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# A Glorious Assemblage: The Rise of the Know-Nothing Party in Louisiana

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A GLORIOUS ASSEMBLAGE:  
THE RISE OF THE KNOW-NOTHING PARTY IN LOUISIANA

A Thesis

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Louisiana State University and  
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by  
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## Abstract

Between 1853 and 1856, the nativist and anti-Catholic Know-Nothing party became a powerful political force in Louisiana despite the state's unique religious and political makeup. This thesis studies the rise of the party in three regions of the state: New Orleans, the Sugar Parishes, and North Louisiana and the Florida Parishes to show that the party gained popularity in the state differently in different regions. In New Orleans, the party rejected anti-Catholicism and adopted a stance against political corruption. In the Sugar Parishes, the Know-Nothings were merely a continuation of the Whig Party under a new name. In North Louisiana and in the Florida Parishes, the Know-Nothings supported anti-Catholicism and opposed the political power of New Orleans. In each region, proponents saw the Know-Nothing party as a means to advance their own agendas.

## Introduction

Eighteen years after they first challenged the dominance of the Democrats, the national Whig Party was falling apart. The Northern and Southern arms of the party had squabbled for nearly a decade over the future of slavery, and the one chance at unifying the wounded party died with president and war hero Zachary Taylor. In the following presidential election, Taylor's successor, Millard Fillmore, failed to earn the Whig nomination. Instead, the party nominated Winfield Scott, who Democrat Franklin Pierce handily defeated. Whigs lost more than just the presidency; Democrats unseated Whigs in congressional races in states across the country. Voters simply had lost faith in the Whigs. The Whig Party continued to exist in local politics in some corners of the country, but after 1852, Whigs ceased to pose a serious threat to the Democrats in national politics.

Two years after the Whig defeat, the American Party held conventions, nominated candidates to all strata of public offices, and gained enough national support to supplant the Whigs as the primary alternative to Democratic rule. At a time when the country divided on slavery's future, the new party found immediate, national success. Although sectional disagreement over the expansion of slavery weakened the Whigs, the Americans avoided the debate by deemphasizing the importance of the issue. For the American Party, a Catholic conspiracy, not the spread of slavery, more immediately threatened American democracy. The American Party's ability to divert the nation's attention from sectional divide proved short lived, and in just five years after the Know-Nothings appeared, newer political parties replaced the American Party as opponents to the Democrats. Still, from 1854 to 1856, the American Party grew rapidly and seemed poised to overtake the Democrats.

In 1854, the American Party's profile grew in Louisiana with the decline of that state's Whig Party. Americans held conventions and entered political races in every part of the state. By the end of the year, voters in East Feliciana, Union, Morehouse, Iberville, and St. Landry parishes as well as the city of New Orleans elected American Party candidates to government positions. Over the next two years, the Americans won a majority of municipal elections in New Orleans, Donaldsonville, Houma, and Baton Rouge. In New Orleans, the party became so entrenched that it remained the dominant political party in municipal politics until Union forces occupied the city during the Civil War, six years after the party's viability ceased elsewhere. While the party outside of New Orleans floundered just two and a half years after it announced its arrival into politics, the American Party in Louisiana persevered for nearly a decade.<sup>1</sup>

Historians disagree on why the nativist and anti-Catholic Know-Nothing Party gained popularity in places where Catholic and Creole voters had long held political influence. Many historians acknowledge that some Know-Nothings in Louisiana rebuked religious intolerance. Some have noted that the American Party in Louisiana even attracted Catholics to its ranks. Historian John Sacher argues that Catholics organized with the Know-Nothings because the state party expressly rejected the anti-Catholic plank of the national party's platform. Sacher cites party leader, Charles Gayarre's, address to the American Party convention where Gayarre applauds the party's stance "save for one rotten fragment," religious intolerance. While this was the case in New Orleans and in the Sugar Parishes, Sacher's argument overlooks the fact that many Know-Nothings in North Louisiana did embrace the anti-Catholic plank. Historian Marius Carriere argues that Catholic supporters of the American Party saw no conflict between their

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<sup>1</sup> John M Sacher, *A Perfect War of Politics: Parties, Politicians, and Democracy in Louisiana, 1824-1861* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 237, 256-258; W. Darrell Overdyke, *The Know Nothing Party in the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950), 58-61.

Catholicism and their political party. Carriere argues that the party feared that papal loyalty undermined American Democracy, but American born Creole Catholics were anti-cleric and maintained no loyalties to the Pope. The party in Louisiana, Carriere claims, stood against new, immigrant Catholics, not the established Catholic population.<sup>2</sup>

Other historians suggest that the American Party grew rapidly in Louisiana because former Whigs refused to support Democrats after the Whig decline. Although the party never achieved a majority in statewide elections, the Know-Nothing Party garnered 46 percent of the votes in the 1855 gubernatorial election, and 48 percent of the Louisiana vote in the presidential election in 1856. Some claim that the party experienced instant popularity because they simply absorbed the Whig Party's clout. Historian Michael Holt argues that the American Party in the South was a "vehicle for former Whigs to continue opposition to the Democrats" after the 1852 election. This was the same charge that contemporary Democrats levied against the Know-Nothings. An 1854 edition of the Democrat newspaper, *Raleigh Star*, argued that the American Party was "Whiggery in disguise." Historian W. Darrell Overdyke studies several newspapers from across the region to show that after the party reached the South, many Whig publications quickly warmed to the Know-Nothings while Democratic papers approached the new party with suspicion. The historians also point out that the upstart American Party attracted more Whigs than Democrats to their ranks.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For clarity, when I am discussing political parties, I will use Know-Nothing Party and American Party interchangeably. Also, I choose to hyphenate "Know-Nothing" rather than type it as "Know Nothing," as many recent historians prefer, because the party's contemporaries almost universally hyphenate the term. Sacher, *A Perfect War of Politics*, 273-242; Marius M. Carriere, Jr, "Anti-Catholicism, Nativism, and Louisiana Politics in the 1850s," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 25, no. 4 (Autumn, 1994): 459-466.

<sup>3</sup> Sacher, *A Perfect War of Politics*, 307-310; Michael Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1978), 165-166; Overdyke, *The Know Nothing Party in the South*, 51-72.

While the Know-Nothing Party in Louisiana indeed attracted more Whigs than Democrats, some historians caution against assuming that the Whigs and Americans were the same party. Michael Holt, in a later work, lists three reasons why conflating Southern Whigs and Know-Nothings does not work: the Whig party continued to function as an independent party (though a much weaker one) after the rise of the American Party, the South experienced genuine nativist movements that strengthened the Know-Nothings, and Democrats, though in fewer numbers than Whigs, joined the Know-Nothing party by the thousands. Some of the most prominent Know-Nothings in Louisiana such as Charles Gayarre and J. H. Kilpatrick previously ran as Democrats. Furthermore, some former Whigs who left the party after 1852 did not join the Know-Nothings. Marius Carriere points out that after 1852, several former Whigs ran for election as Democrats. The idea that the American Party was a continuation of Whiggery originated in the partisan newspapers of the 1850's. Historians must recognize these sources as political propaganda and approach them critically.<sup>4</sup>

Another historiographical argument is that the Know-Nothings became successful in Louisiana because the party was part of a progressive reform movement. Know-Nothings sought to control antebellum urbanization to protect their republican ideals. According to historian Frank Towers, the party won a majority of aldermanic positions in New Orleans by campaigning to erase budget deficits, stop vote fraud, and control the sale of liquor. For Towers, the party sought urban moral and political reform in a time of unprecedented growth in American cities.

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 855-857; Marius Carriere, "The Know Nothing Movement in Louisiana" (PhD diss, Louisiana State University, 1977), 96.



The party's members believed themselves to be the prescription to the problem of corruption caused by immigrant pauperism.<sup>5</sup>

Still other historians interpret the rise of the American Party in Louisiana as a continuation of old ethnic rivalries that even predated the Second Party System. Ira Leonard and Robert Parmet claim that the political rivalry between Democrats and Know-Nothings in Louisiana continued a decades-old battle between Creoles and American natives (that is, English speaking Protestants whose lineage in Louisiana postdated the Louisiana Purchase). The Creoles, Parmet and Leonard argue, supported the Democrats while native born Americans supported the Know-Nothings. The Creoles and Americans had fought for political dominance in Louisiana since statehood, and the ethnic power struggle dominated state politics throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. Sacher recounts that as late as 1846, a native American complained of the rivalry; "a creole [*sic*] always voted for a creole candidate at an election, however much he differed from him in political opinions, rather than support an Anglo-Saxon of his own party." Some historians argue that native born Americans adopted the American Party as their vehicle to oppose Creole politics.<sup>6</sup>

Historians cannot reach consensus on deciphering the Louisiana Know-Nothing Party because the party emphasized different political issues in different places. My research will show that, from the time that the public first acknowledged the presence of the Know-Nothings in Louisiana until the party ceased at the dawn of the Civil War, the American Party never presented a cohesive party message in the state. I will argue that the party took on at least three

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<sup>5</sup> Frank Towers, *The Urban South and the Coming of the Civil War* (Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 94-95.

<sup>6</sup> Ira M Leonard and Robert D Parmet, *American Nativism, 1830-1860* (Huntington, New York: Robert E Krieger Publishing, 1971), 95; Sacher, *A Perfect War of Politics*, 11.

different faces in Louisiana. In New Orleans, the strongest faction of the party de-emphasized anti-Catholicism and anti-immigration (to a degree) and instead emphasized election reform. In the sugar-producing parishes along the Mississippi River, the Know-Nothings were little more than a continuation of the Whigs: an opposition to the Democrats who advocated for the American System, avoided slavery agitation, and dabbled in suppressing the immigrant vote. In much of the remaining parts of the state, the party resembled the more traditional interpretation of the Know-Nothingism; they were anti-Catholic nativists. The American Party's incongruence in Louisiana demonstrates that the party was ultimately a vehicle for a variety of opportunistic politicians to gain influence.

My study of the Know-Nothing Party in Louisiana depends heavily on newspapers because these sources often acted as the voices of political parties. Louisiana newspapers in 1850's were hardly impartial, but rather most papers operated as an organ for one political party. Newspapers reminded their readers which candidates to vote for in elections, and they provided editorial commentary on the state of politics. Voters in Louisiana depended on the newspapers to stay informed on politicians and issues before elections. When historians study the Know-Nothings, the newspapers become even more important because the secret group failed to leave any written record from their meetings. Newspapers, along with books and speeches written by prominent party members, are the best means by which both voters and historians can learn about the Know-Nothings.

Studying the Louisiana Know-Nothing Party is important for several reasons. First, it serves as a case study to show the political vacuum that existed in America after the Whig party started to decline. This is the same political vacuum that eventually delivered the presidency to the Republican Party and brought the country to civil war. The research also brings to light the

interesting political agency of both immigrants and religious and cultural minorities in the face of popular nativism. Both immigrants and the Catholic Creoles in Louisiana influenced the Know-Nothings in some ways. Most importantly, studying the American Party in Louisiana contributes to the understanding of how politics in the state—and by extension, the nation—evolved in the antebellum period.

When studying antebellum Louisiana politics, it is important to understand that since Louisiana gained statehood, cultural identities affected the state's elections. The earliest elections in the state always pitted recently settled Anglo-American Protestants against French speaking, Catholic Creoles. When the United States first annexed Louisiana, the population was almost entirely Creole. Shortly thereafter, a number of Americans resettled in Louisiana and quickly changed Louisiana's demographics. To maintain political power against the rising tide of English speaking Americans, Creoles operated as a voting bloc. Louisiana developed its own party system independent of the Era of Good Feelings that existed elsewhere in the country; in Louisiana, unnamed but identifiable parties split on religious and cultural lines. The Anglophonic American proto-party was strongest in the northern part of the state, and the Creoles' party gained its strongest support in the New Orleans and the Sugar Parishes.<sup>7</sup>

Ethnic partisanship continued during the Second Party System when American politics divided into pro-Andrew Jackson and anti-Jackson factions. Many Creoles politicians ran as National Republicans and later as Whigs because they held a vendetta against Andrew Jackson that existed since the Battle of New Orleans in 1814. While some Creoles became Democrats, the Whigs claimed a majority of Creoles in the late 1830's and early 40's. Still, in instances where a Creole Democrat ran against an American Whig, the Creoles crossed party line to vote

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<sup>7</sup> Sacher, *A Perfect War of Politics*, 12-16

for the candidate of their ethnicity. In the decades preceding the 1850's, political parties became more important in Louisiana, but not as important as the ethnic divisions.<sup>8</sup>

In the late 1840's and early 1850's the politics of Louisiana changed as New Orleans' population grew, making it the largest city in the South. Because the city sits at the mouth of the Mississippi River, it served as a port of entry for European immigrants who sought to settle in the country's interior. By the beginning of the Civil War, over half a million immigrants entered the country through New Orleans. The newcomers brought cultures that were unlike that of both the Creoles and the Americans who already inhabited Louisiana. Newly arrived immigrants, mostly Irish and German Catholics, piled in the city by the thousands. Most stayed in New Orleans for only a short while before continuing on to the nation's interior, but tens of thousands, mainly Irish, stayed in New Orleans. Of those who moved on past their port of entry, thousands settled elsewhere in Louisiana.<sup>9</sup>

These immigrants not only brought their unique culture, but they introduced new social problems as well. Many of the recent arrivals, particularly the Irish, emigrated as political and famine refugees. They arrived in New Orleans with no money to travel far beyond their point of entry. Thousands of the immigrants were paupers with no means of improving their lot. After arriving, they lived in dense immigrant ghettos where they sought work from and socialized with their countrymen. These refugees often viewed America and Louisiana as their temporary home. They longed for returning to Europe when the troubles ceased. Some of these immigrants resisted assimilation while they lived in Louisiana.

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<sup>8</sup> Sacher claims that Creole hatred for Andrew Jackson began during the Battle of New Orleans during the War of 1812. Jackson questioned the loyalty and patriotism of Creoles in New Orleans, so he instituted martial law in the city. Creoles took this mistrust as an insult.

<sup>9</sup> Earl F Niehaus, *The Irish in New Orleans, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), 25.

As Louisiana's Irish immigrant population grew through the 1840's, the state's resources to aid immigrants diminished. Charity for the refugees from Louisiana's established Irish families waned as the population of unskilled laborers from Ireland increased. Irish settlements became slums as immigration outgrew available jobs. While most of the immigrants labored on farms in their home country, they could not continue this livelihood when they arrived in Louisiana. Irish farmers were inexperienced with Louisiana's crops, and the laborers had to compete with slaves for work. Many of the Irish immigrants faced destitution in Louisiana that rivaled their condition in Ireland.

Immigrants to Louisiana faced poverty, but whiskey was cheap. As in other large cities, violence and drunkenness plagued the Irish slums of New Orleans. In most instances, immigrants directed their violence at their own countrymen. Newspapers reported that the "wild Irish" drank and engaged in fistfights simply for the love of fighting. Contemporaries also commented on the correlation between heavy drinking and domestic violence in the immigrant slums. Less commonly, violence and vice spread beyond the slum and affected others. Immigrant street children, orphaned by famine or the difficult transatlantic migration, formed thieving gangs who harassed Louisianans. Irish quarters became the most dangerous and crime-ridden sections of cities.<sup>10</sup>

Both the Whigs and the Democrats in Louisiana recognized the potential influence that immigrants could have on elections. By the middle of the nineteenth century, foreign born constituted more than a quarter of the state's population. These numbers were even higher in the cities. Between 1830 and 1850, the white population in New Orleans grew from 21,000 to over 91,000, mostly from immigration. Despite this growth, voting turnout in the state remained low.

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<sup>10</sup> Niehaus, *The Irish in New Orleans*, 59-62.

In the 1830 gubernatorial election, only 10,000 people cast a ballot. Presidential election turnouts were even lower. Both parties recognized that if they could naturalize and register even a fraction of the immigrants, the new support could change elections in their favor.

Naturalization became a key political issue throughout the state in the 1840's. As opportunists from both parties rushed to naturalize immigrants and encouraged them to vote, nativist sentiment arose in reaction. Nativist clubs existed well before 1840, but those clubs remained apolitical. During the 1840 New Orleans Mayoral election, a new political party itself the "Native American Repeal Party" sought to extend the residency period before immigrants could be naturalized. The party's candidate, cotton press owner William Freret, defeated both his Whig and Democrat opponents. During the next year, the party convened in New Orleans to organize and adopt a platform, and the year after that, the party held a national convention to spread to other states.<sup>11</sup>

In 1843, a similar party called American Republicans formed before mayoral elections in New York and Philadelphia on a platform of delaying naturalization for immigrants, limiting public office to native born citizens, and minimizing Catholicism's influence on public education. American Republican Party members believed two things about immigrant voters: they had not yet lived in the country long enough to appreciate American democracy, and their allegiance was with the Pope, not the nation. Immigrants, party members feared, would use their vote as a commodity and vote for whichever corrupt politicians offered the most money. The party attracted both Whigs and Democrats, though the Democratic newspapers accused the

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<sup>11</sup> Carrier, "The Know-Nothing Movement in Louisiana," 28-30.

American Republicans of being Whigs in disguise. After early success, the American Republicans spread to other cities where immigrants had settled in large numbers.<sup>12</sup>

The American Republican Party reached Louisiana where it merged with the Native American Repeal Party to form the Native American Party. The party nominated Charles Derbigny, son of former governor Pierre Derbigny, for governor in 1846. Unfortunately for Derbigny, the Native American Party never gained wide acceptance in Louisiana, and in the election, the Native Americans won just 2.5 percent of the votes. The party dissolved shortly after Derbigny's defeat, but the Native Americans started the conversation about nativism in Louisiana that would continue for the next two decades.<sup>13</sup>

While members of both parties became interested in nativism, neither the Whigs nor Democrats in Louisiana were willing to take a hard stance on the issue of naturalization. Instead, they took balanced approaches, flirting with nativism where American-born voters had a majority while rejecting it in immigrant neighborhoods. Both parties nominated nativist candidates for the 1844 New Orleans Mayor's race while sustaining efforts to naturalize and register more immigrants, sometimes illegally. These efforts were effective; Democrats used naturalized votes to delivered Louisiana's six electoral votes to James K. Polk in the 1844 presidential election in what historians call the "Plaquemines Frauds." Whigs cried foul at the event, but that did not stop them from continuing their own program of naturalizing immigrants

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<sup>12</sup> Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 11-12.

