

1979

The Richmond Newspaper Debate Over Know-Nothingism 1854-1855

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<https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-bx5v-vp58>

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THE RICHMOND NEWSPAPER
DEBATE OVER KNOW-NOTHINGISM

1854 - 1855

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
John ^{Daniel} Schminsky

1979

APPROVAL SHEET

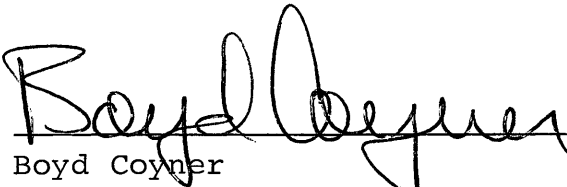
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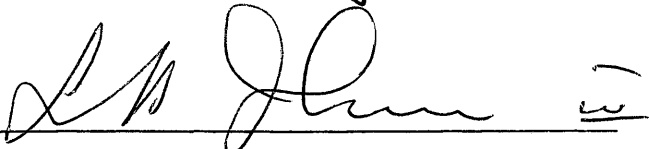


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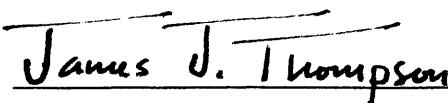
Approved, May 1979



Boyd Coyner



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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the newspaper debate that occurred in Richmond, Virginia during the year preceding the gubernatorial election of May 24, 1855. The debate was ignited by the appearance of the Know-Nothing party, which rose to oppose the Democrats as the Whig party declined in strength. The newspapers argued over three main topics: the danger posed by the foreign-born to the American government and political process, the threat of Roman Catholicism to the freedom of the American people, and the relationship of the Know-Nothing and Democratic parties with the institution of slavery and the interests of the South in general. The debate also covered such topics as political reform, the identity and origin of the Know-Nothings, and secrecy in politics.

The nativism and anti-Catholicism of the Know-Nothing press were relatively mild. The papers were primarily concerned with the political danger posed by the immigrant and Catholicism; they generally did not attack the religious practice of Catholics. Slavery was the single most important issue of the debate, and both Know-Nothing and Democratic papers expressed decidedly pro-slavery opinions. The proslavery stand of the Know-Nothing press reveals the virtual impossibility of holding a true national position in the midst of the sectional controversy.

THE RICHMOND NEWSPAPER
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

On May 24, 1855, the voters of Virginia went to the polls to elect a governor. This was something rather new for the state, since the first popular election of the governor had taken place only four years before.¹ Much had changed within those four years. In 1851 the voters had chosen between Whig and Democratic candidates. In 1855 there was no such choice; by that year the Whig party in Virginia had become a broken and weak political group in the wake of the sectional controversy. The Whigs, realizing the impossibility of winning the governor's seat, had decided against nominating a party ticket. Instead, many of them decided to throw their support to the new American, or Know-Nothing party, which had risen to oppose the Democrats.

By the time of the gubernatorial election the Know-Nothing party of Virginia was barely one year old. Although the exact date of its appearance is unknown (the party originated as a secret organization), the first Know-Nothing groups in Virginia were probably formed in the spring of 1854.² Advocating nativist, anti-Catholic, and vague Unionist principles, the party enjoyed a steady increase in strength and won a considerable number of local elections across the state in late 1854 and early 1855. The Know-Nothings had become strong enough to hold a state convention in March at Winchester

for the primary purpose of nominating a gubernatorial candidate. Their choice was a well-respected ex-Whig, Thomas S. Flournoy. The battle line was thus drawn: Flournoy versus Henry A. Wise, the Democratic candidate who had been nominated five months earlier in Staunton.

In the months between the emergence of the Know-Nothings and the gubernatorial election there occurred a fiery state-wide controversy over the tenets of Know-Nothingism. The debate centered in Richmond. In that city most of the newspapers gravitated to one or the other side and engaged in a spirited journalistic battle that grew in intensity until Wise's climactic victory over Flournoy by some 10,000 votes of over 156,000 cast. Despite Flournoy's decisive defeat, the outcome of the election had been in doubt during the previous months, and the Richmond newspapers reflected this uncertainty by expounding the principles of their respective parties with what often approached ferocity.

Four Richmond newspapers participated in the debate over Know-Nothingism. The Democrats were represented by the Enquirer, a daily paper, and the Examiner, which was published semi-weekly. The Enquirer was edited during the debate by William F. Ritchie (the son of Thomas Ritchie, former editor of the Enquirer and important state Democratic leader), Roger A. Pryor, and William W. Dunnavant.³ The senior editor of the Examiner was Robert W. Hughes.⁴ Both papers were strict party organs, violently opposing Know-

Nothingism and strongly supporting Wise's candidacy. (The Examiner had supported a rival of Wise's at the Stauton convention, but it acquiesced in Wise's nomination with only a little grumbling). The opinions of the two papers were usually very similar, although the Examiner could be more fervent than the Enquirer in its expression of anti-Northern sentiments.

The Whig and the Penny Post supported the Know-Nothing cause. The Whig was a daily paper edited by Robert Ridgway.⁵ As its name implies, the Whig was an organ of the Whig party, and it never became an official paper of the Know-Nothing party. Nevertheless, early in January 1855, the Whig realized that the Whig party could not field a candidate strong enough to threaten Wise in the election for governor. It therefore threw its support to the Know-Nothings, but always maintained that it was only joining a temporary anti-Democratic alliance. Still, once the Whig declared its position, it adopted many Know-Nothing ideas for its own and became for all practical purposes, a Know-Nothing paper.

Unlike the Whig, the Penny Post was not an anti-Democratic paper before the advent of Know-Nothingism. Hardly a year old at the outset of the Know-Nothing debate,⁶ the Post remained politically neutral until January 1855. On the seventeenth of that month the Post suddenly announced "an entire change" in its character; it said that in the future

it will devote its columns to advancing the interest of the great American Party, known to the public by the distinctive appellation of 'Know-Nothings'...[The editors] do not design to do the work negligently. They will enter upon it with zeal and will devote their entire attention to it.⁷

The Post, a daily, was edited by Hugh R. Pleasants, a former associate editor of the Whig, and William S. Easley.⁸

Little difference existed between the arguments of the Whig and Post during the debate. The Whig seemed so sympathetic toward the Post's party that the Enquirer even accused it of commanding the whole anti-Democratic conspiracy:

The Whig in virtue of age and authority directs the movements of the allied army and leads the columns of attack upon the Democracy; but the Post exhibits the most implicit obedience under command and the greatest acclarity in executing the order of its superior. If the Whig jokes, the Post screams with excessive mirth; or if the Whig thunders, the Post swells with sublime rage and beats its gong in heroic imitation.⁹

The only major Richmond paper which remained above the debate was the Daily Dispatch. Although the paper's senior editor and co-founder, James A. Cowardin, was a Whig member of the Virginia House of Delegates during the gubernatorial campaign,¹⁰ it followed a policy of strict political neutrality. The Dispatch seemed to relish its role as an interested bystander, enjoying the excitement of the debate while providing non-partisan and accurate coverage of the campaign. At various times both the Whig and Enquirer accused the paper of supporting their political foes, but the charges

were groundless.¹¹ The Dispatch remained remarkably aloof and good-humored, offering the interested voters of Virginia a calm perspective on the political turmoil which surrounded them.

The turmoil came slowly at first. In June 1854 short, scattered articles began to appear in the Richmond papers that commented on the appearance of the mysterious Know-Nothing organization. Because of the Know-Nothings' secrecy, none of the papers was quick to announce a firm opinion on the new party; but as the Know-Nothings began to oppose the Democrats in state and local elections across the United States, the Examiner and Enquirer started to voice their opposition. At first the Democratic papers ridiculed the Know-Nothings as preposterous and ephemeral. Early in the summer the Examiner charged that the Know-Nothing party was nothing more than a weak attempt to revive the Whig party, an effort that would not last two years.¹² Meanwhile the Enquirer likened the new party to a "rank and noxious weed" that flourished for a day but died soon after.¹³ The denunciations became loud even in June. In that month the appearance of nativist and anti-Catholic principles in a Know-Nothing paper in Boston drew this observation from the Examiner:

We question whether such a farrago of nonsense was ever before gravely submitted to the consideration of the people of the United States. It is the essence of everything outrageous, impracticable and vicious. It is just

such a platform of principles as a convention of fools, fanatics, lunatics, idiots, Greeleyites and devils, would put forth....¹⁴

At the beginning the Whig refused to endorse the Know-Nothings, denied any connection with them, and even attacked them, particularly for their secrecy. On June 13 the Whig responded to a Democratic charge that it had "extended fraternal arms" to the Know-Nothings. "We have had," it said, "no part nor lot in bringing about the success of this new and mysterious organization, and wish to have none of the glory appertaining to such secret and astounding victories." The Whig even added that the denunciatory criticisms made by the Democratic papers against the Know-Nothings were "justly leveled."¹⁵ Two days later the paper explained that it did not condemn the objectives of Know-Nothingism since they had not been fully revealed; but it did condemn the secret means used by the Know-Nothings to accomplish their goals--whatever they were.¹⁶ By August the Whig still admitted that it disagreed with the Know-Nothings on some subjects, but the paper was delighted that they had defeated many Democratic candidates for office. It applauded the Know-Nothings "patriotism" for electing "intelligent, useful, and industrious men" to office, and said that no matter how it differed with them over some things, "the practical results of the Know-Nothing movement, so far, have been in the highest degree worthy of commendation."¹⁷

The exact position of the Post on Know-Nothingism between June 1854 and its conversion into a Know-Nothing organ the following January is not entirely clear.¹⁸ It appears that the Post followed a neutral course until January, but that it showed some signs of favoritism toward the Know-Nothings as 1854 drew to a close. In late December the Post commented on a number of Know-Nothing principles that had been printed in a Washington paper:

A man may very honestly differ from them [the Know-Nothings], with respect to many of their views. Yet we feel assured that there is not one of them [the Know-Nothing principles] which a patriot would be ashamed to avow....If the acts of this party correspond with this creed, we know not how it will be possible for even the most censorious to find fault with them.¹⁹

While the other papers began to take sides during the initial stages of the debate, the Dispatch was content to joke about the new and mysterious phenomenon of Know-Nothingism. In July the Dispatch revealed that the secret password of the Know-Nothings--"Ktsmm-Ca-Knourumbummumus-Kellillimpst-Ksamiurimumux"--had been discovered by a Western editor by dint of his "great industry and sharpness."²⁰ A month later the paper announced that an agent of Barnum's Museum had captured a caged a live Know-Nothing, an attraction that would undoubtedly produce a handsome profit when exhibited to the curious.²¹

As the debate grew and it became evident that the Know-Nothings posed a serious threat to the Democrats, the Dispatch said with satisfaction that "the war of words between

our political neighbors grows very interesting, and we hope they will keep up the steam."²² In January the paper characterized the gubernatorial campaign as a "godsend" that was beginning "to show signs of warmth and bitterness that will be sufficiently excessive to gratify the most morbid appetite."²³ "From now until next May," said the Dispatch, "the blessed fun will last, waxing hotter and more furious as time slips on."²⁴

The campaign did indeed become "hotter and more furious." The Enquirer, Examiner, Whig, and Post all joined in a bitter debate that grew until the papers were mired in arguments over everything (or so it seemed) from immigrants to political secrecy, from Catholicism to slavery. The topics of the debate will be examined in turn in the following chapters.

NOTES FOR CHAPTER I

1. Prior to 1851, the governor was chosen by the State legislature.
2. Philip Morrison Rice. "The Know-Nothing Party in Virginia 1854-1856," The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, LV (January 1947), pp. 61-62.
3. Lester J. Cappon, Virginia Newspapers 1821-1935: A Bibliography with Historical Introduction and Notes, (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1936), p. 171.
4. Ibid., p. 174.
5. Ibid., p. 192; Richmond, Virginia Whig, March 17, 1869.
6. Richmond, Virginia Dispatch, December 19, 1854.
7. Ibid., January 18, 1855, quoting the Richmond, Virginia Post.
8. Cappon, op. cit., p. 180; Whig, March 17, 1869.
9. Richmond, Virginia Enquirer, February 1, 1855.
10. Cappon, op. cit., p. 169.
11. Dispatch, February 26, 1855.
12. Richmond, Virginia Examiner, June 16, 1854.
13. Enquirer, July 14, 1854.
14. Examiner, June 16, 1854.
15. Whig, June 13, 1854.
16. Ibid., June 15, 1854.
17. Ibid., August 15, 1854.
18. Only a few scattered issues of the Post before late February 1855 have survived. Some understanding of the Post's opinions before February can be gained particularly from a daily feature of the Dispatch called "The Spirit of the Press." This provided short summaries of the more interesting comments and items printed in the major Richmond newspapers.

19. Dispatch, December 20, 1854, quoting the Post.
20. Ibid., July 11, 1854.
21. Ibid., August 29, 1854.
22. Ibid., September 6, 1854.
23. Ibid., January 11, 1855.
24. Ibid., January 13, 1855.

CHAPTER II

THE DEBATE OVER THE IMMIGRANT

The Know-Nothing press saw much to fear from the growing number of foreign-born people in the United States. Perhaps the charges most often repeated against the immigrants by the Whig and Post were that foreigners had an inability to understand, even a natural antipathy toward, American political and religious institutions, and that they never, or only after many years, developed a sincere, patriotic feeling for their adopted homeland.

The Know-Nothing papers emphasized the "un-American" political ideology of the immigrants. The Whig said that

few immigrants to this country ever learn to shake off the prejudices against government which they have acquired under the despotisms of the Old World.... [T]hey rarely ever unlearn the impressions of early life, and exhibit almost an utter ignorance of the beneficent spirit and genius of the institutions under which they have come to dwell....¹

The Post was particularly fond of quoting the anti-immigrant statements of the Founding Fathers. It printed an extract from Jefferson's Notes on the State of Virginia to show his suspicion of the immigrant's radical tendencies and difficulty in adjusting to the American system of government:

They [immigrants] will bring with them the principles of their government, imbibed in early youth--or if able to throw them off, it will be in exchange for unbounded licentiousness--passing as usual from one extreme to the other. It would be a miracle if they were to stop precisely at the point of temperate liberty.²

The Whig flatly declared that the large majority of immigrants were "incapable of exercising the rights of free government."³

The Know-Nothing papers were especially horrified by what they considered to be blasphemous ideas held by German immigrants toward religion. By printing extracts from radical German newspapers, the papers hoped to arouse the anger of pious Virginians. The Whig revealed the ideas of a St. Louis paper which condemned religion as a "destructive cancer" and declared that clergymen must be exterminated as "ruinous vermin." The Whig also printed a portion of an article from a German paper in New Jersey which labeled religion, along with laws and morality, as "strait jackets of social life," which "have circumscribed the instinct of self-preservation." Could men with such ideas, asked the Whig, be capable of making good American citizens?⁴

The Know-Nothing papers considered residence in the United States as insufficient to promote patriotism in the immigrant. It was "the stern hand of necessity," not "an abstract admiration of foreign forms of government or the

sole desire to bear a part in the inauguration of great principles," which drove immigrants to America. Self-interest, not patriotism, was the governing motive of the foreign-born. "Changing habitation and government does not eradicate the sympathies of the man, nor change the character of his mind Even when [an immigrant] forswears his allegiance, the love of his old home still lurks in his bosom."⁵ "[S]ay what you will of the fidelity of the naturalized citizens," said the Whig, "they would not be true men, not worthy of any country, if they did not love the land of their fathers better than any under the sun."⁶

Even more distressing to the Know-Nothing press than the immigrants' lack of patriotism were their anarchistic and rebellious attitudes. The Post quoted a speech of a New York German who urged the underprivileged foreign-born to take what they needed: "When the wolf is hungry he has no consideration, and takes his food fearlessly where he finds it; it must be the same with the masses. Help yourselves, and then God will help you." The Post was indignant. Such foreigners, it said, were attacking property laws which also protected "our religion, our lives, the honor of our wives, and the chastity of our daughters."⁷ The Whig told Americans to ponder the language of the New York Citizen, which was "edited by a foreigner." The Citizen urged resistance to the forced disbandment of foreign-born

militia units in New York City.

