South Carolina Catholics and the Know Nothing Challenge: The Charleston Elections of 1855

Adam Tate

South Carolina Catholics defended themselves against the nativist attacks of the Know Nothings during the 1855 Charleston city elections by portraying themselves as loyal southerners and Americans. During the political battle, a number of South Carolina Democrats rose to defend their Catholic neighbors from nativist attacks. By the end of the election cycle, South Carolina Catholics had adopted a critique of centralized state power that gelled with broader Carolinian political concerns, bringing them closer to the South Carolina political and cultural mainstream.

In Catholicism and American Freedom, historian John McGreevy notes that in the regular conflicts between Catholics and American Protestants and secularists, Catholics often bear the label of an anti-progressive social force hostile to modern freedom. This ascribed identity has allowed opponents of Catholicism in the United States to advocate severe limits on the freedom of Catholics while at the same time congratulating themselves as tolerant, freedom-loving Americans. Historically, Catholics have responded by accusing their opponents of hypocrisy, a charge whose truth can sting but usually serves to embitter further their opposition. Catholics have also employed other tactics, however. Because the charges of their enemies assume that Catholics are “others,” people outside the acceptable boundaries of the national community, Catholics have argued for inclusion. The specifics of the Catholic argument reveal the ways that Catholics understood both America and American freedom. As McGreevy has shown, one must study both Catholic self-understanding and Protestant and secular anti-Catholic polemics to comprehend the consequences of this ongoing conflict over American culture.¹

This essay is a case study of a specific conflict, a political battle between the nativist Know Nothing Party and Catholics during the 1850s in South Carolina. For many reasons, most scholarship of antebellum American Catholicism has focused on the North or Midwest. But southern Catholics fought many of the same battles, albeit in a slightly different cultural environment. Looking at the ways in which southern Catholics fought nativism in the 1850s can reveal not only Catholic understandings

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of the United States but also help to explain the specific ways American Catholics adapted to their cultural environments.

In 1854 and 1855, in the wake of the collapse of the Whig Party after the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the nativist Know Nothing Party emerged nationwide to challenge the Democratic Party. The Know Nothings, initially a secret society, seem to have originated in New York in the mid-1850s from an organization called the Order of United Americans, one of many nativist groups protesting the social costs of massive immigration and a growing Catholic political presence. The Party expanded between 1854 and 1856, tapping into pre-existing nativist sentiment throughout the country. Attracting both ex-Whigs and Democrats, it presented a serious challenge to Democratic supremacy in national politics. The Party grew in the South as well. In late 1854 the Know Nothings emerged in South Carolina and organized in Charleston, Columbia, and Greenville. A state with few foreign white immigrants before 1840 and a weak system of party competition, South Carolina had not witnessed a vigorous nativist political movement. While Catholics and Protestants in South Carolina sniped at one another publicly over religious issues, Catholics in the Palmetto State largely had remained insulated from political persecution. Irish immigration grew after 1840 and influenced the state’s urban areas significantly. During the 1850s, Charleston experienced a twenty-five percent increase in the number of foreign-born whites in the labor force. In 1860, Irish immigrants comprised twenty-nine percent of the free male labor force in the city and sixty percent of the unskilled free male labor force. As the immigration numbers increased, political nativism developed in Charleston.

In 1855 Catholics ran for several local offices in South Carolina, an indication of their growing presence in the state’s urban areas. In July, C. E. Kanapaux, Esq., a Catholic, ran for sheriff in Charleston against Col. J. E. Carew, a Protestant. The Know Nothings organized a campaign that resulted in the defeat of Kanapaux. Hoping to capitalize on their newfound strength, the Know Nothings ran a candidate, F. D. Richardson, in the Charleston mayoral race in November 1855 and competed for over a dozen other municipal offices in the state’s most powerful urban center. Charleston Democrats united in the Democratic Southern Rights Party to defeat all of the Know Nothing candidates, to the great delight of the Catholic population of the city.

