The Order of Know-Nothings and Secret Democracy

When you fight the devil, you have a right to fight him with fire.

—Know-Nothing congressman William Russell Smith, Jan. 15, 1855

Political nativism during the 1840s fomented a public backlash. Americans and immigrants alike accused its adherents of bigotry. The nativist movement afforded Catholic spokesmen the opportunity to promote the compatibility of their faith with Americanism. Nativists in response retreated from the political limelight and reformulated their strategy. During the late 1840s and early 1850s, many of them around the country secretly orchestrated the spectacular rise of the fraternal “Know-Nothing” Order. This turn to secrecy exhibited a hallmark of American nativism: its most ardent supporters tend to take drastic measures to protect their communities against unwanted outside influences. Nativism itself is not necessarily incompatible with American democracy. Such movements on the fringe, however, often do not meet democratic standards. Nativists opted to covertly achieve their political aims rather than pursuing the openness and transparency normally encouraged in modern democracies.

Another hallmark of American nativism, to which the Know-Nothing movement in the West well attested, is the tendency of those on the fringe to mimic the very behaviors and tactics they have projected upon their enemies. The Know-Nothing version of secret democracy perversely imitated popular anti-Catholic motifs. Members of the order turned to ritualistic fraternal secrecy to combat the clandestine plotting they thought must have been going on behind closed doors in Jesuit universities and Roman Catholic councils, attempting to fight secrecy with secrecy. Many at the time noticed the irony. “If you hate the Catholics because they have nunneries and monasteries, and Jesuitical secret orders,” railed one Democratic senator from Virginia, “don’t out-Jesuit the Jesuits by going into dark-lantern secret chambers to apply test oaths. If you
hate the Catholics because you say they encourage the Machiavellian expediency of tellin’ lies sometimes, don’t swear yourselves not to tell the truth.”

The actual content of these secret nativist meetings sheds important light on Know-Nothingsm itself as a grassroots movement. But uncovering this has proven difficult because members attempted to confound outsiders with misinformation. To this day, especially little is known about the Order of Know-Nothings in the West. The extant evidence, including Know-Nothings minute books and private correspondence, reveals, on one hand, continuity with the political nativism of the mid-1840s and, on the other, the forging of a new political response to an increasingly polarized and volatile nation.

Where Did All the Nativists Go?

Nativists began to vanish from the public eye around 1848, a year in which immigration levels reached unprecedented highs. Around the same time, locals started reporting odd insignia painted on the sides of buildings as well as folded paper notes randomly discarded about town. One passerby sent a reporter a list of secret "passwords" he discovered beneath a bench somewhere in Ohio in 1854: "MAS L EUGK XQU MX LQVF MAT P PCCK TOU MT LOVL." There were rumors of mysterious assemblies. Wives reported that their husbands were disappearing in the middle of the night. Some fretted that they had joined the Masons or some other "sacileigious" fraternal order.

A secret fraternal society was indeed gaining ranks, and when reporters cornered alleged members for an interview, they all responded the same way: “I know nothing.” New York reporter Horace Greeley referred to the new order as the “Know-Nothings” for the first time in print in the New York Tribune issue of November 10, 1853. The nickname stuck. Americans’ fascination intensified in the spring of 1854 when these “Know-Nothings” influenced the outcome of city and state elections across the nation and even formed independent tickets during the summer of 1854. The secrecy and political meddling of the Know-Nothing Order provoked a firestorm of opinionated articles in the press. Only with the power of hindsight and access to private correspondence and Know-Nothing records can one be sure what they were up to.

There were many other nativist societies in the 1850s, but the Order of Know-Nothings was unique because it required its members to disavow membership. Eventually, the order became the single most influential of these organizations because it aimed to secretly influence elections. The organization apparently originated in the Order of the Star Spangled Banner (OSSB), also known as the
Sons of the Sires of ’76, which Charles Allen founded in New York in 1849. Another nativist group, the Order of United American Mechanics (OUAM), operated separately in the Mississippi Valley under the leadership of dime novelist Ned Buntline but eventually merged with the OSSB sometime in the early 1850s. The OSSB acquired the nickname “Know-Nothing” as early as May 1853. To be admitted into this order, at least at the beginning, an initiate had to be male, white, native born, at least twenty-one years old, and a Protestant Christian.

Misinformation and false reports exaggerated the strangeness of the Know-Nothing Order. A St. Louis newspaper, for example, reported that early societies held séance-like midnight ceremonies in wooded areas outside city limits to avoid detection. One investigator supposedly discovered a Know-Nothing oath “misplaced” at one of these ritual sites:

I, ________, hereby swear (hold up your right hand) this my oath to endure forever and a day after (raise your right leg) that if I catch a Roman Catholic (shut your right eye) alone in the woods (bat your left) or some out-of-the-way place, that I will pound him into a jelly, or chop him into sausages. I will eat him without pepper or salt and in this way endeavor to annihilate the whole tribe of worthless rapscallions—so help me teapot.

Since the members of the order were apparently sworn to secrecy, they could not do much to dispel vicious rumors. So nativists got in on the joke. Under the pseudonym “Know Something,” one such writer confounded contemporaneous reports on Know-Nothing activities by spreading grotesque misinformation. Claiming to be a former member of the order, he pretended to reveal that his cohort actually went by the codename “Babelorium”; that the order’s three degrees of membership were titled “Mumsome,” “Mummore,” and Mummost”; and that, during meetings, the head of the order presided atop a buffalo, “clothed in the wardrobe of an Indian chief in his wigwam.” The penalty for violating fidelity to the order, “Know Something” continued, was an unimaginable racking: the offender’s “hide suspended on a liberty pole till dried to a whisp, then taken down and pounded to powder, and the powder to be put into a fifty pounder to be fired off on the ensuing Fourth of July.” Americans on the outside could not tell if they were supposed to laugh or take alarm.

Many felt more disturbed than baffled. In 1854 Lemuel C. Porter of Louisville left a record in his diary that bespoke his utter bewilderment at the Know-Nothings’ increasing popularity in Louisville: “It is a Singular circumstance that now in the middle of the nineteenth century the most republican & protestant nation on earth should feel such dread of Catholics as to justify a wide
spread secret organization the main object of which is to guard American institutions against their baneful influences.”

