

directors for each. This was not a new or different duty for the commissioners, of course, merely an additional one of like type.

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The nine years following the last convention had been turbulent for the state, but they were only a prelude to cataclysm to follow. The commissioners experienced increasing difficulty in appointing railroad and canal company directors as the state braced itself for, and unwillingly slid into the vortex of, the Civil War.

The sensitivity of the major internal improvement companies to the shifting political realities in the state has already been noted; the board itself, being popularly elected, was certainly not immune from partisan considerations. Davis's observation during the convention debates that so long as political parties continued, "this must necessarily be a political board,"<sup>43</sup> turned out to be astute and largely correct. Thus, in examining the actions of the legislature and the board during the thirteen years between conventions, it is important to understand, and relate those actions to, the underlying political climate.

Though interrupted by occasional Democratic victories in the legislature or the governor's office, the Whigs had remained the dominant party in Maryland for many years. But in the early 1850s a schism began to develop within the party along sectional lines. The party was weakened nationally in the 1852 presidential election when the Democratic candidate, Franklin Pierce, defeated the Whig, Winfield Scott, and it fell hopelessly apart two years later over the Kansas-Nebraska Bill.<sup>44</sup> Its fortunes in Maryland were no better. Democratic governors were elected in 1847 (Philip F. Thomas), 1850 (Enoch Lowe), and 1853 (T. Watkins Ligon), and in 1851 the Democrats finally won control of the reapportioned General Assembly.

The Democrats were to be likewise eclipsed, however, first by the American party and then by the Unionists. The American party (or Know-Nothings) was the manifestation of a xenophobia that had been latent for years. With the growing immigration of Irish Catholics, and especially in Maryland with the inauguration of parochial schools and the request for public assistance for them, these latent feelings began to develop into a more strident and articulate spirit of nativism. This nativism—a clinging to the Protestant-American social fabric and, conversely, an antagonism toward immigrants and Catholics—soon became politicized. The party grew out of secret societies (hence the name "Know-Nothings"), but it eventually shed its clandestine origins and began to field candidates for public office and to campaign openly and roughly.

The American party broke upon the Maryland scene like a shooting star, achieving quick and phenomenal success. But it also faded rapidly. In April 1854 the party captured the municipal election in Hagerstown; in September its candidate, Samuel Hinks, became mayor of Baltimore; and in 1855 it won victories in Cumberland and Annapolis. By 1856 the Know-Nothings were not only in firm control of Baltimore City but had captured the House of Delegates and, with the help of a few remaining Whigs, the Senate as well. In 1857 their candidate, Thomas Hicks, was elected governor.<sup>45</sup>

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43. See chapter 3; *Reform Convention Debates*, 2:443.

44. Richard R. Duncan, "The Era of the Civil War," in *Maryland*, ed. Walsh and Fox, p. 310. See also Roy F. Nichols and Philip S. Klein, "Election of 1856," in *The Coming to Power: Critical Presidential Elections in American History*, ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. (New York: Chelsea House, 1972), pp. 91-117.

45. The Know-Nothings were not the fairest campaigners. Violence and intimidation were rampant, especially in Baltimore City. Indeed the unwillingness (or inability) of the mayor and the city government to remedy the excesses ultimately led to the state assuming control of the city police force in 1860. The Know-Nothing party's huge majority in Baltimore City offset Hicks's losses in the counties and won him the governor's office.