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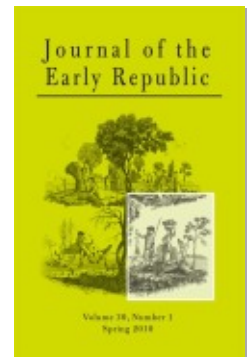
Punishing the Lies on the Rio Grande: Catholic and Immigrant
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Nativism

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Journal of the Early Republic, Volume 30, Number 1, Spring 2010, pp.
63-84 (Article)

Published by The University of North Carolina Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jer.0.0134>



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Punishing the Lies on the Rio Grande

Catholic and Immigrant Volunteers in Zachary Taylor's
Army and the Fight against Nativism

TYLER V. JOHNSON

On August 31, 1846, the steamboat *Corvette* arrived at the camp of the Georgia Regiment of Volunteers on the Rio Grande near Burita, Mexico, a small town downriver from Matamoros. At about 8:30 in the evening, a fight broke out between the Kennesaw Rangers and Savannah's Irish Jasper Greens, two companies in the regiment, which lasted for at least half an hour and involved muskets, swords, and knives. Colonel Edward D. Baker of the 4th Illinois regiment, who was just returning from the funeral of one of his soldiers, heard about the brawl and called on some men to help him quell it. As they attempted to board the *Corvette*, several of the Georgians turned on the Illinoisans. In the ensuing fight, Baker received a bullet in the neck that came out through his mouth, knocking out a tooth; nine other Illinois volunteers received wounds before Baker's men succeeded in restoring order. Baker used some nearby Indiana troops to help guard the contending parties of Georgians, several of whom were court-martialed, including Captain John McMahon, the commanding officer of the Jasper Greens.¹

Several days after, the Savannah *Republican* published the first account of the riot, reporting what precipitated it. Earlier on the evening of August 31, one member of the Kennesaw Rangers called Charles Far-

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1. *Illinois State Register* (Springfield), Sept. 18, 1846; D. to Editors of the *Delta* (New Orleans, LA), Sept. 1, 1846, in *Republican* (Savannah, GA), Sept. 18, 1846.

Journal of the Early Republic, 30 (Spring 2010)

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relly of the Jasper Greens “a d—d Irish son of a b—h.” The ensuing fight raged until the ringleaders were arrested and the steamboat arrived to take the men upriver to Camargo. Fighting broke out anew as they boarded the boat, and the officers again separated the two companies on the steamer, this time by stringing a rope between them, but to no avail; the violence restarted quickly. Six or seven soldiers received wounds, and one Georgian died from a bullet through his heart. Once the Illinoisians quelled the disturbance, Colonel Baker (who was severely but not fatally wounded) arrested the instigators of the Greens, Charles Farrelly and John Makon.²

A closer look at this affray and other such incidents reveals how Zachary Taylor’s U.S.–Mexican War army reflected the ethnic tensions in the antebellum United States as the nation tried to absorb hundreds of thousands of European immigrants, most of whom were Catholic. The riot began over an ethnically charged insult. The Irish Greens no doubt would have been familiar with the violence, ridicule, and ethnic slurs directed at immigrants by nativists in the years immediately preceding the war. In fact, the *Republican*’s coverage of the incident reflected these sensitivities, speculating that Colonel Baker may have erred in failing to announce his rank when he boarded the steamboat. Therefore, when Captain McMahon, who was trying valiantly to calm and restrain his men, saw the arrival of more soldiers, he felt threatened and responded accordingly. The Savannah reporter went on to compliment McMahon’s men: “Justice to the ‘*Greens*’ requires me to say that previous to this unfortunate affray, no company could receive encomiums for orderly and soldier-like conduct which was not equally due to them.” By shifting responsibility to Baker while praising the soldierly bearing of the Greens, the reporter offered a picture of an isolated incident, started by a normally responsible body of men provoked by a grave insult. This account contrasts with the version of events found in the Springfield *Illinois State Register*, which did not mention the ethnic slurs directed at the Greens. In addition, the Illinois paper blamed the fighting on long-simmering

2. *Illinois State Register* (Springfield), Sept. 18, 1846; D. to Editors of the *Delta* (New Orleans, LA), Sept. 1, 1846, in *Republican* (Savannah, GA), Sept. 18, 1846; Unknown to Editors of the *Bee* (New Orleans), Sept. 3, 1846 in *Republican* (Savannah, GA), Sept. 22, 1846.

tensions fueled by alcohol, but gave no explanation for the bad blood between the two companies.³