David Todd Stuart, a Presbyterian minister and head of Shelbyville Female College, worried about the popularity of the movement in his Kentucky hometown. He “formed a bad opinion” of a fellow minister in Louisville for becoming “an enthusiastic ‘Know-Nothing.’” When Stuart returned to Shelbyville on August 8, 1854, an acquaintance cornered him to deliver a cryptic message: “there was a Society of Know-Nothings in the town—that he was a member—and that a gentleman would call on me Thursday evening.” The minister wrote later in his diary that he “felt perplexed and despondent” that men he respected had invited him “to join the Know-Nothing Society.”

Yet others enthusiastically signed up. One cavalier student of Miami University near Cincinnati, Albert Seaton Berry, wrote his cousin in September 1854 that there were many Know-Nothings in the area and that he had joined them. He had been “secreted smugly away in their domicile, cogitating on the principles of republican government and foreign immigration and the naturalization laws—under the new modus operandi.” He made light of his plunge “down the deep black hollow” and proclaimed without reserve that “the star of Know-Nothingism is at its zenith here [in Cincinnati].” He boasted three hundred members in his local lodge, including esteemed fellow students and professors. He believed that prospects for the order were bright in his home state of Kentucky too. He also belonged to the Lincoln Lodge in Lincoln County, Kentucky, southeast of Louisville, where, he told his cousin, “I first beheld the star of K.N. rising above the horizon which since had shone so brightly in my eyes.”

Membership only cost fifty cents, and native-born westerners of all classes joined in remarkable numbers. In August 1854 the Know-Nothing Grand Council of Ohio, which directed the surrounding states before each formed their own executive state bodies, reported 138 subordinate councils in the state of Ohio, 15 in Kentucky, 10 in Missouri, and 5 in Indiana. The nativist editor of the Hannibal True American, Thomas A. Harris, served Tea Party Council no. 1, Missouri’s first official Know-Nothing lodge, as a delegate to Ohio’s grand-council session in July 1854. When he returned home, he was elected vice president of the Grand Council of Missouri and oversaw the formation of eighteen local chapters by November 1854. The following year Harris presided over more than 274 councils. Membership kept rising. The secretary of the Ohio Grand Council estimated 830 councils in his state by January 1855. In June of that year, Grand President Thomas Spooner reported 1,195 Ohio councils, with an aggregate membership of 130,000.
Jesuit Conspiracy

Popular tales of Catholic conspiracies against the American republic played a major role in motivating nativists’ turn to secrecy. In this way those who joined the Know-Nothing orders in their hometowns became obsessed with the secretive power they had attributed to Catholic hierarchy, ritual, and Jesuit intrigue. Know-Nothings justified their modus operandi on, first, the disproportionate influence of Catholics and foreigners in elections, and, second, the supposed covert Catholic agenda to destroy the republic. Know-Nothings masked their political cause in a veil of secrecy to fight unseen Catholic powers. As renowned Kentucky nativist Garrett Davis put it in an 1855 speech in Louisville: “Let Know-Nothingsm keep abreast with Jesuitism. Let us fight the Devil with fire.”

Americans were avid readers of Catholic conspiracies, including the nun tales of Maria Monk and Rebecca Reed and the Jesuit plots imagined by Morse in Foreign Conspiracy Against the Liberties of the United States (1835) and Samuel B. Smith in The Flight of Popery from Rome to the West (1836). In these false stories, nuns were accused of sexual misconduct with priests, aborting their children and discarding the corpses into a pit in the basement of their convent. Jesuits were charged with laying plans for a bloody inquisition in America—arming German and Irish Catholics, fortifying cathedrals with cannons, and constructing secret inquisition chambers beneath. The “conniving Jesuit” functioned as a powerful motif in the anti-Catholic genre. Ever since the infamous Gunpowder Plot of 1605, when Guy Fawkes and a small group of militant Catholics tried to blow up King James I in Parliament and restore a Catholic monarchy in England, Jesuit operations bore the stigma of secrecy and treachery. Although the only Jesuit executed by English authorities was Father Henry Garnet, whose alleged involvement in the plot has since been cast into doubt, the term “Jesuit” became highly charged with connotations of betrayal, lies, secrecy, and treason. As Reverend Abel Stevens remarked, it was “a name that rings with horror on the ear of the patriot.” Jesuit intrigues were so wily, Reverend Samuel Schmucker warned his congregation, that one of its sworn members “may even pretend to be a convert to a Protestant church in order the better to promote the interests of popery.” The order’s creed caused particular alarm because, unlike secular priests, its adherents took a special vow of obedience to the pope.

In one popular tale, British soldiers found a paper tucked away in the pocket of a dead Irish priest. The British had won the Battle of Arklow that day in June 1798, outside Dublin. The priest named Murphy, a known leader of the Irish rebels, carried to his death a list of articles of faith for Roman Catholic clerics—the
The creed stated some of the already widely known dogmas of the Roman Catholic Church, yet it also included peculiar articles never before seen in print. It opened with supplications identifying the pope as the “the Lord God” who had the divine power to “make vice virtue, and virtue vice.” Then it went on to denounce “heretics” and to stipulate the following:

9th We are bound not to keep our oaths with heretics, though bound by the most sacred ties.
10th We are bound not to believe their oaths, for their principles are damnation.
11th We are bound to drive heretics with fire, sword, fagot and confusion.
12th We are bound to absolve, without money or price, those who imbue their hands in the blood of a heretic.

As soon as they finished reading, another soldier discovered a second article on the Irish priest’s person. It turned out Father Murphy was a member of the Jesuit Order. This document instructed Jesuits to establish colleges in “opulent cities,” to accumulate great wealth, and to conceal “the real value of our revenues.” Even more alarming, it encouraged them to use their money to “artfully worm themselves” into the coterie of government officials, so “that we may have their ear” and “easily secure their hearts.”

