

Stephen Brown
History 102
November 8, 2017
Joel Tannenbaum, PhD

The Nativist Riots

Despite being founded on principles of freedom of religion, the United States has a deep history of discrimination on the basis of religion that extends well beyond contemporary Islamophobia. The early United States was a nation with deep roots in Protestantism and it the man denominations that sprouted from it such as Lutheranism and Quakerism, as well as Methodist and Baptist churches to name a few. It's common knowledge and one of the few pieces of information drilled into our heads as American school children that anti-other sentiment pressured early settlers into leaving their homes for the New World. What is so rarely touched on is how quickly the cycle repeated itself or how soon the once persecuted colonists became that which they once fled. Events in Philadelphia during the mid 19th century touch on this cycle.

The Nativist Riots of 1844 stemmed from increased tensions between naturalized citizens of the Protestant persuasion who began to make political moves and newly immigrated Catholics, turning Philadelphia from the proud birthplace of the nation into a hotbed of violent upstarts and chaos. The trouble took place as a series of escalating conflicts, primarily in the Kensington region of Philadelphia. "The Native American party having called a public meeting, had perfect right to carry on their proceedings in peace, undisturbed by any persons, and that the disturbance they met with from persons opposed to the objects of the meeting, was as gross an outrage as was ever perpetrated upon the rights of any body of free citizens," reads an account of the riots, "They were assembled by public call, their object being a perfectly legal one, and the

presumption is that those who were opposed to the meeting were attracted there from mischievous motive” (Perry, 1844. p. 4).

Anti-Catholic rhetoric was cited as stemming from lax or a lack of oversight on the part of election officials. This led to fraudulent votes being cast by recent immigrants to the United States, many of whom identified as Catholic, who had not yet resided in the country long enough to qualify for taking part in elections. John Hancock Lee, in his work on the history of the American Party, explains this, “It was well known that Naturalization Laws, even as they then existed, were mere dead letter, and that men were yearly brought to the polls, and their votes received, who had not been sufficiently long in this country to have lost the odor of steerage” (Lee, 1855. p. 13). Philadelphians were concerned with foreign nationals originated from the United Kingdom, a place with a history of oppressive actions towards the United States, influencing the American political sphere and imposing their own agenda on its citizens. Lee does not hold back of crying foul of foreign evils, continuing on to express, “Such men were exceedingly active at the elections-were noisy and riotous-and actually drove away in disgust many native citizens” (Lee, 1855. p. 14).

The agenda which the Catholic community stood accused of attempting to advance in the court of public opinion was, by Catholic representative’s own testimony, attempting to subvert Protestant and biblical teachings in schools. This was common practice at the time.

“To the efforts of a portion of the community to exclude the Bible from our Public Schools. The Jury are of the opinion that these efforts in some measure gave rise to the formation of a new party, which called and held public meetings in the District of Kensington, in the peaceful exercise of the sacred rights and

privileges guaranteed to every citizen of the Constitution and laws of our State and Country. These meetings were rudely disturbed and fired upon by a band of lawless irresponsible men, some of whom had resided in our country only for a short period. This outrage, causing the death of a number of our unoffending citizens, led to immediate retaliation, and was followed up by subsequent acts of aggression in violation and open defiance of all law” (Catholic Lay Citizens, 1844.).

In response to the disquiet and perspective legal ramifications to the rioting, the Catholic citizens of Philadelphia issued a public address referencing the accusations levied against them. In this address, the selected representatives of Catholic Philadelphians explain their desire for greater representation in order to acquire very specific rights regarding religious doctrine administered in the public schools of the time. “We do not ask you to adopt the Catholic version for general use; but we feel warranted in claiming that our conscientious scruples to recognise or use the other, be respected” (Catholic Lay Citizens, 1844.).

The Nativist Riots accounted for many Philadelphian deaths. Houses and churches were looted or destroyed. “The nativist riots of May and July 1844. In May six were killed with many more injured and some \$250,000 of property destroyed when a nativist rally in an Irish neighborhood in Kensington resulted in several days of shootings and arsons, including the burning of two Catholic churches along with a number of buildings and homes” (Blatz, 2011. p. 899). Both sides of the conflict, compelled to defend the rights which they felt entitled towards, proceeded to tear the city apart rather than seek clarity and understanding. It is only by reflecting on historical events of this

magnitude that we can gain perspective on the root causes of our contemporary fears, the oppressive behaviors that these can encourage, and the exacerbating influence that such behaviors can be on already volatile situations.

Works Cited

Blatz, Perry K. *"Boundaries of Responsibility: Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and the Pennsylvania Riot Damage Law, 1834–1880."* *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 78, no. 4 (2011): 393-425. doi:10.5325/pennhistory.78.4.0393.

Catholic Lay Citizens. *Address of the Catholic lay citizens: of the city and county of Philadelphia, to their fellow-citizens, in reply to the presentment of the Grand jury of the Court of quarer sessions of May term 1844, in regard to the causes of the late riots in Philadelphia.* Philadelphia, PA: M. Fithian, 1844.

Perry, John B. *A full and complete account of the late awful riots in Philadelphia : embellished with ten engravings.* New York, New York: Nafis & Cornish, 1844.

Lee, John Hancock Lee. *The Origin and Progress of the American Party in Politics; embracing a complete history of the philadelphia riots in 1844 ... and a refutation of arguments founded on charges of religious proscription and secret combinations.* Philadelphia, PA: Elliott & Gihon, 1855.