

Religious Intolerance: A Historical Repeat?

BY SAM KATZ WITH ERIN SHIPLEY

Working on the film series *Urban Trinity: The Story of Catholic Philadelphia* has provided an exciting adventure for our team of historians, writers, and film production cast and crew at History Making Productions. To create this documentary, timed to coincide with Pope Francis's historic visit to Philadelphia to attend the World Meeting of Families, we excavated stories that were largely unknown to many of us, revealing fascinating and new insights into Philadelphia and its people.

Urban Trinity presents a story of the struggles of a vast array of immigrant groups whose common denominator was their religion: Catholicism. A recurring theme in these narratives is the powerful and venomous hatred and bigotry they encountered, often not just on religious but on ethnic or racial grounds.

While we've been making this film, we've witnessed the contemporary rise of Islamophobia in America and other western nations. Could there be some interesting parallels between the American anti-Catholicism of the 19th and early 20th centuries, when Know-Nothings and other xenophobic groups stoked passions of fear and threat from the rising tide of Catholic immigrants, and the anti-Muslim fervor that grips a sizable segment of the American public today?

That many American Muslims, like American Catholics of the 19th century, desire to contribute to their country—the United States—is mostly overlooked or marginalized in public conversation. Protests of newly established mosques or Muslim cultural centers in American cities and paranoia about secret plots to establish “Sharia law” in the United States sound similar to the sentiments that some Protestants, regarding a growing “horde” beholden to a pope and fearing the undermining of Protestant culture and influence, openly expressed about Catholics and their institutions less than a century ago.



In following the Philadelphia Catholic story, there are some parallels between modern American Islamophobia and historical American anti-Catholicism. Anti-Catholic sentiments had deep roots, dating back to the Reformation. In early national Philadelphia and elsewhere, many native-born Protestants feared that Catholic immigrants would not be good republican citizens. After all, their first loyalty was to the pope in Rome. By the mid 19th century, during times of economic instability, that distrust deepened as waves of poor Irish Catholics competed with native-born whites and African Americans to get and do work few others were willing to do.

In June of 1832, the *John Stamp* docked in Philadelphia, having completed its two-month journey from Derry in northern Ireland. Dozens of young, provincial Irishmen who disembarked from that ship found work digging the railroad for a contractor named Philip Duffy, performing the backbreaking task of leveling the heavy, rocky soil at mile 59 of the Philadelphia and Columbia Railroad near Malvern. When a cholera epidemic struck Philadelphia and reached mile 59 that summer, the locals shut their doors to the men. With only four brave Sisters of

Charity to care for them, all of the Irish railroad workers perished. But recent historical and archaeological research conducted at “Duffy’s Cut” is conclusive that not all of the bodies buried there died from cholera. In fact, forensic evidence strongly suggests that several of the men and one woman died violently.

Anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant fervor intensified in 1840s Philadelphia when Bishop Francis Patrick Kenrick publicly objected to the reading of the King James Bible in the presence of Catholic children in the public schools. The Catholic Church disapproved of the King James translation, and Kenrick asked that children be allowed to use the Catholic (Douay Rheims) Bible as a matter of liberty of conscience. Radical Protestant Nativists in Philadelphia trumpeted Kenrick’s opinion to gain support for their anti-Catholic and anti-Irish views. Nativists rallied to keep their Bible in schools; and on May 6, 1844, those rallies turned into violent riots. Over the course of the summer, numerous fatalities and dozens of injuries had occurred in the city and its neighboring districts. Catholic churches, homes, and businesses were burned to the ground.

Kenrick had sought acceptance and understanding. He wanted Catholic children



in the two world wars. They took advantage of mid-20th-century programs such as the G.I. Bill, which helped bring higher education and home ownership within their reach and facilitated the final step into the American mainstream. Over time, American Catholics came to be seen as American first and Catholic second. Today, it is easy to forget that such fear and hatred had been directed towards this important segment of our society.

The founder and proprietor of Pennsylvania, William Penn, envisioned a place where diverse religions could be practiced freely. As the commonwealth grew more crowded, however, that lofty aspiration was tested by less admirable human attitudes and behaviors. In time—after decades of hatred and bigotry, but also of persistence and hard work—a religious group once deemed disloyal and threatening was embraced as fully American. *Urban Trinity: The Story of Catholic Philadelphia* traces that story from distress, violence, and exclusion to acceptance, triumph, and eminence.

That’s food for thought. ■

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History Making Productions’ reenactment of the consecration of Bishop (now Saint) John Neumann and History Making Productions’ reenactment of a Catholic sister instructing students at a parochial school in *Urban Trinity: The Story of Catholic Philadelphia*. Courtesy of History Making Productions.



in school with Protestant students. But the violence and vitriol forced him to conclude that making public schools friendly to Catholic children was futile. Instead, he turned inward and focused on building schools run by and for Catholics. His successor, Bishop (now Saint) John Neumann, developed the first and largest parochial school system in the United States. Neumann invited men and women religious to Philadelphia to teach in these schools. With the backing of the bishop, religious orders founded Catholic institutions—hospitals, orphanages, nursing homes, clubs, and societies—across the Philadelphia region. Philadelphia Catholics built a cocoon, where everything from healthcare and childcare to sports and recreation existed within the world of the parish.

Catholic Philadelphians slowly fought and earned their way into the city’s social and political infrastructure, taking low-level jobs and working their way up through patience

and networking. Political bosses such as the infamous William “Squire Bill” McMullen controlled voting districts and carved out a place for Catholics in Philadelphia politics, often with an iron fist. The demographics of Philadelphia Catholics changed over time—from largely Irish and German to Italian, Polish, and other eastern European nationalities, to Hispanic, Asian, and African in more recent years. Catholics proved their loyalty and patriotism, fighting

The first two episodes of *Urban Trinity: The Story of Catholic Philadelphia* (History Making Productions, 2015) will be broadcast on 6ABC/WPVI-TV on Tuesday, September 22, at 7:00 p.m. The third and final episode will air on Sunday, September 27, at midnight. This film series will be distributed to large and growing broadband, educational, and theater audiences following the broadcasts.