The story was fictional, completely made up. Whether or not he knew it, publisher G. A. Seigneur, a French ex-Catholic priest turned American colporteur (a peddler of religious books), was at the tail end of a trans-Atlantic game of telephone. The tale’s origins traced to the militantly anti-Catholic Orange Lodge in Ireland. A patron of that society wrote up the story and submitted it to the local Irish Protestant newspaper. A British subscriber passed it on to an anti-Catholic newspaper in London. During a weekly scan for noteworthy news from London, an American reporter copied the story for an article in New York’s premier anti-Catholic newspaper, the *Protestant Vindicator*, sometime between 1836 and 1839. At no point did any of the journalists attempt to corroborate the story. Enter Seigneur, who rediscovered the news story in the *Vindicator* while in New Orleans nearly two decades later. He then traveled the Mississippi Valley in 1854, selling the tale in his twenty-five-cent compilation, *A Startling Disclosure of the Secret Workings of the Jesuits*. Nearly all of the stories of Catholic misdeeds were recounted in a similar manner.

Americans bought many Catholic conspiratorial works such as Seigneur’s. Journalists in mid-nineteenth-century America took stories of such intrigue
seriously and constantly pressured Jesuit superiors to turn over their “real” clerical oaths, assuming the official materials released to the public were a cover. An investigator supposedly got his hands on an “authentic” copy in 1855 and published it immediately. According to this document, Jesuits vowed to uphold the pope’s “power to depose heretical kings” and renounce “any allegiance as due to any heretical king, prince, or state, named Protestant.” The Jesuit candidate was required to do his “utmost to extirpate the heretical Protestants’ doctrine, and to destroy all their pretended powers, regal or otherwise.” All this was followed by a solemn pledge “to keep secret and private all her [the church’s] agents’ counsels.” Jesuit authorities’ insistence that the document was a fabrication fell on deaf ears.

According to Reverend Charles Boynton of Cincinnati, the Catholic conspiracy in America was the inevitable outcome of the “one central principle of the Papacy”: imperial domination of the Earth. It was the Catholic Church’s “solemn duty to overthrow all Protestant or other opposing governments, and exterminate utterly every faith but her own.” Boynton asserted that the dogmas of the church even permitted the Catholic hierarchy “to employ any means for the glory of God, because treachery and fraud, even the violation of oaths, private murder, or destruction by war, are all justified by the holy end which she has in view.” It was not the Catholic “religion” he sought to proscribe, Boynton claimed, but “a politico-ecclesiastical Corporation of priests and Jesuits . . . under the direction of a foreign power.”

As the real presence of Catholics and Catholic institutions in the West expanded rapidly between 1845 and 1855, especially in developing cities, the Know-Nothing Order presented itself to westerners as the only antidote. A resident of Ohio named Sidney Maxwell mentioned in his diary in September 1854 that he believed the Catholics in his state “have been working themselves into our offices of government.” He vowed to prevent Cincinnati’s government from falling “into the hands of Romanists.” Four months later, after penning this timely entry in his diary, Maxwell celebrated the remarkable rise of the Know-Nothings. On January 1, 1855, though apparently not a member himself, he mentioned that the group’s activities “were entirely secret” yet believed he could properly discern the main object of the new party: “to fill our offices with none than native born Americans—to extend the time of naturalization, and to watch with the utmost vigilance the operations of the Roman Church in this government.” Maxwell noted with admiration that “this new organization had found soil in Ohio, it appears, that was suited to its growth.” In Cincinnati one lawyer remarked that the order “termed out of doubt—Know-Nothing” was poised to
“break down all foreign control and influences, particularly that of the Roman Catholic,” which he evidently thought was “a commendable undertaking and worthy to be carried out to its utmost extent.” In Louisville a doctor penned in private that the order’s opposition to Catholics and foreigners was “truly American” because “the foreign influence has been banefully felt for a number of years . . . in our large cities & Demagogues have given them this consequence by pandering for their support thusly giving them in many cases the balance of power in elections.” A wide cross-section of westerners lent their support to the Know-Nothings.

Nativist leaders in the West believed Catholicism in the United States had grown too powerful for ordinary democratic measures. “Already have [papists] overwhelmed the old native American party in the United States,” renowned Kentucky representative Garrett Davis charged, which therefore “proved by their strength the necessity of a more potent body—even the secret and mysterious order of the Star Spangled Banner.” The Know-Nothings of Kentucky nominated Davis for governor in 1855, then for president of the United States in 1856. Davis believed his order combated two formidable forces: one, the “swarms of demagogues,” and two, the “world-wide hierarchy that boasts of its antiquity, its unchangableness, and its infallibility,” the Catholic Church. The order’s “mode of action,” he claimed, “is to isolate and nationalize the American people from the corrupting effects” of these two forces. Davis explained that through “concentrated native American voting,” Know-Nothingsism counteracted “the spirit of the papacy, [which] undoubtedly, interferes with native Americanism.” It was impossible, he reckoned, “to conceive how it is wrong for the native Americans to interfere back again, by moral and spiritual means with the papists.” Davis proclaimed, “Let the subordinate and grand councils of the Patriotic Fraternity oppose the Beastly Monster,” and “as long as we live, let us ever prefer Christianity to Popery, ‘Liberty to power.’”

“Rigged” Elections

Loose naturalization laws, which varied by state, made it remarkably easy for European immigrants to gain enfranchisement, especially in the West. The state governments of Illinois, Kentucky, Missouri, and Ohio proved especially eager to attract settlers to their states and accordingly adopted a policy of allowing immigrants to vote after only one or two years of residency simply by declaring their intent to naturalize in five years’ time. Acquiring voting rights in these states required the mere expression of one’s intent to become an American citizen.
Eager to attract immigrant workers, one of the least populated western states, Indiana, actually waived all residency requirements and expediently naturalized immigrants upon arrival.\(^3\)

Know-Nothings chastised native-born “demagogues” who allegedly pandered to immigrants. The word “demagogue” derives from the Greek (\textit{demos} means “people,” and \textit{ago} means “carry/manipulate”—so “people’s manipulator”) and refers to a rabble-rousing populist who appeals to the base passions of the lower classes. It was a bad word in nineteenth-century America. Nativists claimed “unassimilated” foreigners fueled demagoguery. They rallied to exterminate corrupt political machines and preserve America’s most important institution: the vote.\(^3\) As Reverend Alfred Ely put it, the ballot constituted nothing less than “our very sanctum sanctorum,” and as such, suffrage “should not only be preserved inviolate but it should be guarded with the severest caution.”\(^4\)

