The conversation about immigration, religion, and the American identity is nothing new.

Harvey Strum
Immigration to New Jersey from the 1790s to the early 20th century altered the ethnic and religious make-up of the state’s population. Canal and railroad construction, along with the industrialization of northeastern New Jersey, attracted immigrants and increased the state’s urbanization, especially in Paterson, Newark, Jersey City, Elizabeth, and Hoboken. By the census of 1840, New Jersey emerged as one of the states with the highest percentage of foreign-born. In 1850 57% of the immigrants lived in just three northeastern counties, Hudson, Essex, and Passaic. Ten years later immigrants comprised 42%, 34%, and 29%, respectively, of the population of these same three counties. Relatively few immigrants settled in the northwestern and southern counties of the state. Warren, Sussex, and Hunterdon counties averaged 2% immigrant and Salem, Cumberland, and Cape May rarely went over 4% from 1840 to 1860. In 1860 immigrants comprised 18% of the population with the Irish representing 50% of New Jersey’s some 115,000 immigrants. The Germans counted for 28% and the British were 16% of immigrants arriving in the Garden State. Between 1840 and 1860 a division developed in the state between counties that became increasingly urbanized and immigrant and counties that remained primarily rural and native-born Protestant.

Many native-born citizens of New Jersey did not welcome this changing population brought by this immigration. Nativists found their arrival unsettling and a threat to what they perceived to be American values. Germans appeared strange because of their language, customs, and desire to maintain their separate identity in America. As the temperance movement developed in New Jersey, local political and religious leaders found themselves in conflict with the Germans who wanted exemptions from temperance laws for beer. The festivals they brought with them antagonized the non-German population. Their habit of visiting beer gardens on Sunday afternoons violated American Protestant attitudes about the Sabbath. In Newark, for example, this became a political and religious issue for decades.

However, most of the animus against immigrants targeted the Irish. By the mid-1820s the Irish Catholics began to increase in numbers and replace the Scots-Irish Presbyterians as the major immigrant group from Ireland. The hierarchical
nature of the Roman Catholic Church appeared contrary to American republican values. Nativists saw the Irish as more than just foreigners with strange ways but as a threat to American political and religious institutions. They expressed their hostility in numerous ways, from verbal and physical violence to organizing anti-immigrant and anti-Irish Catholic political movements, like the Native American Democratic Association and American Republican Party. These political movements and the later Know Nothings believed in a bond between Protestantism and republicanism and perceived the arrival of immigrants—especially Irish Catholics—as a threat to American institutions. Protestants who became nativists questioned the loyalty of the Irish and German Catholics, assuming they only adhered to laws of the Vatican and viewed the Pope as their supreme leader. As such, it was feared they would not recognize the authority of the United States government or the president.

Irish Labor

Construction projects on canals, railroads, and tunnels brought the Irish to New Jersey from the 1820s to the 1850s. Starting in the 1820s “tens of thousands of Paddies were brought to New Jersey as members of construction gangs.” Irish immigrants worked on construction projects like the Morris Canal from 1825 to 1836, the Delaware and Raritan Canal from 1830 to 1834, the Morris and Essex Railroad in the 1840s and 1850s, and the Bergen Tunnel in the 1850s. As one historian observed, “the Irish laborers drove the Morris Canal across northern New Jersey”—but at a price. Many died of
exhaustion or from the summer plague of cholera that repeatedly hit the work camps from July to September, year after year, and their bodies were buried along the canal’s path. Once again, Irish immigrants “picked up their shovels, and cut the Delaware and Raritan Canal” through central New Jersey.  

Dozens of Irish workers died during the cholera epidemic while working on the construction of the Canal near Princeton in 1832. As New Jersey industrialized from the 1820s to the 1850s, Irish workers found employment in factories, mills, and docks, primarily as unskilled or semi-skilled labor.

Industrialization created jobs encouraging immigrants to settle in New Jersey. In Paterson, the number of mills went from nine to sixteen from 1821 to 1832, as the town turned into an industrialized city attracting immigrants seeking work. Initially, Scots-Irish Protestants migrated to Paterson in the 1790s, and in the 1820s Irish Catholics arrived in significant numbers. By the 1830s the percentage increased, sparking the first anti-Catholic and anti-Irish political movement in the Garden State.

Many of the Irish Catholics and Scots-Irish Presbyterians worked as textile workers and participated in the famous 1835 strike of mill hands. Led by the Irish Catholics, over 2,000 workers went out on strike. Although eventually defeated, this strike represented the first uprising of the Irish Catholics in New Jersey, producing a nativist backlash. Having fought landlords in Ireland and organized secret societies in the old country, Irish immigrants brought this tradition to the United States. According to historian Howard Harris, the Irish, “having experienced first-hand the arbitrary misuse of power and authority at home were determined to prevent the replication of such conditions in the United States.” The Irish fought for their rights, leading to conflicts with native-born Americans, Irish Protestants, and other ethnic groups. These efforts led to the perception in the minds of nativists of the threat the Irish posed to the peace and stability of New Jersey.

