

F Your Racist History***

E106: *The Know-Nothing “Native American” Movement*

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Show Notes

Since the days of Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson, American politics have been rife with conflict and division, and there has been a rotating cast of political machines taking and losing power. During the volatile political era of the 1840s and 1850s, a nativist group called the “Know-Nothings” briefly held power on the national stage, maintaining staunch anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic stances. Because most of their members were American descendants of Anglo-Saxon colonists, the Know-Nothings also called themselves the “Native American Party,” but make no mistake: Indigenous peoples were not welcome in their ranks. This was a white man’s movement aimed at improving the livelihood and futures of “native-born” white Americans. Even though the Know-Nothing party officially ended in 1860, their violent and hateful members were absorbed into other political parties, namely the newly formed Republicans.

EPISODE SCRIPT

Introduction

The Know-Nothings: America's original extremist *Fight Club*. A secret fraternity. A xenophobic hate group. A mainstream political party.

When members of this group were asked about their ideology or the inner workings of the mysterious organization, they responded with "I know nothing." *Hmm*. The same way you never talk about *Fight Club*.

As immigration to the United States from Europe exploded in the late 1840s, primarily from Ireland due to the "Great Potato Famine," and newcomers mainly settled in free states, the newly established Know-Nothings rallied support from working-class whites in the North who were fearful for their future prosperity in a demographically changing nascent nation. They were afraid of being "replaced" by foreigners.

What started as arguably a small drunken street gang with codewords and secret handshakes in the late 1840s, quickly turned into a mainstream political party called the Native American Party in the 1850s. "America for Americans," was their motto. Known as the "Know-Nothings," their hateful views were clear and unminced: they were nativist, populist, stood against immigration, and were staunchly anti-Catholic. They wanted to *make America great*.

And, it was absolutely a sort of fight club. In New York, a faction of the Know-Nothings' official political party grew out of a violent street gang called the Bowery Boys, run by Bill "the Butcher" Poole in Lower Manhattan in opposition to the pro-immigrant political machine at the time, Tammany Hall. You might recognize the name "Bill the Butcher" from Martin Scorsese's film *The Gangs of New York*. "Bill the Butcher" Cutting (as the character was named in the movie) was played by the great Daniel Day-Lewis, and the film was loosely based on the feud between nativist Know-Nothing gangs like the Bowery Boys and rival Irish immigrant gang, the Dead Rabbits. Though the film was creatively loaded with historical inaccuracies, Day-Lewis faithfully embodied the Butcher's ruthless hatred of immigrants and the violence he and others used to further the Know-Nothings' xenophobic political cause.

Utilizing any means necessary, the Know-Nothings (made up largely of gangsters like Poole) intimidated people at polling places to keep who they deemed undesirable out of office, mostly freed Blacks and Irish Roman Catholics, and the candidates to whom they pledged their votes. America was expanding at a rapid rate. The growth and sudden change frightened many poor and working-class native-born white Americans into asking questions like: *what are we going to do if immigrants come and take our jobs? How will our culture be changed by foreigners?* Sound familiar? Fearful rhetoric from politicians inspired hatred of the Irish and German immigrants now coming into the country to escape famine and poverty in their home countries, not to mention the people of color and enslaved people already in America who also faced tragic hardships during this time.

Because most of their members were descendants of Anglo-Saxon American colonists and were born in the United States, the Know-Nothings also called themselves the “Native American Party,” but make no mistake: Indigenous peoples were not welcome in their ranks. This was a white man’s movement aimed at improving the livelihood and futures of “native” *white* Americans, and even though the Know-Nothing movement officially ended in 1860, their members were absorbed into other political parties, namely the newly formed Republicans, and their brand of xenophobic “America First” politics hasn’t waned since.

This is episode 6 of *F*** Your Racist History: **The Know-Nothing “Native American” Movement.***

Political Parties of the 1840s

American politics can be broken down into waves known as Party Systems. By the 1840s, the United States was at the tail end of the Second Party System, dominated by two main political parties: the Whigs and the Democrats.

American Politics in the 1840s was a very different landscape than that of the Founding Fathers at the dawn of the 18th century. Gone were the days of Thomas Jefferson’s Democratic-Republicans and Alexander Hamilton’s Federalists; they had been replaced in the late 1820s and early 1830s by the Democrats and the Whigs.

The Democrats

Andrew Jackson's election as President in 1828 ultimately caused a shakeup in American politics. As the name suggests, Jacksonian Democrats rallied behind Jackson, who portrayed himself as the leader of the "common man," a proponent of states rights over federal power, a believer in "Manifest Destiny," or the so-called God-given right of the United States to expand westward and tame the "heathen," an expander of suffrage (as long as you were white and male), and, despite himself being a wealthy Tennessean slave owner, claimed to be anti-elitist.

