Inventing America's First Immigration Crisis

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Inventing America’s First Immigration Crisis: Political Nativism in the Antebellum West. 

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The Valley of Decision

If we gain the West, all is safe; if we lose it, all is lost.

—Presbyterian minister Lyman Beecher, 1830

The American Revolution transformed a social system founded on appearance, aristocracy, and church affiliation into one based on a shared set of values. Rather than luck of birth, certain values determined one’s belonging to the American nation: the belief in natural rights to life, liberty, and property; the belief in the sovereignty of the people; the belief in promotion by merit; and the belief in an individual’s freedom to think whatever one wants to think without the threat of persecution from the state, to say whatever one wants to say, to print opinions in public forums, to assemble with likeminded individuals, and to petition the government to change undesirable policies. These were the building blocks of modern democracy enshrined in the U.S. Constitution. To believe in them was to belong.¹

One of the most radical elements of the U.S. Constitution was its neutrality on religion. The governments of France and Spain officially privileged the Roman Catholic Church; the king of England doubled as the head of the Church of England. But the United States became one of the first modern countries to deliberately not select an official state religion. The unamended Constitution, ratified in 1788, mentioned religion only once (in Article 6, clause 3): “No religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.” The delegates at the Constitutional Convention knew exactly what this meant: men of all religious persuasions could serve as government officials.² The founders ushered in a new degree of toleration for a plurality of religious denominations. Although men who claimed membership in the Episcopalian Church composed the majority, the convention itself represented a diversity of religious affiliations, including Congregationalists, Quakers, Lutherans, and Methodists. Two Catholics signed the Constitution, Daniel
Carroll of Maryland and Thomas Fitzsimons of Pennsylvania. At least thirteen of the thirty-nine signers were affiliated with the Order of Freemasons. Furthermore, the First Amendment to the Constitution, ratified in 1791, ensured that the federal government would not prefer or persecute one religious group over another: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” It was determined then, at least at the national level, that religion would remain a private matter.

Although the delegates to the Constitutional Convention established a secular federal government that could not endorse one religion in particular (or any religion for that matter), this did not mean that Americans wanted to completely remove religion from all governmental functions. From state constitutions down to the level of city ordinances, local American law often has invoked God and privileged Christianity, namely Protestant forms of Christianity. Massachusetts maintained an official state religion, Congregationalism, until its highest state court deemed this unconstitutional in 1833. Connecticut also chose Congregationalism as the state’s official religion until adopting a new constitution in 1818. New Hampshire at the same time permitted only five official state religions, none of which were Roman Catholic.

U.S. courts eventually forced the disestablishment of preferred religious denominations in American states. In this way the United States matched the countries around the Atlantic Ocean in its level of religious tolerance under law. The United Kingdom, for example, passed the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829, which after centuries of persecution finally permitted Catholic citizens to vote, hold office, and generally practice their religion without harassment. Catholic France likewise removed punishments for Huguenots (French Calvinists) in the country. Just as Catholicism retained privileges in France, as did Anglicanism in England, mainstream Protestant denominations in the United States continued to enjoy and expect preferential treatment, especially at local levels.

Hypothetically, anyone could become an American citizen. The U.S. government provided immigrants a simple pathway to citizenship after five years of residency. State governments enforced their own, often more lenient rules for naturalization. As a result of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, an open-state policy in the West permitted residents, once they constituted a population of 60,000 in a given territory, to apply for admission as a new state in the American union. Territorial and state governments could determine residency requirements for enfranchisement. Most western states allowed immigrants to vote after merely two years of residency and a declaration of their intent to naturalize. In an attempt to attract laborers, some, such as Indiana, naturalized immigrants upon
arrival. Open immigration, westward expansion, and state-directed naturalization policies ensured the emergence of a radically diverse American citizenry.

By the 1830s, the unexpectedly rapid pace of immigration and western settlement posed a serious challenge to American national identity. What exact values would unite such a diverse array of peoples spread across the North American continent? Who did and did not belong? Rapid demographic change and territorial expansion triggered America’s first nativist movement.

Despite religious pluralism in America, anti-Catholic sentiment figured prominently in nineteenth-century conversations about immigration policy and western settlement. Many European immigrants to the United States affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church, while most native-born Americans embraced some form of Protestant Christianity. Americans’ anti-Catholic prejudices were part of the legacy of bygone centuries of theological divergence dating back to the Protestant Reformation. Theologically, Catholic doctrines traditionally emphasized the collective over the individual in matters pertaining to salvation. Historically and politically, Roman Catholicism had grown in prestige and power around the world alongside monarchical systems of government. The American Revolution raised additional concerns about the compatibility of Roman Catholicism with a democratic form of government.

Mass immigration, rapid westward expansion, and fervent religious revivalism reawakened the anti-Catholicism that had been so stark in the colonial era. The Upper Mississippi and Ohio River valleys, what most Americans thought of as the “West,” became a significant site of intense competition between Protestant and Catholic migrants, with the entire fate of the American experiment seeming to hang in the balance. Americanism became tied to visions of conquering the West with American customs and values.

The Mississippi Valley as National Crucible

The generation of Americans huddled along the East Coast around the time of the American Revolution imagined the lands west of the Appalachian Mountains as a vast “wilderness,” majestic and treacherous, trafficked by Indians but nonetheless a desolate and uncharted place. And it was all theirs for the taking, at least according to the terms of the Treaty of Paris of 1783, which granted the newly formed American republic a massive endowment of formerly British-occupied territory below Canada, above Spanish Florida, and stretching all the way west to the Mississippi River. Then in 1803 imperial pressures compelled the ruler of France, Napoleon Bonaparte, to sell the Louisiana Territory
west of the Mississippi River, approximately 827,000 square miles, to President Thomas Jefferson’s administration for fifteen million dollars. In just twenty years’ time, the United States doubled in size and then doubled again. Before the Revolutionary era, very few Anglo-Americans ventured beyond the Kentucky and Ohio Territories. The acquisitions of 1783 and 1803 motivated rapid westward expansion thereafter.

