The United States experienced a political crisis in the 1850s. In terms of party structure, this crisis took the form of the collapse of the Whigs, the rise and fall of various nativist coalitions, and the emergence of a new party, the Republicans. Beyond these basic facts, there is considerable disagreement on the nature of the crisis. One school of historians has pointed to the centrality of slavery and labor; another school has argued that issues of ethnicity and religion prevailed, particularly on the local level. The second of these interpretations has dominated the historiography of the Pennsylvania anthracite region. Drawing their methodology from what is generally known as the “new political history,” historians of the mining region have emphasized religious and ethnic conflict to the virtual exclusion of all other considerations.

I would like to thank Professor George Forgie of the University of Texas at Austin for his comments on an earlier version of this essay.

A study of a single political spokesman, of course, cannot invalidate the complex findings of the "new political history." But the argument presented here is that both the nativism and the antislavery sentiment of the 1850s can be interpreted as complementary parts of a single, flexible but consistent ideology concerned, above all, with questions of labor. In the case of Benjamin Bannan, the newspaper editor and political spokesman whose ideology is the subject of this essay, it is clear that nativism and slavery were of more or less equal ideological importance in the 1850s, though he attached different weight to them at different times. Before 1856, it is fair to say that nativism predominated over slavery in Bannan's writings; after 1856, antislavery came to the fore, as a logical complement to Bannan's still-vibrant anti-Catholicism. But antislavery sentiment was clearly present in his writings long before 1856, just as anti-immigrant sentiment continued to be present thereafter. His commitment to both causes was ultimately determined by his mounting concerns about labor and society in the anthracite region. This social dimension to the politics of the 1850s is conspicuously absent from most works on the subject.

The political odyssey of Benjamin Bannan makes sense only in terms of a flexible but consistent ideological position that was constantly being adapted to the ongoing debate over the key issues of a very turbulent decade: the nature of labor and the future of immigration and slavery. What follows is a reading of Bannan's political ideology, firstly in the period 1853 to 1856, when his nativism overshadowed an antislavery position that was still embryonic; and, secondly, in the period 1856 to 1860, when his nativism coexisted with a growing concern over the threat to his society posed by slavery. The unifying theme, in each case, was his deep concern about the social structure of the lower anthracite region of Pennsylvania.


2 A quarter century after it was first published, the most suggestive work on the social underpinnings of the politics of the 1850s is still Foner, Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men

3 The lower anthracite region consisted of the coal-mining areas in Carbon, Schuylkill, Columbia, Northumberland, Dauphin, and Lebanon Counties, centered on Pottsville—as opposed to the upper anthracite region, centered on Scranton and Wilkes-Barre The subject of this essay is the lower region and, in particular, Schuylkill County
The ethno-religious interpretation of the 1850s draws much of its inspiration from the work of Lee Benson and Joel H. Silbey. In 1961 Benson inaugurated what came to be known as the "new political history," by emphasizing the ethnic and religious determination of political behavior. He called for a hardheaded quantitative analysis of political behavior, to replace the subjectivist analysis of political ideology: in other words, historians should concentrate on analyzing what people actually did, rather than what they said. While Benson's work was confined to Jacksonian New York, it had significant implications for American political history in general and for the history of the 1850s in particular. Drawing on Benson’s ideas, Silbey issued his well-known manifesto in 1964, in which he condemned the "Civil War Synthesis":

The Civil War has had a pernicious influence on the study of American political development that preceded it—pernicious because it has distorted the reality of political behavior in the era and has caused an overemphasis on sectionalism. It has led us to look not for what was occurring in American politics in those years, but rather for what was occurring in American politics that tended toward sectional breakdown and civil war—a quite different matter.

Since Silbey wrote, the most noteworthy attempts to correct the Civil War Synthesis and incorporate religion and ethnicity into the historiography of the 1850s have been the works of Michael F. Holt and William E. Gienapp.

Drawing on the work of the ethno-religious school, William A. Gudelunas Jr. and William G. Shade set out to demolish the Civil War Synthesis in the case of the Pennsylvania anthracite region. Rejecting "the historiographical tendency to view everything in the 1840s and 1850s as a foreshadowing of the Civil War," they interpret the 1850s in terms of an ethno-religious conflict between “doctrinally orthodox” and “devotionalist” sects. The doctrinally orthodox, they maintain, made a rigid distinction between the realms of religion and politics, and consequently refused to become crusading reformers. The devotionalists, on the other

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5 Silbey, "The Civil War Synthesis in American Political History." 140
6 Gudelunas and Shade, *Before the Molly Maguires*, 36, for other works, see note 1
hand, had a much more active religious style, based on a personal relation to God, and were the backbone of the great moral crusades of the day, including prohibition and antislavery. Without due account to questions of religion and ethnicity, Gudelunas and Shade argue, the political crisis of the 1850s, and in particular the collapse of the Whigs, makes little sense.

These correctives to the Civil War Synthesis are salutary. To read the history of the 1850s backwards from the crisis of 1860-61 is to draw an over-simplified picture of a very complex decade and to run the risk of ignoring ethnic and religious tensions in favor a single, linear narrative of conflict over slavery. It is to interpret the 1850s solely as a decade headed toward inevitable war. Yet, one cannot ignore the fact that the war did eventually take place, and that it grew out of the political crisis of the 1850s. Problems arise if the ethno-religious interpretation is employed simply as a substitute for the Civil War Synthesis. What is needed is an interpretation of local politics that pays due attention to antislavery as well as nativism.

To make sense of the politics of the anthracite region in the 1850s, we need to understand antislavery and anti-immigrant sentiments as complementary rather than antagonistic strands of an overall ideological position that certain people in the region shared with many others in the United States. The most prominent of these people was Benjamin Bannan, editor of the Pottsville Miners' Journal. Born in Berks County, in 1807, into a Welsh farming family of moderate means, Bannan was apprenticed to the printers' trade when his father died in 1815. In 1829 he moved to Pottsville, Schuylkill County, in the heart of the lower anthracite region. There he purchased the then defunct Miners' Journal, which he edited for the next forty-four years. A devoted Presbyterian, he was

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7 The "orthodox" were composed of Catholics, while the "devotionalists" included German Lutherans and Wesleyans (the United Brethren and the Evangelical Association), and British and American Episcopalians, Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Baptists. Another way to make this distinction would be to group the various religions into "pietistic" and "anti-pietistic" or "ritualistic" sects (as, for instance, in the work of Paul Kleppner). Whatever the terminology, Gudelunas and Shade argue that the crucial distinction between the two groups lay in the relation between religion and politics.

8 The Miners' Journal was founded in 1825 by George Taylor, a Pottsville lawyer. Under Bannan's editorship, it had about 4,000 subscribers. See Gudelunas and Shade, Before the Molly Magures, 97.
deeply committed to the great politico-religious crusades of his time. His political hero was Henry Clay, the perennial Whig candidate for president. Like Clay, Bannan supported a protective tariff, economic expansionism, a national paper currency, and an active role by government to foster economic opportunity.9

The Miners' Journal was, in turn, the leading Whig, nativist, and Republican newspaper in the lower anthracite region, a position made all the more distinctive by the fact that Schuylkill County was overwhelmingly Democratic in politics.10 Bannan was the leading spokesman of the Whigs in Schuylkill County until their collapse in 1853-54. He then followed a tortuous route through the politics of Know Nothingism, finally taking a decisive step toward the Republican camp in 1856.11 Despite the instability of party politics in the 1850s, Bannan's overall ideology remained remarkably consistent. While that ideology involved an antipathy for Catholic immigrants, it involved an equally strong antipathy for slavery, particularly from the middle of the decade onwards. Both aspects of Bannan's ideology were part of a single, coherent vision of republicanism. That vision was based on the concept of honest, productive work and its social rewards, a strong conviction that a virtuous citizenry was impossible without social mobility and the possibility of economic indepen-

9 None of Bannan's personal papers survives in any of the public archives of Pennsylvania. According to Leo Ward of the Historical Society of Schuylkill County, a trunkload of papers survived for a time in private hands. The owner claims that the papers were subsequently destroyed by flooding, a claim that Leo Ward doubts. This lack of evidence does not pose a serious obstacle for the present essay, however, as Bannan's ideology is readily discernible from the pages of the Miners' Journal. There is also a biographical sketch of Bannan in W.W. Munsell, History of Schuylkill County (New York, 1881), 293-94. Though Bannan clearly exercised considerable political influence in the anthracite region, the only elected office he ever held was that of schools commissioner for the borough of Pottsville. During the Civil War, he was appointed draft commissioner for Schuylkill County, where there was considerable opposition to conscription among Irish mine workers. Bannan died July 29, 1875.

10 The Democrats won seven of the ten fall elections held in Schuylkill County between 1844 and 1853. In these years the Whigs won more than 50 percent of the vote only in 1846, 1847, and 1848. In 1852 Schuylkill County gave 4,758 votes to the victorious Democratic candidate for president, Franklin Pierce, compared to 4,128 for his Whig opponent, General Winfield Scott. See Gudelunas and Shade, Before the Molly Maguires, 33, and the Miners' Journal, Nov 13, 1852.

idence for all, and a related emphasis on the harmony of interests between labor and capital.

