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Romanists in the Land of Roger Williams: The Diocese of Providence Observes Its 125th Anniversary

ROBERT W. HAYMAN

Nineteen ninety-seven marks the 125th anniversary of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Providence. The diocese was created in 1872 out of territory that had previously been part of the Diocese of Hartford, whose bishop had lived in Providence since that see was created in 1844, and the Diocese of Boston's southernmost section, which included the cities of Taunton, Fall River, and New Bedford as well as Cape Cod and the islands. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the influx of Roman Catholic immigrants and the natural increase of the resident Catholic population made Roman Catholicism the largest single Christian denomination in Rhode Island. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Catholics made up a majority of the state's population.

The many important economic and social contributions that Roman Catholics have made to the well-being of the state are generally well known. Less well known, however, are Catholic contributions of another sort—the contributions that Rhode Island Catholics have made to strengthening and enlarging the concept of religious liberty. In this they have acted squarely within the tradition associated with the most famous of the state's founders, Roger Williams.



Williams was seeking religious liberty when he fled Massachusetts Bay for the wilderness at the head of Narragansett Bay in 1635. With a small group of like-minded fellow dissenters from the Church of England and the Bay Colony's Puritan establishment, Williams founded Providence, Rhode Island's first permanent English settlement, in 1636. As the colony grew, it attracted a few Irish Catholic settlers, as did the other New England colonies, but their numbers were scarcely significant. When the Rhode Island General Assembly ordered the publication of a digest of the colony's laws in 1719, it included in them a specific provision banning Catholics from becoming freemen and voting in colonial elections, a prohibition that had more to do with a desire to gain favor with English authorities than with any danger that Catholics actually presented to the colony. Although the few Jewish residents in the state were enfranchised in 1777, it was not until 1783 that Catholics gained the right to vote. The arbitrary denial of the full rights of citizenship to Catholics was rescinded after a French army and its Catholic chaplains had spent a year in Rhode Island in 1780-81 and a growing number of French citizens had taken up residence in the state.¹

The Banishment of Roger Williams. *Painting by Peter Frederick Rothermel (1817-1895), oil on canvas, circa 1850. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 3102).*

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Rhode Island was not alone in the early years of the nation in having a religious test for the enjoyment of political rights written into its laws. Many Americans of the day would have agreed with John Locke when he argued in his *Letter concerning Toleration* that the state was justified in restricting the political rights of those members of the political community who presented a real danger to the

state's well being.² Most of the English of Locke's day, and many of other nationalities as well, would have included Catholics among those who presented a real danger to the well being of Protestant states and to the Protestant religion.

The fears of Catholic oppression stirred by propagandists during the American Revolution subsided somewhat during the course of the war, and a spirit of tolerance reappeared. When a rebellion against French rule on the island of Santo Domingo in 1793 forced many of the settlers there to flee, some of the refugees came to Newport. Although most were Catholic, the Rhode Island General Assembly, moved only by their need, voted funds for their relief in 1793 and 1794. The religious needs of these early French immigrants, and later of immigrants from Ireland, were cared for by priests from Boston, who made infrequent visits to Rhode Island but were able to exercise their ministry freely.³

By 1813 the number of Catholics in Providence was sufficient to allow them to rent an old schoolhouse on Sheldon Street as a place where they could gather for prayers and mass. The state's early Catholic community was soon scattered, however, by the economic depression that came upon Rhode Island and the nation in the aftermath of the War of 1812. By 1820 there were only seven Irish Catholics in Providence.⁴

Irish Catholic immigrants began coming to the state once again in the late 1820s. Some, like James McKenna, a textile worker with a knowledge of the machinery used to produce linen, were recruited by the Rhode Island Bleaching Company in Providence, which needed such skilled workers. Others, like Edward McCracken, who came to Providence with his young family from Savannah, Georgia, had settled in other states before hearing that there were better opportunities for them in Rhode Island. Still others, like Michael Reddy from County Carlow, who settled in Woonsocket in 1826, were initially brought to the state by work on the Blackstone Canal. The rebuilding of Fort Adams in Newport and the opening of coal pits at Portsmouth drew over a hundred Irish to Aquidneck Island by 1827.⁵

In March 1828 the Catholics in Newport acquired a former schoolhouse on Barney Street. Father Robert D. Woodley, a young Virginian whom Bishop Benedict Fenwick of Boston had sent to Rhode Island in January 1828, offered mass in the newly remodeled building for the first time on 6 April 1828. Later that same year Pawtucket's Catholics were the beneficiaries of the generosity of a prominent local iron manufacturer, David Wilkinson, who offered Bishop Fenwick a large lot in the southern part of the town near the Providence-Pawtucket turnpike. Raising money to build a church there, the Catholics of Pawtucket and Providence appealed to the wider community as well as their own; but although their appeal did draw some outside sympathy, most of the necessary funds came from Catholic sources. The new church, like the one in Newport, was called St. Mary's.⁶

Although Rhode Island's early Catholics initially enjoyed good relations with their neighbors, the Protestant revival movements collectively known as the Second Great Awakening, which began after 1800, reawakened the latent fears of Catholicism that many American Protestants harbored. These fears were kept alive and periodically inflamed by the sermons of certain ministers, as well as by the yearly celebration of Pope's Day—America's version of Guy Fawkes Day—every 5 November. (At least one community, Bristol, continued the custom of lighting bonfires on Pope's Day until the 1860s.) News that Catholics in

Providence had bought land for a church in the western part of the city in 1832 caused the seller of the property to offer to buy it back for a hundred dollars more than he had sold it for. But in spite of the rise of anti-Catholic sentiment in the nation during the 1830s and 1840s, immigrant Irish Catholics were more often at odds with one another than with their Protestant neighbors.⁷

In 1844 Rome recognized the significant increase in the size of the mostly Irish Catholic immigrant communities in southern New England by erecting the Diocese of Hartford and naming a native-born Vermont convert, William Barber Tyler, as its first bishop. After surveying the situation of the church in Hartford, Bishop Tyler chose during that same year to establish his home at SS. Peter and Paul's Church in Providence, the older of two Catholic churches in the city. During his ensuing years in Providence, Tyler worked quietly to increase the number of clergy who served in the diocese and to better provide for the religious needs of his people. In 1848 he inaugurated the first Catholic school in the state in the basement of SS. Peter and Paul's after hiring a lay couple as its teachers. Bishop Tyler's devotion to his people, particularly his care for the poor, gained the respect of all who knew him, and his death in June 1849 was mourned by Catholics and non-Catholics alike.⁸



William Barber Tyler, first bishop of Hartford.
RIHS Collection (RHi X3 1045).

Tyler's successor, Irish-born Bishop Bernard O'Reilly, had a far more aggressive personality. He was also faced with a more challenging pastoral task and a more hostile political environment than his predecessor as the Catholic population of his diocese swelled as the result of the Irish potato famine of the 1840s. Like their bishop, many of the Irish in Rhode Island had experienced religious oppression in their native land, where they had had little opportunity to object.

In 1852 several Irish Catholics in Providence raised objections to the fact that the Bible readings that formed part of the daily routine in the public schools were done from the King James translation of the Scriptures, a translation that Catholics referred to as the Protestant Bible because it lacked explanatory notes. In response to the Catholic protests, Elisha R. Potter, Jr., the state commissioner of public schools, took the position that the decision as to which version of the Bible was to be used for the daily readings rested "with the teacher, who should respect his own conscience and the conscience of pupils." Despite Potter's stance on the issue, the King James version of the Bible continued to be the one most commonly used in the schools for at least the next twenty years. In the 1860s an Irish Catholic student in Providence's Arnold Street School, George Mahoney, asked his teacher and the school's principal if he could use the Catholic Douay version when it was his turn to do the reading and prayer. His teacher, Thomas W. Bicknell, acknowledged his right to do so and invited his students to thereafter use the Bible of their choice.⁹

The growth of the Irish population coincided with a further resurgence of anti-Catholic sentiment, one that came to focus on the convent of the Sisters of Mercy. Bishop O'Reilly had brought the sisters to Providence in 1851 to staff an orphanage and the parish school that Bishop Tyler had begun. In 1854 a nativist newspaper, the *Anti-Romanist and True Catholic*, appeared on the streets of Providence, and in the January 1855 session of the General Assembly nativists began making their influence in the state felt. On 22 March 1855 placards and handbills appeared in Providence calling on all true native-born American citizens to assemble the next day near the Sisters of Mercy Convent at Broad and Claverick streets. In the early afternoon of 23 March, several hundred Irishmen, many of them armed, gathered in the convent's garden to protect the sisters

against the implied threat. When a large crowd later collected near the convent, Bishop O'Reilly, along with the mayor of Providence, confronted it, and after about two hours the two thousand or so people quietly dispersed. While Rhode Island avoided the bloodshed that occurred in other parts of the country during the years of Know-Nothing agitation, the memory of the convent incident stayed with the Catholic community for the rest of the century.¹⁰

Succeeding to the bishopric after O'Reilly's death at sea in 1856, Bishop Francis P. McFarland, a native-born son of Irish immigrants, enjoyed better relations with his fellow Rhode Islanders than Bishop O'Reilly had. Although nativists had sought to deny Irish immigrants the right to form militia companies during the 1850s, the state's Irish heeded President Lincoln's call to arms and joined with their fellow Rhode Islanders to fight for the Union. When some Catholics serving in Rhode Island units complained, early in the war, that they were denied the opportunity to attend mass, a Catholic priest was appointed chaplain of the Third Rhode Island Regiment. Bishop McFarland later expressed his belief that the "war dissipated the prejudices of our distrustful neighbors."¹¹



On 28 April 1872 Thomas F. Hendricken, a priest of the Diocese of Hartford, was ordained as the first bishop of Providence. The creation of the new diocese was prompted not only by the dramatic increase of the Catholic population in Rhode Island—in 1875 the state had approximately 95,000 Catholics in a total population of 258,239—but also by the material prosperity of many among that population. A notable example was John B. Hennessy, who emigrated from County Limerick in 1821 and settled in Providence in the 1830s. After working as a coachman for Brown University president Francis Wayland, Hennessy opened a little store on North Main Street. He also made money by lending funds to his fellow Irish who could not get loans from the local banks for purchasing homes. When he died in 1888, with a fortune estimated at several hundred thousand dollars, Hennessy was reputed to have been the richest Irishman in the city. Census figures reveal that several other Irishmen of Hennessy's generation had similar resources. By the 1870s the state's Catholics had also begun asserting themselves politically. The first Catholic to hold state office is believed to have been Charles E. Gorman, a lawyer, who was the son of an Irish immigrant father and a mother descended from original settlers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Gorman was elected to the Rhode Island House of Representatives in 1870.¹²