The presence of indigenous Americans; native-born French and Spanish colonists; centuries-old Dominican, Franciscan, and Jesuit missions; and other sundry groups—this populated West—did not square well with American designs. Many of the French and Spanish-speaking creole inhabitants of major hubs like New Orleans and St. Louis remained even after their mother countries had withdrawn. When Anglo-American migrant John Fletcher Darby approached St. Louis from the east bank of the Mississippi River with his family in 1818, he marveled at the “striking and imposing appearance” of this formidable town of 4,000 French Catholic residents. French fur traders Pierre Laclede and Auguste Chouteau had founded the city in 1764, twelve years before Americans declared their independence, and named it in honor of their monarch’s patron saint, King Louis IX. Darby remembered that the residents’ “strange habiliments, manner, and jabbering in the French language . . . had a new and striking effect upon myself and the other children, coming as we did from the plantation in the Southern country.” Even “the negroes of the town all spoke French,” he gawked, and attended mass too.7

Darby became the mayor of St. Louis seventeen years later. By that time, in 1835, the entire region was undergoing a profound transformation in character from being predominantly indigenous American, French, and Catholic to Anglo-American and Protestant Christian. When the United States acquired the vast territory west of the Mississippi River, the Missouri region had no Baptist, Methodist, or Presbyterian churches. By 1836, each denomination represented more than 200 congregations, and over two-thirds of Missouri’s population affiliated with one of these Christian sects. Americans took this as confirmation that all of the land drained by the Mississippi River and its tributaries belonged to them as their “new Canaan,” a popular allusion to the land promised to the ancient Jews in the Old Testament.8

The founding generation welcomed immigrants to join the American experiment, participate in democratic government, and settle the West.9 Indeed, the availability of land in the North American interior attracted a steady stream of immigrants from Europe. After the states ratified the Constitution, approximately 15,000 immigrants, the majority of whom were white Protestants from
the British Isles and enslaved Africans, arrived in the United States annually. In 1790, when the total population of the original thirteen states and the brand new states of Kentucky and Tennessee reached 3,929,652 (including 757,208 black slaves), Americans with Irish ancestry constituted about 8 percent of the total population and German Americans 7 percent, while figures for residents with familial ties to Holland, France, Sweden, and elsewhere were substantially smaller. Most residents who were not British or African were born in America.

Watered by the world’s fourth-largest river system, the Upper Mississippi and Ohio River valleys offered fertile soil and teeming wildlife. Before the advent of railroads, American migrants concentrated in the booming cities of Cincinnati, Louisville, and St. Louis because they lay at the epicenter of river traffic in the interior. Chicago boomed later in the 1850s once the construction of canals and railroads increased opportunities for trade. During most of the antebellum era, Cincinnati ranked as the sixth-largest city in the United States, followed closely by St. Louis. The population of the Old Northwest increased from 1.5 million in 1830 to 7 million in 1860, constituting over 25 percent of America’s total white population.

Charles B. Boynton, an agent of the American Reform Tract and Book Society and minister of the Congregationalist Church, provided a mental image to describe development in the region at the time. “If we start at St. Louis and draw a semi-circular line northward and round to Pittsburgh, it will enclose a system of Railways north of the Ohio [River],” Boynton explained, which “bear commerce to Cincinnati and concentrate upon her as their focal point.” If one completed the southern half of the semicircle, “there is a Southern system of Railways pointing inward upon Cincinnati.” The main metropolises dotting the map of the West included Cincinnati; the Ohio River town of Louisville, 100 miles southwest; the Mississippi River town of St. Louis, 300 miles west of Cincinnati; and finally the Great Lakes port of Chicago, 300 miles north. The rivers and railroads connected the dots. By the 1850s, Chicago, Cincinnati, Louisville, and St. Louis had become significant commercial and cultural centers. It was with a profound sense of the region’s interconnected expansion that Reverend Boynton noted that the West’s “pulsations for good or evil will be felt throughout the land.”

Policymakers did not expect immigrants to travel to developing western states so rapidly and in such great numbers during the 1840s. Between 1840 and 1860, approximately 4.2 million immigrants arrived in the United States, 1.7 million of whom came from Ireland and 1.3 million from the German Confederation. The British constituted the next-largest immigrant group. The population of
the West became relatively diverse as many newly arriving Europeans bypassed the East Coast, sailed straight to New Orleans, moved up the Mississippi River, and settled in interior states like Illinois, Kentucky, Missouri, and Ohio.

Cultivating his own farm in what is now Montgomery County, Missouri, in 1824, German immigrant Gottfried Düden promoted the region as a safe haven for those seeking to escape oppressive and overpopulated areas in the German Confederation. According to Düden, lush and undeveloped Missouri

| Nativity of Immigrants as Reported by the U.S. Census Bureau in 1850 and 1860 |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                  | 1850 Census     | Percentage of Immigrants | 1860 Census     | Percentage of Immigrants |
| Ireland          | 961,719         | 43.51%                   | 1,611,304       | 38.94%                   |
| Germany          | 573,225         | 25.94%                   | 1,301,136       | 31.45%                   |
| England          | 278,675         | 12.61%                   | 431,692         | 10.44%                   |
| British America  | 147,700         | 6.68%                    | 249,970         | 6.05%                    |
| France           | 54,069          | 2.44%                    | 109,870         | 2.66%                    |
| Scotland         | 70,550          | 3.19%                    | 108,518         | 2.63%                    |
| Switzerland      | 13,358          | 0.60%                    | 53,327          | 1.29%                    |
| Wales            | 29,868          | 1.34%                    | 45,763          | 1.11%                    |
| Norway           | 12,678          | 0.57%                    | 43,995          | 1.07%                    |
| China            | 758             | 0.03%                    | 35,565          | 0.86%                    |
| Holland          | 9,848           | 0.45%                    | 28,281          | 0.68%                    |
| Mexico           | 13,317          | 0.60%                    | 27,466          | 0.66%                    |
| Sweden           | 3,559           | 0.16%                    | 18,625          | 0.26%                    |
| Italy            | 3,645           | 0.17%                    | 10,518          | 0.26%                    |
| Other countries  | 37,870          | 1.71%                    | 60,145          | 1.45%                    |
| Total            | 2,210,839       |                          | 4,136,175       |                          |

