Inventing America's First Immigration Crisis

Luke Ritter

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

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The Power of Nativist Rhetoric

The Natives are up, d’ye see . . .
They have seen a foreign band,
By a servile priesthood led,
Polluting this Eden-land,
And the graves of the patriot dead.
The boy and the bearded man,
Have left the sweets of home,
To resist a ruthless clan—
The knaves of the Church of Rome.
The Natives! The Natives!! The Natives!!!

—Know-Nothing campaign song, ca. 1835

Americans defined the United States as a group of people who shared certain values and value-based traits.1 The antebellum nativist movement used immigrants as a measuring apparatus for nationality since Americans chronically disagreed among themselves along partisan and denominational lines. As such, nativists pointed to foreigners to declare “we’re not like that; in contrast, this is what we believe and how we behave.” Rhetoric emphasizing the incongruities between the beliefs and behaviors of native-born Americans and immigrants signaled both a national identity crisis and the solution simultaneously.

Opposition to immigration entered politics during the mid-1830s and became a potent rallying tool over succeeding elections. In the American mindset, Protestantism, as opposed to Roman Catholicism, formed the basis of American values and behaviors. As French political thinker Alexis de Tocqueville put it during his tour of the United States in 1835: “Americans so completely confuse Christianity and freedom in their minds that it is almost impossible to have
them conceive of the one without the other.” To this end, American nativists developed a mythical, nationalist story that rendered Catholicism incompatible with true Americanism and Christianity.

Origins of Political Nativism

At the most basic level, a “nativist” is one or all of the following: 1) a person who believes they are the rightful heir to a geopolitical territory; 2) a person who emphatically favors “natives first” over and against “outsider” influences, perceived or real; and/or 3) a person who demands political policies that effectively prioritize the native-born to the detriment of the foreign-born and their offspring. Hypothetically, even a native-born American might not possess the values and traits that qualifies one as a “rightful heir”; on the other hand, a foreign-born citizen might display the faculties of mind worthy of U.S. citizenship. In some sense, then, the label “nativist” is a misnomer because so-called nativists did not necessarily believe one’s birth in the United States automatically qualified one as a worthy representative of Americanism. In targeting unwanted immigrants and residents, Americans have articulated positive assertions of principle grounded in a broadly felt national and religious identity. Political nativism has often presumed criteria beyond one’s chance of birth for national belonging. Through American history, most Americans have at least occasionally met the basic definition of a “nativist.” Many have avoided the label “nativist,” however, since it is commonly used in the pejorative sense to identify a person who irrationally opposes immigration and foreign-born residents.

More specifically in the antebellum context, “nativist” often described a person who either joined an independent anti-immigrant political party or society or deliberately voted for native-born candidates because they vowed to reform the naturalization requirements for citizenship. The term became popular after the 1835 publication of Samuel Morse’s Foreign Conspiracy Against the Liberties of the United States. Morse marshalled a new political group in New York. His cohort called themselves—or rather were called by others—the “nativists,” and their grassroots campaign for immigration reform became known as the nativist movement. These people vowed to withhold their vote for any public official who was not born on American soil, regardless of party affiliation. In 1836 Morse made an unsuccessful bid for mayor of New York City under one of the country’s first nativist tickets. His widely read treatises stressed the relationship between “foreign” and “Catholic.” He demanded stricter immigration laws on
the conviction that “the Conspirators are in the foreign importations.” “Innocent and guilty are brought over together,” Morse calculated; “we must of necessity suspect them all.”

Until the formation of the independent American (or Know-Nothing) Party in 1854, the political action of choice among nativists was to vote en masse for a native-born American candidate, whether Whig, Democrat, or independent, who promised to resist Catholic and foreign influence in local affairs. Nativists made their intentions known by publicly endorsing certain candidates before elections. It is difficult to discover who attended the early nativist party rallies and even harder to account for the members of the top-secret Know-Nothing Order, which formed in the 1850s.

Even if one could identify all the members of the hundreds of nativist organizations that existed between 1830 and 1860, it would not entirely account for the influence and power of nativism across the United States as a system of beliefs and a nationalist narrative. A cross-section of society, ranging from eminent politicians to ministers and ordinary laborers, supported immigration reform for nativist reasons, though many of them may have never voted for a “Native American” or “Know-Nothing” ticket. Many Americans patronized nativist newspapers and entertained a host of anti-Catholic conspiracy stories. Political nativism entailed much more than voting for a party; it entailed a system of thought that pervaded American religion and politics.

The first episodes of nativist political action took place in the nation’s earliest immigration hubs, New York City and Philadelphia. In 1840 a Catholic faction in New York asked the city to allocate part of the public funds toward Catholic parochial schools. Governor William H. Seward, recognizing the abysmally low attendance of Catholic children in American primary schools, seemed willing to oblige. Irish Catholic voters in New York City under the direction of Archbishop John Hughes formed an independent ticket, nicknamed the Carol Hall Party, that favored public monies for Catholic schooling. Hughes insisted it was a “principle of American government” that the U.S. Constitution’s religious-freedom clause was broad enough to guarantee Protestants the right to read the King James Bible and Catholics to read the Douay-Rheims Version. It was a compromise intended to preserve the religious integrity of each side. He pleaded, “I have never asked or wished that any denomination should be deprived of the Bible, or such version of the Bible, as that denomination conscientiously approved—in our Common or Public Schools.” Hughes insisted, however, that forcing Catholic children to read a spiritually outlawed version of the Bible constituted a violation of their “legal rights of conscience.” Since the
reading of the Protestant Bible violated the religious conscience of Catholics, proponents of sending some school funds to Catholic institutions based their arguments on the right to freedom of worship.9

But Americans argued that any removal of the Bible from common schools or the splitting of public school funds with parochial education actually violated their right to free worship. To nativists, political action like that of the Carol Hall Party seemed to affirm their worst fears of Catholic intervention in American political affairs. In 1841 one nativist writer criticized Catholics for selfishly demanding “a portion of their own money for the education of their own children, in their own Religious Faith!!!”10 At the time, this critic asserted, no Protestant sects campaigned for special parochial-school funding. No Americans expected Methodists or Presbyterians, for example, to request special public funding for their Sunday schools or seminaries. The school controversy isolated Catholics not only as the largest Christian religious group principally opposed to reading the King James Bible in common schools but also as the only Christian denomination in America asking for special public funding. Nativists insisted Archbishop Hughes’s independent ticket amounted to an all-out assault on the Bible and American freedom.