Because the constitution adopted by the citizens of the state in November 1842 had been written to ensure the dominance of the nativist, predominantly Protestant element of the state's population, the number of Catholics in the General Assembly would remain small for some time. Nevertheless, there were voices to speak in behalf of the Catholic population in January 1875 when, in response to charges of abuse of the preferred tax status of private schools, the legislature considered ending the local tax exemptions that such schools enjoyed. While the majority of the private schools were Catholic, Bishop Hendricken was joined by other religious leaders when he spoke at legislative hearings in favor of retaining the exemptions. But in spite of the strong case made by Hendricken and others, the Assembly chose to limit tax exemptions to free public schools and churches. Believing that anti-Catholic prejudice lay behind the change, Bishop Hendricken brought suit in the civil courts to establish that Catholic schools were in fact free public schools, but the justices rejected the argument.¹³

By the 1880s a significant number of those confined in the state prison and reform schools were Catholics. According to the practices of the day, all inmates at the state prison were required to attend the Sunday services provided by the prison's chaplain, who was a Protestant minister. When Catholic prisoners asked to be allowed to have their own services, their requests were denied on the grounds that the prison's services were nondenominational and that offering an alternative would be detrimental to prison discipline. Finding these arguments unconvincing, in February 1884 Bishop Hendricken asked the Board of State Charities and Corrections, which made policy for the state institutions, to allow Catholic clergy the same privileges in the penal and reformatory institutions as the Protestant clergy were afforded. When the board refused to grant the request, Bishop Hendricken obtained the signatures of other Rhode Island religious leaders on a petition to the General Assembly asking that the ministrations of religion at the state prison be granted as a right rather than as a concession. Before the legislature could act on the petition, the Board of State Charities and Corrections altered its position and voted to allow visits to the state's institutions by all clergy. This action, however, did not initially include the reform schools.¹⁴

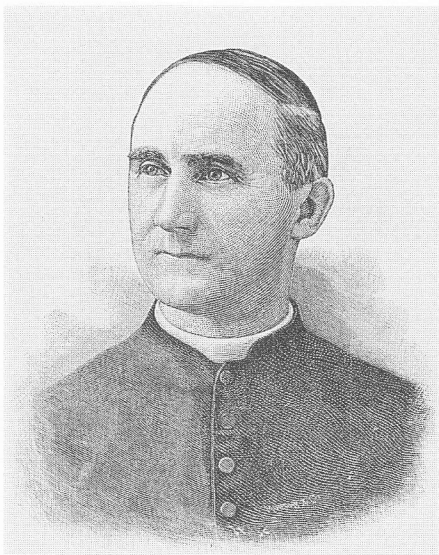
The pastoral situation at the state prison and reform schools would not be settled until after Bishop Hendricken's death. Soon after Matthew Harkins was ordained as the second bishop of Providence in 1887, he visited the state institutions and arranged for one of his priests to say mass regularly at the prison and the boys' reform school. It was not until February 1899, however, that the Board of Charities and Corrections, which was paying the salary of the Protestant chaplain at the institutions, voted to pay the salary of a Catholic chaplain as well.¹⁵

Prominent among those who played a role in arguing many of the issues of concern to Catholics in the late nineteenth century was Charles Gorman, who assisted both Bishop Hendricken and Bishop Harkins with legal advice and spoke at various public forums that discussed church-state issues. From the time of his entrance into public life in 1870, Gorman was a persistent advocate of equal political rights for all citizens of Rhode Island. Gorman particularly supported an amendment to the state constitution that would grant naturalized citizens the right to vote on the same basis as native-born Rhode Islanders. His efforts, and those of other like-minded citizens, finally achieved a measure of success when Rhode Island voters adopted the Bourn Amendment to the constitution in April 1888.¹⁶

Bishop Harkins's solicitude for Catholics deprived of the opportunity for religious worship was most clearly expressed for children in the care of the state. Since the policies that governed the operation of the State Home and School and other state institutions that cared for children were set by the Board of State Charities and Corrections, Bishop Harkins appealed to the fair-mindedness of his fellow citizens and asked a succession of governors to appoint Catholics to the board to represent Catholic interests. It was not until 1898 that the Republican-controlled Senate agreed to the appointment of two Catholics to the board. No Catholic served on the state Board of Education until 1913, when the Republican Senate chose a French Canadian priest, Father Joseph R. Bourgeois, to serve as representative from Kent County.¹⁷

In his dealings with elected and appointed officials, Bishop Harkins asked for simple justice for all citizens, regardless of their religious beliefs. Like many others, he was convinced that the legislature's removal of the tax exemption for private schools in 1875 was essentially motivated by prejudice. With the aid of

Matthew Harkins, second bishop of Providence. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 8971).



Charles Gorman he therefore laid plans in 1893 to support the petition of the Friends School in Providence (later known as the Moses Brown School) for a specific grant of exemption from taxation, such as several Catholic schools had received in 1890. Harkins and Gorman also hoped to secure a general act restoring the exemption to all private schools. When the Senate passed the Friends School bill but did not act on the general exemption bill, Gorman persuaded the Democratic leader of the House, Colonel Samuel R. Honey, to have the House act on the general exemption bill before considering the specific exemption for the Friends School. Honey outmaneuvered those opposed to the general exemption bill by promising that if that measure was passed, he would support another bill that would remove all tax exemptions from religious institutions, churches, schools, and charitable institutions. When the House passed the general exemption bill, Honey fulfilled his promise by supporting the latter bill, but as he had foreseen, it was effectively killed by a popular outcry against the removal of tax exemptions for churches. Meanwhile the general exemption bill was taken up and passed by the Senate.¹⁸

The controversy over tax exemption did not die immediately, however. In June 1894 the Senate Judiciary Committee, considering the issue of tax reform, held hearings which allowed the opponents of Catholic schools—of whom there were many in the late nineteenth century—to voice their opposition and, in so doing, to expose their bigotry. Since many of the tax-exempt churches, schools, and institutions were located in Providence, the city continued to press for a very strict application of the tax laws.¹⁹

Although both Bishop Hendricken and Bishop Harkins agreed with the vast majority of American Catholic clergy that priests should not seek political office or engage in partisan politics, they both saw that running for election to local school committees—as clergymen of other denominations regularly did—was an exception to that rule. At various times Catholic priests were elected to the school committees of Providence, Pawtucket, Woonsocket, Newport, Bristol, and Jamestown. As school board members they oversaw the hiring and disciplining of teachers as well as the discipline of students. They also oversaw the choice of textbooks, an important responsibility, since many of those available contained blatantly anti-Catholic material.²⁰

While the appointment of Catholics to the Board of State Charities and Corrections gave Catholics a voice in the care of children in state institutions, the state remained free to place Catholic children in its care in homes of its choosing. The superintendent of the State Home and School could thus place Catholic children in non-Catholic homes if he felt that there were no suitable Catholic families who wished to have them. In 1905 Bishop Harkins, with the aid of Gorman and other laity, sought to amend the law that created the State Home and School so that the state would be permitted to place children only in homes of the same religious background as the children. Since the school's superintendent opposed the change, the General Assembly took no action on the proposed bill. Led by Gorman, those supporting the bill circulated a petition that gained the signatures of over ten thousand Rhode Islanders, including the Episcopal bishop of Rhode Island, whom Bishop Harkins personally approached. Harkins made his only appearance before a legislative committee on 26 March 1907 to speak in favor of the bill. Since most of the speakers at the hearing opposed it, the bill died in committee. But Harkins refused to give up the fight, and he secured an important ally when a French Canadian Catholic, Aram Pothier, was elected governor at the head of the Republican ticket in 1908. With

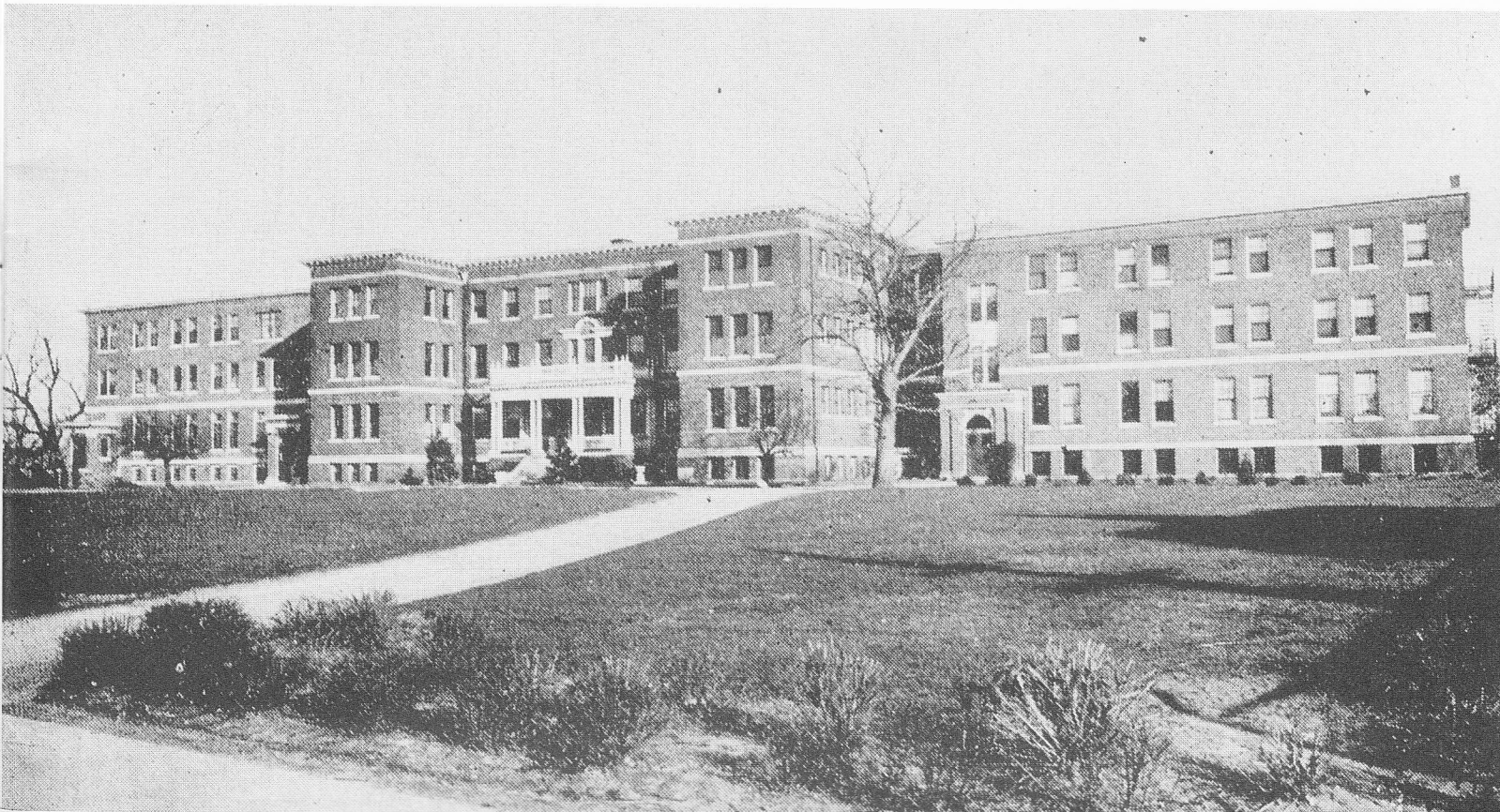
Pothier's active assistance, the legislature passed the bill that Bishop Harkins had proposed in 1909.²¹

