

2012

"Pure Americanism": building a modern St. Louis and the reign of Know Nothingism

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“PURE AMERICANISM”: BUILDING A MODERN
ST. LOUIS AND THE REIGN OF KNOW NOTHINGISM

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduated Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

The Department of History

By
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B.A., University of California, Los Angeles 2008
May 2012

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My colleagues in Himes Hall have often told me that the thesis is one the hardest tests in a graduate students academic life. Success is only contingent upon the complete dedication and sincerity of the student. Early in my writing I realized exactly what that meant and I have tried to create a piece of scholarship that is both accurate and meaningful. This thesis would not be possible without the support and encouragement of my advisor, William J. Cooper. I could not have grown both as a writer and scholar without his counsel and patience. Additionally I would like to thank my committee members, Gaines Foster and Nancy Isenberg for their review of this document and valuable critiques. I owe a great deal of gratitude to the staff at Hill Memorial Library for providing me a Graduate Assistantship during the course of my studies. Perhaps more importantly, they have provided me another form of moral support that I have come to depend on.

On a personal note, I would like to thank the founding board members of Baby Pigeon Press, INC. for their faith and support. Baby Pigeon incorporates the fundamental tenants every professional publishing house should strive for: an inexplicable obsession with the Postal Act of 1792, a curiosity of New Jersey and its culture, and a love for unreasonable dogs. To Nanci Velez for an endless stream of laughter and y'all's, Nate Hall for his ability to connect any historical fact to a Nicolas Cage movie, and Lauren Harper, for, well, everything. To Megan Wilson for reading every chapter of my thesis and suffering through endless gelato dates discussing structure and apostrophe use (I still

don't understand). Lastly, I want to thank my family, including my sister Elizabeth and mother Dona for their love and support during the hardest moments. I did not forget Dad, of course. His wisdom and spirit has been the invisible hand guiding me through life's major milestones.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis will explore the relationship between the rise of the Know Nothing Party and the modernization of St. Louis, the first Western metropolis. By the mid-1850s, two distinct visions of St. Louis existed. On one side of the ideological aisle, Democrats and conservative Whigs cautiously pursued an economic policy that advocated a slow but steady growth in St. Louis' city infrastructure. But by 1850, a new faction of wealthy Yankee merchants, stirred by dreams of empire and western supremacy, challenged the traditional approach and strategically joined the national Know Nothing movement.

Influenced by the intellectual currents of the American Revolution, Nativists engendered a new form of republicanism termed "pure Americanism," which incorporated notions of honor and civic virtue that served as a foundation for a myriad of intellectual and social systems they privately funded across the city. These institutions defined their vision of a modern city, where order and class distinctions were respected and private domains served as models for masculine conceptions of behavior and public propriety. Recasting the character of St. Louis ultimately moved beyond the borders of Missouri as Nativists explored how St. Louis and the pure Americanism paradigm could serve as a remedy for the rancorous spirit that had threatened national unity by 1857. The modern city, the group poignantly argued, would save the country.

Ultimately, this thesis will tell an altogether different story of St. Louis, through

the successes and dilemmas of the Know Nothing Party as it engineered contemporary social reform. Utilizing the interplay of class and republican ideology, I will demonstrate the relationship between conceptions of modernity and westward expansion in antebellum America.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

On August 7, 1854, the streets of St. Louis buzzed with excitement and anticipation over the day's election. For hours, men wearing their best trouser suits and top hats stood in line and suffered on an unusually hot August afternoon.¹ Election days afforded Missourians the opportunity to dress in their best attire as they mingled with their political enemies in the crowded streets and taverns.² Indeed, historians have often described election days during the nineteenth century as a political "middle ground", where various groups celebrated and expressed their different visions for the nation in the public arena, through loud drinking parties in local street taverns, banquets, and celebratory street parades. But socio-economic differences divided St. Louis, the election atmosphere was darkened by intense class tensions and the election violence grew increasingly frequent.

The 1854 election was the first congressional race in the state contested by the Know Nothing Party-- a nativist based oppositional party. The re-election campaign pitted Know Nothing leader Luther Martin Kennett against "Old Bullion" Thomas Hart Benton, a four term Democrat and arguably the most powerful political leader in the state. For voters outside the periphery of the Democratic Party, Benton represented a tradition of Democratic and pro-Southern hegemony that had stifled internal improvements in the St. Louis region. Moreover, Benton's party relied heavily upon the foreign-born vote. As the foreign vote became increasingly decisive in St. Louis elections, resentment built among native-born merchants who felt politically marginalized. Know Nothings capitalized on this feeling during the election and

¹ Frank Leslie, *Untitled Print*, 1859

² For a more detailed account of the 1854 riot, see John C. Schneider, "Riot and Reaction in St. Louis: 1854-1856," *The Missouri Historical Review* Vol. 68, Issue 2 (January 1974).

cast the immigrant as the enemy of American democracy and institutions. The *Republican*, a Whig and Know Nothing organ, repeatedly indulged its readers' fears that immigrants planned to "Germanize St. Louis."³ "The American people" the *Republican* ominously warned, "will not stand innovations upon their rights, their principles, their institutions."⁴

Although on the surface it appeared that nativism was the defining political issue during this campaign, the subtext of its rhetoric was rooted in more fundamental disagreements over the meaning of "republicanism" and what it implied. Know Nothings advocated a distinctly Missouri form of republicanism that Kennett described as *Pure Americanism*.⁵ This ideology championed an expansive concept of modernity that included technological innovation, western industrialization, and even moral perfectionism. Progress, in this view, depended upon massive internal improvements and the support of a modern municipal institutional infrastructure that would reform the minds and morals of St. Louis citizens and regenerate western society into a model of human self-development. Democrats, however, fundamentally disagreed with such a vision of governance and campaigned on a platform of restrained government spending and denounced any form of a bourgeoisie aristocracy. Thus, the 1854 proved to be a pivotal election in Missouri history where two distinct visions for St. Louis's future would be decided.

Then came a sequence of events that transformed the political culture in St. Louis and propelled the Know Nothings into power. It began with a panic. In the weeks before the 1854 election, Know Nothings and their Whig allies initiated a print campaign that underscored the specter of violence on election day, prophesizing that election day would be met with electoral

³James Neal Primm, *Lion of the Valley: St. Louis, Missouri* (St. Louis, Missouri: Missouri Historical Society Press, 1998), 177.

⁴The *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, August 5, as quoted in Schneider, "Riot and Reaction", 172.

⁵ Primm, *Lion of the Valley*, 177.

corruption and melee. Headlines warned, “Beware of the Illegal Vote”⁶ and “Frightful Anticipation.”⁷ Utilizing the threat of a foreign rebellion, the newspaper created an atmosphere of paranoia and anxiety in the preceding weeks. In no uncertain terms, *The Republican* warned that the future of the city lay at the ballot box.

On election day, the growing tension quickly exploded into full-fledged violence after rumors circulated of corruption at the ballot box. An election judge in the Irish Fifth Ward delayed the voting process for a number of immigrant voters- a loyal voting bloc for the Democrats.⁸ The long queue of voters grew impatient, and a shove from one bystander led to the stabbing of another. Events quickly spiraled out of control, with violence spreading throughout the ward, aided equally by the inflammatory campaign rhetoric and the suffocating heat. Democrats, frustrated over perceived electoral corruption, responded with small fires and fisticuffs. Nativists, however, swiftly organized and retaliated against any immigrants within their purview.

Know Nothings flooded the narrow streets, searching for foreigners in taverns and barbershops. Along their path they broke windows, burst through doors, and raided businesses, occasionally trading gunfire with shopkeepers and inn owners attempting, in vain, to protect their property. The mob marched down Morgan and Second Street-- two main thoroughfares in the Irish ward-- gathering strength block by block.⁹ Within minutes, the group swelled to over a thousand. They carried axes and guns, a sign they were prepared for a deadly collision. At the beginning of the riot it was not clear what the mob planned, but once they arrived at the Fifth Ward they initiated a battle against any Irish or Germans wielding weapons. *The Democrat*

⁶ St. Louis *Missouri Republican*, August 7, 1854.

⁷ St. Louis *Missouri Republican*, August 7, 1854.

⁸ Schneider, “Riot and Reaction in St. Louis”, 172.

⁹ *Ibid*, 173.

described the atmosphere as “the most exciting and terrifying one” as “infuriated masses moving swiftly along, firing pistols in the air and venting the loudest oaths and exclamations against the Irish, while the fire bells of the city were ringing and shouts were heard from all parts of the city.”¹⁰ Nativists announced their arrival as they conquered each street, screaming threats while wielding brickbats and clubs.¹¹ What started off as a minor eruption of fisticuffs and stabbings developed into cultural warfare--immigrants and nativists fighting in hand-to-hand combat for the future of their city.

Meanwhile, a combination of Irish, German, and zealous Democrats organized a phalanx on the levee of the Mississippi River. The group, however, was outnumbered and after a quick confrontation with the mob, dissolved and retreated. Refusing to settle for a draw, Nativists followed them throughout the narrow streets.

Approximately ten hours after the initial violence erupted, Mayor John How and a police force arrived to quell the riot, but had little success. St. Louis lacked a professionally organized police force, and thus the majority of police on the ground were volunteers.¹² Quickly outnumbered and outflanked, John How issued an executive order for all city officials to retreat, hoping rioters would lose steam as the hours progressed. This hope proved false, as the riot ensued for days with no effective means to contain the violence.

Perhaps the riot would have been quelled overnight, if not for the reemergence of the fears of an immigrant conspiracy stocked by the *Republican* for weeks. Rumors circulated that a cavalry of Irish countrymen had arrived on the Mississippi River, ready to replenish their fallen

¹⁰ St. Louis *Missouri Democrat*, August 9-10, 1854 as found in Schneider, *Riot and Reaction in St. Louis*, 175.

¹¹ Schneider, *Riot and Reaction in St. Louis*, 174.

¹² Primm, *Lion of the Valley*, 178-179.

countrymen.¹³ Nativists responded with renewed vigor, fearful that foreigners would overtake the city.

Eventually, the nativist group fanned out across the city, occupying popular Irish and German locales and claiming the locations as if conquests in battle. St. Louis University, the offices of the *Anzeiger des Westens* (a popular German newspaper), and various Catholic schools and churches came under attack. With each captured location, the Know Nothings demonstrated to residents the party's strength, and their adversary's impotence.

The throng tore through the community for three full days with a barrage of gunfire, looting, and arson. As dusk turned to dawn on August 10th, the morning light revealed the full devastation of the riot. When the mob rested in the late hours of August 9th, ten people were dead, over twenty critically injured, and significantly more wounded.¹⁴ Irish and German saloons and pubs had received most of the damage. As one priest, who daringly protected the front gate of St. Louis University, described the damage: "it is a wonder to us, when we remember the number of shots fired and the exposed position of the mob, that there were not double the persons killed and wounded."¹⁵ Weeks after the riot, unsubstantiated rumors spread that the death toll was significantly larger. Indeed, the *Republican* reported bodies washing along the shoreline of the Mississippi River.¹⁶

Nativists used violence to establish their political legitimacy and viability. Know Nothings targeted their adversaries' homes and businesses, either ransacking or destroying the buildings. Each location was integral for their rivals political activity and socialization. The

¹³ Schneider, *Riot and Reaction*, 175.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 175.

¹⁵ St. Louis *Missouri Republican*, August 9, 1854.

¹⁶ *Ibid*.

resulting destruction enabled the nativists to shatter their opponents, and pursue reform efforts without interference.¹⁷ The following days revealed that Kennett had defeated Benton, with the *Republican* noting that a regime change would “Regenerate Missouri” and allow its citizens to “Shake off the ‘old man of the was[sic] who had rested upon her shoulders like a nightmare for the last thirty years.’”¹⁸

Once their opponents’ wards were destroyed, Nativists imagined the rebirth of new neighborhoods and businesses. A new St. Louis would be devoid of political corruption and the degenerative influence of imbibing. More importantly, Natives sought to protect the city and its government from foreign influence-politically and morally. In this respect, Know Nothings envisioned themselves as agents of progress for all, defending the city’s community from social disorder and moral decay.

On August 9th, the City Council, filled with Know Nothing stalwarts, held a public meeting to make sense of the riot, and plan for the future. Not only did Nativists control the meeting, they effectively re-cast the memory of the preceding days and established themselves as the party of order and peace in St. Louis. The reforms discussed during the meeting were the temporary closing of all liquor stores and saloons, tighter liquor laws, and the first step toward a professionally organized police force. All of these suggestions would later serve the direct purposes of the Know Nothing Party. Nativists characterized their adversaries as violent deviants and shifted the blame of the riot onto the Irish.¹⁹ In a note of irony, the violence inflicted by the Know Nothings would offer them their biggest political opportunity. Reform,

¹⁷ The theory of mob violence and destruction is detailed in Paul Gilje’s work, *Rioting in America* (Indianapolis: Indiana University, 1996). Gilje argues that Americans living in urban cities throughout the nineteenth century used mob violence in order to control moral behavior and establish political hegemony.

¹⁸ St. Louis *Missouri Republican*, August 7, 1854.

¹⁹ Schneider, *Riot and Reaction*, 183.

Know Nothings argued, needed to be accomplished swiftly and under the guidance and control of the ruling merchant class who were conveniently its own party leaders.

St. Louis Know Nothings did not remain alone. Across the nation, Know Nothingism quickly spread like wildfire. Beginning as a secret, fraternal order, members devised elaborate initiation rites and oaths in order to maintain the society's privacy.²⁰ When a stranger asked a member about the order, the member was instructed to respond, "I know nothing."²¹ Often, newspapers would end editorials with a short statement, stating: "We *know nothing*." – a public show of support for the order.²²

The secret society quickly found roots across the country, with multiple lodges in cities and states, and the movement soon evolved into an organized party called the Know Nothing or American party, sweeping local and state elections on a loosely organized platform of nativism and citizenship reform. The new party appealed to disaffected Whigs and Democrats looking for a competitive national party to rival the Democratic Party.

The national Know Nothing platform remained relatively simple, reflecting their Nativist roots. Of the principles that formed the platform, each attempted to limit and exclude political participation by foreigners. Later, as the fragility of the Union became more apparent, the Know Nothing Party stressed the last addendum to its platform: an allegiance to the Union above all other issues. Regardless of the state or section, the Unionist portion of the platform was shared

²⁰ Mark Dash, "Notes and Documents: New Light on the Dark Lantern: The Initiation Rites and Ceremonies of a Know-Nothing Lodge in Shippensburg, Pennsylvania," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* Vol. 127, No. 1 (Jan., 2003), 89-93.

²¹ Michael Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (NY: Wiley, 1978), 156.

²² Arthur Meler Schlesinger, "The Significance of Immigration in American History," *The American Journal of Sociology* Vol. 27, No. 1 (July 1921), 71-85.

by a majority of Know Nothings and defined the group's political ambitions during its last years as an organization.²³

The Know Nothing movement revealed a growing disillusionment among antebellum Americans over the state of their Union. The Compromise of 1850 and the Kansas Nebraska Act of 1854 provoked residents of the North and the South to view the system as broken-or worse, catering to one section. Nativists in Massachusetts, Virginia, Louisiana, Maryland, and Illinois found an allegiant electorate; eager to restore a sense of equanimity the group had thus far found lacking. For a brief period of time, nativism offered an embittered electorate a distraction from the issue of slavery.

The first attempt by historians to examine the Know Nothing party in America started in the early twentieth century. During the 1920's, Richard Purcell at Washington University in St. Louis supervised dozens of case studies of Know Nothingism throughout the United States.²⁴ The "Purcell School" emphasized the proscriptive policies of the organization but ignored its political impact the party had. As historian Jean Baker points out, "the Know-Nothings were described in terms of their public policies, and there was little effort to examine the groups supporting the party or the clash of human values."²⁵ The Purcell school failed to penetrate the movement's political aspirations, and its analysis lacked a deeper investigation into the movement's ideological motivations.

²³ George H. Haynes, "The Causes of Know-Nothing Success in Massachusetts" *The American Historical Review* Vol. 3, No. 1 (Oct., 1897), 67.

²⁴ Jean H. Baker, *Ambivalent Americans: The Know-Nothing Party in Maryland*, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1977), xii.

²⁵ *Ibid*, xii.

Historians did not begin to recognize the importance of nativism in antebellum America until the late sixties. Beginning with Michael Holt and the “new political history,”²⁶ historians began to approach the organization in a different way--by emphasizing the ethno-cultural divide in antebellum America.²⁷ The new political history movement thrust nativism into forefront of the political crisis of the 1850s. Just a decade later, Holt stressed the party’s influence in the political system and argued that not only did Americans embrace nativism, the Know Nothing Party offered the last opportunity to salvage a cross sectional alliance.²⁸ Nativism became a chord that connected the North and the South.

Yet other scholars point to the differences in Northern and Southern nativism. Historian Tyler Anbinder, author of the most complete synthesis of Northern Know Nothingism, argues that it was deeply rooted in a fervently moral Protestantism. Instead of trying to establish nationalism, they focused their attention on features of labor reform and anti-slavery.²⁹ Their platform explains their quick absorption into the Republican Party--the party of anti-slavery and

²⁶ The “new political history” movement was based on a series of new quantitative methods introduced to the historical field during the Social Science revival. Political scientists and historians began to examine and explain political movements through new methodology and statistical data.

²⁷ Michael Holt’s analytical essay, “The Politics of Impatience: The Origins of Know Nothingism,” *The Journal of American History* Vol. 60, No. 2 (Sep., 1973) argued that the Know Nothing Party grew out of a series of economic and political disruptions in the antebellum period. Later, Holt published the monograph, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s*. In the book, Holt argues that the Know Nothing Party played a direct role in the disintegration of the second party system.

²⁸ Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s*, 158.

²⁹ Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1992), and Dale Baum, “Know-Nothingism and the Republican Majority in Massachusetts: The Political Realignment of the 1850s” *The Journal of American History* Vol. 64, No. 4 (Mar., 1978), 961.

free labor ideology.³⁰ Unlike the South where Know Nothingism was essentially masked-Whiggery,³¹ the northern sect had a much larger mixture of Democrats and Whigs.

The southern Know Nothings had drastically different membership and political influence than its counterpart in the North. Darrell Overdyke has produced the most complete narrative of the Know Nothing Party in the South.³² His book argues that the South did not embrace the secret order as vehemently as the North. Instead, the party served more as a pressure group, with mild success in local elections. James H. Broussard has noted Southern states embraced Know Nothingism primarily because it was the only effective means in which to establish nationalism in the South.³³ This assumption is plausible given that prior to the secession crisis, Southern Know Nothings were the strongest supporters of the Union and swore an oath of allegiance to support of it. Importantly, nativism did not play an integral role in the Southern American parties' politics. In many states, including Louisiana, immigrants and Catholics joined the party and played an active role in campaigning.³⁴

Although historians and scholars separate the Know Nothings by region, they have all embraced the idea that Know Nothings operated insularly, with an emphasis on local events and politics. This phenomenon explains the vast amount of regionally focused studies of Know Nothing parties. According to Michael Holt's work, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s*, this

³⁰ For scholarship relating to the Know Nothing Parties absorption into the Republican Party, see: William Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852-1856* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1987), and Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1970).

³¹ James H. Broussard, "Some Determinants of Know-Nothing Electoral Strength in the South, 1856" *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* Vol. 7, No. 1 (Winter, 1966), 5-6.

³² Darrell Overdyke, *The Know Nothing Party in the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1950).

³³ Broussard, Some Determinants of Know-Nothing Electoral Strength, 11.

³⁴ See : Jean H. Baker, *Ambivalent Americans*, Darrell W. Overdyke, *The Know-Nothing Party in the South* and Marius Michael Carriere, "The Know Nothing Movement in Louisiana" (unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Louisiana State University, 1977).

flexibility allowed Know Nothings to establish cross-sectional ties.³⁵ Although the group's platform varied from state to state, Know Nothings looked inward for political motivation, and not toward national events.

The Missouri Know Nothings, however, remained distinct from their fellow national members, both in their ideology and political aspirations. My study will challenge the traditional, local approach, and argue that Missouri Know Nothings maintained a strong interest in national events, in order to transform national politics from the state level. The Know Nothing party in St. Louis actively tried to form a new brand of American character and identity in the city that was exclusively white, Anglo-Saxon, and untainted by the corruption that seemingly infiltrated the Whig and Democratic parties in other states. Nativists considered their political party a means of establishing civic duty, public virtue, and genteel behavior, qualities they imagined would encourage reform among urban cities across America.

But what prompted St. Louis Nativists to consider themselves unique, and therefore particularly equipped for the challenge of remaking American character? The answer lies within the history of Missouri, and the theory of manifest destiny. Manifest Destiny, defined broadly, is the belief in American exceptionalism and progress through continued expansion.³⁶ This ideology remained deeply embedded in Missourians' identity and consciousness.³⁷ Missouri residents were already preconditioned to believe that they were different, the products of a grand experiment by politicians in Washington and moneymen from the North. St. Louis occupied the minds of countless Americans, anxiously awaiting the prognosis of expansionism in the West.

³⁵ Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s*, 164-166.

³⁶ Albert K. Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny: A Study of Nationalist Expansionism in American History* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1935), 1-2.

³⁷ Adam Arenson discusses the ideology of manifest destiny in Missouri within his book, *The Great Heart of the Republic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011). This paradigm was tested in St. Louis-as the city was the first booming metropolis in the West.

Nativists displayed a drive to attain the ideological promise of Manifest Destiny, and directed their ambitions toward establishing St. Louis as the moral capital of America.