This is when a group of Americans officially formed the American Republican, or Native American, Party. The Executive Committee of the American Republican Party in New York vowed to make the “Holy Bible, without sectarian note or comment,” available to children “in or out of school.”11 The public school controversy quickly spread to other states, and Native American parties formed in almost all major cities between 1843 and 1850.

As the debate raged, nativists recommended amending the U.S. Constitution to exclude foreigners from the polls for an extended period of time. Nearly all Americans admitted the need for some period of acculturation preceding citizenship. The American Republican Party preferred a twenty-one-year probationary period before immigrants could vote. After all, native-born Americans had to wait twenty-one years from birth before they could vote. The policy was meant neither to sully the image of the United States as a safe haven for the destitute nor to interfere with the ability of newcomers to work. Nativists recognized the importance of immigrant labor to the development of America’s economic infrastructure.12 Additionally, nativist leaders proposed literacy tests, enhanced naturalization oaths, and other ways of weeding out foreign “feelings” and “prejudices.” Henry Winter Davis of Maryland argued that the naturalization laws should be reformed to “require a knowledge of and attachment to the Constitution as the condition on which citizenship is conferred.”13 Kentucky
nativist James Wallace recommended a naturalization tax “so heavy that few can pay.”¹⁴

The controversy intensified in nearby Philadelphia as well and eventually erupted into one of the most brutal anti-Catholic riots in American history, resulting in more than twenty deaths between May and July 1844. Nativist fears heightened in 1842, when Bishop Francis P. Kenrick of Philadelphia requested an exemption from reading the King James Version for Catholic students either by excusing themselves from the classroom or bringing in their own translation. The state government seemed to comply in the controversial Maclay Bill of 1842, which prohibited funds to any schools that taught “religion,” though as historian Ray Allen Billington has shown, the Central Committee of Education, composed almost entirely of Protestant ministers, continued to mandate the reading of the King James Bible.¹⁵ In the summer of 1844, nativist mobs attacked German and Irish Catholic homes and the seminary of the Sisters of Charity, and they burned down two Catholic churches, St. Michael’s and St. Augustine’s.¹⁶ Even the burning of the Ursuline convent in Charlestown, Massachusetts, ten years earlier paled in comparison. “We have never known Catholic intolerance to go so far,” one Cincinnatian lamented.¹⁷ According to a lengthy article on the history of anti-Catholicism in America in the *U.S. Catholic Magazine*, Catholics in Philadelphia believed the violence was the result of false rumors raised by nativists, who assumed “the Catholics wished to exclude the Bible from the common schools.” Catholic voters everywhere, the author noted, “never asked that the Bible be excluded from the schools, but merely that their own children, if forced to read the Bible at all, might be allowed to use the Catholic version.” Thus, the author remarked ironically, “a new politico-religious party was organized, called the Native American, for the special defence of the Bible!”¹⁸

Political nativism spread westward. During the 1840s, nativist tickets appeared in elections in all of the West’s major metropolises, including Chicago, Cincinnati, Louisville, and St. Louis. Like their cohorts in the East, the American Republican Party in the West formed because “the integrity and perpetuity of our free Institutions are in imminent peril.”¹⁹ The “American Republican Manifesto” thus asserted a constitutional right to restrict immigration to preserve American institutions.²⁰ As in Philadelphia and New York during the 1844 elections, many Whigs in the West “dropped their own ticket, and voted en masse for the Am. Republican candidate,” as reported by one newspaper in Columbus, Ohio. Although Democrat James K. Polk carried Cincinnati in November, every American Republican candidate for Congress won in Columbus.²¹ In Louisville one German newspaper reported that the Catholic and immigrant
populations defected entirely from the Whig Party because of the “incendiary
natives of which the whole Whig Party of Louisville consists.” A Whig-nativist
coalition in St. Louis elected nativist Peter G. Camden mayor in 1846. One year
later the Native American Party in Kentucky independently nominated Ste-
phen Fitz-James Trabue to “bring about a remedy for the evils growing out of
foreign immigration.” Trabue failed to secure a seat in Congress in 1847 and
1849, but Kentuckians elected Whig candidates Charles Morehead and Humphrey Marshall, both of whom were renowned nativists who later joined the
Know-Nothing Order. Nativists continued to operate inside both of the major
political parties.

Many nativist leaders in the West sponsored Bible societies and evangelical
clubs. Hamilton Rowan Gamble, for example, served as the president of the Mis-
souri Bible Society. He eagerly contributed to the Sibleys’ Lindenwood Female
College and volunteered as a trustee for the Second Presbyterian Church. Gam-
ble saw no conflict of interest between his religious activities in St. Louis and his
political support of the emergent Native American Party. He later served as a
national delegate of the American Party of Missouri in 1855 and became the pro-
visional governor of the state during the Civil War. Peter G. Camden won the
race for mayor of St. Louis in 1846 on an American Republican ticket dedicated
to keeping the Bible in common schools. In 1841 a Baptist minister named
Hinton baptized him in Chouteau’s Pond in St. Louis. Thereafter, Camden
joined the Missouri Bible Society alongside Mary Sibley’s favorite Presbyterian
minister, William Potts, as well as Presbyterian reverend Artemus Bullard, who
served alongside Lyman Beecher in the Foreign Mission Society of the Valley of
the Mississippi during the .