As more of the U.S. press became aware of the disturbance, battle lines were drawn that reflected the ongoing struggle between the immigrant and Catholic communities and their nativist opponents. American Catholic newspapers, in particular, took an even more aggressively defensive posture than the *Republican*. Some editors tried to be magnanimous to the Rangers, blaming rowdy elements within the company, but all defended the Greens as loyal and well-disciplined soldiers. The Irish Catholic Boston *Pilot* went a step further, completely exonerating the Jasper Greens and blaming nativist newspapers for their biased reports. The *Pilot's* correspondent portrayed the Greens as self-sacrificing men, quoting the regiment's commander who said, "they came, not as the hirelings of a despot, but as the free citizens of a country . . . they wanted to show their friends and fellow-citizens of native birth, as well as those misguided young men called 'Native Americans,' that adopted citizens were not cowards in the hour of danger." Other accounts asserted that the Rangers had insulted the Greens on numerous occasions in the days preceding the riot. On the day of the disturbance, several Rangers also confronted Private Makon (one of the court-martialed Greens) as he boarded the steamer. As he carried his luggage to the boat several Rangers goaded him, yelling, "There goes a Paddy. Go it Pat, you are now loaded like a Jack Ass." Makon demanded to be let by, but they replied, "go to hell you d—d Irish son of a B—ch," and although the fight did not break out then, the situation exploded later that evening. The more favorable depictions of the Greens reflected the ongoing efforts of the Catholic and Democratic press to defend their followers and constituents from nativist and anti-Catholic attacks. They held up immigrant volunteers, particularly Catholics, as living refutations of the nativist portrayals of Catholic and immigrant disloyalty and lack of patriotism.⁴

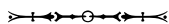
3. Hotah Kah to Editors of the *Republican* (Savannah, GA), Sept. 7, 1846; *Republican*, Sept. 29, 1846; Unknown to Editors of *Daily Missouri Republican* (St. Louis), Sept. 1, 1846, in *Illinois State Register* (Springfield), Sept. 25, 1846.

4. *Freeman's Journal and Catholic Register* (New York), Oct. 10, 1846; "Jasper" to Editors of the *Pilot* (Boston), Oct. 1, 1846. Unknown Georgia volunteer to Unknown Georgian friend, Sept. 10, 1846, *Boston Pilot*, Oct. 17, 1846. The accounts published by the *Pilot* received further confirmation in the *Catholic Advocate* (Louisville, KY), Oct. 31, 1846.

Ultimately, most of the Greens and Rangers would receive only light punishments. The court martial of Captain McMahon and Private Makon convicted the former of drunkenness and, for attacking Colonel Baker, mutinous conduct, and sentenced him to be cashiered, but, citing their own favorable recommendation and the “paliating [sic] character of the testimony,” the court remitted his sentence and restored him to command. Meanwhile the court dropped the charge of mutinous conduct against Private Makon and released him. These verdicts and the support the Greens received back home allowed them to feel vindicated. One Green wrote to the Boston *Pilot* in March 1847, updating the unit’s activities, and mentioning that a gathering of soldiers and civilians in Tampico had raised money for Irish Potato Famine relief. He concluded thus:

Permit me, dear Sir, before I close to return you the sincere thanks of the Irish Jasper Greens of the Geo. regt., for your patience in not publishing or crediting the exaggerated reports published in some of the New Orleans papers in last August, regarding a dispute which took place on board of a steam-boat on the Rio Grande, between them and another company, which proves after investigation, that they were justified in their proceeding.

The citizens of Savannah shared this sentiment, and the Greens got a rousing welcome when they returned to Georgia in June 1847. The *Republican* lamented that the Greens never got a chance to prove their courage in battle, but noted their heavy losses from disease and praised their “honorable service.”⁵



The Greens–Rangers riot was not the only battlefield incident during the Mexican campaign used by Catholic and Democratic leaders to confront the nativists. From spring 1846 to spring 1847 two Jesuit priests, Reverends John McElroy and Anthony Rey, traveled with General Zachary

5. Major General Zachary Taylor, “Orders No. 132,” Oct. 17, 1846, John A. Quitman and Family Papers, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson; Unknown Irish Jasper Green soldier to Editors of the *Pilot* (Boston), Mar. 3, 1847; *Pilot* (Boston), Apr. 3, 1847; *Republican* (Savannah, GA), June 15, 1847.

Taylor's army, serving as chaplains at the behest of President James K. Polk and the leadership of the U.S. Catholic church. As they cared for the dying, preached on Sundays, listened to confessions, and secured conversions, the press at home praised them as superb representatives of the faith whose actions repudiated anti-Catholic propaganda. Father Rey's death at the hands of Mexican bandits bolstered these efforts, providing an irrefutable example of Catholic compassion, fidelity, and perseverance. The conduct of immigrant soldiers in battle served a similar purpose. The press lauded the courage of immigrant volunteers at the battles of Monterrey and Buena Vista, and the cavalry assault on a U.S. supply train near Cerralvo. The deaths of several immigrant officers, just as in the case of Father Rey, testified to their patriotism.