During the thirty-four years that Matthew Harkins served as bishop of Providence, the number of Catholic grammar and high schools increased dramatically, a Catholic college, Providence College, was founded in 1919 and staffed by the Dominican Fathers, and a complete system of charitable institutions was established. These charitable institutions provided care for infants, the sick, the elderly, and a host of others in need, regardless of race or religion. Their creation was a response to the continued prejudice that Catholics experienced at state institutions, as well as an effort to assist those Rhode Islanders whose needs were not being fully met by the state. In time both the city of Providence and the state of Rhode Island would recognize the value of several of the institutions founded under Bishop Harkins by allocating funds to help support them. Such was the case with the St. Vincent de Paul Infant Asylum in Providence and a tuberculosis hospital in Warwick.²²



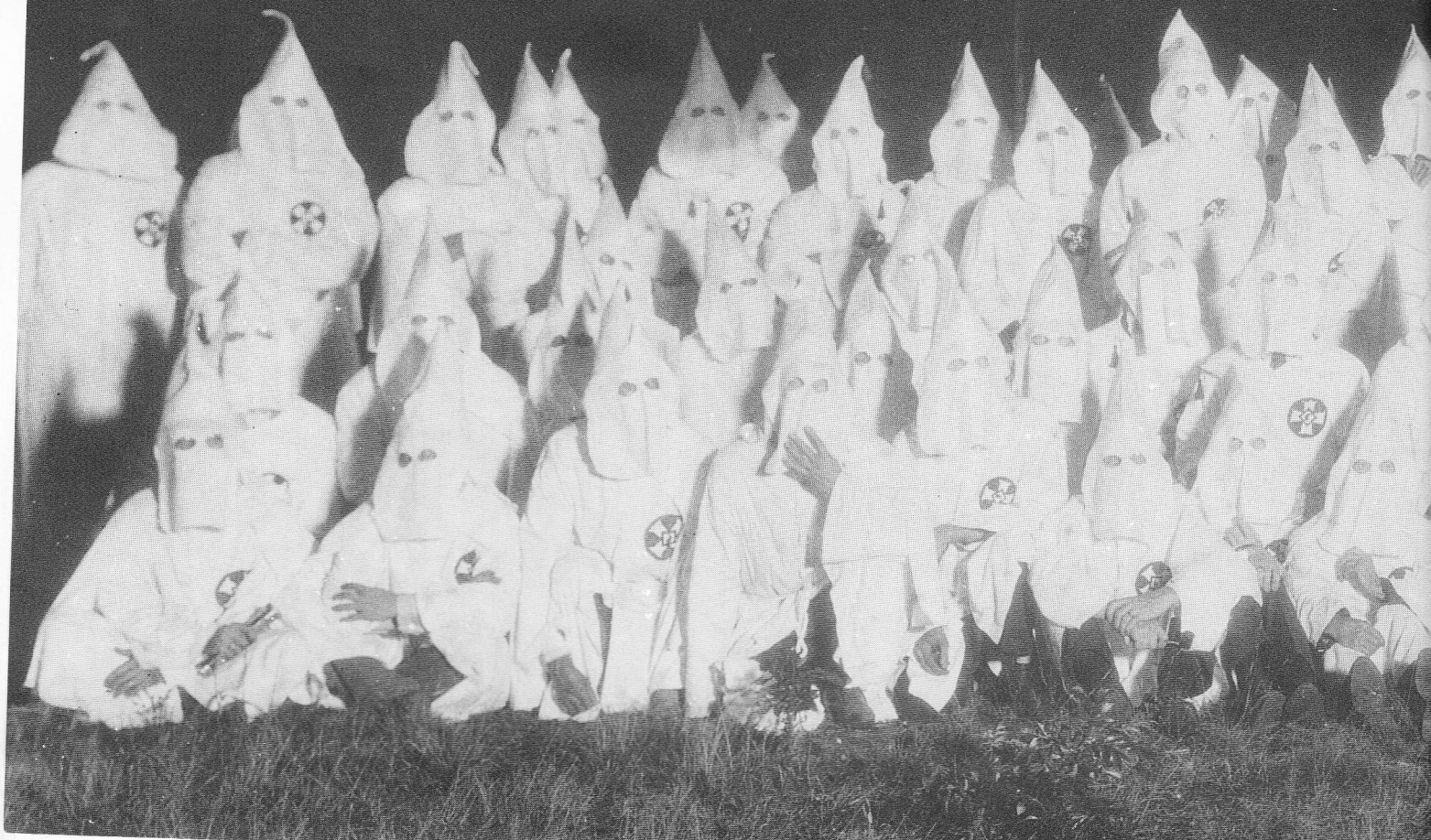
On 10 April 1919 William A. Hickey was ordained as Bishop Harkins's coadjutor. Shortly thereafter the ailing Harkins gave him complete charge of the administration of the diocese. Bishop Hickey became the third bishop of Providence on Harkins's death on 25 May 1921. Under Bishop Hickey the Catholic school system was enlarged and strengthened, particularly by the opening of new high schools, which made a Catholic education more available to the growing number of students who were seeking the more advanced schooling an increasingly sophisticated industry and society then needed. In 1927 Bishop Hickey inaugurated an annual Catholic Charity Fund Appeal to better organize the funding of Catholic charitable and educational institutions and provide for the capital improvements that were required as needs and missions changed.²³

*The St. Vincent de Paul Infant Asylum,
Providence. RIHS Collection (RHI X3 8957).*

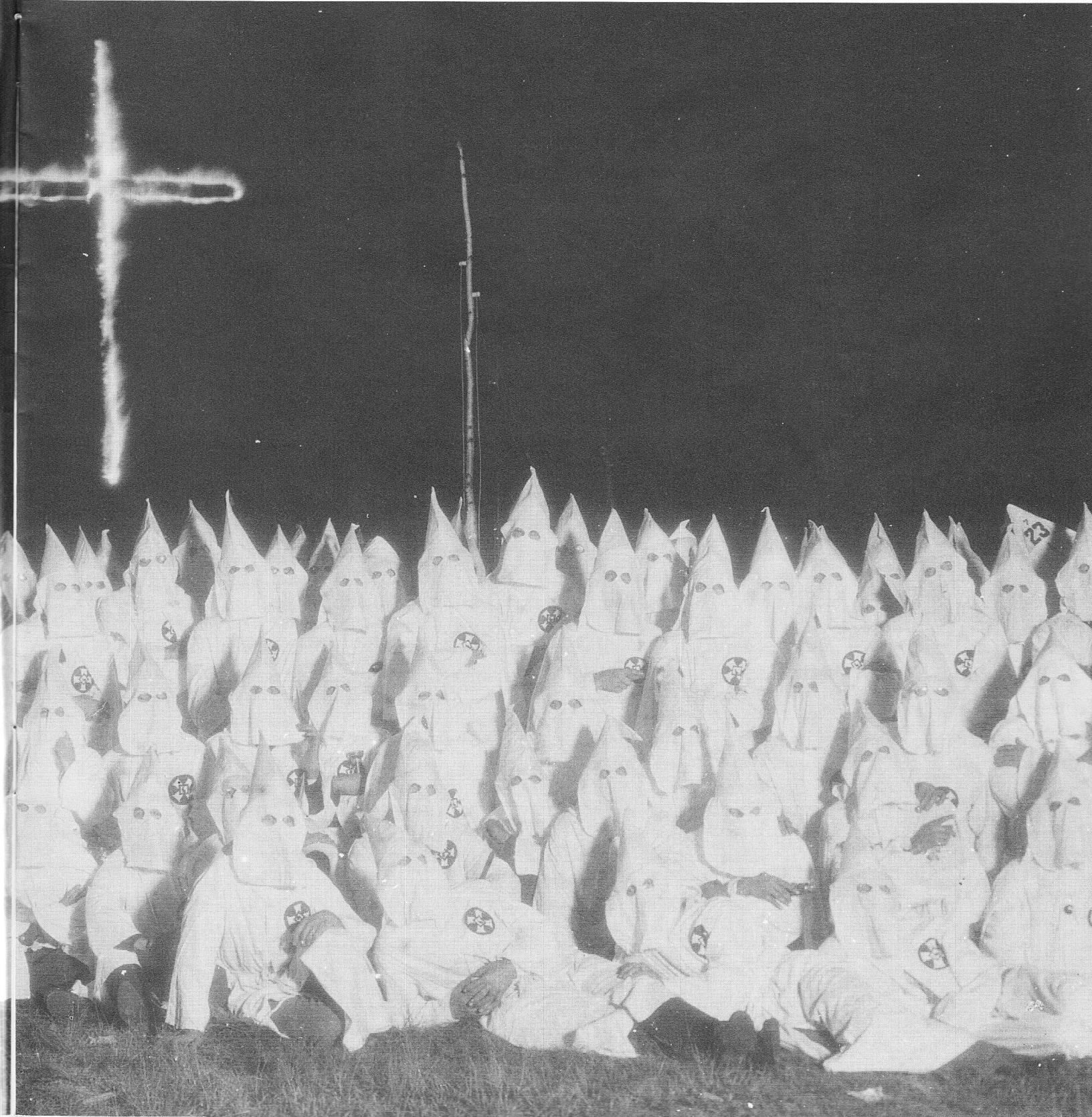


The 1920s witnessed the growth of a new form of the Ku Klux Klan, whose members regarded Catholics and Jews, as well as African Americans, as a threat to their vision of a white Protestant America. Klan activities were most in evidence during the state election campaigns of 1924, in which Republicans were hoping to reverse the dramatic gains scored by Democrats two years earlier. The Klan lent its support to Republican candidates, but most Republicans joined

During the 1920s Catholics faced the fanatical bigotry of the Ku Klux Klan. Sixty Rhode Island Klansmen posed for this photo about 1925. RIHS Collection (RHi (X3) 8960).



