

The Know-Nothing Party - II

Lead: Formed to resist the flood of immigrants in the 1850s, the Know-Nothing Party made prejudice pay big dividends at the ballot box.

Intro.: A Moment in Time with Dan Roberts.

Content: By 1853 the Order of United Americans had chapters in towns all over the country. Riding a wave of resentment against the huge influx of German and Irish immigrants, the Order was better known as the Know-Nothing movement. Legend says that it took its

name from what members said to questions about the Order's secret meetings - "I know nothing."

In 1854 the Know-Nothings formed the American Party, ran hundreds of candidates for local, state and national office, and scored big victories. Voters were worried about an economic downturn, runaway inflation caused in part by the gold flowing out of the California gold fields, and growing crime in major cities, and were frustrated about problems created by expanding industry and the spread of railroads. These so-called nativists were generally white and Protestant and they resented the new immigrant's willingness to vote in blocs. Sensing the hostility of their surroundings, Irish

Catholics and Germans for sheer survival voted together to elect big city machine politicians who promised them concessions and protection.

In the off-year elections of 1854, with little organization and few national leaders, the Know-Nothings elected over a hundred congressmen, eight governors and countless local officials. In Massachusetts for instance, the governor, all state senators and US congressmen, and 376 of the 379 state representatives were Know-Nothings. Their legislative program, born as it was of bigotry and prejudice, proved to be surprisingly progressive. Except in the deep South, Know-Nothings opposed slavery. In Massachusetts, the Know-Nothing

General Court desegregated the public schools and passed laws forbidding imprisonment for debt and allowing married women to bring legal suit in court, to make wills, and to work without the consent of their husbands.

The Know-Nothing movement almost immediately began to die. It had been a coalition of wildly varied interests united only by a temporary upsurge of immigration. In 1856 the Party's candidate, former President Millard Fillmore, only carried one state. That wave of new immigrants had begun to recede, its threat seemed less imposing and Americans had moved on to more important concerns. War over slavery and state sovereignty loomed just over the horizon and a

new, vigorous political movement, the Republicans, had risen out of the Midwest to take the place of the dying Whig Party. The spectacular career of the Know-Nothing Party was over but similar and periodic explosions of anti-immigrant fervor have been an ironic but regular feature of the political life of this nation of immigrants.

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.

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