The Whigs

Formed in 1834, the Whigs developed as an opposition force to the Democrats and newly elected President Andrew Jackson, whom Whigs chided by calling "King Andrew." The party borrowed their name from the English anti-monarchist party that had opposed the pro-Catholic rulers of the seventeenth century, another subtle jab at their opposition, who they viewed as the reigning monarch of the United States. Led by Kentuckian Henry Clay, various political factions (including the National Republicans, Anti-Masons, and disgruntled Democrats) disillusioned by Jacksonian-era politics formulated a new Whig party agenda that favored strong central government, a national bank, and federally funded infrastructure (i.e. railroads and public education), all things their political foes despised.¹

Polarization

The political landscape of the United States in the 1840s was a chasm of polarization, mostly between the North and South over the issue of slavery, but even within the parties themselves there was extreme division. For example, the Whigs started out fractious, and had two internal factions: Conscious Whigs, who advocated for the abolition of slavery and abhorred the expansion of slavery into new territories, and Cotton Whigs, who supported the textile industry which relied heavily on slave-grown Southern cotton. In general, the Whigs were even less keen on allowing immigration than their pro-slavery Democratic counterparts; as new immigrants often aligned themselves with the Democratic party, and drank whiskey or beer, offending the temperate sensibilities of the Whigs who were proponents of state prohibition laws.

¹ "Digital History," www.digitalhistory.uh.edu, n.d., https://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtID=2&psid=3548.

As the United States increased its territory and grew westward, tensions over the expansion of slavery into these new lands threatened to boil over. Southern Democrats made the expansion of slavery an issue of Southern survival. They were afraid that if slavery was kept out of new territories, they would soon become outnumbered within the Federal government, and anti-slavery forces could snuff out the institution altogether. It's also why the South pushed for states rights, so they could attempt to operate outside of the rule of "progressive" Federal law.

The annexation of Texas in 1845 and President James K. Polk's subsequent war with Mexico resulted in the addition of huge amounts of land to the United States, which increased urgency around the debate about whether or not slavery should be legal in these new territories. This massive influx in land acquisition directly coincided with an unrelated boom in immigration felt mostly in the Northeast. Times, they were a-changin'...and fast.

Immigration

Over three million Irish and other European immigrants (many of them refugees) came to the United States between 1846 and 1855²; that's equivalent to 15-percent of what the total population of the United States was in 1845. Needless to say, many "homegrown" Americans were alarmed at the overwhelming amounts of "foreigners" setting up shop and home in places like New York, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts; even coastal southern states like South Carolina saw surges in immigration during this time.

Most of these European immigrants were Catholic, and the sheer volume of these new, non-Protestant, whites with strong religious convictions and devotion to the Vatican coming into America had nativist conspiracy theorists running wild. *Was the powerful Pope facilitating this massive influx in immigration to infiltrate the American government for his own gain?* Many fearful Protestant Americans had no trouble swallowing that conspiracy theory.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act finally destroyed the Whig Party in 1854. The Act voided the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which had admitted Maine as a free state and Missouri as a slave state while prohibiting slavery north of the 36°30' parallel, a line of latitude used to divide the prospective slave and free states west of the Mississippi River, with the exception of Missouri, which is mostly north of this parallel. The Kansas-Nebraska Act made the issue of slavery in

² James M Mcpherson and James Keith Hogue, *Ordeal by Fire : The Civil War and Reconstruction* (Boston: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2010). Page 90.

new territories a matter of Popular Sovereignty, meaning states could decide for themselves whether or not to allow it within their borders. Conscious Whigs were outraged and felt they had been hoodwinked by their fellow partymen who were more or less neutral on the slavery issue; anti-slavery Whigs left the party and joined the newly formed Native American Party, better known as the Know-Nothings.³

Historian Eric Foner points out that “Most anti-slavery people went into the Know-Nothing movement. They didn’t give up their anti-slavery feelings, but they felt that nativism was compatible or connected with hostility to slavery. After All, the Catholic church was opposed to the abolitionist movement.”⁴

Know-Nothings, at least one faction, had a reputation for being anti-slavery, mostly because they thought the institution was akin to indentured servitude which had been used as a tool of oppression against white Protestants, among others. The Catholic church opposed the Protestant reform movements of the era, including the abolitionist movement, simply because these movements were based on the idea that you could make society perfect, and that idea is in direct conflict with the Catholic belief of “Original Sin,” i.e. human beings are inherently flawed and the idea that you can abolish all poverty, slavery, and suffering is akin to blasphemy.

Maria Monk

During this period, Nativists also circulated a wide range of anti-Catholic propaganda, including a famous work called *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk* (1836).⁵

Maria Monk was allegedly a Canadian Catholic nun from Montreal who wrote about the horrors of the nunnery and Catholic practices. Her work included tales of sexual deviance and abuse at the hands of clergy and how uncooperative and rebellious women of the faith had disappeared without a trace. She claimed babies birthed as a result of the alleged abuse had been baptized, strangled, and dumped into a lime pit in the nunnery basement.

³ James M Mcpherson and James Keith Hogue, *Ordeal by Fire : The Civil War and Reconstruction* (Boston: Mcgraw-Hill Higher Education, 2010).

⁴ “MOOC | Know-Nothings in Power | the Civil War and Reconstruction, 1850-1861 | 1.5.8,” [www.youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r1H2DxeXG2E) (ColumbiaLearn, October 29, 2014), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r1H2DxeXG2E>.

⁵ Maria Monk and Protestant Authorities, *Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk* (Baltimore: William G. Warner, Printer, 1836), <https://publicdomainreview.org/collection/awful-disclosures-of-maria-monk-1836>.

The book became a bestseller, and a sequel was published. However, it was soon discovered that Maria Monk had a child out of wedlock, and many of her supporters abandoned her because of it.

