support Brownlow could muster to gain the backing of the rest of the state's Know Nothings. Brownlow exercised a good deal of control over the Tennessee Know Nothings, although perhaps not quite so much as he was generally given credit. One Democratic paper claimed that "he had proved himself omnipotent to control the leaders and the issues" of his party, and had "thoroughly thrash[ed] out the old Whig leaders, and plac[ed] himself at the head" of the Know Nothings.⁴¹ Brownlow would need all of that authority to try and put together a workable coalition with which Gentry might defeat the incumbent Democratic governor, Andrew Johnson.

Because Gentry had not taken the Know Nothing oaths, his support among the Americans was questionable, especially without the backing of a nominating convention. Gentry stood on a nativist platform, which, like Virginia's, was primarily a nativist document, but he had refused to join the Order until the party dropped its secrecy requirements.⁴² This stand on principle prevented many in the party from backing him early on in the hope that another candidate might appear. With reports of the party's numbers running as high as 75-100,000 members, Know Nothings believed that one of their own could easily capture the governor's seat and that they need not look towards a

⁴¹ W. Darrel Overdyke, *The Know Nothing Party in the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950), 108; *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, June 2, 1855; *Nashville Union and American*, March 1, 1855.

⁴² *Platform of the American Party of Tennessee*, 1855, reprinted in *Nashville Daily Union and American*, June 28, 1855; Gohman, *Political Nativism in Tennessee*, 173.

recycled Whig to carry their torch. Without a state-wide convention however, the Know Nothings were unable to choose an alternate candidate, and thus most of the state's Know Nothing leaders eventually decided to join Brownlow in his support of Gentry. The old Whig party was also split over his candidacy, and, like the Americans, they could not get together to chose an alternate competitor. With the combined force of Whigs and Americans, both Brownlow and Gentry believed they could carry the election, but because many refused to stand with Gentry, either because he was not really a Know Nothing, or because he was no longer a Whig, the two were forced to look for help from other sources.⁴³

Brownlow had been a long-time temperance advocate and member of the Sons of Temperance. Hoping that the backing of the state temperance convention would be enough to swing the election for Gentry, the *Whig* editor attempted to convince the delegates that Gentry would be a pro-temperance candidate. The convention, however, adjourned without making a recommendation, instead appointing a committee to question the major party candidates on their temperance stands and leaving the convention's backing to the decision of that committee. Neither candidate was able to answer the committee's interrogation adequately and so they refused to make an endorsement. Gentry's hopes for temperance votes were further damaged when the Know Nothings decided not to back temperance as an issue in the election, leading many Maine Law

⁴³ *Nashville Daily Union and American*, June 28, 1855. Overdyke, *Know Nothing Party*, 108; Andrew Johnson to David T. Patterson, February 17, 1855, Andrew Johnson Papers, LC.

advocates to leave the nativist party.⁴⁴

Gentry's candidacy was handicapped from the start because of his aloofness from the Know Nothings and their rituals, but despite this potentially fatal flaw in the old Whig's campaign strategy, Democratic governor Andrew Johnson still questioned the idea of running for a second term. Relatively unpopular with the Democratic central committee, the Tennessee Governor could not even be certain of a second nomination. Johnson did not believe Gentry could unite the Whigs but also knew that the Know Nothings would not vote for a Democrat. The key to the election seemed to be in the combination of Whigs, Americans, and temperance men, but Johnson was uncertain what any of these groups might decide. With these "elements in the way and they being held in a floating condition to be thrown in at the proper time," he wrote to an adviser, "either side will control the result." Johnson was so frustrated with the "general confusion and confusion," that he claimed to "feel almost deterred from even undertaking to canvass the state again." That combined with the "intense excitement, the misrepresentations and slander which will be heaped upon the candidate," and "the uncertainty of success" forced Johnson to consider seriously stepping aside.⁴⁵ Johnson, however, loved a good fight too much to back down, and after his nomination in March 1855 he determined to take on the

⁴⁴ *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, November 11, 1854; Johnson to Patterson, February 17, 1855; Johnson to William M. Lowry, February 24, 1855; State Temperance Convention to Johnson, March 29, 1855; Johnson to Temperance Convention, April 20, 1855; Andrew Johnson Papers, LC; *New Era* cited in *Nashville Union and American*, March 24, 1855.

⁴⁵ Andrew Johnson to David T. Patterson, February 17, 1855; Johnson to William M. Lowry, February 24, 1855, Johnson Papers, LC; Hans L. Trefousse, *Andrew Johnson: A Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989), 95.

party he referred to as the “allies of the Prince of Darkness,” and a “ huge reptile, upon whose neck the foot of every honest man ought to be placed.”⁴⁶

The Tennessee campaign, like Kentucky’s, never really focused on the relative merits of the parties’ slavery stands. Other issues were brought to the fore and once again the southern Know Nothings’ strong desire to take on the slavery question actively in their national platform seemed out of place. The two candidates toured the state together over the summer canvas on a speaking tour and the goings on of the national convention hardly drew their attention. Temperance remained an issue, albeit a small one, despite the refusal of the Temperance convention to back either candidate. Gentry pushed the nativist cause, as did the Know Nothing press, while Johnson mounted an attack against the Order’s anti-foreign/anti-Catholic ideology similar to Henry Wise. When slavery did become an issue in the campaign it was in an old form which did not directly relate to the charges of abolitionism against the Know Nothings because of their relationship with the northern branch of the party raised throughout the rest of the South. Gentry accused Johnson of abolitionist tendencies because of his backing of a “white basis” policy. As it stood, representatives were apportioned by population, including three-fifths for each slave as called for in the Constitution. Tax roles, however, did not count the slave population, thus giving areas with larger numbers of slaves the benefit of representation,

⁴⁶ Committee of Democratic State Convention to Johnson, March 28, 1855, Johnson Papers, LC; Trefousse, *Johnson*, 95; quotes taken from a Johnson campaign speeche given at Murfreesboro TN, May 8, and Manchester, TN, May 4, 1855, reprinted from *Nashville True Whig*, June 14, 1855, and cited in Leroy Graf and Ralph W. Haskins, eds., *The Papers of Andrew Johnson*, vol. 2, 1852-1857, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1970), 307, 308.

but without additional tax burdens. Gentry claimed that a change to a “white basis” for state apportionment of representatives (it could not be changed at the national level without amending the Constitution) would benefit the North. Gentry implied that Johnson would indeed want to change representation with a Constitutional amendment and thus was a closet abolitionist. Johnson also accused Gentry of lacking the proper determination to protect slavery, but he went back to old statements Gentry had made on the Wilmot proviso and the Compromise of 1850, only once asking how he felt about the Kansas-Nebraska act. Nothing in Johnson’s questioning of Gentry’s soundness on slavery had anything to do with the Know Nothings as an organization and their supposed inherent weaknesses on the “peculiar institution.”⁴⁷

In late July Gentry fell ill and could not continue with the joint speaking tour. Out of courtesy Johnson also ended his campaign at the same time, although William Brownlow accused him of going on with the canvass despite the written agreement he had with Gentry to stop his speeches.⁴⁸ The elections were held on August 2, four days before Kentucky’s, and Johnson was re-elected by just over two thousand votes of a total of over one-hundred and thirty two thousand. His winning percentage was almost exactly the same as two years earlier in his first campaign. In other state elections the Know Nothings did somewhat better, collecting half of the state’s congressional seats and a

⁴⁷ *Nashville Republican Banner*, May 17, 1855; *Clarksville Jeffersonian*, June 13, 1855, cited in Graf, *Papers of Andrew Johnson*, 308-314.

⁴⁸ Andrew Johnson to M.P. Gentry, July 23, 1855, Andrew Johnson Papers, LC; *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, July 28, 1855.

majority in the state legislature. The loss of the governor's house was somewhat unexpected by the Know Nothings, but their position on slavery does not appear to have been the cause. Although Johnson did make an issue of Gentry's record, it was old news and did not play a central role in the campaign. There is no evidence that the Know Nothings' new platform or its 12th section either helped or hurt Gentry's cause, so little being made of it. Sticking to their nativist issues seems to have been the difference for the victorious Know Nothings, while Gentry's physical collapse near the end of the campaign may have done as much to assure Johnson's narrow victory as any other single factor. He was also probably hurt among Know Nothing voters by the fact that he never joined the Order, even after the secrecy requirements were done away with at Philadelphia. Despite this, Gentry won majorities in both the western and eastern portions of the state. Johnson's majority in central Tennessee was large enough, however, to carry the entire state.

North Carolina, Kenneth Rayner's home state and a former Whig stronghold, did not elect a governor in 1855, but the state's congressional races were closely contested. Of all the southern states, North Carolina was perhaps the most competitive. The state had a Democratic governor, but Whigs and Democrats split the rest of the office fairly evenly. Even after the debacle of the 1852 presidential election, the state's Whigs managed to maintain their position and identity. Thus when the Know Nothings began organizing in 1854, they faced not only the Democrats, but the loyal following of the

Whigs. Even after most of North Carolina's leading Whigs did end up joining the Order, they continued to think of themselves as Whigs. "I joined the American party," wrote Zebulon Vance, "because I believed its principles were correct, and that without surrendering a single iota of Whiggery."⁴⁹

As in states like Tennessee, Kentucky, and Virginia, the North Carolina Know Nothings looked towards experienced politicians, either Whigs or Democrats, to carry their banner. At their state convention in May, the Know Nothings nominated former Democrats to run in strongly Democratic districts while Whigs were chosen in areas of Whig strength. Of the eight congressional districts in North Carolina, Democrats ran for four positions, while former Whigs campaigned in the other half. Nativism was the common element for all these politicians and the major drawing card in their decision to join the Order, however, unlike other southern states, North Carolina still had unresolved issues that created political competition. Perhaps the reason why the old parties held on longer in North Carolina and the Know Nothings had so much trouble establishing themselves as a distinct body was because many of the old Whig/Democrat issues still held political sway. A continuing controversy over constitutional reform dealing with the popular election of state senators hung over from earlier elections. Questions of internal improvements and banks still stoked the political fires in North Carolina as well. And because they adopted the old Whig positions on these issues the Know Nothings'

⁴⁹Zebulon B. Vance to David F. Caldwell, February 19, 1858, in Frontis W. Johnston, *The Papers of Zebulon Baird Vance*, vol. 1, 1843-1862 (Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1963), xxxvi; Marc W. Kruman, *Parties and Politics in North Carolina, 1836-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana

nativism was not their only claim to distinctiveness.⁵⁰

The congressional campaigns in North Carolina centered around traditional Whig/Democratic issues as well as the Know Nothing's nativist and anti-party planks, with the controversy over the 12th section of the Know Nothing platform and Kansas-Nebraska playing as little a role as they had in Tennessee and Kentucky. Know Nothing Richard C. Puryear's race was one where the issue of abolitionism was of some importance. Puryear, a former Whig, had originally voted against the Kansas-Nebraska act and was attacked by his Democratic opponent Alfred M. Scales for that action. While Puryear spent a good deal of time defending both his nativism and his opposition to Kansas-Nebraska, Scales was unable to make enough of the issue to win the election. In another race where the slavery question was openly broached, John Kerr, running as a Whig, attacked Edwin Reade for his affiliation with northern Know Nothing abolitionists. Kerr, who had refused Know Nothing overtures because he detested their secrecy and anti-Catholicism, believed that southerners must unite to prevent northern fanatics from destroying their liberties. He saw the American party as a northern infiltration of the South, with his former fellow Whigs as their disguised mercenaries. Reade managed to avoid the stigma attached to him by Kerr, however, and handily defeated the incumbent with sixty-five percent of the vote. Thus in the campaigns in North Carolina where slavery took on a major significance Know Nothings emerged victorious. However,

University Press, 1983), 168-170.

⁵⁰*Fayetteville Observer*, May 17, 21, 1855; *North Carolinian*, January 13, 1855; *Greensborough*

neither Puryear nor Reade put much effort into publicizing the 12th section. Puryear, in fact, did not repudiate his opposition to Kansas-Nebraska, he rather backed Kenneth Rayner's position that the South was better off keeping slavery out of politics. Thus the strong proslavery position taken at Philadelphia had been unnecessary for North Carolina's Know Nothings.⁵¹

The American party managed to win three of North Carolina's eight congressional races, the same number as the Whigs had captured in the previous elections. Puryear, Reade, and Robert Paine were all elected on the Know Nothing party ticket. Four Democrats and an Independent captured the remainder. There was little about the campaign results that indicated the state party's need to back the proslavery version of the 12th section, although they had ratified the national platform with special reference to the proslavery plank. Like those in Virginia, Tennessee, and Kentucky, North Carolina's voters turned out in greater numbers than in previous elections, but there was no real evidence that they were particularly worried about the future of slavery. Democratic references to abolitionism sounded much like they had for many years and they seemed to gain little ground from linking the Know Nothings to northerners.⁵²

Patriot, January 6, 13, March 3, 1855.

⁵¹ Puryear was re-elected by almost exactly the same percentage as he had won with in 1853, 51.4%; *Greensborough Patriot*, June 23, 1855; *Fayetteville Observer*, May 29, 1855; John Kerr to William A. Graham, July 4, 1854, in J.G. de Roulhac Hamilton, ed, *The Papers of William Alexander Graham*, vol. IV, 1851-1856 (Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1961), 519-520; Kruman, *Politics in North Carolina*, 170.

⁵² S.G. Haven to Millard Fillmore, August 15, 1855, Fillmore Papers, SUNY Oswego; *Fayetteville Observer*, July 2, 1855.

In Alabama and Georgia the story ran somewhat differently. Know Nothing strength there was something of an unknown quantity, because neither state had held any significant election since the Order had begun organizing. They did appear strong enough, however, to give a great deal of worry to the Democrats, who began referring to themselves at times as the anti-Know Nothings. To counter the meteoric rise of the Know Nothings, the Democrats turned to the Kansas controversy as a weapon to use against the Order. In these states, as in Virginia, the main thrust of the Democratic campaigns had been to connect the southern Know Nothings directly with their northern counterparts, making the most of free-soil tendencies of Henry Wilson and Henry Gardner. "The Know Nothings of the South are affiliated and co-operating with Abolitionists," wrote the editor of the *Alabama Beacon*. This was a common refrain, and it took its toll on the Know Nothings. Even though a large number of former Democrats had joined the order, with as many as a third of the delegates to the Alabama state convention having deserted the opposition, the Know Nothings still felt compelled to enhance their position on slavery and on Kansas. Both Know Nothing state organizations counted on their party's strong stand on slavery rights and its new found nationality to bolster their popularity in the face of withering attacks from the Democrats. Hence they saw the results of the Philadelphia convention as a windfall. It made the party sound on slavery and took the controversy out of Kansas by accepting the situation and leaving the question of the states' admission up to the settlers. They also hoped that the Order

retained enough nationality for them to avoid the Whigs' fate.⁵³

The Know Nothings' primary response to Democratic charges that they were in league with abolitionists was to back the Kansas-Nebraska act while simultaneously attacking what now had become known as "squatter sovereignty," the act's clause allowing foreigners the right to settle and immediately vote in the territories without first becoming citizens. This opposition, they believed, allowed them to uphold states' rights and be true to their nativism at the same time. They saw the voting of foreigners as a threat to slavery interests in Kansas and accused the Democrats of supporting a policy that nullified any possible gains from the repeal of the Missouri Compromise. But in a contest over slavery, the Know Nothings stood little chance of defeating the Democrats. Exchanging abolitionist charges did nothing to distinguish them from the Democrats and left little to choose from between the two. Instead of stressing their nativism and avoiding slavery, the Know Nothings trod directly upon the Democrats' territory, and were consequently whipped for it.⁵⁴

The elections in Georgia and Alabama proved to be disappointing for the Know Nothings and their hopes for the 12th section. In Alabama the Know Nothings lost the governor's race by the smallest margins in years, but lost it by a large percentage

⁵³ J. Mills Thornton III, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 355-358; *Alabama (Greensboro) Beacon*, June 29, 1855; *Montgomery Advertiser*, June 20, 1855; Anthony Gene Carey, "Too Southern to be Americans: Proslavery Politics and the Failure of the Know-Nothings Party in Georgia, 1854-1856," *Civil War History*, XLI (March 1995), 27-32.

⁵⁴ *Alabama Beacon*, July 6, 1855; *Washington Daily American Organ*, February 1, 1856.

nonetheless. George D. Shortridge won over forty-one percent of the vote to incumbent Democrat John A. Winston's fifty-seven percent, the highest total for an opposition candidate since the 1847 election. The Know Nothings' tactic of making the party safe for slavery failed to give the Order the needed votes to overtake the Democrats. And by making slavery the main issue of the campaign, the Know Nothings only succeeded in turning Kansas into a far greater controversy than it already had been. Adhering to the party line became incumbent for Democrats now that an opposition party was challenging them on that score.⁵⁵

In Alabama's congressional elections Percy Walker and William R. Smith were elected as Know Nothings, but Democrats captured the other five seats. The state legislative elections were just as lopsided, as the Know Nothings were held to twelve out of thirty-four senate seats and thirty-eight out of one-hundred positions in the state House. In Georgia Garnett Andrews lost the governor's race by about the same margin as Shortridge, although his percentage was a sharp decline from the previous two elections when Whigs had gotten forty-nine percent of the vote. Here the lack of support from important Whigs like Alexander Stephens and Howell Cobb had hurt the Know Nothings in addition to their failed slavery strategy.⁵⁶

The results of the South's summer and fall elections did not go as well for the Know Nothings as many had predicted, but they had captured enough positions in their

⁵⁵ *Alabama Beacon*, August 31, 1855.

⁵⁶ *Alabama Beacon*, August 31, 1855; Carey, "Too Southern," 32.

first round of important elections to gain some encouragement for the Order's chances in the 1856 presidential campaign. They had won substantial victories in Kentucky and Tennessee, and had run close races in North Carolina. Their losses throughout the remainder of the South were expected, coming in states with heavy Democratic majorities. Adoption of the proslavery 12th section and the consequential bolting of the northern delegates had also seemed to provide mixed results. In Tennessee and Kentucky the party's proslavery stance made little difference either way in the elections as it was ignored by the state organizations, while in Georgia and Alabama the use of the slavery issue had turned up the level of rhetoric in the campaigns to a height to which the Know Nothings could not follow the Democrats. The reawakening of the debate over the Kansas-Nebraska act only hurt the Know Nothings in the deep South. They could not match the Democrats' proslavery credentials or their virulent rhetoric while the split from their northern brethren did little to ease the Democrats' claims of abolitionism. Attempts to attack "squatter sovereignty" as promoting foreign influence without rebuking the Kansas-Nebraska act as a whole rang hollow and inconsistent and smacked of hypocrisy. For the Know Nothings in the deep South, slavery was a stone better left unturned.

The real disaster of the Philadelphia convention was yet to be felt, however. Many believed that the party's only hope of completing the nationalization process aborted in Philadelphia would come in the next session of Congress. Meeting on December 3, 1855, the 34th Congress would test the loyalty of Know Nothings' to their

party's future as a national organization. Northern Know Nothings had held a separate meeting in Cincinnati in November, but had avoided making their split official. They still backed a restoration of the Missouri Compromise line but seemed to encourage further efforts at re-uniting with southern Know Nothings. Certain that the "approaching organization of the House of representatives is big with the fate of parties if not the Republic," Know Nothings hoped that the combined strength of their two sections would solidify the Order's position as the main opposition party to the Democrats, which they would prove by jointly electing a speaker.⁵⁷ However, instead of wielding the majority promised by the Know Nothings' sweeping electoral victories in the North, combined with their own adequate showing in the South, the southern Know Nothings found themselves an isolated, almost inconsequential minority in Congress, blamed for their role in electing a "black Republican" speaker of the House.

When the House of Representatives met in early December to organize for the upcoming session, no one was certain which party had the upper hand. A great deal of political realignment had taken place since the northern elections so that men who had been elected from one party were more than likely to belong to another by the time they took office. The confusion was so great the publisher of the *Congressional Globe* no longer listed Senators and Representatives by party affiliation. The rise of the Know Nothings and the Republicans combined with the demise of the Whigs left the House of

⁵⁷ Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 196; quote from T. Rufus King to William Burwell, William M. Burwell Papers, LC.

Representatives almost unrecognizable. Everyone seemed to have their own opinion as to the makeup of the House, but it was clear that none of the competing parties had enough votes to control the speakership contest.⁵⁸ The fear was that there was such a large number of “rash and impolitic men” among the members that they would “to some degree jeopardize” the Know Nothings’ hopes for control of the House.⁵⁹

On the very first day of the 34th Congress on December 3, Know Nothing hopes that the party’s two halves could get together to elect a speaker were put to rest. From the first ballot it became clear that there was little unity as men from both sections cast their votes for candidates from their side of the Mason Dixon line. Humphrey K. Marshall of Kentucky was the early favorite of southern Know Nothings and a few northerners, while Lewis Campbell of Ohio and Henry Fuller of Pennsylvania received much of the northern Order’s support. William A. Richardson of Illinois, the Democratic caucus’s official nominee, led from the beginning, but neither he nor any of the other candidates even came close to gaining the votes they need for election. Ballot after ballot the deadlock

⁵⁸ Estimates at the time of Know Nothing strength varied, some going as high as 120 representatives. The difficulty in determining the exact number mostly occurs because of the unknown strength of the northern Know Nothings. Since their elections in the fall of 1854, more than twelve months previous, a great deal had changed. Men elected as Whigs were now members of the nativist party or the Republicans while nativists had gone to the Republicans after the Know Nothing split in Philadelphia. The loyalty of those elected on Fusion tickets was suspect, especially because many believed that they owed their elections to antislavery votes. Added to the problem of ascertaining partisanship was the fact that fully 134 out the 234 House members were there for the first time, and hence had no history in the House to help determine their positions. Tyler Anbinder in *Nativism and Slavery* estimates that 123 men had at least at one time been affiliated with the Order, but this number was certainly too high for the number of Know Nothings by the time Congress convened. Southern Know Nothing numbers are easier to figure and came to 29 total representatives; Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, October 15, 1855, *AHA Annual Report, 1911*, 355-356.