Benjamin Bannan, in short, was a classic proponent of the free labor ideology analyzed by Eric Foner.¹² This ideology emphasized social mobility as an inherent element of economic expansion, and it employed a category of "labor" that embraced all producers of wealth, not just the minority who worked for wages. Labor was free in the sense that it was dignified and independent; this dignity and independence, in turn, rested on individual control over the fruits of one's own labor. In an economy centered on the independent, business-oriented farm and small shop, rather than the factory system, the social paradigm was the small, prosperous, self-employed entrepreneur, and the goal of labor was economic and political independence. As a result, there was thought to be no significant antagonism between honest, productive labor on the one hand and capital on the other.¹³

The point was nicely captured in the title of Bannan's newspaper, the *Miners' Journal*: it was always the journal of the small operating class and never the journal of the mine workers, let alone a trade union movement. The central focus of Bannan's political doctrines, whether expressed in the form of anti-Catholicism or antislavery, was the general question of labor and social mobility. The vital question was whether free, independent laborers could attain what Bannan regarded as their just desserts and rise to the position of free, independent entrepreneurs.

At the heart of this vision of society lay the theory of a harmony of interests between labor and capital. This theory received one if its more cogent expressions in the writings of the economist Henry C. Carey, particularly in his *Principles of Political Economy* (1837). "The interests of the capitalist and the laborer," as he put it, "are . . . in perfect harmony with each other, as each derives advantage from every measure that tends to facilitate the growth of capital."¹⁴ In other words, as society prospered laborers would fulfill their goal of becoming capitalists, and all would live in harmony. Carey's ideas had a powerful influence on Benjamin Bannan, one of his early partners in the mining business of the lower anthracite region.¹⁵

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¹² Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, passim
¹³ Foner, *Free Soil Free Labor, Free Men*, especially chap 1
¹⁵ Anthony F.C. Wallace, *St Clair: A Nineteenth-Century Coal Town's Experience With a*
But how could all laborers become independent entrepreneurs, given that the existence of the latter was predicated on the existence of the former? The answer was that laboring was seen as a temporary rather than a permanent position: given the social opportunity thought to be inherent in northern society, free labor spokesmen like Carey and Bannan assumed that most laborers would eventually achieve the ownership of capital, if they wanted to and were prepared to work hard enough. The bulwark of Bannan's ideal society was a large, independent middle class of prosperous, small-scale entrepreneurs. In the lower anthracite region the entrepreneurs that Bannan had in mind took the form of hundreds of small, independent coal operators, rather than a few powerful corporations. The content of Bannan's ideology was very much determined by the distinctive character of the region where he lived. The basic idea was that a man who started work as a laborer could quickly graduate to the position of miner, and could in turn go on to become a small operator and property holder. The reality was that most mine workers, irrespective of their ethnicity, never completed the second stage of the process, while the majority of the Irish could not even hope to complete the first. Increasingly aware of this fact, Bannan chose to lash out at the Irish, complaining about their religion, their culture, their ways of working, and their drinking practices.

While it would be facile to dismiss Bannan's anti-Catholicism as a mere front for economic concerns, there can be no doubt that the targets he chose—drunkenness, ignorance, laziness, moral laxity, political and religious indoctrination—were relevant not only to the production of a responsible citizenry but also to the production of a responsible, self-sufficient work force. To this extent, the conflict between Protestants and Catholics was not so much a contest between pietism and ritualism as a question of the general relationship between religion and capitalism. The notions of a "calling," of "worldly asceticism," and of the modest accumulation of wealth as a sign of grace, were powerful moral sanctions...
in producing qualities opposite to those Bannan found most reprehensible in Irish Catholics. Self-discipline, sobriety, and punctuality were not only religious obligations but social norms in an expanding capitalist society.\(^\text{18}\)

This emphasis on self-discipline and economic self-sufficiency will help to explain why Bannan was opposed only to Irish Catholic immigrants, and not to immigrants and Catholics in general. Germans, whether they were Catholic or Protestant, were attacked only on the issue of liquor, and even then only rarely. As Benjamin Bannan put it in an editorial on prohibition on May 27, 1854, “There is no class in all our wide land which so much need [\textit{sic}] the blessing of a Prohibitory Liquor law as the Irish. Coming into this country from the ignorance and poverty of the old world, they enter into any avocation which will yield a livelihood, and thoughtlessly plunge into vice and drunkenness.” The connection between nativism and the desire for a stable, law-abiding work force is generally ignored by the ethno-religious school and has yet to receive the detailed attention it deserves. Even Tyler Anbinder, whose recent work does an excellent job of analyzing the political impact of Know Nothingism and the social origins of its leaders, does not adequately address the questions of labor, discipline, and social order that frequently underpinned the anti-immigrant polemics of men like Benjamin Bannan. His chapter on the ideology of the Know Nothings, for example, lists the usual attributes that nativists objected to in the Irish—poverty, laziness, drunkenness, criminality, insanity, idolatry, antirepublicanism, political corruption—without examining why, in social terms, precisely these attributes were considered so objectionable.\(^\text{19}\)

Catholicism, in its Irish variety, was the primary target of Bannan’s nativism. But the ultimate source of his hostility to the Irish was the stubborn fact that most of them worked as laborers rather than miners when they arrived in the anthracite region, and continued to do so for the rest of their working lives. The ethnic and religious conflicts between the British and Irish residents of the anthracite region corresponded to significant social divisions in the mines and mining towns. Mining was a skilled and prestigious occupation, laboring involved menial and often degrading tasks. The variety of cultural attributes that Bannan lamented

\(^{18}\) Max Weber, \textit{The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Catholicism} (New York, 1958), passim, on the concept of “worldly asceticism,” see in particular, 193-94, on the “calling,” see chap 3

\(^{19}\) Anbinder, \textit{Nativism and Slavery}, chap 5 and passim
in the Irish masked a very real fear that a class of immigrants had arrived who were unwilling or unable to move upward through the social scale.\textsuperscript{20}

There were several overlapping strands in the political discourse of the anthracite region in the 1850s. The most prominent were anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant, and antislavery sentiments, along with “moral reforms” like sabbatarianism, the prohibition of alcohol, and educational equality. All but antislavery can be grouped loosely under the heading of “nativism,” which has been defined by its leading historian as “intense opposition to an internal minority on the grounds of its foreign (i.e. ‘un-American’) connections.”\textsuperscript{21} Rather than seeing Bannan’s nativist polemics as the reflection of some deep-seated, ineradicable strain of bigotry, it is better to interpret them in terms of the apparent threat posed to his ideal society by Irish Catholic immigrants, at a time of remarkable political instability. In other words, though Bannan was quite frequently a bigot, the various elements in his ideology can be read not simply as an exercise in pure bigotry, but as an elaboration of his overall position on free labor and political purity.

As early as 1844, when the Whig presidential candidate Henry Clay was defeated in Schuylkill County, Bannan blamed the Catholic Irish, who tended to vote as a bloc for the Democrats.\textsuperscript{22} But it was in the turbulent political context of the 1850s that his suspicions of Irish depravity hardened into certainty. Following the defeat of the Whig candidate, General Winfield Scott, in the presidential election of 1852 Bannan once again blamed the troubles of the Whigs on Irish bloc voting.\textsuperscript{23} In 1853 he accused the Catholic Irish of disrespecting the Sabbath.\textsuperscript{24} He called for a purge of Roman Catholics from the Whig Party and urged the Whigs to adopt an openly nativist stance.\textsuperscript{25} He accused the Irish of

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\item[21] John Higham, \textit{Strangers in the Land}, (New York, 1978), 4 Prohibitionism, sabbatarianism, and educational reform were not always, strictly speaking, “nativist,” but in Schuylkill County these movements were unequivocally directed against Irish Catholics and formed part of a unified anti-immigrant ideology
\item[22] \textit{Miners’ Journal}, Nov 16, 1844
\item[23] \textit{Miners’ Journal}, Nov 6, 1852
\item[24] \textit{Miners’ Journal}, Aug 6, 1853
\item[25] \textit{Miners’ Journal}, Aug 15, 1853
\end{footnotes}
opposing the common school system. And on November 5 (the anniversary of a Catholic plot to blow up Parliament in 1605), he declared that the votes of Irish Catholics were controlled by their clergy and that these "Romish priests" were, among other things, blocking the passage of a temperance law in Schuylkill County. This attack on the clergy was broadened into a general contrast between "Romish" and "American" conceptions of liberty in the Miners' Journal of November 12. These editorials from 1852 and 1853 contained the essential elements of Bannan's nativism: condemnation of the high levels of pauperism and insanity among the Irish immigrants, a call for the prohibition of alcohol, concern over Irish violence and criminality, and hostility to Catholic theology in general and the excessive power of the Catholic clergy in particular.

Bannan's most immediate concern in the early 1850s was the poverty of the recent immigrants, so many of whom had arrived from famine-ridden Ireland. For a man whose vision of republicanism rested on the economic and political independence of small producers, the arrival of the Irish was distressing. If there was one group in society to whom the ideology of free labor seemed inapplicable it was the recent Irish immigrants. Not only did they appear to lack the discipline and sobriety essential to a prosperous, responsible citizenry, they suggested to Bannan the prospect of a permanent, laboring class, morally depraved, socially dependent, and a blight on his cherished republican polity.

