

A City upon a Hill

From the beginning, Americans' perceptions about who they were and their hopes for whom they wanted to be necessarily embodied a deep strain of ambivalence. If this New World "shall be as a City upon a Hill," a beacon to the world, as the Puritan John Winthrop devoutly hoped it would become, where the "eies of all people are upon us," how do we judge others of varying degrees of difference who want to come among us? How do we decide who does and does not fit the decreed model, religiously or ethnically or racially, and with what justification? If the Puritans had come for the freedom to practice their religion, could others of different faiths—or those who, like Roger Williams, the religious separatist who professed "soul liberty" not subject to the established authorities—come to practice theirs in the Puritan community as well?

Winthrop's sermon, delivered on the *Arabella* during, or perhaps before, the long Atlantic crossing in 1630, professed that "when God gives a special commission He looks to have it strictly observed in every article," a hefty self-imposed burden. But it was also Winthrop, as governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony, who decided seven years later that Anne Hutchinson was "not fit for our society," not because she was a theologically liberal heretic—far from it—but because, like Williams, she was an anticlerical dissenter who, in Winthrop's judgment at her trial, had "spoken divers things, as we have been informed, very prejudicial to the honour of the churches and ministers thereof."¹

Hutchinson's crime, if that's what it was, came closer to civic sedition than to religious heresy. Hutchinson, a midwife, had been running weekly meetings of women who, in trusting their own theological reasoning, chafed against the doctrines and laws of what had become an established state church in a society where only church members could vote, where church attendance was compulsory, and where inner religious belief had to bend to the Bible and the ministers officially ordained to interpret it. "As I understand it," she is said to have replied to one of the charges leveled against her, "laws, commands, rules, and edicts are for those who have not the light which makes plain the pathway." So what was her offense? She had the light, it just wasn't theirs. But that statement made it easy for her judges to conclude that she was a "thing not tolerable nor comely in the sight of God, nor fitting for your sex."²

The ambivalence about who belonged was almost inevitable. Americans were creating something out of a wilderness, a vast territory of great natural riches and beauty hidden from European civilization from the beginning of time, and now providentially revealed. Some thought that what the country was or would be was a given, but in fact Americans were making it up as they went along. "The land was ours," as Frost wrote, "before we were the land's."³ To the west was all that open territory, ready (if you ignored the Indians) for the taking, a gift from God. It wasn't surprising, then, that a lot of Americans believed they were divinely blessed above all others. As early as 1837, in a Phi Beta Kappa address at Yale, the influential Yankee clergyman Horace Bushnell observed that America's God-ordained destiny was no "less sublime than to be opened, at a certain stage of history, to become the theater wherein better principles might have their action and free development. Out of all the inhabitants of the world, too, a select stock, the Saxon, and out of this the British family, the noblest of the stock, was chosen to people our country; that our eagle, like that of the prophet, might have the cedars of Lebanon, and the topmost branches of the cedars, to plant by his great waters."⁴

It soon became clear to people like Bushnell that Providence alone wouldn't take care of that. The chosen people of the New World would have to do a little choosing of their own. While "the free mingling and crossing of races would doubtless be a great benefit to the stock," Bushnell continued, "the constant importation, as now, to this country, of the lowest orders of people from abroad, to dilute the quality of our natural manhood, is a sad and beggarly prostitution of the noblest gift ever conferred on a people. Who shall respect a people, who do not respect

their own blood? And how shall a national spirit, or any determinate and proportionate character, arise out of so many low-bred associations and coarse-grained temperaments, imported from every clime?"

Maybe, in fact, the American settlers had been led to a new Garden of Eden, even the original Garden, as the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith Jr. regarded Jackson County, Missouri, the place where, in the 1830s, Mormons "planned to build a kingdom of God that would eventually redeem the United States and, finally, the world."⁵ But if this was a providentially bestowed Garden, a place of perfection, soon to be narrowed to Anglo-Saxon perfection, as Bushnell already had it, and as generations of subsequent American thought would have it, then it would inevitably also be beset by snakes, demons, and, of course, witches. Principal among the despoilers, depending on the time and place, was an ever-changing list of outsiders. Benjamin Franklin's worries (in 1751) about the effect that "Palatine boors" might have in "Germanizing" Pennsylvania echoed controversies dating back to the first decades of the eighteenth century, when Mennonites, having fled Swiss persecution, first to Alsace, then to London, began, along with a growing number of Germans, to emigrate to the New World. Pennsylvania governor William Keith (in 1723) had at first welcomed German workers from New York who chafed over that colony's defective land titles and what they regarded as abusive treatment. But the resulting spike in immigration to Keith's colony quickly generated fear—what one writer called "a panic"—that "Pennsylvania might cease to be a British province. . . . [The] great number of foreigners from Germany, strangers to our language and constitution [Governor Keith told his council], daily dispersed themselves immediately after landing, without procuring certificates from whence they came or what they are [a practice that] might be of very dangerous consequence, since by the same method, any number of foreigners, from any nation whatever, enemies as well as friends, might throw themselves upon us."⁶

The colonial assembly passed a bill prohibiting all foreign immigration, but Keith vetoed it as excessively harsh. In the meantime, "to counteract the German element, every inducement on the part of England was employed to encourage the transportation of English servants to the colonies," which, among other things, meant shipping convicts as indentured servants: seven years' service for ordinary crimes, fourteen years for those sentenced to death. That in turn led to new measures in the colony prohibiting the importation of "Old persons, Infants, Maimed, Lunatics or Vagabonds or Vagrant persons."⁷ But by midcentury close

to half the colony was of German extraction, and so much German was spoken and read, so much business conducted in German, and so many books published in German—in 1732, Franklin himself printed Philadelphia's first German-language newspaper (which soon failed)—that despite all the attempted restrictions, German probably came as close to being an accepted language as Spanish is in contemporary California or Texas. In 1831, barely a century after Keith vetoed the anti-German immigration bill, the Commonwealth authorized bilingual education in German and English in Pennsylvania's public schools. "I suppose in a few years [Franklin had wryly observed in 1753] it will also be necessary in the Assembly to tell one-half of our legislators what the other half says. In short, unless the stream of importation can be turned from this to the other colonies . . . they will soon so outnumber us, that all the advantages we have, will, in my opinion, be not able to preserve our language, and even our Government will become precarious."⁸