⁵⁹ Edward Jay Morris to John Clayton, February 21, 1855, Clayton Papers, LC.

continued as the Know Nothings, both northern and southern, jockeyed for position with each other and the Republicans, switching back and forth between numerous nominees without any significant change in the overall pattern of impasse. Votes were often times scattered among more than fifteen different candidates, making it clear from the beginning that the Know Nothings could not come up with one man both northerners and southerners could back with enough votes to capture the speakership.⁶⁰

On the third day of balloting in the face of obvious stalemate, Humphrey Marshall withdrew from the race in hopes of shifting southern Know Nothing votes towards a candidate who could garner more cross-sectional support. The effort seemed to be wasted as Know Nothing votes divided even further, shifting from ballot to ballot between William R. Smith of Alabama and Felix Zollicofer of Tennessee, as well as several other candidates with as little chance of success. However, over the next several days of voting, southern Know Nothings gradually began to switch to Henry Fuller of Pennsylvania, the favorite of the so-called National Americans, northern backers of a united party. Supported by a small number of northerners and a growing list of southern Know Nothings, Fuller briefly seemed to be a candidate of possibility, if only a larger number of northern nativists could be convinced of the hopelessness of electing Campbell. Solomon G. Haven of New York, himself a one-time favorite for the speakership and Millard Fillmore's eyes in Washington, believed Fuller the only possible

⁶⁰ *Congressional Globe*, 34th Cong., 1st Sess., (December 3- 9, 1855), 3-13.

hope for the Know Nothings because of his moderate position. “The southern men who are Know Nothings,” Haven wrote to Fillmore, “are unable to go for any extreme northern man.” Moreover, in Fuller southern Know Nothings found a man who was willing to “leave this question of slavery where the Constitution of the country has left it,” and put all his efforts into ending agitation over the matter.⁶¹

Fuller’s chances for the speakership ended in mid-December. Despite being the only opposition candidate with support from both northern and southern representatives, the Pennsylvanian seemed unable to garner more than about thirty-five votes. His northern support remained relatively weak because antislavery nativists refused to desert Lewis Campbell for a man who had supported the 12th section from the Know Nothing platform. When Campbell withdrew from the race on December 7 after twenty-three ballots, noting that he could not win unless he abandoned his “well-known principles in reference to slavery . . . [and] Americanism,” Republicans and free soil Know Nothings fell behind Nathaniel Banks of Massachusetts rather than Fuller. A statement Fuller had given on the floor concerning slavery agitation had heartened southern Know Nothings, but now also finished his chances of getting enough northern support for victory. His open acceptance of the Kansas Nebraska act left Fuller little room to operate as far as free soil northerners were concerned, and the time in which one could ignore the slavery issue was over. Having made it the test of loyalty, the southern Know Nothings had alienated

⁶¹ *Cong. Globe*, 34th Cong., 1st Sess., (December 4-8, 19), 4-12, 54; *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, December 29, 1855; S.G. Haven to Fillmore, December 6, 1855, Fillmore Papers, LC.

both themselves and their candidate from the majority of the party. Thus the remaining so-called National Know Nothings and the southern supporters of Fuller simply held too few votes to do anything but stall the proceedings and prevent an election from taking place.⁶²

If Campbell, a sincere nativist, had been unacceptable to southern Know Nothings, Banks, a political opportunist who had quit the Democrats when nativism swept Massachusetts and now seemed on the verge of leaving the Know Nothings for the Republicans, was totally abhorrent, and they were determined to prevent his selection at all costs. Realizing that they had no chance of electing their candidate but still retaining the deciding votes, the southern Know Nothings decided to hold out in an effort to prevent Banks election. Although at this relatively early date in the speakership battle a few desired to unite with the southern Democrats in an effort “to defeat the Black Republicans,” the majority of the southern Know Nothings believed that any obvious effort on their part to back a united southern effort would bring a similar reaction from the northerners and shift five or six votes from Fuller to Banks and put him in the speaker’s chair. In any event, the Democrats offered so little in the way of a “satisfactory division of the congressional patronage” to the southern Know Nothings (their caucus in fact had taken an oath not to give any concessions at all to their rivals) that no deal could

⁶² *Cong. Globe*, 43th Cong., 1st Sess., (December 7, 19, 1855), 11, 54; *New York Herald*, December 20, 1855.

be struck.⁶³

Throughout the rest of December and on into January of 1856 the ensuing debates over the speakership contest revealed just how much animosity had been built up between northern and southern Know Nothings over the adoption of the proslavery 12th section in Philadelphia. Whenever they were not involved in fruitless balloting, members from both sections of the Order vented their frustrations and animosities towards each other on the floor of the House. Leander M. Cox of Kentucky referred to the northern Know Nothings who were voting for Banks as “apostates” who had “gone off from the party or . . . ceased to believe in its principles.” Having been “swallowed up” by free soilism, Cox “no longer recognized” them as members of the Order. Tennessee congressman Felix Zollicofer believed the northern Know Nothings to be under the control of “Greeley and Seward” (Horace Greeley, Republican editor of the *New York Tribune*, and Henry Seward, New York Republican Senator). Ironically, this accusation echoed southern Democratic charges against the Know Nothings. By far the most blunt in his attacks on his fellow Know Nothings was Humphrey Marshall, of Kentucky, who equated them with “black Republicanism.” In the North he could find “no American party, . . . it is all nigger.”⁶⁴

⁶³ George S. Boutwell, *Reminiscences of Sixty Years in Public Service*, vol. I (New York: McClure, Phillips and Co., 1902), 230; A. T. Burnley to John Crittenden, December 24, 1855, Crittenden Papers, LC; *New Orleans Daily Delta*, January 7, 1856; *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, January 19, 1856; *New York Tribune*, December 8, 14, 1855; *New York Daily Post*, January 8, 1856; *Cong. Globe*, 34th Cong., 1st Sess., (December 20, 1855), 59-60, Appendix (Dec 18, 1855), 46; *National Era*, December 20, 1855; *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, December 19, 1855.

⁶⁴ *Cong. Globe*, 34th Cong., 1st Sess., (December 21, 1855), Appendix, 34, (December 20, 1855),

January held out little hope for solving the ongoing struggle as vote after vote ended in deadlock and all sides seemed even more determined to hold out indefinitely. Local councils in Kentucky went so far as to raise money to send to their congressional delegation to support them in their effort to prevent an organization of the House. Throughout much of the rest of the South, however, Know Nothings began leaning towards some sort of deal with the Democrats to finally elect a speaker and prevent Banks from winning. "As it is," wrote the editor of the *New Orleans Daily Delta*, "we believe public opinion generally demands that the Know Nothing Mohamed [sic] should go to the mountain, since it is so clear that the mountain will not come to Mohamed."⁶⁵ With pressure growing on both the National Know Nothings and the Democrats to come to some agreement, both sides began to negotiate on a deal they had dismissed in December, to end the pointless standoff and hopefully keep Banks from being elected. In order to get the support of the Know Nothings, the Democrats had to find a way out of their pledge to give absolutely no concessions to the Order. Using an idea brought up by Georgia Whig Congressman Alexander Stephens, James L. Orr of South Carolina stepped out of the running for the speakership and the Democratic caucus nominated William Aiken, former governor of South Carolina. William Richardson had lost favor earlier in the month with southern Democrats, especially South Carolinians, during the prolonged debate when his proslavery stance was deemed a bit too weak. Aiken was acceptable to the Know

63; *New York Tribune*, December 6, 1855.

⁶⁵ *New York Daily Post*, January 8, 1856; *New Orleans Daily Delta*, January 7, 1856

Nothings because he had not attended the original caucus in early December which had taken the oath not to deal with the Order.⁶⁶ The southern and northern Know Nothings agreed to support Aiken in the hope that they could prevent Banks from winning, back-tracking on some of their earlier statements denying that they would ever work with the hated Democrats.

Even after the two antagonists had struck the deal, Aiken still did not have enough votes to win. Most of the House had realized for over a month that the rules would have to be changed to allow a plurality vote to elect the speaker, but this change had failed to pass for the same reasons a speaker could not be elected outright. With the new agreement, enough Democrats were convinced to accept a plurality rule. Believing that they could now win because of the support of a number of northern Know Nothings, the Democrats were shocked to find that after the change in the voting rules, several northern Know Nothings who had previously voted for Fuller either stayed with him or switched to Banks. Discovering the ruse, the Democrats tried to rescind the plurality vote, but by this point even a majority of their party was tired of the proceedings and the attempt failed. Finally, Nathaniel Banks of Massachusetts was selected as Speaker of the House on February 2, on the one hundred and thirty-third ballot.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ *New York Daily Post*, January 14, 15, 1856; *Cong. Globe*, 34th Cong., 1st Session, (January 24, 1856), 294; Robert C. Winthrop to Howell Cobb, January 5, 1856; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 2, 1856, *AHA Annual Report, 1911*, 357-359; Alexander H. Stephens to Linton Stephens, February 1, 1856, in Richard Malcom Johnston and William Hand Browne, *Life of Alexander H. Stephens* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippencott & Co., 1883), 305-306.

⁶⁷ Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 2, 1856, *AHA Annual Report, 1911*, 359; Alexander

The reaction throughout the South was almost universal condemnation of Banks' election, and although they had worked in concert, both the Know Nothings and the Democrats blamed the other for their defeat. "It was the deliberate intention of the Democrats of the South," wrote the *Richmond Whig*, "to so manage and intrigue during the conflict, to aid in the election of Banks so far as they could do so without publicly casting their votes for him." Others agreed that the Democrats were "solely responsible for the unfortunate and ominous result of the Banks election." The Democrats responded with much the same accusations, upbraiding "the seven national Know Nothings . . . who allowed Mr. Banks to be elected Speaker rather than unite with their southern brethren." Both parties tried to make political gains from their defeat, but for the Know Nothings, this was a bit difficult to pull off, as many were now willing to believe that the House battle had "utterly destroyed all the pretensions of their organization to nationality."⁶⁸

Had a Know Nothing been chosen as Speaker of the House a year earlier, the Order would have seen the selection as a coup, an astounding victory for the new party. But a great deal had happened in the previous eight months, and Banks' election was almost universally recognized as a disaster by the southern Know Nothings. Although still officially members of the American party, Banks and his northern Know Nothing supporters had moved into a transition phase, somewhere between their old party and the

Stephens to Linton Stephens, February 2, 4, 1856, Johnston, *Life of Stephens*, 306; *Cong. Globe*, 34th Cong., 1st Sess., (February 2, 1856), 337.

⁶⁸ *Richmond Whig*, February 4, 8, 1856; *Washington Union*, cited in *Fayetteville Observer*, February 7, 1856.

Republicans. Although they had not yet joined that northern organization, their actions in the House unmistakably marked them as members of the anti-Nebraska/free-soil coalition and not the National American party. The key event in this movement had clearly been the passage of the proslavery 12th section of the Know Nothing platform in Philadelphia the previous June. This forceful takeover of the party platform by southern members had led to the bolting of a majority of the northern initiates, who in turn represented the party's major electoral strength. The lasting animosity of the Philadelphia convention became obvious early on in the speakership battle. The convention which had been intended to create the nationalism needed to win the 1856 elections had in fact done the opposite, shattering the party's national basis. Southern Know Nothings' mistaken belief that they needed a strong proslavery statement in their platform to avoid further defeats like Virginia had gained them nothing and cost them a great deal. All they hoped for after the debacle in the House was that they retained enough support to hold the other parties at bay in a general election just as they had done for two months in the House of Representatives.

CHAPTER 5: "ALL THE OLD POLITICAL HACKS": THE TRIUMPH OF THE OLD LINE WHIGS

Throughout the period in which the southern Know Nothings struggled to situate the party's position on slavery, both in relation to the northern branch of the Order and their own voters, the nativist organization that had burst upon the scene in the second half of 1854 was being slowly transformed. The party which had initially campaigned with much success on an ideology that attacked Catholics, foreigners, and politics as usual, ironically changed into something very much akin to the beast the Democrats had always proclaimed was a "Whig trick." As formerly prominent Whig politicians gradually worked their way into the Order and purposefully pushed aside the party's nativist leadership, the Know Nothings' rhetoric and policies began to look more and more like the presumed dead Whig party. Frustrated by their seeming inability to win important elections, party regulars followed the old Whigs into a presidential campaign that stressed Unionism, sectional conciliation, and an end to the slavery controversy by means of accepting the current situation as a final settlement. All these positions had formed a part of the southern Know Nothings' ideology from the beginning, some more important and widely held than others, but now they assumed center stage in an arena that had once been

held by the Order's fundamental nativist beliefs and an anti-party mission.¹

From its very origins in the South, the Know Nothings had attracted a large number of Whigs. Men like Kenneth Rayner, John Clayton, Vespasian Ellis, William Brownlow, and Garret Davis had all been members of the Whig party, some more prominent than others, and had become Know Nothings early on out of sincere nativist and anti-party convictions. Another group, made up of men like John Crittenden, and Humphrey Marshall, joined the American party in order to mediate its politics and transform it into an organization in which they could feel comfortable while exercising a great deal of control. A third set of Whigs, most notably William M. Burwell and his followers, agreed with Crittenden that the Order's direction needed to be changed, but that the key lay in a strong pro-slavery appeal. While the first group of Whigs committed themselves to promoting the party's nativist positions and fully accepted the necessity of the Order as an alternative to the traditional politics of the second party system, the other two were never completely easy with the Know Nothings' basic nativist, anti-party

¹ The historiography on Know Nothingism in the South generally agrees that the Whigs controlled the party from the beginning and discounts any substantive changes over time. What transformations they do acknowledge are ascribed to the northerners who grew disenchanted with southern proslavery apologists and broke with the national organization after the Philadelphia Convention in 1855. The assumption here is that the southern Know Nothings, whether they were really just a Whig phenomenon or not, were in any case never a legitimately nativist organization. Darrell W. Overdyke in *Know Nothing Party in the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950), over forty years ago claimed that the Know Nothings were primarily a pro-Union organization in the South and also ignores changes in the party over time. Marc Kruman in his study of North Carolina, *Parties and Politics in North Carolina, 1836-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), and Thomas E. Jeffrey's *State Parties and National Politics, North Carolina, 1815-1861* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), both acknowledge the nativist influences in North Carolina and the participation of former Democrats in the Know Nothing party, but tend to view the Whigs' influence as predominant from the beginning. Both argue that the Whigs were not serious about the Know Nothing ideology, but entered the party because it was the only alternative to the Democrats.

ideology. Whereas they undoubtedly acknowledged certain elements of the Order's doctrines as beneficial, their main interest was in using the Know Nothings' political structure to perpetuate their own power and traditional Whig ideals, or in Burwell's case, challenge the Democrats over slavery.

For many southern Whigs, the sudden appearance of Know Nothing lodges in their states was as big a surprise as it was to Democrats. Although they were generally supportive, Whig observers seemed to know little more about the new party than did their chief rival. Democratic newspapers tended to point to the Order as whiggish in thought if not in origin, but often did so while Whig papers were wondering aloud what the party might be and when it might appear in the South. Because of the Order's secrecy requirements, most newspaper editors fell back on speculation as to the timing of the party's entrance into their vicinity, listening carefully for any nativist rhetoric that might indicate the conversion of local politicians. In Louisville Kentucky the first mention of the Know Nothings was a paragraph about a drunken Irishman who mistakenly stumbled into an Order council meeting. Although the paper it appeared in, the *Louisville Daily Courier*, was nominally independent, the comical manner in which the story of the stereotypically drunken Irishman was told clearly indicated the newspaper's editor's sympathy for the Know Nothings, but at the same time he wondered just what this new group might be.²

² *Greensboro Alabama Beacon*, June 29, 1855; *Daily Richmond Enquirer*, June 13, August 1, 1854; *Nashville Union and American*, February 1, 1855; *Richmond Whig*, cited in *Richmond Enquirer*,

Wanting for any concrete evidence of the party's strength, such as election returns, sympathetic Whig editors often supported the Know Nothings while maintaining their Whig standing. Once confronted with massive defections and the overwhelming evidence of their own party's demise, however, many Whig editors changed their papers to official Know Nothing publications, abandoning their old Whig alliances. Other newspapers kept their Whig titles while openly espousing the Know Nothings and joining the Order, while still others backed the party without giving up on the hope the Whigs might someday revitalize themselves.³ The adoption of the new party by Whig editors did not always go smoothly and was far from universal. Some papers called for the creation of a southern Whig party purged of its northern elements but committed to Whig conservatism. In Virginia, many loyal Whig followers of the state party's primary organ, the *Richmond Whig*, refused to join the new party after a feud developed between the *Whig's* editors and Vespasian Ellis, editor of the Know Nothing's national journal, the *American Organ*. The *Whig* did back the Know Nothings in elections, but simultaneously carried on a vicious campaign against John Minor Botts, a Virginia Whig turned Know Nothing, accusing him of being a Whig apostate and a traitor to the conservative cause as well as to the South.⁴

June 9, 1854; *Louisville Daily Courier*, July 15, 1854.

³ *Richmond Penny Post*, cited in *Richmond Enquirer*, January 20, 1855; *Salisbury (NC) Watchman*, July 26, 1855; *Brownlow's Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, October 14, 1854; *Richmond Whig*, June 4, 1855.

⁴ *Petersburg (VA) Intelligencer*, cited in *Fayetteville North Carolinian*, July 10, 1854; *Lynchburg Republican*, cited in *Salisbury Watchman*, January 11, 1855.

In Tennessee, prominent and outspoken Whig editor William Brownlow ran up the Know Nothing banner almost immediately upon the Order's arrival in his state. The fiery Brownlow, known for his take-no-prisoners attitude towards politics, took the Know Nothing oath in one of Tennessee's first councils and helped organize a number of others. Once he had committed to the nativist cause, the Knoxville parson put all his energy into a combination of vilification of foreigners and the Catholic Church. Brownlow especially hated the Roman Church, which he believed held a "determination to damn to utter extinction our free institutions." Unlike many other former Whigs, Brownlow never looked back in hopes of seeing the renewal of his old organization. Although he still held a good many conservative Whig views, including a commitment to the Union, he believed that the party was dead, and in any event the Know Nothings' policies were far better suited to the political realities of a nation under the threat of foreign and papal domination. For Brownlow the old Whig party, however great an organization it may have been, had grown stale and out of touch and had outlived its usefulness.⁵

Throughout the fall of 1854 and on into the winter of 1855 many important Whig leaders responded to the Know Nothings in much the same way newspaper editors had, with initial uncertainty. For them these nativists, seemingly appearing overnight and quietly scheming in their secret councils to overthrow both the Democrats and the Whigs, were not people to be courted, at least not right away. In Virginia, Alexander H. H. Stuart

⁵ *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, January 27, 1855.

remained uncertain about the party's true nature even as it seemed to rise out of nowhere around him. Stuart had been a favorite for the Whig's gubernatorial nomination in late 1854, but by early 1855 he realized that his old party could not or would not even bother to field a candidate with so much of their support having gone over to the Know Nothings. In the face of this disaster for his party, Stuart was at a loss for a course of action. He believed he could win a Know Nothing nomination if he took the oath and joined the Order, but that would require him to "forego all pride and feeling" on Whig ideals dear to his heart. This was not a step to be taken lightly, especially when Stuart had so little trust for the Know Nothings. "Printed platforms and propositions are one thing," he wrote Millard Fillmore, "practical purposes are quite another. What is the end and aim of this party?"⁶

Stuart also echoed another fear the Whigs in Virginia had of courting the Know Nothings too openly, the belief that after the Democrats were defeated, they were next. The Know Nothings were openly critical of all parties and politics as usual and Stuart doubted the Whigs could recover from a Know Nothing victory in which the Whigs became the junior partner. His quandary, however, lay in his simultaneous belief that the Whigs and their ideas would also be lost without the Know Nothings. He had few illusions, however, about how the Whigs would be treated by the new party.

The policy indicated by the Know Nothing organ seems to be dictated by an

⁶ Alexander H.H. Stuart to Millard Fillmore, January 1, 1855, Millard Fillmore Papers, SUNY Oswego; Lucas P. Thompson to Alexander H.H. Stuart, January 21, 1855, Alexander H.H. Stuart Papers #228a, University of Virginia, Charlottesville.

infatuation little short of madness. Here are two great parties . . . equal in strength--naming as a common object the overthrow of the present dynasty and the destruction of the malign influence of Catholicism and foreigners--Neither is strong enough to accomplish it--but the two combined can easily achieve the victory--but on the eve of the conflict, when the enemy is in the field, with his drums beating and colors flying, and all his troops in battle array, one of the allies says to the other, 'stand by us--fight shoulder to shoulder with us--and when the victory is won we will turn our guns on you and drive you from the field.'"⁷

Presented with this possibility, Stuart and his fellow Virginia Whigs' apprehensions about joining the Order are understandable. For many the Know Nothings presented as great a threat as they did an opportunity.

In Kentucky, John J. Crittenden's response to the Know Nothings was similar to Stuart's. While he tested the political waters with a few tentative nativist speeches, the Kentucky Senator's allies tried to work their way into the Know Nothings' organization to find out what the Order's real strength and plans were. Crittenden remained uncertain not only about the possible detrimental effects a union with the Know Nothings would have on a Whig revival, but also about the Know Nothings' overall strength and therefore the benefits of fusion. His people in Kentucky advised him that although growing, the Order was "nothing like as numerous as they'd supposed." This sort of information left Crittenden and his advisers wondering how much help the Know Nothings could really supply the Whigs and in turn his possible presidential candidacy in 1856.⁸

A similar response was repeated throughout much of the South when established

⁷ Stuart to Fillmore, January 1, 1855, Fillmore Papers, SUNY Oswego.