Nativism in American history has invariably been intertwined with a belief in American exceptionalism. Into Bannan's society there now intruded hordes of Irish immigrants, many of them illiterate, penniless, given to drink, and apparently prone to violence. Here were the classic preconditions of nativism, the arrival and settlement of the Irish heralding the emergence of a class-ridden society of the type that was felt to be characteristic of Europe, not America. In 1853 Bannan announced that 191 out of 356 legal paupers in Schuylkill County were Irish Catholics.

26 Miners' Journal, Oct 1, 1853
27 Miners' Journal, Nov 5, 1853
28 For the fears of the nativists and their hyper-nationalist belief that they were saving America, see David H Bennett, The Party of Fear: From Nativist Movements to the New Right in American History (Chapel Hill, 1988), passim. For the belief among Republicans that Irish immigrants, especially the unemployed and the permanent wage earners, "lacked the qualities of discipline and sobriety essential for social advancement," see Foner, Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men, 33-34.
By contrast, only 36 were of British origin. Bannan soon arrived at an explanation for Irish poverty. The problem was alcohol, the solution prohibition.

In 1853 and 1854 the prohibition of alcohol was the dominant element in Bannan’s ideology. In terms of the logic of that ideology, the recourse to prohibition made perfect sense: given the supposed social opportunity of northern society, and provided that this opportunity remained unhindered by such tyrannical institutions as slavery and Catholicism, an individual’s economic success could be seen as a measure of his self-discipline, sobriety, and willingness to work hard. Poverty could therefore be blamed on individual rather than social failings, and what better scapegoat for these failings than the evils of alcohol?

The first evidence of Bannan’s conversion to the cause of prohibition came in an editorial on pauperism on June 25, 1853, when he linked the plight of the Irish with intemperance. There were 636 taverns in the coal regions of Schuylkill County alone, he noted, one tavern for every nine voters. Most of them, he claimed, were frequented by Irish Catholics. In July he was more explicit: “We are daily becoming more and more persuaded that nothing short of a prohibitory law can ever reach the root of the evil, or effectively cure this moral leprosy in Schuylkill County.”

On October 1 he celebrated a legal ruling to “close up all the Bars and the Taverns and Beer Houses in Schuylkill County on Sunday,” and he urged the voters of the county to select the appropriate candidates at the forthcoming local elections: “Now boys, we have a Maine Law for one day in seven—let’s go on for the six other days.”

The “Maine Law” in question was a draconian measure that had gone into effect in Maine in 1851. It prohibited the sale and manufacture of intoxicating liquor within the state.

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29 Miners’ Journal, June 25, 1853
30 For similar arguments in northern society as a whole, see Foner, Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men, 23-25. On the question of antebellum temperance, prohibition, and alcoholism, see William A. Rorabaugh, The Alcoholic Republic (New York, 1979) and Ian R Tyrell, Sobering Up From Temperance to Prohibition in Antebellum America (Westport, 1979)
31 Miners’ Journal, June 25, 1853. Many of the taverns would have been small “grog shops.”
32 Miners’ Journal, July 2, 1853
33 Miners’ Journal, Oct 1, 1853
34 By 1855 the rest of New England would be dry, along with New York and much of the Midwest.
desire was a prohibitory liquor law, if not for Pennsylvania as a whole then at least for Schuylkill County. In line with his ideology of free labor, Bannan identified degradation of the polity as one of the chief evils of alcoholism. Part of the population was sinking into "squalid poverty" through its own vice; the remainder, "the sober, industrious, honest and hard-working Farmer, Mechanic and Laborer," were being "ground to the dust with enormous taxation, to defray the expenses of the Rum-manufactured paupers and criminals." Two weeks later, after the Temperance ticket had lost, Bannan claimed that it had been "cheated out of hundreds of votes."

In his attacks on the evils of alcohol, Bannan consistently linked intemperance not only with poverty but with moral depravity as well. At stake was a notion of the responsible, hard-working, law-abiding citizen, and his antithesis, the depraved, hard-drinking, wayward, violent Irishman. In urging the voters of Schuylkill county to outlaw alcohol, he appealed to them not only as parents but "as citizens and tax-payers" and as "friends of law and order, of sobriety, of morality and virtue."

As the Catholic Irish were allegedly the biggest drinkers, Bannan did not find it surprising that they were also the main source of crime and violence. While at first the newly arrived immigrants were portrayed as simpletons, they were soon being portrayed as brutes, as jokes about "Hibernian Simplicity" gave way to statistics on Irish criminality. As a result of alcoholism, Bannan complained, "our business has been retarded, the moral tone of our people depreciated, crime, riot and even murder stalking broadly, at noon-day, in our midst."

If the crusade against alcohol served for a time as a ubiquitous explanation for the various social ills besetting the anthracite region, it was apparent by the middle of 1854 that the single issue of prohibition could not form the basis of a viable political alternative to the disintegrating

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35 See Miners' Journal, Oct 1, 1853
36 Miners' Journal, Oct 1, 1853
37 Miners' Journal, Oct 15, 1853, carried a lengthy editorial on the vices of alcohol and the virtues of the Maine Law, backed up with "An Appalling Statement, Compiled from Official Reports" on the "Rum, Pauper and Prison Statistics of Schuylkill County."
38 See, for example, Miners' Journal, Oct 1, 1853
39 Miners' Journal, Oct 1, 1853
40 Miners' Journal, June 17, 1854
41 Miners' Journal, Oct 1, 1853
Whigs. By this time, Bannan had expanded his attack into a general assault on Irish Catholicism. This move, of course, did not mean abandoning the cause of prohibition, for it was precisely the Irish Catholics who were regarded by Bannan and other nativists as the most intemperate people in the anthracite region. The issue of prohibition was incorporated into a broader condemnation of the Catholic Irish.

One of Bannan's most consistent complaints against the Catholic Irish was their refusal to accept the common school system. From a Catholic point of view, this refusal might be defended as an exercise of the right to preserve one's faith; but from a nativist point of view it appeared un-American, the rejection of a fundamental cultural institution that was not only accepted by other Americans but was vital to their self-definition. Bannan condemned the recent immigrants for their tendency "to retain distinct exclusive nationality" instead of becoming "American." For these people he had a blunt and classically nativist message: "if you do not like us, our country and our government, go elsewhere." Education was of central importance in Bannan's vision of a free society. If the anthracite region needed to produce a body of citizenry that rejected the division of society into rigid classes, then where better to achieve that goal than in the schoolroom? As another writer insisted, "the peace and permanency of a republic must depend in great measure, upon the intelligence of the people—that such a government cannot long exist where the people are uneducated. . . . An ignorant people are incapable of self-government."

Throughout 1853 and 1854 Bannan consistently linked the question of educational reform with the elements of authoritarianism he detected in Catholicism. Ultimately, for Bannan, the Catholic church was objectionable not simply because it insisted on dispensing its retrograde views in separate parochial schools, but because it was itself a rigidly hierarchical organization that had its political counterpart and natural ally in monarchy and aristocracy rather than republicanism. In general, Bannan found

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43 Miners' Journal, May 6, 1854
Catholicism not only “anti-Christian” but also “anti-Republican.” “It is notorious,” he wrote, “that the Romish priests possess almost unlimited powers in the management of their people—often going beyond the ordinarily prescribed boundaries of mere Church government and directing the family affairs and secular business of their flocks.” The admirable definition of “Liberty” prevalent among “Protestant Republicans,” he declared in November 1853, was infinitely preferable to the “contracted and slavish doctrine prescribed by the Popish Hierarchy.” He later reiterated this point, condemning the “constant plotting of these Jesuitical craftsmen,” and especially “their endeavors to unite Church and State, and render both subservient to the nod of the Pope.”

While these anti-immigrant polemics are of intrinsic cultural interest, their political counterpart was even more significant. Between the elections of 1853 and 1854, as he was penning most of these diatribes, Benjamin Bannan defected from the disintegrating Whig Party and began the political odyssey that would eventually make him the leading spokesman in Schuylkill County for the Republican Party.

Like most of the United States in 1850, Schuylkill County had two main political parties, the Democrats and the Whigs. Though the Democrats were always dominant, the Whigs were by no means a negligible force. As late as 1852, they were still a viable political organization in the anthracite region. In the elections that year, for example, the Whigs and the Democrats won almost equal shares of the vote in the race for local offices, though the Democratic candidate for the presidency, Franklin Pierce, defeated the Whig candidate, Winfield Scott, by 630 votes.

By the election of 1853, however, the anti-Democratic forces were split into Prohibitionists and nativists (the American Party) as well as Whigs.

