
Strange Bedfellows: Nativism, Know-Nothings, African-Americans, and School Desegregation In Antebellum Massachusetts

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Introduction

Rapidly changing economic conditions fueled a bewildering set of dislocations. The value of labor for the working class fell. The population of the foreign born increased exponentially, their numbers pregnant with an unfamiliar culture and a religious faith despised by most Americans. Urban life was beset with poverty and crime. Traditional social and political institutions were incapable of redressing or even containing a growing discontent. These factors and other forces translated into a rage directed at the elite and their failed institutions, spawning a populist revolt that manifested itself in racism, hatred, xenophobia, exclusion and a determination to overthrow the old order and start afresh. That was Massachusetts in the early 1850s.

African-Americans—chafing at life at the margins in a state that nevertheless offered the best overall quality of life in the nation—sought equality of education for their children in fully integrated schools. Utilizing boycotts, non-violent tactics and an alliance with elite whites who objected to inferior “separate but equal” schools, a movement formed driven by a charismatic yet unassuming leader that demanded desegregation. That too was Massachusetts in the early 1850s.

At the nexus of these unlikely arcs, the nativist American Party, known popularly as the “Know-Nothings,” capitalizing on rampant anti-Irish and anti-Catholic sentiment, swept the state, capturing the legislature and the governor’s office. Paradoxically, it was this legislature dominated by Know-Nothings—who rose to power plying the politics of exclusion—that outlawed segregation in schools across the state. The improbable cooperation between nativists and champions of African-American equality, and its highly significant result, is the topic of this paper.

Massachusetts in the Early 1850s

Massachusetts in the early 1850s had undergone dramatic changes that

had radically upended the social, economic, and political dynamics of its very recent past. Once a primarily agricultural state with a thriving urban hub in Boston and its vicinity, by the 1850s Massachusetts had become “the nation’s most densely populated, urbanized, and industrialized state. . . . Social and economic dislocations on a scale exceeding those in other states exerted intense pressures for a political response.”¹ The relatively small size of the state constrained population growth in its heyday of agriculture, leading to wide emigration patterns to the expanding west. But the steady growth in manufacturing from flourishing textile mills and other industries proved a magnet to the native born as well as immigrants from abroad.²

Massachusetts had long been moving towards industrialism, but as manufacturing intensified and agriculture declined, there was a profound shift from the traditional rural and small-town way of life to one often brutally focused upon wage labor in an urban environment. These cumulative trends generated exponential social and economic dislocations that brought dramatic changes to lifeways and bred psychological stress that left great numbers in the population uncertain, angry, and resentful towards those who controlled the political arena—typically legislators beholden to the interests of the “Brahmin” elite—who seemed unwilling or incapable of addressing their concerns.³

Much of the complaints of the growing class of wage laborers coalesced around the so-called “Ten Hour Law,” a proposal that would for the first time restrict the number of consecutive hours a laborer could be tasked to work. Such calls were vehemently resisted by the captains of industry that owned the mills and factories and effectively controlled the economic life in the urban industrial milieu, as well as their business-friendly patron, the Whig Party, which commanded outsize political power in the state, backed by the full authority of the police and the judicial system. There was an often-promoted capitalist fiction that celebrated the freedom of wage earners to sell their labor to the highest bidder, but the reality was instead starkly bleak, as members of the proletariat typically worked long hours for low wages in mind-numbingly repetitive jobs in unsafe working conditions—and one employer was no better or worse than the next.⁴ As historian John R. Mulkern underscores:

Factory work meant low pay, excessive hours, harsh discipline, and deplorable working conditions on a year-round basis. Female operatives put in a seventy-five to eighty-hour week. Factory children, who constituted a majority of the employees in some mills, worked up to seventy hours a week for a few pennies a day. And

everyone labored under a contract dictated by the owners. Through it all, Whig spokesmen and other apologists heaped encomiums on the factory system as the benefactor of the workers. Preachments that factory employment in the mills spelled opportunity for the self-reliant, however, clashed with the ugly reality of factory life.⁵

At the same time, there was a growing resentment in the remaining rural, agrarian segments of the western and central geography still centered upon small-town life that their concerns were completely ignored by a state government preoccupied with rapid economic growth in urban industrialization. “Rural Bay Staters, ever jealous of their political influence on Beacon Hill, viewed with trepidation the demographic trends that were multiplying the number of urban seats in the General Court.”⁶ Moreover, passionate voices for change—in the pro-temperance and anti-slavery movements, for example—remained muted by elite power brokers deaf to their concerns. Add to this combustible mix a massive influx of immigrants.⁷