Let every foreigner [said the Citizen] be drilled and trained, and have his arms always ready! ...The naturalized citizens will not submit. This senseless feud [over the disbandment of the militia units] must be reconciled: There must be peace: or else a war of extermination. We are here on American ground, either as citizens or as enemies.⁸

The Democratic papers responded to the Know-Nothing charges by denying that the immigrants were naturally and permanently hostile toward the American way of life. "The observation of every man," said the Enquirer, "tells him how rapidly and completely the immigrant populations are absorbed into our social system, and how readily they assimilate to the distinctive features of the national character."⁹ If immigrants retained their old beliefs and ways, it was not their fault, but that of such nativists as the Know-Nothings. The Enquirer maintained that xenophobia forced the immigrants together in self-defense and kept alive the "national prejudices and preferences" they had brought from the Old World. Know-Nothingism prevented "alien residents from becoming interested in and identified with American institutions and people, and from parting with their allegiance to the governments under which they were born."¹⁰

Both the Enquirer and Examiner maintained that, despite what the Know-Nothings said, the immigrant had a

great love for the United States and would not hesitate to defend it, even against the nation of his birth. The immigrants, said the Enquirer, had come to America to escape oppression; how could they not love the country which had given them freedom and satisfied their needs?¹¹ A letter in the Examiner asserted that the very fact that immigrants had abandoned their own lands for the United States indicated their appreciation of American institutions; moreover, in past wars, "foreigners have exhibited a devotion to our cause and a loyalty to our flag, whether as officers or soldiers, which was unsurpassed by our native born citizens."¹² The Examiner singled out the Irish as having always proved themselves worthy of America. The Irish, the paper said, "aspire to a real brotherhood, and if they share the liberty of the Republic, they also ask to share in the danger of its defense."¹³ Both Democratic papers argued that the deeds of foreign-born patriots such as Marquis de Lafayette, Friedrich Steuben, Casimir Pulaski, John Paul Jones, Richard Montgomery and Tadeusz Kosciusko¹⁴ made it clear that immigrants could develop a sincere and strong patriotic attachment to America.¹⁵

The Enquirer and Examiner usually described immigrants as varied in character: patriotic and apathetic, industrious and lazy, intelligent and stupid;¹⁶ the Know-Nothing press asserted that immigrants were of bad character and dangerous to American life. The Whig warned that the

annual influx of foreigners to this country is not only alarmingly increased, and is yet on the increase, but the character and moral worth of many of the immigrants is becoming worse. We are not so blind...as not to see that the revolutions in Europe are causing the exodus of a large portion of the worst of the European population.¹⁷

The most common Know-Nothing charge was that the majority of the immigrants were paupers and convicts. While the Post admitted that there were a few intelligent and worthy individuals among the immigrants, it said in general "they are the off-scourings of the alms house or the prisons."¹⁸ The Whig granted that the sheer physical size of America made it possible for some amount of such evil elements to be absorbed with little harm, but the growing rate of immigration was thought too great not to be considered a threat. The paper said that the territory of the United States was large, but that it could not safely accommodate forever Europe's annual "disgorging" of 300,000 paupers and criminals, while Asia, "with her countless millions of barbarians," began to "pour the tribute of a heathen emigration" on the Pacific coast.¹⁹

The Know-Nothing papers maintained that the bad condition and character of immigrants, together with their ignorance toward American institution, undermined the free political process. The poverty and ignorance of the immigrant made him a follower of demagogues, and his natural

radical tendencies drove him to support dangerous political ideas. A letter in the Post declared that foreigners threw their votes to one side "without the discrimination which belongs to those who have been brought up and schooled in the midst of our free institutions."²⁰ In response to the Democratic claim that if ignorance was a disqualification for citizenship, then many ignorant native men should be allowed to vote, the Whig took an incredible stand. Ignorance, it said, while a handicap for foreigners, was an asset for natives when executing the duties of a citizen. The Whig maintained that the more ignorant a native was, the more patriotic he tended to be. This was because the native always meant right when he voted, since he never had anything to gain personally from the ascendancy of a particular party. On the other hand, when foreigners were ignorant, which the Whig said was usually the case, they fell readily under the power of demagogues and Catholic priests.²¹ The Post quoted the New York American Times which said that "free-thinking and agitating foreigners banded together in anti-American associations, aiming to hold the balance of power and threatening by their votes to involve [the] government in a ruinous war against the united governments of Europe."²² Using Jeffersons' prestige to good advantage, the Whig printed an extract from his Notes on the State of Virginia which said that foreigners were destined to warp "the direction of American legislation and render it a

heterogeneous, incoherent, and distracted mass."²³

The Know-Nothing press attacked the Democrats for using ignorant foreign votes to overturn those of native Americans. On the day of the gubernatorial election the Post charged that the Democrats had naturalized "a vast number of foreigners" to defeat the Know-Nothings and likened such an action to the organizing of Tories by Cornwallis and Tarleton during the Revolution.²⁴ Once it was apparent that the Know-Nothings had been defeated, the Post became more bitter. It maintained several days after the election that had the Democrats rounded up intelligent and upright foreign-born voters, it would have submitted to the Democratic victory "without a murmur." But this, of course, had not been the case. The Post grumpily charged that the Democrats had searched

every hold and corner...to bring forward the very refuse of mankind, and these wretches were not only placed on a level with the free and independent people of Virginia, but were placed, by the assistance of men who betrayed their country for power, in a position to rule them with a rod of iron!²⁵

The Know-Nothing defeat was attributed by both the Whig and Post to the Democratic foreign-born voters. The Enquirer denied this explanation, pointing out that the areas of high foreign-born concentration (the cities, in

particular) were the places where the Democrats sustained their greatest losses.²⁶

In an effort to contradict the claims of the Know-Nothings, the Examiner denied that immigrants were mostly paupers, criminals, and illiterates. It claimed that the 1850 census showed that although the foreign-born made up 2.5% of Virginia's white population, they accounted for only 2.25% of the paupers and convicts. And while 12% of Virginia's native white population was illiterate, only 0.92% of the state's foreign-born was illiterate. All this, said the Examiner, "blows into atoms the pretense that we are overrun by foreign paupers and criminals."²⁷ The same paper later noted that the New York Commissioners of Immigration estimated that German immigrants had to date brought \$11,000,000 in gold and silver into the United States. While the Irish were not as rich as the Germans, the Examiner said they took good care of themselves. The Know-Nothing charge of widespread poverty among immigrants was therefore dismissed as being without foundation in fact.²⁸

A favorite tactic used by the Democratic press to discredit the nativism of the Know-Nothings was to emphasize the weakness of the immigrant influence. While the columns of the Know-Nothing papers continuously contained statistics purporting to show the threatening numbers of immigrants

entering the United States, the Democrats countered with statistics of their own, presenting immigrants as only a small fraction of the population; instead of being a group to be scorned and feared, they were to be pitied for their weakness. Both Democratic papers pointed out the small number of immigrants in Virginia to demonstrate that Know-Nothingism had no reason for existence in the state. The readers of the Examiner and Enquirer were constantly told that foreigners could not possibly be a threat in a state where only 23,000 of 1,400,000 people within its boundaries were foreign-born.²⁹ The motto of the Know-Nothings -- "Americans should rule America" -- was labeled by the Enquirer as meaningless. It said that with such a small and slowly growing foreign-born population (the paper predicted that the foreign-born would make up only 17% of the American population in 1900), America could not possibly be ruled by anyone else but Americans.³⁰

The Know-Nothing papers frequently mentioned the economic dangers allegedly produced by immigrants. The Post and Whig discussed the competition of foreign labor at length. The Post charged that many immigrants came to the United States only to accumulate money and then return to their native land.³¹ This money was stolen from the pocket of the native worker. An article in the Whig characterized the American party as an organization that sought to

"protect American labor against European labor--to give employment and bread to our own people in preference to seeing it wrested from them by the vagabonds of other countries."³² The Know-Nothing press expressed indignation at the numbers of foreign-born laborers employed in Virginia. The Post attacked the administration of President Franklin Pierce for allowing immigrant workers to make up one-fourth of the work force at the Portsmouth Navy Yard.³³ Articles in the Post ridiculed the Democratic mismanagement of internal improvements in Virginia, which, it was charged, was the result of foreign-born labor and supervision. The Irish workers on the Blue Ridge Railroad were attacked for their periodic strikes and threats against native strike-breakers. The waste of money involved in the railroad's construction was attributed to the project's engineers and laborers, both of whom, said the Post, were "foreigners to a man."³⁴

The Enquirer defended the use of foreign-born labor by pointing out that it had made a large contribution to the greatness and power of the United States. It said that the railroads and canals would have never been built had it not been for the toil of immigrant workers.³⁵ Furthermore, the Mississippi Valley -- "the crowning glory of the country" -- had been made prosperous by thousands of foreign-born laborers and farmers; the Enquirer charged

that the Know-Nothings would rather "spread the gloom of perpetual desolation over this realm of undeveloped abundance,...than share its riches with the alien in birth or faith....They would arrest the march of empire towards the West and stay the progress of civilization...."³⁶

The Examiner spoke out against foreign labor competition late in 1854, before the newspaper debate had become very intense. At that time, confronted with an anti-immigrant bill introduced by a Democrat in the United States Senate, the paper labored to make some of the bill's provisions appear consistent with its own philosophy and made some remarks on the "ruinous competition" of immigrants.³⁷ But as the campaign progressed, the Examiner altered its position, and in May it announced that the wages of labor were increasing even with heavy immigration, and that the influx of foreigners helped the overall economy "by bringing immense tracts of land under cultivation, by opening roads for the exchange of commodities,...and by [increasing] home consumption...."³⁸

The discussion of the nature and actions of the local immigrant population furnished a relatively minor aspect of the debate over Know-Nothingism. When the foreign-born residents of Richmond did receive attention, it was usually given by the Know-Nothing press in an effort to stress the reality and closeness of the immigrant threat.

The Post attacked the local foreign-born population for its influence in city politics. The paper said that "vast numbers" of foreigners in Richmond combined to "overrule the will of freemen."³⁹ The local Democrats were characterized as demagogues who rode on the tide of the city's foreign votes but had no sincere wish to help the immigrants. The Post claimed that Richmond Democrats were ransacking the alleys and streets of the city for aliens whom they swiftly got naturalized in anticipation of their help on election day.⁴⁰ It was also charged on the day after the gubernatorial election that the Democrats had rounded up between two and three hundred newly naturalized Irishmen and Germans and herded them to the polls to vote down native votes.⁴¹ The Post warned that the solicitude of the Democrats was a fraud; they only desired the "sweet voices" of the immigrants and did not "care a flip for them personally."⁴² Apparently in an effort to turn a portion of the foreign-born population against the Democrats, the Post printed a letter that lambasted the local Democratic party for supporting only Irishmen and no Germans for municipal offices.⁴³

The Know-Nothing papers characterized Richmond's immigrant population as subversive. For every intelligent and patriotic foreign-born citizen of Richmond, said the Post, there were twenty others who were of the reverse

character.⁴⁴ A letter in the Whig warned the city's native citizens that immigrants had "landed on your soil to undermine and slay you. For your own and your country's sake, Virginians, beware how you step, lest the serpent that now dashes in your cities, towns, and villages, should spring upon and sting you and your dear children."⁴⁵ A letter by the same writer in the Post entreated the citizens of Richmond not to support foreign influence in their city by patronizing businesses with foreign-born owners. These foreigners, the letter said, "have already filled their coffers at your expense, and...would, while selling you goods, cut your throat had they the power to do so."⁴⁶

Both the Whig and Post attempted to convince their readers of the dangerously radical ideology of the immigrants in Richmond. The best opportunity arose when it became known that some German residents of the city, apparently members of the German Democratic Association of Richmond, had passed a number of radical resolutions which demanded such things as universal suffrage, the abolition of the Presidency and the federal and state senates, the right to recall representatives, the intervention in favor of all peoples "struggling for liberty," the taxation of church property, the abolition of all laws concerning the observance of the sabbath, the eight-hour work day, and free education. One resolution urged that

support by federal law be given to the emancipation ideas of Cassius Clay.⁴⁷ The Whig was horrified. These Germans were "a nest of raving socialists, political destructives, and infamous abolition pirates." It warned that the "enemy is at our very door--they jostle us in the streets--they throng the business marts of our city, and perhaps intrude, serpentlike, into the homes and around the firesides of our citizens."⁴⁸

For the most part, the Democratic papers said very little about the local foreign-born population. They did, however, react to the Know-Nothing outcry against the radical German resolutions. The Enquirer printed a letter of the former president of the German Democratic Association which said that the resolutions were the work of six or eight men who had seceded from the organization and had been denounced by the loyal members.⁴⁹ The Examiner considered the resolutions so "superlatively preposterous and intensely stupid" that no one in his right mind would pay any attention to them. It added that the German Democratic Association had not been heard from for a long time, was probably non-existent, and if alive, would most likely be a "fast ally" of the Know-Nothings, since many radical Germans were already cooperating with the Know-Nothings in the Northeast and Midwest.⁵⁰

The Know-Nothing press responded by saying that despite the Democratic excuses, the resolutions expressed the sentiments of the majority of Richmond's German population.⁵¹ In truth, however, it seems that the German Democratic Association, also known as the Free German Society, was a small and unpopular group in Richmond. It apparently never had a membership greater than twenty-two and was looked upon with some contempt by most German residents of the city.⁵² It thus appears that the resolutions of a few radical seceders from the regular organization had little chance of gaining much support from Richmond's Germans.