The ambivalence about foreign immigrants—often the vacillation from welcome to calls for exclusion in the same generation or even the same decade—bordered on the commonplace. America needed to attract people to work—if not the Palatine German then the East London cut-purse and prostitute. Jefferson's words in the Declaration of Independence indicted King George for trying to "prevent the population of these States; for that purpose obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither, and raising the conditions of new Appropriations of Lands." But six years later, in 1782, Jefferson warned of the dangers of immigrants who knew nothing of democracy. This country, he wrote, "is a composition of the freest principles of the English constitution, with others derived from natural right and natural reason. To these nothing can be more opposed than the maxims of absolute monarchies [whose emigrants] will bring with them the principles of the governments they leave, imbibed in their early youth; or, if able to throw them off, it will be in exchange for an unbounded licentiousness, passing, as is usual, from one extreme to another. It would be a miracle were they to stop precisely at the point of temperate liberty."⁹ Democracy itself might not be capable of assimilating these alien elements.

What made such doubts most notable was their articulation, even in this case by the author of the Declaration of Independence, on behalf of a nation among whose founding ideals was the belief that all men were born equal and presumably had equal potential. It was the radicalism of the American Revolution and the great ideals in whose name it was

fought that resounded around the world, made us that city upon a hill, and gave the New World its special meaning. In revolution we became Americans by choice, no longer Englishmen. From that moment on, becoming an American was far removed from the classic determinants of nationality and citizenship—nativity, ethnicity, religion. It was and would continue to be an affirmative act, something previously unknown in the world and in many places still unknown.

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In loud echoes of the doctrinal battles of the Old World, the most suspect of the immigrant elements were Catholics. The first Americans, in New England as in New York and Virginia, were children of the Reformation and the brutal battles that accompanied it. What nearly all shared, despite their differences, was “the fear and hatred of Rome.”¹⁰ In his draft of the first postindependence New York State Constitution (1777), John Jay, one of three authors of *The Federalist* and later the first chief justice of the United States, included the requirement that, in order to be naturalized, immigrants “shall take an oath of allegiance to this State, and abjure and renounce all allegiance and subjection to all and every foreign king, prince, potentate, and State in all matters, ecclesiastical as well as civil.”¹¹

Jay, the grandson of French Huguenots persecuted by Catholics, was a firm believer that Catholics couldn’t maintain their allegiance to the Church, and hence the pope, and still be loyal American citizens. As a member of the New York provincial congress, Jay wanted to “build a wall of brass around the country for the exclusion of Catholics” and proposed harsh restrictions in the New York charter but was deterred by his fellow delegate, Gouverneur Morris, among others. The singular American exception was Maryland under Lord Baltimore and the Calvert family, which was founded as a haven for English Catholics. But Maryland quickly became embroiled in religious strife and Puritan persecution of Catholics and Anglicans, which didn’t end until the restoration of the fifth Lord Baltimore as colonial governor in 1658. He swore that he was a Protestant.

America’s providential destiny, of course, also encompassed the question of slavery and race, which would haunt the nation from its beginnings. Indians, “not taxed” (and fit for removal or worse), and black slaves were not citizens at all. Blacks were officially recognized in one of the Constitution’s great compromises—and in the first example in

a long history of census tampering and race confusion—as three-fifths of a person. In 1790, Congress passed one of the world’s most liberal naturalization laws, requiring only two years of residence in the country—extended to five in 1795—and one year’s residence in a particular state, provided that the applicant was a white person of “good moral character.” The law allowed any court, state or federal, to grant citizenship, a policy that “led to a motley array of more than five thousand high and low courts exercising such jurisdiction by the turn of the twentieth century.”¹² The law’s liberality probably wasn’t surprising since eight members of the Constitutional Convention were born abroad, as were eight signers of the Declaration of Independence—and who knows how many thousands of other Americans of their time?¹³

Nonetheless, it took only three years for the nation to have second thoughts, not for ethnic or religious reasons but because President John Adams and his Federalist allies in Congress were determined to check the growth of the immigrant vote, most of which went to the Jeffersonian Republicans. Their instrument was the Naturalization Act of 1798, part of the Alien and Sedition Acts, which lengthened the period required for citizenship to fourteen years and authorized the president to deport foreigners considered dangerous. In 1802, after winning the presidency in 1800, the Jeffersonians revised the Naturalization Act to restore the five-year requirement. Again, as in 1790 and 1795, naturalization was limited to “free white persons” of “good moral character,” limits that wouldn’t change, for blacks, until the adoption of the Fourteenth Amendment after the Civil War and, for Asians, until the middle of the twentieth century.¹⁴

As a practical matter, the question of naturalization wasn’t all that important in the antebellum years because citizenship was still primarily a state matter in which the federal government concerned itself very little, if at all. The issue was left, with virtually no guidance, to those hundreds of state and local judges. Nor did the question of citizenship include immigration. Until well after the Civil War, in the words of the official historian of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, “the United States achieved a policy of free and open immigration largely by failing to legislate on the subject.”¹⁵

