Boston Riots

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The ruins of the Ursuline Convent in Charlestown, burnt down and vandalized by Yankee rioters on August 11, 1834. From Justin Winsor, *The Memorial History of Boston*, vol. III (1881).

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The Ursuline Convent and the Broad Street Riots

The awakening of a new religious tolerance in the nation at large, engendered by the War for Independence, did not curb anti-Catholic sentiment in Boston. Economic and social tensions, brought about by the rising tide of Irish Catholic immigration from Ireland, revived intolerance among the majority Protestant population of Boston. Once again anti-Catholicism emerged as the weapon of choice for Boston's disaffected Yankee Protestant plebeians. This religious prejudice was not new, but it became more pronounced and more violent than the Pope Day celebrations of the eighteenth century. Two major episodes, the burning of a Catholic convent and school in 1834, and the riot in the Irish
neighborhood along Broad Street in 1837, were grim reminders of the heightened religious bigotry that was so much a part of the commercial seaport of Boston.

**Anti-Catholicism and Nativism**

The reason for the intensity of the nativist reaction in Boston against the Irish was because they were immigrants and because the new arrivals were Catholics. The newcomers personified a long-hated religion that endangered prevailing beliefs, causing a virulent Yankee response. An official Catholic Church history reported on this “conflict of religious beliefs”:

This was most important. There was in the Diocese a long tradition of hostility to Catholicism. Nowhere else in the nation was it so strong. It came with the first settlers. Those who followed them had been bred in this tradition. It had been deliberately cultured and fostered. Now this despised, hated—yes, even feared—Church was growing, developing, and expanding. Wherever men looked they saw that Romanism was not dying; it was getting stronger and stronger. A clash was inevitable. This was especially true of the lower classes. Here narrow contacts and limited experience did not serve to breed tolerance. For these people especially, Romanism, saturated with corruption and expressive of everything inimical to democracy, was engulfing the region. Conflict could not be avoided.¹

Indeed, hatred against Catholicism by Yankee plebeians was an intrinsic part of their heritage.

Buttressing native workers’ traditional fears of Catholics was the new evangelical crusade of the first two decades of the century against Catholicism and new antitrinitarian Protestant sects, such as the Unitarians and the Universalists. This nationwide evangelical movement rejected the religious broad-mindedness and liberalism that came out of the American Revolution. Revival leaders called for a return to the purity of Puritanism and highlighted the menace of Catholicism as a danger to American democracy and Protestantism. The first newspapers dedicated to attacking “Popery” and “Romanism” were the Boston Recorder, founded in 1816, and the Boston Watchman, set up in 1819. "To
maintain Protestantism and to oppose Popery” was the “cause of all mankind,” editorialized the *Recorder* in 1829. Tract societies, Bible groups, missionaries, and Sunday schools all set their sights on attacking Catholicism. Revivalist preachers who came to Boston, such as Charles G. Finney and Lyman Beecher, compared Catholicism with Satanism and antirepublicanism. Their incendiary preachings contributed to the rising level of agitation against Irish Catholics.

The native-born laboring poor watched the Irish work for less and become willing tools of the industrialists, who traded skilled hands for unskilled machine tenders. The immigrant accepted lower living standards and brought “a more docile spirit,” wrote one labor historian, making labor solidarity difficult. In this instance, there was substance to the Yankee workers’ beliefs about the economic damage wrought by these newcomers. One major study of Boston in the 1840s noted that the “large number of unskilled workers among the Irish seems to have depressed the market for unskilled labor.” The presence of many immigrants changed the nature of the workforce by deskilling the job market. With increased immigration by 1847, it was common for the Boston press to invoke a strident nativism. A Boston editor commented, “I regret that the tide of immigration has seemed to throw many of our mechanics out of employment, as I have heard since I came to Boston, and they tell me it is the cause of these ‘hard times’ and if we mean our paper should live we must take hold of native Americanism.”

Yankee workers found their incomes diminished and their status eclipsed, and they blamed the newcomers, the hated Catholics.

These poverty-stricken Irish were not yet a political menace; that would not come until well after the Civil War. One historian pointed out that by 1839, the Irish had no more than five hundred registered voters in all of Suffolk County. In 1845 “less than one-sixth of the adult male foreigners in Boston were citizens.” Many natives, however, gave credence to hysterical fears of what the Irish presence portended. Rumor had it that several European countries were deliberately sending over their paupers. England actually stimulated Irish emigration to Canada, which substantiated these rumors. The new arrivals began establishing Catholic Churches, sixteen in New England by 1830. The menace of Catholicism seemed imminent when the first Provincial Council of Catholicity met in Baltimore in 1829. Many believed that the few Irish in Boston gave their support to the Jacksonian Democrats in 1828, while Yankee Bostonians overwhelmingly gave their allegiance to native son John Quincy Adams. The
defeat of their leader caused anguish among Yankee voters, and they blamed the Irish for Jackson's victory.\(^5\)

Anti-Catholicism revived because of the beginnings of Irish Catholic immigration to Boston. The burning of the Ursuline Convent in 1834, and the full-scale warfare that broke out in two events in 1837, demonstrate that the presence of meager numbers of Irish Catholics was enough to inflame the Yankee working poor to riot. While initially small in number, the Catholic Irish immigrants soon appeared to be inundating the city. In 1820, Boston's population was over 43,000, with only 2,000 Irish, or 4.6 percent. By 1825 the number of Irish grew to 5,000, or 8.6 percent. By 1830 the now 7,000 Irish were 11.4 percent of a population of over 61,000.\(^6\) There were not many of them, but their accelerated growth rates gave the appearance to the agitated Yankees that they were everywhere. Moreover, Boston was a major port for Irish entry. Most of the new arrivals went into the hinterland to seek work in construction in the factories of New England. Bostonians, however, could not distinguish the transients from those few staying on in the city. The apparently large numbers of Irish engendered a sense of alarm.

