The Decline of the Ohio Know-Nothings, 1856-1860
by John B. Weaver

The 1850's witnessed the dramatic rise and fall of the Know-Nothing party in American politics. This nativist movement grew out of Protestant alarm over Irish and German Catholic immigration in the 1840's and 1850's, and reached the peak of its political power in 1854 and 1855. Know-Nothings condemned both Whigs and Democrats for being too tolerant of this immigration and too eager to seek immigrant support at the polls. However, the Know-Nothings split apart in 1856 over the issue of slavery and thereafter rapidly declined. In the North the Republican party absorbed most of the antislavery Know-Nothings, thus giving the party a certain nativist tinge. Those Know-Nothings in the North who did not become Republicans faced a politically bleak future. In Ohio these nativists struggled to keep a separate organization alive, but with little success.

As early as 1855 the majority of Ohio's Know-Nothings had entered into an alliance with the Republicans. In that year the Republicans nominated eight Know-Nothings to run for state offices along with Salmon Portland Chase, the party's candidate for governor. Chase himself was not a Know-Nothing and refused to endorse the nativist position but he accepted the Know-Nothings on the ticket as the price for a politically valuable alliance. Those Know-Nothings who detested Chase for his antislavery radicalism and who disliked the nature of the alliance nominated their own candidate for governor, Allen Trimble, who came in a distant third in the three-way race that Chase won.

The competition in 1855 between Chase and Trimble for Know-Nothing support foreshadowed the Know-Nothing split in 1856. On February 15 the majority of the Ohio delegates attending the national Know-Nothing convention in Philadelphia walked out when the Southern delegates rebuffed a move to include a platform plank calling for restoration of the Missouri Compromise. They joined seceding delegates from other Northern states in forming a separate "North American" party, which voted to delay making a presidential nomination until June, when the Republicans also planned to meet. The remaining Know-Nothings, now predominantly Southern, hereafter known as the "South Americans," proceeded to nominate former Whig president Millard Fillmore as their presidential candidate for 1856.
Thomas Spooner, one of the Ohio delegates, had consulted with Chase concerning the actions Ohio Know-Nothings should take at this convention, and it was rather likely that the outcome pleased Chase, for the Know-Nothing split was now permanent, and the “North Americans” clearly offered the possibility of cooperation with the Republicans on the national level in the 1856 campaign. Chase’s friend John Paul had been in Philadelphia and observed a session of the Know-Nothing convention. He reported to Chase that he was “pleased at the way Ford and Spooner handled themselves” in leading the bolt of the Ohio delegates. Another Ohio Republican, who had been concerned that the Ohio Know-Nothings would have to be integrated more fully into the Republican party or else do the party great harm, rejoiced in the outcome of the Philadelphia convention, proclaiming that his “confidence in the integrity of the Ohio Know-Nothings [had been] strengthened.”

After the national division of the Know-Nothings the Ohio members of the party completed a similar separation on the state level. When the Know-Nothing state council approved the actions of the Ohio delegates leading to the national separation, an anti-Republican, pro-Fillmore minority, centered in Cincinnati and a few other locations in southern Ohio, moved to constitute itself as the American party of Ohio. They obtained a charter to that effect from the pro-Fillmore, “South American” national council. The Cincinnati Dollar Weekly Times, a nativist newspaper, endorsed the position of these staunch pro-Fillmore Know-Nothings who at that time were not interested in cooperating with Republicans. It hurled indignation toward those Know-Nothings who had supported Chase in 1855 and the division of
James Charlesworth, editor of the St. Clairsville Independent Republican and leader of the Know-Nothings in Belmont County urged support of Congressman John Scott Harrison, son of William Henry Harrison, as a gubernatorial candidate.

the national organization in 1856, declaring them to be traitors to the goal of a strong independent nativist party capable of defeating both Republicans and Democrats. Especially condemned were several congressmen who had been Know-Nothings when first elected in 1854 with both Republican and Know-Nothing support but who now considered themselves strictly Republican.9 Other bitter remarks were reserved for Republican antislavery radicals like Joshua Giddings, “a most notorious abolitionist agitator” who “for years... has openly preached disunion in and out of Congress,” but whose congressional district was unfortunately “altogether past redemption.”10