There has been only one published scholarly treatment of the nativist elections in Charleston. James Marchio’s superb piece investigated voting patterns in the city to map pockets of Know Nothing strength. The article dealt only tangentially with the political rhetoric of the campaign, however, focusing instead on class politics and labor unrest that contributed
to the rise and fall of the Know Nothings in the city.\textsuperscript{5} Catholic intellectual responses to the nativist political campaigns of 1855 were significant and revealing. During 1855 South Carolina Catholics began their rhetorical response with language and concepts derived from southern political culture and then moved to more thoughtful arguments about the identity of Catholics in America. Catholics appealed to older concepts of the rights of Englishmen and portrayed themselves as part of the American and southern communities. Before the mayoral race in November 1855, Catholics expressed concern over the danger of centralized power in a liberal state. A government that claimed sovereignty over human affairs ultimately subordinated religion and morality to the whims of the rulers. Catholics warned that aggressive state power threatened Catholic religious liberty. South Carolina Catholics, then, moved from arguments about Catholicism and American identity toward a critique of centralized state power during the nativist campaign of 1855.

South Carolina Catholics debated the Know Nothings in the pages of the \textit{United States Catholic Miscellany}, the weekly paper of the diocese of Charleston. The first bishop of Charleston, John England, founded the \textit{Miscellany} in 1822. The paper enjoyed nationwide circulation, but focused mostly on ecclesiastical affairs in the southern states. In 1855 Fr. James Corcoran of the Diocese of Charleston edited the paper. Corcoran sympathized with a states’ rights interpretation of the United States’ Constitution, but tried to remain quiet on most issues of practical politics.\textsuperscript{6} Bishop England had initiated that editorial policy in the early days of the paper. He had no desire for Catholics to become the sport of political parties and thus focused on reporting church news, printing Catholic apologetics, and commenting on European, particularly Irish, affairs. Only rarely did Bishop England comment on matters of party politics.\textsuperscript{7} Although the \textit{Miscellany} usually contained little direct editorializing by the editors, the paper did reprint stories from around the nation. The United States government allowed newspaper editors to receive, “free of charge, one copy of every other newspaper in the country.”\textsuperscript{8} This led to the common practice of editors clipping stories from other newspapers and reprinting them in their own papers. By the 1840s, railroads and telegraph lines delivered the news and the mail more quickly, facilitating a greater spread of information.\textsuperscript{9} Fr. Corcoran carefully selected news to reprint, and these stories provide insights into the opinions the \textit{Miscellany} sought to promote.

Even though the \textit{Miscellany} usually shied away from directly engaging questions of practical politics, the Know Nothings challenged that policy. The Know Nothings organized as a political party and sought to proscribe immigrants, many of whom were Catholic Irish, from
voting and full United States citizenship. There were two issues at hand:
anti-immigration and anti-Catholicism. The Miscellany focused heavily
on the anti-Catholic element of the movement, which it thought predomi-
nated. But in doing so, it left unanswered questions about the difficulties
the Irish working class experienced trying to assimilate. Also, in oppos-
ing the Know Nothing Party, the Miscellany placed itself openly on the
side of the Democratic Party, abandoning its neutrality. Between March
1855 and January 1856, the Miscellany developed its interpretation of the
Know Nothing movement.

The Miscellany initially turned to the familiar tactic in southern polit-
ics that historian William Cooper has called the “politics of slavery.” The
March 10, 1855, edition reprinted a story from a Columbia, South
Carolina paper linking the Know Nothings in the North to abolitionism.
Beyond the other issues that connected Know Nothings, the story claimed,
the “war against slavery” bonded them together. A few weeks later, the
editor of the Miscellany noted that Senator Henry Wilson from Massachu-
setts had been “attacked with apoplexy . . . whilst engaged in delivering
an antislavery lecture.” “It is very likely,” the Miscellany opined, “that Mr.
Wilson’s lecture was not without its spice of anti-Papery. For how could a
Know Nothing speak in public, as such, without dragging in this theme?”
The Miscellany attributed the event to “God’s providence” and noted that
famous anti-Catholic evangelical Lyman Beecher, who had helped to in-
cite a mob that destroyed the Ursuline Convent in Charlestown, Massa-
chusetts in 1834, had been “stricken with apoplexy in the middle of one of
his no-Popery harangues.” The Miscellany used the same tactic against
the Know Nothings as southern Democrats did, branding the Party with
the label of abolition in order to drive away southern support.

