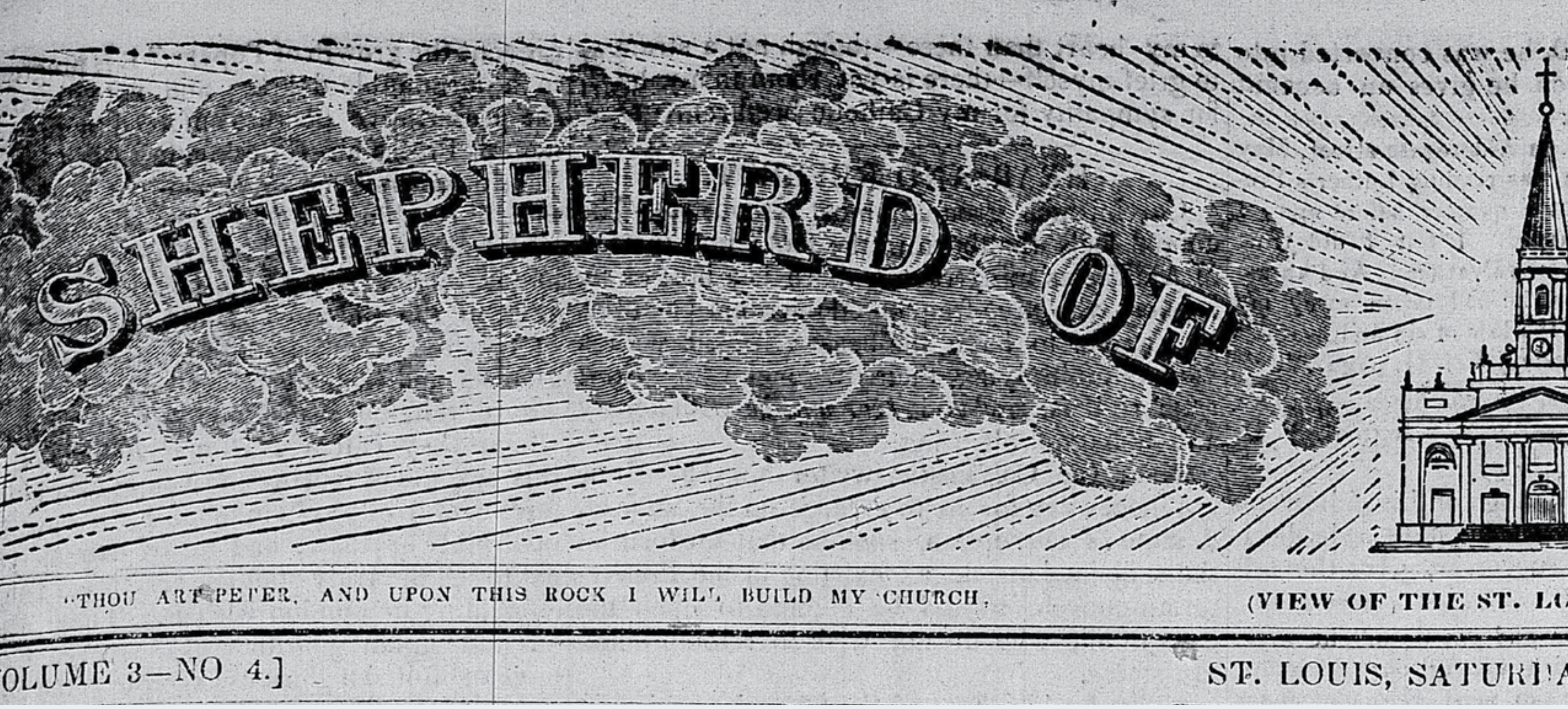


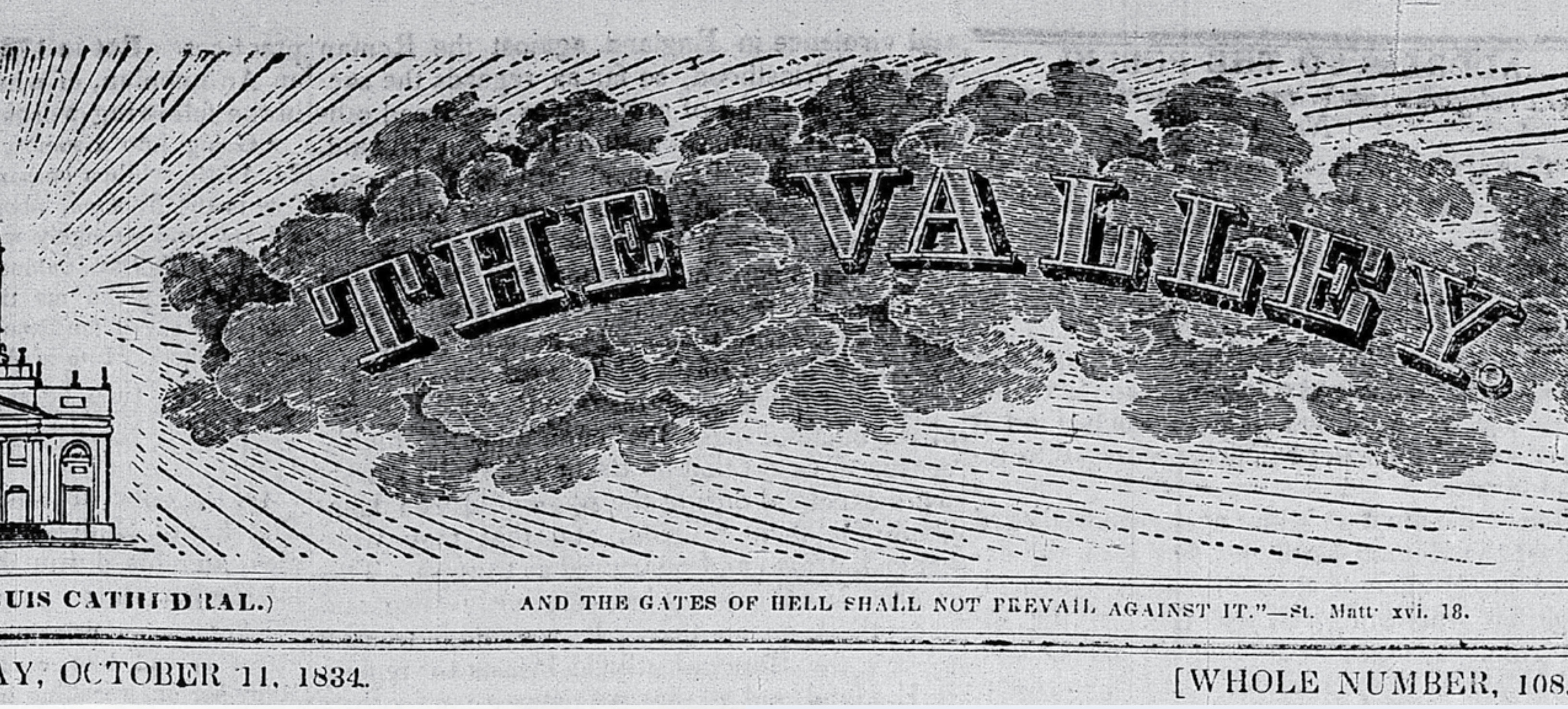
In Defense of the Faith:

