The Demise of the Pennsylvania American Party, 1854-1858

Inextricably entangled with the questions of the collapse of the Jacksonian-Whig party system, the birth of the Republican party, and the coming of the Civil War is the career of the Know Nothing or American party in the mid-1850s. Historians have produced two general but conflicting interpretations of the significance of the Know Nothing movement for the antebellum decade. The older one, fashioned by such luminaries as Allan Nevins and Roy Franklin Nichols, held that the slavery issue destroyed the Jacksonian party system and that the Know Nothings, though an actual expression of distrust of immigrants and Catholics, was an attempt by displaced Whigs and conservatives to create a new organization that would substitute the issues of nationality and Protestantism for the potentially disastrous one of slavery extension.

Recent scholars, such as Michael F. Holt, Ronald P. Formisano, Paul Kleppner, and Joel Silbey, have claimed that the older portrayal of the Know Nothing movement is a serious misreading of the historical record. In their view, anti-Catholicism, hostility to immigrants, and Protestant evangelistic fervor were the main forces behind the emergence of political nativism; sectional questions over slavery were of marginal importance. Indeed, the current writers on antebellum politics argue that anti-Catholicism and opposition to immigration, not slavery, destroyed the second party system. They posit that the nativist explosion in the middle part of the decade realigned the groups that supported and opposed the Democratic party, and they describe the typical nativist supporter as one who was young, from the lower or middle class, a small town or village resident, and an adherent of an evangelical Protestant sect.¹

The ethnocultural explanation of the Know Nothing party has created a new dilemma: how to explain its rapid disappearance. By reducing the significance of the slavery issue in the creation of the Know Nothing party, and by stressing the northern populace’s deeply-rooted fear of advancing Catholicism, scholars have given the nativist crusade the character of a mass movement centered upon a concrete and vital issue. From such a depiction it seems difficult to understand why the American party should have crumbled within the space of three years.

Earlier historians easily produced an answer to the quick death of nativism: the slavery issue came to be so dominant that a new coalition based entirely on antislavery principles overwhelmed it. The ethnocultural interpretation proposes more subtle causal factors: leadership of the Know Nothings was poor and inexperienced; the movement’s secrecy ultimately discredited it; its violence during elections in some states and cities forced many to consider the American party guilty of un-American activities; the threat of being inundated by immigrants dissipated as immigration totals began to fall toward the middle of the decade; the slavery issue, in the form of Bleeding Kansas and the Sumner-Brooks affair, began to edge out anti-Catholicism as the central topic of political discussion; and the Republicans shrewdly

out maneuvered the Know Nothings in patching together a coalition. The plethora of reasons current researchers have given for the dissolution of the American party indicates to some degree the confusion that authors have encountered in understanding the organization’s rapid decline. These explanations seem weak in comparison to the assertions about the powerful forces which brought the party into existence.

A vigorous nativist outburst occurred in Pennsylvania, and thus that state’s experience affords an opportunity to assess the factors that stunted the growth of political nativism and led to its demise. Pennsylvania in many ways was an atypical case of northern nativism, for the Commonwealth had strong industrial interests, close economic and social connections with the border slave states, and peculiar internal political circumstances and personalities. Yet the processes affecting Pennsylvania nativism should have been in operation in other northern locales as well, and therefore a study of Pennsylvania’s difficulties ought to yield some information about the general failure of the Know Nothings to erect an enduring organization.

Two reasons for the political collapse of Pennsylvania nativism ultimately emerge. First, although anti-Popery was a popular rallying cry for a great number of citizens in the Keystone state, it was not powerful enough to build a viable anti-Democratic coalition. Anti-Popery repelled important groups who were essential to the creation of a party that could seriously grapple with the Democratic machine. The slavery issue—in its many guises—proved to be the one issue


that could bring an anti-Democratic coalition and hold it together. Second, if Pennsylvania nativism were going to thrive, it was necessary for it to succeed on three levels simultaneously—local, state, and national. Pennsylvania Know Nothings could realistically hope to win local and state offices, but their aspirations encountered more formidable obstacles in the national arena. When Pennsylvania nativists joined with others to mount a national crusade against immigrants, they confronted the slavery issue; the southern members of the party would not let the subject go unresolved. The politics of slavery, forced on Pennsylvanians from outside the state, then cracked the party inside the state and made its members susceptible to co-optation by the new political organization, the Republican party.

Pennsylvania shared with her sister northern states most of the general conditions that permitted nativism to flourish in the 1850s. Industrialization and the advance of the railroad had upset traditional manufacturing and mercantile patterns, resulting in an apprehensive citizenry. More immediately disturbing was the wave of German and Irish immigration that had washed over the state between 1845 and 1855. The newcomers, besides arousing animosities over ethnicity and national origins, presented religious problems because so many professed Catholicism. Part of the religious clash that ensued was cultural. Pennsylvania's Protestants were crusading against moral evils, especially the consumption of alcoholic beverages; most of the immigrants resisted the temperance laws imposed by evangelical natives. But much of the Catholic-Protestant conflict in Pennsylvania had political roots. During the first years of the 1850s, the Catholics appeared to vote en masse for predetermined candidates, and Democratic party officials seemed determined to award Catholics the spoils of office. Catholic church leaders also appeared to be militant about certain state policies, especially education. A number of specific incidents—such as the visit of Monsignor Gaetano Bedini and Franklin Pierce's elevation of James Campbell, a Pennsylvania Catholic, to a cabinet post—ignited a political reaction against the intrusion of alien and Catholic influences in American life. The Know Nothing, or American, party became the vehicle for this activity.5

5 Billington, Protestant Crusade, 262-288; Coleman, Disruption of Pennsylvania Democracy, 33-35, 55-58, 63-66; Petersen, "Reaction to a Heterogeneous Society," 50-52; Gudelunas,
The career of the Keystone American party was spectacular but brief; its days of real power were limited to the years 1854-1856, and by 1858 the organization had virtually disappeared. Know Nothing lodges, which began in New York City, appeared in Pennsylvania by 1852 and 1853. In the state elections of 1854 the Know Nothings entered politics and revealed their strength. The Know Nothings supported the Whig candidate for governor and the Democratic nominee for canal commissioner, thereby rendering any analysis of the results nearly unintelligible. However, in the state supreme court judge election, the Whigs, Democrats, and Americans held their party lines; that contest provides the only accurate measurement of the relative strength of the parties. Out of 358,000 ballots cast, the Whig nominee received 72,000 (20.1%), the Democrat 166,000 (46.3%), and the American 120,000 (33.6%). For comparison, in the gubernatorial race of 1848, somewhat representative of the hotly contested elections between Whigs and Democrats at the height of the Jacksonian party system, the Whigs obtained 49.2% of the popular vote and the Democrats 50.8% (total vote cast was 332,000). The Know Nothings more than halved the normal percentage the Whigs obtained in state elections and reduced by a substantial amount the percentage the Democrats received.6