Newspaper columns, personal correspondence, published accounts, and the papers of Reverends McElroy and Rey show how the Catholic and Democratic leaders used the military service of immigrant soldiers and Catholic clergy to fight nativism, particularly by focusing on volunteers. The regular U.S. Army, of course, contained large numbers of immigrants and Catholics but they had not opted to go to Mexico; they were ordered there. Meanwhile, many white Americans also looked down on the regular Army as unfit for free citizens. On the other hand, volunteers, who were celebrated as citizen-soldiers, the brave defenders of the Republic, had chosen their destination and they provided better copy for the pro-Catholic and pro-immigrant position. It is not surprising, therefore, that volunteers received acclaim from the Catholic and Democratic press. The historiography of antebellum Catholicism provides important context to this study, but a survey of this literature reveals a gap. With a few exceptions, scholars who address Catholicism in this period tend to focus on the institutional Church and its role in society and culture, giving less attention to military matters. The exceptions arise in those works that focus on anti-Catholicism, particularly in the role that phenomenon played in the war with Mexico. For example, John Pinheiro contends that anti-Catholicism was inextricably intertwined with the spirit of manifest destiny, the idea that the United States had a divine destiny to expand across the entire North American continent. Despite the efforts of Catholic clergy to point out the faithful service of many Catholic men in the war, nativists viewed the Church as monolithic. Therefore, when evidence arose of Mexican clergy encouraging the desertion of Catholic Americans, and when Americans heard of a battalion of U.S. deserters fighting for the Mexicans, nativists rea-

soned that U.S. priests and all immigrant troops must be doing the same.⁶

Only one work of Catholic scholarship looks in depth at the actions of Catholic soldiers in the U.S.–Mexican War. Sister Blanche McEniry's 1937 dissertation, although path-breaking, lacks analysis, and mostly just recounts the stories of various Catholic soldiers, both volunteers and regulars. But McEniry does offer some cogent thoughts on the role of the Catholic leadership, particularly in the press, in defending and promoting the actions of their congregants during the war. Although Catholic newspapers provided surprisingly little commentary on the conflict, when they did, they tended to support the war effort with much greater unanimity than the secular and Protestant press.⁷

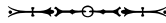
The historiography of nineteenth-century American Catholicism, however, devotes little attention to military matters, although it provides essential context for the discussion of immigration and the war, especially regarding the internal conflicts within the immigrant community over assimilation. Jay P. Dolan's two books describe the stress forced on the Church by the mass immigration of the 1830s, 40s, and 50s as the international hierarchy of Catholicism struggled to dispatch sufficient

6. John C. Pinheiro, "'Religion without Restriction': Anti-Catholicism, All Mexico, and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo," *Journal of the Early Republic* 23 (Spring 2003), 9–10, 69, 70, 72, 76. Pinheiro is not the only scholar to tackle anti-Catholicism during the U.S.–Mexican War. Ted C. Hinckley examined the topic in a 1962 article, and Isaac McDaniel discussed the war's impact on anti-Catholicism in his 1991 dissertation. In fact, Pinheiro takes time to refute McDaniel's claim that Protestant soldiers tended not to accuse their Catholic comrades of disloyalty by pointing to the prevalence of nativist writings and political activity in the 1850s. Ted C. Hinckley, "American Anti-Catholicism during the Mexican War," *Pacific Historical Review* 31 (May 1962), 121–37; Isaac McDaniel, "The Impact of the Mexican War on Anti-Catholicism in the United States" (PhD diss., University of Notre Dame, 1991). See also Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism* (Berkeley, CA, 1994), xvii, xxii, xxiv, 99, particularly her discussion of anti-Catholic discourse.

7. Sr. Blanche Marie McEniry, "American Catholics in the War with Mexico" (PhD diss., The Catholic University of America, 1937), 13, 15, 24, 27. Other scholarship on the Catholic press has confirmed her conclusions on the position of editors regarding the war with Mexico. See Clayton Sumner Ellsworth, "The American Churches and the Mexican War," *American Historical Review* 45 (Jan. 1940), 301–26; and Robert Francis Hueston, "The Catholic Press and Nativism, 1840–1860" (PhD diss., Notre Dame University, 1972), Abstract.

numbers of priests to serve the faithful in the United States and compensate for the underdeveloped state of ecclesiastical organization in the country before the 1820s. New clergy clashed with American congregants used to a certain degree of autonomy. This internal struggle spilled over into the public realm, particularly in the case of Bishop John Hughes, whose aggressive efforts to vivify the faith and practice of his flock, assert jurisdiction over Catholic practice, and promote Catholicism antagonized many Protestants and stoked nativist fears of a Catholic Church bent on subverting cherished religious liberties. Catholics meanwhile continued to maintain that they could be simultaneously Catholic and loyal citizens of the American republic.⁸

Scholarship on antebellum Catholicism has paid too little attention to the U.S.–Mexican War, mentioning a few well-known examples of Catholic and immigrant officers like James Shields (an Irish Catholic) without examining the experiences of the mass of immigrant volunteer companies. But Catholic and Democratic leaders at the time relied on the exploits of the immigrant rank and file to counter nativism. Drawing on the activities of larger cohorts highlighted the fidelity of immigrant soldiers and demonstrated their value and trustworthiness and that of their communities in a democratic America. Similarly, scholars have ignored how Catholic and immigrant leaders made use of immigrant volunteers in the U.S.–Mexican War.⁹



8. Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present* (Garden City, NY, 1985), 114, 115, 124; Dolan, *In Search of an American Catholicism: A History of Religion and Culture in Tension* (New York, 2002), 6, 7, 44–45, 48.