Work on the Morris Canal in the 1820s brought the first Irish to settle in Newark. Further jobs in industry, on the docks, and along the canals, brought the Irish, who settled “in hovels, hastily thrown together to accommodate as many as possible.” Down Neck, between the Passaic River and the salt marshes, a neighborhood of “factories, working-class housing and retail stores” developed into the primary Irish section of Newark in the 1840s. Earlier residents avoided the areas near the marshes because of the “mosquitoes humidity and poor drainage,” but the Down Neck offered the Irish cheap home sites “located at a comfortable distance from the unfriendly Protestant areas of town.” Immigrants from Ireland made up three out of four laborers in the city by 1850. As early as 1836, the foreign-born composed 18% of Newark’s population and by
1860 it rose to 37%. The Irish were a majority of the immigrants in the city in the 1830s and reached 50% by 1860, with the Germans comprising most the remainder in the pre-Civil War period. Industrial jobs drew the Irish to Newark in the 1840s and 1850s. Many Irish worked in tanning yards and in currying. They also found jobs as low paid unskilled and semi-skilled workers, for example, making up 43% of the male leather makers and 28% of the male hatters by 1860. Many of the Irish who arrived in Newark were poor and John Stephens, a local merchant who later served on the Irish Relief Committee in 1847, informed the city council in 1837 about the poverty and difficulty in finding support for Irish immigrant “paupers with families.” The hovels in which they lived reflected their poverty. The Irish who arrived in Newark came with fewer skills than those who settled in Paterson.

Irish immigration to Newark did not sit well with many of their Anglo-Saxon and Puritan Protestant neighbors who despised the Catholicism of the Irish and the foreign cultures brought to the city by the Irish and German immigrants.

Construction projects and industrial jobs also brought the Irish to New Brunswick in the 1830s and work in coal-yards attracted them to Perth Amboy in the mid-1830s. Skilled Irish tradesmen settled in Trenton, Elizabeth, Newark, New Brunswick, Paterson, and Jersey City, but most found employment as laborers and unskilled workers.

By 1852 the foreign-born comprised 62% of Jersey City’s population, of which the Irish made up over half. Like the Irish in Newark they lived in “wooden tenements and makeshift shanties . . . on low lying ground near the factories and railroad docks.” By 1850 76% of the unskilled workers in Jersey City were Irish, where Protestants saw them as competitors. Middle class Protestants often portrayed the unskilled and uneducated Irish as a threat to the social order and to the sanctity of the ballot.

**Irish Freedom**

Protestants became further inflamed by the many "Little Irelands" and their strong identification with the cause of Irish freedom. The Ironbound Section of Newark, Irishtown in Trenton, the Dublin section of Paterson, and the Horseshoe district of Jersey City, to name a few, became Little Irelands where the Irish found kinship as they did in the neighborhoods of the North End in Boston or Five Points in New York City. To the Irish immigrants, these neighborhoods provided emotional security and stability after the shocks of their trans-Atlantic migration and the difficulties of adjustment to a new land. However, these isolated neighborhoods also reinforced the image of the Irish as a clannish people who did not fit into American republicanism. Some American Protestants viewed
such ethnic neighborhoods as proof of how difficult it would be to assimilate Irish Catholics into the American concept of nationhood and further indication that the Irish remained “the other” outside of American society. As historian Dermot Quinn noted, the Irish ethnic clusters identified with the causes of the old country and “in politics as well as culture they seemed to be curious replicas of the homeland . . . transplanted to another.” The Irish supported Ireland’s struggle for self-determination and contributed to many nationalist causes from their Little Irelands in New Jersey. They endorsed Daniel O’Connell’s campaign for Catholic Emancipation, a campaign that started the identification with Irish nationalism that lasted over a hundred years. Initially, the campaign for Catholic emancipation aroused “broadly based support and respect in their adopted land because a substantial segment of the American press avidly supported the effort.” It coincided with the values of American republicanism that opposed religious restrictions in voting and holding office. [Great Britain had placed both direct and indirect restrictions on Roman Catholics through a variety of religious test laws since 1549. A process of dismantling some of these laws began in 1766 and culminated with the Roman Catholic Relief Act 1829.]

By early 1829 Irish Americans organized twenty-four chapters of the Friends of Ireland in the United States. In New Jersey, Newark and Paterson, with the largest Irish populations in the 1820s, supported chapters. Paterson established its chapter in November of 1828. Most members were recent immigrants representing a cross-section of the occupations of Paterson’s Irish. In February 1829, they issued a public appeal to the residents of New Jersey to support Ireland’s struggle for religious equality. This was the first time Irish immigrants in New Jersey appealed to their fellow non-Irish residents of the Garden State for mutual support. By emphasizing republican values, they managed to rationalize cooperation across denominational lines, succeeding even in winning Protestant support and respect. The movement ended when the British Parliament granted the request with the Roman Catholic Relief Act 1829, leading to the disbanding of the chapters in the spring of that year.

