

Irish Immigration and the Know-Nothings

Boston in the mid-1850s

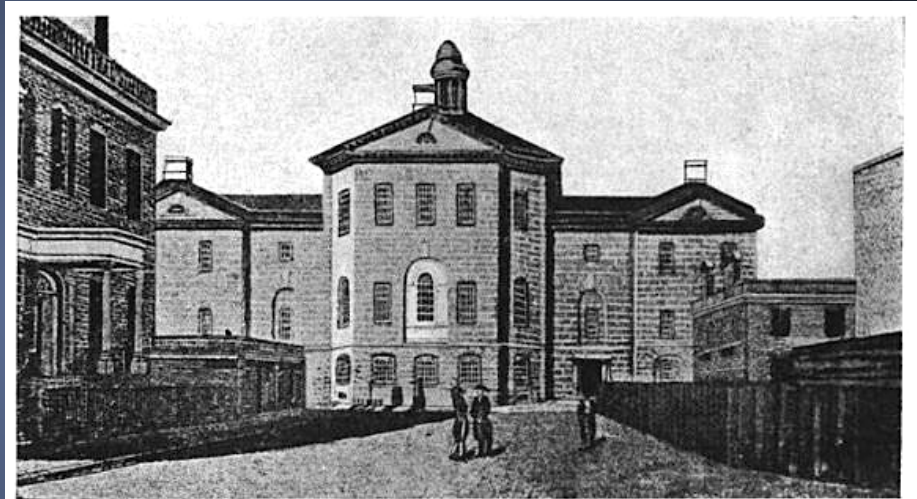
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Boston Before

Boston before the 1850s was a well-established, prosperous city.

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Old City Hall—1850

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While many American cities around the time started with immigrants, Boston had already been prosperous for quite some time. It was filled with old families, literary talents, and a weighty history. Bostonians were proud of this history, and their religion, and were uneasy at the arrival of Roman Catholic immigrants.

Irish immigrants moved in with friends and relatives near the waterfront, creating, in the minds of the Bostonians, a “lump in the community” with unsanitary living conditions.

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Irish clam diggers, late 1800s

Why were the immigrants coming?

During the mid-1800s, millions of immigrants swarmed to the United States for a variety of reasons.

Click [here](#) for information on Irish immigration.

Click [here](#) for information on German immigration.

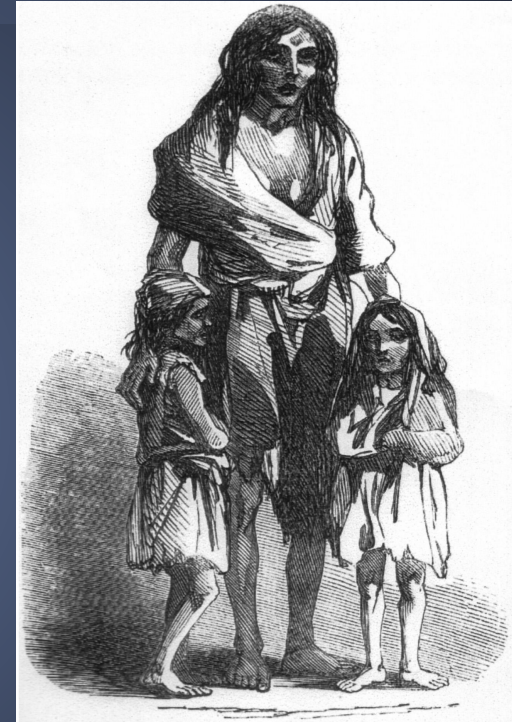
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Irish Immigration

In the 1840s, the potato famine struck Ireland. By this time, about one-third of the population depended on the potato for income and sustenance. In the 1850s, a blight struck Ireland and the potatoes were unusable. As a result, millions of Irish left for America to pursue the “American Dream”—and since Massachusetts was on the east coast and relatively easy to reach, many Irish ended up in Boston. Irish Catholic immigration, unfortunately, was opposed by the Know-Nothing movement.