9. K. Jack Bauer, *The Mexican War, 1846–1848* (New York, 1974), 84–85; James M. McCaffrey, *Army of Manifest Destiny: The American Soldier in the Mexican War, 1846–1848* (New York, 1992), 71–72; Robert W. Johannsen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas: The Mexican War in the American Imagination* (New York, 1985), 167; Paul W. Foos, *A Short, Offhand, Killing Affair: Soldiers and Social Conflict During the Mexican–American War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2002), 9–10. Bauer ignores immigrant volunteers entirely, while McCaffrey and Johannsen make only passing mention of them. Foos is the only recent historian to spend any time at all on immigrant and Catholic volunteers, but his class-based analysis subsumes the crucial issues of religion and ethnicity. In addition, his source base

The wartime service of Catholic and immigrant volunteers varied widely. Like their Protestant and native-born comrades who served in northern Mexico, most never saw combat. They stewed in frustration and often succumbed to disease, waiting to prove themselves while garrisoning small towns throughout the Rio Grande valley and the Sierra Madre Oriental mountain range. A minority did test themselves against Mexicans, some in the major battles at Monterrey and Buena Vista, others in smaller skirmishes against the cavalry and guerrilla bands that preyed on U.S. supply trains, and the exploits provided copy for the Catholic and Democratic press back home as they confronted nativism and anti-Catholicism.

Of the immigrant-dominated units, the German and Irish companies of the 1st Ohio Regiment saw the most action. They were ready to fight from the outset. William Burke, of Cincinnati's Montgomery Guards, confided to a friend in July 1846, "We expect to be removed to Matamoros in a day or two, as a battle is expected next month, and the Guards, who are all in fine spirits, are wishing for it."¹⁰

As part of his campaign in northern Mexico, when General Zachary Taylor laid siege to a Mexican force under General Pedro Ampudia in the city of Monterrey on September 20–24, 1846, he ordered the Mississippi, Tennessee, Maryland/DC, and Ohio regiments under his command to move against the northern and eastern defenses of the city. The German and Irish Ohioans saw heavy fighting in these attacks, and suffered severe casualties. The Montgomery Guards had at least one dead and six wounded; Cincinnati's German Company H lost Lieutenant Matthew Hett, with four soldiers severely wounded; and Dayton's German Company saw three of their number killed and two badly hurt.¹¹

Lieutenant Hett was mourned by Cincinnati's German Catholic community as a martyr. Although he died in late September 1846, his funeral was delayed until after his comrades were discharged from the service the following spring. On June 29, 1847, Hett's company, the German Lafayette Guard, accompanied his corpse to St. Johannis Church in Cincinnati. Various community organizations swelled the procession,

relies too heavily on the Northeast, missing the experiences of the majority of the volunteers who came from the West and South.

10. William Burke to Lawrence McGragh, July 20, 1846, *Pilot* (Boston), Aug. 15, 1846.

11. *Daily Enquirer* (Cincinnati, OH), Nov. 2, 1846.



Figure 1: "The Taking of Monterey." The savage fighting in and around Monterey claimed the lives of dozens of Americans, including German Catholic Lieutenant Matthew Hett. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

including the German Catholic Support Society, the German Society, and the Bricklayer and Tailor Support Society. At the church, numerous speakers rose to praise Hett as a “defender of the fatherland.” One Catholic clergyman boasted of Hett’s German birth,

I am pleased of this because the deceased punishes all the lies which in the last year, and still in public print, expressed their doubt as to whether a German could be a true citizen! The deceased has punished all these because he proved it through his deeds that a German can also die for his adopted fatherland. The deceased was also Catholic. Through his death he punished again other lies which were openly maintained as well in the last year, that a Catholic in the true sense of the word cannot be a good citizen of this republic because he would not be allowed to fight against Mexico due to the principles of his religion.¹²

Hett’s death, though not at the hands of nativists, nevertheless rebuked their accusations and imprecations against Catholics and adopted citizens across America.

Six weeks after the battle at Monterrey, the Cincinnati *Catholic Telegraph* published a letter from Thomas O’Beirne of the Montgomery Guards. The editors introduced the soldier’s note by excoriating a nativist activist in Cincinnati, and reminded their readers that while Catholic soldiers were putting their lives in danger to defend their adopted country, this activist was recruiting for a nativist society which sought to “keep down” Roman Catholics and Democrats. O’Beirne’s letter, written four days after the fall of Monterrey to Taylor’s army, revealed an ethnic pride, while echoing the editorial comments. He boasted of the Guards’ service in the battle as they attacked a Mexican fort and stood their ground in brutal street fighting, “having done our duty as Irish soldiers always should.”¹³

For several months after the conquest of Monterrey, the Ohioans stayed near the city as garrison troops where they heard about the San Patricios, a unit of deserters from the regular U.S. Army fighting for Mexico. Despite its name, most of the deserters did not come from Ireland, a fact missed by most Americans and Mexicans. But native-born

12. *Der Wahrheitsfreund* (Cincinnati, OH), July 1, 1847, trans. Andrew Thomas.

