

In The Past Lane

Edward T. O'Donnell's American history blog

TAG ARCHIVES: ANTI-IRISH SENTIMENT

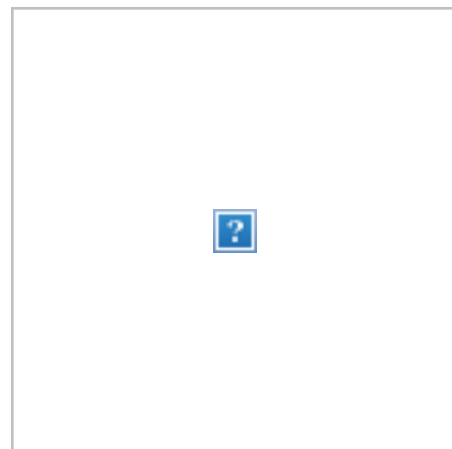
Why Notre Dame Originally Opposed the Name “Fighting Irish”

InThePastLane

January 1, 2013

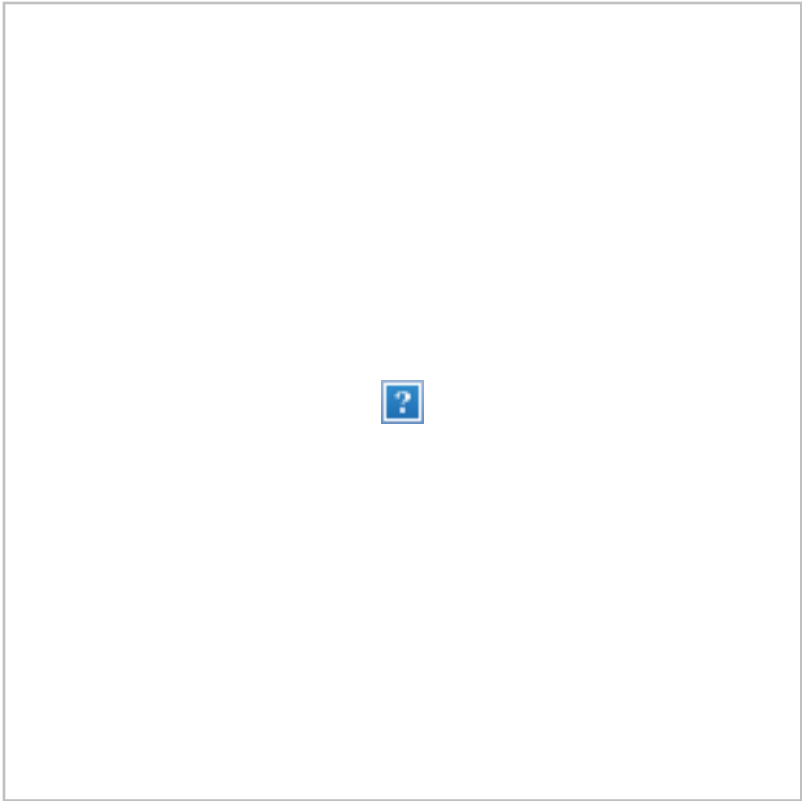
by Edward T. O'Donnell

As sports fans across the nation await the big NCAA college football national championship on January 7, 2013, it's worth exploring the origins of the teams' names. The University of Alabama's team name—The Crimson Tide—originated by chance in the wake of an epic 1907 game against arch rival Auburn. But Notre Dame? How on earth did a college with a French name in the rural Midwest, far from the big cities with large Irish populations, come to be known as “The Fighting Irish”? The answer reveals a great deal about the struggle for ethnic and religious acceptance in United States history, for Notre Dame originally **opposed** the name due to its potentially negative connotations and only embraced it in 1927, long after it had emerged a national powerhouse in football.



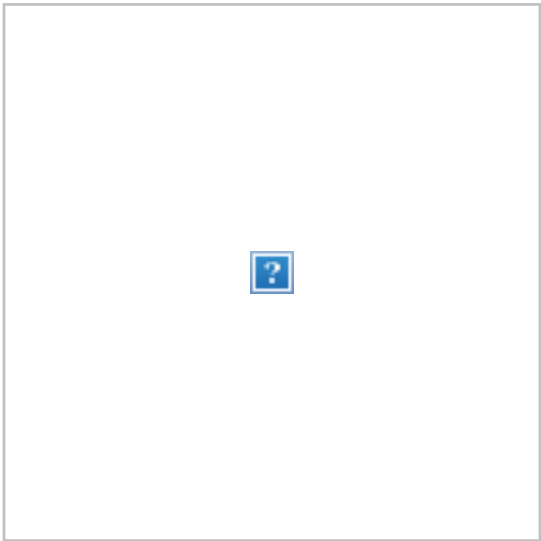
First, a little background. Given Notre Dame's early history, few would have predicted the eventual nickname Fighting Irish. Notre Dame, as its name suggests, was founded in 1842 by a group of French-speaking priests of the Congregation of the Holy Cross. Situated in South Bend, Indiana, it drew Catholic students of all ethnicities from throughout the Midwest. As Catholic colleges went, Notre Dame soon became one of the best, establishing the first Catholic law school in 1869 and first Catholic school of engineering in 1873.

It is important to note that in this late-19th century period Catholic colleges like Notre Dame, Fordham, Boston College, Georgetown, and College of the Holy Cross represented Catholic—in particular Irish Catholic—upward mobility and yearning for acceptance. Mass immigration since the 1830s had only recently created a sizable Catholic population in the United States, a development most native-born American Protestants viewed with alarm and anger. Anti-Catholicism and anti-Irish senti-



Notre Dame's humble origins in 1842 are captured in its original Log Chapel. The University maintains a replica on its campus.

a church that was both wrong theologically and scheming to overthrow the American republic. One of the primary goals behind the founding of so many Catholic colleges in this period, therefore, was to improve the reputation of Catholics in the U.S. by minting generations of respectable, educated, and successful Catholic men.