Much has been made of the breakdown of the two-party system in the Antebellum period, a national fracture formed along the fault line of slavery, but often overlooked are the local dynamics that put stress upon traditional party politics in individual states, tensions entirely unrelated or only peripherally correlated to the slavery question. Perhaps nowhere was this more evident than in Massachusetts. The same two parties—Jacksonian Democrats, popularly known as “the Democracy,” and Whigs, descendants of the anti-Jackson National Republicans, whose core values were called “Whiggery”—were rivals with competing political philosophies in Massachusetts as elsewhere in the nation, but it was their identification with parochial concerns that more starkly defined the parties in the Bay State.⁸

Whigs, who were strongly associated with the pro-business interests of the economic elites, were dominant and had been for some time. Whig control of Beacon Hill—both the legislature and the governor’s office—had nearly become institutionalized. The bicameral Massachusetts legislature known as the “General Court” had an over-crowded lower house that made it unwieldy and sharply diluted the power of representatives.⁹ Districting, growing in popularity in other states, was unknown here. So too was plurality. As such, the governor won election by majority vote. A failure to achieve such majority—which occurred with some frequency—sent the race to be decided by the Whig-controlled legislature, which all but assured continued Whig dominance.¹⁰

Out-of-power Democrats chafed at the status-quo and were eager for any

opportunity to gain ground by challenging Whigs where they might be vulnerable, but were left mostly frustrated. As in other geographies, Democrats appealed to the interests of the yeoman farmer, championed the destiny of the common man, promoted laissez-faire economics, and fiercely defended local government from any encroachment from above. Their greatest political opportunity was perhaps in the “Ten Hour Law,” which had near unanimous support among the working class yet had little hope for passage as long as pro-business Whigs gripped the reins of power. But there was an inherent paradox: how could the Democracy embrace a law that was otherwise antithetical to its core belief that government should ever take a hands-off approach in the economic and social arenas? As it turned out, it could not.¹¹ Yet, in a rather brief span of time, these same arenas had been subjected to dizzying changes that brewed widespread dissatisfaction and frustration, which the state government would not or could not even attempt to mitigate.¹²

There were other forces clawing at the margins for political power, including the nativists and anti-temperance elements. But the largest and most prominent was the anti-slavery Free Soil Party, whose leadership plotted for a way to gain ground. What happened next was unexpected: a “Coalition” of Free-Soilers, anti-corporate Democrats (known as “Locofocos”), and disaffected Whigs combined to deliver a surprising electoral upset that brought them to a command of the General Court in 1851. Since it was the state legislature that chose members of the United States Senate in those days, the greatest historical significance of the Coalition coup was the selection as US Senator of the notable anti-slavery warrior Charles Sumner, who was to loom large on the national stage in the decade ahead. But the Coalition was less successful locally, championing a new state constitution predicated upon wide reforms that ultimately went down to defeat. The Coalition fractured, leaving deeply wounded Whigs, uncertain Democrats, and various splinter groups all jockeying for power in increasingly unfamiliar territory.¹³ This chaos created a vacuum that was exploited and eventually occupied by what was called the “Dark Lantern” politics of the Know-Nothings.¹⁴

Nativism and Irish Immigration

The presence of an ever-growing mass of Irish refugees from Europe with an unfamiliar culture and an offensive religion served up an attractive target for xenophobia that united otherwise disparate constituencies in shared opposition. Nativists hated the Irish because they were both foreign and Roman Catholic.¹⁵ For the working class, the Irish seemed to pose an economic threat as unwanted

competition in the job market, although this was far more imagined than real: factories were booming and had no shortage of low-paying dangerous jobs to go around.¹⁶ Like most despised recent immigrants to the United States, the Irish took the worst jobs at the lowest wages that no Americans wanted. Whigs—the party of the Brahmin elite, the factory owner, the wealthy—viewed the Irish, who tended to naturally gravitate towards the Democrats, as another bloc of future voters who threatened their hegemony.¹⁷ Meanwhile, Democrats took them in only warily, collectively holding their noses, but with an eye towards their eventual value at the ballot box.¹⁸

Traditionalists blamed the Irish for the increases in crime typical to rapid industrialization.¹⁹ Free-Soilers, who in Massachusetts could count on an unusual number of downright abolitionists, were affronted by the apparent racism of the Irish towards blacks that seemed to exceed that of the native born.²⁰ Pro-temperance true-believers viewed the Irish, who like the Germans loved their beer, as a drunken mob.²¹ Native Protestants had a visceral hatred for Roman Catholicism, as well as an unshakable belief that loyalty to the Pope superseded all national borders; the Irish were Catholic almost to a man and thus instantly suspect. Many of these various cohorts overlapped, of course, sometimes on