13. Thomas O’Beirne to Terence O’Beirne, Sept. 28, 1846, *Catholic Telegraph* (Cincinnati, OH), Nov. 5, 1846.

Ohioan Major Luther Giddings's memoir refuted the accusations of nativists who used the San Patricios as evidence that no Irish could be trusted. He asserted that

So far as I am informed not a single volunteer, either among the native or adopted citizens, went over to the enemy. . . . Nearly a third of our regiment were Catholics; and among them were seventy or eighty gallant Irishmen, some of whom, I have reason to know, were proof against the fascinating lures of an insidious foe.

Although Giddings viewed Irish Catholic volunteers positively, misconceptions about the San Patricios seriously threatened the immigrant and Catholic communities. Nativists had frequently claimed that U.S. Catholics owed their primary loyalty to the Catholic Church rather than the United States, and if some had indeed gone over to the enemy because of their religious affinity, it would bolster this argument.¹⁴

In early March 1847, the Montgomery Guardsmen earned additional laurels when, along with another Ohio company, two companies from the 1st Kentucky Regiment (which contained many Germans), two pieces of artillery, and twenty Arkansas cavalymen, they escorted a wagon train traveling from Monterrey to Camargo. On March 7, near the town of Cerralvo, Mexican cavalry under General Urrea attacked the convoy, and in the ensuing battle the Americans lost two soldiers and fifteen teamsters, while most of the U.S. troops fled the scene. The Democratic Cincinnati *Daily Enquirer's* account of the battle contended that the Montgomery Guards alone had distinguished themselves. The Irish unit, had "nobly sustained the laurels they won at Monterrey," echoing Major Giddings's vindication of the Irishmen under his command from charges of disloyalty.¹⁵

Two weeks before the battle at Cerralvo, about 4,500 U.S. volunteers under Taylor barely survived an engagement with a Mexican force over four times their size under General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna at the Battle of Buena Vista. At the height of the two-day battle on February 23, volunteer regiments from Mississippi, Illinois, Indiana, and Kentucky turned back a massive Mexican assault, perhaps saving Taylor's army

14. Luther S. Giddings, *Sketches of the Campaign in Northern Mexico in 1846 and 7 by an Officer of the First Regiment of Ohio Volunteers* (New York, 1853), 275-77.

15. *Daily Enquirer* (Cincinnati), Apr. 6 and 23, 1847.

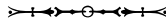


Figure 2: "National Colors of the 1st Regt. Ohio Volunteers." This flag was carried by one of the companies serving alongside the (Irish) Montgomery Guards at Monterey and Cerralvo. Courtesy of the Ohio Historical Society.

from annihilation but meanwhile suffering serious casualties, especially among the officer corps, losing Colonel John J. Hardin of the 1st Illinois Regiment and Lieutenant Colonel Henry Clay, Jr. of Kentucky.

Many immigrant names appeared on the casualty list from Buena Vista. Springfield's *Illinois State Register* eulogized Polish immigrant Jacob Zabriskie, an Illinois captain, reporting, "In the morning of life, in 'the pride of manly beauty,' and the joyousness of bright anticipations, he has offered up his life for his country. Many are the tears that will be shed for him." The Cincinnati *Daily Enquirer* also mourned the captain's death, noting that Zabriskie had fought with Napoleon in several campaigns and participated in the 1830 Polish revolt against the Russian Empire before migrating to the United States.¹⁶

Alexander Konze, a volunteer officer in Company H of the 2nd Illinois Regiment who perished from bullet and lance wounds at Buena Vista, had worked as a teacher in his native Germany before moving to the United States in 1844 in search of a professorship at an American university. Earlier in the war, he had reported to a German newspaper in Milwaukee that his company contained seventy-five Germans among its ninety-four soldiers, and a German, Julius Raith, was the captain. Thus, Konze wrote, "the heroic deeds which the Texan Guards [his company] are determined to carry out will redound to the honor of the German name, and the humiliation of the natives." In a published eulogy, Konze's friends declared that his death had indeed brought honor to all the Germans in America. The deaths of Konze and Zabriskie demonstrated immigrant loyalty. These adopted citizens had shed their blood for their chosen country, but also had fought for democratic principles in their native lands.¹⁷



While defending the violent actions of the Jasper Greens and celebrating the heroism of immigrant soldiers in battle, Catholic leaders and the

16. *Illinois State Register* (Springfield), Apr. 2 and 16, 1847; *Daily Enquirer* (Cincinnati, OH), Apr. 30, 1847.

