

Immigration and Immigrants: Anti-immigrant Sentiment



David H. Bennett, Syracuse University

A sweeping tide of immigration across the nineteenth century brought new ethnic and religious diversity to a growing nation. But the newcomers would face intense hostility: antialien movements flourished in the years before the Civil War and in the last two decades of the century.

After relatively modest increases in immigration up to 1827, economic expansion in the United States and worsening conditions in Europe—particularly in Ireland—led to rapid growth in the number of émigrés to the New World. In 1832, 60,000 alien passengers arrived at U.S. ports. In a pattern tied to the economic cycle of boom and bust, the annual influx of foreigners grew slowly, and in 1844 more than 75,000 sought entry to the United States. These numbers soon rose dramatically, however, as a result of potato famines in Ireland and Germany, as well as failed revolutions and political upheaval in Germany and central Europe. In 1847, 234,000 newcomers reached the U.S. ports of entry. By 1851 the number approached 380,000, and immigration continued at this unprecedented rate through 1854. From 1847 to 1854, almost 2.7 million prospective new Americans entered the country.

The majority of these immigrants were Catholic. In 1807 there were 70,000 Roman Catholics in the United States. By 1840 there were 660,000, and that was before the famine, which caused this population to triple. In 1850 there were two million Roman Catholics in the United States, most of them new arrivals in a nation where fear and hatred of Catholicism had been present since colonial times.

Anti-Catholicism had been rampant in England for many years before the first colonists sailed for America. It took root in the threat to English nationalism presented by the rival imperial ambitions of Catholic Spain and France, and was fed by quasi-historical, post-Reformation propaganda. In some of the American colonies, Catholics were denied the franchise; in others, the Mass could not be celebrated publicly and priests were banished on pain of execution. There was bitter opposition to the creation of Catholic churches and schools.

The increasing number of immigrants in the first half of the nineteenth century created new tensions. Catholic immigrants drew public hostility because of their poverty; the diseases they brought with them after the perilous ocean voyage; the slum housing they were forced to live in; and the dramatic rise in crime rates, alcoholism, and the poverty rolls that occurred after their arrival. Many American-born Protestants, equating their English heritage with “true” Americanism, despised the desperately poor Irish and feared the Germans, who spoke a strange new language. The antialiens were nativists, convinced that opposition to the growing minority of Catholic immigrants was necessary to protect their America.

Nativism took many forms in the first half of the century. Catholic convents, churches, and schools were attacked, and dozens of anti-Catholic newspapers found large audiences. Anti-Catholic books were published, warning of Jesuitic conspiracies to undermine America. A new “convent literature” featured best sellers like *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk* (1836), which recounted tales of rape and sadism inflicted on innocent girls by evil priests in the inner sanctums of Catholic institutions. There were massive demonstrations by “true” Americans, notably the 4 July 1844 procession in Philadelphia, which led to violent conflict and widespread destruction of Catholic property throughout the city.

The antialiens turned to political activism to arrest immigration and to prevent the establishment of Catholic schools. National anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant political parties emerged, particularly the American Republican Party in the 1840s and the American Party in the next decade. The American Party was created out of one of the proliferating nativist secret societies—the Order of the Star Spangled Banner. Its leaders, fearing that the party could be undermined by an imagined secret cabal of Jesuits, forbade party members to acknowledge they knew anything about any such cabal. Hence the party’s more familiar name: the Know-Nothing Party.

Immigration and Immigrants: Anti-immigrant Sentiment

With the breakup of the Whig Party, fractured by divisions over slavery, the Know-Nothings became the second most powerful political organization in the nation by 1854, when they elected five senators and forty-three representatives. In the end, this nativist party also could not contain divisive sectional conflicts. The organization splintered in the years before the Civil War and was already in decline by 1856. In that year, former president Millard Fillmore, the Know-Nothing candidate for president, received only 875,000 votes of the more than four million cast. But its brief period of success was an indication of the intensity of antialien feeling.

The Civil War proved a bonding experience for all people supporting the Union, and after the Confederacy's surrender at Appomattox there was a striking decline in nativist activity. Yet as industrial revolution transformed the United States in the postwar years and attracted a vast new influx of immigrants, the antialien animus rose again. In the 1870s more than 2.7 million newcomers arrived at U.S. ports.

For example, more than eighty thousand immigrants from China arrived between 1870 and 1875, brought to America by companies that had contracted to supply cheap labor to mines, railways, and other enterprises needing unskilled labor. With 30 percent of California's workforce unemployed following the panic of 1873, many workers attacked these newcomers as "coolies" willing to work for slave wages. Outbreaks of violence against the Chinese spread throughout the West, from Los Angeles to Seattle to Denver. In 1882, Congress responded to anti-Asian nativism with the Chinese Exclusion Act, which suspended immigration from China for ten years.

In the 1880s there were 5.2 million more, the greatest number of immigrants in a decade up to that point. Almost 3.7 million more came in the 1890s, despite the economic panic and depression in the United States during those years.

At first, most of the newcomers came from familiar locales, often from cultures the nativists had feared and opposed in the past. More than half of the arrivals through the mid-1880s were from Ireland, Germany, and central Europe. But by the late 1880s, "new immigration" from southern and eastern Europe had begun to change the ethnic landscape of dozens of American cities. Poor Catholic peasant farmers—the *contadini*—from southern Italy, Jews from the "pale of settlement" in the Russian Empire, and Polish and Slavic immigrants arrived in growing numbers. The response was a rebirth of antialien activities.

A striking number of new nativist fraternal groups were formed, the most important being the American Protective Association (APA). Founded in Iowa in 1887, the APA had attracted a membership of 500,000 by 1895. While its leaders focused on fears of Irish Catholic control of big-city political machines and educational institutions, the organization's members focused on assaulting the "alien" ways of the "new immigrants." They believed these people were the inferior "refuse of Europe" and could never be assimilated into U.S. culture.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the APA had disappeared. Nativist activism did not flourish in the first decades of the twentieth century, the years of the Progressive Era. It rose again in the form of the post-World War I Red Scare in 1919, and in the powerful but short-lived Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s. It was in the nineteenth century that antialien movements had their greatest impact in American history.

Further Readings

Anbinder, Tyler Gregory. *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know-Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Bennett, David H. *The Party of Fear: The American Far Right from Nativism to the Militia Movement*. New York: Vintage, 1995.

Billington, Ray Allen. *The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860*. 1938. Reprint, Chicago: Quadrangle, 1964.

Higham, John. *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1955. 2d ed., New York: Atheneum, 1963.

Source: *Encyclopedia of the United States in the Nineteenth Century*. 3 vols. Charles Scribner's Sons, 2001.