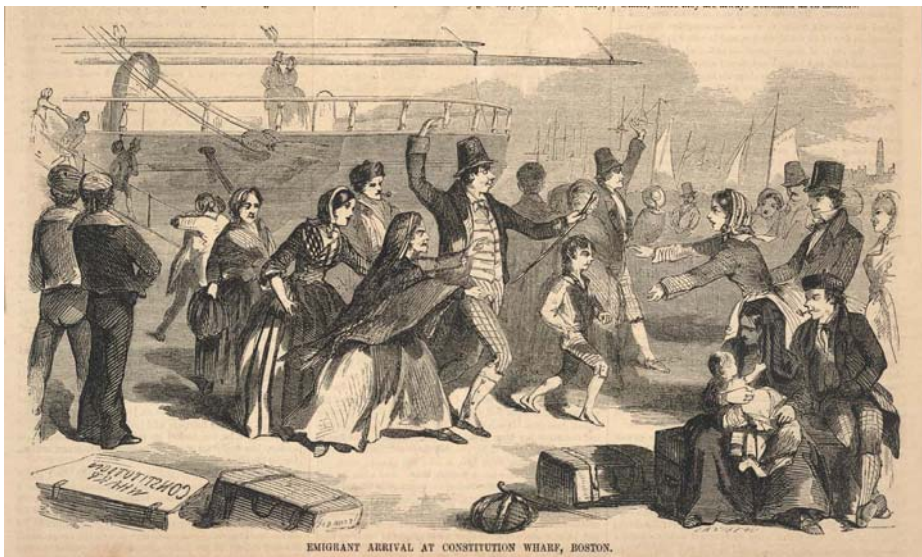


Figure 1. *Emigrant Arrival at Constitution Wharf, Boston, Caneela (?), Wood engraving on newsprint, 31 October 1857.*

multiple levels, overcoming their differences in the commonality of their hatred of the Irish. This served as a kind of glue that bound together the several different elements that comprised the Know-Nothing membership.²²

Nativism has a long, dreadful history in American politics that dates back almost to the very dawn of the Republic. The “Alien and Sedition Acts” enacted in 1798—only a single decade after the Constitution was ratified—increased the residency requirements for naturalization, and granted extraordinary arbitrary authority for the President to imprison and deport aliens deemed “dangerous to the peace and safety,” as well as non-citizen aliens in residence during a time of declared war.²³ One unlikely champion for such extreme measures was Alexander Hamilton, who in a 1798 letter to then Secretary of State Timothy Pickering declared: “My opinion is that . . . the mass [of aliens] ought to be obliged to leave the Country.”²⁴ The irony of this “disappointing stance” was not lost on his biographer, Ron Chernow, who notes that Hamilton, born in the West Indies, was “America’s most famous foreign-born citizen.”²⁵ A little more than a century later, Woodrow Wilson asserted that: “Now there came multitudes of men of the lowest class from the south of Italy and men of the meaner sort out of Hungary and Poland . . . where there was neither skill nor energy nor any initiative of quick intelligence . . . as if the countries of the south of Europe were disburdening themselves of the more sordid and hapless elements of their population.”²⁶ And, of more recent familiarity, then-candidate Donald Trump insisted that: “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending the best. They’re . . . sending people that have lots of problems and they’re bringing those problems. They’re bringing drugs, they’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.”²⁷ As such, this pithy 1841 comment by John Pintard, New York City merchant and philanthropist, hardly seems out of place: “The vice and drunkenness among the lowering laboring classes is growing to frightful excess, and the multitudes of low Irish Catholics . . . restricted by poverty in their own country run riot in this . . . as long as we are overwhelmed with Irish immigrants, so long will the evil abound.”²⁸ In this context, nativism is hardly an aberration in America. It is a part of our national DNA. Thus, it rears its ugly head again and again. As historian Ronald P. Formisano underscores, such “impulses were as mainstream as tolerance and plurality—coexisting and contesting, side by side.”²⁹

Spikes in nativism have frequently coincided with an increase in the percentage of the foreign-born population and immigration trends. Pintard’s comments anticipated the 1850 census, which logged a foreign-born population of 9.7%. At the time Wilson wrote, that number had risen to 13.6%, and continued to historic highs before declining precipitously—to a low of 4.7% in 1970—then

rising once more to 12.9% in 2010, just a few years prior to Trump’s soundbite.³⁰ The ethnicity of the immigrant varied, but the dynamic was unchanged.