⁸ Robert P. Letcher to John J. Crittenden, January 25, 29, 1855; Joseph C.G. Kennedy to Crittenden, May 8, 1855, John J. Crittenden Papers, Library of Congress.

Whig politicians first became aware of the Know Nothings' growing numbers within their states. Few had given the party much attention when it seemed solely a northern phenomenon, but they were forced to look more closely at the Know Nothings when it became apparent that they were organizing at every "school house or cross-roads or blacksmith's shop."⁹ Despite the evidence of the secret society's increasing strength, many still chose to stick by their old Whig organizations in the hope their own party might yet survive. In North Carolina, venerable old Whig William Alexander Graham, who had been unfortunate enough to have been Winfield Scott's running mate in 1852, remained aloof from the new party. Advised by some that the Whigs could "never carry the state again, unless the Know nothings [sic] join us," Graham heeded others' pleas to "oppose all propositions for the fusion of the Whig party with any other." Realizing that the "coming Winter [would] decide whether a National Whig party shall cease to exist," Graham determined to keep his considerable influence out of Know Nothing hands.¹⁰

In Georgia several prominent Whigs took an even stronger stand against the Order's inroads. While Graham may not have joined, he still occasionally spoke publicly in favor of certain aspects of the American party's policies.¹¹ Leading Georgia Whigs

⁹ S. G. Haven to Millard Fillmore, January 10, 1855, Fillmore papers, SUNY Oswego.

¹⁰ Francis Granger to William Alexander Graham, October 24, 1854; Graham to the American Party Committee, October 13, 1855; J.W. Hicks to Graham, October 19, 1855, J.G. de Roulhac Hamilton, ed., *The Papers of William Alexander Graham*, vol. IV, 1851-1856 (Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1961), 528, 533-534, 605-606.

¹¹ Graham backed the Know Nothing's national stand on slavery which had splintered the Order, but did not speak out in favor of their nativism; Graham to American Party Committee, October 13, 1855, Hamilton, *Graham Papers*, 605-606.

Robert Toombs and Alexander Stephens, on the other hand, actively opposed the new party and its nativist ideology. Stephens believed that "Southern Whigs must strike out for themselves," and that they "could not afford either for their own sake or that of the country to fall into the ranks of either of the great nominal parties." Urged on by loyal Whigs, Toombs stood up publicly and attacked the Know Nothings and their secrecy as "the natural covering of fraud, the natural ally of error[sic] and the enemy of truth."¹²

John M. Berrien, another old-time Whig of considerable influence, did join the American party, but only after he had been convinced by fellow Whig George Stapleton that it was in fact a mostly Whig organization where he could still associate with old friends.¹³

Not all Whigs were so wary of the Know Nothings, however. A number of old Whigs, some more prominent than others, abandoned their moribund organization and openly accepted the new party as a better representative of their beliefs. One important Whig who quickly rose within the southern Know Nothings both for his nativist beliefs and his organizational activities was John M. Clayton. The Delaware Senator was something of an anomaly within the Whig/Know Nothing relationship, however. A nationally important senator for much of the second party era, Clayton took up the Know

¹² Alexander H. Stephens to W. W. Burwell, June 26, 1854; Thomas W. Thomas To Stephens, May 5, 1855; Robert Toombs to T. Lomax, June 6, 1855, cited in Ulrich B. Phillips, *Annual Report of the American Historical Association, 1911*, vol. II (Washington, D.C., 1913), 346-353; Stephens to Thomas W. Thomas, May 9, 1855, cited in Henry Cleveland, *Alexander H. Stephens in Public and Private* (Philadelphia: National Publishing Co., 1866), 459-471.

¹³ Hector Orr to John McPherson Berrien, November 16, 1855; George Stapleton to Berrien, November 30, 1855; Robert Robertson to Berrien, November 30, 1855; John M. Berrien Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill.

Nothing banner before any of his leading Whig associates, and did so with an enthusiasm few national Whig statesmen could match. And as a former Secretary of State under President Millard Fillmore, Clayton had a status comparable to men like John Crittenden and Alexander Stephens, but he was far more willing than they to cast his political lot with the fledgling nativists. It had been Clayton's public opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska act and its alien voting license which had first ignited the Order in the South and had given many southern politicians their first understanding of the relevance of nativist issues. And once he had discovered the popularity of his position, Clayton quickly joined in the effort to establish Know Nothing councils in his home state of Delaware and in the promulgation of a "high minded and truly American party." The combination of Clayton's national prominence and his staunch efforts at organizing his state's disparate Know Nothing councils into a real party for a time made him the southern Know Nothings' leading champion and a favorite for the 1856 presidential nomination. Even bitterly critical Democratic newspapers agreed that the former Secretary of State would be a wise choice for the nativists and a man who would lend legitimacy to their anti-foreign/Catholic beliefs. Clayton was, the *Richmond Enquirer* admitted, "a leader who will combine and direct their energies with great ability and the best possible effect."¹⁴

¹⁴ W. Whellingham to John Clayton, July 18, 1854; G. P. Nelson to Clayton, July 4, 1854; A. Pollock to Clayton, October 20, 1854 (quote); *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, October 22, December 2, 1854; *Richmond Enquirer*, October 5, 1854.

In many southern states, however, those Whigs who were initially eager and fervent supporters of the new party were generally less well known, especially on a national level, than John Clayton. Kenneth Rayner, a North Carolina Whig prominent within his home state but relatively unknown nationally, was representative of those Whigs who readily espoused nativism and the Know Nothings as the nation's best hope for an end to political corruption and the evils of papal influence over the republic. Unlike men such as Crittenden or Stuart, Rayner never wondered about the nativists' accuracy in portraying foreigners and Catholics as the basis of the nation's ills. These two groups, he argued, conspired amongst themselves to dominate American politics, and because of their sheer numbers were courted by the corrupt politicians of the old parties, who in turn shifted their policies to favor these un-American peoples. Recognizing the threat, Rayner took an active role in organizing the fledging party within his own state, boasting that he had set up the first Know Nothing council south of Maryland. His early leadership earned him North Carolina's position in the first national convention in Cincinnati in late 1854. There Rayner was thrust upon the national scene and into a more conspicuous leadership position by the introduction of his Union Degree oath which required initiates to pledge their loyalty to the Union and its protection.¹⁵

Other lesser known men like Garrett Davis of Kentucky, or Joseph Segar of Virginia, who had served in Congress but were generally unfamiliar outside of their home

¹⁵ Gregg Cantrell, *Kenneth and John B. Rayner and the Limits of Southern Dissent* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 83-85, 87-88.

states, often assumed leadership positions as well. Davis held established nativist credentials, having made a name for himself as an enemy of the Pope when he railed against the danger of Catholic immigrants during Kentucky's 1849 constitutional convention. Segar was a friend of Kenneth Rayner and helped the North Carolinian in the adoption of the Union oath.¹⁶ They, along with many other younger politicians from both the Whig and Democratic parties formed the main core of the new organization in the South. Unlike many older politicians who had perhaps been Whigs or Democrats for all or most of the existence of those two parties, these men were more likely to identify with the Know Nothings' anti-party beliefs, or at least were more willing to turn them against their old political allies.

Overall the southern Whigs who seemed more likely to have joined the Know Nothings early on in 1854 were local or at the most state-level politicians with both a history of nativist feelings and a disillusionment with the Whigs. The combination of the two factors was crucial in the early days of the southern Know Nothing party. Whigs who were primarily concerned about the fate of their party after its sectional split in the 1852 election and later over Kansas-Nebraska in 1854, did not join the Order in large numbers during 1854. Men like John Berrien, John Crittenden, and Alexander Stuart kept their varying degrees of distance until the growing strength of the Know Nothings preempted any thoughts they may have had about reworking the old Whig coalition.

¹⁶ *Washington Daily American Organ*, December 13, 15, 1854; Albert D. Kirwan, *John J. Crittenden: The Struggle for the Union* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1962), 298; Cantrell,

Other Whigs, such as Alexander Stephens and Robert Toombs, who turned away from the idea of using any national party to protect southern interests stayed away from the Know Nothings entirely. Lesser names within the Whig party, such as Kenneth Rayner, Garrett Davis, Joseph Segar, and even William Brownlow, abandoned the Whigs far more quickly not only out of the belief that the party's future was hopeless in the face of sectional animosity, but also because they believed that it did not address the fundamental problems of immigration and foreign influence. Their nativism was real and sincere, and not the affectation of a lost party politician looking for a new home.

These men who did join early out of a sincere conviction also tended to be younger and have fewer years of political experience than the old-line Whigs. They had come of age during the latter years of the second party system and had no part in its origins. Crittenden, Berrien, and Stuart had all been Whigs since the creation, and were not only committed to the party's goals but generally dominated its politics as well. Men like Rayner and Davis found the Know Nothing's beliefs more to their liking, and were suddenly more prominent than ever before as well.

It was the earnestness and conviction of the nativists during the second half of 1854 and first half of 1855 that fueled the party's rapid rise and swelled its numbers with refugees from both the Whigs and Democrats. During the winter and spring of 1855 local state conventions looked to relatively unknown politicians with nativist credentials from both parties to head their councils and in many cases run for office. The results of the

Virginia election, however, changed all this. The strong showing in the gubernatorial election, despite the poorly run campaign, convinced Whigs like Crittenden that the Know Nothings were indeed worth associating with, but at the same time persuaded them that nativism and an avoidance of slavery were not strong enough issues on their own to defeat the Democrats. Crittenden's people fell short in their attempt to change the Order's direction in Philadelphia. However William M. Burwell, the outspoken proslavery Whig from Virginia who had played no role in the state election, did manage to seize the opportunity presented by the disappointment of the Virginia loss, using his influence at the national convention only a week after the election to push the southern delegation towards a proslavery platform. Burwell's actions not only split the party along sectional lines, but it signaled the growing influence of one portion of the old-line Whigs within the party. Backers of Crittenden and Millard Fillmore now had to deal with both pro-slavery people and the nativists.

The takeover of the southern Know Nothings by the conservative Whig supporters of Crittenden and Fillmore, those who favored their men for the presidency and stressed an avoidance of slavery as an issue, would take some time to accomplish now that Burwell had disrupted the party over slavery. For the most part their efforts were aimed at the national level.¹⁷ These efforts, at times appearing haphazard while at others seemingly well coordinated and planned from the top, managed to shift the Know

¹⁷ Joseph C. G. Kennedy to John Crittenden, May 8, 1855; R. P. Letcher to Crittenden, November, 30, 1855, Crittenden Papers, LC; S. G. Haven to Millard Fillmore, March 27, 1855; Isaac Newton to

Nothings' ideological center away from both nativism and the more aggressively proslavery position to one that stressed in the South the party's ability to defend southern interests better than the Democrats by avoiding further sectional tension. On a national level these Whigs/Know Nothings tried to base their appeal on their self-proclaimed occupation of a center position between the two extremes of southern Democratic "secessionism" and northern Republican "abolitionism" where they could provide the best defense of the Union. Nativism, although never totally abandoned, proved to be of far less importance to the insurgent Know Nothing leaders than it had been to men like Rayner and Davis. They, however, soon found themselves outmaneuvered in the political arena.

While the first obvious evidence of the insurgence of Whig traditionalists within the southern Know Nothings occurred during the Philadelphia Convention where they made their presence known to the rest of the party in June 1855, they had slowly been building their power in several states throughout the spring. In Virginia, the most strongly nativist faction within the Order had succeeded at nominating Thomas Flournoy for governor over better known and less enthusiastically nativist Whigs like Alexander Stuart. In turn they managed to run the campaign on nativist issues, and in many instances had gone out of their way to alienate many of their more traditional Whig supporters. Stuart, in fact, accused Virginia's Know Nothings of taking "pleasure in warring on the Whigs for the purpose of proving that the American movement was not a

Whig trick.”¹⁸ Realizing that the Know Nothings had improved on any previous Whig vote total even without much of the Whigs’ support, and that the chances of a revival of their old party were almost nil, the traditional Whig politicians maneuvered their way onto the state’s delegation to the national convention in an effort to right the party while it still retained some popularity.

Bolstered by Henry Wise’s victory, Stuart’s followers, most of whom favored Millard Fillmore as the next president, hoped to mediate the Order’s politics at the convention.¹⁹ Unfortunately they were trumped by William Burwell. His proslavery platform was adopted rather than the more intermediate position favored by Crittenden and Stuart, and became the center piece of the southern Whigs’ attempt to assert their control over the whole of the Know Nothing organization.²⁰ Besides inserting an explicit statement on slavery into the platform, Burwell never tried to hide his opinion about the nativist course the party had taken up until mid-1855 or what he believed should be their true goal. In Philadelphia, he openly admitted that he had only gone along with the anti-foreign/anti-Catholic position so that he might wring some concessions out of the northern delegates. Burwell, in fact, represented the extreme of this position on both matters, for even an old line Whig like Stuart had some strongly held nativist beliefs,

¹⁸ Alexander H.H. Stuart to Fillmore, July 9, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY Oswego.

¹⁹ Isaac Newton to Fillmore, March 27, May 2, 1855; Fillmore to Edward Everett, April 4, 1855, Fillmore Papers, SUNY Oswego.

²⁰ Albert T. Burnley to John J. Crittenden, June 2, 12, 1855, Crittenden Papers, LC.

even if he did not think them sufficient to capture the presidency.²¹ Nevertheless, a great many Know Nothings at the convention who disagreed with Burwell on nativism listened to him about slavery because the loss in Virginia had convinced them that they needed to change. This conviction gave Burwell the boost he and his proslavery advocates needed to push through their version of the platform.

The willingness of southern Know Nothings to accept Burwell's position on slavery did not signal the abandonment of nativism as a goal for most southerners. A greater emphasis on protecting slavery did not seem out of line for southern nativists, as many argued that opposition to foreigners was essential because it protected slavery. And clearly most southern state campaigns later that same summer still stressed nativism. This action, Burwell convinced them, needed to be taken to prevent the Democrats from using their connection to free-soilers like Henry Wilson of Massachusetts against them. In fact, Burwell's stress on explicitly protecting slavery seemed to have little impact on state parties. Most southern Know Nothings seemed convinced that the statement was all that was necessary. The platform's most important consequence was party disruption at the national level. It was this result which would give men like Crittenden and Stuart their opportunity to move the southern portion of the party once again in a new direction. This time Unionism would be the emphasis.

The upsurge of old Whig power in Kentucky's Know Nothing party occurred at

²¹ Vespasian Ellis to Fillmore, September 7, 185; Stuart to Fillmore, January 1, 1855, Fillmore Papers, SUNY Oswego; *New York Times*, June 13, 1855; *New York Herald*, June 13, 1855.

roughly the same time that it did in Virginia. As in Virginia, thanks to the enthusiasm of the local councils, nativists controlled the state party early on in 1854-1855. Playing off the strength of the Order in urban areas like Louisville where rioters had made the polling areas a dangerous place for anyone with an accent or a history of Democratic voting, the state party easily nominated for governor a minor but strongly nativist and anti-party politician, William V. Loving. And Garrett Davis, who was Kentucky's foremost nativist and a supporter of Loving, had worked his way into the party's nominal leadership by the winter of 1855 and even entertained presidential aspirations. The nativists' position, however, was tenuous, in that they willingly and naively relied upon old line Whig elites to maintain it, a decision they would soon regret.²²

In early June, just as the national convention was convening, William Loving stepped out of the governor's race in ill health. Intentionally avoiding a state-wide vote of the councils, an election they had already lost once, Kentucky's Know Nothing central committee put Charles Morehead, their favorite who had been defeated in the February convention, on the ballot unilaterally. However, the nativist faction, including Garret Davis, generally approved of Morehead, so little was made of his nomination. For his part, Morehead did not deviate from the nativist course of the campaign, but his position on the ticket marked the point at which the anti-party Know Nothings began to lose their influence to the old line Whig backers of John Crittenden, who would use traditional

²² *Louisville Daily Courier*, February 24, 27, 1855; *New Orleans Daily Delta*, April 15, 1855; *St. Louis Intelligencer*, cited in *Louisville Daily Courier*, June 6, 1855.

party tactics to their fullest potential to gain control of the Know Nothings.²³

Crittenden's supporters in the central committee had not been able to pack the state's delegation to Philadelphia, which was led by avid nativist editor George Prentice and former Democrat Edward B. Bartlett, the Order's National president, but they had managed to send Albert T. Burnley along with the official representatives as an observer. Once there Burnley consulted directly with Crittenden about the national platform, asking what sort of settlement he might accept on restoring the Missouri Compromise. Burnley realized the danger of Burwell's position and thought the Virginian's proposal would split the party in half and destroy the nationalism the Know Nothings needed to survive in the South. However, he also attacked Kenneth Rayner as being too "ultra and unreasonable," and the convention as a whole as full of "fools and demagogues." The Kentuckian only hoped that the party could be held together long enough to put Crittenden in the presidency.²⁴

In Kentucky, away from the growing turmoil over the national platform, old line Whigs were gradually consolidating their positions within the Know Nothing organization. Following up on Morehead's nomination by the central committee, Humphrey Marshall, a former Whig congressman, Minister to China, and close ally of Millard Fillmore, was selected to run for the House in his old district. His cousin,

²³ Robert P. Letcher to John Crittenden, January 25, 1855, Crittenden Papers, LC; *Louisville Daily Courier*, June 9, 1855.

²⁴ A. T. Burnley to Crittenden, June 2, 12, 1855, Crittenden Papers, LC.

Alexander K. Marshall, also ran on the American ticket, ironically against his brother Thomas F. Marshall, the straight Whig candidate. When these three men entered the race Know Nothings around the state began to take notice of the changing look of their party. All three of the Marshall clan had been known as political opportunists and their switch to nativism, or against it in Thomas Marshall's case, had been abrupt and seemingly too well timed for sincerity. They were, according to one Know Nothing editor, the very people the party had been formed to oppose. "It is against this class of men that the American party must guard itself," wrote W. N. Haldeman, editor of the *Louisville Daily Courier*. "They must be thrust out of public life if we would not see our government rotten to the very core." Haldeman spoke out openly against the Marshalls' candidacies despite their backing by the central committee, and wished facetiously that the Democrats might withdraw from the race so Alexander and Thomas Marshall might compete alone. "How beautifully they could show up each other's inconsistencies!" He also noted with disdain that although Humphrey Marshall would no doubt be elected because of his connection to the Know Nothings, he was personally "objectionable to forty-nine out of every fifty of those who support him."²⁵ For Haldeman and many of his readers, their new party was not living up to their expectations or its own promises.

Throughout the rest of June and into July Haldeman continued his assault on the Know Nothings' candidates in an attempt to guide his party back to its founding ideals and away from men "who make politics a trade--men who have capacity and ability, but

²⁵ R. P. Letcher to John Crittenden, November 30, 1855, Crittenden Papers, LC; *Louisville Daily*

lack principle and honesty.” It was certainly ironic that he now felt compelled to castigate his own organization for the very abuses it had been formed to oppose.

Haldeman saw the goal of the Order as the destruction of the old Whig oligarchy, and nominating old line Whigs for Know Nothing positions ran exactly contrary to that end.

“If now the party will only exercise a modicum of sense in the selection of candidates,” he argued, “the presidential race in 1856 may be counted on as a certainty.”²⁶

Haldeman had only recently joined the Know Nothings himself, having taken the oath sometime in June. In July the central committee threatened him with expulsion from the Order if he did not back the party’s candidates in his newspaper. He refused and withdrew from the Know Nothings on his own accord, just one of many who left in response to the old line Whig takeover of the organization. “I cannot belong to any party which has for one of its most prominent objects the putting down and discountenancing the demagogues and corrupt politicians of the two old parties,” wrote another disgruntled Know Nothing, “and yet run for office all the old political hacks of the country.”²⁷ Now that the Whigs had the Know Nothings’ reigns in Kentucky and had begun practicing their old party tactics, the Order’s nativism as well as its numbers would begin to decline.

Throughout much of the South a similar pattern repeated itself. States which developed strong Know Nothing followings heavily influenced by the Order’s trademark

Courier, June 9, July 16, 1855.

²⁶ *Louisville Daily Courier*, June 9, 19, July 10, 11, 1855.