Soon after their triumphal entry into state politics in 1854, the Keystone Americans encountered a series of problems that mortally wounded their prospects. In early 1855 Know Nothing state legislators, despite their majority in the legislature, bickered over the selection of a United States Senator and failed to elect one of their party to the post. In the same session, they managed to pass a temperance law, which inspired fierce opposition and further eroded the nativists’ popularity. These organizational problems became ob-

---

6 Computations made from (Harrisburg) Morning Herald, Oct. 24, 1854; Whig Almanac for 1852, 40. For the effect of the Know Nothings on the Democrats, see Easton Whig, Aug. 30, Sept. 13, 1854; Lebanon Courier, Oct. 13, 1854; Clearfield Republican, Oct. 14, 1854; Washington (Pa.) Reporter, Oct. 18, 1854. For the 1854 race and the consensus that the supreme court judgeship contest was the best barometer of party strength, see Coleman, Disruption of the Pennsylvania Democracy, 74; Erwin Stanley Bradley, Simon Cameron: Lincoln’s Secretary of War: A Political Biography (Philadelphia, 1966), 91-93; Petersen, “Reaction to a Heterogeneous Society,” 51-56; Hewitt, “Know Nothing Party in Pennsylvania,” 41-43.
vious in the state elections of 1855, when American party leaders could not draw together the state’s anti-Democratic forces; the result was an overwhelming Democratic victory. Moreover, the Pennsylvania Know Nothings divided over slavery extension, a number of adherents deserting the party and joining the recently-established Republicans. The presidential election of 1856 showed how badly the Keystone Americans had faltered and how enormously the Republicans had gained; the Millard Fillmore ticket in Pennsylvania, a fusion of Know Nothings, conservative Whigs, and others desiring a united front against the Democracy, received but 82,000 votes; the Republicans obtained 148,000. Republicans then sought to destroy the American party in the gubernatorial contest of 1857. They practically succeeded; the American candidate only received 28,000 votes in comparison to the 146,000 cast for the Republican nominee. Finally the opposition coalesced in 1858. The effects of the Panic of 1857 had united the anti-Democratic forces against administration economic policies. Though known as the “People’s Party,” the opposition coalition moved entirely into the Republican camp by 1860. The Americans, therefore, had ceased to be an alternative to the Republicans by 1858, and as early as 1856 it was clear that the Republicans were becoming the only organization that could contest the power of the Democracy.

That the American party’s electoral might in the Keystone state lasted only four years, 1854-1858, has caused questions about the organization’s weaknesses. Such a perspective has slighted the strengths in the movement. Keystone Americans revealed a number of attitudes and values that would later become cornerstones of the successful Republican party’s ideology; they stood for more than

---

7 Fusion among the opposition in 1855 was made only two weeks before the election and was imperfect. The Democrats obtained 181,000 votes, he opposition fusion 150,000, the Republicans 7000, Whigs 2000, and two separate nativist candidates 4700; Tribune Almanac for 1856, 55; see also Alexander K. McClure, Old Time Notes of Pennsylvania, (Philadelphia, 1905), I, 238-240.

simple religious and ethnic bigotry. In order to assess accurately the reasons for the decline of Pennsylvania Know Nothingsm, the organization's strengths as well as its shortcomings need to be examined.

Even though Pennsylvania nativists openly attacked immigrants on economic, religious, and ethnic grounds, they normally presented themselves as defenders of American institutions and liberties. They employed a general argument of republicanism: liberty was always being attacked by the forces of despotism and only an enlightened and vigilant citizenry could preserve individual freedom. Nativists feared the free thinkers of German extraction; one editor commented about a German riot in Cincinnati that "foreign anarchists and revolutionaries" were incapable of understanding American institutions. Catholicism, according to Pennsylvania nativists, represented the greatest threat to republican government. Supposedly, Catholicism was a secret religious order that embraced hierarchical principles; the priesthood held sway over the minions and controlled their behavior. Americans stressed that the Catholic leadership had used its power throughout history to torture non-adherents, to centralize power, and to extirpate civil liberties. A frequent assertion of the nativist press was that Catholics propagated "anti-Republican and anti-Christian" sentiments. Stephen Miller, editor of the Harrisburg Pennsylvania Telegraph, one of the central organs of the American movement, printed (alleged) instructions from the Pope to Archbishop Hughes of New York City which demanded the prelate to "SPREAD RO-

9 For the connection between Republicanism and nativism, see Formisano, Birth of Mass Political Parties, 5 8, 218 219, 249 266, 323 330, Holt, Forging a Majority, 7 9, 311 312, idem, Political Crisis of 1850s, 179, Kleppner, Third Electoral System, 58 69, Petersen, "Reaction to a Heterogeneous Society," 257 259, Maizlish, "The Meaning of Nativism and the Crisis of the Union," 170 178 See the dissenting views of Baum, Civil War Party System, 30 36, 46 53

10 For example, (Pottsville) Miner's Journal, Aug 18, 1855, Washington (Pa) Reporter, Nov 2, 1855, (Harrisburg) Pennsylvania Telegraph, Aug 22, Sept 19, 1855, (Gettysburg) Star and Banner, Sept 7, 1855, Lebanon Courier, May 13, 1853

11 (Harrisburg) Pennsylvania Telegraph, July 11, 1855, also, ibid, July 18, 1855, report of meeting of Junior Sons of America, ibid, July 25, 1855

MANISM IN AMERICA, CRUSH OUT REPUBLICANISM.\(^{13}\) Catholicism tried to control men's consciences; further, it attempted to manipulate public institutions—particularly schools, and it interjected itself into the political arena. So American party newspapers wrote about the "Temporal Power of the Pope," called for "NO POLITICAL POPERY," and published letters proving that Catholic divines were issuing political orders to their flocks to vote for Democratic candidates.\(^{14}\) The attractive quality of the American party campaign was that although it demeaned certain religious and ethnic groups, it nonetheless placed the nativists on the side of championing traditional freedoms and representative government.

