

## **The Philadelphia Riots Of 1844: Republican Catholicism And Irish Catholic Apologetics**

### **The 2018 Pencak Award**

[Editor's Note: *The following essay is by the 2018 winner of the William A. Pencak Award, Anne Morgan of Truman State University of Kirksville, Missouri. Anne majors in History and was a junior when she wrote this paper. Her history professor, Daniel Mandell, nominated Anne. The Pencak Review Panel felt it was very well written and presented a thesis with new information on an old topic, the Philadelphia riots of 1844. The Pencak Award carries a cash prize of \$150 and recognition in this journal. We wish Ms. Morgan all the best in her future endeavors. This article also appears on the Pennsylvania Historical Association's website at: [pa-history.org](http://pa-history.org). For information on the 2019 Pencak Award, see the call for nominations elsewhere in this issue.*]

**Abstract:** This paper analyzes the development of a distinctly American Catholic identity among Philadelphia's Catholics in the wake of the 1844 Philadelphia riots. It offers a critique of historians' thesis that by the nineteenth century, a largely immigrant Catholic population had rejected the Revolutionary-era synthesis between republicanism and Catholicism. The ideological battle following the riots reveals the ways in which Philadelphia's Catholics challenged their nativist opponents by utilizing republican rhetoric. Catholics' republicanism was much more liberal than nativists' classical republicanism; as such, they emphasized the protection of minority rights and the separation of church and state.

**Keywords:** Catholicism, Irish immigration, Nativism, Republicanism, Ethnic identity, Philadelphia

In 1844, years of conflict between native-born Protestants and Irish Catholic immigrants in Philadelphia culminated in two eruptions of unconstrained mob violence. The riots, lasting from May 6<sup>th</sup> to May 8<sup>th</sup> and from July 6<sup>th</sup> to July 7<sup>th</sup>, took place in the districts of Kensington and Southwark. They resulted in dozens of deaths and extensive destruction of property. Rifle-wielding men and boys fought in the streets, burning Irish Catholic homes, churches, and schools, while inefficient militias struggled to restore order. The riots proved a formative event for Irish Catholics in Philadelphia, bringing into stark relief the issue of how to negotiate assimilation to a cultural sphere dominated by the Protestant majority. This was no small task: nativists portrayed Irish Catholics as inherently unpatriotic, unchristian, and unassimilable. Nevertheless, in an American culture strongly influenced by Protestant evangelicalism and republicanism, they appropriated the language of the nativists for their own purposes. Indeed, in contrast to the classical strand of republicanism commonly espoused by their adversaries, they emphasized aspects of liberal republicanism, especially its central tenet of minority rights. Thus, in nineteenth century Philadelphia, Irish Catholics constructed a distinctly American Catholic identity by refashioning republican rhetoric to encompass a liberal defense of minority rights.

Mark A. Noll described two separate but closely related strands of republicanism in nineteenth-century American political culture: classical and liberal. Noll defined classical republicanism as an “older strand of republicanism [which] usually favored checks and balances on power, worried about ‘the democratic mob,’ and defined virtue as disinterested middle and upper class men acting disinterestedly in public for the good of the whole society.” Liberal republicanism, on the other hand, was a “newer strand of republicanism, which emerged most strongly after the American Revolution,” combining “traditional republican principles with a much more democratic trust in the people at large, much more attention to the protection of

individual rights, [and] much more concern for enhancing the economic opportunities of all white men.”<sup>1</sup> In the ideological battle following the riots, Protestants and Catholics drew from a shared vocabulary of republicanism. Nevertheless, Protestant and Catholic versions of republicanism often clashed.

Nativists tended to promote a classical, more communitarian republicanism. They viewed Protestantism as inextricably tied to republicanism, and they identified Catholics—especially immigrants—as a serious threat to the stability and prosperity of the American republic. If left unchecked, foreign-born Catholics’ European servility would endanger American freedom. Thus, Amanda Beyer-Purvis characterized the riots as “[an] attempt by nativists to exercise popular sovereignty by violence and rioting” in order to “enforce the ‘natural’ order of the community.”<sup>2</sup>

Catholics, on the other hand, were well acquainted with the persuasive powers of republicanism. As Beyer-Purvis demonstrated, nativist rioters sought to bar Irish Catholics from full citizenship, which they viewed as the exclusive domain of white native-born Protestants. Catholics rejected this narrow view of citizenship, citing the Constitution’s provisions for religious liberty.<sup>3</sup> This writer argues that in 1844, Philadelphia’s Catholics adopted the language of liberal republicanism in order to refute Protestant propaganda, which portrayed Catholics as dangerous reactionaries and religious fanatics bent on destroying democracy. To bridge the gap between Irish Catholic “other” and patriotic American citizen, Catholics infused their apologetics with the language of republicanism. They also expanded their republican rhetoric to include liberal ideals, such as minority rights and the separation of church and state. By endorsing a more democratic form of republicanism than their Protestant counterparts, Philadelphia’s Catholics affirmed that Catholicism and American citizenship were not, in fact, mutually exclusive.