The opponents of political nativism had clear political incentives to depict the
nativists as a strange, marginalized group, but in reality nativist political leaders
were well-connected. One disturbed political commentator in St. Louis consid-
ered Camden’s coterie there a confused and fleeting party: “He was elected by a
mad faction, and may our Heavenly Father forgive them, for they knew not what
they did.” But Camden’s faction swayed politics in the city for over a decade.
At least one of the men on his ticket, Luther M. Shreve, who at that time served
on the board of the St. Louis Lyceum, a large library and hall for intellectual
debates, later became a delegate to the Grand Know-Nothing Council of Mis-
souri during the height of nativist success in 1855. These Bible-believing nativists
remained important political figures with broad community support.

For over a decade in Cincinnati as well, renowned nativist James D. Taylor
campaigned for a “Free Common School System” and an American Party in
that city. Taylor also organized Bible drives as a trustee for the First Presbyterian Society in 1843. That same year he established Cincinnati’s premier nativist newspaper, the Dollar Weekly Times, for the stated purpose of protecting American institutions against “the insidious wiles of Catholicism.” Under the mantra “Free Thought, Free Schools and Free Speech!” Taylor led an independent “Free Ticket” in the spring 1853 municipal election to oppose the splitting of school funds to pay for Catholic schools. He did not win because there were two other “free school” tickets more popular than his. Later, in 1855, the city’s Know-Nothings, who had swept the previous year’s elections, nominated Taylor for mayor. Western nativist leaders forged decades-long political careers, interrupted only by the Civil War. They raised public awareness of the negative cultural, economic, and religious effects of immigration in the American West.

**Christian American Myth**

American nativism became rhetorically potent because its leading proponents told a compelling origin story of the United States, replete with powerful religious symbolism. Popular nativist books, newspaper articles, pamphlets, and political propaganda promoted a Christian American myth. That myth served as a framework for how Americans should interpret the past, and it provided “lessons” for contemporary society. Nativists saw independence, individualism, and Protestantism as historically and inseparably linked. They attributed the success of American democracy to the harmonious meeting of Protestant, specifically “Bible-based” and “Puritan,” ecclesiastical principles with the civic principles enshrined in the U.S. Constitution. While the Christian American myth sustained a sense of belonging to a uniquely free and Protestant nation, it likewise constituted a guiding framework—a measuring stick—by which Americans decided who did and who did not belong. It helped nativists justify an immigration policy aimed at restricting European Catholic access to U.S. citizenship.

“God gave this country to our fathers and us a Protestant land, and we will keep it thus!” Cheers lifted from the Cincinnati crowd gathered in College Hall after Charles B. Boynton, a Congregationalist minister, delivered the line. On this Monday, July 5, 1847, schools were closed and work suspended to celebrate Independence Day. Americans held their national holiday on the fifth that year so as not to disturb Christian assemblies on Sunday, July 4. The widespread local policy at the time, of respecting the Christian Sabbath, added weight to Boynton’s claim that the United States was a “Protestant land.” His address attracted “Native Americans” advocating for a stricter immigration policy. The eastern
agent of the American Tract Society, Reverend Charles Peabody, met Boynton during his travels and noted, “he always carries along with him the popular feeling,” though “he has on quite too much steam for his own good.”

In the spring elections of 1847, a substantial number of these native-born white Americans defected from their traditional parties and voted instead for an independent “Native American” ticket. Those supporting political nativism in Cincinnati included English-speaking citizens, white, native born, rich and poor, and many recent migrants to the West of various affiliations. Boynton stressed the lengthy “historical” record of Catholic Europe’s antagonism to American ideals. “The Protestant Republic cannot dwell in peace with Rome,” he claimed. Granted, there were many immigrants “noble and valuable,” but Boynton worried about “the criminals, the paupers, the sabbath-breakers, the main supporters of infidelity” in their midst, those who together might produce a “general influence” of moral degeneracy. Only an extended residency requirement could ensure the naturalization of fully Americanized—by which he meant Protestantized—immigrants. So complete was the harmonic relationship between the American state and Protestant Christianity, Reverend Boynton proclaimed in his speech, that “Puritanism, Protestantism, and True Americanism are only different terms to designate the same set of principles.”

The nativists of the antebellum era set out to prove that Protestant Christianity was the root cause of the most desirable American national “attributes.” Three published works in this historical-political genre explicitly connected the nativist movement’s version of American heritage to Puritan ancestry. Boynton, a Cincinnati minister and spokesman for the Native American Party, published a collection of his public remarks in 1847. That year the country witnessed more than just its first “nativist tickets”; 1847 also saw some of the first nativist fraternal orders emerge. Bostonian Alfred Brewster Ely, a leader of one of the original secret nativist societies, the Order of United Americans (OUA), likewise published his reflections on the history of America in 1850. Marylander Anna Ella Carroll’s anti-Catholic works sold many copies between 1854 and 1856, the height of Know-Nothing power. Boynton, Ely, and Carroll spoke before different crowds, in different regions of the United States, and at different times, each of them representing a stage of development in the antebellum nativist movement. Yet a mythical story seemed to connect them across time and place and audience. Each author traced the birth of American principles to early Puritan New England, promoted Protestant America as providentially blessed by God, and condemned Catholic Europe as being against the stream of historical progress.
Puritanism, in particular, held a special ascendancy in Boynton’s mind. He believed the Puritans of New England were the first group to strike the correct social balance between church and state because they used the Bible as their sole guide. Boynton depicted Catholicism as Puritanism’s antithesis. “From the moment the Papacy was born,” the reverend declared in his address before the Native American Party of Cincinnati in 1847, “it declared war against Puritanism, for Puritanism is older than Rome.” By “Puritanism,” Boynton meant a timeless principle of social organization that kept both ecclesiastical and civil spheres of government democratic in their operations and separate in their functions. Early Christian churches were “private associations,” in his view. “Popery” changed that. Only three hundred years after Jesus founded the Christian church, it “proved false to its trust” when Roman emperor Constantine made Christianity legal. In 325 Constantine summoned the Council of Nicaea, which established a uniform doctrine, known as the Nicene Creed; set the date for Easter; and ordered the promulgation of canon law. According to Boynton, this was when the “terrific power” of the papacy arose. Then, “for a thousand years and more, truth and liberty were crushed together” as the “Roman hierarchy” attempted to suppress the modes of faith and government “born of the Bible.”