The Miscellany also called the Know Nothings dishonorable, a com-
mon tactic in South Carolina politics. In the March 31, 1855, edition of
the paper, Fr. Corcoran included a short account from the Boston Pilot
under the ironic heading “Know-Nothing Chivalry.” A group of nativists
“attacked” two nuns in Providence, Rhode Island while the ladies were
walking through the streets. In addition to harassing women, the Know
Nothings, asserted Corcoran, were liars who distorted Catholic beliefs in
order to increase popular hostility to the Faith. Corcoran noted that the
secrecy of the Know Nothings made the Order “essentially un-American
and anti-republican.” Southern papers commonly made similar charges
against political enemies, a tribute to the influence of honor culture in the
region. Thus, at first, the dispute with Know Nothings differed little from
other political conflicts.
In April, however, the *Miscellany* began to publish more thought-
ful attacks on nativism and linked American Catholics to the histories
of Britain and the United States. Catholic writers claimed an American
identity for Catholics in opposition to Know Nothing claims that Catholi-
cism was foreign to the United States. In the April 7, 1855, edition, the
editor reprinted a column from the Litchfield *Republican* that asked, “Did
our revolutionary fathers proscribe men merely because they were for-
eigners?” The answer was “no,” of course, and was followed by a brief
discussion of prominent participants in the Revolution who came from
Scotland, Wales, Ireland, and Germany. In the next issue, the *Miscellany*
reprinted a lengthy article from the Boston *Daily Advertiser* concerning
the harassment of the Sisters of Charity by a nativist mob that insisted
upon its right to inspect their convent. To defend the nuns, the author ap-
ppealed to bills of rights in the Massachusetts constitution and the United
States Constitution protecting individuals against illegal searches and sei-
zures. The writer concluded, “The revolution was fought in vain if the
great American principles of private right and domestic security are now
being set at naught.” By printing appeals to both the history of the Revolu-
tion and constitutional rights, the *Miscellany* insisted that Catholics, even
if they had been born in Europe, did not have to be permanent strangers
in the United States. Catholics were and had been citizens of the United
States, a fact recognized by the Founding Fathers. Quoting George Wash-
ington’s letter to Virginia Baptists, the *Miscellany* noted that Washington
admitted he would not have signed the Constitution if he believed that the
document would have endangered “the religious rights of any ecclesiasti-
cal society.” Washington concluded that “any man conducting himself
as a good citizen, and being accountable to God alone for his religious
opinions, ought to be protected in worshipping the Deity according to the
dictates of his own conscience.” How could nativists disagree with the
father of their country?

The *Miscellany* expanded the argument that Catholicism was not ad-
versarial to American principles. The paper reprinted an account of Fr.
James Ryder’s address to the Georgia Historical Society in April 1855.
Ryder, a Jesuit and former president of Georgetown University who lived
in South Carolina for a time, portrayed Catholics as friends to civil lib-
erty, while addressing the main issues raised by the Know Nothings. The
Church, hardly a shill for monarchy, “recognized and obeyed any form of
government adapted to the circumstances of a people.” It also “was op-
posed to tyranny and . . . had always proved the best friend to the rights of
the people.” The Church ameliorated slavery in the ancient world “by soft-
ening the heart of the master” but had “never declared that it was wrong
that Christians should be subject to masters as bondsmen.” Catholics were no threat to southern slavery, he emphasized.  

Ryder also made an argument concerning the Catholic origins of the “rights of Englishmen,” an important point because such privileges were widely understood to be a basis of American rights. During the seventeenth century, those hostile to the claims of the Stuart monarchs had invoked the ancient constitution and the rights of Englishmen as their defense. These thinkers rooted rights in the historic tradition and experiences of the English people, claimed their rights preceded the Norman Conquest of 1066, and that authority for their rights lay beyond the reach of the monarch. During the imperial crisis of the 1760s and 1770s, American colonists had used the “rights of Englishmen” language to justify resistance to Parliament’s colonial legislation. The rights of Englishmen arguments did not die out with the appearance of natural rights claims. In fact, the two arguments for rights, one particular and the other universal, persisted during the Early Republic. American conservatives, frightened by the radical social implications of natural-rights arguments—especially in the aftermath of the French and Haitian Revolutions—held to the idea that their rights had evolved through a historic process and that the patriots of the American Revolution had claimed and owned these rights by fighting the “tyrants” of their own day. Thus when Ryder claimed historic rights or the rights of Englishmen he implied that he was part of the community that enjoyed these rights, not an outsider begging for inclusion.

