

# Manchester's "Disgraceful Riot" July 3 and 4, 1854

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(Background Material and Photographs by Christopher MacLeod)

In a sad turn of events following the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, newspaper headlines across the country chronicled repeated attacks on Muslims and their property. On September 13, 2001, for example, a San Francisco vandal mistook a Mission District law office for an Islamic Community Center and hurled a bag filled with blood at the building's door. The name of Osama bin Laden was scrawled on the bag. Attackers often fail to make distinctions between ethnic groups prior to acting. Vandals threw softballs inscribed with pro-American slogans including "God bless America" and "Freedom for all," through the window of a cafe owned by a Greek American in Massachusetts.<sup>1</sup>

Never have social studies educators been more essential in helping their students make sense of the confusing events of the world. Recent happenings give each of us the opportunity to look to our past to examine how those before us have dealt with diversity in difficult times.

While the specifics are different, New Hampshire's own history provides examples in which Americans acted intolerantly toward people from different cultural traditions. The mob activity that pitted Manchester's Irish and Yankee residents against each other on July 3 and 4, 1854, provides one of the most dramatic examples of Nativism in New Hampshire.

Looking back, the *melée* seems both incomprehensible and inevitable. Because Irish-Americans became assimilated into the mainstream of American society so long ago, it is difficult to think of this group as a target of ethnic intolerance. Yet in the 1840s and 50s, Manchester, the state's first city, was experiencing the dislocations of a community in the midst of making the transition from an agricultural to an industrial economy.

Much of the industrialization that would transform the city's riverbanks was made possible by the railroad, which attracted the first surge of Irish Catholics in the 1840s. Eventually, many of these immigrants would replace the farm girls who worked in the first mills. In 1850, 1,325 Irish-born residents lived in Manchester, concentrated in the tenements on Elm Street between Central and Park Streets. By 1860, more than one quarter of the city's population of 20,000 was foreign born; of these 5,000 immigrants, nearly three-quarters were from the Catholic counties of Ireland.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Arab American Institute, <http://www.aaiusa.org/Tragedy/incidents.html>

<sup>2</sup> Peter Haebler, "Nativist Riots in Manchester," *Historical New Hampshire*, Vol 39, No. 3 & 4, Fall/Winter 1984, p. 124. While Kidder agreed with the party's central tenets, he deplored the violence that would come to be associated with Know-Nothingism.

The influx of immigrants into Manchester was typical of a change that was occurring in larger communities nationwide. In response to the perceived threat that these new groups posed to the established order, the Order of the Star-Spangled Banner and its political wing the American Party, emerged. Known also as the “Know-Nothing Party,” the American Party experienced a short but intense period of notoriety in the Northeast during the mid-1850s. In 1854, Joseph Kidder, a Manchester merchant, noted in his diary that if Know-Nothingism “establishes the doctrine of Native Americanism it will certainly have accomplished one good thing.”<sup>3</sup>

Manchester was a traditionally Protestant community, and many established residents were alarmed by the customs of their new neighbors. Most Protestants had had few opportunities before to witness Catholic masses or an Irish wake. Mr. Kidder noted these practices with fear:

The most dangerous system of Religion, if it not be a desecration to call it a Religion, is the Roman Catholic. The subjects are simply so many suppliant tools in the hands of the Pope, Bishop, and Priest to carry out just what desires these men may require. They are void of a conscience. Their conscience is the keeping of the priest. This is a dangerous doctrine.<sup>4</sup>

Kidder’s viewpoint reflects a long tradition in American thinking that was particularly strong in New England from the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries. For Kidder and many Americans, the perceived danger was that Catholics would not vote their “conscience,” but would rather vote the will of the Vatican. Know-Nothings would charge Catholics with tipping elections in favor of Democrats in critical state and national elections in the 1850s. As a result, many blamed naturalized immigrants with the passage of the Democratically supported Kansas-Nebraska Act.

There was no shortage of speakers who sought to warn native-born Americans of this perceived threat. Nine days before the Manchester riots, John S. Orr, an itinerant lecturer, appeared in Manchester. Known as the “Angel Gabriel” because of his penchant for summoning crowds with a brass horn, Orr, draped in long white robes, delivered rousing, emotional attacks on Catholicism.

At the same time, work was nearing completion on the new Saint Anne’s Catholic church, a majestic structure that served as a visual reminder that new arrivals were making their mark on the built landscape and establishing themselves despite the community’s resistance to change.



