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RS#09: The Bible Riots

Directions: Read the context and source accounts of the Bible Riots. How was this event a reaction to immigration in northern cities in the mid 1800s?

The event known as the "Bible Riots" occurred in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania during the spring and summer of 1844. A violent reaction by a group of nativists, the riots terrorized Irish-Catholic immigrant community and revealed strains caused by urbanization and immigration in the mid 1800s.

Context: In May 1844 riots broke out in the Kensington area of Philadelphia. This became known as the Bible Riots and lasted for three days. It involved American-born Protestants and Irish immigrants. For more than ten years, Irish Catholics had been settling in the Kensington neighborhood and got along well with the American-born, (nativists) mostly Protestant workers who lived there. They had often demonstrated together in trade union strikes, but as the Irish population grew, the American born population became more and more intolerant of immigrants. While the intolerance grew out of a fear of the Irish taking jobs and housing away from the American-born families, the riots began when the Catholic population opposed the exclusive use of Protestant bible in the public schools. On May 6, 1844, a nativist political party, The American Republican Party, staged a rally across from a gathering place for the Irish community. In a rainstorm, the riot began with shots fired, bricks thrown, and general chaos in the street. This was the beginning of a bloody summer for Philadelphia, with several clashes, including one depicted on July 7, 1844, between nativists and Irish immigrants. At least 20 people were killed and more than 100 injured in the violence.

Source: Adapted from <u>www.philaplace.org/story/316</u>

Source A: John Perry's Account of the Riots, 1844

"[T]hat the Native American Party (the Know Nothings) having called a public meeting, had a perfect right to carry on their proceedings in peace, undisturbed by any persons, and that the disturbance they met with from person opposed to the objects of the meeting was as gross an outrage as was ever perpetrated upon the right of any body of free citizens. The citizens who composed the meeting were assembled in the exercise of a right which is guarantied [sic] to them by the Constitution (p.4)..."

(After the meeting was forced to move indoors because of rain, the riot began.)

"A few minutes after the meeting was re-organized under the market house, a commotion occurred from some cause or another, and some twelve or fifteen persons ran out of the market...pursued by about an equal number. A scuffle ensued....At the report of the fire-arms,

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the majority of the meeting dispersed precipitately, while a number took position at the south end of the market where they displayed the American flag. (p.5)"

"The Irish population were in a dreadful state of excitement, and even women as boys joined in the affray, some of the women actually throwing missiles. Many of them when they temporarily retreated, returned armed with fire arms, which they discharged sometimes with particular aim at individuals engaged on the other side, and at other times firing indicriminatley [sic] in the several groups, on the larger body of belligerents (p.8)."

(The next day, the riot settled down for a short time before it began again.)

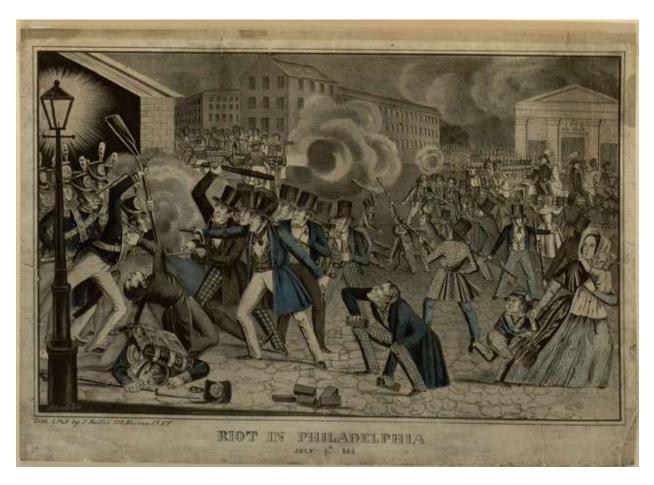
"An immense meeting of the Native American party was held in the State House Yard....The President opened he meeting with a few appropriate remarks, in which he deprecated all violence, and exhorted the meeting to maintain a strict decorum on the occasion, and in their deportment as native Americans...Col. C. J. Jack, then came forward, and made a speech, in which he said that he had been a long time opposed to the influence of foreigners in elections, and had at least two years ago, urged upon the citizens the necessity of organizing a regiment of Native American volunteers, to sustain the native citizens and the laws against the aggressions of foreigners. He had been, he said, in some degree a marked man in consequence of the expression of such principles; but he did not shrink of personal consequences, and hoped yet to witness the eradication of every party principle or institution in the land which was not purely American. Col. Jack was much applauded (pp12-13)."



(By the end of the meeting, violence had once more broken out and fires were set at Catholic churches and the houses of the Irish in the area. The rioting lasted a total of three days.)

Source: Excerpt from "A full and complete account of the late awful riots in Philadelphia: embellished with ten engravings," by John B. Perry, 1844. <u>http://digital.library.villanova.edu/Item/vudl:94648</u>

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Source B: *Riots in Philadelphia, July 7th 1844*. Lithograph by H. Bucholzer

Source: H. Bucholzer hand colored lithograph published July 1844 depicting Philadelphia Riots of 1844. <u>http://digital.library.villanova.edu/Item/vudl:94014</u>