Further investigation into her stories also found inconsistencies and inaccuracies. Perhaps the most damning of all was the critical omission that Maria Monk had been held in an asylum in her younger years, and many of the names from the book were not fellow nuns but fellow patients. It is no secret that asylums at the time were rife with abuse. The stories Maria told happened in facilities meant to care for vulnerable people. However, the abuse was likely not the result of the evil Catholic sex cult practices she claimed to have experienced, but instead of her time in the asylum. In essence, it was “fake news.”

In spite of these realizations, Maria Monk’s work planted a seed: a kernel of truth was all that was needed to whip people like the Know-Nothings into a frenzy over her allegations. These stories put Catholics on the defensive and didn’t actually solve the root of the problem: the supposed abuse of young girls and women. And, they gave the nativists a more robust platform from which to tout their conspiratorial views.

The “Native American” Party

The Order of the Star-Spangled Banner was a secret society formed to foster xenophobic ideas under the guise of patriotism. Seems the historical playbook hasn’t changed much in this regard. Little is known about the Order—it was a secret, after all—except that the group evolved out of the even more shadowy Order of United Americans. Both were fraternities that presumably only admitted white Protestant men. The Order of the Star-Spangled Banner had a set of initiation rituals known as “Seeing Sam,” which included memorization of special signals, hand gestures, and other covert forms of communication. Initiates also had to pledge to uphold Protestantism in the face of “Popish idols.” This was due to their belief the Catholic Pope was sending immigrants to illegally vote at his will in an attempt to control the United States.

When asked about the secret society, members were required to respond to questions with the reply, “I know nothing.” This group and mantra became the core of the ‘Know-Nothing’ movement.

Due to the secret nature of their beginnings, it was difficult to spot a supporter overtly. But, by 1853, the Know-Nothings had gained enough notoriety to be taken seriously. Their beliefs and values as a political party evolved (in the wrong direction) into “America First” as a way to make their more hateful opinions easier to swallow.

1854 Midterm Elections

At the height of their popularity, the Know-Nothings became a formidable third party, which was demonstrated in the 1854 midterm elections. They defeated the Democrats, taking control of the House of Representatives and installed Nathaniel P. Banks as Speaker of the House.

Democrats held the Senate but the Know-Nothings became the second-largest majority. To this day, they hold the record for most third-party seats ever acquired in either chamber of the United States Congress.

In total, by year’s end, the Know-Nothings accounted for 100 elected congressmen, eight governors, a controlling share of half-a-dozen state legislatures from Massachusetts to California, and thousands of local politicians and community leaders. They also reported one-million members and over 10,000 lodges associated with the growing group.⁶

In Massachusetts, the Know-Nothings swept the elections in 1854, and as a result, they were able to pass some interesting legislation and mandates. To start with, they deported large numbers of indigent Irish immigrants from the state and passed a personal liberty law to protect the rights of escaped slaves who made it to Massachusetts, circumventing efforts of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. They also racially integrated the public schools of Boston. What’s the reason for this racially progressive stance? Well, most Black people of this period aligned with Protestantism, and were therefore worthy of protection under the Know-Nothing doctrine.⁷

As a general political movement, the Know-Nothings wanted to restore America to a country of “temperance, Protestantism, self-reliance, with American nationality and work ethic.”⁸

⁶ Mathieu Billings, “Nativist Riots and the Know-Nothing Party,” Bill of Rights Institute, n.d., <https://billofrightsinstitute.org/essays/nativist-riots-and-the-know-nothing-party>.

⁷ “MOOC | Know-Nothings in Power | the Civil War and Reconstruction, 1850-1861 | 1.5.8,” [www.youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r1H2DxeXG2E) (ColumbiaLearn, October 29, 2014), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r1H2DxeXG2E>.

⁸ Lorraine Boissoneault, “How the 19th-Century Know Nothing Party Reshaped American Politics,” *Smithsonian Magazine* (Smithsonian Magazine, January 26, 2017), <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/immigrants-conspiracies-and-secret-society-launched-american-nativism-180961915/>.

Supporters championed ideas such as a 21-year naturalization process for new immigrants, removal of all Catholics from office, mandatory Protestant Bible teachings in school, and the deportation of criminals (criminals other than themselves, of course). These last two party principles clashed in horrific violence with the tarring and feathering of a Swiss immigrant Catholic priest named Johannes Bapst.

Political Violence

Bapst arrived in the United States in 1848. He had been sent to Maine to help guide new immigrants from Catholic countries and convert people already living there, and he was successful. However, the Know-Nothings also had a stronghold in Maine, as they did in many states in New England. In 1853, the party had gained enough government seats and support to implement their plan to “restore America.” Mandatory Protestant Bible reading in school was one such element of the plan implemented in Ellsworth, Maine, where Bapst lived at the time. Many of the Catholic families were, understandably, upset by this new mandate and turned to Bapst for help. He repeatedly asked the school board, made up of mostly Know-Nothing supporters, to allow the Catholic bible for those students who wanted it. They rejected him. Students then started refusing to use the Protestant bible and were expelled. Local newspapers picked up the story and published angry letters from the community.

The following year, in June 1854, the Know-Nothings decided Bapst needed to be silenced and took violent action against the priest. The mob first went to his rectory. Luckily Bapst wasn't there, but they broke every window. The priest got the message and left town.

But they didn't stop there. A week after Bapst left, the Know-Nothings bombed the Catholic schoolhouse.