<sup>13</sup> Carrier, "The Know-Nothing Movement in Louisiana," 28-32; Sacher, *A Perfect War of Politics*, 140-141.

to vote for the Whig party. For much of the following decade, naturalization remained an issue of contention between the parties.<sup>14</sup>

Several events precipitated the fall of the Whigs in the early 1850's. Zachary Taylor's death in 1850 exposed a growing rift between the Northern Whigs and Southern Whigs. While the war hero was alive, Taylor's celebrity attracted both pro-slavery and antislavery Whigs from both the North and South, but his death exposed the party's growing sectional divide. His successor, Millard Fillmore, was unpopular during his short tenure, and Whigs nominated Mexican American War general Winfield Scott to run instead of the incumbent in the 1852 election. Scott supported the Compromise of 1850, which brought detractors from both the North and South. The party may have survived its sectional crisis, but two of the Whigs' most influential leaders, Henry Clay and Daniel Webster, died shortly before the presidential election. The demoralized and fractured party showed poorly in the 1852 election. Democrat Franklin Pierce took all but four states to easily beat Scott and win the presidency. The national Whig Party never recovered from the defeat.<sup>15</sup>

Historians argue that the Whigs fared poorly in the 1852 national elections because they failed to distinguish their party from the Democrats. The Whig's national convention in 1852 adopted a platform that was similar to the Democrats. Both parties assured constitutionally limited powers for the federal government, state control over the institution of slavery, and

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<sup>14</sup> Sacher, *A Perfect War of Politics*, 124; Carrier, "The Know-Nothing Movement in Louisiana," 28-37; Sacher explains that Democrat John Slidell exploited a loophole in the 1812 Louisiana Constitution that allowed voters to vote anywhere in their county—a political body used in Louisiana only for election purposes—but elections were still determined by who won in each parish. Slidell transported naturalized voters from New Orleans downriver to Plaquemines Parish, which was part of the same county as New Orleans. As a result, Pole won in Plaquemines Parish by a 990 margin, when only 600 people in the parish were registered to vote.

<sup>15</sup> Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the Whig Party*, 726-729; David M. Potter and Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Impending Crisis: America Before the Civil War, 1848-1861* (New York: Harper Collins, 1976), 143.



enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act. Both parties also supported the Compromise of 1850 as a solution to the slavery question. The election lacked contentious issues to invigorate voters. As a result, the apathetic electorate had the worst turnout in decades. With Clay and Webster dead, and with Scott showing less charisma than Zachary Taylor four years prior, the Whigs did not have a unique message or a hero that they could get behind.<sup>16</sup>

American politics experienced a period of transformation in the early 1850's. The old issues of internal improvement and a national bank that defined the era of Jacksonian politics lost relevance, and both parties insisted that the Compromise of 1850 answered the slavery question. When the Whigs departed from national politics, opportunistic politicians built new parties to fill the political void. These parties tackled new issues such as moral and political reform, opposition to the 1850 compromise, and immigration reform. The Second Party System gave way to a new era of antebellum politics.<sup>17</sup>

By 1853, the country was ripe for a new outbreak of nativism. In cities across the Northeast, Catholic immigrants began challenging Protestant dominance in the public sphere. The struggle was often fought over public education; Catholics challenged Protestant religious teaching in public schools. Nativists responded by organizing clubs to resist Catholics. In New York City, two nativist secret societies, the Order of the Star Spangled Banner and the Order of United Americans, swelled their ranks. The clubs expanded across state lines, and wigwams—the name given to lodges of the fraternal organizations—emerged throughout the Northeast. By

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850's* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1978), 97-105; Democratic Party Platforms: "Democratic Party Platform of 1852," June 1, 1852. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29575>; Minor/Third Party Platforms: "Whig Party Platform of 1852," June 17, 1852. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=25856>.

<sup>17</sup> Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 12-19; Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of American Whigs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 188-189.

the end of 1853, nativist networks spanned the New England and the Mid-Atlantic regions, and reached the South and Southwest. Newspapers referred to these groups as “Know-Nothings,” as member supposedly claimed ignorance when asked about the group. It was from this group that the American Party gained its political base.<sup>18</sup>

When the first American Party candidates ran for Philadelphia’s municipal government early in 1854, the party already had a national support structure. Americans were immediately successful at the polls because they had the support of thousands of voters from the Know-Nothings clubs, they already had a large public profile by nature of the popularity of the Know-Nothing societies, and they already had a network of newspapers to proliferate their message. Secrecy of the Know-Nothings was more legend than tenet, and voters, especially in the Northeast, were already familiar with the group before they emerged on the political scene. Because the Americans ran as opposition to the Democrats, many Whig newspapers rushed to support the new party. The American Party’s national rise in popularity was meteoric; within months, the party held elected positions in every region of the country.

Its decline was equally as swift. In three years, the party all but disappeared on the national stage. The party focused too narrowly on nativism to maintain wide support. Know-Nothings became unfashionable after violence from election riots soured many voters from nativism. More importantly, the country was quickly fracturing on the question of slavery’s future, and the American Party was unable to produce a unified stance on slavery. After a third place showing in the 1856 presidential election, Know-Nothingism ceased as a serious national political movement.

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<sup>18</sup> Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 24-26. The American Party was the political arm of the Know-Nothings. The groups were essentially synonymous before 1856, and they were literally synonymous after that year when the party lifted their tenet of secrecy and became exclusively a political party.

The American Party showed resilience in places where it offered a more robust ideology. Know-Nothings remained a political force in New Orleans city politics, for example, until Union soldiers forced that government from power in 1862. Since its beginning, the Know-Nothing Party in Louisiana customized its message for the demographically unique state. Catholic, French-speaking Creoles' political power endured in some parts of Louisiana. Demographics of other parts of the state more closely resembled the rest of the South. Know-Nothings adjusted their message in the different parts of the state accordingly. The state party toned down nativist rhetoric, rejected religious intolerance, took a proslavery stance, and tackled political corruption. The Louisiana American Party produced a state platform that departed from the national platform.<sup>19</sup>

This thesis will attempt to illustrate how the Know-Nothing Party started and gained traction in three distinct regions in Louisiana at the end of the Second Party System: In New Orleans, the party was a vehicle for opportunistic politicians to win office amidst corruption, in the Sugar Parishes, it was a means to continue Whig programs after that party's demise, and in North Louisiana and the Florida Parishes, it was a nativist and anti-Catholic, anti-New Orleans party. The study pays special attention to the beginning of the organization, and how its supporters introduced themselves to potential voters and addressed local politics. It looks at some of the local party leaders in three different regions of Louisiana, to see how they fit into the Know-Nothing archetype. Most importantly, it will look at who voted for American Party candidates and where those votes fit in to the larger political trends of the antebellum period. It will also focus on how the party in Louisiana changed over two years as it faced pressure to

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<sup>19</sup> Leon Cyprian Soule, *The Know-Nothing Party in New Orleans: A Reappraisal* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana Historical Association, 1961), 3; Charles Gayarre, *Address to the People of Louisiana on the State of Parties* (New Orleans: Sherman, Wharton, & Company, 1855), 33-36.

unify and integrate with the national party leading up to the 1856 convention and presidential election.

## Chapter 1: New Orleans

On Thursday morning, March 16, 1854, the *New Orleans Bee* summoned its readers to a “grand and imposing gathering of the sovereigns this evening in Lafayette Square.” The *Daily Crescent*, one of the other Whig newspapers in the city, ran a similar piece. The meeting, the newspapers claimed, should attract both Whigs and Democrats to discuss municipal reform without partisanship. The next morning, the *Bee* happily reported that the “glorious assemblage” resulted in the nomination of an anti-party reform ticket to run in the upcoming municipal elections. The list of candidates, published on the paper’s front page, boasted names of established politicians and newcomers to city politics. Whigs constituted a majority of the nominees, but the ticket included some Democrats, including James W. Breedlove for mayor. The *Bee* declared that the grass roots movement would finally bring an era of corrupt party politics to an end in the Crescent City.<sup>20</sup>

Not everyone was as optimistic. On the same morning that the Whig press announced the gathering, the city’s largest Democrat newspaper questioned who was behind the meeting. The *Louisiana Courier* suggested that “a majority of the signers of the call for the ‘independent’ meeting” belonged to the Know-Nothing secret society. The only reform that interested the movement was removing voting privileges from naturalized citizens. The secret society, argued the Democrat paper, consisted mostly of Whigs who, since the fall of the national Whig Party, longed for membership in something. The *Courier* cited the fact that the *Bee*—recently a Whig newspaper—was quick to support the reform movement as evidence that the reformers were simply Whigs under a new name.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>“The Meeting To-Night,” *New Orleans Bee*, March 16, 1854; “A Glorious Assemblage,” *New Orleans Bee*, March 17, 1854.

During its eight-year existence, the American Party was many things in New Orleans. The party sought to enact election and immigration reform, repudiate anti-slavery legislation, and facilitate trade and industry in the Crescent City. Just as importantly, the party was also not many things. The party was not, as Democrats charged, just Whigs of another name, it did not share the national party's stance on Catholicism, and the party's constituency was not entirely Anglo-Saxon nor entirely Protestant. The local chapter was not, as some historians claim, unionists who sought to escape sectional divide. New Orleans' unique demographics lent to the uniqueness of the local branch of the party. The New Orleans Know-Nothings treaded a fine line between existing in union with the national party and operating as an independent party with the same name.

The New Orleans American Party's uniqueness makes them worthy of study. They seemed to defy the national party at every point of their existence. When the Know-Nothings first created a ticket for a city election in 1854, the group initially hid their affiliation to the ticket. Afterwards, the party nominated Catholics and Creoles to state and local offices. The city's most noteworthy contribution to the national party's conventions occurred when the New Orleans branch of the party created controversy at the meetings. When the national party dissolved after 1856, the New Orleans party remained strong for another six year years. The New Orleans party's refusal to assimilate with the national party shows the great degree to which political parties in the in antebellum period operated as coalitions of independent and localized groups.

This study also shows the political agency that ethnic minorities and immigrants possessed in New Orleans during the antebellum period. Historians describe the American Party

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<sup>21</sup>“Independent Movement,” New Orleans *Louisiana Courier*, March 16, 1854.

as anti-Catholic and anti-foreigner, but in New Orleans, the party catered to Catholic and naturalized voters. The local chapter of Know-Nothings openly welcomed Catholics in their ranks, and they engaged in a bit of doublespeak in regards to immigrant enfranchisement. Even as the local party's platform included a plank to extend residency length before naturalizing immigrants, they tried to win some of the naturalized vote in the meantime. The party even nominated Irish candidates to run for assembly position to represent Irish neighborhoods. Elections in New Orleans often were decided by small margins, and immigrant votes had the potential to change elections.

The Know-Nothings in New Orleans did not appear suddenly during the March 16<sup>th</sup> meeting. Well before they nominated tickets for municipal elections, lodges of the secret group held meetings and initiations in the city. Because the group left no written record of their meetings, it is difficult to know how popular the lodges were before they engaged in politics. The fact that newspapers had written about the Know-Nothings before the Reformers announced their ticket, though, indicates that the group already existed before March, 1854. Three events created a political condition in New Orleans that precipitated the transformation of the Know-Nothings from a secret club to a political party. First, as in New York and Philadelphia, the Know-Nothing Party in New Orleans grew from the demise of the Second Party System during the first years of the 1850's. Second, a tide of immigration into the city tipped a balance of ethnic political power between Americans and Creoles that had existed for decades. Third, after sixteen years of separation, the three distinct municipalities that constituted New Orleans unified under a single government.

By 1852, the two-party system of Democrats and Whigs started falling apart in New Orleans. The parties failed to differentiate themselves from each other in any meaningful way.

Without real issues separating the parties, they resorted to *ad hominem* attacks in their campaigns against each other. In a January 4, 1852, article, the *Louisiana Courier* accused the Whigs of being anti-slavery, and the newspaper claimed that the party had no means of maintaining national support. Whigs newspapers responded with the same accusation against the Democrats. These attacks masked the fact that neither party defined a unique plan for city government. Charles Gayarre declared that the Whig Party, “although retaining its name, sought to become a counterfeit of its rival.” With no meaningful differences, party support depended on party loyalty: Whigs voted for Whigs and Democrats voted for Democrats because that is what they had done for years. For both political parties to remain viable, they needed voters to keep their supporters from losing interest.<sup>22</sup>

Immigration to the city affected the political balance. By 1850, nearly three out of every ten white males in Louisiana had been born abroad. Most of the foreign born came by way of New Orleans, where over 150,000 people entered in the 1840’s alone. A majority of the immigrants eventually settled outside of the state, but enough stayed in the Crescent City to change the politics of the city. The U.S. Naturalization Act of 1795 and the Louisiana Constitution of 1845 granted naturalization and the right to vote to white male immigrants after five years in the U.S. and two years in the state. Naturalized voters initially lacked inherent party loyalty, so both parties fought to attract naturalized votes. Whigs and Democrats accused each other of supporting nativism in the hopes of securing immigrant votes, and both parties engaged in purchasing immigrant votes. Politicians dabbled in illegal “colonizing,” or transporting purchased voters to another precinct to tip the balance in their favor. This was the method by which John Slidell won Plaquemines Parish for James K. Polk in the 1844 presidential election.

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<sup>22</sup> “The Presidency,” New Orleans *Le Courier de la Louisiane*, January 4, 1852; Gayarre, *Address to the People of Louisiana*, 2.



Political reformers feared—with good reason—that the expansion of suffrage to more immigrants tempted the politicians with corruption.<sup>23</sup>

While politicians fought over immigrant votes, the city consolidated under a single government. In 1836, New Orleans divided into three separate municipalities to ease ethnic tensions. Creoles dominated the “first municipality” (as designated by the federal census), Americans were a majority in the second, and the third contained an amalgamation of immigrants, Creoles, and Americans. For sixteen years, voters in the three municipalities elected their own mayors and assemblies, and the three municipalities functioned as independent cities. After financial woes plagued the first and third municipalities, New Orleans elected to organize under a single city government. A short time later, a new state constitution redrew New Orleans boundaries to include the suburb of Lafayette. The old municipality boundaries remained, but instead of separating cities, the boundaries separated four city districts. The second municipality became the first district, the first municipality became the second district, the third municipality became the third district, and the town of Lafayette became the fourth district. Four governments consolidated into one, a surplus of politicians fought over fewer positions, and because the different ethnic quarters of the city unified under a single government after 1852, politics in New Orleans became more ethnically plural.<sup>24</sup>

Following the disappointing 1852 presidential election and the deaths of Henry Clay and Daniel Webster, the Whig Party in Louisiana experienced its own collapse in state and local politics. When the new state constitution took effect in 1853, it called for special elections to fill

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<sup>23</sup> United States Census, *The Seventh Census of the United States: 1850, An Appendix* ed. J. D. B. DeBow, Washington, DC: Robert Armstrong, 1853, 474; Niehaus, *The Irish in New Orleans*, 25; Sacher, *A Perfect War of Politics*, 205.

<sup>24</sup> Soule, *The Know-Nothing Party in New Orleans*, 14-16; United States Census, *The Seventh Census of the United States: 1850*, 474; *Constitution of the State of Louisiana Adopted in Convention, July 31, 1852* (New Orleans: Press of The Crescent, 1852), 5-6.

new government positions. Whigs lost badly and the party's members became disheartened. In August of that year, only seven parishes sent delegates to the state Whig convention. In November, Democrats crushed the Whigs in state congressional elections, giving Louisiana's Democrats an insurmountable majority in the legislature. When the new legislature met in Baton Rouge, its Democratic majority gerrymandered the state's voting districts to assure that Whigs could never regain power in state politics.<sup>25</sup>

After 1852, the Whigs ran out of issues with which to challenge the Democrats. Between 1850 and 1852, the Louisiana Whigs' main campaign issue was to push for a convention to adopt a new state constitution. They eventually got their way, and the state drafted a new constitution in 1852. No more contentious issues separated the two parties. A shift in traditional Democratic causes brought the parties to agreement on what were traditionally Whig causes, such as internal improvement, public banks, and state funding for railroads. The two parties seemed evenly matched, but ultimately the Democrats were successful and the Whigs faltered in the state on the perception that Democrats had a stronger pro-slavery résumé. As a result, the Whigs fell in to disfavor, leaving a gap in elections for politicians who opposed the Democrats.<sup>26</sup>

When the Know-Nothings presented themselves as an independent reform movement, their ploy was not unprecedented. In elections where Whigs had a legislative majority in New Orleans' government, groups of self-proclaimed "non-partisan" reform movements tried to run against the Whigs. For example, in the 1852 municipal election, a group of "reformers" (though it is uncertain what they were trying to reform) organized. They claimed to be non-partisan, but contemporaries recognized its Democratic leaning. One of the leading Democratic newspapers

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<sup>25</sup> William H. Adams, *The Whig Party of Louisiana* (Lafayette: University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1973), 246-269.

<sup>26</sup> Adams, *The Whig Party of Louisiana*, 249.

bemoaned how the Whigs ridiculed the reform movement as a Democrat trick. Two years later, when the Know-Nothings presented themselves as a reform movement, the same Democratic newspaper attacked the movement as a Whig trick. The independent reform groups were not ideologically linked from one election to another, but rather they were a recurring phenomenon during this period of political change.<sup>27</sup>

To understand why the Know-Nothings presented their party as a non-partisan reform movement rather than revealing publicly that they were Know-Nothings, it is important to look at what contemporary critics wrote about them. Democratic newspapers' accusation that the reformers were Know-Nothings suggests that most New Orleanians were familiar with the group and that many Democrats in the city were unfriendly to them. The morning after the March 1854 meeting, the New Orleans *Courier* proclaimed that the meeting was merely a coming out ball for the new, nativist party. The meeting's call for participation was all a ruse; "the whole thing is already cut and dry by the 'knowing ones.'" In another article, the *Courier* contended that "a majority of the signers of the call for the 'independent meeting'" belonged to "a new secret society, a branch of which, we are sorry to hear, has lately been established in our city." Know-Nothings were silent about their involvement in the reform meetings because they did not want their reputation undermining their political ambitions in New Orleans.<sup>28</sup>

Two weeks after the meeting, Know-Nothings gave up the charade and acknowledged their part in the gathering. The New Orleans *Bee*, which became one of the voices of the movement, confirmed that Know-Nothings indeed existed in the city, and that they were present

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<sup>27</sup> "Independent Movement," New Orleans *Louisiana Courier*, March 12, 1854; "The Next Election," New Orleans *Louisiana Courier*, March 11, 1854.

<sup>28</sup> "Independent Movement," New Orleans *Louisiana Courier*, March 15, 1854; "The Know-Nothings," New Orleans *Louisiana Courier*, March 16, 1854.

at the Lafayette Square meeting. Despite this, the paper proclaimed that the meeting still maintained its original goal of non-partisanship. Members of the Know-Nothing society were a prominent part of the gathering, but they were not the only ones. According to the paper, Know-Nothings, Democrats, Whigs, Creoles, Americans, Protestants, and Catholics were all represented. The *Bee* admitted that the Know-Nothings had called the meeting, but they were not the anti-Catholic, nativist group that the Democrat newspapers portrayed. Members of the order organized the reform movement, but not to recruit for the Know-Nothing cause.<sup>29</sup>

Indeed more than just Know-Nothings attended the meeting. Even the Democratic newspapers conceded that people of all political persuasions were present at Lafayette Square out of curiosity and interest in the movement. When papers first announced the meeting, they did not indicate the political leaning of the group. Even after the meeting adjourned, nobody hinted that it was related to underground nativist groups. People from opposing parties attended to “enjoy the fun” of the circus-like atmosphere. Even the next day, the attendees did not realize that Know-Nothings directed the meeting. One letter to the *Courier* speculated that they met under the auspices of John Livingston, who upon failing to garner a Democratic nomination, sought to challenge his old party. Several days passed before the critics of the Reform movement recognized their ties to Know-Nothingism.<sup>30</sup>

The fact that the secret society nominated its own political party ticket was hardly scandalous. Know-Nothings were not the sole secret club in New Orleans. Many of the city’s most prominent men, regardless of their political affiliation, belonged to at least one club. Well-known Democrat-turned-Whigs-turned-Know-Nothing politician Charles Gayarre received an

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<sup>29</sup> “The Reform Ticket,” *New Orleans Bee*, March 25, 1854.