²⁷ *Louisville Daily Courier*, July 12, 16, 17, 18, 1855; *Hawsville (KY) Eagle*, cited in *Louisville Daily Courier*, July 18, 1855.

nativism gradually found old-line Whigs maneuvering into their party's leadership positions and bringing an increasing whiggishness with them. The party did not abandon nativism, but it was beginning to seem more like a front issue for a party looking to win office. The nativist factions contributed to this course as well through their nominations. Eager to win elections, and some nearing desperation after the loss in Virginia, Know Nothings readily chose experienced office holders from both the Whigs and the Democrats to fill their tickets. In many instances, Whig or Democratic congressmen elected in 1853 simply ran again, this time under the Know Nothing banner, readily supported by men who may have suspected their sincerity, but who needed office holders nonetheless. In North Carolina, Richard Puryear retained his seat despite his change in parties, while in Tennessee Emerson Etheridge, Felix Zollicofer, and Charles Ready managed to do the same. Alabama saw a similar result for William R. Smith. Certainly this did not mean that all Whigs joining the Know Nothings were simply trying to remain in office or that nativism played no role in the elections. For example, North Carolina Whig John Kerr easily defeated his Democratic opponent with 86 percent of the vote in 1853, but in turn lost his seat in 1855 to the Know Nothing candidate Edwin G. Reade who garnered 65 percent of the ballots in a campaign which openly stressed nativism. In another instance Georgia's Robert Trippe had been unsuccessful in 1853 as a Whig, but won handily in 1855 as an American, and William R. Smith became known as one of the staunchest nativists in the South. So while the pattern of nominations itself does not

indicate a lessening of nativist attitudes or that former Whigs could not be good Know Nothings, it does suggest that local state parties were concerned enough about winning to adopt the electoral practices of the two parties they attacked as un-democratic political machines. This in turn meant putting up men for election whose nativist credentials were often newly minted. The further influence of these men had a gradually increasing impact. The party was now becoming a Know Nothing/Whig hybrid, with the more politically experienced Whigs taking command.²⁸

Nowhere was the influence of the old line Whigs more pronounced than in the struggle to nominate the Know Nothing's first presidential candidate. In this conflict the nativists eventually found themselves shunted aside, their aspirations for the presidency squelched by a movement from within their party to select a "true conservative" with long-standing credentials who might broaden their appeal beyond the nativist vote. At the same time the most avid pro-slavery people would be removed as well. That this would eventually happen did not become evident until the convention met in Philadelphia in February 1856, however the process began soon after the Know Nothings first appeared as a force in southern politics. With the party consolidating in late 1854, only two years before the next presidential election, southern Know Nothings almost immediately began searching for a nominee or positioning themselves to take up that position. The field remained fairly extensive for some time, but as their influence within the Order grew, the old line Whigs soon came to the fore, and through the domination of

²⁸ Kruman, *Politics and Parties*, 159-179; Jeffrey, *State Parties and National Politics*, 248-249.

the presidential selection process they managed to wrest control of the party away from its more nativist element.

Delaware Senator John Clayton emerged as an early favorite amongst a number of Whigs and Know Nothings. Popular because of his nativist stand against the Kansas-Nebraska act, Clayton seemed to be the ideal candidate for both the anti-foreign elements of the new party and those Whigs who wanted to continue their conservative traditions under the auspices of the Order. As early as the summer of 1854 Clayton's supporters were urging him to consider the presidency. He was spurred on by Whigs who objected to being "connected to any secret society or organization" and feared that only a man of Clayton's nativist credentials could succeed in the present atmosphere where the Know Nothings had broken "down the old party landmarks," making it "extremely difficult if not impossible to elect any candidate who [did] not pledge himself to the support of their principles."²⁹ More enthusiastic nativist backers like William Brownlow also chimed in to endorse Clayton, but his increasingly ill health forced the senator to back out of the race before it really got under way.³⁰

Following Clayton's withdrawal the Know Nothing presidential race seemed to be a free for all with no one person ever clearly moving to the fore. Numerous candidates

²⁹ *Baton Rouge Weekly Comet*, June 30, 1854; Chandler L. Du Fould to John Clayton, February 15, 1855; D. Rodney King to Clayton, July 3, August 10, December 3, 1854, John M. Clayton Papers, LC.

³⁰ F.N. Pettis to Clayton, July 19, 1854; A. Pollock to Clayton, October 20, 1854, John A. Rogers to Clayton, January 19, 1855, Clayton Papers, LC; *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, December 4, 1854; Joseph G. Comegys, *Memoir of John M. Clayton* (Wilmington: Historical Society of Delaware, 1882), 280-281.

were put up by their home state organizations and local Know Nothing editors, but the field seemed as wide ranging as the South itself. In Tennessee Brownlow ran “John Bell for President” banners on a daily basis with little or no support from Bell himself, who did not appear to want the job.³¹ Just how uncertain the Order was about the choice is demonstrated by a poll held in Richmond in March 1855 to pick a favorite for the state party to support. Eleven names were thrown into a hat and drawn out blindly. Kenneth Rayner won this particular straw poll by virtue of having his name selected twice.³² Rayner, in fact seemed a logical choice to many, especially as he had the backing of a number of northerners within the party. The North Carolinian expressed little interest in the nomination however, and appears to have supported Garrett Davis of Kentucky as the best anti-party nativist available for the job. Davis was the one sincere nativist candidate who clearly wanted to run for the presidency. Out of respect for John Crittenden and because of the unrelenting opposition of fellow Kentucky Know Nothings like Humphrey Marshall, George Robertson, George Prentice, and national party president E. B. Bartlett, however, he backed away from too openly pursuing a goal “so far above my merits and capabilities.”³³

³¹ William G. Brownlow to John Bell, January 15, 1856, John Bell Papers, LC; *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, June 2, 1855; Joseph Howard Parks, *John Bell of Tennessee* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950), 305-306.

³² The eleven candidates were Sam Houston, Kenneth Rayner, William C. Rives, Millard Fillmore, Daniel Ullman, George Law, Governor Pollock, Alfred B. Ely, General Bayley, Robert F. Stockton, and Jacob Broome, *Fayetteville Observer*, March 23, 1855.

³³ Cantrell, *Rayner*, 106-107; Garrett Davis to A.T. Burnley, January 27, 1856, John Crittenden Papers, LC.

With the strong nativist element within the Order shying away from actively seeking the nomination, either out of respect for elder Whig statesmen as in Garret Davis's case, or disinterest as in Kenneth Rayner's, the old line Whigs straddling the fence were in a position to assert their authority over the Know Nothings through the nominating process. The two most prominent of these were Millard Fillmore of New York and John Crittenden of Kentucky. Fillmore, the former Whig president, who was generally considered the South's "one friend among the influential Whigs of the North," conducted, or had conducted for him, perhaps the strangest campaign for the presidential nomination in American history, especially considering that it was for an openly nativist party. In May of 1855 he departed for a year-long tour of Europe, leaving his campaign up to others in an effort to keep himself as aloof as possible from the turbulence of American politics. For anyone who asked, the ex-president was enjoying his forced retirement and recovering from the recent deaths of both his wife and daughter. But he had left under the advice of supporters like Isaac Newton, who counseled him to let his loyal supporters take care of his nomination while he was out of the country.³⁴

Fillmore seems to have decided to put his hat into the Know Nothing ring sometime in the fall of 1854 when he first admitted having voted for Know Nothings in New York's state elections. By the beginning of 1855 Solomon Haven, Fillmore's old law partner now sitting in Congress, advised him to join the Order quickly to prevent

³⁴ *Fayetteville North Carolinian*, July 10, 1854; Robert J. Rayback, *Millard Fillmore: Biography of a President* (Buffalo: Buffalo Historical Society, 1959), 396-397; Isaac Newton to Fillmore, May 2,

being left behind in the race, as Sam Houston had already taken the oath and could become a popular candidate, especially among the southerners whose support Fillmore needed to stand a chance of being nominated. Oaths or not, however, Fillmore was clearly in the Know Nothing camp by January, 1855.³⁵ Early that month he wrote Alexander Stuart to let him know his position on the new party. "It is important that every man who approves of its main object," he told a still undecided Stuart, "should unite with them and bind his influences to give it a proper direction. . . . My mind inclines towards the Know Nothings as the best remedy for existing evils." In this letter, intended to be published, the former President clearly indicated his identification with the Order's ideology, but he also made clear his belief that it required better leadership to give it the "proper direction." To accomplish this, Fillmore's people were already in the process of infiltrating the Order, backing candidates whom they believed they could trust but who were not generally known as Whigs. Too much whiggism, Fillmore saw, would hurt the Know Nothings' anti-party popularity and their effort to "take away the influence of demagogues of both parties." But too little of the Whigs' "best influences" would see the party drift aimlessly. Fillmore had given a good deal of thought into creating a national Union party, and by late 1854 the Know Nothings appeared to be the best organization for accomplishing that end.³⁶

1855, Fillmore Papers, SUNY Oswego.

³⁵ Fillmore appears to have taken the Order's oaths, but according to his biographer Robert Rayback, he did so quietly in his own home, without the usual ceremony and ritual, Rayback, *Fillmore*, 396; Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 204.

Once he had departed for Europe, Fillmore's lieutenants took over his campaign, keeping him apprised of their progress throughout the tumultuous summer conventions and elections. Their primary worry was in gathering enough support from southerners to rewrite the disastrous platform from the June Philadelphia convention and to counteract New York merchant George Law's candidacy. Law was a political unknown but was popular in New York and other strong Know Nothing states in the North. He also had a great deal more money than anyone else to spend and Fillmore's people feared this might overturn their efforts. "George Law is making a great struggle for the nomination for the presidency in paying out money with great liberty," Haven warned Fillmore, ". . . and with some prospects of success." Haven need not have worried about Law however, at least as far as the South was concerned. The New York businessman was almost as unpopular with southerners as William H. Seward, and stood nearly as little chance of getting any of their support, whatever the current condition of sectional harmony within the party. "If the truth were really known," remarked a New Orleans Know Nothing editor, "it probably would appear that Mr. Law was named in connection with the Presidency by some wag, who thought it would prove a good joke, but finding that the people here and elsewhere have taken the matter into serious consideration, said wag is either afraid or ashamed to confess himself." And although Law did find a number of supporters from amongst those who despised professional politicians, his popularity

³⁶ Millard Fillmore to A.H.H. Stuart, January 15, 1855, December 22, 1854, Alexander H.H. Stuart Papers #228, 228a, University of Virginia; S.G. Haven to Fillmore, January 10, 17, 1855, Fillmore Papers, SUNY Oswego.

amongst antislavery Know Nothings doomed him in the South. Ironically Law also lost favor in the North when his backers at the Philadelphia convention voted for the proslavery southern version of the platform. For “Live Oak George,” as Law was popularly known, there seemed to be no way to win.³⁷

Crittenden’s campaign was perhaps even more subtle and manipulative than Fillmore’s or Law’s. The Kentucky senator does not appear to have clearly set his goal on the presidency for himself as much as ensuring that the Know Nothing’s nomination fell to a traditional Whig conservative. For him that meant either Fillmore or himself, but for his backers in Kentucky, it meant Crittenden. Their plan had two phases, both of which needed to succeed if Crittenden were to gain the nomination. The situation within the Kentucky Know Nothing party was complex and required careful planning and coordination amongst Crittenden’s men, especially ex- governor Robert P. Letcher, Albert T. Burnley, Judge George Robertson, and *Louisville Journal* editor George Prentice, his chief lieutenants. First, they would need to wrest control of the party away from the nativist elements under the leadership of Garrett Davis, who also had political ambitions for the presidency and enjoyed the favorite position amongst the anti-party Know Nothings who did not care for the old Whig Crittenden. Although they had been somewhat successful in this endeavor when they had taken control of the state party’s central committee, Davis still had a substantial following, enough to at least win him the

³⁷ Haven to Fillmore, June 29, August 15, December 6, 1855, Fillmore Papers, SUNY Oswego; *New Orleans Daily Delta*, April 7, June 15, 1855; Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 206.

Kentucky Know Nothings' backing for the nomination in the state-wide convention. Here the central committee wielded little power over the more nativist local councils, the same ones which had nominated Loving for governor the previous year, and would be hard pressed to prevent Davis's selection. Second, they had to deal with the challenge from other Whigs like Humphrey Marshall and A. K. Marshall, both of whom were openly working for Fillmore. The Marshalls had been essential to the growing Whig dominance over the nativists in Kentucky, but now they stood between Crittenden and the Presidency. Their support was vital in the defeat of Davis, but Letcher and Burnley had to be careful they did not simply play into Marshall's hands and give Kentucky's votes to Fillmore.³⁸

Crittenden and his people were even less optimistic about the Know Nothings than Fillmore had been initially. Burnley had summed up the Philadelphia convention as one composed of "immaterial men" and dominated by "fools and demagogues." Attending a party mass meeting in November 1855, Letcher came away disheartened. The party seemed to be run by the "meanest speakers in the world," and he found the "whole order of the affair was bad, very bad."³⁹ Still the Kentuckians could not ignore the Order's popularity, and Crittenden was buoyed by pleas from supporters throughout the nation to take up the campaign. From New York James Reynolds advised him that

³⁸ R. P. Letcher to John Crittenden, November 30, 1855, Crittenden Papers, LC; Kirwan, *Crittenden*, 301-302; Humphrey Marshall to Fillmore, July 9, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY Oswego.

³⁹ A.T. Burnley to Crittenden, June 12, 1855; R. P. Letcher to Crittenden, November 30, 1855, Crittenden Papers, LC.

the party must choose a candidate “from the South, [who] must not be an ultra proslavery man,” while Joseph Kennedy favored Crittenden because he believed Fillmore had too many enemies in the North. John Clayton even weighed in behind Crittenden, and pointing to evidence of a good deal of support for the Kentuckian in the South, Burnley urged Crittenden to “take the leadership of the American party in the Senate by making a whaling speech on our principles and policy and show most men a willingness to meet all.”⁴⁰

In early December 1855, George Robertson, a one-time Crittenden opponent who had managed to overlook old disagreements, left Kentucky for Washington to consult with the Kentucky Senator over strategy for the upcoming nomination at the February convention, yet again to be held in Philadelphia. Before leaving, Robertson together with Letcher had tried to dissuade Garrett Davis from pressing for his own nomination by the state convention to be convened in late January, just prior to the national meeting. Robertson, who disingenuously claimed he had never heard Davis’s name mentioned in connection with the Presidency, argued that a February nomination would be too early and would eventually force the breakup of the national party. Explaining that what was needed now were “sensible, discreet men . . . who rise above partisan feelings, and who would be willing to give up Mr. Crittenden or Mr. Davis for the good of the cause and for the safety of the Union,” Robertson counseled for a delay. His intention, however, was to

⁴⁰ James N. Reynolds to Crittenden, October 5, 1855; Joseph C. G. Kennedy to Crittenden, May 8, 1855; William H. Russell to Crittenden, December 18, 1855; A.T. Burnley to Crittenden, January 7, 1856,

get Davis out of the race so as to prevent the Know Nothings from making any nomination. He and Letcher did not believe Crittenden could win as soon as February, but would have a better chance if the convention were put off until the following summer. Davis felt betrayed by the lack of support, especially so because he had hoped Crittenden's backing would balance the attacks he had been forced to endure from Humphrey Marshall and other Fillmore supporters, who had been berating Davis for the past eighteen months over his candidacy. Nevertheless, Robertson headed for his rendezvous with Crittenden convinced he had persuaded Davis to step aside for at least the time being.⁴¹

The plan Robertson and Crittenden composed was designed to counter both Davis's nativists and Marshall's Fillmore people in the same blow. Their full intentions are unclear, but they apparently hoped that by preventing any nomination by the Kentucky convention and at Philadelphia as well they would have more time to put together a campaign for Crittenden. By postponing the nomination until July 4, they may even have hoped for a straight Whig party revival allowing them to gain that party's nomination and forcing the upstaged Know Nothings to follow suit, giving the Whigs their rightful place at the head of a conservative coalition. While this hope may have been something of a long shot, Crittenden's people did have considerable evidence that the desire to postpone the choosing of a candidate was widespread throughout the party. Know Nothing leaders

Crittenden Papers, LC.

⁴¹ R. P. Letcher to Crittenden, December 13, 1855; Garrett Davis to A.T. Burnley, January 27,

from many states, both North and South, were increasingly convinced that an early nomination would only open their candidate up to attack for months before he had any opponent to direct the campaign against. The District of Columbia council, as well as those in Virginia and Arkansas had already voted to support a postponement until Independence Day. With the advantage of knowing who their candidate was so early in the race they feared that the Democrats could then seize the offensive and attack the Know Nothings without any repercussions for their own man.⁴²

Late in January, 1856, the Kentucky Know Nothings held their state convention in Frankfort in some of the worst winter weather conditions any locals could remember. The below zero temperatures and nearly impassable roads prevented almost half of the state delegates from attending. The majority of those snowed out were younger politicians, staunch nativists, and strong supporters of Garrett Davis. Crittenden's supporters, however, were strategically positioned and hoped that his people could use the inexperience of most of the delegates to their advantage. In the month since Davis met with Robertson and Letcher, he had reconsidered his decision, if he had ever really backed away from his candidacy. Davis had since become determined to allow his name to be put up for nomination. Certain of the support of his state's nativists as well as national party leaders like Kenneth Rayner, Davis, however, still felt the need

1856, Crittenden Papers, LC.

⁴² A. T. Burnley to Crittenden, January 7, 1856, Crittenden Papers, LC; Kirwan, *Crittenden*, 302; N. K. Hall to Fillmore, February 4, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY Oswego; William Brownlow to John Bell, January 15, 1856, John Bell Papers, LC; *Washington Daily American Organ*, December 6, 22, 1855, January 7, February 1, 1856.

to get Crittenden's backing. A soft-spoken man with great respect for the elder Crittenden, Davis's desire to have Kentucky's elder statesmen anoint him left him open to the cynical manipulations of Letcher, Burnley, and Robertson.⁴³

Shortly before the Frankfort convention convened, Garrett Davis met again with Letcher and Burnley to discuss the presidential nominations. Davis was clearly becoming concerned about the lack of support he was getting from Crittenden's people as they tried to persuade him that making no nomination was the best course. Convinced that he could carry the convention with a "triumphant majority, . . . 9/10ths of the numbers," Davis believed that withholding the nomination would only succeed in helping Humphrey Marshall and his fellow Fillmore backers. To assuage this fear, Burnley left Davis with the idea that Crittenden would give his full support to Davis later, but for the moment would only vote to make no recommendation for the presidential nomination. To ensure that he could get Crittenden's men's subsequent support, Davis agreed to back Letcher as a delegate to Philadelphia where he would be in a position to counter Marshall's delegates and their Fillmore plan, but remained uncommitted to the no nomination strategy. Several days later at the convention, in an effort to convince Davis's followers of their sincerity, Burnley offered up a resolution which called for the convention to commit the state to backing Davis fully if he were nominated at the national convention in Philadelphia. After a bit of soul searching and just as much confusion over Burnley's

⁴³ *Louisville Daily Courier*, January 25, 1856; Garrett Davis to A. T. Burnley, January 27, 1856, Crittenden Papers, LC.

intentions, they turned down the offer, still hoping that they might make a nomination right there. They also noted that Burnley had not promised to support Davis for the nomination, but only offered to back him if he were already chosen as the Know Nothing candidate, quite a different thing entirely. Unfortunately for his supporters, their desire to stay with Davis all the way went for naught, as their leader completely withdrew his name in the face of Crittenden's growing strength, or as the *Louisville Courier* put it, Davis was "tricked out of a recommendation by the wire-workers."⁴⁴ The convention eventually followed Burnley and Letcher's plan and voted to make no recommendation at all.

Davis thus left the Frankfort convention without any sort of backing from his home state, and with the worthless promise of some future help from Letcher and Burnley, who openly bragged about how they had gotten Davis to "virtually crawl down and admit that the course we pursued was wise, and his otherwise." In fact Davis seems only to have gone along with the plan because the numbers of his supporters were reduced by the severe weather to the point where he could not count upon enough votes to have carried the day, and so decided that Burnley's promises were better than the embarrassment of a defeat in his own state. Whatever the reason, however, Davis's failure was another triumph for the old line Whigs in their battle to take control of the Know Nothings away from the party's nativist elements. Now that they had prevented his nomination, the path seemed clear for Burnley and Letcher to pursue Crittenden's

⁴⁴ A. T. Burnley to Crittenden, January 28, 1856, Crittenden Papers, LC; *Louisville Daily Courier*, January 25, 1856.

nomination in Philadelphia. Humphrey Marshall was also pleased to have Davis out of the way of Millard Fillmore's candidacy. But for the die-hard nativists in Kentucky, those who had joined the Know Nothings in an attempt to free the nation from the old party hacks, Burnley's sly manipulations were a sign that the Know Nothings were no longer living up to their promise and had become the organization they had been intended to oppose. "The very best--the sage, the experienced, the honest delegates--voted for the great part for Mr. Davis," noted the *Courier*, but "Judge Robertson and Gov. Letcher . . . [were] jealous of the honesty, manliness and integrity that first made Mr. Davis the advocate of Native American principles."⁴⁵ Jealous or not, they had managed to remove the one strong Know Nothing candidate who might have prevented the Order from choosing a Whig as its presidential candidate.

The Virginia Know Nothings were by early 1856 as much under the sway of their state's old line Whigs and men like Alexander Stuart as Kentucky's party. As a result they were determined not to repeat the mistake of the gubernatorial campaign of waging war on the Whigs. Following Stuart's advice in an effort to unite the two voting groups the state convention nominated John M. Botts as their favorite son. An old line Whig and outspoken Unionist, Botts represented something of a compromise. He was not as outspoken a nativist as many Know Nothings might have hoped, but neither was he as strong a proslavery advocate as Burwell's supporters wanted. His Unionism and ties to

⁴⁵ A. T. Burnley to Crittenden, February 8, 11, 1856; Garrett Davis to A. T. Burnley, February 8, 1856, Crittenden Papers, LC; *Louisville Daily Courier*, January 25, 1856.

the Whigs were enough, however, to earn him the backing of the state convention.⁴⁶

The Georgia state Know Nothing party went even further in its metamorphosis into Whiggery. In their state convention in December 1855, following the guide of John M. Berrien, the convention president, Georgia's Order decided to send no delegates to Philadelphia and to act independently of the national organization. Determined to sever its connections to the main body of the Know Nothings in the hopes of ridding itself of the Order's northern antislavery taint, Georgia's Americans were still ready to back a Know Nothing candidate if he were a strong southern rights supporter with Whig credentials, either Fillmore or Crittenden. They wished to do so, however, of their own accord without having to come to a mutual agreement with any northerners. Essentially, Georgia's Know Nothing party had decided it would follow the proslavery Whig path laid out by Burwell. For them the issues of nativism had not been strong enough to maintain a link to the national party. Instead they left their fortune up to a hoped for Whig revival. Once nominated, Millard Fillmore turned down their generous nomination, convinced that he could not be both a Whig and a Know Nothing candidate. And because he believed that by this date most of his Whig supporters had already become Americans, he politely turned aside any strictly Whig offers of support.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ *Washington Daily American Organ*, January 7, 1856.