Several assaults upon Catholics began as early as 1823, when rioters vandalized Irish homes. In the summer of 1825, vandals broke windows and furniture in Irish homes. Six constables kept watch the entire night to protect the neighborhood. In July 1826, after a quarrel broke out between cooper’s apprentices and Irish laborers, a crowd besieged the Irish section on Broad Street. Two days later an even larger crowd returned to raid the homes in this neighborhood. Authorities convicted and fined two Irishmen of rioting. Also found guilty were four Yankees, who received jail terms of two, six, nine, and twelve months. In 1828 fighting broke out between English and Irish Protestants against Irish Catholics. A Catholic historian reported, “Again in the same year [1828], Broad Street, Boston, was the scene on three successive nights, of an assault on the homes of orderly and unmolesting people; their houses were violently attacked, windows were broken, stones hurled in upon the inmates, and the most insulting language added to the outrage.” Many incidents of gangs beating solitary Irishmen occurred. A newly completed Catholic Church suffered damage when assaulted by an Yankee crowd in 1831. The mayor of Boston, Charles Wells, received a petition in 1832, “praying that some measures may be taken to suppress the dangerous riots, routs, and tumultuous assemblies in and about Broad Street.” Charlestown, adjoining Boston and later incorporated by the city, wit-
nessed a nativist riot on Thanksgiving, November 29, 1833. In early December a brawl between some inebriated Irishmen and some natives resulted in the death of one of the Yankees. The next day some five hundred Yankees, reinforced by volunteer firemen from Boston, marched on the Irish neighborhood, looting and burning houses. Throughout New England, Irish Catholics suffered from an increasing number of physical encounters with “lower class people,” as one newspaper put it.7 Continuing Yankee antagonism toward Catholics would lead to the burning of the Ursuline Convent in Charlestown in 1834.

The Ursuline Convent Riot

An official Catholic Church history labeled this event “the most disgraceful outrage ever perpetrated in New England and the most tragic event in the history of the Church here.”8 The destruction of a Catholic convent and school for girls reflected the lower classes’ outrage that they felt against Catholics, their animosity to Irish immigrants as working-class competitors, their long-held dislike of the gentry, and their fear of loosening religious and moral standards. The imposing structure planted upon a hill in Charlestown symbolized every area in which the plebeians felt threatened.

While a town in its own right with selectmen and a town meeting, Charlestown was a dependent suburb of Boston. Commerce was still king in Boston, a town with a small group of prosperous merchants, traders, craftsmen, artisans, clerks, and a host of unskilled workers. Many laborers toiled in jobs related to the maritime trade—shipbuilding, rope making, stevedores, and rum making. Charlestown was across the river, adjacent to the North End of Boston and connected by the Charles River and Warren bridges. Transportation, fishing, a variety of hand manufacturing, and shipbuilding and refitting were the major concerns of this satellite community. Charlestown's workers repaired vessels in the War of 1812, built the “largest ship then afloat” in 1833, and were erecting the nation's first dry dock in 1834. A town of about 10,000, Charlestown was “almost wholly occupied by people of English descent,” largely working class.9 The plebeians of Boston and Charlestown made up the crowd that burned the convent.

Many disparate threads, when woven together, made the convent the perfect target of attack for the lower classes. This was a time when stories of the so-called scandalous goings-on that took place secretly in nunneries and monas-
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teries circulated throughout the United States and Europe. Lurid narratives of sexual deviance, and even murder of babies and forced incarceration of females, were commonplace among the Protestant world. While many books sensationalized tales of licentious priests and nuns, others suggested that convent schools were places where Catholics coerced Protestants into converting. Plebeians probably did not read these books, but rumors of Catholic immorality had been around for years. In this specific case, tales of a nun kept in the convent against her will was to serve as a rationalization for crowd action.

Both religious and class factors motivated the lower classes to direct action against the Catholics. The Ursulines originally set up a catechism school for Catholic girls from Boston. When they moved to Mount Benedict in Charlestown, the Ursulines enlarged the school into a profitable finishing school for the daughters of Boston's Protestant elite. As one student, Louisa Whitney, remarked later in her diary, “It was built expressly for a boarding-school, and intended for the children of rich men, Protestants preferred.” Louisa was reluctant to attend the school, but she stated that her father worried about her becoming a “rebel.” He wanted her taught obedience and submission. Another reason given was his outrage against the Reverend Lyman Beecher, who was denouncing “Romanism” in his Boston sermons. “My father was a Unitarian, violently opposed to Orthodoxy, and a spirit of antagonism to Dr. Beecher led him to carry out at that time the plan he had long formed for my education in a convent.”10 By 1815 the Boston upper classes had converted to Unitarianism, and in so doing created a schism with the Congregational Church.

