

Philadelphia Bible Riots of 1844

The Philadelphia Bible Riots took place in the spring of 1844, in the largely Irish immigrant neighborhood of Kensington. On May 6th, 1844, members of the Native American Party, an anti-Irish, white Protestant political group, gathered directly across from the main Irish market in the neighborhood to hold a rally upholding the use of the Protestant Bible in Philadelphia public schools. A previous meeting three days before had been interrupted by local Irish people who disagreed with the speakers. This time, rain pushed the Native American Party rally inside the Nanny Goat Market, and nativists and Irish people started to fight in the crowd. The violence soon escalated with shots fired, and then grew into a massively destructive riot, with Irish people shooting out of buildings and from behind fences, and then as many as 3,000 nativists roaming the streets, setting fire to buildings, and over a period of three days, burning two major Catholic churches and multiple buildings. At least 20 people died, thousands were displaced (mostly Irish), and a low estimate of the property loss was \$250,000, or about \$6.8 million in today's money.

The primary cause of the Philadelphia Bible Riots was a disagreement between Catholics and Protestants over how religion should be presented in public schools. Long before stricter separation of church and state regulations moved religion out of the American public school classroom, the questions surrounding what Bible to use, what hymns to sing, and what prayers to lead were serious. In the case discussed here, Philadelphia Catholics objected to their children being taught from the main Protestant version of the Bible, the King James version. They also balked at having Protestant prayers and hymns taught in school, and rejected anti-Catholic books and materials that were often used in schools. The Catholic Bishop of Philadelphia, Francis Kenrick, wrote to the Board of Controllers of Public Schools in late 1842 to communicate these complaints, and the reaction from Protestants in the city (and outside of it) was swift and overwhelmingly negative.

As with many conflicts between groups, the discord between Catholics and Protestants also had significant ethnic, cultural, and political overtones. Protestants were largely of English and Scotch-Irish heritage, and had been in United States for more than a generation. Most of the Catholics in the United States were recently arrived immigrants from Ireland. Almost half of all immigrants to the United States in the 1840s were Irish Catholics, especially after the potato blight of 1845 made life in Ireland untenable for many people. By the 1840s, many U.S.-born Protestants felt threatened by the influx of Catholic immigrants from Ireland, as well as Germany, and formed nativist political parties such as the Native American Party that aimed to protect the rights of "Native Americans." Nativists set themselves above the Irish by lambasting their religion, their supposed excessive drinking, and their alleged laziness and stupidity, while promoting Protestantism, temperance, and the Protestant work ethic.

Document 1: Bishop Kenrick's Letter

"Interference of Romanists with the Public Schools." Christian Observer Vol. XXII No. 4 (January 27, 1843).

PHS call number: PHS Periodical Room

**This article includes Bishop Kenrick's letter to the Board of Controllers of Public Schools, and a report of the proceedings of the Board of Controllers of Public Schools meeting, January 10, 1843.*

Source note: Bishop Francis Patrick Kenrick (1797-1863) was born in Ireland and was ordained as a Catholic priest in 1821. After arriving in Philadelphia in 1830 and gaining recognition through several publications as a Catholic scholar, Kenrick became the bishop of Philadelphia in 1842. Between 1834 and 1842, Kenrick advocated for Catholic children in public schools, arguing that they should not be forced to read the Protestant King James version of the Bible, and should not be forced to say Protestant prayers in school. Kenrick's letter, though mild in its recommendations for how to make public schools more equitable for Catholic students, provoked outrage in many nativists who saw Kenrick as part of a Catholic conspiracy to take over the schools and either make them overtly Catholic or more generally godless.

Reading questions:

1. Who is the author of this source? When was it written? How does the timing of this letter fit into the chronology of the Philadelphia Bible Riots?
2. What are the three "conscientious objections" to the use of religion in public schools that are outlined in this document (page 2)?
3. What is the tone of this letter?
4. What example does Kenrick provide of another school district allowing Catholic children to read a Catholic version of the Bible (page 2)?
5. What reason does Kenrick provide for objecting to compulsory Protestant hymn singing in schools (page 2)?
6. What were the resolutions of the Board of Controllers of Public Schools (page 3)? Were they accepted or rejected? How do you think the board's decisions were received by the public?

Document 2: Reply to Bishop Kenrick

Colton, Walter. *The Bible in Public Schools: a Reply to the Allegations and Complaints Contained in the Letter of Bishop Kenrick to the Board of Controllers of Public Schools*. Philadelphia: T.K. & P.G. Collins, 1844.

PHS call number: PAM LC 111 .C648 1844

Source note: Walter Colton (1797-1851) was a navy chaplain and Congregational minister originally from Vermont. Colton gave this lecture in response to Bishop Kenrick's 1842 letter to the Board of Controllers of Public Schools (Document 1). Later printed in pamphlet form, the lecture was widely distributed with the help of the American Protestant Association. Though many of its arguments against Kenrick had been made before, the pamphlet became influential among anti-Catholic nativists in the controversy over religion in schools. After finishing his navy chaplaincy, Colton became *alcalde* of California, acting as governor with judicial and policing powers over the territory.