The Know-Nothing press cited the "evils" of the immigrants as proof that decisive action had to be taken to protect the nation. According to the Whig and Post, the necessary course to follow was embodied in the platform of Virginia's Know-Nothing party.⁵³ This platform consisted of thirteen basic principles, three of which directly concerned the immigrant and immigration. The first two principles proposed to eliminate the foreign-born from the American political process. The first said that only "those born on our soil, and reared and matured under the influence of our institutions" should be elected to political office. The second stated that no foreigner should be allowed to vote until he had "resided within the United States a sufficient length of time to enable him

to become acquainted with the principles and imbued with the spirit of our institutions, and until he shall have become thoroughly identified with the great interests of our country." American immigration policy was the subject of the third principle. It said that while "foreigners of honest and industrious habits" should not be prevented from entering the United States, "all legal means should be adopted to obstruct and prevent the immigration of the vicious and the worthless, the criminal and the pauper."

The Know-Nothing papers devoted most of their energy to demands for the prevention of the foreign-born from holding office and voting. The first object was to be gained by simply convincing the electorate to vote only for native Americans. The second was to be brought about for all practical purposes by a change in the naturalization laws, which the Whig said were the source of "great and serious frauds."⁵⁴ The major change proposed by the Know-Nothings was the extension of the residence requirements for citizenship from five to 21 years. This was judged as the "sufficient length of time" needed for the immigrant to familiarize himself with the American system.

History was cited by the Know-Nothing papers to support the 21-year proposal. The Whig warned that Americans should not disregard the lesson gained from the fall of the Roman Republic. The paper said that because of an injudicious

policy toward aliens, Rome was plagued with a mischievous and worthless foreign population that supported unscrupulous demagogues. Upon recognition of this threat the Roman government attempted to amend its naturalization laws. But it was too late; the foreign influence had become too strong and the dispute that arose over making all Italians Roman citizens resulted in a disastrous civil war that contributed directly to the fall of the Republic.⁵⁵ The Know-Nothing naturalization proposal was even characterized as a liberal measure in comparison to one policy of the past. After all, said a letter in the Whig, the Know-Nothings asked a mere 21 years for naturalization; Moses required the Egyptians and Edomites to dwell among his people for three generations before they were granted entry to the "assembly of the Lord."⁵⁶

The Democratic papers denounced the Know-Nothing desire to proscribe the foreign-born from officeholding and voting. How, said one letter in the Enquirer, could Americans seek to deprive foreigners of their rights? Present-day Americans were scarcely removed by one generation from their foreign forebears who had "unsurped the country and the home of the native red man of the wilderness and driven him, the only native heir of this fair land, to seek a precarious existence amid the wilds of the far West."⁵⁷ The Enquirer and Examiner showed that they too could use the Bible to some advantage; they claimed that the nineteenth

Chapter of Leviticus, not the Know-Nothing platform, contained the directions for the proper treatment of foreigners:

If a stranger sojourns with thee in your land, ye shall not vex him; but the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you and thou shalt love him as thyself, for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.⁵⁸

The Democratic papers labeled the Know-Nothing proposals as ungrateful and dangerous. One letter in the Enquirer asked how it was possible that Americans, "who have...reaped a golden harvest from the iron sinews of the stalwart sons of the Old World, scornfully tell them that they are not worthy to be trusted in any of the civil relations of life?"⁵⁹ The Enquirer warned that if the American party's measures were made law, dangerous passions would be released that could not be easily subdued, and the American population would quickly turn into "two distinct and antagonistic classes of privileged patricians and disfranchised plebeians."⁶⁰

The Examiner constantly denounced the nativistic attitudes of the Know-Nothings. As early as June 1854, it said that it was regrettable that the government provided "no cells and halters" for men who joined together "for the purpose of persecuting millions of their fellow citizens...."⁶¹ But the Examiner, to a greater extent than the Enquirer, attacked the Know-Nothing proposals on the

simple grounds that they were not needed--at least not in the South. It adamantly maintained throughout the debate that foreign-born Southerners created no problems. "We have few foreigners amongst us [Southerners]," said the Examiner, "that are not useful, respectable, moral, industrious people."⁶² Know-Nothingism was a remedy for the huge number of foreign vagabonds in the North. "It is vain to pretend that foreignism has grown or can grow, into an evil and abuse amongst us. What need have we of medicine, before we are afflicted with disease[?]"⁶³ The Examiner wanted to ignore the nativist clamor against the immigrants:

Northerners have been berating us about slavery too long to expect help from us in eradicating a 'curse' of their own. Foreignism is their own domestic evil, over which we have no rightful control. It is against our political principles to meddle with the domestic affairs of Northern States....⁶⁴

The Enquirer considered as pure folly the Know-Nothing proposal to change the naturalization laws to prevent immigrants from exercising the right of suffrage. Qualifications for voting, it said, were a concern of the states, not the federal government. Even alien status did not automatically prevent a person from voting; if a state wished, it could allow an alien to vote. Now, said the Enquirer, if Virginia were about to change its constitution, then there might be some point to the Know-Nothing movement;

the Know-Nothings could campaign to gain control of the state convention in order to insert a 21-year residence requirement for voting in the new constitution. But since there were no plans for making a new constitution, the paper concluded that the American party had no purpose in Virginia.⁶⁵

The Examiner admitted that foreigners should become acquainted with American institutions before citizenship was granted and that the current naturalization laws were not stringent enough.⁶⁶ In one uncharacteristic outburst the Examiner violently attacked "easy" naturalization:

Know-Nothingism is partially right.
American citizenship should not be
made dirt cheap. The sovereignty
of this Republic is in the people;
and every vagabond adventurer escap-
ing from the jails and packed-off from
the poor-houses of Europe is not fit
for sovereign citizenship in this
country the moment his dirty rags
and stinking carcass touch our shores.⁶⁷

Only a few weeks before this was printed the Examiner's choice for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination, Shelton F. Leake, had been defeated at the Staunton convention. The unusually harsh language of the paper may have been largely due to some momentary bitterness over Wise's nomination.

Nevertheless, the Examiner soon afterward charged that the 21-year proposal of the Know-Nothings would be a practical prohibition of citizenship in the majority of

cases; it therefore offered its own proposal:

The true remedy [for the naturalization laws] is to be found not in lengthening the period of probation, but in prescribing some standard of moral qualification for citizenship....
The fact of moral qualification for that high privilege [voting] might be referred to a jury, or tested in some other practical way.⁶⁸

The Richmond papers came closer to agreement on the subject of the immigration laws than on any other topic. Even the neutral Dispatch felt compelled to make some comment on the issue. In general, the Dispatch seems to have been positively inclined toward immigration. While it often printed immigration statistics, it never expressed any anxiety over the great numbers of foreigners flooding into the country;⁶⁹ it even applauded immigration to the United States as an "efficient, practicable and economical mode of propagating republican principles," since it drew away the subjects of European monarchs.⁷⁰ But in December 1854 the news of a Belgian ship unloading a cargo of paupers and convicts in New York prompted the Dispatch to comment on the sorry state of American immigration policy:

This practice of a foreign government, in sending to our shores its paupers and criminals, by the shipload, is considered worthy of the attention of the administration. It is enough that our country should be an asylum for the oppressed, who come among us with strong hands and willing hearts, ready to earn a subsistence

which they could not procure at home; but a regular system of sending to us the poverty-stricken, diseased, helpless and crime-stained of other countries, taxing Americans to feed and cloth them or submit to their depredation, is...a real, practical grievance, which should be redressed.⁷¹

This dissatisfaction with the immigration laws was also reflected in the Democratic press. In the first few months of the debate the Enquirer attempted to establish the image of the Democratic party as a strong advocate of immigration. In November 1854 the paper said that the party had "always manifested the kindest and most liberal spirit towards the oppressed people of other lands, and has invited their immigration...."⁷² But as the months passed, and the growing strength of the American party made it apparent that there might be widespread dissatisfaction in Virginia over immigration and the laws that concerned it, the Enquirer changed its tune. It now recognized certain problems involved with immigration, but hastened to pledge that Democrats were capable of solving them. In February 1855 the Enquirer said the Democratic party

is not only willing, but especially capable to remove any political evil, or supply any deficiency in legislation, from which the interest of the country may suffer....Any abuse of the naturalization laws, or any excess of immigration, will be corrected by the Democratic party. It is understood that the Secretary of the

Treasury has already matured a measure which will effectually suppress the evil of pauper and convict immigration of which the Know-Nothings are making such a prodigious complaint.⁷³

The paper said a few months later that the evils in the immigration system could be remedied by simple legislation, and did not require the "radical and total revolution in the spirit and the policy of the government" which was planned by the Know-Nothings.⁷⁴

The Examiner took a stand similar to that of the Enquirer:

We have long entertained and long ago expressed the conviction that something must be done to evaluate American citizenship, or at least, to rescue it from that decline in intrinsic dignity and public estimation which an indiscriminate surrender of it to Chinese coolies and European felons and paupers by the half-millions in the year must occasion....[W]e are unwilling to allow a secret society... [to] grow into power by appropriating to itself the task of doing what one or the other of the honorable and respectable parties of the country should make haste to do itself.⁷⁵

The Enquirer charged that the proscriptive policy of the Know-Nothings would only worsen immigration problems. The paper said that the denial of political rights to the foreign-born would not check the immigration of unwanted people. While those foreigners who would be worthy of American citizenship might hesitate from immigrating because of the political limitations, those interested only in

earning a subsistence would accept any political degradation and would therefore immigrate despite the restrictions.⁷⁶

In response to the Democratic attacks, the Know-Nothing papers emphasized that the American party did not advocate the complete denial of rights to the foreign-born. The Whig said that while it considered native Americans alone to be worthy of exercising political power in the United States, it would protect all the rights "of person and property" entitled by law to foreign-born residents.⁷⁷ Furthermore, the Know-Nothing papers denied that they desired to deprive any rights of immigrants who had already attained citizenship. Such an action, the Post claimed, would be ex post facto and thus unconstitutional. The sole object of the Know-Nothings was to "restrict the privilege of voting with regard to persons hereafter coming to the country." "The American party does not disfranchise them [naturalized citizens] or their children....It looks to the protection of them, as well as native born citizens against the increasing evils of immigration."⁷⁸

The Whig threw back the Democratic denunciations of the Know-Nothings for their supposedly proscriptive ideas. The American party only urged men not to vote for foreigners; could that be proscription?

Does a Democrat [said the Whig] think he is proscribing a Whig when he refused to vote for him? Does a Whig a Democrat? Has not this been the habit of all parties--and is it not right that a man should vote for the representative and exponent of his own principles, and against him who opposes them?

NOTES FOR CHAPTER II

1. Whig, February 2, 1855.
2. Post, May 4, 1855. The quote is essentially accurate; see Notes on the State of Virginia, p. 156. The Post neglected to point out that here Jefferson was arguing against the idea of encouraging a large importation of foreigners to quickly increase the American population. Even though Jefferson doubted "the expediency of inviting them [foreigners] by extraordinary encouragements," he believed that if the foreigners came "of themselves they are entitled to all the rights of citizenship...." (p. 157, Notes on the State of Virginia).
3. Whig, May 5, 1855.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., March 10, 1855, quoting the New Orleans Creole.
6. Ibid., April 19, 1855.
7. Post, May 4, 1855.
8. Whig, February 1, 1855.
9. Enquirer, February 1, 1855.
10. Ibid., April 20, 1855.
11. Ibid., March 20, 1855.
12. Examiner, March 6, 1855.
13. Ibid., July 21, 1854.
14. Marquis de Lafayette (1757-1834), French nobleman, served as a major-general in the Continental Army during the American Revolution. Casimir Pulaski (1748-1779), Polish patriot, served as a cavalry commander in the Continental Army and was killed in action. Tadeuz Kosciuszko (1746-1817), Polish patriot, served as a colonel of engineers in the Continental Army. Richard Montgomery (1738-1775),

Irish-born American, served as a brigadier-general in the Continental Army and was killed in action. John Paul Jones (1747-1792), Scottish-born American, a successful captain in the Continental Navy. Friedrich Steuben (1730-1794), Prussian baron, served as a major-general and drill expert in the Continental Army.

15. Enquirer, March 19, 1855; Examiner, March 16, 1855.
16. Enquirer, October 17, 1854; Examiner, March 6, 1855.
17. Whig, September 30, 1854.
18. Post, March 2, 1855.
19. Whig, February 17, 1855. The number of immigrants entering the United States in the 1850s had become quite high indeed. The following figures from William J. Bromwell, The History of Immigration to the United States.... (New York: Privately printed, 1856), p. 175, show the number of aliens arriving at American ports during the first half of the 1850s:

1851	379,466
1852	371,603
1853	368,645
1854	427,833

According to A Compendium of the Ninth Census...., Francis A. Walker, Superintendent of the Census, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1872), p. 376-377, there were 22,985 foreign-born residents and 1,398,205 natives in Virginia in 1850. (Slaves were considered natives.)

20. Post, March 3, 1855.
21. Whig, March 26, 1855.
22. Post, March 12, 1855.
23. Whig, May 3, 1855. The quote is essentially accurate. See Notes on the State of Virginia, pp. 156-157.
24. Post, May 24, 1855.
25. Ibid., May 29, 1855.

26. Enquirer, June 8, 1855. It is true that immigrants were concentrated in urban areas and that the cities tended to vote strongly for the Know-Nothings (Petersburg is a notable exception), but the foreign-born were still only a fraction of the urban populations. For city and county voting statistics, see James P. Hambelton, A Biographical Sketch of Henry A. Wise, with a History of the Political Campaign in Virginia, in 1855 (Richmond: J.W. Randolph, 1856), pp. 355-359.
27. Examiner, March 23, 1855.
28. Ibid, May 1, 1855.
29. Ibid, March 6, 1855. This position was a reversal of sorts for the Examiner. On July 11, 1854, before the debate over Know-Nothingism had gotten very heated, it printed an article from the Fredericksburg Herald that said 100,000 foreigners entered the field of American politics every year, "a startling exhibit of power and influence of a population born and reared beyond the enlightening and ameliorating influences of republicanism...."
30. Enquirer, March 20, 30, 1855.
31. Post, March 16, 1855.
32. Whig, January 10, 1855, quoting the Lexington Gazette.
33. Post, May 3, 1855.
34. Ibid, April 9, 23, 1855.
35. Enquirer, August 26, 1854.
36. Ibid., March 26, 1855.
37. Examiner, December 19, 1854.
38. Ibid., May 1, 1855.
39. Post, April 5, 1855.
40. Dispatch, February 16, 1855, paraphrasing the Post of February 15, 1855.
41. Post, May 25, 1855.