The general acceptance by Boston's Brahmins of the liberal Unitarian credo was a shock to the more evangelical Congregationalists, Baptists, and Methodists. When Harvard and the leading churches of Boston went Unitarian, the fundamentalists countered by setting up the Andover Theological Seminary and Amherst College to train clerics in the old faith. The period 1825–35 was one of evangelical fervor, in which the revivalist ministers connected the Unitarians with the Catholics, sensing a plot against the “true” religion. One newspaper commented, “Atheists and infidels will always be ready to sympathize with Catholics, to unite with them in crushing Protestantism preparatory to the subversion of Christianity.”11 In fact, the Unitarians did support toleration of Catholicism, which earned the gratitude of that church's leaders. While Boston's Catholic bishop John Cheverus “could nowise rejoice in the Unitarian denial of Our Lord's divinity, nor could he, on the other side, be blind to the anti-
Catholic bigotry of the orthodox . . . he clearly leaned toward the Unitarians.” In a letter of 1831, Cheverus’s successor, Bishop Benedict J. Fenwick, commented on the intolerance toward his flock: “I must say that it is not the same with the Unitarians, and that on all occasions they show themselves favorable to the Catholics.” The more evangelical sects were keenly aware of the open support Unitarians showed Catholics. The working poor were hard-line Protestants, and thus they had additional reasons, besides class, to hate their masters, the Brahmins.

The lower orders lived in a rigid moral world where their ministers readily pointed out the “sin” and “evil” of Catholicism and Unitarianism. The Yankee Protestant mechanics had a deep moral sense, and traditionally they were quick to lash out against those who defied the mores of the community. The Boston working classes had demonstrated their concern for the preservation of community proprieties time and again in the food riots and bordello riots of the eighteenth century. Both in the market riot of 1737 and the Knowles impressment riot of 1747, the laboring poor publicly proclaimed their moral righteousness in defending direct action. The traditions of the Puritan world still had enormous influence over the plebeians’ lives.

In addition to anti-Catholicism and concern over “immorality,” class conflict was an issue in the events culminating in the destruction of the Ursuline Convent. While Boston’s rich Protestants were overwhelmingly Unitarians, with a sprinkling of Episcopalians, they were also largely conservative Federalists, then Whigs. Boston’s Brahmins, such as Josiah Quincy and Harrison Grey Otis, were religious liberals, but also staunch economic conservatives. They monopolized city and state government while controlling the reins of economic power of New England. The working poor reluctantly paid deference to these rich men who followed a “false” religion. The evangelical ministers of the community exhorted the laboring poor against the “conspiracy” between the elites and the Catholics.

The Ursuline Convent itself represented this unholy alliance and symbolized the breach between rich and poor. It was a series of splendid buildings, remote from the rest of the community but in full view on a large hill, easily seen from working-class quarters. Described as “an immense structure,” it also had a lodge, the bishop’s house, several terraced walks, and “picturesque” grounds. Louisa Whitney noted, “The Convent with its broad halls, long galleries, and massive walls, put me in mind of palaces.” She went on to write, “In
fact, the whole establishment was as foreign to the soil whereon it stood as if, like Aladdin’s Palace, it had been wafted from Europe by the power of a magi-
cian.”14 Here was palatial splendor, where Yankee workers believed the Unitar-
ian rich sent their children to plot or connive with the satanic Papists. The daily
sight of Catholic opulence amid Yankee hard times must have further galled the
working classes.

What better target could the laboring poor find to express anger and frus-
tration against their oppressors and those responsible for their economic prob-
lems than an isolated, alien, palacelike structure that housed mysterious goings-
on? One eminent Bostonian who sent his daughter to the school wrote after-
ward that he thought the “mob” believed “that the Nunnery at Charlestown was
an immoral and corrupt place, where all sorts of vice and superstitions were
practised:—and that Protestant parents who sent their children there for in-
struction were guilty of a heinous sin.”15 Actual events surrounding this particu-
lar convent seemed to corroborate the poor’s worst fears.

As early as 1830, a Boston newspaper wrote a false story about an orphan
girl “inveigled into the Ursuline Convent . . . after having been cajoled to trans-
fer a large fortune to the Popish massmen.” More damaging to the nunnery’s
reputation were the slanderous jibes of one Rebecca Reed. A convert, she en-
tered the convent as a charity case to train for the order. Found unsatisfactory,
she left the convent and falsely accused the sisters of trying to kidnap her. For
two years she roamed Boston, Cambridge, and other areas, spreading rumors
about the convent. Later a self-confessed member of the riotous crowd, John
Buzzell, remarked, “From this time we looked upon the nunnery with disfavor,
and many stories of cruel practices within its walls were told and believed.”16
Thus, on July 28, 1834, when a nun, Sister Mary John, fled from the convent in
an agitated state, the triggering incident for a riot was in place.

