

An Irish or Nativist riot? The Abingdon Square Incident

BY HUGH E. O'ROURKE

The riot at Abingdon Square in Greenwich Village on the Fourth of July 1853 occurred during a period of heavy Irish immigration and corresponding nativist sentiment. Nativists were Americans who greatly resented new immigrants and who tried to challenge their transition into the United States. Nativists also viewed immigrants' Catholicism, with its connection to the Papacy, as incompatible with American democracy.

Exactly

which

group was at fault for the

Abingdon Square incident is clouded in history.

It is clear, however, that the accounts of the incident in the New York newspapers were greatly influenced by anti-Irish feeling among journalists of the day.

THE EARLY AOH CELEBRATES JULY FOURTH

During the nineteenth century all New Yorkers enjoyed the celebration of the Fourth of July. Groups would assemble in the various neighborhoods and march as individual units to lower Manhattan, where they would hold official observances. The Abingdon Square Riot, as it became known, occurred on July 4, 1853 at the intersection of Eighth Avenue and Hudson Street, as three hundred to five hundred members of the Ancient Order of Hibernians marched down Eighth Avenue to lower Broadway.

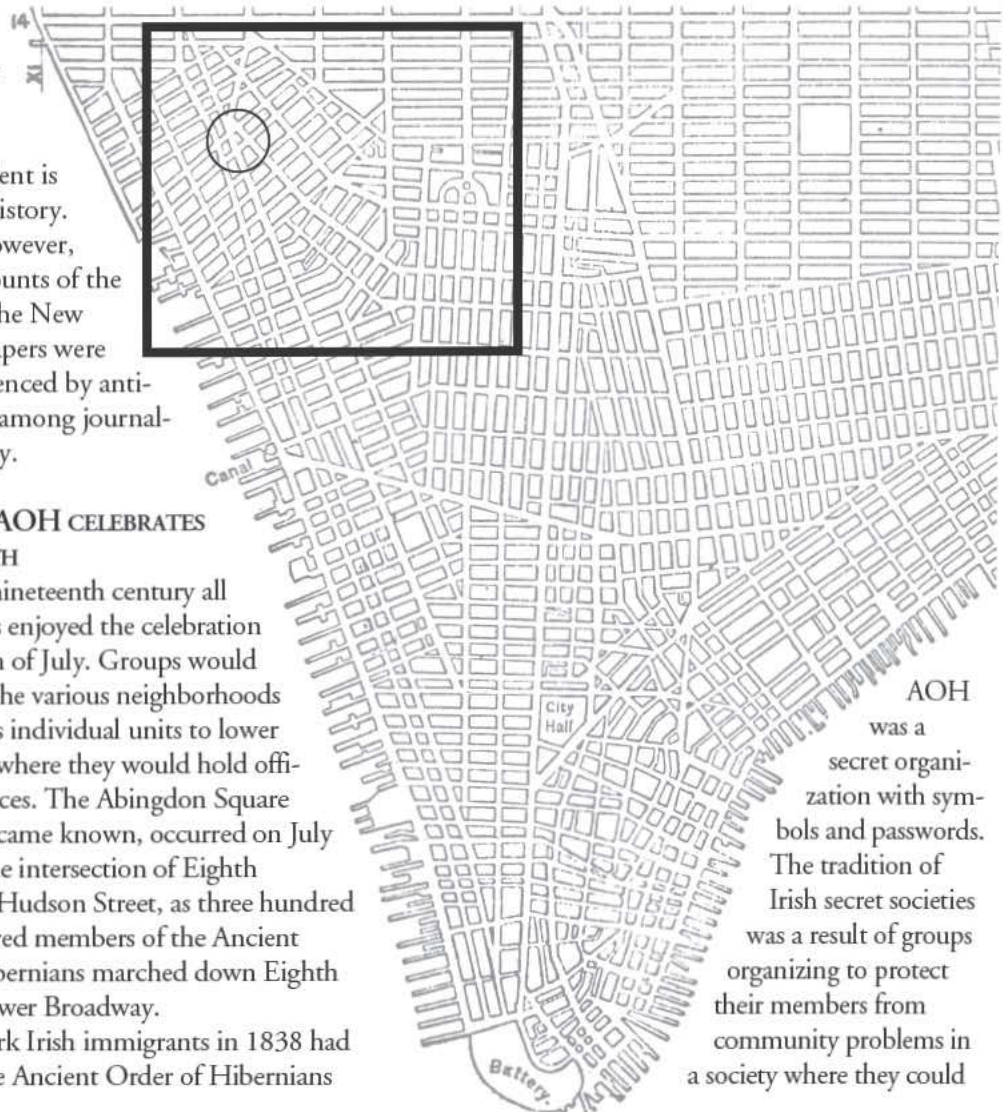
New York Irish immigrants in 1838 had organized the Ancient Order of Hibernians