In \textit{The Origins, Principles, and Purposes of the American Party}, Know-Nothing Henry Winter Davis of Maryland condemned the Democratic Party in particular for consistently pandering to immigrants. Indeed, that party consistently drew more than 75 percent of the immigrant vote.\(^4\) James Chapman, a former Democrat and the minister of the Southern Methodist Episcopal Church of Tennessee, demonstrated the problem in his exhaustive book \textit{Americanism versus Romanism; or, The Cis-Atlantic Battle between Sam and the Pope} (1856). Even though the proportion of immigrants to the entire population was small, Chapman showed how immigrants’ solidarity within one party, in this case the Democratic Party, gave them disproportionate political power. The native-born American vote typically split in half between the Whig and Democratic Parties. The numbers suggested that the foreign-born population, however, was not so evenly divided between the two parties.\(^4\) Democrats generally secured above two-thirds of the foreign-born vote, often just enough to swing elections in their favor. By 1850, more than 90 percent of Irish Americans nationwide voted for proslavery Democrats, with roughly 80 percent of German Americans voting for them as well. In cases when two Democratic candidates competed, Germans preferred the one with a more moderate position on the extension of slavery in the West.\(^4\) The growing power of this so-called “foreign bloc” of voters became apparent in elections held in urban areas in the North and West, where major metropolises hosted disproportionately large immigrant populations. Most Germans and almost all Irish voted Democrat, so as a group they played a decisive role in mid-nineteenth-century elections, especially at local levels.

Statistically speaking, Roman Catholic citizens tended to vote en bloc for the same candidate, typically a Democrat. More than 95 percent of Catholic
immigrants nationwide voted Democrat after 1845. They composed significant percentages of foreign populations in urban areas. Since Democrats relied on the immigrant vote, they therefore depended on Catholics for victory. This could be witnessed in many American elections, Davis asserted, as “demagogues” found loyal immigrant voters, or “mercenaries” as he called them, in the solid “faction of the political papists.” Reverend Chapman asked “whether it is their nationality, their personal feeling, or their Catholicism that causes them to coalesce at the polls?” The fact of Catholic bloc voting proved with “almost unquestionable certainty,” Chapman claimed, that the pope in Rome held sway over American elections. “The German and the Irish socially hate each other,” he offered as an example, “but if they are Catholics, they always vote alike.”

If the elections were already rigged in this fashion, then nativists figured they had no choice but to do some rigging of their own. In their minds, Catholic bloc voting necessitated dark-lantern politicking. For all their celebration of democracy, the nativists were among the first to admit that the American system of government had a disturbing flaw for them: if left to their own devices, Catholic American voters would also mold American institutions. On one hand, nativists placed the blame on the “demagogues” who tried to win the German and Irish vote. It was “not that we fear their numerical strength,” nativist Reverend Sam Chapman remarked, “but their influence over time-serving and self-interested politicians.” On the other hand, nativists believed Catholic leaders were then plotting to destroy their opposition, infiltrate the U.S. government, and eventually bring about the nation’s demise.

The modus operandi of the nativist movement revealed a strange fascination with the stigmatized “Catholicism” nativist authors had been imagining. Contemporary observers often dismissed Know-Nothingism, however, as a smoke-screen for political agendas its members wished to keep hidden. Whigs believed Democrats in the order were trying to destroy the Whig Party, while Democrats believed the Whigs in it looked to do them in. Some charged that the order was secretly a tool of northern abolitionists; others accused the Know-Nothings of being in league with the southern “slavocracy.” But what exactly did the Know-Nothings attempt to accomplish?

A Peek Inside Know-Nothing Councils

Members of the Know-Nothing Order vowed to vote in unison for a political candidate who was native-born and Protestant Christian, their purpose being to limit Catholic and foreign influence in politics. The Know-Nothings initially
did not conspire with one political party in particular. According to the State Council of Missouri’s previously top-secret Ritual of the Order, its president delivered an address to initiates after the conferral of the first degree, wherein he explained their reason for gathering: “foreign influence has been making steady and alarming progress in our country.” On the one hand, the Know-Nothing Order continued the work of earlier patriotic societies such as the Order of United Americans (OUA): “good and true men have devised this Order as a means of disseminating patriotic principles, of keeping alive the fire of national virtue, of fostering the national intelligence, and of advancing America and the American interest.” On the other, it broke with tradition by organizing independently and politically to check “the stride of the foreigner and alien” and to thwart “the deadly plans of the enemies of our Republican Institutions.”

The 1854 constitution of the Grand Council of Ohio obliged members to make this pledge:

I, _______, hereby solemnly swear eternal fidelity to the vows I have taken in this Order. I also swear that I will advance the interests of every native born American citizen, especially the members of this Order, to the entire and absolute exclusion of all aliens and foreigners, and more especially those who belong to or approve of the Roman Catholic faith. So help me God!

Here in the official 1854 version, the “Roman Catholic faith” was explicitly denounced. Thus, from its inception, the Know-Nothing Order functioned as a safe haven for anti-Catholics. Members could express such beliefs openly among comrades without having to fear public scorn. Through 1854 and the first half of 1855, only white, native-born Protestant Christian men over the age of twenty-one were admitted to a council. The order barred men who were married to a Roman Catholic woman. The Grand Council of Ohio, the West’s first state Know-Nothing council, on August 1, 1854, resolved to establish the following criteria for membership: “any person born within the jurisdiction of the United States, of Protestant parents, and raised and educated under Protestant influence, and who has not a Catholic wife, shall be eligible to membership in this order.”

Initiates began their symbolic journey into the inner sanctums of the organization by facing the marshal, who guarded the entrance to the lodge. He asked, “Do you believe in a Supreme Being, the Creator and Preserver of the universe?” Answer: “I do.” Then the initiate made a solemn pledge of secrecy upon the “Holy Bible and Cross.” The marshal first asked for his age and where
he was born. If the candidate was twenty-one years or older and a native of the United States, the marshal then queried as to whether he wanted to liberate public schools “from all sectarian influence” (the proper response being “I do”), whether he submitted his private judgment and civic duties to “the authority of any man or set of men on earth, either lay or ecclesiastical” (response, “I do not”), and whether he was willing to resist foreign influence in American political affairs (response, “I do”). If the initiate answered the questions correctly, the marshal permitted him into the council room, where the vice president gave him the first-degree passwords, signs, and handshakes.50