This narrative formulation set up the Protestant Reformation magnificently as the single moment in which the true Christians in hiding finally brought forth the light of knowledge. It was these reformers, after all, who insisted on printing the Bible in vernacular translations. Englishman John Wycliffe first translated the Bible for readers who could not read Latin, the official language of the Catholic Bible and the church. The English Protestant Reformation soon followed under King Henry VIII in the 1530s. Still, the Reformation was not complete, Boynton observed; the powers of good (religious liberty) and of evil (religious despotism) remained at war. England shamefully slipped back into old “popish” ways under the tyrannical rule of the Anglican Church. And so it was not until a century later when Puritan Oliver Cromwell—“England never saw a greater or a nobler man,” Boynton claimed—led the English Puritan Revolution, inaugurating the English Civil Wars, during which that country supposedly reached a height of moral character it never again attained.

This portion of the narrative prefigured English America as the next and final site of reformational progress. On February 22, 1850, the OUA invited an itinerant minister to ring in the 118th anniversary of George Washington’s birthday. Reverend Ely’s lengthy speech charmed the rowdy nativist crowd. The first half was a 12,000-word history stressing the special influence of puritanical forms of civil and ecclesiastical government on the development of American
liberty, followed by another 12,000 words describing the imminent dangers of foreign immigration. “We are as an Order,” Ely announced, “opposed to the encroachments of foreign influence, and are desirous of sustaining a policy purely American—a Bible-based, Law-loving, Liberty-built policy.”

During the Dark Ages, a time periodization Ely applied to the 1,204 years between Emperor Constantine’s recognition of the Christian religion in 313 and the beginning of Martin Luther’s Reformation in 1517, true Christianity existed only in hiding because “the Bible was shut up from the people.” “Religious Despotism” enslaved all of Christendom “with the cross in one hand, and bloody sword in the other,” Ely recounted. Without direct access to the Bible, ignorance prevailed. True Christianity lay a fledgling in wait. Only a few believers, by the special grace of God, remained unadulterated by the “whore of Babylon,” the Antichrist mentioned in Revelation 17 and 18, which many Protestants interpreted as a reference to the pope. These few “awaited the time when the hand of Providence should take them out and the breath of Heaven blow them into flame to consume alike the despotism and the despot, the tyranny of church and of state.”

Puritanism in America, distant from the influences of the pope and the English monarch, finally established an egalitarian society with a truncated religious system. True Christian modes of society and government “burst forth in the Puritan forests” of New England, Ely proclaimed. The “Puritan meeting-house” inculcated “the principles of a Republican Christianity” as the colonists adopted “the very forms of stern simplicity, rejecting all notions of sacramental efficacy and priestly intercession.” Their reverence for the biblical doctrine of “justification by faith alone” engendered unparalleled individualism. In the “Puritan school-house,” teachers used “the Bible as the first textbook” and imparted knowledge “under rules of wholesome discipline—where the mind was early trained to think, to investigate, to decide upon, and to act independently and fearlessly.” The Puritan way of organizing education, politics, religion, and society, he claimed, induced a natural progression of equality, individual accountability, and self-government, all of which led, inevitably, to the American Revolution. Ely admitted that the English Puritans had at least one flaw: they loved liberty too much and at times became overzealous in their pursuit of justice.

Anna Ella Carroll’s *The Great American Battle; or, The Contest between Christianity and Political Romanism* (1856) became one of the most popular among the new wave of nativist books flooding the U.S. market during the height of Know-Nothing power. It adorned the personal libraries of prominent
nativist leaders alongside copies of Lyman Beecher’s *Plea for the West* (1833) and Maria Monk’s *Awful Disclosures* (1836). Caroll’s editor, Horace Galpen, believed *The Great American Battle* was calculated to “restore the poor, blinded Papists, in bondage to priestcraft, to their native original right of freedom of conscience” and to show Catholics the “freedom of Bible Republican independence.” Former U.S. president and 1856 American Party presidential nominee Millard Fillmore endorsed Carroll’s “good cause.” J. W. Barker, president of the Know-Nothing State Council of New York, proclaimed the book “a complete success.” Another renowned New York nativist leader, Erastus Brooks, labeled Carroll a “true American Woman,” while Louisville journalist George D. Prentice believed her book exhibited “a striking illustration of the truth that an intellectual woman, though she may not have the privilege of voting at the polls, can teach men how they should vote.” Carroll sold her 365-page magnum opus for the bargain price of one dollar; Americans bought tens of thousands of copies. The enthusiasm over *The Great American Battle* had at least as much to do with the author as with the content. Anna Carroll descended from one of the nation’s oldest and most influential Catholic families. Nativists were thrilled to count in their throng the granddaughter of Maryland statesman Charles Carroll, the only Catholic to sign the Declaration of Independence—whose cousin, John Carroll, became the first U.S. Catholic archbishop in 1789. Her father, Thomas King Carroll, an Episcopalian, served as governor of Maryland in 1830. Although some in the family converted to the Episcopal Church after the Revolution, including Anna’s father, many members of the Carroll family continued to practice their ancestral religious heritage from English Catholics in the seventeenth century. Carroll’s middling position between two religious traditions, her advertisers alleged, made her more sensitive to the potential pitfalls of excessive anti-Catholicism. Horace Galpen, author of the book’s introduction, claimed, “The subject of this book is no fiction.” He believed it transcended contemporary anti-Catholic works, riddled with conspiracy and vitriol, by warning instead against the entire “system of Popery.” Carroll wrote in the preface: “Connected as I am with those holding the Roman Catholic as well as the Protestant faith, it would not be consonant with reason or taste to arraign them!—and though myself a Protestant. . . . I honor that paternal ancestry of which I in common descended with the amiable, distinguished, and worthy Archbishop who bore my name, the first in the United States, and one of the heroic signers of our Independence.” In *The Great American Battle* and a lesser-known work published that same year, *The Romish Church Opposed to the Liberties of
the American People, she labored to persuade Catholic Americans that Roman Catholic doctrines were inherently incompatible with Americanism.