(AOH) in lower Manhattan. Facts surrounding the founding and the early years of the organization are sketchy. It appears that the group followed the Irish tradition of secret societies.

Ridge, in a history published by the Ancient Order of Hibernians (1986), quoted a report in *The Truth Teller* on January 14, 1843, that discussed the secret societies and identified a Shamrock Benevolent Society, which denied that it was a secret society. Ridge also suggests that the

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Illustration: The Abingdon Square riot occurred just south of Fourteenth Street in Greenwich Village, or Manhattan's old Ninth Ward.



AOH was a secret organization with symbols and passwords. The tradition of Irish secret societies was a result of groups organizing to protect their members from community problems in a society where they could

not depend on government for help. In America the problems facing the new immigrants were most likely threats from nativists who resented the influx of poverty-stricken immigrants. Ridge suggests that the organizers of the AOH received a charter from an illegal secret society in Ireland, but the original document is no longer in existence. A copy survived and is the source of continuity of the organization. However, the origins of the organization are murky and the AOH cannot verify many of its claims.

The AOH operated under a variety of names such as the "St. Patrick's Fraternal Society," "St. Patrick's Funeral Society," or simply "St. Patrick's Boys." The name "Ancient Order of Hibernians" was probably not used publicly until 1851 when a more open fraternal structure replaced the idea of the secret society. Parade organizers of the 1853 Saint Patrick's Day parade listed the AOH as a marching unit in the parade. Archbishop John Hughes may have encouraged the organization as the membership rallied in front of old Saint Patrick's Church to defend it against a nativist mob in 1845. New AOH branches grew as parishes were formed.¹

James Saunders, an Irish tavern owner, was the apparent leader of the Ancient Order of Hibernians in the 1850s. The first actual mention of the name AOH in print was in an advertisement in the *Irish-American* (December 13, 1851) for a meeting. The meeting called for all members of the AOH to attend a gathering at Baglin's Hall on West 25th Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenues. The wording of the announcement suggests that the organization had been in existence for some time before the meeting.²

MARCHING TO ABINGDON SQUARE

The organization first came to the attention of the greater New York community with the Abingdon Square incident. The membership of the AOH assembled at James Saunders' tavern, 369 East 12th Street, at 10:00 A.M. on July 4, 1853. The group assembled into three divisions to march to the larger New York City parade on lower Broadway. The group carried a twelve-foot high banner of George Washington shaking hands with Daniel O'Connell. It was the custom of local groups to assemble in their own neighborhoods at

taverns or meeting halls and to march to the larger event. The route of march for the day was 12th Street east to the Bowery, north on Bowery to 14th Street and then west to Eight Avenue. The group would then march south to Canal Street and east to Broadway, where the group would fall behind the military for the parade.³

The Hibernians marched without incident to the westside and into the Greenwich Village neighborhood. At the intersection of Eighth Avenue and Hudson Street a coach from the Kipp and Brown stage line drove into the ranks of the marching Hibernians. Whether this was accidental or intentional is open to discussion.

Ridge describes a dispute between the marchers and the stage driver that lead to on-lookers becoming involved. Many hostile, and possibly nativist bystanders, attacked the Irish who responded in kind. The Ninth Ward police, responding to a report of rioting, beat the Irish marchers. Captain Stevenson of the Sixteenth Ward, on duty and covering the area, reported, "As the police tried to make arrests, the other marchers would counterattack and rescue the prisoner. The police ultimately, with the aid of two fire companies, and other residents, succeeded in subduing the riot and the Hibernians beat a retreat down Hudson Street. The crowd demolished one or two of their banners during the disturbance. The police succeeded in capturing near forty of the rioters, all of whom bore the strong evidences of an impression made on their heads by a contact against the policeman's

with appropriate ceremonies. An oration was delivered by LORENZO B. SHEPARD.