The first-degree oath required members to vote only for native-born Protestant Americans, to resist foreign political influence in general, and to keep the order and its membership a secret. The second degree called upon members to imitate the “brilliant deeds of patriotism of our fathers, through which [we] received the inestimable blessings of civil and religious liberty,” and, above all, to keep alive “the deathless example of our illustrious WASHINGTON.” The third degree bound members to preserve the union of the United States at all costs. At each conferral, new passwords and signs were conveyed. At the end of the conferral of the third degree, the president explained the meaning of the member’s symbolic passage: the dangers to American liberty came from within; immigrants in their midst brought “imminent peril.”51

Not until March 1854 did any Know-Nothing groups attempt direct action. In 1852 Pope Pius IX had donated a marble stone to be incorporated in the Washington Monument in Washington, D.C. John F. Wieshampel raised outcries against the use of the stone in the national monument. His widely circulated pamphlet The Pope’s Stratagem, “Rome to America!” underlined the pope’s recent efforts to “interfere” in the American civic order.52 On March 6, 1854, a small Know-Nothing mob stormed the storage shed in the capital where the “Pope’s Stone” rested. They poisoned the guard dog, bound and gagged the guard, dragged the marble block to the Potomac River, and cast it into the water. Several newspapers reported that before capsizing the marble into the river, the Know-Nothings pounded off several chunks and stole them away.53

Two months later, on May 17, the biggest grand council meeting of Know-Nothings in the West to date congregated in Cincinnati. Delegates from all over the region converged in the Queen City. Robert Morris from Lodge no. 9 in Portsmouth, Ohio, brought two rare gifts that thrilled the councilmen. One member immediately moved “the thanks of this Grand Body be returned to Bro. Morris” for the generous contribution of the items. Upon another motion, the grand council resolved to keep the gifts in their “permanent possession.”54
One of the mementoes was a small chunk of marble, which Morris claimed was an authentic piece of the original “stone which Pope Pius IX contributed to the Washington Monument.” This was a diabolical symbol sure to enflame the ire of Catholic Americans. The Grand Council of Ohio was not the only group to seemingly endorse the theft and destruction of the Pope’s Stone. Know-Nothing councils in Chicago, Cincinnati, Louisville, and St. Louis each hailed the group of twenty men who sunk it as true patriots; several of them also claimed to possess authentic pieces of the stone. For the anniversary of its capsizing in the Potomac, the Grand Council of Missouri even organized the Committee on the Washington Monument to join hearts with the rioters in Washington, D.C., and preserve the symbolic purity of the national icon.55

The other memento was a Roman Catholic relic upon which the original members of the Grand Council of Ohio apparently swore their first oaths to the Know-Nothing Order. Catholics venerated relics, and if this one actually was authentic, they would have certainly condemned the order as the most heinous and sacrosanct group in the whole of the country. That added to the Know-Nothings’ revelry. Morris claimed that this relic “had been taken from one of the Catholic churches of Philadelphia during the riot which took place there a number of years since.” Here, he referred to the Philadelphia Riot of 1844, during which nativists tore down and carried away various holy items stationed in St. Augustine’s and St. Michael’s Cathedrals before they burned both to the ground. What happened to the consecrated paraphernalia had remained a mystery until now. Morris told the group, “Catholics claimed that the wood of which it is composed is a part of the true cross upon which our Savior was crucified.”56

We may never know whether these artifacts were authentic, but we can glimpse the intended message behind their ritualistic appearance. The relic and the rubble were insignia, “mementoes” as they called them, that the Ohio Know-Nothings reappropriated as their own crypto-Catholic icons and relics. For the Know-Nothing council, the chunk of marble stolen from the Washington Monument and the relic stolen from a cathedral in Philadelphia represented in microcosm the destruction of Roman Catholic designs. The insignia also symbolized the necessity of taking direct action against Roman Catholic intervention in state and public affairs. These Know-Nothing councils did not necessarily condone rioting and property damage as much as they lent their support to an ethos, that they were serious, a force to be reckoned with, like Rome; that they cared not one iota for Catholic religiosity, miracles, and holy items; and that demagogues, Catholic voters, and political office seekers should take heed of the order.
Even in secret, the Know-Nothings tried to practice what they preached—a pure democracy. Although shrouded in mystery, their councils were in some ways more democratic than the existing two-party system. As historian John Mulkern has pointed out, Know-Nothings envisioned their radically democratic lodge networks as “the ultimate expression of republicanism.”57 When it came to voting for political candidates, members felt their individual vote carried more representative weight in these lodges than in the traditional nomination processes within Whig and Democratic caucuses. “Each party [has] its secret agents in Washington—meeting in dark conclave,” one Know-Nothing representative explained; “mysterious inuendos of conspiracy are uttered with low tones and smothered breath, and all justified, commended, practiced, and applauded.”58 Indeed, the two political parties each harbored a core group of influential and powerful leaders, wielding backing and money, who often swayed the course of the nominations. Things were different in Know-Nothing councils. In August 1854 the Grand Council of Ohio formed a separate Committee on Elections, which resolved immediately to model the order’s inner election procedures purely on the U.S. Constitution so that even “the choice of nominees for all offices” would be “elective by the people.” Know-Nothings in the West resolved that each subordinate council would send one delegate for every three hundred members to the state council to serve as legislator. Unlike in the Whig and Democratic processes, where the convention selected candidates, Know-Nothing officials from the county to national levels were nominated by popular vote.59

Moreover, Know-Nothing votes were recorded on secret ballots at a time when elections still practiced voting viva voce (“by word of mouth”; that is, voice vote). Many still defended the old system because, as one Missourian put it, voting out loud prevented “bad and ignorant voters” from gaining “impunity from public shame or private resentment in consequence of voting as their own malignant passions may dictate.” This commentator believed that “the secret ballot is anti-republican—it encourages men to give votes they would not dare avow, and of which they would be ashamed, if known.” Interestingly, those in favor of the voice vote criticized the secret ballot for enabling political nativism.60

During Know-Nothing elections, the candidate with the simple majority of votes won the nomination, and all members then vowed to vote for the nominee in the upcoming election. A tie was settled by lot.61 In the case of a vacancy, the president of the order sent out his nominee in secret to all the subordinate councils, and each had the opportunity to approve or reject his selection. Annual elections were held for executive councilmen, including the president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, and so on. The Committee of Elections structured the
process this way because they believed it was “the best course to secure, spread and strengthen American principles, as recognized by this Order.” The Know- Nothings envisioned a highly individualistic democratic process.62