42. Ibid., April 6, 1855.
43. Ibid., April 3, 1855.
44. Ibid., May 4, 1855.
45. Whig, March 21, 1855.
46. Post, March 3, 1855.
47. Cassius Clay (1810-1903), Kentucky abolitionist and newspaper publisher.
48. Whig, January 30, 1855.
49. Enquirer, February 2, 1855.
50. Examiner, February 2, 1855.
51. Whig, February 3, 1855; Post, March 15, 1855.
52. Hermann Schuricht, History of the German Element in Virginia (Baltimore: Privately printed, 1900), II, pp. 34-36.
53. The platform was regularly printed in the Post during the months immediately preceding the election.
54. Whig, September 30, 1854.
55. Ibid., February 17, 1855. The Examiner (April 20, 1855) claimed that the liberal Roman policy toward aliens was wise, and that civil war broke out only when a "native Roman party" arose and divided the people against themselves.
56. Whig, March 20, 1855. See Deuteronomy 23:7-8.
57. Enquirer, March 23, 1855.
58. Ibid, December 5, 1854; Examiner, March 9, 1855. See Leviticus 19:33-34.
59. Enquirer, March 23, 1855.
60. Ibid., July 14, 1854, April 24, 1855.
61. Examiner, June 16, 1854.

62. Ibid., January 30, 1855.
63. Ibid., December 12, 1854.
64. Ibid., January 30, 1855.
65. Enquirer, March 15, April 6, 1855.
66. Examiner, March 6, 1855.
67. Ibid., December 13, 1854.
68. Ibid., December 19, 1854.
69. For an example of the sedate view of the Dispatch, see the November 8, 1854 issue.
70. Dispatch, July 22, 1854.
71. Dispatch, December 23, 1854.
72. Enquirer, November 21, 1854.
73. Ibid., February 1855.
74. Ibid., April 24, 1855.
75. Examiner, December 19, 1854.
76. Enquirer, October 17, 1854.
77. Whig, March 5, 1855.
78. Post, March 3, April 10, 1855.
79. Whig, May 3, 1855.

CHAPTER III

THE DEBATE OVER ROMAN CATHOLICISM

The Know-Nothing party was partly the outgrowth of a new anti-Catholicism. Although anti-Catholicism had been in America since Jamestown, it had existed as an unorganized hostility until the early 1800s. During the 1820s, the religious tolerance fostered by the Revolution was shaken by growing Catholic immigration and the rise of Christian fundamentalism. A movement toward a unified front against Catholicism began as some Americans thought they saw a popish plot taking shape. Anti-Catholic propaganda became more highly developed and was read more widely as newspapers affiliated with Protestant sects were born. Anti-Catholic societies sprung up in the 1830s and expanded in the 1840s. In 1845, anti-Catholicism entered politics with the founding of the Native American party. Although this party accomplished little, it indicated that anti-Catholicism in America was no longer a mere feeling, but a political force. It was, however, a force that could not develop within the two-party system. The Democrats welcomed Catholics to American politics, and the Whigs gave little more than lip service to the anti-Catholicism. The Native American party was a third-party attempt to raise the Protestant standard in the 1840s; the Know-Nothings raised it in the 1850s. Although the Know-Nothings produced as few practical accomplishments as the

Native American party, they caused a more turbulent discussion of the Catholic question.¹

In comparison to the immigrant issue, Catholicism was only a slightly less important topic of the newspaper debate, even though it was discussed in less varied ways. Since so many Catholics in the United States were foreign-born, the discussion of Catholicism frequently overlapped with that of the immigrant question. Nevertheless, the existence or non-existence of the Catholic threat was argued as an issue in itself. The anti-Catholic campaign was led by the Post, and its attacks were occasionally quite ferocious. The Whig, on the other hand, although it regularly expressed anti-Catholic sentiments, seems to have never had the energy of the Post on this subject. The Democratic papers shared a common willingness to defend against the anti-Catholic assault, but took pains not to appear as if they were supporting Catholicism against Protestantism.

The Know-Nothing press said that the most imminent danger posed by Catholics in the United States was their threat to the freedom of the American people. It was claimed that a calculated Catholic plot was afoot in the United States, aimed at perverting the United States government and the American way of life. Catholics, the Post said, were secretly at work, "spreading over our

whole land and undermining our institutions and the dearly bought liberties bequethed [sic] us by the fathers of the Revolution."² The accumulation of four million Catholics in the United States was no accident; it was the result of a "deliberate design" of the Catholic Church, which had been "systematically at work for years past, preparing to marshal a mighty Jesuit host against the impending battle day." Evidence of this plot, the Post said, could be seen in such European organizations as the Society for the Propagation of the Faith and the Leopold Foundation, which were conspiring to colonize the western states of America with Roman Catholics.³

The Know-Nothing papers charged that the Catholic conspiracy already infiltrated the American government. The Post carried numerous articles purporting to show the huge number of Catholic workers in the federal bureaucracy. Catholics in high offices were sometimes the targets of Know-Nothing attacks. Roger B. Taney, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, was one target. Another was James Campbell, President Franklin Pierce's Postmaster General. Campbell, said the Post, was an "infamous Roman Catholic, a red-mouthed Jesuit, bound soul and body to the Pope." Campbell cared nothing for the mail service. "All he cares for is to advance the interest of the Jesuit party, and this whole Post Office Department is now one vast engine

for propagating Jesuitism in the United States."⁴ Later, the Post charged that Campbell had sent state secrets of the United States to the Pope.⁵

The Post predicted that American freedom would instantly end if the Catholic plot succeeded in overthrowing the United States government:

We believe that the Catholic Church, will, if it ever gets the power, proscribe Protestantism and the Bible in this country and in this state, destroy our constitution and liberties, and make these United States a kingdom of the Pope, ruled and governed by a Catholic tyrant of the Pope's appointment.⁶

Security and freedom of thought and action would not exist in a Catholic state. There would be no free press or public education without religious instruction. Convents, "the prison houses of females,"⁷ would be erected everywhere. Property would be at the mercy of the church. Even private enterprise would be restricted. The Post printed the remarks of a former priest who said that the government in Rome maintained a tight control on the city's tobacco trade and gained much tax revenue from it. The ex-cleric added that the government was so intent on increasing Roman consumption of tobacco (and thereby its tax revenue), that it had sentenced one citizen to twenty years in the galleys for persuading a friend to quit smoking cigars.⁸

The Enquirer countered the Post by arguing that free institutions were not incompatible with Catholicism. It maintained that the American republican system was largely derived from the Magna Carta, which was written 300 years before the time of Luther, and that the crucial development of Parliament also took place before the Reformation. Therefore, "all the essential privileges of Englishmen, and all their fundamental securities against arbitrary power were established by Roman Catholics and secured by constitutional guarantees."⁹ Furthermore, said the Enquirer, the corruption of the Catholic Church had disappeared long ago. The Reformation had forced the Church to cleanse itself of its impurities.¹⁰

Just as they had done in regard to the influence of the foreign-born, the Democratic papers characterized the power of the Catholic Church in America as of no concern and pitifully weak compared to the power of the Protestant churches. Catholic influence in the United States was greatly exaggerated, the papers said, and it in no way warranted a full-scale political movement to oppose it. The value of Catholic Church property in the United States was put at only one-tenth of the value of Protestant property, and Catholic churches were said to be able to accommodate only one-twentieth the number of people Protestant churches could hold.¹¹ Anti-Catholicism was portrayed as

even more ludicrous on the state level. The Enquirer said that the Know-Nothings were afraid that Virginia's 800,000 Protestants would be swallowed up by the state's 7,000 Catholics; this would be like Jonah swallowing the whale.¹² The Examiner agreed with the Enquirer and charged that the Know-Nothing idea about the threat of Virginia's minute Catholic population was a "cowardly, mean, malignant, and false pretense."¹³ (In response to the Democratic ridicule of its position, the Post grumbled, "[H]ow many Jesuit priests does it take to rule a state? How many wolves would be required to destroy a flock of 10,000 sheep...if the shepherd were absent, asleep or dead?")¹⁴ The Enquirer concluded that the Catholic Church was so weak that, far from conspiring to overthrow freedom, it tenaciously clung to that principle as its only security against persecution.¹⁵

In its effort to discredit the Know-Nothings' anti-Catholicism, the Examiner utilized a very pointed argument, against which the Post and Whig could not gracefully defend themselves. Because of the large number of Catholics in Louisiana, the state's Know-Nothing party followed a conservative course on the Catholic issue and openly courted Catholic support; even a number of prominent Louisiana Know-Nothings were Catholic.¹⁶ The Examiner used the Louisiana situation to embarrass Virginia Know-Nothings. It said that if Catholics were a threat to America, the

threat would be most dangerous in those areas where Catholics were heavily concentrated--in Louisiana, for example. Yet instead of opposing the Catholic influence in that state, the Know-Nothings were seeking its support. If the Know-Nothings were friendly to large masses of Catholics, why, asked the Examiner, should anyone be antagonistic or afraid of Virginia's handful of Catholics?¹⁷

When speaking of the Catholic threat, the Know-Nothing press often focused its attacks upon the Pope. If Catholics gained control of the United States government, the papers said, America would become a papal kingdom. This was because the Pope not only claimed supreme spiritual power over the world's Catholics, but temporal dominion as well. The temporal power of the Pope, said the Post, was "no mere bagatelle, no figment of the imagination, but a fearful, alarming reality," and was as much an article of faith among Catholics as his infallibility.¹⁸

These sentiments of the Post were quite different from those it had expressed only a month or so before. Just days before the public announcement of its conversion to the Know-Nothing cause, the Post's opinion of American Catholics was paraphrased in this manner by the Dispatch:

The Post is sure that our Roman Catholic citizens, the greater part of whom are as true patriots as ever breathed, if the alternative of deserting the cause of their country, or obeying the mandates of

the Pope, were presented them, would kick Popes and Councils to the very end of the earth, and proclaim the cause of their country, with their swords in their hands, and their country's flag waving over their heads.¹⁹

To support their charges, the Know-Nothing papers printed many articles showing specific claims of power by the Pope in Italy. The Whig and Post said the Pope had declared the attempts made by the Sardinian and Piedmontese governments to gain some authority over Church property to be violations of the Holy See's supremacy. If the Pope claimed the right to interfere in the internal affairs of Sardinia, he could just as logically claim the right to interfere in New York.²⁰ The Whig printed an article from the Dublin Ireland Tablet which supported the deposing power of the Pope. If the Pope claimed the power to depose European sovereigns, could he not, asked the Whig, also claim the power to replace the President of the United States with an archbishop?²¹

To bring the danger of the papal threat closer to home, the Whig charged that the Pope's temporal power was already being "slyly and clandestinely" exercised in the United States through the Catholic episcopacy of the country.²² The Catholic bishops, the Post said, had taken an oath of allegiance to the Pope that was entirely inconsistent with an American's allegiance to his country. The oath made them nothing less than spies for the "the

driveling despot that lives in the Vatican." This "vast system of espionage," claimed the Post, was conducted primarily through the use of the "infamous confessional."²³

Again, the Democratic papers responded to the Know-Nothing attacks by stressing the actual weakness of their target:

Everybody knows [said the Enquirer] that the head of the Catholic Church, so far from being an aggressive aspirant for political power in other countries, is a poor dependent at home, without resources and without authority; and that his own provinces would revolt and throw off papal dominion, if they were not held in subjection by the pressure of foreign arms.²⁴

The Examiner agreed; it said that

the Pope is the weakest, most dependent of all European Sovereigns, and has only been kept on his throne for several years by French soldiers. In point of power, he is about on par with the King of the Sandwich Islands --a formidable sovereign!²⁵

The same paper ridiculed the "brave" Know-Nothings who sweated with "cold perspiration at the mention of mild Pio Nino."²⁶

Both the Examiner and the Enquirer printed a letter of Bishop John McGill of Richmond that denied the temporal power of the Pope in the United States. McGill maintained that no Catholic in Virginia, unless he was born in a papal state and still an alien, owed or acknowledged any temporal allegiance to the Pope. Moreover,

McGill asserted that every Catholic citizen in the United States would defend his country in the event of an invasion by a Catholic power.²⁷

The Know-Nothing papers used the Catholics of Richmond to make the Catholic threat seem real and very near. A rousing St. Patrick's Day celebration in Richmond gave the Whig an opportunity to warn its readers of the city's Catholics. Noting that the Irish had expressed distinctly Democratic sentiments in various speeches during the celebration, the Whig charged that the city's Democratic party had "entirely surrendered itself to the foreign Catholic population." It added that if the natives did not stand their ground, they must submit to the rule of Irish Catholics. The question, concluded the Whig, was no longer whether Whigs or Democrats should control the government, "but whether Americans or foreign Catholics shall rule America."²⁸

The Post claimed that the Catholic conspiracy was operating within Richmond itself. Catholic agents were prowling the streets, plotting, sowing dissension, "spying out all our secrets, and reporting them to the powers in Rome...."²⁹ The Post also participated in some mud-slinging at the local Catholic clergy. It attacked a prominent Catholic clergyman for allegedly visiting victims of a recent cholera epidemic in the city for the sole purpose of accumulating gifts of money. The priest, said the Post, left Richmond with \$18,000.³⁰

In addition to attacking Catholicism, the Know-Nothing papers portrayed themselves as champions of Protestantism. The Protestant faith was presented as the fountain from which all good things flowed. An article in the Post claimed that the "great civilization and prosperity" of Northern Europe, in which America had its roots, were primarily the results of the moral effect of the Protestant Reformation.³¹ Paraphrasing the speech of a Virginia Know-Nothing, an article in the Whig maintained that "free government is the natural consequence of Protestantism and free thought."³² A writer to the Post said that the Protestant-born American government must be handed down to posterity, "uncontaminated by the taint of ancient and consecrated errors that are about to be flooded upon us from abroad."³³

At the same time an effort was made to identify the Democrats with Catholicism and anti-Protestant ideas. The Post declared that the Examiner's failure to denounce the Catholic Church would damn the paper in the eyes of all Protestants.³⁴ The Whig attacked the Enquirer because that paper had made a remark which was construed to imply that Methodism was more tyrannical than Catholicism.³⁵ Perhaps the most frequently used weapon against the Democrats was a statement made by Henry Wise during the campaign. In a speech at Richmond, Wise attacked the Know-Nothings on

the papal threat issue: "If we are to have a Pope, for God's sake, let him be a Catholic Pope, away over in Italy, and not one of our Protestant priests kneeling at our love feasts." This produced an uproar in the Know-Nothing camp. An indignant Post said that Wise "intended to express his contempt for Methodist love feasts, or rather the Methodist preachers who officiated at them."³⁶

For fear of alienating a large portion of Virginia's Protestant population, the Democratic press was careful not to appear as champions of the Catholic faith. The papers tried hard to run a middle course, professing their devotion to Protestantism while abhorring the religious intolerance of the Know-Nothings. "We are not," said the Enquirer, "and never can be, the apologists of the Roman Catholic religion. We are essentially Protestant, reared under Protestant influences and bound by the strongest ties of affection and reason to Protestantism."³⁷ It said earlier that it opposed the Know-Nothings

in the interest of no particular church, but of religion itself which is corrupted and debased by carnal connection with the powers of this world. It is for the sacred principle of religious liberty and not the particular cause through which it is assailed, that we contend.³⁸

The Examiner said that it "in no sense" defended the Catholic religion against the Know-Nothings; it maintained that "Catholicism as a temporal polity and Catholicism as

a system of religious faith are two different subjects." One could uphold the rights of a Catholic and still not support his religious beliefs.³⁹

The Democrats charged that the Know-Nothings' intolerance would pervert the very religion that the American party claimed it was trying to protect:

Shall Protestantism [asked the Enquirer]...revive the cruel spirit and barbarous practices of its ancient enemy, and strive to consummate its ultimate glory by means which it scorned in the unequal struggles of its infant existence? Is this the day, the country for a persecuting Protestantism?⁴⁰

The Examiner warned that if the Know-Nothings ever succeeded in crushing the Catholics, they would turn to Protestant sects for fresh victims.⁴¹

Attempts were made by the Democratic papers to shift Protestant sympathy from the American party to the Democrats by denying the piety of the Know-Nothings and identifying themselves with a firmer faith in Protestantism. The Protestant faith, said the Enquirer, could be safely left to fight its own battles; it possessed an "indestructible and irresistible vitality" and required no help from "prostitute politicians."⁴² The papers maintained that the Know-Nothings were hardly the pious defenders of the faith that they pretended to be. The Enquirer charged that nearly all Know-Nothings were a reproach to Protestantism

and that most were "old, wrinkled, cast-off prostitutes of party, with no more pretension to piety than an unrepentant Magdalen, and no more sincerity of zeal than a blaspheming infidel."⁴³ An article in the Examiner questioned the devoutness of J.M.H. Beale, the Know-Nothing candidate for lieutenant governor. It said Beale was a disgrace to the Baptist Church, of which he was being "passed off" as a devoted member. The paper charged that "a more profane man cannot be found in Virginia. He is a desperate swearer, accompanying almost every word with an oath as black as the secret councils of Know-Nothingism."⁴⁴

Since so many immigrants were Catholic, the measures proposed in the platform of the American party of Virginia to curb the immigrant influence were also expected by the Know-Nothing press to undermine the Catholic influence.⁴⁵ Voting against foreign-born candidates would automatically defeat many Catholics, and the 21-year naturalization proposal would prevent many Catholics from voting. Similarly, the prevention of pauper and convict immigration would keep many undersirable Catholics out of the country. The Know-Nothing papers did not advocate depriving native Catholics of the right to vote, but they did recommend that no Catholic, no matter where he was born, should be elected to political office.