The 1844 Philadelphia riots must also be contextualized within the broader study of the origins and nature of anti-Catholicism in America.<sup>4</sup> In *The Protestant Crusade*, Ray Billington observed that anti-Catholic prejudice in colonial America was rooted in England's long history of conflict between Protestants and Catholics. Protestants targeted "the antinational character" of Catholicism, fearing a Catholic conspiracy to undermine the English government. Thus, "anti-Catholicism...became a patriotic as well as religious concern." In America, the fear of Catholicism centered on its perceived threat to the newly emerging republic.<sup>5</sup> The national origin of immigrant Catholics was another central component of anti-Catholicism. John Higham's *Strangers in the Land* defined nativism as "intense opposition to an internal minority on the ground of its foreign (i.e., 'un-American') connections." American nationalists were particularly alert for any sign of "a failure of assimilation" or "disloyalty" among the foreign-born.<sup>6</sup> Richard Hofstadter analyzed this fear and insecurity displayed by the nativists. According to him, nativists' rhetoric was part of a broader "paranoid style" in American political discourse, characterized by "heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy." He framed anti-Catholicism as fundamentally irrational, defined by an obsession with foreign conspiracies and the persecutions of sinister adversaries.<sup>7</sup> Nationalism was the unifying theme of these interpretations of nativism, along with its corollary, ethnocentrism. Philadelphia was certainly not immune to these phenomena.

Despite Pennsylvania's reputation as a haven for religious dissenters, during the colonial period Protestants in the province excluded Catholics from full political rights.<sup>8</sup> Prior to the ascension of Catholic King James II to the throne, William Penn advocated for freedom of conscience for Catholics, but not religious toleration, which included unrestricted public worship and political rights. Penn opposed what he viewed as Catholicism's politically destructive

nature.<sup>9</sup> Pennsylvania's colonists shared his concerns. Thus, the 1696 Frame of Government (Markham's Frame) banned Catholics from government positions, and a 1705 statute prevented Catholics from holding public office during the rest of the colonial period.<sup>10</sup> From 1776 onwards, religious qualifications for political office were considerably less discriminatory. The new state's 1776 constitution stated that no man who worshipped a God could "be justly deprived or abridged of any civil right as a citizen," merely requiring officeholders to swear an oath of belief in God and the divine inspiration of Scripture. Similarly, the 1838 constitution proclaimed that "no person who acknowledges the being of God and a future state of rewards and punishments, shall, on account of his religious sentiments, be disqualified to hold any office or place of trust or profit under the commonwealth."<sup>11</sup>

After the Revolution, other states, which had formerly restricted the political rights of Catholics, broadened their religious toleration laws. For example, New Jersey's 1776 constitution restricted political offices to Protestants. But its 1844 constitution removed this restriction, specifying that "no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public trust; and no person shall be denied the enjoyment of any civil right merely on account of his religious principles."<sup>12</sup> This illustrated the overall evolution in most states' religious laws. Arguably, the 1844 Philadelphia riots represented, in part, the resurgence of Pennsylvania's colonial anti-Catholicism.

Due to the stresses of numerous disruptive social changes, Jacksonian America was characterized by increased levels of mob violence.<sup>13</sup> The previous era had been characterized by "corporatism," which "had bound society with ties of deference and paternalism within a system of hierarchy." But by the early nineteenth century, the "myth of the single-interest society" had disappeared, replaced with a multiplicity of antagonistic interests based on race, religion, and

other aspects of identity.<sup>14</sup> This was a period of rapid urbanization and industrialization, an unsettled environment in which evangelicalism and other mass movements quickly took root. In line with the populist politics of the age, Americans perceived collective violence as an effective and legitimate expression of political discontent. Popular uprisings, not traditional electoral politics, allowed different social groups to act out ethnic rivalries.<sup>15</sup> Jacksonian rioting was essentially preservationist, that is, it was “one of the means by which some established groups attempted to preserve or expand their power, their privilege, their sense of moral superiority, and their access to material advantages.”<sup>16</sup> This “social bargaining process” defined the relationships between native-born Protestants and immigrant Catholics, who often competed for economic and social opportunities. Moreover, the city of Philadelphia lacked sufficient means of social control to combat mob violence. Law enforcement in Philadelphia was decentralized and largely impotent, allowing sporadic outbursts of violence to continue to occur.<sup>17</sup>