their Democratic opponents in denouncing the organization. Between June and September 1924 the Klan set fire to a number of crosses, one of them on the Providence College campus when the apostolic delegate was attending a church service there. In 1925 the Klan began holding regular meetings on the Grant estate in Georgiaville. According to the Reverend E. Dean Ellenwood, a Universalist minister in Woonsocket, the Klan posed little threat to the Catholic Church; the



Klan's activities in fact united and strengthened Catholics in their resistance to proselytizing Protestantism, he believed. A few ministers supported the Klan and its objectives, but they were a decided minority in the state.²⁴

When thousands of Rhode Islanders were thrown out of work in the Great Depression that followed the stock market crash of 1929, Bishop Hickey directed those parishes that had been planning new construction to begin the work as soon as possible in order to provide jobs for the unemployed. With parish projects added to the work financed by the Catholic Charity Fund Appeal, the church undertook over a million dollars in new construction in both 1930 and 1931. To relieve the needs of Catholic parishioners, Bishop Hickey directed that branches of the St. Vincent de Paul Society be established in every parish. In addition, he asked diocesan officials and the various Catholic lay organizations in the state to cooperate in any way they could in the many other food and clothing collection drives organized to help needy Rhode Islanders. Hickey also urged his fellow Catholics to contribute to the Community Fund drives conducted in the state. When Mayor Dunne of Providence organized a football game between Providence College and Rhode Island State College (now the University of Rhode Island) for the benefit of the city's Milk and Fuel Fund, Hickey, an avid football fan, lent the project his personal support. The game, played at Brown University Stadium on 28 November 1931 and won by Providence College, was the first meeting of the two teams since athletic relations between the colleges had been severed in 1922. When Bishop Hickey died suddenly on 4 October 1933, his contemporaries remembered, among his contributions to the state, his untiring efforts to ameliorate the condition of the unfortunate of all classes and creeds.²⁵

Francis P. Keough, ordained as the fourth bishop of Providence on 22 May 1934, shared many of the same interests as his predecessors. Like them he sought, with the assistance of his clergy and the laity, to strengthen and expand the parishes, schools, and charitable institutions of the diocese. His most notable accomplishment was the strong support he gave to the Catholic Charity Fund Appeal, which collected over \$900,000 during 1948, the last year of his administration. Bishop Keough gained national prominence as chairman of the American Bishops' Committee on Motion Pictures, the group that oversaw the work of the Legion of Decency in reviewing films and assigning them moral ratings. He also encouraged the work of the *Providence Visitor* in its campaign to rid Rhode Island newsstands of indecent literature. A fervently patriotic man, Bishop Keough lent his active support to the nation's war effort during World War II, particularly by urging the purchase of war bonds and stamps, which were made easily available through the parishes and parochial schools of the diocese. Prior to the war he directed two of his priests, Fathers William Delaney and Frederick Moreau, to organize youth groups that would provide healthy recreation for the young people of the diocese, especially the young men who could not find work because of the depression. As the war was nearing its end, he authorized another of his priests, Father Edmund F. Brock, to hold a conference for the clergy of the diocese in June 1944 in order to inform them of the diocese's plan to organize Labor Schools for businessmen and workers in the postwar period. The goal of the schools would be to improve the condition of labor and the relations between labor and management by educating both in economics and the social teachings of the church. These schools proved to be very popular.²⁶

When Bishop Keough was appointed Archbishop of Baltimore in December 1947, the diocese was pleased to hear that Rome had chosen as the diocese's next



Francis P. Keough, fourth bishop of Providence. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 8958).

bishop a Rhode Island priest, Father Russell J. McVinney, who was then rector of Our Lady of Providence Seminary in Warwick. McVinney's years as bishop embraced an important period of transition within both the American Catholic Church and the nation. The impact of World War II, the educational opportunities available to returning veterans, and the growth of the suburbs after the war all helped to break down the ghetto mentality common among Catholics in earlier years. Catholics were entering more fully into the mainstream of American life at a time of social and religious change brought on by the civil rights movement, the American experience in the Vietnam War, and the Second Vatican Council, which first met in 1962. Although McVinney himself was politically and religiously conservative, out of a sense of duty as bishop he took a leading role in the movement for the political and economic rights of African Americans and the poor. Along with the Catholic Interracial Council and Father Edward H. Flannery, editor of the *Providence Visitor*, Bishop McVinney was a strong advocate of the Fair Housing laws enacted by the General Assembly in 1965 under considerable pressure from many parts of the religious community. McVinney also assigned many of his priests and religious to work directly with the poor and disadvantaged of the state. According to William G. McLoughlin, a knowledgeable non-Catholic historian of the Rhode Island political, social, and religious experience, these priests and nuns became the "social conscience of the state," not only working for Fair Housing laws but also helping to integrate schools, joining with others in protests against the Vietnam War, organizing boycotts on behalf of Chicano grape pickers, and supporting the claims of welfare mothers.²⁷

During the 1960s staggering school enrollments, acute shortages of religious teachers, and increased costs of school operation prompted diocesan school superintendent Monsignor Arthur A. Geoghegan and the Catholic Diocesan School Committee to approach the General Assembly for additional forms of indirect aid to Catholic schools. The earliest attempt by Rhode Island Catholics to secure indirect aid to their schools, an effort by Newport's pastors in 1913, had been rejected as a violation of the separation of church and state. However, in 1937 the legislature had amended the state's general laws to allow local school committees to provide busing for students in nonprofit private schools. In 1961, at a time when the Diocese of Providence had the highest percentage of Catholic children in Catholic schools of any diocese in the country, the Diocesan School Committee asked the state to provide mathematics and science textbooks and diagnostic testing to all students in the state. In response, the General Assembly created a commission to study the issue, and hearings the following year allowed all sides to express their views. The commission finally found that there was no constitutional conflict and recommended that the

Assembly enact the requested legislation. A proposal by Monsignor Geoghegan and Citizens for Educational Freedom in 1968 that the state institute a system of tuition vouchers divided the community more than the request for textbook aid had and, in the view of one participant in the latter effort, brought out "blatant anti-Catholicism and bigotry."²⁸

When Bishop McVinney died in August 1971, Rome recognized the multicultural and multiethnic character of the Diocese of Providence by naming as the new bishop Monsignor Louis E. Gelineau, a Vermont priest of French Canadian background. Under Bishop Gelineau's pastoral care the diocese continued its commitment to a social as well as religious ministry to the people of Rhode Island, but while the commitment to a social ministry remained, the nature of that ministry changed. Until the 1970s priests and religious supplied much of the staff for the diocese's charitable institutions and for those that engaged in advocacy for the poor. With the decline in the number of priests and religious, both in proportion to the Catholic population and in total numbers, and the expansion of the social services of the government under the new programs created by Congress in the 1960s and 1970s, the number of Catholic social institutions shrank and lay people supplied larger and larger percentages of their staffs.

The decline in the number of religious and the increase of higher-paid lay staffs figured significantly in the substantial reduction of the number of Catholic grammar and high schools during the 1970s and 1980s. But by the 1990s, at the same time that the public school system was seeking better ways to meet the challenges of a changing society and economy, a greater vitality was evident in the Catholic school system.

The decline in the number of Catholics who regularly professed their faith at Sunday mass, a trend that first appeared in the statistics of the 1960s, continued during Bishop Gelineau's years, along with the decline of other traditional Catholic practices. When charges of sexual abuse committed by priests of the diocese began to be made public in 1985, the responsibility of responding to the charges and to the needs of those abused fell primarily on Bishop Gelineau's shoulders. In spite of his best efforts, agreement on compensation for the victims was not easily reached, and the issue remains unsettled.

In the midst of these difficulties, fresh signs of religious enthusiasm and vitality appeared. During the last thirty years the diocese has sought to reorganize its resources and redirect its priorities in the light of the mandates of the Second Vatican Council and the changes that have come about as new immigrants from Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Cape Verde islands have taken up new homes in the state. Among the healthy signs of church life was a strengthening of the Roman Catholic Church's relationships with other churches and church leaders. Having begun with personal friendships between Catholic and other clergy in the days of Bishop Hendricken, these relationships received new impetus with the efforts initiated by the Fathers of the Atonement and the prayers for church unity that they introduced in the diocese in 1952. During Bishop McVinney's and Bishop Gelineau's years the developing connections became more formal and practical. When he retired in June 1997 and was succeeded by his coadjutor, Bishop Robert E. Mulvee, Bishop Gelineau was recalled as "a people's bishop" who had provided strong leadership for the church in difficult times.²⁹



While Catholics differ from some of their fellow Rhode Islanders on such matters as birth control, censorship, and abortion, they share with those of other faiths similar views on many social and moral issues of importance. One principle to which the state's Catholics are committed is the principle of religious liberty. As William McLoughlin observed, "Had not Catholics come to respect the state's tradition of religious equality, the plight of non-Catholics might be more difficult today. [Catholics] have not returned the bigotry they suffered, but accept the ideal of religious liberty as Roger Williams expressed it."³⁰ During the last 125 years the Catholics of Rhode Island have sought to show themselves good citizens of the state by praying for its welfare, by taking an active and constructive part in its political life, by seeking to provide for the material needs of its poor and disadvantaged, whether Catholic or non-Catholic, as means allow, and, above all, by bringing the insights and values of their Catholic tradition to the task of determining the best course for Rhode Island to follow in addressing the needs of its citizens.