The Catholic Response to Anti-Catholicism in Early Nineteenth-Century St. Louis

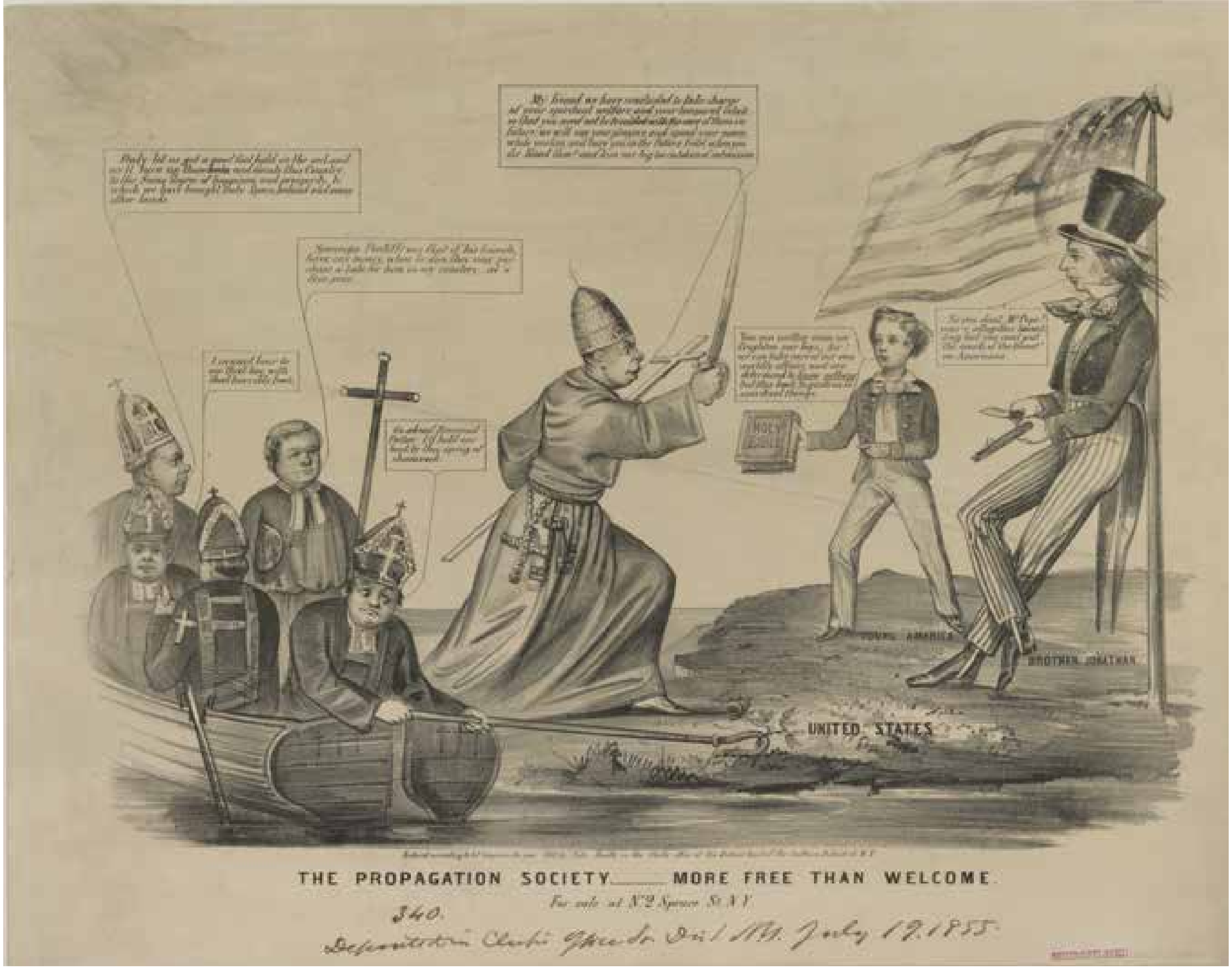
BY SARAH HINDS

(Above) The Cathedral in St. Louis was the largest physical symbol of the church for Catholics in the region. The publishers of the Catholic newspaper, *Shepherd of the Valley*, used the Cathedral as one of the paper's stock images in its masthead. *(Image: Office of Archives and Records—Archdiocese of St. Louis)*

(Right) The Basilica of St. Louis, King of France, informally known as the Old Cathedral, stands adjacent to the Gateway Arch grounds today. When completed in 1834, it was the first cathedral west of the Mississippi and the only Catholic church until 1845. *(Image: Office of Archives and Records—Archdiocese of St. Louis)*



Beginning in the early nineteenth century, Roman Catholic immigrants entered America through major port cities at astounding rates, settling either along the East Coast or continuing westward. Many who continued west established themselves in St. Louis, a rapidly growing metropolis ideally located for trade and travel on the Mississippi River. These Catholic immigrants met hostility from Protestants who found their Catholic faith theologically backwards at best, and at worst incompatible with republican government and therefore inherently un-American. Out of fear and distrust of Catholicism's association with the pope, most anti-Catholics hoped to keep "Romanists" out of politics, or to at least minimize their influence. As a result, anti-Catholicism manifested itself as largely a project of the Protestant clergy—a project that sought to keep in check a growing Catholic population. A similar phenomenon characterized the Catholic immigrant experience elsewhere in the United States at the time, but St. Louis is notable for the relatively peaceful response of Catholic immigrants to native Protestant anti-Catholicism. Ironically, as Catholics responded to anti-Catholic vitriol in the community, the press, and politics, they practiced many of the distinctly American values that Protestant antagonists accused them of resisting.



Nativism combined a dislike of immigrants and Catholics, which went hand-in-hand in the case of Irish Catholic immigrants. This 1855 print, "The Propagation Society, More Free Than Welcome," was produced and widely sold by Nathaniel Currier, who was among the largest print houses producing inexpensive prints of a variety of subjects for people to hang in homes. Young America is greeted by Pope Pius IX in a boat with a group of bishops, one of whom holds the boat to shore with a crozier hooked around a shamrock "of your spiritual welfare, and your temporal estate, so that you need not be troubled with the care of them in future; we will say your prayers and spend your money, while you live, and bury you in the Potters Field, when you die. Kneel then! and kiss our big toe in token of submission." *(Image: Library of Congress)*

Despite the evangelical hue of the concurrent Second Great Awakening, the largest denomination in the country by 1850 was Catholicism. Catholics numbered 318,000 in 1830; by 1870, there were 4.5 million. This was partly due to the annexation of Texas and the United States' acquisition of other primarily Catholic territories in the southwest, but immigration also contributed immensely to this increase. Thousands of Irish and German Catholics immigrated to America in the first half of the nineteenth century and brought their faith with them to their adopted homeland, many of them landing in St. Louis. These were not the first Catholics to make their home in St. Louis, a city named after a Catholic king and saint. The city could trace its Catholic roots back to the French fur traders who founded the city in 1764. In the early nineteenth century, the city drew thousands with its lucrative port on the Mississippi River and the enticing lure of opportunity in the American West. Immigrants came in waves, the first sizable group arriving in the 1830s. Extreme poverty in Ireland pushed thousands of unskilled Irish workers across the Atlantic to cities like St. Louis. Another wave began arriving in the 1840s, fleeing the devastation of the Irish potato famine in 1846 and 1847 and the tumultuous revolutions and economic downturn in the German Confederation. Between 1840 and 1850, the population of St. Louis grew by 372.8 percent. By 1850, 77,860 people resided in St. Louis: 9,179 of these were Irish, and 22,340 were German. By 1860, those numbers increased several times over; St. Louis boasted a population of 160,733, with 29,926 Irish and 50,510 Germans.[1]

America, and St. Louis in particular, drew immigrant populations searching for peace and opportunity. Much to the chagrin of many native-born Americans, these immigrants often did not assimilate but created ethnic and religious enclaves within the city of St. Louis, often in the form of Catholic parishes. Churches formed on the basis of ethnicity. One could have walked down Chouteau Avenue in the heart of the city in the early nineteenth century and passed one or more specifically Irish, French-Irish, or German parishes along the way. The trend was repeated throughout the city. "Religious and ethnic solidarity, cultural isolationism, institutional separatism, and an aggressive minority consciousness that was defensive as well as insular" characterized immigrant Catholic communities across the city. Instead of meshing with the distinct culture of St. Louis, Irish and German Catholic immigrants retained and continued to embrace their own respective cultures. They worshiped with their fellow immigrants, and in the case of the Germans, continued to speak and publish newspapers in their native language. They further "alienated themselves from the community" by establishing their own newspapers and cultural organizations, leading nativists to assume reluctance on the part of the immigrants to "accept American institutions and ways of living."[2] The fact that immigrants retained their own cultures and way of life, and that many of them were Catholic, contributed to the inevitable and gradually intensifying nativist sentiments that swept antebellum America, and St. Louis in particular.