⁴⁷ Hector Orr to John M. Berrien, November 16, 1855; George Stapleton to Berrien, November 30, 1855; Robert Robinson to Berrien, November 30, 1855, John M. Berrien Papers, Southern Historical Collection, UNC Library; H. M. Miller to Millard Fillmore, July 12, 1856; G. J. Carlisle to Fillmore, July 18, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY Oswego; Fillmore to William C. Rives, July 23, 1856, Fillmore Papers LC; Anthony Gene Carey, "Too Southern to be American: Proslavery Politics and the Failure of the Know

By the time the Know Nothings prepared to meet for their nominating convention in Philadelphia in February, 1856, the American party had a very different look than the one which had gathered in that same city nearly eight months earlier. Northern and southern members were at odds with each other over the platform and the struggle in the House speakership elections, and now the old line Whigs in the South had made a grab for power within their state organizations with the intention of nominating one of their own for the presidency, thereby pushing the whole national American Party into a Whig camp. The transformation was startling. In the spring of 1855, a new party, organized around opposition to foreigners, Catholics, and corrupt party politics had seemed on the verge of creating a viable national party which could openly challenge the Democrats throughout the whole nation and for the presidency. By early 1856 this same organization would struggle to convince its supporters that it was still the same party they had put their hopes in for the past year and not a return to the old party politics they had abandoned. With Whigs of dubious sincerity now guiding the Order towards the 1856 presidential elections and the party split over slavery, that would be an uphill battle.

CHAPTER 6: "AS A PARTY IT HAS NO GREAT POPULARITY": THE 1856 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

The Know Nothing national nominating convention, scheduled to convene in February 1856, presented its organizers with an extremely difficult challenge. The events of 1855 and early 1856 had dimmed the American Party's prospects as well as its members' vast enthusiasm for success in the upcoming year. Although some still hoped that the party might "meet as brethren of one great and mighty family, having in view no other object than the supremacy of our principles and the perpetuity and harmony of our glorious Union," the combined acrimony of the previous June convention and the battle over the speakership vote in the House of Representatives had done little to mold the Know Nothings into a viable national organization. Without that, the Order's southern members would find it difficult to compete effectively against the Democrats and to prevent large numbers of their northern counterparts from turning towards the Republican party.¹ If they were to succeed in putting a Know Nothing in the presidency, the American Party would first have to overcome the setbacks it had endured throughout much of 1855. Only then could they attempt to choose a candidate who could represent the varied interests within the party as well as satisfy both sectional wings. This second

¹ *Boston Bee*, cited in *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, February 16, 1856.

Philadelphia convention thus became a test of the Know Nothings' desire and ability to overcome their mutual animosities and create a national conservative nativist party in a world where sectional politics increasingly ruled the day. Their answer was to try and hold a center position between extreme northern and southern positions.

The subsequent presidential campaign of 1856 in many ways reflected the Union emphasis of its candidate, Millard Fillmore, and his advisers, all Old Line Whigs. But at the same time the nativist ideals of many of the Know Nothings' earliest adherents also came out during the run for the presidency. Southern Know Nothings tried to re-emphasize the nativist issue which had so energized the party at its inception. This duality of purpose, which had formed a coherent ideology in 1854 and early 1855, increasingly reflected a division within the American party which gave the not incorrect impression that they were no longer the same organization which had transformed the political landscape the previous year. Although Millard Fillmore and his supporters maintained high hopes right up until the end, the party's inability to harmonize these two goals remained a thorn in their side throughout the campaign. When the northern half of the party abandoned the movement in June 1856 in favor of the Republican nominee, John C. Fremont, they took the heart out of the American party and the Know Nothings as a nativist reform movement. In the South the American party would maintain a considerable following and managed to put up an important political opposition to the Democrats, but it would be under the banner of a Union party, not as the nativist Order

that had promised so much in early 1855 and that clearly still had an important following throughout 1856.

The main body of the American convention had scheduled their presidential nomination for February 22, but prior to that, on February 18, the national council arrived in Philadelphia to determine the more difficult questions surrounding the party's split over slavery.² Foremost amongst their concerns was how to bridge the gap between North and South created by the proslavery 12th section of the party platform passed the previous June. The platform had been so disruptive to party loyalty that most delegates, even southerners, recognized that there had to be a change before they could start a national campaign under a common banner. The struggle between northerners and southerners over this would dominate the convention. But this battle would also pit extreme proslavery southerners who backed William M. Burwell's platform against the old line Whigs who were now so prominent and favored an avoidance of sectional issues and a new platform drawn up by Burwell's antagonist at the *American Organ*, Vespasian Ellis. The national council also faced the decision of whether or not they should go ahead and select a candidate at all so early in the presidential contest. With the election nine months away, many believed the Order should wait until summer before throwing their hat into the ring. Without some sort of resolution on these two matters the remainder of the convention served no purpose.

² William G. Brownlow to John Bell, January 15, 1856, John Bell Papers, Library of Congress.

The second American Party convention to meet in Philadelphia in eight months began much the same as the previous one had in June of 1855. The first issue of contention regarded the secrecy requirement already abandoned at the last convention. This time the question centered on whether to admit reporters to the council's sessions. After a good deal of fairly heated discussion during which several strange suggestions for circulating passwords about the floor to separate members from outsiders were considered, the council voted on a resolution which would "present the American party to the country not as an Order, not as a Society, but as a broad, comprehensive, conservative, National Party, standing like other political parties, openly before the country." Amidst a general confusion in which delegates protested the inclusion of outsiders and reporters actually took the floor to argue their case, a majority of the delegates eventually submitted to William Brownlow's advice to "have the doors thrown open to all mankind" and adopted the resolution to admit reporters.³ In the long run this debated seemed to have little importance, but it represented a dramatic change of course for a secret society, and sent an early signal that the old Order was not going to be recreated here in Philadelphia.

³ The irony that many of the Order's members were newspaper editors and were freely reporting on the convention never seems to have entered the debate over secrecy. William G. Brownlow and Vespasian Ellis, two of the South's most prominent voices in the Order, reported diligently on the convention's activities throughout the proceedings. Ellis' paper, the *Washington Daily American Organ*, was many delegates' source for the revised platform even before it was put to a vote. *Washington Daily American Organ*, February 21, 21, March 1, 1856; *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, March 1, 1856; *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, February 20, 1856.

The past June there had also been a brief but passionate debate over the admission of rival delegations from Louisiana. Eventually the Catholic delegation was refused, but not before most southern state parties determined to make explicit their opposition to “Roman Catholics” rather than “Protestant Catholics,” or loyal Americans who had pledged their allegiance to the Union and Constitution and denied the temporal authority of the Pope. When the national council convened, it faced once again the admission of Catholic delegates from Louisiana as well as a disputed delegation from Pennsylvania. The Pennsylvanians were eventually seated despite accusations that they had sided with Republicans during the last election and helped defeat Know Nothing candidates. Northern members, on the other hand, attacked the Louisiana delegates again for their Catholicism. Several Louisiana Know Nothings, including Congressman George Eustis, admitted that their organization was primarily Catholic and that the state council had refused to recognize the 8th section of the national platform because it singled out Catholics by name, but that they had all taken a solemn pledge and were fully committed “Native Americans who refuse to recognise any power outside of the constitution and laws of our native land.” Somewhat surprisingly the Louisiana members were admitted by a vote of 66 for 58, a majority which included a good portion of northern votes.⁴ The result seemed to signal a significant change for a party that founded in large part on anti-Catholic bigotry. While many of the southern members had always been willing to accept

⁴ *Washington Daily American Organ*, February 21,23, 1856; *Louisville Daily Courier*, February 25, 1856; *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, March 1, 1856; *New York Times*, February 21, 1856; *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, February 21, 1856; *Fayetteville (NC) Observer*, February 25, 1856.

Catholics under limited circumstances, northern delegates now seemed to be inclined to draw the same distinctions between native-born Catholics and those from foreign countries. A more likely case can be made, however, that at least at this early point in the convention a good number of northern Know Nothings were willing to put aside the Catholic question in the hope of renewing party harmony, at least on this limited scale for Louisiana's unique situation. For them it was a small political sacrifice, in that there was no backing down on the platform wording beyond turning a blind eye towards Eustis and the rest of his delegation. It carried a significant message for a northern electorate that was still profoundly anti-Catholic, however. In the end it may have been a greater sacrifice than the northerners wanted to make, and one whose importance has been overlooked by the controversy over slavery within the party. Like the decision to drop any remaining secrecy, the Catholic issue indicated that the Order had undergone a significant change in the past year. Its transition into a full-fledged political party had reached a crisis point, and the great challenge for the delegates was to keep the party intact in the face of sectional politics while retaining its nativist appeal. This Louisiana question struck at the heart of that delicate balance.

The issue the Know Nothings would spend the most time struggling with, however, was not the role of Catholics within their ranks (however ironic that was for a nativist party), but with the old platform they had adopted the previous June. The proslavery 12th Section of that document had proven too divisive to go unchallenged at

this meeting and no delegate could have arrived in Philadelphia unaware that he would spend a majority of his time wrangling over the platform's wording. The northern caucus had determined to make a concerted effort to rid the platform of the hated 12th section.⁵ Several southern Know Nothings, according to John P. Kennedy of Maryland, himself not a party member but attending as an observer on Millard Fillmore's behalf, suspected that the northern antislavery people would force the slavery question in the hope the southern delegates would walk out of the council, freeing themselves to join the Republicans currently meeting in Pittsburgh. Kennedy, Alexander Stuart of Virginia, and Solomon G. Haven of New York managed to convince the southern caucus, presided over by Henry Clay's eldest son, Thomas Hart Clay, to agree to resist unanimously any changes and remain at the meeting. Kennedy, Stuart, and Haven formed the heart of Fillmore's advance team and knew that any disruption of the party over slavery and a subsequent bolt by the southerners would destroy their man's chances. Although both they and Fillmore were set on running a campaign based on a Union platform that explicitly attacked sectional politics and objected to the wording of the 12th Section, they believed that discussing change at this point would only further the negative impact of the proslavery plank. They absolutely could not afford a sectional split in Philadelphia if they were to run as they hoped as the only party capable of ending slavery agitation and sectional conflict. Any such disruption would mark the Americans as being as tainted by

⁵ The 12th section from the June 1855 platform had denied Congress the power to "legislate upon the subject of Slavery in the States[,] . . . any Territory, [or]. . . in the District of Columbia," *New York Express*, June 16, 1855.

the slavery controversy as the other parties and defeat Fillmore's Union party designs before they could get underway. If that happened, all his well-laid plans for transforming the Know Nothings into the vehicle of national reconciliation and Union by "giving it a proper direction" would be torpedoed.⁶

The issue came to the floor during the debate over the seating of the rival Pennsylvania delegations. Amid accusations from southerners that the so-called Edie delegation had abandoned the platform and Know Nothing principles in general, (they had in fact denounced the proslavery 12th Section) several northern members submitted resolutions calling for the complete repeal of the same offending portion of the national platform. Arguing that "freedom" was "national and slavery sectional," T. H. Ford of Ohio split the convention wide open in a raucous debate reminiscent of the House speakership battle. Following the previous evening's caucus discussions, most delegates were prepared to revisit the question of the 12th Section, and a great many had resolutions at hand to either support or counter Ford's proposal.⁷ The result was two days of increasingly denunciatory accusations and the conclusion by many that the American party had reached the end of its line as a national organization.

- Late in the evening of February 20 a heavily northern majority voted to repeal the

⁶ John P. Kennedy to Millard Fillmore, March 15, 1856; S. G. Haven to Fillmore, March 4, 1856, Millard Fillmore Papers, SUNY Oswego; Fillmore to Alexander Stuart, January 15, 1855, Alexander H.H. Stuart Papers, University of Virginia.

⁷ *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, February 21, 1856; *Washington Daily American Organ*, February 23, 25, 1856; *New York Times*, February 22, 1856; *Fayetteville Observer*, February 25, 1856.

12th Section entirely, but could not agree upon any substitute position. The demise of the proslavery platform seemed to have reversed the southern wing's victory from the past June. Northern delegates had finally come together long enough at least to remove the mention of slavery from the document. By a vote of 138 to 51 the old proslavery plank came down around the southerners' heads, leaving them wondering how much further they could exercise any modicum of control. Alex R. Boteler of Virginia, who had accompanied William Burwell in his attacks on northerners at the previous convention, now led the southern attack on the northern delegates, claiming that antislavery agitation recent unrest amongst the slaves of his district could be directly traced to. The repeal of the 12th Section, he argued vehemently, was directly "endangering the lives and property of men of the South." Chaos erupted throughout the hall as Boteler warned the northerners against forcing the South to build a united front in opposition to their stand. After the Virginian's inflammatory speech the odds that many of the southern delegations would return the next day seemed pitifully small.⁸

Resolutions to call for the renewal of the Missouri Compromise were less successful, however, despite the clear northern majority on the 12th section vote. The so-called National Americans, northerners still committed to working with southern members, agreed to get rid of any proslavery planks, but they were still not inclined to pass antislavery wording. They tried to reason with the southerners, explaining that the

⁸ *Washington Daily American Organ*, February 23, 1856; *Fayetteville(NC) Observer*, February 25, 1856; *New York Times*, February 21, 1856.

12th section had done no one any good. They had not won any elections because of it, while on the contrary it had hurt the Order in the northern vote. Its elimination was necessary and could not possibly cause more damage than its passage. Having gone that far, however, these same national men were unwilling to turn the meeting's agenda over to the antislavery delegates. They clung to the belief that any mention of slavery furthered the dangerous agitation that lay at the root of sectional political problems, the very thing the party promised to fight. Thus, although northerners appeared to have taken control of the convention, the primary goal of the antislavery delegates who held a majority in the northern state delegations was still out of reach.

The northerners' victory proved to be far shorter lived than even the most optimistic southern Know Nothings might have hoped. Late in the evening amidst great confusion the council had voted to select a committee to draw up a replacement for the 12th Section. However, the very next day the southerners, despite threats to the contrary, did return and instead of adopting a replacement plank, managed to completely substitute a new platform for the June version, now stripped of its proslavery wording. This new platform, written by *American Organ* editor Vespasian Ellis and already accepted by the Washington D.C. council, was the work of the strong Unionist faction and read almost entirely the same as the old version, with a few minor changes. It also lacked the offending 12th Section, but in its place Ellis had substituted a clause calling for the "maintenance and enforcement of all laws constitutionally enacted, until said laws shall be repealed, or shall be declared null and void by competent judicial authority." Ellis

trumpeted the new version as acceptable to all because the platform now contained “neither the word *Slavery* nor the word *Catholic*.” It passed by a vote of 108 to 77 in a far less sectional tally than the previous vote to banish the 12th Section, but again the convention hall erupted over the result. Several Ohio delegates, satisfied with simply eradicating the 12th Section, flew into a rage over the tally, prompting William Brownlow to threaten the entire delegation, claiming he could “lick any five” on his own. President E. B. Bartlet of Kentucky managed to restore order yet again just long enough to adjourn the meeting.⁹

Despite Ellis’s confidence that the opposition of “ultra” northern and southern men confirmed that it was a “national conservative platform” which laid “ultraism upon the shelf,” the new document seemed to please very few. Contrary to its supporters’ belief that this new version of the American “axioms” “most strongly recognised . . . the rights of the South,” and that “not a principle [was] advanced which the North could justly dispute,” opponents argued that it now served no one’s interests.¹⁰ By leaving slavery out of the platform in any explicit sense, the same group of southerners who had forced through the original 12th Section were left unsatisfied, while antislavery northerners still believed they needed a call for the restoration of the Missouri Compromise line if they were to have any chance in the fall elections.¹¹ And without at

⁹ *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, February 22, 25, 1856; *New York Times*, February 22, 1856; *Richmond Whig and Public Advertiser*, February 26, 1856; *Fayetteville (NC) Observer*, February 25, 1856.

¹⁰ *Washington Daily American Organ*, February 23, 1856; *New York Times*, February 22, 1856.

¹¹ See, for example, the negative reaction of George D. Shortridge, the American gubernatorial

least some mention of the Catholic Church, many Know Nothings had trouble believing they were still a part of the same organization they had rallied around with such enthusiasm only one year earlier.

The adoption of this new, bland wording gave a good indication of just how far the American party had come from its headier days of secret meetings and phantom candidates, when the Order's mystery formed a large part of its appeal. It also indicated how much influence the old-line Whigs now held. The Know Nothings' anti-party beliefs had led them to assault issues directly, in often times extreme and uncompromising ways. Compromise was something that party hacks did with their ideals in order to stay in office and reap the monetary rewards of patronage. Compromise meant accepting the votes of non-citizens, indeed scraping for them, and bowing to the influence of the "un-American" lackeys of a Catholic Pope. For a party at one time committed to reform, the acceptance of a platform designed to offend no one left much to be desired. Yet it can be argued that this platform, at least in regards to its nativism, more nearly reflected the ideals many southern Know Nothings had long espoused. Men like Kenneth Rayner and Garrett Davis, in addition to the Louisiana delegation led by Gayerre, had never been comfortable with a blanket denunciation of Catholicism, but had rather argued that the party's goal should be to block the influence of a foreign Pope on American politics. This platform still denounced outside interference in the political system, albeit

candidate in Alabama, who praised the "moral sublimity" of the 1855 platform, which "commanded respect even when it did not receive assent . . . [and] fell grateful as the light of Heaven upon the ungenerous wound"; *Montgomery Mail*, reprinted in *Fayetteville Observer*, April 2, 1856.

indirectly. But beyond that, few benefits came from this non-offensive wording. The platform did not convince Know Nothing opponents that the Order had changed its ways. Slavery and Catholicism as terms may have been left out, but anyone familiar with the Know Nothings knew the meaning of vague references such as “the maintenance and enforcement of all laws constitutionally enacted” and “allegiance or obligation of any description to any foreign prince or potentate.” For those inclined to object to the American Party’s ideals there seemed to be no difference. In the end, although a certain amount of nativism and a vague reference to state’s rights remained, diehard nativists and both antislavery and proslavery activists were left unsatisfied. And while the most explicit references to anti-Catholicism had been removed from the platform, the Know Nothings’ opponents remained unconvinced of the party’s good intentions.

Despite these misgivings, the new platform had received a more balanced support than any attempt to unite the American Party under one statement of policy since Kenneth Rayner first proposed the Union Degree almost a year and half earlier. Vespasian Ellis showed the same enthusiasm for the new statement of principles that Kenneth Rayner had for his Union Degree in late 1854, but the struggle to unite the party was far from over. On Friday, February 22, the nominating convention finally convened. Essentially an expanded version of the national council, this second meeting was no more peaceful. The same question of which delegation to allow from both Pennsylvania and Louisiana was repeated, taking up almost the entire first day of the convention. Then, the next morning,

a Pennsylvania delegate proposed that they “repudiate all platforms adopted by the National Councils” and replace them with the “Bible and the Constitution.” While not taken particularly seriously, the motion threw the convention into chaos as delegates argued over whether the national council had any authority to change the party platform on its own. In a scene of high drama and low comedy majorities quickly formed, voted and then just as suddenly collapsed. “Jacobin club[s]” came together and “made and unmade” decision after decision throughout the rest of the day.¹²

With renewed calls to repeal the same 12th Section, which had already been abrogated and subsequently replaced, the convention turned from confusion to near anarchy. R. K. Call of Florida, although he had voted to accept the new platform, now felt compelled to put up one last appeal to the Union men within the convention. With tears flowing from his eyes Call pleaded with the northern delegates to stop “stabbing at the best interests of the South and destroying its very vitality.” He could see that there were “two American parties at the convention and that between them was an insurmountable barrier” and he had “no hope of a conciliation.” With that he left the convention hall followed by a number of other southern bolters. Know Nothing President Bartlett pleaded with Call to stay, then, failing in that, surprised the entire gathering by moving that the nominating convention adjourn until July. A number of southerners like Crittenden, Brownlow, and Ellis, as well as northern supporters of Millard Fillmore had

¹² *Washington Daily American Organ*, February 25, 1856; *New York Times*, February 23, 1856; S.G. Haven to Millard Fillmore, March 4, 1856, Millard Fillmore Papers, SUNY Oswego.

contemplated this plan, but events had already overtaken it by this time. Earlier in the month the idea of nominating on July 4 (rather than on George Washington's Birthday, the reason February 22 had been chosen as the date) had begun to hold sway.