Notes

1. Patrick T. Conley, *Democracy in Decline: Rhode Island's Constitutional Development, 1776-1841* (Providence: Rhode Island Historical Society, 1977), 32-34.
2. John Locke, *A Letter concerning Toleration*, in *The Works of John Locke* (London: W. Ostride & Son, et al., 1812), 6:45-47.
3. Robert W. Hayman, *Catholicism in Rhode Island and the Diocese of Providence*, vol. 1, 1780-1886 (Providence: Diocese of Providence, 1982), 3-13. See also Patrick T. Conley and Matthew J. Smith, *Catholicism in Rhode Island: The Formative Era* (Providence: Diocese of Providence, 1976).
4. Hayman, *Catholicism in Rhode Island*, 1:13-18.
5. For James McKenna, Wilfred Harold Munro, *Memorial Encyclopedia of the State of Rhode Island* (New York: American Historical Society, 1916), 410-11; for Edward McCracken, obituary of Mary Campbell (his daughter), *Providence Visitor*, 18 Nov. 1910; for Michael Reddy, *Woonsocket Patriot*, 28 June 1878; for Irish in Newport in 1827, Bishop Benedict Fenwick, "Memoranda," 2 Feb. 1827, Archdiocese of Boston Archives.
6. Hayman, *Catholicism in Rhode Island*, 1: 19-23.
7. Ibid. 37-38; *Bristol Phenix*, 5 Nov. 1887; David H. Bennett, *The Party of Fear: From Nativist Movement to the New Right in American History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 35-47.
8. Hayman, *Catholicism in Rhode Island*, 1:57-86.
9. Ibid., 126-127; obituary of Fr. George T. Mahoney, *Woonsocket Evening Call*, 23 Dec. 1907.
10. Hayman, *Catholicism in Rhode Island*, 1:128-40; obituary of Patrick Boyle, *Providence Visitor*, 23 May 1896.
11. Hayman, *Catholicism in Rhode Island*, 1:150-54.
12. Obituary of John B. Hennessy, *Providence Visitor*, 6 Feb. 1888; obituary of Charles E. Gorman, *ibid.*, 16 Feb. 1917; Robert A. Wheeler, "Fifth Ward Irish: Immigrant Mobility in Providence, 1850-1870," *Rhode Island History* 32 (1973): 53-61.
13. Hayman, *Catholicism in Rhode Island*, 1:292-96.
14. Ibid., 296-99.
15. Hayman, *Catholicism in Rhode Island and the Diocese of Providence*, vol 2, 1886-1921 (Providence: Diocese of Providence, 1995), 648-52.
16. Conley and Smith, *Catholicism in Rhode Island*, 97-103.
17. Hayman, *Catholicism in Rhode Island*, 2:668-81.
18. Ibid., 652-57.
19. Ibid., 657-58.
20. Ibid., 661-67.
21. Ibid., 668-81.
22. Ibid., 481, 534; Patrick T. Conley, "Matthew Harkins: Catholic Bishop and Educator," *Rhode Island History* 53 (1995): 71-89.
23. Thomas F. Cullen, *The Catholic Church in Rhode Island* (North Providence: Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, 1936), 189-95.
24. *Providence Journal*, 23 Jan., 1, 6 Feb. 1923, 11 Oct. 1926; *Providence Evening Tribune*, 7 Nov. 1924.
25. *Providence Visitor*, 4 Apr., 21 Nov. 1930, 30 Jan., 6, 13 Feb., 30 Oct., 27 Nov. 1931; *Providence Journal*, 5 Oct. 1933.
26. *Providence Visitor*, 19 Feb. 1948.
27. Ibid., 31 Jan. 1964, 13 Aug. 1971; *Providence Sunday Journal*, 16 July 1972; William G. McLoughlin, *Rhode Island: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1978), 225.
28. *Providence Journal*, 13 Mar. 1914, 13 May 1937; *Providence Visitor*, 16 Mar. 1962, 1 Mar. 1963; Patrick T. Conley, interview with Robert McKenna, 1965.
29. *Providence Journal*, 12 June 1997.
30. McLoughlin, *Rhode Island*, 225.

Catholic schools were widely regarded as a threat to public education. This cartoon by Thomas Nast appeared in Harper's Weekly, 30 September 1871. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 8959).



THE AMERICAN RIVER GANGES.

Reproduced, from HARPER'S WEEKLY for September 30, 1871.

The Growth of a Catholic Educational System in Providence and the Protestant Reaction, 1848-1876

DAVID GARTNER



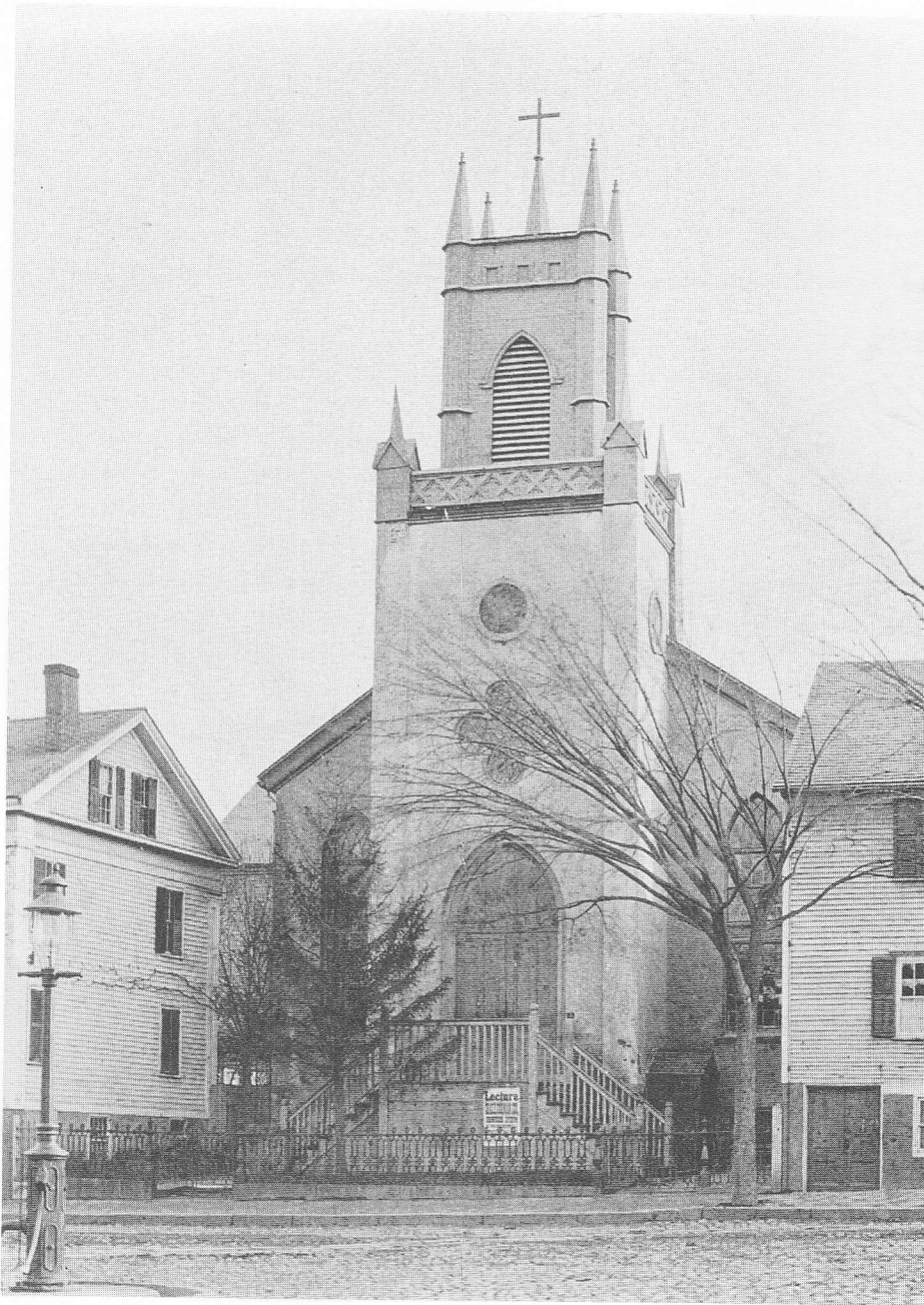
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During the mid-nineteenth century, Catholics in Providence dissented from the popular consensus in support of public education and set about establishing their own alternative educational system. This effort reflected an underlying conflict between the Protestant orientation of the public schools and a quest for Catholic power, a quest that manifested itself in the development of Catholic schooling across urban America.¹ The Catholic leadership of Providence viewed the public schools as a form of Protestant schooling, in which anti-Catholic bigotry was expressed by most textbooks and by many teachers. Beginning in 1848 these clergy sought to construct a system of parish schools that would help perpetuate the faith among the rising generation of immigrant children. In 1851 the Sisters of Mercy arrived in Providence to serve as teachers for the Catholic youth of the city, signaling the first major step toward the development of a full-scale Catholic school system.² Competing with the public schools for the enrollment of immigrant children, the Catholic schools stimulated militant opposition among Providence Protestants. In the 1860s Catholic leaders challenged the Providence Reform School's treatment of its immigrant students. Although the challenge was unsuccessful, Providence Catholics proved themselves far more effective in maintaining and expanding their own educational system in the face of Protestant assaults for the rest of the nineteenth century.

Throughout the nation early Catholic efforts had focused on the issue of excusing Catholic children from reading the King James Bible and participating in other Protestant religious exercises in school. By the 1850s, however, Catholic leaders had begun to reject the system of public schooling as entirely inadequate and to seek to establish their own separate diocesan parochial school system.³ Although Providence did not witness intense conflict over the use of the King James Bible and avoided the "Bible riots" that befell Philadelphia and other northern cities in the 1840s,⁴ the Catholic leadership of Providence took early initiatives toward the establishment of a system of Catholic schools.



The expansion of Catholic schooling in the city closely paralleled the establishment of new parishes, thus reflecting the overall growth of Providence's Catholic population. Only about 250 Catholics lived in Providence in 1833, but the subsequent influx of Irish laborers to work on construction projects, particularly the new railroad lines, swelled Catholic populations in the city's Fox Point and Smith Hill sections. The first Catholic church in Providence, SS. Peter and Paul, was completed on High (now Westminster) Street, on part of the site of the present cathedral, in 1838. Continuing Irish immigration expanded the city's Catholic population to 1,696 in 1839 and to approximately 2,500 by 1844. In order to accommodate this growth, St. Patrick's Church, on Smith Hill, was completed and dedicated in 1842, during the period of martial law that followed



The first SS. Peter and Paul Church was located near the site of the present cathedral. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 304).

the Dorr Rebellion. The following year Providence became part of the newly created Diocese of Hartford, and in 1844, as a result of its sizable Catholic population, the city acquired its own bishop in residence. In October 1848 a parish school was established in the basement of SS. Peter and Paul, now the diocesan cathedral, and in December of that year St. Patrick's Church established a parish school as well.⁵

The second bishop of Hartford, Bernard O'Reilly, actively recruited the Sisters of Mercy to come to Providence to take charge of the parochial schools at the cathedral and St. Patrick's and, ultimately, to create a system of parish schooling throughout the state.⁶ O'Reilly articulated his sense of urgency in an 1851 letter requesting financial support from Catholics in France: "We do not even have any schools except two, who do not deserve the name, because of the poverty of our catholics. . . . The state gives free education but it is a Protestant education and therefore in order to save our children for the faith we need Catholic schools."⁷ Experiencing another wave of Irish immigration, Providence witnessed a rapid expansion both of Catholic churches and schools in the 1850s. Four additional Catholic churches were established within a six-year period during this decade: St. Joseph's, in Fox Point, in 1852; St. Mary's, in