Non-Catholics perceived Catholicism's relationship to the pope to be both incompatible with and a legitimate threat to American institutions. The pope, to Roman Catholics, is the spiritual head of the Catholic Church—the Vicar of Christ, who follows a line of apostolic succession beginning with St. Peter, to whom Jesus gave the "keys to the kingdom of Heaven." Thus the pope is not, and certainly was not, worshiped, but he is considered a spiritual leader of the world's Catholics. To Protestants, this relationship with a foreign sovereign (who at the time was also temporally in charge of the Papal States) seemed to be a blatant and dangerous misplacement of loyalties on the part of immigrants. An 1851 pamphlet published in St. Louis by Neidner & Co. argued that the "Romish Church" should be considered a threat because "it owes allegiance to a foreign sovereign." The thought of ceding authority, even spiritual authority, to any foreign entity disturbed many American Protestants. To do so was to take a step backwards in the progress the country had made in the last several decades toward independence and liberty; it was to invite the danger of subversion by a foreign leader. "There is cause for alarm to our free institutions," reads the 1851 pamphlet; "If infant liberty was crushed in Italy by French bayonets at the solicitation of the pope, why may not a similar course be attempted at some future time in America?"[3]

The conflict between Catholicism and the rest of religious America drew, then, not solely from Catholic practices and worship—though theological differences ran deep and caused contention—but from the role of the papacy in the life of the church. Catholics during the first fifty years of the American republic's existence proved their loyalty by being some of the staunchest supporters of the cause for independence. Mary Jane Farrelly noted a "strongly republican element" existed in early American Catholicism, when "lay-clerical relations were marked by a degree of harmony and cooperation." The "spirit of 1776" manifested itself distinctly in those of the Catholic faith, and Catholics in the late eighteenth century were "largely accustomed to the republican idea that ordinary people such as themselves were the source of power in civil society." But the waves

Some Protestants, especially those actively involved in the Second Great Awakening, saw the Catholic Church as something outside the bounds of Christianity, such as "Dr. Duff on the Jesuits," a nativist tract published in 1846. *(Image: Mary Ambler Archives, Lindenwood University)*

of immigration from the 1830s onward brought Catholics from countries politically and socially chaotic. These Catholics found respite in what came to be known as ultramontanism—literally "looking over the mountains" to Rome—for guidance. Naturally, a historically Protestant nation still reveling in its young independence took offense at the idea of looking to a power other than immediate, American civil institutions—more specifically, the American people themselves—for any kind of authority. The fact that Catholic immigrants often used rosary beads to pray and the fact that they typically prayed in Latin, though of course alien to the average Protestant of the Second Great Awakening, was not as disconcerting as was the question of whether or not Catholics "[could] bear unshackled allegiance to the Constitution and government of [the] Republic while [owing] allegiance to a foreign sovereign."[4] The question was whether these newcomers could be both faithful Catholics and loyal Americans.

Concern for the immigrants' loyalty certainly contributed to nativist, anti-immigrant sentiments that arose and took aim at Catholics, but so did a pre-existing stigma against Irish laborers. By 1836, more than half of Irish immigrants were unskilled. Irish pouring into the United States to escape the potato blight in the following years were one of the "most impoverished, destitute, unskilled groups" ever to immigrate to America. In the south, the Irish laboring class was so looked down upon that the upper echelon of society relegated them to the same social level as slaves. The Irish Catholic immigrants were denigrated to the lower rungs of society for their ethnicity, and they were altogether feared for their religious beliefs. The Native American Democratic Association in St. Louis concluded in 1835 that the "Roman Catholic religion is a political engine incompatible with a free government." Some Protestants further interpreted the massive influx of Catholic immigrants to mean that the pope himself was "attempting to get possession of the Mississippi and Ohio Valleys."[5] It appeared to the most vehement of critics that Catholics were attempting to invade in order to establish a papal foothold in the West. Despite these perceptions, nothing indicates either Catholics or Pope Pius IX wanted to take over any part of the American West; these Catholic immigrants, the Irish especially, sought to escape poverty and suffering in their homeland to find a better quality of life and economic opportunity, as did their fellow American-born citizens.

The perception that Catholicism and republican government were mutually exclusive moved an ever-increasing number of Protestant ministers and laypeople to speak out against the spread of Catholicism and to take action to prevent its influence in American civil life. To "prevent Catholics from becoming a political majority and taking control of the country," many Protestants launched frequent verbal and political attacks on Catholics. Beginning in the 1830s, Catholics in antebellum St. Louis experienced increasing anti-Catholic rhetoric in the press, in the community, and in politics. Their reaction, nonviolent and defensive, sought primarily to defend the Catholic faith by responding to animosity in a way that fostered theological dialogue, cohesion within immigrant communities, and a distinctly American Catholic identity.

St. Louis experienced a significantly less violent nativism and anti-Catholicism compared to other American cities during the antebellum period. In Philadelphia and Boston, convents and churches burned, anti-Catholic riots raged, and small but significant casualties and personal damages mounted. The tense but few conflicts that did occur in St. Louis lasted but a few days, and violence was relatively minimal. Instead, anti-Catholicism voiced its vehement disgust for Rome in the community vocally, and by peaceful yet zealous activism.

As time progressed in the antebellum period, more and more immigrants traveled west and settled in St. Louis. As more Catholics arrived in the Mississippi Valley, more Catholic missionaries were sent to accommodate them, fueling the fear of a papal plot to dominate the region. The Home Missionary Society formed partly in reaction to fear of "popish aggression." Established in 1826 to initially provide religious support for westward-moving Protestants, the society worked to establish Protestantism while at the same time tacitly combat Catholicism. It "supplied funds and preachers, set up seminaries, and by their press activity, helped to create an anti-Catholic atmosphere in the once-Catholic city of St. Louis." So long as the Home Missionary Society supported Protestant missionaries in the West, Catholicism would not remain unchallenged as "Popish aggression" was considered a very real and legitimate threat to Protestantism in the West. In 1839, a Missouri agent of the society in St. Louis wrote, "It is by no means certain that the Jesuits are not to prevail to a great extent in this Western country. Their priests are coming upon us and with a zeal that ought to make Protestant Christians blush." Four years later, a Home Missionary Society manager in St. Louis lamented how "popery," in "occupying" the city, had "erected her banner, bid defiance to Protestantism—to free intelligence, equal rights, and a pure evangelical piety." He asked: "[S]hall this fair land be abandoned, without a struggle, to the undisputed and perpetual dominion of the Man of Sin [the pope]?"[6]

Catholics responded to the affronts of the Home Missionary Society and other similar groups by cohesion within their own ethnic and religious communities. In the larger community, Catholics and immigrants in general were harassed for their identity, so they often turned to their own parish or other groups in the community for moral or financial support while living in an often-unwelcoming environment. However, not all Protestants held nativist views. At times, mission crossed denominational lines. Catholic and Protestant immigrants often worked together in immigrant aid societies, and peacefully so. These groups offered material support to the poor and suffering of ethnic communities. Catholics and Protestants attended meetings of the "Friends of Ireland," a group established after the potato blight hit Ireland. Germans established the Giessner Auswanderugs Gesellschaft with the sole purpose of assisting

Germans settling in Missouri. This group was not strictly Catholic or Protestant, but rather one that offered assistance to those with a shared heritage.[7] When the focus was the homeland and ethnicity, religion did not seem to inhibit Catholics and Protestants from working together.