Another political advantage bolstering the appeal of the Pennsylvania Americans was that they offered a full and popular legislative agenda. They certainly called most frequently for a revision of the naturalization laws and the elimination of Catholicism from domestic politics, yet they justified these demands by insisting that they stood for freedom of religion, liberty of conscience and civil rights—they merely wanted to protect these republican values from a "despotic" religious organization and uninformed immigrants.\(^{15}\) Pennsylvania Know Nothings also believed themselves in the forefront of progress, because they sought to extend the benefits of public education and establish moral reform laws such as temperance.\(^{16}\) Unlike nativists in

\(^{13}\) (Harrisburg) Pennsylvania Telegraph, Sept. 5, 1855.

\(^{14}\) (Gettysburg) Star and Banner, April 27, 1855; (Harrisburg) Pennsylvania Telegraph, Sept. 5, 1855. See also (Harrisburg) Morning Herald, Aug. 18, 1854; (Harrisburg) Pennsylvania Telegraph, Sept. 12, 1855, Feb. 12, 1856; New York True Freeman quoted in Lewistown Gazette, June 29, 1854; Washington (Pa.) Reporter, Sept. 24, Oct. 1, 1856. The Washington Reporter, Dec. 10, 1856, quoted from a proclamation of Archbishop Hughes that "Only from the democratic party can you [Catholics] hope for protection. Therefore, must every good Catholic vote for James Buchanan."

\(^{15}\) (Pottsville) Miner’s Journal, Sept. 1, 1855; Clearfield County meeting in Clearfield Republican, Feb. 15, 1854; (Harrisburg) Pennsylvania Telegraph, Nov. 28, 1855; Lebanon Courier, June 22, 1855. The subtitle of the Pennsylvania Telegraph was: "A Family Newspaper Devoted to Americanism, Temperance, Moral Reform, Education, Art and Science, General Intelligence, Agriculture, &c."

\(^{16}\) (Harrisburg) Pennsylvania Telegraph, July 25, Aug. 22, 1855; (Pottsville) Miner’s Journal, Oct. 1, Nov. 5, 1853; (Gettysburg) Star and Banner, March 24, 1854; Lewistown Gazette, March 26, 1852; Petersen, ‘Reaction to a Heterogenous Society,’ 231-236, 241-245. Though American party followers and leaders overwhelmingly favored temperance, the organization did not incorporate the issue into its platform; (Harrisburg) Morning Herald, June 2, 1855.
other states, Pennsylvania's Know Nothings revealed a preference for an economic program, consisting of high tariffs and the American System of Henry Clay. Undoubtedly these unusual economic proclivities of Keystone Americans derived from the state's traditional attachment to protectionism and the large number of former Whigs in the Know Nothing ranks.17

If some of the more positive aspects of the Know Nothing movement have been undervalued, the defects of the party have perhaps been exaggerated. Certainly the organization initially had troubles with amateur and at times disreputable leadership, the lack of a press to trumpet doctrines, and a tarnished reputation because of the secretive nature of the order. Yet by late 1855 Pennsylvania Know Nothings had taken enormous strides to eliminate these imperfections. Most Know Nothings believed secrecy was necessary to combat the conspiratorial nature of Papal operations, but complaints that the secret activities of nativist leaders led to abuse and irresponsible government created a desire to abolish closed meetings.18 By the end of 1855 a number of local American party councils agreed to conduct their affairs openly, and at the start of 1856 the American State Council resolved to do away with secret sessions.19 Leadership among the Know Nothings, especially in its first year of existence, certainly was inexperienced, self-righteous, and at times venal. Once the Americans revealed the power of anti-Catholicism and xenophobia, however, the organizations gained adept politicians like ex-Governor William F. Johnston, John Covode, Henry Fuller, and Thaddeus Stevens. John-

17 Resolution 7 of Know Nothing Council of Trenton in (Gettysburg) Star and Banner, May 25, 1855; (Harrisburg) Morning Herald, Jan. 20, 1855; Lewistown Gazette, May 10, 1855; Harrisburg Telegraph, June 12, May 29, 1856; Holt, Forging a Majority, 169; Baker, Ambivalent Americans, 48. See also Know Nothing questionnaire sent to Simon Cameron: William Kirkpatrick to Simon Cameron, Feb. 9, 1855, Cameron Papers, Library of Congress. On the influence of Whigs in the Know Nothing party, see Holt, Forging a Majority, 154-155.

18 Lewistown Gazette, Sept. 15, 1855; Easton Whig, Aug. 30, 1854; (Washington, D.C.) National Era, Feb. 1, 1855; Lebanon Courier, April 6, 1855; McClure, Old Time Notes of Pennsylvania, 1:204, 208; Billington, Protestant Crusade, 417; Coleman, Disruption of Pennsylvania Democracy, 71; Geary, History of Third Parties in Pennsylvania, 168; Holt, Forging a Majority, 141-143; Lee F. Crippen, Simon Cameron: Ante-Bellum Years (Oxford, Ohio, 1942), 147.

19 (Gettysburg) Star and Banner, Jan. 18, 1856; ibid., June 15, 1855; (Pottsville) Miner's Journal, July 21, Aug. 18, 1855; (Harrisburg) Pennsylvania Telegraph, Aug. 22, 1855; Lewistown Gazette, Feb. 8, Sept. 15, 1855.
ston had been a popular Whig governor, and both Covode and Stevens would become notable—some would say notorious—Republican congressmen. And the American party quickly acquired a somewhat reticent but supportive press in 1855. Several Whig journals moved to the American camp once they saw that the Whig organization had been reduced to impotence and that the Americans were probably the best vehicle for anti-Democratic sentiments.

Despite the party's electoral strengths and its growing organizational sophistication, Pennsylvania Know Nothings very early exhibited a mortal flaw: the leadership could not construct a workable coalition with the state's other anti-Democratic groups. The slavery controversy, apprehension over Catholicism and immigration, the elimination of old economic issues, and a widespread belief that the parties were only serving themselves instead of the general welfare—all destroyed the Jacksonian party system in the Keystone state, annihilating the Whigs and separating a significant number of adherents from the Democrats. This general public reaction to political events and to the social environment, however, merely produced conditions in which a new party could arise; the reaction had to be organized and cultivated by knowledgeable and skillful political leaders. In particular, the Pennsylvania anti-Democratic forces needed an organizational goal—or an umbrella issue—upon which all could agree, and which would be of enough importance to everyone to enable the different factions to compromise in order to preserve party unity. Anti-Catholicism and xenophobia generated a mass movement which wreaked havoc upon the Jacksonian party system, but anti-Catholicism and xenophobia were not issues of sufficient power to create a new political party; they did not motivate the fragmented opposition to unite under the American banner.

