



Lincoln won election to the Illinois state legislature as an anti-Nebraska Whig in 1854, although his adherence to the Whig Party prevented his election by that legislature to a U.S. Senate seat in 1855. Elsewhere, many northern Whigs triumphed in 1854 by denouncing slavery extension and the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The absolutely critical facts, however, are that those victorious Whig candidates did not win solely because they opposed slavery extension and that many Whigs who trumpeted their opposition to slavery extension lost. Usually they did not lose to pro-Nebraska Democrats. Instead, they were defeated by yet another new party that arose in the political turmoil which erupted between 1853 and 1856, a party whose existence had little to do with African-American slavery or its possible extension.

This was the American or Know-Nothing Party, an anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant, and antipolitical incumbent organization that began to emerge in 1852 and 1853, well before the introduction of Douglas's bill. Appalled by the economic, social, and political evils that had supposedly accompanied the massive European immigration to the United States since 1846 and by the eagerness of both Whigs and Democrats to solicit Catholic and immigrant votes, Know-Nothings vowed to proscribe all Catholics and all foreigners from public office, to change natu-

ralization laws so that recent immigrants could not vote, and to elect only candidates "fresh from the ranks of the people" rather than the spoils-hungry hacks now leading the Whig and Democratic parties. Very specific developments in the early 1850s intensified native-born Protestants' fear of and animosity toward Catholic immigrants and entrenched politicians. The point here is that those antagonisms fueled a grassroots political revolt in 1854 and 1855 that threatened to eclipse any concern about the Kansas-Nebraska Act or slavery extension among northern—and southern—voters.

In the North in 1854, most victorious Whig candidates for state offices or Congress had Know-Nothing backing, and that was also true of anti-Nebraska or Republican coalitions in Ohio, Indiana, and Michigan. Where those anti-Nebraska Whig candidates did not have such backing, they often lost despite intense northern outrage at the possibility of slavery extension. As one New York Whig wrote after his state's 1854 contests, "This election has demonstrated that, by a majority, Roman Catholicism is feared more than American slavery." In northern elections during 1855, moreover, Know-Nothing candidates almost always bested candidates of the new Republican Party, even if Democrats prevailed because the anti-Democratic opposition divided its favors. And in the South, where an antislavery, anti-southern party like the Republicans' had no chance of flourishing, the Know-Nothings had supplanted Whigs as the Democrats' major opponents by the end of 1855.

The point cannot be emphasized enough. The reemergence of the slavery extension issue caused by passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in May 1854 infuriated the northern public and spawned the creation of the exclusively northern and overtly anti-southern, antislavery Republican Party. It also decisively contributed to the wreck of the Democratic Party's electoral

fortunes in the North. Yet antforeign and anti-Catholic sentiment was just as important in causing Democratic defeats in 1854 and 1855, just as it was indisputably more important than antislavery or free-soil sentiment in killing off the Whig Party in the North. Northern Whigs tried to exploit the North's deep anger at the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854 and 1855, but that effort failed to deter Know-Nothing incursions into their electorate. Only after the extent of northern Whig losses to Know-Nothings in the 1854 elections became clear, indeed, did Whigs like Seward and Lincoln, both of whom abhorred the bigotry of Know-Nothings, finally abandon their old party and join the Republicans. Simultaneously, the 1854 elections in the North convinced most southern Whigs that they must abandon the Whig Party and become Know-Nothings themselves if they had any hope of defeating Democrats. In short, Know-Nothingism, and the passionate anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant, anti-politician resentments it expressed, were equally if not more important than the Kansas-Nebraska Act in destroying the Whig Party.

By the start of 1856, in fact, most political observers were predicting that the Know-Nothings, not the emerging Republican Party, would elect the next President. Yet by the end of 1856, the Republicans, rather than the Know-Nothings, had replaced the Whigs as Democrats' primary political opponent. They did so largely because of what had happened with regard to slavery extension on the ground in Kansas since passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in May 1854. The Republican Party had emerged because of northern outrage at a specific event—passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. For the party to grow, it needed further evidence of Slave Power aggressions against the North. Subsequent events in, or about, Kansas provided that evidence.

Most of the settlers who moved into Kansas once land went on sale were small farmers from the Midwest and non-

slaveholders from the upper South, including some Missourians. Most had little interest in the slavery extension question and shared a common desire to keep all blacks, free or slave, out of Kansas. Like all frontiers, Kansas also attracted a number of men hoping to make a quick buck from land speculation, and these included the federally appointed governor, Andrew H. Reeder. Nonetheless, some slaveholders hoping to create a new slave state did appear in Kansas along with their chattels, as did some New Englanders whose primary goal was to stop slavery extension by controlling the new government. Of vast importance, almost all Northerners moving to Kansas did so by traveling up the Missouri River from St. Louis, a route that carried them through the heart of slaveholding country in western Missouri. Regarding these northern settlers as an invasion of abolitionists, those Missouri slaveholders redoubled their determination to legalize slavery in Kansas.

Egged on by ex-Senator Atchison, whose term ended in early March 1855, hundreds of heavily armed Missourians, aiming to exploit an ambiguity in the original act as to what constituted "residency" in Kansas, poured across the border when Kansas's first territorial legislature was elected on March 30, 1855. These "Border Ruffians" took over polling places in sparsely populated hamlets and cast not only their own ballots but hundreds of additional, wholly fictitious ballots for pro-slavery legislative candidates. This fraud yielded a heavy majority of pro-slavery men in the new legislature, and they immediately passed draconian pro-slavery laws. To hold office in the territory, including its legislature, one had to swear an oath that slavery was and would forever remain legal in Kansas. Harboring a fugitive slave was punishable with ten years at hard labor, and circulating abolitionist literature became a capital offense. In response to these laws, men elected by Northerners resigned from

the new territorial legislature in a huff and helped set up a rival "free-state" government of Kansas in the town of Lawrence, a government that the Democrat Pierce's administration denounced as an outlaw regime.

With Northerners and Southerners in Kansas pledging allegiance to rival territorial governments, clashes between the two sides were inevitable. The worst of these was the bloody mass murder of five southern, and presumably pro-slavery but non-slaveholding, settlers along Pottawatomie Creek by the abolitionist fanatic John Brown and his sons in late May 1856. The most widely publicized of them, however, occurred days earlier on May 21, 1856. Then a posse that included hundreds of Missourians invaded Lawrence, destroyed the printing presses of the "free-state" newspaper, and burned some buildings. No one was killed, but the Republican press in the East immediately labeled the "Sack of Lawrence" as the start of a war in Kansas over slavery in which "Freedom" was "Bloodily Subdued." "Bleeding Kansas" thus became a powerful weapon in the Republicans' propaganda arsenal during the 1856 presidential campaign, for the Democratic administration clearly sided with the pro-slavery forces.