The Know-Nothing proposals were attacked by the Enquirer for their narrow-minded anti-Catholicism. "Is it not monstrous," the paper asked, "that while Great Britain is adopting a genial liberality on this subject [the civil rights of Catholics], a party should be found in this country, urging a retrograde policy and the introduction of proscriptive intolerance?"⁴⁶ The Examiner declared that the Know-Nothings were attempting to re-establish the evils of the past: "Spain and Portugal are no longer disgraced by the Inquisition. Alas! it has only changed its locality--it is now transferred [sic] to the vales and mountains of Virginia!" The paper added that if the Pope ever came to America with tyrannical intentions, "he would find the Know-Nothing fraternity of Jesuits his most apt and accomplished instruments of midnight torture and persecution."⁴⁷

The Democratic papers often charged that the Know-Nothing proposals were anti-Catholic, not so much because the American party was concerned with the political influence of the Catholic Church, but because it wished to proscribe Catholics for their religion alone. Policies with such motives, said the Enquirer, were "insulting to the memory of the great dead" of Virginia, who had been devoted to religious liberty, and illegal according to the constitutions of the United States of Virginia.⁴⁸ The

Examiner predicted that the Know-Nothings' brand of anti-Catholicism would eventually rebound against them. It said that however popular opposition to Catholicism might be "in the pulpit, in the social circle, and in the individual sphere of the citizen," its popularity ended as soon as the functions of republican government were perverted to crush out a proscribed religion.⁴⁹ And once the public's sympathy was aroused by the "yelping hell-hounds of persecution," the popular prejudice against the Catholic Church would "vanish as the morning vapor."⁵⁰

The Know-Nothing papers constantly reiterated that the American party did not attack Catholics for religious reasons.

- We [said the Whig] make war upon no man's religion...But we do make war upon the Catholic Church, because... it is a 'political church'--that is, a church that dabbles in politics and claims and exercises the right to interfere in governmental matters.... And we should just as readily oppose the Episcopalian, Methodist, Presbyterian, or Baptist Churches, if either of them claim to possess the political rights and power which Catholics claim for the Catholic Church.⁵¹

The Post agreed, commenting that the Know-Nothings had

never, in any instance, manifested the slightest wish to interfere with Roman Catholics in the exercise of their religious worship...or any other privileges....They believe, however, that the spirit of republican government is altogether inconsistent with the interests of the Roman Catholic Church....⁵²

The Whig insisted that the Know-Nothings wished to protect religious freedom and only claimed the right to vote for whom they pleased, against whom they pleased, and for any reason they pleased.⁵³

The claims of the Whig and the Post were derided by the Democratic press. The pledge to use only the right to vote against Catholics was denounced by the Enquirer as an example of intolerance that "is...not of the manly sort which marches boldly to its object, and destroys its victim in the light of day; it is a mean and cowardly intolerance, that appeases its proscriptive appetite as the midnight assassin [sic] gluts his revenge." It was further charged that even if the Know-Nothing proposals concerning Catholics did not violate the Constitution in fact, they still showed a "practical disregard" for it.⁵⁴ The Examiner concluded that, all in all, the anti-Catholicism of the Know-Nothings was simply "preposterous." The Catholic Church, it said, had survived for 1800 years; it would undoubtedly withstand "the operations of ephemeral moles and worms, that, this year, burrow in the ground and brood their young, and then are heard of no more forever."⁵⁵

NOTES FOR CHAPTER III

1. For a full treatment of American anti-Catholicism before the Civil War, see Ray Allen Billington, The Protestant Crusade 1800-1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism. New York: Rinehart and Co., Inc., 1952.
2. Post, February 27, 1855.
3. Ibid., March 23, 1855.
4. Ibid., February 24, 1855.
5. Ibid., April 3, 1855.
6. Ibid., March 1, 1855.
7. Ibid., March 3, 1855.
8. Ibid., April 3, 1855.
9. Enquirer, March 27, 1855.
10. Ibid., March 3, 1855.
11. Ibid., September 20, 1854.
12. Ibid., April 23, 1855.
13. Examiner, March 2, 1855.
14. Post, March 5, 1855.
15. Enquirer, October 9, 1854.
16. W. Darrell Overdyke, The Know-Nothing Party in the South (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950), pp. 218-223.
17. Examiner, April 3, 1855.
18. Post, February 26, April 2, 1855.
19. Dispatch, January 12, 1855 quoting the Post.
20. Whig, March 5, 1855; Post, March 10, 1855.
21. Whig, April 2, 1855.

22. Ibid., February 16, 1855.
23. Post, March 17, April 3, 1855.
24. Enquirer, February 1, 1855.
25. Examiner, April 20, 1855.
26. Dispatch, January 3, 1855.
27. Dispatch, January 3, 1855; Examiner, April 24, 1855.
28. Whig, March 21, 1855.
29. Post, April 3, 1855.
30. Ibid., May 15, 1855.
31. Ibid., April 2, 1855.
32. Whig, May 24, 1855, quoting the Lynchburg Virginian.
33. Post, March 3, 1855.
34. Ibid., March 5, 1855.
35. Whig, March 2, 1855.
36. Post, March 14, 1855.
37. Enquirer, March 27, 1855.
38. Ibid., February 8, 1855.
39. Examiner, February 27, 1855.
40. Enquirer, January 22, 1855.
41. Examiner, February 23, 1855.
42. Enquirer, March 26, 1855.
43. Ibid., February 16, May 15, 1855.
44. Examiner, May 11, 1855.
45. Catholicism was not mentioned by name in the platform. The platform did say, however, that religious toleration was a fundamental principle of civil freedom, but that

any group, which believed a foreign power could control the thoughts and actions of Americans, was in conflict with the principle of freedom of opinion.

46. Enquirer, February 2, 1855.
47. Examiner, April 20, 1855.
48. Enquirer, February 8, March 1, 1855.
49. Examiner, January 30, 1855.
50. Ibid., February 23, 1855.
51. Whig, April 2, 1855.
52. Post, February 26, 1855.
53. Whig, March 10, 1855.
54. Enquirer, March 26, 1855.
55. Examiner, February 23, 1855.

CHAPTER IV

THE DEBATE OVER SLAVERY

The immigrant and Catholic questions produced a great deal of hot discussion among the Richmond newspapers, but the single most bitterly contested issue was the relationship of Know-Nothingism and the Democracy to slavery and the South. The Whig, Post, Enquirer, and Examiner fought more violently over the question of who, between Know-Nothings and Democrats, were the truest friends of the South and slavery than who advocated correct policies in regard to immigrants and Catholics.

The discussions of slavery and the South in the debate over Know-Nothingism are particularly interesting. The Know-Nothing organization was officially known as the American party and it purported to be just that: an American party, devoid of any sectional partisanship and dedicated to the preservation of the Union. On the national level the Know-Nothings declared their opposition to any sectional agitation and proclaimed their "neutrality" on the slavery issue. This position won the support of many people, but it was becoming increasingly difficult in the 1850s for politicians to avoid the slavery issue, especially on the state and local levels, where basic opinions on slavery more nearly approached

unanimity. Candidates for office found that to win elections, they had to take a stand on the issue. Perhaps this was especially true in the South, where the inhabitants were less inclined to be indifferent toward a controversy that threatened to alter their society profoundly. Thus the Know-Nothings in Virginia had to support distinctly pro-slavery and pro-Southern doctrines; to have done otherwise would have been to commit political suicide. Slavery was not an official concern of the Know-Nothing party, but it demanded attention in Virginia. By observing the attention given by the Richmond newspapers to slavery, an issue that supposedly had nothing to do with the debate over Know-Nothingism, a sense can be gained of the deep attachment that many Southerners, whether Democrat or Know-Nothing, had to the obligation to protect slavery.

The Know-Nothing press often used a proslavery argument to support its nativist doctrines. The Post and Whig repeatedly charged that immigrants entering the United States were hostile to the South and particularly to its institution of slavery. The Post said that

all foreign immigrants are inimical to Southern institutions--made so by education, prejudice, and interest. They are taught in countries from which they emigrate, to look upon

slavery as a social and political evil,
blighting and destroying all that is
good and prosperous.¹

The Whig modestly estimated that only nine-tenths of all immigrants were abolitionists, as well as being criminals, paupers, and slaves of the Pope.²

The abolitionism of the immigrants was attributed primarily to two causes. The first was the radical tendencies of the incoming foreigners. The Post declared that immigrants had "licentious and extravagant notions of liberty," and likened them to the Jacobins of the French Revolution.³ The second was the immigrants' hunger for labor. It was said that the Irish and Germans would not stop after they had deprived native whites of their jobs; they would agitate for slave emancipation and deportation in order to destroy black competition for work.⁴ The Know-Nothings believed that the immigrant threat to slavery would manifest itself mainly through the ballot box. Not only would foreigners help elect antislavery men to government offices, their concentration in the free states would swell hostile Northern representation in Congress. A partial solution, said the Post, would be to change the current naturalization laws, "the deadliest enemies of slavery," to allow for withholding the franchise from foreigners for 21 years.⁵

The Democratic papers denied that immigrants were overwhelmingly opposed to slavery. For the most part the Enquirer ignored the Germans (who had, it admitted, some abolitionists among them⁶) in favor of stressing the Southern sympathies of the Irish and Catholics in general. Articles maintained that not one in 10,000 Irishmen was an abolitionist and that even the idea of an Irish free-soiler was absurd.⁷ Both Democratic papers agreed that the Irish were among the truest friends of the South in the North; after all, said the Enquirer, it was an Irishman who had been recently shot down by a Boston mob for aiding in the recapture of a fugitive slave from Virginia.⁸ Both papers also claimed that the Catholic Church had always followed a conservative course on the slavery issue; it was the Protestant sects of the North that had agitated for antislavery measures. The Examiner said that the Catholic Church, whatever its faults, was the only religious sect in the North that was sound on slavery.⁹

The Enquirer attempted to discredit the Know-Nothings' proslavery nativism by charging that it was ultimately detrimental to Southern interests. An article in that paper said that if the proslavery Irish vote of the North was canceled, an abolitionist majority would be abolished in the territories and the District of

Columbia. The result of this would be "the first sound of the tocsin of civil war between the Northern and the Southern states."¹⁰ The Enquirer declared that it would much rather accept the influence of immigrants in support of Southern interests than yield to the "fanatical machinations of the native born anti-slavery madmen of New England and New York."¹¹ If the United States gave in to the pressure against immigrant labor, the Know-Nothings would then turn on slave competition "and demand for the ... exclusion of the slave from all handicraft employments, with the certain result of an ultimate agitation for the abolition of slavery."¹² In addition, said the Enquirer, the acquisition of Cuba would be out of the question if the Know-Nothings gained power; most Cubans were Catholic and so there would be virtually no one on the island eligible, under Know-Nothing doctrine, to fill its government offices.¹³ And there was an indirect danger to slavery inherent in nativism. "Old Virginia" wrote in the Enquirer that if a person could deprive a Catholic of constitutional rights, another could just as logically disregard those of an owner of a fugitive slave. In other words, an endorsement of Know-Nothing nativism was an endorsement of the "higher law" doctrine.¹⁴

It was rather difficult to prove the antislavery nature of Know-Nothing nativism; more vulnerable to

Democratic attacks were the actions of Know-Nothing politicians in the North. Some Northern Know-Nothings were blatant in the expression of freesoil sentiments which the Democrats seldom failed to print in the columns of their papers and claim were proof of the Know-Nothings' "rotteness" on slavery. The Know-Nothings of the North, said the Examiner, were nothing but "a rabid abolition and Freesoil party."¹⁵ The Enquirer said that almost every representative elected by the Know-Nothings in the free states was a freesoiler; that every Northern governor they elected advocated antislavery principles; and that every senator they supported was a "rank, fanatical, and avowed abolitionist."¹⁶ These elected officials were the worst results of Know-Nothingism, because while that movement would soon pass into obscurity, the abolitionists it placed in office would remain to plague the South.¹⁷

The most fertile areas to gather evidence of questionable Know-Nothing attitudes on slavery were in New York and Massachusetts. Both the Examiner and the Enquirer never tired of recalling how the arch-foe of the South, William H. Seward, had been elected to the Senate with the help of Know-Nothing votes. The Enquirer particularly enjoyed drawing attention to the resolutions of a Know-Nothing council in Schenectady, New York that had declared its opposition to the extension of the

social, and political evil" of slavery.¹⁸ The Know-Nothing press responded by disowning the Schenectady council members. The Post labeled them a "spurious" lot that had no connection with "genuine" Know-Nothingism.¹⁹ The same course was followed in regard to the Know-Nothing supporters of Seward in the New York legislature. The Whig denounced them as "perjured scoundrels," and the Post called them "traitors" for whom the American party should not be held responsible.²⁰

