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III

KNOW-NOTHINGISM IN RHODE ISLAND

BY  
CHARLES STICKNEY, A. B.

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PROVIDENCE, R. I.  
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## KNOW-NOTHINGISM IN RHODE ISLAND.

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During the years 1854-'55-'56, when the Kansas-Nebraska strife was absorbing the attention of the whole country, obliterating party lines and alienating the fraternal feeling between the North and the South, a new political organization was swiftly and secretly formed ; its spread over the country was magical and its strength, as demonstrated at the polls, was wonderful. The party was quickly formed, swept the North, and dissolved, on account of the absence of cohesive principles ; in its various stages and in the different portions of the country it bore different names, but that by which it was most generally known is "Know-Nothing," from the fact that its members always asserted that they knew nothing not only of the principles but also of the existence of such a party.

When it had reached such a prominence as to make a denial of its existence absurd, its partizans called it the American Party, and in certain States we find promulgated orders and announcements of "The Sons of '76," and "The Order of the Star-Spangled Banner." In the adoption of such names two motives seemed to prevail : to impress upon all that they were radically and enthusiastically American, and to induce as many as possible to join their ranks by the use of patriotic or quasi-patriotic appellations. This same spirit, we shall see, manifests itself in other ways, and it is to be recollected that they very frequently in communications and orders signed themselves "Sam," on account, it has been said, of the name of "Uncle Sam" given to our government. Likewise in their campaigns they made frequent use of a supposed command given by Washington on an important occasion, "Let none but Americans be placed on guard to-night."

But the great movement of the '50's was only a renewal of earlier movements. From the foundation of the government a strong anti-foreign feeling was manifest; this brought about the enactment of the Alien and Sedition Laws in 1798. But the radicalism and injustice of those measures overthrew the Federal Party and occasioned a kindlier feeling towards immigrants. In succeeding years we see the nativist feeling bursting forth from time to time; opposition to Gallatin was based upon his foreign birth, while in 1844 the feeling became more evident in the existence of the United American and the Native American parties.

During the great movements attending the Mexican war, the fixing of the northwest boundary, and the Compromise of 1850, the nativist feeling somewhat subsided. But these very movements forced to a dissolution the Whig Party and weakened the Democratic. The people began to think for themselves, and the old tenets of parties so ably advocated by Clay, Calhoun, Webster and Benton, were no longer regarded as vital. The policy of the South became more manifest, the growth of anti-slavery sentiment in the North was vigorous. Among the great mass of voters whom the new questions had forced from their former party, or greatly alienated from their attachment for it, there was a field especially adapted to the propagation of new ideas. And when the party with its strong feeling against the foreign element made its appearance in the field of American politics, a large mass of voters, who, as far as having any fixed principles is concerned, were "floaters," immediately attached themselves to the new organization.

But it was not alone the movements which I have mentioned that gave birth and vitality to the new party. The immigration from the continental countries and Ireland had been unprecedented during the previous ten years. The discovery of gold in California and the bountiful crops throughout the country were strong inducements for immigration, while the general disquietude throughout Europe in 1848, and the Irish famine, were driving many to seek other places in which to live.

A large part of this immigration was Catholic and espe-



cially subservient to Catholic domination. The Catholic press of this country, as well as the clergy, was radically ultramontane in its views, nor did it hesitate to express these views even in a time of great excitement. It is probable that the thoroughness with which public attention was absorbed in the Kansas-Nebraska struggle emboldened the Catholic element to overstep the bounds of wisdom in their assertions of Catholic domination—especially the assertion that the Pope could summon all possessors of temporal power, and execute judgment upon them.

The State of New York was the section of the country in which they most urgently advocated their claims — the division of the public school fund and the enactment of certain laws favoring them in the possession of ecclesiastical property. The feeling against foreigners in general and Catholics in particular, was not decreased by the struggle in New York; but when the Pope sent a nuncio to this country to arrange a settlement of the difficulties, the feeling was greatly intensified. Especially was this true when the nuncio was received everywhere and by the Government at Washington with what seemed more than due respect and attention.