Other immigrant aid groups within the Irish community especially centered on supporting immigrants of the Catholic faith. The first wave of Irish immigrants established the Erin Benevolent Society in 1819 with the aim of addressing "the interests of distressed Irish both in St. Louis and in the homeland." On March 17, the members combined their faith and ethnic heritage by celebrating their patron, St. Patrick, with a procession through the city and a subsequent banquet. A second generation of Irish Americans established the "Society for the Diffusion of Alms" in 1840. This group focused on "helping the needy at home." Members, mostly men, were assigned wards of the city, and "[looked] after the needs of the poor" in their respective wards, distributing alms as needed.[8] The Catholic faith served as a basis for these and similar groups, and knit the Irish community even closer together.

Expressions of anti-Catholic sentiment were not limited to the work of specific organizations; many Protestants sought to disperse their warning of the threat of Catholic influence to the general public as well. The active resistance that aimed to minimize the spread of "papal aggression" communicated the anti-Catholic message to the public by sponsoring public lectures to fuel the "fires of racial and religious antagonism." Protestant ministers frequently gave such lectures, which intended to primarily "attack their [Protestants'] opponents rather than limit their scope to an exposition of their own beliefs," explaining why these lectures effectively directed animosity and suspicion toward Catholics. In St. Louis, one of the most prominent lecturers was the Reverend Nathan Lewis Rice, minister of the Second Presbyterian Church. In one lecture published in 1853, Rice expressed concern with the possibility of a papal invasion and described Catholicism as a religion "admirably adapted to please the carnal mind," one of "pomp and show."[9]

While opponents like Rice took aim at Catholicism, Catholics reacted by starting their own faith-based organizations. The Western Catholic Association, one of the earliest of such organizations, formed in 1833 for the "propagation, defense, and support of the Catholic religion in the Western country by all honorable and lawful means." Similarly, the St. Louis Catholic Institute, organized in December 1853, pushed back against the slew of anti-Catholic presentations and events by hosting its own lecture series and meetings. In its constitution and by-laws, the institute set forth the goal of the "inculcation of Catholic principles," which the group pursued by "establish[ing] a select library and reading room to provide for lectures, addresses, and debates, and to found a hall for Catholic purposes." The institute held meetings the second and fourth Tuesday of each month, and a member could use the reading room for a $3 per year charge.[10] The formation of these societies and the philanthropy within the Catholic community served to embolden members and provide an atmosphere where they could hold fast to their Catholic identity. In responding to the anti-Catholic message of groups and individuals by forming their own Catholic societies, Catholics gave themselves a voice with which to defend their faith.

Catholics often channeled their defense through the publication of pamphlets. These responded to lectures, spoken and published, that attacked Catholic principles. From the nature of religious controversy at the time, wrote historian George Joseph McHugh, "it seems that the propagation of one's religion could be compared to a business venture in which competition was very spirited."[11] Sold and distributed to the general public, pamphlets fostered something of a dialogue between Catholics and the rest of the community.

In 1853, Rice published his lectures in a number of pamphlets. They are riddled with his intense disagreement with several specific Catholic principles, including church authority and infallibility. "Romanism is full of absurdities," he wrote. "But it claims a venerable antiquity; its rites are . . . imposing and its doctrines, when skillfully set forth by a cunning priest, are not without plausibility. . . . We too believe in the holy catholic church [*sic*]; but we do not believe in the church of Rome; nor do we believe in any church as the rule of faith."[12]

In regard to religious authority, he asserted his own interpretation of a Catholic's adherence to Church authority, and then made clear that Protestants saw the Bible as their only rule of faith: "She [the Catholic Church] claims to be divinely appointed expounder of God's revelation to man, and forbids, under severe penalty, anyone to understand that revelation otherwise than she directs."[13]

Catholics used diatribes against their church such as this to engage in theological debate. In the early months of 1854, an unnamed Catholic layman published a pamphlet disputing Rice's points. His response, both theological and apologetic, used a Catholic perspective of the faith to explain and defend specific principles. The Catholic layman who wrote the 1854 pamphlet explained the authority of the Church as the rule of faith:

> Now the Catholic reads and thinks for himself as much as the Protestant, but he knows that in all governments, human and divine, there must be some final authority to decide matters of law and doctrine. The Catholic reads the Bible and works on theology as the lawyer reads the enactments of legislators and the principles laid down by jurists. He understands his Bible, but in points of difficult interpretation, which might give rise to disputes, he willingly refers to the Church for a final decision—just as the lawyer and every sensible man is willing to refer contested points in the laws to the Supreme Court.[14]

Church authority and infallibility are two principles that contributed to the Catholic allegiance to the pope in spiritual matters—naturally then, these two doctrines caused the most contention among Protestants. Later in his lecture series, Rice also took offense at the doctrine of infallibility: "These pretentions of the Church of Rome are founded upon her claim to infallibility in her teaching. She professes to be guided in all her decisions concerning doctrines and morals, by the spirit of inspiration, and therefore demands that her dogmas shall be received as the word of the eternal God. . . . He who disbelieves this, must abandon her communion. We are protestants and against all her exclusive pretentions and anathemas, we enter our solemn protest."[15] The layman responded:

> The argument is this, and it is plain: The Savior established a Church to teach all nations. The Holy Spirit commands men to hear the Church—but God could not require men to obey a teacher unconditionally, which teacher might lead them astray; therefore that teacher is infallible, otherwise God would not command us to hear a teacher which might lead us astray. But he has commanded us to hear the Church. Therefore the Church cannot lead us astray. In other words, she is infallible.[16]

Comparing the Protestant claim and the Catholic layman's reply, the nature of the Catholic response becomes clear. The Catholic pamphlet, as did many others printed at the time, some also including more extensive biblical references, takes each protestation put forth by Rice and

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He saith to him again: Simon son of John, lovest thou me? He saith to him: Yea Lord, thou knowest that I love thee. He saith to him: Feed my lambs.
St. John, xxi. 16.

And other sheep I have, that are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice, and there shall be one fold and one shepherd
St. John, x. 16.

VOL. I. NO. 2.

SHEPHERD OF THE VALLEY.

ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI. ("ONE LORD, ONE FAITH, ONE BAPTISM.") SATURDAY, JULY 14, 1832.

The *Shepherd of the Valley* appears to be the first religious periodical published in the St. Louis starting in 1832. Initially edited by Bishop Joseph Rosati, who became the first bishop of St. Louis, it became the official organ of the Diocese in 1834 or 1835. According to William Hyde and Howard Conard, it ceased publication in 1836, was replaced by the *Catholic Banner* in 1839, then the *Catholic Cabinet*. Irish-born Archbishop Peter Richard Kenrick (1806–1896) reconstituted it as a weekly newspaper starting in 1850; it suspended publication in 1854 amidst financial problems. *(Image: Office of Archives and Records—Archdiocese of St. Louis)*

systematically attempts to explain the principle to present a clear Catholic defense.

Pamphlets contributed greatly to the Catholic voice in antebellum St. Louis, but the Catholic press that emerged in reaction to anti-Catholic publications played an even larger role in giving Catholics an outlet through which to defend their faith. The *Catholic Cabinet*, a self-proclaimed "chronicle of religious intelligence containing original and selected articles" approved by the bishop himself, published articles on the Catholic faith in the immediate St. Louis area. The periodical also included works written elsewhere in the country. In July of 1845, an article titled "The Press" painted a lucid picture of the relationship between Catholicism and the press. The press in general, it stated, "is too much under the influence of the great majority of readers . . . the innumerable productions which fall from it consist rather of what is novel and exaggerated rather than what is sound and instructive." The press, it claimed, too often portrayed Catholicism inaccurately. The article asserted that the press typically misrepresented and distorted principles and motives of the Catholic faith—principles, the article said, that have "been held sacred by a great majority of the Christian world for the period of eighteen hundred years."[17]

An editorial in the *Baptist Pioneer*, edited by J. M. Peck of Rock Spring, Illinois, exemplified this sort of misrepresentation and distortion: "The Missourians, and especially the citizens of St. Louis seem to have made up their minds that their children shall be moulded by the plastic hands of Jesuit priests, sent expressly from a foreign soil to form the minds and manners of American youth, that they may become the loyal subjects of a foreign prince, blasphemously styled God's vice-regents on earth and 'Our Lord God, the Pope.'"[18]

A significant number of St. Louis Catholics responded by writing letters to the most prominent Catholic paper in the city, the *Shepherd of the Valley*, to "deplore [the Baptist Pioneer's] anti-Catholic policy."[19] Peck's manner of playing to the fear of a "popish plot" to take over the West while theologically misrepresenting Catholic doctrine characterized the general tone of the press toward Catholicism during the antebellum period.