But the questions, confusion, and controversy about race that began even before the 1787 convention—at first just about the black-white/north-south dichotomy, then about a growing multiplicity of ethnicities—have long since crept into countless national policy areas, including, for the past 150 years, questions about immigration. Who qualified

as white—not just in the one-drop-of-blood sense—but in determining whether Arabians or Armenians or Syrians or Punjabis or Filipinos or Hawaiians were white and thus eligible for naturalization? Was the Mexican white or, as part (or maybe largely) Indian, something else? (Under the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, Mexicans in the territory taken from Mexico after the war in 1848 could choose to become Americans, so essentially they became white.) Was a person who was half white and one-fourth Chinese and one-fourth Japanese white? From the last decade of the nineteenth century to the 1940s, federal courts confronted more than fifty such questions.¹⁶ In the early years of the twentieth century, Congress drew a map with a line around northern Europe to help determine which people from which “nations” should be eligible for naturalization and immigration and which should not. In the case of Mexicans, Latino advocates who “fought to be included on one side or the other of the American racial divide” have alternately played it both ways, first pushing for whiteness to avoid the stigma of being seen as black, then for nonwhiteness when affirmative action seemed to open the way for significant economic or political advantages.¹⁷

Through much of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, Americans, if they thought at all about people from other countries, tended indiscriminately to conflate race, ethnicity, nationality, and class. The definitions changed over time as new generations of immigrants and their descendants from southern and eastern Europe—Jews, Italians, Slavs, Greeks—became Americanized and thus inferentially whitened. But for most of three centuries there was also the fuzzy line between American (meaning white Anglo-Saxon Protestant) and other (meaning mostly Catholic and, when it suited the occasion, Jewish). And as the Irish, impoverished by the potato famine, began to arrive in great numbers in the late 1840s and 1850s, and a great many others—Germans and French for the most part—came after massive crop failures on the continent and the failed revolutions of 1848; as the Chinese came to California during and after the Gold Rush; and as some eighty thousand Mexicans in the newly annexed territories of the Southwest became American citizens after the Mexican War and the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, the line became brighter and the backlash more virulent.

Roughly 143,000 immigrants arrived in the United States in the 1820s. In the 1830s, that number jumped to nearly 600,000; in the 1840s, to 1.7 million; and in the 1850s, the decade before the Civil War, to 2.3 million, including an exploding proportion from Ireland. In the two decades between 1820 and 1840, about 700,000 Irish immigrants

arrived in the United States; in the next two decades, more than 1.7 million came. By 1850, counting the second and third generations, New York was more than one-third Irish. In Boston, from 1845 to 1855, the Irish-born population increased from one in fifty to one in five. There were similar increases in other eastern cities.¹⁸

It would have been surprising if those millions, many of them radically different from the way older Americans imagined themselves, had been greeted with complete equanimity. The newly arrived Irish, many of them with limited skills and education, were crammed into filthy, overcrowded housing, sometimes ten to a room, sometimes in backyard sheds that once housed tools or animals, as thousands of Latinos would be 150 years later. As William Shannon, himself the son of Irish immigrants, put it in his masterful history of the American Irish, they “challenged the code of the community at almost every point.” In competing for jobs, they threatened “the old occupational structure of master, journeyman and apprentice.” They did not seem to practice the Yankee virtues of thrift, self-denial, and sobriety. Although the Irish were a crucial source of labor for the nation’s expanding industries, the proper people, who then called themselves “native Americans,” saw “that the Irish . . . posed problems in housing, police, and schools; they meant higher tax rates and a heavier burden in the support of poorhouses and private charitable institutions. . . . They seemed drunken, dissolute, permanently sunk in poverty.”¹⁹ At the very least, said a writer in the establishmentarian *North American Review* in 1835, we had better consider “the ignorant and improvident refugee in the light of a pupil whom we have five years given us to form into an intelligent and virtuous citizen. If we fail in any considerable degree to attend to his wants, to supply his defects, to enlighten his darkness, we must of course expect that our chalice will be returned in time to our own lips, charged with the ingredients of insubordination, recklessness and venality.”²⁰

Assimilation rarely worked as smoothly as succeeding generations imagined it. As Shannon and others have pointed out, “appearances were partly deceiving.”²¹ It was rare for first-generation Irish workers to have rags-to-riches stories. To rise economically in the customary American fashion (which, in fact, was not all that customary), said Shannon, “demanded more in terms of relentless perseverance, financial acumen, familiarity with new ways, and plain good luck than the first Irish generations were able to summon from themselves or their environment. . . . But within the bounds of what was humanly possible, the Irish laborers and housemaids of the first generation were not so

thrifless as the native stereotype of them suggested.”²² But the stereotype, which began to spread even before the great midcentury wave of Irish immigration, stuck. It would be applied to other generations of immigrants from that day to this, often based on the same realities of immigrant life. To be that special creature, the American, there always had to be the Other.

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The anti-immigrant, anti-Irish, anti-Catholic reaction began well before the peak years of Irish immigration, much of it—though hardly all—concentrated in the northeastern states and directed against the Irish and German Catholics who had concentrated there, men and women who, in their drinking and debauchery, seemed to have no respect for the Puritan mores around them (whiskey for the Irish, as the cartoonists portrayed it, beer for the Germans). In August 1834, a nativist mob, many with Indian-style painted faces, broke into the Ursuline convent and school in Charlestown, near the site of the battle of Bunker Hill across the Charles River from Boston, and torched it. The spark was the rumor that a young nun, a former Protestant, was being held there against her will. But much of the fuel was provided by increasingly virulent sermons by prominent Protestant ministers, among them the celebrated Reverend Lyman Beecher (father of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Henry Ward Beecher), who warned of the dangers of creeping “Popery” and foreign immigration. A few years earlier, Beecher had accepted the presidency of Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati to carry on his battle against what he and many others were certain was a popish plot, perhaps with the support of the Hapsburg emperors and other European despots, to swamp the American West with a flood of Catholic immigrants and destroy American democracy. Beecher had come east on a speaking tour to raise money and sound the alarm.