<sup>30</sup> *New Orleans Courier*, March 15, 1854.

invitation to join the secret, pro-Cuba “Republican Association” just months before he aligned with the Know-Nothings. Like the Know-Nothings, this lesser known society intended to nominate candidates for office. The tradition of private clubs forming their own parties harkened to the Anti-Masons in the 1820’s. Historian Daniel Walker Howe explains that the transition from club to party was easier in the nineteenth century because parties printed their own ballots. All a party needed to do to run in an election was to find a way to distribute its ballot. The rise of the Know-Nothings in New Orleans may seem odd in today’s world, but contemporaries would not be shocked by this course of events.<sup>31</sup>

The Lafayette Square meeting announced a diverse ticket of forty-two candidates, Whig and Democrat alike, from various ethnicities. The ticket, published the following day in the *Bee*, included J. W. Breedlove for mayor, O. DeBuys for comptroller, William H. Garland for treasurer, L. H. Pilie for surveyor, and A. J. Phelps as street commissioner, along with four district recorders, seven aldermen, and twenty-six assistant aldermen. In contrast to the *Courier’s* insistence that Whigs dominated the party, the *Bee* reported that twenty-five of the nominees were former Democrats, including Breedlove. Although a majority of the candidates were Anglo-Americans, the roster of candidates included Creole and Irish names as well. The pro-Democrat and anti-Reform *Courier* could not refute the claim that the Know-Nothings presented a bipartisan ticket, but they instead suggested that the Democrats must have been added to the ticket without their knowledge.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 827; William L. Cushing to Charles Gayarre, October 30, 1853, *Charles E. A. Gayarre Letters and Miscellanea*, Edward Whatron Family Papers, *Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections*, LSU Libraries, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge.

<sup>32</sup> New Orleans *Bee*, March 18, 1854; “Democrats and Whigs,” New Orleans *Bee*, March 23, 1854; “The Crescent on Independents,” New Orleans *Courier*, March 18, 1854.

Reformers were not, as contemporaries insisted, simply a continuation of Whigs. Some Whigs did continue their political careers as Reformers, but this is hardly surprising considering that only two parties printed tickets in the 1854 municipal election. The *Courier* points out that the Independent Reformers' nominees for treasurer, comptroller, and surveyor ran for those same positions as Whigs in the 1852 election. The similarities between the two parties end there. None of the Reform ticket's district recorder nominees ran in the 1852 election, and only one of the seven aldermen ran for that position in previous elections. The overwhelming majority of assistant aldermen never ran for office before the '54 election. The three city-wide candidates that the *Courier* cites—Garland, DeBuys, and Piliè—each won their seat in the previous election as Whigs, and they became incumbents without a party. The Whigs in New Orleans dissolved their party in 1854 without nominating a ticket. The three incumbents joined the Reformers because it was the only way to keep their jobs.<sup>33</sup>

Though the *Bee* conceded that the Know-Nothings formed the Reform ticket, the ticket was not nativist, anti-Catholic, nor anti-Creole as opponents argued. Several nominees, including surveyor Piliè and comptroller DeBuys were Catholic Creoles. Historian Lyon Soulè argues that inclusiveness of Creoles would have been almost mandatory if a party was to succeed in antebellum New Orleans. "No ticket could be formed without bearing the names of Creoles, by birth and by baptism Catholic," he argued. The Reform ticket went further in the case of Piliè and DeBuys by nominating the Creole politicians to city-wide offices. Of the forty-nine positions filled by the election, only five—the offices of the mayor, comptroller, treasurer, surveyor, and street commissioner—were decided by every voter in the city. In contrast, district recorders were

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<sup>33</sup> "Independent Reform Ticket," New Orleans *Bee*, March 18, 1854; "Municipal Election Returns," New Orleans *Courier*, March 24, 1852.

picked only by their district, and individual wards chose their aldermen and assistant aldermen. With Piliè and DeBuys, 40 percent of the Reformer nominees for city-wide offices were Catholic Creoles.<sup>34</sup>

The election, held two weeks after the meeting, brought mixed success to the Independent Reformers. Despite the landslide defeat for their mayoral candidate, James Breedlove, to Democratic candidate, John Lewis, Reformer candidates won the treasurer's, comptroller's, surveyor's and street commissioner's races. They also elected four aldermen and eighteen assistant aldermen against the Democrats nine aldermen and nine assistants. The Reformer party won the district recorder race in the first district, but they lost the other three districts. Just two weeks after the party's inception the reformers won twenty-seven of the forty-two races it had entered.<sup>35</sup>

The election returns suggest that the 1854 race featured a decline in party loyalty. Voters tended to elect the individual candidates rather than vote on strict party or ethnic lines. Wards that elected Democratic candidates in one race did not necessarily vote for the Democrat in other races. Similarly, those who voted for the Reform candidate did not necessarily vote that way in all elections. Voting did not follow any ethnic pattern, either. Districts that voted for Creole candidates in one race did not necessarily vote for Creoles in other races. The election marks a period of political realignment in New Orleans. Some districts that voted Democrat in the 1852 municipal election voted for Reform candidates in 1854, and some Whig districts elected Democrats.

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<sup>34</sup>Soulè, *Know Nothing Party in New Orleans*, 52.

<sup>35</sup> Democrats ran unopposed for several city posts, thus the number of total elected people in the 1854 election is higher than the number of Reform candidates. Also, one alderman and one assistant alderman were nominated by both parties. *New Orleans Bee*, March 28, 1854; *New Orleans Bee*, March 29, 1854.

In the mayoral race, Democrat John L. Lewis defeated Reformer J. W. Breedlove in a landslide, despite losing the mayor's race in 1852. Lewis garnered nearly 61 percent of the 12,333 votes cast, winning all four districts. Even in the American majority first and fourth districts, Lewis topped Breedlove by 91 and 251 votes, respectively. This was a marked improvement for Lewis, who had run for the same position two years earlier but lost to Whig Abdiel Crossman. In that year, Lewis had lost in the American districts as well as the Creole dominated second district (though he lost the second district by only eleven votes). In the 1854 election, Lewis gained 51 percent of the first district's votes, an overwhelming 67 percent of the second district's votes, and 58 percent of the fourth district's votes. Both candidates in the 1854 race shared American, Protestant pedigrees, so the results could not be explained ethnically. The Reform candidate's bad defeat to a candidate who lost two years before suggests the city's disdain for Breedlove.

The same was not true of the comptroller's race, where Creole Whig-turned-Reformer DeBuys fared much better than Breedlove. In his race against American Democrat Kerr, DeBuys won the first district handily, taking 67 percent of the votes. Despite sharing an ethnic heritage with the majority in the second district, DeBuys lost by 4 percent in that section. The immigrant-heavy third district split between the two candidates, and the fourth district gave a slight nod to DeBuys. This gave the Reform candidate a 7 percent advantage over his opponent across the city. The two districts he won in the 1854 election are the two that he lost in the 1852 election. In the second district, where DeBuys won his 1852 race by over 200 votes, he lost by the same margin in 1854. In the third district, Debuys won by 210 votes in 1852, but he lost by seven in 1854.



In the treasurer's race, the Independent Reformer candidate won every district. The election pitted two American candidates against one another, and Independent Reformer candidate Garland won with 55 percent of the vote. The third district, where Garland received less than 44 percent of the votes in 1852, gave the incumbent a 102 vote majority in 1854. The Creole district voted for Garland at about the same rate in both elections. In the fourth election, where he had not gained a majority but still won against two opponents in 1852, Garland beat his Democratic opponent, Collins, by a huge 22 percent margin.

The Reformers' surveyor candidate, Creole Piliè, won his race by the same margins Garland despite not sharing his ethnicity. Piliè received just forty-five fewer votes than his fellow Reformer, Garland. The greatest differences between the two races were in the first and second districts. In the American first district, the American Garland received fewer than 300 more votes than his fellow party member Piliè. In the Creole second district, Creole Piliè received fewer than 300 more votes than Garland. Piliè and Garland polled virtually identically in the third and fourth districts. The data suggests that if ethnic and religious bias infiltrated New Orleans's municipal politics with the rise of the Know-Nothings, it did so to the amount of 600 votes, an amount too insignificant to swing any elections.

Neither party won all races in a single district. The first district elected the Democratic mayoral candidate, John Lewis, but voted for the Reform candidate for comptroller, treasurer, surveyor, and street commissioner. The second district voted for Democrats in the mayoral, comptroller, and street commissioner's races, and voted for Reformers for the treasurer and surveyor's races. In the third district, Democrats won the mayor's and street commissioner's race, Reformers won the treasurer's and surveyor's race, and the comptrollers race was virtually

tied (Democrats won by seven votes). The fourth district voted Democrat for the mayor and treasurer, and Reformer for the other three positions.

Just as ethnicity seemed unimportant in the election, voters seemed not to vote on financial lines either. In some cases, wards that had similar amounts of wealth voted for different parties. The second and eighth wards, for example, stood on opposite sides of the city, but in the 1850's they had similar demographic statistics. They had about the same numbers of white males in the 1850 census, with the second ward's population 2,000 fewer than the eighth's. The economic standings of the two wards appeared similar as well. The city assessment from 1856 listed the taxable wealth per person of the second and eighth (subtracting business capital and corporate wealth), was nearly indistinguishable. Still, the two parties voted for opposing parties in the 1854 election: the second ward elected Reformer candidates to all district positions, while the eighth ward elected Democrats to their district's offices.<sup>36</sup>

The different outcomes between the individual races suggest that this election was one that emphasized the individual over the party and ethnicity. Voters in the election tended not to vote straight party tickets, and neither party could win an entire district. Only two of the city wide candidates won in every district, and these two—Democratic mayor candidate Lewis and Reformer surveyor candidate Piliè—shared neither party affiliation nor ethnicity. Conversely, only one candidate, James Breedlove, lost in every district. No district elected all of the Creole candidates, nor did any district vote for exclusively American candidates.

New Orleans was not immune to election rioting, but violence during the 1854 election did not impact the result of the election, and there was no evidence that the nativists perpetrated the violence. Two men died in Election Day attacks in the city, but both of these occurred in the

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<sup>36</sup> C. M. Waterman, *General Message of Mayor C. M. Waterman to the Council of the City of New Orleans, October 1<sup>st</sup> 1857*, (New Orleans: Printed at the *Bulletin* Office, 1857), 17.

American quarter, not the immigrant neighborhoods. The *Bee* reported no excitement or violence in the second or third district below Canal Street, but it described some excitement in the first district. No papers mentioned the nationality or politics of the dead or the assailants. Attackers killed one of the men at the seventh precinct polls, where a day earlier, the *Bee* warned that voting fraud may occur. That article encouraged readers to “keep the polls free, challenge suspicious votes, and aid in preserving the sanctity of the ballot box” by stationing “strong force at each precinct.” The man suffered his violent demise to a mob after they accused him of voting twice. He was as likely a victim of media-promoted vigilantism as he was a victim of nativism.<sup>37</sup>

While the Reformers did not use the Know-Nothing or American Party monikers for the 1854 election, they were absolutely members of that party. The New Orleans party continued to call themselves “Independent Reformers” despite participating in the state and national Know-Nothing conventions and supporting American candidates in elections outside of New Orleans. Historians claim that because of the ethnic makeup of the city, the party did not use the word “American” to describe their municipal tickets in fear of alienating the Creole and immigrant voters. The Reformers’ political opponents did not make such a distinction; in the days preceding the election, Democratic newspapers use the terms “Know-Nothings” and “Independent Reformers” interchangeably. While little is known about the inner working of the New Orleans Know-Nothing meetings in 1854 (they were still a secret group and left no written record) historians and contemporaries agree that the group was behind the Independent Reform Party.<sup>38</sup>

Following its moderate success in the 1854 municipal election, the New Orleans Know-Nothings won a series of political victories that made them the dominant party in the city. In a

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<sup>37</sup> New Orleans *Bee*, March 27, 1854; New Orleans *Bee*, March 28, 1854; Soule, *The Know Nothing Party in New Orleans*, 54-55.

<sup>38</sup> Soule, *Know Nothing Party in New Orleans*, 59-63.

sparingly participated election in September, 1854, the New Orleans group successfully fielded an American Party candidate for state senate. After showing that it could get representation in the state legislature, the party turned its focus back to dominating the city council. The Know-Nothings once again nominated an Independent Reform ticket for the 1855 municipal elections and proved it could win in every district of the city. By the end of the election, the Know-Nothings boasted more elected politicians in New Orleans than the Democrats.<sup>39</sup>

Just as in the 1854 election, in 1855 the Know-Nothings nominated a diverse Reform ticket without regard to the candidates' ethnicity or religion. Their goal, they claimed, was to continue to reform the corrupt government that left the city "under the dreadful burden of taxation; its finances are terribly dilapidated, and its credit ought to be above suspicion." Know-Nothing newspapers called upon the city's "brightest citizens" and "friends of good government" to repair the municipalities damaged finances and rebuild its infrastructure. Their ticket nominated several Catholics and Creoles, which included almost every candidate from the Second District. Just as in the 1854 election, most of the Creole Reformers won their races. In fact, most of the Reform candidates of all ethnicities won their races; Reformers won thirty-four of the thirty-five races they entered.<sup>40</sup>

After a year of success around the country, Know-Nothings sought to consolidate their political gains with a national convention, but instead they exposed the sectional rift in the party. In June, 1855, Know-Nothing delegates from across the country met in Philadelphia to draft the American Party platform and consolidate the party for the 1856 presidential election. The

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<sup>39</sup> Soule, *Know Nothing Party in New Orleans*, 64-65.

<sup>40</sup> New Orleans *Bee*, March 15, 1855; New Orleans *Bee*, March 16, 1855; New Orleans *Bee*, March 20, 1855; New Orleans *Bee*, March 23, 1855; New Orleans *Bee*, March 27, 1855; Soule, *Know Nothing Party in New Orleans*, 64.

meeting reached a crisis when Southern Know-Nothings announced their plank to preserve existing slavery laws, prohibit Congress from denying slavery in territories, and prohibit Congress from limiting slavery in the District of Columbia. Northern Know-Nothings challenged the plank and called for the Missouri Compromise's return. After much debate, the convention voted to include the Southern plank. Several Northern delegates repudiated the platform, and some even left the party. The convention ended with a new American Party national platform and a divided party.<sup>41</sup>

The convention exposed a division within the Louisiana state Know-Nothing Party as well. The state sent two separate delegations to Philadelphia: a mixed Protestant and Catholic group—dominated by the New Orleans party—and an all Protestant “Simon Pure” delegation. Newspapers reported that the Protestant and Catholic New Orleans delegation was not aware of the “Simon Pure” group until both arrived at the convention. Though they both represented the same state, the convention decided to admit both groups. When the Philadelphia convention began on June 8, the two Louisiana delegations challenged each other over Catholic inclusion in the party. While the New Orleans–led delegation maintained their stance of religious tolerance, the “Simon Pures” fought to require religious tests to keep Catholics out of the party. The Protestant delegation proved to be more in line with the mainstream Know-Nothings, and the national party adopted a strict anti-Catholic platform. Disgusted, most of the pro-religious-tolerance faction left the convention in protest.<sup>42</sup>

After the national convention rebuked the New Orleans Know-Nothing's religious tolerance, the local party became more, not less, dedicated to inclusiveness. Know-Nothing

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<sup>41</sup> Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 162-170.

<sup>42</sup> New Orleans *Bee*, June 14, 1855; Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 166-167; Sacher, *A Perfect War of Politics*, 240-241.

newspapers reported with self-awareness that the local arm of the party had gone against American Party mores. The New Orleans group would not begrudgingly accept the platform, but instead they would continue to reject anti-Catholicism. According to the *Bee*, “the conduct of the majority of the Philadelphia Convention renders it an imperative duty of the party here to mark out a distinct, independent, and manly course; to disavow every feature in the National programme [*sic*] which has the slightest tendency to sectarian intolerance.” Because the American Party continued to be the only nationally viable opposition to the Democrats, the New Orleans party did not completely divorce from the national party, but they sought to rebuke the anti-Catholicism with their own state platform.<sup>43</sup>

Louisiana Know-Nothings converged on Baton Rouge in July, 1855, to nominate candidates for the upcoming state election and to adopt their state party platform. The meeting generated much excitement, and every parish sent a delegation. Upon convening, the delegates continued the battle over Catholic inclusion in the party. This time, the pro-Catholic faction defeated the Simon Pures. The party nominated two Catholic Creoles to statewide offices for the fall election: Charles Derbigny of Jefferson Parish for governor and J.V. Duralde of West Baton Rouge for treasurer. The convention also named five Protestant Americans from Orleans, East Baton Rouge, Ouachita, Rapides, and Claiborne parishes to the other contentious statewide positions. The Louisiana Know-Nothings constructed a diverse ticket for the state election just as they had done in the New Orleans municipal elections.<sup>44</sup>

The Louisiana American Party convention created its own platform to repudiate the national one on religious intolerance and to reinforce the national platform’s protection of

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<sup>43</sup> New Orleans *Bee*, June 23, 1855.

<sup>44</sup> New Orleans *Bee*, July 4, 1855; New Orleans *Bee*, July 6, 1855

slavery. The ninth plank in the platform adopted by the convention expressly attacked religious tests for office. The framers declared that the American Party in Louisiana were “friends of religious as well as civil liberties, and that [they] are opposed to any political proscription for religious faith, either as to the right of voting or holding office.” The convention then reacted to the anti-slavery stance of the Northern Know-Nothings, passing several resolutions to protect slavery. The convention did not address immigration or immigrant suffrage until the fifth and sixth resolutions. The state party’s platform was unique; it resembled neither the Democrats’ nor the Know-Nothing Party in other states’.<sup>45</sup>

Know-Nothing campaigners held a ratification rally in New Orleans where they highlighted the state platform’s departure from the national party. State party president William Perkins, flanked by a number of party vice presidents of American, Creole, and Irish lineage paraded to cheers through Lafayette Square in front of “tens of thousands” of onlookers. Several prominent party members, including Catholics Derbigny and Dreux (Charles Gayarre, probably the most famous Catholic party member could not attend due to illness) addressed the crowd. The Creole speakers, Catholic nominees, and planks on religious tolerance proved to the attendees that the American Party continued to support ethnic and religious tolerance as it had since its first Reform meeting sixteen months earlier.<sup>46</sup>

The convention’s state policy sought to continue the party’s earlier mission to end corruption in local politics and to provide internal improvements for the state. Officially, the party opposed political patronage. The New Orleans *Daily Picayune*, which by 1855 had become a Know-Nothing organ, reported that the Louisiana Know-Nothings “believe that the office

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<sup>45</sup> New Orleans *Daily Picayune*, July 6, 1855; New Orleans *Bee*, July 6, 1855.