The press, the Catholic Cabinet aptly noted in July of 1845, "has been sustained by immense pecuniary means, and by a zeal which never tired in promoting its professed object, the destruction of the Catholic religion." This certainly appeared to be the case with Elijah Lovejoy, the controversial editor of the *Observer*. Lovejoy used his newspaper to spew frequent attacks against Catholicism, and as an individual he wholly condemned the Catholic faith and all associated with it. Little was off limits for Lovejoy, who even found cause to attack Catholics for their use of vestments and candles. His intolerance for anyone but Presbyterians and his vehement anti-Catholicism likely stemmed in part from his upbringing in a home that "accepted malicious rumors and unfounded superstition about Roman Catholics."[20]

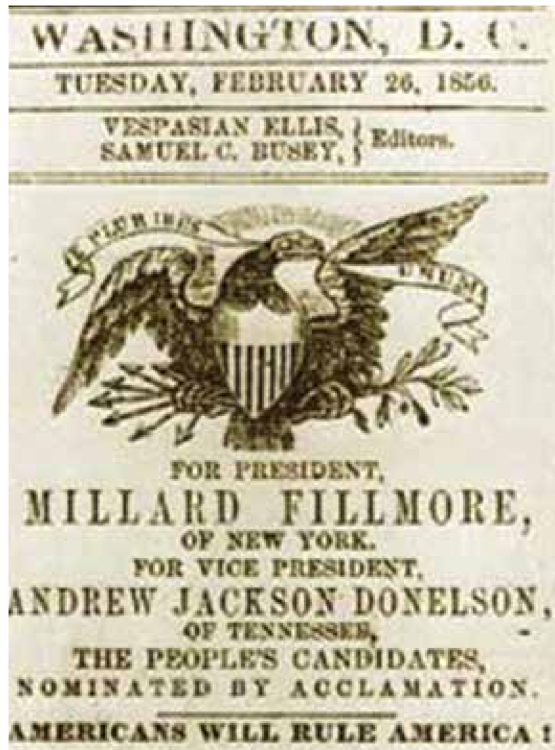
The *Observer* "followed the trend" in rebuking Catholicism for fear of a "popish plot." Initially, Lovejoy printed anti-Catholic articles signed by a correspondent who referred to himself simply as "Waldo." The influence of other Protestant newspapers and the anti-Catholic Presbyterian minister Edwin F. Hatfield led Lovejoy to become "personally anti-Catholic" in 1834. "We have broken our truce with this spirit of darkness [Catholicism]," he said. "Henceforth we stand in direct and unceasing and uncompromising hostility to it. . . . [W]e are now fully convinced . . . that it is a spirit of unmixed evil."[21]

In this regard, the *Catholic Cabinet* astutely described the duty of the Catholic press as one of "defensive warfare." To accusations and attacks from Lovejoy, Catholics responded by not only writing of their disgust directly to the *Observer*, but also by starting their own newspapers. "Under circumstances so discouraging, the Catholic press has sustained itself with a dignity and decorum," wrote the *Catholic Cabinet*. Such dignity and decorum manifested itself in 1832 with the Western Catholic Association's founding of the *Shepherd of the Valley*, which became the city's most prominent Catholic newspaper. It had a "strongly defensive cast" and frequently "engaged in controversy with the *Observer* and other periodicals of the Protestant persuasion." The *Shepherd* printed a few local contributions, but included a great deal of content that had been printed in other Catholic publications across the country—all of which the editors hoped would help "refute some of the calumnies directed against the Church."[22]

In the case of Elijah Lovejoy and the *Observer*, Catholics responded emphatically—yet in "terms that were generally milder than Lovejoy's attacks." In addition to printing theological and apologetic tracts, the *Shepherd* printed lay Catholics' reactions and responses to Lovejoy's paper. Some called him out for his theological misgivings. Others were more personal: "The people will not patronize a slanderer, a calumniator, a libeller [*sic*]," wrote one. "I venture to predict [his] speedy extinction as an Editor in St. Louis." Another issue of the *Shepherd* more tactfully stated that Lovejoy was "a weak, unprincipled man, whose endeavors are calculated to create anything but brotherly love between Catholics and Protestants, but it is not true that any Catholic in this community. . . . bears any hatred towards him, and we are certain that the clergy harbor nothing but pity for him."[23]

Ultimately, as the *Catholic Cabinet* described, the *Shepherd* and other modes of the Catholic press in St. Louis achieved "the great object it [the Catholic press] had in view: the explanation of our tenets, the defence of those tenets against misrepresentation and calumny, and the encouragement of the faithful to persevere in that holy religion."[24]

Catholics used the press as a defense in the face of antagonistic preachers and journalists, but it was also the primary mode of defense in the hostile political environment Catholics faced. The early 1830s saw "erratic outbursts of a radical fringe of the Protestant populace." By the late 1830s and beyond, as the number of immigrants filtering into St. Louis grew rapidly,


WASHINGTON, D. C.
TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 1856.
VESPASIAN ELLIS, } Editors.
SAMUEL C. BUSEY, }

FOR PRESIDENT,
MILLARD FILLMORE,
OF NEW YORK.
FOR VICE PRESIDENT,
ANDREW JACKSON DONELSON,
OF TENNESSEE,
THE PEOPLE'S CANDIDATES,
NOMINATED BY ACCLAMATION.
AMERICANS WILL RULE AMERICA!

The American Party was the political organization for the Know-Nothing Movement, which was both anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic. After the Whig Party dissolved following a disastrous 1852 election, the American Party attracted some former Whigs. In 1856, it nominated Millard Fillmore (1800–1874), who became president after Zachary Taylor died in July 1850, and former Democrat Andrew Jackson Donelson (1799–1871), the nephew and private secretary to his uncle and namesake. The ticket finished a distant third behind Democrat James Buchanan and the first presidential candidate nominated by the new Republican Party, John Charles Fremont. *(Images: Library of Congress)*

anti-Catholicism became more determined and vigorous. Anti-Catholic sentiment had gone from a largely fringe movement to a more concentrated effort—a "crusade"—to "save the West from the Pope."[25]

The widely held and growing belief in Catholicism's inherent incompatibility with American institutions largely fueled the sense of urgency and necessity to keep Catholics out of government and away from the political sphere of influence altogether. These notions were primary tenets of the American Party—the so-called "Know-Nothings"—a tacitly anti-Catholic and unabashedly anti-immigrant political party that came to prominence in St. Louis and across the nation in the 1850s. Nativists like the Know-Nothings shared the popular belief that Catholicism was an "enemy of republican institutions and a friend of foreign despotism." Catholicism, to this group, represented all that stood in opposition to "the spirit of the age and progress." Thus it became apparent to many impassioned Protestants that "native-born citizens must counteract the growing political influence exerted by Catholic immigrants" in order to defend their distinctly republican, American way of life.[26]

The Know-Nothings personified these ideals of defending American institutions from immigrants and their foreign influence. Members and their activism essentially "galvanized the forces that had bred hostility to foreigners and Catholics for fifty years." The Know-Nothings entered the political arena around the time the Whig Party began to disintegrate, providing a "temporary refuge for distressed Whigs." The party required its members to not only be male and Protestant, but also required that they "believe in resisting the 'insidious policy of the Church of Rome,' and all other foreign influences against the institutions of our country." Their goal became "placing in all offices . . . none but native-born Protestants."[27]