The leaders of the order expected individual members to comport themselves in a manner becoming good republican citizens. The Ohio Grand Council included a clause in its constitution that required members “to possess good moral characters.” The constitutions of Ohio and Missouri included passages to prevent possible “demagoguery” within Know-Nothing councils so that politicians could not pander to the order during campaigns. The Missouri Grand Council, for example, passed a special restriction in 1855 barring membership for anyone currently running for office to discountenance “demagogism” and prevent the order from “being used as an instrument for promoting interested and selfish ends.”63

If one could peek inside the Grand Councils of Ohio and Missouri, one would witness procedures that paralleled the most solemn of congressional sessions. According to the Ohio council’s “Rules of the Order,” meetings began with the seating of the president and the pounding of a gavel: “at the sound of the gavel there shall be a general silence, under the penalty of a public reprimand.” Then came a roll call of officers, an orderly presentation of the delegates’ certificates, the reading aloud of the previous meeting’s minutes, the reports of the committees, and then the conferral of degrees upon new members and any “new business.” The “presiding officer,” the rules stated, “shall preserve order and decorum” at all times. No member was to interrupt another while speaking. Before making a motion or speech, each member had to rise and ask the permission of the presiding officer, who could accept or deny the request. Slander was forbidden, as was personal attacks on fellow members.64

The first meeting of the Grand Council of Missouri, on September 29, 1854, established similar procedures. Missouri’s Know-Nothing delegates first ratified the order’s constitution, voted on the next meeting date, and amended the bylaws and rules. On October 19 and 20 they met again in St. Louis in the hall of Yorktown Council no. 11, where they spent two tedious days revising drafts of bylaws and proceeding through the several nominations for various seats in the executive council and the national convention (to be held in June 1855). Only after the day’s sessions did the delegates leave parliamentary procedure behind to share one another’s company at “a sumptuous [dinner].” They made patriotic toasts into the early morning hours, and the company was “entertained by the happiness interchanged of anecdote and friendly tokens.”65

Like U.S. congressional sessions, Know-Nothing councils opened with prayer. Clergymen, of course, joined the order. It seemed natural for the Grand Council
of Missouri to invite the minister of St. Louis’ First Methodist Church, Charles B. Parsons, “to open sessions of this council each morning with prayer.” The Know-Nothings of St. Louis probably requested Reverend Parsons because of his personal connection to Solomon Smith, president and state delegate of Valley Forge Council no. 14 in the city. Parsons saw no reason why his religious duties should interfere with an opportunity to oblige Smith, “an old friend.” Another Christian minister from that state privately urged Missouri Whig politician George R. Smith to join the Know-Nothing Order: “I am a life member, so far as I understand their aims and objects. I am not one of them, but am one with them, and if alive and well, expect on the day of the ‘fight’ to record my vote in favor of the sentiment, ‘None but Americans shall rule America.’” Little did the reverend know that George Smith was already a member of the order, representing the district of St. Louis for the Grand Council of Missouri.

Masonry, Odd Fellowship, and Know-Nothingism

The whole structure of the Know-Nothing Order, including its dark-lantern rituals, borrowed from Masonry. The Order of Free and Accepted Masons began as a respected club for elite men in early America. Freemasons included at least nine of the signers of the U.S. Constitution and such esteemed patriots as George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Paul Revere. Before the mid-1830s, a rare few considered the secrecy and exclusivity of Freemasonry undemocratic. The nation’s first president, after all, was a master mason, the highest rank of the order, in Fredericksburg, Virginia.

During the Second Great Awakening, a new generation of evangelicals like Charles Grandison Finney, formerly a Mason himself, denounced Masonic secrecy and ritual. After his conversion to Christianity in 1824, Finney condemned Freemasonry as at best a diversion from the faith and at worst a “counterfeit religion.” He organized an anti-Mason crusade that lasted well into the mid-nineteenth century. In The Character, Claims and Practical Workings of Freemasonry, Reverend Finney accused the order of drawing young men away from religious conversion and toward a fraternal initiation that only mimicked in some ways the ethos experienced in church gatherings: the fear of hell, the obstacle of personal ineptitude, the hope in personal transformation, and the perseverance of brotherly love. Masonic rituals created a kind of “liminal experience,” an in-between space, exotic but reflective of mainstream hopes and fears.
in the 1840s figured two females for every male. Apparently, many young men chose fraternities over churches.\textsuperscript{72}

Catholic leaders had warned their charges for centuries not to join secret societies under pain of excommunication. The church hierarchy consistently opposed secret orders such as Masonry and Odd Fellowship. They pronounced it a mortal sin to join any society requiring an oath of initiation that bound members to hold higher allegiance to the order than to their ecclesiastical authorities and to withhold details of their membership from the clergy in the confessional booth. This hostility to secret societies traced back to the earliest Roman Catholic councils anathematizing Gnosticism. According to Father Edward Purcell: “It is distinctly known to all Catholics, that their church does formally and unreservedly condemn all Secret Societies, whose members bind themselves by solemn oaths . . . to fellowship or secrecy.”\textsuperscript{73} To be reconciled to God, an individual had to clear his conscience to his confessor.

The Catholic Church took the matter so seriously, Purcell explained in 1849, that “if a Catholic should die whilst attached to the order of Odd Fellows, we would not attempt to interfere with his funeral.” In other words, the Catholic hierarchy refused to admit those who died as members of secret societies into its consecrated burial grounds, implying that committed Masons and Odd Fellows could not enter heaven. Catholics acknowledged the right of such societies to exist and recognized their charitable contributions, but they also claimed the right to exclude such orders from their own places of worship. Although Freemasonry made use of scriptures and Christian doctrines, Purcell argued it was not a true religion because its object was the promotion of its members, not the defense of “the word of God and the peace of his Church.”\textsuperscript{74} The rituals of Masonic societies, moreover, obviously “ridiculed the Scriptures and mocked at religion,” incorporating mock antiphons and creeds and referring to their superiors as “High Priest” and the like.\textsuperscript{75}

The Masons and Odd Fellows began a campaign of their own in an attempt to build bridges with concerned Christians. They embraced a new semitransparency, publishing many of their proceedings.\textsuperscript{76} Curious readers could see firsthand that Masons respected God in the opening invocations, “thou hast promised that where two or three are gathered together in thy name, thou wilt be in the midst of them,” and that their constitutions outlined democratic procedures for members, with each individual casting ballots to elect members to office.\textsuperscript{77} They claimed the attendance of “many thousands of devoted and consistent Christians and church members,” including clergymen.\textsuperscript{78} One member celebrated a new hall in St. Louis as a “temple of practical Christianity,” referring to the Order of Odd
Fellows as a “great and spreading church,” harboring both “the priest of science” and the “priest of religion.” The author believed the motto of the order—“Friendship, Love and Truth”—epitomized the “true spirit of Christianity.”