<sup>46</sup> New Orleans *Bee*, July 6, 1855.

should seek the man, and not the man the office, and [they] should oppose the distribution of office among office seekers, or as a reward for partisan service.” As part of its’ state mission, the party sought to “reform the abuses” in the Louisiana’s expenditures. The party’s platform declared that money should not go to partisan causes, but rather it should go to “education of the youth of the country in school established by the state,” the establishment of “a constitutional organization of the swampland commission,” and “a more efficient administration of the Internal Improvement Department with a view of improving our inland navigation.”<sup>47</sup>

The Louisiana American Party emerged from their convention as foremost a pro-slavery party. The state Know-Nothing platform, touted by the New Orleans branch of the party, argued that an attack on slavery was an attack on the constitution. The New Orleans Know-Nothings issued a series of resolutions at their ratification rally, declaring that the states’ rights of self-determination are constitutionally guaranteed, and any attempt to alter that constitution must be completed without “sectional and unloyal prejudices.” They resolved to “uphold and enforce our constitutional right on the subject of slavery.” The state party vowed to urge Northern Know-Nothings to “annul and rebuke the vain and unconstitutional efforts of Nullifiers and Abolitionists to oppose and overthrow the federal laws and disturb the harmony of the Union.” The convention went on to pass a resolution condemning president Franklin Pierce for “appointing and retaining Free Soilers in office.” For the New Orleans Know-Nothings, any attempts to pass laws to limit slavery threatened the union, and being friendly with anti-slavery parties was an act of hostility.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> “The American Convention,” New Orleans *Daily Picayune*, July 6, 1855.

<sup>48</sup> New Orleans *Bee*, July 12, 1854; “The American Convention,” New Orleans *Daily Picayune*, July 6, 1855.



In addition to making their pro-slavery stance a priority, the New Orleans Know-Nothings emphasized another issue that they had not during the 1854 elections: they focused more on residency extensions for naturalizing immigrants. For the party, these two issues were linked; the Know-Nothings demanded twenty-one years of residence before an immigrant can become naturalized as a means of protecting slavery and Southern power. Almost all immigrants to America in the 1850's came from countries that had outlawed slavery. Party members argued that thousands of immigrants continued to enter America through New Orleans, but increasingly, they settled permanently in other sections of the country. The South grew from immigration, but not as rapidly as the North. By extending residency restrictions for immigrants to vote, they kept suffrage from likely anti-slavery voters and reduced the Northern vote. Northern Know-Nothings already pushed for the residency requirements for more purely nativist reasons, so by adopting the plank on residency extension, the New Orleans Know-Nothings brought their party into harmony with the national party while still building their pro-slavery reputation.

Know-Nothings across the South perceived the pro-slavery, pro-Southern benefit of nativism. The New Orleans *Bee* reprinted a speech by Virginia governor William "Extra Billy" Smith in which the popular Old Dominion politician declared that nativism originally existed in the South to correct the unfair congressional representation that the North enjoyed. Extra Billy argued, "The North has 55 more Representatives than the South already. The natural increase of the South is one third greater than of the North because there are greater checks on population there, but the artificial element of foreignism brings 500,000 who settle annually in free states, with instincts against slavery, making 50 representatives in the past 10 years to swell opposition in the South." Smith called on the Know-Nothings to end immigration, or at least end immigrants' abilities to vote or be counted for representation, to allow natural population growth

in the South to catch up with the North's larger population. In time, the population of the South would meet or exceed that of the North, and the growing movement to end slavery could be met with a powerful pro-slavery force.<sup>49</sup>

Despite the state party platform's departure from the national party's, the New Orleans Know-Nothings did not wish to withdraw from the national party. Instead, they insisted that the whole American Party would eventually come around to the Louisiana form of Know-Nothingism. Charles Gayarre, who by 1855 had become a dominant figure in the party in New Orleans, proclaimed, "I am led to hope that the national platform of the American Party will soon be cleansed from the only stain which disgraces its purity,"—the party's religious intolerance. When California Know-Nothings adopted a Louisiana-like state platform that rebuked religious tests, the New Orleans Know-Nothings heralded the news as proof that the rest of the country would soon adopt their brand of Know-Nothingism. "We rejoice," the *Bee* reported, from the bottom of our hearts at triumph achieved by our gallant brethren of California; and our exultation is greatly enhanced by the reflection that the platform of the American Party of California is *substantially the LOUISIANA platform [sic]*." If the Know-Nothing Party in a free state could recognize the New Orleans party's vision of the party, then surely the rest of the country would come around to their way of thinking.<sup>50</sup>

In reality, the national party was continuing to find difficulty in defining their stance on national issues beyond extending residency requirements for immigrants. Northern and Southern wings of the party seemed unable to find common ground on any other issue. The party across the country began to fracture, and in the second half of 1855, the American Party lost steam. Its

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<sup>49</sup> New Orleans *Bee*, March 16, 1855.

<sup>50</sup> Gayarre, *Address to the People of Louisiana*, 33-34; "The California Victory," New Orleans *Bee*, October 16, 1855.

decline was so rapid that it rivaled the party's rise. The question of slavery divided the party on sectional lines, and after Northern Know-Nothings failed to pass anti-slavery resolutions during the Philadelphia convention, the anti-slavery component of the party left en masse for the Republican Party. The Northern Know-Nothings who remained in the party divided on their response to the South's pro-slavery demands for the party. The party continued to drift in different directions through 1855, a process that accelerated following Millard Fillmore's nomination during a chaotic national convention in February, 1856.<sup>51</sup>

While the national party split, the New Orleans Know-Nothing Party remained confident through the 1855 state elections. The party's candidates did not fare well in most of Louisiana, but in New Orleans, the Know-Nothings continued to be successful, though the election was wrought with violence and corruption. The New Orleans *Daily Picayune* reported that gubernatorial candidate Charles Derbigny, as well as the American candidates for lieutenant governor, secretary of state, auditor, treasurer, attorney general, and superintendent of education won all but the Fourth district. Initially, it appeared that the party's candidate also won the Orleans Parish sheriff's race—a result that was reversed when Democrats challenged the election with charges of voter suppression. Derbigny and most of his American Party running mates ultimately lost the election, but not for lack of support in the Crescent City.<sup>52</sup>

New Orleans Know-Nothings' optimism persisted through the winter into the national American Party Convention in February that resulted in Millard Fillmore's presidential candidacy. The nominating meeting was chaotic; many Northern Know-Nothings walked out of meetings allowing the remaining Southern delegates to adopt a proslavery platform. The

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<sup>51</sup> Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 208-212.

<sup>52</sup> New Orleans *Daily Picayune*, Morning edition, November 7, 1855.

nomination of Fillmore, the former president whose legacy included signing the Fugitive Slave Act, alongside running mate, Andrew Jackson Donelson, alienated the remaining antislavery Know-Nothings. The party in New Orleans touted the nomination as a great success and a wise decision. The New Orleans *Daily Picayune* wrote that the nomination was “met with a cordial response here by all.” The *Bee* regarded the nominations as a victory for pro-slavery forces. The paper argued that despite his upbringing in New York, Fillmore remained conservative on the issue of slavery. When “abolition reared its miscreanted [*sic*] front,” the *Bee* recalled, Fillmore signed the Fugitive Slave Act. The New Orleans Know-Nothing organs rejoiced at having a slave owning Southerner on the ticket as well. Andrew Jackson Donelson, nephew of the seventh president and namesake, owned slaves at both his Tennessee home and his Mississippi plantation.<sup>53</sup>

Know-Nothings in the North and the West were less thrilled about the nominations. Newspapers in the North decried the Fillmore nomination as the end of the party. To them, Fillmore seemed a peculiar choice, as he had no background as a nativist. They further pointed to the admission of the Catholic delegation from Louisiana as evidence that the party did not focus enough on the tenet of nativism. For Northern Know-Nothings, the nomination of Fillmore and lenience on Catholicism made the party a pro-slavery counterfeit of the Democrats.<sup>54</sup>

Even the Democratic press in New Orleans recognized that the Know-Nothings held a stronger proslavery stance, and they admonished the party for being too regional. The Fillmore/Donelson ticket, while strongly proslavery, the Democratic *Courier* claimed, polarized the electors. In contrast, the Democrats in New Orleans took advantage of the Know-Nothing’s

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<sup>53</sup> New Orleans *Daily Picayune*, March 10, 1856; New Orleans *Bee*, March 12, 1856.

<sup>54</sup> Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 210-211.

regional divide to promote themselves as a unified national party. They declared, “What may be the success of the nomination of Mr. Fillmore may have in catching the votes of the old line Whigs is beyond conjective [*sic*]; it is well known, however, that the truly patriotic and conservative members of that respectable but now disorganized party have long since given their adhesion to liberal nationality and conservatism as represented by the Democratic Party.” A vote for the American Party, the *Courier* argued, was a vote for sectionalism and a fractured America. The Democrats presented themselves as a unionist party in contrast to the Americans as the party of sectionalism.<sup>55</sup>

The charges that the Americans were not a national party proved to be true, and after the convention, Know-Nothings in the North left the party in droves. As early as 1854 in some Midwestern states, Americans and Republicans formed coalitions and created joint tickets to run against the Democrats in state and local elections. After the 1856 Know-Nothing convention, the supporters of the coalition in those states simply abandoned the American Party moniker and joined the Republicans. By 1856, Republicans had proven that they presented a formidable challenge to the Democrats in the North, and all but the most conservative Know-Nothings in that region departed the American Party for the Republicans. Several events during the election year, including the outbreak of violence in Kansas and Preston Brooks beating Charles Sumner in the Senate, changed the election to one with sectional parties. With Know-Nothings losing virtually all support in the North and still unable to overtake the Democrats as the leading party in the South, the American Party lost its significance in presidential politics. Gaining only eight

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<sup>55</sup> “The K.N. Lantern Bearers,” New Orleans *The Courier*, March 9, 1856.

electoral votes in the presidential election (compared to 174 for the Democrats and 114 for the Republicans), the Know-Nothings died as a nationally viable party.<sup>56</sup>

While the party ceased to exist in most parts of the country, including the majority of Louisiana, the Americans continued to dominate the New Orleans municipal government. In March, 1856, voters elected Charles Waterman as the first of three consecutive American Party mayors. The omnipotence of the American Party in city government and the inability of the Democratic candidates to gain ground against them made the Democrats resort to election gimmicks. Much like the Know-Nothings in 1854, Democrats led supposedly “Independent Reform” movements in 1858 and 1859. One of the movements even attempted to restore the Whig Party to the city. Despite that attempt, the American political machine became entrenched in the city, and despite sometimes-violent opposition by the Democrats, they persevered. Only occupation by Union soldiers in 1862 could dislodge the American Party from the Crescent City.<sup>57</sup>

The Know-Nothing Party in New Orleans began as a political coalition to unclench the Democratic stranglehold on the city only to become the unshakable incumbent party four years later. Controlling municipal government had always been the goal for the American Party in the city. Locally minded reformers organized under the banner of Know-Nothingism solely because after the fall of the Whig Party, the American Party provided the best opportunity for opposing the Democrats at a time when Whigs dare not join their old foes. The New Orleans American Party fared well in local elections, and in just over a year it controlled the general assembly of the city. By 1856, the New Orleans Know-Nothings controlled virtually every level of city

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<sup>56</sup> Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 211-219.

<sup>57</sup> Soule, *The Know Nothing Party in New Orleans*, 91-105.

government. The New Orleans arm of the party was also powerful component in the state's Know-Nothing organization, and it imposed the local party's ideology on the state party's platform.<sup>58</sup>

The New Orleans Know-nothings never shared the core ideology of the national party. The city was multicultural and cosmopolitan since its inception, and New Orleans never accepted the violent sectarianism that was ubiquitous with the Know-Nothing Party elsewhere. Even in the first municipal election that the Know-Nothings ran, the party could not have achieved its victories without support from Catholic Creoles and naturalized voters. When the national party tried to force their New Orleans brethren into a more ideological union with Know-Nothings elsewhere in the country, the local party pushed back by formally advocating religious tolerance. Already distanced from the national party on the issue of religious tolerance, the New Orleans Know-Nothings adopted resolutions unrelated to nativism for their municipal and state platforms. As the American Party crumbled, New Orleans Know-Nothings diversified their ideology to become a pro-slavery political machine. The party remained strong in the city, and in the days before Union soldiers occupied the city, New Orleans remained a lone island of Know-Nothingism in a land that had long forgotten the party.

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<sup>58</sup> For a discussion of former Whig aversion to aligning with the Democrats, see Sacher, *A Perfect War of Politics*, 239-241.

## Chapter 2: The Sugar Parishes

In contrast to the party's immediate success in New Orleans, the Know-Nothings influence crept slowly through the sugar-producing rural parishes of South Louisiana. No "glorious assemblage" of "tens of thousands" met in the cities of Houma, Thibodaux, or Plaquemine; the white population of most parishes numbered fewer than 5,000. Know-Nothings joined the political fray in the Sugar Parishes only after the party had organized in New Orleans. The American Party gradually grew for two years preceding the 1856 presidential election. When the Whig party did not run in New Orleans municipal election in 1854, apathy for the Whigs spread to the rural towns and villages upriver from New Orleans, and former Whigs abandoned their old party for the upstart American Party. By 1855, no Whig party existed in Southeast Louisiana. Two years later, no American Party existed either.

Geographic isolation and unique economic interests in the Sugar Parishes forged a society that was economically and politically different than New Orleans. While residents of the rural parishes looked to New Orleans as their link to the outside world, their interests were often incongruent. Self-sufficient communities grew along the rivers and bayous of South Louisiana to serve a plantation economy. Sugar parishioners recognized New Orleans' importance as a marketplace for the planters' production, but rural Louisianans were locally minded in their daily interactions. Sugar Parishes' planters, farmers, and craftsmen cared more about the tariff and internal improvement than election reform. Their politics centered on the preservation of the planter society rather than partisanship and ethnicity.

The politics of the sugar-producing, agricultural parts of South Louisiana is worthy of study because the region's economy and culture was unlike anywhere else in the country, and the presence of the Know-Nothings in such a location seems to be an anomaly. In places like



Ascension, Assumption, Iberville, Lafourche, Plaquemines, St. Charles, St. James, St. John the Baptist, St. Martin, St. Mary, Terrebonne, West Baton Rouge, and the western half of Jefferson Parishes, sugar dominated the economy. In 1850, more than 90 percent of the country's total sugar production came from South Louisiana, and the state's sugar plantations were some of the most opulent in the South. American and Creole landowners in the region disregarded their ethnic differences to form a multi-ethnic class of planter elites. To protect their status and wealth, the sugar planters found their political interest in opposition to planters further north in Louisiana who grew cotton. Immigration did not impact political life in these parishes as much (except for the areas closest to New Orleans in Jefferson and Plaquemines parishes) as it did in Orleans Parish. Despite this, before the end of 1854, the Know Nothings became a force in the municipal politics of Plaquemine, Houma, Thibodaux, and Donaldsonville, and some of the most ardent support for the American candidates in subsequent elections came from the Sugar Parishes.

Few historians have investigated how the American Party gained traction—and in some towns thrived—in the Sugar Parishes of southern Louisiana. Most historians, when looking at the Know-Nothing party in the state, treat the sugar growing parishes as an extension of the New Orleans area. When historians do talk about the party in places like Houma and Donaldsonville, they give the same reason for the Creole population's acceptance of the party as they do when discussing the New Orleans Know-Nothings. Marius Carriere's research shows that the Know-Nothings made headway in this largely Catholic region because many Catholic Whigs felt more comfortable with the nativist party than they did with the Democrats. Carriere states that the strength of the Know-Nothings in the rural Sugar Parishes depended on planters' antipathy for the Democrats, not unlike some of the Whigs in New Orleans.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Carriere, "The Know Nothing Movement in Louisiana," 77.

Carriere's research is valuable, but data shows that the political tendencies of the Sugar Parishes were much more complex. While Catholics in some parishes may have voted for Know-Nothings because of their unease with Democracy, this tendency was far from universal. Comparing election returns from across the Sugar Parishes shows that support for the Know-Nothings in the region varied greatly from town to town and from parish to parish. For example, while West Baton Rouge and Lafourche had large Know-Nothing majorities in 1855 and 1856 elections, Assumption and Iberville, which geographically bookended West Baton Rouge and Lafourche, voted for Democrats. In some instances, parishes that were adjacent to one another and had similar demographics voted for different parties. Relying on census data and election returns alone, and barring more complete sub-parish and sub-town level demographics and election returns, historians have a hard time finding universal voting patterns in Louisiana's sugar region.<sup>60</sup>

Throughout the years of the Second Party System, voters in the Sugar Parishes chose their party based on four criteria. First, parishioners voted for the party that they felt could preserve the economic advantage enjoyed by sugar planting in the region. Second, they voted to preserve slavery and the status quo of racial hierarchy in the region. Third, they voted in line with family alliances that dictated much of how sugar parishioners lived their lives. Finally, citizens in rural Louisiana followed New Orleans political trends with varying degrees of interest, and some voted on the same partisan lines as their statesmen in the crescent city.