My study of Know Nothingism in St. Louis, Missouri therefore emphasizes an overlooked period in antebellum political history when Americans did not consider disunity and fracture inevitable and engaged in a cooperative effort to regenerate republican ideals in order to establish nationalism both in the region, and later, throughout the fractured country. Through a political paradigm termed *Pure Americanism*, Nativists blended republican principles with Manifest Destiny to form a distinctly Missouri form of republicanism that advocated a wide-ranging movement toward modernity. What followed was the development of a modern welfare state-including public and post-secondary education, public health authorities, and centralized municipal bureaucracy. Although this vision supported city-wide reform, Nativists hoped in time their institutional model for city order would catch fire across the country, increasing the cultural similarities and ignoring the differences that threatened to divide the Union.

Several factors distinguish St. Louis from other urban cities and make it the ideal setting for a case study. First, the city acted as the main access point to the burgeoning American West, and in consequence, constituted a middle ground for both Southern and Northern influences. Historians have noted this peculiarity and characterized Missouri as culturally Southern, with a Northern economic impulse.³⁸ Historian Adam Arenson has aptly noted, “Northerners and southerners, European immigrants and free and enslaved African Americans- as a booming metropolis in a border state, St. Louis’s demographic stew mirrored the nation’s regional, political, and ethnic diversity as no other city did.”³⁹ Missourians learned how to negotiate and

³⁸ Arenson, *The Great Heart of the Republic*, 1-5.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

build a dialogue that moved beyond a sectional divide.⁴⁰ For many migrants flowing into the city, St. Louis symbolized a fresh start for a nation quickly succumbing to sectional tension.

Some historians have used the label middle ground to describe their micro-histories, perhaps too liberally.⁴¹ A middle ground, according to Richard Whige, is “in between cultures, peoples, and in between empires and the nonstate[sic] world of villages....On the middle ground diverse peoples adjust their differences through what amounts to a process of creative, and often expedient, misunderstandings.”⁴² Missouri was purposefully colonized and developed through a cooperative effort by Northern and Southern interests.⁴³ Differences were settled through accommodation and acculturation, a sharp contrast from the ideologically polarized North and South. If any setting could be regarded as the mirror image of the cultural and political demographics of America, it could and should be Missouri.

Furthermore, St. Louis’ geographic location, situated on the Mississippi River, naturally defined the city as a magnet for immigrants. Over the course of two decades, from 1840 to 1860, St. Louis received a large influx of immigrants, mostly of Irish and German descent.⁴⁴ Germans established a lively and semi-prosperous community in St. Louis. The Irish however, suffered from generations of European and American prejudices and failed to establish economic autonomy like the Germans. Instead, they competed with blacks-either free or enslaved- for low

⁴⁰ For works that discuss the intersection of Southern and Northern identity, see Adam Arenson, *The Great Heart of the Republic*, or James Neal Primm, *Lion of the Valley*.

⁴¹ In particular, John David Bladck, “‘Virginia is Middle Ground’: The Know Nothing Party and the Virginia Gubernatorial Election of 1855” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* Vol. 106, No.1 (Winter, 1998).

⁴² Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1991), x.

⁴³ I use the word *colonized* purposefully. Before Americans expanded into the Missouri territory, there was a thriving Native American culture already settled. See, John C. Ewers, *Indian Life on the Upper Missouri: Civilization of the American Indians* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 2000) or Edwin Thompson’s, *Five Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri: Sioux, Arickaras, Assiniboines, Crees and Crows* (*Civilization of the American Indian Series* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961).

⁴⁴ Perry McCandless, *A History of Missouri: Volume II, 1820 to 1860* (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1972),41.

wage positions but found moderate success in local politics. St. Louis, for both the Germans and Irish, offered the same promises that enticed Natives, and they came in droves.

The story of the Know Nothings offers a unique framework to analyze the significant development stages of St. Louis as it transformed into a powerful metropolis and cultural symbol for Manifest Destiny. During this period of remarkable development, the community faced an explosion in population growth, class stratification, and the development of a state party system, all of which played a significant role in the rise of the Know Nothing Party. In order to illustrate the kinship between St. Louis modernity and the Know Nothing Party, I have organized the following chapters chronologically. The first chapter will trace the economic and cultural background of St. Louis, the various factors that enticed migrants to Missouri, and the development of a thriving nativist culture that solidified class divisions in the region. The second chapter will recount the rise of the Know Nothing Party, including the 1854 congressional election between Thomas Hart Benton and Kennett that sparked the bloody Nativist riot that marks the entry of the Know Nothing Party as a political force in St. Louis. Chapter Three details the organized effort of Nativists to create a social welfare institutional infrastructure and cleanse the city of corruption and urban decay. Natives hoped the extensive reforms would define their city as the new moral capital of America. The last chapter will examine the eventual failure of the Know Nothing Party to maintain political hegemony in St. Louis as the issue of slavery re-shaped city politics.

The study of the Know Nothing Party in St. Louis not only reflects the people's growing dissatisfaction with the political order, but offers an important insight into their world view and

aspirations for the Union. Know Nothings dreamed of a “City upon a Hill” with Missourians leading the future of American democracy and morality, amid a nation in chaos.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ *City on a Hill* references a speech given by John Winthrop in 1630. The speech declared that the Massachusetts Bay Colony would be the beacon of Christian charity and principles for the world to see, and replicate.

CHAPTER 2

FORGING A FUTURE ON SHAKY GROUND

Thomas P. Otter's 1860 landscape portrait *On the Road* is perhaps one the most renowned images of the nineteenth century Missouri frontier.¹ A powerful railroad and a teetering wagon lurch toward the glowing western edge of the basin as a lush, fertile land beckon future settlers to conquer and domesticate. Painted a mere two decades after a swell of migrants seized upon the region, landscape portraits like Otter's drew inspiration from the crowd of ambitious Americans who ventured thousands of miles into the Western frontier in search of fortune, free land, and most important, the promise of a new beginning. The combination of the weaving wagon train and an anonymous gravesite underscore the inherent danger settlers faced as they made the trans-Mississippi journey.

Most artistic depictions of Western expansion promoted the idea that expansionism was akin to progress. In Otter's rendering, the sleek, powerful railway train leads the feeble wagon train toward the golden glow of the Western horizon, underscoring the belief that America's future progress lay in the West. Otter's work, like many other landscape portraits, were portrayed as maps that visually drew the readers eye toward the Western side of canvas, reinforcing Americans' desire to extend America's population beyond the confines of the original thirteen states. This belief was part of a much larger folk movement taking hold across America, called *Manifest Destiny*. Defined broadly, Manifest Destiny was both a belief and policy label that advocated for American expansionism from sea to sea.

¹ Thomas P. Otter, *On the Road*, 1860.

Yet, Manifest Destiny was a contested concept among migrants, who carried with them fundamentally different visions of western expansion and authority. In the minds of Southern and Northern migrants, independence and dependence were fundamentally opposing strategies in governance, and they sparred over how best to create a stable and well ordered western society. While urban Whigs, most notably Yankee and New England migrants, heavily lobbied for state sponsored public works projects and internal improvements, southern migrants envisioned government in the West only as a means to protect their property, most notably slaves. This fundamental conflict over governance divided migrants and foreshadowed the organization of the Know Nothing party in the 1850's.

I have organized the chapter according to the three significant phases of development in St. Louis. The first phase, occurring just after statehood, saw a staggering economic and population boom. During this period, migrants from both the North and the South flocked to Missouri, imagining the St. Louis area as a landscape spiritually distinct from the North and South and uniquely capable of producing a new society of Republican westerners. This belief suggested that the fate of American progress-both culturally and economically- lay waiting in the hands of St. Louis residents. St. Louisans heralded a new future for America, becoming the model of Republican principles while devoid of political and moral corruption. While this myth bound both groups together in a shared belief that Missouri held the key to America's future prosperity, differing views of governance split Missouri's first generation of state builders. During the second phase of development in St. Louis, the city became consumed with conflict as resident coped with the tremendous growth of their city and clashed over conflicting interpretations of republicanism. It is during this period that nativism in St. Louis took hold. Yankee merchants, in part out of frustration over their political powerlessness, found a new

political foe in the large influx of immigrants and sought any available avenues in which to proscribe the growing class from political participation. The last phase began with a devastating fire that destroyed a large portion of the city. The fire signaled a potential re-birth for the city, allowing a new group to steer the rebuilding process, and in consequence, the political direction of the city.

The Development of a Western Empire

The geographic location of St. Louis played a significant role in the initial attraction of settlers to the area. St. Louis sits at the confluence of two major waterways in the Midwest—the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. For centuries, this site made the region a strategic location for trade and immigration. During the eighteenth century, Osage Indians and French fur traders shared a fragile control over the region and took advantage of the free land and fertile soil to create a strong output of wheat and fur trade. A floating population, however, hindered the demographic and economic growth that their fellow Illinois and Louisiana neighbors experienced during this period.² Unlike their territorial neighbors, the Osage and French residents actively feared imperial encroachment from American settlers and created policies that limited any external influences in the Missouri economy, including manufacturing and Eastern banking.³ The village by the river stood relatively untouched and autonomous, only engaging in trade with north Louisiana traders.⁴

Despite prescriptive territorial policies, the St. Louis region did not remain in isolation for long. After a century of modest growth and a fluctuating population, the city received an

² For more information about the relationship between French fur traders and the Osage Indian tribe, see: Stephen Aron, *American Confluence: The Missouri Frontier from Borderland to Border State* (Bloomington: Indiana State University, 2006), Chp. 1-3.

³ Adler, *Yankee Merchants*, 15.

⁴ Primm, *Lion of the Valley*, 87-91.

unprecedented boom in permanent residents after the War of 1812 when American soldiers stationed in the region decided to settle permanently.⁵ During this period, land promoters labeled the Missouri region as the “poor man’s country” and enticed these migrants to establish roots in the region with cheap land and abundant natural resources.⁶ By 1819, steamboat traffic grew exponentially on the Mississippi River, allowing faster and more effective transportation and trade between villages, and supplies and migrants poured into the region. The *Independence*-- the region’s first commercial steamboat-- ran up and down the Mississippi, connecting the Louisiana traders with the St. Louis traders, effectively dissolving any previous French trade policies. The city began its gradual move from a frontier post to a merchant capital for the West.

The development of the city’s infrastructure did not gain momentum until after statehood. Missouri’s quest for statehood sparked an intense debate over the extension of slavery into the new territory. The Missouri Compromise temporarily appeased both sections by forcing a balance of admitted free and slave states, and Missouri residents were charged with the task of establishing a state that straddled the physical and ideological boundaries of the North and South. Statehood sparked the necessary steps toward governmental organization and internal improvements, the essential ingredients for the development of an urban metropolis in the West.

In the midst of Missouri statehood and municipal organization, a major ideological phenomenon was taking root across America. *Manifest destiny*, the belief in continual expansion ordained by God, became a political paradigm that enticed migrants to move west, looking for

⁵ Adler, *Yankee Merchants*, 16.

⁶ Aron, *American Confluence*, 67.

cheap land and new beginnings.⁷ A central cornerstone of Manifest Destiny was Americans' belief that imperialism was inherently linked to nationalism. Only through the courageous pioneers who settled and domesticated the West could the American empire grow and progress. In this vision, the growth of an American diaspora would eventually disperse republican ideals across the continental frontier, spreading "liberty" and morality across the wild and savage West. "The wild has been changed" one poet optimistically pronounced, "to a blooming garden and its limits are expanding with the mighty genius of Liberty."⁸ The defense of American liberty, the poet strongly implies, hinged upon territorial expansion. This belief defied class and sectional loyalties, influencing both the elite and the working class across America's landscape to uproot and take a chance in the unknown frontier.

The concentration on Missouri as a focal point for Manifest Destiny occurred naturally. According to many contemporary thinkers, St. Louis marked the gateway to the blossoming West.⁹ Travel literature exaggerated the region's resources and implied migrants would be immediately spoiled with riches and plentiful land, drawing eager settlers from across the country specifically into the Missouri region. Advertisements, pamphlets, and narratives circulated in Northern and Southern newspapers, enticing frontiersmen with a fantastical image of a western paradise ripe for settlement and plundering. Writers glowingly reporting that Missouri "possessed all the right requirements of good climate, good soil and good health-with

⁷ While the term Manifest Destiny itself only became popular in 1840, the idea of ordained expansionism existed in the earliest years of the republic. See: Amy Greenberg's *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 22.

⁸ U.P. James, *The Loiterer-Poetical Literature of the West* Vol. 1, Issue 6 (1841), 378. (Accessed November 21, 2011). <http://web.ebscohost.com.libezp.lib.lsu.edu/ehost/archiveviewer/archive?sid=00af33d1-e981-4773-b521-84351a032059%40sessionmgr14&vid=6&hid=25&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWlhvc3QtbGl2ZSZZY29wZT1zaXRI#kw=true&acc=false&lpId=divl21&ppId=divp66&twPV=&xOff=0&yOff=0&zm=fit&fs=&rot=0&hid=25&docMapOpen=true&pageMapOpen=true&AN=44720374&db=h9j>

⁹ Adler, *Yankee Merchants*, 45.

varied and beautiful scenery, and springs, and streams of pure water running rapidly over.”¹⁰ It was a valley of bountiful resources and unending agrarian potential. Literature romanticized the city and shaded readers from the often brutal conditions that lay waiting for them in an underdeveloped region. The waterways, abundant cheap land, and a strategic location made for a perfect subject to set an American West mythology.

Theology played a significant role in the growing western lore. Advertisements often compared St. Louis to the legendary Garden of Eden.¹¹ Writers often compared the biblical region set between the union of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, St. Louis was equally rich in fertile land and ample water sources. In consequence, writers implied that the Missouri region held similar spiritual powers that could heal the sick and generate an especially virtuous and healthy society. One writer argued that Northeasterners “come from localities afflicted with consumption, to a place where pulmonary disease is almost unknown, except in the cases cured by its climate...”¹² Temptation, either through drinking or poor lifestyle, could be cured through the mystical climate in Missouri.

The opportunity for new beginnings in an unsettled region struck a chord with many Americans experiencing the growing pains of modernity. Writers followed their biblical metaphors and lavish promises with short allusions to the drawbacks of their own climates. As one pamphlet pointed out, “Come from the cold regions of all countries, where winter consumes all the products of summer; come from crowded cities where the laboring man is poor, to a

¹⁰ “*The Great Southwest*”, (State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia).

¹¹ Adler, *Yankee Merchants*, 53.

¹² “*The Great Southwest*”, (State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia).

region where industry is sure of reward...”¹³ The myth promised the best, and concealed the worst of the region from readers.

Steamboats carried news of commercial trade and free land in the distant West.¹⁴ This news was particularly enticing for Southerners who were increasingly concerned with solidifying slavery’s hold in the new territories. Northern merchant and bankers, however, found within the growing market for food and farming a new opportunity to make money. In turn, writers presented St. Louis as an unmarked and unclaimed region that lacked any identifiable cultural or political character and therefore ripe for American settlement.¹⁵ Consider the claim of one anonymous essayist, writing in 1841:

The yells of fierce savages now faintly echo from beyond the waters of the Mississippi, and the time is not far off when the last Indian will leave his bones to bleach on the rock-bound coast of the Pacific. My hearers-this damsel Improvement, who drives head so on the car of Time, is working astonishments in this little world of ours.¹⁶

There was no room for Native Americans in this author’s vision of American expansionism. Instead, their place in the Missouri region was easily white washed in favor of the Americans’ desire to expand.

The personification of St. Louis quickly manifested into a grand myth, which I term *Manifest Republicanism* that blended Republican elements from the American Revolution that

¹³ Robyn Burnett and Ken Luebbering, *German Settlement in Missouri: New Land, Old Ways* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1996), 11.

¹⁴ Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), 223.

¹⁵ This of course was a fallacy, considering the deep French-Indian roots that existed, but it was a strong theme in travel literature, what Americans wanted to believe in order to pursue an aggressive expansionist policy.

¹⁶ James, *The Loiterer-Poetical Literature of the West*, 20.

valued public virtue and autonomy with the expansionist principals of Manifest Destiny.¹⁷

Manifest Republicanism was a broad, utopian vision that designated Missouri as America's destiny- both politically and morally.

This paradigm was heavily influenced by a belief in Missouri exceptionalism, a belief that Missouri was unique, and generated a citizenry that held a distinct worldview. Unlike Northern and Southerners preoccupied by the corruption and moral decay wearing down both regions, Western residents had successfully escaped the trap and were morally superior. Migrants who came to the region believed that their geographic position uniquely equipped them for the task of developing and leading the new moral capital. They were the chosen few and innately different from brethren left behind in their native region.

Manifest republicanism assumed there was a purpose-either nationalistic or religious- for the various migrants who came to the region.¹⁸ In the words of one travel writer, "St. Louis enjoys the preeminent advantage of a position in the center of the great valley of the West...this is a commanding point."¹⁹ The term *commanding point* is important to understanding the underpinning ideology of the parable. Missouri would be the moral leader not only for future settlements in the West, but for the already established North and South. This belief presupposed that the problems afflicting the Southern and Eastern region, could be solved through the strong moral leadership of St. Louis. A national purpose made the political stakes much higher. Missouri state-building not only held immediate implications; settlers were setting

¹⁷ I borrow Gordon Woods definition of public virtue, "the willingness of the people to surrender all, even their lives, for the good of the state." As found in Gordon Wood's, *The Creation of the American Public, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 68.

¹⁸ Adler, *Yankee Merchants*, 50.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 53.

an example for their country and any political failures could have national repercussions. This would play a significant role later on as the Know Nothing Party developed a political platform.

In turn, Americans were captivated by fantasy of an awaiting Western paradise narrated by travel literature, and St. Louis received a population boom between the 1830s and 1850s.²⁰ When migrants –from the North and South- settled in the city, they brought grand hopes for both their own future, and their new setting. Collectively, they traveled to the new region, driven to develop the area with a greater, nationalistic purpose in mind. St. Louis was the gateway, not only to the riches and perils of the West, but for the future of American character and industry. Despite a shared belief in Missouri exceptionalism however, differing motivations and circumstances drove native-born migrants into the Missouri territory.

A majority of Southerners migrated to the Missouri territory to transplant southern culture and slavery in the West. Most migrants from the South hailed from Kentucky, Virginia, and Tennessee.²¹ Most were poor, yeoman farmers enticed by the opportunity of cheap land in which to create their own homesteads. Although Northerners feared the Missouri Compromise would lead to the territory becoming a plantation society, most Southerners in the region could not afford slaves.

A majority of Southerners settled on the periphery of St. Louis, preferring to focus on homesteading and re-creating the agrarian dream that Thomas Jefferson had once planned for the American West. This dream, underpinned by a pastoral ideology, assumed agriculture would steer the economic system in the West.²² Significantly, power and wealth were measured by

²⁰ Ibid, 46.

²¹ Ibid, 16.

²² The pastoral ideology assumes that the agrarian economy-either by through a landed class, tenant farming or wage earning- was the supreme economic system for America. For more information on this paradigm, see: Timothy

land and not the complex forms of capital and stocks of the residents' Northern neighbors. They envisioned the next generation of Missourians perpetuating the republican farmer archetype, selflessly toiling on his farm, and serving as a virtuous citizenry dedicated to an agrarian lifestyle and landed aristocracy.

Northerner migrants, in contrast, alternatively planned to capitalize on the Western markets, intent on creating a lucrative banking center in St. Louis. St. Louis, according to many Northern merchants, was the next urban capital for America and required the guidance of experienced businessman in order to reach its potential. They dreamed of the city becoming the commercial epicenter of America, with steamships and railroads bringing merchant commodities from the North and South, all converging in St. Louis.

Neither of these groups, however, incorporated the native population into their broad vision for the future. The influx of population into the city erased most of the French-Indian presence in the Missouri territory, effectively Americanizing the region. Reacting to the changing atmosphere, French settlers labeled American migrants as “vampires,” slowly draining the French-Indian culture out of the city in favor of an Anglo-Saxon demographic. After the 1820's, the only French influence left in the city was in its name, and architectural relicts.²³

In sum, inhabitants from both sections migrated to the city with a shared imagination of the West, drawn by the potential for St. Louis to grow into a commercial and cultural leader. Although each group migrated to the region with very different reasons, they inevitably

Sweet, “American Pastoralism and the Marketplace: Eighteenth-Century Ideologies on Farming”, *Early American Literature* Vol. 29, No. 1 (1994).

²³ Frederick A. Hodes', *Rising on the River: St. Louis 1822 to 1850, Explosive Growth from Town to City* (Tooele, Utah: Patrice Press, 2009), 7.

congregated within the city limits of St. Louis during the same period, charmed by the mythological image of the city and the opportunities that lay waiting for them.

The Genesis of Nativism in St. Louis

In a letter to a close friend, St. Louis newcomer James Cowan of New England promised that in St. Louis “there is every advantage here to bring a man of your turn and genius into notice.”²⁴ Cowan assured his friend that education and good breeding would be met with eagerness in the city. St. Louis, his description implied, was neither the frontier outpost or Southern colony that many New Englanders and Yankees imagined. Instead, Cowan noted, the western city was a perfect location for smart, adventurous New Englanders like himself to find the independence and prosperity that had thus far escaped them in the crowded markets of the North.

Cowan’s dream was the typical dream of many New England and Yankee migrants who settled in the St. Louis region during the period of 1830 to 1850. Northern settlers were primarily looking for a territory with greater social mobility than in New England. Social mobility, including the freedom to participate in markets and expand their business quickly was the cornerstone of their idea concept of independence.

Northern entrepreneurs almost all settled in the heart of the city, where they could live within walking distance of their growing network of businesses, including grocery stores, banks and grain merchants. Primarily middle to upper class, these men were Whigs who championed healthy government funding in the public economy and state sponsored public improvements. Their strong support for manufacturing and economic expansion formed their overarching vision

²⁴ Adler, *Yankee Merchants*, 65.

of a bourgeoisie Western empire. This dream was not altogether out of reach. By the close of the great northern migration in 1845, St. Louis was one of the primary banking and trading centers in the country.