Source: Joseph C. G. Kennedy, ed., Population of the United States in 1860; Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census, (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1864). Note: The 1870 census added some more to this number. The numbers for 1860 were 4,138,697, and for 1850 they were 2,244,602.
was an ideal location for a new *Vaterland* in America. Many new immigrants responded and formed long-lasting, German-speaking communities in remote agrarian towns such as Augusta, Hermann, and Marthasville. During the 1830s, explicit corporatist settlement schemes included, for example, one German-speaking group from Rhenish Bavaria in the German Confederation that intended to purchase a large tract of land west of the Mississippi to establish a “New Germany” in America. This “New Germany,” they imagined, could attract German immigrants and eventually apply as the twenty-fifth state of the Union. Another settler society announced its intention, in a pamphlet published in 1842, to reserve a large tract of land in the West exclusively for Catholic refugees from Ireland, which they hoped might eventually become a new Irish state. Both attempts failed.

Most immigrants settled in highly populated urban areas. Those who traveled out west tended to concentrate in greater numbers in Illinois and Ohio, especially near Chicago and Cincinnati. Two-thirds of all immigrants to the South settled in Kentucky, Louisiana, and Missouri, and most of those concentrated in the burgeoning cities of Louisville, New Orleans, and St. Louis. Agrarian settlement in the country required money the newcomers seldom had, while the booming cities offered semiskilled workers employment.

German immigrants were slightly more likely on average to settle in the West than were their Irish counterparts. One traveler from the East Coast observed, “The German population of these western cities are as much the ruling element as the Irish are with us.” Between 1848 and 1850, when the arrival of immigrant “Forty-Eighters” peaked, 34,418 Germans settled in St. Louis alone; many of them stayed and contributed to the distinct German character of the city.

Even though immigrants concentrated in urban areas near native-born Americans, assimilation continued to be a gradual, often multigenerational process. Distinctly ethnic districts emerged in Chicago, Cincinnati, Louisville, and St. Louis, and entire portions of cities revolved around newly built immigrant stores and churches, including the “Over-the-Rhine” district in Cincinnati, “German Broadway” in North Chicago, “Butchertown” in Louisville, “New Bremen” in North St. Louis, the “Kerry Patch” in Central St. Louis, and “Carondelet” in South St. Louis. Americans expressed concern that the rapid influx of German and Irish immigrants to western cities would not provide the proper incentives for assimilation. While serving as the director of the Western Literary Institution, Calvin Stowe argued in 1835, “Nothing could be more fatal to our prospects of future national prosperity than to have our population become a congeries of clans, congregating without coalescing.” As the immigrant populations of
western cities began to outnumber the native born, one self-proclaimed “Native American” complained that “the valley of the Mississippi will not long be American in the character of its population, if it now is.”

Mass immigration from Europe boosted the Catholic population in the United States from 150,000 in 1815 to 1 million in 1850. That same year, while the Catholic Church claimed 1 million members in the States, there were approximately 1 million Presbyterians, 2.7 million Methodists, and 1.6 million Baptists. After 1840 nearly 95 percent of all Irish immigrants worshiped in a Catholic Church, as did over 30 percent of German immigrants. By 1860, the Catholic Church in the United States claimed about 3 million members, which meant that Catholics constituted approximately 11 percent of the total free population.

### Table 1.2. U.S. Population, 1850

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>United States</th>
<th>Total (White)</th>
<th>“Colored”</th>
<th>Foreign-born</th>
<th>Percentage of foreign-born to total white pop.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>864,034 (11th)</td>
<td>5,436</td>
<td>111,892</td>
<td>13.23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missouri</td>
<td>592,004 (13th)</td>
<td>90,040</td>
<td>76,592</td>
<td>12.94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>1,955,050 (3rd)</td>
<td>25,279</td>
<td>218,193</td>
<td>11.16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kentucky</td>
<td>761,413 (8th)</td>
<td>220,992</td>
<td>31,420</td>
<td>4.13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>3,048,325 (1st)</td>
<td>49,069</td>
<td>655,929</td>
<td>21.52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>985,450 (6th)</td>
<td>9,064</td>
<td>164,024</td>
<td>16.64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>2,258,160 (2nd)</td>
<td>53,626</td>
<td>303,417</td>
<td>13.44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>255,491 (18th)</td>
<td>262,271</td>
<td>68,233</td>
<td>26.71%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Kennedy, *Population of the United States in 1860.* Note: The total population does not include persons, enslaved or free, classified as “colored.” The chart features the percentages of the foreign-born population to the total white population. The ranking of each state according to population includes “colored” and enslaved persons.
Unlike in the East, Roman Catholic missionaries had been ministering in the Mississippi Valley for a long time, since the seventeenth century. Catholic leaders in the region persisted in expanding their unique imprint on western culture. The “Catholic revival” of the mid-nineteenth century motivated new evangelism in North America. Catholic revivalists campaigned to increase the number of the church’s parishes, schools, and societies precisely to safeguard Catholic Americans from prodding Protestant missionaries and the day-to-day temptations of American secularism.  