This glaring failure of the Know Nothings became evident in connection with the numerous anti-Democratic political fragments.

20 Many of the complaints about Pennsylvania's nativist leadership emanated from Alexander McClure who detested many of the directors of the party; Old Time Notes, I, 197-198, 215-221; see also Baker, Ambivalent Americans, 80-100; Coleman, Disruption of Pennsylvania Democracy, 81; Hewitt, "Know Nothing Party in Pennsylvania," 39-54; Holt, Forging a Majority, 155-156, 165-166; Petersen, "Reaction to a Heterogeneous Society," 255. The initial leadership of the Know Nothings, due to its secrecy, remains mysterious.

21 Note the number of American journals counted by the editor of the Harrisburg Telegraph, March 11, 1856.
that emerged from the state races of 1854. The Whigs had splintered into several distinct groups. Anti-Masonic Whigs, due to their antagonism to secret societies, distrusted the Know Nothings and finally embraced antislavery and the Republican party. Henry Clay Whigs (or Silver Greys or old line Whigs), most populous in southeastern Pennsylvania and Philadelphia, clung to their Whig identities and at times aided the Democrats. German Whigs often followed the path of ethnocultural realignment and became Democrats. A majority of Whigs, of course, joined the American party, and that accession of Whigs was particularly noticeable in the middle section of the state. Another element in the exploded Pennsylvania political system was a Democratic contingent, under the guidance of antislavery congressman David Wilmot and Galusha A. Grow, in the northern tier of counties. These Democrats broke away from their normal political affiliation, momentarily joined the Know Nothings in 1854, and finally in 1855 became a major component of the Free Democracy of antislavery forces.22

Pennsylvania newspapers noticed the inability of the Know Nothings to pick up the anti-Democratic fragments of the Jacksonian party system and forge them into a unified opposition. A number of Whig meetings suffered divisions when attempts were made to fuse with the Americans; frequently, groups of Whigs would storm out of the gatherings in protest.23 The supporters of nativism were often perplexed by Whig resisence to coalition; a number of American party adherents remarked that Whigs and Americans “embody very nearly the same principles.”24

Know Nothings also had difficulties in attracting the state’s antislavery forces. Antislavery Democrats and Free Soilers allied more

---


24 (Harrisburg) Pennsylvania Telegraph, July 11, 1855; also, Lewistown Gazette, July 26, 1856; (Pottsville) Miner’s Journal, Oct. 12, 1855.
readily with the Free Democracy than with the Americans, and then in 1855 formed the backbone of the Republican party. In the election of 1855, other ex-Democrats deserted the Know Nothings for the Republicans—this was especially true in the northern tier counties of Warren, Potter, McKean, Wayne, Tioga, Northampton, Luzerne, Susquehanna, and Bradford.  

One incident underscored the coalition failure of the Pennsylvania Know Nothings—the legislative contest to elect a United States Senator in early 1855. Party lines were thoroughly confused due to the entrance of the Know Nothings in the autumnal 1854 state election, and no one knew just how solid allegiances were in the legislature. Reporters reckoned that the Pennsylvania Senate was fairly evenly divided between Whigs and Democrats. Many observers believed that in the House the Whigs had the majority of the 100 members, but remained uncertain as to which members had ties to the American party. An early indication of the strength of the Know Nothings in the House came in the selection of a Speaker: Henry Strong, a Whig-American, won the position with 77 votes; he attracted a surprising number of Democrats.

The parties then prepared to tackle the senatorial question. A peculiar complication arose due to the personality of Simon Cameron. Cameron, a former protectionist Democrat, had imperceptively slipped into the American party in hopes of furthering his national political ambitions. His ties with the Know Nothings, however, were tenuous, and although he had a considerable following in the state, he was widely known as a manipulator and often suspected of underhanded, corrupt dealings. Seeing the unsettled condition of the parties in Pennsylvania, Cameron determined to make a run for the senatorial seat.

26 Pittsburgh Morning Dispatch, Jan. 5, 1855; Easton Whig, Jan. 3, 10, 17, 1855; Crippen, Cameron, states that the legislature had 61 Whigs, 23 Americans, and 49 Democrats.
27 Crippen, Cameron, 139-140; Bradley, Simon Cameron, 93-94. Cameron's activities are vividly revealed in his correspondence; Samuel W. Black to Cameron, Oct. 23, 1854; Gen. Fogel to Cameron, Oct. 28, 1854; Charles Frailey to Cameron, Nov. 6, 1854, Cameron Papers, Library of Congress.
The parties went into caucus to select nominees. On Friday, February 9, the Americans met but found their numbers swollen to ninety-one; evidently a number of Democrats (estimated to be twenty) had entered the meeting as pseudo-Americans in order to grab the nomination for Cameron. Amidst some consternation and resentment, balloting began. Through five ballots the leading contenders were Cameron and Andrew Gregg Curtin, antislavery Whig and future wartime governor of the state. On the sixth ballot, ninety-two votes were counted, one more than the official number of delegates. At this juncture, thirty-one angry members stomped out of the hall. The remaining delegates then selected Cameron as the party nominee; the bolters chose no one but swore opposition to the Cameron candidacy. At the same time the Americans were dividing, eight “old line” Whigs nominated Thomas Williams, and twenty-six “old line” Democrats put forward Charles Buckalew.