This self-conscious activism of the Irish in Paterson played an instrumental role in their strike activities three years later. The campaign for Catholic Emancipation represented one of the few occasions in which the Irish could gain public support and respect—as they would again during the Great Famine relief campaign. American political leaders and newspaper editors supported both campaigns. Irish-Americans had successfully portrayed Catholic Emancipation as an extension of the values of the American Revolution. Ironically, while this
campaign aimed to remove disabilities on Catholics participating in public life and serving in Parliament, it would take the new 1844 Constitution in New Jersey to remove such disabilities in the Garden State.17

In the 1840s the New Jersey Irish also endorsed another of Daniel O’Connell’s movements, to repeal the 1800 Act of Union between England and Ireland and re-establish an Irish Parliament. This was the cause of the Irish Repeal Association and chapters were organized in Paterson, Newark, Trenton, Jersey City, New Brunswick, and Bordentown that held regular meetings, publicized the nationalist cause, and raised funds for repeal. These multiple chapters reflected the growth in the Irish population of New Jersey by the 1840s. Annual St. Patrick’s Day dinners in Paterson were occasions for toasts to O’Connell, such as when resident John Mooney raised his glass to “a speedy repeal of the Union.”18 Indeed, between 1840 and 1845, St. Patrick’s Day celebrations in Newark, Paterson, and Trenton became opportunities to remember Ireland, publicize the cause of repeal, and also reinforce their sense of identity in America. In 1840 the Hibernian Provident Society in Newark toasted to O’Connell, repeal, and to Ireland’s “sons and daughters: the pride and ornament of both hemispheres.”19

In 1842 representatives of repeal associations met in a national convention in Philadelphia and elected three New Jersey repealers as officers, George Budd of Trenton, John Lewis from Newark, and William McDermott who came from Bordentown, hinting at the active role played by New Jersey Irishmen.20

During the summer of 1843 Irish-Americans established a repeal chapter in Trenton and local press extensively covered their meetings. Whigs, however, questioned whether local Democrats were supporting repeal only to win Irish votes. Repealers attempted to neutralize the issue of partisanship by claiming that organizers sought support “without distinction of party, religion, or politics.”21 Two months later, Charles Riddle, secretary of the Trenton association, emphasized that “persons of all denominations, Protestants as well as Catholics, participated in the Repeal Movement.”22 While identifying with the political movements in the Emerald Isle, Irish immigrants to New Jersey were careful to identify themselves publicly as “American citizens, native and adopted.”23

The repeal movement allowed the Irish to both identify with Ireland and created a positive public space in the United States. Trying to wrap repeal in American nationalist symbols, repealers tied the Anglo-American conflict over Oregon with repeal.24 [Great Britain and the United States were in diplomatic conflict over the border between British Canada and what would become the states of Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and the western third of Montana, threatening possible war; the conflict was peacefully resolved by the Oregon Treaty of 1846.]
Irish-Americans and Irish immigrants in New Jersey “far from Ireland” supported repeal because they wanted to keep Ireland “close to their hearts.” Repeal, like Catholic Emancipation and famine relief, were opportunities for the Irish to identify with the old country but also create a bond with other Americans. Unfortunately, despite such efforts, nativists would not accept the Irish as part of American society and still saw them as outsiders.

In 1846 the Repeal Movement split in Ireland. The more nationalist faction formed the Young Ireland movement calling for independence. Efforts to oust the British found a sympathetic audience among the Irish of New Jersey who rallied in the summer of 1848 to demonstrate their loyalty to the Irish cause and contribute their small sums to Irish freedom. When they met in Newark, a local newspaper reported, “there was a great deal of enthusiasm and the contributions were general and generous.” Similarly, in Trenton “many friends of Ireland met . . . the wildest enthusiasm prevailed and a stern determination was manifested by the Irish . . .” to support the cause of freedom.

When the friends of Ireland met in Jersey City they made clear they supported “the independence of Ireland from British usurpation and misrule.”

The Young Ireland rebellion fizzled in 1848, but it provided another opportunity for Irish-Americans to show their loyalty to the cause of Ireland’s freedom. However, as before, to many American Protestants their Irish loyalty demonstrated that the Irish could never become “real” Americans and remained foreigners at heart.

Famine Relief

One of the rare examples of Catholics and Protestants working together occurred in 1847. Particularly in Jersey City, in that year the famine relief campaign emerged as momentary public endorsement of Catholic-Protestant cooperation on behalf of Irish Catholics. Only a few months earlier, they fought over public education when the Jersey City school committee denied a petition from Catholics for a share of the public-school fund. Yet divisions were overcome in the face of this humanitarian crisis as they worked together to solicit funds for Irish relief and even chartered a ship, Overmann, that sailed to Ireland from Newark. On her mainmast, she bore a white flag with the inscription “New Jersey ship for the suffering Irish” in blue silk. A second Jersey ship, William Dugan, was later also sent with food and clothing to Ireland.

For a moment in 1846–47, the people of New Jersey ignored their sectarian, political, social, and ethnic differences to join in a voluntary movement to aid the starving in Ireland and Scotland. Protestant clergy who hated Catholicism and
local political leaders unhappy about the perceived social disorder brought by Irish and German immigrants embraced a Christian charity. Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians, Unitarians, Universalists, Dutch Reformed, Baptists, and Quakers, all helped Catholics in Ireland. The people of the Garden State considered themselves a people of plenty who felt a moral obligation to aid the starving Irish.31

School House Wars

The campaign for Irish relief proved a brief period in late 1846–1847 when Protestants and Catholics worked together on a common cause. Most of the rest of the time, however, many New Jersey Protestants abhorred the presence of Catholics and expressed their concerns in several different ways. One of the issues that alarmed Protestants across the Northeast and Middle West during the three decades prior to the Civil War became known as the School House Wars. Catholics requested a share of public school funds to educate their children and Protestant members of school boards and city councils resisted these requests. In New Jersey, these fights erupted with special bitterness in Newark and Jersey City in the 1830s and 1840s.