On July 8, 1854, they took over the town meeting. They declared if Bapst was found, they would help him in “trying on an entire suit of new clothes such as cannot be found at the shops of any taylor (sic); and that when thus apparelled, he be presented with a fine ticket to leave Ellsworth upon the first railroad operation that may go into effect.”

Bapst did not take their threats as seriously as perhaps he should have and attempted to return to Ellsworth in October.

The story is that a mob of over 500 Know-Nothings and their sympathizers dragged Johannes Bapst from the home where he was staying, took him into the woods, tied him to a tree, and beat him. They then poured boiling hot tar over his body and dumped feathers on him while taunting him and threatening to hang him. As promised in the town meeting, they made him “ride the rail,” meaning the mob hoisted him up on a fencepost wedged between his legs and carried him through the town. Bapst was then dumped at the town limits and left for dead.

The priest survived the ordeal but never returned to Ellsworth. Despite outrage from the community and in the media, no charges were ever filed against his attackers.⁹

While this story is shocking, it is far from the only violence imparted at the hands of the Know-Nothings and nativists during this time. Between 1844 and 1858, major cities saw increased xenophobic and anti-Catholic crime associated with the rhetoric of the Know-Nothings, some of which evolved into riots. Supporters burned down churches, hurt and killed innocent people, and terrorized Irish- and German-American immigrants. Their control and influence over the law and legislature allowed them to get away with it. Newspapers that sided with them published pro-nativist stories and political cartoons.

In 1856, Thomas R. Whitney, a New York journalist, politician, and Know-Nothing figurehead, published (the extremely long-titled book) *A Defence of the American Policy, as opposed to the encroachments of foreign influence, and especially to the interference of the papacy in the political interests and affairs of the United States*. The twenty-six chapter work dedicates six entire chapters just to discuss anti-papacy “Romanism” and the “dangers” of Catholicism. Other sections discuss naturalization, suffrage, immigration, and the party itself. In it, Whitney repeatedly reiterates the conspiratorial suggestion that papal powers were influencing American politics. The claim soon became the ideological doctrine of the Know-Nothings.

A Know-Nothing Martyr: the Death of Bill the Butcher^{10 11}

William Poole was born on July 24, 1821, in Sussex County, New Jersey. By the early 1830s, Poole was working and learning the family trade in his father’s butcher shop in Washington

⁹ Emily Burnham, “164 Years Ago, This Bangor Priest Was Tarred, Feathered and Ridden on a Rail,” Bangor Daily News (Bangor Daily News, June 19, 2018), <https://bangordailynews.com/2018/06/19/news/bangor/164-years-ago-this-bangor-priest-was-tarred-feathered-and-ri-dden-on-a-rail/>.

¹⁰ “William Poole,” Wikipedia, May 28, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Poole.

¹¹ Herbert Asbury, *The Gangs of New York* (Pickle Partners Publishing, 1928).

Market in Lower Manhattan, New York, which he eventually took over. Developing brutal fighting skills early on, Poole became a noted boxer and street brawler in New York City. A leader by nature, he formed the Washington Street Gang and is often credited with a founding role in the Bowery Boys nativist gang of over 200 fighters.

Because of his trade and his notoriously dirty fighting style—he was known to bite the noses and ears off of his opponents and carve people up with butcher knives—William Poole had earned the name “Bill the Butcher” by the time he was twenty years old.

The social climate of New York City in the 1840s was highly volatile and segregated by culture, race, country of origin, religion, and class. Bill the Butcher, having been born in America, was a nativist through and through, and his involvement with the Bowery Boys would have exposed him to a variety of nativist sects, including but not limited to the Order of the Star-Spangled Banner and the Order of United Americans (precursors to the Know-Nothings). Though wholly disorganized, these men (and a few women) were united in their hatred of immigrants, Catholics, and the Irish.

When the Know-Nothing party became the official Native American party in 1854, Bill the Butcher morphed into a political leader. His gang members were the boots on the ground sent to do the party’s bidding. They gathered at polling places, intimidated and beat up immigrants before they could vote, and generally terrorized anyone in lower Manhattan not associated with the nativist movement.

By the time he was 31 years old, William “Bill the Butcher” Poole was one of the most famous men living in New York City, mostly because of his brawling, debauchery, and roughing up of polling places. And he made plenty of enemies.

One night in February, 1855, Bill had a run-in with an Irishman named John Morrissey. Morrissey was a champion boxer and an opposing Tammany Hall man who had been regularly hired to protect polling places from Bill and his goons. They were old adversaries.

The Butcher was apparently feeling quite good about himself and yelling about how tough he was when Morrissey decided he had had enough. Morrissey walked up to Bill, spit in his face and drew a gun on him. He fired all of his shots but missed, leaving him unarmed and facing

one of the fiercest fighters in lower Manhattan; Bill pulled his own pistol ready to kill Morrissey where he stood. Lucky for Morrissey, a friend of his intervened and convinced Bill it wasn't a fair fight. Exasperated, Bill threw down his pistol and produced two butcher knives. He placed them upon the bar and instructed Morrissey to pick his weapon, a prospect Morrissey did not relish since it was known throughout the city that Bill the Butcher could throw a butcher knife through an inch of wood at twenty feet.¹²

Police broke up the fight and told both Bill and Morrissey to go home. Morrissey did as he was told, but Bill came back to the pub with two of his friends, presumably to antagonize Morrissey's friends who remained.