More broadly, the riots stemmed from a clash between different principles of public morality. Nineteenth-century evangelicals brought morals into the public sphere, attempting to make politics and law conform to the standards of evangelical piety. Strict observance of the Sabbath and temperance were of a particular concern to them.<sup>18</sup> Class conflict further heightened these divisions between evangelicals and Irish Catholics. In Kensington, the site of the May riots, weavers were predominately Irish Catholic. Due to an economic depression, the Trades’ Union uniting immigrant weavers and native-born artisans broke down; this had the effect of “magnifying the importance to [native-born] artisans of the temperance and public education movements,” among other evangelical causes, which emphasized middle-class virtues and self-help.<sup>19</sup> By contrast, Irish Catholics in Philadelphia formed ethnic enclaves throughout the city, centered on local churches, taverns, firehouses, and outdoor markets. The parish church,

especially, “served as a social, educational, and welfare center for local Catholics” while also providing a refuge from religious discrimination.<sup>20</sup> The development of separate religious and cultural spheres reinforced mutual hostility.

Evangelical and Catholic interpretations of the Bible also came into conflict. The controversy over the use of the King James Bible in Philadelphia’s public schools was a major source of tension leading up to the riots. Since 1834, Catholics in Philadelphia had protested what they viewed as Protestant bias in the public schools. A particular point of conflict was the use of the Protestant-approved King James Version of the Bible, which Catholics rejected in favor of the Douay-Rheims Bible.<sup>21</sup> Bishop Francis Patrick Kenrick, an Irish immigrant, led the laity in calling for a strict separation of church and state in the public schools. A series of articles published in the *Catholic Herald* under the pseudonym “Sentinel” were likely his work.<sup>22</sup> In 1841, “Sentinel” proclaimed:

Catholics object altogether to the use of the Bible as a school book, because it familiarizes children with that which they ought to revere as the word of God: but they object most especially to the use of the Protestant Bible, as being an incorrect translation in many respects, and a mutilated work, inasmuch as the Deutero canonical books are omitted.

“Sentinel” further declared that “THE READING OF THE PROTESTANT VERSION OF THE BIBLE IS UNLAWFUL, AND NO CATHOLIC PARENT CAN PERMIT HIS CHILDREN TO USE IT AS A SCHOOL BOOK, OR OTHERWISE.”<sup>23</sup>

Nativists quickly pounced on arguments such as these. The *North American* claimed that public school education was “purely secular” and accused Catholics of trying to make public education “sectarian.” In response to “Sentinel,” “Justitia” attacked “these foreigners [who] come here and dare to trample on *our Bible*, and have the impudence to tell us that no rule of FAITH, or no Bible, shall be tolerated, but the *ipse dixit* of their masters—a poor miserable tool

of a bunch of Cardinals.”<sup>24</sup> The Bible debate deeply divided Philadelphia’s native-born Protestants and Irish Catholics. The debate also gave further ammunition to the nativists, who were convinced that Irish Catholic immigrants threatened the very foundations of American democracy.

Indeed, the hub of nativist activity in nineteenth century Philadelphia, the American Republican Party (also known as the Native American Party), defined its anti-Catholic stance in political, not religious, terms. In 1837, a meeting of “native Americans” drew up a constitution which called for the repeal of the 1790 Naturalization Law and the removal of all political rights from immigrants. Upon its founding in 1843, the American Republican Party released a declaration of principles reiterating that immigrants were unfit for any political office, adding that they should be required to live in America for twenty-one years before being able to vote. Significantly, the declaration of principles also held that “the Bible, without note or comment, is not sectarian...it is the fountain-head of morality and all good government, and should be used in our public schools as a reading book” and opposed “a union of church and state in any and every form.”<sup>25</sup> Likewise, an 1844 address presented by Philadelphia’s American Republicans claimed that the party stood for freedom of conscience, and that its opposition was merely to foreign immigrants whose primary allegiances were of necessity not to America.<sup>26</sup> Such euphemistic language belied the party’s anti-Catholicism. In fact, despite its emphasis on politics, the American Republican Party was clearly invested in issues of religion and especially antagonistic to the growth of Catholic influence in education and politics. The Native Americans were reactionaries, in the sense that they looked backwards to an era when the political rights of Catholics were more tightly circumscribed.