The common council in Jersey City denied Catholic requests for money in 1839 and 1842. Each time the trustees of St. Peter’s Catholic school made the case that they served poor children and would allow access to students of other denominations. Opponents saw this as sectarian and a violation of the concept of common schools. Father John Kelly, the new rector at St. Peter’s Church, sent another request for public school funds in the spring of 1846, arguing that the school served two hundred students and was “open to children of all denominations.”32 The Committee on Schools rejected the request because Father Kelly wanted a share of the public-school money but did not want to comply with the regulations for public schools. As a sectarian institution, St. Peter’s Catholic School had no legitimate claim to public money. Father Kelly appealed the decision and made a second request for funds.

In July 1846, there was an especially bitter debate over this issue. Frederick Betts, an alderman on the school committee, denounced another alderman, Horatio Fryatt, for supporting giving public money to St. Peter’s Catholic School, charging that Fryatt sold his vote or Irish Catholic political support. Surprisingly, both Fryatt and Betts served on the Irish Famine relief committee in Jersey City in 1847 and both gave speeches at the public meeting chaired by the city’s mayor for Irish relief. Betts told the citizens of Jersey City that “although I claim to not be a descendant of the Emerald Isle—yet, as an American, I have been susceptible of the feeling of distress.”33
Betts, Mayor Phineas Dummer, and other Protestant leaders in Jersey City portrayed helping Ireland in terms that emphasized the values of American republicanism and Protestant concepts of charity. They could identify with the hungry Irish Catholics in Ireland, but could not identify with the educational and religious needs of Irish Catholics in Jersey City.

Father Kelly continued to argue for a share of the public school moneys into the 1850s, but the Jersey City Common Council continued to repeatedly turn down the requests. In November 1852, for example, the Common Council’s Committee on Schools agreed to hear an appeal from Father Kelly, who told them the Roman Catholic Church did not control the school because the parents of the 600 students contributed to the payment of the teachers. Further, he argued, as such they had the right to send their children to whatever school they believed appropriate. The parents made sacrifices “as poor as they are, for the support of a school in accordance with their own views,” and because they paid taxes they were entitled to a share of the public money.34

This verbal war over access to the funds continued into 1853 when Father Kelly and Rev. Alexander W. McClure of the First Reformed Dutch Church exchanged arguments in a series of articles in the Jersey City Telegraph. Essentially, Father Kelly made the same points and further argued that the free common schools in Jersey City were Protestant in orientation. Rev. McClure questioned Father Kelly’s reasoning and stressed the separation of church and state as the primary reason for not setting aside a share of the school funds for St. Peter’s Catholic School. Rev. McClure warned of the slippery slope from “State-paid schools teaching religion” as “entering wedges for a State-paid priesthood.”35

The School House Wars would continue to divide Protestants and Catholics in Jersey City, and sectarian parochial schools would not get public funding. Catholics viewed this denial of public education funds as anti-Catholic discrimination while Protestants, like McClure, believed their opposition was upholding American republican principles. Unfortunately, as historian Douglas Shaw concluded “it is no exaggeration to view the schools [in Jersey City] as an extension of the Protestant community.” While the argument against religious school funding from public coffers had constitutional merit under the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, the effect was less about preventing the government favoring one religion over another as much as sustaining the de facto dominance of Protestant influence. Few Catholic children went to the common schools because they attended St. Peter’s. The new school board established in 1852 consisted of twelve Protestant men connected to evangelical Protestant missionary organizations or nativist
groups. Protestant leaders viewed Jersey City as a Protestant city and wanted to maintain its identity against the increasing immigrant population and the schools served as one vehicle for Protestant dominance. Protestant leaders, like Rev. McClure, viewed the fight over schools as evidence of Catholic priests trying to gain control over the city’s government. The fight over the schools “exhibited the deepest fears of the Protestant community about the threat of Catholic power.”

A similar effort took place in 1843 in Newark when the St. John’s Free School petitioned for a share of public school funds but ran into resistance because it “was a sectarian school—a Roman Catholic school.” An extensive debate developed in the press in late 1843, though the Catholic clergy and lay people had tried since 1838 to obtain a share. A few years earlier in 1836, city leaders made a concession to Catholics by allowing payment of a variety of teachers, including two Catholic tutors, Bernard Kearney and Francis Murphy, who served 164 Irish Catholic children. However, in 1837 the Common Council decided to consolidate the teaching of students into one school and terminated most of the teachers including the two Irish Catholics. This led to renewed efforts in 1838 to seek a share of the public school funds for St. John’s Free School. The argument was made it was a public school serving poor children, echoing the justification Father Kelly used in Jersey City. Newark city leaders, however, repeatedly rejected this claim on the public treasury.