To understand politics in the Sugar Parishes, it is important to understand that sugar planting was a lucrative venture. By the middle of the nineteenth century, sugar planting became

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<sup>60</sup>*Census of the United States* from University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu> (accessed October 10, 2013); All election data, unless footnoted as unofficial returns published in newspapers, came coded from *Constituency Level Election Archives, Codebook version December 17, 2012*.

the most profitable form of agriculture in the South, and as a result, Louisiana's farms became some of the most valuable in the country. In 1850, Louisiana claimed less than one percent of total farms and just 1.4 percent of all improved farmland in the country, but the state contained more than 2.3 percent of total farm value. Louisiana's farms ranked fifth in the nation and first in the south in value per acre of improved land. Within the state, the most valuable farmland existed in the sugar belt. The six parishes with the most value per acre—Ascension, Assumption, Iberville, Plaquemines, St. Mary, and Terrebonne—all produced sugar as their primary cash crops. 1850 was not a fluke year. The census a decade later shows that Louisiana's farms were second only to New Jersey's in value per acre. Once again, this 1860 census showed that the sugar producing parishes contained the most valuable acreage in the state.<sup>61</sup>

The sugar industry in the U.S., of which Louisiana had a virtual monopoly, had long relied on the American System to keep sugar prices high and to get its product to market. The Whig-backed economic plan had plenty of detractors in the south, but many voters in the Sugar Parishes backed the internal improvements and the tariff. Louisiana's sugar planters declared that protection was not only good for them, but good for the country as a whole. At least one sugar planter reasoned that without protection, people who produced sugar would instead grow cotton and over-saturate cotton markets. Although historians do not agree on the viability of Louisiana sugar without the benefit of protection, there is little debate that the series of tariffs passed after 1828 enjoyed wide popularity in South Louisiana. Internal improvements—especially new railroads and canals to help planters in far flung rural parishes move their crop to market—were equally as popular in the region. During the first half of the nineteenth century, South Louisiana

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<sup>61</sup> 7<sup>th</sup> *Census of the United States*; 8<sup>th</sup> *census of the United States*; Historic Census Browser, "7<sup>th</sup> Census" and "8<sup>th</sup> Census," from University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu> (accessed October 10, 2013).

remained mostly wilderness and wanting in infrastructure, and planters in remote parts of the state depended on faster transportation and better ports to earn profits.<sup>62</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the Sugar Parishes turned in to bastions of Whiggery during the years of the Second Party System. Elections showed a positive correlation between the scale of sugar production and Whig votes. The ten parishes that produced the most sugar voted for Whig candidates in nearly three out of four elections. The next ten biggest sugar producers voted for Whigs in just over half of the elections between 1828 and 1844. Comparatively, in the sixteen parishes that produced no sugar, Whigs won only a quarter of all elections. Popularity of the tariff and internal improvements were so great in South Louisiana that even Democrats in the sugar region did not challenge the American System. One Democratic newspaper justified sugar protection in spite of the party's traditional stance by declaring that a tax on imported sugar was, in fact, not a tariff, but a revenue duty. Opposition to sugar duty by either party would amount to political suicide in South Louisiana.<sup>63</sup>

Equally critical to the continued prosperity of sugar planters, the preservation of slavery was among the highest priority of both parties in South Louisiana. Although historians do not agree that the Louisiana sugar industry would have perished without the tariff, they do agree that antebellum sugar plantations depended on large slave labor forces. The number of slaves correlated to the profitability of sugar plantations; as the number of slaves on a plantation increased, the profits increased exponentially. The parishes that grew the most sugar were also the parishes with the most slaves. In these parishes, the slave population dwarfed the free population. This fact did little to quell anxiety of free whites who constantly feared slave

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<sup>62</sup> Sacher, *A Perfect War of Politics*, 36.

<sup>63</sup> Sacher, *A Perfect War of Politics*, 51-52, 187-188.

rebellion. For free whites, protecting slavery in remote sugar planting communities was as much about safety as it was profit.<sup>64</sup>

While this thesis does not intend to enter the discussion on Southern economic dependence on slavery, it needs emphasizing that the sugar-producing region of Louisiana was a noteworthy case. In the 1840, 1850, and 1860 census, Louisiana ranked third behind just Mississippi and South Carolina for having the highest number of slaves as a percent of the total population—all this despite Louisiana's urban population. Louisiana had the highest ratio of slaves to acres of farmland by far—at least 25 percent more than the next highest state in both the 1850 and 1860 census. In 1850, Louisiana's farms averaged one slave for every 650 acres of improved land. Sugar producing parishes had even higher concentrations. Ascension, St. Bernard, St. Charles, St. John the Baptist, St. Mary, and Terrebonne Parishes all had more than one slave per 500 acres of improved land. High concentration of slaves improved profit; the six rural parishes with the highest number of slaves per acre were all in the top ten for land value per acre as well.<sup>65</sup>

The high number of slaves in the Sugar Parishes and the wealth produced from planting sugar brought white men from different ethnic and economic backgrounds together in this region unlike New Orleans. Americans and Creoles in the region, both wealthy and poor, shared common political interests for three reasons. First, because slaves in several of the parishes outnumbered whites, slave owners and non-slave owners alike shared an interest in maintaining the stability of slavery. Second, planters and small farmers depended on one another in the

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<sup>64</sup> *7<sup>th</sup> Census of the United States*. from University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu> (accessed October 10, 2013).

<sup>65</sup> “6<sup>th</sup> Census of the United States;” “7<sup>th</sup> Census of the United States;” “8<sup>th</sup> Census of the United States,” from University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu> (accessed October 10, 2013).

interest of the parishes' self-sufficiency. Third, Creoles and Americans in the Sugar Parishes intermarried and interacted with each other socially.

The high concentration of slaves brought wealth planters in the Sugar Parishes, but it also brought anxiety. In nearly every rural, sugar-producing parish, slaves outnumbered whites (only in Lafourche did whites slightly edge out slaves as the majority). In addition to persistent fear of slave resistance or rebellion, whites in rural South Louisiana were charged with the task of managing a huge population. In the interest of protecting their investments and (in the cases of the whites who did not own slaves) perpetuating the racial hierarchy, sugar parishioners, regardless of slave owning status, served on slave watches and police juries. Every white resident of the Sugar Parishes benefitted economically from slavery and the institutions continued growth in the region. Wary of sectional agitation that may threaten slavery, sugar parishioners voted in favor of compromise with the North. For example, in the 1844 and 1848 elections, Sugar Parishes' voters gave big majorities to Henry Clay and Zachary Taylor in their respective presidential races, in a stand against Texas annexation and in favor of a slavery compromise for western territories.<sup>66</sup>

Not all white residents of the Sugar Parishes owned slaves or planted sugar, and few owned the largest sugar plantations, but all white sugar parishioners were invested in the survival of sugar communities. Most white sugar parishioners lived on small farms rather than the large sugar plantations. The 1860 census shows that in Assumption Parish, nearly two-thirds of farms spanned less than 50 acres, and nearly a third were less than twenty acres. Just eight percent of farms were located on more than 500 acres. In Terrebonne Parish, 70 percent of farms were on

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<sup>66</sup> Hanes Walton, Donald Deskins, & Sherman Pucket, *Presidential Elections, 1789-2008: County, State, and National Mapping of Election Data*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010) 120, 133; Holt, *Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, 91-94, 168-170.

less than 50 acres, while fewer than seven percent were larger than 500 acres. Even in sparsely populated West Baton Rouge, one in three farmed on less than 50 acres while one in five farmed on large plantations. While just a small percentage of the white population of rural South Louisiana belonged to the wealthy planter class, small farmers, merchants, craftsmen, and laborers all played a role in sugar production. The sugar communities lacked the ethnic and religious divides of New Orleans. Instead, sugar parishioners bridged the Catholic and Protestant, Creole and American divide professionally, socially, and even in marriage. Isolation, dependence upon one another, and shared economic interest created an ethnically and religiously egalitarian society—at least amongst the white planter elite.<sup>67</sup>

Rural South Louisiana developed a unique system of trade and interdependence between large plantations and small farms. For years, historians charged that southern planters greedily threw all of their resources toward their staple crops without consideration of self-sufficiency; Kenneth Stamp accused planters of growing “not even enough corn and pork to feed their slaves.” More recently, though, historians have revisited the data and found that the sugar region had very little net import of grain or meat from outside of the region. The farming communities achieved this by dividing production. The plantations utilized their large slave force to harvest sugar and grains in different seasons, while smaller farms raised a surplus of meat. Farmers could then buy and sell their surplus meat and grain locally with less overhead and with less market fluctuations than they would have with imported food. Plantations depended on small

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<sup>67</sup> *8<sup>th</sup> Census of the United States*, from University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu> (accessed October 10, 2013).

farms as a source of food, and the small farms depended on sugar planting as a source of income.<sup>68</sup>

Unions between the white population of the Sugar Parishes extended beyond economic interdependence to social and religious life as well. Unlike New Orleans, the white residents of the Sugar Parishes regularly breeched the ethnic divide in their home life. Inter-marriage between Creoles, Acadians, and Americans built familial bonds and helped the wealthiest farmers to forge a planter class. In the decades that followed the Louisiana Purchase, one in five weddings in some parishes were between Americans and Creoles. Planters and farmers worshipped together, too. Relaxed religiosity in the remote parishes meant that Creoles and Americans attended Catholic and Protestant churches together—or at least the women and children did. Sarah Russell asserts that “men of the sugar planter class rarely indulged in the anxieties of the staunchly faithful.” Planter men escorted their families to worship, and then “left hurriedly to pursue more entertaining engagements.”<sup>69</sup>

White men of the planter class, as leaders of their communities, joined political clubs to support local and national candidates. These organizations were as much social clubs as they were political; in addition to hosting campaign speeches, clubs hosted barbecues and hunts for its members and dances for their families. Political clubs became the center of social life, and the lines between political, social, and business alliances blurred. Both Americans and Creoles joined the same political clubs. For example, Whig supporters known as the Centerville Rough and Ready Club in St. Mary Parish had about even numbers of Creoles and Americans in support

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<sup>68</sup> Kenneth Stamp, *The Peculiar Institution*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), 50; Mark D. Schmitz, “Farm Interdependence in the Antebellum Sugar Sector,” *Agricultural History* 52 (January 1978), 94-103.

<sup>69</sup> Sarah Russell, “Inter-marriage and Intermingling: Constructing the Planter Class in Louisiana’s Sugar Parishes, 1803-1850,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 46 (Autumn, 2005), 421-425.



of Zachary Taylor's 1848 presidential bid, as did the Democratic group, The Granite Club of Iberville Parish. Political clubs in the Sugar Parishes closely watched the ethnically partisan politics of New Orleans, but they did not partake in the ethnic division themselves.<sup>70</sup>

While the rural parishes of South Louisiana shared economic interests, similar demographics, and shared many of the same political clubs, the parishes never voted together as a unified bloc. Throughout the 1830's and 1840's the parishes varied from having a large Democrat majority to having a large Whig majority. In the 1848 election, for example, Plaquemines Parish gave nearly two-thirds of its votes to Democrat Lewis Cass and Lafourche gave more than two-thirds of votes to Whig Zachary Taylor despite the similar geography, proximity, and ethnic background. While more than half of all political races in the Sugar Parishes voted for Whig candidates (but in no election did every parish vote Whig), the parishes did not vote Whig at the same rates. Furthermore, their voting habits changed over time, and parishes that voted for Whig candidates in one election did not necessarily vote for that party in subsequent elections.

In the 1840, 1844, and 1848 presidential elections, a majority of Sugar Parishes gave their support to the Whigs, but the party began losing popularity by the 1852 election. In 1840, Plaquemines and Assumption Parishes were the only two rural South Louisiana parishes with Democratic majorities. In the 1844 Presidential election, Plaquemines was again solidly Democratic (though some argued that this was due to scandal), and that party had won by a small margin in Ascension. The 1848 presidential election was virtually the same as the '44 election, with the exception that Whig Zachary Taylor won Ascension by a small margin. In 1852, though, Whig dominance waned. In that year's presidential election, Iberville, Ascension, Assumption,

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<sup>70</sup> Russell, "Intermarriage and Intermingling," 413, 425-426.

and Plaquemines all went to the Democrats. Additionally, St. Mary, Terrebonne, and St. Martin voted for the Whig candidate at a much lower rate than previous years. The growing antipathy that Sugar Parishes' voters felt toward the Whigs corresponded with the national sentiment, and the local Whig party never recovered to their previous popularity after losing the 1852 election.<sup>71</sup>

The sudden collapse of the state and national party left the Whig planters and their political clubs without a party to support. Some Whigs used the opportunity to reinvent themselves as Democrats, but most still harbored resentment for the Democrats. These Whigs without a party needed a new group to support. They got their wish early in 1854, when Know-Nothing club nominated their "Independent Reformer" ticket in New Orleans for a city election that March. Many of the former Whigs gave their support to that Know-Nothing backed group. Just days after the Know-Nothings announced their intentions to run in New Orleans, the *Southern Sentinel* of Plaquemine—a Whig vehicle and Iberville's largest newspaper—gave the new party its sympathies, as did the *Thibodaux Minerva*, a French-language newspaper from Lafourche.<sup>72</sup>

Other newspaper took an opposing position to the new party. Pro-Democrat newspapers from the region approached the new party with suspicion. The *Pionier de l'Assomption*, a French-language Democratic newspaper from Napoleonville, was quick to denounce the new party. The *Pionier* observed the nativist and anti-Catholic stance of East Coast Know-Nothings and accused the local party of similar atrocities. Lucy's *Avant-Courreur*, the official newspaper of St. Charles Parish, bemoaned the election violence that accompanied the Know-Nothings.

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<sup>71</sup> Walton, Deskins, & Pucket, *Presidential Elections*, 120-153.

<sup>72</sup> *Thibodaux Minerva*, April 1, 1854; *Plaquemine Southern Sentinel*, March 25, 1854. The *Sentinel* declared that "the Breedlove ticket has our sympathies" before the New Orleans election and reported favorably toward the Know-Nothings in subsequent editions. The *Minerva* reported favorably on the party's success in the days following the election.

Both accusations had some validity. In most parts of the country, the Know-Nothings were both violent and anti-Catholic nativists. On top of that, the 1854 New Orleans election, which the Sugar Parishes' newspapers followed obsessively, was not immune to violence at the polling places.<sup>73</sup>

Pro-Whig papers (which quickly became pro-Know-Nothing newspapers) responded by dispelling charges of anti-Catholicism amongst Louisiana's American Party. The *Southern Sentinel* claimed that, while it was true that the Know-Nothings elsewhere subscribed to religious intolerance, the local party condemned it. The *Sentinel* went on to claim opponents overstated the party's anti-Catholicism to pit "Catholics against Protestants and Protestants against Catholics...merely done through political tact, nothing more—done by the Democratic Press to catch the sympathies in Catholic regions. It is wholly untrue that the Order is opposed to Catholics or any other religious denomination." The *Minerva* assured its readers that a Know-Nothing plank to proscribe Catholicism would soon be overturned at a national convention, and thus it was irrelevant.<sup>74</sup>

The Know-Nothings in the Sugar Parishes never subscribed to the anti-Catholicism of the national party because the region was too Catholic for an anti-Catholic party to win elections. According to the 1850 census, the parishes of Ascension, Assumption, Iberville, Lafourche, Plaquemines, St. Bernard, St. Charles, St. James, St. John the Baptist, St. Martin, St. Mary, Terrebonne, and West Baton Rouge contained a combined 22 Catholic churches out of a total of 39 churches. Not only did the Catholic churches outnumber protestant churches in the Sugar

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<sup>73</sup>, "Les Know Nothing," Napoleonville *Pionnier de l'Assomption*, July 23, 1854; "Elections a la Nouvelle-Orleans," *Lucy Avant-Courreur*, April 3, 1854.

<sup>74</sup>, "The Know-Nothing and the Democratic Press," Plaquemine *Southern Sentinel*, May 13, 1854; "Democratic Know Nothings," Thibodaux *Minerva*, July 1, 1854.

Parishes, but the total accommodations of the churches outnumbered the accommodations of protestant churches, 13,290 to 7,265. In Assumption, St. Bernard, St. Charles, St. James, and St. John the Baptist, Catholic churches were the sole places of worship listed in the census. In West Baton Rouge, the census listed one Catholic church and one Protestant church, but the Catholic church could accommodate 500 people to the Protestant church's 200. The ratio of churches and accommodation of churches in the Sugar Parishes would suggest that Catholics outnumbered non-Catholics in the Sugar Parishes.<sup>75</sup>

The Know-Nothings in Southeast Louisiana tried to stay attractive to Creoles while simultaneously preaching nativism. The American Party in the Sugar Parishes attracted a fair number of Catholic Creoles to their ranks. In the 1854 town election in Plaquemine, the party nominated Zenom LaBauve and Alfred Greaud—both Catholic—as selectmen. In 1855 Know-Nothings in Lafourche nominated Catholic candidates for clerk, assessor and state senate. Later that year, the Know-Nothing convention nominated Catholic J.D. Duralde of West Baton Rouge for state treasurer. While the Know-Nothings in the Sugar Parishes avoided the issue of Catholic Proscription, they embraced the doctrine of nativism. The party claimed that recent immigrants were easily corruptible and unworthy of government representation. They advocated for twenty-one years residency requirement before an immigrant could be naturalized. The *Southern Sentinel* wrote that the “political object of the Association is to destroy the influence of foreign vote in our election of every description.” The *Thibodaux Minerva* declared that the American Party's goal was to insure that “the rightful sovereigns of the country—the native born—will in

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<sup>75</sup> *Census of the United States*, from University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu> (accessed October 10, 2013).

the future be permitted to attend the polls without being knocked down and mutilated by worthless vagabonds.”<sup>76</sup>

Such anti-immigrant rhetoric did not threaten the success of the party because rural South Louisiana did not experience a wave of immigration in the 1830’s and 1840’s. The 1860 census lists less than ten percent of the free, white population in the Sugar Parishes as foreign born, and many of those had lived in the United States for decades. In Assumption and Terrebonne Parishes, just one in twenty free whites were born abroad. The number of immigrants stayed did not change much in the late 1840’s, which suggests that most of the foreign born were not of the Irish and German pauper stock that had settled in New Orleans. The number of foreign born in the Sugar Parishes was relatively low; in total in Louisiana more than one in five was foreign born. By the mid nineteenth century, not enough immigrants had settled in the Sugar Parishes to be politically relevant.<sup>77</sup>

The Know-Nothing party gained popularity in the Sugar Parishes at different times. The towns of Plaquemine and Thibodaux elected Know-Nothing tickets in local elections as early as April of 1854. By May, 1854, the *Sentinel*, published in Iberville, stopped reporting news of the Whigs and it began exclusively covering the American Party. Elsewhere, the Whig party survived for another year before former Whigs left to join the Know-Nothings or Democrats. During the state election in 1855, the Whigs Party failed to pull any delegates from the Sugar Parishes to a convention. Thereafter, Whigs completely disappeared in remaining municipal and judicial election in the region, as it had been entirely supplanted by the Know-Nothings.

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<sup>76</sup>“The Know-Nothings,” Plaquemine *Southern Sentinel*, April 22, 1854; “New Orleans Reformers,” Thibodaux *Minerva*, May 13, 1854.

<sup>77</sup>*8<sup>th</sup> Census of the United States*. from University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu> (accessed October 10, 2013).

The American party in the Sugar Parishes, like its Whig predecessors, drew conservative, wealthy planters to its ranks. Men like Henry Watkins Allen of West Baton Rouge, J. B. Robinson of Terrebonne, and Theodore Hunt (who hailed from New Orleans but sought to represent the Sugar Parishes as a US congressman) attracted voters in the Sugar Parishes for three reasons. First, they did not stir the pot of the pending sectional crisis. Second, they sought programs to protect sugar planters' interest. Third, party leaders fanned nativist flames in their districts.