Society officials appealed openly to the wives of members. One leader of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, the second-most-popular secret fraternal society in the Mississippi Valley, reminded outspoken female dissenters in 1846, “your nature is different.” While men were naturally aggressive and prone to selfishness, the author claimed, “your Creator has already endowed you with the feelings and sentiments peculiar to Odd Fellowship.” Men needed Odd Fellowship, in other words, to “elevate them to the standard of your own.”

The exclusivity and secrecy offered sincere pursuers of the truth the assurance that the men to whom they committed their fraternal love were indeed upright fellows.

By 1853, the city of St. Louis listed ten major Masonic lodges, as well as three German ones, and ten lodges of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows. There were many more subordinate lodges. There were also eight councils of the United Ancient Order of Druids and at least five councils of the natiivist Order of United American Mechanics in St. Louis alone. In 1855 Chicago counted one council of the OUA, sixty Odd Fellows’ subordinate lodges, one hundred of the Independent Order of Good Templars, and over 150 Masonic lodges.

Many of these organizations’ members joined the Know-Nothing Order the following year. Philip Swigert of Frankfort, Kentucky, to give a specific example, presided as the grand sachem of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky in 1845 before he served as an executive officeholder in the Know-Nothing Grand Council of Kentucky in 1855. A prominent St. Louis delegate to the Know-Nothing National Council in 1855, Archibald Gamble, had been a Mason since Missouri became a state in 1820.

Know-Nothings copied the structure of Masonic degrees, governance, and lodges. Instead of incorporating the numerous degrees of these lodges, though, Know-Nothings reduced those conferred to just three. Instead of “Grand Lodge” and “Grand Master,” Masonic terms, Know-Nothings used “Grand Council” and “Grand President.” Instead of the executive positions of “Warden” and “Deacon,” Know-Nothings used “Marshal” and “Instructor.” Instead of “Guardian,” they used “Sentinel.” Many subordinate lodges of Freemason, Odd Fellows, and Know-Nothings were named after U.S. founders and Revolutionary events, including Washington, Franklin, Bunker Hill, Valley Forge, and Plymouth Rock, which were the most popular. The Know-Nothing Order of Cincinnati even solicited the Odd Fellows to publish their initial proceedings (abridged) in 1854.
Employing a tactic familiar to Masonry, members of the Know-Nothing Order argued that secret fraternal societies like theirs actually promoted free-thinking and that this was precisely why the Roman Catholic Church forbid its congregants to join them. According to these spokesmen, Catholic leaders’ outcries only proved that Know-Nothing countermeasures accomplished the intended effect of undermining the very secrecy the church had traditionally relied upon. They further argued that the Catholic religion demanded “a more submissive obedience to its guides, a greater dependence upon authority for its direction and conduct, and a closer inter-relation of personal sympathy and identity of end and object, than any other fraternity in our land.” One Know-Nothing outside Chicago pointed out with disgust that a member of the Catholic Church faced excommunication and ostracism simply for being “sworn not to tell what he knows about the Masons, or any of their sort of secret duins.” If Masons were good republicans, and Catholics could not be Masons, he therefore reasoned that Catholics could not be good republicans. “If they made em no nothins,” an Illinoisan argued in 1854, “they couldn’t be Catholics.” If a Catholic were ever elected to office, then “all the Pope hes got to du to pull down the hull fabric of our Government and build himself up onto it is to tell such fellars to du it.” He concluded, “Pears to me it’s the Catholics that go agin the Constitution and the no nothings is agin them, just because they are agin the Constitution.”

In 1854 nativist author S. D. T. Willard, using the pseudonym “A Foe to Despotism,” sold 20,000 copies of his propaganda piece *Red Cross of Catholicism in America*, which elaborated on a Catholic conspiracy to infiltrate Know-Nothing councils. Willard argued that church leaders claimed duplicitously to oppose secret orders in public while plotting “in secret conclaves” themselves. “Hear that, ye Odd Fellows,” Willard warned: “Admit no Roman Catholics into your noble order, for as sure as they should learn your secrets and proceedings, an account of them would be transmitted by the first opportunity, to his unholiness, the Pope.”

Like their Masonic counterparts, Know-Nothing propagandists in 1854 and early 1855 tried to persuade the public that the secret rituals of the order hid nothing sinister. One such propaganda piece, a 350-page novel titled *The Know-Nothing?,* hit the presses in Cleveland, in 1855. The anonymous author painted a rosy picture of Know-Nothingsm. The protagonist of the story, Mr. Lamont, appears in an anonymous western town seeking members for a mysterious club. “The name of this order I cannot tell you now; but hear me,” he tells one recruit, “I have information to impart that will startle you.” The recruit, Edward Buford,
selects friends to come with him to a secret midnight meeting. They attend on his word that the order is “consistent with true principle, sound morality, and genuine patriotic feeling.” During the first meeting, Mr. Lamont affirms “the duty of every good citizen to look abroad...to see where evils exist” and correct them. He gives them simple signs and passwords to indicate their membership in the group and promises to reveal more the following meeting. At the second meeting, he encourages the men to shun selfishness and pledge “obligations that will make us continually stand by and love each other.” Lamont urges them to avoid slander against their brothers, to help one another in business, and to watch over the families of deceased brethren. In a delightful twist, Mr. Lamont is revealed to be Edward Buford’s biological brother, not immediately recognizable because he had spent several years abroad. This plot device stresses the familiarity of Know-Nothings in western locales, suggesting that members were friendly neighbors rather than mischievous outsiders.