In this era, the chief target of nativist outrage was the Irish. As Formisano points out:

It was hardly coincidental that the peak of Know-Nothing/American success came in the very years that unprecedented numbers of immigrants arrived in America – over 400,000 in 1854. The influx of close to 3 million new immigrants from 1844 to 1854 amounted to 14.5% of the nation’s 1845 population. The culture shock registered in countless ways, most notably in the political tsunami of nativism and anti-Catholicism.³¹

These anti-Irish trends had a long history that included the burning of a convent in Charleston, Massachusetts in 1834,³² and a series of riots in 1844 in Philadelphia that had the city in flames and claimed dozens of lives.³³ But the massive mid-century influx of the Irish exacerbated existing antipathies.³⁴

The potato, a New World crop, made its way to Europe via the Columbian Exchange, and was a key ingredient to an “agricultural revolution” that resulted in a population boom. This was most evident in Ireland, which consumed more potatoes than anyone else, and increased its population of 1.5 million in the 1600s to something like 8.5 million in the 1800s, largely due to a substantial decrease in infant mortality from famine times.³⁵ Another New World product was a type of bird guano that made excellent fertilizer, sourced from islands off of the coast of Peru and exported to Europe.³⁶ It is likely that one of the guano ships brought a new strain of Andean potatoes to Belgium in 1843/44 along with a hidden passenger, an oomycete called *P.infestans*—a kind of water mold—that caused a blight that devastated potatoes across Europe. It was first spotted in Ireland in September 1845, and in two months more than a quarter of the potato crop was wiped out. And that was only the beginning. Ireland was a nation beset by poverty with a population so dependent upon this staple that forty percent ate “no solid food but potatoes.”³⁸ According to Charles Mann, “The consequences were horrific; Ireland was transformed into a post-apocalyptic landscape. . . . People ate dogs, rats, and tree bark. Reports of cannibalism were frequent. . . . So many died that in many Western towns the bodies were interred in mass graves.”³⁹ Between 1845 and 1855, Ireland lost a third of its population—1 million people died from starvation and disease, and 2 million emigrated.⁴⁰

Many such emigrants made for Massachusetts, with its convenient port

that was on a direct line from Liverpool. For the Bay State, as Mulkern notes, this translated into an,

Influx during the 1840s and 1850s of thousands of Irish immigrants, driven by poverty, famine, and oppression from the Old World to seek a better life in the New. Over ten thousand arrived in the Commonwealth in 1845. Just two years later, the number entering had doubled, and by 1855, one out of every five Bay Staters was foreign-born. Immigrants and their children were in the majority in Boston, the capital city of Yankee Massachusetts, and were fanning out in apparently inexhaustible numbers to the other cities and manufacturing towns of the state.⁴¹

Know-Nothings Sweep to Power

Frustration with the existing parties united disparate entities who lacked the ability to otherwise turn their respective political voices into consequential results, including nativists, temperance advocates, and anti-slavery forces. The American Party—known as the Know-Nothings, or simply as “Sam”—after the identification with Uncle Sam’s nephew that became its emblem—wore a nativist cloak, but one that belied a complexity in the fabric of its membership. And the most significant threads were those former members of the Free-Soil Party, who briefly tasted political power during the coalition days—long enough to put Charles Sumner in the Senate. Some clearly sought to hijack the mantle of the Know-Nothings in order to advance anti-slavery ideals, but not all: a number of Free-Soilers, in Massachusetts as elsewhere, also held to pro-temperance and nativist ideals.⁴² Yet, it was the mass of followers with anti-slavery loyalties that had the most impact upon the Know-Nothing Party—and ultimately upon African-Americans—in the state of Massachusetts.

Perhaps most emblematic of these associates was Henry Wilson, a cunning and chameleonlike operator whose first allegiance was to Free Soil but according to historian William E. Gienapp “joined the nativist bandwagon as part of a calculated bid to be elected to the United States Senate.”⁴³ Less cynically, Dale Baum argues that “Wilson genuinely hoped to make Know-Nothingism the vehicle for a strong antislavery program.”⁴⁴ Virginia Purdy concurs, noting that: “It was Wilson’s strong conviction that office-holding was the only way to get ‘principles’ into the statutes that led him into the Know-Nothing party.”⁴⁵ It was true that Wilson was not willing to sacrifice political power for ideological purity,

a lesson that perhaps should not be lost on anyone seeking to be an agent of change. Mulkern perhaps best captures the complexity of Wilson as a political figure, describing him as a,