Fearing the influence of migrating Anglo-American Protestants in the previously Catholic French-and Spanish-controlled Mississippi River valley, Bishop Louis Dubourg of New Orleans, for example, recruited Roman Catholic missionaries from Europe. Italian priest Joseph Rosati came to America in 1816 in

<table>
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<th>Foreign-born</th>
<th>Percentage of foreign-born to total white pop.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Midwest</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>1,704,323 (4th)</td>
<td>7,628</td>
<td>324,643</td>
<td>19.05%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missouri</td>
<td>1,063,509 (8th)</td>
<td>118,503</td>
<td>160,541</td>
<td>15.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>2,302,838 (3rd)</td>
<td>36,673</td>
<td>328,249</td>
<td>14.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kentucky</td>
<td>919,517 (9th)</td>
<td>236,167</td>
<td>59,799</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Northeast</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>3,831,730 (1st)</td>
<td>49,005</td>
<td>1,001,280</td>
<td>26.13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>1,221,464 (7th)</td>
<td>9,602</td>
<td>260,106</td>
<td>21.29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>2,849,266 (2nd)</td>
<td>56,949</td>
<td>430,505</td>
<td>15.11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>South</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>357,629 (17th)</td>
<td>350,373</td>
<td>80,975</td>
<td>22.64%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** The total population does not include persons, enslaved or free, classified as “colored.” The chart features the percentages of the foreign-born population to the total white population. The ranking of each state according to population includes “colored” and enslaved persons. **Source:** Kennedy, *Population of the United States in 1860.*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>United States</th>
<th>1860 Total (White)</th>
<th>1860 Foreign-born</th>
<th>Percentage of foreign-born</th>
<th>1870 Total</th>
<th>1870 Foreign-born</th>
<th>Percentage of foreign-born</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>109,260</td>
<td>54,624</td>
<td>49.99%</td>
<td>298,977</td>
<td>144,557</td>
<td>48.35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Louis</td>
<td>160,773</td>
<td>96,086</td>
<td>59.77%</td>
<td>310,864</td>
<td>112,249</td>
<td>36.11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cincinnati</td>
<td>161,044</td>
<td>73,614</td>
<td>45.71%</td>
<td>216,239</td>
<td>79,612</td>
<td>36.82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisville</td>
<td>68,033</td>
<td>22,948</td>
<td>33.73%</td>
<td>100,753</td>
<td>25,668</td>
<td>25.48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>1,072,312</td>
<td>488,306</td>
<td>45.54%</td>
<td>1,338,391</td>
<td>563,812</td>
<td>42.13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston</td>
<td>177,812</td>
<td>63,791</td>
<td>35.88%</td>
<td>250,526</td>
<td>87,986</td>
<td>35.12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philadelphia</td>
<td>585,529</td>
<td>169,430</td>
<td>28.93%</td>
<td>674,022</td>
<td>183,624</td>
<td>27.24%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

South

| New Orleans            | 168,675            | 64,621            | 38.31%                    | 191,418    | 48,475           | 25.32%                    |

Source: Kennedy, *Population of the United States in 1860*. Note: The total population for these cities in 1860 and 1870 include persons labeled as “colored.” The statistics do not count second-generation immigrants—that is, citizens born in the United States with at least one parent of foreign birth. Of the total U.S. population, 28.25 percent had at least one parent of foreign birth. This chart includes Brooklyn as part of the greater New York City Metropolitan Area.
response to Dubourg’s call. When Rosati first observed St. Louis in 1817, a year before Darby’s arrival, about four thousand French residents occupied the town. The sole Catholic church, built forty years earlier, was poorly furnished. It lacked doors, windows, and a solid floor. The priests there slept on the ground and wrapped themselves in buffalo skins during the winter. Rosati’s efforts during the early years of St. Louis contributed directly to the perpetuation and growth of the city’s unique Catholic heritage. Rosati took charge of the Episcopal See of St. Louis in 1818 and was consecrated bishop in 1824. As migrations to the West increased, Catholic leaders placed the city at the center of a new archdiocese in 1827, which included all of Missouri, most of Illinois, and all of the settled territory north of the state of Louisiana.27

The completion of the “Old Cathedral,” as it is colloquially known in St. Louis, evidenced Bishop Rosati’s remarkable success in promoting Catholicism in the West. The building design completely remodeled the drafty French Catholic Church on Third Street. Rosati took personal responsibility for financing the project, campaigned relentlessly for aid from local benefactors, and eventually solicited architects George Morton and Joseph Lavielle to design the new Greek Revival–style stone cathedral. Morton and Lavielle also designed the city’s first

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1850</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
<th>German Immigrants</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>St. Louis</td>
<td>77,860</td>
<td>22,340</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cincinnati</td>
<td>115,435</td>
<td>34,000</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisville</td>
<td>43,194</td>
<td>18,000</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>29,963</td>
<td>6,000</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

courtthouse. The architectural style of the new cathedral was deliberately modeled after contemporary U.S. civic buildings to stress the “Americanness” and legitimacy of Catholics in America. Elaborate pageantry accompanied the dedication of the church on October 26, 1834. A large parade, including three militia companies and the Jefferson Barracks military band, celebrated the dedication. Four bishops, twenty seminarians, twenty altar boys, and thirty priests led the services. Eight days of high masses followed, with sermons in both English and French. St. Louis parish membership rose rapidly after the building opened.28