The circumstances of the riot, and the identity and makeup of the crowd
are well known and generally agreed upon:17 A nun, Sister Mary John, was ill
or had a nervous breakdown, and left the premises in search of a family that had
been friendly to her. Edward Cutter, a brick master who lived near the convent,
and his friend John Runey, a Charlestown selectman, escorted her to the family
in question. Both were bitterly anti-Catholic. Fearing a scandal, Catholic
Bishop Benedict Fenwick persuaded the sister to return with him to the con-
vent, assuring her that if she persisted in her desire to leave the order, she could
do so in a short time. Rumors abounded that Fenwick had forced her return,
and the Ursulines were torturing her in the convent’s “dungeons.” The plebeians heard stories of “her being badly treated leaked out through servants.” To make matters worse, the mother superior, Mary Edmond St. George, and two other members of the ten-person order were converts from Protestantism. Fear of forced conversions was a major issue in anti-Catholic writings. Maintaining that Sister Mary John was “mentally ill,” the mother superior stubbornly denied entry to Cutter’s daughters and others wishing to visit with the nun. Hearing that the Ursulines turned away visitors, the suspicious Charlestown selectmen authorized Runey to investigate the matter.

By the beginning of August, newspapers were circulating stories about the “mysterious disappearance of a young lady at the Nunnery.” Rumors abounded in the Yankee working-class community. On Saturday, August 9, Cutter, Runey, and the Charlestown selectmen visited the convent and demanded the right to inspect the premises. The mother superior again refused entry. Mother St. George, a strong and brave leader, nonetheless was sharp of tongue and impulsive. She spurned the requests of the Charlestowners, but in so doing increased the tension by remarking more than once that the bishop would bring “20,000 Irishmen to pull their houses down over their heads” if they attempted to enter the convent. Finally, she allowed Cutter and his brother, Fitch, to meet with Sister Mary. They seemed satisfied and left, requesting permission for the selectmen to search the premises on another day. On Monday, August 11, the selectmen searched the convent, looking for secret chambers, torture rooms, and the bodies of babies. Finding nothing, and meeting a much recovered Sister Mary John, they left announcing that the next day’s newspapers would have their full report exonerating the Ursulines of any evil acts. A letter in the next day’s Boston Morning Post from Cutter informed the community that he had spoken with the sister in question and she was free to go at any time. Another letter in the same newspaper, signed by Runey and the other Charlestown selectmen, clarified “erroneous statements” and announced that the convent was “in good order” and there was “no cause for complaint.” It was too late; on Monday evening, the day before the publication of these letters, the crowd burned the convent to the ground.

The day before, on Sunday, the truckmen of Charlestown and Boston had put up posters warning the authorities to act:

To the Selectmen of Charlestown!! Gentlemen: It is currently reported that a mysterious affair has lately happened at the Nunery [sic] in
Charlestown, now it is your duty gentlemen to have this affair investigated immediately, if not the Truckmen of Boston will demolish the Nunery [sic] Thursday night—August 14.

Another poster proclaimed a call “to arms,” to leave “not one stone upon another of this curst nunery that prostitutes female virtue and liberty under the garb of holy Religion.” On Monday evening, August 11, just a few hours after the authorities had searched the premises, a crowd began forming around the convent bearing banners and shouting “no Popery,” and “Down with the cross.”

Although estimated as a crowd of at least two thousand, the actual rioters numbered anywhere from forty to sixty, or sixty to one hundred, depending on the source used. They were easily discernible since they were “disguised with masks and fantastic dresses and painted faces, assembled” or with “faces painted like Indians.” They lighted barrels of tar, and the fires brought out the Boston and Charlestown volunteer fire departments, described as “undisciplined, turbulent, and frequently riotous men” who were “notorious for their hostility to the Irish.” One of the accused ringleaders, John Buzzell, said they burned the tar barrels “to bring out the fire boys, who will help us tear down the buildings.” At that point, the mother superior confronted Buzzell and his men. Buzzell later described her as “the sauciest woman I ever heard talk.” Once again, she intemperately warned the crowd, “If you meddle with us, the Bishop has 30,000 men, who will burn your houses over your heads.”

The angry crowd began throwing bricks and missiles at the windows, and when the frightened nuns and children fled through a back entrance, the rioters battered down the doors and entered. The crowd vandalized the interior and stole precious objects, and then began setting fires throughout. After the rioters torched the buildings, the firemen made no effort to put the blaze out.

The crowd went so far as to damage the convent’s graveyard. This act scandalized the New England Galaxy, which reported on August 16 that the “cowardly assailants,” “disguised with paint,” demonstrated “the most damning proof of the Vandal character of the perpetrators, was the desecration of the tomb.” The newspaper commented further it was ashamed that “Americans—native Americans—Yankees” made up the “mob.” Reporting on the event on August 20, another newspaper in the western part of the state, the Hampshire Gazette, demonstrated how out of touch it was with the working classes. It mused per-
plexedly that such “a great number of persons were assembled at the spot, and were witness of these transactions. We are unable to account for it, that no measures were taken to repress them [the rioters].” Buzzell explained that the intrusion into the tomb was “to see if the body of the music teacher Mary St. John was there.” At this point his memoirs take a very dubious turn: “The door of the tomb was broken open, and within was the body of a young girl who had evidently been dead but a day or two at most, and whom I religiously believe to this day to have been Mary St. John, although I had no positive proof of her identity. This finished the events on the hill, and after watching the flames for a while, the immense mob slowly dispersed.”

