


Chapter 214– An Anti-Immigration Party Re-emerges

	<p>Dates: 1844 to 1853</p>	<p>Sections:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anti-Immigrant Fervor Mounts Initially In 1844 • The “Know Nothing Party” Picks Up Momentum
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Date: Summer 1844

Anti-Immigrant Fervor Mounts Initially In 1844



A Stereotypical Put-Down Of An Irishman

Amidst the growing turmoil over slavery in Kansas, President Pierce is now visited by the resurgence of another political party dedicated to attacking “Others” – in this case Catholic immigrants from Ireland and Germany, the majority of whom have become Democrats.

This party originates in Philadelphia in 1844, the brainchild of the Jewish-turned-Methodist preacher Lewis Levin who is convinced that a conspiracy is under way to threaten the nation’s values and government. The purported villains here are the Catholics emigres whom he casts as the moral equivalent of the blacks – uneducated, impoverished, lazy by nature, prone to disruptive behaviors including criminality. Worse yet, he asserts they owe their loyalty to the papacy rather than the government in Washington.

Levin’s answer at the time is the Native American Party which calls upon U.S.-born, white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, loyal patriots to take back the country from these interlopers. The result is a series of street clashes in Philadelphia reminiscent of the European violence between Protestant and Catholics, with churches left in flames and many fatalities on both sides.

While these are finally put down by military force, the seeds of ethnic and religious discord have taken root at both the local and national level.

Lewis Levin is able to turn his cause into the election of himself and five other Native American Party members to the U.S House in 1844. He carries his passion to Washington, haranguing the lower chamber with his vision of the threat posed by the immigrants:

We are menaced by the accession of eight millions of foreigners, not only entirely ignorant of our institutions, but ignorant of everything, uncultivated in mind, brutal in manners

But his voice is soon drowned out by the overriding focus on the Texas Annexation and the Mexican War. In turn, his overbearing personal manner finally drives even his early admirers away, and he loses his re-election bid. From there Levin spirals downward, occasionally delivering his fiery political attacks until suffering a mental collapse in 1856 and dying four years later in the Philadelphia Hospital for the Insane at fifty-one years old.

But the anti-immigrant flame he has ignited will live on well after his time.

Date: 1849-53

The “Know Nothing Party” Picks Up Momentum

In 1849 another nativist party appears, the “Order of the Star-Spangled Banner,” formed in New York City by one Charles Allen to help elect American-born Protestants to public office. Its impact is trivial, but it survives long enough to attract interest from a dry goods merchant named James W. Barker, whose organizational skills have been honed within his own “Order of United Americans.”

At first, Barker’s group is more social than political in character, albeit dedicated to celebrating the “true American” stereotype, native born Protestants. The society is structured, ironically, along the lines of the heretofore “suspicious” Freemasons. Members are carefully screened; local lodges established to hold meetings; graduated “degrees” and titles earned by achievement and tenure; and a series of rituals – handshakes, passwords, other codes -- to distinguish its initiates.

Patriotism is an assumed virtue, and a favored slogan is George Washington’s famous wartime mandate: “put only Americans on guard tonight.”

Another is the rote response to all outsider questions about the Order’s practices – “I know nothing.”

The ongoing spike in Catholic immigrants entering New York City year after year transforms the organization from social advancement into the political arena. While officially designated The American Party by 1852, it is quickly labeled The Know-Nothing Party by Horace Greeley and his fellow New York newsmen.

Its initial foray into campaigning comes in the election of 1852 when a party convention nominates Daniel Webster, only to have him die nine days before the voting. But the victory recorded by Franklin Pierce – backed especially by the Irish Catholic immigrants – yields a surge in membership for the “Know Nothings.”

The first sign that the “Know Nothings” are to be taken seriously as a political power comes in Lewis Levin’s home base of Philadelphia. On June 13, 1854, Robert T. Conrad, a lawyer, judge, newspaperman and politician is elected Mayor of the city on the American Party ballot. One of Conrad’s early acts is to hire hundreds of new policemen, all “native born,” to clamp down on activities in the Irish Catholic neighborhoods.

The movement continues to gain momentum, with membership climbing over the one million mark during the year. Many of the early Lodges, known as “wigwags,” are located in large cities in the Northeast, but they soon materialize across all regions of the country, including the South and West coast.

Their presence is about to shake up the political landscape in the election of 1854.