Know-Nothings responded to what they believed to be a "popish plot" to take power with their own "Protestant plot" to maintain an ironclad grip on all offices of government. They found this acceptable and necessary, though; ingrained in their ideology was the belief that "Protestantism defined American society" because it was rooted in individualism, in private prayer, and in interpretation of scripture. The average Know-Nothing member found motivation in the claim that "a Romanist is by necessity a foe to the very principles we embody in our laws, a foe to all we hold dear."[28]

This incendiary view of such a large portion of antebellum St. Louis' population escalated—perhaps inevitably—into what became known as the Know-Nothing Riot of 1854. The event highlights the uneasiness with which the Know-Nothings approached the concept of immigrant voters, and the way in which the Irish community stood up for itself and each other during and after the riot. On August 7, 1854, voters flocked to the polls in St. Louis. Twenty members of the Know-Nothing Party "accompanied an election judge to the Fifth Ward" to oversee voting procedures. The judge began turning away mainly Irish voters who could not prove their citizenship. A scuffle ensued and erupted into the "largest riot in St. Louis before the Civil War." The mob grew to number five thousand and raged for three days; when the dust settled, ten people were dead, fifty Irish boardinghouses were destroyed, and the mob had caused over $200,000 in damages to homes and businesses in the Irish district near the intersection of Second and Morgan Streets. While "nothing was unusual about the occurrence of violence at the polls between Irish-Americans and native-born Americans," this mob trumped all other similar conflicts in St. Louis by its magnitude.[29]

The response of the Irish Catholic community during and after the riot illustrates their "ability to match the nativist onslaught." During the riot, the Irish Hibernians, a "paramilitary religious organization," contributed to the exchange of gunfire between the Irish and the Know-Nothings. The Hibernians were one of several Irish militia companies at the time. After the initial confrontation, during which an Irish boy stabbed a Know-Nothing member, the Irishmen fled and were pursued by the Know-Nothings to a boardinghouse on Second and Green Streets. The Irish Hibernians were among those who stood fast to "prevent the vengeful Know-Nothings from entering the building."[30]

Irish-Americans who incurred either personal injury or damage to homes and businesses in the riot appealed to the city for reparations during the following months. The Irish physically impacted by the riot "mobilized and successfully persuaded the Board of Aldermen to pay damages . . . totaling $163,000." Such persistence by the Irish community and the corresponding reaction of the city is notable since the city was, in no way, "bound by law or precedent" to pay such damages. Also during the riot, Bishop Richard Peter Kenrick ordered several diocesan priests to "go at once among the

Peter Richard Kenrick (1806–1896) was the first Catholic archbishop west of the Mississippi River. Like his brother Francis Patrick Kenrick (1796–1863), who was archbishop of Philadelphia between 1842 and 1851, Kenrick had to address anti-Catholic sentiment and protest during the 1840s and 1850s. *(Image: Missouri History Musem)*

Irish portion of the population engaged in these riots to counsel them to desist from all further attempts to disturb the peace."[31] His response exemplifies the clergy's decidedly impartial and uninvolved stance in regard to politics.

Bishops throughout antebellum America "repeatedly encouraged lay Catholics to good citizenship," but they, as the clergy, "refused to become involved in partisan politics." Part of the Protestant, nativist argument was aimed at the church's involvement in European politics, and the clergy was aware of and sensitive to that criticism. In a pastoral letter in 1837, the American bishops "made it clear that, unlike some of the Evangelicals who had been organizing for a Christian Party in politics, they refused to identify Catholicism with any political movement." They articulated clearly that the duty of Catholicism in the political arena was to "develop sound moral consciences, not to devise strategies or particular means to achieve penultimate temporal ends." Kenrick ascribed to this same school of thought, having attended Maynooth, a seminary in his home country of Ireland that had a strong "no politics" tradition. Like many clergymen, Kenrick refrained from political involvement at all levels. Moreover, he refrained from "indulging in nationalistic prejudice." Rather, he favored parishes formed on the basis of nationality; such parishes would "help immigrants make a transition from the old world to the new without losing [their] identification with the Church." Kenrick remained "silently impartial" in regard to ethnic identity: "He did not identify Irish and American, or Irish and Catholic. . . . [H]e saw the middle west as a melting pot."[32]

The Know-Nothings certainly caused a fair amount of trouble in St. Louis, especially for St. Louis immigrants and Catholics. The party's popularity for the few elections in which it made a strong showing was due in great part to "dissensions [that] occurred in the ranks of the older parties which allowed the natives the opportunity to hold the balance of power in a few elections." McHugh writes that the nativist movement "furnished a temporary refuge for distressed Whigs and acted as a stepping stone to the formation of the Republican Party." As the Know-Nothing movement began to decline, it began to become more focused on appealing to anti-Catholicism—yet this focus did not seem to prolong its existence. When the nativists made anti-Catholicism rather than anti-immigrant sentiment a primary focus in St. Louis, their influence rapidly declined. Because the Know-Nothings waited until their party's popularity began to decline before they focused succinctly on anti-Catholicism, it is clear that "the Catholic population of St. Louis was not ready to allow the religious question to be brought into politics."[33] Regardless, Catholics responded with their newspapers, and also by challenging city courts for what they believed was owed them, and in the case of the clergy, by not responding at all.

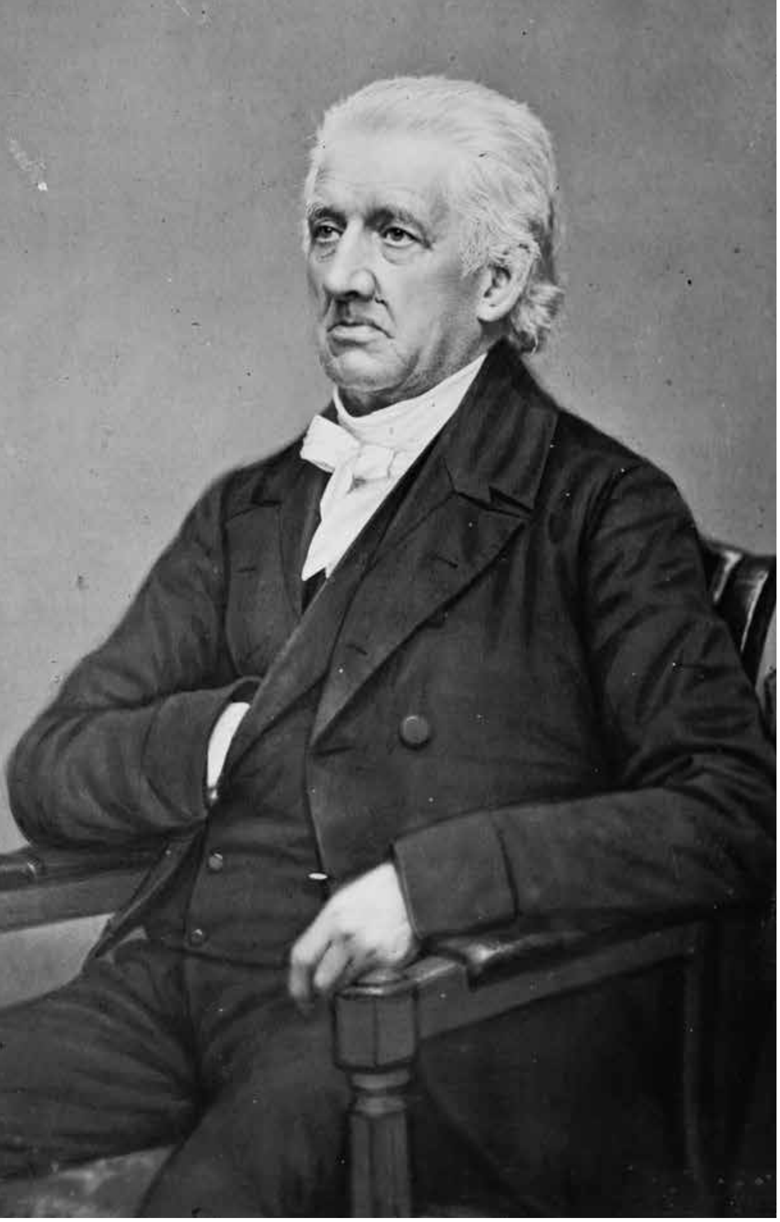
The question that remains, then, is how pervasive was this anti-Catholicism in antebellum St. Louis? Further, what was the essence of the Catholic response? The incendiary messages of people like Nathan Rice and Elijah Lovejoy certainly fueled a sense of anti-Catholicism in the city. But for quite some time, though they may have harbored immense theological disagreements, Catholics and Protestants could and did work together peacefully as fellow citizens. Both groups united for the cause of the homeland in Irish aid societies like the Friends of Ireland. For several years it was not uncommon for members of both faiths to attend these meetings together. This sense of relative tolerance is further qualified by the fact that in 1847, a majority of St. Louisans—faith disregarded—trusted the Catholic Bryan Mullanphy to lead the city as mayor.