Crittenden's followers saw the later date as a chance to work on his support or that of another conservative Whig candidate. Fillmore's backers wanted a July date as well, at least if he were to be the candidate, otherwise they did not care when the nomination was made. However, the Republicans were now meeting in Pittsburgh and there was a growing fear amongst the southern delegates and the so-called "National Americans," as well as Fillmore people that an earlier Republican nomination, even as little as a day sooner would put the northerners "all off the American [and] on to the Republican track." With that in mind Bartlett's proposal sent the convention into a eight hour pandemonium.¹³

According to several accounts, the Know Nothings managed to outdo even their frequent previous volatile attempts at anarchy. Pepper Norris of Delaware, a John Clayton man, mildly commented that the "confusion in the convention today has been great and the proceedings very disorderly." The *New York Times*, however, described delegates as "seized with a sudden desire to test the strength utmost of their lungs. . . . After that you might have added the combined bellowings of all the bulls of Bashan

¹³ A. T. Burnley to John J. Crittenden, January 7, 28, 1856, George Robertson to Crittenden, March 8, 1856, John J. Crittenden Papers, LC; N.K. Hall to Fillmore, February 4, 1856; S.G. Haven to Fillmore, March 4, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY Oswego; Pepper Norris to John Clayton, February 23, 1856, John Clayton Papers, LC; *New York Times*, February 25, 1856; *Washington Daily American Organ*, December 22, 1855, January 7, February 25, 1856; *Richmond Whig*, February 26, 1856; *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, March 1, 1856; *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, February 25, 1856.

without perceptibly increasing the aggregate roar.” The confusion was so great and the noise so overwhelming the *Times* reporter could not hear the furiously pounding gavel despite standing a short distance from the president of the convention. “It was as if he was banging a bag of feathers.” The chaos continued for some time, until “the lungs of the convention gave out, and after one last roar” the meeting settled down somewhat, although each delegate was then given the opportunity to explain his vote on the matter in tedious and often insulting detail. After semi-order was restored the motion to adjourn was voted down with the conviction that its adoption would mean that the American party would probably never meet again. “The convention has resolved to act, “ noted Norris, “at all hazards.”¹⁴

The following Monday, William Brownlow put up a motion to nominate for the presidency. Delegates from New England as well as Illinois, Iowa, Ohio, and Pennsylvania threatened to bolt if they did not get a new platform that honored the old Missouri Compromise line. Undeterred the convention voted 151 to 51 to go ahead with the nomination. Good to their word, the antislavery northerners, led by Edmund Perkins

¹⁴ *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, February 15, 19, 1856; *Fayetteville (NC) Observer*, February 21, 1856; Norris to Clayton, February 23, 1856, Clayton Papers, LC; *New York Times*, February 25, 1856; *Washington Daily American Organ*, February 25, 1856; William Brownlow claimed at the convention that he only voted to nominate immediately in order to avoid a northern bolt to the Republicans, but a month before he had told John Bell that counting on postponing the choice until the summer was “a mistake” and that the convention would “nominate beyond all doubt.” Brownlow feared that a southern expectation of a postponement would hurt their attendance and allow northern delegates to nominate their candidate, probably George Law, forcing the southern Know Nothings to either accept Law or divide the party. By the time the struggle over whether to chose a candidate came up, Brownlow was no doubt heartened by the combined effort of national men and southerners in passing the new platform and was convinced that they could nominate their candidate, Millard Fillmore; see Brownlow to John Bell, January 15, 1856, John Bell Papers, LC.

of Connecticut, walked out of the hall and did not return.¹⁵ After five days of turbulence, the Know Nothings were finally prepared to choose a presidential candidate, but one nominated by a shell of the party.

With all the commotion over the platform debate, the question that had so occupied the minds of most delegates before the convention, whom to nominate, had drifted from most Know Nothings' minds. With so many convinced before the gathering that the selection of a candidate should be put off until the next Independence Day celebration, the main candidates' people had to scramble to gather votes. At the same time, the sudden decision to vote immediately ended the hopes of several candidates' backers. Crittenden's men had still seen their man as a possibility the day before, but now the Kentuckian was left without a vote when his home state delegation recognized the hopelessness of their cause and kept A. T. Burnley's promise to vote for Garrett Davis. Pepper Norris of Delaware put John Clayton's name into the hat, and several other men had faint hopes, among them Robert Stockton of New Jersey and Sam Houston of Texas. The only two hopefuls with any realistic chance, however, were Millard Fillmore and George Law. Fillmore's people could count on most of the southern votes as well as those of the National Americans. Law, who took for granted the support of antislavery northerners, saw his prospects fade dramatically, however, when the Connecticut and New Hampshire representatives and a majority of the Ohio delegates

¹⁵ *New York Times*, February 26, 1856; Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 209.

stormed out of the hall in exasperation after the convention voted to table one last attempt to renew the platform discussion. Without the votes of these antislavery delegates, Law's people could see the writing on the wall.¹⁶

After an unofficial tally in which each member named the candidate of his choice, the convention remained split. Fillmore's men had corralled seventy-one votes for their candidate, but another seventy remained scattered amongst eleven other candidates. Later that evening, however, R. K. Call of Florida returned with the rest of the wayward southerners, including Percy Walker of Alabama and Alex Boteler of Virginia, bolstering Fillmore's support. Several candidates withdrew themselves or had their backers do so, including John Clayton, and with this switch, it appeared that Fillmore would easily garner enough votes. The former Whig president received the nomination on the first official ballot with 179 out of 243 votes. Law finished a distant second with only 24 votes now that the conservatives had thoroughly quieted the antislavery portion of the convention.¹⁷

The vice-presidential selection went almost as smoothly. Andrew Jackson Donelson, adopted son of Andrew Jackson and former Democrat from Tennessee rounded out the ticket with a southern man. Three other southerners, Alexander Stuart,

¹⁶ A. F. Hopkins to Crittenden, February 22, 1856, Crittenden Papers, LC; Pepper Norris to Clayton, March 20, 1856, Clayton Papers, LC; S. G. Haven to Fillmore, March 4, 1856; John P. Kennedy to Fillmore, March 15, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY Oswego; *New York Times*, February 26, 1856; *Washington Daily American Organ*, February 27, 1856; *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, February 26, 1856.

¹⁷ *Fayetteville (NC) Observer*, February 28, 1856; *New York Times*, February 26, 1856; *Washington Daily American Organ*, February 2, 1856.

Kenneth Rayner, and Percy Walker were considered, but Donelson's relation to Andrew Jackson and his strength amongst southern Democratic voters made him the most popular choice by far, receiving 181 out of 211 total votes.¹⁸ Almost immediately following Donelson's acceptance speech, the convention adjourned as quickly as possible to avoid any further dissension.

The 1856 Philadelphia convention encapsulated a microcosm of all the political problems the American party's southern membership faced. Southern Know Nothings came to Philadelphia in the hope of re-establishing the American party's national standing which had been so damaged by the infighting of the previous nine months, as it was their only chance for winning the presidency and constituting themselves as a legitimate opposition party in the South. They were faced, however, with a northern majority that was strongly opposed to the proslavery stance the southerners had imposed upon the party platform the previous June. This majority was determined either to rid the American party of its proslavery slant or destroy it. Thus the southerners were confronted with a choice; they could either give in and appear to their voters as though they were backing down in the face of northern antislavery agitators, or they could stand up for a platform which had gained them nothing and in fact had lessened the uniqueness of their message by shifting the focus of the party away from nativism towards slavery.

Unfortunately, both choices produced the likely possibility of a sectional bolt that might

¹⁸ *Washington Daily American Organ*, February 27, 1856; Donelson's nomination was generally well received, but was not as crucial as Fillmore's, despite Donelson's claim to his wife that it was a "position that I could not have declined without breaking up the party," see Andrew Jackson Donelson to

destroy the party.

What they chose, in fact, was a third alternative. Vespasian Ellis's new platform was in certain respects an attempt to regain an earlier position by weakening the strictly anti-northern flavor of the proslavery appeal. The southern Know Nothings had, after all, reached the height of their popularity when they had campaigned as a nativist party. The real force of their message was not that *northerners* were a threat to slavery (the implied message of the proslavery 12th Section) but that *foreigners* were a threat to slavery. Ellis had argued this point ever since the adoption of the 12th Section and it had been a primary campaign theme in most of the Southern elections. By de-emphasizing the nativist position in favor of a state's rights stand in the previous June's document, the southern Know Nothings not only weakened their own allure, they also forced northern Americans from antislave states to challenge them over the party's direction, thus leading to the anarchy which became so common during the previous year. What the convention eventually adopted was the closest wording to this message the southerners could get given the climate of the meeting. The platform was weakly worded on state's rights, but strong enough to keep most southerners from bolting (although too strong for a majority of northerners), and mild as well on the Catholic threat, but went far enough to satisfy most nativists. If it failed (and it did fail to hold the entire party together), it was because significant minorities from both the North and the South, angered by months of conflict over the 12th Section, were now committed to an extreme sectional position. Thus the

solution came too late to hold the entire party together, nevertheless, the new platform was adopted by the remaining core of the party.

While the new platform may have been a belated attempt to revive the party with what was admittedly a watered-down version of the Order's nativist ideology, the presidential nomination far more clearly reflected the impact of the Whig upsurge within the Know Nothing's ranks. Despite Vespasian Ellis's attempt to find a middle ground in the platform for both slavery and nativism, the party image that emerged with Millard Fillmore and Andrew Jackson Donelson as its representatives bore little resemblance to the one that had excited voters and panicked Democrats less than a year before. As a result of the ever increasing influence of old line Whigs within the American party, the Know Nothings' ticket appeared to have little to do with the party's nativism. Fillmore and Donelson presented themselves only secondarily as the nation's saviors against the evils of foreign domination and political corruption. Their primary goal was to manifest the party as the only one that could avoid the devastating effects of sectional agitation. Their message was essentially a conservative Whig stand. By abandoning even the nativism that was left in the platform in the hope that attacking the Democrats on slavery would win the presidency, Fillmore presented voters with a very different alternative than the Know Nothings had in 1854-55. They now represented a negative reaction to the sectional politics of the Democratic and Republican parties, offering Unionism as the heart of their own message.

For the rank and file at the convention, Fillmore's selection was a compromise position of someone who could represent with dignity and sincerity the broad width of party beliefs. For northerners he was a candidate who personally disliked slavery and did not want to see it spread, while for southerners he was the man who had brokered the Compromise of 1850 and actively enforced the Fugitive Slave Act as President. Even nativists believed they had found in him someone who understood their fears. What they got, however, was a man who had sought to control the party for his own purposes, namely as a pro-Union vehicle. The result of this compromise was a two-headed beast. The Americans (not including the bolting northerners who represented a third perspective) left Philadelphia as a pro-Union party and a nativist party, but not as a pro-Union nativist party. The two ideals had become divorced from each other, neither argument separately wielding the force they had harnessed together.

Reactions throughout the South to Fillmore's nomination varied, but they represented the change in support the American party was now receiving. Fillmore was not the staunch nativist who was going to save the Union from the Pope and the influence of un-American foreigners or even prevent foreign abolitionists from voting in the Kansas elections. He was put forth, rather, as a conservative statesman who stood in the center between the two extremes of abolitionism and disunionism. "This seems to be," declared the *Abingdon Virginian*, "at the same time, the most popular and the most unpopular ticket of modern times--popular with Union loving, conservative men of all parties, and unpopular with fanatics and office-holders of all grades." The ticket was generally well

received by Know Nothing newspapers which hoped Fillmore and Donelson would not forget the popularity of nativist issues, as well as those Whig journals which had only nominally supported the American party in the past but now saw a candidate upon which “Whigs and Americans can heartily unite.” Whig journals which had remained aloof from the nativist movement in some cases also pledged their support for the ex-Whig led ticket, but others remained undecided in the hope their old party would still nominate its own candidate.¹⁹

Fillmore’s candidacy presented the Americans with a rather strange and often ironic situation. At the time of his nomination, the “American” party’s standard bearer was not even in the country, let alone anywhere near Philadelphia. Fillmore embarked upon a tour of Europe the previous summer and was still dining with the crowned heads of the continent when he was notified that he was to lead a party which for several years had openly campaigned on the platform that the former subjects of those nations whose hospitality he was now enjoying were not fit to be citizens of the United States. The ex-President’s connection to the Know Nothings did cause one extremely socially awkward moment, however. While visiting Rome, Fillmore was officially presented to the Pope.

¹⁹ *Abingdon Virginian*, March 29, 1856; Not everyone was pleased with Fillmore’s association with the Know Nothings, however. Dorothea Dix, the well-known reformer who tirelessly campaigned on behalf of the mentally ill, was greatly disturbed by her friend’s connection to the American Party. The two had met in 1850 while Fillmore was vice-president and had grown fairly close during his presidency and even more so following the death of his wife and daughter. Dix objected to what she saw as the low-class demagoguery of the Know Nothings, and felt that Fillmore was demeaning himself by becoming their candidate. She never really accepted his explanations as to his course of action, but did wish him well as she despised the Democrats and Republicans as much as the Know Nothings; see Dix to Fillmore, October 22, 30, November 3, 8, 1856; Fillmore to Dix, October 30, November 5, 1856 in Charles M. Snyder, *The Lady and the President: The Letters of Dorothea Dix and Millard Fillmore* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1975), 255-266.

Fearing the image this might leave if he were forced to take the customary kneeling position and kiss the Pope's hand, Fillmore came close to rejecting the offer. After reconsidering, he did meet with the Pontiff, who fortunately for the New Yorker's candidacy allowed him to sit, "neither offering hand nor foot for salutation."²⁰

Little was made of this incident in the American papers, and neither did the Know Nothing press seem to think it odd that their nominee did not return in any haste to answer their call. There were some American politicians, however, who did notice the irony with some misgivings. Henry Winter Davis of Maryland worried about the perception of Fillmore beginning his campaign while out of the country and advised him to accept the nomination only after returning. "I think it will look better," Davis offered, "for your acceptance of an American nomination to be given on American soil."²¹

At the time of his nomination, very few, either inside or outside the organization, were really certain if Fillmore had taken the oaths and could therefore be considered a member of the Order. The fact that his lack of Know Nothing credentials was not an issue at the Philadelphia convention indicates just how far nativism had slipped, or been sidetracked from the party's main agenda by the former Whigs who now dominated the presidential campaign. In the very recent past Fillmore had expressed some enthusiasm to his Whig associates for Know Nothing ideas, but for the most part he restricted his

²⁰ Fillmore to S. G. Haven, January 22, 1856, Fillmore Paper, SUNY Oswego; Robert J. Rayback, *Millard Fillmore: Biography of a President* (Buffalo: Buffalo Historical Society, 1959), 399-400.

²¹ S. G. Haven to Fillmore, March 4, 1856; Henry Winter Davis to Fillmore, March 31, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY Oswego.

praise to the Americans' anti-party beliefs. He had condemned the "fraud and bribery" that turned an election into a "farce and a mockery," and had supported Know Nothing candidates in New York, or had at the very least voted for them. Like other Whigs, however, Fillmore strenuously objected to the Order's secrecy requirements and rarely, if ever, openly mentioned nativism. His only real attempt to establish his nativist credentials with the party came in a letter to Isaac Newton in early 1855 in which he decried the "corrupting influence which the contest for the foreign vote is exciting upon our election." Fillmore in fact had been opposed to nativist politics in the past and had been instrumental in urging the establishment of a German newspaper in Buffalo in 1843 in an effort to secure the German vote for the Whigs. Despite this history and his reservations about the party, Fillmore did take the Know Nothing oaths and formally satisfied the nativists in a private ceremony just prior to leaving on his European tour.²²

Strangely enough, Fillmore's distance and separation from the political intrigues within the American party left even some of his closest advisers wondering if he in fact would even accept the nomination they had fought so hard to secure on his behalf. John P. Kennedy of Maryland wrote Fillmore to convince him that he would have no trouble with the new platform, while Solomon Haven encouraged his old law partner on numerous occasions to announce his decision. By declining, Haven prodded, Fillmore

²² Fillmore to Alexander H.H. Stuart, January 15, 1856, Alexander H.H. Stuart Papers, University of Virginia; Fillmore to Isaac Newton, January 3, 1855; Fillmore to Thurlow Weed, December 29, 1843, Fillmore Papers SUNY Oswego; Fillmore to Dorothea Dix, October 30, 1856, reprinted in Snyder, *The Lady and the President*, 257-258; Rayback, *Millard Fillmore*, 156, 396.

would be telling his people and the entire nation “I am out of the scrape and you and the country may both go to the devil.” More than two months after the nomination Haven was still writing to Fillmore complaining that his prolonged silence had completely demoralized the Americans in Congress and that his delay was beginning to benefit the other two parties. On May 21, three months after the convention, Fillmore finally decided to return home and sent his official letter of acceptance to the “unsolicited and unexpected nomination.”²³

Despite the fact that the American party was now a fundamentally different entity than it had been a year before, or perhaps because of it, Millard Fillmore and his advisers were extremely optimistic. They had emerged from the acrimony of the convention with a party relatively intact and one that was seemingly willing to follow the Old Line Whigs who now led it. Fillmore adviser John P. Kennedy went as far as to claim that “as a party it has no great popularity. Nothing but your nomination has saved it.” Believing this, and with the platform’s nativism toned down and adopting a declared neutrality on the question of slavery, Fillmore thought that he had the popularity necessary to win in both sections of the Union. Ironically, as of March 1856, the ex-President was not completely wrong in this assessment. As Michael Holt has recently argued, the Know Nothing presidential campaign of 1856 was not the forgone conclusion it has generally been

²³ John P. Kennedy to Fillmore, March 15, 28, 1856; S.G. Haven to Fillmore, March 4, April 24, May 11, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY Oswego; Fillmore to Alexander Stuart et. al., May 21, 1856, John Pendleton Kennedy Collection, George Peabody Branch, Enoch Pratt Free Library, Baltimore.

claimed to be.²⁴ While the Americans may have worried about losing northerners to the Republicans if they did not nominate in Philadelphia, they emerged from their chaotic convention as the party seemingly with the least troubles. By March 1856, the Republicans had yet to organize much of anything and the Democrats were struggling to regain their standing in the North in the midst of Franklin Pierce's calamitous administration.²⁵

In the South, Fillmore's supporters hit the campaign trail with gusto, rallied by the seemingly widespread acceptance of the ex-president's nomination. Convinced that they had both a "popular ticket . . . and the inside track," many felt assured that "those advantages and a thorough conservative organization" would be all they needed for victory.²⁶ William G. Brownlow was so excited about Fillmore's prospects that he promised "two or three thousand" additional votes in east Tennessee alone, even as he reveled in the first violence of the canvass.²⁷ Despite this enthusiasm, vice-presidential candidate Andrew Jackson Donelson remained uncertain of an overall strategy while

²⁴ Both Tyler Anbinder in his *Nativism and Slavery*, and Michael Holt have recently re-examined the 1856 presidential campaign from the American party perspective in the north; see Michael Holt, "Another Look at the Election of 1856," in Michael J. Birkner, *James Buchanan and the Political Crisis of the 1850s*, (Selingsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1996), 37-67. Little has been done, however, on the equivalent campaign in the southern states where Fillmore earned a majority of his votes.

²⁵ John P. Kennedy to Fillmore, March 15, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY Oswego; Michael F. Holt, "Another Look at the Election of 1856," 37-67; Potter, *Impending Crisis*, 259-260.

²⁶ J. Hughes to Andrew Jackson Donelson, March 20, 1856, Andrew Jackson Donelson Papers, LC.

²⁷ Brownlow loved to tell stores of any victory over a Democrat, and here he related a tale of a fight between two local newspaper editors, Know Nothing John M. Fleming and Democrat M. L. Patterson;

awaiting Fillmore's return.²⁸

Once back in the United States, Fillmore began his campaign, contrary to the tradition, with a speech of his own. Normally presidential candidates left the speech-making to their organizers and aids, but Fillmore took to the road in his home state of New York on his own behalf. Under the pretext of offering a few remarks to the crowds gathered to welcome him home from Europe, Fillmore rallied the troops with a whistle-stop tour along the route back to his home in Buffalo. It was his first real opportunity to make a public stand on the American platform, and it quickly became clear that he was not a Know Nothing, at least as the northern public had come to know them. While stumping his way home Fillmore rarely strayed from his Union message, even remarking that he had "no hostility to foreigners," and only objected to the mingling of church and state. The most he could say about his meeting with the Pope was that it had not caused him to become a Roman Catholic.²⁹ For Know Nothings waiting to hear the nativism they had long associated with their cause, Fillmore's words raised little enthusiasm. He apparently had taken Solomon G. Haven's advice on how to conduct the campaign. Haven had suggested that Fillmore could keep his Whig doctrines and only add "Americans shall rule America." The key however was to promise to leave each section

William G. Brownlow to Donelson, March 18, April 18, 1856, Donelson Papers, LC.

²⁸ A. J. Donelson to A.J. Donelson Jr., March 20, 1856, Donelson Papers, LC.

²⁹ Fillmore's speeches were reprinted in the *Washington National Intelligencer* June 24, 26, 27, July 1, 1856; and *The Arrival, Reception and Speeches of Millard Fillmore from New York to Buffalo* (New York: 1856), 2, 16, 13; Rayback, *Millard Fillmore*, 405-409.

“to the quiet enjoyment of its powers.”³⁰ This was the heart of the presidential strategy, to avoid sectional controversies at all costs. Fillmore stuck to this course, finally managing to endorse a nativist agenda in a speech in Newburgh, New York. Despite his backers’ excitement over this speech, Fillmore appeared to be doing little more than throwing a bone to his potential anti-Catholic voters.³¹

The northern campaign, controlled as it was by Fillmore and his “wire-pullers,” did not change much over the rest of the summer. The campaign in the South was put together in large part by Fillmore’s people and took on a similar shape. The Know Nothing press for the most part put nativism exactly where Fillmore wanted it, on the back-burner. The preservation of the Union through a strict avoidance of slavery issues became the party’s rallying cry. The party presented this message in a positive manner for the few months before the Republicans and Democrats nominated their own candidates. Left without an opponent to attack, Fillmore’s campaigners could once again tout the American party’s blessings and not worry about defending themselves, much the same way they had prior to 1855. Throughout the South, Know Nothing papers shifted the attack back to the Democrats, referring to them as the “anti-American” party and claiming that abolitionists were just as important to their success as they were for northern Republicans. After all, without the specter of abolition to hang around the

³⁰ S. G. Haven to Fillmore, April 24, May 11, 1856, Fillmore Papers, LC.

