



In New York, politics and liquor were more closely connected than almost anywhere else in the country. And the politicking went on everywhere, from high-end hotel bars, where members of the Tammany society met, down to the waterfront, where groceries sold liquor to drunken sailors at three cents a glass. This is where Fernando Wood's career began. After two years of hustling sailors, Wood had enough money to enter politics and become a congressman, Grand Sachem (head honcho) of Tammany Hall, and, eventually, mayor of New York City. Despite his success, allegations that Wood had run a "clip shop" and made his money through overcharging and tricking drunken customers, dogged him throughout his controversial and colorful political career. Wood embodied the "machine politics" against which reform candidates were beginning to rally. He exerted control over the voting populace and political candidates through a network of saloons, some of which he owned. His graduation to Tammany only reflected his ability to climb the ladder of success and was not an example of a clip shop owner going legit. Tammany was quickly becoming the most corrupt political machine in the country, thanks to men like Wood, of whom an opponent once said should have been "on the rolls of the State Prison." Others accused him of already owning the police force.

The person who closely managed that police force was Captain Isaiah Rynders, who owned most of the "groceries" around Paradise Square (roughly adjacent to today's Columbus Park), a few bowery saloons, and a tavern by the name of Sweeney's House of Refreshment. In 1843, the dashing Rynders, whose curriculum vitae bragged professional gambler and Bowie-knife fighter, opened up the Empire Club, a saloon at 28 Park Row. This became a major political center and marked the beginning of a new era of his influence over New York voters. In the tight presidential race of 1844, Rynders was credited with winning the city for James Polk through intimidation, extortion, and outright fraud. He ruled by having New York's finest psychotics under his thumb. One would-be lieutenant had introduced himself to Rynders by bursting into the Empire Club and

offering to fight any man in the room. After he was pummeled, he was offered a position by Rynders, who'd been impressed by his utter recklessness. The Empire Club's gangs were known to break up rival Whig political meetings and, at one of the city's polling centers one Election Day, Rynders declared that his men would murder any Whig voters brought in from Philadelphia. The crowd dispersed. He was also credited for the success in New York of two subsequent Democratic presidents, Franklin Pierce and James Buchanan, and was considered so effective that New Orleans' politician John Slidell once hired Rynders's lieutenants to intimidate Louisiana voters.

Like many other saloon-based machine politicians, Rynders didn't end his politicking at election time. He was in the business of controlling government and agitated against the opposition year-round. One notable emotional political event orchestrated by Rynders was the Astor Place Riots of 1849, which grew out of a seemingly unlikely antipathy brewing among New Yorkers over two competing versions of *Macbeth* and the rival headliners. Patrons of the rum-selling groceries, clip shops, and Bowery saloons, alike, were all passionate about Shakespeare and partial to the stylings of American tragedian and matinee idol Edwin Forrest. Uptown at the recently opened Astor Opera House on Broadway, however, wealthy New Yorkers had invited British rival William Charles Macready to perform. Forrest and Macready had been enjoying a very public spat over the previous few years, stemming, in part, from their very different acting methods. Macready was staid and reserved; Forrest went over the top in a manner Macready denounced as vulgar.

While this may not sound like a recipe for a major urban riot, the atmosphere was highly charged. The Astor symbolized some of the last vestiges of English aristocracy in New York and Macready's insults were taken as a personal indictment of American tastes. This was enough to ignite the passions of Bowery dwellers, especially after Rynders got them properly mobilized—and lubricated. Rynders may or may not have had an opinion on acting styles, and was more likely attempting to make the Whig mayor, Caleb Woodhull, look bad, while also demonstrating his own power, which was threatened by a non-Democrat administration. Rynders wrote an incendiary handbill, reading, "Shall Americans or English rule in this city?" and distributed it—along with a large number of tickets to the Astor House performance—at his Empire Club and through a network of area saloons. Rowdy ticket-holders stopped the performance from the inside, while some ten thousand

people rioted outside, smashing the Astors' windows. Twenty-two died; many more were injured. Woodhull called in the National Guard, a heavy-handed reaction that was widely seen as entirely appropriate. While Rynders didn't manage to do much damage to Woodhull, he certainly further hurt the reputation of that "Scottish play", since the riots added to the lore that *Macbeth* was cursed.