Ohio’s pro-Fillmore Know-Nothings also emphasized the theme of national unity in 1856, declaring the Republican party to be sectional and a fomenter of national discord. “The country will hold the seventy or eighty Republicans in Congress answerable for something besides Kansas harangues,” declared the Dollar Weekly Times, a reference to the way Republican orators had seized upon “Bleeding Kansas” as a weapon to dramatize the dangers of an aggressive “slave power.”11 Fillmore championed national unity and peace in his campaign, which might be expected of a man who was essentially a conservative Whig repelled by Republican “radicalism” on
slavery and who had only minimal affiliations with the Know-Nothing move-
ment. Former Whig senator Thomas Corwin, who up to this point had
remained aloof from Republican politics, supported Fillmore until October
when he switched reluctantly to John Frémont, the Republican and “North
American” presidential candidate. Other old Whig leaders in Ohio, including
that party’s gubernatorial candidates in 1850 and 1853, endorsed Demo-
cratic candidate James Buchanan as the best hope for saving the Union.

The Ohio Know-Nothings who supported the Republicans in 1855
and 1856, and who had for all practical purposes become Republicans
themselves, were rewarded for their cooperation in 1857. That year the
Republican-controlled General Assembly enacted two laws that incorporated
nativist thinking. One stipulated that church property could not be owned
directly by the clergy, but only by the congregation itself through lay trus-
tees. This measure was directed specifically at the Roman Catholic Church,
since it prohibited the practice that was customary in American Catholicism
at that time. The other law, of more immediate political importance, was
“An Act to Preserve the Purity of Elections,” that dealt with residency re-
quirements for voting. To the standing requirements of one year’s residence
in the state and thirty days’ residence in the county prior to election day, it
added the requirement of twenty days’ residence in the township or ward,
and stiffened the penalties for violations of these rules. “Residency” was
more rigorously defined, and election judges were authorized to demand to
see the naturalization papers of any immigrant whose citizenship or eligi-
bility to vote were questioned. This act was a response to charges from both
Know-Nothings and Republicans that immigrants sometimes voted illegally
because Democratic politicians rounded them up and shepherded them to
the polls en masse on election day. The vote on these two measures went
along strong party lines, with only a handful of Democrats voting for them
and Republicans against.

Chase’s endorsement of the elections act had been cautious and had been
balanced with a warning not to go to the other extreme of denying citizens
the reasonable opportunity to exercise their rights. Although he signed both
measures into law, his private view was that the legislation was “neither wise
nor beneficial,” but a necessary sacrifice to maintain party strength and
unity. The Ohio State Journal, a leading Republican newspaper, was far
more positive in its appraisal of these laws, especially the elections act. It
blamed fraudulent immigrant voting for the defeat of Republican congress-
man Samuel Galloway of Columbus in a close election in 1856, and was
disappointed that the lawmakers had not gone even further and added a
one-year waiting period after naturalization before granting of the fran-
chise. A constitutional amendment incorporating such a waiting period
did pass the Ohio House of Representatives by a vote of fifty-three to fifty,
but this fell short of the three-fifths majority for approval. All fifty-three of
the affirmative votes were cast by Republicans, but nineteen Republicans joined with the Democrats in voting against the measure.¹⁹

The Know-Notings outside the Republican party were not appeased by passage of the church property and election acts. The Hillsboro American Citizen especially pointed out that some Republicans had refused to support the waiting-period constitutional amendment.²⁰ Calling the Republicans "hypocritical," this nativist journal had nothing but scorn for the legislative session ending in the spring of 1857. It had been "wasteful," "extravagant," and guilty of a "salary grab" (in voting pay increases for legislators), and its sudden adjournment in April, 1857 was "unexpected but welcome."²¹ Ohio nativists who wanted to continue an independent course on the statewide level could point to the Republican state ticket of 1857 as evidence that true nativists could expect little or nothing of substance from that party. Governor Chase, whom militant nativists abhorred, was renominated, and all but one of the other nominations for state offices went to new men instead of the Know-Notings who had been elected with Chase in 1855. In place of Know-Nothing Thomas Ford the Republicans nominated Martin Welker, of German Protestant ancestry, for lieutenant-governor. Nativists also balked at the prospect of supporting the Republican nominee for state supreme court judge, the antislavery radical Milton Sutliff.²²

