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The Know-Nothing Party - I

Lead: In 1854 the Know-Nothing Party riding a wave of anti-immigrant prejudice, rolled up victory after victory. Except for the pre-Civil War Republicans, it was the best third party showing in American history.

Intro.: A Moment in Time with Dan Roberts.

Content: The United States is nation of immigrants. Beginning with the Jamestown Colony in 1607, successive waves of aliens have sought a new life and prosperity in what they considered to be a land of opportunity.

Crowding out the original Native Americans, whose ancient ancestors actually may have themselves emigrated from the eastern Asia, more strangers arrived each decade in search of a new home. Within a couple of generations, their families now firmly established, many of the newcomers considered themselves "native Americans" and looked with barely tolerant superiority at the next batch of immigrants spilling onto the docks of Boston, Philadelphia, and New York.

The stream of immigration was fairly small, steady and until the 1840s was filled with English-speaking Protestants who usually could get by on their own, but, beginning in 1846,

social unrest in Germany and the Irish Potato Famine turned the steady stream into a flood. Between 1845 and 1854 nearly three million immigrants, split almost evenly between Germans and Irish, poured into northern ports. They spoke little English, were usually dirty and rumped, and brought with them diseases such as cholera. To many established Americans the most sinister feature of this new immigrant wave was that most of the newcomers were Roman Catholic and, in this view, owed allegiance to a foreign power, the Pope in Rome.

The reaction to this burst of immigration was immediate. Pamphlets and oratory whipped up sentiment against the new foreigners,

but translating those feelings into political action took more time. The two major political parties, the Whigs and the Democrats, dominated national, state and local politics and up to that point no third party had had much of an impact. Yet by 1853, building on growing nativist sentiment, the Order of United Americans was hard at work establishing lodges all over the country. These lodges were secret and only native-born Protestants need apply for membership. An old legend has it that members were told to answer anyone who asked questions about their secret meetings with the words "I do not know," or "I know-nothing." The political movement now had a name.

Next time: The Know-Nothings score big time victories.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

Baker, Jean H. *Ambivalent Americans: The Know-Nothing Party in Maryland*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977.

Mulkern, John R. *The Know-Nothing Party in Massachusetts: The Rise and Fall of a People's Movement*. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1990.

Wernick, Robert, "The Rise and Fall of a Fervid Third Party," *Smithsonian* (November 1996, Volume 27, Issue 8): 150-158.

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