What made the Ursuline convent a particularly inviting target was that it had been educating both Catholic girls and the daughters of upper-crust liberal Boston Protestants, most of them Unitarians, which added class animosity to religious hatred. As a dozen nuns and sixty pupils fled out a back door, and as the growing crowd of spectators cheered, the mob burned the place nearly to the ground. In the days following, they returned to torch whatever was left of the Ursuline property, while other rioters roamed through Boston. The violence was widely condemned by proper Bostonians, even by ministers like Beecher,

who a few days earlier had fanned the flames. “The soul sickens,” said the *Boston Evening Transcript*, “the heart grows faint—the whole man is unmanned, at the very thought of the abomination. The perpetrators of the outrage must be ferreted out, and summarily punished as they merit.” But the arson trial of the “perpetrators”—those who were brought to trial—was so slanted against the prosecution and so laced with further rumors about the Catholic iniquities at the convent that the jury quickly acquitted them.²³

Two years later, in 1836, perhaps prompted by the Charlestown savagery and the story about the captive nun that helped provoke it, came the publication of *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk, as Exhibited in a Narrative of Her Sufferings During a Residence of Five Years as a Novice and Two Years as a Black Nun, in the Hotel Dieu Nunnery in Montreal*, a purportedly true story similar to hundreds of other priest-nun scandal tales dating back to the Middle Ages. (Monk’s story had been preceded shortly before by the publication of Rebecca Theresa Reed’s much less sensational *Six Months in a Convent*, which was about her brief sojourn with the Charlestown Ursulines.)²⁴ In *The Awful Disclosures*, the innocent Maria, a Protestant convert to Catholicism, was told by her mother superior that her duty “was to obey the priests in all things; and this I soon learnt, to my utter astonishment and horror, was to live in the practice of criminal intercourse with them.”²⁵ The priests weren’t allowed to marry and sacrificed their worldly pleasure for the faith, she was told. Thus it was the nuns’ duty, in this clerical harem (she said it was housed in a great gothic edifice with secret doors and hidden passageways, including one from the priests’ seminary nearby), to sacrifice for them. After being impregnated by a priest, she said, she escaped from the Hotel Dieu with her baby and fell into the welcoming arms of some New York Protestants.

The 1830s and 1840s saw the publication of a long list of anti-Catholic tracts and books, among them Beecher’s own *Plea for the West* and a collection of letters to the *New York Observer* by the painter Samuel F.B. Morse, who was then working on his telegraph, about the alleged Catholic plot to conquer America. Morse called it *A Foreign Conspiracy against the Liberties of the United States*.²⁶ But far and away the biggest sensation was *The Awful Disclosures*. The book, heavily promoted by the nativist journal the *American Protestant Vindicator*, went through scores of printings in the United States and abroad—it sold some three hundred thousand copies within months of its publication, feeding the anti-Catholic passions that had been simmering for

years and prompting an equally inflammatory sequel. A modern edition is still available. Shannon called it the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of the Know-Nothing movement.

Charlestown was only the beginning. In succeeding years, there would be more anti-Catholic, anti-Irish riots in the textile-mill city of Lawrence, Massachusetts, in Baltimore, and in New York, among other places. But the most deadly and dramatic came in Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love, in May 1844, even before the heyday of the Know-Nothings and before large numbers of Irish potato famine immigrants began to arrive. Battles over prohibition, partisan animosity, literature like Maria Monk's *Awful Disclosures*, and fear of the growing "foreign influence" of the Catholic hierarchy in Philadelphia public schools triggered a wave of anti-Catholic demonstrations that quickly turned violent. The immediate spark in Philadelphia was the partial success of Bishop Francis Patrick Kenrick's insistence that Catholic public schoolchildren not be forced to read the King James version of the Bible but be allowed to read the Catholic Douai Bible instead. He eventually got the Philadelphia school authorities to rule that children whose "parents were conscientiously opposed" to the King James version might be excused from class, which immediately produced the fear that Protestant kids might also be deprived of the Bible. It brought a manifesto from ninety-four Protestant clergymen calling "the attention of the community to the dangers which . . . threaten these United States from the assaults of Romanism."²⁷

The clergymen got help from an unlikely source: Lewis Levin, a nativist Philadelphia lawyer and politician who was the son of a Jewish South Carolina family. Said to be a brilliant orator, Levin, a leader of both the city's temperance movement and its American Republican Party, would soon be elected to Congress. As the editor of the nativist *Philadelphia Sun*, Levin appears to have been the key figure in organizing the nativist protest march into the Third Ward of the working-class (largely Irish) suburb of Kensington. As the demonstrators gathered, Levin mounted a box and called on the crowd to battle "the deleterious effects of Popish interference in the elective franchise," which predictably brought a barrage of rotten vegetables and rocks from neighboring residents, most of them Irish weavers, who drove the marchers off. In the ensuing riot, Levin appears to have done his best to calm the crowd and spare one of the churches under attack. Barely a day later, however, another nativist demonstration triggered three more days of rioting in which Protestant mobs burned homes and two churches and in which scores of people were badly beaten and several killed.²⁸

Two months later, on July 4, there was yet another nativist demonstration, staged by a crowd estimated at between five thousand and thirty thousand people, inflamed by a report that the priest of St. Philip de Neri Church in the Philadelphia factory suburb of Southwark, fearing an attack, had stored guns and ammunition in his church. (The arms delivery had in fact been legally sanctioned by Governor David Rittenhouse Porter for use by militia in defending the church.) Word about the mob, “those near the church composed of the worst class of mankind, the very dregs of the canaille of a large city,” brought the militia to restore order, though not until after a prolonged shootout outside the church with the demonstrators, who had managed to find their own cannon, and not until thousands of Catholics had fled. All told, according to one credible study, some 45 were killed in the May and July riots and 145 wounded. Most were nativists shot by the militia. Property damage was substantial.²⁹