This bourgeoisie ideal of republicanism contrasted sharply with Southern settlers who believed a family farm offered the key to *virtue*- a term used to mean honest, productive, and civic-oriented. Southerners were neither interested nor committed to securing public-funded education, major internal improvements or the investment of Eastern capital in the region. All of these Yankee economic principles clashed fundamentally with their concept of independence. Being independent to the average Southern settler meant being clear from debts, high taxes, and being able to rule their own households.

Although most of these political differences had been debated and discussed since the nation's founding, in St. Louis and other Western cities, these ideological differences consumed city politics. Because of the nature of Manifest Destiny, settlers founded territories faster than a government order could follow. Thus, settlers were forced to work together to create a state government that satisfied the majority of migrants, which often led to tense debate over the nature of government itself, much like St. Louisans faced during this period.

Southerners congregated in rural areas, with a small minority venturing within the city limits. In many ways, Southerners were heard but not seen in St. Louis. Their agrarian objectives were antithetical to the growing commercial market in the city, but they still held a dominant political power in the state legislature. They lived and produced outside the boundaries of the city, yet ruled over its direction from the capitol building.

For a short period, Northerners and Southerners developed the city in tenuous accord. The primary focus for the first few decades after statehood was to create basic American institutions that each group felt necessary for their individual interests, including a public school system, a hospital, a telegraph office, a functioning port, and the development of more housing in the city. Residents made small step toward improving the river's port system, making access and trade easier and more efficient, ensuring steamboat access that brought further opportunities for migration and trade with outsiders.

As the state moved toward modernity, however, the ideological division between settlers of St. Louis became apparent. Yankee merchants often complained of the inadequate streets, poor health care, and the dangerous levee and port system on the Mississippi. This included a dangerous harbor that frequently caught steamboats in a growing sand bar or choppy waters. Each obstacle impeded the flow of traffic and cost the city a considerable amount of money when a steamboat capsized.²⁵ The post-statehood improvements both groups supported did not go far enough for merchants who depended and lived in the heart of the city, where many of the city improvements were needed.

Fortunately for Southerners, for the first half of the nineteenth century, their group was the majority of the voting population, granting them control over the political and economic direction of the city. St. Louis, as well as Missouri as a whole, was primarily a Southern occupied region masquerading as a new establishment. Southerners controlled the state legislature, and therefore, the language and design of the state constitution and laws.²⁶ This included Southerners attempts to block banking and real estate speculation, which they blamed

²⁵ Primm, *Lion of the Valley*, 149.

²⁶ Adler, *Yankee Merchants*, 20-21.

for most the country's financial panics.²⁷ By limiting frontier banks, Southerners hoped to keep men of business and fraudulent investors from infecting the Missouri economy, thereby inhibiting their own independence.

The Democrats, the party of Missouri Southerners, was commonly referred to as the party of the "lower class," and held political power in the region for decades. They found a powerful leader in Thomas Hart Benton, a frontier politician who had charisma and deep connections with rural Southerners. Benton spent the majority of his young adult life in North Carolina before settling with his family in Tennessee and serving as a lawyer and lieutenant colonel. After the War of 1812, Benton followed many pioneer's West to Missouri in search of new opportunities and quick fortune. He established himself as a newspaper editor for the *Missouri Enquirer*, serving the political needs of Southerners before the Democratic Party became a force in the state. He would eventually rise to become the most powerful politician in Missouri history and the symbol of Democratic hegemony in the state. In many ways, Benton's character was reminiscent of Andrew Jackson, a frontier politician with a propensity to downplay his intellectual gifts in favor of appealing to lower working class voters.²⁸

Tensions between rural Missourian and the merchant class surfaced as soon as the first legislative program was enacted. Southerners passed sweeping economic policies that were economically conservative in nature, and limited government aid for internal improvements. Merchants pushed the legislature for a state-sponsored bank, standard state currency, and internal improvements along the levee to make trade more efficient. Their pressure accomplished little,

²⁷ Ibid, 19-20.

²⁸ For more information about Thomas Hart Benton, see: William Nisbit Chambers, *Old Bullion Benton: Senator from the New West: Thomas Hart Benton 1782 to 1858* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1956) and William Montgomery Meigs, *The Life of Thomas Hart Benton* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1904).

however. Southerners stood firm in their economic policy and St. Louis remained a fiscally conservative city, much to the chagrin of Northerners looking to diversify the economy.

It was not until the late 1830's that the Whig Party-comprised of Northern merchants-developed a coalition in Missouri, but it did not alter the political landscape of the region. Whigs never found a firm footing in the state and instead acted as a pressure group. Chiefly, Whigs suffered politically from being tagged by Democrats as the party of the "genteel upper class."²⁹ For most of Missouri's history prior to the Civil War, the Democrats controlled power in the state legislature.

Rise of the Immigrant Population

The rising percentage of foreign immigrants in St. Louis dramatically changed the cultural and political landscape of the city. During the period between 1845 and 1854, the United States received an influx of three million immigrants, with a significant portion traveling on to St. Louis. The city's population grew at a staggering rate during this stage, at certain periods growing ten percent within days.³⁰ Thousands of immigrants reached the city on steamboats every week, and their numbers soon eclipsed the population of native-born Americans. The largest percentage of newcomers was German, with over thirty thousand in Missouri, and six thousand living in St. Louis alone.³¹ By 1850, more than half of the city population was either German or Irish, with the latter making up fifteen percent of the population.³²

²⁹ John Vollmer Merring, *The Whig Party in Missouri* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri, 1967), 12.

³⁰ Robyn Burnett and Ken Luebbering, *Immigrant Women in the Settlement of Missouri* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2005), 49.

³¹ Primm, *Lion of the Valley*, 149.

³² For information about the Irish population, See: David A. Lossos's, *Irish in St. Louis* (Chicago: Arcadia Publishing, 2004), 8.

Immigrants, much like native-born inhabitants, found the opportunity to develop a new urban city an attractive alternative to the already established cities of New York and Boston. St. Louis offered the opportunity to carry on their cultural traditions and establish roots in an emerging American city. Americanization was not part of their aspirations, and they clung to Old World customs and traditions. Immigrants established their own parochial schools, welfare agencies, and even their own militias.³³ They established an insular community within the city, making social ties with native-born residents rare.³⁴

Very quickly, immigrants became immersed in the political culture of St. Louis. A majority of them turned to the Democratic Party, in large part because Whigs in St. Louis already held a strong nativist sentiment.³⁵ Unfortunately for Whigs, the growth of the immigrant vote thwarted any political regime change in St. Louis. The Whig platform did not appeal to foreign-born voters, especially German and Irishmen leery of aristocratic elites, and party members soon found themselves outnumbered.³⁶ In turn, Democrats maintained political power in St. Louis by electing a string of city mayors, and their political dominance was seemingly endless.

Social conditions in St. Louis during this period deteriorated rapidly. Housing development and social services did not keep pace with the massive influx of population.³⁷ St. Louis streets were breeding grounds for tuberculosis, and its water sources produced numerous cases of cholera. During especially deadly periods, the *Missouri Republican* reported the weekly mortality rate from cholera alone at over a hundred.³⁸ Although Missourians had made

³³ Mark Edward Lender and James Kirby Martin, *Drinking in America: A History* (NY: Macmillan Press, 1987), 58-59

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Primm, *Lion of the Valley*, 172-173.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 147.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *The Daily Republican*, May 23, 1849.

great progress in internal improvements in prior decades, they simply could not keep pace with the unprecedented population surge.

Nativists used these growing pains as an opportunity to attack the swelling immigrant population. Yankee residents soon began to resent the old Frenchtown, an immigrant sanctuary south of the city along the Mississippi River. Nativists renamed the district “Dutchtown” and focused a significant portion of their political attacks on any social institutions that were foreign in character, including the various pubs and brothels scattered throughout immigrant slums.

Intense rhetoric invariably led to random acts of violence and riots. During the late 1840’s in particular, St. Louis experienced a series of Nativist riots that continually grew more heated and violent. On July 29, 1849, a cadre of fire companies engaged in a melee after a group of Irishmen heckled the companies while they were fighting a blaze along the levee. Irishmen fired bullets at the growing mob (by this time Nativists had learned of the melee and joined the fireman) and the two groups battled along the docks of the Mississippi. After repeated attempts to contain the violence, the police gained control, though most of the fighting had subsided between both sides.³⁹ These engagements happened frequently and illustrate the growing bitterness between the two groups as they fought to establish their positions within the city’s social order.

At this crucial period, nativism became the primary political issue for northerners. The Whigs experienced a schism within the party that allowed a small but powerful Nativist pressure group to divide the party.⁴⁰ With the party’s economic plans for the city at a relative dead end, and its member’s hopes for a political coup dashed with the emergence of the immigrant vote,

³⁹ Primm, *Lion of the Valley*, 174.

⁴⁰ Merring, *The Whig Party in Missouri*, 78-79.

nativism offered the only avenue for which Whigs to achieve political power. Neither policy nor a strong leader, however, would push nativism to the forefront of Missouri politics. Instead, the political growth in nativism would be aided by a random act of God, ironically aboard a steamship.

The Great Fire of St. Louis: A New Beginning

In the late hours of May 17, 1849, fire bells awoke the sleeping city of St. Louis. Flames peaked across the north end of the city near the docks of a group of steamboats. The *Grey Cloud*, a steam boat docked on the Mississippi, set off a series of explosions and sparks that ignited other steamboats and shipping to the right and left. The fire spread rapidly across the levee, and then jumped toward the cheap, low income housing in the Fifth Ward. These buildings were relicts of St. Louis's frontier past- with wooden plank buildings crowded closely together. The fire ripped through the old French wards with ease, and left blocks of thick ash and rubble in its wake. Fireman battled the blaze with tenacity, hoping to contain it from the northern block of the city where the majority of merchants and bankers lived. The winds carried the blaze across the city, creeping dangerously toward the cathedral and courthouse, although miraculously both received only minimal damage.

The *Missouri Republican* reported in the days after the fire the city suffered at least three million dollars in property damage.⁴¹ Millions of dollars of commodities lay floating in the Mississippi River along with dozens of capsized steamboats. The loss of life, however, was

⁴¹ The *Daily Missouri Republican*, May 21, 1849.

never fully calculated. Newspapers estimated a minimum of a hundred but the final number was never agreed upon.

The Great Fire proved to be the single greatest disaster to strike the young city. Three quarters of St. Louis was leveled in hours, with the old French and immigrant districts receiving the most damage. “Dutchtown,” reviled by Nativists, smoldered in ruins along with most of the city. Immigrants, however, were not the only group that suffered mightily from the tragedy. Merchants, unprepared for a fire left their life’s savings in vaults that were not fireproof. Countless businessmen lost a majority of their savings and were forced to start over again.

William Greenleaf Eliot later stated, “The work of rebuilding began before the ruins were cold...”⁴² But who would steer the direction of constructing the city once again? After decades of contentious and sometimes combative disagreements within the fractious city, starting the process of development again could simply have meant a renewal of the sectional and ethnic divisions that characterized the first half of the century. Northerners, however, had the upper hand at this point. What they lacked in political power, they made up for in capital-an integral ingredient for a city in ruins. Hours after the fire was extinguished the city’s districts were redrawn, and new ward supervisors were chosen in order to assess the damage and develop a strategic plan for disaster relief. These appointed supervisors were business owners with financial stakes in the reconstruction program. The *Missouri Republican* called for a meeting of “businessmen of the city” to make the heavily burned areas the “handsomest part of the city.”⁴³ Merchants argued that if the city hoped to survive the disaster that accompanied the fire, and

⁴²William Greenleaf Eliot papers, “Slow St. Louis”, As found in Arenson, *The Great Heart of the Republic*, 27.

⁴³ *The Daily Missouri Republican*, May 21, 1849.

remain a financial capital for the West, immediate rebuilding had to occur. They commissioned five hundred laborers to excavate the business district and clear the rubble.⁴⁴

Once the rubble was cleared, business leaders across St. Louis organized and designed a re-building plan for the city. In a shrewd move, merchants took control of the plan and redefined the city. This included immediate improvement of the roads, rebuilding the destroyed port system, and designing safer building structures in both the residential areas and the financial district. Many of these improvements were not only meant to be practical, but to “beautify” the city and make it less of a pioneer boomtown. After years of following the conservative Democratic political agenda, northern Whigs dreams of extensive internal improvements seemed to be within reach again.

The new St. Louis, however, only benefited a select few in the city, namely the merchant class. Re-districting and “improved” housing pushed immigrants out of the affluent northern block of the city and into the older parts of the city that were left standing, carefully out of the purview of the elite whites.⁴⁵ Housing costs soared during this period, with one resident glumly reporting that the new St. Louis came with exorbitantly high housing costs. The group’s city plan, in consequence, demonstrated gentrification in its early form in urban America.

This development plan went beyond the physical re-building process of the city. Merchants made the case to the public that a new economic system was needed in order to solve the crises. The conservative, insular approach to Missouri government steadfastly pursued by Democrats was quickly disregarded as businessmen fought aggressively for eastern capital to

⁴⁴ Ibid, May 24, 1849.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 23.

recover lost savings. Missourians received insurance payouts from Northern banks that inevitably lead to St. Louis's reputation as an Eastern city in the West.⁴⁶

As early as 1851, Whig participation in city politics flourished, with weekly meetings across the city.⁴⁷ Whigs took on a more vocal role in advocating for more state support for public institutions, including extending the public health care system, higher education, and even more opportunities for arts and culture in the region. This included the public school system, with popular Whig leaders Wayman Crow and William Eliot assuming control over the city's school system and advocating for further state support for public education.⁴⁸

In an edition of first anniversary of the fire, the *Missouri Republican* glowingly reported of the rebuilding process:

It may be assumed, therefore, that the great loss by the fire of the 17th of May has been, within a year after its occurrence, almost entirely repaired. It has been altogether so, if we take into consideration the greatly improved and costly character of the buildings which have been erected, the enhanced rents which the owners are receiving, the increased facilities for business, and the security from fire which widened streets and alleys unquestionably afford.⁴⁹

Like countless other editorials, the *Republic* editor of the Whig organ offered glowing reports about the new housing developments and city plans. Although many writers predicated many of their reports with a solemn acknowledgement of the tragic death toll, they commonly spoke of the fire as a sacrifice that was needed in order to build a stronger, more modern city for residents.

⁴⁶ See Jeffrey Adler's chapter "The Offspring of the East" in *Yankee Merchants*, 91.

⁴⁷ See: *Daily Missouri Republican*, March 11, 1850.

⁴⁸ See, *Ibid*, March 11, 1851.

⁴⁹ *Daily Missouri Republican*, May 17, 1850.

Newspapers prophesized St. Louis would “rise, phoenix-like, from her ashes.”⁵⁰ Editors carefully cultivated a celebratory lore surrounding the tragedy that portrayed the rebuilding a natural course in the progress of the city.

Historian Adam Arenson has argued that the Great Fire “occurred at the start of a new era” in St. Louis’s history.⁵¹ His statement, however, does not give the Great Fire enough historical credit. The great fire not only marked the beginning a new phase of change in St. Louis, it was *the* catalyst for change. The destruction of the old, French wards provoked Yankees to re-model the city, both architecturally and economically, into a Northern model of bourgeois supremacy.

Conclusion

At the close of the first half of the nineteenth century, the city of St. Louis had gone through immense change and growth. Like many urban areas during this time, St. Louis was confronting the growing pains that accompany modernity. As newcomers- Northerners, Southerners and immigrants- settled had developed the city; new loyalties divided the political landscape and quickly marked the region as polarized. The Know Nothings were the beneficiaries of these events, bred from decades of hostility toward Democratic hegemony and foreign political influence. In the following few years, nativism became a dominant ideology for Northerners as they navigated the political landscape of St. Louis and sought to establish their political dominance.

⁵⁰ *Daily Missouri Republican*, June 1, 1849, As found in Arenson, *The Great Heart of the Republic*, 23.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 11.

CHAPTER 3
THE RISE OF THE KNOW NOTHING PARTY IN ST. LOUIS

On a mid- November evening in 1850, Democratic Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri rose to address an audience of eight hundred of St. Louis' wealthiest and economically powerful citizens at the Mercantile Library.¹ It was a curious setting for Benton. The Mercantile Library was founded by city merchants and Whig stalwarts, Benton's political enemies for much of his long political career. Benton, however, chose the setting in a clever act of politicking, hoping his speech would serve as a symbolic bridge over the ideological differences between the two parties.

At the moment of his speech, Benton was desperately fighting to salvage what remained of his reputation and career in Missouri. Months earlier the senator had lost his senatorial campaign in a bitter contest that revealed the growing dissatisfaction among Missourians over the divisive issues of slavery and federal funding. These issues, combined with the national debate over the Compromise of 1850, had placed Benton in a precarious position. As a prominent opponent of slavery extension in a state driven by proslavery Democrats, Benton understood his political viability rested upon an alliance with his former political foes, the Whigs, in order to gain lost support within his own fractured party.² In his new political strategy, Benton characterized himself as the people's senator, a servant wholly devoted to the future growth of St. Louis.

¹ Thomas Hart Benton, "The Age of Progress." as quoted in Arenson, *The Great Heart of the Republic*, 29.

² William Nesbet Chamber's, *Old Bullion Benton: Senator from the New West* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1956), 371-372.

The speech, aptly titled, “The Progress of the Age,” attempted to mend broken relationships severed after the compromise by refocusing the attention of Missourians on the promise of momentous economic and cultural growth of St. Louis in the coming years.³ “The world” Benton remarked “was never so enlightened...never before so humane, social, and benevolent.” Missourians, he implored, had a divine purpose for their particular region, invoking the predominate belief in Missouri exceptionalism that initially motivated migrants to the state. “This is to be the theatre of the St. Louis merchant-a city such as this will be, not only fifty, but five hundred, and thousands of years hence-an American territory which can neither be diminished nor divided.”⁴ Benton’s language straddled the lines between optimism and naiveté; the speech assumed Missourians could easily move away from the partisan bickering and unite under the auspices of Missouri progress. Unfortunately for Benton, he gravely underestimated the bitter class divisions in the region, particularly in St. Louis. For Missourians across the political spectrum, *progress* was a highly divisive term that carried with it years of simmering divisions between Democrats and Whigs who had fought a lengthy political battle over the direction of city development. In consequence, Benton represented the old order, out of touch with desires of Missouri voters and tainted by a seemingly inadequate national legislature.⁵

Just a few months after Benton’s Mercantile speech, St. Louis Mayor and rising Whig star Luther M. Kennett contributed a written declaration of the state of the city in a new opposition newspaper, *The St. Louis Intelligencer*. Kennett was relatively new to the political

³ Benton, “The Age of Progress”.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ The general feeling of frustration and anti-party sentiment in Missouri was party of a much larger national feeling. This anxiety was a product of several events that sparked a debate over the extensions of slavery, including the Compromise of 1850, and later, the Dred Scott decision. Form more information on anti-party sentiment, see Holt’s, “The Politics of Impatience.”

scene and rose quickly, perhaps aided in large part because he did not suffer from political baggage unlike Benton.

Kennett proclaimed: “Let us hope that moral and intellectual improvement will keep pace with the increase of wealth and luxury, and that our citizens may be prepared by education and habit to be worthy of the future if they so resolve, the brilliant future that is in reserve for them.”⁶ The spoils of intellectual and material pursuits, however, could only be achieved through an unprecedented surge in public improvements throughout the city. Only through a much more aggressive economic policy, Kennett argued, would Missourians live to see the “‘greatest good for the greatest number’-and the early and timely preparation of St. Louis for its ‘manifest destiny,’ that of being at no distant period the Queen City of the Great Central Valley of the American Republic, and in time the largest inland town on the face of the Globe.”⁷ Progress, in Kennett’s view, could only be obtained through a strict adherence to a radical Whig economic policy that advocate a stronger bond between government and business.

Kennett’s message stood as a testament to Missouri’s new political environment. The great fire, coupled with the politically jarring Compromise of 1850, dramatically altered the political landscape and garnered the Whigs and the merchant class more political power. The growing distinctiveness of an elite, radical sect of the Whig party helped reinforce the idea of progressive economic reform that had become an overruling principle in antebellum Missouri. Both Benton and Kennett stood at the confluence of these changes, maneuvering and adapting their political positions to keep pace with them. Their dueling visions foreshadowed what would become one of the most vital elections in St. Louis history, marking an important turning point in

⁶ *The St. Louis Intelligencer*, April 20, 1851.

⁷ *Ibid.* Please note the grammatical error is in the original text.

the relationship of the state government and its citizens, and propelling an embryonic Know Nothing movement into a significant position of power in Missouri politics.

The Know Nothing party, a hybrid of disillusioned Whigs and Democrats, became the major oppositional party in Missouri. It enlisted Luther Kennett as its chief spokesman. Kennett's followers labeled their candidate as the future of economic prosperity for the city with the political slogan "Pure Americanism." Kennett and his followers came to define this paradigm as an alternative form of republicanism that sought to adopt a new city order, privileging an elite group of Missourians with a series of massive internal improvements and state subsidies for merchants. The rise of the Know Nothings and their new, distinct republican ideology can be viewed through three significant events that happened in quick succession. During the late months of 1850, the Compromise of 1850 provoked intense political debate and chaos among the political parties in Missouri, which shifted political loyalties and partisanship in the region. During the same period a small group of wealthy merchants established the *St. Louis Intelligencer*, a voice for the more virulent faction of Whigs that eventually evolved into the Know Nothing Party. This paper grew into the first and only political organ for the Know Nothings, creating a distinct identity and voice for the new group. Finally, the congressional election of 1854 between Benton and Kennett gave the embryonic party an opportunity to test its new political platform and establish it summarily distinct from their mother party, the Whigs. These three events allowed the group in two short years to develop into an organized political party and consequently win its first statewide election.