RIOT IN THE NINTH WARD.—We regret to state that the National holiday,—so truly a day of rejoicing, was yesterday dishonored by a desperate riot. We understand that as one of KIPP & BROWN'S stages was passing down Hudson-street near Troy-street, when the horses, growing frightened by the noise of fire-crackers, which were exploding freely on all sides, became unmanageable, and the driver was compelled to guide them along an open space of ground, through which an Irish Society, four or five hundred strong, was moving, in procession. Instantly the Irish set on him, pulled him from his box, and most cruelly beat him. The citizens who witnessed the assault, immediately took part in the riot and several thousand people were soon collected on the ground. Information was sent to the Ninth Ward Police Station, when eighteen officers were despatched to the scene. A most indiscriminate and bloody fight then took place. The Irish, it is stated, were headed and encouraged to the resistance of the Police by their Marshal or President, who flourished his sword, which was subsequently taken from him by the police. The fighting was continued down Hudson-street to near Canal.

The main scenes, however, ceased at Hammersly street, where the banner of the Irish was destroyed. Several of the police and citizens were severely injured; and amongst the former, Lieut. LEBBING, who was injured by a blow from a paving stone, on the head.

Officers SMITH, CLARK, FELL, and three ex-policemen, were severely injured; officer CLARK is confined to his home from the effect of the injuries. Thirty-six of the rioters, were arrested and taken before Justice BRUANT, who committed them for examination. Dr. J. K. HARRIS, one of the Surgeons to the Police Department, was called in and dressed their wounds.

The Police of the Ninth Ward, headed by Lieutenants TAFT and SEARING, were assisted by Capt. STEVENSON, of the Sixteenth Ward, with a platoon of his men. The citizens residing in the vicinity, rendering all the aid in their power to the Police. A number of citizens, whose names we could not learn, were severely injured.

The Irish, it is alleged, used pistols in a part of the fray; but they suffered severely in the conflict. It was reported that the driver of the stage was killed, but, on enquiring this morning, we heard he was a little better.

Illustration: The New York Times suggested on its front page for July 5, 1883 that the riot at Abingdon Square dishonored "a day of rejoicing." It reported that the "Irish... suffered severely in the conflict."

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THE
WHOLE NO. 7498.

SECOND EDITION.

THE VERY LATEST NEWS
RECEIVED AT
Telegraph, Express and the Mails
AT THE
NEW YORK HERALD OFFICE.

New York, Tuesday, July 5,
One o'clock P. M.

THE FOURTH OF JULY.
Its Celebration in New York
and Vicinity.

ALARMING RIOT IN THE NINTH WARD.
THE MONUMENT TO THE CAPTORS OF ANDRE.

THE BRILLIANT FIREWORKS.
The Metropolis in a Blaze of Glory,
&c., &c., &c.

Riot in the Ninth Ward.
A STAGE DRIVER BEATEN IN A HORRIBLE MANNER—
CONFLICT BETWEEN THE HIBERNIAN SOCIETIES
AND THE POLICE—A NUMBER BADLY INJURED ON
BOTH SIDES—ARREST OF THIRTY-SEVEN RIOTERS.

Between ten and eleven o'clock on the morning of the
4th of July, a very exciting disturbance, resulting in a
general riot and fight, took place in the Ninth ward at
the corner of Troy and Hudson streets, in which several
of the Hibernian societies, called the "Ancient Order of
Hibernians" formed a very conspicuous part.

At one time several hundred men were engaged in the
riot, hurling stones and other missiles at the police.
A number of the citizens in the immediate vicinity aided
the police in quelling the riot, many of whom, as well as
the policemen, received severe cuts on the head, and
bruised limbs. One of Klipp and Brown's stage-drivers,
by the name of Edwin J. Carpenter, was very seriously
and cruelly beaten by a number of the Hibernian Society,
the injuries of which may yet prove fatal.

The origin of the riot was in consequence of a stage
driver, Carpenter, passing his stage across the line of the
Hibernian procession. The Marshal, James Saunders, who
was on horseback ordered the stage driver to back.