Reading questions:

1. Who is the author of this document? Is it a reliable source of information on our topic? Why or why not?
2. On page 4, the author of the pamphlet claims that “the Bishop asks the Board...to cast the Bible out of the public schools, and to suppress all religious exercises.” Based on your reading of the Kenrick letter (Document 1), is this claim true?
3. What point is Colton trying to illustrate when he uses the example of the Jewish treatment of the Old Testament and other sacred texts (page 5)?
4. What critiques does Colton offer about the Catholic version of the Bible (page 7)? How do these critiques compare to the praise he gives for the King James version earlier in his lecture?
5. What argument does Colton support by using the example of Galileo and the forced recanting of his scientific observations (page 8)? What greater point does this example make about the Catholic Church?
6. What is Kenrick's ultimate goal regarding religion in schools, according to Colton (pages 12 and 13)?
7. Why might Colton's claim that Kenrick's message comes down directly from the Pope resonate with nativists (page 14)?

Document 3: Full and Complete Account of the Late Awful Riots

A Full and Complete Account of the Late Awful Riots in Philadelphia: Embellished with Ten Engravings. Philadelphia: John B. Perry, Henry Jordan; New York: Nafis & Cornish, 1844.

PHS call number: F 158.44 .F95 1844

**Browse descriptions of the riots in Kensington, and the aftermath of those events, pages 2-61.*

Source note: John B. Perry was a Philadelphia-based publisher active in the mid-1800s. In addition to publishing this account of the Philadelphia Bible Riots, Perry published many salacious yet historically oriented books such as *Book of Pirates* and *Book of Murders*, which documented dozens of well-known American murders.

Reading questions:

1. When was this source written? Who do you think was the intended audience? How reliable is it as a source of information about the Philadelphia Bible Riots?
2. Philadelphia newspaper the *Public Ledger* reported that the nativists had the right to meet wherever they wanted to practice free speech, but the Irish unfairly interrupted them (page 4). Why does Perry include this excerpt in his account of the riots?
3. How did Native American Party president, Thomas Newbold, react when the already riled up crowd suggested going back to Kensington on Tuesday, the second day of the rioting (page 13)? Did he help to quell the riot?
4. What was the law enforcement and military presence early on in the riots (pages 17-21)? What was their role during this period?
5. How was St. Michael's Catholic Church burned down (pages 24-26)? What was the mob's reaction to this building's burning?
6. What orders were given to the military units in Philadelphia on May 9th, day 3 of the rioting (pages 46-48)? How did these orders affect the rioting that was still underway?
7. What was one major consequence of the riots for the Irish of Philadelphia, according to this source (page 54)?

Document 4: Feldberg Secondary Source

Feldberg, Michael. *The Philadelphia Riots of 1844: a Study of Ethnic Conflict*.
Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1975.
PHS call number: F 158.44 .F44 1975

**See especially Chapter 4, which includes a discussion of the School Bible controversy (pp. 85-96), and Chapter 5 on the Kensington riots. See also Feldberg's discussion (p. 93) of Walter Colton's pamphlet, "The Bible in Public Schools" (Document 2).*

Source note: Michael Feldberg earned his Ph.D. in history from the University of Rochester, and turned his dissertation into his first book, *The Philadelphia Riots of 1844: a Study of Ethnic Conflict*. Feldberg went on to become executive director of the American Jewish Historical Society and is currently executive director of the George Washington Institute for Religious Freedom.

Please note: The American Republican Party, established in 1843, is unrelated to the Republican Party of Abraham Lincoln. The party's name was changed to the Native American Party in 1845. This small and short-lived political party promoted nativist, anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant policies such as introducing barriers to immigration and naturalization.

Reading questions for Chapter 4:

1. Who is the author of this source? Do you think it is a reliable source?
2. In what ways did the violence of 1844 in Philadelphia erupt out of cultural, rather than economic, conflict between Protestants and Irish Catholics (page 78)?
3. What is Lee Benson's theory on cultural conflict in the United States, and how does he use nativism in the 1840s as an example of this theory (pages 80-82)?
4. Why does conflict due to cultural differences turn so easily into mass movements in the United States (page 85)? How does this manifest in the violence of 1844 in Philadelphia?
5. How did Philadelphia produce "one of the nation's strongest local crusades against Catholics" (page 87)?
6. To what education policies did Catholic Bishop Kenrick publicly object from 1834-1842 (page 89)? What was the broader significance of these objections?
7. Why did Walter Colton's reply (Document 2) to Bishop Kenrick's letter (Document 1) have such a large impact on the Bibles-in-schools question (page 93)?

Reading questions for Chapter 5:

1. Why did the largely nativist Native American Party (in 1844 known as the American Republican Party) choose to hold their May 3rd meeting in the Third Ward, which was “clearly Irish territory” according to Feldberg (page 100)?
2. Describe the law enforcement and military response to the outbreak of rioting on May 6th, 1844 (page 105).
3. What new technique did the nativists use to gain an advantage over the Irish on the second day of the Kensington riots (page 110)?
4. What was the turning point of the riots, as explained by Feldberg (page 114)?