It was now that a movement in New York City was started by a committee of which one Barker was chairman; on June 17th, 1854, a formal constitution was adopted. The choice of the day — the anniversary of Bunker Hill — was made so as to arouse a patriotic feeling.

The constitution governed the organization, which was strictly secret; it provided for different degrees as in many secret orders, but the founding of the new party on these lines was in conflict with the spirit of the Constitution of the United States, and was withal dangerous to national liberty. For the Constitution forbids Congress making any laws prohibiting the free exercise of religion; and if the American Party could proscribe Catholics, there was no limit to their power — Jews, Infidels and Protestants were all subject to their dictation.

Notwithstanding these facts the organization grew rapidly and extended through many of the northern States where the reason for its existence could not be advocated with

that appearance of necessity which gave rise to it in New York. But in every State in which a branch was organized under the Grand Council—which corresponded to our present National Executive Committees—they carried the elections with varying degrees of success. Their first attempts were in municipal elections, for it was in municipal affairs that the supposed evil influence of Catholics was especially manifest. The aspiration of being a national party did not seize them till they had been intoxicated with minor successes. The party was stronger in the North than in the South; the little immigration to the South and the anti-slavery feeling which permeated the northern members of the party being the causes. And among the northern states it was strongest in New England, the home of the authors and supporters of those Alien and Sedition Laws.

Gardner was elected Governor of Massachusetts by a two-thirds vote, while the two branches of the legislature were strongly Know-Nothing. In the autumn of '54, New Hampshire, the home of the then President of the United States, went with the new party, and Connecticut dropped into line with a clean sweep of the State. Rhode Island proved not impervious to the new influence.

The political conditions existing in Rhode Island at this period were in some respects different from those in other States. The conservatism of the State had prevented much advancement along the line of political freedom, and the transition from a form of government, thought suitable nearly 200 years before, was accomplished only by revolution. The Dorr rebellion was not successful, in the fact that it did not overthrow the aristocratic government, but it caused such an agitation of the subject of constitutional amendment that the Charter of Charles II. was laid aside in 1842, and a mode of government adopted granting more nearly an equality of rights. In this contest, it may be said in general, were ranged the wealthy against the poor, the aristocratic against their more humble neighbors. The foreign element, on the whole, sided with the Dorr faction, partly because their right of suffrage was greatly limited either on account of their poverty or the laws of naturalization, and partly because

their leader was a sympathizer with the dominant race—for at this time by far the greater part of the foreign-born population of Rhode Island were Irish.

During the time from the adoption of the new constitution till the death of Dorr, in 1854, the Dorrite faction was supported by the Democratic Party of the State. The reasons are obvious. And in the future political contests it was this element which saved the existence of the party when others went under.

A second question which at this time afflicted the people of Rhode Island was that of temperance, and of this the State seems to have had periodic visitations. The law, afterwards so famous as the "Maine Law," on account of its similarity to one on the same subject in Maine, had been passed and was in 1854 being tried. The campaign against the saloon was very vigorous and the question intruded itself into all matters; no party could ignore it, and every candidate for any office of importance, was first required to state, if it were not already known, his position on the Maine Law. In the campaign of 1854, the Democratic Party came out unequivocally against it; but it had the tact to base its opposition not on the unconstitutionality or injustice of the law, but upon the non-enforcement, and hence, practical failure of the same. No law can be enforced which has a mere majority, and that supporting it half-heartedly. There can be little doubt that the law was poorly enforced. With redoubled zeal the temperance advocates applied themselves to the task of saving the law from repeal. Papers were established whose first and most prominent object was the enforcement of the law. Open-air meetings were held in every town in the State; the pulpit resounded with denunciations of the evil, and the press was energetic. The question in the years covering Pierce's administration drew more attention and commanded more votes than did the question of franchise, which had in a measure subsided after the adoption of the Constitution in 1842.