St. Anne

<sup>3</sup> Joseph P. Kidder Diaries, June 8, 1854, quoted in Haebler, p. 126.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph P. Kidder Diaries, July 12, 1854, quoted in Haebler, p. 127.

While the root causes of the July 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> riots go back years, the immediate cause can be traced to events of June 11, 1854. Following an argument between John Marshall, a prominent Manchester Yankee, and Michael Calin, a young Irishman, the two men came to blows over a rented carriage. Marshall struck the recent immigrant dead with a monkey wrench. The incident heightened tensions between Yankees and Irish and inflamed what was already an extremely volatile set of circumstances. Marshall was arraigned on the third of July. The next morning brought the first riot.

In the 1800s, many papers were aligned with political parties. The *Union Democrat* competed with the Know-Nothing *American* both for readers and for loyalty to their aligned political parties. The following account, titled “Disgraceful Riot,” is from the *Manchester Union Democrat*:

A serious and disgraceful riot occurred in this city, on the morning of the 4<sup>th</sup> instant. The particulars, as we understand them, are substantially as follows: Some Irish boys kindled a bon-fire in honor of the day, at the lower end of Elm Street, at a safe distance from any building. The officers extinguished it once or twice, which operation called the attention of persons in the streets, to that point. An excitement followed, during which missiles of various kinds were thrown by the Irish into the crowd, which had gathered around the “Marshall Building” ... Several windows were broken and other damage done. Besides, two persons were seriously injured—David Cross, Esq., by a stone in the head, and Charles Lee in a manner somewhat similar.

It is conceded, we believe that the Irish commenced the first violence, though many insist that they had too much provocation. However this may be, the proceedings which follow are in the highest degree disgraceful to the parties engaged and to the city. A large number of men, armed with clubs and other destructive implements, about day-break, commenced an assault upon all the Irish houses in that neighborhood. Some ten or fifteen were pretty thoroughly dismantled—the doors and windows of many of them being completely stove in. The rioters next proceeded to the Catholic Church—just re-built at great cost, and probably the handsomest in the State—and continued their fiendish work. ...

It will be considered a very remarkable circumstance in connection with this matter that *not a single arrest was made during its entire progress!* [Emphasis in original text] The city authorities certainly had sufficient reason to apprehend these depredations, and sufficient time to prepare to meet them. We understand the “guardians of the city,” from the highest to the lowest, were on the ground, at intervals, or during the whole excitement. ... Yet, after a turbulent night, the day dawns upon a gang of desperadoes, pitching brick-bats into the windows of a church, and not a man to raise his voice against the disgraceful proceedings! Three or four arrests have since been made, but the opinion is quite common that there was a lack of vigilance and vigor on the part of those whose business it is to protect the persons and the property of our citizens. ...

As a sequel to this affair, some 500 “Know-Nothing” sympathizers, assembled in front of the *Daily Mirror* office, last Thursday evening, and honored that establishment with a series of groans, for its notice of the riot.—Subsequently cheers were given for the Mayor, or the “Angel Gabriel” and the “monkey wrench.” The crowd then dispersed without further violence. These things indicate a feverish excitement in the public mind, which calls for prudence and firmness of all who cherish the prosperity and reputation of our city. There is on the part of many, a feeling of hostility toward the Irish, as unreasonable as it is cruel. By far the larger portion of our foreign population demean themselves with prudence and propriety; and certainly no man in the city labors more constantly and ardently to restrain the rude impulses of the rest, than the pastor of the Catholic Church. His efforts ought to be aided by our government and people, in the spirit of conciliation and reform, and not of proscription and extermination. At least when tumults do occur, the whole power of the law should be exerted to protect the innocent, as well as to punish the guilty. On the recent occasion—and it is not the first—hundreds of Irish women and children were driven from their homes to find shelter in the woods, or beneath some friendly roof, against the indiscriminating madness of a mob, incited to violence by some unconsidered offence of their countrymen, or perhaps by the incendiary harangues of some scoundrel mountebank. ...<sup>5</sup>

It is significant that the rioters chose to attack the Catholic church. In addition to their longstanding apprehension about Catholicism, rioters were likely motivated to attack this structure through their identification of the building with the Irish. Many Yankees equated this group with the dramatic changes that threatened the ingrained traditions of their community.

In Manchester, further violence was averted through the good offices of the city’s leadership. Time will tell if today’s leaders are up to our contemporary challenges. To be sure, social studies educators will be more important than ever in helping young people understand the world that they one day will inherit.