Study in pragmatism. He comprehended politics as the art of the possible, and to make things work it was sometimes necessary to blur decisive issues and to resort to expediency . . . He also understood the significance of political power and that in a republic power flows from the ballot box. Political victories, he wrote, were not won by adhering scrupulously to abstract ideals, however noble they might be.⁴⁶

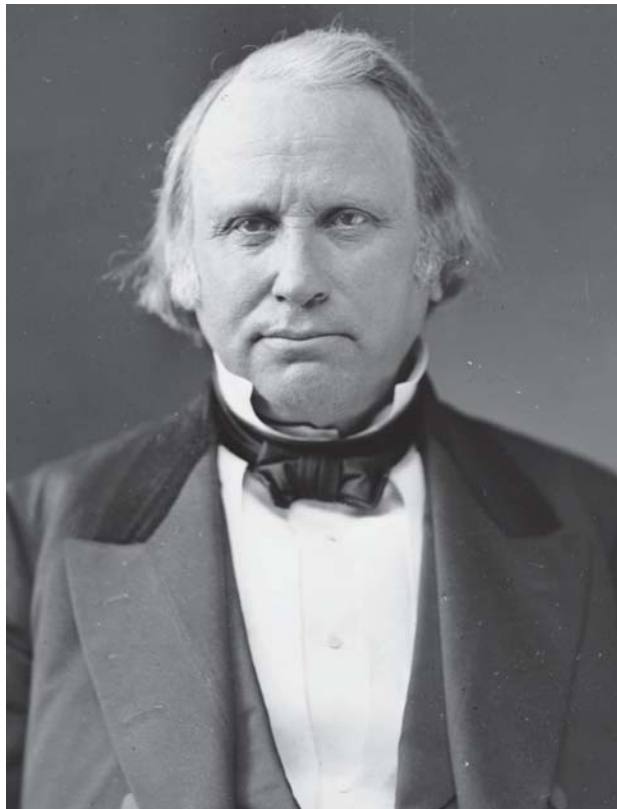


Figure 2. Henry Wilson, Vice President of the United States, unknown photographer, between 1860 and 1875.

Significantly, it was Wilson, who was to join Sumner as an anti-slavery force in the United States Senate, who earlier proved to be a key figure in forging the short-lived Coalition, as well as later helping to engineer the later Know-Nothing sweep to victory.

The key ingredient to Know-Nothing success was a network of local fraternal lodges comprised of relatives, friends, and neighbors.⁴⁷ These lodges, which met in secret, initially represented an organic yet “protean force” that was “built on antipartyism,” yet morphed into a unique party of its own.⁴⁸ The core values of the organization could be traced back to the Native American Party of the 1840s and its especially virulent strain of anti-Irish nativism. While its descendant was loyal to its roots in this regard, it was much more of a bigger tent populist movement that developed as a by-product of a paralyzed political culture unresponsive to popular dissatisfaction. Their secrecy, a trademark of what was styled “Dark Lantern” politics, spawned the sobriquet “Know-Nothings,” which was at first a pejorative, but later embraced by the membership. The genius of their secretive “Dark Lantern” approach was this organizational structure rooted in local lodges whose members were especially loyal precisely because their fellow associates were friends and neighbors. The strength, discipline and clandestine nature of the lodge organization was clearly the reason for the near universal astonishment at the 1854 election results: “What had been a shadowy network of fraternal lodges suddenly erupted at the polls, electing the governor, all forty senators, and all but three representatives in the House, with 63 percent of the vote.”⁴⁹

The political impact of the Know-Nothings was a national phenomenon, but only Massachusetts produced such a landslide.⁵⁰ Like their brethren elsewhere, and true to their ideological commitment, once in power Bay State Know-Nothings sought to deprive Roman Catholics of “their right to hold public office,” and to make the naturalization process for aliens longer and more arduous.⁵¹ However, much of their nativist zeal was spent on such absurdities as replacing “the Latin inscription above the house Speaker’s podium with an English translation.”⁵² But unlike their counterparts in much of the rest of country, the Beacon Hill Know-Nothing legislature passed a host of extremely progressive reform legislation, creating laws to protect workingmen, enacting mechanics’ lien laws, and—significantly—ending imprisonment for debt.⁵³ There were also laws that provided an overall boost to public school expenditure, made vaccination compulsory, funded libraries, took tentative steps to regulate child labor, and strikingly improved women’s rights in property, marriage and divorce.⁵⁴ They came close to actually passing a version of the Ten-Hour Law, but ultimately failed in that