Ohio Republicans had several reasons for bringing in new men to run with Chase in 1857, including the need to appeal to the non-nativist elements in the party coalition, such as German-Americans, and the need for a fresh political image to counteract the tarnishing effects of the canal and state treasury scandals of Chase's first term. The involvement of State Treasurer William Gibson, a Know-Nothing, in the treasury scandal especially incensed those who had always been cool toward Know-Nothing cooperation with the Republicans.²³ Some Republicans were concerned by this ticket shuffling. Congressman John Sherman warned Chase that Thomas Ford was angry at being dropped from the ticket. He reminded the governor that Ford "has been useful to the Republican Party. His being on the ticket drives off no yet—yet attaches to it a large number and of a class that you and I could not in the least influence."²⁴ Nevertheless, Ohio Republicans went into the 1857 campaign with little formal acknowledgment of the role Know-Notings had played in the formation of their party in 1854 and 1855. Even the one Know-Nothing on the ticket, Board of Public Works member Jacob Blickensderfer, was bitterly assailed by many Ohio Republicans for his role in the canal controversy, and was the only candidate on the Republican ticket who suffered defeat that fall.²⁵

The Know-Notings, generally those who had supported Fillmore and the South Americans in 1856, nominated a former Whig, Philadelph Van Trump of Lancaster, for governor in 1857. Their platform expressed both nativist views of Catholic immigrants and a "middle-ground" position on
slavery decrying both the extension of slavery and Republican “fanaticism” on the subject.²⁶ Their campaign proceeded with invective directed equally at Chase and at the former Know-Nothings who had “sold out” to the Republicans. Fusion with Republicans had nearly killed a movement that had otherwise been on its way to success, according to the Lancaster Gazette. The Cincinnati Dollar Weekly Times urged firm adherence to independent action in 1857, even though it acknowledged that the party’s vote would be small.²⁷

However, the logic of their situation as a third party encouraged some Know-Nothings to make alliances with either Democrats or Republicans where their votes could help determine outcomes in municipal and county elections. In some areas evidence surfaced of Know-Nothing-Democratic collaboration.²⁸ In Cincinnati some Protestant Democrats fused with Know-Nothings while some Catholic Democrats then endorsed those Republican candidates for county office whom they found more acceptable.²⁹ In other areas Know-Nothings and Republicans collaborated on the local level, as in Steubenville where the local Know-Nothing newspaper, the True American, endorsed Chase for governor while supporting a Republican-Know-Nothing fusion ticket for county offices.³⁰

The True American’s endorsement of Chase was rather unusual, since most of the Know-Nothings who supported a major party candidate chose the Democrat Henry Payne over Chase.³¹ The Know-Nothings of Marietta decided that if Van Trump should withdraw they would throw their endorsement to Payne, and on election day reports indicated evidence of Know-Nothing support for Payne.³² Conscious of this possibility, the leading Republican newspapers scoffed at the logic of such an alignment. The Cincinnati Gazette found it “inconsistent” that any nativist would support the candidate of a party that had vigorously opposed the church property law of 1857, and the Ohio State Journal wanted to know how those old Whigs among the nativists could support a party that had so maliciously attacked the great Whig statesman Henry Clay.³³ Yet some militant nativists had come to the conclusion that “Republicans were no better than Democrats.”³⁴ One such militant, a former Whig who vowed never to join the Republicans, hoped that the Van Trump candidacy would result in the election of Payne. He admitted that as a remnant group the remaining Know-Nothings were “potent only for mischief.”³⁵