The Compromise of 1850: The Birth of a New Political Landscape

On February 5, 1850, Kentucky Senator Henry Clay approached the podium to fight aggressively for a sectional compromise and stave off a potential secession crisis throughout the Southern states. The persistent question of extending slavery into new territories routinely created political angst amongst Northern and Southern sections, but when California applied for admission to the Union, the Whigs and Democrats were quickly consumed in a contentious fight over the extension of slavery. Clay attempted to reconcile these differences with a series of five resolutions, known as the Compromise of 1850. Clay's plan asked both sections to cede political ground, including the fugitive slave clause for Northerners, while the South would relinquish both the domestic slave trade in Washington, D.C., and the extension of slavery in California.

Benton's opposition to the compromise was complex to say the least. A Unionist at heart, Benton found that the tenuous compromise on slavery extension did little to promote nationalism and only prolonged a conflict between the two sections. Remarking later on the compromise, he stated: "there has been no moment in the progress of this business in which there was not a majority of Senators in favor of the general object of each measure of this bill."⁸ Although Benton was a fervent Democrat and opposed the fundamental principles of Whiggery, he formed a tacit alliance with the party against the Compromise in order to stop what he considered a hapless debate over slavery extension that would only prolong a rift between sections. Instead, Benton energetically pushed Congress for funding of a grand railroad line that would connect the North, South and West from a hub station in St. Louis. A railroad, he hoped, would divert attention away from slavery and instead serve as the chain to bind the three regions

⁸ As quoted in William M. Mieg, *The Life of Thomas Hart Benton* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1924), 391.

together and promote western expansion.⁹ Ever the savvy politician, Benton competed with the great compromisers for national attention, and aggressively fought for the transnational railroad to start in St. Louis that would allow Missourians to reap the immense economic rewards a railroad could bring. Henry Clay, however, quickly shot down funding for a transnational railroad under the terms of the compromise, and Missourians lost key support in bringing the railroad to St. Louis.

Although Benton lost the railroad proposal, he did not quietly fade into the background during the compromise debates. On the floor of Congress, he passionately argued against the compromise, and sought every legislative avenue in which to stall a vote, including amendments and procedural votes.¹⁰ In response to Benton's parliamentary diversionary tactics, Vice President Millard Fillmore ruled Benton out of order. As Benton refused to stand down, a tenacious Mississippi Senator Henry S. Foote brandished a gun and threatened him on the Senate floor.¹¹ The three parties were separated and their tempers eventually cooled, but Benton continued his political crusade against the compromise, even after its eventual passage.¹² In the thick of a heated congressional race two years later, Benton bitterly recounted his opposition: "I have but one view of it from the beginning, and that one I freely communicated to my intimate friends-it was total condemnation of the whole scheme! I held but one conduct towards it from the beginning, and that was to stand off and let it alone. It was a union upon the spoils principle which I abhor and detest, and would never go into such a combination..."¹³ His animosity was

⁹ Arenson, *The Great Heart of the Republic*, 34.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹¹ Historian Michael Holt described the senator as having "a whiplash tongue and was relentless in attack" in his introduction to Holman Hamilton's work, *Prologue to Conflict: The Crisis and Compromise of 1850* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1964;-2005).

¹² My information about the heated exchanges on the Senate floor over the compromise comes courtesy of Adam Arenson, *The Great Heart of the Republic*, 39.

¹³ *Daily Missouri Republican*, May 23, 1852.

so virulent, their national newspapers frequently published his adversarial speeches on the front page, and his political persona generated several popular national political cartoons.¹⁴ Benton's opposition amounted to naught, and the compromise was passed due to the careful maneuvering and negotiation of Senator Stephen Douglas of Illinois.¹⁵ Douglas succeeded in the short term and forestalled an impending civil war, but the Compromise did not reconcile the fundamental difference of opinion among sections over the place of slavery in America.

As Northerners and Southerners grappled with the Compromise's political implications, Benton bitterly returned to Missouri under intense political scrutiny.¹⁶ Fiery political matter had already begun to consume Missouri party politics, with angry op-ed pieces featured prominently in Missouri newspapers. Historian Michael Holt has argued that the question of slavery extension was potentially lethal for national political parties; state parties "made slavery extension another source of interparty combat between them and thereby retained the loyalty of most of their voters."¹⁷ In Missouri politics, however, the compromise served as a political hurricane, throwing loyalties and partisanship into a tailspin and creating deep schisms among rank and file voters in each party. Benton inadvertently became a political compass in which Missourians based their political partisan loyalties on their party's support for the senator.

¹⁴ Arenson, *The Great Heart of the Republic*, 39.

¹⁵ According to Michael Holt's scholarship on the subject of the Compromise of 1850, Stephen Douglas played a fundamental role in passing the compromise through a steady stream of political negotiation and maneuvering. This includes the division of the Act into five bills, and then dutifully ensuring each bill passed with a majority according to section. For more information on the Compromise of 1850, see: Michael Holt's, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s*.

¹⁶ In William Nesbet Chambers' biography *Old Bullion Benton* he describes the senator's immediate emotional state after the compromise as despondent and anxious. In one respect, the senator was eager to clear his name from any disparaging criticisms over his stance over slavery extension, and yet he was even more frustrated over the state of politics that had revealed itself during the compromise debates. Feeling as though public opinion outweighed rational judgment, he described decisions in Congress as "bubble politics" (371-372).

¹⁷ Holt, "The Politics of Impatience," 58.

The Missouri Democrats quickly dissolved into two warring factions: pro-Bentonites and anti-Bentonites. Anti-Bentonites found Benton's condemnation of the slave power and the fugitive slave clause antithetical to the proslavery heritage in Missouri. "He has been weighed in the balance and found wanting... we say resign! Resign! And let some man be appointed, who will more correctly represent the wishes of the people of the State in Congress."¹⁸

In the case of pro-Bentonite Democrats, their loyalty was less to Benton as an individual than to the general principle he promoted: Unionism. Unionists accused Anti-Benton Democrats of being "Calhoun politicians." These "petty politicians of the State," they argued, "are not now, and never have been his friends...and the people, heretofore, have had discernment enough not to trust their profession of principles."¹⁹ Several pro-Bentonites authored public pronouncements in support of Benton, signed simply "One of the Old Guard,"²⁰ a symbolic show of support for Benton and the traditional values of compromise. The opposition, Benton supporters argued, was under the spell of a group of "mischievous" partisans designing to "inflame the passions of those who are arraying themselves under their respective banners." The "banners" described by the contributor served as a convenient metaphor for sectional identity, a barrier Unionist found proscription, prohibiting a national identity to take root. "**THE PEOPLE**" the contributor passionately implored, "should act, and repress and repudiate the efforts of these incendiaries to bring about a dissolution of this glorious union."²¹

Fearful of these Democratic divisions, Benton balked at the lack of harmony in the state, professing the city was: "Just as divided as ever, so far as the anti-Benton leaders are concerned, with the advantage of putting them in the coach box, whip and reins in hand; worse than ever on

¹⁸ *Daily Missouri Republican*, September 1, 1850.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, February 26, 1850.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, February 26, 1850.

²¹ *Ibid.*, March 5, 1850.

the part of democracy, who are now enacting the part of the anvil under the hammer, receiving all the hard knocks and returning none.”²² Benton, in consequence, was left adrift in a sea of opposing Democratic loyalties, with only a minority of pro-Bentonites for support.

As the Whigs witnessed the disintegration of their political foes, it seemed they were in the best political position they had been in Missouri politics thus far. The great fire had given them a political resurgence and allowed them the opportunity to reassemble the City Council with Whig stalwarts, successfully mitigating much of the Democratic party’s influence in St. Louis. The Democrats were otherwise succumbing to internal divisions with Benton as their leader. But the Compromise’s destructive trend did not spare Missouri Whigs, instead exposing significant ideological disagreements within the party.

Much like the Democrats, the Whigs split in support of Benton. Pro-Benton Whigs found his support of the railroad extension a step toward even more national funding for St. Louis internal improvements and western expansion itself. The *Missouri Republican* editor published short, direct proclamations of support for the senator almost daily.²³ The paper’s support of Benton, however, was tenuous. Benton was at that time the only politician actively fighting for the railroad, an economic incentive that would directly benefit their voters. Naturally, the editors found a convenient political alliance with him, but their support hinged upon securing the transnational railroad hub in St. Louis.²⁴ The *Missouri Republican* fiercely defended Benton against both Democrat and fellow Whig attacks, characterizing him as an honest politician and

²² *Ibid*, May 23, 1852.

²³ The *Missouri Republican*’s political affiliation requires particular clarification. From the Jacksonian Era to the mid-1850’s, the paper supported the Whigs until the party’s political disintegration. From 1856 onward, the paper endorsed the Democrats. See, Walter Barlow Steven’s *100 Years of the St. Louis Republic* (St. Louis: St. Louis Republic, 1908), 9-13.

²⁴ Later, when it became clear the railroad would not materialize, they made a dramatic turnabout and returned to characterizing Benton as the face of Democratic tyranny. For the present, however, the majority of Whigs steadfastly supported Benton during the brunt of the political firestorm.

an “unflinching friend of the Missouri Democracy”²⁵ Any opposition to Benton, the editor implied, was tantamount to an assault on the tranquility of the Union itself.²⁶ Conservative Whigs implored the party to draw a firm line in its support Benton, further solidifying a divide between the conservative and radical fringes.²⁷

As the majority of Whigs placed their political bets with Benton, a small, radical faction of the party grew increasingly frustrated by its party’s alliance with the Democratic leader. Anti-Bentonite Whigs characterized Benton as the epitome of political impotence in the national legislature. The group believed its party’s support of him was misguided and reckless. One Whig newspaper remarked of Benton’s railroad support:

What is this, ye hypocrites, but good, old...solid and sterling Whig doctrine?...the principles you have fought against and kept down by baseborn and low-flung calumination...? What has become of the doctrine that Congress had no power to make internal improvements? Is not all Missouri Locofocodom on the tiptoe of anxiety to show how devout they are in spirit to make a railroad a mile wide and 2,500 miles in length, at the cost of probably 200 millions of dollars? And is not every foot of this road to be made by Congress?²⁸

The *St. Louis Intelligencer* warned its readers their support could lead the Northern press to favor Benton as a presidential candidate, hurting their own party’s chances.²⁹ Furthermore, any cross-party alliance with Benton, anti-Bentonites argued, degraded their own party’s values, and hurt their national party’s chances at the presidency. Anti-Bentonites questioned the legitimacy of Benton’s support, and found his weakened support among his own party an opportunity to take down the powerful Democratic senator.

²⁵ *The Daily Missouri Republican*, February 26, 1850.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, March 5, 1850.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ As found in Primm, *Lion of the Valley*, 213. Please note I have copied the grammatical errors from Primm’s text.

²⁹ *The St. Louis Intelligencer*, January 19, 1850.

Upon closer examination, however, anti-Benton frustrations were merely a veneer for a much deeper schism between conservative and radical Whig members over the future of the Whig platform in the city. The successful string of housing reforms that accompanied the Great Fire prompted a new generation of Whigs to voice a decidedly more activist political ideology than the Whigs had traditionally pursued. This new ideology included, broad support of state sponsored reform, including public education, banking laws, and health care. Radicals wanted to fundamentally change the scope and intent of government into a more energetic and visible body in the city's institutions.

Furthermore, the Whig Party in Missouri traditionally operated as a pressure group, rarely crossing the boundary from political advocate to aggressive partisan. Active campaigning meant for many finally establishing a formal Whig ticket for each St. Louis election, an act that had long been ignored by Whigs for fear of Democratic retribution.³⁰ The Whigs focused primarily on the city alderman positions, which had traditionally been appointed or elected by Democrats. After the Great Fire, however, the positions were hastily filled by Whig representatives, and they played a profound role in steering the new, progressive direction of the city during the first few years of the 1850s. These men came from the radical wing of the Whig party, and included future political stars of the Know Nothing Party, including: Luther Kennett, Wayman Crow, and George Budd.³¹

³⁰ Whigs fear of Democratic retribution is discussed further in Merring's, *The Whig Party in Missouri*. Merring argues that because the Whig's lacked a firm voting bloc, any ticket would surely flounder, and put them in the ire of Democrats. It was not until the disintegration of the Democratic Party after the Compromise, and the great flight of Democrats from the city, that Whigs found a reliable constituency, and thus, support for a Whig ticket. Evidence of Whigs establishing a distinct ticket can be seen in, *Daily Missouri Republican*, August 1, 1850.

³¹ Numerous alderman positions were posted in both the *St. Louis Intelligencer* and the *Missouri Republican* that included a detailed list of alderman up for yearly elections in St. Louis. See: *The Daily Missouri Republican*, August 1, 1850.

The more radical wing of the Whigs found a new political leader in Luther Kennett, a wealthy merchant and elder statesman in the region. Kennett had been a consistent fixture in the St. Louis political scene for the past few decades, but the great fire elevated him, like many wealthy Whigs, into an alderman position.³² He also remained one of the most enigmatic and politically pliable candidates to run for office in antebellum Missouri. At various points, Kennett could be virulently nativist and anti-Catholic, before quickly pandering with great success to immigrants for political support.³³ In political circles, this flexibility made him an ideal political candidate for the radical sect, who had not yet formed a solidified membership or campaign platform.

In the fall of 1850, Kennett campaigned for and won the mayoral seat in St. Louis, further solidifying the change in course for the Whigs. He moved into the leading role of the radical Whigs with ease, enacting a broad-sweeping plan of internal improvements that had been, for most of the Whigs short life span in the city, an unattainable dream. Equipped with the support of his fellow alderman and political partners, Kennett laid out an ambitious proposal for the city in the new year, including: authorizing the city to borrow money from the state, improvements to the harbor, expanding the local hospital, and cosmetic improvements to the parade ground, and city square.³⁴ In response to heavy Democratic criticism, Kennett remarked, “But does not the rapid increase of our city in wealth and population justify us in making preparation for its future growth as well our own immediate comfort?”³⁵ Not only was an aggressive economic policy necessary, Kennett declared, it was vital to the progress of the city.

³² Primm, *Lion of the Valley*, 177.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ *The St. Louis Intelligencer*, April 20, 1851.

³⁵ Ibid.

A Printers Voice: The *St. Louis Intelligencer* and the Birth of the Know Nothings

As the Missouri state party system rapidly disintegrated under the weight of the Compromise of 1850, a small group of wealthy St. Louis merchants were busy planning a game changing political maneuver of their own. On January 1, 1850, George Budd, an entrepreneur with seemingly endless business ties among the city elite, produced the inaugural edition of the *St. Louis Intelligencer*. The paper proved to be an instant sensation in St. Louis, with advertisements and page counts of the periodical growing considerably each day.³⁶ Although most political movements and parties in American culture maintained a partisan paper by this point, the *Intelligencer* holds the legacy of helping the Know Nothing's organize and develop a rhetorical platform through its pages.³⁷ The paper gave a voice to a discontented minority of Whigs who no longer felt wholly loyal to their mother party.

“A public journal,” editor J.B. Crockette proclaimed in the inaugural issue, “if conducted with fairness and candor, with dignity and discretion-if it is allowed to become the instrument of no faction, nor the vehicle of private malice if it advocates only what is pure in morals” would elevate the morals of its readers through intellectual enlightenment and personal fulfillment. The *Intelligencer*, Crockette declared, would avoid the travails of partisanship and political dishonesty of other pressmen and act as a moral compass for readers, guiding their head and hearts through honest, and introspective forecasts. Crockette concluded the introductory piece with a cautionary note to Whig readers: “Our prospectus has already announced that the *Intelligencer* will advocate ‘the noble conservative principles which have heretofore

³⁶ During the preliminary months of the paper, the periodical increased from two to three pages daily, to five to six pages daily. Additionally, the paper expanded its advertising base. Advertisements ranged from dressmakers, and apothecaries, to male toupee' shops, all which were targeted toward urban citizens in St. Louis.

³⁷ I use the word rhetorical purposefully. The Know Nothings would not develop a solidified, organized platform until after the 1854 election. Instead the group formed its platform around public debate and speeches, but did not create a formal, printed platform like its national counter-parts.

characterized the Whig party,' This pledge will be faithfully redeemed, and so long as the administration of General Taylor continues as faithfully as it has hitherto done to uphold those principles, it will receive the cordial and hearty support of this journal."³⁸ The *Intelligencer*, Crockett implied, did not work *for* the Whigs, it was purely a political watchdog. This significant delineation foreshadowed the newspaper's eventual break from the Whig party in favor of the growing Nativist movement.

In the first few months, Crockett aimed toward arousing anti-party sentiment among readers. He often lamented his disgust at the national political scene and the grandstanding of national legislators.³⁹ News columns and lengthy op-ed pieces presented endless coverage of partisan bickering and the lack of progress by Congress to reconcile its fundamental differences on slavery. One particular editorial piece observed:

It is mortifying to witness so much wrangling in our National Legislature. Most of the time of Congress is occupied by subjects of no practical importance; much time is wasted in discussing abstractions, and a large portion of it is devoted to speeches for home consumption.⁴⁰

Crockett further bemoaned the state of Congress, griping: "their debates cost their country heavily, and seriously retard the public and private legislation of Congress."⁴¹ Magnifying the inadequacies of the Whigs and Democrats seemed to prove an effective strategy, as op-eds multiplied in the following months, growing increasingly sensational in nature.⁴²

³⁸ *The St. Louis Intelligencer*, January 3, 1850.

³⁹ Editorials lamenting the grandstanding of legislators is not a phenomenon singularly in Missouri. Across the country, as pressmen began to publish congressional speeches daily in their papers, politicians increased their dramatic language and theatrical floor speeches. Andrew Robertson's, *The Language of Democracy: Political Rhetoric in the United States and Britain, 1790-1900* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 115.

⁴⁰ *The St. Louis Intelligencer*, January 9, 1850.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² In the first few months, Crockett focused primarily on providing an overview of the daily news, with a few editorials sporadically reaching the front page. After the first six months passed, however, Crockett began to add editorials on the front page regularly. By 1851, they were a constant fixture for the daily paper, and rarely absent.

Crockette's literary scheme of hortatory and incendiary rhetoric chartered a new course in Missouri newspaper culture.⁴³ Prior to the *Intelligencer*, partisan papers in Missouri were surprisingly restrained in their language and reporting to the public.⁴⁴ Crockette, however, used stinging and hyperbolic commentary generously to mobilize Whigs, especially against the state legislature they found stifling to business interests.⁴⁵ Extreme language and ad hominem attacks filled its pages, and in every daily issue, the editor dutifully offered a front-page editorial brashly attacking the Democrats and the state legislature (filled with both Democrats and Whigs). Many of Crockette's opinion pieces attacked the Democrats for their self-interest, or indifference to the issues plaguing the merchant class, particularly vagrancy laws and usury taxes.

Democrats, of course, received a generous amount of criticism, including Governor Austin Augustus King and Senator Benton, the most visible faces of the party at the time. The editor implored King and his supporters to retire in shame, acerbically declaring:

WE think that his excellency should be satisfied by this time, that he is held in the most fotid[sic] contempt by the democracy of the state. Two thirds of the press that supported him for governor has since denounced him for his unwarrantable somerset[sic] last summer, and will hold no fellowship with him. His name is a slur upon the party. The few friends who still cling to him instead of letting him die his political death as softly and easily as the case will permit, are constantly and most cruelly holding him up as a pink of consistency, and a criterion of honest politicians!⁴⁶

The editor ended his stinging diatribe with a final parting shot at King's Democratic and Whig supporters, "We conceive it to be most cruel in these men to be continually bringing this man before the public. As his friends they should for the sake of decency let him alone- for like a

⁴³ I borrow Andrew Robertson's definition of *hortatory rhetoric* as "the language of political mobilization...Hortatory rhetoric was active, urging voters to mobilize." As found in Andrew Robertson's, *The Language of Democracy*, 16.

⁴⁴ The leading political organs of the Whigs and Democrats rarely openly attacked the *character* of politicians in the fashion of Crockette. Of course, editors openly questioned the positions of public officials, but character attacks rarely made it into the pages. Instead, their commentary was focused primarily on political issues, and not with particular individuals.

⁴⁵ *The St. Louis Intelligencer*, May 9, 1851.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, October 10, 1850.

mass of filth and corruption, the more he is stirred the worst he stinks...”⁴⁷ Crockette’s editorial supported a journalistic tactic described by historian Jeffrey Pasley as “the politics of exclusion.”⁴⁸ Editors routinely produced scathing character profiles that: “ejected opponents from the public sphere by re-embodimenting them in guises” that highlighted their personal shortcomings.⁴⁹ Crockette carefully stripped away his adversary’s airs of gentility and honor, creating demeaning caricatures that entertained his readers and discredited his opposition.

Benton faced a gauntlet of attacks, including editorials that described the ex-senator as corrupt and a “despot.”⁵⁰ When Benton lost his 1850 re-election campaign, the *Intelligencer* cuttingly remarked: “The last mail steamer brought to us the welcome news of the political regeneration of Missouri-the defeat and final overthrow of the unscrupulous, vain and egotistical pretender, Benton”⁵¹ The citizens of “dear old Missouri” had finally rid themselves of “one who has for nearly thirty years misrepresented her true interest in the Senate of the United States.”⁵²

Crockette often portrayed local elections as impending crises for democracy. He pleaded with readers to stand up against the Legislature at the polls, or else “despotism”⁵³ could spread throughout the state and spoil democracy within it. By constructing a fictional reality for readers, Crockette implied frequently that the state of democracy could easily succumb to tyranny without an adequate *republican* watchdog. Crockette, of course, assumed his editorials should rightfully assume that role.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Jeffrey Pasley, *The Tyranny of Printers: Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁵⁰ *The St. Louis Intelligencer*, January 19, 1850.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, April 30, 1851. The above quote contains grammatical errors in the original text that I have left unchanged.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, May 6, 1851.