17. Edward and August Stohlmann to Editor of the *Evening Post* (New York), date not given, New York *Evening Post*, May 3, 1847; Alexander Konze to Editor of *Wisconsin Banner* [Milwaukee], July 2, 1846; Herman Upmann to Dr. Huebschmann, Feb. 26, 1847, Alexander Konze or Conze Letters, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.



Figure 3: “Death of Col. Clay, Battle of Buena Vista, Feb. 23, 1847.” Given his famous father, Lt. Col. Henry Clay Jr.’s death at Buena Vista attracted great attention. However, the immigrant community paid more attention to the deaths of German Lt. Alexander Konze and Polish Capt. Jacob Zabriskie, both known liberal revolutionaries who had recently emigrated to the United States. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Democratic Party used the work of Fathers John McElroy and Anthony Rey with Taylor's volunteer soldiers to counteract negative views of Catholicism. The two clerics were in Mexico to assuage the fears among political and military leaders in the United States regarding how Mexican civilians and priests would react to the invasion.

In the summer of 1846, as his army began to occupy the Rio Grande valley, General Taylor issued a proclamation designed to placate the population. Arguing that Mexico's military leadership had instigated the conflict, he expressed sympathy for the Mexican people and promised to protect those who remained neutral. His army, Taylor vowed, would respect their religion and leave their churches and clergy undisturbed. He demonstrated his good faith by affirming that "Hundreds of our army, and hundreds of thousands of our people, are members of the Catholic Church. In every State, and in nearly every city and village of our Union, Catholic Churches exist, and the Priests perform their holy functions, in peace and security, under the sacred guarantee of our constitution." Mexicans had nothing to fear from him or his army.¹⁸

However, President Polk thought that American anti-Catholicism could incite popular Mexican resistance and took swift action to defuse tensions. He met with the nation's Catholic hierarchy, including Archbishop John Hughes of New York, early in 1846 and secured the appointment of two Jesuits, the Frenchman Anthony Rey and the Irishman John McElroy, to minister to Taylor's army, an extraordinary step given that the Army made no provision for chaplains of any denomination. But the absence of Catholic chaplains in the Army of Occupation had created problems; Catholic soldiers could not receive last rites when ill or nearing death, for example, and they found little comfort in the itinerant Protestant preachers who accompanied several volunteer units. Polk and Taylor also wanted Rey and McElroy to calm the Mexican populace, fearing popular resistance should Mexicans think that the Americans threatened their religion.¹⁹

In light of this latter concern, Polk's choice of McElroy and Rey is

18. General Zachary Taylor, "A Proclamation by the General Commanding the Army of the United States of America, To the People of Mexico," 1846, Thomas Sidney Jesup Papers, Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, NC.

19. Robert Ryal Miller, *Shamrock and Sword: The Saint Patrick's Battalion in the U.S.-Mexican War* (Norman, OK), 156-57, 160-61.

curious. Neither spoke Spanish, thus limiting their ability to influence Mexican civilians they met. But they did practice among the U.S. troops camped near the Rio Grande, providing excellent examples of compassion, fair-mindedness, and courage that bolstered the efforts of Catholic leaders back home to depict Catholicism favorably and refute anti-Catholic prejudice.

Rey and McElroy landed at Brazos Santiago, just north of the mouth of the Rio Grande, on July 1, 1846. Within a few days, they reached Matamoros, the largest town in the lower Rio Grande valley and the site of a major U.S. hospital that took the worst cases from the surrounding garrison towns. In these early weeks and months, the number of ill soldiers at Matamoros increased steadily to nine hundred, most of them volunteers. McElroy described his work among them in his journal in early September, recording,

Five deaths to day from the hospital two were baptized—a good spirit seems to exist among the sick desirous for instruction & received among them with the greatest kindness—I find but few of the volunteers have ever been baptized, and in danger they are all willing to receive this Sacrament up to this date I have baptd. ten their names in another book of this size.

These circumstances continued throughout his tenure on the Rio Grande, as more and more men were sent to Matamoros to convalesce, many of whom died there. In September, McElroy baptized volunteers from Georgia, Maryland (writing a letter to the soldier's father when the man died in the hospital), Indiana, Illinois, and Mississippi, most of them near death. It is unclear whether the men that McElroy baptized or converted on their deathbeds represented new converts to the Catholic faith or whether they were lapsed Catholics who had not received the sacraments for a long time.²⁰

During this stressful time, McElroy became separated from Father An-

20. Father John McElroy, "Chaplains for the Mexican War—1846: Journey to Matamoros and Labors in Mexico," *Woodstock Letters: A Record of Current Events and Historical Notes Connected with the Colleges and Missions of the Society of Jesus in North and South America* (hereafter cited as *Woodstock Letters*) 16 (1887), 38–39; McElroy, Sept. 3, 6, 7, 12, 13, 15, 19, and 23, 1846, Father John McElroy, S.J. Journals, Maryland Province Archives, Georgetown University Special Collections (hereafter cited as McElroy Journals).