The rupture in the American ranks boded ill for the election of a senator in the legislative convention. Twice the legislators attempted to elevate someone to the U.S. Senate, and twice Simon Cameron failed to gain the required majority. Finally a group of frustrated legislators determined to elect no one and to postpone the decision until October (the date later changed to January 1856 because of legal complications). The postponement measure passed by the narrow margin of 66-65.28

The voting habits of the state legislators revealed that the American party had not overcome the ancient mutual distrust of Whigs and Democrats. Twenty-eight of the bolters from the American party caucus issued a public document explaining their actions. Three-fourths of these Americans had Whig antecedents. Included among the seven Democrat-Americans at the bolter’s caucus were three from northern tier counties; the Democrat-Americans who seceded were

28 The figures used for the American caucus comes from (Pottsville) *Miner’s Journal*, Feb. 17, 1855, and (Gettysburg) *Star and Banner*, Feb. 16, 1855; reports on state legislature from *Miner’s Journal*, March 3, 1855. See “Protest of the Americans” in *Easton Whig*, Feb. 28, 1855, for the seceders’ view of the invading Cameron Democrats. The number of individuals who bolted from the caucus depends upon the source one uses: see the figures in Crippen, *Cameron*, 141-145; Bradley, *Cameron*, 96-103; McClure, *Old Time Notes*, I, 198-199. A number of constitutional difficulties forced the legislature to reschedule the election of a U.S. senator from October 1855 to January 1856; (Philadelphia) *North American and United States Gazette*, March 9, 29, 1855.
essentially Free Soil. This split between the Whig and Democratic sides of the American party also appeared in the legislature's voting for Senator. Cameron obtained only 49% of the vote of the Whig-American legislators; but from the Democrat-Americans he obtained 68%. On the adjournment vote, only 38% of the Whig-Americans voted the Cameron position (nay), but 53% of the Democrat-Americans sided with Cameron's wishes.

Various Pennsylvania political luminaries testified to the inability of the American party to overcome their members' previous party attachments. Cameron's political advisers and correspondents made it clear that his elevation to the U.S. Senate depended on Democratic rather than American votes. One friend wrote Cameron that he should expect support from Whigs as well as from his former Democratic comrades; the Whig-Know Nothings obtained the offices of Governor, Speaker of the House, and State Treasurer, and so “certainly their policy would be to cast their vote for the Democratic K. Nothing” for the U.S. Senate.

Democratic leaders as well recognized the coalition problems of the Americans. Jehu Glancy Jones, Democratic congressman from Berks county, informed James Buchanan that the American party was permanently riven into three groups: national Know Nothings, Free Soilers and eastern Know Nothings, and drop-outs from the Democracy. “No earthly power,” Jones asserted, “can now or hereafter reconcile or unite either of these three elements of power with the other.” Virtually all observers agreed that the divisions that appeared in the American party were those of Whig versus Democrat. The legislative battle over the U.S. Senate seat demonstrated that the Americans had not succeeded in supplanting past

29 (Harrisburg) Morning Herald, Oct. 12, 24, 1854, gives party affiliations, and the (Pottsville) Miner's Journal, Feb. 17, March 3, 1855, provides the legislative convention's vote for senatorial candidates. The computations for party allegiance were constructed by including Independent Americans with Democrat-Americans. For some legislators the slavery issue had an impact on the senatorial choice. Antislavery Americans feared that Cameron, among his other numerous faults, was insincere about stopping the extension of slavery; Pittsburgh Morning Dispatch, Jan. 23, Feb. 27, 28, 1855. The Whig-Democratic split over Cameron was noted by “Uno” in (Philadelphia) North American, Feb. 15, March 1, 3, 9, 1855.

30 Quote from William Rogers to Cameron, Feb. 19, 1855, Cameron Papers; see also James C. Davis to Cameron, Feb. 17, 1855, H.D. Foster to Cameron, Feb. 25, 1855, and George Lear to Cameron, Feb. 24, 1855, ibid.
political loyalties with a new one; and the party's most obvious failures were with a sizeable portion of former Whig and Free Soil Democrats.\(^{31}\)

The Know Nothings in the legislature were able to fulfill one campaign pledge: to enact a law which provided more stringent control over alcoholic beverages. Toward the end of the session the legislature passed a bill popularly known as the "jug law," which limited the sale of liquor to purchases of at least a quart and prohibited alcoholic consumption at the place of sale, thereby dealing a blow to "grogeries," saloons, and hotels. Even this accomplishment backfired on the nativists, for it produced an angry reaction in the southern grain-growing and distilling counties and motivated a number of merchants to form a "liquor league" and campaign on behalf of legislators who would repeal the abusive features of the act.\(^{32}\)

The American party's performance in 1855 was mortifying to people in and out of the party. Alexander McClure remembered the novice American party legislators as "the most Dolly Varden political lot that I have ever seen in Pennsylvania." Cameron's emergence as a political force in the American organization made others wince; they warned the party against "political machinations" and intrigues. The editor of the Lebanon Courier mourned that in 1854 the cry heard in the state was for new men; "we beg to express our decided belief that new men . . . are not the best men to fill office."\(^{33}\)

But the worst—and for the anti-Democratic forces, the most appalling—results were to come at the end of 1855 and the beginning of 1856. The disparate elements of the opposition waited until the last few weeks of the state elections to arrange a fusion, and by then

---

\(^{31}\) Jehu Glancy Jones to James Buchanan, May 9, 1855, Buchanan Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania; see also Jeremiah S. Black to Buchanan, Feb. 17, 1855, ibid.; Jehu Glancy Jones to Jeremiah S. Black, July, 7, Aug. 6, 1855, Jeremiah Sullivan Black Papers, Library of Congress; Lebanon Courier, Feb. 23, 1855. The weakness of the American party coalition is also observed by Dale Baum, Civil War Party System, 28, 35-36.


\(^{33}\) McClure, Old Time Notes, I, 197; (Pottsville) Miner's Journal, May 5, 1855; Lebanon Courier, May 11, 1855. See also Washington (Pa.) Reporter, March 7, 1855; (Philadelphia) Public Ledger and Transcript, Feb. 28, 1855.
it was too late. The Democrats stormed back into power. Once in control of the state legislature, the Democrats captured the U.S. Senate seat, bestowing the honor upon William Bigler. That position would have been the opposition's had there not been such intense internal division among the Know Nothings. The opposition had lost one of the great prizes of state politics by their ineptitude. And due to the uproar over the jug law—what one Harrisburg correspondent called a "bill of abominations"—the major provisions of that legislation were recast and its temperance features largely eliminated.34