Like Boynton and Ely before her, Carroll attempted to unite all Americans, regardless of regional origin, under a Puritan ancestral story. “Americans, let us see how the first stones were gathered,” she challenged her readers. Like Boynton and Ely before her, she began her story of America with the Puritans in seventeenth-century England. They “were assailed day and night by the ministers of the ecclesiastical tyranny” under the reign of Queen Elizabeth and her successor, King James I. They escaped to Amsterdam, where they laid plans to transplant to America to worship freely and “advance the Gospel in the New World.”

One hundred of these pious “pilgrims” embarked for America on the Mayflower and landed on the Rock of Plymouth in December 1620. After “prayer and thanksgiving to almighty God,” they consented to the Plymouth Compact. In Carroll’s estimation, the implications of this minute affair were profound. “This, Americans, was the first republic erected in America,” she proclaimed, “and is the most remarkable instance of the true spirit of liberty upon the record of history.”

Carroll opined, “For five thousand years this vast continent lay upon the bosom of the deep, occupied by untutored man.” Europeans had no conception of the size of the North American continent at the time, yet their singular desire “for freedom to worship God” resulted in “the unparalleled development of liberty.” She deemed the Protestant American conquest of the continent “our ‘manifest destiny.’”

In locating the seeds of the American principles of civil and religious liberty in Plymouth, Carroll deliberately overlooked her native Maryland, founded in 1634, where Catholics and Protestants initially enjoyed de facto religious freedom. The Plymouth Colony was not even the first English settlement in North America. Englishmen seeking gold and a strategic port to combat Spanish hegemony in the Atlantic founded the fledgling colony of Jamestown in 1607. Among the many colonial French and Spanish settlers on the continent, Carroll singled out in her retelling only the French Huguenots, Calvinist refugees from France who founded a short-lived community in Florida in 1564 near present-day Jacksonville. “The same God which had taken the English Pilgrim and set him on Plymouth Rock,” she claimed, “led the French Huguenot to the South. It was the genius, the heroism, the instinct, of liberty.” But for the most part, Carroll and her cohorts preferred not to give mention to the well-known existence in America of other European groups who were Catholic and had been there much longer than the British colonists, not to mention the indigenous peoples who had been there even longer.
Another nativist author attempted to account for the holes in Carroll’s story. The same year Carroll wrote *The Great American Battle*, a nativist from Ohio published an extensive history of Catholicism and Protestantism in America titled *The Outlook of Freedom: or, The Roman Catholic Element in American History*. In this 400-page history, Justin D. Fulton interpreted the development of the entire continent as a “battle” between the religions. “This is the first attempt,” he claimed in the introduction, “to trace the elements of Romanism and Protestantism as they have met face to face to try swords on a new field.” From Columbus to the arrival of the Puritans to the Louisiana Purchase (1803) to the U.S. war with Mexico (1846–48), Fulton described America as the scene of a cosmic contest pitting free Protestantism against despotic Roman Catholicism, the historic “foe to freedom, of truth and of humanity” and “secret ally of a foreign despotism.” Fulton concluded, after reviewing the “facts,” that Protestants were destined to win in North America.59

As the advocates of the Christian American myth sought to establish their version of events, no other founder was more frequently appropriated and contested than George Washington. Almost immediately after Washington’s death in 1799, American authors began composing stories about his life and death that suited the memory of an exceptionally religious founding. Preachers everywhere depicted Washington as a singularly pious Christian, whose enduring personal faith in Jesus Christ had saved the American republic from otherwise sure destruction. It yet remains unclear what exactly Washington actually believed about God. Regardless, Americans throughout the United States adorned their homes with depictions of the “Father of the Country” and revered his image “like a saint’s icon,” as historian Edward Lengel has pointed out. Popular primary-school readers borrowed fabricated accounts of the first president’s piety from “Parson” Mason Locke Weems’s 1800 biography, *Life and Memorable Actions of George Washington,* a bestseller. The Sunday School Union also disseminated curriculum detailing moral tales of Washington’s faith during the American Revolutionary War, all based on no real evidence.60 Nativist pamphlets frequently (mis)quoted Washington’s instructions to one sentinel while the Continental Army encamped at Valley Forge: “Put none but Americans on Guard To-night.” He never said it.61

America’s largest nativist organization at the beginning of the 1850s, the OUA, vowed to educate the public about Washington’s true religious legacy. At its exclusive meeting on February 22, 1850, celebrating Washington’s birthday, Reverend Ely of Boston invited all Americans to “meditate upon the life and character of this ‘perfect just man,’ till they learn to emulate his virtues
and become thoroughly imbued with his spirit.” The name of Washington, Ely proclaimed, rose “above every name, . . . a name ever dear, and interwoven, with the most hallowed associations! [A] character that seems to acquire, if possible, new luster with each succeeding year!” Initiated members took home elaborate certificates, each measuring more than three feet long and two feet wide, adorned with images of the beloved Father of the Country. The OUA granted one award to a New Yorker, who later moved to Cincinnati, in 1850 that included richly detailed portrayals of quintessential Revolutionary events—the British retreat from Concord, the Battle of Bunker Hill, the signing of the Declaration of Independence—and the inauguration of President Washington. Amid these grand depictions appeared Washington kneeling in prayer at Valley Forge encampment.\textsuperscript{63} Also included was a sketch of a humble wooden schoolhouse overlooking a harbor. The students had just been let out for the day, while ships of commerce hoisting U.S. flags sailed in the distance. The caption for this image read: “Patriotism and Education, our country’s hope.”\textsuperscript{64}

The nativist movement reinforced the legend of Washington as a man of faith and all but christened him as America’s first saint. One popular nativist organ celebrated Washington as the great “Bible General,” the founding fathers as the first “Bible Congress,” and the founding generation as devoted Christians who “prayed to no licentious Pope—to no mere man” and “took the Protestant Bible as their guide.”\textsuperscript{65} Reverend Boynton of Cincinnati attributed the allegedly Christian values of the U.S. Constitution to “our great puritan statesman, George Washington.”\textsuperscript{66} In the first chapter of The Romish Church Opposed to the Liberties of the American People (1856), Anna Carroll likewise claimed that the founders recognized “the Protestant religion as the support of this government.” She included Washington’s alleged supplication to “that Almighty Being” in an address at the conclusion of the Revolutionary War in 1783 as well as Benjamin Franklin’s benediction during the Constitutional Convention.\textsuperscript{67}