The Astor Place Riots are often regarded as the first real clash between urban immigrants and the so-called Nativists, an anti-immigrant group, also known as the American Party, which would come to dominate the political scene as the Whig Party imploded in the 1840s and 1850s. The Nativists weren't gunning for the Whigs, however. Their prime targets were the Democrats, often perceived as having a corrupting influence over America's major cities. The political control the Democrats exerted through Irish American gangs operating out of grog shops and saloons was one of the many reasons used to justify the early Nativist campaigns, which were buoyed by burgeoning anti-Irish and anti-Catholic sentiment. Aside from opposing further immigration and urban growth, the Nativists almost universally advocated for the institution of "blue laws," like Sunday closing ordinances, which interfered with the urban saloon's business.

Of course, the Irish weren't the only ones despised by the Nativists, who didn't much like German immigrants either. From 1830 to 1860, there had been a massive wave of Irish and German Catholic immigration, prompting a sea-tide of anti-immigrant, anti-papist feeling from those who saw both groups' arrival as a threat to Protestant values. Although they were lumped together by those who hated them, the Germans and Irish couldn't have been more different in their drinking habits. Where the Irish were ambibulous—happy to drink both spirits and beer—Germans generally stuck to lager, a lighter, bottom-fermenting beer that they began brewing in America as soon as they arrived. Lager, incidentally, would soon take off in nineteenth-century America. As soon as regular ice deliveries and refrigeration made cold lager readily available, it began replacing the traditional darker and heavier beers.

In addition, the Irish were known for drinking in saloons, standing at a rail while serving themselves shots of whiskey. In contrast, German beer gardens often welcomed entire families. They were well lit and relatively quiet and orderly, though the larger ones sometimes featured shooting galleries, live classical music, and bowling alleys. The term "beer garden" is slightly misleading; there was rarely any garden

involved and was really just a large hall with tables for people to sit at. Occasionally, there might have been a large mural of some natural scenery but, where budgets were tight, the artwork was a luxury. Contemporary accounts of the behavior of the patrons are mixed. Some actually reported being unnerved by the quiet with which most Germans drank; others complained that, on special occasions, the patrons would go on a “dutch lager beer spree.”

Lager or whiskey, saloons, grog shops, or beer halls, the sight of the working classes drinking anything, anywhere, was offensive to some, and they began lobbying for the first neoprohibitionist policies, many simply thinly veiled attacks on freedom of association for immigrants and the working poor. The Germans and Irish were singled out for having an insidious control over the liquor supply in America, and fear-mongering began over the “liquor power” that Cincinnati temperance leader and Congressman Samuel Cary wrote was “unquestionably the mightiest power in the Republic. It can make or re-make officers, from President to constable.”⁶

Given the gangs of the Bloody Ould Sixth Ward and other urban centers, there was almost certainly more than a grain of truth to the assumed association between crime and public drinking. However, what motivated some of the anti-Catholic bigotry was a series of inflammatory tracts. The first was a piece of fiction published in 1835 called *Six Months in a Convent* by Rebecca Reed, who gained advance publicity for her book by claiming to have been held captive at Boston’s Ursuline Convent. Before the manuscript was even published, Boston townspeople began rioting, burning down the convent on the grounds that another young woman was allegedly being held captive there. This turned out to be false but, nonetheless, helped the novel sell two hundred thousand copies, then surpassing both Cotton Mather and Thomas Paine for all-time American bestseller status. On its heels came Maria Monk’s *The Hidden Secrets of a Nun’s Life in a Convent Exposed*. This book turned out to be completely fraudulent, a crass attempt to cash in on the wave of anti-Catholicism—some of which can be attributed to Lyman Beecher, one of the most important figures of the Second Great Enlightenment—which would bring evangelism to new heights. Beecher is also seen as having helped to incite the riot which resulted in the burning of the Ursuline Convent, since he delivered his incendiary anti-Catholic sermon, “A Plea for the West,” in Boston shortly before the incident.