The 1844 riots were not the first episodes of civil unrest in Philadelphia—there had already been attacks on blacks and abolitionists, and there would be more, both in Philadelphia and elsewhere on the East Coast. At the same time, as Shannon points out, each week during the spring and summer in the antebellum years, “vessels arrived in Atlantic Coast seaports carrying more Irish to America. While the battle raged intermittently in the streets between the Irish and natives, the reinforcements poured forth from steerage. The Irish were slowly winning the battle for the city against the Protestant lower class by sheer force of numbers.”³⁰ But those numbers didn’t check the nativist politics of the American Party, the American Republican Party, the fraternal Order of the Star Spangled Banner, the Order of United Americans, the American Patriot Party, and the various other orders, clubs, groups, and publications that were part of the Know-Nothing movement of the 1850s. Predictably, the arrival of the new immigrants only reinforced the warnings of clerics like Beecher, who saw the West as the new Eden: “If the potentates of Europe have no design upon our liberties, what means the paying of the passage and emptying out upon our shores of such floods of pauper emigrants—the contents of the poor house and the sweepings of the streets—multiplying tumults and violence, filling our prisons, and crowding our poor houses, and quadrupling our taxation, and sending annually accumulating thousands to the polls to lay their inexperienced hand upon the helm of our power?”³¹

But Shannon was probably right that what had been happening on the streets in the 1830s and 1840s was increasingly channeled into political-cultural movements and into the groups that were spawned by

them, the Know-Nothings paramount amount them. Know-Nothings—the label came from the organized refusal of early adherents to answer questions about the group—were pledged to resist “the insidious policy of the Church of Rome, and all other foreign influence against our republican institutions [and] to place in all offices of honor, trust, or profit, in the gift of the people, or by appointment, none but native-born Protestant citizens”³²

The Know-Nothings were a strange animal, a conglomerate of largely Protestant blue-collar workers in the Order of the Star Spangled Banner and similar fraternal Masonic-like organizations. Beginning as the Native American Party in New York—in most places it ultimately called itself the American Party—it drew in part on the remains of the Whigs (who were fracturing over slavery), in part on the status anxieties of an urbanizing age, in part on reaction to high levels of Catholic immigration, and in part on reaction to (or avoidance of) the bitter sectional battles over slavery in the admission of new states in the western territories. In retrospect, the American Party also served as a halfway house for voters confused by the crazy quilt of parties growing out of the slavery dispute and the fight over the new territories, or abandoning the old parties on the way to the new Republican Party in 1860. In the 150 years since, it’s also become clearer that religious bigotry was hardly the only contributing impulse to the formation and success of the movement.³³ Among working men and women, many of whom were themselves badly exploited, there was a genuine fear that foreign immigration would jeopardize their jobs and welfare, and would be used to further undermine their rights and wages. But whatever the prime impulse, the core of the American Party program was nativist, rooted in a fear of “the imminent peril of Freedom, both from internal and external foes,” perhaps even fear for the Union itself. The call, as in the platform of the Massachusetts party, was for:

1. An essential modification of the naturalization laws, so that the immigrant shall not be permitted to exercise the elective franchise until he shall have acquired a knowledge of our language, our laws, and institutions, by a residence in this country of at least 21 years.
2. Stringent penalties against the fraudulent transfer of naturalization papers, and such a description of the peculiarities of the person applying for naturalization as shall render such transfer impossible.

3. Opposition to all attempts to establish foreign military or political organizations to perpetuate old national prejudices; but encouragement of such a policy as shall tend to assimilate the foreign population, in sentiment and feeling, with the mass of American citizens.
4. Efficient laws to prevent the deportation of criminals and paupers, by foreign authorities, to our shores; but a hospitable reception to the persecuted and oppressed of every clime.
5. The withholding of grave diplomatic and political trusts from persons of foreign birth.
6. The right to worship God according to the dictates of one's conscience to be preserved inviolate. Resistance to any politico-ecclesiastical hierarchy, which, through its agents, be they pope, bishops or priests, who attempt to invade this right, or acquire political power. Hence, we rebuke all attempts to appropriate the public funds to the establishment of sectarian schools, all attempts to exclude the Bible as a text-book therefrom, and all attempts to wrest from the laity and give to the priesthood the control of church property. We also rebuke in indignant terms such sentiments as those put forth by the representatives of the Papal Power. That "Protestantism has no rights in the presence of Catholicism," "that Religious liberty is only to be endured until the opposite can be established with safety to the Catholic world," and that "the Catholics of America are bound to abide by the interpretation put upon the constitution of the United States, by the Pope of Rome."
7. That the Bible as the source and fountain of all true and rational liberty should be made the basis of all popular education, and should be open to, and in the hands of every man, woman and child. And the man or men who may attempt directly or indirectly to shut it out of our schools, or to keep it from the hands and hearts of our people or any portion of them, should be deemed guilty of a crime against society, and of treason against liberty itself.³⁴

There were other versions of the creed, though the underlying anxieties and motifs were fundamentally the same: "The strange, cruel monster of Rome," as one tract put it, "can never amalgamate with the fair and beautiful form of America. Liberty and Despotism are two eternal

opposites.”³⁵ Some party documents called for “the repeal of all Naturalization Laws,” the election of “none but native Americans to office,” “war to the hilt on political Romanism,” and “more stringent and effective Emigration [*sic*] Laws,” among other planks.³⁶ In Pennsylvania, in what (again) seemed more like a Masonic initiation than enlistment in a political party, prospective members were required to swear “before Almighty God, and these witnesses, that you will not divulge or make known to any person whatever the nature of the questions I may ask you here, the names of the persons you may see here or that you know that such an organization is going on as such, whether you become a member or not!” They were also to promise on oath “to elect only native-born citizens to office, to the exclusion of all foreigners and Roman Catholics.”³⁷

The focus on excluding immigrants from elected office and denying them voting rights, either for twenty-one years or maybe forever, was partly based on pure nativism—call it a principled belief in the incompatibility between the freedom of republican government and the despotic power of the Church—but also in part on the fact that the Democratic Party was more hospitable to immigrants and Catholics, organized them, and got the lion’s share of immigrant votes. Shortly after the election of 1844, in which Democrat James K. Polk narrowly beat Henry Clay, the Whig, Horace Greeley’s Whiggish *New York Tribune* complained:

Our Country’s greatest living Statesman has just been defeated . . . and the benignant system of Nation Policy with which he is identified has been frustrated by what is termed the Foreign Vote. That is, the Man and the Measures preferred by a large majority of Americans born have been crushed by the vote of Two Hundred Thousand Immigrants from Europe whom we have admitted to an equality of Political Rights with us. While we Americans born are nearly all in some degree educated and informed on questions of National policy, these are in good part unable to read or write, and many of them unable to speak our language. While we very generally consider and discuss the great Political questions of the day, these concern themselves very little, inform themselves less, with regard to the Tariff, the Annexation of Texas, or whatever may be the ruling topics of the time, but band together as Irishmen, Germans, or whatever they may be, to secure personal or clannish ends.³⁸

None of this should sound strange in the context of the nation’s current immigration debates, with their demands for stricter immigration laws, a “Real ID,” policies to discourage voting by immigrants and ethnic minorities who might not be citizens (or maybe are), and insistence on Christian—meaning Protestant—Bible reading in public schools. There

are only two major differences. One is that many states in the antebellum years *did* allow noncitizens to vote—as did the federal government in the Kansas and Nebraska territories under the 1854 act organizing the territories, providing that the voter intended to become a citizen and took an oath to support the Constitution. The other difference is that the Know-Nothing parties of the 1850s were often pro-labor in their economic positions—many of the rank and file were clerks, mechanics, teachers, and preachers, nearly all Protestant, of course. They condemned “all attempts to appropriate the public funds to the establishment of sectarian schools,” which meant Catholic schools, since the public schools were, for all intents and purposes, Protestant schools.

In Massachusetts, the party also strongly opposed slavery, favored the regulation of industry and laws to protect workers, and promoted women’s rights. But when they won control of the governor’s office, both houses of the legislature, and most other high state offices, the Know-Nothings, few of whom had any political experience, proved themselves hopelessly incompetent and often corrupt. Thus, despite the passage of some appeals to Congress on tightening naturalization laws, so little was accomplished that the session became a joke. The legislature’s so-called Nunnery Committee, in its attempt to investigate convents, not only visited schools, convents, and colleges, but lavishly entertained itself at dinners in the company of women who were associated with nunneries only in the Elizabethan sense. (The diocesan *Boston Pilot* took delight in pointing out that one committee member had visited nuns “of the type who got him intoxicated and stole \$71 from him.”) Most of the Know-Nothing legislators did not survive the next election.³⁹

Notwithstanding the mess in Massachusetts, what may be most telling about the Know-Nothings in their various political incarnations is the degree of electoral success they quickly achieved and how quickly they vanished as a political movement. In the short ten years of their existence—roughly the decade of the 1850s—they elected not only governors in Delaware and Massachusetts, but also captured all the top state offices as well as a majority in their legislatures. In the mid-1850s, 43 of the 234 members of the U.S. House were Know-Nothings. Know-Nothings also held mayoral and other city offices in Boston, Salem, Chicago, and Philadelphia. Most surprising were the elections in 1855 of American Party members J. Neely Johnson as governor of California—a majority of the legislature was also captured by nativists—and Stephen P. Webb as mayor of vigilante-plagued San Francisco. Those successes led to the growing expectation that the American Party, which would

nominate Millard Fillmore as its candidate the next year, would win the presidency in 1856. But, like the nation a few years later, the party's convention broke apart over the slavery issue, with the northern wing joining the new Republican Party in supporting John C. Fremont. In November, Fillmore won just 23 percent of the popular vote and carried only one state, Maryland, with eight electoral votes. In that same election, only fourteen Know-Nothings were elected to Congress.

Just a year earlier, Abraham Lincoln had written a letter to his long-time friend Joshua F. Speed, declaring that he was not a Know-Nothing:

How could I be? How can anyone who abhors the oppression of negroes be in favor of degrading classes of white people? Our progress in degeneracy appears to me to be pretty rapid. As a nation we begin by declaring that "all men are created equal." We now practically read it "all men are created equal, except negroes." When the Know-Nothings get control, it will read "all men are created equal, except negroes, and foreigners and catholics." When it comes to this I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretence of loving liberty—to Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocrisy.⁴⁰

Lincoln's implicit recognition of the incompatibility between nativism and the country's founding ideals would have been an appropriate epitaph for Know-Nothingism. Yet after the Civil War ended in the triumph of the industrial north, and the rate of immigration resumed its upward trend, Know-Nothing's ghost refused to rest. On the contrary, as immigration increased in the decades after the war—and as the country tried to deal with hundreds of thousands of former slaves, as the railroads and the Homestead Act opened great expanses of the West, as the cities and all they brought with them grew, and as demands from bishops for public support of parochial schools inflamed the controversies over religion in schools—questions about who belonged and who did not, about the designs of Rome, about race and nationality, and about what was and was not American became increasingly intense and unsettling. These were the same questions Crèvecoeur had tried to answer a century before. Now they were more perplexing and divisive than ever.

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The great nineteenth-century exception to the patterns of nativism in Boston and Philadelphia was the West Coast, California particularly, where most foreign immigrants were non-European and where, from the start, race and ethnicity could be more easily defined to delineate

who qualified—or might eventually qualify—as American and who didn't. The first California constitution, drafted at a convention that included Californios—Mexicans whose residence preceded annexation—and adopted in 1849, gave the right to vote to “every white male citizen of the United States, and every white male citizen of Mexico, who shall have elected to become a citizen of the United States.”⁴¹ Tellingly, in light of later controversies about official languages, it was published in both English and, as the “Constitucion del Estado de California,” in Spanish. Its forty-seven signers included one Carrillo, one Dominguez, one Rodriguez, one Covarrubias, one De La Guerra, one Pico, one Vallejo, one Sansevaine, and one Pedronena.