But a greater and more engrossing question was that of Catholic influence and domination. Notwithstanding the fact that Rhode Island had been the most advanced in religious toleration, the bitterness against the Catholics in this State

was deep. But all that was said and done cannot be regarded as the result of genuine apprehension. When the Know-Nothing Party adopted a constitution in 1854, they thought they had a mission to perform; the desire to become a national party overshadowed all other desires. It is true that they were still animated by the one idea—hostility to Catholic influence; but in the organization of the councils in each State their one object, to carry the State, was to be accomplished by whatever means or arguments were most potent. In a strong anti-slavery section their position on the slavery question was the rallying principle for partyless voters. In Massachusetts they found their best argument to be in defence of that principle for which they were supposed to have been founded—to keep Catholics out of office and Catholicism restricted in its influence.

In Rhode Island they had a variety of principles; they advocated all that was popular, whether they were Whig or Democratic principles. The foreign-born population of Rhode Island was about 30,000, or one-fifth of that of the whole State, and the occupation of this element threw them into congregations where their evil influence was easily imagined. "America for the Americans" was the rallying cry. The anti-slavery cause was not omitted from the declared principles for which the party contended. By advocating this—and they were probably more sincere in it than in their denunciation of foreigners—they attracted to themselves a large following from the Whig Party and not a few Democrats. In the history of Know-Nothingism in Rhode Island there is only one fact that can be absolutely asserted. In the Spring of 1855 it conquered. When it came no one can say, what it saw can only be imagined. Its proceedings were too secret and its records too few to betray much of its existence. There was a third party in the field of Rhode Island politics in 1854, but it went by the name of "Independents"—a very non-committal title; in the campaign which this party waged there is nothing to indicate that it had anything in common with the Know-Nothings of a year later. It corresponded most nearly to our Prohibition Party, composed of radical temperance men with a sprinkling of those who were radical on other subjects.

Although the party accomplished nothing at the polls, its advent was the beginning of Whig dissolution in the State, and in that way was instrumental in contributing to Know-Nothing success.

It is not improbable that the formation of a council for Rhode Island was begun soon after the adoption of the party Constitution in June, for allusions are made from time to time in the press of the day to secret gatherings, and an uncertain feeling penetrating all ranks of politicians. Whether the dreaded party was organized among them, the Democrats and the Whigs knew not. In July, 1854, the *Providence Post*, the Democratic organ, protested against the action of the governor when he issued arms and uniforms to two companies of men, who called themselves the "Guards of Liberty." The companies were composed wholly of native-born Americans, and the *Post* considered it a manifestation of the presence of Know-Nothingism and an attempt on its part to have a military footing in the State.

It will thus be seen how suspicious the old parties had become. When the November election approached, the fact that, so far, the Know-Nothings had never lost an election, was discouraging, and prospects were very depressing to the professional politicians, for the fall election in Massachusetts was a most decided victory for the new party, and the political condition of that State was not very dissimilar to that of Rhode Island. A few days previous to the Massachusetts election, an election was held in this State, but it was not a general election; rather for action on the proposed amendments to the State Constitution, while there were a few by-elections to unimportant offices. It was in the election of an assemblyman from Cumberland, that the Know-Nothings were first successful in this State. In that contest the Democrats nominated their strongest man, a native American, and a man of tried ability—Fenner Brown; on the whole he deprecated foreign influence, but he had not pronounced himself decidedly against it at an opportunity he previously had. The Whigs made no nomination, while the Know-Nothings brought forward one Boyden, whom they elected by the small majority of 16. But small as it was, it signified much.

Whatever may have been done in perfecting their organization, but little had been publicly done ; so little indeed, that no one knew of the certain presence of the party. Nearly a month later the *Worcester Spy* said : " From all that we can learn, there are pretty certain indications that Rhode Island will, at the next election, place herself by the side of Massachusetts on the American question, for it seems that ' Sam ' has marched across the disputed boundary."