Beecher was developing an argument that he fervently believed would change the American psyche forever, namely, that if too much drink is a sin, none at all must bring a soul even closer to perfection. Beecher was the first to promote abstinence as a lifestyle choice.⁷

Ironically, the very same democratic and egalitarian ideals that stemmed originally from the taverns were key to the success of the populist evangelical movement that swept America during the Second Great Awakening. Beecher and other religious leaders rejected the negativity of Calvinism (predestination, meaning that no matter how well you behave, you can never be certain you're getting into heaven) and adopted the more hopeful promise of eternal salvation for everybody (a very democratic notion) so long as they reformed thoroughly. Part of the new optimism involved devotion to social activism and reform. Human society was theoretically perfectible, according to reformers, and it was their duty to be part of the drive toward that ideal. Members were actively working on improving social conditions, establishing women's rights, and ending slavery.

Alongside those laudable and high-minded goals, however, was a dogged commitment to abstinence. Temperance movements, like the one Benjamin Rush had advocated, became more radical. Adherents rejected even mild alcoholic beverages, caffeine, medicinal drugs, meat, hot food (because it led to appetites of the flesh), leisure, masturbation, and more than once-monthly sex for married couples. Proponents of this new extremism, such as Sylvester Graham (of the cracker fame), espoused waking before dawn, hearty exercise, prayer, cold cereal, contemplation, hard work, vegetables for dinner, and an early bedtime.

But, while Graham expanded the repertoire of things to abstain from, Beecher concentrated on alcohol. It was during his career as minister in East Hampton, Long Island (an area which now has one of the greatest bar-to-human ratios in all of America), that Beecher came to realize he would devote his life to the eradication of liquor. In his parish, complained Beecher, was a "grog seller" who "drank himself, and corrupted others." The grog seller, Beecher noted, kept a jug right under his bed to slake midnight or early-morning thirsts. In the course of working toward eliminating intemperance, it became clear to Beecher that calling for moderation was no longer enough. This extremism earned him followers but also enemies and, when his Boston church caught fire in 1830, the volunteer firefighters, who spent their watch-time in taverns, didn't even attempt to put it out.

It wasn't difficult for Beecher and others to connect the hated grog sellers to the hated Catholics, making life increasingly difficult for urban immigrants. Although they were victims of a growing discrimination, the German and Irish Catholics didn't always passively accept vilification and marginalization. In the 1830s, for example, many Irish-Catholic immigrants in Rhode Island still didn't have the right to vote, a result of the original charter for the colony that granted the rights to vote, sue, and serve on juries only to men with property. Recent Irish immigrants, many of whom lived in cities and worked in textile mills, were lobbying to change the qualifications for full citizenship. Theirs was an uphill battle against the Protestant, land-owning, agrarian citizenry, which, despite representing less than half the population, controlled almost the whole political scene.

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Lawyer Thomas Wilson Dorr campaigned for suffrage for Rhode Island's largely Catholic workers. After trying to introduce a new constitution through legal channels and failing, he staged an extralegal election in which he was elected governor in 1842. The actual governor, Samuel Ward King, refused to give up power or introduce electoral reform, which prompted Dorr and his supporters to organize a general assembly at Sprague's Tavern in Chepachet to discuss further action.

King's men, however, launched a preemptive attack on the rebel tavern, occupying it over a period of several months, during which time they ran up a tab that amounted to thirty-seven gallons of brandy, twenty-nine gallons of rum, and smaller quantities of cider, Madeira, champagne, and various liquors. When not drinking, the troops ate and smoked cigars, too—all at Jedediah Sprague's expense. King and his men made an example of Sprague but also of Dorr, who was tried for treason, then sentenced to hard labor and solitary confinement. Although harsh punishment took a toll on him before his eventual early release, Dorr's legacy was electoral reform—a law that allowed any man who could pay a one-dollar poll tax to vote, instituted in 1843. This would make Rhode Island the first state to allow blacks to vote.

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Most of the anti-Irish and anti-German prejudice elsewhere was more insidious than that found in Rhode Island, however. Instead of explicitly denying political and legal rights to Catholic immigrants, Nativists typically launched campaigns that tightened the regulations around the public spaces the Catholics used for political organizing. They had their work cut out for them, though. By 1850, Boston, for example, had at least twelve hundred licensed liquor sellers, most of whom were Irish. In

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New York, the *Tribune* editor complained that three-quarters of the city's saloons were operated by Catholics, even though they represented only a quarter of the population. The number of *shebeens* (illegal bars run mainly by Irish women out of their private homes), dram shops, and grog shops is impossible to guess, but there were many.