Because slavery and the fate of free blacks—not Mexicans, much less the Chinese, who were not yet a major presence—was the overriding issue of the time, especially in the territories, it was the question of slavery and the in-migration of blacks, free or slave, that dominated the California constitutional debate. One delegate “had heard of gentlemen having sent to the States for their negroes, to bring them here, on condition that they should serve for a specified length of time. He was informed that many had been liberated with this understanding. After serving a few years, they were to be set loose on the community. He protested against this. If the people of this Territory are to be free against the curse of slavery, let them also be free from the herds of slaves who are to be set at liberty within its borders.”⁴²

But the link with other races would soon become obvious. In the West, the nation's long-established white-black dichotomy almost immediately set the pattern for the treatment of any class of people defined as something other than white, among them the “mongrel” Latinos and the Chinese who, in 1849, were just beginning to arrive.

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Like the rest of the nation, California in the early Gold Rush era needed immigrant labor but wasn't quite sure whether to welcome Chinese workers, even for hard, dangerous low-status jobs—first in mining, then in the construction of the Central Pacific Railroad through the Sierra, later in construction of the Sacramento River levees—or to shut them out to protect white workers. Beginning in 1849, the Gold Rush brought thousands of people from every part of the world—Frenchmen and Brits across the Atlantic; Chilean miners up the West Coast; Americans traveling overland from the East or by ship down one coast,

by land across the isthmus of Panama, and by ship up the other; Australians and Chinese across the Pacific. While many were welcomed, for the Chinese the welcome quickly wore off.

Unlike the Irish in the East or even Latinos in the Southwest, the Chinese (and as they began to appear in the West, all Asians) were a truly alien breed. “Prior to the Gold Rush,” as historian H. W. Brands put it, “few Americans had ever encountered a Chinese outside the pages of Marco Polo; as a people, the Chinese seemed almost as exotic as Martians would have been to a later generation of Americans.”⁴³ They were not Christians of any sort. Their language, dress, grooming, diet, gambling, use of opium, and, paradoxically, their willingness to work incredibly long hours as contract laborers under terrible conditions put them in a class far beyond any that most Americans had ever encountered. Even black slaves were Christians and spoke English. But as more Chinese women arrived in the generation following the Gold Rush, what probably made the Chinese most “exotic” was the common practice of polygamy and the easy acceptance of prostitution, both of which were deeply offensive to most Americans—and certainly not part of any version of a city upon a hill.⁴⁴

Shortly after admission to the Union in 1850, California enacted the Foreign Miners’ License Tax Law, which imposed a twenty-dollar monthly fee—an exorbitant sum at the time—on any foreigner engaged in mining in California. The law, despite its name and its impact on angry Mexican miners, many of whom had only a few years before regarded this territory as theirs, was primarily aimed at Chinese miners. (Ironically, because it proved a major source of revenue for state and local government, and because the Chinese miners, being almost all single men, required little in the way of schools or other public services, the law briefly protected them from the exclusionary pressure of the mid-1850s.)⁴⁵ But the law proved hard to enforce and was repealed less than a year later.

That hardly ended the animosity toward “coolie laborers”—so labeled because of a misreading of the terms that bound those who were contract workers—and the “tide of Asian immigration” that Governor John Bigler warned about in his 1852 message to the legislature. The lawmakers, he said, should ask Congress for a measure prohibiting the Chinese from mining. In the interim, he also wanted another tax on foreign miners—a new version was duly enacted—and, since the Chinese would never honor an oath, he also called for the disqualification of Chinese people as jurors and witnesses in California courts. Although he didn’t specifically propose it, he also made clear his interest in some sort

of law that would more or less exclude Chinese immigration altogether. States had a right, he reasoned, to bar the entry of dangerous classes.⁴⁶

Two years later, the state Supreme Court would grant part of his wish, racially classifying Chinese with Indians, blacks, and mulattoes, thus preventing them from testifying at trials involving white people in the state's courts. In this particular case, George Hall, a white man, had been convicted of murdering a Chinese gold miner, in large part on the testimony of Chinese witnesses. The court overturned the conviction, adding the dictum that, in the words of Chief Justice Hugh C. Murray, "even in a doubtful case, we would be impelled to this decision on grounds of public policy. The same rule which would admit [the Chinese] to testify would admit them to all the equal rights of citizenship, and we might soon see them at the polls, in the jury box, upon the bench, and in our legislative halls."⁴⁷

Along the way, Murray also came up with the novel thesis that because Columbus thought that San Salvador, where he first landed, was an island in the China Sea, the Chinese were really Indians.⁴⁸ In effect, Murray's decision was a license for whites to harass and abuse Chinese immigrants, both in the goldfields and elsewhere, with near impunity. Two years after the *Hall* case, Mariposa County ordered all Chinese to leave the county. Those failing to comply were to be "subjected to thirty-nine lashes and removed by force of arms."⁴⁹ As a growing number of Chinese miners succeeded in claims abandoned by whites, there were increasing demands that the Chinese be run out, sometimes formalized in petitions and local votes in the gold country, many of them coming against a background of increasing anti-Chinese violence in the camps.