The nativist movement also depicted Washington as a nativist. The Washington they envisioned patriotically opposed foreign influence in America. The official constitution of the OUA vowed to honor “the precepts and warning legacy of our immortal Washington, to ‘beware of foreign influence.’” The society also believed that his true legacy promoted the prevention of “ignorant and vicious foreigners from exerting an undue influence” over the country.\textsuperscript{68}

Nativists often misapplied quotations to serve their agenda. The line “beware of foreign influence” referred to Washington’s 1796 Farewell Address, in which he famously announced his retirement from the presidency after serving two four-year terms. It became one of the most frequently cited quotations of
a founding father in nativist literature, yet it was hardly verbatim. Washington actually said: “Against the insidious wiles of foreign influence (I conjure you to believe me, fellow-citizens) the jealousy of a free people ought to be constantly awake, since history and experience prove that foreign influence is one of the most baneful foes of republican government.” In the context of the Farewell Address, the president referred specifically to the danger of forming a diplomatic alliance with any foreign nation in Europe during the French Revolutionary Wars. The “foreign influence” of which he warned referred to English and French diplomats who even then still tried to prod the United States into the European war. If Washington was thinking about “foreign influence” within the republic, it was that of French or pro-French revolutionaries trying to stir up Americans to support their cause. Washington’s successor, John Adams, had the same concerns in mind when he oversaw the passage of the infamous Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, which among other things temporarily raised the residency requirement for naturalization to fourteen years (instead of five).

Another popularly cited passage derived from Thomas Jefferson’s Notes on the State of Virginia (1788), in which he momentarily expressed concern about the potential for immigrants to render the American Republic “a heterogeneous, incoherent, and distracted mass.” Jefferson also wrote these words in the context of American foreign policy regarding the French Revolution. The key political debate of his day revolved around whether the United States should lend support to the French revolutionaries, to England, or to remain neutral, the very same issue that concerned Washington and Adams. Nativists also claimed precedents for their proposed twenty-one-year residency requirement in the Alien Act of 1798. “No nothing measures originated of old John Adams,” Kentucky nativist James Wallace explained to his brother, “and were advocated strongly by our Father [Washington].” The founding fathers, he claimed, “always held this right to be preserved by the constitution.”

Nativists invoked the founding fathers to persuade Americans that Catholicism also threatened the republic. One Virginian, writing under the pseudonym “Madison,” accused his generation of lacking vigilance. He regretted that his fellow Americans had become an unsuspecting people who “look upon popery” in the same light as “other Protestant denominations.” He warned, “This is the MISTAKE WHICH MUST BE CORRECTED, or all is lost.” If only native-born Americans would remember the example of their founding fathers, “Madison” argued, they too would support anti-Catholic legislation. “The revolutionary fathers,” he recounted, knew well “the character of the papacy and the treachery of papal princes.” Boynton told a nativist crowd in Cincinnati
that the Puritan faith had been “baptized with the American name,” for the
founders had designed the U.S. Constitution to “ preserve a Christian, Protes-
tant, Democratic State.” The biggest threat to the perpetuation of American
principles, in the reverend’s view, was Catholicism. He for one believed that the
United States was the first Christian nation to successfully liberate itself from
papal dominion. The founding of the United States brought the entire world “to
the final struggle—the death-grapple—in which Romanism or Protestantism
and Liberty must die.” If the country failed to survive, Boynton warned, popery
would again deliver the world to darkness. The nativist movement grew in
popularity during the antebellum era because it not only drew on old fears but
also asserted positive beliefs about American identity.

Religious Freedoms

For Americans, the language of freedom was especially evocative. The founders
had demanded religious liberty in the Constitution to protect the people from
subjection to the rule of a particular state-preferred church. In the early repub-
lic, separation of church and state meant first and foremost the sustained resis-
tance to any denomination becoming the official religion of the government,
as in Anglican England and Catholic France. “Protestantism” was no single
organized religion but a diversity of Christian sects operating independently of
one another so that it went hand in hand with religious pluralism. Americans
promoted common Christian rituals in government functions but resisted the
ascendancy of any one sect in political affairs. Generally, those who had grown
accustomed to denominational competition supported church-state separation
as not only necessary but also ideal. The church, separated from the state, could
elevate its members above the ambition, greed, and power supposedly inherent
in temporal affairs. The state, in turn, would be kept in check by an upstanding
Christian citizenry.

Many Americans assumed there was (and would always be) a permanent
Protestant majority in the United States. It was the responsibility of citizens,
young and their peaceably direct the ship of state on a course
consistent with divine law. Any sectarian disputes should be resolved democrati-
cally. As a democratic state was founded on the will of the people, Christianity,
Reverend Abel Stevens asserted before his congregation in Boston in 1835, could
operate “upon the most simple and elementary principles of society.” Christian
ethics ought to “enter essentially into its most complex institutions . . . mould-
ing and shaping its institutions.” Without “the Christian Religion [as] the
foundation of all good Government,” as Daniel Raymond, editor of the *Western
Statesman*, reasoned in the 1842 mission statement of the nativist-leaning Cincin-
nati newspaper, “our political shipwreck is not far off.” He further asserted,
“It is therefore the duty of every good Christian to exercise his whole influence
upon the Government.”