45 Miners' Journal, Nov 26, 1853
46 Miners' Journal, Nov 5, 1853
47 Miners' Journal, Nov 12, 1853
48 Miners' Journal, May 20, 1854
49 Gudelunas, “Nativism and the Demise of Schuylkill County Whiggery,” 229
50 The political nomenclature of the 1850s is notoriously complicated. The most important of the early nativist fraternal organizations were the Order of United Americans (OUA) and the Order of the Star Spangled Banner (OSSB). Between May 1853 and May 1854 the OSSB
The local elections of that year marked the beginning of the end for the Whigs in the anthracite region. Within seven months the local Whig Party had collapsed, to be replaced as a political force by a broad array of special interest groups.51

On the eve of the 1853 election, even as he was calling for the passage of a stringent prohibition law, Benjamin Bannan pledged his unwavering allegiance to the Whig Party, albeit somewhat guardedly and defensively. "We are a Whig—a devoted admirer and a staunch supporter and advocate of Whig principles, as we have always been and hope ever to remain," he declared. "We have seen nothing, as yet, to lessen our appreciation of the party, nor anything to cause a change of our long established opinions in favor of its doctrines." But he went on to insist that the upcoming election was "principally of local importance," and that "to secure a Prohibitory Liquor Law is of equal, aye and more importance to the State at large and to Schuylkill County in particular than any and all other questions put together, which enter into the Canvass this Fall." Consequently, Bannan endorsed two Prohibitionist candidates for local office.52 Although the Democrats won the election as usual, the combined votes for the Prohibitionists and Americans exceeded those for the Whigs, while the votes for all three opposition parties together exceeded the Democratic total. The lesson was clear: a coalition of Whigs, Know Nothings, and temperance men offered a genuine possibility of breaking the Democratic stranglehold on the politics of Schuylkill County.53

became known as the “Know Nothings" At this stage, they were a secret society rather than a political party They generally supported candidates from the existing parties, though they occasionally favored an entirely independent slate The Pennsylvanian Native American Party of the mid-1850s, however, was a remnant of the Pennsylvania American Republican Party of the 1840s As such, it was an open political party rather than a secret fraternal order Many Know Nothings joined this party because its platform duplicated their own views But the Native American Party leaders refused to cede control to the Know Nothings and continued to field their own candidates, even after the Know Nothings began to do so themselves The Native Americans were generally referred to as “the American Party" in the press, and, to make matters more complicated, the official name of the national Know Nothing Party was also the American Party The best secondary source is Anbinder, Nativism and Slavery, 20-21, 59, see also the Miners' Journal, Aug 26, 1854

51 Gudelunas, “Nativism and the Demise of Schuylkill County Whiggery," 229-32
52 Miners' Journal, Oct 1, 1853 There were no federal or significant state offices at stake in the Schuylkill County elections of 1853
53 Gudelunas, “Nativism and the Demise of Schuylkill County Whiggery," 231
Clearly, any analysis of the political crisis of the 1850s requires close scrutiny of the pivotal election of 1854, which, on a national, state, and local basis, sealed the fate of the already disintegrating Whig Party. The chief beneficiaries of the collapse of the Whigs were, in the short term, the Know Nothings and prohibitionists, and, in the long-term, the antislavery Republican Party. But the political realignment in question is among the most complicated events in American history, and it has been the subject of considerable debate among historians. Which was more important in bringing about the collapse of the second party system: nativism or slavery?

Once again, the dispute comes down to a matter of priorities: most historians see both nativism and slavery as important, but not equally so. Not surprisingly, the ethno-religious school holds that nativism was the primary cause of the political breakdown. Their opponents, on the other hand, argue that the Whigs collapsed over the inability of the northern and southern wings of the party to agree about slavery: the collapse of the Whigs over slavery created a brief moment of opportunity and nativist parties rose suddenly and spectacularly to power across the northern United States. In this way nativism was transformed from a cultural impulse into a potent political force. Which of these two models best fits developments in Pennsylvania and, in particular, Schuylkill County? Once again, it seems possible to mediate between them rather than making a stark choice between opposites. In the case of Benjamin Bannan, both national and local concerns were important; so, too, were nativism, prohibition, and slavery. All of these concerns were relevant to Bannan's particular political position.

The central political event of 1854 was the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act by the U.S. Senate on March 3 and by the House of Representatives on May 22, which opened up the Nebraska Territory to "popular sovereignty" on the issue of slavery. In the debate over...
Kansas-Nebraska, an already fragmented national Whig Party went rapidly into terminal decline and the Democrats were badly shaken. While Gudelunas and Shade are quite justified in stating that local issues of prohibition and anti-Catholicism overshadowed the national issue of slavery in the politics of Schuylkill County in 1854, this does not mean that Benjamin Bannan was entirely oblivious to national developments. Nor, of course, does it mean that national developments had no impact on local politics, irrespective of the attention paid to these developments by local politicians and newspaper men. The assertion by Gudelunas and Shade that “no strong editorial reference to the Kansas-Nebraska Act appeared in the 1854 editions of the Miners’ Journal,” therefore, does not substantially advance their argument. Moreover, it is by no means clear what they mean by the word “strong,” for there were several editorials and articles on Kansas-Nebraska in the Miners’ Journal between April and October 1854, and they were uniformly hostile.

It is quite understandable, of course, that Bannan’s distinctive interpretation of the Kansas-Nebraska Act has been neglected by the ethno-religious historians, as it fits so poorly with their thesis. Yet Bannan was clearly concerned about the Kansas-Nebraska question as early as 1854, not just from 1856 onward. What he had to say about it in 1854 provides an important insight into both his overall ideological position at that time and the origins of his subsequent, more outspoken, polemics against slavery. On April 1, 1854, Bannan pointed out that the Kansas-Nebraska bill denied unnaturalized aliens the right to vote for, or hold office in, the state governments that would eventually be formed in the territories. Claiming that the disfranchisement of these aliens was “a direct deviation from the established custom,” Bannan condemned it as “a gross violation of that identical republican, democratic principle the friends of the Bill pretend to be fighting for, and an unwarranted outrage upon the rights of the great body of settlers—the parties immediately interested in this act of legislation.” The same issue of the Miners’ Journal carried a large


map of the United States highlighting the territories at stake, with a
caption declaring that "The repeal of the Missouri Compromise may
seal the fate of Utah and New Mexico, as well as Kansas, Nebraska,
and the Indian Territory."\textsuperscript{57}

Bannan demanded to know how the Democrats, a political party that
claimed to defend the rights of immigrants, could behave in this way.
At first sight, his interpretation of Kansas-Nebraska may appear rather
disingenuous. After all, it was Bannan and his allies—not the local
Democrats—who were open to the accusation of being anti-immigrant
bigots. In portraying the Democrats as the anti-immigrant party, therefore,
he was presumably trying to win back some of the Protestant immigrant
vote for his prohibitionist and anti-Catholic allies. Bannan, it should be
remembered, was not so much a xenophobe as a critic of the Irish; he
had no quarrel with immigrants from Britain and Germany and he was
eager not to alienate all the immigrant vote.

Yet Bannan’s writings on Kansas-Nebraska cannot be dismissed as
mere political opportunism. The vision of society he mapped out in his
writings on this subject was a clear enunciation of his overall ideology
of free labor. The real reason the Democrats were abandoning their pro-
immigrant stance in this case, he claimed, was their desire to preserve
slavery and undermine the mobility and dignity of free white labor. The
future of the United States was at stake; if slavery emerged victorious
what would become of Bannan’s vision of upwardly mobile, independent
labor? “The secret of the whole proceeding is simply this,” Bannan wrote,
“the emigrants who seek a home on our western frontiers are, almost to
a man, opposed (and with great good reason) to human slavery.” Allowing
the foreign settlers to vote on “the determination of their governmental
organizations . . . would entirely overturn the fine plans of Southern

\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Miners’ Journal}, April 1, 1854, italics in original The version of the bill passed by the
Senate on March 3 included an amendment by Senator Clayton of Delaware striking out the
 provision giving rights of suffrage and office-holding to alien immigrants who had declared their
intention of becoming citizens of the United States The Senate approved the Clayton amendment
by twenty-three votes to twenty-one, with every Southern senator present voting aye and every
free state Senator but one voting nay For the fate of the Clayton Amendment, see note 60
Figures from Russel, “The Issues,” 208-9
politicians in the extension of the 'peculiar institution.'”

Stephen A. Douglas (the architect of the Kansas-Nebraska bill) himself, Bannan continued, was the owner of “a large amount of slave property,” a fact that the foreign population of the United States ought to bear in mind in seeking to distinguish between its political friends and enemies. This theme of the Democrats’ betrayal of their immigrant constituency was reiterated in the Miners’ Journal on April 15 and 22, when Bannan also announced his support for a homestead bill, thereby taking another decisive step toward the doctrines that would define the soon-to-be-formed Republican Party.

When the Nebraska bill was finally passed by the House on May 20, Bannan condemned it in no uncertain terms, despite the fact that the political rights of immigrants were not abridged in the version of the bill that went into law. Clearly, his principal objection to the bill now involved the central issue of slavery in the territories. In an editorial entitled “The Nebraska Iniquity,” he declared that:

The deed of iniquity has been consummated. The Slavery power of the South, aided by the dough-faced demagoguism of the North has triumphed—Nebraska is given over to Southern interests, and the Missouri Compromise is dead, and with it all national compromises.