Perhaps most embarrassing to Southern Know-Nothings were the actions of their party in Massachusetts. There, the Know-Nothing-dominated state legislature busily churned out antislavery resolutions, attempted to remove a judge who had enforced the Fugitive Slave Law, and elected an outright freesoiler, Henry Wilson, to the Senate.²¹ In the later stage of the newspaper debate, few issues of the Examiner and Enquirer failed to contain some attack on the "abolitionism" of the Massachusetts Know-Nothings and a plea to Southerners to open their eyes and discover the real spirit of Know-Nothingism--an "abolition wolf in sheep's clothing."²² Even the Dispatch felt compelled to condemn the Massachusetts legislature when that body passed a personal liberty law. Although the paper did not mention the Know-Nothings by name, it denounced the legislature and suggested that

Massachusetts be permitted to secede from the Union.²³

The Whig and the Post were undoubtedly made quite uncomfortable with all this, but they attempted to salvage as much political capital from the situation in Massachusetts as possible. The Post admitted that abolitionists had partly succeeded in gaining possession of the state's American party, but maintained that Massachusetts was the only state where this had happened.²⁴

As in the case of New York, the Know-Nothing press attempted to dismiss the freesoilers as not "real" Know-Nothings. The Whig claimed that they had not taken all the oaths required for full membership in the American party and were therefore not legitimate Know-Nothings.²⁵

Henry Wilson, said the Post, was not a "full" Know-Nothing. "Were he so," said the paper, "he would be compelled to forego his intention ... to continue the anti-slavery agitation."²⁶ Some months later the Whig claimed that Wilson had denounced the proslavery sentiment of Know-Nothingism and had ended his connection with them.²⁷

The Whig attempted to expose the fallacy in the Democratic attempts to link the Southern Know-Nothings with their Northern counterparts. It declared that all parties of the North, "without exception," were rotten on the slavery issue; but what had this to do with

parties in the South? Even if it could be proved that every Know-Nothing north of the Mason-Dixon line was an abolitionist, this proved nothing about Know-Nothings in the South, who happened only to agree with their Northern brethren on issues entirely unrelated to slavery. The Northern states which the Democrats controlled were out Heroding Abolition Massachusetts a long way;"²⁸ did this mean Southern Democrats were abolitionists? Actually, said the Whig, of all the rotten parties in the North, the American party was the least rotten and the most likely to uphold Southern rights.²⁹

While the Democrats happily pointed to the sins of the Northern Know-Nothings, the Know-Nothing press utilized a Northern weapon of their own. By printing the denunciation of the Know-Nothings that were being thrown out by the antislavery press, the Whig and Post attempted to discredit the Democratic charge that the American party was an abolitionist party in disguise. The Post said that an abolitionist possessed a faultless instinct, "as unerring as the nose of the wild ass," which "never mistakes anything else for one of his own kind."³⁰ Therefore, if antislavery newspapermen like Horace Greeley and Thurlow Weed bitterly attacked Know-Nothingism, what could be better evidence of the Know-Nothings' soundness on the slavery issue? And if the

Southern Democratic press stood "cheek by jowl" with "nearly the whole host of Northern Abolitionists in determined and reckless opposition to the Know-Nothing organization,"³¹ was not this enough to make Southerners suspicious of the Democrats? Was not something "rotten in Denmark when Southerners and abolitionists banded together in politics?"³² Indeed, said the Whig, it was difficult to tell who was the bitterest foe of the Know-Nothings, the Richmond Enquirer or Greeley's New York Tribune.³³ Thus the Know-Nothing papers basked in the hostile tirades of the freesoil press and welcomed any charges that labeled the American party as proslavery.³⁴ Greeley's claim that the Know-Nothings were "a national and nigger-catching party" seems to have especially delighted the Whig and it continually reminded its readers of Greeley's charge.³⁵

The Democratic press also made use of antislavery papers when they chanced to praise the Know-Nothings, but this happened infrequently and was usually confined to citations from New England, and particularly the Massachusetts, press. The Enquirer chose more often to admit that some abolitionists opposed the Know-Nothings, but maintained they did so for reasons wholly unrelated to slavery or because of jealousy:

... [T]hey [the abolitionists] lose caste and consequence if they suffer a more zealous and vigorous champion of the cause to enter the field. Their thunder is stolen by the Know-Nothings, and their wrath and hatred are in proportion to the enormity of the outrage.³⁶

In addition, the Enquirer explained the ultra-abolitionist opposition to Know-Nothingism as a sure sign of danger to the South. The fanatics of the Garrison school even attacked such antislavery advocates as Charles Sumner, William H. Seward, and Henry Wilson for lukewarmness on the slavery issue; but these senators, the Enquirer said, were the type of men the South had to fear the most. The ravings of the Garrisonians did themselves more harm than good by alienating potential, more moderate supporters; but men like Sumner, Seward, Wilson--and the Know-Nothings--"temper their zeal with discretion, ... see the necessity of caution and circumspection," and pursued their goals with persistent energy. The anti-slavery extremists who denounced the American party simply could not see its subtle tactics and lacked the patience to await "its slow but sure results."³⁷

In an effort to bring their charges of abolitionism closer to home, none of the Richmond newspapers were above making personal attacks on the state and local candidates of the opposing side. The histories of the

candidates were closely reviewed and any blemishes were exposed and exploited. The Enquirer, undaunted by the fact that Thomas S. Flournoy and J. M. H. Beale were slaveowners, declared that they were both rotten on the slavery issue.³⁸ Flournoy, it seems, had made an obscure remark in 1846 that supposedly linked the degeneracy of Virginia with slavery. The charge against Beale was based upon his vote for ending the slave trade in the District of Columbia while he was a representative in Congress. The Know-Nothing papers struck back by denying that Flournoy had ever uttered any unsound sentiments on slavery and claiming that if Beale was rotten, so were Stephen A. Douglas and Thomas Ritchie (the former editor of the Enquirer), who had also supported the abolition of Washington's slave trade.³⁹

Because Henry A. Wise's Democratic candidacy for governor was announced months before the American party's nominating convention, the Know-Nothing press leveled their guns early. The Whig lambasted the Democrats for attacking everyone outside their party for opposing slavery, while nominating a man for governor who had opposed the Kansas-Nebraska Bill.⁴⁰ The Post listed the nation's three leading antislavery agitators on its front page and placed Wise at the top of the list--ahead of the Devil and Theodore Parker.⁴¹ While the Enquirer was

attacking Flounoy and Beale, the Whig attacked John Munford, the Anti-Know-Nothing candidate for Mayor of Richmond, for voting in favor of the freesoil constitution of California when he was a resident in that state.⁴²

The way the Democratic papers viewed Southern Know-Nothingism is revealing of how some Americans in the 1850s were especially prone to blame the section opposite their own for their troubles. While the Enquirer sometimes attacked Southern Know-Nothings for their rottenness on slavery, it more often avoided such an open declaration. Instead, it chose to regard most Know-Nothings of the South as ignorant dupes of the Northern, anti-slavery portion of their party. An article said that Know-Nothingism was nothing more than "a vile Yankee trick, to reduce the South to the most abject submission to every wrong which they [Northerners] may choose to inflict."⁴³ It was not indigenous to Virginia, but a "base and pestilential importation from the North, the nursery of Abolitionism."⁴⁴ Know-Nothingism was only one of a number of threatening movements, such as "Fanny Wrightism, ... Abolitionism, Maniacism, Free-Soilism, Woman's-rightism, and all the other thousand and one isms, which start up from time to time among the fertile imaginations of the people of Yankeedom...."⁴⁵

The idea of Know-Nothingism as a Yankee conspiracy was most highly developed in the columns of the Examiner. It characterized Know-Nothingism as a vile product of the North, "a fungus growing out of the rotten condition of Northern society," and as a "wooden horse ... with insidious Northern fanatics in its belly."⁴⁶ The Examiner charged that Yankee agents and money had been employed in propagating Know-Nothingism in Virginia.⁴⁷ The scheme of these Northerners was to establish a clandestine alliance with non-slaveholders, city-dwellers, and Northerners in the South, and then promote abolitionist ideas. The paper said that Know-Nothingism had taken root mainly in Southern towns,

where Southern agriculturists are newest, and where the handicraftsmen of the workshops and white adventurers from the North collect together and abound. We doubt if nine out of every ten of the Northern residents in Virginia do not belong to these [Know-Nothing] councils that hold incessant secret correspondence with their confederates beyond the Potomac. Abolitionism never conceived a plan better calculated to disseminate its tenets and advance its infernal plans of incendiaryism at the South than this system of secret clubs of unknown novitiates.⁴⁸

In the eyes of the Examiner, the Know-Nothing party was another name for "Yankeeism": "Yankees at the South join

in it. Yankees at the North join in it. The Know-Nothing is a Yankee policy. The Know-Nothing is 'The Yankee Party.'"⁴⁹

While the Enquirer seldom failed to launch bitter attacks on Southern Know-Nothings on the topics of immigration and Catholicism, it more moderately criticized them directly on slavery. It displayed a clear unwillingness to blame Southerners for the American party's supposedly antislavery tendencies, although it did blame them for their foolish assistance:

We must not be understood to assert that every individual member of the Know-Nothing party in the South is inimical to the institutions of the South; but we do say that he is contributing to the success of a party which is essentially antagonistic to slavery, and that he imposes upon himself an obligation to stand off in treacherous inactivity while the enemies of the South are violating its rights, and waging desperate war against its peculiar interests.⁵⁰

One writer to the Enquirer maintained that Southern Know-Nothings had been "hoodwinked, gulled, and entrapped" into supporting the antislavery American party.⁵¹

"Southern men," said another writer, "are not Know-Nothings, either in principles or practice.... [T]he chief promoters and supporters of the Know-Nothings in the South are from the Yankee States...."⁵²

This distrust of the North was felt not only among Democrats--Know-Nothings also shared in the hostility; indeed, one of the most striking aspects of the Richmond debate over Know-Nothingism is the similarity in views which the newspapers held toward the North. The Know-Nothing papers made much of the American party's nationalism; but when it came to slavery and Southern interests, they were uncompromising champions of the South.

To be sure, the Know-Nothings attempted to be national in their view. A prominent member of the American party in Virginia was quoted by the Post as having said that the Know-Nothings opposed "the Abolition doctrines of the North, and the sectional opinions of the South," and "substituted in their place, opinions and actions hostile to both, but National in their character."⁵³ The Know-Nothing press often took a dim view of anything that smacked of anti-Unionism. An article in the Whig said that the "everlasting prattling" about the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions and state rights in general made Know-Nothings "tired and sick."⁵⁴ And when a Southern convention was proposed for the purpose of promoting the adoption of a sectional platform for the 1856 presidential election, the Post dryly remarked that such conventions "for political objects are always in bad taste, and are seldom productive of good. The whole

Union should be consulted and represented in any national movements."⁵⁵

But the mid-1850s was not a time when nationalism had much of a chance. The Whig correctly observed that on the slavery issue "there is no such thing as a national party."⁵⁶ Some claim to nationalism might have been assumed by avoiding the slavery controversy, but this the Post steadfastly refused to do:

Believing the [Know-Nothing] Order to be the only conservative party now in existence, we see not how the slavery question can be passed over. It is of the very essence of conservatism--the question above all others, most affected by the National character which the Order ought to support.⁵⁷

The Post made its devotion to slavery and its suspicion of the North very clear. It said that Northern abolitionists had "no more right to interfere with slavery in Virginia than they have to emancipate the serfs in Russia."⁵⁸ The Know-Nothings, said the Post, in contrast to the Whigs and Democrats, had pledged to the South their determination to enforce the Fugitive Slave Law.⁵⁹ It further charged that the object of the North was to agitate on the slavery issue, and this was a sure road to sectional conflict and the end of the Union.⁶⁰

As 1855 wore on this rather moderate stand gave way to a more radical and even violent sectional attitude. As early as February, the Post, exasperated by the anti-slavery sentiments expressed by some Northern senators, claimed that it was "useless to disguise the fact, that the whole North is corrupted to the very core."⁶¹ By June, after the Know-Nothings had been defeated in the gubernatorial election, hostile feelings permeated the paper's opinions. It struck at Northern hypocrisy, charging that the manufacturing towns were as responsible for slavery as were slaveowners. "New England and Old England," said the Post, "are the most pharisaical of the nations upon the subject of slavery." If Northerners really wished to end slavery, they would have to stop buying cotton, tobacco, and sugar.⁶² The Post was even ready to agree with the sectionalist Charleston Mercury that the Northern campaign to prohibit slavery in the territories and repeal the Fugitive Slave Law had made the "day of generalities, of vague pledges to support the guarantees of the Constitution" a thing of the past.⁶³ A simple pledge to maintain the laws that protected slavery was no longer good enough; direct support had to be given to the expansion of slavery. In regard to the "emigration societies" which were forming in the North to help in the establishment of a freesoil Kansas, the

Post declared that if freesoilers had such societies,

we ought to have them too. If they send out their thousands of abolitionists, we ought to send out our tens of thousands of proslavery men....

Let us form aid societies, and thus meet the abolitionists on their own ground.⁶⁴

Freesoilers, the Know-Nothings had said, were agitators-- threats to the Union who had to be suppressed. Now the Post was willing to meet such agitators "on their own ground"--in effect, becoming an agitator itself, even though it might not admit it. The paper had reached a point where there was no real difference, if there had been one before, between it and its Democratic adversaries on the subject of slavery. The Post would have probably agreed with the Enquirer when it said that with

half of Europe and all of the North assailing us, it is no time for Southern men to ground their arms, to tie their hands, or to give any pledge or enter into any engagement that will diminish their ability to carry on warfare offensively or defensively ... Instead ... of ... attempting to patch up a hollow truce with Abolition, Southern men should gird on their armor....⁶⁵

The Democratic papers chose not to acknowledge the proslavery attitude of the Southern Know-Nothings. The Examiner and Enquirer attacked them instead for

being neutral on slavery. The Enquirer called such a position "treachery" and hardly less inimical to Southern interests than abolitionism itself.⁶⁶ As the Examiner charged, to be

neutral on the slavery question at this crisis of public affairs is to be hostile to the South. Her case in the Union is like that of the Lord Jesus Christ in Judea. Whosoever is not with her is against her. There is no half-way ground between the South and Abolitionism.⁶⁷

NOTES FOR CHAPTER IV

1. Post, March 16, 1855.
2. Whig, March 14, 1855.
3. Post, March 16, 1855.
4. Ibid., March 2, 3, 16, 1855.
5. Ibid., March 16, 1855.
6. Enquirer, August 5, 1854, quoting the Lynchburg Republican.
7. Ibid., January 13, 1855, August 5, 1854, quoting the Lynchburg Republican.
8. Examiner, March 6, 1855; Enquirer, February 8, 1855.
9. Examiner, February 13, 1855; Enquirer, January 12, 1855.
10. Enquirer, January 13, 1855.
11. Ibid., August 25, 1854.
12. Ibid., January 22, 1855. See a similar statement in the Examiner, March 6, 1855.
13. Ibid., May 8, 1855.
14. Ibid., April 6, 1855.
15. Examiner, January 30, 1855.
16. Enquirer, April 20, 1855.
17. Ibid., December 29, 1854, quoting the Washington Union.
18. Ibid., February 8, 1855.
19. Post, February 8, 1855.
20. Whig, February 13, 1855; Post, March 14, 1855.