Pro-nativist Protestants employed republican rhetoric in order to demonstrate their superior commitment to American values. John B. Perry's account of the riots claimed that a group of angry Irishmen were the instigators, disturbing a public meeting of the Native American Party. According to Perry, this was a clear violation of the Native Americans' First Amendment right to assemble peaceably.<sup>27</sup> A pamphlet entitled *The Full Particulars of the Late Riots* was even more explicit in its sympathy for the nativists, blaming "the foreign rabble," ungrateful immigrants who attacked peaceful citizens and defied the nation's laws.<sup>28</sup> Contemporary Sidney George Fisher also stated that "a mob of Irish" were the first attackers, portraying the Native American Party as a reaction to "the serious effects, now beginning to be painfully felt, of the influence of the ignorant and demoralized Europeans, the outcasts of their own nations, upon the character of our elections & the security & order of our society."<sup>29</sup> The Grand Jury's presentment concurred, asserting that "the efforts of a portion of the community to exclude the Bible from our Public Schools" was one of the main causes of the riots. It emphasized that the Native Americans were merely exercising "the sacred rights and privileges guaranteed to every citizen." The Grand Jury also implied that recent immigrants were largely responsible for the violation of those rights.<sup>30</sup>

Nativist accounts of the riots fit well with native-born Protestants' perception of Irish Catholics as inherently anti-republican, dating back to the colonial period. In the midst of the public schools debate, "Justitia" had claimed that

it is time now that the question should be asked, discussed and settled, whether a Priest or Bishop, who has taken the oath of allegiance to the Pope, as his spiritual and temporal master, can become a citizen of the United States, and whether if he does take the oath of allegiance to our Government, he does not commit perjury.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, nativists argued that Catholics could not even be trusted with citizenship, much less full political rights. To the nativists, the riots seemed only to confirm this. The anonymous poem *Six*

*Months Ago* framed the riots as a conflict between nativists' republican freedom and the "slavery" of "a foreign band" of Irish Catholics. According to the author, the Native Americans were patriotic and pious citizens dedicated to preserving their Revolutionary heritage of liberty. By contrast, Irish Catholics were savage tyrants, masquerading as innocent refugees, who carried the seeds of despotism to America. The poem depicted the riots as a holy war, with innocent "Republicans" martyred at the hands of Irish Catholics.<sup>32</sup>

Protestants' republicanism was classical, characterized by a fear of democratic excesses and the practice of public virtue by disinterested elites. The rioters' uncontrolled violence and destruction of property left onlookers worried. Anxiously, Perry inquired: "Are our liberties to be surrendered to the rash and headlong domination of mobs, or are we to fly from this great evil to the lesser one of a consolidated police state?"<sup>33</sup> Fisher shared Perry's aversion to mob rule. Thus, he stated: "I confess my hatred of democracy is stronger than my love of country." Fisher associated "democracy" with the unconstrained excesses of the masses. Above all else, he valued social stability. Despite his sympathy for the Native Americans, Fisher volunteered to help guard a Catholic seminary with a company of about forty men. As a member of Philadelphia's upper class, he took part in a meeting "numerously attended by members of the bar, merchants, & men of education and property," who were all deeply concerned about the implications of the riots. The attendees signed an address to the governor "in order that by the publication of the names it should be made apparent who were the friends of law & order."<sup>34</sup> By these actions, Fisher and his fellow elites displayed their fidelity to the republican ideal of the commonwealth, or common good.

Nativists condemned the actions of all rioters, if only rhetorically, because to do so was to highlight their commitment to republicanism. The *North American* claimed that before the

riots, the Native Americans had attempted “to allay the excitement” of the unruly mob: “The more conspicuous men of the American party used all their influence to tranquilize the meeting...But it was all in vain.” Thus, the *North American* distinguished rank-and-file nativists from the American Republican leadership, allowing the latter to claim plausible deniability. The newspaper concluded that both Irish Catholic and nativist rioters were to blame. Yet its sympathy for the nativists’ righteous “rage” proved that this was an argument made in bad faith.<sup>35</sup> In their 1844 Philadelphia address, the American Republicans again sought to dissociate themselves from the actions of the rioters, denouncing “the insolent assumption of our name by men of all climes and parties—men who defied the laws which we defend, and Vandal-like, destroyed, without remorse, the architectural ornaments of the present, and the literary records of the past—the mob, both native and imported.”<sup>36</sup> Denunciations such as these served to reinforce the respectability of the nativists. But the nativists did not have a monopoly on republican virtue.

According to scholar Jay P. Dolan, American Catholics developed a synthesis of republicanism and Catholicism after the American Revolution. Irish Catholics in particular were fervent defenders of the ideals of democracy and popular sovereignty. This early republican synthesis was part of immigrant Catholics’ broader adjustment and accommodation to American culture.<sup>37</sup> Yet Dolan contended that the republican synthesis was undermined in the early nineteenth century by a more conservative and undemocratic form of American Catholicism, imported largely from Europe.<sup>38</sup> This was a Catholic church which

emphasized the weakness of human nature, the prevalence of sin, and the need for the church and its clergy to help people overcome this worldly environment. It stressed the authority of the hierarchy and the subordinate role of the laity. The medieval monarchy, not the modern republic, was its model of government.