Furthermore, over a decade before Mullanphy became mayor, both Catholics and Protestants gathered together for the dedication of the new Cathedral of St. Louis, King of France, on October 26, 1834. The event truly knew no religious bounds as much of the city came together to celebrate what was viewed, more or less, as a civic ceremony. Local militia companies that were "captained by members of other Christian denominations" volunteered to participate. The event even blurred the line between Church and state, as a military band from Jefferson Barracks offered its services for the ceremony. Elijah Lovejoy, unsurprisingly, did not approve. He lamented the fact that the dedication had "defamed the Sabbath" and he was also disturbed by the multi-denominational nature of the event. For a time, this seems to have been the nature of the relationship between Catholics and Protestants in St. Louis: a relative peace, and a "spirit of cooperation between religious faiths" marked by the low hum of opposition on the fringe of religious communities.[34]

The situation reached its zenith only when the Know-Nothing Party injected a partisan hue to immigrant-native relations. The only major violent incident, the riot of 1854, erupted over fear of the Irish Catholic voting bloc. The Know-Nothings contributed, in this way, to the polarization of Catholics and Protestants in St. Louis; because the party feared and distrusted immigrants' involvement in politics and government, they felt only Protestants could dutifully serve in political office. Thus, every voting immigrant Catholic became a threat to the established political order of the American republic, an issue that brought anti-Catholicism from the fringes of the community to the forefront of political discussion. The Know-Nothings took the previous tacit concern for Catholic involvement in government and placed it on the political stage, making it an issue that weighed more heavily on the minds of lay Protestants, in turn negatively affecting their relationships with Catholics.

Still, anti-Catholicism in St. Louis did not escalate to the level that it did elsewhere in America. Even during the moments of greatest intensity, St. Louis retained a semblance of decorum in the face of religious difference compared to the vitriol and violence experienced in other cities with large Catholic immigrant populations on the east coast. This becomes apparent when considering that the same year that Catholics and Protestants peacefully gathered for the dedication of the Cathedral, a vehemently anti-Catholic faction of nativists (mainly Congregationalists and Unitarians) utterly destroyed an Ursuline Convent in Charlestown, Massachusetts. In the days prior to July 28, 1834, a rumor spread that a nun was being held at the convent against her will. City officials toured the convent and "found no signs of foul play." Later that evening, dozens of nativists (many reportedly intoxicated) torched the convent after looting it and ransacking everything, including consecrated Eucharist hosts. In the following days, many participants cited an especially inflammatory speech given by Lyman Beecher in Boston on July 27 as the primary reason for the event.[35] In one of his sermons, Beecher portrayed Catholic subversion as imminent and marked his words with a sense of urgency in fighting back against the rapid influx of Catholic immigrants:

> [T]he Roman catholics of Europe seem to be seeking an asylum from the contentions and revolutions of the old world and a site for the palace of the Pope and the Romish Church in the Great Valley of the Mississippi. . . . [T]he principles of this corrupt church are adverse to our free institutions, from the contempt and hostility which they feel towards all Protestants. . . . Roman Catholic Europe is pouring her population into the Valley in great abundance; and . . . if the subjects of the Pope are increased beyond the increase of our own people . . . they would in thirty years more, out number our native inhabitants. . . . Despotic princes in Europe would empty their coffers of treasure liberally, could they by means

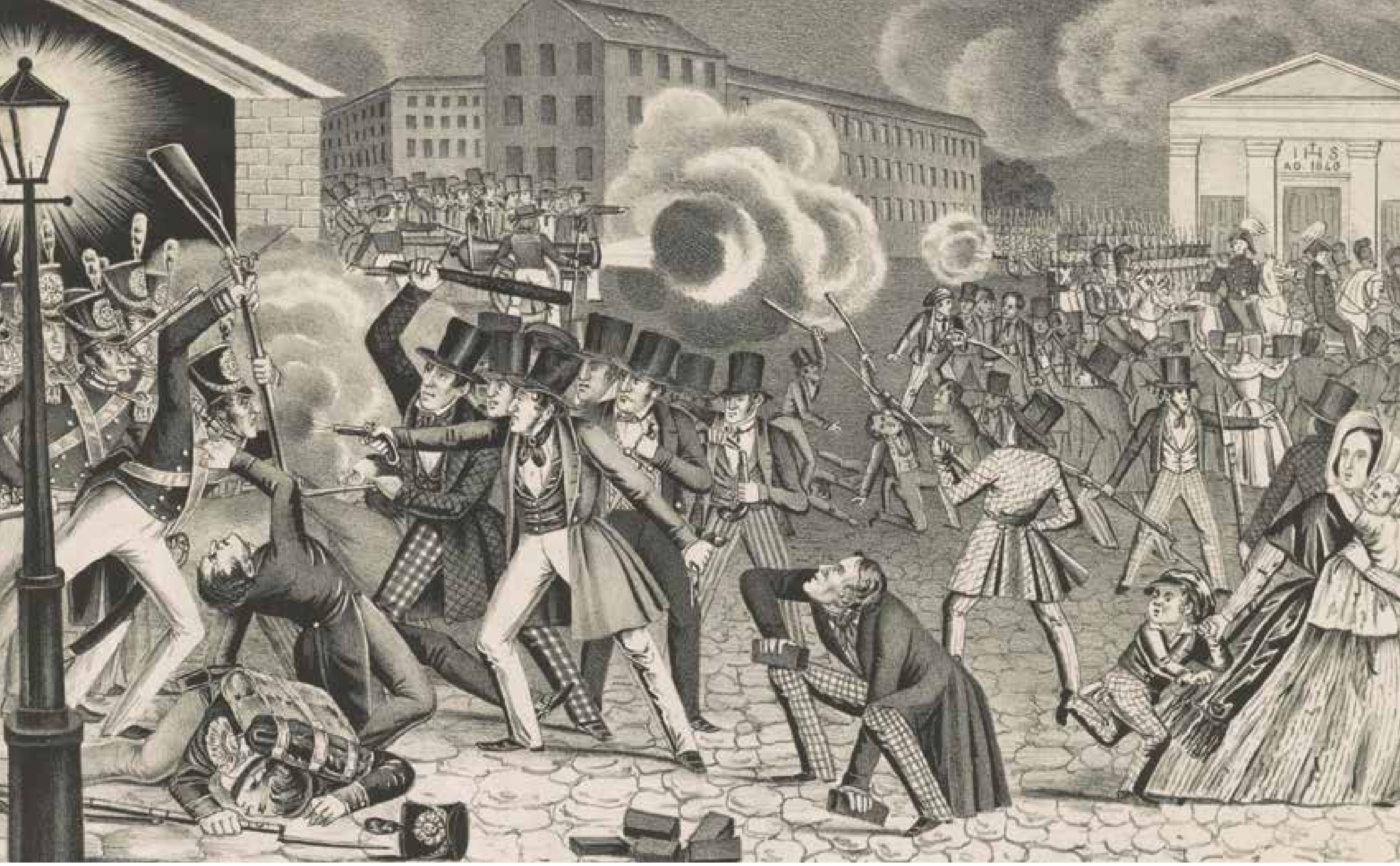


Presbyterian minister Lyman Beecher (1775–1863) was the patriarch of the influential Beecher family and a leading voice in the Second Great Awakening as a proponent of temperance, abolition, and anti-Catholicism. His primary platform came as president of Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati, a noted training ground for abolitionist clergy. Soon after publishing his anti-Catholic "A Plea for the West," he delivered a sermon in Boston in 1834 on the same topic that probably contributed to the burning of the Catholic Ursuline sisters' convent. *(Image: Library of Congress)*