From the November election till that held in April, the Know-Nothings conducted a vigorous campaign, though a secret one. There were no public Know-Nothing meetings of a political character, but every thing was done under cover of secrecy. As the election of 1855 resulted in the annihilation of the Whigs and the success of the Know-Nothings, by a five-sevenths vote of all cast, there was some essential force which contributed to the result ; and as the party held their power for little more than a year, this force was something which could not long continue to dominate men.

In the consideration of this, those three questions—Slavery, Catholicism and Intemperance, which were being agitated in the State, must not be overlooked. But why did the opponents of each ally themselves with the Know-Nothing Party ?

In moments of excitement men are often borne away beyond the domains of reason ; to accomplish their desires they will grasp at every object which may seem to be helpful to their cause ; and the movements of 1854 and 1855 were only aberrations of political reason. The Catholic organization in respect to its nunneries and some of its rites and customs was secret, and a secret order was founded to combat it. There was not a crime committed by an Irishman that was not flashed before the public as a proof of the evil influence of their religion ; there was not a statement of a prominent priest or bishop that was not picked to pieces and considered in the light of prejudice. In the State of Massachusetts a committee was appointed by the legislature to visit certain Catholic nunneries, so as to bring to light their supposed iniquitous practices. Ex-priests and nuns who advertised themselves as having escaped from convents, harangued in public or wrote for the press. In Providence, a great amount of

political excitement was made of the case of a young lady who entered a convent ; hand-bills, bearing the startling headline, "Americans to the Rescue!" were freely circulated ; on them it was asserted that she had been compelled to join against her own and her parents' will. At the time appointed for the rescue a small crowd gathered in front of the convent, but no attempt was made, as there were too many police to make it successful.

This was done after the young lady in question had asserted in the daily papers that her act was voluntary, although opposed by her parents. An affair which occurred in New York helped to incite the citizens here. A man named Poole had been very prominent in the movements of the new party. After a time of some excitement he was killed by one of the roughs of the Bowery. He was regarded as a martyr and honored with imposing funeral ceremonies. Leading Know-Nothings in this city declared that they had been threatened with like treatment, but asserted their intention to meet it, if necessary.

This was the method which they had adopted in their work of winning voters. The influence of the press in this State in favor of the Know-Nothings was limited ; they had no avowed organ, but the Whig papers gave them limited support. This was true of the *Journal* and especially of the *Providence Tribune*, which was, primarily, the organ of the temperance advocates. Early in the campaign they assumed a neutral attitude towards the secret order, and finally consented to defend them and their principles. But the pages of all the papers seem to have been free for the use of "Sams" and "Anti-Sams," for we find long controversies running in the papers ; yet these articles bore not at all on the question of the day, but dwelt on what had or had not been done in other times, together with creeds and doctrines.

The Protestant clergy on the whole seem not to have taken hold of the question with any great zeal ; yet we find clergymen elected to the legislature of Massachusetts as members of the new party. Only one instance is recorded of a minister preaching especially on the subject, and that was of a Boston divine, who misquoted for his text, saying, "My breth-

ren, Paul was a 'Know-Nothing,' for he says, 'I determined to know nothing among you,' etc. Let us be like him." But this fact was attested by an Anti-Know-Nothing paper.

In this contest there was much feeling against the new party, among the Catholics in the Democratic Party, and among many Whigs who feared the results attending the machinations of a secret organization.