According to Dolan, by the 1820s, as a result of increasing European immigration, the republican synthesis was no longer a central part of American Catholicism. An undemocratic church

structure mirrored an anti-republican turn among American Catholics. He also noted, however, that the tension between republicanism and hierarchical authority within American Catholic communities continued well into the nineteenth century.<sup>39</sup>

Indeed, it would be far too simplistic to conclude that Philadelphia's Catholic laity as a whole passively submitted to an authoritarian leadership without retaining any trace of its democratic heritage. It was generally more liberal than the elite leadership and showed little inclination towards complete separatism.<sup>40</sup> Irish Catholics' responses to the riots of 1844 illustrate that they viewed republicanism as compatible with Catholicism. Most importantly, Irish Catholics' strategic use of republican rhetoric provided a cogent critique of nativism. The effectiveness of this critique was tested in 1844, as nativists' attacks intensified, seeming to threaten the very existence of Philadelphia's Catholic community.

Bishop Kenrick constructed his arguments in republican terms. As the riots broke out, Kenrick adopted a moderate and conciliatory tone, appealing for peace in two broadsides, each published in the *Catholic Herald*. The first broadside counseled Catholics to maintain order and avoid public places, while the second suspended public worship "until it can be resumed with safety, and we can enjoy our constitutional right to worship God according to the dictates of our conscience." Despite Kenrick's cautious approach, his attempts at peacemaking were accompanied by careful political maneuvering, which entailed linking Catholicism with republicanism in order to combat nativism. Thus, he contended that Philadelphia's Catholics did not wish to infringe on the rights of Protestants or take away their Bibles; on the contrary, Catholics "only desire to enjoy the benefit of the Constitution of the state of Pennsylvania, which guarantees the rights of conscience, and precludes any preference of sectarian modes of worship."<sup>41</sup> Kenrick's energetic defense of Catholics' civil liberties against governmental

repression, as well as his use of state and federal constitutions as authorities, demonstrated that he was well aware of the persuasive powers of republican rhetoric.

Irish Catholics appropriated republican ideology to fit their own purposes, highlighting their contributions to American society. Articles in the *Catholic Herald* attested to Catholics' patriotism. In 1841, "Sentinel" noted that many Catholics held strong ties to America. Tens of thousands of Catholics had extensive American roots, particularly in Maryland and Pennsylvania, dating back to the colonial period; many were native-born or naturalized citizens.<sup>42</sup> Thus, in 1844, "M." observed: "When young America sent forth to the nations of Europe a statement of her grievances and sufferings, whose was the address that first greeted her? History answers, Catholic Ireland." "M." drew on the hagiography of Revolutionary-era heroes and the immigrant Irishmen among them to demonstrate that Irish Catholics were more than willing to serve their adopted country.<sup>43</sup>

Moreover, Catholics skillfully exploited the tension between Protestant republicanism and anti-Catholicism. There was a clear disconnect between nativists' republican rhetoric and the lack of religious and political freedom extended to Catholics. A poem written by "Miss E. F. Walsh" sharply criticized nativists' attacks on their fellow Christians. Walsh condemned the nativists because they, the supposed protectors of liberty, had taken part in the violence. Her claims were clearly calculated to shame the nativists for their lack of patriotism and therefore allow Catholics to take the moral high ground. Walsh's tone was ironic, bitter:

I thought I trod on "holy ground,"  
Where Liberty and peace are found—  
'Twas but a dream!—this cannot be  
The home of those both brave and free—  
For surely if with freedom blest,  
Your brethren could not be oppress'd.  
Oh! no, the peaceful state of Penn,  
Owns no such bold, degenerate men,

I have miscalled you—this rude land  
Is not Columbia's rescu'd strand!<sup>44</sup>

Walsh effectively used the nativists' own rhetoric against them, demonstrating their failure to adhere to republican ideals.

Likewise, Bishop Kenrick's sermon on "Charity Towards Enemies" advised Catholics to resist the nativists by practicing virtuous self-control: "If these deluded men can succeed in disturbing the peace of society, by their combined attack on their unoffending fellow-citizens, worshipping God according to the dictates of their conscience, let no portion of the blame rest with us." He further counseled his flock that "whilst they may fancy that they do God and the country service in pointing you out as enemies of the Constitution and Laws," it was imperative for Catholics to "sustain the characters of peaceable and good citizens."<sup>45</sup> In this manner, Catholics highlighted the hypocrisy of the nativists while reinforcing their own civic devotion.