Figure 4: “Father John McElroy, S.J.” McElroy and his fellow Jesuit Anthony Rey ministered to thousands of Catholics in Gen. Zachary Taylor’s army in northern Mexico, providing comfort, consolation, and the sacraments. He became embroiled in controversy after confusion erupted over whether he had converted the dying son of a Presbyterian minister. McElroy lived to return home, but Rey died at the hands of guerrillas. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

thony Rey, his fellow Jesuit. Rey had left in early September to join General Zachary Taylor in his campaign against Monterrey where he ministered to the wounded even while the battle raged, baptizing at least three officers and a number of privates, “besides administering to the Catholics the consolations of religion.” After the battle ended, Rey stayed on in Monterrey to attend the sick and wounded, and where, like McElroy, he often served as a conduit for news, informing families back home of the condition of their sons, husbands, and brothers. Two

months after the battle, McElroy wrote to Rey, inquiring about Charles Gould, a volunteer in the regiment raised from Maryland and the District of Columbia whose mother had written to McElroy asking for news of her son. McElroy had already met Gould and the young man had promised to go to confession with Father Rey. McElroy also asked after Joseph B. Millard and Captain F. Brittan of the Maryland and DC unit. Millard's sister, Mary Eugenia, a nun at Baltimore's Visitation Convent, had expressed her concern for their welfare in a letter to McElroy. In a December 8 letter, Rey assured McElroy that all three were safe.²¹

Back in Matamoros, McElroy continued to minister to the sick and healthy troops in the city. Throughout the fall and winter, he heard confessions from a variety of men, including a captain from one of the Illinois regiments, an Ohio lieutenant, and several other unnamed volunteers. He even welcomed a few conversions to the Catholic Church, such as the Ohio volunteer who took his first communion as a member of the Church in February. The sick also received McElroy's attentions and kept him busy. Indeed when Father Rey wrote in November asking for McElroy's assistance in Monterrey, he regretfully declined, citing the positive results of his labors in Matamoros. With three regiments of volunteers in the city, a company of regular army artillery across the river in Fort Brown, frequent visits by troops marching to other locations, and a regiment of Tennessee volunteer cavalry in the vicinity, his ministry required a lot of work. He mentioned his admission of the sacraments to three soldiers in the previous week (two of whom had since died) and the proliferation of sick soldiers as evidence of the pressing duties that occupied him throughout his term in Matamoros. In a March 18 letter, McElroy mentioned yet another increase in the number of sick in the city due to the recent arrival of new volunteer levies. He rejoiced, however, that there were, "thank God, still conversions among them, and no Catholic dies without the sacraments."²²

21. Father John McElroy, "Chaplains for the Mexican War," 225; Father Anthony Rey to Father John McElroy, Nov. 10 and 20, Dec. 8, 1846, *Woodstock Letters* 17 (1888), 150, 151, 153.

22. McElroy, Oct. 6 and 22, Dec. 27, 1846, and May 4 and 6, 1847, McElroy Journals; Father John McElroy to Father Anthony Rey, Nov. 25, 1846, *Woodstock Letters* 17, 151-52; Father John McElroy to Unknown, Mar. 12, 1847, *Catholic* (Pittsburgh, PA), Apr. 17, 1847.

On Sundays McElroy performed his other key function, preaching to the troops in Matamoros. His diary frequently mentioned soldiers who came to Mass. On October 11, 1846, a large and well-behaved congregation attended the day's services, over half of whom were Protestants. A week later the first of several volunteer officers, Ohio's Colonel Samuel R. Curtis, brought his men to hear McElroy's sermon. That day the cleric read a passage from Maccabees and instructed the attendees on "the duties of soldiers to God—to their country, etc." The next month, Colonel Joseph Lane marched several Indiana companies to the church; so many men attended that they filled all the available seats. The following April, three other officers paid McElroy a visit, asking about accommodations for the next day's Easter services, one of whom, Captain John Barry, was the commanding officer of Company B in the Massachusetts regiment, which consisted almost entirely of Irish Catholics. Later that month, the regiment's commander, Colonel Caleb Cushing, pledged to McElroy that all of the Catholics under his command would henceforth attend church every Sunday. Not all of the men led to McElroy's services by their commanders were Catholic, but the Jesuit priest was usually the only English-speaking clergyman of any denomination in Matamoros, limiting their religious options.²³

Father McElroy did not always have such a positive experience with soldiers. An incident in the fall of 1846 led to a major controversy back in the United States, triggering renewed attacks from nativist editors and politicians. It all began rather innocently. Sometime in September or October, McElroy attended Lieutenant John L. May, a young Alabama volunteer, who lay dying at the Matamoros hospital. Afterwards, McElroy wrote a letter to May's father, and sought to comfort his grief by informing him of his son's deathbed baptism and conversion to the Catholic faith. May had been a student at Georgetown College, so he would have been not unfamiliar with Catholicism, and by all accounts his father appreciated McElroy's efforts. But another young lieutenant died at about the same time, in the battle at Monterrey in late September 1846, and due in part to a mix-up in the transmission of news of both deaths and to the timing of McElroy's letter, which had been published in sev-