Ryder invoked the rights of Englishmen to establish that American Catholics could claim them as well. “In the days of the usurpation of William of Normandy and his successors,” he contended, “it was the Catholic Church which stood between the people and an unjust tyranny, defending the rights of the former, and softening the character of the latter.” The famous Magna Charta “was, indeed, the work of the Catholic Church.” “Whatever there was good, liberal and just in the English Constitution and English laws could be traced to [the] Catholic mind,” Ryder asserted. In America, the Church continued its fight for freedom. “Catholic Maryland,” he mentioned, “first unfurled the banner of religious liberty and toleration.” The presence of Catholics in the American Revolution—here Ryder invoked Charles Carroll of Carrolton and Casimir Pulaski—demonstrated that Catholics fought and bled for American freedom. American Catholics had won for their religious successors these rights. In other words, Catholics in America, including newly arrived Irish Catholic immigrants, claimed rights that were theirs by both intellectual and historic inheritance. Ryder’s insistence on inherited rights made rhetorical sense given that nativists held Catholicism to be foreign to the country. He im-
plied that Know Nothings were vandals, seeking to deprive American Catholics of rights that were justly and appropriately theirs, not by nature but by history and tradition.

As the election for sheriff neared in Charleston, the *Miscellany* made its case for Catholic belonging in American culture one more time. In late June, the *Miscellany* reprinted the new Know Nothing platform that emerged from the Party’s national convention in Philadelphia. The paper also reprinted critiques of the platform from southern states’ rights perspectives.24 Southern papers accused the Know Nothings of advocating consolidated national government and a vigorous role for the federal government in economic affairs, a similar program to that of the defunct Whig Party.25 While reprinting these critiques did not necessarily mean that the *Miscellany* endorsed the specifics of the states’ rights doctrines of southern Democrats, the inclusion of the arguments implied that southern Democrats and Catholics shared a common enemy in the Know Nothings. Thus the *Miscellany* subtly hinted that Catholics should be perceived as good southerners fighting alongside the Democrats against the dangerous Know Nothings.

C. E. Kanapaux, the Catholic candidate for sheriff of Charleston, lost the election, gaining only forty-two percent of the vote. In a lengthy editorial the *Miscellany* denounced the Know Nothings for underhanded tactics. The paper acknowledged that Col. Carew, the victor, was well respected and received support from many not aligned with the Know Nothings. But the “Know Nothing faction brought the religious question into the field and made it an issue of Catholic and Protestant.” Know Nothing support of an immigrant over a native South Carolinian on the basis of religion—Carew was an Irish-born Protestant while Kanapaux was a native South Carolinian—made it clear to the *Miscellany* that anti-Catholicism rather than hostility to foreign immigration was most dear to their cause. Know Nothings included “all those implements that form an essential part of anti-Catholic warfare” in their attack on Kanapaux, especially “forgery and falsehood.” Know Nothings spread rumors that Fr. Patrick Lynch, the administrator of the diocese, had preached a sermon of support for Kanapaux. They claimed that the pope had even sent Kanapaux money and that the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy in Charleston had been raising campaign cash for him. Even Protestant ministers, the paper claimed, “went round to their flocks, and cautioned them against the horrible sin of voting for a Catholic.”26 It seemed in July 1855 that the Know Nothings in South Carolina were gaining ground. Catholics would have to intensify their opposition.
In August 1855, South Carolina Know Nothings, emboldened by successes during the summer, planned to run candidates in the Charleston city elections in November. This worried not only Catholics but also Democrats, who feared a strong, viable second party in the city and state. They too joined in attacking nativism, and the Miscellany adopted a new argument against the Know Nothings. The paper attacked the nativists for their views of the expanded authority of the state.