Not a single northern Whig, Bannan observed, had voted for the measure. Given that the Whig Party had split in two along sectional lines, it seems obtuse to deny that Bannan was affected by, and deeply concerned with, the political divisions engendered by slavery. Yet this dimension to his political odyssey is conspicuously absent from the ethno-religious interpretation. To attribute Bannan’s abandonment of the Whigs in April 1854 to their inability to further the locally relevant causes of prohibition and anti-Catholicism, is to misunderstand the timing of his decision and to

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58 Miners’ Journal, April 1, 1854, italics in original. Cf. Russel, “The Issues,” 208 “the main consideration was not the proper treatment of immigrants but how the suffrage requirements would affect the slavery question in the first territorial legislatures. Immigrants were predominantly strongly antislavery and giving them the suffrage would strengthen the free state cause.”

59 Miners’ Journal, April 1, 1854

60 The Clayton Amendment was omitted from the version of the bill passed by the House on May 22, and the Senate approved this version on May 25 without trying to restore the Clayton Amendment, for fear of provoking Democratic opposition in the House, where the vote (115 to 104) had been very close. Figures from Russel, “The Issues,” 208-9

61 Miners’ Journal, May 27, 1854, italics in original
ignore the national context in which the decision was made. Split asunder by the question of slavery, the Whigs were by then incapable of furthering any cause whatsoever, and Benjamin Bannan finally abandoned ship.

Even if the signs of discontent were evident months earlier, Bannan’s defection from the Whigs coincided almost exactly with the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act by the Senate in March and by the House in May. The final collapse of the Whigs on a local basis, therefore, can be traced only in immediate terms to anti-Catholicism and prohibition; without the conflict over slavery these two impulses could never have taken on the political force they did. They would have remained culturally potent, of course, but they could scarcely have provided the basis of a new coalition against the Democrats if the national Whig Party had not broken apart over slavery. Thus, even if prohibition and nativism were of more pressing local concern than slavery in the anthracite region in 1854, the course of local events was decisively molded by the momentous developments on the national stage.

The events that unfolded in Schuylkill County in the election year of 1854, in short, make sense only when viewed in a wider context. At the very least, they need to be interpreted in terms of the state election in Pennsylvania that year. At their convention, the Pennsylvania Whigs adopted a platform explicitly denouncing the Kansas-Nebraska Act for its repeal of the Missouri Compromise. As their gubernatorial candidate, they nominated three-time congressman James Pollock, a man who had no prior connection with the antislavery movement but who was a well-known nativist. His opponent was the incumbent Democratic governor, William Bigler. While Kansas-Nebraska was debated intensely at the Democratic convention, Bigler and his supporters pushed through a platform that ignored the issue altogether. As a direct result, the well-known antislavery man David Wilmot finally quit the Democratic Party, coming out in support of Pollock.62

But it was the Know Nothings, rather than the two mainstream political parties, who were to determine the outcome of the 1854 election in Pennsylvania. Prior to 1854, the Know Nothings had thrown their support to one or the other candidate of the two major parties. This time, encouraged by the divisions among the Whigs and Democrats, they took

a more independent line, supporting the Native American Party candidate, Thomas H. Baird, for justice of the Supreme Court, and the Democratic nominee for canal commissioner, Henry Mott. As for the gubernatorial race, James Pollock had joined the Know Nothings shortly after his nomination; as a result he won the endorsement of the Native Americans in October. He also came out openly in opposition to Kansas-Nebraska, in line with his party platform. The Know Nothings endorsed one candidate from each party, and their support was to prove decisive.63

The election results in Pennsylvania in 1854 make sense only in terms of the decisive impact of the Know Nothings. Pollock beat Bigler by almost 37,000 votes in the gubernatorial race. Despite the fact that a normally Democratic state had elected a Whig governor, it was quite clear that he had won only because of his endorsement by the Know Nothings. Their support also enabled Bigler’s Democratic running mate, Henry Mott, to defeat his Whig opponent by more than 190,000 votes. And the Democratic candidate, Jeremiah Black, won the Supreme Court race because the Whig and American candidates split the opposition, with the American easily outpolling the Whig candidate. Moreover, at the congressional level, the Democrats lost eighteen of the twenty-five races, as the American and anti-Nebraska forces were swept into office. The long-term results of the election were quite clear: a major crisis in the dominant Democratic Party, the rise of the Know Nothings to a position where they could apparently seize actual political power, and the parallel demise of the Pennsylvania Whigs.

In Schuylkill County, where nine offices were contested in 1854, the results of this upheaval were evident in a quite distinctive way. In addition to the three state offices of governor, canal commissioner, and Supreme Court judge, the congressional seat for the Schuylkill district was contested, along with a seat in the Pennsylvania Assembly, and four county offices.64 In April 1854, in the midst of the debate over Kansas-Nebraska, Benjamin Bannan finally abandoned the Whigs, openly calling for the formation of a new, single-issue Prohibition Party. While this antiliquor

64 The four county offices were prothonotary, register and recorder, commissioner, and director of the poor
party would retain a separate existence, Bannan felt that it should ally itself with the Americans and that this combination would sweep the coming elections, "sure as shooting."

And, if James Pollock were to pledge his support for temperance, Bannan guaranteed that he would support him in the race for governor.

But he would support Pollock as a prohibitionist and Know Nothing first, and as a member of the Whig Party second. According to Bannan, the Whig, American, and Free Soil candidates were all fighting for much the same goal, namely the defeat of the Democrats. They could accomplish this goal only if they united behind one “standard bearer,” and in Bannan’s opinion, Pollock was the best candidate, as he would be capable of winning the votes of the anti-Nebraska and anti-immigrant forces as well as those of loyal Whigs. While Bannan would have preferred Pollock to run on a pure American ticket, he followed the lead of most other Pennsylvania Know Nothings by agreeing to support him on the Whig ticket. But Pollock, it was clear, was the American candidate in all but name. Though Bannan called on the Whigs to join the new coalition, it was clear that he no longer regarded their party as a viable political option.

Deprived of their chief spokesman and the powerful medium of the Miners’ Journal, the Whigs of Schuylkill County continued their irreversible decline.

Of the various local issues on Bannan’s mind during the election campaign, the questions of prohibition and Catholicism were clearly uppermost. In September, an issue of the Miners’ Journal carried a lengthy article on the evils of “Romanism” and the “papal church system”; another reminded the electorate that prohibition was the principal issue to be settled in the election, and a third printed a series of “startling” figures demonstrating how the Irish topped the list of “Rum, Pauper and Prison Statistics of Schuylkill County.” An October issue carried a series of anti-Catholic quotes from various “American patriots,” among them Lafayette and Andrew Jackson, as well as a warning to Protestant

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65 Miners’ Journal, April 8, 1854
66 See Miners’ Journal, April 8, 15, 1854
67 Miners’ Journal, Aug 26, Sept 2, 1854
68 While the Whig ticket had been printed alone on the front page of the Miners’ Journal until May, 1854, it was joined after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act by the American ticket
69 Cf Gudelunas, “Nativism and the Demise of Schuylkill County Whiggery,” 232-33
immigrants not to succumb to the lure of the Democratic Party. But the question of slavery was by no means absent from the pages of the *Miners' Journal* as the election approached. Bannan approvingly quoted a newspaper from neighboring Northumberland County regarding James H. Campbell's "hostility to the Nebraska swindle." The *Miners' Journal* also included an excerpt from a Harrisburg newspaper celebrating "The March of Freedom" and the triumph of anti-Nebraska sentiment in Iowa, Vermont, and Maine.

With one exception, the election of 1854 was a disaster for the Whigs in Schuylkill County. The Whig candidate, James H. Campbell of Pottsville, was elected to represent the Schuylkill and Northumberland County district in Congress. But in all the other races the Democrats were victorious. Moreover, a referendum on whether or not to pass a state-wide prohibition bill, which had been defeated in Pennsylvania as a whole by only 2,064 votes, was defeated in Schuylkill County alone by 2,876 votes (5,638 to 2,762). And, while James Pollock was elected Governor of Pennsylvania, he was defeated in Schuylkill County by his Democratic opponent, Bigler, by a tally of 5,388 votes to 4,252. The victorious Democrat candidates Henry S. Mott (canal commissioner) and Jeremiah S. Black (Supreme Court judge) won Schuylkill County by big margins. And the Democrats won both of the assembly seats that were contested in Schuylkill County, along with all four races for county offices.

Yet, while the local ascendancy of Democrats remained largely undisturbed, the election of 1854 was far from being a case of politics as usual in Schuylkill County. The figures for the defeated candidates reveal a significant political transformation on the county level. In the gubernato-

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70 *Miners' Journal*, Sept 9, 10, 30, Oct 7, 1854. The issue of September 30 claimed that 155 of 282 people committed to state institutions in Schuylkill County in 1853 were Irish Catholics.


74 The results of the election in Schuylkill County were published in the *Miners' Journal* on October 14, 21, 1854. For the three offices in state government, Benjamin R. Bradford, Bloomfield S. Spicer, and Thomas H. Baird ran on the "American" ticket. For the other six offices, the opponents of the two mainstream parties ran on the "American Union" ticket, an alliance of ex-Whig, temperance, and Know Nothing interests. Both the state and county slates were generally referred to as the "Americans."
rial and congressional races, as well as the race for canal commissioner, the American candidates polled only a couple of hundred votes. In the elections for the two seats in the state assembly, the opposition to the Democrats was split between Whigs and Americans. But, in the race for Supreme Court judge, the American candidate took second place to the Democrat. And, in the four county offices, the Americans dramatically outpolled the Whigs to take second place to the Democrats in each case.\textsuperscript{75} Clearly, the demise of the Whig Party in Schuylkill County was complete.