The demands didn't go unchallenged. In San Francisco and in the Central Valley, newspaper commentaries lauded the industrious, moral, and orderly Chinese—not surprisingly since many enterprises depended on them and since they were wanted for domestic labor and the hot, backbreaking work of clearing and reclaiming agricultural land. In some counties, revenue from the 1850 tax on foreign miners was the largest source of income, larger than the property tax. In the words of the *San Joaquin Republican*, a Stockton newspaper, "Have not this race of men . . . discovered new placers, and been . . . the hewers of wood and drawers of water for our citizens? In the cities are they not our attendants in our houses, and in our public rooms? Do they not wash our shirts? The Chinese, in this city alone, must expend, and thus throw into circulation, money to the amount of \$500 a day, at the very smallest calculation. This money goes into the hands of our merchants."⁵⁰

And there were protests from the Chinese themselves. After one of Governor Bigler's speeches came a pointed reminder from a leader of San Francisco's Chinese community that "when your nation was a wilderness, and the nation from whom you sprung barbarous, we exercised most of the arts and virtues of civilized life." Some showed signs that, at least when it came to absorbing American racial attitudes, the Chinese were acculturating quickly. A few months after the *Hall* decision, another representative of the Chinese community complained that "your honorable people have established a new practice. They have come to the conclusion that we Chinese are the same as Indians and Negroes, and your courts will not allow us to bear witness. And yet these Indians know nothing about the relations of society; they know no mutual respect; they wear neither clothes nor shoes; they live in wild places and [in] caves."⁵¹

Later in the decade, the California legislature debated a "Negro Exclusion Bill . . . an Act to restrict and prevent the immigrations to and residence in this State of Negroes and Mulattoes" (marked in the accompanying report as the "nigger bill"), which was similar to laws in a number of other states, most of them in the South and Midwest. Those laws, often in response to workers' petitions, were officially promoted to protect whites from cheap labor, and (paradoxically) because, as in the California proposal, "the negro is by nature indolent and in a state of freedom [and thus] becomes a ready prey to vice." This law would thus protect the state from Negro laziness and the social burdens associated with it, even as it shielded whites from competition in the labor market. But because the legislators couldn't figure out how to distinguish between "legal" black residents who had arrived before passage of the bill (it was proposed that they register and wear tags) and "illegal" immigrants who arrived after its adoption, the bill was dropped.⁵²

But that, too, was a temporary reversal. In Salem, Oregon, in 1851, a black saloon keeper and boarding house owner named Jacob Vanderpool was arrested as an illegal resident and jailed for moving into the territory in violation of a law passed by the territorial legislature in 1849 that prohibited the immigration of free blacks after it was passed. He was tried five days later, convicted, and ordered deported.⁵³ In 1857, the year of *Dred Scott*, Oregonians adopted a constitution that rejected slavery and that was in many ways respectful of civil rights (of whites), that was liberal in its voting qualifications, but that reiterated and broadened the prohibition on the entry of free blacks. "No free negro or mulatto, not residing in this State at the time of the adoption of this Constitution," it

said, “shall come, reside or be within the state, or hold any real estate, or make any contracts, or maintain any suit herein. . . . The Legislative assembly shall provide by penal laws for the removal . . . of all such negroes and mulattos.” Voters approved that provision by a margin of 8,640 to 1,081. The constitution also called for the “punishment of persons who shall bring them into the State, or employ or harbor them” and provided that “no Negro, Chinaman or mulatto shall have the right of suffrage.”⁵⁴ Oregon, like many others, wanted to be a white state.

All Negro exclusion laws eventually fell with the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868 and the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870. They nevertheless served as models for the rapidly growing movement to exclude Chinese (and later all Asians) from immigration, naturalization, and, in many parts of the nation, from the right to own property and enjoy other civil and commercial rights. In 1859, the California Supreme Court, under a different group of justices—Hugh Murray died in 1857—struck down as unconstitutional California’s “act to prevent the further immigration of Chinese or Mongolians to this State,” passed by the legislature the year before, which imposed severe penalties on anyone found guilty of helping Chinese to enter California.⁵⁵ That provision, too, presaged congressional legislation in the twenty-first century.

The drift was clear: what states like California couldn’t do under the federal Constitution, Congress could. It took just over thirty years from the Gold Rush to passage of the federal Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. The growing pressure in the West and the laws passed by territorial and state legislatures in the intervening decades had often lumped blacks with Chinese (and eventually all other non-Caucasians) on the list of races to be excluded from immigration, naturalization, and the franchise. In 1869, during debate on the Fifteenth Amendment conferring voting rights on all citizens regardless of “race, color or previous condition of servitude,” the California Democratic State Central Committee issued an “address to the Voters,” asking “Shall Negroes and Chinamen Vote in California?” a question that left no doubt about what the answer should be.⁵⁶ What was happening, said historian Najia Aarim-Heriot, was the “Negroization of the Chinese.”⁵⁷

. . .

For all the great differences through two centuries of antebellum history among the Northeast, the South, and the Midwest, and the short pre-Civil War decade of white settlement on the Pacific Coast, the fused

narratives of those histories generated an almost fully evolved nativist legacy. It's that legacy that set the terms of the nation's self-definition and its immigration and racial policies for the 150 years since. Americans had in effect been preparing for 200 years their response to the immigrant generations of the industrial age and beyond long before they had any clear idea that they were coming. The nation was a gift from God to his chosen people, but a gift that imposed great obligations. "Providence has raised up, and sustained, and qualified the Anglo-Saxon race," as one anonymous mid-nineteenth century writer put it in the *American Whig Review*, a journal that was obsessed with the subject. That Providence required its members "to perform a great work in reclaiming the world; has guided and protected them from temptation, or brought them from it purified, and ennobled by every scene of trial; and has given to them the destinies of the world."⁵⁸

What was never clear—and couldn't be clear—was whether we were engaged in the pursuit of perfection or merely engaged in its nurture and preservation. Our great institutions were themselves ambivalent. The same founding document that, within four years of its drafting, promised freedom of worship and the separation of church and state, reduced blacks to part-persons or, maybe more realistically, to nonpersons, and Indians to less than that. It guaranteed citizens' rights and protections that no prior society had ever promised, if it thought of them at all, but never fully defined who in the future would be entitled to become a citizen. Nor were we sure whether Americanism rested on acculturation, reform, education, and what the Germans called *Bildung*, or whether it would rely primarily on the screening and exclusion of undesirables by race and genes and what, in the first decades of the twentieth century, was to be selective breeding. Notwithstanding those constitutional rights and protections, would the nation's ideals permit state-imposed sterilization of inferiors—in essence doing the Lord's work on the fallopian tubes? It was around these fundamental chasms that so many of our political battles would be fought.