When it came to national politics, Know-Nothings of the Sugar Parishes tended to be pragmatic Unionists who were willing to give some concessions to Northern anti-slavery interests to protect slavery in the South. Theodore Hunt's condemnation of the Kansas-Nebraska Act dissented from the majority opinion in the South. In 1855, Hunt delivered a speech at a Know-Nothing barbecue in Houma where he declared that the South had little to gain by the repeal of the Missouri Compromise. The North could not sustain a plantation economy anyway, so the risk of stoking the anti-slavery flame was not worth the reward of slavery's expansion. A year later, Henry Watkins Allen spoke in support of Fillmore's Know Nothing presidential candidacy by painting Fillmore as a cure for sectionalism. Allen declared that Fillmore's previous stint as president, "left the country prosperous and happy; his compromise resolutions had healed the unfortunate sectional differences that previously existed, while his foreign policy had secured peace in all the world. Alas! How changed within a few years. In this very moment there is a civil war in our own country—American blood is daily shed by American hands. The

end is not yet—Civil war may continue to rage until state after state be involved... Who strikes for Union? Friend, whoever though art, I am with thee.”<sup>78</sup>

Party leaders sought to protect sugar planters’ interests, especially within the state. One of Allen’s first acts after declaring his loyalty to the American Party was to take on the merchants of New Orleans to preserve profits for the planters. The city’s ports allocated limited space for planters to store their sugar, which limited the amount they could sell at one time. When Allen threatened to open another port to compete with New Orleans, the city gave in to the planters’ interests. In other instances, first in 1856 and again 1857, cotton Democrats fought to repeal—or at least reduce—the tariff from which sugar planters had long profited, Americans Allen and J. B. Robinson championed the defense of protection, declaring protecting the tariff their highest priority. Both sides supported government assistance for internal improvement, especially railroads. The 1852 Constitution allowed for an unrivaled decade of rail construction in the state after a virtual moratorium under the 1845 constitution. Because the Whigs had authored the 1852 constitution, and by the nature of more Whigs joining the Americans than the Democrats, the Americans gave the illusion that they had a stronger resume for internal improvements than the Democrats. Know-Nothings in the Sugar Parishes had inherited the American System from their Whig predecessors.<sup>79</sup>

In the Sugar Parishes, party leaders defended—rather than downplay—the nativism of the national Know-Nothings. Theodore Hunt’s speech at Houma embodied the Know-Nothing motto, “America for Americans,” and provided insight on Sugar Parishes’ Know-Nothings

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<sup>78</sup>*Speech of Col T. G. Hunt, At the Houma Barbecue, Parish of Terrebonne, on the 15<sup>th</sup> of September*, (Published by the executive committee of the American Party of Louisiana, New Orleans: September 1855); Vincent H. Cassidy and Amos E. Simpson, *Henry Watkins Allen of Louisiana*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), 48.

<sup>79</sup> Cassidy and Simpson, *Henry Watkins Allen*, 46-49; Sacher, *A Perfect War of Politics*, 229-230.

stance on immigration. In the speech, Hunt spoke about the changing role of American immigration law and how immigrants of the 1840's and 1850's were not like earlier immigrants. According to Hunt, America's first naturalization laws were enacted to incorporate a few thousand highly talented people from abroad. The laws "invited foreigners to settle in the country; and for the purpose of attracting good men to society, they superadded to the other inducements the privilege of citizenship." Subsequently, the number of pauper immigrants had gotten out of control, and "this extraordinary and unexpected increase shows that naturalization laws could no longer serve the purpose for which they were intended." For Hunt, the goal of the Americans' nativism was to prevent from voting, "aliens who will have no interest in the soil, and who may just have escaped the prisons of Europe, or who will not understand the first principles of our government." Many Creole sugar parishioners were willing to accept this nativism despite being ethnically non-American because the restrictions that the Know-Nothings proposed did not affect their right to vote. By definition, Creoles were the descendants of the French and Spanish who resided in Louisiana prior to statehood. By the 1850's all Creoles were either native-born citizens, or they had lived in Louisiana long enough to meet even the lengthiest naturalization restrictions. Through their decades of economic and social connections with the ethnic Americans, many Creoles found more in common with their Anglo neighbors than newcomers from Europe.<sup>80</sup>

Know-Nothings in the Sugar Parishes did not see nativism and adherence to the American System's commercialist ideology as independent issues. To Know-Nothings, Democrats stood in the way of the commercial growth, and they used immigrants' votes as a tool. The editor of the *Minerva* wrote that recent immigrant voted as "the paid hirelings of some

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<sup>80</sup>*Speech of Col T G Hunt, 5.*



moneyed demagogue,” in contrast to Know-Nothings who understood that “the country is deeply, directly, and indirectly interested in the future welfare of our great commercial mart.” Sugar Parishes’ Know-Nothings believed that their party inherited the American System; this is evident in the way the presses treated political candidates. For example, before the 1855 election, Democratic newspapers declared that their congressional candidate, Miles Taylor, boasted a strong Anti-Know-Nothing stance. The *Minerva* responded by claiming that Taylor was actually quite friendly to the Know-Nothing cause as he “announced himself the advocate of a Protective Tariff, and a National Bank.” Not only were these causes friendly to the American Party, but Know-Nothings believed they were anti-Democratic.<sup>81</sup>

The Democratic press did not attack these American Party leaders’ positions, but instead they repeated their assertion that Know-Nothings harbored anti-Catholic positions. Sugar Parishes’ Democrats could not find any compelling issues upon which they could oppose the Americans without abandoning some of their rural constituency except to attack the Know-Nothings’ perceived religious intolerance. These assaults on the party started early in the local party’s existence, and they continued until after the Know-Nothings went in to decline following the 1856 elections. During the summer of 1854, Napoleonville newspaper *Pioneer de l’Assomption* declared that the Know-Nothings ran against Democrats by being the anti-Catholic party, implying that the Democrats were a party for Catholics—claims that few Democratic candidates would be willing to make. A year later, Lucy’s *Avant-Courreur*, published in St.

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<sup>81</sup> “New Orleans Reformers,” Thibodaux *Minerva*, May 13, 1854; Thibodaux *Minerva*, September 15, 1854.

Charles Parish, covered the American Party's national convention by focusing on the meetings treatment of Catholic delegates rather than on the platform that the party produced.<sup>82</sup>

These accusations put the Americans on the defensive throughout the party's existence. The editors of Plaquemine's *Southern Sentinel* declared very early in the local party's existence that the Americans sought change in immigrant voting laws, "but if [Know-Nothings] go further, and have religious as well as political reformations, we cannot side with this other aim and must condone it." Twenty days after Thibodaux's *Minerva* first acknowledged the existence of Know-Nothing in Louisiana, the editor already addressed the bad reputation that Democratic press gave the group with claims of religious proscription. With no small amount of irony, *Minerva* countered accusations by claiming that the American Party held Catholic Creoles to a higher regard than the Democrats did. During the 1855 gubernatorial election, the Americans nominated more Creoles to statewide posts than the Democrats, a fact not lost on the *Minerva*. "Which party has shown the Creole portion of our population the most respect, [*sic*] the K.N.'s or the Anties," the editor asked. "The American looks to place of birth only, and not whether the candidate is of an English, French, Spanish, or Italian parentage."<sup>83</sup>

Catholic majorities in a parish did not seem to dissuade them from voting for the Know-Nothings. The American Party in the Sugar Parishes actually experienced more success in the more heavily Catholic Parishes than it did in the more heavily Protestant parishes. Some of the most Catholic parishes gave their support to the Know-Nothings; of the five Sugar Parishes with the highest ratio of Catholic church accommodations to their total white population in the 1860 census, three—St. Mary, St. James, and St. Martin—voted for the Know-Nothing candidate in

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<sup>82</sup>Lucy Avant-Courreur, July 1, 1855; Napoleonville *Pionier de l'Assomption* July 23, 1854.

<sup>83</sup>Thibodaux *Minerva*, July 1, 1854; August 18, 1855; *Southern Sentinel*, April 29, 1854.

the 1856 presidential election. St. James voted for the Know-Nothing candidate despite the fact that two-thirds of the total church accommodations in the parish were Catholic. Among the five with the fewest Catholic accommodations, only St. Charles voted for the American Party. This data suggests that Catholics were no less likely than non-Catholics to vote for the Know-Nothing candidate.<sup>84</sup>

The number of planters in an area did not determine who voted for Know-Nothings either. Six non-urban parishes (which therefore excludes Jefferson and Plaquemines parish) in Southeast Louisiana voted for the Fillmore ticket during the 1856 presidential election: St. Bernard, St. James, St. Martin, St. Mary, Terrebonne, and West Baton Rouge. The size of farms in these parishes varied greatly. In Terrebonne, more than 72 percent of farms extended more than one hundred acres—the most of any of the Sugar Parishes. However, in St. Bernard and Terrebonne, only 19 percent and 23 percent, respectively, of farms stretched beyond one hundred acres. The Parish with the second highest percentage of large farms, St. Charles, where 56 percent of farms were over one hundred acres, voted Democratic, as did Ascension and Lafourche, where less than a quarter of farms were large. Land wealth of the voters did not seem to affect the popularity of the American Party.<sup>85</sup>

Nor did the number of foreign-born affect the election outcomes. Outside of the suburban areas in Jefferson and Plaquemines Parishes near New Orleans, the foreign born population hardly constituted more than one in ten of the white population in any of the Sugar Parishes. The parishes that voted for Know-Nothing candidates ran the gamut from almost negligible number

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<sup>84</sup>8<sup>th</sup> *Census of the United States*. from University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu> (accessed October 10, 2013).

<sup>85</sup> Walton, Deskins, & Pucket, *Presidential Elections*, 141-153; 8<sup>th</sup> *Census of the United States*.

of foreign born to just over ten percent foreign born. Those that voted Democrat also varied within that range. Democratic Ascension, Assumption, Iberville, Lafourche, and St. John the Baptist counted 8.7 percent, 4.8 percent, 10.9 percent, 7.6 percent, and 10.8 percent of their white population, respectively, as foreign born. American Party backing St. James, St. Martin, St. Mary, Terrebonne, and West Baton Rouge had 7.7 percent, 6.7 percent, 13 percent, 5.2 percent, and 9.4 percent foreign-born. There was no pattern that could suggest that the ratio of immigrants to total population played any role in the election.<sup>86</sup>

In the 1855 state election—the election in which the Know-Nothings enjoyed the most success in the Sugar Parishes—sugar parishioners tended to vote for a party rather than individual candidates. Voters tended to select straight party tickets with concern for neither ethnicity nor religion of the candidates. The number of votes for Derbigny was virtually the same as the number of votes for the American Party’s candidates for Lieutenant Governor, Secretary of State, Treasurer, Auditor, Attorney General, and Superintendent of Education. For example, in Assumption Parish, Derbigny and Texada both received 238 votes, Duralde and Beale both received 235, and Roseman, Randall Hunt, and Stillman received 236. In Lafourche, Derbigny received 415 votes, Texada received 401, Beale 392, Duralde 396, Roseman 394, Randall Hunt 410, and Stillman, 396.<sup>87</sup>

Within the parishes, voting districts tended to vote heavily toward one party or the other. In Lafourche, five of the sixteen voting districts gave over 80 percent of the votes to one party in the 1855 state election. Another seven districts gave more than two-thirds of their votes to one

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<sup>86</sup>8<sup>th</sup> *Census of the United States* from University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu> (accessed October 10, 2013).

<sup>87</sup>*Pionier de l'Assomption*, November 12, 1855; *Thibodaux Minerva*, November 9, 1855. Election returns were unofficial results published in *Pionier de l'Assomption* and *Thibodaux Minerva* newspapers.

party. In Assumption, three of the fourteen districts voted unanimously for a party—one district voted entirely American and two voted entirely Democratic. In six other of Assumptions districts, one party received less than ten total votes. Interestingly, how one district voted did not affect how others voted. For example, while Lafourche's 13<sup>th</sup> precinct voted in favor of the Democrats 44-2 during the 1855 election, the nearby 15<sup>th</sup> precinct voted American 43-16. In Assumption, the fifth ward voted 37-0 for the Americans, while the sixth voted 139-9 for the Democrats. It is also noteworthy that even in the rural, remote Sugar Parishes, the cities were the most politically contentious places. The closest race in Lafourche occurred in Thibodaux, where Americans won 142 (a third of their total votes in the parish) to 131.<sup>88</sup>

The best determining factor as to how a parish voted in the 1855 and 1856 elections was whether they had voted Whig or Democrat in previous elections. While it is true that both Whigs and Democrats voted for and ran with the American Party, in the Sugar Parishes, the number of Whigs who went to the American Party was much higher than the number of Democrats. This fact can be seen when looking at the parishes with American majorities in the 1856 presidential race. No parish that had voted for a Democratic candidate in either the 1848 election or the 1852 election had an American majority in 1856. The five rural Sugar Parishes that voted for the American Party in the 1856 presidential election—West Baton Rouge, St. James, St. Mary, St. Martin, and Terrebonne—had all given more than 60 percent of their votes to Whigs in 1844, 1848, and 1852 presidential elections. In contrast, only Lafourche and St. John the Baptist parishes had given more than 60 percent of their votes to Whigs and 1852 and voted Democratic in 1856.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup>*Pionier de l'Assumption*, November 12, 1855; *Thibodaux Minerva*, November 9, 1855.

While the American Party in New Orleans was a reform minded alternative to the Democrats, and in the Florida Parishes and North Louisiana, the Americans were anti-Catholic nativists, the Americans in the Sugar Parishes was little more than a continuation of the Whigs of the area. Sugar parishioners joined the American Party because their society needed divisive politics. They needed more than one party so that they could have a system of political alliances and clubs. Politics was a leisure activity and the basis of business and family connections. The perseverance of an anti-Democratic party in that region remained important to continue the planter lifestyle. When the Whigs declined in the early 1850's the anti-Democrats became Americans and took on some of the language of that group. Since immigration was irrelevant in the region, they adopted nativism. Since anti-Catholicism was unpopular, the group rejected that tenet. The American party in the region showed tendencies toward Unionism, protection, and preservation of the planter economy.

Ultimately, these American Party programs did not separate the party from the Democrats. Enough former Whigs had gone to the Democratic Party to give the Democrats majorities in the 1855 and 1856 elections. By the end of 1856, the Americans in the Sugar Parishes were in the same position as the Whigs in '52: their party was quickly losing their ability to represent the Sugar Parishes in national politics and the national party split over the expansion of slavery. By the 1857 state convention, most Know-Nothings in the Sugar Parishes had abandoned their party and had joined the Democrats.

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<sup>89</sup> Walton, Deskins, & Pucket, *Presidential Elections*. These numbers do not include Jefferson or St. Bernard, where a large percentage of the population lived in suburbs of New Orleans.

### Chapter 3: North Louisiana and the Florida Parishes

If the national parties of the Second Party system amounted to, as historians have suggested, a loose alliance of locally minded politicians who gathered every four years to select a presidential candidate, it should also be said that in Louisiana, parties played a similar role. While both northern and southern Louisiana shared some key ideology—namely the importance of protecting slavery—the people and political tendencies of North Louisiana and the Florida Parishes were occasionally incompatible with those of their fellow Louisianans to the south. For Louisianans in the Florida Parishes and in North Louisiana, politics served two purposes: to preserve the lifestyle of ethnically American North Louisianans, and to counter the political power of New Orleans.

When the American Party reached North Louisiana and the Florida Parishes, political actors in the regions used the party to continue their struggle against the old political power structure of New Orleans. The people of the Florida Parishes and North Louisiana saw themselves as the antithesis to their counterparts to the south; they were much more likely to be internal immigrants from the Southern United States, less likely to be Catholic, and they were less economically dependent on New Orleans than the sugar parishioners. When voting, they tended to support people from their own regions without strong party consideration. North Louisianans already had a tendency toward nativism and anti-Catholicism before the American party organized in the regions. Because they dominated the religious culture of North Louisiana and the Florida Parishes, Protestants in the northern parts of the state felt less inclined to appease Catholics in their politics. The American Party in the Florida Parishes and in the Northwest of the state more closely resembled the American Party in the rest of the South rather than that of New Orleans. Cities as near to the Catholic, Sugar Parishes as Baton Rouge—just across the

river from West Baton Rouge Parish and north of Ascension, bred a virulent wave of anti-Catholicism as Know-Nothingism spread through the regions.

North Louisiana and the Florida Parishes are not geographically linked, and the regions run the gamut between rural and urban, but the Know-Nothings in these regions were similar: nativist and anti-Catholic. They were more like the Know-Nothings in the rest of the South than they were to the Know-Nothings in New Orleans and South Louisiana. The American Party in North Louisiana and the Florida Parishes did not adhere to the special brand of Know-Nothingism that was more popular in the southern part of the state because nativism was not as much of a liability in the northern regions as it was the southern regions. North Louisiana and the Florida Parishes had many fewer naturalized citizens than South Louisiana, a smaller percent of its population was Catholic, and many more were Americans born out of the state. As a result, the American Party in northern Louisiana more closely adhered to the national party's tenets than southern Louisiana.

None of this implies that North Louisiana and the Florida Parishes ever voted as a regional coalition, but rather it suggests that the American Party had common values across the two regions. North Louisiana and the Florida Parishes had parishes in each region giving strong support to Democrats, some to Americans, and even as late as 1856, some places gave majorities to Whig candidates. Party majorities in the two regions often changed from election to election; a parish that voted Democratic in a gubernatorial election did not necessarily vote that way in a presidential election. North Louisiana and the Florida Parishes could not be pigeonholed as being a party stronghold for any political party throughout the antebellum period.

In the years preceding 1854, two trends changed the political climate of North Louisiana and the Florida Parishes: population growth changed the political importance of the two regions,



and party realignment affected the regions' votes. At the beginning of statehood, North Louisiana's sparse population constituted a small fraction of the state's total population. As the region grew from internal immigration, North Louisiana's votes became more important for deciding state elections. Meanwhile, the number of voters in the Florida Parishes stagnated early, and the region's political importance diminished. The population shifts occurred while voters in the northern regions of Louisiana shifted from Whig to Democrat majorities. As a result, northern Louisianans did not have longtime loyalty to one party the way sugar parishioners had. Both North Louisiana and the Florida Parishes had always been culturally American, and the population growth in those regions had originated from elsewhere in the country. Joseph Tregle declared that "nowhere was the control of the Americans so complete as in the Florida Parishes." Neither region had been home to large French speaking populations like in rural South Louisiana, nor did they receive a large number of immigrants like in New Orleans.<sup>90</sup>

While the 1820 census showed that nearly a third of Louisiana's non-naturalized residents lived in North Louisiana, this number is deceiving as nearly all of them lived in Natchitoches. Only 38 of the 3,145 "aliens" lived in the remaining parishes of North Louisiana. In the 1850 census, which counted individuals born outside of the United States regardless of their naturalized status, barely 2 percent of the state's immigrant population lived in North Louisiana—at a time when 22 percent of the white population lived in those parishes. In that same year, more than half of Louisiana's 61,920 people born in the U.S. but outside the state resided in North Louisiana. 56 percent of the white population in that region came from

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<sup>90</sup> Joseph G. Tregle, "Louisiana in the Age of Jackson: A Study in Ego Politics" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1954), p. 66.

elsewhere in the country; in Jackson Parish alone, nearly 71 percent of the white population migrated from other states.<sup>91</sup>

Since statehood, the Florida Parishes and Northwest Louisiana had more demographically, economically, and politically in common with the surrounding states of Mississippi, Arkansas, and Texas than they did with New Orleans and the Sugar Parishes. The residents of the more northern parts of the state were from the same protestant, American stock as their neighbors in the surrounding states. Planters in these areas grew the same commodity—cotton—as their neighbors to the north and east. The voters in North Louisiana and the Florida Parishes opposed the tariff that their neighbors down river in southeast Louisiana supported. Like their neighboring Gulf South states, voters in North Louisiana and the Florida parishes split nearly evenly between Democrats and Whigs.<sup>92</sup>

Of Louisiana's free whites who were born in other states, most migrated to Louisiana from elsewhere in the South. According to the state's register published in 1855, 44,697 of the Louisiana's 60,447 whites born in other states—nearly three of every four—came from Maryland, Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Kentucky, Arkansas, and Texas. Nearly a third of the population born-out-of-state migrated from Alabama and Mississippi. The ratio of slave state migrants to northern migrants was higher in North Louisiana and in the Florida Parishes, as a majority of the other 15,750 American migrants to the

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<sup>91</sup> "4<sup>th</sup> Census," "from University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu> (accessed May 10, 2014). 7<sup>th</sup> *Census of the United States*.