The trustees of St. John’s Free School again filed a petition with the Common Council on November 17, 1843, arguing that it was a public free school under the definition of common schools and its Catholic orientation was not relevant since it served a poor student population. Father Patrick Moran and Michael Finigan, Secretary of the Trustees, made their appeal in the press and defended themselves from a series of unnamed writers who opposed their plan. Opponents emphasized that St. John’s was a sectarian Catholic school, not a common school, and therefore not entitled to any share of the public school money. The Common Council and Protestant opponents ignored the precedent of the school system previously hiring Catholic teachers to teach Irish Catholic children. As in Jersey City, the arguments against funding were rooted less in principled defense of the Establishment Clause than deflecting what the de facto Protestant dominance saw as competition for influence. While hiding behind non-sectarianism as a weapon against Catholics, the Newark common school system too had effectively become a Protestant school system. “Evangelical Protestants recognized and defined a school ‘system’ that met unwavering Protestant terms,” according to historian Joel Schwartz, and the “Protestants’ machine geared up to protect the new educational establishment” against the Catholic threat.
This debate continued in 1845 and 1846 when the trustees of St. John’s Free School again petitioned the Common Council for a share of the school fund. The members of the Council considered the question in September 1845 and June 1846. Though one alderman believed Catholics were superstitious and ignorant, he believed giving them a share of the school fund would counter that, allow the children to become better citizens. On the other side, another alderman argued the constitutional separation of church and state dictated no aid to any sectarian schools, whether Episcopalian, Baptist or Catholic. Having failed, the trustees asked permission to further try to convince the Common Council, but the request was denied. For two decades Catholic clergy and lay trustees of St. John’s Free School appealed for funds, but the School Committee always rejected the requests. With the school system in Newark under firm Protestant control city officials saw no reason to make a special accommodation for Catholics.

The school funding issues in Newark and Jersey City did not remain confined to New Jersey and reflected larger conflicts elsewhere in the country. Historian Dale Knobel concluded that the nativist reaction to the “school issue in New York and Philadelphia assumed the form of an organized social movement.” In the 1840s the conflict between Catholics and Protestants over Catholic access to funding for public schools and Catholic opposition to the use of the King James Version of the Bible in public schools created the social conflict that produced the nativist American Republican Party in New York City. This led to the bloody Protestant attacks on Catholics in Philadelphia in 1844. This Catholic-Protestant conflict “convinced many Americans that Catholics were attempting “to overthrow and demolish our Common Schools,” encouraging the growth of anti-Catholic and anti-Irish nativism. Such conflict New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania “were taken as signs of a Catholic plot to use the educational system to undermine [Protestant] faith and freedom” and “the public-school controversy activated the broad evangelical community.”

In New Jersey, the Princeton Theological Seminary made clear its opposition to Catholic theology and its belief that the American educational system and American society should remain solidly Protestant. Students responding to the Catholic threat established the Committee on the Romish Church in 1832. In 1844, they drew up a new constitution for the Committee on Public Morals, Romish Church and Infidelity, hoping they could spread knowledge about the evils of Catholicism and expressed concerns about the growth of the Catholic population in the United States. Students invited members of the faculty, like Professor Charles Hodge, to lecture on the papacy. The student group on the Romish
Church would not have survived as it did without faculty support. Princetonians attacked Catholic doctrines, Samuel Miller explained in several reviews he wrote in 1831 and 1832 of books on Catholicism. Miller believed a mere explanation of the truth of Protestant Christianity would prevail over the evils of Catholicism. Miller and other Princetonians considered "Catholic seminaries and convents as 'sinks of moral profligacy and pollution.'"49

Feelings of distrust towards Catholicism were not limited to Protestants. In 1835 Professor Hodge proposed a resolution that was adopted by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church recommending the conversion of Catholic immigrants. "The Princetonians were indeed alarmed," according to historian Bryan Lamkin," by the arrival of so many Catholics after 1830" who posed a "threat to the freedoms guaranteed in the U.S. Constitution."50 The three most prominent members of the Princeton faculty, Samuel Miller, Charles Hodge, and Archibald Alexander, expressed their opposition to Catholicism, concerns about Catholic immigration, and the threats Catholics created for the American educational system.51 Such opposition was also expressed by other major Protestant denominations, like the Methodists, Baptists, and Dutch Reformed.52

### Political Power

The fear was that Catholic immigrants, especially the Irish, would alter American politics and republican institutions through their growing political power. If the inadequately assimilated Irish voted as a bloc it "would spell the ruin of the American political system."53

In 1832, a National Republican newspaper in New Jersey complained about the bloc voting of naturalized Irish for Andrew Jackson. The editor complained that Jacksonian supporters appealed to a class of Irish emigrants who "never had the advantages of education." This class of citizen, he asserted, was "easily excited by eloquence and exaggeration." The editor went on to complain: "Will not our Irish citizens—can they not—act without being instructed how?"54

In 1844 some New Jersey Whig newspaper editors blamed their defeat in the presidential election because "the foreign vote went heavily against us." Democrats filled the minds of "our naturalized citizens . . . with the grossest falsehoods about Whigs."55 Luther Pratt, writing in the Whig Jersey City Advertiser, while distancing himself from the anti-immigrant Native American Party, agreed that "demagogues use the poor, illiterate, and ignorant Irish and Germans, to swell their votes at elections."56 Whigs warned each other to remain on guard against naturalized voters at election time and blamed Democrats for persuading ignorant foreigners to "become...
naturalized . . . for the sake of securing their votes." Editors of other Whig newspapers admitted they could not win over the Irish Roman Catholics who tended to vote Democratic. New Jersey Whigs walked a political tightrope in trying to limit the votes of naturalized voters and agreeing with the nativist attack on the foreign voters, especially Irish Catholics, but still trying to avoid directly endorsing the positons of nativist political groups in hope of eventually attracting naturalized citizens. It put the Whigs in a quandary how to appeal to nativists and yet still attract immigrant voters.