Catholics feared that Know Nothings gave the state too much control over religious and moral affairs. In the August 25, 1855, edition of the Miscellany, Fr. Corcoran reprinted a letter signed “A Protestant Citizen” from the Charleston Mercury, the leading states’ rights Democratic paper. Corcoran wrote, “It is one of the clearest and most rational expositions of the case [against Know Nothings], that it has ever been our fortune to see from a Protestant pen.” The crux of the letter concerned the Know Nothings’ acceptance of a powerful liberal state. “A Protestant Citizen” set up a hypothetical dilemma to make his point. The state “proposes a law, or adopts a policy, involving a grave moral question for one of her citizens.” Three men, a “Catholic, a Baptist, and a Deist . . . have to determine upon their votes.” Each discerns in his own way. The Catholic “consults his priest, the Baptist goes on his knees and communes directly with his God, the Deist refers the matter to his reason.” Each citizen agrees that the law is immoral and that “they cannot, in conscience, obey.” The law passes, and “the State punishes the disobedience in each.” The State does not care, says the writer, “how they arrived at their conclusion.” The Know Nothings, however, take the power of the state to a higher level. They condemn the Catholic for how he made his decision. “A Protestant Citizen” concludes, “In other words, this principle claims for the state the right to determine how moral truths shall be learned by its citizens, and it thus erects itself into the only and infallible church.” Implied is that the State would then enforce its claims with religious zeal.27

“A Protestant Citizen” defended religious toleration as a limit on state authority. He noted that the “state does not profess to teach men their moral duties; it leaves them free to learn from God, through whatever teachers they may select.” The Know Nothings want to punish citizens “for the selection of their teachers.” By setting itself up as an arbiter of acceptable methods of religious teaching, the state places itself in judgment of religious claims. “A Protestant Citizen” contended that “if the State has the right to forbid this, because political questions are controlled by their moral elements, and therefore, it alone can decide upon the moral truth involved, we will be subject to a worse tyranny than the union of church and state; for the State, irresponsible, unreflecting, mastered by bad men,
or government by selfish ones, will be the Church.” Religious freedom shielded citizens from universal moral claims of a powerful, centralized state.

Later in the same issue, Fr. Corcoran assured South Carolinians that Catholics would be loyal. “Many Protestants,” he predicted, “will discover that the Catholic religion not only happens to be always on the right, conservative side of all social questions, but is at the same time always an object of hatred and persecution to the wicked.” Know Nothings were no different than other persecutors. Corcoran’s comments along with his decision to reprint the article from the *Mercury* were efforts to reach out to South Carolina Democrats who simultaneously were attacking Know Nothings in the state. South Carolina Protestants, he hinted, should see that Catholic Carolinians stood by them in the fight against abolitionism and the growth of state power.

As the city elections approached, the *Miscellany* reused older arguments and renewed a plea for toleration. Several letters noted that Catholics had fought and died for the country and that they possessed the inherited rights of Englishmen. Others invoked the Founding Fathers, particularly Charles Carroll of Carrollton. In the October 27, 1855, edition, Fr. Corcoran reprinted a speech given by Bishop England in March 1821 at Charleston’s Hibernian Hall. Bishop England told his audience that every person had the duty to seek the truth and “profess it.” But if individuals came to “different results” they “should not therefore be precluded from uniting their efforts to promote the other various good objects, for the attainment of which they all agreed.” In other words, neither Catholics nor Protestants would give up their claims to possess the truth, but this did not end the possibility of social tolerance and cooperation. South Carolina Catholics hoped their fellow citizens would agree and defeat the Know Nothings in the city elections.

The defeat of all of the Know Nothing candidates in the November Charleston election did not cause South Carolina Catholics to forget the lessons learned during the debates of 1855. Fr. Corcoran noted about the nativists’ defeat, “It was a most unmistakable rebuke to the foul spirit of sectarian and social intolerance, that has lately attempted to creep in amongst us.” The *Miscellany* did not stop its critiques of nativism even though the Know Nothings disbanded in South Carolina after the November election. On January 19, 1856, the paper reprinted parts of a speech by Democrat Lawrence Keitt, states’ rights advocate and fire-eater, denouncing the Know Nothings. Keitt argued that “suffrage is a qualified political right, given to individuals in correlation to public duty.” Catholics had performed their duties and thus deserved the vote. If Catholics were
dangerous to American republicanism, the Founding Fathers would have proscribed them. Know Nothings, then, by working to block the rights of Catholics to vote flouted the wisdom of the Founders. Thus the *Miscellany* continued its conservative message of hostility to the growth of government power and its support of the concept of inherited traditional rights. The fact that the *Miscellany* continued this message after the Know Nothings had been vanquished shows that these arguments were not merely used pragmatically to produce a quick victory. Instead, they became part of the Catholic rhetorical arsenal.