Olneyville, in 1853; St. Bernard's, in Cranston, just over what was then the Providence city line, in 1857; and Immaculate Conception, in the North End, in 1858. Catholic schooling expanded even more dramatically with the establishment of a secondary school for girls, St. Xavier's Academy, at the Sisters of Mercy convent at Broad and Claverick streets, in 1851; an academy for male students and a parish school at St. Joseph's in 1852; and parish schools at St. Mary's, in nearby Pawtucket, in 1855 and Immaculate Conception in 1860. By 1860 an estimated nineteen hundred students were enrolled in the state's Catholic schools, mostly in Providence.⁸

The efforts of Providence's Catholic leadership to develop a system of parochial schools reflected the conviction that the public schools supplied a Protestant form of education, and that Catholic children could become lost to the faith as a

result. "As effect succeeds cause," wrote Bishop O'Reilly in 1851, "so it will be in too many instances, with those precious deposits trained in uncatholic schools; they will lose their faith, the faith of God, for which their fathers perilled everything."⁹ O'Reilly's determination to bring Catholic schooling to all Catholic children significantly predated the national movement toward construction of a Catholic school system. As historian John Tracy Ellis notes, it was not until 1884, at the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore, that the Catholic hierarchy in the United States sought to "make parochial school almost mandatory among their priests and people."¹⁰ Nearly thirty years earlier, in his 1855 report on education for the Hartford diocese, O'Reilly had expressed his hope "that in a little time every congregation in the diocese will have its schools. If we wish to save the rising generation to religion and God, we will, even at sacrifice, give them a thorough Catholic education, nothing short of this will protect youth against error and save them to Religion."¹¹

According to Sister M. Catherine Morgan, a teacher with the Sisters of Mercy, the Catholic community in Providence strongly backed the clergy's efforts to construct an alternative school system. Although student-teacher ratios were enormously high and facilities inadequate, many parents eagerly sent their children to Catholic schools; despite "any of the inconveniences of heat and cold, or uncomfortable school furniture which the children have to endure," these parents "think it is sufficient compensation to have their children receive a Catholic education."¹²

On the other hand, some Catholic parents favored continuing the practice of sending Catholic children to the public schools, or "mixed education," as it was called. This group, however, was in the minority. In response to an 1852 letter to the *Boston Pilot* from a Providence Catholic advocating mixed education, several other Catholics from the city attacked the idea and came to the defense of Catholic schooling. These writers asserted that Catholic schools were both urgently necessary and in popular demand.

"Mixed Education" [declared one letter writer] is neither more nor less than for us Catholics to hand over our children, body and soul, to the teaching of men, devoid of any religious unity themselves. . . . It is to the Catholic Church we must look for education free from fanaticism and bigotry. . . . I know the Catholics as well as any one, and as many of them;—their opinions are as their fathers' were, with the Church.¹³

Another Providence Catholic argued that Catholic schools were crucial in order to "preserve our youth to religion" and urged that the parochial educational system be expanded rapidly; "if there be anything for which Catholics should contend strenuously, it is that of the organization of Catholic schools, in connexion with every congregation, throughout the length and breadth of the land."¹⁴

Strong community support for Catholic schools was demonstrated in St. Joseph's Parish after its parochial school fell into debt during 1855 and was closed by the parish priest. By the following year popular pressure led to the school's revival: "So great was the desire of the people," wrote Sister Morgan, "that he re-opened it for the beginning of the next school year in 1856, and about 50 to 60 boys and between 90 and one hundred girls crowded gladly back to their dear, familiar schoolroom."¹⁵ But such support in the parish—which served a largely poor Irish congregation—could not replace the need for continued parish-based funding; and following the panic of 1857, in early 1858 the school was closed once again.



A parish school was established at St. Patrick's Church, Providence, in 1848. Lithograph, circa 1875. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 8954).

Though setbacks did occur, Catholic education grew into a significant and competitive alternative school system in Providence during the 1850s. Its impact was recognized by the city's public school committee as early as 1851, when a committee report noted that "a considerable diminution of the numbers attending several of the schools has recently taken place by the removal of children of Roman Catholic parents, schools having been provided for them under the immediate supervision of the Sisters of Mercy."¹⁶ By the fall of 1851 the Sisters of Mercy had charge of over five hundred students in the schools at St. Patrick's and the cathedral.¹⁷ Within several years of the order's arrival, Catholic school enrollment in Providence had tripled.

In 1854 a letter published in the *Providence Journal* reported an extremely small number of Catholic children in attendance at the public schools: "The Superintendent of the public schools of this city informs me that there is not to exceed one-tenth of the children of Catholic citizens that attend the schools; and these do so in direct opposition to the will of the priests."¹⁸ Whether or not this estimate was accurate, it is clear that

by the mid-1850s the rise of Catholic schooling had become an important concern of those who directed the public schools. Although the city's Protestants, extremely wary of any challenge by the Catholic Church, were inclined to overestimate the magnitude of the threat to the public school system, Catholic schools were in fact competing with public schools for students. In 1855 the Providence School Committee again attributed declining enrollments in its schools to Catholic competition. "This apparent decrease in the number of children attending our public schools," said its report, "notwithstanding the large increase in our population, may be accounted for by the fact that several hundred children have withdrawn to attend the Roman Catholic schools."¹⁹

In that same report School Superintendent Daniel Leach advised that one public school be closed for lack of students: "The school on Wickenden street has been reduced to so small a number by the removal of Catholic children, that unless it shall be materially increased, I would recommend its discontinuance at the close of next year."²⁰ The escalation of competition between the two school systems can also be seen in the figures for school enrollment released in 1855. While public school enrollment had grown from 5,180 students in 1850 to a total of 5,730 students by 1855, Catholic school enrollment, according to a Catholic

Enrollment in Public Schools and Catholic Schools in Providence, 1848-1883

DATE	PUBLIC SCHOOLS	CATHOLIC SCHOOLS
1848	5,904	100 (est.)
1851	5,280	500
1855	5,730	1,640
1865	7,401	1,273
1875	11,306	2,553
1879	11,240	2,676
1881	12,102	2,742
1883	13,140	3,197

SOURCES: Edwin Snow, *Census of the City of Providence, Taken in July 1855* (Providence, 1856), 32; *Report of the School Committee of the City of Providence*, 1900, p. 328.

census, had increased from about 500 students in 1851 to an estimated 1,640 students by 1855. (Neither school system could attract those children—nearly one-third of the total population between five and fifteen years old—who were numbered not among school enrollees but among the workers in the state's sizable child-labor force.)²¹



This 1842 broadside sought to undermine support for the People's Constitution by appealing to anti-Catholic prejudice. RIHS Collection (RH X3 4355).

NATIVE AMERICAN CITIZENS!
READ AND TAKE WARNING!

A SHORT SERMON.
LET EVERY SOUL BE SUBJECT TO THE HIGHER POWERS. *ROMANS, 13, 1.*
Christians, like all other men, have the right to protect themselves against oppression. They have also the right to aid in the protection of others, but our Savior said, "MY KINGDOM IS NOT OF THIS WORLD," and thus taught his followers that it was inconsistent with their duty to him, and with their respect for his doctrine, to mingle in the strife for power. Paul, in the above quoted text, did not intend to teach his brethren that they should submit, with degrading servility, to tyranny, cruelty, and oppression, when they could remove the evil without producing another equally great. But his frequent exhortations, as well as those of his DIVINE MASTER, fully show that they considered it the indispensable duty of CHRISTIANS to submit to existing governments for the sake of peace, until oppression became too cruel to be borne, or until the evil could be remedied without unnecessary violence; and that, in ALL CASES, for the HONOR of the CHURCH, the SUCCESS of the GOSPEL, and the PEACE of the COMMUNITY, CHRISTIANS should "be subject to the HIGHER POWERS," as long as forbearance would be a virtue.

CHRISTIAN PROFESSORS OF RHODE ISLAND, I put to you a plain question—Will you answer it as an ALIEN of GOD, to HIM AND YOUR OWN CONSCIENCE? Does it appear that the Constitution is to be voted on for adoption or rejection, on the 21st, 22d, and 23d, inst. as of such a character as to threaten danger to your rights and privileges, or those of others? Is it oppressive in its provisions or bearings? Would you be justified in rejecting it, and in adopting another which will place your government, your civil and political institutions, your PUBLIC SCHOOLS, and perhaps your RELIGIOUS PRIVILEGES, under the control of the POPE of ROME, through the medium of thousands of NATURALIZED FOREIGN CATHOLICS? Does the honor and propriety of the church require it? Do the peace, welfare, and prosperity of the State require it? Yet, reject the Constitution now presented to you, and you show your preference for anarchy, which should it ever be adopted, WILL PLACE THE BALLANCE OF POWER IN THE STATE, IN THE HANDS OF THOSE PEOPLE. The event can readily be predicted. Would you defend yourselves and your church against the operations and predominance of such a power, and preserve the State

from anarchy and ruin? Would you preserve peace, and thereby avoid violence and bloodshed? Would you pay that respect to the CONSTITUTED AUTHORITIES WHICH THE GOSPEL DEMANDS? Would you keep a conscience pure and undefiled, by pursuing a course on which you can hereafter look with approbation, and for the correctness of which, you can CONFIDENTLY APPEAL TO HEAVEN IN THE HOUR OF DEATH, AND AT THE DREAD TRIBUNAL HEREAFTER? Then, and I must suppose such to be your wish, array yourselves on the side of the "HIGHER POWERS." In a quiet and peaceable manner, GIVE YOUR VOTES FOR THE CONSTITUTION ON MONDAY NEXT. Show those who act in the opposition only to carry out their will, that you value too highly your CHRISTIAN PROVERBS, your CHRISTIAN CHARACTER, and your CHRISTIAN PRINCIPLES, to countenance sedition, and to endanger the peace of an entire community, only to defeat the benevolent object of the existing government, and to give encouragement and support to a spirit of violence and disorder. Tell those who would alienate you to and them in the work of strife, "WE HAVE NOT SO LEARNED CHRIST."

REV. WILLIAM S. BALCH.
The above gentleman, late Pastor of the First Universalist Church in this city, and who while here, did much for the party which have made and voted for the "People's Constitution," was requested by that party to lecture during his visit here this week from New York. He very properly refused to do so; and said he would not care to be a resident here; for the reason, that the party here carried the thing too far, and are now making a political affair of it, and he would have nothing to do with it. This valuable testimony from one of the ablest and best friends of the suffering cause.