Why, then, did the nativist movement wish to deny certain freedoms to Cath-
olic Christians? Nativists argued that Catholics could not be trusted because
their allegiance to the pope in Rome might trump their devotion to the U.S.
Constitution. They feared that self-identified Roman Catholics wanted instead
to unite their church’s hierarchy with the federal government and extirpate Prot-
estant heretics. Nativists worried that another inquisition could begin in Amer-
ica on a simple command from the Vatican. Boynton pointed out in his 1847
Independence Day speech that the separation of church and state was “of great
delicacy of structure.” Of course, Presbyterians might dominate one electoral
district, Congregationalists another, but many Americans thought the arrival
of numerous Catholic immigrants raised superseding concerns. Boynton pin-
pointed the conundrum, wondering “whether to guard ourselves against Rome
is intolerance or righteous self-defence.” Could the young republic embrace
the newcomers and *Americanize* immigrants influenced by “popery” in a timely
manner, if, indeed, it was possible at all?

Americans recognized limits to religious liberty. At the time, Mormonism
was popularly thought to be beyond those limits insofar as it promoted polyg-
amy, and nativists argued Catholicism might as well exist beyond the threshold
of reasonable toleration as well. While a good Mormon had to recognize polyg-
amy, a good Catholic was compelled to acknowledge “the temporal power of the
Pope.” Without limits, even the polygamous faith of the Mormons, one nativist
from Virginia reasoned, could claim immunity “under the broad shield of the
freedom of religion!” “The papal is not like the Christian religion,” a Native
American argued, “IT IS A POLITICAL ORGANIZATION.” As such, it
could be legislated against.

At this point in history, many drew a distinction between “Catholicism” and
“popery.” According to U.S. law, Catholic Americans had the constitutional
right to worship as they wished, but they had no right to inject their church’s
influence into political affairs. This was the difference between “Catholics” and
“papists” according to Reverend Nicholas Murray, an Irish ex-Catholic priest
and vocal nativist: the former attended mass but voted according to the dictates
of their own conscience, while the latter strove to abide by the dictates of the
pontiff in Rome in public and in private. The distinction did not allay popular
fears that Catholic citizens could easily feign allegiance to the Constitution. “Popery and Christianity are just as opposite as is the truth and its caricature,” Murray claimed in a sermon delivered in the same New York hall where Reverend Ely had spoken before the OUA on Washington’s Birthday in 1850. Murray explained that for Protestant Americans the oath to the U.S. Constitution was inviolate because it consummated the perfect harmony of civil and religious liberty as espoused in the Bible. Catholic Americans who pledged their allegiance to that same Constitution, however, were rendered duplicitous by their tenets of faith, which demanded their undivided allegiance to the temporal and spiritual authority of the pope.

In response, Catholic authors flipped the Christian American myth on its head. Their historical narratives often stressed the Catholic role in the development of America and the U.S. Constitution. These outspoken proponents of Americanism often claimed post facto that the Roman Catholic Church had always been committed to American values, that the adherents of Catholic dogma were the truest Americans. In his 1842 work, Protestantism and Catholicity Compared, Reverend Jaime Balmes of Spain offered an influential counternarrative to American claims that their version of Christianity alone signaled human progress. He asserted that “the progress which has been made since Protestantism has been made not by it, but in spite of it.” Balmes nodded to the many Catholic clerics who had been ministering to the inhabitants of the American West for centuries. He cited the brutality of the French Revolution as evidence of the logical end of the secularism some Americans seemed to be espousing. Bishop of Louisville Martin Spalding followed suit, arguing that Protestantism “has really done little for the cause of human freedom” because basic U.S. principles, including freedom of thought, trial by jury, habeas corpus, and fair taxation, all derived from Catholicism. The faith’s age-old observance of the freedom to do right guarded against “libertine” pluralism, or liberty without a moral compass.

Catholic counternarratives connected American freedom to developments, not in New England, where English Puritan leaders “hung Quakers, burned witches, proscribed and drove from their territory all who were not of the number of the elect,” as one Cincinnati Catholic wrote, but instead in the English Catholic colony of Maryland. From its founding in 1634 under the Catholic Lord Baltimore’s two sons, George and Leonard Calvert, until the Glorious Revolution of 1689, Maryland remained the only colony in English North America that extended religious toleration to Protestants and Catholics alike. Although the Puritan overthrow of the Catholic-dominated government there in 1689
drove Catholic worship underground, Maryland Catholics retained leadership positions and persisted in their faith privately in their homes. In a brief history titled *The Day-Star of American Freedom; or, The Birth and Early Growth of Toleration in the Province of Maryland* (1855), George Lynn-Lachlan Davis claimed that the Maryland charter’s provision for religious toleration, written at a time when other colonies forbid Catholic priests from even entering their domain upon pain of death, placed it “in advance of every State upon the continent.” It was Maryland, not Plymouth, that made America. Marylanders “planted that seed which has since become a tree of life to the nation, extending its branches and casting its shadows across a whole continent.”

Catholic newcomers quickly laid claim to the American Revolution and asserted their right to enjoy free worship. Their ideas about American freedom constituted a substantial component of the political dialogue. Irish Catholic Thomas D’Arcy McGee emphasized Catholicism’s historic contributions to the American Revolution in *The Catholic History of North America*. He featured a letter written by Bishop Charles Carroll to Washington praising the president for his service to “our country” and his “respect for religion.” Washington responded, “I presume that your fellow-citizens will not forget the patriotic part which you took in the accomplishment of their revolution and the establishment of their government.” Washington longed for Roman Catholics to “enjoy every temporal and spiritual felicity” in the United States throughout the years to come.

In a blistering critique of Boynton, titled *Reverend Cha’s B. Boynton on Nativism: Reviewed by an American Citizen*, one Cincinnati Catholic accused the nativists of distorting the past to serve their ends. The author argued that Catholics in colonial Maryland demanded a clause about religious freedom in the U.S. Constitution despite Puritan attempts to proscribe them. Furthermore, the church’s clerics, the Cincinnati Catholic asserted, would never speak on political matters during mass or try to sway parishioners to vote for one candidate or another, unlike Boynton, both an outspoken nativist and a Congregationalist minister. Catholics understood that bringing politics into mass undermined their faith. The writer took special offense at Boynton trumpeting the “Native American” cause from a pulpit and challenged the minister to produce “the chapter and verse in the Bible in which the Savior has commissioned you to preach politics, setting man against man.”