Within this intense partisan climate, the editors of both Whig periodicals the *Intelligencer* and *Missouri Republican* held somewhat parallel partisan views and publicly maintained an amicable relationship. The growing popularity of the *Intelligencer*, however, soon began to make the *Republican's* editor anxious, leading to a rivalry highlighted in the pages of both periodicals. Upon news of the publication of the *Intelligencer*, the *Missouri Republican* proclaimed:

We learn from the New Era of last evening that this new Whig paper will appear about the 7th inst. Its institution is to run itself against the republican, but we are apprehensive that it will miss the mark, in as much as we believe that none of contemporaries have ever been able to find out the exact position of the enterprising journal. The intelligencer, however, is not only full of energy, but has 'a pock full of rocks' and is determined to strive for a position that the Republican has not yet attained.⁵⁴

The *Intelligencer* editor publicly responded to the announcement with a front page editorial:

Towards our brethren of the press we cherish no feelings but those of unfeigned good will, and we are resolved that in our intercourse with them our conduct shall be marked only by courtesy and due respect. If this felling is met in a proper spirit, as we have no reason to doubt it will be, we shall get on most pleasantly with all our neighbors.⁵⁵

As the printed exchanges imply, both editors at least publicly tried to quell any competition among the Whig papers. However, as Croquette became comfortable in his role as a deliberate partisan, he expected the editor of the *Republican* to mimic his literary style with theatrical commentary in order to mobilize the more conservative wing of the Whigs. When the legislature passed a higher tax on imported goods, merchants looked toward each paper for guidance, and an effective political strategy to fight against the tax. The *Republican* implored readers to wait patiently for a possible reversal by the court. The *Intelligencer*, however, found considerable fault with the cautionary strategy, and caustically shot back: "The *Republican* However, advises them to be exceedingly discreet and temperate, for fear that they may arouse undue prejudices

⁵⁴ Republished in the *St. Louis Intelligencer*, January 30, 1850.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

against them.”⁵⁶ Crockette’s attack illustrates the deeper changes between the old and new norms of print culture. While he naturally assumed the role as partisan editor and proudly manipulated readers emotions for political purposes, the *Republican’s* editor attempted to maintain an air of objectivity and stay above the fray of partisan attacks.

The *Intelligencer* did not make the fateful break with Whig party until the second year of operations, when the state Legislature- a mixture of Whigs and Democrats- began to pass taxes unfavorable for the merchant class. Most of these measures took the form of usury laws that curtailed the rate of interest a merchant or banker could charge a borrower to six percent.⁵⁷ Radical Whigs beseeched the state Legislature to forego a cap, but were ultimately unsuccessful in forestalling a vote in favor of the statutes.⁵⁸ The *Intelligencer* desperately urged the editor of the *Missouri Republican* to join its cause and help mobilize fellow Whigs against the legislation. If conservative Whigs did not adopt the tax reform issue as a central issue in the Whig platform, the editor pled, the legislature would begin attacking all Whigs, not just the privileged elite. “The merchants are the victims now; but a year or two hence it may be the mechanic, the schoolmaster, the minister, or the farmer. If it should be focused necessary to increase the revenue demagogues will be afraid to advocate an open, undisguised directed property tax but they will be found taxing vocations and making honest men pay for the privilege of following an honest calling.”⁵⁹

The *Missouri Republican* largely ignored the desperate pleas of Crockette as the ideological distance between the two wings of the Whig party grew wider. He found

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, May 2, 1851. The grammatical errors in the cited quote are original to the source.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, October 15, 1850.

⁵⁸ In the May 6, 1851 issue of the periodical, the *Intelligencer* openly implored Whigs to amend the state constitution in order to circumvent the ordinance, but failed.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

considerable fault with the direction he perceived the party taking, starting with the conservatives' apathy toward the Legislature's tax policies. The lack of initiative by the *Republican* and its conservative readers to form an organized campaign against the Legislature frustrated Crockette. He unleashed a series of angry, front-page essays that characterized the conservative wing of the party as "old fashioned,"⁶⁰ and "despondent."⁶¹ "We are mortified" the editor heatedly wrote, "to see the indifference which is manifested toward these great enterprises. But the people of St. Louis will soon be taught a lesson which they will not soon forget."⁶² Taking yet another opportunity to illustrate an impending political crisis, the editor warned his readers: "If these enterprises fail now, it will depreciate the reputation and prospects of this city throughout the union. It will not only prove that we are wholly devoid of enterprise and public spirit, but that we are deficient in a city, and are blind to the teachings of experience."⁶³ The Whigs, Crockette claimed, lacked the fighting spirit necessary to take the political reins from the Democrats and fulfill Missouri's destiny as the preeminent American city. After dissolving their political relationship with the Whigs, Budd and Crockette focused on establishing a distinct political identity for their wayward group. The fateful decision to join the growing Nativist movement can be explained in two ways: ideological agreement and opportunity.

While the Know Nothing movement was always an elitist undertaking in St. Louis- its founding members were affluent merchants supported by a social network of likeminded wealthy businessmen- popular rhetoric published in the pages of the *Intelligencer* identified the party as an early form of progressive populism, with supporters seeking "greater opportunity because

⁶⁰ Ibid. April 26, 1851.

⁶¹ Ibid. May 9, 1851.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

they see society as tilted out of balance.”⁶⁴ “In our opinion” Crockette protested, “the whole system is anti-republican, arbitrary, tyrannical, liable to the grossest abuses, and dangerous in the extreme. It is incompatible with that republican equality and that sacred regard for the rights of minorities which are the boasts of all American citizens.”⁶⁵ These exaggerated notions of Democratic tyranny and of lackadaisical conservative Whigs forced radicals to look outside the periphery of their traditional party roles and find a new label in which to differentiate themselves. Crockette and Budd branded this new opposition party as the only refuge for democratically conscious men in the city.

The national Know Nothing Party, already underfoot in various cities across the country by this point, began to utilize rhetoric similar to Crockette’s editorials. Historians have long debated the role of populism, either progressive or reactionary, in the Nativist movement, and whether it was merely a passing trend.⁶⁶ Yet, populist currents ran rampantly throughout Know Nothing rhetoric, both in the North and South, and served as a framework in which the group expressed its displeasure with the political status quo. Thus, radical Whigs did not view the Know Nothings as a drastic or incongruent political ideology from the one they were already expressing in print.

Furthermore, radical Whigs joined the Know Nothings in a clever act of political opportunism.⁶⁷ By 1852, Know Nothing lodges were already slowly spreading across the city

⁶⁴ Ronald Formisano, *For the People: American Populist Movements from the Revolution to the 1850s* (Chappell Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 11.

⁶⁵ *The St. Louis Intelligencer*, May 9, 1851.

⁶⁶ The only known historiographical essay on populism in the Know Nothing Party, see *For the People*. I borrow Formisano’s definition of Reactionary populism as “more easily slide into exaggerated fear regarding their enemies and the causes of social ills, while some of the most extreme and marginal entertain the desperate conviction, as Richard Hofstadter put it some time ago, that history itself is a conspiracy”, 13.

⁶⁷ The argument that Whigs and Democrats joined the Know Nothings out of political opportunism is not a new position. Historians studying the Know Nothing Party, including Darrell Overdyke and Jean Baker have discussed the motivations behind Whigs and Democrats joining the movement, including political opportunism (Darrell

through the initiative of ex-Native American party men.⁶⁸ These lodges caught the attention of newspaper editors, who cryptically referenced the secret meetings in their columns.⁶⁹ The *Intelligencer* revealed its affinity for the growing opposition party, describing the meetings as an amalgamation of “the enlightened and patriotic of both parties.”⁷⁰ Many of the lodges were centered squarely in the financial district where merchants lived and worked, a significant incentive.

Election of 1854: “Pure Americanism” and the Rise of the Know Nothing Party

In the summer of 1854, the newly formed Know Nothing Party launched its first congressional campaign in an election that pitted old foes Kennett and Benton against each other once again. “Justice to the West!”⁷¹ a jubilant newspaper headline screamed to readers on August 7, 1854. Justice, according to the *Republican’s* estimate, was nothing short of a sweeping Know Nothing victory. Claiming success prematurely, the editor excitedly proclaimed: “Mr. Kennett will be heard and justice will be done in the West.”⁷² The election served as a watershed moment for the city. Natives pushed aside the politically powerful Democrats and transitioned Missouri toward an economically progressive direction. Now armed with a strong political voice in Kennett, an identity courtesy of Croquette’s editorials, the Know

Overdyke’s *The Know Nothing Party in the South* and Jean Baker’s *Ambivalent Americans: The Know Nothing Party in Maryland*. Furthermore, John Merring similarly argued this point in his work, *The Whig Party in Missouri* where he describes the Know Nothing Party as “masked Whiggery.”

⁶⁸ The Native American Party was a national Nativist political party that focused on keeping political leadership solely within the Native American bloc. In Missouri, they had a small congregation, but their platform and political objectives held no similarities with the later Know Nothing’s. Historians focusing on Missouri politics have incorrectly assumed that the membership within the two Parties were congruent, when in fact the Know Nothings were primarily wealthy merchants from the Whig Party.

⁶⁹ *The St. Louis Intelligencer*, May 1, 1851.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ *The Daily Missouri Republican*, August 7, 1854.

⁷² Ibid.

Nothings were finally able to campaign on a platform expressing their distinct vision for the city; a grand plan that personified their dream of a bourgeois empire, complete with new city roads, a state bank, and the adoption of state financial regulations that suited “their people.”⁷³

In the 1854 election, the newly branded Know Nothings packaged a form of nationalism that championed a significant growth in state spending and proscribed competing political ideologies by labeling them as un-American. In what would become the defining political philosophy of the Know Nothing Party in Missouri, Kennett’s supporters began to campaign on a platform labeled “Pure Americanism.”⁷⁴ *Pure Americanism* in many ways was merely a continuance of manifest republicanism, but adapted for a new political party. Instead of focusing simply on manifest destiny and republicanism, pure Americanism incorporated the anti-party sentiment aroused by Know Nothings, and the belief that city politics could be purified only if old party men like Benton were ejected. Their new ideological current would “relieve the space from old fogytion-which is to wipe out all the crude notions that have obstained[sic] a roothold for the last thirty year.”⁷⁵ Democrats opposed to the Know Nothing platform were described as blind to progress, and preoccupied only by slavery and a Southern “chivalry” that “evinces its prowess, by striking down our national emblems and blotting out the stars and stripes from our banner.”⁷⁶

The Kansas Nebraska Act further helped Know Nothings in their crusade to purify politics. The act, proposed by Senator Stephen Douglas, supported slavery extension into new

⁷³ *Ibid.*, August 6, 1854.

⁷⁴ Primm, *Lion of the Valley*, 213.

⁷⁵ *The Daily Missouri Republican*, August 1, 1854.

⁷⁶ *The St. Louis Intelligencer*, May 3, 1851.

territories through popular sovereignty and tested the loyalties among Whig and Democrats.⁷⁷ Within Missouri, Benton and the Democrats had difficulty finding their footing in the aftermath of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The Democrats were an amalgamation of pro and anti-slavery extension members, and Benton was expected to offer a clear, hard-line on his stance. The national discussion over the act forced Benton's campaign into a storm of slavery debate solely among Democrats, severely stunting his ability to campaign on issues that motivated Whigs to the polls. Additionally, Democrats, already uncomfortable with Benton's position on slavery during the Compromise struggle, pressured the ex-senator to take a position during campaign stops. Benton tried in vain to dodge discussing his particular feelings openly, which further frustrated pro-slavery Democrats.⁷⁸

The Natives, however, found the Kansas-Nebraska Act yet another demonstration of the systematic corruption and self-interest of national politicians unable to put the issue of slavery to rest. Benton, the Whigs and Natives continually argued, belonged to this circle of corruption, and was a "traitor to the state."⁷⁹ Unlike the Know Nothings, the Democratic membership had a large percentage of fervently pro-slavery voters who demanded a hard and fast stand on slavery in Kansas. Democrats demanded a firm stance from Benton on the Kansas-Nebraska Act and Benton again found himself defending his position as anti-slavery extension proponent. The Know Nothings were largely apathetic on extension, and Kennett easily avoided falling into a public debate over slavery.

⁷⁷ This of course is a summarized version of the political implications of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. For more information on the Act and the political fallout nationally, see: Nicole Etcheson's, *Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War Era* (Kansas City: University of Kansas Press, 2006).

⁷⁸ In Washington circles, Benton discussed openly his desire for the Act to be destroyed. See: *The Daily Missouri Republican*, March 25, 1854. And yet on the campaign trail he dodged any public debate among Democrats, fearing any tenuous relationships between Democratic could easily be broken. See: *Ibid.*, April 12, 1854.

⁷⁹ *The Daily Missouri Republican*, August 27, 1854.

While Democrats were befuddled by the question of slavery extension, Know Nothings could campaign on a more optimistic platform of economic progress, which further encouraged support from new voters. Merchants, the campaign argued, were the new apostles of progress and prosperity for the Union. Progress, however, could not continue without a steady stream of government support for city projects, including new hospitals, educational centers, a new city park and more improvements to the city's port and levies.⁸⁰ As Kennett's supporters argued, "a great many men, laborers, mechanics, &c., who were poor then, and who are rich now; nay, worth a hundred times more than in 1842; and to what do they own this but to the improvements of the city." Internal improvements, they repeatedly argued, were necessary for a wealthy, contented city.⁸¹ Without a full support of Kennett's pure Americanism paradigm, Natives then declared: "you will again be poor"⁸² In total, the Kansas-Nebraska Act allowed Know Nothings to brand themselves as the future, while labeling the Democrats as the party of old issues.

But as the election entered the last stretches, political rhetoric from Know Nothings became tinged with intense nativism. Both the *Republican* and the *Intelligencer* offered fiery commentary detailing alleged foreign plots to flood the streets with Irish and German gangs and destroy the city's cultural institutions.⁸³ Nativist rhetoric grew in intensity in the last few months as Democrats campaigned heavily for the foreign vote. Democrats blanketed Missouri newspapers with campaign literature imploring immigrants to vote Democratic, declaring: "That to those[foreigners]... who have the institutions of their native or adopted country and desire that their children shall be freemen, imbued with democracy, we cordially extend an invitation to join

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, August 6, 1854.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*, April 4, 1852.

⁸³ The institution's Nativists were primarily concerned with were Protestantism and slavery, in party due to Henry Boernstein's public Catholicism and abolitionism. Primm, *Lion of the Valley*, 176-177.

and act with our party.”⁸⁴ For the divided Democrats, foreigners offered the best hope to supplement their discontented rank and file members.

Kennett supporters capitalized on the anxiety surrounding the foreign vote and channeled the discourse into vitriolic nativism. Both the *Intelligencer* and the *Missouri Republican* dramatically stepped up its Nativist rhetoric in order to mobilize conservative Whigs. The *Republican* suggested that Democrats were conducting their meetings in both the English and German languages, and also visiting Irish and German slums to campaign for votes.⁸⁵ Nativism, in consequence, became a convenient political tool for Know Nothings to motivate their constituents to the polls.

As nativism became firmly entrenched in the Natives’ campaign strategy, Kennett supporters made Henry Boernstein, the editor of a German language paper *Anzenger des Westens* as a key target.⁸⁶ Boernstein’s influence as editor for the Democrats in many ways paralleled Croquette. Both men established their papers for partisan purposes and exerted a significant influence over the direction of their party through editorials and political promotion. Although the comparisons are striking, their political ideologies never allowed them to find a common ground. In the Natives’ view, Boernstein represented two key elements guaranteed to incite Kennett supporters: He was German, and an active editor for the Democrats. Natives labeled

⁸⁴ Both the *Daily Republican* and the *Intelligencer* republished each other’s news items. Please see: *The Daily Missouri Republican*, June 4, 1854.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, August 7, 1854.

⁸⁶ Unfortunately, Henry Boernstein has escaped biographical treatment. The only descriptive accounts include recollections of Boernstein include: Arenson, *The Great Heart of the Republic*, a and Walter Barlow Stevens, *Missouri the Center State: 1821-1915* (Chicago: S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1915) Although the latter offers only a cursory description of the editor.

Boernstein a foreign instigator, plotting to usurp “our social and political institutions-to unsettle the very foundations of society.”⁸⁷

Furthermore, Boernstein began to antagonize the Nativists in the *Anzenger* in order to motivate the dissatisfied Democrats, skillfully using Croquette’s editorial tactics against them. “You are badly fixed” Boernstein proclaimed to the “poor” Know Nothings, “we pity you.”⁸⁸ Heading into the summer months, the editor of the *Republican* expressed anger and frustration over Boernstein’s lengthy diatribes against the Kennett campaign, writing: “He[Boernstein], day after day and for many weeks, continuously did publish in the “Anzeiger des Weatens[sic],” incendiary articles, calculated to inflame the passions of the people.”⁸⁹ The *Republican’s* editor then prophetically announced: “Tonight ‘Old Bullions’ will be found thrown off the track... all owing to the stupidity and recklessness of the engineer Boernstein.”⁹⁰ Boernstein appealed to the mayor for specialized protection of his printing office, and the *Missouri Republican* took great pleasure in printing the editor’s plea in its paper, publicly mocking him on the front page. “Let him behave himself and nobody will harm him” the editor condescendingly warned, “It is his fears and his fright that are consellers[sic] in this case, coupled with an intimate desire to produce riot and confusion on election day, so that he may profit by it.”⁹¹

Just a few weeks before the pivotal election, the continual mud-slinging between the editors had ratcheted up tensions between the two parties. In the last printed edition of the *Republican* before the election, the paper offered a slew of sensational editorial pieces purposefully fanning partisan flames. Reports filled the pages of the paper of possible voter

⁸⁷ *The Daily Missouri Republican*, August 2, 1854.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, August 6, 1854.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, August 2, 1854.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, August 7, 1854.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

fraud by Democrats, conspiracy theories surrounding Benton's supposedly corrupted dealings in Congress, and tales of Democratic chicanery.⁹² Headlines spoke of a lurking threat of un-naturalized foreign voters flooding polls and voting Democrat, proclaiming: "Illegal Voters' and "Challengers be at Your Posts!"⁹³ Violence should be administered, the editor plaintively maintained, if Democrats attempted "to force illegal votes into the ballot box, in such manner as the *Anzeiger* advises."⁹⁴ The *Republican's* editor carefully groomed its readers to prepare for a possible riot in the city.

Indeed, on Election Day, after a few hours of peaceful balloting, the city erupted in full scale violence at the site of a Ninth Ward ballot box in an immigrant slum. After days of gunfire and dozens of confirmed deaths, the city not only had a new congressman in Luther Kennett, they also had a new group in power, the Know Nothing Party. Days after the election and riot, Natives came together for a City Council meeting to argue for state funding for a new police squadron and reparations for the destroyed city.⁹⁵ The programs proposed during the council meeting would become the first of many sweeping changes the Natives would make under the auspices of progress and peace in the city.

⁹² First, in a piece titled "Summons", the editor detailed a lengthy meeting among Democrats, including Benton and the Mayor How's secretary, over possible voter malfeasance among Kennett's campaign. The *Republican's* editor feared that illegitimate charges could hurt the Natives' campaign. Furthermore, in a report titled, "Dodging the Bank Question" the *Republican* charged the Democrats with blatantly lying to constituents over their position over the question of a state sponsored bank in order to garner last minute votes.

⁹³ *The Daily Missouri Republican*, August 6, 1854.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Schneider, "Riot and Reaction", 183.

Conclusion:

The defeat of Benton destroyed the last semblance of commonality and negotiation among the parties. In various moments in antebellum Missouri, the Whigs and Democrats found common ground in their support of the Senator. But as Benton faded from the political scene, so did their tenuous accord, and the legacy of compromise. The rise of the Know Nothing Party behind Luther Kennett signaled a new era in Missouri politics characterized as progressively minded, but divisive in spirit.

CHAPTER 4

“RULE OR RUIN”: THE REIGN OF KNOW NOTHINGISM IN ST. LOUIS

In the autumn of 1854, the founders of the St. Louis Mercantile Library jubilantly announced the grand opening of their permanent library facility, located at Fifth and Locust, in the heart of the financial district. The building, one of the most opulently furnished public spaces in the city, boasted two lecture halls, a reading room, and a boardroom. Precious artwork adorned the walls and eighteenth-century Missouri manuscripts filled the burgeoning archives. A standing monument to their political goals, the archival holdings celebrated St. Louis’s Western heritage, while the architecture expressed their aspiration to be a modern metropolis.¹

The development of the building itself was not without its own revealing history. In a savvy move to increase publicity and community excitement, the founders organized a design competition, sending out a national call to all major cities. Their intentions were not solely to garner attention for the library, but to display to the nation a new chapter in Missouri’s culture. For much of the state’s history, the nation remained captivated by the belief in manifest destiny, advocating the spread of American democracy and republican ideals across the plains. Although Missouri stood as the model for this belief, the city retained much of its lawlessness, Western identity and suffered growing pains post-statehood.² The group remained confident that the mere design of the building would defy the dirty, uncivilized stereotype that plagued the city and display the “pride of not only its membership and owners, but an intelligent community.”³

¹ Adam Arenson, “Cultural Barometer: The St. Louis Mercantile Library as a National Institution” *The Missouri Historical Review* Vol. 102, No. 2 (January 2008), 92.