The truckmen of Charlestown and Boston led a crowd of their peers, acting in unison for a common purpose. The onlookers and the actual assailants were the poor Protestant laborers of Boston and Charlestown—truckmen, brick makers, sailors, firemen, apprentices, and “youthful hooligans.” Indicted ringleader John Buzzell described his followers as men “from the poorest and most ignorant strata” of the community. The historian of the Boston Irish wrote, “it is the working class that throws the rock and sets fires.” Eyewitness Louisa Whitney had no trouble identifying the crowd members as “from sixty to a hundred men, most of them Boston truckmen . . . while some two thousand men, old and young and of all conditions, stood quietly by and looked on, aiding and abetting the rioters.” Famed Massachusetts politician and Civil War general Benjamin Butler later stated in his diary that some of those involved were Scots-Irish Presbyterian brick makers from New Hampshire who were working on a job in a nearby brickyard. These men held grudges that went back to Catholic persecutions of Presbyterians in Northern Ireland. Thus, the rioters hated and feared Catholicism, which they connected with European “Romanism” and corrupt monarchy. They worried about immorality and the danger to their own religion posed by this “alien” threat. The plebeians resented the Irish immigrants who worked for less and took away their jobs. They envisioned the convent and its surroundings as a place where their masters, elite Unitarians, indulged in sinful behavior. In their minds, the crowd was defending its vision of a republican, Protestant America against local and European aristocrats.

The air of openness and self-confidence that the mob demonstrated during the riot was apparent in the aftermath (as was true of the crowds in the market riot of 1737 and the Knowles impressment riot of 1747). The day after the convent burned, the mood of the rioters was both jubilant and self-satisfied. Louisa
Whitney had fled the convent to Charlestown with the nuns and the other children. They hid in various homes of well-to-do sympathetic townspeople. When she and others rode out of town on a coach to return to Boston, she described the crowd:

So we slowly rode the gauntlet between a double file of amiable ruffians, who saluted us with jeers, yells, shrill whistling, and catcalling, roars of laughter, rough jokes, and questions. Most of them were in shirt-sleeves; some like ourselves, had no hats; others had trimmed their hats with green wreaths, and stuck flowers in their breasts; some had red and yellow handkerchiefs tied round their heads, with a coxcomb or sunflower stuck in the knot. Some danced and shuffled along the sidewalk; others strode on with heads thrown back. . . . We scarcely understood any of the questions put to us in such rough, vulgar utterance as the crowd made use of, but we did not feel afraid of them; they were evidently good-natured and meant us no harm.25

Throughout the months that followed the common people of Boston and Charlestown openly supported the rioters, while the elites castigated their actions.

Initially, the upper classes, though distressed by the “work of a lawless mob,” showed signs of their own repressed fear of Irish Catholics. Rumors quickly circulated that an army of twenty thousand Irishmen, called up by the mother superior, were marching on Boston to wreak vengeance. One incredible story went around “that the Library of Harvard College was doomed to assault and destruction by the Irish Roman Catholics.” Demonstrating their blatant nativist tendencies and insecurities, the elite sons at Harvard organized and armed themselves. Brahmins Franklin Dexter and Robert Winthrop were chosen as captain and lieutenant over forty armed undergraduates. Rumors were rise that the citadel of Brahmin culture was in mortal danger:

Sentinels were stationed at the door and windows, patrols were sent out on the streets and roads, and every preparation was made for defending the building and the books at all hazards. More than once during the night rumors reached us of a mob approaching. At one time there came a man on horseback at full speed announcing that a thousand infuriated
Irishmen were coming along the Charlestown road, and were hardly more than a mile off! 26

This bizarre episode revealed the temporary overreaction of elites and their growing distaste for the new immigrants, which could easily turn into class warfare.

The Irish posed no threat, however, but the rioters continued their work. The next evening they returned to the ruins of the convent and set more fires. A crowd of 1,000 roamed the Boston streets preparing for the so-called attack of the Irish. On Friday, August 15, a crowd set fire to a shack in Charlestown that housed Irish laborers. A Boston crowd marched to Charlestown to join in but could not cross the river when the authorities raised the drawbridge. The Boston correspondent from the New York Journal wrote, “I have not witnessed such a scene of excitement throughout the whole mass of the phlegmatic and peaceable population of Boston since my residence in the city commenced.” 27 A Boston gentleman described the tension in the community in a letter to a friend: “Eight hundred police men patrol the streets. The draws of Bridges are all raised after nine O’clock and guards stationed at all the avenues—at the arsenal, at the Catholic Church and at Cambridge. . . . Men collect in the streets, in day time, in great Masses to talk—bayonets gleam by moonlight and women are frightened by day and by night.” 28

The day after the riot, Boston’s elites met at Faneuil Hall to condemn “the base and cowardly act, for which the perpetrators deserve the contempt and detestation of the community.” The meeting set up a committee, with Josiah Quincy, Harrison Grey Otis, William Sturgis, Nathan Appleton, Henry Lee, Charles Loring, and others of the town’s luminaries to bring “the villains to justice.” While they claimed sympathy for their “Catholic brethren,” the upper classes were responding to their classic fear of lower-class anarchy and the challenge to property rights and “civilized society.” Their resolves condemned “the destruction of property and danger of life caused thereby,” and called “loudly on all good citizens to express individually and collectively the abhorrence they feel of this highhanded violation of the laws.” 29 They hoped to bring the lower classes to their senses in the trial of the rioters that followed.