The Cincinnati Catholic further criticized Reverend Boynton’s religiously narrow association of Washington with Puritanism and “the monster Cromwell.” According to the writer, Cromwell had “waged a cruel, bloody, unrelenting
warfare against the church in which our country’s father [Washington] was raised and instructed [the Anglican Church].” Boynton had defined Puritanism negatively by “its uncompromising hostility to Rome,” but the Cincinnati Catholic rejoined, “Would it not be better to set Rome straight, and convince her of her errors, than to be thus uncompromisingly hostile to her, hostile even to death?” Alluding to John 8:3–11, the writer recounted how Jesus demurred condemning an adulteress, then suggested “perhaps the Puritan is not his disciple.” If Puritanism was so opposed to monarchies, then perhaps it failed to grasp Jesus’ commission to “teach all nations” (a reference to Matthew 28:19). After all, “Christianity has been propagated and has flourished under every form of government, and so it will continue.” The Cincinnati Catholic argued that Reverend Boynton’s notion that American principles sprang from Puritans in New England failed to acknowledge the historical reality that Christian “principles were known and acted upon in Europe, long before Columbus set foot upon the New World.” “Really, Mr. Boynton,” the reviewer concluded his lengthy critique, “you are too shallow.” It was the height of impudence to tell the Roman Catholic Church it was “incompatible with liberty” at “this late hour,” since “for eighteen hundred years it has been the religion, frequently the only religion of republics and monarchies, both absolute and limited.”

Catholic Americans displayed their patriotism in public to prove their loyalty. On Washington’s Birthday the Catholic Telegraph published a eulogy to the president, “the purist patriot that ever guided the destinies of a nation.” It called upon all, regardless of nationality or religion, to “preserve in purity the memory of him who was ‘first in war, first in peace and first in the hearts of his countrymen.’” Every Fourth of July, Catholic Americans lined the streets to join in the celebration of the Revolution “to testify their respect for their independence and their gratitude for the blessings of the only free government on earth.” Many of them, Purcell claimed, happily embraced “the political principles of our revolution.” A certain strand of Catholic Americans even entertained the myth that the Virgin Mary had graced the general in a miraculous vision at Valley Forge and that Washington converted to Catholicism on his deathbed.

The public discourse compelled a reevaluation of the meaning and limits of church-state separation. The principle of religious freedom clearly served the interest of Catholic Americans, who wished to observe their faith without persecution. Father Purcell, editor of the Catholic Telegraph, assured Catholics in the West that “the pretexts [nativists] assume—that the country is in danger, that Catholics are foes to liberty, are undermining the Constitution, etc.—cannot hide, even from those who believe them, the fact that Catholics are persecuted
for conscience sake.” The nativists “banded together to proscribe us,” he charged, not for violating any laws of the country, but merely “for being Catholics.”

Catholic priests persistently disavowed collusion with any political party and refused to intervene in matters outside the generally accepted scope of pastoral instruction. Archbishop Hughes of New York, one of the most cited exemplars of “political Romanism,” assured the public, “I have never, in my life, done any action, or uttered a sentiment, tending to abridge any human being, of all or any of the rights of conscience, which I claim to enjoy myself, under the American Constitution.” He rejoined that he did “nothing more than is done by clergymen of other denominations.” Besides, the archbishop declared, Catholics did not seek to interfere with any religious tenets of other Christian denominations.

Eventually, Catholic apologists compelled some native-born Americans to reappraise the Christian American myth. In an 1832 speech, a Whig state senator of Illinois, James Morrison, a native-born American, unraveled the very core of the Christian American myth. Morrison questioned the premise: “It is asserted that ours is a Protestant country, but are our institutions Protestant in their origin?” He continued: “I venture the assertion that not one of them is,” rather, “the modern Representative form of Government is traceable to the Roman Catholic Councils.” To prove this shocking claim, he recounted the American Revolution, which “was accomplished by Catholic aid,” as an example of the church hierarchy’s disposition toward democratic states: “her rule is silent, individual opinion begins, revolution may ensue.” Morrison disregarded papal incursions into state affairs in the past as a matter of historical circumstance: “The Catholic Church teaches obedience to legitimate government, so long as that government rules within the limits of reason and justice. This is her principle, founded as she says, upon the divine law.” Alluding to the escalating sectional crisis, Senator Morrison retorted that Catholic Americans were even more loyal to the American republic than many Protestants because their faith bound them to legitimate rulers, regardless of “irritating” congressional acts. He thus rejected almost every key ingredient of political nativist rhetoric and offered a more inclusive understanding of American republicanism. Catholics found many other Anglo-American friends like Morrison who despised political nativism.

Conclusion

Ironically, the nativists of the 1840s actually fulfilled their own prophecies of “Catholic-foreign influence” in U.S. politics by excluding Catholics and immigrants alike from the major narratives and institutions that generated national
identity. Their assault on the Roman Catholic Church stimulated a social spiraling effect: nativists sought to protect the American principle of religious freedom from the inroads of “political Romanism,” but pervasive anti-Catholic sentiment compelled Catholic Americans to foreground their version of American religious freedom. “Religious freedom” became the rallying call of Catholics and nativists alike, and the misunderstandings between both sides seemed only to increase every time a respective representative staked out a claim.

One newspaper editor informed readers in St. Louis, “If the Catholics ever gain (as they surely will do, though at a distant day) an immense numerical superiority, religious freedom in this country is at an end.” The line appeared in one of the city’s premier pro-Catholic newspapers, the Shepherd of the Valley. The archbishop of St. Louis, Peter Richard Kenrick, endorsed the newspaper without reservation. When they read the line, most American nativists saw only one possibility: this was evidence of a literal Catholic conspiracy to destroy American democracy in the West. They quoted this controversial line from the Shepherd of the Valley over and over again, and readers around the country grew ever more convinced of a “papist plot.” The writer, a pious St. Louis Catholic, actually wrote the phrase sarcastically. Catholics read the line as it was intended, as a play on the kind of proscriptive “religious freedom” the nativists wanted. Ironically, nativist writers misread the line as an affirmation of their deepest fears.