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Illustration: The incident at Abingdon Square made front-page news in the New York Herald on the next day. The newspaper report indicated that citizens and the police combined forces to quell the riot in which "Hibernian societies" played a conspicuous part.

clubs." The police arrested thirty-eight persons, including James Saunders.⁴

The *New York Herald* blamed the marchers for the riot. The article reported that the stage-coach horses became frightened at holiday fire-crackers, and the driver, Edward J. Carpenter, lost control of the coach which crashed into the ranks of the marchers. James Saunders on horseback ordered the coach to back out of the parade route, but the driver was unable to do so because the horses were frightened. Saunders then ordered the

marchers to attack the driver. The marchers in this account attacked the driver, pulled him from the coach and assaulted him. Several bystanders rushed to help the driver, but the Hibernians also assaulted them. The police from the Ninth and Sixteenth Wards arrived and attempted to end the melee. In the fight the Hibernians armed themselves with "... cart-rungs, staves and paving stones." According to the *Herald's* version, the police were unable to control the crowd and some local citizens joined with the police to end the affair. Two unnamed fire companies also responded and helped the police in controlling the riot. During the battle a paving stone struck down Lieutenant Seabring of the Ninth Ward Police. Stones and other missiles also severely injured Officers Smith, Clark and Pell.⁵

IRISH SENSITIVITIES A FACTOR?

Irish marchers appeared to have a sensitivity toward persons cutting through their parade ranks. Riots occurred after persons tried to cross the street through Irish marchers at the Saint Patrick's Day Parade in 1867, and in the Jersey City and Newark parades in 1872.

In the Saint Patrick's Day parade in 1867 Brooklyn Hibernians of Division 3 of Williamsburg attacked a deliveryman who cut through their ranks as they assembled before the parade. In the ensuing riot thirty-three police officers were injured and numerous Hibernians were arrested.⁶

In Jersey City the spark that led to the violence was the cutting through the line of marchers by a deliveryman. In that parade a pedestrian, Theodore Smith, attempted to cross the street through an AOH unit. He was assaulted by the members of the marching unit. When Police Officer Bowe came to Smith's aid, he was struck by Patrick Dolan, a parade marshal. Fortunately, Patrick Joyce, a Hibernian official, intervened and saved the Police officer from the marchers. Dolan was arrested. At another point in the parade another pedestrian, William Francis, was stabbed when he attempted to cross through the marchers. In the Newark parade similar problems developed. A street car, driven by Moses Miller, attempted to pass through a gap in the parade. "The Hibernians broke ranks instantly, seized (the driver's) horses and fell upon the driver and

beat him insensibly." Approximately two thousand marchers gathered around and threatened the driver with further violence. A squad of police officers was able to prevent further violence.⁷

The police arrested thirty-eight of the Abingdon Square rioters. They were all released on \$500 bail except James Saunders who had a bail of \$5,000.⁸

At a subsequent hearing S. J. Webb gave evidence that he was on the coach when the horses entered the line of march. The marchers grabbed the horses and beat them with staves. Other marchers threw stones at the driver. Another witness, Richard J. Bush, saw a marcher strike the driver three times. Others giving testimony to the affair were Edward M. Dawson, 620 Hudson Street, Samuel Rowland, 201 West 13 Street and Robert Sutherland, 26 Greenwich Street. Their testimony suggested that the AOH was responsible for the violence.⁹

James Saunders was convicted of exciting a riot and sentenced to one year in prison and fine of \$250.00 dollars. Several of the other Hibernians were also incarcerated.¹⁰

The *New York Times*, always suspicious of the Irish community, found faults with the performance of two of the police officers. "Only two policemen both Irishmen proved traitors. These men turned upon their officers and took part with the rioters. Their names are Patrick Kelly and John Cusack. They are charged with doing all in their power to release such as were taken into custody by the other officers."¹¹ It is interesting to consider why these two Irishmen risked their jobs in protecting the Hibernians. It may have been because they witnessed a great injustice in the police and community handling of what they perceived to be a minor traffic problem.

NEIGHBORHOOD TENSIONS A FACTOR?