² These growing pains included a myriad of election riots, yellow fever epidemics, overcrowding in certain city wards, and a lack of institutional infrastructure in pace with the influx of population.

³ *The Daily Missouri Republican*, October 16, 1854.

The design committee eventually selected St. Louis architect Robert S. Mitchell, confident in the skills of their own local talent. After two years of construction, the committee excitedly announced the grand opening of the library. After years of visitors speaking on makeshift stages, St. Louis finally had a defined space to commemorate city events and host prominent politicians and writers. The organizers settled on a balance between neo-classical and Romanesque architecture, with grand arched windows and ornamental moldings along the exterior. This desire for order, symmetry, and classical ideals gave visual representation to their political goals. The design, fulfilling the committee's ambitions, ensured the library would stand in national prominence. The group's avid ambition for intellectual engagement would soon reveal to the nation exactly what they had hoped: St. Louis was on the cusp of a cultural renaissance.

The Mercantile Library stood as an example amongst a sea of new cultural institutions gaining influence in antebellum St. Louis. With the groundbreaking of each new institution, the founders believed the community would slowly reform its bawdy behavior to fit these models of middle-class decorum.⁴ Founded and guided by the same individuals responsible for the Know Nothing movement, each institution stood as a monument to the party's aspirations and cast an authoritative shadow upon the community.

In the months after the Know Nothings' stunning 1854 election, they showed little interest in the party spirit and bickering that came to define the contest. Instead, Natives re-focused their attention on fostering an enlightened, sophisticated community of republican westerners through a series of mutually oriented civic projects. The party's intention was not simply to enrich the moral integrity of the citizens in St. Louis, but to position the city as a

⁴ I define *middle class decorum* as the rise of distinct protestant social values, tolerance, and civility.

national model for its republican ideal, *pure Americanism*. This large scale campaign of moral suasion was deeply inspired by Unitarian minister William Greenleaf Eliot's weekly sermons that expressed a desire to recall basic Revolutionary principals, including honor and civic virtue. Nativists aimed to spread these principals throughout St. Louis's urban landscape, implementing order and reform in a setting known nationally for its violent riots and dirty streets.⁵ If *pure Americanism* could reform even the most primitive of urban landscapes, then surely it could serve as an organizing mechanism for metropolises in both the North and South, mitigating the growing sectional tension the Know Nothings viewed as inhibiting human progress. The modern city, the group poignantly argued, would save the country.

With the party's goals defined, Natives found reform of the existing society necessary, and they created two distinct, but complimentary reform projects: police and temperance reform. By eliminating drinking and lawlessness, Know Nothings would be free to dream of St. Louis' rebirth into an enlightened, culturally vibrant community that would eclipse the North and South in wealth and intellect.

Building a Commanding Point: The Rise of an Institutional Infrastructure

The abrupt turn from aggressive political partisans to enlightened reformers requires us to reflect on the original intentions of Yankee migrants as they settled within the city. Moved by visions of a western Garden of Eden, travelers flocked to the region hoping to escape the slums and corrupt city politics that plagued Boston and New York.⁶ Throughout the jolts in Missouri's political culture, migrants clung to the belief that Missouri would become the setting for the rebirth of democracy- uncompromised by sectional tension and free from corruption and the

⁵ Adler, *Yankee Merchants*, 131.

⁶ *Ibid*, 53.

personal ambition of Washington politicians. As I have argued, however, after years of Democratic rule, a turbulent economy stalled state funding on internal improvements and the city remained stagnant. Nonetheless, a new generation of elite city boosters inherited the belief of Missouri exceptionalism and, with it, a driving ambition to fulfill the state's destiny as a commanding point for the American empire.

While city elites dreamed of *pure Americanism*, St. Louis residents endured the reality of extremely violent and restless streets during this period. The city embodied what historians have termed the *frontier mentality*: where community members administered justice on an individual and frequent bases, and violence was common, with brothels and taverns dominating the streets.⁷ Papers frequently reported deadly robberies and scuffles on the levees and the ineffectiveness of the police authority made the community a hot bed for riots and revelry. The nation soon took notice, labeling St. Louis as a dangerous and unruly frontier boomtown.

The frontier mentality began to wane as the city moved toward industrialization in the 1850s, witnessing the rise of an energetic group of elite merchants and traders. From their small business outpost that dominated the financial district, these men watched anxiously as riots and lynch mobs incited chaos outside their business doors. The lack of social order and civility stood as a direct threat to their business prospects, and Northern investors were growing increasingly cautious about investing in the volatile region.⁸ If the social environment played a direct role in the community's character, then a complete remodeling of the city's cultural infrastructure was

⁷ A more descriptive definition of the *frontier mentality* can be found in Catherine L. Albanese, "Savage, Sinner, and Saved: Davy Crockett, Camp Meetings, and the Wild Frontier," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 5, Special Issue: American Culture and the American Frontier (Winter, 1981), 482-501. In her article, she writes of the mentality rampant in the West: "...nature was conquered and controlled when heroic humans such as Davy Crockett lost all semblance of self-control in an ecstasy of violence. Drinking in power both from the whiskey jug and the blood of wild life, man conquered the chaos of the natural world by immersing himself totally in it." (486).

⁸ Adler, *Yankee Merchants*, 131.

desperately needed by the mid-1840's. At the forefront of this movement were a host of familiar men, including Luther Kennett, Wayman Crow, and George Budd. Institution building, they theorized, could stand as prototypes for community behavior and serve as a prescription for the turbulent streets. They designed an ambitious network of humanitarian organizations that addressed the basic needs of the destitute, including education, healthcare, and Protestant theology. Over time, they hoped these institutions would produce the social conditions conducive to shaping civic-minded and respectable community members. In the words of one planner, the group hoped to build a "nursery of future Greshams and Astors of statesmen, divines and enlightened mechanics."⁹ Without direct reform, they feared the city would lose the contest between the frontier mentality and bourgeoisie decorum.

The creators first tested institutional building with the establishment of Washington University and the Mercantile Library, both in 1846. Education and intellectual fulfillment, as their immediate choice implied, stood as the cornerstone of their institutional strategy. The group desperately warned the public that "No time must be lost" in establishing an education system for the fate of the city's moral health depended on an educated youth.¹⁰ This was especially true for poor and orphaned juveniles.¹¹ Plans for scholarships and financial aid for the poor were thoughtfully included in Washington University's original charter, for the organizers hoped to instill virtues of "industry and neatness" in the likelihood their parents "will not."¹² This philosophy was as much political as it was a social cause. Over time, the group imagined an increase in access to education would engender an educated populace that reflected their

⁹ *The Daily Missouri Republican*, January 1, 1852.

¹⁰ Adler, *Yankee Merchants*, 131.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Washington University, *Charter and Constitution*, 11.

worldviews and aspirations for the region. “An education is not only the basis of public virtue” one writer declared, “but the bulwark of freedom.”¹³

Power and control seemed to be a particular concern for these men during this period. The committee funded its organizations privately, allowing them to maintain maximum control over the direction and message.¹⁴ Membership in the Mercantile Library was subject to approval by the board, and could be extended and revoked at its behest. Furthermore, the educational program at the University maintained the power to “prescribe the course of instruction” and “deem proper for the appointment of its professors, teachers and officers.”¹⁵ In consequence the party’s educational program for the city was inextricably linked to its own political and economic interests. Not only would the children receive a traditional English education, but also the program must include experimental course work to “enable them to earn a respectable living” as judged by the committee.¹⁶

The Mercantile Library soon emerged as the epicenter for elite culture and arts in St. Louis.¹⁷ The members eagerly filled the fifteen hundred capacity lecture hall, keen to listen to distinguished writers and orators from across the country. Among the notables that visited St. Louis on their speaking tours were Ralph Waldo Emerson, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Louis Agassiz.¹⁸ Moreover, the group sent out an ambitious set of lecture invitations to prominent

¹³ Ibid, September 20, 1854.

¹⁴ The founders took a novel approach to funding the library, canvassing the business district and eliciting full support for the whole project in a matter of months, foregoing the usual subscription based libraries. The library, although operated and funded by the elite, was open to anyone desiring intellectual enrichment and civic camaraderie. See Arenson, “A Cultural Barometer”, 91.

¹⁵ Washington University, *Charter and Constitution*, 3-4.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Historian Adam Arenson described the Mercantile Library in his analytical essay as the “cultural barometer” of the city, where political trends of the city and nation could be judged by tracing the evolution of the library system.

¹⁸ Ibid, 95.

politicians and scholars that revealed to the nation the hunger for intellectual enrichment in the West.¹⁹

The burgeoning cultural renaissance quickly affected the community, and civic spirit flourished among the elite class. Printers often described these new institutions as “the finest in the West”, emphasizing Missouri’s exceptionalism.²⁰ St. Louis may not have a transnational railroad, one writer proclaimed, but the “the light of knowledge is radiating in every direction.”²¹ Editors offered celebratory reports on the progress of the city, but urged citizens to flock to these new organizations for the future “fame and prosperity of St. Louis” depended on their continual support. In unison, the Whig press and the city elites championed the expansion and success of these institutions, joining their future with the progress of the city.

But the founders hit an impasse by 1854. The tremendous growth in elite culture did not trickle down toward the working class as the group had hoped. This was especially evident in the large clusters of immigrants rooted in the Ninth Ward. Instead, immigrants chose to distance themselves and create distinct institutions that catered to the various ethnic groups in the city, including a German language newspaper the *Anzeiger des Westens*, a theatre, saloons, and even a brewery.²²

Thus by 1854 the cultural economy in St. Louis grew increasingly secularized, mimicking what historians of culture often describe as a “cultural hierarchy,” a tension between

¹⁹ Among the requests sent, but never accepted, Herman Melville, Henry Clay, Judah P. Benjamin, and Stephen Douglas. Ibid.

²⁰ *The Daily Missouri Republican*, September 11, 1854.

²¹ Ibid, September 20, 1854.

²² Mark Edward Lender and James Kirby Martin, *Drinking in America: A History* (NY: A Free Press, 1982), 60.

tradition and modernity that plagued the antebellum class system.²³ The creators found that complete social re-organization required political authority. They needed the power to enforce laws and institute reform from the top down.

Their fortunes quickly turned when they gravitated toward the Know Nothing Party. The party inundated Missouri politics from both the state and local level with loyalists in alderman positions, police squadrons, and eventually, the mayoral seat. Even the Whig paper, the *Missouri Republican* offered complicity and political support to its rivals during this period as a possible attempt to establish a friendly alliance. This political supremacy complimented the already constant presence of Know Nothings in the boardrooms of St. Louis's institutions. The weakened Democrats and Whigs could only watch as Know Nothingism spread across the city, taking their political offices and with it, their power.²⁴

Kennett, Crow, and George Budd found a political voice and a new identity in the Know Nothing Party. Political office offered them legitimacy and a renewed purpose in the city. No longer merely city boosters, the founders labeled themselves statesmen, honorably working toward the benefit of the whole. Natives reveled in their growing influence, often likening themselves to paternal figures, gifting the city with "moral and intellectual, if not religious treasures."²⁵ This paternalistic rhetoric, circulated in both the *Intelligencer* and the *Missouri Republican*, contributed to the elites' growing sense of responsibility in educating *and* regulating

²³ Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of a Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

²⁴ Discussion among both parties quickly turned to fusion. The Democrats tried whole-heartedly to work out the differences among their fractured party to recoup their political losses with only moderate success. The Whigs, however, never fully recovered from the Know Nothing defection. Suffering not only from the collapse of their state party, but also the breakdown of the national party, the Whigs continued to implode, and would never reach political supremacy in Missouri.

²⁵ *The St. Louis Intelligencer*, October 15, 1850.

the spectrum of social camps in the city. They assumed the role as the head of household for the community at large, dictating and controlling the behavior of residents.

But as the party's roles changed, so did the scope of its goals. Winning a congressional seat caused Natives to move beyond simply challenging the nation's wild frontier conception of the Missouri region. Civic spirit turned to a much more extensive, nationally-focused political ideology. Inspired by its 1854 *pure Americanism* campaign, the party envisioned a stable and robust city that would surpass the East both in cultural and economic prosperity. Filled with men recently converted to the Know Nothing cause, the City Council quickly passed ordinances for a variety of municipal projects that included city extension, broadly defined police powers, and a host of internal improvements meant to beautify the city's town center.²⁶ Visions of a "New York of the West" dominated the party's thoughts and transformed assumptions about the city's future.²⁷ Not only was the *pure Americanism* model an ideal organizing mechanism for their own city, Nativists saw the potential for the paradigm to spread across the East and South, circulating concepts of urban order and modernization.

Nativists' conceptions of morality and proper behavior were in large part motivated by a desire to recall Revolutionary principles of civic virtue and individual honor. The growth of the modern city, Know Nothings found, had inadvertently left behind a sense of decorum and self-restraint, resulting in a crisis of morality.²⁸ In lengthy op-ed pieces the *Missouri Republican* urged its readers to embrace traditional American values, or what it termed as the "golden

²⁶ Evidence of these vast ordinances can be seen in the extensive coverage of the *Daily Missouri Republican*. See: Ibid, December 12, 1854, October 29, 1854, and November 26, 1854.

²⁷ *The Daily Missouri Republican*, October 15, 1856. As found in, Jeffrey Adler, "Streetwalkers, degraded outcasts, and good-for-nothing huzzies: Women and the dangerous class in Antebellum St. Louis". *Journal of Social History* v. 25, No. 4 (Summer 1992), 739.

²⁸ *The Daily Missouri Republican*, September 19, 1854.

mean”—a balance between virtue and ferocity.²⁹ Recognizing an inherent wildness in Western men, the group reasoned a delicate balance could be found within the community. Instituting moral order—eliminating violence, the sex trade, and public drunkenness lay at the heart of this balance. In a period of intense class division and violence, this moral balance created rules by which Nativists could create a stable social order and act as a panacea to the frontier mentality. In turn, Natives hoped that a new moral order would not only re-cast the Natives’ own community’s identity, but also have a much more extensive impact on the moral fabric of the nation, adding stability to an increasingly rootless society torn apart by political corruption and sectional jealousies.

Imbued with a new sense of responsibility, the Know Nothings began a campaign under the political slogan, “Rule or Ruin!”³⁰ The word *slogan*, however, belies the true purpose of the mantra. “Rule or Ruin!” was in every sense a battle cry meant to shore up new voters and renew the resolve of wavering supporters. Without complete Know Nothing hegemony, the slogan protested, the city would be doomed to perpetual depravity. “We must guard the community” William Eliot Greenleaf remarked, “from corruption.”³¹ Nativists remained confident that the party’s officials were the only agents in the city equipped to build *and* protect the moral integrity of its community.

Armed with this new utopian vision, Natives dropped the antagonistic spirit that marked the 1854 campaign and adopted a more amicable approach to its opponents. Growing increasingly concerned with the cultural hierarchy and the tense political environment in its own state, Natives sought to construct a harmonious community, impenetrable to class strife and

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ *The St. Louis Intelligencer*, April 14, 1856.

³¹ *The Daily Missouri Republican*, November 19, 1854.

partisan politics. While the surrounding states seemed mired in sectional jealousies, Natives hoped to fortify the bonds amongst community members, urging readers: “How many bridges have we among us?”³² This, of course, did not preclude party members from taking shots at immigrants at particularly vulnerable political moments, but in general the public dialogue remained fixed on building a stable, congenial environment.

This harmonious approach to political foes developed into a belief that St. Louis had a significant role in fixing the deeply rooted sectional divide in the country. “The physical greatness of our godly heritage” the party proclaimed, “enables us to gaze with a more patriotic vision upon the miserable strife of extremely Northern and extremely Southern fanatics.”³³ Not only were Missourians chosen by God, the editor explicitly stated, they were distinct from their Southern and Northern brothers. Anyone outside the borders of Missouri was merely “bleary eyed, weak-headed mortals” who lacked the capabilities to dream beyond “the limited range of their own horizon.”³⁴ Their geographic distinctiveness equipped them to scrutinize the weaknesses in American character objectively and amend society through their own, superior behavioral standard.

But what were the shortcomings Nativists found so inhibiting to American progress? Informed by an informal code of conduct that valued civic virtue, Know Nothings saw the country’s cities ruled by corrupt community politicians, unrestrained passions, and poverty.³⁵ By the end of 1854, these ideas laid the groundwork for an expanded police force and temperance. Both reforms struck at the heart of Natives’ ideas of a well-ordered society and fulfilled their vision as a city rescued by the *pure Americanism* paradigm.

³² Ibid, October 15, 1850.

³³ Ibid, September 19, 1854.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Adler, “Streetwalkers”, 739.

The Rise of Washington King and a Professional Police Force

In the fall of 1854, William Greenleaf Elliot ascended the platform at Eliot Seminary to give his second talk in a series titled “Three discourses on the causes of social disorder in American cities.”³⁶ A mixture of Whigs and Natives sat in wooden pews, an audience the popular Unitarian minister knew intimately. Eliot used the lecture series to target significant social vices he found inhibiting the growth of St. Louis’ humanitarian institutions, including election violence and intemperance. In the first lecture, Eliot took aim at the mob mentality running rampant throughout America’s cities. “Enough has been done” the minister remonstrated, “to bring disgrace upon us.” Eliot authoritatively advised the community on the most prudent course of remedy to Missouri’s crime laden streets—an extensive reform of the state’s criminal justice process. The lectures revealed to the community the Know Nothings’ new political platform for the next two years, beginning with the improvement of the city’s volunteer police department.

Police reform was a reaction to years of frustration and hostility toward the lack of professionalism and organization in the city’s municipal departments. St. Louis’s police department depended heavily on a volunteer squadron. Men of all ages could be seen patrolling the streets wearing makeshift yellow stars pinned to their chests, the only visible sign of authority and justice for city residents. These volunteers lacked basic training and leadership, a recipe for disaster in a city defined by its volatile streets and high murder rate.³⁷ Community members and newspaper editors often complained about the ineffectiveness of amateur volunteers in quelling riots and mob violence. In one infamous instance, a small fight among

³⁶ *The Daily Missouri Republican*, November 19, 1854.

³⁷ Adler, *Yankee Merchants*, 170.

Irish immigrants on the levee dissolved into a large-scale riot after volunteer policemen and fireman arrived on the scene and joined the fight.³⁸ In total, the community wrestled with feelings of anxiousness and fear over the relative inability to maintain social order in an unpoliced, frontier city.

The lack of a professional unit was endemic of a much larger disagreement between Democrats and Know Nothings over the role of law enforcers in St. Louis. Heretofore, law enforcers in antebellum St. Louis were left to interpret the vagrancy laws at their discretion, and judges supported this phenomenon by allowing police to arrest vagrants without warrants or cause.³⁹ Law enforcers often focused primarily on protecting business and arresting bank robbers and petty thieves, and not regulating the moral health of the city.⁴⁰ Nativists, however, intended enforcers to take a much more aggressive stand on moral indiscretions, such as prostitution and public intoxication. Moral indiscretions, coupled with the lack of a standing police force, consumed the attention of Know Nothing officials looking to affect the greatest amount of change on the streets in the shortest amount of time.

Public support of an expanded police force, however, had to be stirred. Although crime was as natural to St. Louis's streets as the inclement weather, it was traditionally considered a part of frontier life, even exciting to many.⁴¹ Law enforcers rarely intervened in moral indiscretions and instead focused on protecting businesses in the city. Whig and Nativist editors began to circulate an exaggerated crime narrative that flooded newspapers and monopolized the front pages. Tales of small children senselessly doused in kerosene by drunken vagrants and

³⁸ *The Daily Missouri Republican*, July 30, 1849.

³⁹ Adler, "Streetwalkers", 738.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 740.

⁴¹ Patricia N. Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (NY: W. W. Norton and Company, 1987).

degraded women roaming the streets (antebellum expressions for prostitutes) could most often be found on the front page.⁴² In order to demonstrate to a white readership the horrific danger in the streets, dramatic crime stories uniformly involved white victims. These powerful images of a morally bankrupt society profoundly influenced officials in the criminal justice system to re-evaluate the role of municipal codes and police in policing the behavior and morality of the public.⁴³

Ironically, the single event that pushed the city toward police financing came from violence on behalf of its reformers. The 1854 election riot could have been quelled within a matter of hours with an experienced police force, but the lack of organization and leadership proved difficult to contain. The riot proved to skeptics that the city could no longer continue with volunteers.⁴⁴ As parts of the city lay covered in broken glass and deserted bodies, civic leaders gathered together for an informal meeting to regroup and create a strategy to contain any remaining violence. Nativists capitalized on the opportunity and pushed the party's reform agenda, arguing for municipal funds to finance a salaried, professional organization. A paid force, the party hoped, would bring a sense of honor and legitimacy to the justice system and loyally defend the city from chaos.

Coincidentally, the Know Nothings were aided by an enormous gain in political officeholders, primarily in the City Council and mayor's office. Shortly after Kennett's 1854 congressional win, Know Nothings quietly focused on yet another key election: the mayoral seat formerly occupied by Kennett. Unlike the dramatic 1854 congressional election however, the campaign for mayor remained a quiet affair and relatively unnoticed by the press, with

⁴² Evidence of these narratives can be found in *The Daily Missouri Republican*, August 8, 1854, August 14, 1854, December 13, 1854, and December 27, 1854.

⁴³ Adler, "Streetwalkers", 738.

⁴⁴ Primm, *Lion of the Valley*, 173.

Washington King winning easily. He assumed the command, ensuring the city would continue under Know Nothing supremacy for at least another year.

Almost as soon as King became mayor, he started a crusade to re-shape the police department. For King and his party, reform of the police entailed two basic principles, expand and professionalize. Expansion happened relatively quickly. Armed by the ardent support of a Know Nothing filled City Council, King easily secured funding for a paid police force.⁴⁵ Volunteers either embraced the new plan or resigned their police titles. Democratic volunteers feared the Know Nothing backed police would increase the party's influence in the city and refused to stay on.⁴⁶ Overall, however, the city maintained an organized force, and the flight of disgruntled Democrats remained insignificant.