Class divisions, religious enmity, and nativism were evident in the legal proceedings that occurred. Even before the arrest of thirteen men, posters and anonymous letters appeared threatening prospective witnesses. The Bunker Hill
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Aurora of August 23, 1834, reported a poster that read, “all persons giving information in any shape or testifying in a court against anyone concerned in the late affair at Charlestown may expect assassination, according to the oath which bound the party together.” Besides the anonymous letters to the court officers, a handbill emerged evoking the patriotism of the rioters:

Liberty or Death!
Suppressed Evidence.
Sons of Freedom! Can you live in a
free country, and bear the Yoke of
Priesthood, veiled in the habit of a
profligate Court.

Among the men arraigned for arson and burglary—capital offenses—were a brick worker, cordwainer, shoemaker, baker, carpenter, and a sixteen-year-old boy, Marvin Marcy. The first trial was against the apparent ringleader, brickmaker John Buzzell. The defense statement to the jury was simple. All the witnesses against Buzzell were Catholics, thus suspect. The jury therefore should reject Catholic “imported testimony” in favor of “domestic testimony.” In spite of the wealth of evidence against him, the jury acquitted Buzzell. He recalled the event some fifty years later: “The testimony against me was point blank and sufficient to have convicted twenty men, but somehow I proved an alibi, and the jury brought in a verdict of not guilty.” The jurors, his plebeian peers, shared his anti-Catholic views. In the trials that followed, with one exception, the Yankee juries found the accused Yankees innocent. A jury convicted young Marcy, sentencing him to life imprisonment at hard labor. The following October, following a groundswell of public support, Marcy received a pardon. Once again, the crowd had taken direct action, and the authorities were unable to punish them for their unlawful violence. No wonder the plebeians had faith in crowd action as an ad hoc tool to redress grievances.

The victory of the rioters signified that nativist sentiment among Boston’s plebeians remained quite strong. Many believed that more rioting would be forthcoming. The Ursuline nuns ousted by the fire found temporary shelter in Roxbury. By December 15, the sheriff of Middlesex County warned his colleague in Norfolk County that “I have received information, that threats have been made to pull down or destroy the building, used as a Nunery [sic], at Rox-
bury. Altho, I do not, on common occasions, think much of these threats, Yet I think they may mean something, in these times of excitement and insubordination." Prominent Roxbury citizens heard of this threat, and met on December 23 at the town hall to take "measures to suppress riots and for protecting the building now occupied by the 'Ursuline community.'" The Roxbury selectmen formed a "Committee of Vigilance of Protection" to protect the Ursuline nuns. They appointed "a nightly patrol to watch the building." It soon became clear to the committee that the militia units assigned for protection might not be trustworthy. One citizen reported, "Necessarily coming in contact with a great variety of Men as I do, and hearing frequent allusions made to the all exciting topics of conversation; I am able from what I can collect together from the information of some of the most worthless and detestable Men, who justify the proceedings of the late outrages in Charlestown, that a somewhat similar mode of operation will be adopted here." Warnings of impending forays continued for days. "Look out sharp on Saturday night" one anonymous letter writer stated, "as an attack on the temporary Convent is meditated." The Committee of Vigilance took special precautions, and no violence occurred.34

Bishop Fenwick feared further assaults and organized an armed defense force to guard Catholic Churches. Fenwick also worried about the reaction of his own people. In a letter to a friend he wrote: "Certainly some lives will be lost in case of another attack, for our good Irishmen are now wound up to a point where if you go one step further the cord will snap. They have been horribly insulted in the public prints, which insults they feel most sensibly. All are now armed, and they keep themselves so." To add to his fears, in March 1835 a book appeared, Six Months in a Convent, purportedly written by Rebecca Reed, and chronicling her cruel treatment at the hands of the Ursulines. The respectable press reacted negatively. The New England Magazine remarked, "We believe in common with the most respectable portion of our fellow citizens, that Miss Reed is a week [sic], silly person, of a very romantic turn of mind, and so acting and speaking deceitfully. . . . The infinite absurdity of Miss Reed's book should be exposed," and was written "for the purpose of inflaming the mob to new acts of persecution and outrage, on the small community of women."35 Nonetheless, the publication of scurrilous books and the continued outpouring of Protestant ministers' diatribes against Irish Catholics continued unabated.

Bishop Fenwick tried to open a new school for the Ursuline Sisters in Roxbury, but could get no students to apply amid Boston's tense atmosphere. In
1838 he sent the sisters to Canada. In January 1835, Fenwick petitioned the state legislature to indemnify the Catholic Church for the destruction of the convent. A select house committee brought in an ambiguous report, but the majority agreed to some compensation. One house member, Robert Winthrop, who a year before had been guarding Harvard against an Irish incursion, spoke in favor of the report. He admitted that his fears about the Irish had been premature and that the Catholics, “under the wise counsel of the Bishop, exhibited great moderation and forbearance at that exciting moment, and conducted themselves in a manner to win the respect and sympathy of all their fellow-citizens.” Others were not so tolerant, arguing against any indemnification for the “alien church.” One Protestant newspaper, the American Protestant Vindicator, on January 21, 1835, condemned support for the majority opinion: “Any man who proposes, or would vote for the measure, which would rob the treasury of the descendants of the Puritans to build Ursuline Nunneries, after the model of the Ursuline Nunnery at Quebec, and as the headquarters of the Jesuit Fenwick and his ‘20,000 vilest Irishmen’ must be a raving lunatic.” The house voted down the petition, 412 to 67. The legislature rejected similar petitions that came forward in 1842, 1846, 1853, and 1854. The ruins of the Ursuline convent sat upon Mount Benedict for forty years, a symbol of a community torn apart by nativism. The Catholic Church sold the land in 1875. Developers leveled the hill, and the site eventually became the suburban housing lots of the new town of Somerville. In the years after the convent burning, further violent acts against the Irish by the Yankee plebeians were not long in coming.

