



Riots in the City of Brotherly Love

"No less than two hundred families have been compelled to remove from their homes....Men with their wives, and often six or seven children, trudging fearfully through the streets, with small bundles, seeking a refuge they knew not where....a large number of Irish Catholics and others, who were so ruthlessly thrust from their homes during the riots of Tuesday and Wednesday, had encamped in Camac's Woods and other places, some two or three miles north of the city....They were without food, except what chance or charity threw in their way, and destitute of clothing sufficient to protect them from the damp night air. While in this deplorable situation....one woman gave birth to a child."

- From *A Full and Complete Account of the Late Awful Riots in Philadelphia*.
Philadelphia: John B. Perry, 1844.

Such was the scene of turmoil, violence, and fear in May 1844 when, for several days, Irish Catholic residents of Kensington were the target of nativist aggression. Torching two churches, a mob pillaged and vandalized the homes of Irish Catholic residents who fled with whatever possessions they could carry. Many would return to find that their neighborhood now resembled a war zone; their homes nothing but a mass of rubble and their community torn apart along ethnic lines.

The events that would leave this and other Philadelphia neighborhoods in ruin began in the 1830s and could just as easily have occurred in any other major American city during the antebellum period. A time of great social change and economic unrest, this period was a time when people redefined what it meant to be "American." Protestant revivalism, reform movements, industrialization, and urbanization moved sentiments and attitudes of native-born Americans in directions that conflicted with the social and political customs of the mass of new immigrants straining city borders and saturating the low-skilled job market. In Boston and New York, for example, tensions brewed as cultural differences between the swelling number of Irish Catholic immigrants and native-born Protestant citizens became more pronounced and in antithetical. Irish immigrants were the target of anti-Catholic violence in Boston in 1834 when a mob of Protestant working-class men burned a Catholic convent to the ground. In April 1844 a group of 1,200 Protestants carried anti-Catholic banners through the Irish wards of New York City antagonizing the citizens and threatening to burn down St. Patrick's Cathedral.

The spark that ignited the 1844 Philadelphia riots was the issue of Bible readings in the public schools. Irish Catholics disagreed with the policy that required their children who attended public school to read from the Protestant King James version of the Bible. Catholics argued that their children should be allowed to either use their own version of the Bible for religious exercises, or should be excused from the religious instructions altogether. In an effort to reach a compromise that did not threaten the authority of the native Protestants while appeasing Irish Catholic demands, the school board decided to keep the King James version in the schools, but to allow Irish Catholic children to leave the classroom during the lessons. Not all nativists and Irish Catholics viewed this as an adequate resolution. They continued to rally around the idea that each side was, in its own way, attempting to "save the Bible."

The quest to "save the Bible" came to a head when a Kensington school director by the name of Hugh Clark, himself a Catholic, authorized a teacher to temporarily suspend religious instructions in her classroom. The teacher found the Catholic schoolchildren's exiting the classroom during religious instructions disruptive to the rest of the class and a distraction that undermined the lesson. Until a more suitable method of excusing children could be devised, Clark suggested that the teacher suspend the lessons. As nativist groups heard about Clark's recommendation, they believed that the Irish Catholics intended to eliminate the Bible from public schools entirely.

The Bible question gave strength, popularity, and political clout to a growing national nativist movement. Native-born Americans threatened by the growing number of immigrant voters and the social and economic implications of the mass migration of the Irish Catholics organized into a political party called the American Republican party, which later became the national Know-Nothing Party. This party argued that only native-born Americans should hold public office. In addition to severe restrictions on immigration, the Know-Nothings pushed for a twenty-one-year wait before immigrants could become naturalized citizens. By the 1850s, the Know-Nothing Party gained control of legislative bodies in numerous states including Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and California. The Bible issue was incorporated into the American Republican Party's platform in Philadelphia. The major rallying cry for the nativists was to "save the Bible," more specifically, the King James version, from the "foreign influence" that sought to eliminate it entirely.

Violence in 1844 began when the American Republican Party held a political rally on May 3 in Kensington, a largely Irish Catholic neighborhood in North Philadelphia. The party made several attempts to hold the rally but were continually disrupted by local Irish residents. The speeches made at the rally, anti-immigrant in nature, offended and disturbed

the crowd of several hundred Irishmen who composed the audience. Annoyed that these nativist speakers would try to rally political support for a party that openly discriminated against them in their own neighborhood, the Irish crowd forced the speakers from the podium and tore down the platform from which they spoke. The nativists persisted in their desire to hold the rally in Kensington despite what they viewed as a direct attempt on the part of the Irish to suppress their right to assemble. Another meeting was organized for May 6 and widely publicized throughout the city. This time, three thousand nativists and Irishmen attended the meeting. As tensions began to mount between these two groups, a thunderstorm sent the crowd running for cover to the market house, and this is when the violence erupted. The Irish residents and nativists clashed violently for two days, resulting in the burning of dozens of homes and two Catholic churches. The violence was finally suppressed by the militia, but not before at least 20 persons were killed and over 100 wounded.

Tensions mounted once again in July 1844 when nativists responded to reports that St. Philip de Neri Catholic Church in Southwark, a South Philadelphia neighborhood, contained an arsenal of weapons placed there by the residents of that neighborhood. The weapons were placed in the church by the authority of the governor in response to a threat the church received. Nativists as well as rowdy gangs of young onlookers demanded the removal of the weapons. Despite confiscation of the weapons and appeals by certain nativist political leaders and local authorities to disperse, the crowd attempted to break into the church. A battle between the crowd, some of whom were nativists, and the state militia ensued as troops took a firm stance to protect and secure the church. In the end, at least 14 people were killed, 2 of whom were soldiers, and 26 others were wounded. The long term results of the July riots would be a reassessment of the peace-keeping measures in Philadelphia.

Sources Used:

A Full and Complete Account of the Late Awful Riots in Philadelphia Philadelphia: John B. Perry, 1844.

Dennis Clark, *The Irish in Philadelphia: Ten Generations of Urban Experience*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1973.

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