<sup>92</sup> For the sake of this thesis, I used John Sacher's regional distinctions. I defined the Florida Parishes as East Baton Rouge, East Feliciana, Livingston, St. Tammany, St. Helena, Washington, and West Feliciana Parishes. North Louisiana consisted of Bossier, Caddo, Claiborne, Bienville, Jackson, Union, Ouachita, Morehouse, Carroll, Madison, Tensas, Franklin, Caldwell, Winn, Natchitoches, De Soto, Sabine, Rapides, Catahoula, and Concordia Parishes.

state lived in the more cosmopolitan New Orleans. In North Louisiana, the vast majority of whites born outside of the state came from other slave states.<sup>93</sup>

The North Louisiana parishes' population growth outpaced the rest of the state in the decades following statehood, and that region's political clout grew while the Florida parishes' populations stagnated. The 1820 census lists 11,603 free whites spread throughout Catahoula, Concordia, Natchitoches, Ouachita, and Rapides parishes, which at that time constituted the entire population of North Louisiana. This was less than 16 percent of the state's total white population of 73,383 that year, putting the region behind Florida Parishes' 13,208, Orleans Parish's 19,244, and South Louisiana's 29,328. North Louisiana's small population in the 1820 census belies the fact that the region stretches across nearly half of the state's 43,500 square miles of habitable land with a population density of just .56 free whites per square mile. In the 1830 census, that density grew to .64 free whites per square mile. By 1840, the white population in North Louisiana had more than doubled to 28,033, while the total state's white population had increased by just over 75 percent, from 89,231 to 158,457. In the 1850 census, the North Louisiana white population doubled again to 56,773 while the whole state grew by just over 61 percent to 255,491. North Louisiana's growth continued to outpace the rest of the state, and in the 1860 census, the region had grown by 60 percent to 90,702, while the rest of the state's white population growth of 40 percent to 357,456. North Louisiana's white population grew from having less than 15 percent of the state's white population in 1830 to more than a quarter of all white residents by 1860. Meanwhile, the white population of the Florida Parishes diminished as a percentage of the state's total. The 1820 census records show that despite consisting just over 10

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<sup>93</sup> A. W. Bell, *The State Register: Comprising an Historical and Statistical Account of Louisiana, from its Earliest Settlement as a Territory, Down to its Present Period as a State; Together with an Accurate List of All State and Parish Officers*, (Baton Rouge: TBR Hatch & Co; 1855) 180-181.

percent of the state's total land, the Florida Parishes housed more than 18 percent of Louisiana's white population. By 1830, fewer than one in six white Louisianans lived in the Florida Parishes. By 1840, that ratio was down to 11 percent, and in 1850, just 9 percent of Louisiana's white population lived in the Florida Parishes. The Florida Parishes population continued to grow throughout the antebellum years, but they grew at a much slower pace than the rest of the state.<sup>94</sup>

Both regions remained overwhelmingly Protestant throughout this period of Louisiana's population growth. Just six of the 66 Florida Parish churches listed in the 1850 Census were Catholic, and three of those were in St. Tammany Parish. These Catholic churches held 2,140 of the 14,520 total church accommodations in the Florida Parishes. By 1860, just eleven of the 113 churches, and 2,400 of the 26,575 church accommodations in the Florida Parishes were Catholic—a decrease from 15 percent to fewer than 10 percent of the total seats. In 1850, North Louisiana had eight Catholic churches with accommodation for 2,300 out of 137 total churches with accommodations for 29,400. More than half of the Catholic churches and accommodations in North Louisiana were located in Natchitoches alone. The 1860 census lists North Louisiana with twenty-two Catholic Churches with accommodation for 7,550 out of a total 315 churches and 86,866 accommodations—a slight increase from just under 8 percent to about 8 and a half percent. Catholics were far smaller a percentage of the population in the Florida Parishes and North Louisiana than in New Orleans or the Sugar Parishes (where the 1860 Census lists 45

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<sup>94</sup> 4<sup>th</sup> *Census of the United States*; 5<sup>th</sup> *Census of the United States*; 6<sup>th</sup> *Census of the United States*; 7<sup>th</sup> *Census of the United States*, from University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu> (accessed May 10, 2014).

percent and 68 percent of total church accommodations were Catholic, respectively) and the majority of Catholics in those regions lived in a few outlier parishes.<sup>95</sup>

The relative scarcity of Catholics in North Louisiana and Florida Parishes made anti-Catholic nativism less of a political liability than elsewhere in the state, and thus anti-Catholicism permeated local politics. The 1850 Census lists Catholics as just the fourth most popular denomination in the Florida Parishes by total accommodation, after the Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians, respectively. In North Louisiana, Catholicism was the third most popular behind the Methodists and Baptists, but each of these denominations still had more than five times as many accommodations as the Catholics. The relatively small number of Catholics compared to other denominations affected the regions votes'; in every gubernatorial race from the beginning of statehood until 1855, whenever a Catholic ran against a Protestant, the North Louisiana and Florida Parishes' voters chose the Protestant candidate with one exception. Newspapers like Baton Rouge's *Daily Advocate* openly opined about the dangers of "Papism" in politics without fear of reprisal.<sup>96</sup>

Local representation in state politics to counter New Orleans' dominance proved more important than party. From 1828 through 1852, a majority of North Louisiana and the Florida Parishes voted Democratic. All parishes in the regions were pro-Jackson in the 1828 and 1832 elections. Jackson garnered over 92 percent of the votes in two of the Florida Parishes. After the second American party system took hold in Louisiana's state politics in the mid 1830's, Democrats won a majority of parishes in North Louisiana and Florida Parishes in all but one

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<sup>95</sup> 7<sup>th</sup> *Census of the United States*; 8<sup>th</sup> *Census of the United States*. from University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu> (accessed May 10, 2014).

<sup>96</sup> Eight gubernatorial elections pitted a Catholic against a Protestant, and only in the 1842 election, when both regions voted for Lafayette native Alexander Mouton over Tennessee-native-turned-Donaldsonville resident, former governor Henry Johnson. 7<sup>th</sup> *Census of the United States*, from University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu> (accessed May 10, 2014).

gubernatorial race. That race in 1838—which pit Democratic New Orleans mayor Denis Prieur against Whig planter Andre Roman—split the Florida Parishes with three parishes giving majorities to the Whigs and three to the Democrats, while three North Louisiana parishes gave majorities to Roman and five to Prieur. Even in parishes where Prieur won a majority, the Whig candidate had garnered more votes than in any previous election. John Sacher attributes the success of the Whig candidate as the North Louisiana and Florida Parishes’ reluctance to support a New Orleanian.<sup>97</sup>

In subsequent elections, party ideology became less important for Florida Parishes’ and North Louisiana’s voters than having local representation. The Florida Parishes and North Louisiana successfully voted their own candidates in to statewide offices in the 1846 and 1849 elections. In 1846, they elected West Feliciana resident Isaac Johnson governor by great margins—in the Florida Parishes, Johnson garnered two-thirds of the votes—alongside Joseph Walker of Rapides for Treasurer and Charles Rowley of Concordia for Adjuster and Inspector General. Again in 1849, Florida Parishes and the North Louisiana gave big majorities to Democrat Joseph Walker from Rapides over the legislatively inexperienced, New Orleans-connected Creole lawyer, Alexandar Declouet, from St. Martin. Democrats’ success in 1849 showed that party success in the northern parts of the state depended on building an illusion that the party represented those regions and not just New Orleans.<sup>98</sup>

Three elections in 1852 proved that party ideology remained less important than who was running: the Florida Parishes and North Louisiana both gave Democrats majorities in the

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<sup>97</sup> The returns from East Feliciana are lost for the 1838 governor’s race. Henry O. Robertson, “The Emergence of the Whig Party in Louisiana’s Florida Parishes, 1834-1840,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 33, no. 3 (Summer 1992), 308-310; Sacher, *A Perfect War of Politics*, 182.

<sup>98</sup> “Louisiana: Governors. Under the Territorial Government,” *The American Almanac and Repository of Useful Knowledge (1830-1861)*, 1848, American Periodicals, 289; Sacher, *A Perfect War of Politics*, 147.

presidential election, Democratic voters in both regions supported the Whig constitution proposal, and the gubernatorial election was the closest in decades. The Democrat presidential candidate, Franklin Pierce, had won North Louisiana's fourth congressional district by a landslide, and only three parishes in the region—Concordia (by 35 votes), Morehouse (by 59 votes), and Madison (by 24 votes)—gave Winfield Scott a majority. The Third Congressional District gave a nearly ten percent lead to the Democrat. The Whig-championed state constitution proved to be much more popular; the measure gained an outright majority in the Third Congressional District—which contained the Florida Parishes as well as some Sugar Parishes and parts of the North. In the Fourth Congressional District—which contained the Northwest quarter of the state—voted against the constitutional convention, but at a much smaller margin than they voted against Whig politicians.<sup>99</sup>

The biggest benefit that the proposed constitution offered to the northern part of the state was representation based on total population, both free and slave, for state government. Since the agricultural North had a much higher percentage of its population enslaved, the new rules gave the North more representation per free white than New Orleans. The importance of representation for the parishes with a high percentage of their population enslaved should not be understated; those North and Florida Parishes with relatively few slaves, like Calcasieu and Livingston, where slaves constituted less than a quarter of the population, overwhelmingly opposed the constitution. In most North Louisiana parishes where slavery was prevalent, even those that voted Democratic, tended to support the Whig constitution. St. Helena, from Louisiana's Third District, with nearly half its population enslaved, gave Democrat Franklin Pierce a 248-209 victory over Winfield Scott, but the parish voted 246-191 in favor of the Whig

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<sup>99</sup> "Louisiana Election Returns Complete," New Orleans *The Daily Picayune*, November 29, 1852, 2.

constitution. In Natchitoches, where slaves outnumbered whites, the Democratic presidential candidate won with 407 votes against the Whig's 289, while voting in favor of the constitution, 438 to 236. In DeSoto Parish, 55 percent slave, the Democrat won the election by 47 votes, but the new constitution won by 119 votes. In the North and Florida Parishes vote for the 1852 state constitution, voters willingly voted against their party for the opportunity to regain political power from New Orleans.<sup>100</sup>

Louisiana voted to adopt the 1852 constitution by a nearly 10 percent margin, and the state election mandated by the constitution that followed showed more North and Florida Parishes' antipathy to New Orleanian politics. During the Whig convention in Baton Rouge in late November, just a single representative from the North or Florida Parishes voted for the New Orleans-backed St. Landry native Louis Bordelon, who ultimately won the nomination. Instead, the representatives from the northern regions split their vote between John Ray of Ouachita and John Moore of St. Martin. The election a month later pitted Bordelon against Democrat Paul Hebert of Iberville Parish. As neither gubernatorial candidate represented the North Louisianans or the Florida parishioners, Hebert won the election by merely 356 votes in the Florida Parishes and 740 votes in the North, in no small part because of his party's pro-North of William Wood Farmer from Union for Lieutenant Governor and A.S. Heron as Secretary of State.<sup>101</sup>

While the Whig Party swerved off track throughout Louisiana in 1852, nowhere did the wheels come off quite as far as they did in North Louisiana and the Florida Parishes. Politicians

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<sup>100</sup> Livingston opposed the constitution 420-73. Calcasieu opposed it 195-20. *7<sup>th</sup> Census of the United States*, from University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu> (accessed May 10, 2014); Sacher, *A Perfect War of Politics*, 168-169; "Louisiana Election Returns Complete," New Orleans *The Daily Picayune*, November 29, 1852, 2.

<sup>101</sup>"Whig State Convention," Baton Rouge *The Baton Rouge Gazette*, December 11, 1852. My claim that Louis Bordelon was backed by New Orleans is based on the fact that he was nominated by a New Orleans representative at the convention, and six of the city's nine districts had voted to nominate him. "Election Returns," *The Opelousas Courier*, January 8, 1853.



from these regions lost interest in the Whig party before the gubernatorial election even began. At the Whig Convention, the parishes of St. Tammany, Washington, Livingston, Concordia, Calcasieu, Rapides, Sabine, Natchitoches, Bossier, Caldwell, Bienville, Morehouse, Jackson, Franklin, Madison, Carroll, and Winn failed to send any delegates. When two candidates—George McWhorter of Concordia and Joseph Bernard of East Baton Rouge—received nominations for the governorship, both rejected the nominations. While the Whigs did not face total embarrassment in the North or Florida Parishes—they lost both regions by fewer than ten percent of the vote—that was more attributable to the fact that the Democratic candidates were nearly as unappealing to the North Louisiana’s parishioners and Florida parishioners as the Whigs’ ticket.<sup>102</sup>

The Whig Party in the North experienced its final death throes in a two elections the following year. In the first election, Democrat Thomas Slidell, of New Orleans, defeated Whig Christian Roselius for Chief Justice of the Louisiana Supreme Court. Both candidates feigned anti-partisanship, but their party affiliation became clear in the newspaper endorsements that they gained. Slidell, with the stronger Democratic pedigree by nature of his brother being Senator John Slidell, walloped his opponent 1027 to 764 in the Florida Parishes and 2203 to 1527 in North Louisiana’s parishes. In November, North Louisiana again sent Whigs reeling. Florida Parishes’ voters elected Democrats in all three senate races, and the elected Democrats to five of the nine open House offices. North Louisianans elected four Democrats in five senate races, and nineteen Democrats in the 26 House races. As a result of the two elections,

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<sup>102</sup> “Whig State Convention,” *The Baton Rouge Gazette*, December 11, 1852.

Louisiana's judiciary and congressional delegation joined the executive branch solidly in the hands of Democrats.<sup>103</sup>

Nativism had never been particularly out of fashion in the northern reaches of the state, but by 1853, it experienced a particularly noteworthy revival. Whigs faced a particular dilemma whether to embrace nativism as an attempt to win some races in the North, knowing that the southern part of the state had less of an appetite for it. Christian Roselius campaigned in the regions with the claim that he was a truer Native American and friendlier to extending residency requirements for enfranchisement than his opponent. He justified residence extensions by claiming that they equalized all Louisiana residents. A political ally of Roselius explained that native-born Americans had to live in the nation for a certain number of years before voting (by nature of age restrictions), and foreign-born residents should too. Pro-Roselius newspapers in New Orleans made the effort to reject claims that their candidate harbored Native American sentiment, but in the North, Roselius supporters embraced the stance.<sup>104</sup>

While the American Party did not enter the Louisiana political arena until the Jackson Square Americans announced their reform party in New Orleans, Know-Nothing lodges almost certainly existed in North Louisiana and the Florida Parishes before then. In late 1853 and early 1854, popularity of anti-Catholicism in cities like Baton Rouge where the native-born, protestant residents already watched their political representation wane as their parish failed to grow rapidly like New Orleans. Northerners did not need to live in proximity to the Catholic immigrant paupers to feel that their religion threatened Louisiana. Some in the Florida Parishes bemoaned the sad state of Irish immigrants, and blamed their religion. The Baton Rouge *Weekly*

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<sup>103</sup>“Election Returns-Judges Supreme Court,” New Orleans *The Daily Picayune*, April 21, 1853; “Election of the Chief Justice,” New Orleans *Daily Crescent*, April 4, 1853;

<sup>104</sup>“Election of Chief Justice,” New Orleans *Daily Crescent*, April 4, 1853;

*Comet* blamed Catholicism for the high number of illiterate white men in Louisiana. According to the paper, “the Church on one side (the side of Rome) [*sic*] feels that its strength lies in the weakness (intellectually) of the people.” Catholicism was incompatible with the free thinking that democracy demanded of its citizens. The fact that this sentiment arose when it did—at the end of 1853 and in January, 1854 corresponds too much with the spread of Know-Nothing wigwams to be coincidental.<sup>105</sup>

Newspapers in North Louisiana became aware of the Know-Nothings by the end of 1853, and they reported about the American Party as early as March, 1854, but local politicians did not declare themselves as Know-Nothings until statewide elections pitted them against the naturalized-supported New Orleans Democratic political power. As in New Orleans, the group in Baton Rouge declared themselves to be independent reformers. Nativist newspapers quickly endorsed the reformers. The *Comet* declared “the weight of our prosperity depends on their wisdom, and integrity; and therefore such as have a deep and permanent interest in our lovely little city, should be alone accepted. We cannot see for our life, how it is that a man’s calling himself a Democrat or a Whig, has anything to do with it.” Former party membership mattered less than whether the candidate had long time residency and investment in the community.<sup>106</sup>

The Know-Nothing party meant different things for different people in the northern regions of the state, but preeminently, the group used their nativism to attack New Orleans’ Democratic political power structure. The regions had relatively few foreign-born whites to affect local politics; the Know-Nothings there worried about Orleans and Jefferson Parishes’—home to nearly 90 percent of the foreign born in the state—affect on state elections. Caddo

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<sup>105</sup>“Public Education,” Baton Rouge *Weekly Comet*, January 22, 1854.

<sup>106</sup>“Our Municipal Authorities,” Baton Rouge *Weekly Comet*, March 26, 1854.