³¹ *Washington National Intelligencer*, July 1, 1856; George Robertson to Fillmore, July 3, 1856; S. G. Haven to Fillmore, July 4, 15, 1856; Henry Hillard to Fillmore, July 8, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY Oswego.

Know Nothings' necks, the Democrats would have no issues at all for their campaign.³²

Fillmore's race in the South had several problems early on which clearly illustrated the party's weaknesses. The first issue emerged from the Know Nothings' attempts to preach the gospel of the Union and ignore the nation's growing sectional animosities. The difficulties this caused for the party's national structure have already been well noted, and the dangers this ideal posed for the campaign were similar. The questions potential Fillmore voters most wanted answered was how did the candidate stand on the Republicans' call for a restoration of the Missouri compromise line and what would he do with Kansas. Politicians from throughout the South wrote both Fillmore and Donelson, but especially Fillmore, asking for his stand on restoring the old demarcation between slave and free territory in the West and under what condition he would admit Kansas into the Union.³³ Fillmore and Donelson's responses showed just how delicate a dance the party was taking around sectional issues. In public Fillmore did little to let anyone know exactly what he would do about the battle in Kansas between the pro and anti-slavery forces battling over the territorial government, sticking to a tactic of avoiding

³² "Anti-American" was a new term for the Democrats. A popular one during the more clearly nativist phase of the party was to refer to the Democrats as the "*Sag-nicht*" party. This play on the Know Nothings' own name designated the Democrats in German as the "say-nothings," a reference to their unacknowledged reliance on foreign votes, see William G. Brownlow to Fillmore, April 18, 1856, Fillmore Paper, SUNY Oswego; Shellyville (TN) *Expositor*, cited in *Kinston (NC) American Advocate*, June 19, 1856; *Kinston American Advocate*, June 19, 1856; *Richmond Whig*, May 6, 1856.

³³ Fillmore received any number of appeals for his stand on this controversy; see, for example, H. M. Miller to Fillmore, July 12, 1856; William A. Lewis to Fillmore, July 14, 1856; J.H. Skook to Fillmore, July 17, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY Oswego; N.G. Foster to Fillmore September 5, 1856; Fillmore to N.G. Foster, September 25, 1856, both letters reprinted in *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal* from *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*, October 4, 1856.

the issue. However, following the “sack of Lawrence” and Charles Sumner’s caning by Preston Brooks on the floor of the Senate in May, avoidance was hardly possible.³⁴ Yet, Fillmore continued to argue simply that the revocation of the Missouri Compromise line had been a mistake, but that any further action would only make matters worse. One adviser went as far as to suggest that Fillmore “not write any more” answers to further personal inquiries over the matter, arguing that “a man who does not know your position is either too obtuse to be of much of a threat against you, or too suspicious to prove a valuable friend.”³⁵

This solution satisfied few voters in the South, and the questions continued to pour in. Anna Ella Carrol of Maryland, a staunch Fillmore supporter, worried that his circumvention of the issue would cost the election. In a private letter, Fillmore confessed his reasoning for remaining mum. Fillmore believed that the South would benefit from the restoration of the compromise line and that it would simultaneously “annihilate [the] Black Republicans and the hydra-headed monster of disunion,” but that such a solution was impossible in the present political climate. “I confess,” Fillmore admitted, “that I see no light leading from this dark and bewildering cave.” Without an answer other than avoiding sectional controversies and protecting the Union, Fillmore was left with few

³⁴ Few national Know Nothings made very much of the Sumner attack when it occurred; see S.G. Haven to Fillmore, May 25, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY Oswego; William Gienapp, however, sees the attack as the single most important event in the Republican party’s ascendance in the North during 1856 in William E. Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852-1856* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 280-281.

³⁵ Humphrey Marshall to Fillmore, July 10, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY Oswego.

alternatives for the real situation in the West. While his advisers fretted about the “fearful extremes to which the sectional hostility has already driven our country,” they offered little of anything which might alleviate the problems.³⁶

Another immediate problem confronting the Fillmore camp as the summer of 1856 approached was what to do about the impending meeting in New York of the northern Know Nothing bolters. These men represented a majority of the Know Nothing constituency, at least in the North, and by late May they seemed determined to make their own nominations, ending any last remaining hope that they might somehow come back to the national party and support the Fillmore ticket. William Brownlow tried to put together a strategy with Donelson, but acknowledged that he was “at a great loss to know what we ought to do.” Brownlow feared that the only hope the Southern and national men had was in superior numbers, and that “to be feebly represented would put us in for it.” Even given that, the Tennessee editor remarked, “I have no faith in being able to do much with them ‘Bolters,’ if the whole South were represented there. Under our laws it requires three men to get up a riot, but one Black Republican can do it any time!” Given their lack of strength at the convention, Brownlow could think of nothing else than to use the southern press to “take ground in advance of their action,” and claim “that they have no authority to meet to ratify or undo the action of the Philadelphia convention.”³⁷

³⁶ Fillmore to Anna Ella Carrol, September 8, 1856, Anna Ella Carrol Collection, Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore; Thomas R. Whitney to Fillmore, July 21, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY Oswego.

³⁷ S. G. Haven to Fillmore, May 25, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY Oswego; William G. Brownlow

Once the northern Americans met in New York it became clear that Brownlow had been correct. The southern states were represented by only a handful of delegates from Arkansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, Tennessee, and Virginia, and their calls for national unity and appeals to accept Fillmore as the whole party's nominee made up little more than background noise for the real purpose of the meeting. John Minor Botts of Virginia gave an impassioned speech calling for the slavery issue to be put aside in the interests of sectional harmony, and for the party to concentrate on the goals originally set out by the Order, "controlling or destroying the influences which have been exercised by the foreign population of this country for the past twenty years." The response was less than enthusiastic, and Botts, like the rest of his fellow southerners present, soon became irrelevant to the proceedings.³⁸

The real question for the northern Know Nothings was whether they would nominate their own candidate for the presidency or take up a nominee from the Republicans who were scheduled to meet only a couple of days later than the North American convention. The notion of backing Fillmore was a dead letter before the meeting ever convened. The battle developed between a group within the convention who wanted to work a deal with the Republicans and those who wanted to either run their own man and have the Republicans follow, or at least maintain enough independence to force the Republicans to give the vice-presidency to a North American. Nathaniel Banks,

to Donelson, May 24, June 12, 1856, Thomas A. R. Nelson to William G. Brownlow, June 9, 1856, Donelson Papers, LC.

speaker of the House and Boston's representative, constructed a complicated plot to have himself nominated by the North Americans, and then wait until the Republicans had chosen a candidate, most likely John C. Fremont, the "pathfinder" who had earned his fame exploring the West and inciting revolt in California on the eve of the Mexican War. Once the Republicans had chosen, Banks, ever the opportunist, would turn down the American nomination in favor of the Republican vice-presidential spot. Banks upheld his part of the bargain, but the Republicans nominated William L. Dayton of New Jersey for vice-president, a man with no connections to the Order. Thus the northern Know Nothings were left without a candidate of their own, permanently separated from the rest of their party, and following meekly in the Republican party's trail.³⁹

With Fremont running as a Republican, Fillmore knew one candidate he would be contending with in the North. The Democrats would provide the other as well as his only opponent in the South, and they too were meeting to nominate in early June. Because Franklin Pierce had long since faded as a possibility for a second term, the Democrats settled on long serving, long suffering James Buchanan of Pennsylvania, a one-time Congressman, Senator, Secretary of State, and foreign diplomat. Although he had certainly served in enough positions for a long enough period of time to have made

³⁸ *Washington Daily American Organ*, June 5, 9, 1856.

³⁹ George Law, William H. Johnston, and Thomas R. Ford to Nathaniel P. Banks, June 10, 1856; Banks to Law, Johnston and Ford, June 11, 1856; S. M. Allen to Banks, June 13, 15, 1856; James W. Stone to Banks, June 14, 1856, Nathaniel P. Banks Papers, LC; Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 215-219; Gienapp, *Origins of the Republican Party*, 329-330; *New York Express*, June 17, 1856, *New York Herald*, June 17, 1856;

innumerable enemies, Buchanan proved to be the one candidate acceptable to both northern and southern Democrats. Having been out of the country serving as minister to Britain during the struggle over the Kansas-Nebraska act, Buchanan never had to take a stand. Without the negative baggage either Pierce or Stephen Douglas carried, Buchanan was just the man for a national election.⁴⁰ Now that both the Democrats and Republicans had made their choices in mid-June, the Know Nothings were now no longer running alone and the campaign could really begin.

Buchanan's nomination as the "anti-American" candidate lifted the spirits of southern Know Nothings and raised their enthusiasm to new levels. For them, the "old public functionary," as Buchanan often referred to himself, was an "aged horse, and at every turn the mud on the track appears to get deeper and deeper." William Brownlow was gleeful about Buchanan's nomination. "We are not afraid of 'old Buck' in Tennessee, when once we show up his Federal ten cent anti-slavery record." In an effort to attract as wide a range of supporters as possible, Know Nothing newspapers dredged up any criticism of Buchanan they could find, including statements from both Andrew Jackson and Henry Clay, never noting the irony of invoking two such bitter rivals and enemies for the same purpose. The Know Nothings were not alone in their characterization of Buchanan however. Even a number of southern Democrats began to worry about their party's choice. Andrew Johnson, Democratic governor of Tennessee,

⁴⁰ David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 259-260.

lamented that “if it was not for Buchanan’s want of popularity it [Fillmore-Donelson] is the dead deadeat ticket that was ever presented in good earnest to the people of Tennessee. . . . If we had a popular nominee we could beat them ten thousand votes and if the state goes against us it will be on account of the extreme weakness of our candidate and nothing else.”⁴¹

Using Buchanan and Fremont’s nominations, Fillmore and his people tried to touch up their initial strategy for maintaining the Union. The real race, Fillmore wrote to Donelson, was “to be between the Americans and Republicans. The Democracy is deserting Mr. Buchanan by scores . . . and joining the other parties.” The Fillmore campaign now presented the choice as one between their party and its avoidance of sectional issues, and wasting a vote on Buchanan, which because of his extreme unpopularity in the North would only translate into a Fremont victory. “We are putting the idea that the race is between you and Fremont, and that Buchanan is nowhere except as an ally of the Black Republicans,” Donelson wrote. And if Fremont did win, the Know Nothings cautioned, the southern Democrats’ true nature would be revealed, and in all likelihood they would take the South out of the Union. “There is no wish amongst the leaders of the Southern Democracy,” Andrew Donelson warned, “to arrest the dangers of sectionalism. . . . If we are in a minority [we must] throw the possibility of defeat . . . upon the Democratic party where it belongs.” Donelson at one point even went as far as

⁴¹ R. P. Letcher to John J. Crittenden, July 1, 1856, Crittenden Papers, LC; William G. Brownlow to Donelson, June 12, 1856, Donelson Papers, LC; *Kinston (NC) American Advocate*, June 12, July 3, 1856; Andrew Johnson to A.O.P. Nicholson, June 27, 1856, Andrew Johnson Papers, LC.

to suggest that the southern Democrats secretly wanted Fremont to win. "In my judgment many of them desire the election of Fremont as leading to the dissolution of the Union."⁴²

This strategy, like so much of the politics of the 1850s, was designed to play directly on people's fears. Rather than exploiting a fear of Catholics and foreigners as before, however, Fillmore's concentration on Union as the glue to hold the party together suggested a different tactic. Now the Americans would capitalize on both southern and northern fear of a Republican victory and its possible consequences for the Union. In the scenario proposed by the Know Nothings, voting for either the Republicans or the Democrats amounted to the same thing because both favored pushing sectional tensions to the point of southern secession. A vote for anyone but Fillmore in effect became a vote against the continuation of the Union. Fillmore's hope was that his party would become synonymous with Unionism both North and South. There was no alternative for voters, Fillmore backers argued, the choice was between Fillmore and Union or anyone else and the end of the United States as they knew it.⁴³

Bolstered by this new offensive, Know Nothing enthusiasm over their candidate and his chances reached its peak in July and early August. Adding to their excitement in the North was the hope that the Know Nothing spread rumor that Fremont was Catholic

⁴² Fillmore to Donelson, July 10, 1856, Donelson Papers, LC; Donelson to Fillmore, July 1, July 26, August 25, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY Oswego; *Louisville Weekly Journal*, October 15, 1856.

⁴³ Donelson to Fillmore, August 25, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY Oswego; *Washington Daily American Organ*, September 1, 1856.

would bring the northern American voters back to Fillmore.⁴⁴ From all over the South predictions of victory flooded into both Fillmore and Donelson's mail as their backers carefully counted potential votes and tried to guess the minds of Americans. The most extremely optimistic predictions gave Fillmore an outright victory in a dozen states both North and South and a two-to-one advantage in the Electoral College over the Democrats with the Republicans running a distant third. More reasoned estimations also gave Fillmore between sixty and eighty-two electoral votes in the South. While some Fillmore supporters recognized the difficulty of winning such northern states as Ohio and Pennsylvania, few seemed to doubt that Fillmore was still the odds on favorite to win the election.⁴⁵

All these estimations of outright victory were still unproved predictions and had little standing in reality. Several important state elections were scheduled for August and September, however, and these would provide a real test for Know Nothing possibilities in the fall elections. Ten southern states had elections scheduled between August 4 and October 14, with four states choosing governors--Arkansas, Florida, Missouri, and North Carolina. North Carolina's elections set for early August, were perhaps the most important test for the Know Nothings of the southern campaigns. The state had been Whig for much of the second party period and Know Nothings had held their own in congressional elections in 1855. Although the governor, Thomas Bragg, was a Democrat,

⁴⁴ Gienapp, *Origins of the Republican Party*, 367-72; Holt, *Politic Crisis of the 1850s*, 179-180.

⁴⁵ R. O. Marlett to Donelson, July 10, 1856, Donelson Papers, LC; Humphrey Marshall to

his victory in 1854 had been at the expense of Whig candidate Alfred Dockery, who had run before Know Nothing lodges could be organized and before the Order had forged a presence in the state. Since then Kenneth Rayner of North Carolina had emerged as an important leader in the national party and was the most influential southerner with northern Americans.⁴⁶ North Carolina would provide the first test of the new Union emphasis and hopefully an indication of Fillmore's chances throughout the South in November.

In 1856 Bragg ran again, this time against Know Nothing candidate John A. Gilmer. The North Carolina campaign in many ways resembled the national one, in large part because the state party very much resembled the national, in that it, too, had been taken over by Whigs. But as a transformed Whig party, the North Carolina Americans lost the benefits of their anti-Catholic, anti-foreign, anti-party beliefs without gaining the votes of a party which was essentially dead. Nativists, especially Democrats and new voters, who had seen promise in the new party the year before, abandoned the Know Nothings once they began to appear too whiggish. Whigs in the state were not sufficiently numerous to make up the difference, and indeed, many refused to vote for a party that was nativist despite the toning down of that message. In addition, the fact that the party was the "American" party and not the "Whig" party made it easier for old-line

Fillmore, July 10, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY Oswego; *Louisville Weekly Journal*, August 2, 1856.

⁴⁶ *Fayetteville (NC) Observer*, July 7, 1856.

Whigs to vote Democrat, because they were not deserting their old party anymore.⁴⁷

Bragg won by as large a margin as North Carolina had seen during the second party system with over fifty-six percent of the vote.⁴⁸ The Democrats had managed to pillory Gilmer on both Know Nothing and Whig issues at both the state and national level. His stand against broadened suffrage and in favor of internal improvements had identified Gilmer as a Whig, while his lackluster nativism failed to attract any additional voters. He had adopted the Whig's least popular issue while abandoning the Know Nothing's most popular ideas, a lethal combination. The loss was a blow to the Fillmore campaign and the Know Nothings' hopes, but it was put down as a "purely local" defeat. The issues, North Carolina Know Nothings insisted, "cannot operate in the national, or Presidential election." Whatever the reason, however, the conservative Whig version of Know Nothingism had not proven that it could win in the South, or even do as well as the nativist variant. Following their defeat in North Carolina and similar poor showings in the other southern state elections, the Fillmore campaign's enthusiasm began a decline that would continue unchecked until the elections in November.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Marc W. Kruman, *Parties and Politics in North Carolina, 1836-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana Press, 1983), 171-174; Thomas E. Jeffrey, *State Parties and National Politics: North Carolina, 1815-1861* (Athens: University of Georgia, 1989), 249-253; *Kinston (NC) American Advocate*, June 19, 1856; *Fayetteville (NC) Observer*, July 14, 17, 1856.

⁴⁸ *Congressional Quarterly, Guide to U.S. Elections* (Washington D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, 1975), 423; *Kinston American Advocate*, August 7, 1856; *Fayetteville (NC) Observer*, August 14, 18, 25, 1856.

⁴⁹ *Kinston (NC) American Advocate*, August 14, 1856; *Greensborough (NC) Patriot*, June 6, 1856; *Fayetteville (NC) Observer*, July 17, 1856; Donelson to Fillmore, August 25, 1856; James G. Carts to Fillmore, September 30, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY Oswego; Know Nothings lost gubernatorial races in Arkansas, Florida, and Missouri as well, while failing to elect a single new U.S. congressman;

Despite their defeat in North Carolina and poor showing throughout the South in the August elections, by September Fillmore and his backers still believed they had enough support to at least put the election into the House of Representatives, although probably not win it outright anymore. This was certainly a fall back position, considering their grandiose expectations in July, but Fillmore and the old-line Whigs who surrounded him still placed their hopes on the votes of their former party, which was scheduled to convene its own convention in Baltimore in September to nominate a presidential candidate. "If a union can be effected between the Whigs and Americans, I see no reason why the vote of this state should not be given to you," Alexander Stuart advised from Virginia. And Stuart was not the only former Whig adviser who put his faith in a public Whig backing of Fillmore's candidacy to save the day. Conservative Whigs who supported Fillmore's Union strategy sincerely believed that their old party would rise from the dead to put their last president back in the executive mansion. "If prominent men of the old Line Whigs will take an active part, many that are now doubtful will come to the support of Mr. Fillmore, and this desired object can be attained," one North Carolinian remarked.⁵⁰ This over-enthusiastic hope for the support of a moribund political organization seems somewhat bizarre, however. The increasing whiggishness of the Americans had already caused any number of defections and continued to worry many

Congressional Quarterly, *Guide to U.S. Elections*, 399, 403, 417, 601.

⁵⁰ A.H.H. Stuart to Fillmore, July 9, 1856; D.C. Morton to Fillmore, August 12, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY Oswego; Richard A. Caldwell to William A. Graham, in J.G. de Roulhac Hamilton, *The Papers of William Alexander Graham*, vol. IV., 1851-1856 (Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1961), 646.

party members. G.J. Carlise of Virginia warned Fillmore to be “guarded” in his acceptance of any Whig nomination. Most Whigs were already Know Nothings, Carlise noted, and “the few who compromise the meeting (Whig Convention) are men who cannot see what is passing around them and do not know that the idea of reviving the Whig party in name is utterly hopeless.” Of even greater worry was the fact that many of the “Americans of Virginia are from the ranks of the Democratic party and they do not like the charge that the American movement is a Whig trick.”⁵¹

Initially Fillmore seemed ready to heed Carlise’s advice. When the Georgia American state convention nominated Fillmore early summer, but did so with their own platform and a public declaration that they were not supporting the platform of the national party, Fillmore refused to accept their nomination.⁵²

How can they then suppose that I will subscribe to their platform? If it be the same as that of the American party, it would be useless; and if it be different it would be inconsistent, and in either case, to adopt it would but increase the jealousy of the American Democrats who are constantly told that the American party is the old Whig party in disguise. ...I cannot be one thing at the North and another at the South, nor one thing to the American party and another to the Whig party. I should be glad to secure the votes and support of all Union-loving men, whether Whigs or Democrats, and whether North or South of Mason’s and Dixon’s line. ...If they require a pledge of some precious dogma of their own, as a condition of support, then I must be content to go without it.⁵³

From this statement it appeared that Fillmore did not want to further his identification

⁵¹ G. J. Carlise to Fillmore, July 18, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY Oswego.

⁵² H. M. Miller to Fillmore, July 12, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY Oswego.

⁵³ Fillmore to William C. Rives, July 23, 1856, Millard Fillmore Papers, LC.

with an official Whig nomination, which was essentially what the Georgia state convention had given him. By September, however, pressure from his advisers and the losses in the southern state elections had pushed Fillmore to accept gladly the national Whig party's backing.⁵⁴

The Whigs' official support gave the campaign a slight boost, at least amongst the most diehard, but by October the Know Nothings had little hope left. The weakness of the Fillmore led party and the growing fear of southerners that a vote for Fillmore was a vote for Fremont (the irony of this conclusion for the Know Nothings is obvious) combined with Democratic victories in Pennsylvania and Florida, seemed to offer few prospects for optimism. States like Tennessee and Kentucky, which Know Nothings had previously believed were assured for their ticket, were now questionable, while many others which had seemed a stretch but quite possible were now given up on entirely.⁵⁵ Kenneth Rayner helped put together a last ditch attempt to form a fusion ticket in Pennsylvania between the Republicans and the Americans in an attempt to keep that key state out of Buchanan's hands, and hopefully give it to Fillmore. The deal fell through, however, because of the refusal of American state officials to countenance a fusion with the Republicans.⁵⁶

By election day the late campaign pessimism that overcame Andrew Jackson

⁵⁴ *Richmond Whig*, September 19, 23, 1856.

⁵⁵ H. W. Richards to Fillmore, October 6, 1856; John C. Pendleton to Fillmore, October 4, 1856; Donelson to Fillmore, October 18, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY Oswego.