AN EXAMPLE.
In a "Short Sermon" published in our extra sheet, the writer alluded to the possibility that, should a constitution be adopted, the "People's Constitution" adopted, the naturalized foreign Catholics might exercise a pernicious influence on our political, civil, and religious institutions, and on our public schools. We have a man, who, at the CATHOLIC BISHOP HUGHES, of New York, at the last election in that city, uttered under his control, some words after an effort of a few days, to sustain the native sex his own views on the question of public schools for the purpose of securing the loss of the CATHOLIC CHURCH, a portion of the common school fund of the State. With a

longer period for the purpose, it is probable a body of foreign naturalized Catholics might have been organized, and will hereafter be organized, in that city and State, under PAPEL, ecclesiastical influence, to carry out their views. The excitement on the question still continues. The Bishop and his party are determined to succeed in their efforts. The native citizens have become alarmed. And meetings have been held to prevent the admitted attempt from becoming successful.

On Wednesday last, a meeting was held in the Park, New York city, on the question. And during the proceedings, a band of foreigners broke in upon the assembly, and by means of violence, broke up the meeting. A New York paper says: "Our cheeks are reddened with shame and indignation as we write about this matter; for so gross an insult to our rights as Americans, we have never seen or heard of before. Bands of filthy wretches, whose every touch was offensive to a decent man, drunken lechers; rascals who the police and criminal courts would be ashamed to receive in their walls; coarse, monstrous, vicious, blind slaves and rear huns; disgusting objects, bearing the form of man, but whose soul is the same might almost object to us as companions—these were they who broke into the midst of a peaceful body of American citizens—drunk and insolent, the chosen officers of the assembly, and with strikes, buff blows, and howling in their filthy, common native tongue, revealed the continuance of the customary routine. We saw Irish priests, thieves, and drunkards, looking on with approval and evidently encouraging the gang who created the tumult. We noticed two of these tavern louts, on their knees, praying fervently—one of the most aged and respectable men of our city. We noticed the whole body of these officers forced, at length, from their seats, and driven, with lust and blood, from the stage. And these officers were native Americans—men with grey heads—men known for four years as good as government of reputation philanthropy and exalted worth! And is New York to utter no best voice of abhorrence towards this transaction? Is this hypocritical, unprincipled, and unchristian, and let these Jewish knaves, and their apocryphal laws, what it is to feel the blast from an injured and outraged country?"

Remember, however—Read this, Ponder seriously on it. Say—are you prepared to witness such scenes enacted in your title, and threaten peaceful and prosperous State? Are you prepared to see a Catholic Bishop, at the head of a posse of Catholic Priests, and a band of their servile dependents, take up arms, and let these critical seasons? Is this the way to secure your institutions, under the sanction of a State Constitution? If not, vote for the Constitution now presented to you, which is well calculated to protect you from such abuses. ROCK WILLIAMS.

The rapid growth of Catholic schools in Providence led to a militant Protestant reaction during the mid-1850s, with Catholics increasingly viewed as subversive for their opposition to the public school system and their advocacy of public support for their parochial schools. No issue aroused greater ire among the Protestant population of Providence than the idea of public funding for the Catholic school system. The controversy was not unique to Providence; it was contested in several other cities as well. The first and most spectacular conflict of this nature took place in New York during the 1840s, when Bishop John Hughes demanded public support of Catholic schools in that city and sought to establish a new political party to achieve his goal.²² In Rhode Island, however, continuing suffrage restrictions on the foreign-born gave the issue of public money for Catholic schools a different form.

Fears of Catholic control of the public schools had been a powerful political instrument effectively utilized by the Law and Order party during the Dorr Rebellion in the early 1840s. One influential broadside, aimed at dividing the Dorr coalition, argued that the People's Constitution would "place your government, your civil and political institutions, your PUBLIC SCHOOLS, and perhaps your RELIGIOUS PRIVILEGES, under the control of the POPE of ROME, through the medium of thousands of NATURALIZED FOREIGN CATHOLICS."²³ The demand that Catholic schools in Providence be publicly funded

was seen as a new twist on the old Catholic determination to subvert the public school system. The question of such funding became a central campaign issue in 1854, when it was used by the Whigs to strengthen public opposition to the full enfranchisement of naturalized citizens, and it continued as a focus for anti-Catholic hostility with the rise of the Know-Nothing party in 1855 and 1856.

Opposition to Catholic schooling was sparked by a July 1853 address to Irish naturalized citizens by John Coyle, a Providence Catholic-school teacher, who argued the case for publicly funding the Catholic schools.²⁴ Coyle outlined the shortcomings of the Providence public schools with respect to Catholic children, explained the importance of educating these children within Catholic institutions, and argued for the fairness of supporting the Catholic schools with public money. He attacked the classroom use of the King James Bible and pointed out the bigotry of many public school teachers, who "invariably taunt Catholic youth about the 'superstitions' and practices of their church." For Coyle, as for Bishop O'Reilly, the most compelling reason for the existence of Catholic schools was their role in perpetuating the faith: "We believe our religion and value it as our father's above all price, as the most precious inheritance Catholic parents can leave their offspring."

A tax structure requiring that Catholics support the public schools was unfair, said Coyle. Focusing on the proselytizing function of these Protestant-dominated schools and the lack of a Catholic voice in their direction, he insisted that "there can be no greater abuse of freedom then to tax a people for institutions, in the choice of which they have no voice, they have no confidence, and whose objects are incompetent to meet their objectives." Those who opposed extending public support to Catholic schools "were afraid that you by your unity might cause a division of the school fund, and that there would be an end to those state incubuses, common schools for the further proselytizing of Catholic youth and robbing them of their faith." Coyle's final argument, very similar to the case made a decade earlier by Bishop Hughes in New York, asserted that allowing Catholic taxes to support Catholic schools was integral to protecting religious freedom: "It is . . . essential to liberty of conscience that parents be allowed to train up their children in that religious belief they deem essential to their Salvation."

Immediately printed in its entirety in the *Providence Daily Tribune* (which would soon become the voice of the Rhode Island Know-Nothings), Coyle's speech drew a surge of Protestant indignation. The *Tribune* and the *Providence Journal* responded to the speech by accusing all Catholics of seeking to destroy the public schools. Labeling Catholics as un-American in their advocacy of dividing school funds between public and parochial schools, articles in both newspapers used the issue to attack the Democratic party, to which most enfranchised Catholics owed their allegiance. A series of articles in the *Tribune* by the Reverend George Darrow attacked Coyle and raised the specter of Catholics' "acquiring political power as shall enable them to annihilate our noble state system of education." Catholics sought "to procure for them[selves] an extension of the political power for the sole purpose of obtaining a portion of the school money to support their own sectarian schools," said Darrow. A writer in the *Journal*, "Sentinel," made the connection between Catholic demands and political subversion even more explicitly than Darrow did; "Whoever aims to destroy our Common school system," declared Sentinel, "aims to destroy our liberties."²⁵

A direct attack on the state's Catholic schools was mounted in the 1853 session of the General Assembly, where legislation was introduced to make attendance

at public schools mandatory for all children between the ages of five and fifteen. Two proposed bills empowered towns and cities to punish all children found to be truant.²⁶ One of these bills, aimed specifically at Providence, authorized "the Board of Aldermen to commit to the Reform school any boy, who is a habitual truant from school," the *Journal* reported.²⁷ Both bills were passed by the House of Representatives, but neither gained passage in the Senate.²⁸ The legislative effort was ultimately doomed by the demand for child labor in the state's textile industry, over one-half of whose workers were then under the age of fifteen. Textile manufacturers would prevent the passage of a compulsory-education bill in Providence until 1887.²⁹

In its 1854 session the Assembly began challenging the tax-exempt status of Catholic institutions and sought to bring these institutions under state authority. Fearing the expansion of Catholic influence over the children of Providence, the Senate resisted a bill—passed by the House—to provide a tax exemption for an orphan asylum being constructed in the city by the Catholic diocese. After passing a bill to enlarge the powers of local school committees, allowing them to visit any school receiving either direct or indirect state aid through tax exemptions, the Senate pressured the House into passing a similar bill before senators would approve tax-exempt status for the Catholic orphan asylum.³⁰

In 1854 the state's Whigs made their opposition to public funding of Catholic schools an important element of their nativist strategy in their successful campaign against the Democrats. Editorials in the *Providence Journal*—an organ of the Whigs, and later of the Republicans—closely linked the possibility of expanded suffrage for the foreign-born with the division of the school fund between public and parochial schools. The *Journal* cited the recent change, advocated by the Democrats, in the method of selecting the members of the Providence School Committee; previously appointed by the city council, the committee had been reorganized so that a majority of its membership would be popularly elected.³¹ According to the *Journal*, the change was part of an "attempt which has undoubtedly been made by the Roman Catholic Hierarchy to obtain possession of the common school education in this country, or at least to divert a part of the school money to sectarian schools."³² The paper returned to this issue in a later editorial attack on the Democrats:

We do not suppose the Democratic leaders desire a division of the school money among sectarian schools as an end, but that they will consent to it as a means. They advocate such a change in suffrage as would certainly be followed by a division of the school money and they have commenced by taking charge and direction of the school money out of the hands of the committee who have so long and faithfully served in this city and making the school committee a political body, chosen at the State elections, amidst all the excitement of heated partisanship.³³

In the summer of 1854 the Know-Nothing party entered Rhode Island politics, engaged in a vigorous campaign for the November election of the legislature, and stimulated a further escalation of nativism among the citizens of Providence.³⁴ Although little of the anti-Catholic Know-Nothing platform was implemented during the party's brief ascendancy in 1855 and 1856, the Catholic school system was affected by a curtailing of its privileges of tax exemption during this time.³⁵ In 1855 the General Assembly passed a law limiting tax exemptions to three acres for all private schools. This law increased financial constraints on the Catholic schools, but it impacted non-Catholic private schools even more, and it was repealed in 1857.³⁶ But the tax-exemption issue was not



Francis Patrick McFarland, third bishop of Hartford. From William Byrne, *History of the Catholic Church in New England*, vol. 2 (Boston, 1899), facing page 150. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 1047).

dead; it would resurface in the 1870s, when limitation of tax exemptions would again threaten the growth of Providence's Catholic school system.