From a practical standpoint the results of the election disappointed the anti-Chase Know-Nothings, since the 10,135 votes received by Van Trump were insufficient to defeat Chase, who squeaked by Payne with a margin of less than two thousand votes. The Know-Nothings had not run candidates for any other state office, but the fact that the total vote cast in these races approximately equaled the combined vote of Chase and Payne suggests that the Know-Nothings who voted for Van Trump may have simply refrained
from voting in these other races.\textsuperscript{36} Know-Nothings apparently did little to help Jacob Blickensderfer, who lost his race for membership on the Board of Public Works because of his role in the canal scandal, but then Blickensderfer was one of the Know-Nothing "renegades" who had become too closely identified with Republicanism to suit militant nativists.\textsuperscript{37}

Van Trump's campaign marked the last statewide effort by an independent Know-Nothing party to place a candidate on the ballot. Many Know-Nothings who wanted to have a meaningful political impact now turned, however reluctantly, to the prospects of joint action with other parties. In 1858 such cooperation usually involved Republican—Know-Nothing coalitions. In Cincinnati Republican candidates for local office received Know-Nothing support, and even Chase found a reasonably friendly reception from Know-Nothings when he campaigned for Republicans in the Queen City.\textsuperscript{38}

Ohio's Know-Nothings generally supported Republican congressional candidates in 1858. In the Tenth District the Republican nominee Carey Trimble received the official endorsement of a Know-Nothing convention meeting in Portsmouth.\textsuperscript{39} In the Twenty-first District the Steubenville \textit{True American}, which had endorsed Chase in 1857, now supported Republican congressman John Bingham's re-election bid: "Although Mr. Bingham is not quite American enough for us yet, he is infinitely better in this respect than any man from the Democratic ranks."\textsuperscript{40} On the state level Republicans courted Know-Nothing support with the nomination of William Peck as its candidate for supreme court judge. As one conservative Republican declared, it was an "admirable selection" because Peck, unlike Milton Sutliff, was free of "ultra-isms," and would appeal to Know-Nothings.\textsuperscript{41}

Despite the occurrence of Republican—Know-Nothing cooperation in 1858 one group of Know-Nothings continued to favor a separate party completely independent of the Republicans. These separatists met after the 1858 election and called for a state convention and an independent campaign effort in 1859.\textsuperscript{42} Most of these Know-Nothings lived outside Cincinnati. Within the Queen City Know-Nothings divided into two factions, the larger one favoring cooperation (but not union) with Republicans, and a smaller group, officially organized as the National American Association, preferring independence from all political alliances.\textsuperscript{43} The editor of the Cincinnati \textit{Dollar Weekly Times} personally agreed with the larger faction of cooperationists but wanted to avoid offending either side. He was convinced that a separate Know-Nothing campaign in 1859 would "fizzle" but would not say so publicly lest the "diehards" be angered.\textsuperscript{44}

The separatist Know-Nothing position was somewhat strengthened, at least temporarily, by two actions Ohio Republicans took at their state convention in June, 1859. The Republicans punished incumbent state supreme judge Joseph R. Swan, who had voted to uphold the Fugitive Slave Law
against a group of Oberlin citizens in the Oberlin-Wellington slave rescue case, by denying him re-nomination. Along with this they added a call for repeal of the Fugitive Slave Law to the party platform. This outburst of antislavery fervor aroused the ire of many Know-Nothings who argued that Swan should not have been dropped from the ticket.

Another action at the convention caused even more consternation in the Know-Nothing ranks. Some German-American delegates from Cincinnati demanded that the platform include a condemnation of the nativist-inspired naturalized voting amendment that Massachusetts had just added to its state constitution. Republicans sympathetic to nativism, led by former congressman Lewis Campbell, objected, but the German-Americans held firm. A compromise was finally worked out, in which such measures were generally condemned, but without mentioning the Massachusetts amendment by name. The Cincinnati Dollar Weekly Times described the compromise as a "hocuspocus shuffle to avoid the issue and satisfy everybody," but militant Know-Nothings were not pleased.