The political disasters that befell the Keystone's American party in 1855 proved that nativism and its allied reform causes were sufficient to wreck the old Jacksonian party system but too weak to generate a new and viable party system. The initial and most disastrous failure of the American party, even before slavery became a dominant force in the state's politics, was its incapacity to forge an anti-Democratic alliance. In the state elections of 1854, nativism had created a number of political fragments, all of which despised the Democracy. In the fight over the U.S. Senate seat, even giving allowance for the role of unusual personalities (Cameron), these groups—or at least their leaders—would not sacrifice their organizational goals and identities for the larger purposes of the American party. Although many opposition leaders and followers may have agreed in part to the American party's desire to curb the effects of immigration and to hinder the spread of Catholicism, they were evidently not persuaded that these objectives were so urgent that they needed to combine with other anti-Democratic elements, suppress their own legislative agendas, and compromise on matters of patronage and organization in order to provide a united front. During the senatorial contest, Morton McMichael of the Philadelphia North American sensed that nomination struggle would reveal the integrity and future prospects of the American party in the state: "The Know Nothings' must and will be tried by this test." By March 1855 the Pennsylvania Americans received their grade: they had flunked.35

One issue existed that could unify the opposition groups. The issue was, of course, the extension of slavery. The first hint that the slavery extension issue would draw the opposition fragments into one party emerged in the congressional election of 1854. Bickering among opposition leaders and a confusion of party allegiances characterized the state elections of 1854 and 1855. The congressional contests of 1854, however, did not witness such turmoil. Anti-Democratic forces captured 18 of the state's 25 congressional seats. Of the opposition victors, at least 5 can be identified with the American party (William Millward, A.E. Roberts, Henry M. Fuller, John R. Edie, and John Covode), 1 with the Nativist American party (Jacob Broome), 2 with Free Soil-Americans (J.J. Pierce and Lemuel Todd), and 10 primarily with the Whig party (Job R. Tyson, William C. Bradshaw, John C. Kunkel, James H. Campbell, David F. Robinson, John R. Knight, David Ritchie, Samuel A. Purviance, John Allison, and John Dick.)

In addition, the election of 2 particular Democrats was significant: John Hickman, American-Democrat, and Galusha A. Grow, a Free Soil Democrat who ran for office uncontested. While there were many currents in politics in 1854, the question of slavery extension belonged more specifically to congressional races than to state contests. Opposition to slavery's expansion united the anti-Democratic opposition. All the splinter groups stood solidly behind the opponents of the Kansas-Nebraska Act regardless of the candidates' party antecedents. In the state elections of 1855, the ill-fated coalition of the opposition ran in the counties on average 4.5 percentage points behind the percentages obtained in the 1854 congressional poll. In short, the experience of the Pennsylvania opposition in 1854 and 1855 was that hostility to slavery's extension produced a formidable anti-Democratic coalition whereas American party principles did not.

Once the American party debacles of 1855 became obvious, and as the furor over "Bleeding Kansas" mounted, opposition leaders

---

36 Lebanon Courier, Oct. 13, 1854, gives the victors of the congressional districts plus their political affiliation; determination of American party members also based on Hewitt, "Know Nothing Party in Pennsylvania," 62, 78, 79; American State Council report in Harrisburg Telegraph, May 15, 1856; Washington (Pa.) Reporter, Oct. 29, 1856; Lewistown Gazette, Oct. 4, 1855. Calculations on loss of 1854 and 1855 elections based on results published in Whig Almanac for 1855 and 1856, excluding the counties of Bradford, Crawford, Erie, McKean, Susquehanna, and Tioga due to the fact that the seats were uncontested in these counties.
moved swiftly to hoist the anti-extension-of-slavery banner to rally the forces hostile to the Democracy. When the legislature met in January 1856, the Republicans and Americans, after agreeing to support the Know Nothing E. Joy Morris for the U.S. Senate, issued a public declaration which stressed foremost the slavery issue and which relegated the matter of immigration to secondary importance. Shortly thereafter the opposition began to prepare for the state elections of 1856 and called for all anti-Democratic forces to congregate at Harrisburg and devise a Union electoral ticket. In their call for the convention, the Keystone state's opposition leaders admitted that the only means of drawing the opposition groups together was by elevating the slavery issue above all others:

WHEREAS, the freemen of Pennsylvania, opposed to the National Administration, are divided into political organizations, holding, on some questions of governmental policy, divers opinions; yet it is believed that a large majority of the freemen of this State are agreed upon the momentous issues forced upon the country by the repeal of the Missouri compromise; by the undisguised policy of the National Administration to impose by violence and fraud Slavery upon Kansas, contrary to the wishes of a large majority of the inhabitants; and by its unjust, illiberal and Anti-American preference of men of foreign birth over those born upon the soil, to offices of trust and honor, . . .

[we resolve . . . . ]

After 1856 the Republicans waged a war against the American party leadership and captured its followers by carefully blending antislavery with anti-Catholicism and by adding in 1858 the economic program of protectionism. Most politicians had seen the shortcomings of the American party in 1855 and had already surmised that the organization would not grow into the primary vehicle of anti-Democratic sentiment. The American party could not form the necessary coalition; the Republican party could. Antislavery proved to

37 (Pottsville) Miner's Journal, Jan. 19, 1856; (Gettysburg) Star and Banner, Jan. 18, 1856.
38 Washington (Pa.) Reporter, April 2, 1856
be the least common denominator of political fusion among the opposition elements because, evidently, the issue was of sufficient urgency to a broad range of the followers and leaders of the anti-Democratic forces that it provided the only political foundation on which a party could be erected. Once the platform of anti-extension was established, the party could then augment its numerical strength by absorbing some of the other objectives for which the separate opposition groups had campaigned. The reverse was not true. A powerful anti-Democratic party apparently could not be constructed by an emphasis only on anti-Catholicism, to be then followed by concessions on antislavery.40

The second major weakness of the Pennsylvania American party was the inability of the leadership to stake out a position on the slavery extension issue that would satisfy both the desires of the state's nativist followers and the national organization. Pennsylvania Know Nothings quickly developed a response to the Kansas-Nebraska Act and to the question of slavery's expansion that seemed acceptable to most of the anti-Democratic groups in the state—and, indeed, which resembled the position of the Republican party. They called for a restoration of the Missouri Compromise and a prohibition against slavery's establishment in territories that had been guaranteed freedom. The Pennsylvanians ran into an insuperable obstacle when the party attempted a national organization. Southern demands on the slavery extension issue destroyed the position of the Keystone Americans and left them without a viable solution to take before the public. In this case, national party deliberations clearly upset local political development.