The Democratic State Convention heartily denounced the Know-Nothings, and made their destruction one of the principal objects to be accomplished in the election. The party organ, the *Post*, published in full the outrageous conduct of the nunnery-investigating committee appointed in Massachusetts. This committee exceeded its instructions and aroused great indignation throughout New England. But one of the most powerful methods of attack was the publication in full of the oaths of the order, together with certain signs, passwords, etc. The penalty for breaking the oath is not stated; from an instance which came to notice it appears to have been a boycott of the betrayer, but it was seldom accompanied with personal violence. A right-angled triangular piece of white paper pasted up in certain places was a call for a mass meeting. A red paper with an equilateral triangle meant trouble, and each one must come prepared. Only one public call was made for a convention and the convention itself was secret. As more clearly indicative of the feeling and attitude of the parties toward the new organization a few quotations from the dailies are made. The *Providence Post* (Democratic) of November 10th, 1854, said: "American Party, and other like terms, are coming into common use. If one could only tell their meaning it would be agreeable. They doubtless have some peculiar significance as now used. Whatever they may be, and we confess our ignorance on this point, such a use of the words is certainly unfortunate."

December 29th. "The fact that a new organization is about to make its first appearance at the ballot-box is one that should not be lost sight of. Its power no man can estimate, its objects are mysterious and whether bad or good the results only can show."

February 16th. "The Whig Party may be said to have re-



solved itself into its original elements ; all that remains of it is to be found in the mysterious depths of Know-Nothingism or abolitionism."

March 27th. "We have now an organization whose whole purpose is to give new strength and life to the Whig Party."

But this last quotation must not be taken as true ; not only did the election returns prove its falsity, but likewise the nominations of the Whig and Know-Nothing Parties, each of which had a ticket of its own. These were the tactics adopted by the Democratic organ to rally Democrats to their party's support by intimating that their old opponent was their opponent still and not a new and different organization.

As the organ of the Whigs the *Journal* showed less opposition. April 2d, a few days previous to the election, it asks : "Are there any Whigs left? We believe there are. We hear on all sides, indeed, of strange defections, of men, from whom such a thing would have been least expected, who have gone into the secret organization ; but we hear, too, of men who are neither frightened nor disposed to submit."

Again it said : "It is the duty and should be the pleasure of every Whig to stand by his party."

On the next day it had evidently forgotten who those men were who were "neither frightened nor disposed to submit," for it says, "If there is one Whig left in each ward, we will thank him to call at this office and take the proxies [ballots]. We don't know whom to give them to." The following day it expresses gratification at seeing several old Whigs and being assured of their support.

As the April election drew near, the Democratic Party and the secret organization made ready for the contest. The advantage was obviously with the Know-Nothings. The Whigs had ceased to be an element in the campaign as an organization, while the Democratic platform was satisfactory to but few besides its authors. Their convention was held early in March, when a strong ticket, headed by A. V. Potter, was nominated. The Know-Nothings made a public call for a secret convention. The *Providence Tribune*, the

organ of the Maine Law Party, was partial to the new organization, and on the 19th of February contained the following call :

“REPUBLICAN STATE CONVENTION.

“A Republican State Convention will be holden at Unity Hall, in the city of Providence, on Thursday, March 8th, 1855, for the purpose of nominating candidates for State offices and representatives to Congress who are known to be opposed to the encroachment of the Slave power, especially as exhibited in the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, opposed to the interference and influence of foreigners in state and national affairs, and in favor of the principles and faithful execution of the law against drinking-houses, etc.”

This can hardly be considered an early call of the present Republican Party, for at that time the name “Republican,” as applied to any party, had not been resuscitated, and this is the first time the word had been used in Rhode Island as a party name for a long period.

These facts, the principles set forth in the call and the assertion afterwards of Know-Nothings, together with the work accomplished in that convention, make it partially certain that although issued under the name “Republican,” it was thoroughly a Know-Nothing affair.

Two days later the call was fathered by a writer who signed himself “Sam” to an article which said :

“We take the same platform as enumerated in the call for a ‘Republican Convention,’ announced in your paper. We in Rhode Island embrace temperance, restoration of the Missouri Compromise, the total abolition of all foreign influence, whether in the name of the Pope of Rome, or of Bishop Hughes of New York.” The latter prelate, it may be well to add, was one of the most influential Catholics in the United States at that time, and by far the most pronounced in the defense of Catholic rights.