Within minutes, half a dozen friends of Morrissey's associates crowded into the bar, specifically two men named Lewis Baker and Jim Turner. Turner took aim at Bill using his arm to steady his huge revolver, but accidentally shot himself instead. He hit the floor but managed to get a second shot off that hit his target in the knee. As Bill crumpled to the floor, Lewis Baker, who had himself been beaten in the street by Bill a few weeks before, grabbed the Butcher's lapel and fired his revolver twice into him. One bullet settled in his abdomen, the other pierced his heart. Despite this, Bill the Butcher threw one last knife that landed in the door jam before he finally collapsed on the ground.

Miraculously, William Poole lived for 11 more days after the incident, giving plenty of time for him to spin the story to the hundreds of people filing past his sick bed. By the time he died, nearly 250,000 mourners had packed into Lower Manhattan to pay their respects. Papers across the country reported the Butcher's famous alleged last words: "Good-bye boys: I die a true American!"

1856 American National Convention

From February 22-25, 1856, the "Know-Nothing" Native American Party held a convention. Having established themselves as the main opposition to the Democrats, they needed to find the right candidate to put forth as president.

¹² Herbert Asbury, *The Gangs of New York* (Pickle Partners Publishing, 1928).

Former President Millard Fillmore was selected as the presidential candidate and Andrew Jackson Donelson, a prominent Tennessean and a ward of former President Andrew Jackson, was selected as the vice-presidential candidate. Fillmore's camp would later say that he was not even present at the convention and never put his name forward for nomination.¹³ In fact, Fillmore was never a card-carrying Know-Nothing. But, he agreed with their stance on immigration and stated that the Native American Party was the "only hope of forming a truly national party, which shall ignore this constant and distracting agitation of slavery." Nevertheless, the pair lost the election. They received 21-percent of the popular vote but only received a total of 8 electoral college votes, finishing a distant third in general voting.

The Issue of Slavery

The 1856 American Convention and Millard Fillmore's subsequent election loss marked the beginning of the end for the Know-Nothings. As the Civil War loomed, the party's lack of a unified position on slavery caused fissures too deep to be repaired.

In order to become a viable national party and fill the void left by the Whigs, Know-Nothing leaders had avoided discussing the country's most controversial issue. At the time, there were ardent abolitionist Know-Nothings *and* there were pro-slavery Know-Nothings. But following the 1856 convention, it was clear slavery was no longer an issue they could ignore. The party could not pick a side without splitting their coalition in two.

People, allegedly including Abraham Lincoln, criticized the anti-Slavery Know-Nothings as hypocrites. But, Lincoln was afraid to make overt anti-nativist statements in public for fear of losing support. He wanted to maintain an air of neutrality in order to prevent the burgeoning Republican party from being associated with extreme abolitionists while also leaving the door open for ex-Know-Nothings to join his party.

In private, Lincoln criticized the nativists. In an 1855 letter to his close friend Joshua Speed, Lincoln said, "I am not a Know-Nothing. That is certain. How could I be? How can anyone who abhors the oppression of negroes, be in favor of degrading classes of white people?...As a nation, we began by declaring that 'all men are created equal.' We now practically read it 'all

¹³ Allan Nevins, *Ordeal of the Union : A House Dividing 1852-1857*. (New York: Scribner, 1947).

men are created equal, except negroes.' When the Know-Nothings get control, it will read 'all men are created equal, except negroes, and foreigners, and Catholics.'"¹⁴

Conclusion

The “Know-Nothing” Native American Party eventually disintegrated because, just like the Whigs, they couldn’t agree on a hardline stance on the issue of slavery, while Democrats alternately became stronger because they unified under the banner of protecting Southern slavery. Know-Nothings who were in the anti-slavery camp joined the newly formed Republican party, and the ones who weren’t joined the Democrats. But, even as the party dissolved, nativist sentiment lingered.

The Ku Klux Klan, established in the wake of the Civil War, had lost some steam in the 1880s and ‘90s but was revived in the 19-teens thanks to the film *The Birth of a Nation*. Their membership boomed because of it, and the group morphed into a nativist terrorist movement that smelled a lot like the Know-Nothings. To quote historian William Starr Myers from his 1924 piece “Know-Nothings and the Ku Klux Klan:”

“With the possible exception of masks, robes, and other like paraphernalia, [the Ku Klux Klan] is an almost complete replica of the old Know-Nothing movement of the ‘fifties of the last century. It professes the same objects, and uses nearly the same methods.”¹⁵

Most Klan members were reliably loyal to the old Democrats. At the 1924 Democratic Convention in Madison Square Garden, 20,000 Klan members held a cross-burning across the river in New Jersey to intimidate one of the candidates up for nomination against their own, a fellow Klan member named William McAdoo. The candidate they were protesting was Catholic and opposed prohibition. Very Know-Nothing. *Hmm*.

Since 1860, there have been two consistent political parties in America: the Republicans and the Democrats. But, it’s not that simple. As the issues have changed—and the people have changed—the platforms of these parties have also shifted significantly.

¹⁴ Abraham Lincoln, “Abraham Lincoln’s 1855 Letter to Joshua Speed,” [abrahamlincolnonline.org](http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org), 2018, <http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/speed.htm>.