40 The contrast between the Republican party and the American party in uniting the opposition elements into one organization is both startling and revealing. Republicans had to work with the same squabbling groups as did the Americans, and the early history of the Republican party is the record of the compromises made between the party's factions. Yet those compromises were made under the Republican but not under the American standard. Republicans confronted the same difficulties with ambitious politicians as did the Americans—for example, Simon Cameron and Andrew Curtin in Pennsylvania—but those ambitions never destroyed the Republicans like they destroyed the Americans. In almost every instance Republicans overcame the obstacles to the creation of a coalition. See Eric Foner, Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War (New York, 1970), 103-260; Silbey, Transformation of American Politics, 28-32; James L. Huston, "The Panic of 1857 and the Coming of the Civil War," Ph.D. diss. (University of Illinois, 1980), 196-204.
Although Keystone Americans in 1854 and 1855 concentrated on the topics of temperance, Catholicism, and immigration, they did not shy away from a consideration of the slavery extension question that the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act had raised. The nativist press called the Kansas-Nebraska Act a "fraud," a "swindle," and an "outrage." Stephen Miller asserted that though the South deserved every right the Constitution afforded, the Kansas affair involved an "illegal and unconstitutional extension of slavery" which could never be condoned.\footnote{(Harrisburg) Pennsylvania Telegraph, Aug. 29, 1855; Easton Whig, Sept. 27, Oct. 18, 1854; (Pottsville) Miner's Journal, May 27, July 15, 1854; (Gettysburg) Star and Banner, May 19, 26, 1854; Washington (Pa.) Reporter, March 29, 1854.} From editorials and local council resolutions came a clearly-defined stance of the Pennsylvania Americans on the territorial question: they demanded the restoration of the Missouri Compromise. One of the resolutions of a Trenton, N.J., Know Nothing Council was approvingly reprinted by Pennsylvania nativists: "that the time honored [Missouri] compromise shall be re-established, and observed hereafter as sacredly as it was before its uncalled for and wicked violation."\footnote{(Harrisburg) Morning Herald, May 31, 1855; (Gettysburg) Star and Banner, May 25, 1855; see also Pittsburgh Daily Dispatch, June 8, 1855; Kittanning Free Press quoted in (Harrisburg) Pennsylvania Telegraph, Aug. 22, 1855; Blair County meeting in Pennsylvania Telegraph, Sept. 12, 1855; Indiana county meeting in ibid., Sept. 12, 1855; Whig county convention in ibid., Sept. 5, 1855; (Pottsville) Miner's Journal, Nov. 17, 1855; Lewistown Gazette, July 26, 1855; Washington (Pa.) Reporter, Aug. 1, 1855; Easton Whig, Sept. 27, 1854; Lebanon Courier, Sept. 21, 1855.}

During their period of greatest strength, Americans expressed a number of sentiments that revealed a considerable hostility to the "peculiar institution." Stephen Miller in his various Harrisburg newspapers rejected southern claims that the Constitution protected slavery's extension into the territories and called slavery a "desolating curse."\footnote{(Harrisburg) Morning Herald, May 11, 1855; see also ibid., Oct. 25, 1854, Jan. 24, 29, 31, 1855; (Harrisburg) Pennsylvania Telegraph, Aug. 8, 1855; Washington (Pa.) Reporter, July 25, 1855.} Moreover, American party leaders often revealed a willingness to evaluate slavery in the same manner that they evaluated Catholicism: a conspiratorial effort among a few to destroy civil liberties and republicanism. Pennsylvania nativists frequently made reference to the "Slave Power" and its attempt to seize control of
the government. The editor of the Lebanon Courier, writing about the deliberations of a national American party convention, made the connection between anti-slavery and anti-Catholicism explicit: "The order professes to oppose Romanism because it is hostile to the general principles of Liberty, being opposed to Free Speech, a Free Press, Free Education, &c. On all these, Romanism and Slavery are homogeneous."  

Between 1854 and 1856 Keystone nativists made frequent proclamations extolling nationalism and denouncing sectionalism, but these expressions did not contradict the essentially antislavery bias of the party. When the Republicans finally became a serious contender to the Americans in 1856, nativists attacked them for being a party of one idea, embracing sectional goals, and advancing radical and abolitionist views. But the Americans in Pennsylvania at the same time defined their nationalism to mean that slavery was a local institution that should be limited to its present borders. In fact, many Americans asserted that the "great work of preserving Freedom in the Territories belongs exclusively to the American party . . . ."  

Regardless of their many antislavery principles, Pennsylvania nativists took a position on the slavery extension issue that held considerable promise for their political growth. By calling for a restoration of the Missouri Compromise, Pennsylvania Americans offered a policy that was sanctified by three decades of experience and which had been blessed by the great legislative statesmen of the past. It could certainly be called a national solution for a sectional dilemma. Moreover, the Pennsylvania Know Nothing embrace of the resurrection

---

45 Lebanon Courier, June 22, 1855; see also Harrisburg Telegraph, Feb. 24, 1856; Pittsburgh Daily Dispatch, Jan. 5, 1855.  
46 (Gettysburg) Star and Banner, Nov. 23, 1855; Easton Whig, July 2, 16, Aug. 13, Sept. 3, 17, 1856; Lewistown Gazette, Aug. 23, 1855; (Harrisburg) Pennsylvania Telegraph, Oct. 17, 1855.  
47 See, for example, Harrisburg Herald, Jan. 24, 1855, and (Pottsville) Miner's Journal, Nov. 17, 1855.  
of the Missouri Compromise enabled the organization to hold conservatives and antislavery moderates within the party. So long as the Americans could maintain that their party would re-establish the Missouri Compromise, they could undercut the antislavery appeal of the Republicans.