> of the Romish church, subvert our free institutions and bring into disgrace all ideas of an effective government.[36]

Beecher expounded upon many of the same concerns over Catholic subversion in government that Protestant ministers in St. Louis lectured about, but St. Louis never experience such direct and unmitigated violence, especially against religious orders. Sisters in St. Louis were, in fact, largely responsible for much charity in the city from which all denominations benefited. The Sisters of Charity, for example, ran a hospital, and the Sisters of Mercy began one of the few schools for blacks. The Massachusetts convent burning was rooted in the widely held belief that monastic life itself was "deviant" and drew from a general suspicion of convent life in general.[37] Though anti-Catholic Protestants in St. Louis may very well have shared these same suspicions, they never acted upon these beliefs to the violent extent that like-minded Protestants did in Boston.

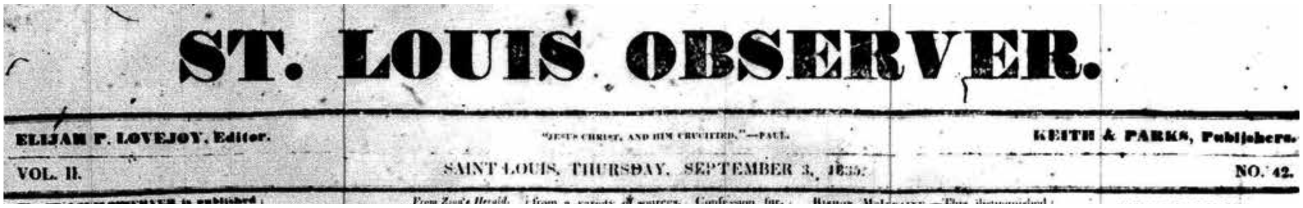
Similarly, Philadelphia saw riots and violence almost incessantly throughout the summer of 1844; these events arose from vehement theological opposition to the Catholic view of the Bible, as well as other economic and social factors. Protestants became incensed when the bishop of Philadelphia requested that the school board allow Catholic students in public schools to read a Catholic version of the Bible in school rather than the Protestant King James Version. The board approved this request in 1843; Protestants largely considered the request "an outrage, an insult, and a direct violation of fundamental American religious values." This, combined with frustration over immigrants competing for jobs and the ever-present perception of a papist threat, culminated in a series of riots in Philadelphia that became known as the Bible Riots. Two separate incidents ravaged parts of the city. The end result was astounding and incomparable to the singular, though significant, riot in St. Louis. In Philadelphia that summer, "Every Catholic Church . . . was threatened with attack. . . . [T]wo were burned to the ground, and one was badly damaged. . . . [T]wo libraries, two rectories, a schoolhouse and multiple blocks of homes were also torched. About thirty people were killed and hundreds injured. . . . [T]he riots caused at least a quarter of a million dollars worth of damage, an astronomical amount for the time."[38]



The "bible riots" of 1844 reflected long-standing animosities in Philadelphia, including a fight in Southwark, pictured here. Tensions rose when Catholic Bishop Francis Patrick Kenrick (whose brother, Peter Richard Kenrick, was bishop in St. Louis at the time) objected to public schools compelling students to sing Protestant hymns and read from the King James Bible. Over a period of about three months, as many as 20 died in the violence, and the state militia was called in to restore order. It was the longest and bloodiest anti-Catholic riot in the United States to date. While it did not resolve religious tensions, it did lead to a state law mandating one police officer for every 150 residents in every municipality in Philadelphia County, and created of a consolidated police force in the county five years later, both contributing to the consolidation of government in Philadelphia County in 1854. *(Image: Library of Congress)*

These events in Boston, Philadelphia, and numerous other cities were often spurred by some deep theological dispute or misconception, or over concerns that immigrants would take jobs away from native citizens. St. Louis, which even in the 1850s had a history of Catholic presence in the city, only experienced an event of relatively comparable magnitude when anti-Catholicism was brought to the forefront of local politics.

Catholics responded to the verbal and political animosity they faced in a way that was both nonviolent and defensive. Elijah Lovejoy antagonized not only Catholics, but he also greatly angered slaveholders in St. Louis with his combative abolitionist views, which he zealously printed alongside Catholic criticisms in the *Observer*. While the offended slaveholders responded by defacing Lovejoy's property, throwing his printing press in the river, and ultimately murdering Lovejoy, Catholics responded to his theological attacks with letters to the *Observer* and articles in their own Catholic newspapers. They created a means for their voices to be heard and then refuted accusations against Catholicism, defending the faith. This is not to say that the Catholic response was passive, for they certainly employed strong, most often theological, rhetoric in their letters, lectures, pamphlets and newspaper columns. But their



ST. LOUIS OBSERVER.

ELIJAH P. LOVEJOY, Editor. | "JESUS CHRIST, AND HIM CRUCIFIED."—PAUL. | KEITH & PARKS, Publishers.

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The *Observer* was initially an anti-Jackson newspaper published in St. Louis by Elijah Lovejoy (1802–1837) starting in 1827. Lovejoy was moved by the evangelical movement of the Second Great Awakening to return to Princeton Theological Seminary in 1832, where he became an ordained Presbyterian minister before returning to St. Louis in 1833. While a voice of abolition (especially after the lynching of Francis MacIntosh), Lovejoy's paper, which later moved to Alton, Illinois, also carried a strong anti-Catholic sentiment. Lovejoy was murdered in 1837 while trying to keep protesters from throwing his printing press into the Mississippi River in Alton. *(Image: Mary Ambler Archives, Lindenwood University)*

response was not geared toward physically harming or silencing those who swore Catholics to be enemies.

An antebellum Protestant's religious views, influenced by Second Great Awakening individualism, would describe an American as necessarily Protestant; to be American, many thought, one must live American values, like individualism and republicanism, and understand the importance of constitutional liberties. It seemed outlandish that one, such as a Catholic, could be faithful to an inherently hierarchical and universal Church while still pledging allegiance to American political institutions. Protestant tolerance ended with those whom they believed did not live these American values: therefore, Catholics were excluded. But when considering how Catholics responded to anti-Catholicism in St. Louis in the antebellum era, it is evident that Catholics were, in fact, enjoying and partaking in some of the most deeply cherished American values engrained in the fabric of the republic. In fact, these American values and liberties enabled them to defend their faith in the midst of the harsh criticism they faced. Immigrant Catholics used their newfound freedom of speech (a freedom they may or may not have enjoyed with such fervor in their countries of origin) to publish their own newspapers, write letters to the editor, and distribute Catholic pamphlets. The right to assemble freely made the Western Catholic Association and St. Louis Catholic Institute meetings possible. The concept of Manifest Destiny pushed Catholics westward along with Protestants.

Alexis de Tocqueville observed in 1844 that Catholicism itself "predisposes the faithful to obedience," whereas "Protestantism . . . generally tends to make men independent, more than to make them equal."[39] With striking irony, at the same time Catholics were accused of being un-American, they practiced and lived American values cherished by the most vehement critics of Catholicism. Catholics may have paid spiritual homage to the pope, but they clearly enjoyed and understood the benefit of the liberties America afforded them—and used these liberties to defend the Catholic faith.

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