Violence
Violence, both verbal and physical, aimed at Catholic institutions, especially churches, emerged as another manifestation of nativism in New Jersey that came from both American-born Protestants and immigrant Protestant Scots-Irish. As early as 1824 Scots-Irish members of the Orange Order attacked a Roman Catholic church in Paterson, but local Catholics held off the Orangemen. The Orange Order, a Protestant fraternal organization based primarily in Northern Ireland, arrived in the United States in the 1820s. Orangemen started a riot in New York City in 1824 by parading on July 12th through an Irish Catholic neighborhood in Greenwich Village. The events in Paterson appear to be an extension of this provocation. Protestants drove the Irish out of Elizabeth in 1829, denying employment to Irish Catholics who dared to venture into that community. During the first St. Patrick’s Day celebration in New Jersey which took place in Newark on March 17, 1834, Protestants harassed the marchers. Such St. Patrick’s Day harassment continued in Newark for over twenty years. Protestants would hang effigies of “Paddy” from an elm tree on Broad Street surrounded by potatoes with a bottle in the effigy’s pocket. When this happened again in 1852 “a large mob of incensed Irishmen” cut down the tree, ending the practice of harassment though the authorities arrested them. To counter the anti-Catholicism, Father Patrick Moran promoted religious tolerance, but many Protestants ignored his efforts to promote mutual understanding.

When the Irish came back to Elizabeth in 1844 to establish St. Mary’s Church, a group of nativists planned an attack. However, the local priest, hoping to avoid violence, stationed women members of the congregation in front of the church with their children. On this occasion, the strategy worked and the attackers backed off, saving the church from destruction and avoiding a confrontation between nativists and Irish Catholic men. In South Amboy in 1851 “bigoted, rough oyster dredgers who hated everything Catholic” harassed the local priest. Irish members of the parish defended Father John Rogers with the “tongue and fist.” Similarly, in Red Bank when
the congregation attempted to build St. James Church in 1849–50 "so intensely intolerant were mechanics" the members of the parish had to bring the frame from Jersey City and stand guard each night for fear the local Protestant mechanics would destroy it.62

Nativist Politics

The willingness of the Irish to stand up for their rights sparked a nativist reaction. In 1835 two thousand textile workers went out on strike for six weeks in Paterson. Workers in other parts of New Jersey endorsed the strike and voiced their opposition "to this species of oppression."63 Irish workers sought a reduction from 13-and-a-half hours to 11 hours per day. The strike bitterly divided the community and produced the first nativist political party in New Jersey's history. Ironically, the Irish did well in the politics of Paterson. By the mid-1830s they flocked to the Democratic Party and assumed leadership positions. In 1831, for example, Irish immigrants filled ten of twenty-eight elected offices. From 1826 to 1839, twenty-seven immigrants won elections to town offices.64

The success in Democratic politics and militancy in the 1835 strike led to a reaction from National Republicans and Whigs who blamed the Irish for stirring up trouble at town and political meetings in April, June, and July of 1832 and disrupting a political meeting on September 27, 1833. National Republicans and later Whigs blamed Democrats and Irish political leaders of creating class tensions in the community.

"The inability of Paterson National Republicans/Whigs to disrupt the coalition of immigrants and wage-earners," according to historian Howard Harris, "led some to turn to nativism as a means of wooing American born Patersonians away from the Democratic Party."65 When the Irish and other textile workers walked out in 1835, Whigs formed a chapter of the Native American Democratic Association. Formed in New York City in 1835 by James Webb, editor of the Courier, the party campaigned against the pauper immigrants, the election of immigrants to political office, and the influence of Catholicism. Chapters were formed in several cities including Paterson. The Paterson chapter denounced the unrestrained immigration of foreigners not sufficiently acquainted with American republican principles that threatened American democracy.66 In Paterson, the party demanded a 21-year waiting period for citizenship and election to public office as well as an end to pauper immigration. NADA wanted "the elimination of the Irish immigrants as a major political force in the community."67 The Native American Democratic Association failed to win over Protestant workers in 1835, however, electing only one nativist leader to office at the town meeting, compared to five strongly anti-nativist candidates. By
early 1836 the local chapter of NADA, which peaked at 400 members, folded, admitting defeat. No other chapter existed in New Jersey in the 1830s, although NADA remained active in other American cities until the early 1840s. At least in Paterson in the mid-1830s, the Irish continued to play a “pivotal role in local politics.”

However, in the mid-1840s a new nativist organization that originated in New York City appeared in New Jersey—the American Republican Party or Native American Party. It lasted for ten years and found a base in Camden, but also successfully organized in Burlington, Cumberland, Salem, Cape May, and Gloucester counties. An advertisement appeared in the Newark press in December 1843 calling for the creation of a branch of the Party. When 1,000 nativists met in January 1844 it “was a perfect jam, and we have seldom witnessed a greater degree of enthusiasm than was manifested at this meeting.” Speakers at the meeting denounced Catholics, the naturalization of foreigners, and naturalized Americans voting. A local newspaper sympathized with the nativist desire to exclude naturalized immigrants from the franchise. American Republicans did well in the local Newark elections of 1844, electing all their candidates in the South Ward and winning several city-wide offices. However, the Whigs succeeded in restoring discipline and competing temperance and anti-slavery movements weakened the nativist appeal in Newark by 1846.