21. The situation in Massachusetts prompted the Enquirer to say (February 2, 1855) that the "poison of Know-Nothingism" has made Massachusetts' political sentiments "infinitely worse." It described the states' body politic as "one mass of sores from the crown of its head to the sole of its foot." The Examiner (January 30, 1855) called Wilson "one of the most rabid Freesoil demagogues in all New England."
22. Examiner, February 2, 1855.
23. Dispatch, May 21, 1855.
24. Post, March 2, 29, 1855.
25. Whig, May 17, 1855.
26. Post, quoted in the Dispatch, February 8, 1855.
27. Whig, April 25, 1855.
28. Ibid., March 1, 1855.
29. Ibid., February 5, 28, 1855.
30. Post, March 21, 1855.
31. Whig, January 12, 1855.
32. Ibid., May 29, 1855.
33. Ibid., October 27, 1855.
34. A good example of the Post's willingness to acknowledge the proslavery position of the Know-Nothings is in the March 10, 1855 issue. It cites the Ohio Patriot and the Cleveland Leader to show how free-soilers were "furious against the Know-Nothings, on account of their proslavery tendency."
35. For example, Whig, February 6, 1855.
36. Enquirer, December 19, 1854.
37. Ibid., February 13, 1855.
38. Ibid., April 3, 1855.
39. Whig, April 11, 1855; Post, April 4, 1855.

40. Whig, March 15, 1855.
41. Post, February 24, 1855.
42. Whig, April 3, 1855.
43. Enquirer, April 6, 1855.
44. Ibid., January 18, 1855.
45. Ibid., January 13, 1855.
46. Examiner, September 12, 1854, April 17, 1855.
47. Ibid., May 18, 1855.
48. Ibid., January 30, 1855.
49. Ibid., April 17, 1855.
50. Enquirer, January 26, 1855.
51. Ibid., April 6, 1855.
52. Ibid., January 13, 1855.
53. Post, March 3, 1855.
54. Whig, February 6, 1855, quoting the Kanawha Republican.
55. Post, March 24, 1855.
56. Whig, March 6, 1855.
57. Post, February 26, 1855.
58. Ibid., March 14, 1855.
59. Ibid., April 17, 1855.
60. Ibid., April 14, 1855.
61. Ibid., February 27, 1855.
62. Ibid., June 2, 1855.
63. Ibid., June 5, 1855.

64. Ibid., June 14, 1855.
65. Enquirer, June 16, 1855.
66. Ibid., January 26, 1855.
67. Examiner, February 23, 1855.

CHAPTER V

MINOR ISSUES OF THE DEBATE

The Richmond debate over Know-Nothingism was not confined strictly to discussions of immigrants, Catholicism, and slavery. Considerable attention was also given to the subjects of political reform, the identity and origins of the Know-Nothings, and secrecy in politics. Political reform was an official goal of the Know-Nothings; they billed themselves as men of principle who sought to oust the demagogues and political hacks from offices of public trust. The Know-Nothing press was therefore quite energetic in its attacks on the "old" Democratic politicians and their party machine. (The Whig was less inclined than the Post to dwell on the matter of political reform since it still officially represented one side of the old political system). The subjects of Know-Nothing identity and secrecy were brought into the debate primarily by the Democratic papers in an effort to discredit the image of the Know-Nothings as pure-minded newcomers to the political scene. These three topics did not eclipse or even approach the importance of the three main issues of the debate in terms of the attention given to them by the newspapers; they nevertheless played very conspicuous roles in the discussions of all the papers.

In debating the idea of political reform, the Know-Nothing papers presented the Know-Nothing movement as a spontaneous uprising of the common people who were disgusted with the corruption permeating the government and politics. The Post declared that the old issues that had once divided the Whig and Democratic parties were now settled or worn out. The parties struggled no longer over principles, but rather over political spoils at the sacrifice of the public interest.¹ The common citizen needed a refuge "from the corruptions and political chicanery of the old parties," and that was what Know-Nothingism offered.² An article in the Post said that the Know-Nothing party

is designed to be composed of the people--the honest, industrious portion of society, and in order to keep it pure and undefiled, it is their policy to avoid political tricksters, wire-pullers and demagogues who are always watching the course of things, trying to keep with the stronger party.³

A writer to the Whig characterized the Know-Nothing party as "a great moral movement," "a great Party of Reform," that was composed of the country's "honest masses" who were determined to infuse "freshness and ... purity into the administration of public affairs."⁴

The Whig was eager to discuss the need for political reform as long as the target of reform was the Democratic party. The paper lashed out at the Democrats, charging that their party had been

diverted from its legitimate functions and objects and notoriously prostituted to gratify the passions and wishes of a few head-long, "rule or ruin," office-seeking individuals.... Is it any matter of surprise that Know-Nothingism, or any other respectable means of escape from its despotic and contaminating toils, should be eagerly embraced, sought after, and gloried in, as alike the salvation of themselves [the people] and their country?

The Whig even declared that the idea of ridding the government of self-serving Democratic politicians was the basic reason compelling the Whigs to support the Know-Nothings. On the day that it suggested that the Whigs should not nominate a ticket of their own for the coming gubernatorial election, the Whig said that reform "must form the basis of union between good men of all parties in the present important struggle."⁶

The Democratic press responded to the Know-Nothing cries for reform by charging that the Know-Nothings were only seeking to gather political spoils for themselves. The aim of the Know-Nothings, said the Enquirer, was to confer political power on men of "ruined fortune

and blasted reputation" who could not gain power through the traditional parties.⁷ The same paper said that the very sophistication of the American party discredited the notion that it was the "offspring of a popular impulse" or intent on limited goals; it indicated instead that the Know-Nothing organization was a full-fledged political movement seeking to survive the restricted aims to which it publicly aspired.⁸

If the Know-Nothings were ever uninterested in purely political objectives, that time, said the Examiner, had passed long ago:

There is no office too high for Know-Nothing aspiration, and none so low and mean that the Order will not scramble for it in the mire with the dirtiest crowd of hungry beggars [sic]. It has got a creed and a platform; it has organs of propagandism and of defence; its partisan appeals are as familiar to the public ear as household words. It is no longer a forlorn corps for the succor of the righteous against the ungodly, or a balance of power weighing out success to merit, as inexorably as blind old Justice. It is a tub standing upon its own bottom, a noggin into which Federalism, Whiggery, Nativism, and Abolitionism have all emptied their sacks of principles.⁹

The Examiner did not view the Know-Nothing leaders as a new breed of statesmen. When the Know-Nothing convention in Winchester nominated a number of ex-Whigs and ex-

Democrats to run in the May election, the paper viewed the candidates with contempt. This Know-Nothing ticket, said the Examiner, instead of being "as fresh and pure as butter just from the churn," was "the most rancid platter of long packed away and accidentally raked up stuff that was ever offered in the political market."¹⁰

If there ever was an organization in need of reformation, said the Democrats, it was the American party. Because of the Know-Nothings' intricate system of regional councils and their oaths that supposedly bound party members to vote as the councils directed, the Democrats were quick to point out that far from being a movement of the people, the Know-Nothing party was an undemocratic instrument of despotism. The Know-Nothing organization transferred power from the people to a few councils of oligarchs that drove the rank and file like sheep.¹¹

In June 1854 the Constitution and Ritual of the American party was drawn up in New York City. The party was organized as a secret lodge, complete with passwords, secret meetings, oaths, and mysterious ceremonies. Members were pledged to profess ignorance of their party and its activities--hence the name "Know-Nothing." In the course of the turbulent Virginia gubernatorial campaign of 1854-1855, it was impossible for secrecy to be strictly kept--candidates had to be selected, votes openly

sought, and principles expressed; still, the secrecy of Virginia's Know-Nothing party was not officially dispensed with until January 1856.¹² The mystery surrounding the Know-Nothings undoubtedly attracted some Virginians, but it just as certainly repelled many voters who were suspicious of secrecy mixing with politics.

The Democratic press used the secrecy of the Know-Nothings to good advantage; many frightening things could be said about opponents who were not completely open to public scrutiny. The papers created an image of the Know-Nothings as mysterious plotters and saboteurs. The Examiner said it was unfortunate that the Democrats, instead of dealing with an open, honorable enemy, were confronted with a foe

who lurks behind the bushes, log and trees, like the native aborigines of the country, painted, disguised, uttering noises and rising signs unfamiliar to civilized ears, and practicing stealth, deception and cunning, that they may surround us of a sudden with an army of assassins, where we see only quiet and dream only of security.¹³

Secrecy in a political association, charged the Democratic papers, was an indication of the members' evil intentions. Said the Enquirer:

If the practices of Know-Nothingism are praiseworthy, why hide them from the public eye? The truth is, Know-Nothingism shrinks from scrutiny with the guilty fear of the felon. Conscious crime makes it avoid detection and wrap itself in the gloom of impenetrable secrecy.¹⁴

Secrecy not only shielded Know-Nothing treachery from the public, it also implied a "contemptuous disregard of the public intelligence."¹⁵ Thus the tendency of a secret political association was to wrest the decision-making power from the people and place it in the hands of an "irresponsible and unknown oligarchy." This would be intolerable. Publicity, said the Enquirer, was one of the "inviolable safeguards of liberty."¹⁶

The Democrats warned that all sorts of evil things would result from the clandestine activity of the Know-Nothings. Even though the Know-Nothings were relatively few in number, their secrecy increased their threat. The Examiner asserted a secret society was the main instrument in corrupting and overthrowing a free community. If the society could not control free elections, it would secretly introduce dissension into the community, thereby creating factions and jealousies that would inevitably produce fraud, criminal resistance, and finally oligarchy and despotism.¹⁷ The same paper pointed out that a handful of Jacobins, through a veil

of secrecy, had ruled France "with a despotism and fiendish cruelty never before known on earth." The Know-Nothings, if triumphant, would rule in much the same way; the United States would be controlled by a Know-Nothing council in a Northern city, the Constitution would be subverted, and the South would be desolated.¹⁸ The secrecy of the Know-Nothings was actually what endangered the South the most; Southern institutions were too strong to be overthrown by an open attack. If the South was undone, it would be through the treacherous workings of secret agents of organized societies.¹⁹

An article in the Examiner brought up another threat posed by Know-Nothing secrecy. It said that Negroes were known to be imitating the secret association. Even the thought of this was frightening. Such activity among the blacks was "fraught with such danger" that it should "compel every true friend of the South" against the Know-Nothings.²⁰

Long before its conversion to the Know-Nothing cause, the Whig declared itself opposed to politics hidden from the public view. In June 1854 it said that it had "neither respect nor tolerance for any secret political organization, no matter what the objects proposed to be accomplished by it."²¹ But the Whig later changed its tune. It joined with the Post in claiming that evil

did not necessarily follow from secrecy and that secrecy in American politics and government had always been safely and prudently practiced. A writer to the Whig pointed out that the Constitutional Convention had withheld its deliberations from the public and that the President and Congress could keep confidential messages secret for the good and safety of the country; why, then, condemn the Know-Nothings? Secrecy was "perfectly compatible with virtue and patriotism."²² The Whig later added that secrecy was consistent with the practices of both Whigs and Democrats, who often used secret caucuses to draw up their political plans.²³

The hidden activities of the American party was characterized by the Whig and Post as a trivial aspect of the organization which was worth no discussion. If some people, said the Post, thought their goals could be gained through secrecy, no one had the right to object to it.²⁴ A writer to the Whig expressed no fear of the mystery surrounding the Know-Nothings; he said that if he had a barn filled with "rats, mice, cockroaches, bed-bugs, ants, mosquitos, and other plagues," he would not quarrel with the apothecary who offered him an effective poison, simply because he did not know what sort of poison it was.²⁵

Secrecy was also claimed to be a practical necessity for many Know-Nothings. The Whig said that concealed political action allowed former Whigs and Democrats to cooperate with the Know-Nothings without facing the hostility and jeers of those who would label them political turncoats.²⁶ A speech of a prominent Know-Nothing printed in the Post voiced the same ideas; it added that only secrecy allowed an urban Know-Nothing to be safe from the foreign population and protected the government job of a Know-Nothing working during the term of a Democratic administration.²⁷

The Know-Nothing press accused the Democrats of utilizing the same political secrecy which they so vehemently condemned the Know-Nothings for practicing. The Whig charged that the only reason the leaders of the Virginia Democratic machine (who were based in Richmond and thus dubbed the "Richmond Junto") were attacking the Know-Nothings' secrecy was because it broke "the force of their secret society by opposing to it one more republican in its organization, and consequently more acceptable to the people."²⁸ An article in the same paper claimed that nearly all the Democratic caucuses in the Virginia legislature had been closed from the public in recent years and added that Democratic, Jacobin-like secret societies could be traced all the way back to the

1790s.²⁹ The Post often attacked the Democrats for their organization of "Sag Nicht" societies. The Post said these groups were secret conglomerations of German Democrats, formed by agents of the Pierce administration, which sought to concentrate votes against the Know-Nothings in the Midwestern states. The Democrats, said the Post, were apparently horrified by native secret societies, but not by foreign ones.³⁰

The Democratic papers devoted much discussion to the origins of Know-Nothingism and the question of who the Know-Nothings actually were. Know-Nothingism, said the Enquirer, certainly did not arise out of "honest apprehension of Papal aggression, or sagacious foresight of the possible evils of excessive immigration." Instead, it was only "a poor, paltry, puny counterfeit of an idea, which any weak and depraved intellect might originate."³¹ If, then, Know-Nothingism grew out of no genuine and new movement, what exactly was it?

The Democrats had a ready answer. Know-Nothingism, they said, was nothing more than Whiggery with a new name. In the early weeks of the debate the Democratic press recognized the Know-Nothings and Whigs as distinct groups, but claimed they were drawing increasingly closer. In August 1854 the Enquirer said that because of the division among Whigs, their party had

become an "obsolete idea"; the Whigs had therefore abandoned their principles and had united with "Native Americanism"--the first "ism" that had presented itself to the searching eyes of the Whigs.³² A few months later, however, the Democratic papers were claiming that the merger of the Whigs and Know-Nothings was rapidly changing Know-Nothingism into a Whig movement. In late October the Examiner predicted that Know-Nothingism would be synonymous with Whiggery before the gubernatorial election.³³ By January 1855 the Enquirer declared the metamorphosis complete. The paper said that the pretense of independence was but a "deception" and "snare" of the Know-Nothings, their aim now being "the ascendancy of Whig measures and Whig policy."³⁴

With the Know-Nothings identified essentially as Whigs, it was but a small matter for the Democratic papers to link Know-Nothingism with the despised old Federalist party, from which the Democrats claimed the Whigs descended.