Boston’s elite feared more nativist rioting. In 1837 Mayor Samuel A. Eliot talked of a “a spirit of violence” pervading the city and the nation. As a member of the ruling classes, he could not fathom why any Americans rioted. “What ever may be the cause in other countries, it is manifestly impossible that any sufficient or justifying cause for popular violence exists in this, where Republican institutions secure to every individual his just share in the government of the whole.” The mayor deluded himself into believing that the plebeians had the same political rights as their masters, and therefore should refrain from unlawful acts. The plebeians, however, did not share his faith in the fairness of the American political system. They made this abundantly clear when they chose violence as their instrument of popular expression. The Broad Street riot of 1837 was another manifestation of working-class discontent with an imperfect system that often ignored their needs.
The Broad Street Riot

The major protagonists involved in this civil disturbance were the Yankee volunteer fire companies of the city and the Irish poor. Like other American cities, Boston had a small group of paid firemen who managed one or two engines, plus several volunteer fire companies who competed to put out fires. As mandated by the town’s 1739 statute, Boston offered payment to the volunteer fire company that got to the fire first. The statute read: “That for the encouragement of the respective companies belonging to the several Fire engines in this town and to stimulate them to their duty in extinguishing of Fires, as they may occasion, There be and hereby is allowed to be payed [sic] out of the Town Treasury the sum of Five Pounds to the company of such Fire Engine as shall first be brought to work upon any house or building that shall be on fire.” Volunteer companies had evolved into elaborate social clubs, where drinking and brawling were as important as answering fire alarms. These companies were intensely competitive, and fights often broke out between them. Undisciplined, they often caused civil disorders. The historian of Boston’s fire department reported that in 1834 selectmen dismissed Engine Company 3 “for disorderly conduct while at a fire on May 1. The company attached to Engine 13 was, on Dec 1, also severely censured for going to a fire in Chelsea.” A Catholic Church history described these firemen as “chiefly from those poorer strata of the population among whom hostility to the Catholics and the Irish was fiercest.”

The Broad Street riot of 1837 involved over fifteen thousand people, almost one-fifth of the city’s population. One reason for the considerable numbers involved was that the riot took place on a Sunday, June 11. The large crowd cheered while a hard core of some seven hundred volunteer firemen and others burned an Irish neighborhood to the ground after beating many Irishmen and looting and vandalizing their homes. A newspaper described the rioters as “those classes of the community who sympathize in a common prejudice against foreigners.” There were also many young men involved, described as “unreflecting youths.” The newspaper went on to comment that the rioters hated the Irish because they were taking away their jobs.

The circumstances of the riot reflected the ongoing animosity of the Yankee plebeians toward the newcomers, and the Irish resentment of their treatment at the hands of the natives. A volunteer company had just returned from a fire when one of their members became involved in a shoving match with
some men in an Irish funeral procession of four or five hundred that was forming on the same street. Firemen rushed out of the firehouse to help their colleague but were no match for the large group of Irish. After the procession started on its way, the firemen began ringing the firehouse bells, calling for reinforcements. The *Boston Evening Transcript* of June 15 reported that one fireman went to another firehouse on foot, exclaiming, “The Irish have risen upon us, and are going to kill us.” As the funeral moved along, it collided with a fire company looking for a fire. Then several other fire companies arrived on the scene and attacked the mourners.

The fighting escalated when the Irish moved as a group toward their homes on Broad Street. Word of the violence spread throughout the heavily populated North End, and scores migrated to the contested area. In fear of the attacking firemen, the Irish came out of their houses on Broad Street to defend their homes. After two hours the more numerous firemen won the day; the Irish had either fled or returned to their homes. At that point the looting and vandalism began. “A gang of stout boys and loafers, who had followed the firemen at such distance that they might be protected from the dangers, and at the same time participate in the mischief of the affray, attacked the houses of the Irish in the rear of the scene of the combat, tearing to pieces and destroying everything wantonly and recklessly. The houses were sacked, their contents thrown into the streets, and everything demolished as speedily as possible.”

Beatings of Irishmen continued. The violence finally ended with the appearance of Mayor Eliot with the sheriff, who had called out the militia. Over eight hundred strong, the militia dispersed the crowds and patrolled the neighborhood. Armed troops called out by the local authorities became the typical response to urban rioting.