Moreover, while the Democrats were still dominant in Schuylkill County, this was decidedly not the case on the state level, where the Americans had made striking advances. A Know-Nothing Whig had been elected governor, and the Democrats had suffered a crushing defeat in the congressional races, losing eighteen of the twenty-five seats that were contested in Pennsylvania, including the one in the Schuylkill district. According to Tyler Anbinder, seventeen of the twenty-five congressmen elected were members of the Know Nothing order.\textsuperscript{76} Of the seven Democrats elected, Benjamin Bannan estimated that only three were loyal to Stephen A. Douglas, the by-now notorious architect of the Nebraska bill.\textsuperscript{77} With the Know Nothings victorious in Pennsylvania, Bannan clearly saw an alliance between Americanism and prohibitionism as a viable alternative to the Whigs and the basis of a new coalition against the Democrats.\textsuperscript{78}

How and why had this new political configuration come about? The Miners' Journal quoted an editorial from the Gettysburg Star, attributing the realignment to "the damning infamy of the Nebraska swindle," an editorial that Bannan endorsed as "truthful to the letter." But, in his own editorials on the subject, Bannan was less concerned with the overall defeat of the Democrats in Pennsylvania than with their continued ascendency in Schuylkill County, which he blamed on Catholic bloc voting and, above all, the defection of Protestant immigrant voters.\textsuperscript{79} On this

\textsuperscript{75} Miners' Journal, Oct 14, 1854
\textsuperscript{76} Anbinder, Nativism and Slavery, 61-62
\textsuperscript{77} Miners' Journal, Oct 21, 1854
\textsuperscript{78} As Bannan declared in the Miners' Journal on October 21, 1854, the Democratic victory in Schuylkill County "is but as a drop in the ocean compared with the generally favorable result throughout the state." In the overall results of the 1854 election, he detected considerable grounds for optimism. "The returns of the late election throughout the State are of the most cheering and encouraging character—there is manifestly a better time coming."
\textsuperscript{79} Miners' Journal, Oct 21, 1854
basis, historians of the anthracite region have seen nativism and prohibition as the single most important issues in the politics of the 1850s, and especially the election of 1854, with slavery playing only a peripheral role in the collapse and realignment of the party system.

The origins of the political crisis and realignment, Gudelunas and Shade insist, are to be found in the politics of nativism rather than those of slavery: "Rank-and-file Whigs were not repulsed by their party's positions on the presumably salient national issues of the early 1850s. The Schuylkill County Whigs disintegrated because they did not become the instrument of anti-Catholicism many disgruntled Whigs truly desired." Long before the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Gudelunas and Shade conclude, the Whigs had "already been struck a deadly blow by the growth of virulent ethno-religious animosities." In common with historians like Holt and Gienapp, they insist that religion and ethnicity, not slavery, were the fundamental issues that determined the election of 1854.

The problem with this interpretation lies in the way the question is formulated. As Tyler Anbinder has persuasively argued, to pose the question in terms of a stark opposition between nativism and slavery is to ignore the fact that Know Nothingism was much more than a question of anti-immigrant sentiment. From its inception, as Anbinder demonstrates, Know Nothingism entailed opposition to the extension of slavery as well as hostility to immigrants. Know-Nothingism, in other words, is best understood as a politically volatile compound of anti-immigrant, anti-slavery, and temperance sentiment.81 “Historians have thus been misreading the options that faced voters in 1854,” Anbinder argues, “because a vote for the Know Nothings was much more than simply a vote for nativism.”82 The distinction Anbinder makes here is crucial to any analysis of the political crisis of the 1850s. Antislavery on its own was not the decisive issue in the election of 1854 in Pennsylvania or Schuylkill County, but

80 Gudelunas, “Nativism and the Demise of Schuylkill County Whiggery,” 236
81 In a recent review of Anbinder’s work (American Historical Review 98 [1993], 1,684-85) Michael Holt argues that the “new political historians” have always conceded that antislavery sentiment was integral to Know Nothingism from its inception. But one certainly does not get that impression from Holt’s own work on the subject. Gienapp does admit the centrality of slavery in the election of 1854 in Pennsylvania, but concludes that “despite the importance of the Nebraska issue, nativism was the most powerful impulse” (Origins of the Republican Party, 147)
82 Anbinder, Nativism and Slavery, 67
neither was nativism. These two movements belonged to a wider Know Nothing coalition that undoubtedly was the decisive element in that election.

It was precisely this multifaceted coalition that Benjamin Bannan supported and that broke the mold of Pennsylvanian politics on both the state and county levels in 1854. Different aspects of the coalition’s platform appealed to different people in different places, of course: that was the secret of its success. Anti-immigrant sentiment was strongest in the south and east of the state, prohibition in the area between Harrisburg and Scranton (including the anthracite region), and antislavery in the west and north. An attraction to one element in the platform did not imply hostility or indifference to the other elements. In Schuylkill County, for example, it is clear that prohibitionism and anti-Catholicism overshadowed antislavery. But it is equally clear that Benjamin Bannan was concerned with the question of slavery as well, and that his endorsement of the cause of antislavery involved a gradual shifting of priorities rather than a sudden, unprecedented conversion in 1856. Throughout the election campaign, he repeatedly and explicitly urged the creation of an alliance between the various anti-Democratic forces—temperance men, nativists, ex-Whigs, and Free Soilers—to fill the vacuum left by the disintegrating Whig Party, which he had finally abandoned during the national debate over Kansas-Nebraska in April 1854.

While the national question of slavery was ultimately responsible for the collapse and realignment of the party system, political fragmentation on the local level was still expressed primarily in terms of religious and ethnic conflicts. Nowhere was this more true than in Schuylkill County, where nativism remained strong throughout the 1850s, and in subsequent decades as well. Benjamin Bannan was not concerned with slavery and immigration in some abstract, philosophical sense; rather, he was concerned with their immediate impact on the labor system, social structure, and political fortunes of the region in which he lived. In 1856 he would take a decisive step toward antislavery Republicanism, but not before taking a long detour through the politics of Know Nothingism, as he struggled to find a viable political solution to local problems. His polemics against the Irish, indeed, grew even more intense between the autumn of 1854 and the summer of 1856, reaching their peak in 1855.

83 Anbinder, Nativism and Slavery, 68
By September 1855 it was election season once again. With the collapse of the Whigs, Bannan was now firmly committed to the American ticket. The *Miners' Journal* urged voters to support the American Party in the upcoming local elections and condemned the enormous power allegedly wielded over Irish voters by the Catholic clergy. The newspaper pledged its allegiance to the American ticket: "Favorable to American Institutions and Americanizing adopted citizens, and opposed to all inroads of Popery, Jesuit Priests, and all American Demagogues who court their support, and also all anti-American doctrines, come from what source they may." When the Americans were defeated by the Democrats in all ten state and local offices contested in Schuylkill County in October 1855, Bannan blamed the defeat on the twin evils of alcohol and Catholicism. Despite their best efforts, the Americans had failed to build a viable political alliance to fill the vacuum left by the collapse of the Whigs.

After 1855 the Americans went into a terminal decline, just like the Whigs they had hoped to replace. The demise of political Know Nothingism after 1855 (which was somewhat more gradual in Pennsylvania than elsewhere) can be explained in much the same way as its brief rise to power over the previous two years. Just as the Know Nothings had risen to political prominence to fill a vacuum caused by the collapse of the Whig Party over slavery, they fell from prominence when they proved incapable of forging a viable political alliance on the same issue. To maintain themselves as a political force, they had to stake out a position on slavery. But it was impossible to satisfy the national organization as well as local demands. When the northern and southern Know Nothings...
discovered that their opinions on slavery were irreconcilable their party collapsed, first nationally and then locally. Out of this crisis emerged a new alliance between nativists and Republicans that finally offered the prospect of a viable political opposition to the still-dominant Democrats. 87 At the forefront of this alliance in the lower anthracite region was Benjamin Bannan, who took a decisive step toward the Republican camp during the election of 1856.

As late as October 1855, with the Whigs in ruins, Benjamin Bannan went to some pains to downplay the differences between “the old Whig measures and the principles of the modern American organization,” the party he now supported. “A comparison of the two draws us irresistibly to the conclusion that they are in many respects synonymous.” 88 The point, of course, is not that the Whigs had been opposed to immigrants; rather, by joining the Americans, Bannan was continuing his desperate search for a viable successor to the party of his hero, Henry Clay. This suggests a fundamental continuity in Bannan’s political trajectory, rather than a series of sharp breaks or ruptures. In much the same way, the antislavery sentiment that increasingly dominated his ideology from 1856 onward did not simply emerge out of the blue. It had clearly been present in his writings in the first half of the 1850s, even if it was overshadowed by anti-Catholicism and prohibitionism.