The battles with the Know Nothings in 1855 had important ramifications for South Carolina Catholics as the sectional crisis intensified. In their fight, Catholics found allies among those who would lead the secession movement in South Carolina five years later. William Porcher Miles, who became mayor of Charleston upon winning the November 1855 election, denounced nativism and attempted a number of reforms. His enemies dubbed him “Paddy Miles,” a nickname that revealed his allegiance to the Catholic Irish working class of the city. Miles became a leading fire-eater in 1860 and a prominent Confederate politician. As South Carolina drifted toward secession, the experiences of the nativist campaigns contributed to the transformation of South Carolina Catholics into loyal Confederates. Their experiences during the Civil War would confirm, not create, their southern identity. South Carolina Catholics ultimately used a debate over religious freedom and the nature of American culture to paint themselves as loyal southerners and Americans. Ironically, a movement to exclude southern Catholics actually brought them closer to the South Carolina political and cultural mainstream.

Notes

I would like to thank David Gilbert, Nathan Coleman, John Quinn, the anonymous readers for the *CSSR*, and Kevin Schmiesing for their comments on earlier drafts of this article.


4. In Columbia, a Know Nothing won the mayoral race in April 1855.


9. Ibid., 68.

10. W. Jason Wallace, *Catholics, Slaveholders, and the Dilemma of American Evangelicalism, 1835–1860* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), chap. 4, especially p. 94, believes that southern Know Nothings were not as fully anti-Catholic as their northern colleagues. This question was debated in South Carolina at the time.

11. William Cooper, *The South and the Politics of Slavery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), especially chap. 9. I agree with Bladek that it is hard to judge the effectiveness of these appeals in the Know Nothing campaigns in the South. Bladek, “‘Virginia is Middle Ground,’” 65.


13. Ibid., April 7, 1855. On Beecher, see Nancy Lusignan Schultz, *Fire and Roses: The Burning of the Charleston Convent, 1834* (New York: Free Press, 2000). Corcoran’s rhetorical tactic might be distasteful, but he was well informed of the tendencies of the northern Know-Nothings. Bruce Laurie, in his insightful book *Beyond Garrison*, notes, “The fact is, however, that the Know-Nothings outdid the Free Soilers on anti-Southernism and antislavery” (279). Laurie also writes: “Know-Nothings who had passed through Free Soilism and who were possibly political neophytes had no more respect for the plantation system of the South than they did for the Catholic Church. For them the two were similar, with comparable hierarchies of parasitic planters and prelates living off the labor of others—peasants in Old Europe and poor whites in the South” (282). This explains why South Carolina Catholics, while linking Know Nothingism and abolitionism, did not address at all the issue of slavery itself, which did not surface in any significant way in the 1855 election.


15. *United States Catholic Miscellany* (Charleston, S.C.), March 31, 1855. Also see the story on August 18, 1855, for another use of honor language.


18. Ibid., April 14, 1855.

19. Ibid., April 21, 1855.

24. United States Catholic Miscellany (Charleston, S.C.), June 30, 1855. On the convention and its effects in the South, see Bladek, “‘Virginia is Middle Ground,’” 65–70.  
25. The Charleston Mercury doubted the coherence of the new Party and mentioned its confused approach to its platform. October 3, 1855.  
26. United States Catholic Miscellany (Charleston, S.C.), July 14, 1855. See also Charleston Mercury, July 12, 1855. James Marchio printed the election returns in “Nativism in the Old South,” 45.  
28. Ibid.  
29. Ibid.  
30. Ibid., September 15 and October 6, 1855. These issues reprint letters from General William R. Miles, a politically active Catholic in Mississippi around the city of Jackson.  
31. Ibid., September 22 and October 13, 1855.  
32. Ibid., October 27, 1855.  
33. Ibid., November 10, 1855.  
34. Charleston Mercury (Charleston, S.C.), November 20, 1855, reprints the notice about the dissolution of the state Know Nothing Party.  