Parish had hardly 200 foreign born whites living within its boundaries in 1850, but a Know-Nothing newspaper in Shreveport bemoaned the foreign influence in Louisiana politics. Likewise, less than ten percent of the 1850 white population in East Baton Rouge emigrated to the United States, but the *Comet* insisted on declaring that “the making, interpretation, and execution of laws, cannot be intrusted [*sic*] to those who are ignorant of our constitutional safeguard—who are ignorant of our established statues [*sic*], and who are ignorant of the temper of the American people.” The northern regions’ attack on foreign influence was a thinly veiled attack on New Orleans’ influence.<sup>107</sup>

In addition to using nativism to minimize New Orleans’ political reach, the group used nativism in the defense of slavery. Many in the northern parts of the state recognized that keeping slavery’s status quo depended on a continued balance of power between slave and free states, and immigration skewed this balance. “Upon consulting census reports,” claimed the *South-Western*, “it finds that three-fourths of the Irish emigration stays in New England and the middle states, where commercial and manufacturing interests are seated, and are found in the South only where there are great public works in construction. In this way, it is gradually effecting [*sic*] the balance of power in the Union.” Furthermore, the slaveholders feared that immigrants could also import antislavery sentiment. “Abolitionism is a fanaticism of foreign birth,” the *South-Western* claimed. The *Comet* agreed and went further to argue that the Democrats, nationally, courted antislavery people to their ranks. In 1854, the American Party was just months old, and had yet to take a stance on slavery on a national level. Americans, by nature of the newness of their party, gained immunity—at least initially—on the slavery question. The party took a proslavery position in the South and an antislavery position in the

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<sup>107</sup> Shreveport *South-Western*, October 31, 1855; “Foreign Emigration and its Effects,” Baton Rouge *Weekly Comet*, March 21, 1854.

North, and the factions got along harmoniously as long as they did not have to acknowledge one another.<sup>108</sup>

Another reason that they became popular was that the Know-Nothing Party in the North and the Sugar Parishes featured genuine anti-Catholicism in its ranks—an aspect that made them unique among the party in Louisiana. The pro-protestant group declared their loyalty to the national group instead of the rogue New Orleans-led pro-Catholic faction of the party.

Americans in the northern sections of the state declared themselves, “proud to stand, with complete stight [*sic*] outness and flat footedness, upon the *whole* Philadelphia platform, and especially upon the anti-Catholic Plank thereof.” The northern regions of the state dispatched their own “Simon Pure” delegation to national conventions to send the message that not all of Louisiana supported the pro-Catholic delegation from New Orleans. Democratic newspaper picked up the dissenting messages within the American Party and quipped that the Know-Nothings would inevitably fall apart from within if given enough time.<sup>109</sup>

Anti-Catholic Know-Nothings in North Louisiana justified religious proscription by claiming that Catholics’ loyalty to the pope and bishops was incompatible with republicanism. Know-Nothings cited a “politico-religious” system to which nativists assumed Catholics belonged, in which national loyalty lie with Catholicism, and the sect acted as a nation state without borders. Catholics, according to nativists, still followed popes and priests, “unproductive nobility.” “Republican politics and the Catholic Religion,” the *Comet* claimed, “have never been

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<sup>108</sup> Shreveport *South-western*, November 8, 1854; August 1, 1855.

<sup>109</sup> “An Unkind Cut,” *George A. Pike Scrapbook*, Mss. 2835, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La; “Things About town,” *George A. Pike Scrapbook*, Mss. 2835, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La.

known to travel peaceably together.” Catholics could not be subjects to two governments, and their unwillingness to convert showed their loyalties.<sup>110</sup>

Despite their success in elections—especially in the Florida Parishes—the Americans in the northern sections split in two factions over their support of the pro-Catholic state platform. One group, the Simon Pures, led by *Comet* founder and editor George Pike of Baton Rouge, accused the more Catholic-sympathetic Know-Nothings of simply being Whigs without party and subsidiaries of New Orleans. Opposite the Simon Pures, another faction of Americans in the northern regions conceded support to the South Louisiana branch of the party in the interest of a unified party to challenge Democrats. Those in the faction that supported the state ticket were no less anti-Catholic, they just downplayed the candidates’ Catholicism. For example, anti-Catholic supporters of the state Know-Nothing Party, according to Democratic newspapers, justified their support by claiming that gubernatorial candidate Derbigny was really a “Protestant Catholic” who secretly despised Catholicism. Democrats took advantage of the schism within the party as a sign that the American party would inevitably fall apart. “Dissention and troubles continue,” one Democratic newspaper opined on the state of Know-Nothings in Louisiana, “to distract the doughty warriors of the K.N. wigwam. The ‘pipe of peace’ is no longer a ‘pipe of piece,’ but one of many pieces.”<sup>111</sup>

Pike and the Simon Pures sought to bring the Americans in line with the national group by purging the state party of old Catholic Whigs who joined the Americans by default as the Whigs ceased to convene. The Baton Rouge *Advocate*, a Democratic newspaper, recounted the

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<sup>110</sup> “Peculiar Circumstances,” *George A. Pike Scrapbook*, Mss. 2835, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge.

<sup>111</sup> *George A. Pike Scrapbook*, Mss. 2835, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, 1855-1856, (information taken from an unlabeled newspaper clipping in George Pike’s scrapbook); Sacher, *A Perfect War of Politics*, 243.

story of a man, “J.D.” (probably J.V. Duralde, a popular Sugar Parishes politician) who had been a longtime supporter, “financially and otherwise,” of the Whigs. When the Whigs became Know-Nothings, the *Advocate* claims, the Catholic J.D. became a “member of no party”—a fact with which Duralde, who had just gained the American Party’s nomination for treasurer, may have disagreed. The Simon Pure faction did not regard the American Party as successor to the Whigs, but rather they believed that the group should be a non-partisan organization of members from both political parties. The group nominated their own ticket for the 1855 state election that contained both Whigs and Democrats, including Lieutenant Governor Robert Wickliffe, who would go on in the election to win the governor’s race as a Democrat, to keep the position of Lieutenant Governor. The ticket, headed by Pike for governor, listed only ethnically American, protestant candidates from the Florida Parishes for Governor, Lieutenant Governor, Secretary of State, Treasurer, Auditor, Superintendent of Education, and Attorney General. Thoroughly as anti-New Orleans as it was nativist, the Simon Pure ticket failed to win most of its nominations—only R.G. Beale of Baton Rouge gained a nomination for Secretary of State—at the state convention.<sup>112</sup>

The Simon Pures spelled trouble for the state’s American Party. Their existence gave legitimacy to Democratic claims that Louisiana Know-Nothings harbored anti-Catholicism despite American claims otherwise. The Southern, pro-Catholic faction of the party regarded the Simon Pures as a black eye on the organization. Charles Gayarre tried to downplay the prevalence of the Simon Pures in the north, claiming that the anti-Catholic faction totaled just

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<sup>112</sup> “Things about Town,” *George A. Pike Scrapbook*, Mss. 2835, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge; “American Sentinels,” Shreveport *South-Western*, July 16, 1855. The Simon Pures actually nominated two tickets—a group calling themselves the National American Party, whose support derived from North Louisiana, but whose leader, C.W. Hardy, hailed from New Orleans, met to nominate a separate ticket in July as well. For further discussion on this anti-Catholic ticket, see Overdyke, *The Know-Nothing Party in the South*, 219-222.

“fifty low bred scoundrels.” Contrary to Gayarre’s insistence, the Simon Pures organized in the northern, Protestant, parishes of the state, such as the American Party council at Sparta, in Bienville, where a group formally denounced that official State party’s stance on anti Catholicism and adopted the entire national platform. The two sides fought over which claimed legitimacy—the faction that controlled the state convention, or the faction more closely aligned with the national convention. Even more damaging for the state party, the schism fueled Democrats’ claims of Know-Nothing weakness and disorganization.<sup>113</sup>

Despite the fact that the convention rejected the Simon Pure ticket and platform, the American Party fared reasonably well in the Florida Parishes. To the chagrin of the anti-Catholics, the convention in New Orleans nominated several Creole Catholics, including the party’s candidates for governor, lieutenant governor, and treasurer. The South Louisiana wing of the party garnered enough support to adopt a pro-Catholic platform, with the ninth plank meant to silence the Simon Pures:

“While we approve of the platform adopted by the late national council of the American Party at Philadelphia, we reject the application of the principles of the eighth article to the American catholics, [sic] as unjust, unfounded, and entirely unworthy of our country. We shall forever continue to protest against any abridgement of religious liberty, holding it as a cardinal maxim that religious faith is a question between each individual and his God. We utterly condemn any attempt to make religious belief a test for political office, and can never affiliate with any party which holds sentiments not in accordance with these.”

Despite these slights, the Know-Nothings gubernatorial candidate lost to his West Feliciana-native opponent by just 13 votes in the Florida Parishes. In Louisiana’s Third Congressional District race, which encompassed the Florida Parishes as well as parishes in North and South

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<sup>113</sup> Sacher, *A Perfect War of Politics*, 243-244; Overdyke, *The Know Nothing Party in the South*, 219-221.



Louisiana, the Know-Nothing candidate had won the Florida Parishes by 103 votes, but lost the broader district.<sup>114</sup>

The Americans fared more poorly in the northern parishes. Derbigny lost to Wickliffe there by 2,025 votes—nearly 14 percent of the electorate. In Louisiana’s fourth Congressional District, which contained Caldwell, Bienville, Winn, Rapides, Natchitoches, Sabine, Calcasieu, De Soto, Bossier, Claiborne, Union, Ouachita, Franklin, Caddo, Jackson, and Morehouse Parishes along with several parishes in Southwest Louisiana, the Know-Nothing congressional candidate lost in the North Louisiana by more than 15 percent. Those northern Parishes in the third district—Concordia, Catahoula, Tensas, Carroll, and Madison—gave their American Party congressional candidate a slight edge (116 vote lead), but the Third District parishes to the south tempered the vote, and the Democrats won that election.<sup>115</sup>

The American Party failed to win in North Louisiana during the state election for two reasons: a new group, calling themselves Anti-Know-Nothings campaigned against the American Party in the Fourth Congressional District, and with the defeat of the Simon Pures at the state convention, the Americans chose a New Orleans dominated ticket. Anti-Know-Nothings, also called anti-Americans by the Know-Nothing press, formed coalition tickets in elections to attract former Whigs who became disillusioned by the nativism present in the American Party. Anti-Know-Nothing tickets were essentially identical to Democratic tickets. The group started as a means for the Democrats to make inroads in former Whig strongholds for local and judicial elections by giving Whigs the option to support the Democratic candidate

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<sup>114</sup> Shreveport *South-Western*, July 18, 1855; “Louisiana State Election Official Returns,” *Clinton Feliciana Democrat*, December 1, 1855.

<sup>115</sup> “Louisiana State Election Official Returns,” *Clinton Feliciana Democrat*, November 24, 1855.

without having to feel like they were electing their old foe. Anti-Know-Nothing tickets were essentially identical to Democratic tickets. Know-Nothing press dismissed the anti-Know-Nothings as “political missionaries,” who envied the spread of the American Party. It is difficult to quantify how many former Whig votes the Anti-Know-Nothings brought to the Democrats, but it can be assumed that if the Know-Nothings gained much of their support from former Whigs, an alternative for old Whigs siphoned some of the party away from the Know-Nothings.<sup>116</sup>

Many North Louisianans felt reluctant to support the American Party in the election because the official state ticket contained several of their classic political foes—New Orleans-backed Catholics. Three Catholic Creole names sat atop the ticket: Charles Derbigny for Governor, Louis Texada for Lieutenant Governor, and J. V. Duralde for Treasurer. As the son of a former governor who had lived in greater New Orleans since Louisiana was a Spanish colony, Derbigny lived in New Orleans his entire life. The Democratic ticket, on the other hand, featured only two Creole names, no candidates from New Orleans, and five candidates from the Florida Parishes and North Louisiana: Robert Wickliffe for Governor from West Feliciana, Andre Hebron from East Baton Rouge for Secretary of State, Samuel F. Marks from West Feliciana for auditor, C. E. Greneaux from Natchitoches for Treasurer, and Samuel Bard of Carroll for Superintendent of Education. Democratic papers took advantage of the Know-Nothing’s gubernatorial candidate by pointing out that Derbigny’s own father, as a native of France who began his political career shortly after arriving from that country to Louisiana in 1797, would not have been eligible for his political career under Know-Nothing naturalization proposals.

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<sup>116</sup> Shreveport, *South-Western*, September 26, 1855. Michael Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, 933.

Democrats beat the Know-Nothings at their own game in the North during that 1855 election by providing a ticket that was, by its makeup but not by its ideology, more friendly to locally-minded nativists.<sup>117</sup>

The Know-Nothings never regained the level of popularity in the northern parts of the state that they held before the state election. By the 1856 presidential election, the party had already lost several of the parishes that had voted for the American candidate for Congress in 1855. Catahoula, East Baton Rouge, Rapides, and West Feliciana had American majorities in the 1855 elections, but voted for Buchanan in the 1856 presidential race. Of the six parishes that had voted for Fillmore in 1856, four of them had done so with much smaller margins than they had in 1855. In Madison Parish, the American majority dropped from 66 to just 19 votes; in Concordia, it dropped from 93 to 20 votes; in St. Tammany, it dropped from 251 to 77; and in Morehouse, the vote dropped from 97 to 19 votes. In St. Helena, the American party lead increased minimally from a 16 vote majority in 1855 to a 23 vote majority in 1856 (though it should be noted that the overall votes for the American candidate decreased, but the Democrat's decrease was greater), and in Caddo, the differential had increased from 28 in 1855 to 35 in 1856. The parishes that had voted Democrat in 1855 almost universally did so with bigger margins in 1856.<sup>118</sup>

The Know-Nothing party began its slow decline in the Florida Parishes and in North Louisiana because it became more entrenched in New Orleans. The party lost its newness and intrigue after the state election. Residents in the northern parts of the state could no longer

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<sup>117</sup> Clinton *Feliciana Democrat*, July 14, 1855.

<sup>118</sup>The 1855 congressional race is a better indicator of party support than the governor's race because several nativists rejected Derbigny because of his Catholicism; Clinton *Feliciana Democrat*, December 1, 1855; Clinton *Feliciana Democrat*, November 22, 1856.

pretend that the party could help the northern parts of the state oppose New Orleans as the party entrenched itself in that city. The Americans had become stronger than ever in New Orleans for the 1856 presidential election. Through votes and violence, the party had won by landslides in first, second, third, and fourth districts of New Orleans as well as Jefferson Parish. To make matters worse, the national party had been crumbling since the convention to nominate their presidential candidate after the Northern wing of the party left to join the Republicans, leaving the Know-Nothings popular in just a few slave states. By the time of the presidential election, the American Party in North Louisiana and the Florida Parishes had gone from being a vehicle by which to oppose the New Orleans political structure while having the backing of a national party to being a regional party dominated by the New Orleans political infrastructure.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Clinton *Felician Democrat*, November 22, 1856; Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850's*, 185.

## Aftermath and Conclusion

The presidential election in 1856 proved to both Know-Nothings and Democrats in Louisiana that the nation needed to address the question of slavery's expansion and the growing sectional divide. Just days after Buchanan had clinched the presidency, West Baton Rouge Democratic newspaper, *The Sugar Planter*, opined, "the election of Mr. Buchanan will not work a termination of the slavery agitation. It was never believed that it would; it will only postpone the solution of a great problem, the permanency of the federal union." New Orleans Know-Nothing paper, the *Daily Crescent* declared that, "our enemies—for they are our countrymen only in name—are already laying their plans for the conduct of the next Presidential campaign, by preparing for the struggles which will take place in the free states during the intermediate time...the organs of freesoilism seek to keep up an unhealthy and unpatriotic agitation which can only result in dissolution of the Union at no distant day." The Fillmore vote highlighted the growing sectional divide; while he gained 44 percent of the vote in the South, Fillmore won just 13 percent in the North. Most of the Northern Know-Nothings had bolted from the party to the Republicans and a Northern offshoot of the Know-Nothings that had supported Republican candidates. After 1856, the Know-Nothings were finished as a national party.<sup>120</sup>

The Know-Nothings in Louisiana did not disappear overnight or peacefully. Many of the American Party voters had abandoned party support for the Democrats by the 1857 elections, but some remained. Leading up to the 1857 state election, the Know-Nothings—by that time mostly old line Whigs who still refused to integrate with the Democrats—had all but abandoned nativism. The party instead focused on attacking their opponents with charges that the Louisiana

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<sup>120</sup> "The Beginning of the End," Port Allen *The Sugar Planter*, November 15, 1856; "The War against the South," New Orleans *Daily Crescent*, November 17, 1856; Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs*, 249; Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, 964-966.

Democrats had allied with Northern Democrats who were less than friendly to slavery. Even after they lost badly in the 1857 elections, Know-Nothings continued to be a force in New Orleans, where the party increasingly relied on violence to suppress the Democratic vote. American Party candidate Gerald Stith won the mayoral race in 1858 by 130 votes amidst a riot that tore New Orleans apart for weeks. The city remained the sole holdout for the American Party in Louisiana, but it stuck around until the Union Army assigned their own government in the city in 1862.<sup>121</sup>

The American Party in Louisiana nominated candidates for elections for seven years—at least in name—but outside of New Orleans, the party had nearly vanished within four years. By 1857, Americans no longer competed with Democrats anywhere outside of New Orleans. The state election that year was so bad for the Americans that they could not even defeat a split Democratic Party, with two candidates, in the Third Congressional District. The two Democratic candidates combined for nearly twice the American candidate's votes. In the Fourth District's congressional race, the Democrat received 80 percent more votes than the American candidate. As the Americans faded in to obsolescence, "Opposition" or "New Line Democrats" replaced them as the primary oppositional party to the mainstream Democrats in Louisiana. The Know-Nothings never again had widespread appeal in the state.<sup>122</sup>

During its brief existence, the American Party gained such national and multi-regional popularity because the party adapted to fill the political needs of constituents. Michael Holt described the Know-Nothing party as an anti-foreign and anti-Catholic reform party that

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<sup>121</sup>Sacher, *A Perfect War of Politics*, 264-265, 267; "City Election Returns—Official," *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, June 10, 1858.

<sup>122</sup>Clinton, *Louisiana Feliciana Democrat*, November 21, 1857; *The Opelousas Courier*, November 28, 1857; John Sacher, *A Perfect War of Politics*, 272-374.

culminated from the “revolt against politics as usual as usual that had appeared in 1852 and 1853.” The party did not initially have a unifying program or stance on other issues, nor did it dictate the level to which their anti-Catholicism or anti-foreignism should be central to the party. The group spread far and wide before the party convened to decide a platform. When the party finally held conventions, their inability to reach a consensus on slavery’s expansion—their battle over supporting a restoration of the Missouri Compromise and their fight over Millard Fillmore’s nomination served as a proxy for this—caused the party to splinter and fall apart. Only when the Americans tried to unify their party did their party lose support.<sup>123</sup>

Louisiana’s Know-Nothing party acted like a microcosm of the national party in that Americans in different parts of the state valued different aspects of the party and manipulated the party to fit their needs. The party expanded across the state in 1854 and 1855, rising from non-existence to winning one US congressional district, several state senate and congressional seats, and near countless municipal positions in all regions of the state. When the party convened in Baton Rouge to decide their state ticket for the 1855 election, the party began to splinter along regional lines. Shortly thereafter the party retracted until it existed as New-Orleans specific party, and grew to irrelevance in the rest of the state. As a microcosm of the nation, the Know-Nothings of Louisiana serve as an invaluable model to understand how political movements expanded and contracted in the antebellum era.

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<sup>123</sup> Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 218-219.

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## **Vita**

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