¹⁵ William Starr Myers, “Know Nothing and Ku Klux Klan,” *The North American Review* 219, no. 818 (1924): 1–7, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25113191?seq=2#metadata_info_tab_contents.

If we look at the 1930s, when Franklin D. Roosevelt became president and orchestrated the New Deal, i.e. public assistance programs meant to ease the suffering caused by the Great Depression, it started a change of allegiance for many voters. Before Roosevelt, Southern whites typically voted Democrat, whereas generally Black Voters and Northern whites voted reliably Republican. But, after the New Deal, some of these Republican voters realized the Democratic party might better represent their interests, and vice-versa.¹⁶

The shift intensified when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act into law in the 1960s. Black voters who never considered voting Democrat because of the party's history of supporting Jim Crow laws and segregation suddenly shifted and became ardent supporters of the party. White Southerners, outraged by the new legislation, jumped ship and started voting Republican. President Richard Nixon's Southern Strategy, i.e. the use of racist rhetoric on the campaign trail to entice white Southern voters all but solidified this shift.

Even today, within the Republican party there still appears to be similarity stemming from the Know-Nothings whom it absorbed back in the 1860s: namely, their anti-immigration and nativist stance.

The Know-Nothings started as a violent "secret society" built upon an unfounded fear that the Catholic Pope and the Vatican were sending immigrants to infiltrate the American government for the purposes of control. If we look at modern right-wing groups like the neo-fascist Proud Boys and conspiracy-driven Qanon, people who almost certainly vote Republican, these groups are built upon similar conspiracy theories and practices of exclusion and white American "chauvinism." And, they use fear of "the other" to recruit new followers. Like the Know-Nothings, groups like the Proud Boys have also found ways to mainstream their toxic political ideologies, and they provide opportunities to express them violently.

Formed in 2016, the Proud Boys claim to be a fraternal organization of "Western chauvinists," who seek to stamp out political correctness and a so-called "white guilt agenda." From its inception, the group has been steeped in violence. Members routinely spew Anti-Muslim and

¹⁶ "Party Realignment and the New Deal | US House of Representatives: History, Art & Archives," @USHouseHistory, 2019, <https://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/BAIC/Historical-Essays/Keeping-the-Faith/Party-Realignment--New-Deal/>.

white-supremacist rhetoric, dozens have been arrested and charged with violence, and the group often serves as a gateway to the broader and more violent white-supremacist movement. Proud Boys are often present at alt-right gatherings and protests, including the deadly 2017 “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, which a former Proud Boy helped co-organize, and at the storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, where several members have been charged with federal crimes. They believe women belong in the home raising children, and their leader has publicly questioned women’s right to vote. Initiation into the Proud Boys also has a very *Fight Club* feel to it. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, there are varying degrees of membership, all with their own initiation protocols, including public declaration that you are a Western chauvinist and “getting into a fight for the cause.”¹⁷

Former President Trump is among many modern Republican leaders who have continually refused to denounce these groups and their ideas because they are a part of the Republican voter base. Instead of denouncing the Proud Boys when asked about them during a 2020 presidential debate, Trump instead gave them an order to “stand back and stand by,” and they heard him loud and clear. Political violence ensued because of it. Trump’s candidacy and presidency emboldened such groups, and they built quite the following during his tenure. A 2018 study by the Southern Poverty Law Center found that 15-percent of users of far-right forums they surveyed indicated that groups like the Proud Boys were an important influence on their political development.¹⁸

Even since former President Trump has left office, and despite the horrifying storming of the U.S. Capitol in January, public polling indicates that Trump remains popular with much of the Republican base, as do his anti-immigrant and xenophobic views, and those of white-supremacist groups like the Proud Boys. The group’s violent tactics are also becoming accepted by many, including those who participated in and supported the attack on January 6, 2021. A study on the Capitol insurrection conducted by the Chicago Project on Security and Threats at the University of Chicago found that although “only about 10% of those charged were members of established far-right organizations...the remaining 90% of the 'ordinary' rioters are part of a still congealing mass movement on the right that has shown itself willing to put

¹⁷ Southern Poverty Law Center, “Proud Boys,” Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/proud-boys>.

¹⁸ Brendan O’Connor, “Trump’s Useful Thugs: How the Republican Party Offered a Home to the Proud Boys,” www.theguardian.com, January 21, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2021/jan/21/donald-trump-useful-thugs-proud-boys-far-right-republican-party>.

'violence at its core.'"¹⁹

A few prominent Republicans have spoken out and distanced themselves from what the party has become. The Lincoln Project, a political action committee made up of former and current Republicans, formed in 2019 and sought to defeat Donald Trump in 2020, as well as any Republican Senators up for re-election who had supported him. Trump administration officials who resigned, like former Department of Homeland Security Assistant Secretary for Counterterrorism Elizabeth Neumann, have been very vocal in their disgust with the shift in the party under Trump and continually condemn violent extremist groups and the politicians who empower them. Neo-conservative Liz Cheney, a U.S. Representative from Wyoming, was ousted this spring as the Chair of the House Republican Conference for supporting the impeachment of Trump for his role in the Capitol siege and for her criticism of his false stolen-election narrative.

What will happen between now and the 2024 presidential election? Are we witnessing another emerging faction within an established American political party? Will more Republicans join in dissent and seek to build anew? Which side of this divide will prevail? Or will we all lose?