The Catholic variety of republicanism was more liberal than classical in its emphasis on minority rights and the separation of church and state. In the aftermath of the riots, a grand jury released a report blaming Irish Catholics for allegedly inciting the violence.<sup>46</sup> In response to the report, Philadelphia's Catholic community issued a resolute appeal to their fellow citizens. The authors of the address displayed their dedication to liberalism, especially its doctrine of limited government:

We have heard it affirmed that because Catholics are a minority, they must submit to the regulations which the majority may please to adopt. We are willing that the principle should be applied to all things wherein public interest and order are concerned, saving always those principles and rights which the Constitution holds to be inviolable. We are the minority; and for us, therefore, does the Constitution exist. The majority need not its protection, for they have the power to take care of their own interests...**UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES IS CONSCIENCE AT THE DISPOSAL OF A MAJORITY.**

In this way, Philadelphia's lay Catholics asserted their individual rights. While nativists claimed the right to assemble peaceably as outlined in the First Amendment of the Constitution, Catholics, in turn, emphasized the clauses of the amendment which related to religious liberty. Their central concern was the limitation of state power as a means to safeguard civil liberties. Indeed, the Catholic laity argued that without the protection of minority rights, "this government would be a despotism, for the governing power would be uncontrolled."<sup>47</sup>

Furthermore, Philadelphia's Catholic community made a concerted effort to refute the nativists' charge that Catholics were by their very nature anti-republican. The laity contended that they had sought only to use the Douay version of the Bible in the public schools; like Protestants, Catholics were entitled to "liberty of education as connected with liberty of conscience—the birth-right of freemen." They asserted that Catholics were, in fact, loyal Americans and had wholeheartedly embraced the nation's democratic values. Thus, the laity claimed: "We yield to none of our fellow-citizens in attachment to republican institutions, we owe no allegiance whatever to foreign prince or potentate; the obedience which as children of the church, we render to the chief Bishop, regards not things that appertain to this world." Furthermore, they affirmed that "we are Philadelphians, and we love our city...WE DEMAND that the exclamation, 'I AM AN AMERICAN CITIZEN,' shall continue to be the protection of our rights, and the guarantee of our freedom."<sup>48</sup> These arguments countered nativist accusations that Irish Catholics were unassimilated and retained a European cultural identity. The *Catholic Herald* endorsed the laity's address, arguing that "political liberty, as identified with republicanism, is quite in harmony with Catholic principles. Witness the many Italian republics of the middle ages, fostered by Popes against the Emperors, wherein the principle of popular sovereignty was acted on in the most unequivocal manner."<sup>49</sup>

Pro-Catholic pamphlets released after the riots and distributed to a wider audience, likely composed of a significant portion of the Catholic laity, further reinforced Catholics' sympathy for republicanism. *The Truth Unveiled* was purportedly written by "a Protestant and native Philadelphian."<sup>50</sup> Similarly, the author of *The Olive Branch* identified himself as a Protestant.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, the pamphlets were clearly meant to be distributed among a Catholic audience.<sup>52</sup> *The Truth Unveiled* contended that the riots were a blatant violation of minority rights. The author denounced the "treason, rank treason" of those nativists who persecuted Catholics on the grounds that America was "a Protestant land."<sup>53</sup> Similarly, *The Olive Branch* appealed to "the laws and their supremacy," which sustained the common good. According to the author, the riots were contrary to the principles of the Constitution. Moreover, *The Olive Branch* noted, "*even in our country, the boasted land of freedom from all restraints on conscience, we have had and still have [a] union of Church and State.*"<sup>54</sup> After all, the Puritans had executed Quakers and Baptists for their beliefs; all minorities were potentially at risk when the state protected one religion at the expense of others.<sup>55</sup> Thus, the dangerous "power" of this union should be opposed by all citizens as a threat to their freedom.<sup>56</sup> In this way, pro-Catholic partisans challenged Protestant nativism by endorsing the doctrines of secularism and religious pluralism.

In the wake of the 1844 Philadelphia riots, both Catholics and nativists utilized republican rhetoric in order to support their claims to religious and political legitimacy. Nativists and Catholics shared a significant amount of common theological and cultural ground, as evidenced by their common use of Scripture and the Constitution as authorities. Catholics in Philadelphia found a particular resonance in republican rhetoric, which appeared fundamentally compatible with their Catholic beliefs. The implications of this are clear. Catholics protested



strongly against nativist attacks on their religion and ethnicity. They maintained that they were American citizens who possessed the same rights as their native Protestant counterparts.