endeavor.⁵⁵

There was much more, however, including a law that “prohibited the exclusion [from public schools] of children for either racial or religious reasons.”⁵⁶ This landmark legislation, which effectively made Massachusetts the first state in the country to ban school desegregation, has been largely overlooked or given scant attention by historians of this era. A 1989 book length treatment of the Know-Nothing legislature by the historian Virginia Purdy, for example, devotes but a single line of its two hundred eighty-nine pages to this momentous and truly historic moment: “They also passed (‘with a shout’ in the House of Representatives) a law prohibiting all distinctions of color and religion in admitting children to Massachusetts public schools, ending a long and bitter struggle to desegregate Boston’s schools in particular.”⁵⁷ Conspicuous in its absence in the historiography is how all of this came about.

African Americans and School Desegregation

By the 1850s, Massachusetts arguably offered the best overall quality of life for African Americans anywhere in the country, making the commonwealth a favored destination for runaway slaves who were welcomed into thriving black communities that would actively aid and abet their escape.⁵⁸ It was “a hotbed of abolitionism and the most egalitarian state in the nation.”⁵⁹ That is not to say that blacks did not experience racism, as well as elements of separation and exclusion typical for that era, but by all accounts conditions were vastly better than those in other states, north and south. Massachusetts, for instance, was one of only five states where African-Americans had the right to vote. In the economic sphere, blacks put a grip to almost every rung of the occupational ladder, most notably evidenced by African-American attorney Robert Morris, and there was a thriving black middle class. Massachusetts also had a very active abolitionist movement with key players both white and black. Yet, for all that, conditions varied by region within the state, and, it should be noted, the rights enjoyed evolved by custom rather than protection by law. Disparities were most pronounced in Boston, where for many years segregation was the *status quo* in housing, in theaters, in transportation—and education.⁶⁰

According to historian Rabbi Louis Ruchames, the first public schools were viewed as “eleemosynary institutions” for educating the poor through public charity, thus stigmatized with an implied dependency blacks sought to avoid by fostering separate Negro schools, financed largely by wealthy and sympathetic white philanthropists.⁶¹ Over time, public education was widely seen as a shared

right, and blacks lobbied for public funds to support their schools. In 1820, the first Negro public school was established in Boston; there were others in New Bedford, Salem and Nantucket. But it soon became clear that separate schools not only tended to inferior facilities, but underscored an inferior status for blacks by virtue of their separation. Black leaders and their white abolitionist allies lobbied for integration, which was surprisingly successful; by 1846, public schools were fully effectively desegregated throughout the state with the lone exception of the Boston school system. There, the city's school committee took an uncompromising stand against integration that launched a nearly decade long "scene of one of the most prolonged and intense campaigns for Negro rights in the history of the North."⁶²

The somewhat unlikely figure at the center of this struggle was William Cooper Nell, who as a boy attended one of these segregated schools, Boston's Belknap Street School for Negroes, where he was scarred by a humiliation that



Figure 3. William Cooper Nell (1816-1874),
photographer unknown.

turned him into an ardent integrationist. In this episode, Boston's Mayor, William Gray Otis, and a noted civic leader, Samuel T. Armstrong, oversaw examinations for academic excellence that awarded top students highly coveted "Franklin Medals." Nell was one of the recipients, but instead of a medal, he and other worthy black students were given instead a biography of Benjamin Franklin. Worse, their white counterparts were honored with a grand dinner at Faneuil Hall, where the medals were presented, and black honorees were not invited. The resourceful Nell conspired with a friend who was a waiter so that he was able to observe the proceedings while assisting with food service. Armstrong recognized Nell, and whispered, "You ought to be here with the other boys." He wondered to himself: "If you think so, why have you not taken steps to bring it about?" Many years later, Nell recalled: "The impression made on my mind, by this day's experience, deepened into a solemn vow that, God helping me, I would do my best to hasten the day when the color of the skin would be no barrier to equal school rights."⁶³