The national organization ruined the plan of Pennsylvania nativists to make the restoration of the Missouri Compromise the party's answer to the slavery extension issue. Due to the numerous successes of the Know Nothings in the state elections of 1854, a movement arose to create a national party that would offer a presidential ticket in the 1856 election. A national convention was held in Philadelphia between June 8 and June 15, 1855. Initial reports indicated that southerners were receptive to the idea of the resurrection of the Missouri Compromise, but two days after the opening of the convention, the Americans suffered a sectional split over the slavery-territorial issue. The gathering, due to the numerical strength of southerners, adopted a platform which included a twelfth section that declared that the existing legislation on slavery constituted a final settlement of the question. This was an acceptance of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Most northern state delegations then bolted. Evidently southerners grew adamant on the slavery question because they feared that any wavering on the part of the national conclave would enable southern Democrats to brand Americanism as abolitionism with a new political face. And southern Americans doubted that they could survive such an onslaught.49

Pennsylvania Americans demonstrated throughout the disintegration of the American party their attachment to the Missouri Compromise. During the 1855 Philadelphia convention they supported

49 New York Times, June 9, 16, 1855, Overdyke, Know Nothing Party in the South, 128 133, 208 210, Geary, History of Third Parties in Pennsylvania, 174 177, Richard H Abbott, Cobbler in Congress The Life of Henry Wilson 1812 1875 (Lexington, Ky, 1972), 73 75, Billington, Protestant Crusade, 424 426, David M Potter, The Impending Crisis 1848-1861, ed Don E Fehrenbacher (New York, 1976), 254 255, William J Cooper, Jr, Liberty and Slavery Southern Politics to 1860 (New York, 1983), 245 246 Perhaps the fear of southerners could be most seen in the difficult Virginia gubernatorial contest of 1855, which the Democrat Henry A Wise won, see Clement Eaton, The Mind of the Old South, rev ed (Baton Rouge, 1972), 97, Overdyke, Know Nothing Party in the South, 91 95, 128, 209 It might also be remarked that this election in Virginia had national repercussions because it revealed that the American party's strength in the South was doubtful
the minority platform which called for a restoration of the Missouri Compromise. When the northern members bolted, the Pennsylvanians joined with Vermont delegates and a few others to issue a protest against the majority platform and again called for the re-establishment of the Missouri Compromise. Nearly one month later the Pennsylvanians held a state council at Reading. Antislavery Americans tried to force through a free soil platform and failed; an attempt to pass a resolution favoring the national party platform also fell short. Only the platform which demanded the restoration of the Missouri Compromise succeeded. But even so, the Pennsylvania Americans fractured. They split into two Councils: the Edie Council, which favored the re-establishment of the Missouri Compromise, and Hunsecker Council, which called for acceptance of the Philadelphia resolutions.

In 1856 the Pennsylvania Americans sank into further political impotence. They participated in the American national nominating convention in February, but they bolted once again when the convention refused to adopt the re-institution of the Missouri Compromise as its standard, although the convention did replace the twelfth section with a new and generally meaningless substitute. The North Americans later held their own nominating convention in New York City in June, and there they proved highly susceptible to the allures of the Republican party. The northern Know Nothings sought a fusion with the Republicans, but the latter refused to sacrifice any of their organizational integrity; the Know Nothings then embarrassingly adopted the Republican presidential nominee as their candidate although they continued to support their choice, William F. Johnston, for the vice-presidency. That action provoked still another split in the party.

50 New York Times, June 14, 15, 1855.
51 (Harrisburg) Pennsylvania Telegraph, July 11, 1855; Pittsburgh Daily Dispatch, July 7, 9, 1855; (Gettysburg) Star and Banner, July 13, 1855; (Harrisburg) Morning Herald, July 10, 1855; Hewitt, "Know-Nothing Party in Pennsylvania," 56-58; Coleman, Disruption of the Pennsylvania Democracy, 82-83; Holt, Forging a Majority, 166.
52 Harrisburg Telegraph, Feb. 29, 1856; Easton Whig, Feb. 27, 1856; New York Times, Feb. 21, 22, 25, 26, 27, 1856; ibid., June 13-21, 1856; Geary, History of Third Parties in Pennsylvania, 184-192; Coleman, Disruption of the Pennsylvania Democracy, 83-101; Potter, Impending Crisis, 250-259; Crippen, Cameron, 152-156.
The troubles of the American party in the election of 1856 had not been unforeseen by numerous Pennsylvanians in 1855, and throughout 1856 newspapers and political leaders deserted the American party for the Republican standard. Behind this movement stood one central fact. When the National American Council in June 1855 rejected the proposal of re-establishing the Missouri Compromise, it also rejected the one policy that might have been acceptable to the northern public. Had northerners and southerners reaffirmed their loyalty to the Missouri Compromise, the American party might have defeated the Republicans and have become the dominant northern party. When the proposal was cast aside, however, there was no longer any room in the Pennsylvania American organization for those who harbored antislavery attitudes, regardless of how moderate those sentiments were. These individuals had no place else to turn but to the Republicans. Herron Foster and Reese Freezon, the editors of the Pittsburgh Daily Dispatch, had warned party leaders during the senatorial fight of 1855 that a neglect of the slavery extension issue would wreck the party. They stated that unless the Americans selected a candidate who openly avowed confining slavery to its present limits, "the loss in the Wilmot district, the northern tier of counties, and in Western Pennsylvania, will be fully one-half the whole vote of their ticket in the State." Foster and Freezon accurately predicted the path of the American party's deterioration.

The fall of the American party in Pennsylvania was the result of a number of factors, but the two outstanding ones were a failure to achieve coalition and the corrosive effect of the slavery extension issue. Anti-Catholicism and xenophobia were strong enough to shatter the two-party system in 1854 but too weak to serve as a means to

---

53 Pittsburgh Daily Gazette, June 15, 1855, Sept 22, 1855, see also (Gettysburg) Star and Banner, June 15, 1855, Lewistown Gazette, Oct 30, 1856, Lebanon Courser, July 4, 1856, Harrisburg Telegraph, July 24, 1856, (Pottsville) Miner's Journal, July 12, 1856

54 Pittsburgh Daily Dispatch, Jan 23, 1855 Whether or not a new sectional compromise based on restoration of the Missouri Compromise would have been feasible by the mid 1850s and would have avoided armed conflict is something of a moot question. Both northerners and southerners had rejected the Compromise line as being unfair to their particular sections. See Holman Hamilton, Prologue to Conflict The Crisis and Compromise of 1850 (New York, 1964), 59, 61, 65, 102, Potter, Impending Crisis, 55-57
forge a new anti-Democratic organization. Some of the remnants of the Whig party refused participation in the American party on an anti-immigrant, oath-bound basis, and other groups would not allow any other issue to replace that of slavery extension. Although there existed a possibility that the American party could effect a settlement of the expansion question by re-establishing the Missouri Compromise, this effort was thwarted by southern Know Nothings. In a sense, the American party of the 1850s had only the power to destroy, not to create.

Oklahoma State University

JAMES L. HUSTON