Native Americanism [said the Examiner] in whatever name or whatever disguise it appears, is no recent thing in this country. It is a hoary and oft-punished abomination of the Federal party. Opposition to the foreigner, cruel, intolerant and lawless, has, at intervals, characterized that party ever since 1787.

The Examiner then went on to show how Federalists had supported anti-immigrant measures during the Constitutional Convention and the presidential administration of John Adams.³⁵ The Enquirer said that the Know-Nothing party drew "into its bosom all the rotten remains of defunct Federalism" and used the same intolerant nativism that had compelled the Federalists to pass the Alien Act of 1798.³⁶ The identity of Know-Nothingism and Federalism, said the Enquirer, was after all a natural result of American politics; the paper claimed that only two great parties could exist in the United States: the Democratic and Federal parties.³⁷

A favorite tactic of the Democratic papers was to trace the origin of Know-Nothingism to the "seditious" Hartford Convention. Had not the Hartford delegates, asked the Enquirer, passed resolutions supporting the prevention of the foreign-born from holding offices in the federal government? Did they not declare their support for stricter naturalization laws? Did not the delegates meet in secret? It was clear: the "infamous Hartford Convention" was the father of Know-Nothingism.³⁸ The same paper later altered its argument. It claimed that Know-Nothingism was actually "the indisputable production of Benedict Arnold." According to the Enquirer, Arnold, following his defection to the British, had

issued pieces of propaganda that had urged Americans to resist the foreign influence of France which threatened the Protestant religion. Thus the Know-Nothings' ancestors at Hartford were merely "poor plagiarists" of the ideas spawned by the hated Arnold.³⁹

Although the Post was firm in denying that Know-Nothings were Whigs in disguise,⁴⁰ the Whig was especially vocal in doing so. The paper claimed in December 1854 that the impressive successes of the Know-Nothing movement could not have been attained without support from Democrats, and that actually there were probably as many former Democrats in the American party as former Whigs.⁴¹ A writer to the same paper agreed, pointing out that substantial Know-Nothing victories had occurred in strong Democratic states such as Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania.⁴² In response to the Enquirer's charge that the Know-Nothing nominating convention in Winchester was composed of 95 former Whigs and three former Democrats, the Whig maintained that the correct totals were 53 Whigs and 47 Democrats.⁴³ (The Democratic papers always admitted that a few misguided Democrats had strayed to the American party, but they claimed that many would return to the Democracy when their eyes were opened to the evil intention of the Know-Nothings.⁴⁴)

Until it gave up hope on the Whigs' chances to field a strong, independent ticket for the 1855 election, the Whig, although always professing sympathy for the Know-Nothing cause, adamantly maintained the independence of the Whig party.

In many things [said the Whig] we agree with them [the Know-Nothings]-- in others we widely differ from them.... [I]f this [Know-Nothing] party expects to absorb the great Whig party, and to control its will and shape its action, it will find that the experiment will be as hazardous as it will certainly be unsatisfactory.⁴⁵

Even when the Whig finally announced its full support for the Know-Nothings, it did not favor surrendering the distinct identity of the Whig party, but only advised an anti-Democratic alliance:

We counsel not the abandonment of a single Whig tenet, but only urge a course which will first effectually expel the Goths and Vandals, and ultimately, probably immediately, result in putting Whig measures and Whig policy in the ascendant.⁴⁶

Despite the claims of independence, the Whig's opinions between January and the May election were nearly identical to those of the Know-Nothing party. In view of the tottering condition of the Whig party at the time, there was not much sense in thinking differently; as a

prominent Virginia Whig said:

[I]f the organization of the Whig party is to be broken up, it leaves no other alternative to us, but to choose between the two other parties: the Know-Nothings ... and the Good-for-Nothings, ... and having fought against the Good-for-Nothings for twenty-odd years, ... I am strongly inclined now to fight on the side of the Know-Nothings....⁴⁷

NOTES FOR CHAPTER V

1. Post, May 15, 1855.
2. Ibid., April 9, 1855.
3. Ibid., March 3, 1855.
4. Whig, December 19, 1854.
5. Ibid., January 18, 1855.
6. Ibid., January 3, 1855.
7. Enquirer, January 26, 1855.
8. Ibid., February 26, 1855.
9. Examiner, January 30, 1855.
10. Ibid., March 23, 1855.
11. Enquirer, January 18, February 26, 1855.
12. W. Darrell Overdyke, The Know-Nothing Party in the South (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950), pp. 75-76. For a review of Know-Nothing secrecy and ritual, see pp. 34-44.
13. Examiner, May 11, 1855.
14. Enquirer, February 15, 1855.
15. Ibid., March 20, 1855.
16. Ibid., February 15, 1855.
17. Examiner, May 4, 1855.
18. Ibid., January 30, 1855.
19. Enquirer, December 9, 1854.
20. Examiner, April 3, 1855, quoting the Baltimore Argus.
21. Whig, June 13, 1854.

22. Ibid., April 10, 1855.
23. Ibid., April 16, 1855. A writer to the Examiner (March 23, 1855) attacked this type of argument by claiming that the secrecy of the Know-Nothings was permanent, while the secrecy of caucuses was only temporary since their acts were soon made public.
24. Post, February 27, 1855.
25. Enquirer, November 18, 1854, quoting the Richmond Whig.
26. Whig, November 15, 1854.
27. Post, April 13, 1855.
28. Whig, April 16, 1855.
29. Ibid., February 20, 1855.
30. Post, March 17, April 16, 1855.
31. Enquirer, January 22, 1855.
32. Ibid., August 29, 1854.
33. Examiner, October 31, 1854.
34. Enquirer, January 8, 1855. It is a fact that regardless of whether Know-Nothingism was synonymous with Whiggery, most of the Know-Nothings' support in Virginia came from former Whig strongholds. 39 Virginia counties which supported the Whigs in the presidential election of 1852 were carried by the Know-Nothings in the 1855 gubernatorial election. In comparison, only eight counties which voted Whig in 1852 were carried by the Democrats in 1855. Most Democratic counties in 1852 remained Democratic in 1855: only fifteen out of 97 counties which supported the Democrats in 1852 were carried by the Know-Nothings in 1855. Thus there is some evidence which suggests that Virginia Know-Nothingism was in good part another manifestation of the battle against the state's Democratic leadership, which had been the traditional occupation of Virginia's Whig party. (The sources of the above county voting figures were James P. Hambleton, A Biographical sketch of Henry A. Wise, with a History of the

Political Campaign in Virginia in 1855 (Richmond: J. W. Randolph, 1856), pp. 356-358, and W. Dean Burnham, Presidential Ballots 1836-1892 (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1955), pp. 223-227.

35. Examiner, September 12, 1854.
36. Enquirer, October 5, 1854.
37. Ibid., April 6, 1855.
38. Ibid., February 15, 1855. See the Examiner, September 12, 1854, for a similar argument.
39. Ibid., March 1, 1855.
40. For example, see the Dispatch, January 19, 1855 under the heading "Spirit of the Press."
41. Whig, December 2, 1854.
42. Ibid., December 19, 1854.
43. Ibid., March 20, 1855. The Whig's totals are more accurate; see Philip Morrison Rice, "The Know-Nothing Party in Virginia 1854-1856," The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, LV (January 1947), p. 72.
44. For example, Examiner, October 17, 1854.
45. Whig, December 25, 1854.
46. Ibid., January 3, 1855.
47. Enquirer, November 28, 1854, quoting a letter printed in the Richmond Whig.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Whatever one's position in the debate over Know-Nothingism, it could not be denied that the Know-Nothings had injected a considerable amount of zest into the political life of Virginia. The new party had induced raging arguments over new issues and spurred discussion of old issues in new ways. Nevertheless, the great spirit of the debate set an exhausting pace, and for many Virginians the novelty of the political excitement must have waned as the campaign wore on. By the end of March 1855 even the Dispatch seemed tired of the whole thing.

For one [the paper said], we shall be hastily glad when the election is over, and things assume their wonted course. We would be sincerely obliged to any individual who would knock us into the first of June, when we have every reason to hope that the raging of the political elements will have subsided, and the lion will lie down with the lamb.

As May 24 drew near the Dispatch looked with great relief toward the end of the campaign. As might be expected, the paper was not worried about the outcome of the election.

Happily [said the Dispatch], on next Thursday week the turmoil will end, the popular verdict rendered, curiosity as to the result be satisfied, the

victors exult in their success, the defeated submit like good republicans, and everything settle down into quiet and repose. It is not likely that the country will be ruined by the success of either party. The country has been 'ruined' by political prophets every four years since the government was established, but it has a vigorous constitution and gives no sign of destruction yet. The Dispatch confesses that it feels more apprehensions as to the chinch bug and the fly in Virginia, than it does in regard to the ravages of the triumphant party in this election, whichever it may be.

The other papers, of course, were less unconcerned than the Dispatch. Their final pre-election issues were crammed with last minute denunciations of the opposing side and exhortations for the faithful to turn out at the polls in force. Some of the final attacks traded by the papers were quite vicious. The Examiner, for example, left its readers to ponder this parting thought before the election:

The frogs and locusts and vermin which infested Egypt, did not produce a more profound antipathy or universal loathing and retching among her people, than our honest Democracy of Virginia feels towards the polluting filth and nauseating slime [of Know-Nothingism]....But the sentiment of the Virginia Democracy is: This is a foul, demoralizing, debasing, filthy thing that has got into Virginia pastures from the Northern pig-sty, and is turning our land of honesty, truthfulness, good manners, and manly frankness, into a very Yankee's slough of falsehood, slander, deceit, cunning, detraction, meanness, and vileness. For the love we bear our Commonwealth,

and for the hatred she inspired in her sons for all that is mean, groveling and despicable, we must beat down this foul beast and smite it unto death.³

The strong language of the Examiner hints at the potentially explosive nature of the election. Elections that pitted Know-Nothings and Democrats against each other in other states had been marred by violence at the polls, and violence in Virginia was a real possibility. It had already been shown that Richmond newspaper editors were on the verge of abandoning reason in favor of brute force. Back in March Roger A. Pryor of the Enquirer and William S. Easley of the Post had to be arrested to prevent an open brawl on the streets of Richmond.⁴

The Dispatch tried to make light of the tension-filled election situation. Three days before election day the paper joked:

Such bloody works as next Thursday will witness, must throw Sebastopol into the shade. The ferocity of the contest has already been unequalled. Hundreds of brave men have been skinned and swallowed alive. If such horrors happen in advance, what may we not expect next Thursday? We tremble to think of it.⁵

Despite its tongue-in-cheek observations, the Dispatch was still concerned about the threat of violence; on May 23 it begged the voters of Virginia to "keep cool" when they went to the polls the next day.⁶

Fortunately, election day passed without serious incident. It became evident within several days that the

Know-Nothing challenge to the Virginia Democracy had fallen far short of its objective. Wise had scored a decisive victory, receiving 83,424 votes to Flournoy's 73,244.⁷

Democrats also captured the offices of lieutenant governor and attorney general, as well as most lesser positions that were at stake in the election.

The reactions of the Richmond newspapers varied. The Dispatch called the election the most exciting Virginia had ever witnessed and quickly turned to other topics of interest.⁸ The Democratic papers were ecstatic over their victory, but continued to attack the Know-Nothings as they had for nearly a year. The Whig was surprisingly quiet after the election. Once the outcome was known, the paper chose largely to ignore domestic politics; the Whig apparently thought it best to draw the public's attention from the handsome victory of the opposition. The Post, however, did not submit to the election results meekly. It called Wise's victory "a triumph of fanaticism and Abolitionism" and blamed it on the votes of foreigners and the illegal machinations of political hacks.⁹

The debate over Know-Nothingism was exciting and spirited, but only seldom vicious. Most of the nativism and anti-Catholicism evident in the debate was quite mild. To be sure, much of the raw energy from which Know-Nothingism drew its strength was a product of pure bigotry and the Know-Nothing papers did not shrink from playing upon

the fears and prejudices of their readers. Still, the emphasis of the Know-Nothing press was always on the political dangers that supposedly stemmed from immigrants and Catholics. If the Whig and Post attacked the foreign-born for their evil characteristics, it was because these characteristics posed a danger to the political institutions of the United States. The Know-Nothing press seldom attacked the personal integrity of the immigrants without showing how their vices were political threats. The Whig and Post also did not denounce Catholics for their religious belief and practice. The papers did use the Catholic religion to frighten their readers by claiming that Americans were in danger of having a strange and corrupt religion imposed upon them; but the right of Catholics to worship as they pleased was never questioned. Only the despotic temporal aspects of Catholicism were attacked by the Know-Nothing papers as dangerous.

The most intriguing aspect of the debate is its connection with the sectional controversy. As far as the debate is able to reveal, the Virginia brand of Know-Nothingism was strongly sectional in character and consistent with the attitudes of most Virginia Democrats and Whigs on the subject of slavery. Know-Nothings, Whigs, and Democrats may have differed on exactly who the abolitionists were and exactly which policies and circumstances tended to lend the most support to them, but nearly all agreed that

slavery was good, that antislavery agitators were dangerous and should be suppressed, and that the North should be distrusted. The Democrats attacked the Know-Nothings for being untrue to slavery, but the Know-Nothings attacked the Democrats for the same reason; both parties claimed to be the only hope of the South in the face of a hostile North.¹⁰ Admittedly, the Know-Nothings always maintained that they were dedicated to American, not sectional principles; but there were few politicians at the time who acted differently. Whether in the North or South, whether antislavery or proslavery, people of the 1850s were increasingly identifying their opinions as being truly American and those which opposed them as sectional. They tended to speak of the Constitution and the interests of their respective sections in one breath. The Post, for example, could not separate the two; it said the American party was "the only constitutional party, the only reliance of the South, and if it is crushed, the South is gone."¹¹

For all their nationalistic rhetoric, the Know-Nothings seem to have been as wrapped up in the sectional conflict as anyone else. It is hard to believe that they could have remained above the controversy; all the Richmond newspapers reflect the deep passion which many Southerners had for protecting slavery. An understanding of this passion and of the inability of an "American"

party in the South to stand indifferent to slavery leads to a better understanding of the coming of the Civil War. Perhaps that is the most important conclusion to be drawn from a study of the Richmond newspaper debate over Know-Nothingism.

NOTES FOR CHAPTER VI

1. Dispatch, March 27, 1855.
2. Ibid., May 16, 1855.
3. Examiner, May 18, 1855.
4. Dispatch, Post, March 10, 1855.
5. Dispatch, May 21, 1855.
6. Ibid., May 23, 1855.
7. James P. Hambleton, A Biographical Sketch of Henry A. Wise, with a History of the Political Campaign in Virginia in 1855 (Richmond: J.W. Randolph, 1856), pp. 355-359.
8. Dispatch, May 29, 1855.
9. Post, May 29, 31, 1855.
10. Enquirer, February 20, 1855; Examiner, July 25, 1854, February 16, 1855; Post, April 17, 1855.
11. Post, May 14, 1855.

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