As quickly as the force expanded, so did its role. The evolution of the criminal justice system in St. Louis can be seen in the implementation of the vagrancy law passed in 1850. When the City Council originally passed the ordinance, police broadly defined vagrants as anyone causing mischief in the financial district, and they irregularly enforced the code. But as Nativists replaced Whigs and Democrats in the city's municipal departments, the term "vagrants" could pertain to anyone, including women and children.⁴⁷ The broad, ill-defined code allowed Nativists to exert a considerable amount of influence in defining acceptable and unacceptable behavior through the execution of the ordinance. Ill-behaved women, juvenile

⁴⁵ Ibid, 173.

⁴⁶ Amy Greenberg, *Cause for Alarm: The Volunteer Fire Department in the Nineteenth Century City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 119.

⁴⁷ Adler, "Streetwalkers", 738.

delinquents, and rowdy saloon owners now faced much harsher and more aggressive police attention and Nativists felt confident the law could finally rid St. Louis of its frontier conduct.⁴⁸

While the Know Nothings succeeded in expanding the force, professionalization was compromised by King's use of it as a party tool. He seemed to understand the benefits of having a paid arm of the city under his power and often used it to his party's advantage. German and Irish business owners reported police harassment, and officers could frequently be seen on street corners handing out Know Nothing literature.⁴⁹ The party and force became so intertwined, ex-volunteers labeled the department as "contaminated" with partisanship.⁵⁰

The Know Nothing success in police reorganization spread to other volunteer municipal institutions, including the fire department.⁵¹ Quickly after police reform, the City Council voted to finance a salaried fire department. Unlike the police force, the fire squad saw a mass exodus of firemen.⁵² The episode quickly became an ugly political matter for the Know Nothings as Democrats charged political chicanery. Although King saw the benefits of a more authoritarian arm of the party in the fire and police department, the community resented the flagrant partisanship. It became clear to many, especially Democrats, that King saw both first and foremost as a political tool.

Unfortunately for King, his tenure as mayor lasted only one year. By 1856, Howe regained his political footing, aligned with the Democrats and the countless numbers of former police and fire volunteers unwilling to subscribe to the Know Nothing- "contaminated"

⁴⁸ Adler, *Yankee Merchants*, 170.

⁴⁹ Primm, *Lion of the Valley*, 173

⁵⁰ William Hyde, "Recollections of St. Louis," in the *Globe Democrat*, January 24, 1892, as found in Greenberg's, *Cause for Alarm*, 119.

⁵¹ See: Greenberg's, *Cause for Alarm*.

⁵² Greenberg, *Cause for Alarm*, 119-122.

departments.⁵³ King's legacy in the city, however, remained in his effort to revolutionize the application of criminal justice in the city.

Temperance Movement:

In the fall of 1854, Know Nothings quietly started planning temperance ordinances for the city. Natives first looked toward other large cities for guidance including London and New York.⁵⁴ In language reminiscent of the Maine law, the city alderman passed a series of city temperance ordinances that limited the sale of liquor on Sunday and limited the power of saloon owners in the city.⁵⁵ For reformers, imbibing represented the grisly underbelly of the city they wanted to purify. Conveniently, temperance legislation financially and socially debilitated the party's German and Irish political foes, the majority of saloon and tavern owners in the city. Although not denying the inherent nativism imbedded in temperance, the ordinances had a much more extensive goal.

While temperance legislation can be traced to the early Republic, the movement did not gain momentum until the Jacksonian era. Recent analyses of temperance have pointed toward the "modernization paradigm" as the central source of this growth in support. According to this interpretation, the extreme economic and social changes market capitalism created prompted middle-class merchants and artisans to bind together under a mutual cause that celebrated a string of Protestant ideals including industry, restraint, sobriety, and virtue. As the modern class

⁵³ William Hyde, "Recollections of St. Louis," in the *Globe Democrat*, January 24, 1892, as found in Greenberg's, *Cause for Alarm*, 119.

⁵⁴ *The Daily Missouri Republican*, September 15, 1854.

⁵⁵ The Maine law, passed in 1851, prohibited the sale and manufacture of liquor in the state of Maine. The law stood as an example for other reformers, hoping to enact temperance in their own state. See: Carlson, "'Drinks He to His Own Undoing'", 669.

system began to take shape in America, a middle class ideology deeply rooted in Protestantism began to rise, exerting a significant voice in American culture.⁵⁶

The modernization paradigm is particularly relevant in St. Louis as the Know Nothings gained strength in the city. St. Louis's enforcers established general temperance ordinances that limited the sale of liquor on the Sabbath and created stern regulations for pubs and saloons in the city.⁵⁷ A moral campaign allowed Know Nothings to join other groups, including the sons of temperance, and exert a considerable amount of influence on the working class.

Temperance literature circulated throughout the city and proved to be popular among readers, entertained by the lengthy narratives that filled the columns. In fact, temperance literature was the most widely disseminated reform literature in the nineteenth century, and reformers expertly employed a superior network of print materials that grew into considerable relevance.⁵⁸ St. Louis benefited from a localized temperance newspaper *The Missouri Cascade*, which published regularly in the antebellum period. Alliances with both the sons of temperance and the *Cascade* maintained the Know Nothing's political momentum and increased its promotion during city elections.

The ideology of temperance appealed to Missouri Know Nothings for two important reasons: genuine agreement and political strategy. First, the moral degradation paradigm fit well with the Nativists newly developed campaign for urban order. For many reformers, the liquor trade was a significant source of the American lapse in moral judgment and behavior. "We will

⁵⁶ For a more complete historiographical treatment of temperance, see: Douglas W. Carlson, "'Drinks He to His Own Undoing': Temperance Ideology in the Deep South", *Journal of the Early Republic* Vol. 18, No. 4 (Winter 1998).

⁵⁷ American Temperance Union, *Journal of the American Temperance Union, volumes 1-4* (Philadelphia: American Temperance Union, 1917), 22.

⁵⁸ Scott C. Martin, *Devil in the Domestic Sphere: Temperance, Gender, and Middle-Class Ideology, 1800-1860* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008), 6.

never become a strictly law abiding people” Eliot passionately proclaimed, “until one of the enacted laws is that of temperance.”⁵⁹ Accounts of drunkenness filled the pages of both the *Intelligencer* and *Cascade*, creating a “human face” for temperance legislation.⁶⁰ Narratives typically followed a consistent scheme: A family torn apart by an weak male head of household unable to control his drinking. Tales often ended with a dramatic death of a female child at the hands of a drunken father, representing the death of virtue in a society besotted with alcohol consumption.

Along with the vision of broken families, temperance literature suggested that abstinence restored an individual’s respectability- an all-encompassing term to describe virtue and honor.⁶¹ This summation appealed particularly to St. Louis Natives, looking to redefine the moral fabric of Missourians. A respectable man remains stoic, maintaining complete control of both his physical and emotional impulses. In contrast, temperance formulas characterized an inebriated head of household as incapable of controlling his temper and pocketbook, spoiling the honor of the family as a whole. Respectability, reformers avowed, was antithetical to an intemperate society.

Although Natives’ subscribed to the moral degradation paradigm, the crusade held a strategic value for the party as well. Temperance literature seduced new members and fortified the resolve of the party’s supporters.⁶² During the decisive few months after the group’s congressional win, Natives formed a crucial alliance with yet another partisan paper, the

⁵⁹ *The Daily Missouri Republic*, November 19, 1854.

⁶⁰ Marin, *Devil in the Domestic Sphere*, 17.

⁶¹ Historian Jeffrey Mason, in his analytical essay, defines the idea of respectability as “all-encompassing, ultimate code word. Respectability is more than a matter of certain forms of everyday behavior; a narrative defines it as a matter of business. The respectable man takes advantage of his society’s offer of personal freedom in order to further his material progress, which not only supports his family but sustains the wealth of the community.”(98-99). For more information, see: Jeffrey Mason, “Poison it with Rum; or, Validation and Delusion: Antebellum Temperance Drama,” *Pacific Coast Philology*, Vol. 225, No. ½ (Nov., 1990), 96-105.

⁶² Douglas, “Drinks He to His Own Undoing”, 670.

Cascade. Editors of the *Cascade* were wholly devoted to temperance, and the paper served as the predominant source for temperance literature in the state. In addition, the editors also published political accounts of elections, tacitly supporting the movement. Alderman elections often appeared in the left hand corner of the front page coinciding with the editor's routine opinion essay. Temperance literature became a powerful campaign tool for Know Nothings looking for publicity and outreach.

Furthermore, temperance legislation acted as a mechanism to limit immigrants' political power.⁶³ Bars and saloons in St. Louis filled the ninth ward with naturalized and un-naturalized immigrants creating large social networks that, for the most part, stayed confined within their own groups. Particularly within the Irish culture, alcohol consumption was deeply interwoven in the cultural fabric and acted as a form of social expression.⁶⁴ Nativists identified the saloons as an important political center for immigrant groups and attacked these buildings first during the 1854 election riot. Broken windows and battered doors revealed the political and social hostilities and elevated the tensions between these groups. Structures, Natives found, could, and were, easily re-built. Laws, however, could permanently limit foreign influence by destroying the groups' social and economic refuges.

Nativists never saw the complete abandonment of alcohol consumption in the city. The community largely ignored the ordinances as well as the reformers' attempts to vilify alcohol and salon keepers. Even Washington King found temperance a difficult path to follow and was

⁶³ Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 145.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

widely reported to enjoy liquor even on the Sabbath.⁶⁵ Redefining a community's moral health, Know Nothings once again found required acquiescence from the whole.

Conclusion:

Although the Know Nothings focused most of their attention on internal improvements and temperance, reform was quickly taking hold across St. Louis in a variety of city institutions including public schools, banking, and healthcare, but with mixed results. In total, the Know Nothing Party was critical in developing and guiding social reform during these years. But as the next chapter will demonstrate, this radical alliance of reformers would soon fall apart, torn by the very issue that drew disillusioned members into the movement: slavery.

⁶⁵ *The Daily Missouri Republican*, July 01, 1855.

CHAPTER 5

“THE LONG AGONY”¹: VIOLENCE AND DISORDER ON MISSOURI’S HOME FRONT

*A blush of roses
Where rose never grew!
Great drops on the bunch grass,
But not of the dew!
A taint in the sweet air for wild bees to shun!
A stain that shall never Bleach out in the sun!*

*Back, steed of the prairies!
Sweet song-bird, fly back!
Wheel hither, bald vulture!
Gray wolf, call thy pack!
The foul human vultures
Have feasted and fled;
The wolves of the Border Have crept from the dead*
John Greenleaf Whittier²

As Nativists pursued their dream of a modern city, proslavery Missouri farmers were locked in a violent struggle to secure slaveholding across their state border in Kansas. Few people anticipated the intensity of violence that unfolded in Kansas. Initially sparked by the Kansas-Nebraska Act, migrants from both the North and South flooded the region in hopes of controlling the admission of the territory as either a slave or free state. While Stephen Douglas, the author of the bill, imagined Kansas could demonstrate the benefits of popular sovereignty in placating sectional tensions, it instead created a proxy civil war between sections. Advocates from both sections prophesized that the events in Kansas would determine the fate of slavery in America. In response to

¹ “The long agony” is a term used in editorials across Kansas, including Leavenworth *Daily Times*, January 30, 1861, as found in Albert Castel’s work, *Civil War Kansas: Reaping the Whirlwind* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 1.

² John Greenleaf Whittier, *Marais Des Cynes*, 1858, *Bleeding Kansas: A Narrative of Guide to the Sources*, <http://www1.assumption.edu/ahc/Kansas/default.html>, (Accessed September 2, 2011).

this prediction, ruffians organized covert militias to compete for a sectional advantage, thwarting any chances of a democratic process in the region.

The violence in Kansas marked an unfortunate turn in the relationship between ruffians, and consequently, national compromise. Skirmishes between forces occurred so commonly that Horace Greeley prophetically termed the conflict, “bleeding Kansas.”³ Greeley’s expression precisely exposed the violent culture that captured residents and migrants of Kansas from 1856 to 1858. The territory of Kansas was akin to a battlefield, with both groups creating hierarchical militias, traveling with cannons, and collecting prisoners of war at every confrontation.⁴ Unlike customary theatres of battle, the violence in Kansas transcended the traditional boundaries of war.⁵ Ruffians firmly placed violence in the domestic sphere, invading and pillaging affluent homes and towns and taking prisoners along their trail.⁶ Violence had irretrievably replaced cooperation in the region, a foreboding sign for the fate of compromise in the national political scene.

³ Etcheson, *Bleeding Kansas*, 190-191.

⁴ Information about ruffian takings prisoners of war can be found in numerous personal letters and diaries of survivors of the conflict, including Spencer Kellogg Brow, Diary entry, January 1, 1857, Repository for Territorial History, http://www.territorialkansasonline.org/~imlskto/cgibin/index.phpSCREEN=border&topic_id=75&search=Osawatomie,%20Battle%20of, (accessed July 2, 2011).

⁵ In Neely’s book, *The Border Between Them*, he describes the pattern of violence as “a newfound ferocity to the struggle” that “set in motion a pattern of retaliatory guerrilla violence.” (57). This new style of guerilla warfare, he argues, stripped away “the conventional boundaries of the territorial struggle” as it was waged primarily “in and upon settlers’ households, and nearly every home seemed to become a potential target.” (57). For more in-depth description of this new style of guerilla warfare, see Neely’s, *The Border Between Them*.

⁶ Jeremy Neely convincingly argues in his work, *The Border Between Them*, that the sack of Lawrence and the murders at Dutch Henry Creek marked a “grim turning point” in the violence in the Kansas region, where brutal violence and guerilla warfare became the norm, as ruffians used violence to sway the vote, instead of political channels (56). For more information on the sack of Lawrence, and the murders at Dutch Henry Creek, see: T.H. Goodrich, *Bloody Dawn: The Story of the Lawrence Massacre* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1991). Neely’s work, and Etcheson’s, *Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War Era*.

Most historians have missed the opportunity to illustrate the role Missourians played in the conflict and in turn, their activity profoundly transformed Missouri politics in the later half of the 1850's.⁷ For Missourians, Kansas was foremost a personal conflict. As a bordering state, Missourians shared territory and financial relationships with native residents of Kansas and felt a kinship to the region unlike other foreign migrants.⁸ Kansas was Missourians' home front, and they naturally feared that the fate of Kansas was intrinsically tied to their own economic autonomy and livelihood.⁹ As abolitionists inched closer toward the adjoining border, citizens reacted with desperation and brutal violence. Both Missouri's senior senator and governor would not only permit farmers to join the conflict, they would actively recruit and lead ruffians into the region in order to "rescue" their neighbors from tyranny. By 1856, just two years after Douglas's legislation, Missourians uniformly disregarded popular sovereignty in favor of brute force.¹⁰

While border ruffians exchanged combat miles away, the public in St. Louis watched in horror and fear. Missourians had always defined themselves against the sectional fanaticism of the North and South. Now, they watched as their community became a setting for the growing sectional fervor. Confrontations often unfolded miles

⁷ While they often acknowledge their presence in the conflict, they rarely indicate the extent of their role. Both Potter and Etcheson allude to the Missouri presence but do not go into detail about their motivations to cross the border into Kansas. I cannot fault either historian, given the purpose and scope of their respective works. Instead, I am merely pointing out a gap in the historiography.

⁸ Etcheson, *Bleeding Kansas*, 43.

⁹ At first, free soil ruffians only amounted to roughly four percent of the population, but as native residents grew frustrated with the inundation of pro-slavery migrants, the faction grew considerably larger and more aggressive. Many rural Missourians expected to extend their farms into the Kansas territory. For Missouri farmers, Kansas embodied their distinct vision of manifest destiny-rolling hills waiting to be claimed and tamed. Their visions of unencumbered growth, however, were punctuated by the growing free-soil presence in the region that inevitably led to the fanatical support of slavery. For more information about Southern migrants in Kansas, see Etcheson, *Bleeding Kansas*, Chp. 2.

¹⁰ Ibid.

outside the Missouri border, and ruffians from the east and west inundated Missouri, searching for quick access points into the Kansas territory. As a consequence of Kansas, Missourians could no longer remain isolated from the growing hysteria. The violence forced Missourians to regain their lost sectional loyalties, inherently dividing the political and social culture in Missouri. Sectional loyalties soon formed a significant portion of the Missourians' identity, a shift that precipitated another party re-alignment and the withdrawal of Yankee migrants from the region. As a result, nationalism and community solidarity in St. Louis dissolved by the end of 1858.

Only within this contextual frame can we fully understand the failure of the Know Nothing Party in St. Louis. Know Nothings unwittingly became stuck between two worlds: one of communitarianism and another where absolutism and slavery gained centrality. After years of promoting social welfare and nationalism to an energetic community, Natives now encountered a fractured and disillusioned public. After the bleeding Kansas fiasco the issue of slavery and its future became inexorable in the minds of Missourians, severing any chords of unity and compromise among rural and city residents. The city had moved forward, the Know Nothings discovered, but not in the direction the group anticipated. Sectional fanaticism replaced a desire for order, and the Know Nothing movement inevitably lost favor in St. Louis society.

The general unraveling of the Know Nothing Party foreshadowed a meaningful shift in the community's identity and ambitions. No longer inspired to reform American society with institutional building, residents became consumed with sectional rivalry, and

a general feeling of suspicion and chaos filled the air. The *heart of the republic* had lost its source of optimism in the midst of Kansas, causing residents to question their belief in Missouri exceptionalism and Western regeneration. Natives learned a lesson similar to countless Americans before them; While the popular “City on a Hill” rhetoric can serve as an inspiring political ideology, it does not have the capacity to control the compelling political and economic landscape. In the case of the Know Nothing Party, national tensions cast an ominous shadow onto the city and the political culture in Missouri soon devolved into a microcosm of the national political chaos.

Railroad Itches: The Continental Railroad and the Collapse of Missouri Exceptionalism

By the end of 1856, the Know Nothing members’ confidence in St. Louis was soaring. After a swift sweep into city and state politics, the Know Nothings oversaw an extensive map of reform projects that modernized St. Louis. Besides a public library and national university, Know Nothings directed advances in public healthcare and primary education. With its cultural stamp on the city’s character evident, Know Nothings stood atop a new bureaucratic city order.

Inevitably cracks in the party’s plan began to form, and by 1857, the Know Nothings encountered an insurmountable obstacle: the courting of the trans-continental railroad. The railroad project, discussed and planned by city officials for decades, united the public in a shared fantasy for the future of St. Louis. A railroad hub, the public

dreamed, would bring an unending flood of wealth and revenue and increase the city's influence nationally. Prospectors believed St. Louis was the ideal site to unite southern and northern railroad tracks and they aligned with the Pacific railroad company—a mixture of politicians, private investors and engineers—to raise public support for a government contract. The potential St. Louis hub would serve as the entrance to the West, opening western expansion toward the California coast. The transcontinental railroad hub, in consequence promised to secure sizeable revenue for the city and finally solidify St. Louis's position as a commanding city similar to New York City and Boston.

“Railroad mania” swept across St. Louis and by 1853 Nativists took charge of an organized campaign for the hub.¹¹ City boosters and printers purposefully fostered a favorable political and financial environment for the railroad, including hosting railroad conventions and sponsoring glowing railroad editorials that often covered up the rampant corruption and mismanagement. “There is a great race” the *Republican* editor implored, “in which she[St. Louis] ought to run, and run swiftly, for the supremacy...of more extensive inland commerce than the earth has ever yet seen.”¹² Nativist editors promised fast cash, unchecked prosperity, and new commercial opportunities to the public. A transcontinental railroad center symbolized the consummation of civility and modernity for the West. They had finally tamed the frontier West and curbed the frontier mentality that characterized it. The railroad promised to be the talisman among their institutional infrastructure, and they pursued it with vigor.

¹¹ The term “Railroad Mania” is a term used by Adler to describe the frenzy that followed the railroad dream in St. Louis. See, Adler, *Yankee Merchants*, 119.

¹² *The Daily Missouri Republican*, November 4, 1854.

Yet railroad builders never invested their own money in rail projects.¹³ Instead, Nativists and other city boosters borrowed money and arranged for favorable tax subsidies- all in hopes of luring builders into the region. Luther Kennett, along with other leading Nativists, organized separate investment groups to raise and buy railroad stock. These investment groups became so common in St. Louis they inevitably began to compete with each other. In addition, city councilmen re-organized the city charter to include the subscription of railroad stock from city taxes in hopes of speeding up construction for the project.¹⁴ By 1850, the city of St. Louis invested more money in a pacific railroad than any other region in America.¹⁵ All of these investments amounted to a tangled web of city and state capital, inextricably tied to a fantasy.

But the emotional and financial investments turned into a losing gamble. Nativists assumed the Pacific Railroad Committee-comprised of engineers, policymakers and investors-would take note of the extensive internal improvements and consider St. Louis's potential as a model American city. In hindsight it was clear that St. Louis's volatile economy and inclement weather proved to be a substantial risk.¹⁶ Furthermore, a local engineer commissioned by the Pacific Railroad Committee noted that while the city had mad tremendous strides in modernization, outlining bridges and roads required massive improvements before any substantial locomotive transportation could be

¹³ For more information about the financial schemes and corruption in the transcontinental railroad company, see Richard White's, *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* (NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011).

¹⁴ Adler, *Yankee Merchants*, 119- 120.