With the slowing of Irish immigration to Rhode Island after 1855, and the onset of the depression that followed the panic of 1857, the construction of new Catholic churches and schools came to a temporary halt during the 1860s. No new parish was founded in Providence for twelve years after the establishment of Immaculate Conception Parish in 1858. Similarly, fourteen years elapsed between the inauguration of Immaculate Conception's school in 1860 and the opening of another new parish school anywhere in Rhode Island.³⁷ Francis P. McFarland, ordained the third bishop of the Diocese of Hartford in 1858, was not immediately engaged in expanding the Catholic school system, but he did retain a strong commitment to Catholic education. Disgusted by the anti-Catholic bias he perceived at the Brown University commencement of 1864, the following Sunday he spoke of "the importance of supporting schools and guarding children as shown by the spirit of bigotry and intolerance around us."³⁸

Although Providence Catholics did not expand their challenge to public school enrollments in the 1860s, in 1868 Bishop McFarland and several leaders of the Providence Irish community did attack the abuses allegedly suffered by Catholic children at the Providence Reform School. Established in 1850 with "an especial view to the confinement, instruction and reformation of young persons of idle, vicious and vagrant habits,"³⁹ by 1866 the reform school had admitted 1,878 children, of whom 884 were of Irish parentage.⁴⁰ In February 1868 Bishop McFarland wrote to the editor of the *Freeman's Journal* in New York, seeking advice about the situation at the school. In his letter McFarland described allegations of mistreatment of the children and denounced the refusal by the school's board of trustees to investigate these allegations; "The fact that a majority of the children are Catholics," he declared, "doubtlessly increases their unwillingness to act." McFarland also claimed that the school was denying Catholic pupils their religious liberty: "Catholic prayer books are taken from children and burned, and they are compelled to join in Protestant worship."⁴¹

After discussing the issue at a meeting in September 1868, McFarland and a group of parishioners petitioned the Providence City Council to address conditions at the school.⁴² The petition, signed by Thomas Cosgrove and other prominent Catholic citizens of the city, alleged that "vices against chastity, decency and good morals have prevailed in the school," that "teachers use immodest and disgusting language in the presence of the children," and that "modes of punishment the most cruel and inhuman have been used in the school." Finally the petitioners charged that children were being deprived of their religious liberty.

A spirit of proselytism and of religious intolerance has prevailed in the school, as is shown by the fact that children of different creeds are compelled to attend a form of worship which is contrary to the conscientious convictions of a large majority of them; which is in direct conflict with the spirit and letter of our state constitution. . . . The children of said school are denied the use of books and all religious instruction in the religion of their choice.⁴³

An investigation was conducted over several days (during which the legal fees of the Irish Catholic petitioners were paid for by Bishop McFarland).⁴⁴ Although many children testified to the brutality of the school's staff, no action was taken to discipline the staff or to change conditions at the school. Students recounted

how children would be kicked or beaten for extended periods after refusing to obey orders by school authorities. Katie Hopkins described how her friend, Elden Kelly, received 184 blows upon his back from the principal after having laughed during a religious service. James Foster told how he had been struck in the face by the principal after refusing to take off his coat. Despite repeated testimony of this nature, all but one member of the Providence Board of Aldermen declared that the charges were not sustained, that no sectarianism was permitted at the school, and that the staff was simply pursuing their aim of inculcating good morals.⁴⁵



Unsuccessful at influencing the Protestant-dominated public school system, the Catholic leadership of Providence soon refocused its attention on building a formidable alternative to that system. In the early 1870s Catholic secondary schooling became a firmly established part of the Providence community. In September 1870 the Fountain Street Academy for the instruction of boys was opened in the Cathedral parish, and in 1872 a prestigious school for girls, the Elmhurst Academy, was founded on Smith Street in what was then North Providence, just outside Providence, by the Sisters of the Sacred Heart.⁴⁶

By the mid-1870s a new wave of parish elementary schools were also established in Providence in response to the renewed growth of the Catholic population after the Civil War. In the entire Diocese of Hartford, including Providence, the Catholic population grew from an estimated 90,000 members in 1858 to 200,000 by 1872. As a result of this growth, in 1872 the Diocese of Providence was formed. The new diocese included 95,000 Catholics in the state of Rhode Island and an additional 30,000 in southeastern Massachusetts. Three new parishes were founded in the Providence area during the early 1870s: St. John's, on Federal Hill, in 1870; Assumption, in Elmwood, in 1871; and St. Edward's, in the North End, in what was then North Providence, in 1874. New parochial schools were opened in St. Mary's Parish, Olneyville, in 1874; in St. Edward's Parish in 1877; and in St. Patrick's Parish in 1878. A school was reopened in St. Joseph's Parish in 1879.⁴⁷

After a decline in enrollment during the 1860s, Providence's Catholic schools were again offering formidable competition to the city's public school system in the 1870s. In 1865 the Catholic schools had accommodated 1,273 pupils, or 17 percent as many as were attending the public schools. By 1875 Catholic school enrollment had grown to 2,553, or 23 percent of the public school total. Among the city's Irish American children, approximately 54 percent would be attending Catholic schools by 1880.⁴⁸

As the Catholic school system developed, the arguments in support of it by Catholic leaders remained basically consistent. Their fundamental concern, of course, was a desire to perpetuate the faith, and they continued to focus on the proselytizing nature of the public schools. By 1870 they were even more directly identifying public school education as distinctly and strongly Protestant, and they were now adding a new objection: that the public school system did not employ Catholics as teachers.

Bishop McFarland articulated his position regarding Catholic education in a St. Patrick's Day address in 1870. "Train up your children in the love of that faith so that they may never abandon that cause for which your fathers bled and

died," he urged. "We feel it our duty to educate our children as Catholics; to seek a religious training for them at the same time we seek an intellectual training for them." McFarland appealed to a sense of group solidarity embracing not only religious affiliation but shared Irish heritage as well: "You must remember to study the interests of your race and church and to stand up for those interests." While restating the established Catholic position, he also added an insistence that Catholic children have teachers of their own faith; "Why should Catholics be excluded from having a schoolmaster or schoolmistress of the same religion as their fathers?" he asked.

Although Catholic children are 425 more numerous than all others we have not a single Catholic teacher in the public schools. This is not because Catholic teachers are incompetent but they do not get an opportunity. But they talk about passing laws which will compel Catholic children to go to Protestant schools and in the meantime it is determined that no Catholic teacher shall be employed.⁴⁹

The Providence school system in fact remained reluctant to hire Catholic teachers for at least another decade. During the 1870s few teachers were hired from the city's predominantly Catholic Irish community; in 1880 fewer than 4 percent of Providence's public school teachers were children of Irish immigrants.⁵⁰

The *Weekly Visitor*, a Catholic newspaper founded in Providence in 1875, also attacked the public schools as Protestant institutions. "The public schools are sectarian and a religion entirely hostile and antagonistic to Catholic faith is taught there," the *Visitor* charged. Moreover, the Protestant nature of the schools was a publicly acknowledged fact: "That the present school system is Protestant, the tone of the books Protestant and the influence of the schoolroom Protestant is admitted by all Protestant denominations." The *Visitor* did not object to truly nonsectarian education, though it was skeptical that it could actually be achieved: "Yes, let us have non-sectarian schools if that be possible, but do not call those we have by that name."⁵¹

Protestants again sought to impose legal constraints on Providence's Catholic school system in the 1870s. Striking at the financial resources of local Catholic churches, in 1870 the General Assembly limited the tax exemption of property held for religious purposes to \$20,000. In 1871 the Assembly approved a proposed amendment to the state constitution stipulating "that no sectarian or denominational school or institution shall receive any aid or support from the revenues of the state, nor shall any tax be imposed upon the people or property of the state in aid of such schools or institutions."⁵² The amendment was rejected by the voters, but the resurgence of Protestant hostility toward Catholic schools and fears of a divided fund for school financing can clearly be seen in these legislative actions.

In another reflection of renewed apprehension over the city's Catholic schools, in the fall of 1872 Providence mayor Thomas Doyle—who also served as president of the Providence School Committee—vetoed the proposed construction of a public school building because he feared the competition that the school would face from a Catholic school to be built nearby. "There is opposition to the erection of any large brick building at a great cost," reported the *Providence Journal*, "especially as [Doyle] was informed of the intention of the Catholics to erect a school on Barton street."⁵³

The issue of the fairness of taxing Catholics for schools hostile to their faith was raised in a public speech in 1874 by Thomas Hendricken, the first bishop of the Diocese of Providence. Because of their religion, Hendricken argued, a majority



Thomas F. Hendricks, first bishop of Providence. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 8956).

of the children of Providence did not receive the benefits of their parents' tax money. "At present Catholics have much to contend against," declared Hendricks; "although we pay taxes in support of the institutions of the state, we are nevertheless practically debarred from them as Catholics and this, too notwithstanding that in the State we number one-third of the population and in the city . . . fully one-half."⁵⁴ In an editorial on the bishop's speech, the *Providence Journal* renewed its accusations of a Catholic conspiracy against public education and heatedly charged that "it is the overthrow of our common school system that the dignitaries of the Papal church have at heart."⁵⁵

In response to the heightened competition posed by Catholic schools, in 1875 the General Assembly held a series of hearings on the tax-exempt status of the state's religious institutions. In January 1876 Representative William Sheffield introduced a measure for punishing anyone who interfered with children's attendance at public schools; but the Assembly that month instead chose a more direct way to attack the Catholic school system: through its finances. The new legislative act limited the tax exemption for churches to buildings and surrounding land of no more than one acre, and it restricted the exemption for educational institutions to free public schools only.⁵⁶

The debates over the act in the General Assembly revealed a distinct anti-Catholic bias as the underlying motive for this legislation.⁵⁷ The *Weekly Visitor* interpreted the legislation as a sign of the resurgence of anti-Catholic activity in the city. "We thought religious persecution was a thing of the past, but we find it has only changed its forms. . . . Indeed it is charged that the bill for taxing church property, schools and charitable institutions was designed from the beginning to oppress us solely." The *Visitor* quoted from a speech by a Warwick legislator who supported the bill with the argument that tax exemption provided a financial advantage to "a sect of religionists whose primary obedience is due, not to the Government whose protection they enjoy, but to a foreign prince, three thousand miles away." According to the speech, the Catholic Church claimed "an absolute dominion over the consciences of men [and therefore] exclusive control over their minds." Moreover, the church believed that its immunities were rooted not in civil right but in right granted directly by God. "What," demanded the legislator, "must be the inevitable consequences of these assumptions?"

To array all the vast forces of this Church against every element by which the permanence of a free government is secured, and to declare through all those organs by which public opinion may be influenced an uncompromising hostility to that very system of *public education* which it is the object of the present bill and has always been the anxious care of this State to *foster and protect* as the life-blood of our institutions.⁵⁸

Whatever the motive for the passage of this act, its effect was clear: Catholic schools were now denied the tax exemption that they had previously enjoyed.⁵⁹ Catholics challenged the law in the Rhode Island courts, arguing that their parochial schools were in reality a form of free public schooling. In an 1878 suit against the tax assessors in Providence, St. Joseph's Church claimed that the city was taxing church lots and buildings that were, in fact, being used for free public schools. The Rhode Island Supreme Court ruled against St. Joseph's on the grounds that the legislation allowed tax exemptions only to those schools that were "established, maintained and regulated under the statute laws of the State."⁶⁰





Thomas F. Hendricks, first bishop of Providence. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 8956).

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