It was clear that policing unlicensed bars was going to be almost impossible, so in 1851, inspired in part by Beecher, one state, Maine, decided upon a radical solution—instituting a prohibition on alcohol, thanks to the perseverance of the crusading Neal S. Dow, Portland mayor and “Father of Prohibition.” Eleven states would follow with their own “Maine Laws” and, where there wasn't political will for state-wide abstinence, local municipalities often voted to go dry. Inspired by the Maine Law, Stephen Miller, a Nativist who was at the helm of two “non-partisan” newspapers in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, campaigned for the adoption of a local dry law. After temperance, Miller's second-greatest cause célèbre in his papers was “Americanism.” Coupled with the editorial policy of announcing all arrests for public drunkenness that involved Irishmen, the message in both the *Harrisburg Telegraph* and the *Morning Herald* was clear. “Patrick O'Gutter” was characterized as a drunken wife beater who passed out in ditches and belonged to the lowest “class of Irish paupers who are daily thrust upon our shore by the thousands, to subsist upon the bounty of American citizens.”

Not far away, in Wayne County, Pennsylvania, a letter to the editor voiced the complaint that Americans had been “humbled long enough by tavern keepers, and their groggeries, and naturalized citizens.” The author then proceeded to declare his intention to join the “Know-Nothing Party” (the other party name for the Nativists, in addition to the American Party). In the *New York Herald*, an editor wrote the following in support of the Nativists: “The Know Nothing Order is the sign of the first movement against these rum hole conventions and grog shop politicians.” *The New York Tribune*, owned by Horace Greeley, was in another political camp. Greeley was a Whig—the last of a dying breed—and fiercely anti-Nativist. It had been Greeley, in fact, who had come up with the epithet “Know-Nothing”—a jab at the party's secretive meetings, at which all members were counseled to say they knew nothing if questioned. Strangely, the Nativists embraced this nickname. Greeley's anti-Nativism didn't translate into a radically progressive editorial line, however, since the *Tribune* blamed liquor for the prisons being full of Irish “culprits” and the gallows “hideous” with Catholic

murderers. Still, his sentiment was a degree more moderate than that of the Nativists. To quote one editorial: “The fact that the Catholics of this country keep a great many more grog shops and sell more liquor in proportion to their number than any other denomination creates and keeps alive a strong prejudice against them.”

The collapse of the Whig party left a void, making it possible for the Know-Nothings to gain power in many municipalities nearly overnight, especially in the Northern states, where they capitalized on a burgeoning anti-immigrant sentiment. As the Democrats increasingly became known for “Rum, Romanism and Rebellion,” the Know-Nothings rode anti-Catholic sentiment to victory across Massachusetts, in Philadelphia and in Washington, DC, in some cases with candidates running on a Whig ticket but secretly representing the Know-Nothings. The key to identifying a candidate’s political bent lay in his pledging three campaign promises: a crackdown on crime, barring immigrants from holding any government job at any level, and enforcing or instituting Sunday closing laws for bars.

These were common to almost all Know-Nothing candidates. Although they claimed to be motivated by Sabbatarianism, a Puritan legacy that encouraged the shuttering of all businesses on Sundays, the motives behind the movement were readily apparent. In 1849, the *Irish American*, a New York newspaper, laid them out clearly: “Whilst wines and brandies are imported, sold and consumed by the rich; whilst the ‘upper ten’ guzzle, and swill, and get drunk with impunity, the working man’s lips are to be padlocked, the liquor stores shut up.” The editorial ended with a call for legislators to stop making separate laws for rich and poor.

Other than Catholicism and being feared and hated by Nativists, the main thing the Germans and Irish shared was Sundays. That is, drinking on Sundays. Since many of these recent immigrants were working in the worst possible hard-labor jobs with exploitative practices, Sunday was the only day off most had and drinking at the saloon or beer garden represented the only recreation many immigrants enjoyed. In addition, the housing many lived in was so inadequate that even the most meager of these public spaces would have seemed palatial.