Catholic leaders carried out similar plans in early Kentucky and Ohio. The Diocese of Bardstown, just outside of Louisville, became the first inland diocese of the Catholic Church in 1808. The Episcopal See moved later to Louisville in 1841. The first bishop of Bardstown, Joseph Flaget, laid the cornerstone of the Basilica of St. Joseph in 1816, and by 1823, the new cathedral, also in the Greek Revival style, stood as a testament to Catholicism’s growing influence in the region. The cathedral’s main school, Saint Joseph’s College, quickly grew into one of the West’s major Catholic institutions for higher learning. In 1838 Bishop Guy Ignatius Chabrat of Bardstown informed Bishop Rosati that “notwithstanding all the efforts our enemies have made and the slanders they have endeavored to propagate against us, our institutions are in a more prosperous and flourishing state than they ever have been.”29 One year later Bishop Chabrat exulted, “all our institutions are filled with pupils and in the most prosperous way the violent efforts of our enemies against them have completely failed.”30

The relative strength of Catholicism in the interior of North America appealed to European immigrants. In the 1830s both the bishops of the archdioceses of Bardstown (Kentucky) and Cincinnati wrote letters home encouraging immigrants to settle in the Ohio River valley. These newcomers tended to follow similar settlement pathways. The success of Catholicism in the West apparently inspired immigrants in eastern cities to migrate westward. Furthermore, the bishop of Boston at the time, Benedict Joseph Fenwick, believed anti-Catholic sentiment in his city compelled Catholics to resettle in western cities, which were thought to be more religiously tolerant. They fancied Bardstown (later Louisville), Cincinnati, and St. Louis as safe havens for their faithful. Bishop Fenwick intimated to Bishop Rosati in 1837, “The persecuting spirit that prevails here is driving all our best Catholics to your Missouri.”31

When Bishop Rosati died in 1843, upward of 40 percent of St. Louis residents worshiped in a Catholic church. His successor, Irish bishop Peter Kenrick, whose brother, Francis Kenrick, served as the bishop of Philadelphia, observed, “As no city in the United States enjoys greater opportunity for the practice of
the Catholic religion, so there is none that expresses Catholic life and Catholic character better than St. Louis.” Indeed, for its reputation as a Catholic hub, St. Louis received the moniker “Rome of the West.”

The construction of Catholic institutions increased at a rapid rate as did the immigration of Catholic Europeans to the West. In 1844 one Cincinnati newspaper noted the dramatic rise of Catholicism nationwide in just ten years’ time. The tendency of these immigrants to settle in urban areas made their presence especially striking. Cincinnati claimed seventy Catholic churches, Louisville forty, Chicago thirty-eight, and St. Louis thirty-seven, this in addition to numerous ecclesiastical and lay institutions for men and women in each city. The Catholic Telegraph of Cincinnati reported 65,000 parishioners in the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, 40,000 in Louisville’s vicinity, and 50,000 in Chicago. The Catholic Church in America also estimated about 57,400 conversions to the faith between 1830 and 1860. Most of these converts were also immigrants.

### Why Did Americans Fear Catholicism?

Although on paper the United States tolerated the Catholic religion, Americans at the time of the Revolution were not really sure where their toleration ended, nor did they have to consider it since the Catholic population along the East Coast was negligible. Most of them considered Roman Catholicism an Old World religion on its last leg before extinction. American Catholicism was so marginal at the time of the Revolution that most people outside of Maryland, southern Pennsylvania, and cities such as Boston, Philadelphia, and New York City had little to no actual contact with Catholics.

As the descendants of the British Empire, Anglo-Americans had theological, historical, and political reasons to worry about Roman Catholicism. Theologically, for all their similarities, Catholics and Protestants have fundamentally disagreed over whether salvation is essentially personal or collective. Catholic doctrine builds on the basic belief that the Roman Catholic Church, that

### Table 1.6. Growth of the Roman Catholic Church in Cincinnati

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Dioceses</th>
<th>Bishops</th>
<th>Churches</th>
<th>Priests</th>
<th>Seminaries</th>
<th>Colleges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1835</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>327</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1844</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>675</td>
<td>709</td>
<td>22</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
organization managed by the pope in Rome and the officially anointed bishops, meditates salvation between God and lay people, while most Protestant churches uphold the tenet that salvation is a process that occurs between God and the individual without intercession. Historically, after the Reformation of the sixteenth century, Catholics and Protestants took up arms against one another in a series of ongoing religious wars. During the colonial era, British citizens on both sides of the Atlantic were taught from a young age that the Catholic nations of Europe posed the greatest threat to their country, especially France and Spain.

Politically, the Roman Catholic Church upheld the bloodline monarchies of Europe for centuries, and in many countries its clerics doubled as spiritual and political leaders. In America, Catholic clergies aided in the Spanish and French colonization and subjugation of Native Americans. In both Europe and America, the church owned vast amounts of property, which remained under control of officially sanctioned leaders. Americans could cite many examples of church officials endorsing absolute monarchy. Furthermore, contemporary public statements issued by various popes and bishops appeared to condemn the democratic revolutions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

As descendants of the Revolution, Americans typically worried that Catholicism—that is, the dogma of the church, not necessarily of every single self-proclaimed Catholic—contradicted the shared set of values that grounded their democracy. During and after the Revolutionary War, they shared a belief in self-government and certain intrinsic rights, namely the individual’s right to personal liberty and private property. The ecclesiastical system of the Catholic Church seemed like a top-down hierarchy rather than an institution controlled by the people, although the church was much more decentralized than Americans thought. The church’s commitment to private property ownership seemed weak as it insisted on controlling vast amounts of property in both Europe and America, rather than turning over control to a board of private trustees, as was the norm for American religious organizations. The Roman Catholic Church taught a natural-law theory, which posited that all humans were made in the image of God and thus could know the difference between right and wrong even in the absence of Catholicism, but any “individual” rights came from God specifically through the church. Americans shared a commitment to certain individual freedoms, including the freedom to worship, speak, and print freely and the right to assemble and petition authorities. They believed that Catholicism, as dogma, discouraged individual adherents from thinking, speaking, printing, or assembling independently. Catholic dogma did require a degree of subservience to clerical authorities. Native-born Americans thus worried that Catholics
among them served as potential “links in the great chain that is fastened to the foot of the papal throne,” as argued in the Republic: A Magazine for the Defence of Civil and Religious Liberty; since laymen “are bound to obey their church; they believe it can do no wrong.” As a reverend working for the American Home Missionary Society put it: “The cardinal principle of the Latin Church is the destruction of man’s individuality and manhood in all the higher functions of his moral nature. He cannot think, judge, believe, choose, address God, or govern himself in the department of his religious interests.” Put this way, Catholicism seemed to threaten the very social foundations of the United States.