Of the results of this convention no record has been found. The convention met, but its proceedings were secret. The *Warren Star* published as the ticket nominated by this convention the following : “For Governor, ‘Sam ;’ for Lieut.-Governor, ‘Sam ;’” and in like manner the same gentleman

was a candidate for every office on the ticket. This will illustrate the secrecy with which they did their work.

It was declared by the Democratic and Whig press that a convention of the Know-Nothings was held March 27th, for on that day was published their party ticket, headed by W. W. Hoppin, who was at that time the Whig governor of the State. It is not probable, though of course possible, that a convention was held on that date, for all the nominations were made by the grand council of the State ; and the date would have been too late for an active campaign. The next day a Whig convention, attended by few, was held. For a long time it was questioned among the leaders, whether it was advisable to nominate a ticket at all, so discouraged had they become. They re-nominated their State officers for the most part.

In the three tickets offered to the people the Whigs and Know-Nothings nominated the same candidates for governor and representative from the eastern congressional district, N. B. Durfee. In the western district there was no Whig candidate, there being only six Whigs present at the nominating convention, so little was the interest manifested in that party. The Democrats and Know-Nothings combined on one man, or rather the Know-Nothings nominated one who had already been nominated by the Democrats ; this was B. B. Thurston, the candidate for congressional honors from the western district ; the other Democratic nominee for Congress was Davis, a naturalized citizen.

It is impossible to say whether these Democrats and Whigs who were placed on the Know-Nothing ticket were members of the organization or not. The presumption is that they were, for while all three were prominent men and would strengthen any ticket on which they might be placed, they were not necessary to Know-Nothing success. They were either actual members of the organization, or active supporters of its principles ; and the grand council of the State did not at that time look so much to obtaining office as to the execution of certain principles. It is probable that any respectable man the Know-Nothings might have nominated would have been elected, for they were undeniably strong.

Their very secrecy was a source of strength to themselves and of weakness to their enemies.

Outside the two opposing parties the Know-Nothings had little to contend with. In some districts, as in Newport, a rival secret organization, styling itself the Anti-Know-Nothing Party, made nominations for municipal offices.