While waiting on the institution of state laws, a number of municipalities, most notably Chicago, considered following Stephen Miller’s Harrisburg example and adopting local “blue laws” (so named, some say, for the blue paper on which the laws were written in New Haven in

1665; others maintaining “blue” is a reference to “true blue,” implying a rigid adherence to principle).⁸ Stirred by a combination of racial and religious intolerance and a desire to shut down the “machine politics” of the immigrant taverns, and emboldened by the prohibition movements of the era, Chicago “Know-Nothing” Mayor Levi Boone (grandnephew of Daniel Boone) decided to enforce an existing Sunday closing law. This was actually a state law, enacted in 1843 and universally ignored. According to a *Chicago Times* article that recounted the incident a few decades later in 1877, Boone also raised the fee for a liquor license from fifty dollars a year to three hundred in an attempt to force out “all the lower classes of dives and leave the business in the hands of the better class of saloon-keepers, who, when the temperance law should go into force, could be rationally dealt with.”⁹ At the time, Illinois was facing the introduction of a “Maine Law,” which would be voted upon in June 1855.

That same year, Boone made good on his campaign promise and had the police begin enforcing the old state law—although only in the sections of town where immigrants lived, who represented more than half of Chicago’s population in the 1850s. Taverns frequented by Protestants were overlooked in the attempt to clean up the city, whereas two hundred German immigrant owners were arrested for keeping their establishments open on Sundays or neglecting to pay the higher license fees. When the first of the cases went to court in May 1855, five hundred Germans and Irish descended on the Cook County Court House to protest the trial. “After making themselves understood that the decision of the court must be in their favor if the town didn’t want a taste of war,” they blocked traffic at Clark and Randolph Streets, gathering strength until Boone instructed the police to arm themselves with clubs and break up the riot.¹⁰

Boone declared martial law, but the mob only grew bigger and immigrants joined in from all corners of the city. After an hour-long battle, the rioters fled, and while many were injured, only one was killed. A few were arrested and only two were convicted (Irishmen, of course). Nonetheless, the protest, dubbed the “Chicago Lager Beer Riot,” mobilized immigrant voters, who rejected Boone in his run for office the following year. The Illinois “Maine Law” was also rejected by the voters.

When voting, moderates who hoped to avoid more unrest were mindful of the 1857 New York riots, in which large parts of the Five Points and Bowery had been turned into veritable war zones. This had been the unintended result of a New York State initiative to clean up the city,

despite the attempts by Mayor Fernando Wood and Captain Isaiah Rynders to thwart reform. At stake were “dead letter” Sunday closing state laws, brought back to life by Nativism, that Wood had promised would never be enforced by his police, who answered to Rynders. What neither Rynders nor Wood could control, however, was the state legislature’s plan to discharge the entire city police force because of its widespread reputation for corruption and replace it with state agents. Ex-policemen, joined by German and Irish immigrants motivated by Sunday closing laws, and by the established Bowery and Five Points gangs such as the Dead Rabbits, Roach Guards, and Bowery Boys, erupted onto the streets in May and again in July. In the midst of this chaos, which Rynders typically reveled in, he somehow lost control. Perhaps he had lost his edge before the 1857 riots. In the 1850s, he went Native himself for a few years, despite the fact that he was half-Irish, half-German, and the chief string-puller of the saloon politics in the immigrant quarters of New York City—an exemplar of the very brand of politics the Nativists were campaigning to dismantle.

The Nativists weren’t going to last long either and the American Party was replaced by the Grand Old Party, the Republicans. All this came about in 1854, when President Pierce (son of a tavernkeeper, by the way) introduced the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which divided the Nativists into proslavery and antislavery camps. The Act, which allowed the residents of the new states to determine for themselves whether or not they would permit slavery, was a clear affront to abolitionists, since it reversed the Missouri Compromise of 1820 that prohibited slavery in Kansas. The fracture was too much for the Nativists to bear and they would disappear in a few years. The Republicans, however progressive they were regarding slavery, shared many of the same reactionary and bigoted values as their predecessors. In 1855, the Chicago chapter of Republicans announced in the *Tribune* that it would not court the “grog shops, foreign vote, and Catholic brethren,” unlike those who catered to the “lowest class of foreign citizens.” Chicago Democrats, its Republican opponents claimed, were “the Irish Roman Catholic and Whiskey Party of the city.”

Regardless of the rhetoric, voters were shying away from any kind of extreme measures, for these always seemed to lead to violence in the streets, not to mention a new proliferation of establishments designed to evade the law—shebeens, blind pigs, and blind tigers. Of course, illegal and unlicensed establishments had always existed but, anywhere there