The novelist wrote the story in part to insulate Know-Nothings from the accusations of anti-Mason female protesters. One Illinois reporter, for example, recorded local women’s concern with the order: “The wimmen, all tu once, got to complainin that the men fokes stayed out nights till ten or leven oclock, and fur a week or so back every boddy hes bin a talkin about the no nothings bein in the neighborhood.” So, late in the novel, when one new recruit returns late at night, his wife accuses him of forsaking her for a scandalous club. “It’s nothing more nor less than this outlandish Know-Nothing society that is leading all the men away from their duties,” she yells. If he refuses to convince his married friends to quit the order, she threatens, the women of the town would form a society “that will make you cook your own dinners, make your own shirts, and take care of yourselves in general!” But the following week, she is “put to shame” when it comes to light that Know-Nothings have cared for the widow and son of a deceased member of the order, ministered to the poor, fed orphans, and spread kindness and goodwill throughout the town. The novel ends with the rosy conclusion that the Know-Nothings had elevated the western town to “a city set on a hill,’ casting abroad a bright and glorious light” for the rest of America to emulate.

Looking inside the Know-Nothing councils in the West reveals how anti-Catholicism remained a key aspect of the movement. Nativists justified their secrecy on the grounds of a Catholic conspiracy to subvert their liberties. This secrecy allowed them to avoid accusations of bigotry from their enemies and prepare a new political strategy. The Order of Know-Nothings invoked the “greater good” of American unity and purity. Cloaking their actions in secrecy
nevertheless appeared suspect to many. Over the ensuing years of the order’s existence, Know-Nothings confronted challenging, potentially devastating criticisms.

Know-Nothingism as “Un-American”

Many Americans excoriated nativist secrecy as un-American. Purcell, a Catholic priest based in Cincinnati, thought it especially revealing that native-born Americans chose secrecy as their ploy to “end popery” in a free republic, where Protestants in fact dominated “the Press, the Publishing houses, the Public School Fund, the Universities, and popular prejudices.” Perhaps it suggested that nativists were insincere about their love of democracy. A Protestant reverend in Ohio agreed with Purcell that the “secret Democracy” of the Know-Nothings served as a cover for “plotting schemes and in the dark working vigorously to the injury of our country’s common good.” The minister prodded, “Pretend, do they, to oppose Catholicism?” He thought it more likely they were in league with Jesuits than against them. A Missourian likewise denounced Know-Nothingism as cowardly and could only imagine that the nativists had sunk so low because they wished to conceal “monstrous bigotry and intolerance.” The order had merely added “religious bigotry and jacobinical secrecy” onto the “ostensible principles” of the “old Native Americanism.”

Orestes Brownson of Boston asserted that the order was essentially anti-Catholic, rather than authentically and positively “nativist.” Brownson, an Anglo-American convert to Catholicism and editor of the premier Catholic journal in the United States, argued the distinction in his Boston Quarterly Review. His essays were dispersed so widely that they appeared as common stays in private western libraries. In an article titled “Native Americanism,” Brownson defined nativism as a natural and necessary preference for one’s own country over others. He admitted that immigrants from Germany and Ireland did not automatically share a sense of allegiance to the United States like native-born Americans and agreed that some foreigners needed time to assimilate, although he hesitated to offer an opinion on immigration policy. He instructed Catholic Americans to beware, then, “of confounding the proper native American feeling with the anti-Catholic feeling.” He asserted that true “Native Americanism is as strong in the bosom of American Catholics as it is in the bosom of American Protestants.”

Vitriolic exchange between “No-Popery leaders” and Catholic immigrants had made out nativism and anti-Catholicism to seem like the same thing. In targeting Know-Nothing secrecy, Catholic Americans emphasized their own transparency. This was precisely what nativists wanted to counteract, but
their decision to hide from the public limelight discredited them. One Missourian pointed out this exact dilemma: “Secrecy is no doubt an element of strength; it is also a source of weakness. When the order and its principles are attacked, there is nobody to defend—nobody belongs to it.” Under the pseudonym “foreigner,” one writer asked in 1854, “What are they afraid of?” How could reasonable people honestly worry that “two to three millions of Catholics” were both able and willing to “murder all the nineteen millions of Protestants in the twinkling of a broomstick?” The author concluded that Know-Nothings ultimately gathered in secret because “they feel and know that their object is to oppose the laws of the country, and their machinations will not bear the light of day, or the scrutiny of their fellow citizens.”

Hardline Democrats and Whigs likewise denounced the entire movement as bigoted. In an address widely circulated by Democrats in 1855, Governor Henry A. Wise of Virginia took more offense at the “religiously intolerant” Know-Nothing Order than the purportedly decrepit and outdated Roman Catholic Church. “Yes, sir,” a representative from New York concurred, “a class of men are springing up in the politics of this country more bigoted, intolerant and proscriptive than the inquisition in Spain.” The national Democratic platform officially condemned the Know-Nothing Party as contradictory to “the liberal principles embodied by Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence, and sanctioned in the Constitution” because it applied “an adverse political and religious test” for political office holding. Democrats considered this “political crusade in the nineteenth century, and in the United States of America, against Catholics and foreign-born” as inimical to “the spirit of toleration and enlightened freedom which peculiarly distinguishes the American system of popular government.” The Democratic convention thus aligned with Catholic Americans in opposing “all secret political societies, by whatever name they may be called.”

Conclusion

The Columbian newspaper in Ohio announced the first ever “Holy Church Democratic State Ticket” in its October 11, 1854, issue. Archbishop Purcell of Cincinnati appeared as the nominee for Ohio’s director of public works, Pope Pius IX for the office of supreme judge. The newspaper’s editor called it the “Pope’s Ticket.” It was exactly what the nativists had prophesied would occur, yet it was another Know-Nothing sham. The Roman Catholic Church in America did not condone such uniting of church and political interests, but the idea that it could, that it might, continued to animate the Know-Nothing
Order. Their perception, that a “Pope’s Ticket” was imminent, led to an actual Protestant ticket under the Know-Nothing Party. The nativists beat the Catholics to it.

Such Know-Nothing antics suggested a place for the nativist movement on the fringe of American politics and society, but political nativism returned to the fore dramatically in 1854 after its adherents formulated a new strategy. The unique political circumstances of the mid-1850s emboldened and transformed the Know-Nothing Order into a political organization capable of garnering massive, nationwide support.