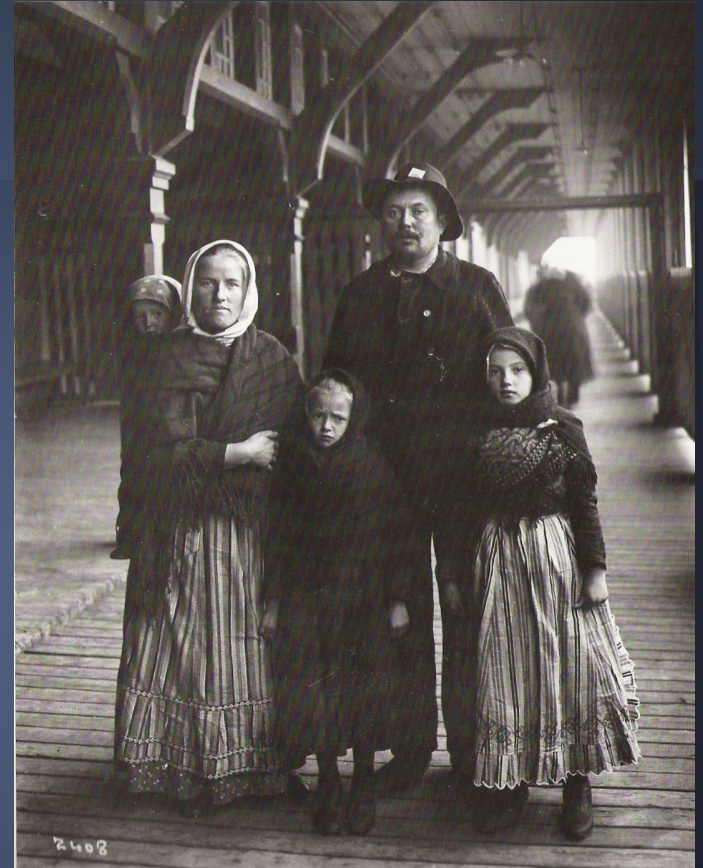
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German Immigration

In the mid 1800s, about five million Germans immigrated to the United States. For the most part, they did not settle in Massachusetts; they settled in the midwest, in places like St. Louis. German Catholics were also opposed by the national Know-Nothing movement.

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Massachusetts Opinion on Immigration

Many people in Massachusetts were opposed to the new flow of immigration, for assorted reasons.

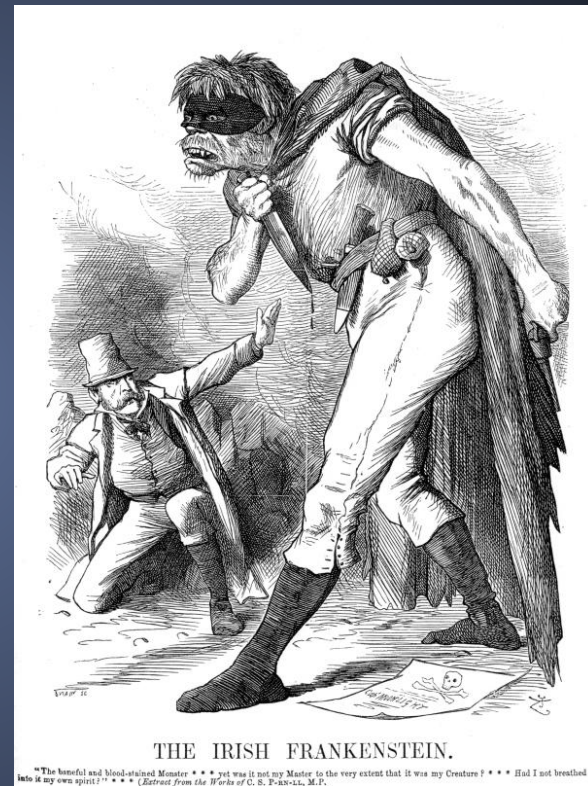
Click [here](#) to find out why.