William Cooper Nell was a remarkable individual who has somehow been nearly lost to history. Born in Boston, the son of a free black anti-slavery advocate, the polymath Nell became—often simultaneously—a journalist, a writer, a historian, an activist, an abolitionist, a civil servant, and a tireless promoter of African-American rights. From his youth, he was inspired by William Lloyd Garrison's abolitionist crusade, and he worked first as assistant and later as journalist on Garrison's famous newspaper, *The Liberator*. He also wrote for Frederick Douglass's *The North Star*, but when a schism developed in the abolitionist movement, Nell remained loyal to Garrison and was alienated from Douglass. Nell studied law, but was never admitted to the bar because, deeply influenced by Garrison, he believed that he could not take an oath to the Constitution, which both men saw as a pro-slavery document.⁶⁴ Nell wrote two books—*Services of Colored Americans in the Wars of 1776 and 1812*, and *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution*—the first histories focused on blacks ever published in the United States.⁶⁵ Most characteristic of Nell was his unswerving opposition to what he termed "colorphobia," as well as his uncompromising stance on integration. Nell resisted anything that smacked of separation, even otherwise benevolent efforts that were sympathetic to his goals but were divided by color. In an especially radical stance for many black as well as white audiences of the day, Nell also strictly opposed separate churches.⁶⁶

The heir to Nell's old school on Belknap, rebuilt and renamed the Smith School, was the focal point of the resistance to segregation. The Smith building hosted a primary school, as well as the only public grammar school (for children

eight to thirteen years old) for blacks; there was no high school. Because the Smith Grammar School was near Boston Common, and most blacks lived “on the back slope of Beacon Hill,” the location was inconvenient. There were also allegations of substandard leadership by Smith’s white principal.⁶⁷ In 1844, a group led by John Hilton, a black barber and antislavery activist, Nell, and (then law student) Robert Morris, began a petition drive to end segregation.⁶⁸ When this attempt, which was stubbornly repeated in several subsequent years, ended in failure, a call for boycott began. Hilton pulled his own daughter out of Smith, “where she was doing poorly, and moved her into an integrated school in Cambridge where she carried away the honors from the white children.”⁶⁹ Other blacks followed suit, although not all black families advocated integration.⁷⁰ Attendance dropped at Smith, but the Boston School Committee was intransigent, ruling repeatedly—although by narrower margins over the years—that segregation was the best solution for children of both races.⁷¹

By 1849, Smith attendance had dropped by half, but the boycott was threatened by the appointment of a competent new headmaster who was black—and had the support of those African-American families who did not object to segregation. The integrationists, with Nell now in a central leadership role, ratcheted up pressure for the boycott, including a peaceful but nevertheless physical presence at Smith School to discourage registrants, which was eventually scattered by police. That evening, when Nell and his boycott advocates met at the nearby Belknap Street Baptist Church, opponents outside threw stones, breaking church windows. Nell, who consistently advocated for strict nonviolence—and whose methods and mien in some senses prefigured by a century those of Martin Luther King—told the crowd that the stones will be kept “as trophies of the prowess of those who resort to such methods of appeal.”⁷² The boycott continued.

Meanwhile, the courts got involved. A black parent, Benjamin R. Roberts, sued for equal protection rights under the state constitution because his daughter was barred from attending a school near her residence and was compelled to a long walk to Smith instead. He was represented by Robert Morris, now one of the first African-American attorneys in the United States, and Charles Sumner, who would later serve as United States Senator. In April 1850, the state Supreme Court ruled against him, declaring that each locality could decide for itself whether to have or end segregation.⁷³ (This ruling was to serve as an unfortunate precedent for the ignominious separate but equal ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* some decades hence.⁷⁴) Rather than lose hope, Nell doubled down his efforts, this time with a new tactic—a “Negro taxpayer’s boycott of Boston.” Prominent blacks began to move out of the city to the suburbs, which all featured

integrated schools, depriving Boston of tax revenue.⁷⁵

Ironically, larger national events with grave implications for the state overshadowed the desegregation endeavor while infusing it with new vigor. The Compromise of 1850, embraced by prominent Whig Daniel Webster, included a powerful Fugitive Slave Act that put former slaves in Massachusetts in grave jeopardy, and fully alienated anti-slavery Free-Soilers from the Whigs. Southern agents made well-publicized attempts to seize and return escapees to their owners, which energized active legal and extra-legal resistance in the state. Integration efforts paled alongside this greater crisis for African-Americans. Yet, it also brought greater sympathy and legitimacy for their struggle to a wider audience. The legislature passed a “Personal Liberty Bill” that forbade state officials from aiding federal authorities in the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act.”⁷⁶ Because opponents questioned its organic nature and cast his movement as but a pawn of abolitionists, Nell had long downplayed the quiet, consistent support of his white allies. But in the wake of the unfortunate Massachusetts Supreme Court ruling, he actively reached out to them. Abolitionists were too preoccupied with resisting the Fugitive Slave Act to lobby vigorously for integration, and one of several school desegregation bills died in the legislature early in 1851, but antislavery sentiments intensified.⁷⁷