Bannan’s emphatic endorsement of the cause of antislavery in the mid-1850s, therefore, is best seen not as a new departure but as a continuation of the fundamental themes that had preoccupied him in the early part of the decade, above all the question of the dignity and mobility of labor. But why did Bannan come to see slavery as such a threat, given that there was no prospect of slavery being introduced in Pennsylvania? Once again, the most convincing answer to this question lies in the conception of labor that lay at the heart of his ideology. To Bannan, the expansion of slavery into the unorganized territories of the West entailed the triumph of a southern way of life that was the antithesis of his own ideal: a repressive, aristocratic, rigidly hierarchical society, where labor

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87 This new alliance achieved political power in Schuylkill County only in the emergency years of 1860-62. In the late 1850s and again between 1862 and 1872 the Democrats dominated the county politically.

88 Miners' Journal, Oct 13, 1855
did not get its just rewards and where there was no real prospect of social advancement for the majority. Free labor was the opposite of slavery, and these two intimately related concepts provide the key to deciphering Bannan’s ideology throughout the entire decade of the 1850s, whether that ideology took the form of anti-Catholicism or antislavery.

Bannan’s outright conversion to the cause of antislavery is clearly evident in the presidential election of 1856, a three-way race involving James Buchanan (Democrat), Millard Fillmore (Know Nothing Party), and, for the first time, a Republican candidate, John C. Frémont. The Know Nothings were already in trouble over the issue of slavery, and stood little chance in the coming election. Politically astute as ever, Bannan moved sharply toward the Republican camp, continuing the trajectory that would lead him to become the chief spokesman in the anthracite region of the new political consensus against slavery. In doing so, he illustrated more clearly than ever the concerns with free labor that animated his political activity throughout the 1850s, in both its primarily nativist and its primarily antislavery phases. A victory for Frémont, he promised his readers in the summer of 1856, would mean “NO MORE NEGRO STATES TO DEGRADE FREEMEN AND WHITE LABOR.”

Bannan called on the North Americans, ex-Whigs, and Republicans to unite in order to defeat the “Pro-Slavery Sham Democracy.” He announced a new set of principles on the front page of the Miners’ Journal: “FREEDOM OF SPEECH. FREEDOM TO KANSAS. NOT ANOTHER INCH OF SLAVE TERRITORY. The Union, Now and Forever, and the men who will carry out these Principles.” To fulfill these goals, Bannan declared his support for the Republican candidate, pledging allegiance to “FREMONT, FREEDOM, THE CONSTITUTION AND THE UNION.” Bannan came out in support of the Union Electoral Ticket, staking the fortunes of the North Americans on Republican candidate Frémont. The Know Nothings had not yet merged formally with the Republicans, but the electoral alliance of 1856 was a major step in that direction.

89 Miners’ Journal, June 28, July 26, 1856, capitals in original
90 Miners’ Journal, Oct 4, 1856 Following the split over slavery in 1856, the Americans split into northern and southern factions
91 Miners’ Journal, Oct 4, 1856, capitals in original
92 Miners’ Journal, Oct 11, 1856
In the month before the presidential election, editorials in the Miners’ Journal were dominated by the issue of slavery in the territories. “We call upon every man honestly opposed to Buchanan to secure Pennsylvania at the coming election from the grasp of the Pro-Slavery Sham Democracy,” Bannan wrote. “The Opposition in this State possess the power, and every American and Republican can vote the Union Electoral ticket, without the sacrifice of a single principle which they cherish.” The two parties, American and Republican, shared many sentiments, he continued, including hostility to “the growth of the Papal power in this country.” “Like the American party,” Bannan concluded, “the Republican is obnoxious to the Catholics of the country. They go in a body, people and presses, for their candidate, Buchanan.” Anti-Irish sentiment clearly remained integral to Bannan’s ideology, even as he became preoccupied with the cause of antislavery.

Bannan foresaw in Buchanan’s election a dual threat to freedom, on the one hand from Catholicism and on the other from slavery. Buchanan, he felt certain, was favorable to both. “The opponent of James Buchanan who hesitates at this moment in regard to the course he would pursue, is false to himself, to his friends, to the principles of Freedom he professes to love,” Bannan announced. “We need not impress upon American minds, that the election of Jas. Buchanan will foster Roman Catholicism.” Later he switched from Catholicism to slavery, issuing “a last appeal.” “ACTION, FREEMEN, ACTION,” he exhorted the voters of Schuylkill County. “The forcible extension of Slavery into the free Territories of the West, is not calculated to affect us visibly in this generation; but posterity, which will number in its ranks your children and your children’s children, will as you act in this matter, either have cause to bless or curse your memory.”

93 Miners’ Journal, Oct 25, 1856
94 Miners’ Journal, Oct 25, 1856 A chief source of nativist hostility to Buchanan (and to William Bigler, the Democratic candidate for governor of Pennsylvania in 1854) involved the case of James Campbell, a Pennsylvania Catholic who had served as post-master-general in the Pierce administration. In 1851 Bigler had appointed Campbell to the position of attorney general of Pennsylvania. Buchanan had then, supposedly, persuaded Pierce to appoint Campbell to the post-master-generalship, a cabinet position. The affair caused great bitterness between Pennsylvania Democrats and their nativist opponents in the early 1850s. See Gienapp, Origins of the Republican Party, 94, Anbinder, Nativism and Slavery, 30, 54, Holt, The Political Crisis of the 1850s, 124, 141
95 Miners’ Journal, Nov 1, 1856, italics and capitals in original
Both the “slave power” and the “Catholic threat,” as historians like David M. Potter and James L. Huston have observed, could be portrayed in much the same terms: a conspiracy of the few to subvert the liberties of the many.\textsuperscript{96} Despite this evident affinity between the causes of nativism and antislavery, however, they were not the same thing, and it is evident that antislavery took precedence over anti-Catholicism in Bannan’s ideology from the election of 1856 onward. Just before the election he stated the issue more explicitly than ever: “Concede one inch now—waver from the strict line of duty a hair’s breadth, and the Slave Power will gain a victory over Freedom and the dignity of Free White Labor, which will extend its effects far into the future history of this Republic.”\textsuperscript{97} Once again, Bannan’s concerns were clearly animated by questions of labor, just as they had been in the early 1850s.

The defeat of the Republican candidate in that year, the collapse of the Know Nothings, and the victory of the proslavery Democrats only hardened Bannan’s resolve, driving him further in the direction of the Republican Party. Nationally Buchanan won 1,832,955 votes (45.3 percent; 174 electoral votes), Frémont won 1,340,537 votes (33.1 percent; 114 electoral votes), and Fillmore 871,731 (21.6 percent; 8 electoral votes—only those of Maryland, a slave state). In his native state, Pennsylvania, Buchanan had a majority of only 705 over the combined opposition. But in heavily Democratic Schuylkill County, much to Bannan’s dismay, Buchanan won quite easily, polling 7,035 votes compared to only 4,780 for the combined opposition (2,188 for Frémont and 2,682 for Fillmore.)\textsuperscript{98}

Though the Republicans had done remarkably well in their first presidential race, the fact remained that Buchanan had been elected, and for Benjamin Bannan the new president embodied the twin evils of pros-Catholicism and proslavery. When the election results came in, Bannan proceeded to hammer out a new “political creed” that first appeared on the front page of the \textit{Miners’ Journal} November 8, 1856, and which would be reiterated over the next two years. This five-point statement

97 \textit{Miners’ Journal}, Nov 1, 1856
98 For the local and state results, see \textit{Miners’ Journal}, Nov 8, 1856 and Oct 3, 1857, for the national results, Gienapp, \textit{Origins of the Republican Party}, 414 The 2,682 votes for Fillmore in Schuylkill County were comprised of 2,315 votes on the Union ticket and 367 “straight Fillmore” votes
was the clearest formulation of his political doctrine that Bannan produced in the 1850s. The first two points dealt with the pressing issue of slavery, but there was also a stridently anti-Catholic plank that read:

While we accord to every man the right to worship his Creator according to the dictates of his own conscience—without fear or molestation, and will proscrib e, no man on account of his birthplace, who is a good citizen, and cordially supports our institutions—yet we are decidedly opposed to Roman Catholic, Jesuitical, and all other foreign influence, not in accordance with our Institutions, true Christianity, and the best good of the masses—and lastly, political opposition to men who give or offer to Roman Catholics office, to influence their votes, as a means of political advancement of themselves and others.

Yet the fact that this statement was placed fifth and last in the platform clearly suggests that the crusade against slavery now overshadowed all other political causes. The first point in his platform pledged “Determined opposition to the extension of Slavery into the Territories of the United States—and opposition to the acquisition of any Territory, either by annexations, purchase or conquest, for the extension of the area of Slavery.” The second point guaranteed “opposition to any interference with the rights of Slave-holders in the States in which Slavery exists by State law,” but called for a new Fugitive Slave Law, “giving the right of trial by jury to establish the claim to a slave, which will bring the law within the limits of the Constitution.”