O'Dea in his three-volume *History of the Ancient Order of Hibernians in America and Ladies Auxiliary* (1923), which the AOH published, did not report the incident in his work. However, in a later interview with the *Irish American* he suggested that the Hibernians were the victims of an attack by nativists who lived in the Ninth Ward. He may have been correct as there was a history of Irish Catholic and Irish Protestant tensions in the Ninth Ward, or

Greenwich Village, neighborhood. In 1824 a riot between Irish Catholic and Orangemen celebrating the 12th of July resulted in many injuries and arrests.¹² The *Irish American* quoted O'Dea as charging the Orangemen and other anti-Catholic elements in the Ninth Ward were the aggressors in the 1853 incident.¹³

The Greenwich Village neighborhood, home to many native-born professionals and artisans, was well known for supporting its favorite son, Bill "The Butcher" Poole, who lived at 164 Christopher Street. Poole was a gambler and gang leader of a Protestant faction that often fought with the Irish Catholics. Associates of John Morrissey, prize-fighter, gang leader, gambler, election fixer, and later U. S. Member of Congress, eventually murdered Poole in a saloon. New York nativists admired Poole for his last words, which the newspapers reported to have been, "I think I am a goner. If I die, I die a true American; and what grieves me the most is, thinking that I've been murdered by a sot of Irish—by Morrissey in particular." The phrase, "I die a true American," became a nativist rallying cry and the phrase appeared on Poole's casket.¹⁴

O'Dea suggests Bill Poole's followers and the nativists of the Ninth Ward turned out and wiped the street clean with any man wearing white trousers. Hibernians wore a uniform of white trousers, black frock coats, and high silk hats.¹⁵

THE NATIVIST FACTOR EXPLORED

Anti-Catholicism, with roots in religious and national rivalries, xenophobia, the fear of foreigners and their unfamiliar traditions, increased as the flow of Catholic immigrants arrived. A feeling that America had lost its ability to control its national destiny triggered nativism during the middle of the nineteenth century.¹⁶ It was also a continuation of the Anglo-American traditional fear and hatred of Roman Catholicism. Nativists feared that Catholics, who were allegedly accustomed to living under European despots and monarchies, would undermine American democracy. The *Daily Budget*, a nativist newspaper, wrote in its May 23, 1854 edition:

Of all the people that flock to this land of liberty, the Irish Catholics are well

*known to be the least desirable citizens. They are ignorant, quarrelsome and every way disagreeable. Besides it is not at all unlikely that the people of Europe, glad to rid themselves of these worthless creatures, drive them to America.*¹⁷

Other issues exacerbated the division in society between the native born and the immigrant population. The problem of the public schools and the use of the Protestant Bible caused Archbishop Hughes to create a separate Catholic school system. The American Republican Party in 1843 called for a 21-year probationary period before naturalization, the election of only native-born persons, and the reading of the King James Bible in public schools. Temperance and abolitionism were also issues that separated the Irish immigrant community and the nativist New Yorkers.¹⁸

It is clear that nativists attacked the Hibernians. Poole was associated with several nativist associations that marched in his funeral procession on March 11, 1855. The procession included 155 carriages and 6,000 mourners. The newspapers listed the Howard Engine Company No. 34 and the Live Oak Engine Company No. 44 as in the procession. They may have been the unnamed two fire companies that helped the police in attacking the Hibernians. Poole was also the leader of a company called the Poole Guard, which was also in the procession. The Order of United Americans (OUA) was a nativist organization associated with the Know Nothing movement. The Hancock Chapter of the OUAs and representatives of the Continental, Ironsides, Ethan Allen, New York, Excelsior, Empire, Henry Clay, Bunker Hill, Champs, and Jasper Paulding chapters of the OUAs marched in the procession.

The AOH held a meeting on July 12 in Grand Street Hall to state its side of the incident and to rescue its badly damaged reputation. The officers of the Ancient Order of Hibernians and other prominent Irish leaders, including Thomas D'Arcy Magee, the Young Ireland movement leader, denied that the AOH had caused the riot. They blamed the Ninth Ward's population for the attack.¹⁹

However, P. Lynch the editor of the *Irish American* agreed with critics of the AOH within

the Irish community. The aggressive driving of the stage driver did not warrant the reaction given. Marching units do not have a monopoly on the right to use the streets. The assault on the driver was therefore, "...a cowardly and a dastardly act, demanding the repudiation and disgust of all who love fair play and manly proceeding." Lynch stated that the AOH and other Irish organizations on parade should never retaliate when provoked. Public opinion must be considered if the Irish were to gain the respect of the people of New York City.²⁰