Courtesy, Granger Collection

There are several theories as to why the people of Massachusetts themselves were opposed to immigration. One possible reason was cultural; people did not want to be exposed to other cultures. Another reason was economic; immigrants were desperate for money and willing to work for less than Americans. This second reason would also explain why most of the people opposed to immigration were working class; they were afraid of the competition.

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Governmental Policies

The Know-Nothing government was in power in Massachusetts from 1854-1857, headed by Governor Henry J. Gardner. During this time, they passed much legislation involving prevention of immigration.

Click [here](#) to find out about the election of 1854.

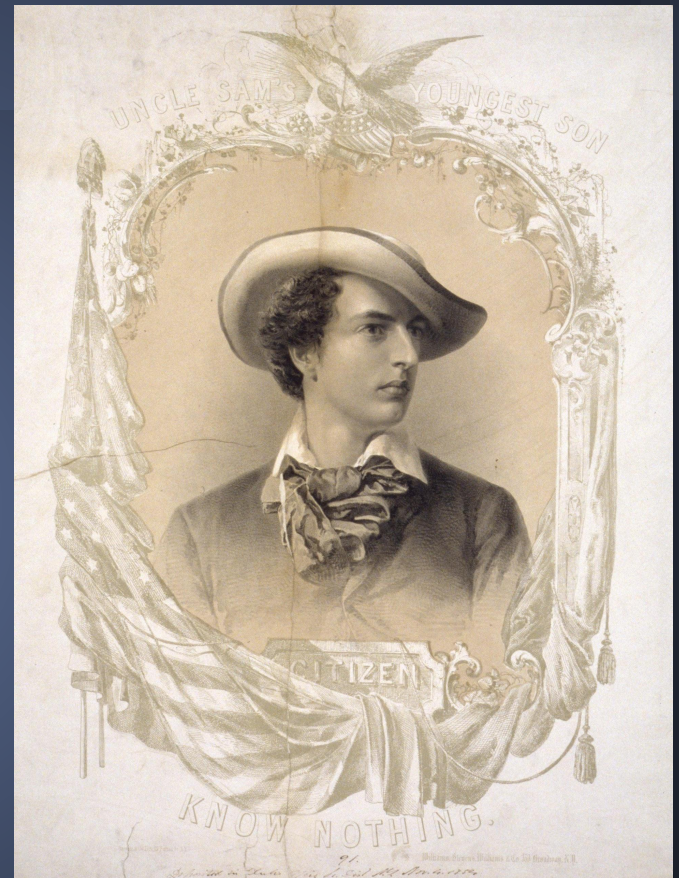
Click [here](#) to find out more about Governor Gardner.



The Election of 1854

The Know-Nothing movement was a national American political movement during the mid 1850s, promising to purify American politics by ending the influence of Irish Catholics and other immigrants. After the election of 1854, the governor, all state officers, the entire state senate, and all but three state representatives were Know Nothings.

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Henry J. Gardner

Henry J. Gardner was born in Dorchester and was active in the local Whig Party in the early 1850s. In 1854, he won a landslide victory for the seat of Governor over Emory Washburn. He held the office for three years, and during this time enacted legislation on a wide-ranging agenda.



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Governor's Addresses

The Governor's Address of 1855 stated Governor Gardner's worries about the fact that "during the present decade...nearly four millions of aliens will probably be poured in upon us...nearly four-fifths of the beggary, two-thirds of the pauperism, and more than three-fifths of the crimes spring from our foreign population." Essentially, he was trying to convince the people and the legislature of Massachusetts that immigrants were a detriment to the population, and recommended much legislation, including disenfranchisement of people illiterate in English.

The Governor's Address of 1856 discussed, among other things, the suggestion enlarging the powers of the Board of Alien Commissioners. Gardner stated that "They should have the entire regulation of the admission and transfer of paupers to the different Almshouses,—of removing the alien pauper insane to the Lunatic Hospitals,—of sending paupers out of the State to those places where they have a settlement..." Gardner wanted to have more regulation of the paupers, which he also stated were mostly immigrants.

The Governor's Address of 1857 states explicitly that "aliens unfitted to appreciate or rightly use the great trust," and essentially states that immigrants are unfit to be in America. This was Governor Gardner's last year in office, and in this address he most explicitly stated that immigrants were unfit to live in the United States, saying clearly what he and his legislation had been hinting at for the past three years.