The remaining two points in Bannan’s statement are also of interest in figuring out the politics of the lower anthracite region in the late 1850s. Both of them involved a long-term commitment to the social philosophy of the Whig leader Henry Clay—a system of internal improvements sponsored by government, and a high tariff to protect American industry. These demands did not amount to a program of “big government” as much as a call on government to play its role in fostering the prosperity of individual entrepreneurs, the bulwark of Bannan’s republican society. The proper function of government, in terms of Bannan’s ideology, was not to equalize social conditions but to equalize conditions of opportunity to allow honest, productive labor to fulfill its function of becoming wealthy, thereby ensuring the prosperity of the nation and the

99 Miners’ Journal, Nov. 8, 1856
stability of the republican polity. As he put it, "The professed object of legislation is to better the condition of the people financially as well as morally—to lighten their taxes and improve their business, to secure the Farmer, Mechanic and Laborer more liberal returns for their daily work, as well as to prevent crime, punish offenders and protect the innocent and defenseless."  

In Pennsylvania, where an industrial revolution was underway, the tariff was of central importance. It was also a potent source of sectional conflict, complementing the root cause of that conflict, slavery. In 1857, for example, President Buchanan supported a tariff lowering rates back to the only mildly protective rates of 1816. This move could be interpreted as further support for the slave South, particularly in the light of Buchanan's refusal to take the antislavery side in Kansas and the impact of the Dred Scott decision in March 1857. Benjamin Bannan edged ever closer to the Republican Party, encouraged by their general support for a reasonably high tariff (even if many Republicans saw the tariff more as a way to raise revenue than to protect industry).

On its own, of course, the tariff would never have led to a civil war; it was only one element in a larger ideology that was dominated by the questions of labor and slavery. The prominence of these two related issues was evident, for example, in the Pennsylvania gubernatorial election of 1857, when David Wilmot ran against Democrat William Packer. While the debate over slavery dominated the election, the politics of nativism had not simply disappeared. Anti-immigrant sentiment remained politically potent much longer in Pennsylvania than in most states, and Wilmot ran on a Union ticket of four candidates that included two Know Nothings and, as a concession to the nativists, a plank opposing the naturalization of immigrants owing allegiance "to any foreign potentate." But Wilmot was nationally known as an antislavery man, and, as Eric Foner has noted, the very name "Union Party" insured that slavery, not nativism, would be the focus of the campaign. The raison d'être of the Union Party was opposition to slavery, and its two Know Nothing candidates endorsed the resolutions against slavery passed by the national Republicans the previous year.

100 Miners' Journal, Oct 1, 1853
101 Foner, Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men, 174
102 The quote from the Union platform is in Foner, Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men, 255
103 Foner, Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men, 255
Benjamin Bannan, for one, had no doubt that slavery was the central issue in the coming election. "The second Tuesday in October is rapidly approaching," Bannan warned the voters of Schuylkill County. "On that day the citizens of Pennsylvania will be called on to record their verdict either for or against the extension of Slavery into the Free Territories, either for or against the cause of Kansas." He called on the citizens of Pennsylvania "to condemn in a decided manner" Buchanan’s "aggressive policy" in favor of slavery and "against the rights of the Free North." "It is useless for the Democracy to assert that the Slavery question does not enter into this contest," Bannan concluded. "We say emphatically, that it does." Thus, even though the election of 1857 in Schuylkill County involved local and state rather than national offices, it is evident that slavery was the dominant issue.

Clearly, the question of slavery was intimately bound up with local concerns, in particular Benjamin Bannan’s desire to preserve a sturdy, independent, and mobile labor force in Schuylkill County and, in so doing, to preserve a reliable and virtuous republican citizenry. In this sense, Bannan found the Irish doubly objectionable. Not only did they support the proslavery Democrats; as shiftless, violent, drunken laborers they were also the least suitable candidates in the county for citizenship in Bannan’s republic of free labor. He warned the workingmen of Schuylkill County to come to a sense of their true interests. "Unfortunately in this country there is a class of workmen, who blind to their own interests, will advocate at the polls, slave-labor," Bannan wrote. "They cannot or will not see that the introduction of slave labor degrades their occupation and lessens their remuneration. Not only disposed to place themselves in a position which subjects them to the imperious commands of the slave-holder, they seem content that their children should be depressed in the scale of humanity." The "class of workmen" Bannan was referring to were the Irish laborers of the lower anthracite region, or at least the more unruly elements among them. Wilmot’s opponents, Bannan announced, were "the slaves of party; the slaves of Propaganda."

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104 *Miners’ Journal*, Sept 26, 1857, italics in original
105 In general, as Gudelunas and Shade have demonstrated, Irish Catholics voted overwhelmingly Democratic, while other (mainly Protestant) ethnic groups were more likely to vote Whig, American, or Republican. *Before the Molly Maguires*, passim
106 *Miners’ Journal*, Sept 26, 1857
Unless the Irish could become more disciplined, more sober, more independent, and less Democratic, Benjamin Bannan faced the prospect of rigid social divisions in the anthracite region, which would make his dream of a middle-class republic more remote than ever. At the same time, Irish support for proslavery Democrats conjured up the prospect of national domination by slave-owning southerners and the consequent subversion of free labor in the North. By September 1857, the future of the United States was looking grim to Benjamin Bannan. "Let Packer be elected," Bannan declared, "and a shout of exultation from little Delaware to Texas, would re-echo through the Slave States. It would be another nail in the coffin of Freedom." It was therefore a major blow to Bannan when Wilmot was defeated in the October election. Democrat William Packer won the state vote by a handy margin. In Schuylkill County he won by 5,950 votes to 3,079, and Democrats were elected to most local offices as well.

The weekend before the gubernatorial election, Benjamin Bannan first mentioned in print the idea that a secret society was active in the anthracite region. This theory, which was to preoccupy him in the 1860s and 1870s, grew directly out of accusations of political corruption against Irish Catholics. Bannan's dissatisfaction at Irish Catholic bloc voting had been evident as early as 1844, and by 1856 these charges had hardened into an accusation of electoral fraud. By the following year Bannan was evidently convinced that behind the various forms of un-Americanism he had been attacking for the previous five years (including support for slavery) there lurked a mysterious secret society, the "Molly Maguires." The society was mentioned for the first time in the *Miners' Journal* of October 3, 1857. But it was not until 1862, during the ferment of the Civil War, that the Molly Maguires were linked to an organized pattern of violence. The crusade against the Molly Maguires, which has been interpreted almost solely in nativist terms of Protestant versus Catholics, had its ideological origins in a debate over slavery. Once again, this peculiar conjunction makes sense only if it is borne in mind that Bannan's immediate problem with slavery was much the same as the problem that had confronted him during the early 1850s: the threat to his society

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107 *Miners' Journal*, Sept 26, 1857
109 *Miners' Journal*, Oct 25, 1856, see also Nov 1, 1856
posed by the presence of thousands of impoverished, unskilled, undisciplined Irish workers.\textsuperscript{110}

By the time the Molly Maguire violence began, the politics of the 1850s had run its course. Despite the continued strength of anti-immigrant sentiment in Pennsylvania, there was even less chance of nativism on its own providing the grounds for a viable anti-Democratic coalition in the late 1850s than there had been in the first half of the decade. In Schuylkill County the various elements in the anti-Democratic coalition affiliated themselves with the People's Party, a state-wide organization formed in 1858. The People's Party endorsed a protective tariff as well as opposition to slavery, and it also included nativist demands, such as a ban on the immigration of paupers and criminals, legislation against voting fraud, and strict enforcement of the naturalization laws. But by the end of the decade slavery overshadowed all other political issues, and by 1860 the People's Party had merged into the Republican Party, whose platform specifically rejected nativism.\textsuperscript{111}

In the lower anthracite region, Benjamin Bannan and his supporters campaigned for Abraham Lincoln as president and the ex-Know Nothing Andrew Curtin as governor.\textsuperscript{112} Both men won majorities not only in Pennsylvania but in Schuylkill County as well, reversing the usual pattern of Democratic victories. If ever there was a presidential election where the single issue of slavery predominated on the local as well as the national level it was in 1860. Yet, so concerned are Gudelunas and Shade to demonstrate the irrelevance of slavery to the political crisis of 1850-61 that they argue, most unconvincingly, that the central issue in the election of 1860 was the tariff.\textsuperscript{113} Nowhere are the problems inherent in the ethno-religious interpretation more evident than in this account of the election of 1860. In that year, more decisively than ever, local politics

\textsuperscript{110} Cf Wayne G Broehl Jr, \textit{The Molly Magures} (Cambridge, Mass, 1964)

\textsuperscript{111} The fourteenth clause of the Republican platform in 1860 read as follows “The Republican Party is opposed to any change in our naturalization laws, or any state legislation by which the rights of citizens hitherto accorded to immigrants from foreign lands shall be abridged or impaired, and in favor of giving a full and efficient protection to the rights of all classes and citizens, whether native or naturalized, both at home or abroad” Quoted in Foner, \textit{Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men}, 257


\textsuperscript{113} Gudelunas and Shade, \textit{Before the Molly Magures}, 71, 78
was shaped by national developments, and politics at both levels was determined by slavery, the only issue cohesive enough to bring about a new political coalition to replace the vacuum left by the collapse of the Whigs. After a decade of engagement with the related issues of labor, immigration, and slavery, Benjamin Bannan had emerged as the leading Republican spokesman in Schuylkill County. His political odyssey was complete.

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