A simplistic portrait of Irish Catholic separatism and conservatism, then, is not sufficient for a full understanding of Philadelphia's Irish Catholic population in the first half of the nineteenth century. The events of 1844 complicate our understanding of Dolan's contention that in the nineteenth century, "the Catholic intellectual tradition...stood in opposition to the American liberal tradition."<sup>57</sup> The debate over the compatibility of Catholicism and American political traditions was far from settled. In the aftermath of the riots, Philadelphia's Irish Catholic community demonstrated that they had not wholly relinquished their Revolutionary heritage of republicanism. The city's Catholics proved to be skilled political actors, presenting an Irish Catholic discourse of liberal republicanism which challenged nativists' blend of anti-Catholicism and classical republicanism.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 564–65.

<sup>2</sup> Amanda Beyer-Purvis, "The Philadelphia Bible Riots of 1844: Contest Over the Rights of Citizens," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* (hereafter *PH*) 83, no. 3 (2016): 371

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> On the history of anti-Catholicism in Revolutionary New England, see Francis Cogliano, *No King, No Popery: Anti-Catholicism in Revolutionary New England* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995). The Ursuline convent riots of 1834 marked the beginning of a new, more virulent anti-Catholicism in antebellum New England. Rioters raided the Ursuline convent in Charleston, Massachusetts, and burned it to the ground. They were spurred by unsubstantiated reports that young women were imprisoned in the convent. Rebecca Reed's tale of captivity and abuse, published in 1835 as *Six Months in a Convent*, was distributed throughout the community before the riots. A year later, Maria Monk's *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery*, which described widespread rape and

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infanticide within a convent, provoked public outrage in Montreal, Quebec. These fabricated exposés of Catholic crimes defined the popular genre of anti-convent literature. See Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 135–161, <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft1x0nb0f3/>.

<sup>5</sup> Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade 1800–1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1964), 1–2, 39–40.

<sup>6</sup> John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism 1860–1925* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1955), 4–5.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 3, 19.

<sup>8</sup> For a greater understanding of this paradox, consult David Sehat’s *The Myth of American Religious Freedom*. His revisionist account demonstrated that throughout American history, a Protestant “moral establishment” regulated public morals through coercion, strengthening the ties between the state and organized religion (p. 5). This contradicted the orthodox view of America as a land where evangelicals, religious minorities, and nonbelievers were granted the same rights. In Pennsylvania, the moral establishment promoted the Christian republic as the ideal form of government. During the debate over Pennsylvania’s 1776 constitution, these “Christian republicans” called for official state sponsorship of Protestant Christianity in order to maintain social order and combat the immorality of the masses. David Sehat, *The Myth of American Religious Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 15–22. See also Spencer McBride, *Clergymen and the Politics of Revolutionary America* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2016), 120–126.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Douglas Newman, “‘Good Will to All Men...From the King on the Throne to the Beggar on the Dunghill’: William Penn, the Roman Catholics, and Religious Toleration,” *PH* 61, no. 4 (1994): 461–2.

<sup>10</sup> J. William Frost, “Religious Liberty in Early Pennsylvania,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 105, no. 4 (1981): 434–5.

<sup>11</sup> Francis Thorpe Newton, ed. *The Federal and State Constitutions, Colonial Charters, and Other Organic Laws of the States, Territories, and Colonies Now or Heretofore Forming the United States of America*, vol. 5, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1909), 3082, 3085, 3113.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 2597–2599.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Feldberg, *The Philadelphia Riots of 1844: A Study of Ethnic Conflict* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975), 5.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Gilje, *Rioting in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 63.

<sup>15</sup> Feldberg, *Philadelphia Riots*, 5–6, 14.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Feldberg, *The Turbulent Era: Riot and Disorder in Jacksonian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 37.

<sup>17</sup> Feldberg, *Philadelphia Riots*, 6–7, 14–15.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 85–86, 88.

<sup>19</sup> David Montgomery, “The Shuttle and the Cross: Weavers and Artisans in the Kensington Riots of 1844,” *Journal of Social History* 5, no. 4 (1972): 415–6, 421.

<sup>20</sup> Feldberg, *Philadelphia Riots*, 24–26.

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 89–90.

<sup>22</sup> Bernard C. Diethorn and Vincent P. Lannie, "For the Honor and Glory of God: The Philadelphia Bible Riots of 1840," *History of Education Quarterly* 8, no. 1 (1968): 44, 49.

<sup>23</sup> *Catholic Herald*, November 25, 1841.

<sup>24</sup> *North American*, December 11, 1841.