Dogmatic statements officially mandated by Roman Catholic councils included two especially offensive claims: 1) there was only one true Church, that which the pope and bishops presided over; and 2) the leader of that one true Church, the pope in Rome, held special spiritual and temporal powers. Orestes Brownson, an Anglo-American convert to Catholicism, openly admitted in his newspaper, the Quarterly Review, which bore the endorsement of Pope Pius IX as well as nearly every American bishop and was generally thought to be the official organ of the Catholic Church in America, “The Pope is the proper authority to decide for me whether the constitution of this country is or is not repugnant to the laws of God.” Brownson explained that one should submit one’s mind to that which is true. If it was true that Jesus Christ established the Roman Catholic Church and gave its leadership certain powers—and he believed it was—then it stood to reason that Catholicity “cannot be carried to excess.” Roman Catholicism “is not one system among many. It is simply the truth, and nothing but the truth. It excludes all not itself: it recognizes no rival: IT WILL BE ALL OR NOTHING.” The logic was consistent, but those who did not share Brownson’s faith recoiled at his militancy. Individual Catholic and Protestant Christians might be able to coexist, but how could a consistent advocate of Catholicism in principle tolerate a plurality of religions? As a Catholic American who supported religious freedom, Brownson, of course, had much more to say about that.

The pope interpreted divine law as the spiritual head of the church and likewise claimed the temporal power to dispense his followers from their allegiance to any government he deemed hostile to that law, an authority several popes in the past had actually invoked. What if the current pope declared the U.S. government heretical and released his subjects from their oaths as citizens? Americans wondered, as the Catholic population grew to several million in the mid-1850s, would Catholic Americans rally to the Roman pontiff’s call to arms? Questions such as these often represented a misunderstanding about the actual
ideas Catholic populations held about dogma and papal power, for even Cath-
olics hotly debated among themselves the limits of the temporal powers of the
pope and later the nature of the doctrine of papal infallibility. For Catholics in
the mid-nineteenth century, the line between church and state authority was
rather ambiguous. As Americans struggled with their own ideas about national
versus state powers, fears of Catholic nationalism grew especially potent.43

For these reasons, Americans frequently called into question Catholic loyalty
to the Constitution and the “building blocks” of democracy enshrined therein.
In the event of a conflict between Roman Catholic doctrines and U.S. princi-
pies, Americans worried that church leaders would “go against our country and
for the Pope,” as one pastor bemoaned. If following Catholicism meant holding
a higher allegiance to the pope in Rome than to the U.S. Constitution, then “a
man can no more be a Papist and a true and loyal American citizen than he can
serve two masters,” Reverend Nicholas Murray taught. “He must be either a bad
patriot or [a] Papist.” Protestant Christians did not have to choose between
their faith and their country, Americans reasoned, but Catholics did.

The Evangelical “Valley Campaign”

Evangelical Christian Americans, inspired by the recent revivals of the “Sec-
ond Great Awakening,” envisioned the incorporation of the American West as
a crucial part of a larger foreign-missions movement to proselytize to all nations
and peoples. From afar, Christians imagined the vast region as a blank slate and
open field, where American settlers could leave petty denominational conflicts
behind and band together for the expansion of Protestant Christendom. But
migrants actually encountered highly contested ground. Evangelical mission-
aries expressed deep concerns about secularism, pluralism, and Catholicism.45
One agent of the American Home Missionary Society, for example, described
Cincinnati as “truly a most mighty Sodom, not in size but in wickedness.” Rever-
end Charles Peabody, an agent of the American Reform Tract and Book Society,
believed the city was “even almost as bad as New York.” Likewise the reverend
described St. Louis as a “great bustling and wicked city” in which “the Roman-
ists have long had almost the entire control.”46 “Infidels, Deists, Unitarians, Pa-
pists and a hundred other heretical Sects and demi-Sects and semi-Sects and
anti-Sects are rank as weeds over the whole country,” one Scottish American
Presbyterian merchant in Louisville bemoaned in 1840.47 Scores of religious
tracts detailed the apocalyptic scenes awaiting Americans if they allowed such
“irreligion” to thrive in the West.48
Early reports warned Christians that the region had become a barbarous, uncivilized place where vice held sway over an ignorant, irreligious, and superstitious population. The first official survey of religious institutions in the West, the Schermerhorn-Mills report of 1814, conducted on behalf of the American Bible Society, yielded grim findings: “There are districts containing from twenty to fifty thousand people entirely destitute of Scriptures and of religious privileges,” Mills and Schermerhorn observed during their tour. “The whole country from Lake Erie to the Gulf of Mexico is as the valley of the shadow of death.”

As early as 1820 one arrival to Louisville feared that “vice and immorality appear to be gaining ground here. . . . [W]ickedness abounds and religion is a stranger.” Reverend Peabody also sent home alarming reports of the influence of morally destitute migrants. Almost all of Ohio, he remarked, “is a complete moral wilderness. Few churches & schools are here & the population is generally poor & ignorant.” Likewise, the American Home Missionary Society alerted “our eastern people” to the “omnipresent sense of poverty” in “the West.”