The reactions of some of the Know-Nothings to these developments concerned Republican leaders. Congressman John Gurley of Cincinnati, who kept a close watch on the Know-Nothings warned Chase, "They are warlike," adding that some action should be taken to appease them. Chase had already thought of this, and had instructed Gurley to communicate to the editor of the Dollar Weekly Times the real concern Ohio Republicans had for the problem of fraudulent administration of naturalization and voting laws. But within a few days Gurley had changed his mind about the dangers of Know-Nothing unhappiness. He advised Chase to forget about the matter, feeling confident that the crisis had passed. He had persuaded the Dollar Weekly Times to endorse the entire Republican state ticket. As far as most Cincinnati Know-Nothings were concerned expediency had overcome principle. Those who were eager to enter again into alliance with Republicans for municipal contests in 1858 did not want to disrupt this coalition. The Cincinnati Gazette also downplayed the importance of political principle by dismissing the Republican platform as the "crude notions of resolution mongers." So what if the platform contained some sharp words against nativism and the Fugitive Slave Law? The platform meant nothing; what really mattered was the election of Republicans to local and state office.

A few weeks after the Republican convention the Know-Nothings assembled for what proved to be their last official statewide meeting. By mid-morning fewer than one hundred persons had gathered at the meeting hall in Cincinnati, but the organizers expected that the "noon trains" would bring in scores of additional Know-Nothings from other areas in the state. Reconvening in the afternoon with a few more participants, the division between the separatists and the cooperationists quickly became evident. After listen-
ing to long exhortations to uphold “Americanism,” calls for national unity, and expressions of disgust with the existing political parties, the cooperationists yet prevailed and the convention voted not to make any separate nominations for state offices. They were too weak, the argument went, and could only reasonably expect to poll about five thousand votes in the gubernatorial race. The cooperationists maintained that the presence of Know-Nothing candidates on the ballot could only help the Democrats, something they did not want to see happen.

The separatist Know-Nothings had fallen on hard times. A few days after the state Know-Nothing convention the National American Association of Cincinnati gathered for a rather dispirited meeting. The discussion gave a sense of being passed by in the sweep of political events:

A. W. Churchill then stated that as there was nothing for the Association to do during the summer, he thought there was no necessity for keeping up their meeting . . . Ford K. Martin hoped the Association would not disband. It was a most unpropitious time, just after the recent convention, to take such a step. He hoped they would keep together, and keep alive a little spirit of Americanism. Other members expressed an earnest desire that they should keep together as a forlorn hope. They hoped there were some true and tried men who had not bowed the knee to Baal.

Some Know-Nothings outside Cincinnati did continue the quest for independent action. J. C. Charlesworth, editor of the St. Clairsville Independent Republican and leader of the Know-Nothings of Belmont County, called the failure to nominate a separate ticket a “mistake,” condemned the Cincinnati cooperationists, and urged the possibility of supporting former Republican congressman John Scott Harrison as a gubernatorial candidate. Charlesworth arranged for a meeting of separatists at the state fair in Zanesville in September, but the only action taken there was a decision to support Judge Swan as a write-in candidate for re-election. Swan received a scattering of write-in votes in the election, and in Belmont County alone garnered six hundred such votes.

Throughout the late 1850’s nativism in Ohio gradually merged into a diffuse “conservatism” that embraced old Whigs and conservative Republicans as well as nativists. This conservatism included a concern for the preservation of the Union and a resistance to antislavery radicalism as well as a degree of sympathy for the nativist philosophy. In 1860, as sectional tensions increased, conditions were ripe for a separate political organization of these conservatives. The Constitutional Union party emerged and in Ohio it attracted some Republicans, former Whigs, and Know-Nothings. Lewis Campbell felt “crushed out” of the Republican party, and joined with Allen Trimble,
Philadelph Van Trump, J. C. Charlesworth, and others in supporting the presidential candidacy of John Bell. Separatist Know-Nothings generally supported Bell, but they did so as individuals and not as an organization. Cincinnati’s cooperationist Know-Nothings generally shunned the movement. To their consternation the Constitutional Unionists went ahead and nominated a full slate of candidates for municipal office in Cincinnati, and for the Queen City’s two congressional seats.