Elsewhere, nativists also organized in 1844. In Burlington County, for example, “a large meeting of 1,500 to 2,000 Native Americans” met in Burlington with Philadelphia nativists. In most of New Jersey the nativists posed a threat to the Whig Party since the American Republicans appealed primarily to dissident Whigs. When the nativists organized in Camden in 1844, a local Democrat, Isaac Mickle, observed they were “addressed by some ignorant jack-an-apes who had pistols sticking out of their pockets as if they expected mortal fight.” Mickle feared if the American Republicans ran a ticket the Whigs would win “the Natives being all Democrats.” He organized a group to “resist the progress of the Native American cause,” but Mickle underestimated the strength of the nativists in Camden. In March 1845 nativists carried all the elected posts, the first town in the state to come under nativist political control. Nativists, first in the American Republican Party, and later in the American Party, would dominate Camden’s politics for most of the next fifteen years. To celebrate their victory, in mid-June 1845 nativists held an event “with banners flying and music playing” led by the editor of the Camden Advertiser.

In 1845 the nomination of nativist candidates in Camden and Burlington counties helped elect Democrats to the Assembly by drawing away voters from the Whig Party.
Nativist defections from the Whigs also cost them a congressional seat in a special election for the second district, allowing Democrat George Sykes to win. As a friend told Sykes: “If the Native American Party never did a good act before, they are now entitled to much credit for the result of your recent election in New Jersey.”

To join the Camden Native American Association, you had to be a native-born American who subscribed to denying naturalized citizens of the right to vote and hold public office. Catholics could not join. Nativists hated and feared the adaptation of Irish immigrants to the American political process and while those in Camden wanted to end it specifically in New Jersey, they also sought the same changes for the United States as a whole.

In 1846 the nativists finally succeeded in electing one member to the State Assembly from Cape May County. Their candidates for Congress in the first and second congressional districts ran behind the Democratic and Whig candidates, obtaining about 10% of the vote in the first congressional district, almost no votes in Mercer and Monmouth counties, and just 5% in Burlington County in the second district. Some contemporary newspapers bluntly called the American Republican or Native American Party the anti-Irish Catholic political party.

The Native American Party remained a minor third force in New Jersey politics until the Native American Party replaced it and on July 5, 1852, this newcomer held its national convention in Trenton. Party members railed against foreigners and Catholics, and agreed to adhere to their overall fundamental principles. In New Jersey the Native American Party succeeded in electing an occasional candidate to the Assembly and in dominating Camden. They ran candidates in West New Jersey for the Assembly and Senate into the early 1850s. When the two-party system held, however, they ran a poor third in Camden and Burlington counties in 1851 and 1852. It received small but consistent support in Burlington, Cape May, Gloucester, Cumberland, Camden, and Salem counties. Although it made an appearance in urban centers like Newark, the Native American Party did not leave much of an impression in the cities of northeastern New Jersey. Beyond Camden it appears to have found a small base of support among rural Protestants in West New Jersey who were upset by the ethnic and religious changes taking place in urban areas.

The 1852 Trenton convention was really their last hurrah. What replaced them and became more successful in NJ and nationally was the American Party (better known as the Know Nothings), another anti-Catholic, anti-Irish political movement that sprang from several secret organizations, especially the Order of United Americans. This movement peaked in the mid-
1850s, especially in 1856, but got pushed aside in NJ and nationally by the slavery issue—and by another new political party, Republican Party. The diehard nativists in the American Party fought on until 1859 and then the Camden branch tried to survive as Constitutional Unionists in the 1860 presidential election. Once again, Irish Catholic immigrants and their German neighbors, would bear the brunt of these new assaults.

**Twentieth Century**

Despite the efforts of the nativists, by the end of the 19th century, it was clear that the Irish were here to stay. Indeed, they had emerged as the dominant force among New Jersey's many immigrant communities, followed by the Germans and Italians. The more established they became, the more "respectable" they appeared, even to nativists who became increasingly distracted by new waves of immigration from southern and Eastern Europe.

Like any group, the legacy of Irish immigration has had its positive and negative aspects. When one thinks of the corruption of early 20th century New Jersey "machine politics," the larger-than-life characters who were the political bosses tended to have Irish roots: "Big Jim" Smith of Newark, Thomas McCran of Paterson, and the legendary Frank "Boss" Hague of Jersey City.

The Irish in New Jersey remained strong forces in labor unions and the fight for workers' rights. Irish industrial activism was instrumental in the 1913 Paterson silk strike, the 1919 Gloucester County trolley strike, and 1934 Camden shipyard strike.

By the late 20th century, New Jersey had elected two powerful Governors of Irish heritage, Richard Hughes in 1961 and William Cahill in 1970. The Irish have effectively at last assimilated into the accepted mainstream of American sociopolitical life. Some historians view this as coming at a cost. Claiming Irish roots these days is more a matter of sentimental pride than the staking of a claim of identity.

The ethnic and religious groups seeking and influencing the American identity may be different, but the resurgent nativism of our own time echoes the experiences of New Jersey's 19th century Irish in the wards of Jersey City, Newark, Paterson, Camden, Trenton, and elsewhere.
Notes:

The author gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the New Jersey Historical Commission and the Sage Colleges.