⁵⁶ Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 241-242; N. Sargent to Fillmore, October 12, 1856, Fillmore

Donelson's earlier enthusiasm seemed completely justified.⁵⁷ The final tally reflected a woeful defeat for the American party. Fillmore won in only one state, Maryland, and finished with only twenty-one percent of the vote nationwide, nearly a million votes behind the winner, Democrat James Buchanan. In the South the vote totals were far closer as the Americans were the only opposition to the Democrats, but the results were essentially the same. Nowhere did Fillmore gain on any previous Know Nothing totals, and in most states he finished far worse than American candidates from the previous year. In Virginia, for example, the state which had seemed so promising but had begun the Know Nothing slide, Fillmore was beaten by 30,000 votes, 20,000 more than Thomas Flournoy's deficit in 1855. Other than Maryland, in only four southern states, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, and Tennessee, did Fillmore get more than forty-five percent of the vote.⁵⁸

Yet despite this overwhelming defeat, Fillmore did manage to win 43.9 percent of the South's vote total, although only 21.6 percent in the North and South combined. While this only garnered eight electoral votes, Fillmore was only a few thousand tallies from throwing the election to the House. These numbers encouraged a good deal of finger pointing, and ironically enough the Know Nothings identified their old antagonists--foreigners, Catholics, and corrupt politicians working in league together--as the primary culprits. The message which Fillmore's campaign had dealt with only marginally now

Papers, SUNY Oswego.

⁵⁷ Donelson to Fillmore, October 18, 23, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY Oswego.

came back as an explanation for his defeat. Even before the national election, following Democratic victories in the Pennsylvania and Florida state elections, Andrew Jackson Donelson had blamed increased naturalization rates and “foreign capital” for Know Nothing defeats. After the election voting discrepancies were suddenly discovered in key states like Kentucky, Ohio, and Indiana, “the triumph,” Know Nothings claimed, “of chicanery and fraud.” One Know Nothing newspaper even noted how much better educated Fillmore voters were than Buchanan voters. Using education rates in southern counties and comparing the two candidates, George Prentice of Louisville came to the conclusion that Fillmore voters were far more intelligent, presumably because they were native-born.⁵⁹ The irony that the explanation for their defeat went back to the old nativist ideology was lost on most Know Nothings, but by the end of 1856, there were so few Know Nothings left this particular irony no longer mattered.

The 1856 election proved to be the last stand on any national level for the Know Nothings. In 1855, the Order was poised to take over the national government in the name of “Americanism.” By the end of 1856, it was a political joke not worth considering any longer. The time in between was filled with conflict over sectional issues between the northern and southern halves of the party and the quiet takeover of the southern organization by old line Whigs. The result was the destruction of the party’s

⁵⁸ Congressional Quarterly, *Guide to U.S. Elections*, 270.

⁵⁹ Donelson to Fillmore, October 18, 1856; *Louisville Weekly Journal*, November 19, 1856, January 3, 1857.

promise and its political eclipse.

CONCLUSION: THE MEANING OF THE KNOW NOTHING PARTY IN THE SOUTH

Ever since their defeat in the 1856 presidential election, the Know Nothings, or the American party, have been relegated to that refuse pile of American political history known as “third party” status.¹ To be part of that select group is to be forever remembered (if you are lucky enough to be remembered at all) as finishing third in a two-man race, the odd-man out. Once the election is over people tend to forget very quickly that there even was a third-place finisher, let alone place any sort of significance on that third party, other than occasionally noting a noble and gallant effort in the face of insurmountable odds.

The Know Nothings were different from other third parties in many ways, however. They were not, as the Liberty or Free Soil parties were in the antebellum era, or the Populist party was at the end of the nineteenth century, an alternative to the two established parties seeking to make inroads into an already highly defined party structure. The Know Nothings emerged in the midst of the party system breakdown, and indeed were at least partially responsible for that breakdown. Their sudden appearance shocked the Democrats and destroyed the floundering Whigs. At the height of their power there

¹ For example, political scientist J. David Gillespie puts the Know Nothings in a list with “other important transient parties,” see; J. David Gillespie, *Politics at the Periphery: Third Parties in Two-Party America* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 43.

was only one established party, the Democrats. In the North they had to contend with another upstart organization, the Republicans, and it was a closely contested race to determine which one would emerge as the opposition party to the Democrats in the American two-party system. The Know Nothings' eventual loss and consignment to third-party status in no way lessens their importance during those years before the Republicans emerged victorious.

In the South, the Know Nothings never really were a third party. As the nativists began to gather adherents in the second half of 1854, the second party in the South, the Whigs, devastated by the combined blows of the 1852 elections and the Kansas-Nebraska Act, now for all practical purposes disappeared under the onslaught of the Know Nothings. Left without a party of their own, many Whigs rushed to join the secret new nativist organization. Added to their numbers were southern Democrats alarmed by the apparent Catholic leanings of the Franklin Pierce administration, or the potential threat to slavery implied by the Kansas-Nebraska act with its land and suffrage allotments for non-citizens. By 1855 the Whigs were gone and there were only two parties in the South, the Know Nothings and the Democrats. So to think of the Know Nothings as a third party in the South leaves one wondering just who number two might have been.

The party in fact did not disappear following Millard Fillmore's defeat in 1856. Remnants managed to hang on in several states, including Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Tennessee, and Texas. From 1856-1859, the American Party (Know Nothing

was rarely if ever used anymore) comprised the only opposition to the Democrats available to southerners, but it existed in a much diminished condition. As an opposition party, the American Party stood on much the same ground Millard Fillmore had in 1856, that is as the Unionist alternative to the sectional Democrats and Republicans. Although the dire predictions of 1856 had not come true--the southern Democrats had not left the Union--the threat was by no means diminished.

In Tennessee William G. Brownlow continued to fly the American Party flag well into 1857, backing American candidates for Congress in that year's elections. In May, the state party held its convention, chaired by former governor Neil S. Brown, in Nashville. Although the party sounded somewhat more whiggish than in the past, calling for new tariffs, land policies, and a federally funded railroad to the Pacific, it still adopted resolutions attacking foreign influence and suffrage, as well as the corruption of the Democratic administration. Brownlow's state led the South when it returned three men to the House in the 1857 elections, Charles Ready, Felix Zollicoffer, and Horace Maynard, who represented the parson's own district. In 1855 Tennessee had sent five Americans to the House, but by 1857 these three would be the best showing of any southern state for the party.² Even this small victory was short lived, however. In September the *Knoxville Whig* announced the official end of the American Party in Tennessee. Brownlow was still lashing out at the Democratic Party for "debas[ing] itself through the dangerous and

² *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, April 18, May 9, 1857; Congressional Quarterly, *Guide to U. S. Elections* (Washington D. C.: Congressional Quarterly, 1975, 600, 603.

destroying elements of Foreign demands and exactions” and for “prostitut[ing] itself to the base purposes of designing politicians and unprincipled Aliens.” Vowing that he could “never act with that organization in this life,” and would only “unite with the Democracy” in “Hell,” Brownlow maintained his defiance, but no longer did so as a Know Nothing. After 1857 the bare remnants of the Order, combined with anyone else opposed to the Democrats, would simply be known as the Opposition.³

The story was much the same in the other southern states which had had Know Nothing strongholds. Where the party did continue it did so as only a shadow of its former self. Like Tennessee, most states ran candidates in 1857; eleven were elected to the House from the South, but by the next round of elections only Maryland fielded any American candidates.⁴ By then the remaining opposition was scattered between numerous state organizations that had very little connection to each other, let alone to any national party. In 1860 a few remaining Whig/Americans, centered on the remnants of the Fillmore supporters in Virginia and Kentucky, backed Brownlow’s old favorite, John Bell of Tennessee, for the presidency under the Constitutional Union Party umbrella. The *New York Herald’s* description of the party as a “great gathering of Fossil Know Nothings and Southern Americans” was not far from the truth.⁵ The party’s leadership, men like

³ *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, September 12, 1857.

⁴ Congressional Quarterly, *Guide to U. S. Elections*, 603, 606.

⁵ F. William Walker to William A. Graham, December 31, 1859, J.G. de Roulhac Hamilton,, *The Papers of William Alexander Graham*, vol. IV., 1851-1856 (Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1961), 133-135; Joseph Howard Parks, *John Bell of Tennessee* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1950), 352; Albert D. Kirwan, *John J. Crittenden: The Struggle for the Union* (Lexington:

Bell, John Crittenden of Kentucky, William A. Graham of North Carolina, Sam Houston of Texas, and Edward Everett of Massachusetts, were four years older and had even less national backing than Fillmore had gathered in 1856. The young, idealistic men like Kenneth Rayner and Garrett Davis, although still Union men, had faded from national prominence, giving the Constitutional Union Party a rather decrepit look.

Ironically, the Constitutional Union Party captured more states than Fillmore had managed to win in 1856. Bell was victorious in Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee, three states Fillmore had considered crucial and believed he was almost certain to win, but lost nonetheless. Maryland, Fillmore's only prize, went to John C. Breckinridge and the Democrats, however. Even with more electoral votes, Bell managed 9 percentage points less of the popular total than Fillmore had earned.⁶ Unionism as the exclusive appeal to voters seemed no more popular in 1860 than it had in 1856.

For the most part, former Know Nothings did little to distinguish themselves as Unionists during the secession crisis. A majority went the way of their states and abandoned the Union Degree when the time came. The most notable exception was William Brownlow, who, despite his rabid proslavery beliefs, not only condemned secession, but continued to attack the Confederate government in his newspaper until forced to flee. He was eventually expelled from the state by Confederate authorities in

University of Kentucky Press, 1962), 347-356; David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 417.

⁶ Congressional Quarterly, *Guide to U. S. Elections*, 270-271.

1862, only to return as Reconstruction governor of Tennessee.⁷ Perhaps the most surprising, however, was Kenneth Rayner. The North Carolinian had first emerged on the national scene when he championed his Union Degree oath in 1854. He made Unionism a central tenet of southern Know Nothingism and put his full weight behind saving the Union. He had played a large role in the fusion plans between the Americans and Republicans in Pennsylvania in 1856, however, and his position at home in North Carolina suffered greatly. Viciously attacked by the Democratic press for his role in the election, Rayner was burned in effigy and his career never recovered. In 1860 he backed Breckinridge in the election, and fully endorsed secession after the fall of Fort Sumter in 1861. It was, as one former ally put it, “the most extraordinary summerset in history.”⁸

Although the Know Nothings appear as just a temporary flash of light on the American political scene and end with a sad story like Kenneth Rayner’s, their contribution was for more significant. Between 1854 and 1856 the Know Nothings had attempted to redraw the political landscape in both the North and the South, essentially wiping out the old political alignments between Whigs and Democrats and replacing it with the new nativist centered political scheme. By 1855 it was clear to many astute observers that the old political system had ended and a new arrangement was taking

⁷ Thomas B. Alexander, “Strange Bedfellows: The Interlocking Careers of T. A. R. Nelson, Andrew Johnson, and W. G. (Parson) Brownlow,” *East Tennessee Historical Society’s Publications*, 51 (1979), 66-72.

⁸ Gregg Cantrell, *Kenneth and John B. Rayner and the Limits of Southern Dissent* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 110-117, 130; Kemp P. Battle to William A. Graham, April 16, 1860, in Roulhac Hamilton, *Papers of William Alexander Graham*, IV, 156-157.

place. The political system of the 1840s could not handle the problems of foreign and Catholic influence; indeed it had encouraged them, and thus could not be revived. Any new system had to be built around an opposition to both the Catholic Church and the corrupting influences of immigrants. The only alternative seemed to be new a political alignment that would be entirely sectional in basis, and when it became so, northern politicians and parties would dominate where southern men previously had. In that world the nativists' agenda became secondary at best, and for southerners it was even more troubling; slavery would no longer be protected now that the dominant party, surely a northern party, would have no stake in it. Whereas the national Democratic Party had committed itself to the protection of slavery in the 1820s, the destruction of the Democrats' nationality meant the end of that agreement as well. There would be no one to protect slavery except southerners who would find their political influence increasingly limited.

The Know Nothings realized this and attempted to put together a new coalition with northerners along nativist lines. Here was an issue that was not only pressing, but that did not divide men by which part of the nation they lived in or which form of labor they preferred, free or slave. The reliance on nativism was both a response to increased immigration and an attempt to redefine American nationalism in the face of the breakup of that nationalism over slavery. The new Americans would be more like the old, revolutionary men who had first created the nation. Motivated by a republican ideology,

they would think of the United States as one entity, devoid of sectional issues and united in a battle to prevent foreign influence over American political and social institutions. The politicians who had been corrupted by this influence and the sectional controversy would be swept away in favor of patriots who knew the Pope for what he really was, and did not bother slavery or slaveholders as long as slaveholders did not bother them. Thus, they could save slavery and the nation at the same time. Southern Know Nothings were convinced that their victory, which would have begun in Virginia and spread throughout the South, would have bound the Northern Know Nothings to them and thereby the nation. After Virginia, they shortsightedly believed that they had to rethink their strategy, a tactic that brought disaster for the American party. Unable to reconcile the question of slavery, northern free-soilers broke with proslavery southerners, first at their national meeting in Philadelphia in 1855, then in Congress in early 1856, and finally at the party's nominating convention.

Once the party split over slavery, old line Whigs, many who had previously remained aloof from the nativist centered Know Nothings, gradually worked their way into the Order and pushed it towards their agenda. By the time of the presidential campaign in 1856, the southern Know Nothings were dominated by Whigs who now stressed Unionism over all else, forgetting the crucial link the party had once made between nativism, slavery, and Unionism. Without the two in combination, the Know Nothings' appeal, never great enough to be taken for granted, began to wane. Although they offered a better alternative to the Democrats by stressing Unionism than they had by

strongly backing slavery, it was not enough to convince southern voters fearful of the fate of their peculiar institution.

The Know Nothings were the last real opposition party of any significance in the South before the Civil War. Once they abandoned their alternative vision of American politics in order to answer the Democrats' charges of abolitionism, the South was put on the road to one party rule. By stressing slavery in the same way the Democrats did, southerners became even more convinced that the protection of the institution was the paramount issue. The Know Nothings turned up the political pressure for southern politicians to defend slavery by forcing them to out do each other at home in order to be elected. In doing this they made northern free-soilers into an even greater threat. When slavery became the only issue and the Democrats the party of slavery, the sole alternative was northern politics, which was unacceptable. With no choice at home, distrust in the political system grew. Southerners still believed in republican tenets, but that ideology demanded choices, and without options, politics no longer seemed to be the answer.

Added to the important role the southern Know Nothings played in the radicalization of slavery politics in the South was their destruction of their own national party. When they forced the northern majority to actively support either slavery expansion or leave the party, the northerners preferred the latter. From there it was a short trip into the arms of the waiting Republicans, who used their new-found strength to destroy what was left of the northern Know Nothings. With Northern politics now dominated by a party opposed to both slavery and seemingly the whole southern way of

life, the southern Democrats now appeared completely justified in the accusations they had always made against the Know Nothings, now aimed at Republicans. And as the only significant party remaining in the South, southern voters were increasingly inclined to accept their position, and those who were not had no vehicle through which to object. Thus in 1861, when the critical period for political decisions arrived, southerners turned from political solutions and left the Union instead, choosing simply to separate themselves from the rest of the country rather than give into Republican rule, a situation for which they no longer believed politics held the answer.⁹ The Know Nothings had played a crucial role in the development of southern politics in the 1850s. It was, however, a very different role than any of them had ever intended. They contributed directly to the breakdown of the national party structure and the system of political compromise that plagued the late 1850s, which in turn led to the coming of the Civil War.

To grant so much importance to the workings of a failed political movement may seem excessive, and perhaps seems to threaten to return Civil War historiography to the era of the "blundering generation."¹⁰ It has certainly not been my intention to do so, or to suggest that if only Thomas Flournoy had given a few campaign speeches in Virginia in 1855 he may have won that election, avoided a breakup of the national Know Nothing

⁹ In this conclusion, I agree with Michael Holt's analysis in *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1978), 219-259.

¹⁰ For the most prominent assertions of this thesis, see Avery O. Craven, *The Coming of the Civil War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957); James G. Randall, "The Blundering Generation," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, xxvii (June 1940), 3-28; Roy F. Nichols, *The Disruption of American Democracy* (New York: Macmillan, 1948); and for a good explanation of Civil War historiography on the "blundering generation," see Thomas J. Pressly, *Americans Interpret their Civil War* (Princeton: Princeton

Party and that in turn may have avoided the Civil War. Neither has it been my intention to write a history of an inevitable, "irrepressible conflict," one in which the players have no role beyond succumbing to the inevitable pressures of the slavery controversy. There were many factors which led to the American Civil War, and the Know Nothings only form part of a much larger historical process. Slavery was indeed an issue that became increasingly difficult to avoid, as the Know Nothings discovered, but at the same time they contributed to the urgency with which southern politicians dealt with the problem. The war was not simply nor entirely the result of the actions of a relatively small group of politicians, but the Know Nothings did have an impact on the success of the Republican Party, and in doing so advanced the sectional trend in politics which in turn helped bring on the war. The Southern Know Nothing Party did not cause the Civil War, but they did contribute in significant ways to the circumstances which put the nation on the brink of war in early 1861, and thus share in the responsibility.

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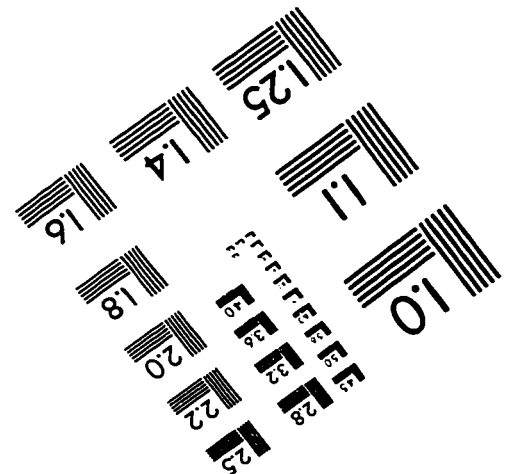
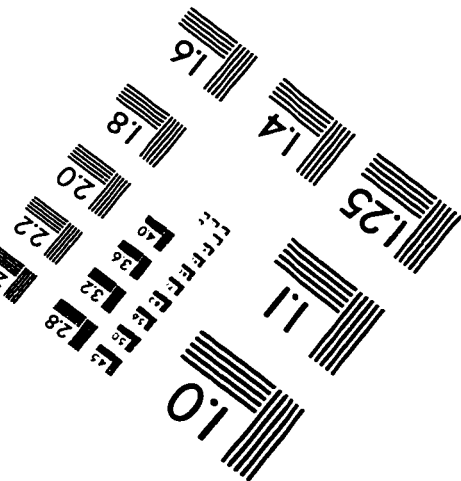
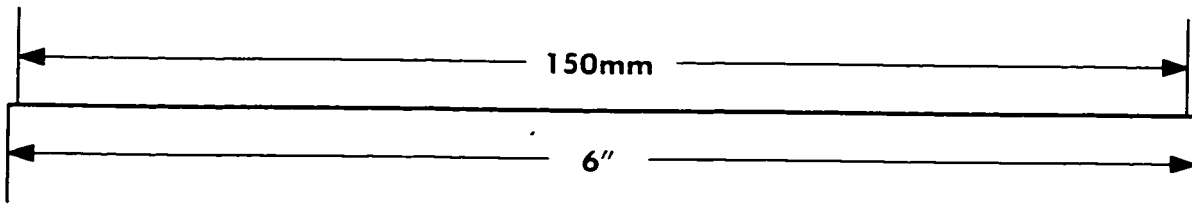
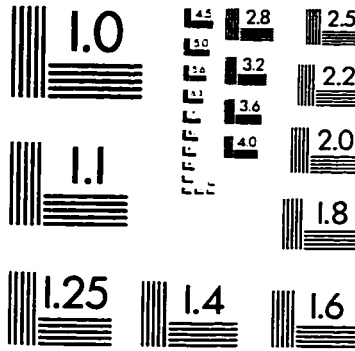
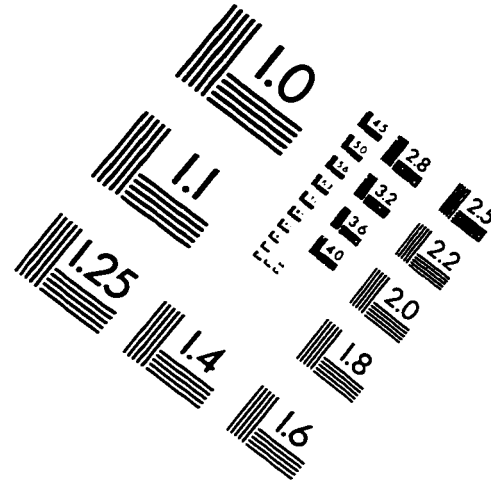
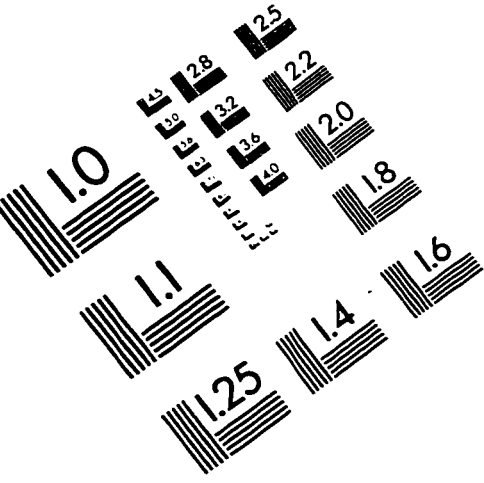
Dissertation

America for Americans: The Southern Know Nothing Party and the Politics of Nativism, 1854-1856.

Publications

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