The “Valley Campaign” channeled energy and resources from New England’s major benevolent societies and religious organizations toward the establishment of Christian institutions in “the immense Valley of the Mississippi, which is to be the future theatre of our greatness,” as Reverend Abel Stevens, a campaign leader in Boston in 1834, preached. “There is perhaps no place which presents so great an opportunity to doing good,” Presbyterian evangelical Joshua Belden wrote home from St. Louis in July 1830. “The scepter of Dominion is soon to pass from the East to the West. The inhabitants of this valley are soon to sway the destinies of the Nation.” While in Boston, Lyman Beecher became one of the Valley Campaign’s chief advocates, dedicating an entire series of treatises on the subject, of which *A Plea for the West*, published in 1835, proved the most popular. In a letter dated July 8, 1830, Beecher told his daughter that he longed to move to Cincinnati, “the London of the West,” because “the moral destiny of our nation, and all our institutions and hopes, and the world’s hopes turns on the character of the West. . . . If we gain the West, all is safe; if we lose it, all is lost.” Beecher practiced what he preached. In 1832 he took the dual appointment as president of Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati and pastor of the city’s Second Presbyterian Church. A vast network of missionaries and societies responded to Beecher’s call because they believed that the fate of the United States hinged on their success.

Missionaries focused their efforts on wresting the valley from the grasp of the Roman Catholic Church. In 1832 an Illinoisan warned about “the prospect of the Roman Catholic religion getting the ascendancy in our beloved country” by
“gaining ground in the valley of the Missippie.” In 1830 the Fifth Annual Report of the American Tract Society pleaded for sponsorship, without which “the progress of error and vice at the West . . . , the progress of Romanism, together with open and disguised infidelity,” would leave “the world fallen—America ruined.” Despite “all the Protestant effort,” another migrant wrote home despairingly in 1843, Catholics in Louisville and Cincinnati “embody a population whose only conformity to the divine will” was to “multiply.” The American Home Missionary Society therefore urged the planting of “the Gospel in those rich regions, which God has so remarkably wrested from the despoticisms of Romish intolerance, and thrown into our hands.” Anti-Catholicism, then, gathered momentum in mid-nineteenth-century missions literature.

Certain evangelical groups espoused a postmillennial eschatology that invested the incorporation of the American West with cosmic meaning. Postmillennialists believed a thousand-year period, the millennium, would precede the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, or the Last Judgment, although denominations differed on the exact timing of the events described in various apocalyptic passages in the Bible. They included Baptists, Congregationalists, some Methodists, and “New School” Presbyterians such as Beecher, as well as a host of emergent “nondenominational” sects, including more fringe groups like the Millerites, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Seventh-Day Adventists. Adherents looked for “signs” of the end times foretold in the Bible. A doomsday passage in Revelation prophesied the downfall of the great “whore of Babylon,” or the “Beast,” before the Second Coming. Postmillennialists interpreted the beast as the same “Antichrist” mentioned in other parts of the Bible. They believed the pope was the Antichrist. The original Westminster Confession, drafted by the Church of England in 1646 as a universal statement of reformed belief, made this anti-Catholic doctrine perfectly clear. Chapter states explicitly that the Roman Catholic mass is idolatrous and the pope is the Antichrist. The First Presbyterian Church in America adopted the Westminster Confession in 1729 as a doctrinal standard with which all ministers had to approve. (The Presbyterian Church in the United States ultimately removed this specific anti-Catholic language in 1903). A peculiar interpretation of the book of Daniel fueled much of the anti-Catholic eschatology. Reverend Samuel Schmucker believed that in Daniel’s strange vision in the seventh chapter, the four beasts represented empires, with the fourth bearing “ten horns,” referring to the Roman Empire, which was split into ten kingdoms by A.D. Daniel prophesied that the Messiah, or Christ, would arise in the fourth empire. Schmucker believed the first coming of Jesus Christ in the Roman Empire fulfilled this prophecy. Daniel also
prophesied that a “little horn,” or a little kingdom, would arise among the other
ten, absorb three of them, and usher in the reign of the Antichrist. Schmucker
believed the Roman papacy was the little horn, since the pope “acquired territory
and became a temporal ruler or king, a *politico-religious prince.*” He interpreted
the triple papal tiara as an unintentional “emblem of the three kingdoms . . .
as tokens of the crowns of Odoacer, of Theodoric and [of] Alboin!” The pope
also fit Daniel’s description of the Antichrist as “diverse” from all other rulers
because, according to Schmucker, “he is both priest and king, combining in him-
self both secular and ecclesiastical power!” According to Cincinnati’s Reverend
Boynton, another confirmation of the theory that the pope was the Antichrist
was that the “beast” mentioned in Revelation 17:9 “sitteth on the seven hills,”
and Vatican Hill was situated across the Tiber River from the legendary Seven
Hills of Rome. Thus, the papacy, Boynton proclaimed in one 1847 sermon, was
the same archenemy true Christians had always faced. The Roman Catholic
church under the direction of its “chief engineer,” the pope, would continue to
lead Christians astray until the end of the world.

Since the late nineteenth century, biblical scholars have been aware that
the book of Daniel was probably not written by the Daniel of legend during
the Babylonian exile in the sixth century B.C. Instead, most scholars date the
book to around the second century B.C. during the Jewish Maccabean Revolt.
Early nineteenth-century Protestant theologians failed to see, however, that the
author’s messianic references were not to a future first-century messiah (Jesus
Christ) but to the deposed High Priest Onias III, who the author of Daniel
hoped would restore the desecrated Second Temple of Jerusalem. The “little
horn,” or the Antichrist, described in the apocalyptic portions of the book ac-
tually referred to the contemporaneous Greek king of the Seleucid Empire, An-
tiochus IV Epiphanes. In 167 B.C. Antiochus desecrated the Second Temple by
erecting an altar to Zeus.