23. McElroy, Oct. 11 and 18, Nov. 14 and 15, 1846, and Apr. 3 and 20, 1847, McElroy Journals.

eral Catholic newspapers, his father, Rev. James S. Woods, a Presbyterian clergyman from Pennsylvania, came to believe that McElroy had converted his son.²⁴

Woods was furious, and he informed friends and sympathizers that a Jesuit had taken advantage of his son. Word spread and several Protestant religious papers with nativist sympathies picked up the story, including the *American Protestant* and the *Presbyterian*. They attributed the affair to a Catholic conspiracy and denounced McElroy to their readership. Catholic newspapers countered by pointing out that McElroy had never traveled to Monterrey and that his letter referred to a volunteer soldier from Alabama, not a minister's son from Pennsylvania. Nonetheless, the rhetorical war heated up. In late January 1847, the New York Catholic newspaper the *Freeman's Journal and Catholic Register* lashed out at the Protestant editors who continued to rail about McElroy's supposed deception,

We have had enough of this cant and fanaticism. Catholics are numerous and increasing—a larger number of us were born on the soil than he [the editor of the *Presbyterian*] thinks for, and whether born here or not we yield to none in discharging all the duties of good citizens.²⁵

Here again the Catholic press assumed the first line of defense against nativist attacks, defending Catholic clergy and soldiers from charges of disloyalty and dishonesty. Just as with the Catholics who marched in Taylor's army, they claimed that McElroy represented the courage and steadfastness of Catholics in a time of war, and his labors on the behalf of Catholic and Protestant soldiers provided yet another refutation of nativist arguments.

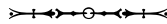
Long after his return from Mexico, McElroy viewed his labors in Taylor's army as ultimately successful. He acknowledged that Polk's motives in appointing him and Father Ray stemmed more from political calculation than a concern for the spiritual welfare of the army. Nevertheless, McElroy contended that he and Rey had great success in rehabilitating the image of Catholicism among the U.S. population at large. "Such

24. *Freeman's Journal and Catholic Register* (New York), Jan. 30, 1847; *United States Catholic Miscellany* (Charleston, SC), Mar. 20, 1847.

25. *Freeman's Journal and Catholic Register* (New York), Jan. 30, 1847.

examples from the priesthood,” he asserted, “dispel at once the calumnies so often reiterated against us and cause our Faith to be viewed in a different light; and in what more glorious cause can life be sacrificed than in such as I have described.” And, although the popularity of nativism in the United States through the 1850s makes McElroy’s optimism seem naïve, many Protestant soldiers had appreciated the chaplains’ contributions.²⁶

McElroy’s journal shows that he baptized sixty-two volunteer converts in Matamoros, almost all of them near death, including soldiers from Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, Illinois, Ohio, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Georgia. To Catholic newspaper editors on the home front, however, McElroy and Rey went beyond their missionary efforts that won new converts to the faith. They lauded the compassionate care the two priests offered soldiers of all faiths who suffered in the sick hospital and on the battlefield, and editors pointed with pride to the favorable assessments of the clergymen by several Protestant officers. Rey’s death gave further proof of his courageous service, and McElroy’s continuing labors with the sick in Matamoros reflected compassion and care without prejudice. Both stood in stark contrast to the religious bigotry of anti-Catholics. When nativists tried to seize upon McElroy’s supposed manipulation of a dying Protestant officer, the Jesuit’s supporters in the United States refuted the charge and used the testimony of Protestants in the Army as proof.²⁷



The service of McElroy and Rey, the martial exploits of immigrant soldiers at Monterrey, Buena Vista, and Cerralvo, even the riotous actions of Georgia’s Irish Jasper Greens presented opportunities to Catholic and Democratic leaders. Their press consistently defended the patriotism, loyalty, and courage of their soldiers and clerics, using their actions as weapons to fight the accusations of nativists and anti-Catholics. As a result, the war in northern Mexico became more than a theater of military action. It became a battlefield in the struggle between native-born Americans and adopted citizens over who would or could be loyal to the United States. Scholars of Catholicism and immigration have illuminated

26. McElroy, “Chaplains for the Mexican War,” *Woodstock Letters* 16, 227–28.

27. John McElroy, *McElroy Journal*, *McElroy Journals*.

the social, political, and economic aspects of assimilation and acculturation in the antebellum era, and these issues intersect, perhaps even more starkly in wartime, whose stresses heighten suspicions of dissent and difference. The actions of Jesuit chaplains and the immigrant volunteers in Zachary Taylor's army demonstrated that such conflicts also produced opportunities for ethnic and religious minorities to carve out and defend their place in the nation.