The police department suspended two police officers for their actions in the riot. Sergeant Patrick Kelly and Police Officer John Cusack faced an investigation and hearing in front of the Police Commissioners on charges that they failed to take proper action in suppressing the riot. The Board of Police Commissioners, established April 12, 1853, included the mayor, the recorder and a city judge, who were responsible for disciplinary hearings.²¹ The first witness against Police Officer Cusack, John J. Van Clief, stated that he requested Cusack to arrest a marcher who had punched a citizen. Cusack refused and told the witness "...to go on about (your) business." Cusack's lawyer Alderman Busteed, asked the witness if he were a member of the Order of United Americans. The witness replied that he would not answer that question. This was the usual response for Know Nothings to deny or refuse to answer any question about their organizations or affiliations with the movement. The term "Know Nothing" comes from their frequent response of "I know nothing" when asked about the organization. Another witness, Edward Thumedy, testified that Van Clief said to him that they should appoint no Catholics to the police department. Cusack also received support from Lieutenant Lealy and Judge Beebe who stated that he was an efficient policeman. Several other witnesses testified that he had tried to make arrests during the riot.

Several police officers testified that Sergeant Kelly had ordered them to release Hibernians whom they had arrested and prevented them from stopping the riot. Witnesses complained that Sergeant Kelly instructed the policemen on the scene to stop clubbing the Hibernians. For the defense several Hibernians testified that they did not receive preferential treatment from



Kelly. Edward J. Carpenter, the stage driver, also testified that Kelly saved his life from the beating. They quoted some police officers, who testified against Kelly, as questioning whether they should have promoted him to Sergeant.²²

The commissioners of police found Sergeant Kelly and Police Officer Cusack guilty and imposed to a thirty-day fine.²³

This may have been lenient as many police officers were dismissed during that period for minor violations.

A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Undoubtedly the Hibernians were attacked by New Yorkers with nativist sympathies. However, there is enough evidence to suggest that the Irish were sensitive of real or perceived slights and were quick to resort to collective violence to defend their honor or rights in hostile surroundings.

The Abingdon Square riot was just one of the many that occurred between 1845 and 1875 in which Irish immigrants were the major partici-

pants. A cultural examination of the rural pre-Famine history and culture of the immigrants helps to explain this behavior. Cultural criminology explains the Irish immigrants' pattern of collective violence as being a continuation of a cultural tradition that accepted collective violence as both a problem-solving technique and a recreational activity. Rural Irish life was filled with the collective violence of faction fighting and agrarian secret societies. These groups used primitive rioting to solve problems, correct injustices, and as a recreational device. Collective violence in New York City and the surrounding counties was a continuation of traditional behaviors that were common in pre-Famine Ireland. As the Irish immigrants and their American-born children adjusted to life in the city and to the requirements necessary for success in an industrial setting, their traditional behaviors changed. They dropped or modified those behaviors that were incompatible with life in an industrial society. Thus, Irish immigrant riots were frequent until 1875 when the Irish immi-

Illustration: Anti-Irish nativism is shown in Thomas Nast's illustration of rioting on St. Patrick's Day in 1867. Nast's drawing appeared in the April 6th edition of Harper's Weekly.

grants were greatly influenced by the modernizing effects of urban living. Their success in politics, industry, and government created an environment that made traditional rural cultural behaviors inconsistent with their new reality. This transition made them the quintessential New Yorkers.

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Notes

- 1 Ridge, John T., *Erin's Sons in America: The Ancient Order of Hibernians*. 1986: 10-13.
- 2 Ridge, 1986, 14.
- 3 *New York Times*, July 23, 1853:6.
- 4 *New York Herald*, July 5, 1853:1.
- 5 *New York Herald*, July 5, 1853:1
- 6 *New York Times*, March 25, 1867:2
- 7 *New York Times*, March 19, 1872:8.
- 8 *New York Times*, July 5, 1853:1, and July 6, 1853:3.
- 9 *New York Herald*, July 9, 1853:8.
- 10 *New York Times*, January 1, 1855:3.
- 11 *New York Times*, July 9, 1853:8.
- 12 Emmet, 1915, 464.
- 13 Ridge, 1986,20.
- 14 *New York Times*, March 9, 1855:1.
- 15 Ridge, 1986, 20.
- 16 Higham, 1971, 166.
- 17 Quoted in *Irish American*, June 3, 1854:2.
- 18 Anbinder, 1992, 11-19.
- 19 Ridge, 1986, 19-20.
- 20 *Irish American*, July 23, 1853:2
- 21 Stokes, 1967, 211.
- 22 *New York Herald*, July 19, 1853:4.
- 23 *New York Times*, July 23, 1853:5.