3-Ibid, 64. In 1832 cholera developed across the northeast. For its impact on New Jersey, for example, Bergen Courier, July 11-October 3, 1832; Newark Daily Advertiser, July 27-August 27, 1832; New Brunswick Times, August 1, 1832; Trenton Emporium, July 14-August 11, 1832; and Trenton State Gazette, July 22-September 22, 1832.


8-John H. Stephens to the Newark City Council, 1837, Box 0233, Common Council Communications, General, 1836–1889, Historical Vault, City of Newark Archives and Records Management Center (Newark Archives).


12- Ibid.


14-Paterson *Intelligencer*, November 26, 1828.

16- Paterson Intelligencer, February 11, 1829, May 13, 20, 1829. In the May 13th issue there is a letter from Robert Hughes and Daniel McCarthy, May 11, 1829 about the disbanding of the chapter.


18- Paterson Intelligencer, March 24, 1841.

19- Newark Eagle, March 24, 1840. Also, cited in Quinn, Irish, 63.

20- Philadelphia Public Ledger, February 23–24, 1842; Paterson Intelligencer March 30, 1842.

21- Trenton State Gazette, June 28, July 7, 12, 24, 1843; Trenton Emporium, July 5, 14, 1843; Paterson Intelligencer, June 21, 28, 1843.

22- Trenton State Gazette, September 6, 1843.

23- Trenton Emporium, July 12, 1843. Also, see Trenton State Gazette, January 8, 1844; Newark Daily Advertiser, November 14, 1843. New York Freeman’s Journal, December 2, 1843. This newspaper, an Irish-American newspaper covered repeal meetings in Newark, Paterson, and New Brunswick from 1842–45. Women were asked to attend meetings in Trenton and Paterson and they did attend which was somewhat unusual in gender segregated life of Irish-Americans, New York Freeman’s Journal, April 5, 1845; Trenton State Gazette, September 28, 1843; Trenton Emporium, November 10, 1843.

24- Newark Daily Advertiser, February 2, 1846.

25- Quinn, The Irish, 63.

26- Newark Morning Eagle, August 23, 1848

27- Trenton State Gazette, August 23, 1848.

28- Jersey City Telegraph, July 12, 1848.

29- Report of the Committee of Schools on the Memorial of the Trustees of St. Peter’s School, Jersey City Advertiser, May 19, 1846.


32- Jersey City Advertiser, May 19, 1846. For example, see Jersey City Advertiser April 5, 1842 August 9, 1842.


34- Jersey City Sentinel, November 19, 1852.

35- Jersey City Telegraph, March 10, 1853. The articles were published from March 2–21, 1853 and republished as John Kelly, School Question: A Correspondence between Rev. J. Kelly, of St. Peter’s (R.C.) Church, and Rev. A.W. McClure, of the First Reformed Dutch Church, Jersey City (New York: C. Scribner, 1853).


37- Petrick, Church and School in the Immigrant City, 56.

38- Newark Eagle, September 5, 1843.

40- Newark *Daily Advertiser*, November 21, 1843. For details of this extended press debate look at the *Advertiser* from November 17-December 15, 1843.


48- Record Book of the Society of Inquiry, subcommittee: Committee on the Romish Church, Archives and Special Collections, Princeton Theological Seminary. See, for example, meetings for December 1832.


50-Ibid, 66.

51-Ibid, 79.

52-For the Methodists, see Van Dussen's study; for the Dutch Reformed, for example, Rev. McClure's conflict with Father Kelly in Jersey City cited above; and for a general history of the Baptist nativism, see Terry Carter, "Baptist Participation in Anti-Catholic Sentiment and Activities, 1830–1860," (Ph.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1983).


54-Bergen *Courier*, October 3, 1832.

55-Somerset *Whig*, November 19, 1844.

56-Jersey City *Advertiser*, January 14, 1845.

57-Ibid, January 9, 1844. See, for example, Newark *Sentinel*, November 3, 1846 for those concerns.

58-Somerset *Whig*, October 22, 1844.


60-Newark *Sentinel*, March 22, 1852.


65-Ibid, 590.

66- Paterson Intelligencer, August 12, 26, September 9, 1835. For conflict over the strike also see Newark Daily Advertiser, August 8, 11, 1835.


68-Ibid, 592.

69- Newark Morning Post, December 23, 1843.

70- Newark Eagle, January 2, 1844. Trenton State Gazette, January 3, 1844 reprinted another account of the meeting from the Newark Morning Post. Also, Newark Daily Advertiser, January 3, 1844.

71-Newark Eagle, January 2, 1844.

72-Mt. Holly Mirror, June 20, 1844.


75-Camden Mail, March 12, 1845. For a list of nativist mayors of Camden, see Camden Democrat, March 20, 1880.

76-Ibid, June 18, 1845.

77-Paterson Intelligencer, November 12, 1845, Whigs estimated they lost 2,000 votes to the nativists in West New Jersey in 1846, Trenton State Gazette, November 6, 1846.

78-John Meechan to George Sykes, November 11, 1845, George Sykes Papers, Special Collections, Rutgers University Libraries.

79- Constitution and By-Laws of the Native American Association of the Township of Camden (Camden: Franklin Ferguson, 1844), Manuscript Collection, New Jersey Historical Society, Newark.

80-Camden Mail, November 18, 1846.

81-Salem National Standard, November 25, 1845.

82-Trenton True American, July 5–7, 1852.