<sup>25</sup> John Hancock Lee, *The Origin and Progress of the American Party in Politics: Embracing a Complete History of the Philadelphia Riots in May and July, 1844, with a Full Description of the Great American Procession of July Fourth, and a Refutation of the Arguments Founded on the Charges of Religious Proscription and Secret Combinations* (Philadelphia: Elliott and Gihon, 1855), vi–vii, 15, 21.  
<https://archive.org/details/originprogressof00leejuoft>. Declaration of principles quoted in Lee, *Origin and Progress*, 21.

<sup>26</sup> *Address of the American Republicans of the City of Philadelphia to the Native and Naturalized Citizens of the United States* (Philadelphia, 1844), 17. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.31175035155152>.

<sup>27</sup> John B. Perry, *A Full and Complete Account of the Late Awful Riots in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: J.B. Perry, 1844), 3. <https://archive.org/stream/fullcompleteacco00phil#page/n5/mode/2up>.

<sup>28</sup> *The Full Particulars of the Late Riots, with a View of the Burning of the Catholic Churches, St. Michaels & St. Augustines* (Philadelphia: 1844), 4–5,  
<https://digital.library.villanova.edu/Item/vudl:229212#?c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-5286%2C-312%2C13850%2C6235>.

<sup>29</sup> Sidney George Fisher, *A Philadelphia Perspective: The Diary of Sidney George Fisher Covering the Years 1834–1871*, ed. Nicholas B. Wainwright (Philadelphia: The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1967), 165.

<sup>30</sup> *Catholic Herald*, June 20, 1844.

<sup>31</sup> *North American*, December 11, 1841.

<sup>32</sup> *Six Months Ago; or, That Eventful Friday and its Consequences* (Philadelphia: J. F. M'Elroy, 1844), 1, 3–5, 9.

<sup>33</sup> Perry, *Complete and Full Account*, 20.

<sup>34</sup> Fisher, *Philadelphia Perspective*, 167, 171.

<sup>35</sup> *North American*, May 8, 1844.

<sup>36</sup> *Address of the American Republicans*, 21.

<sup>37</sup> Jay P. Dolan, *In Search of an American Catholicism: A History of Religion and Culture in Tension* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 29, 32.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 37. See also Maura Jane Farrelly, *Papist Patriots: The Making of an American Catholic Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 7–9, regarding nineteenth-century Catholics' "ghetto mentality."

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 44–45, 58–59, 70.

<sup>40</sup> Jennifer Schaaf, "'With a Pure Intention of Pleasing and Honouring God': How the Philadelphia Laity Created American Catholicism, 1785–1850," PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2013, 138–9,

<https://repository.upenn.edu/dissertations/925/>. Schaaf argued that Philadelphia's Catholic laity did not conform to historians' "ghettoization thesis," the thesis that hostile, conservative Catholics retreated from engagement with American culture.

<sup>41</sup> *Catholic Herald*, March 14, May 7 and May 16, 1844.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, December 16, 1841.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, June 20, 1844

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, June 6, 1844.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, May 16, 1844.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, June 20, 1844.

<sup>47</sup> *Address of the Catholic Lay Citizens, of the City and County of Philadelphia, to their Fellow-Citizens, In Reply to the Presentment of the Grand Jury of the Court of Quarter Sessions of May Term 1844, In Regard to the Causes of the Late Riots in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: M. Fithian, 1844), 6.

<https://digital.library.villanova.edu/Item/vudl:228900#?c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-6422%2C-397%2C17562%2C7906>.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 7–8, 10.

<sup>49</sup> *Catholic Herald*, July 25, 1844.

<sup>50</sup> *The Truth Unveiled; or, a Calm and Impartial Exposition of the Origin and Immediate Cause of the Terrible Riots in Philadelphia, on May 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup>, A.D. 1844* (Philadelphia: M. Fithian, 1844), 1.

<https://archive.org/stream/truthunveiledorc00prote#page/n0/mode/2up>.

<sup>51</sup> *The Olive Branch, or, An Earnest Appeal in Behalf of Religion, the Supremacy of Law and Social Order with Documents Relating to the Late Disturbances in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: M. Fithian, 1844), 3, 15.

<https://digital.library.villanova.edu/Item/vudl:256343#?c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-3514%2C-198%2C9307%2C3955>.

<sup>52</sup> Both pamphlets were published by M. Fithian, which published numerous pro-Catholic pamphlets in addition to the *Catholic Herald*.

<sup>53</sup> *The Truth Unveiled*, 8–9.

<sup>54</sup> *The Olive Branch*, 5–6, 36 [emphasis in original].

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 37; *The Truth Unveiled*, 9.

<sup>56</sup> *The Olive Branch*, 37–38.

<sup>57</sup> Dolan, *American Catholicism*, 58.