

The Fires of Philadelphia: Citizen-Soldiers, Nativists, and the 1844 Riots Over the Soul of a Nation

Luke Ritter

New Mexico Highlands University, lukeritter@nmhu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Ritter, Luke (2022) "The Fires of Philadelphia: Citizen-Soldiers, Nativists, and the 1844 Riots Over the Soul of a Nation," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 24 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.24.2.10

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol24/iss2/10>

Review

Ritter, Luke

Spring 2022

Schrag, Zachary M. *The Fires of Philadelphia: Citizen-Soldiers, Nativists, and the 1844 Riots Over the Soul of a Nation*. Pegasus Books, 2021. HARDCOVER. \$29.95 ISBN 9781643137285 pp. 416

In May 1844, political and religious conflicts between the native- and foreign-born residents of Philadelphia boiled over into violence. American-immigrant tensions ran especially high in the Third Ward of Philadelphia, which included a large number of Irish Catholics and happened to fall outside city police jurisdiction. According to Schrag, the 1844 riots manifested existing tensions regarding citizenship, immigration policy, and religion and compelled a national conversation about the respective roles of the police, the militia, and the military in urban America.

Several of the chapters include brief yet detailed biographies of those who participated in the infamous Philadelphia Riots of 1844, including: Lewis Levin, George Cadwalader, Samuel Morse, Morton McMichael, Augustus Pleasonton, Francis Kenrick, William Craig, Augustus Peale, Peter Albright, John Colahan, and many more. The opening page of each chapter features a historic image such as a portrait, a newspaper clip, or an antebellum artist's rendering of a moment in the Philadelphia riots. Chapter fourteen also showcases a rare daguerreotype image of a crowd gawking at the military stationed inside Girard Bank (158).

Bishop Francis Kenrick, the subject of chapter seven, became the nativists' main antagonist during the so-called School Controversy, a major religious disagreement between Americans and immigrants—many of whom were Catholic—over the use of the King James Bible in public schools (73). An ensuing media campaign elevated the animosity between Americans and immigrants, Protestants and Catholics.

Frequent public disturbances between rival gangs and competing firemen persisted as the bane of the fledgling police force. The Kensington Ward seemed particularly immune to police, posse, and militia rule. Volunteer militiamen mustered as a democratic, national defense measure but were also called upon to suppress domestic riots. In May 1844, not even the militia could

prevent the pitched battles that caused the deaths of over twenty Philadelphians nor the arson that destroyed St. Michael's, St. Augustine's, and a convent of the Sisters of Charity.

The first 168 pages or so document an exact sequence of events, interspersed occasionally with short bios. Schrag provides an historical interpretation in chapters 15 and 16, raising such questions as Who was to blame? and What lessons could be gleaned? Residents of the city on both sides of the conflict claimed the moral high ground. After July 4, 1844, another riot emerged, this time in Southwark. The final third of the book focuses on the actions taken by various militia companies and the military. Schrag later concludes in the epilogue that modern police forces "owe their existence at least in part to the bloodshed of 1844" (317).

The author draws on similar sources as other historians who have previously recounted the political and religious tumult in antebellum Philadelphia. At 328 pages of text and 88 pages of end notes, Schrag's account favors copious detail and description over concise analysis and interpretation. Still, the stories are walloping fun.

*Luke Ritter is the author of *Inventing America's First Immigration Crisis: Political Nativism in the Antebellum West* (Fordham University Press, 2021). He is currently Assistant Professor of American History at New Mexico Highlands University.*