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More of Gardner's suggestions

Governor Gardner suggested many other things in his inaugural addresses, such as:

- “Americanizing America”
- Immigrants must wait until they had lived in America for 21 years, as the native-born American voting age was 21.
- Naturalized citizens could not hold public office.
- Shipping the poor immigrants back to Liverpool.
- Immigrants were stereotyped as alcoholics, so Gardner suggested prohibition of the sale of alcohol.
- Removing the Latin inscription at the speaker's podium in the Massachusetts House of Representatives (because it was not in English).
- Reading the Protestant King James Bible in public schools.

Know-Nothing Legislation

The 1855 Massachusetts Resolves described examinations by Governor Gardner himself of state almshouses and “lunatic hospitals.” In all cases, Gardner suggested that libraries be funded in order to provide the paupers/patients with suitable reading. In this case, this might have meant English books specifically, especially in the almshouses, because generally paupers were immigrants and Gardner, as a Know-Nothing, was trying to push out foreign culture.

The 1855 Acts, on the other hand, were examples of what else the Know-Nothing party did. They focused on regulating railroads and insurance companies. In these areas their program was surprisingly progressive.

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Bostonian opinions of the Know-Nothings

Not all Bostonians shared the views of the Know-Nothings. Charles Francis Adams, the son of John Quincy Adams, thought that the Know Nothing Program was “immoral” and “antisocial.”

Wendell Phillips, a prominent Boston abolitionist, wrote that “You and I lament, that so large a share of the abolitionists have scampered off into the “know nothing party.” Well may we lament, that they were educated to no higher point than to be guilty of such folly...My experience teaches me, that foreigners and natives are about equally good; and that Roman Catholics and Protestants are also about equally good.” February 20, 1855, Syracuse University Library, Special Collections Research Center, Gerrit Smith Broadside and Pamphlet Collection

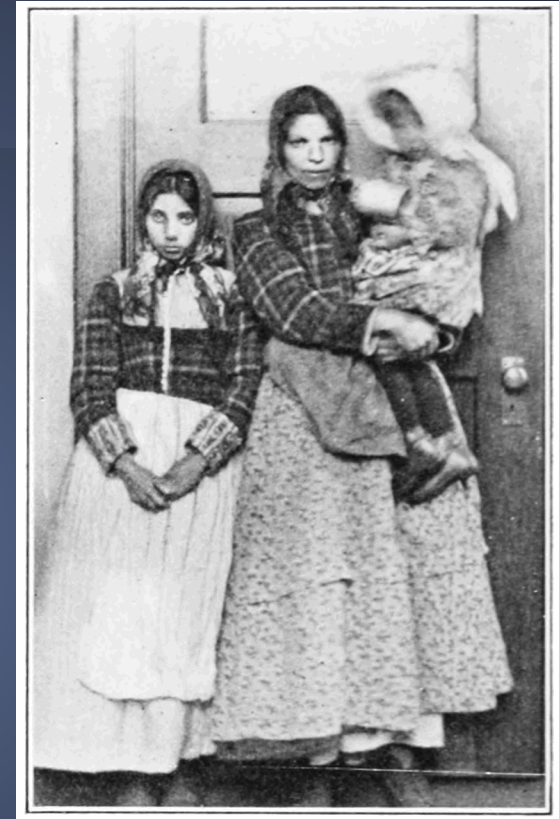


Charles Francis Adams

In the long term...

Intolerance of immigration was not only a problem in the 1850s. There were major problems involving Italian immigration into the twentieth century. In 1919 and 1920, Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer attempted to arrest and deport radical leftists, in a series of raids known as the Palmer Raids. Intolerance of immigration even continues today.

However, the Know-Nothing movement declined as the issues of slavery and secessions—which lead to the Civil War—became more important. Some Know-Nothings proposed amendments to the Massachusetts constitution; the process required more than one legislative session, and with successive elections the Know-Nothings lost control of the legislature.



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