¹⁵ Arenson, *The Great Heart of the Republic*, 67.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 66.

achieved.¹⁷ By 1857, not a single track of railroad had been laid for the hub. In a bitter twist, officials in Chicago, St. Louis's newly rising western rival, received word that it had been chosen as the Western hub for the railroad. Unlike Missouri that lacked a firm commitment to statewide improvements, Illinois appeared to be a safer investment for committee members unsure of the uneven growth in Missouri.

The economic implications of the loss would not be seen until the financial panic in the summer of 1857, but the psychological effects were immediate and significant. The defeat shook many merchants and investors to their cores, creating a general sense of apprehension.¹⁸ For decades, these men had steadfastly devoted their time and money to designing a model environment, assuming both riches and perpetual growth would immediately follow. Had they bet on the wrong western city? This question gained widespread traction among merchants and the financial elite.

The results of the fiasco effectively shattered the romantic image Nativists held for St. Louis. Their dreams of fast cash and western supremacy had been thoroughly dashed by the growing support for Chicago. Left "humiliated" and defeated, Nativists focused their attention on completing the tracks of railroad unfinished by corrupt builders.¹⁹ Unbeknownst to Nativists, the loss of the railroad center would mark the

¹⁷ This includes a particularly deadly collapse of the Gasconade Bridge in Jefferson County in 1855 that left almost fifty dead and many more wounded. News reached the Pacific Railroad Committee and, as Adam Arenson argues, persuaded the committee that the Missouri region was not equipped to handle a transcontinental railroad. See: *Ibid*, 77-78.

¹⁸ See *Ibid*, 146-152.

¹⁹ Examples of this can be found in the following sampling of editorial articles: *The Daily Missouri Republican*, June 4, 1858, *Ibid*, June 13, 1858, and *Ibid*, August 8, 1858.

closing chapter in their institutional re-modeling campaign, serving as an ominous sign of the general economic and political decline in the city.

Slavery and the Rise of the Democratic Party in St. Louis

Both the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the Transcontinental railroad failure added a new angle in Missouri politics, animating sectional loyalties and the issue of slavery resurfacing. The issue became exceedingly more heated in the following two years and caused northerners and southerners to view each other as enemies, indicating that a sectional compromise was unlikely.

As a political party serving mostly urban St. Louis, Natives avoided directly addressing the issue of slavery for most of its political tenure. This tactic was helped by the fact that slavery played only a small role in the city's social culture.²⁰ During the 1850's, slaves only accounted to roughly one percent of the population, with free blacks almost two percent.²¹ Within the city, the only traces of slavery were economic, as slaveholders traveled to the city with wagons full of tobacco, grain and sugar cane for the city's commercial market.²² Although slavery held a constant presence in St. Louis's

²⁰ Although Missouri was considered one of the first territories to extend the plantation system, the regime only supported small farms with very few slaves. Partly due to the unpredictable climate, and the southern migrants' lack of capital, prosperous plantations with large slave labor gangs were a rarity in the state. see: Diane Mutti Burke's *On Slavery's Border: Missouri's Small Slaveholding Households, 1815-1865* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010).

²¹ Primm, *Lion of the Valley*, 179.

²² Rural residents, mostly yeoman farmers, grew tobacco and grain crops and relied on slave labor in small numbers. Farmers were predominately first or second-generation southerners, migrating to the region with the purpose of extending slavery and southern values into new territories. For more information on rural Missouri slavery, see: R. Douglas Hurt's *Agriculture and Slavery in Missouri's Little Dixie* (Kansas City: University of Missouri Press, 1992).

daily economy, Know Nothings rarely referenced the institution.²³ Instead, the party continued to focus on St. Louis's commercial prospects, branding itself as the party of economic progress and innovation.

While the divide among pro-slavery Democrats and Unionist Natives was apparent, the state was by no mean fractious. Instead, what bound rural and urban dwellers together was a strong national identity, fortified by a shared belief in Manifest Republicanism.²⁴ Until the mid-1850's, the domestication of the wilderness and the building of a state infrastructure occupied the minds and hearts of most Missourians. In consequence, the issue of slavery remained isolated and contained in rural Missouri, both physically and metaphorically. Neither ignoring nor confronting slavery, Missourians had learned to compete and debate over economic issues instead.

But the alarm bells in Kansas began to ring louder, and by the summer of 1856, the violence in the region touched Missouri politics and pulled slavery from the margins of the political imagination. Missouri's involvement in Kansas began with the agency of a few fanatical pro-slavery politicians, most notably Senator David Rice Atchison.²⁵

Atchison's primary political goal for the majority of his career was to ensure the spread

²³ This of course is with the exception of a few notable cases, including William Greenleaf Eliot who often presented passionate appeals on behalf of abolitionism in his Sunday sermons. See: Arenson, *The Great Heart of the Republic*, Chp. 3.

²⁴ Please see chapter one of this thesis for an in-depth discussion of *Manifest Republicanism* in Missouri.

²⁵ David Rice Atchison is an interesting antebellum politician to study. Throughout antebellum historiography, historians have typically described Atchison as a fire-eater. Over the last few years, historians have begun to revise the historiography and characterize Atchison as much more pragmatic, if not conservative in his pro-slavery views. While Atchison has not received a full academic treatment in many years, the most read, although by far not the most complete, biography of Atchison is William E. Parrish's *David Rice Atchison in Missouri, Border Politician* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1961).

of slavery into western territories, and he did so with a passion. Unlike Luther Kennett and Thomas Hart Benton who viewed the West as the starting place to create a sense of nationalism in the country, Atchison remained faithful wholly to the South and slavery. Like the growing majority of Democrats in Missouri, Atchison believed that the West was the ideal setting to practice self-government and continue the practice of slavery in new territories.

Beginning in the summer of 1854, both Atchison and Missouri's Governor Hancock Lee Jackson began an intensive campaign to lure Missouri men to cross the border and "rescue" Kansas men from the lawlessness.²⁶ This included proslavery meetings across rural Missouri, motivating farmers to temporarily settle in Kansas and do whatever was necessary to ensure a proslavery vote for the territory. Atchison supplied a healthy sum of Missouri ruffians for the South, eager and dutifully prepared to go to battle in Kansas and defend what he considered a direct threat to "Our institutions."²⁷ Atchison's war zeal was so virulent in Kansas, he famously advised his Missouri ruffians "to give a horse thief, robber, or homicide a fair trial, but to hang a negro thief or Abolitionist, without judge or jury."²⁸

The violence in Kansas did not remain isolated from Missouri politics. Atchinson expertly channeled this fervor into a passionate support of slavery in the political

²⁶ "Come to the Rescue!", broadside, September 6, 1856, Missouri Historical Museum, <http://www.civilwarmo.org/gallery#item/CWMO-134>, (Accessed September 3, 2011).

²⁷ David Rice Atchison, December 15, 1855, as found in *Kansas Historical Society, Volume 9* (Topeka: State Printing Office, 1906), 141.

²⁸ David Rice Atchison to Jefferson Davis, September 24, 1854 in William W. Freehling's *The Road to Disunion, Volume II: Secessionists Triumphant 1854-1861* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 72.

sphere.²⁹ In the Missouri state legislature, where a virulently pro-slavery faction of the Democrats led by Atchison began to voice a considerably more extreme pro-slavery position and argued against the Missouri Compromise.³⁰ Instead, Atchison and his followers believed in the extension of slavery into all territories by way of the political doctrine popular sovereignty.³¹ While Whigs supported Benton and the Missouri Compromise, Democrats in the state legislature actively campaigned against the former Democratic leader and their more moderate support of slavery. The future of the West, according to both groups, would either be characterized by regional cooperation or popular sovereignty. By the close of 1856 Democrat were a united party and defeated any Whig representatives in the legislature, and therefore, any challenge to Southern interests at the state level. Democrats took over the Missouri state legislature with relative ease, and soon had eyes on re-claiming St. Louis as a Democratic stronghold once again.³²

There are several reasons why Democrats focused on St. Louis politics for their next campaign goal. First and foremost, the city held the majority of the region's capital and commercial markets. Slaveholders' financial livelihood depended on the city's commercial markets. Thus, having political control over the direction of St. Louis's

²⁹ I do not intend to describe Atchison's political maneuvering as merely strategy. Instead, he wholly believed in the gospel of slavery and, in consequence, no longer believed that compromise was in the best interests of the South. For more information about Atchison's political and ideological viewpoints, see William E. Parrish's *David Rice Atchison, Border Politician*.

³⁰ This included the belief that not only should Kansas be a slave state, but also any territory in the burgeoning West. In part motivated by the growing fear of antislavery groups, southerners feared that northerners would take control over territorial governments and prohibit slavery. *Journal of the House of Representatives of the state of Missouri in the 18th General Assembly*; Chris Childers, *Popular Sovereignty, Slavery in the Territories, and the South, 1785-1860* (Ph.D. dissertation, Louisiana State University, 2010), 271.

³¹ Childers, *Popular Sovereignty*.

³² Merring, *The Whig Party in Missouri, 207-211*.

economy benefited the Democrats' polity directly. Furthermore, the Know Nothings, the only other sizable political party in the region at this point, held a monopoly in the city's government, and a seat in Congress. Thus, conquering St. Louis would increase the Democrats' influence over both the rural and urban areas of Missouri, while simultaneously debilitating its only political foe in the region.

What the Nativists were not willing to confront, the Democrats were more than willing to expose. Democrats characterized Nativists as the party of abolitionists, and described leaders as "black vomit." Furthermore, Democratic newspapers throughout the region denounced the party as an extension of the Republican Party, a loaded charge in the South.³³ These assaults firmly put slavery in the political discourse and Know Nothings found it increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to ignore slavery.

The politicization of the fugitive slave clause in St. Louis further compounded the Know Nothings' troubles. In part a reaction to rural Missourians' legitimate fear of their own slaves escaping to Kansas, Democratic papers publicly questioned how Know Nothings would approach the Fugitive Slave Act. Would they aid the slave or the slave catcher in St. Louis? City dwellers found the question altogether vexing. A majority of residents may not have been fervently pro-slavery, but the accusations caused a deep worry that their city could become a sanctuary city for fugitive slaves.³⁴

³³ Proslavery forces within the city employed this incendiary rhetoric to further incite the city's Irish population, who supported Atchison's Kansas cause. For more information on the city's newspaper rhetoric, please see: Adler, *Yankee Merchants*, 128-129.

³⁴ Etcheson, *Bleeding Kansas*, 190-191.

The Know Nothings reacted to the barrage of attacks with a carefully constructed set of resolutions on slavery, a dangerous move for Nativists. Henry Rollins, a senior Know Nothing leader, arranged for a public meeting among party members to create a new political platform. In comparison to the Know Nothings' *pure Americanism* platform, this agenda finally acknowledged slavery and largely ignored internal improvements.³⁵ The resolutions called for a strict adherence to the Fugitive Slave Clause, a particular concern for many Missourians who worried that slaves in Missouri would escape to Kansas. Furthermore, the party denied Congress the power to legislate on slavery in states where it already existed, or to exclude the institution from states entering the Union. It offered more concessions to pro-slavery members than to anti-slavery while not being particularly aggressive.

The Know Nothing leaders never meant the resolutions to be a definitive stance on slavery. They hoped the vague language and a weak support of slavery would appease both sides. Instead, Democrats found the resolutions an affirmation that the Know Nothings were weak supporters of the institution, and in consequence, the southern cause. The political attacks continued, and sectional sympathies among city residents ballooned. Local newspapers regularly featured advertisements and business reports that emphasized these tensions, including proud affirmations of the growing southern character in the city.³⁶

³⁵ Parish and McCandless, *A History of Missouri*, 269.

³⁶ Adler, *Yankee Merchants*, 167.

In response to the depth of divisions in Missouri, Know Nothings reintroduced pro-Unionism as the centerpiece of their platform. Reminiscent of their original beliefs in Unitarianism, Know Nothings tried in vain to reconcile with Democrats over slavery and move forward as a unified state. The concluding paragraph of its charter included an oath of allegiance to the Union, and its preservation.³⁷ The belief in Unionism temporarily joined the St. Louis branch with Know Nothings across the country, where preservation of the Union took priority.³⁸

Perhaps the strongest blow to the party, however, was the loss of its editorial support. St. Louis's major daily newspaper and Know Nothing supporter inexplicably switched sides, and became the Democrats' strongest editorial voice in the city. It is not clear how or even why the *Republican* shifted its support, but the effects were immediate. Know Nothings depended on editorials not only for campaigns, but also for its public support of the various social works programs they enacted just a year earlier.

In the summer of 1857, Know Nothing Party lost its most powerful political seat when Luther Kennett failed in his re-election campaign. After a stunning election win that vaulted the party into statewide prominence, Kennett now stood poised for reelection in a growing Democratic city. With the political baggage of the Know Nothings weighing heavily upon his campaign, Kennett could do little but hope that Democrats

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Unionism became the central political strategy in the national platform. Although several Know Nothing groups in the North supported the Unionism, they inevitably joined with the Northern sponsored Republican Party. Southern Know Nothings, however, supported Unionism steadfastly until 1857 when the group disappeared. For Northern Know Nothingism, see: Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*. For Southern Unionism, see: Overdyke's, *Know Nothing Party in the South*.

would fail at gathering support in the region. Outnumbered by Democrats and unable to muster editorial support, Kennett's failed reelection campaign stood as a glaring sign of the groups rapidly dissolving power in the region.

The Panic of 1857

The summer of 1857 marked the closing chapter of the Know Nothing Party in St. Louis. Only weeks after Kennett's loss, America suffered a significant financial panic that permanently reshaped the financial and social demography of St. Louis. After suffering steep financial losses, merchants and speculators in the city abandoned the Know Nothing Party and returned to their eastern cities in search of new economic opportunities.

The panic began on August 24th, 1857, with the collapse of Ohio Life, an eastern investment bank. Rumors rapidly spread throughout Wall Street of the failure and national stock market suffered a steep decline.³⁹ The bank's failure, however, spooked anxious financiers already worried about a slow foreign market. Just hours after the rumors originally circulated, investment banks throughout Wall Street halted any further loans for merchants, which resulted in a serious financial panic in America. After a string of bank failures, the recession sparked a steep decline in American exports and a massive recall of bank loans for struggling merchants. By September, bank loans were

³⁹ My summary of the panic of 1857 is, of course, a short discussion. For a more in-depth look at the panic, and the national financial and political implications, see: James L. Huston's, *The Panic of 1857 and the Coming of the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1987).

scarce, the stock market was steadily dropping, and Americans waited in a state of perpetual alarm.⁴⁰ Local and state financial institutions were rapidly deteriorating, and congressmen scrambled to find a lifeline for the American economic system.⁴¹

News of the panic spread quickly to St. Louis. While the telegraph transmitted news of the bank failures just hours after Wall Street suffered the first collapse, railroads carried northern newspaper reports to the region just days later.⁴² In consequence, the people of St. Louis experienced the terror and panic on Wall Street almost as quickly as easterners, and it occupied the attention of periodicals across Missouri.

For St. Louis, like many western cities, the financial implications were devastating. The speculative investments and mismanagement of railroad investors crushed western land prices and effectively stalled any eastern investments from flowing into the region. Furthermore, the panic caused the massive railroad financial mess to crumble beneath investors. Dozens of St. Louis investment groups closed operations and both northern and foreign markets all but suspended trade and bank loans in the region.⁴³

The panic confirmed to many merchants the end of an era. Southerners and Democrats had inundated St. Louis streets and political culture, and St. Louis grew

⁴⁰ Ibid, 17.

⁴¹ The study of the historiography of the 1857 panic offered an interesting, if not altogether different interpretation of the causes of the Civil War. In Huston's *Panic of the 1857*, he argues that the panic eliminated any economic ties between sections, ultimately leading to the political disintegration of the union.

⁴² My information about the communication between the East and West during this period is informed by Richard John's *Spreading the News: the American Postal Service from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 88-90.

⁴³ Adler, *Yankee Merchants*, 152

increasingly more fiscally conservative, and pro-slavery.⁴⁴ An increasing number of Southern merchants settled in the city, forging a much stronger commercial connection with the South than previously held. Evidently still suspicious of Northern markets, an increasing number of lawmakers found the South a more reliable financial partner.⁴⁵ St. Louis, Nativists found, no longer held the promise of prosperity and new beginnings. Instead, it faced the same innate sectional tensions and turbulent markets that they had hoped to avoid.

Shortly after the panic, merchants abandoned St. Louis in 1857 and 1858.⁴⁶ From the period of 1857 to 1860, the city directory reveals a sharp decline in self-identified businessmen and merchants in the city. Indeed, historian Jeffrey Adler notes that a sizeable majority of St. Louis residents fled shortly after the cultural and political turn in the city, unable or unwilling to keep their businesses afloat without the support of Northern markets.⁴⁷ Moreover, the increasing reliance on small, southern firms for financing sharply limited the type and scale of businesses in the city. St. Louis merchants started a steady and quick migration out of the city from 1857-1858. Some migrated to Chicago, while others returned to the North.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Ibid, 157.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ My point that Yankee merchants left the region shortly after the panic is informed by two sources. First, Jeffrey Adler offers a lengthy discussion of the exodus of Yankee merchants in his work, *Yankee Merchants*, 152. Furthermore, by establishing a list of Know Nothing merchants and checking the St. Louis business directory, I found confirmed Adler's assumption. For more information about the St. Louis directory, see: *Kennedy's City Directory* from 1857 to 1860, <http://www.rollanet.org/~bdoerr/1860CyDir/1860CD.htm>, (Accessed September 20, 2011).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 166.

One of the most notable Know Nothing escapees exposed in the directory was J.B. Croquette, who had famously served as the Nativists' editorial voice for their first three years.⁴⁹ It is not clear where Croquette moved, or if he stayed in the printing business. His abandonment, perhaps more than any of the other party men symbolized the significance of this flight for the party.

The Know Nothing Party, in consequence, was effectively deserted by 1858. Not only did the majority of its constituency leave the city, many of its leading voices were defeated in city alderman elections. Luther Kennett, Washington King, and Croquette left the city and the Missouri political scene. Some men who continued to use the Know Nothing label only did so as independent voters.⁵⁰ Altogether, the Know Nothing Party disappeared as the Missouri party culture returned to a one-party system.

By 1858, St. Louis was reborn. After the great flight St. Louis resembled a southern city, both in demographics and politics.⁵¹ Although some merchants stayed in the region, they could not stem the tide of southern values and fiscal conservatism from invading city institutions.⁵² St. Louis politics became a one-party system and the Democrats regained hegemony in the region.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Mering, *The Whig Party in Missouri*, 211.

⁵¹ Many historians overlook the great flight in 1857, and its effect on St. Louis political culture. For more information, see Adler, *Yankee Merchants*.

⁵² Ibid, 173.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

By 1861, the dream of creating a national model of American Unionism was shattered by slavery politics. On April 12, 1861 Confederate forces opened fire on Fort Sumter and officially commenced the American Civil War. In a note of irony, St. Louis finally stood as a commanding site during the conflict. The St. Louis Arsenal and the city's position on the Mississippi River served as a strategic point in the Western theatre.¹ The war, however, effectively dissolved any remaining national bonds among city residents. Although the state officially voted against secession, the decision was wrought with resistance and tension, much of which was evident throughout the city.

At the close of the Civil War, the city suffered from a significantly reduced trade, a depleted population, while the surrounding states still suffering internally from the sectional divisions the war exposed.² Between the fall of the Know Nothing Party and the Civil War, St. Louis no longer served as respite from sectionalism. Instead, it became a microcosm of the America's moral and economic divisions- revealed in the city's deteriorating cultural and financial institutions.

¹ The St. Louis Arsenal contained a reserve of weapons and artillery that appealed to both the Union and Confederacy. See: Arenson, *Great Heart of the Republic*, 78.

² This included an intense, and long running guerilla war over the state's constitutional convention decision to stay in the Union. For many fanatically pro-southern Democrats, secession was the state's only viable option to continue the institution of slavery in the state, and they protected it in the same spirit of "bleeding Kansas"-through violent and brute force. For more information about the guerilla warfare in Missouri during and after the Civil War, see: William E. Parrish's, *A History of Missouri, Volume III: 1860 to 1875* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1973, reprinted in 2002), Mark W. Geiger, *Financial Fraud and Guerilla Violence in Missouri's Civil War, 1861-1865* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), and Christopher Philips' *Missouri's Confederate: Claiborne Fox Jackson and the Creation of Southern Identity in the Border West* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000).

In effect, sectionalism bookended St. Louis's history, with regional divisions evident in the city's founding fabric, and eventually undermining its preeminence in the 1850's. Beginning with the first Americans to occupy St. Louis, various residents sought to shape Manifest Destiny to suit their individual economic and political interests. The Civil War, in consequence, revealed these deep-seated divisions and the St. Louis community succumbed to sectional tensions.

In exploring the key themes and trends that shaped St. Louis, it becomes immediately apparent that the cultural clash between Northern and Southern values played a profound role in the make-up and direction of the Know Nothing Party in the city. The leading party members utilized populist rhetoric to portray St. Louis as the best and only hope for Republic virtue and sacrifice. Neither strictly nativist nor completely egalitarian, Nativists in St. Louis were moved instead moved by a profound belief in institution building, hoping that social and economic reforms would unify the Missouri region, and in time, the nation. This hope, however, dimmed as sectional tensions and slavery politics consumed Missouri politics.

This fact helps to shed light on the inhabitants of the region, and demands inclusion in the broader narrative of antebellum American politics. A study of St. Louis and the greater Western region helps reveal what both united and divided Americans in the nineteenth century. While Manifest Destiny drove Northern and Southerners into the region under a divine belief in American expansionism, it also revealed the dueling

visions of American progress, with Southerners determined to spread slavery in the West, and Northerners busy designing a thriving capitalist economy. Inevitably, individual ambitious, national politics, and an unstable economy sunk both the Know Nothing Party, and the first great city in the West.

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