Bell received less than three percent of the total Ohio presidential vote, but Cincinnati and Belmont County both gave him more than ten percent. Cincinnati wards with large Know-Nothing constituencies were those in the city giving Bell the most votes, while wards with large immigrant populations gave him the fewest number of votes. Cincinnati voters clearly perceived Bell as a nativist candidate in 1860.

The campaign of the Constitutional Union party in Ohio was a final antebellum expression of faith in a unified conservative society. It was a society looking to the peaceful resolution of the slavery question at some distant future time and quietly assuming the continued dominance of an Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture. Know-Nothings who cast their lot with this party may have done so out of fear of the possible disruption of the Union should Lincoln win, or even out of a conviction that the Republicans had used their movement to get ahead and should therefore be opposed. But in doing so they joined company with a remnant of the very Whigs whose moderation they had decried some eight years before.

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(5) John Paul to Chase, February 24, 1856, Salmon P. Chase Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (hereafter Chase Papers, HSP). Thomas Ford was then lieutenant-governor.
(6) Joseph Medill to Chase, February 14, 1856, ibid.
(7) Ohio State Journal (Columbus), March 21, 1856; Cincinnati Gazette, March 22, 1856.
(8) Cincinnati Dollar Weekly Times, February 21, 1856; Ibid., April 24, 1856.
(9) Ibid., October 9, 1856.
(10) Ibid.
(11) Ibid., May 8, 1856.
(14) Ohio, Laws, 54 (1857), 110-12. When the Democrats regained control of the General Assembly in 1858 this law was repealed. (Ohio, Laws, 55 [1858], 8.)
(20) Hillsboro (Ohio) American Citizen, April 11, 1857.
(21) Ibid., February 7, 1857; Ibid., April 25, 1857.
(23) James M. Ashley to Salmon P. Chase, June 16, 1857, Chase Papers, LC. Chase forced Gibson to resign in 1857 when Gibson’s concealment of a $555,000 deficit in state funds became known. Gibson blamed his predecessor, Democrat John G. Breslin, who was indicted for embezzlement, but both men came under a cloud of suspicion. See Roseboom, The Civil War Era, 1850-1873, p. 325.
(24) John Sherman to Chase, June 26, 1857, Chase Papers, HSP.
(26) Lancaster (Ohio) Gazette, August 13, 1857; Hillsboro American Citizen, August 15, 1857.
(27) Cincinnati Dollar Weekly Times, October 8, 1857.
(29) Ibid., September 30, 1857.
(30) Steubenville (Ohio) True American, August 26, 1857.
(32) Cleveland Leader, September 5, 1857; Ohio State Journal, October 7, 1857.
(33) Cincinnati Gazette, October 9, 1857; Ohio State Journal, October 7, 1857.
(34) Hillsboro American Citizen, February 7, 1857.
(35) John F. Brasee to Salmon P. Chase, August 28, 1857, Chase Papers, LC.
(36) Smith, History of the Republican Party in Ohio, I, 74.
(37) Cleveland Leader, October 22, 1857.
(38) Ohio State Journal, October 6, 1858; Ibid., October 18, 1858.
(39) Cleveland Leader, August 30, 1858; The Tribune Almanac and Political Register for 1859 (New York, 1859), p. 57.
(40) Steubenville True American, August 25, 1858.
(41) Isaac Strohm to John M. Barclay, July 18, 1858, Isaac Strohm Papers, Ohio Historical Society, Columbus, Ohio (hereafter Strohm Papers, OHS).
(42) Steubenville True American, December 8, 1858.
(43) St. Clairsville (Ohio) Independent Republican, May 5, 1859; Ibid., May 26,
The Republicans denied Judge Joseph R. Swan, who had voted to uphold the Fugitive Slave Law against a group of Oberlin citizens, renomination. This act aroused the ire of many Know-Nothings who felt Swan should have remained on the ticket.