Everyday Americans are increasingly being sucked in by the fear-mongering and empty promises made by far-right extremist groups like the Proud Boys, and by people like Donald Trump. Can these efforts be countered? Can these bad actors be out-organized?

Those who care about democracy and hope to defeat those who want to destroy it better get to work, because history is repeating itself.

¹⁹ Alan Feuer, "Fears of White People Losing out Permeate Capitol Rioters' Towns, Study Finds," *The New York Times*, April 6, 2021, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/06/us/politics/capitol-riot-study.html>.

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Source Notes

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/immigrants-conspiracies-and-secret-society-launched-american-nativism-180961915/>

- Secret fraternity that rose to prominence in 1853
- “At its height, Know Nothings had over 100 elected congressmen, 8 governors, a controlling share of half-a-dozen state legislatures from Massachusetts to California, and thousands of local politicians”
- Beliefs: anti-catholic, nativists, anti-immigration, pro-anglo saxon, 21-year naturalization period for immigrants, deportation of foreign vagrants, Bible reading in schools
- Secret handshakes and passwords. If someone asked them about the group, they were supposed to respond with “I know nothing.”
- American politics before the rise of the Know Nothings: Federalists, Democratic-Republicans, and Whigs (small third party that produced two presidents: William Henry Harrison and Zachary Taylor)
- When the Whigs splintered over slavery politics in the early 50s, the Know Nothings stepped in to fill the power void. They were the first major third party with clout in American politics.
- The first party to leverage the economy over immigration.
- Know Nothing power players: Thomas R. Whitney, and William “Bill the Butcher” Poole.
 - Whitney- son of a NYC silversmith. He wrote the magnum opus for the Know Nothings called *A Defense of the American Policy*
 - Charter member of the Order of United Americans (precursor to the Order of the Star-Spangled Banner)
 - Anti-suffrage and women’s rights
 - Bill the Butcher- gang leader, prizefighter, and butcher in the Bowery (5 Points)
 - Terrorized voters at polling places
 - Became the party martyr: February 24, 1855- Poole got into a fight at a bar with an Irish boxer that police broke up. He came back later that night, picked the fight back up, and a Welsh Immigrant named Lewis Baker shot him in the chest. It took two weeks for Poole to die, and his last words were, “Goodbye boys, I die a true American.”
 - 250,000 people came to his funeral in lower Manhattan
- Know Nothing gangs spread to Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Louisville, Cincinnati, New Orleans, St. Louis, and San Francisco.
- Know Nothing Nativist movement patterns:
 - Nationalism
 - Discrimination (Catholic v Protestant)
 - Working-class identity
- The Know Nothings collapsed because they were unable to take a firm stance on the issue of slavery, just like the Whig party

- “One can’t possibly make sense of current events unless you know something about nativism. That requires you to go back in time to the Know Nothings. You have to realize the context is different, the themes are consistent. The actors are still the same, but with different names.”-- Historian Christopher Phillips

<https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/01/30/heres-what-happens-to-a-conspiracy-drive-n-party-463944>

- Conspiracies are often entangled with nativist politics
- Panic over Irish immigrants taking native jobs gave rise to the nativist movement in the 1840s
- “Americans Must Rule America.”
- The rise of the Republican party helped end the Know Nothings by siphoning off anti-slavery members
- “In their policy goals, the Know Nothings were in part a reformist party representing working Americans against the elite; they ended up passing a variety of laws about working conditions that presaged the union and labor movements after the Civil War. But the movement was founded, and grew, purely on the strength of anger and resentment. And only because of instability in the political system — the collapse of the Whigs and the widening divisions between northern and southern Democrats — was there an opening for them in the first place.”

Myers, William Starr. "Know Nothing and Ku Klux Klan." *The North American Review* 219, no. 818 (1924): 1-7. Accessed June 4, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25113191>.

- “With the possible exception of masks, robes, and other like paraphernalia, it [the KKK] is an almost complete replica of the old Know Nothing movement of the ‘fifties of the last century. It professes the same objects, and uses nearly the same methods.” (p 1)
- Organization of the KN began in 1852.
- Started in New York.
- Consisted of Grand Councils, Superior Councils, Subordinate Council, grip, passwords, secret signs, and much ritual.
- It was organized in response to the naturalization of foreign immigrants
- Opposed to the activities and spread of the Roman Catholic Church
- In Boston, meetings were called by chalking up a skull and crossbones on tree boxes or fences.
- “America for Americans”- motto
- If a member was asked about the movement, he always replied “I know nothing.”
- Local elections were won in Maryland, Massachusetts, and Delaware in the fall of 1854
- National convention 1855- they adopted the name “American Party.”
- The American party nominated Millard Fillmore for President and Andrew J. Donelson for VP in 1856
- Congressional representation in the 34th congress: 5 Senators and 34 HOR out of 62 and 237 respectively.