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<sup>5</sup> *Manchester Union Democrat*, July 12, 1854.  
Manchester’s “Disgraceful Riot”

## Background

Prejudice against the Irish was not confined to Irish-Catholics, nor to the 1800s. Noting that “certain families recently arrived from Ireland” were intending to settle around what is now Concord, the state’s General Court, in 1720, resolved “that the said people be warned to move off within the space of seven months, and if they fail to do so, that they be prosecuted by the attorney general, by writs of trespass and ejectment.”<sup>6</sup> These unwanted Irish were the so-called Scotch-Irish—Presbyterian Scotsmen transplanted, first, to Northern Ireland, then, to America.

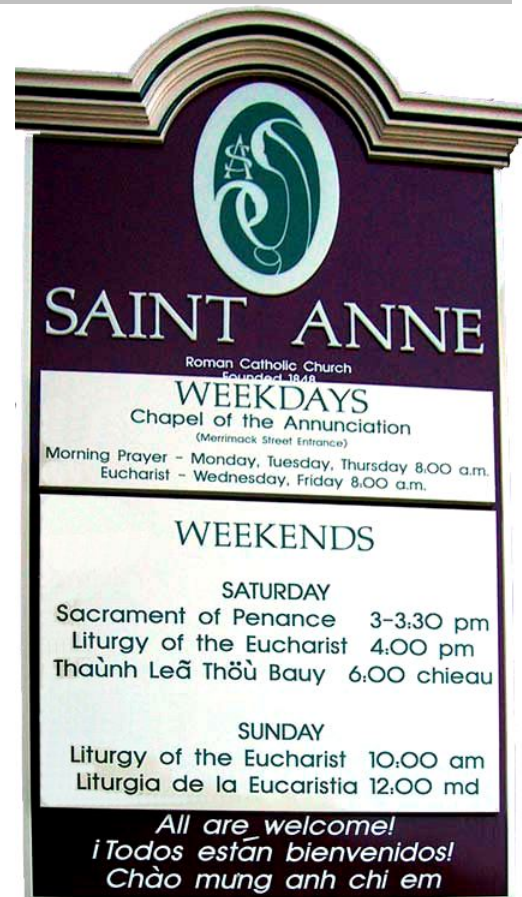
But these Irish persevered and prospered, eventually settling in Londonderry and spreading to such towns as Windham, Chester, Litchfield, Manchester, Bedford, Goffstown, New Boston, Antrim, Peterborough, and Acworth. Later, in the 1800s, Irish-Catholics from the southern counties of Ireland began to arrive.

The damage inflicted on Manchester’s church of St. Anne in July 1854, was just part of recurring animosity toward these newer immigrants. Even as this first Catholic church in Manchester was being built in 1849 to serve its six hundred parishioners, St. Anne struggled against “warp-minded ones.”<sup>7</sup>

Nor was prejudice against Catholics in New Hampshire confined to uncouth street-toughs. Until the state’s constitution was amended in 1877, for example, no Catholic could be governor, serve on the governor’s council, or be a representative or senator.<sup>8</sup>

And prejudice toward other nationalities occurred between Catholics, too. The early part of the twentieth century was sometimes marked by bitter rancor between Irish and French Catholics and between Irish and Polish Catholics.<sup>9</sup>

In our troubled times, it is indeed a hopeful sign (see above) that today St. Anne, a church that struggled to overcome prejudice and mistrust at its own founding, clearly welcomes our country’s more recent immigrants.



<sup>6</sup> Thomas D’Arcy McGee, *A History of the Irish Settlers in North America: From the Earliest Period to the Census of 1850* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., Inc., 1980), p. 33. The book is a reprint of the original 1852 publication.

<sup>7</sup> *St. Anne Church (Manchester, N.H.): Historical Sketch, 1849–1974* (Manchester: Royal Press, nd), pp. 4–5.

<sup>8</sup> “Historical Sketch of the Diocese,” *About the Diocese of Manchester*, World-wide Web (<http://www.catholicchurchnh.org/about.cfm>), accessed September 7, 2003. This is a summary of Rev. Msgr. Wilfrid Paradis’s *Upon this Granite: Catholicism in New Hampshire, 1647–1947* (Manchester, 1998). The N.H. Constitution is available at <http://www.state.nh.us/constitution/constitution.html>.

<sup>9</sup> “Historical Sketch of the Diocese.”