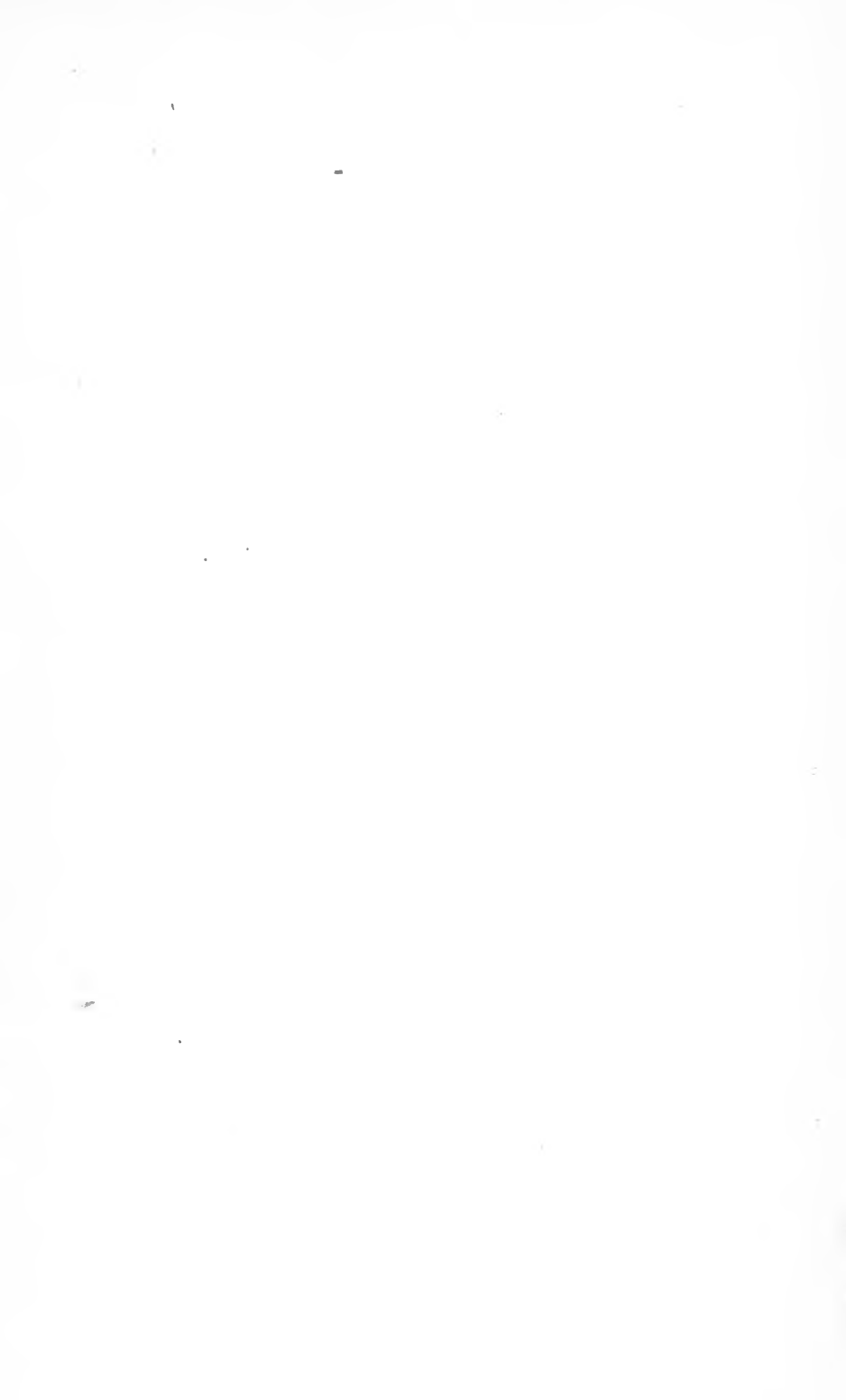
When election day came, there was no doubt in the minds of any except of the blindest politicians that the Know-Nothings would elect their ticket. The *Journal*, commenting on the registering, which had been done systematically by the Know-Nothings alone, asserted that at the close of the day preceding the last on which voters might register, there were in the city of Providence two-thirds who had not listed their names. The *Post* assumed a forced cheerfulness and hope as to the result.

The election was an overwhelming defeat for Democrats and Whigs alike. Gov. Hoppin, the candidate of two parties, received 10,500 to 2,300 for the Democratic candidate. The real strength of the parties is best shown in the vote for lieutenant-governor and the other State officers. Here the Know-Nothing strength was 8,875; Whig, 1,258; Democratic, 2,274; this was a decrease of about 8,000 from the Whig vote of 1854, and of 4,000 from the Democratic vote of the same year. The Democrats saved only two towns, one of which—Glocester, had long been a democratic stronghold; the other was Foster. It is curious to note that the feeling against the temperance law was very strong here. It was said that no place in the State took so little interest in the temperance movement as Glocester. Both branches of the General Assembly were strongly Know-Nothing.

In the year during which they had control of the State government we cannot see any marked changes in legislation or execution of the laws. They did not attempt to go to that radical extreme to which the legislature of Massachusetts had gone, nor did they retain control of the offices long enough to undertake and accomplish any great measures. The same governor continued in office and pursued the same course. In the following spring a new condition of affairs caused new combinations, and while the Know-Nothings were nominally

in the field, their influence had greatly declined." The rising Republican Party supplanted them, and, like the Whigs, they disappeared altogether. Yet we can find some of their old prejudices still existing in the minds of men, who though now old, were once members of that powerful organization, adopted its principles and have refused to abandon them when true American patriotism asserts that those principles are hostile to the safety of a free government.













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