Catholic theologians, who typically did not embrace postmillennialism, more
easily connected Daniel’s prophecies to the Maccabean Revolt because they
drew on critical information from 1 and 2 Maccabees, deuterocanonical books
appearing in the Catholic Bible but not in the Protestant one. First Maccabees
offers reliable historical information on Antiochus’s desecration of the Second
Temple in 167 B.C. as well as the Maccabean movement for an anti-Hellenistic
high priest to restore the temple.

Apocalyptic biblical allusions nevertheless permeated evangelical western
promotional literature. Beecher’s Foreign Mission Society of the Valley of the
Mississippi prepared the West for “the approach of the days of the Son of Man,”
a layered biblical allusion to the messianic figure in Daniel 7:13–14. In 1832 a likeminded minister wrote Reverend Beecher, “Nowhere in all the world can you do half as much to impart and disseminate such views as in the great Western Valley—the Valley of Decision in respect to this, and probably all other nations.” “Western Valley” here referred to the Mississippi Valley; “Valley of Decision” frequently appeared as a biblical allusion to the “Valley of Jehoshaphat” described in Joel 3:14, also known as the “Valley of Destruction” or “Decision.” In drawing a comparison between the Mississippi Valley and the “Valley of Decision,” this minister situated the American West as the millennial location of the final conflagration. Postmillennialists literally interpreted Joel’s account as the fate that awaited not only the Jews but also all of God’s chosen people at the very end of the world. In this Valley of Decision, according to the postmillennialists’ exegesis, God’s chosen people would finally be separated from the “wickedness” of the “multitudes” of “heathens” around them. In the last days “the sun and the moon shall be darkened,” Joel divined, “and the stars shall withdraw their shining.” Then God’s wrath will pour forth: “The Lord also shall roar out of Zion, and utter his voice from Jerusalem, and the heavens and the earth shall shake.” God’s people who survive the conflagration afterward gain paradise: “the mountains shall drop down new wine, and the hills shall flow with milk, and all the rivers of Judah shall flow with waters, and a fountain shall come forth out of the house of the Lord, and shall water the valley of Shittim.” The evangelical Valley Campaign stood to bring “the Millennium to the very doors.” The final showdown would not be between ancient Hebrews and Pagan Moabs, but rather between “true” and “false” Christians in North America.

By the mid-1830s, anti-Catholicism had reached a fever pitch in popular media. A sensational book written by Samuel Finley Breese Morse in 1835 captured the anti-Catholic vitriol. Today most people remember him as the inventor of the telegraph (Morse Code is named in his honor), but he was well known at the time as the nation’s most prominent advocate for immigration reform. Morse’s *Foreign Conspiracy Against the Liberties of the United States* quickly became a bestseller. The young inventor claimed to have discovered a secret papal plot to destroy the American republic from within. Emperor Ferdinand I of Austria and Pope Gregory XVI of Rome conspired to carry out the deed through a three-step process, Morse announced: first, they would raise special funds to build Catholic institutions in the American West, where Protestant institutions were scarce; second, they would employ Jesuits to warp the minds of America’s youth in Catholic schools (by day) and infiltrate government entities
(by night); and third, clerics in America would, upon receiving the command from Rome, incite Catholic immigrants to mass insurrection. Several at the time called into question the validity of Morse’s evidence, but the book rose above its critics’ concerns and became a vital component of Americans’ popular imagination. Many became convinced—seriously—that the allegations were true.74

“The Jesuits and their Ursuline sisters are in their seminaries,” a writer using the pseudonym “Native American” wrote in 1835, “silently weaving the winding sheet for our liberties.”75

Another self-proclaimed nativist and ex-Catholic priest, Samuel B. Smith, published a sensational book only a year after Morse’s Foreign Conspiracy, playing on fears of Catholic expansion in the West. In The Flight of Popery from Rome to the West, Smith elaborated on a Rome-led immigrant conspiracy to snatch control of the Mississippi Valley. The scheme, he alleged, aimed at founding a new Catholic kingdom in the American West just as the democratic revolutionaries in Austria and Italy were poised to drive Emperor Ferdinand I of Austria from his throne and the pope from Rome. The “popish intrigues” Smith listed included alleged secret meetings behind the closed doors of Jesuit schools, in which Catholic leaders plotted the overthrow of America, and secret inquisition chambers and tunnels beneath Catholic cathedrals, with weapons stashed there for the impending uprising.76

Reverend William Wiener claimed that the insurrectionists had already chosen St. Louis as the site for the first action because the “French papists” had named it after King Louis IX, a crusader and one of the most renowned military figures in Catholic hagiography.77 Smith took the conspiracy theory one step further: he claimed that the pope intended to move the Vatican across the Atlantic to St. Louis or perhaps Cincinnati; he could not be sure. “Every Romish temple that rises in the West,” Smith warned, “will swell the Jubilee of Popish triumph, till the day rolls on, when the distant Valley of the West will toll the death of our Republic.”78

Conclusion

The rapid development of the antebellum West wrought conflicting views: some considered the settling of the Mississippi and Ohio River valleys a sign of God’s blessing to the United States; others saw it as a potential source of subversion from within. The Valley Campaign’s “revival plea” intermingled hope for the perfection of Christian unity and the Second Coming of Christ with fear for a
nation that remained unresponsive to the supposed lack of morality in the West. Many believed the American West was the final battleground upon which the fate of their nation would be decided. Religious competition in the region continued to forge American national identity, especially once American-immigrant disagreements over value-laden school policies and Sunday laws triggered a veritable culture war.