There was even greater irony ahead. The Whigs were swept out of office in the populist revolt that put the Know-Nothing Party in control of the General Court, which in Massachusetts manifested itself as a virulently nativist yet curiously progressive and anti-slavery political entity. Many Know-Nothings were—like Henry Wilson—Free Soil, or allied to their interests. Now a powerful and influential US Senator, Charles Sumner also had a friendly relationship with both the Know-Nothing lawmakers and Nell’s integrationists. This time, a new bill “easily passed the . . . House . . . with a shout, not more than half a dozen voices being heard in opposition . . . the Senate quickly concurred, and the Know-Nothing governor signed the bill on April 28, 1855.”⁷⁸

Nell’s persistent agitation over more than a decade had finally succeeded; Massachusetts became the first state in the United States of America to prohibit public school segregation.⁷⁹ Still, in retrospect this celebration should be tempered by the racist motives of some of those Know-Nothing lawmakers, who saw little threat in the “small, Protestant Negro minority” but much menace in the growing numbers of Irish Catholics swelling the population. In debate prior to passage of the desegregation bill, one proponent who was a representative from Boston regretted “that Negroes living on the outskirts . . . were forced to go a long distance to Smith School . . . while . . . the ‘dirtiest Irish,’ were allowed to step from their

houses into the nearest school.”⁸⁰

Conclusion: Populism & Progressivism

A landmark law favoring black education represented just a fraction of the host of progressive legislation passed by the Know-Nothing legislature. What can historians make of the fact that what at first glance looks like a nativist, reactionary political entity turned into one of the most progressive legislative forces in American history? It could well be that populist revolts take on many faces but at root most are simply and essentially populist revolts, striking out against the status quo. The recent past can serve as guide. For example, as essayist Lance Morrow observed of the presidential election of 1968: “There was poetry, if not logic, in the fact that many voters who would have supported Robert Kennedy switched to Wallace after Kennedy’s death. Kennedy and Wallace, so different in most ways, drew from the same deep pools of passion and longing for a voice.”⁸¹ Just as incongruously, there is strong suspicion that a number of 2016 Democratic primary supporters of Bernie Sanders ultimately voted for Donald Trump, who represented an agent of change, even if one nearly diametrically opposed to their original candidate.⁸²

Historian Ronald P. Formisano argues convincingly that a mosaic of forces can serve as engine to revolts against the *status quo*, and that it did in this case, noting,

That Know-Nothingism was populist *and* progressive *and* reactionary. It was not progressive because it was populist, or reactionary because it was populist. Rather, all three of these currents came together, making it a classic case of the combination of progressive and reactionary elements in a populist movement.⁸³

In this sense then, the paradox of a movement defined on its face by racism advancing the rights of African-Americans may be no less remarkable, perhaps, but at least bears clarity.

Epilogue

Gearing up for the 1856 presidential race, the national Know-Nothings met in convention and declared the party agnostic on slavery, seeking to unite the country behind nativism. Massachusetts Know-Nothings, however, met in

Springfield on August 6-7, 1855, and while championing nativism countered with a free soil and antislavery position known as the “Springfield Platform.” This severely wounded the national party, which nevertheless nominated former President Millard Fillmore, who went down to defeat in 1856 as antislavery votes hemorrhaged from the American Party and flowed in great numbers to the emerging Republican Party.⁸⁴ The Know-Nothings were essentially relegated to a footnote in history. Republicans obtained the White House for the first time in the 1860 election, and Civil War ensued that resulted in the abolition of slavery. Henry Wilson capped off a distinguished career as Vice-President of the United States in the second term of President Ulysses S. Grant.⁸⁵ In a life marked by many notable achievements, in yet another milestone William Cooper Nell “became the first African-American to hold a federal civilian post,” when he was selected as Boston postal clerk in 1861.⁸⁶ The rights of blacks, however, suffered after Reconstruction, in the north as well as the south. African-Americans had to fight a long battle to effectively desegregate Boston schools once again, more than a century after Nell and his determined movement integrated schools the first time. Anti-Irish and anti-Catholic prejudice lingered long after the Civil War, as well, and while the Irish have now long been assimilated into American life, as recently as 1960 the Catholic religion of the Democratic nominee for President, John F. Kennedy, remained a significant liability in a very close election.⁸⁸ And nativism, this time directed at an entirely different ethnicity, remains a thriving business in 2017.⁸⁹

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5. Mulkern, 13.

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9. Mulkern, 13.
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11. Mulkern, 20, 22.
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15. Haynes, 73.
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36. Mann, 212-215.
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