- Lots of Know Nothing violence in Baltimore where they weren't very prevalent
 - Voter intimidation: they lined up at the polls, armed with shoemaker's awls, and prevented men of other parties from voting.
 - "Buckets of blood were brought from the slaughterhouses and placed in tubs. Foreigners were held up by their heels and their heads soused in the blood. Then they were let loose in such an appearance of near-death that other foreign-born citizens were fearful of their lives and did not dare wander far from their houses, much less go near the polls."
 - Other intimidation: riots, murder, and destruction of property.
 - The author makes it sound like these tactics were distasteful to "good citizens" and the party fizzled out by 1860.
- The slavery debate also caused the dissolution

The Gangs of New York by Herbert Asbury

Chapter: The Killing of Bill the Butcher

- "Bill the Butcher, chieftain of a gang of West Side Bruisers who terrorized the area around Christopher street."
- "Commonly held to be the champion brawler and eye gouger of his time, and not even the ferocious mayhem experts of the Five Points and the Fourth Ward dared engage him in combat."
- John Morrissey: keen of intellect and giant in stature
 - Thought to be from Ireland. In Troy, New York where he tended bar and achieved great local renown as a slugger and a rough and tumble fighter
 - Became a rich man: estimated fortune at \$700,000- I assume this is after his 5-point bar fight days.
- "Before organizing his own gang and becoming a power in politics, Poole has served an apprenticeship with the Bowery Boys.
- Bill Poole hung out at the Americus Club, a Native American and Know Nothing refuge.
 - When Morrissey came to NYC, he tried to "wreck" this club. Bill the Butcher beat him to a pulp.
- Election in the upper part of the city- Bill the Butcher boasted he was going to take his gang to the polling place and destroy the poll boxes
 - Morrissey was hired by "honest citizens" to gather the strength of an opposing gang to protect the place.
 - He prepared well, and when Bill arrived with his thugs, he realized they were outnumbered and left without a fight.
 - Because of this, Tammany Hall gave him money (for his service?) and he opened a gambling club.
- Morrissey v Bill the Butcher.
 - In a Broadway barroom, Morrissey started spoiling for a fight. He bet Bill \$50 he couldn't name a place where Morrissey wouldn't meet him to fight. Bill named the Christopher street pier in the heart of his territory. Morrissey paid him the \$50.

- Then, he made the wager again. Bill suggested the Amos street dock the next morning, and Morrissey accepted.
- Bill didn't show, but 200 of his gang members pulled Morrissey from his carriage and beat him badly
- Feb 24, 1855- Morrissey was playing cards at Stanwix Hall and Bill came in "proclaiming his prowess." Morrissey came out of the card room and spit in Bill's face before pulling a gun on him. He fired all of his shots, but missed. Bill pulled his gun, but Morrissey's friend Mark Maguire convinced him it wasn't a fair fight, so Bill laid two knives on the bar and told Morrissey to pick his weapon. Morrissey wouldn't do it- Bill's was an actual Butcher and knew his way around a knife.
 - "Common knowledge that Bill the Butcher could throw a butcher knife through an inch of pine at twenty feet."
 - Police broke up the fight and told them to go home. Morrissey went, but Poole came back to Stanwix Hall with his brother-in-law and a friend.
 - Morrissey's friend, Lew Baker, who himself had been beaten severely in the streets by Bill, picked a fight with him at the bar. Baker ended up shooting Bill in the chest twice at point-blank range. One of the bullets pierced his heart.
 - Baker fled the city for the Caray Island, but the authorities were able to get to him via a boat provided by a Native American party higher-up named George Law
 - Baker was captured and tried three times, each trial ending with a hung jury, until the prosecution finally gave up.
 - Poole lived for 14 days after he was shot twice in the torso.
 - Last words: "Good-bye boys: I die a true American!"
 - "The Native Americans gave Poole one of the most remarkable funerals ever seen in New York." (P.90 has a detailed description of his elaborate funeral.)

Ordeal by Fire by James McPherson

- Page 90: "Land shortages and labor surpluses in Europe, plus the potato blight in Ireland and the revolutions of 1848 on the Continent, caused millions to emigrate. High wages, cheap land, and the booming American economy attracted most of them to the United States. During the decade 1846-1855 more than three million immigrants entered the United States- equivalent to 15 percent of the 1845 population. This was the largest proportional increase in the foreign-born population for any ten-year period in American history."

https://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtid=2&psid=3548 - The Whig Party

<https://www.newspapers.com/image/488028946/?terms=William%20Bill%20the%20Butcher%20Poole&match=1> - New York Daily News story of Bill the Butcher's Death

https://www.jstor.org/stable/1900028?seq=4#metadata_info_tab_contents

- “A nerve had been touched. Poole’s murder opened old wounds, allowing ancient ethnic hatreds to ooze with renewed ugliness. Less obviously but perhaps more profoundly, Butcher Bill’s demise traced new lesions of class and gender that gaped wide midcentury. The Stanwix Hall Affair takes us deep into antebellum New York City, giving us insight into popular nativism, working-class culture, and urban street life.” (391)
- “Poole, concluded one observer, ‘had the spirit and the soul of a patriot-- selfishness formed no part of his composition and his heart was large enough for himself, his friends, and his country too.’”
- Poem attributed to Bill published posthumously:
 - Here let them have the blessings of our law,
 - Let Justice shield them and let Justice awe,
 - But let them not presume beyond to go,
 - And Teach *Americans* what they should know;
 - Let not our country in their hands be given,
 - And thus betray the trust received from Heaven.
- Stage plays appeared all over the country for months after his death depicting the incident. The ending scene? His famous last words, of course.

<https://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/BAIC/Historical-Essays/Keeping-the-Faith/Party-Realignment--New-Deal/>