Amazingly, no deaths resulted from the violence, but many were badly wounded. There was no hospital for the seriously hurt, and friends or relatives cared for them. Since proper hospital and police records are lacking, it is impossible to determine if anyone died from his wounds, and the extent of the physical injuries. Property damage was in the thousands. Many Irish families lost their homes. The militia vigorously enforced the peace, but as they were largely Yankee, they arrested thirty-four “bleeding Irishmen.” A grand jury brought indictments against fourteen Irishmen and four Yankees for rioting. At the trial a Yankee jury found four Irish guilty and acquitted their fellow Yankees. The plebeian firemen emerged unscathed and victorious.
The elite response was to mitigate the threat posed by the volunteers by ending the system. In September Mayor Eliot announced the establishment of a professional, paid fire department, thus ending the long rule of the volunteer companies. Firefighters received a yearly salary, and the mayor and aldermen maintained discipline and approved the hire of all new members. New rules prohibited engine companies from running "races on returning from fires, and the use of rattles, horns and all unnecessary noises and the smoking of pipes or cigars, were strictly forbidden." The matter did not end there because one of the militia units that had helped restore peace was the Montgomery Guards, an Irish company. They would soon pay a price for their interference against the firemen.

The Montgomery Guards Riot

The militia units that restored order during the Broad Street riots had long been the linchpin for the protection of lives and property in times of war and civil unrest. The 1747 impressment riot was a success because the militia would not muster and suppress the rioters. In peacetime these units would participate in maneuvers and periodic parades and musters on the Boston Common. They were the darlings of the elites, who enjoyed dressing up and giving dinners for their men. Militia service was compulsory, but many well-to-do citizens found ways to avoid it. Some plebeians considered it onerous and burdensome both because of the expense involved and the time lost. Nonetheless, others grudgingly agreed that such service was necessary to preserve civil order, and was the patriotic duty of all citizens. Belonging to a well-thought-of unit, with resplendent uniforms, was a way for some lower classes to have some status in the community. In an effort to assimilate, in January 1837, several naturalized Irish Americans secured permission from the governor, Edward Everett, to organize their own unit. The Montgomery Guards, named after an Irish hero of the Revolution, wore green as their company color.

On September 12, 1837, three months after the Montgomery Guards had helped restore order in the Broad Street riot, they joined a muster on the Common of all ten militia companies that made up the infantry regiment of the Boston Brigade. As soon as the Montgomery Guards appeared, the rank and file of six companies quit the field, leaving their officers standing alone. The Yankee plebeians made known their unwillingness to participate with Irish Catholics in
such patriotic proceedings. They disobeyed their officers and publicly insulted the Irish guardsmen. The remaining troops went through with their parade, and at 6:00 P.M. the Montgomery Guards began marching back to their armory. An unruly crowd of some three thousand confronted them and began pelting them with stones and assorted brickbats. When they finally arrived, the much maligned Montgomery Guards found themselves surrounded and captive in their own armory. Only the appearance of Mayor Eliot with a large posse of armed men succeeded in dispersing the crowd.

This was not a major riot. No serious injuries occurred, and there was little property damage. The mayor’s quick and resolute response prevented an escalation of the violence. Symbolically, however, the lower orders demonstrated to the authorities their willingness to use direct action to gain their ends. Once again, the Yankee working classes had taken matters into their own hands. Violence and disobedience to orders was their way of showing their disapprobation with the elites who had allowed the Montgomery Guards to form, and their hatred of the newcomer Irish Catholics.

Retribution by the upper classes was quick in coming. Three members of the crowd “were sent to jail,” but no further information is available on this issue. In February 1838, Governor Everett disbanded the six mutinous companies for “deserting their public duties and provoking the riot.” Two months later the governor also disbanded the Montgomery Guards, maintaining that their continued existence would provoke “outrages of a dangerous character.” Six months later, with the governor’s approval, all the disbanded Yankee companies reconstituted themselves under different names. That was not the case for the Irish militia. They did not receive permission to reorganize, thus losing the right to participate in Boston society as full-fledged citizens. As happened many times before, Yankee plebeians attained their social goals using communal social violence.

The Broad Street riot of 1837 against the Irish was both larger and bloodier than the Ursuline affray, yet historians have paid scant attention to it. Almost fifteen thousand people engaged in violent acts, yet no scholarly historical study of this melee exists. The reason for the obscurity of this large riot may be that it involved lower-class groups fighting with each other. The property damaged was the slum housing of the Irish. In contrast, the Ursuline convent burning was an attack by lower classes on the property of a well-to-do religious institution used primarily by Boston’s upper classes. Thus, the convent burning was
an affront to the personal interests of elites and their notion of the sanctity of private property. The Broad Street riot concerned violence only to the lower classes by the lower classes. The wanton beating of Irish immigrants and the vandalism and destruction of tenements lived in by a despised minority did not warrant a major upper-class response. There was no meeting of indignant Brahmins at Faneuil Hall protesting the lawlessness of the “mob” or the inordinate violence heaped upon the Irish poor. The elites did not pass resolves sympathizing with the victims as they did after the Ursuline event.

By minimizing the importance of this riot, elites affected its historical significance for later generations. They left no record of this event in the papers and memoirs they handed down to posterity, now stored in repositories of learning. Elites thus provided few incentives for the study of this event by historians who avidly chronicled upper-class doings of this era. After 1846, when the Irish inundated the Hub with large numbers of potential voters, the patricians awakened to the problem and actively participated in nonviolent nativist activities. Nevertheless, it was the laboring poor who first recognized the menace of these Catholic newcomers. They acted because the elites ignored their needs. Fear of change led the plebeians to strike out violently against their imagined enemies, the Irish Catholic immigrants, rather than become impotent victims to forces that seemed beyond their control.