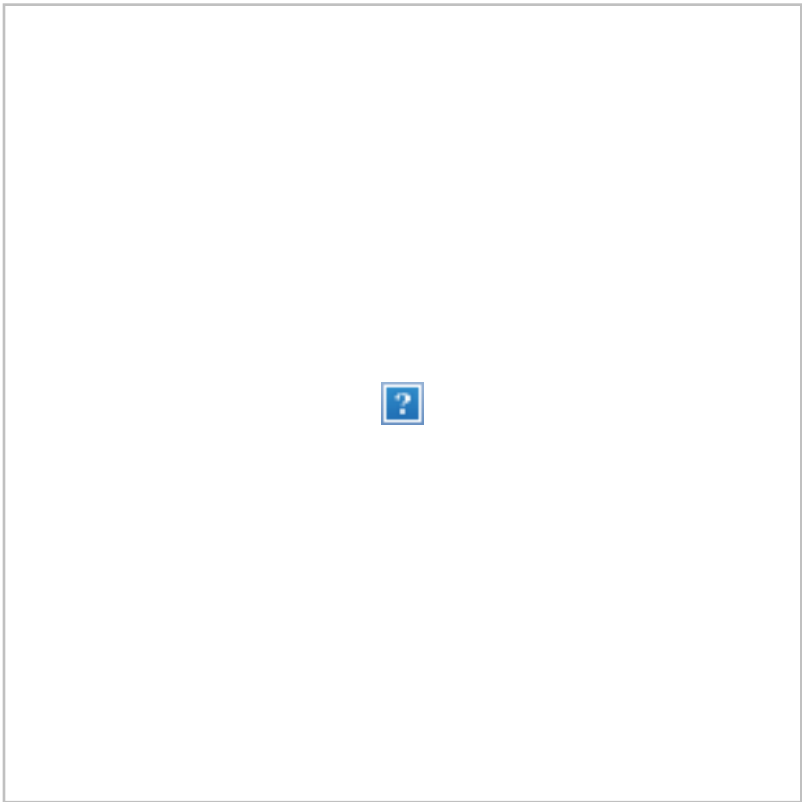


A scorecard from the Harvard-Yale football game of 1890. Rivalry games such as this drew enormous crowds at the

Notre Dame went about this work in relative obscurity until the emergence of college football in the 1880s and 1890s as America's second most popular sport (after professional baseball). In an era before radio and television (not

ment soared and remained a prominent feature of public life until the early 20th century [[click here for many examples](#)].

Take, for example, the assessment of a young Theodore Roosevelt in the 1880s that, "The average Catholic Irishman of the first generation, as represented in the [New York State] Assembly [is a] low, venal, corrupt, and unintelligent brute." Or *Harper's Weekly* a few years earlier: "Irishmen...have so behaved themselves that nearly seventy-five per cent of our criminals and paupers are Irish; that fully seventy-five per cent of the crimes of violence committed among us are the work of Irishmen; that the system of universal suffrage in large cities has fallen into discredit through the incapacity of the Irish for self-government." In short, most Americans viewed Irish Catholics as people prone to violence, crime, corruption, drunkenness, and ignorance. They also viewed them as members of



Political cartoonist Thomas Nast routinely depicted the Irish as savage brutes in the pages of the nation's most popular journal, Harper's Weekly. This image, published April 6, 1867, portrays St. Patrick's Day as a bloody melee.

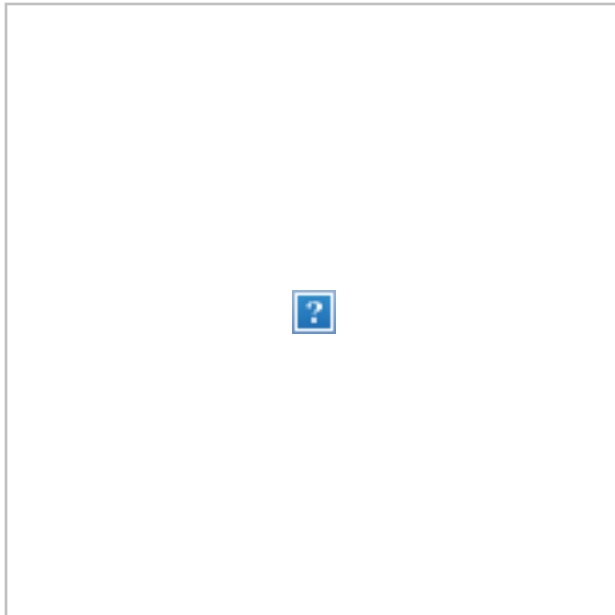
turn of the century.

to mention fire codes), it was not uncommon for 30,000 fans to turn out for games between Harvard and Yale, or Army and Navy. They were the powerhouse teams that Notre Dame eyed as it began its

rise. In the eyes of ethnic Catholics, these schools stood as bastions not only of football prowess, but also of elite Protestant privilege. As such they became irresistible opponents for Notre Dame.

Notre Dame's football program started in 1887 and gained national recognition by the early 20th century. A stunning victory over Michigan in 1909 paved the way for contests against other top-level teams.

Notre Dame's breakthrough moment came in 1913 when, led by captain Knute Rockne, it upset Army 35-13. The game is considered one of the most important in college football history because it was the first time a team made extensive (17 attempts) and successful (14 completions and two TD's) use of the little-used forward pass. Rockne took over as coach in 1918 and guided the team to a succession of winning seasons, including national championships in 1919, 1924, 1929, and 1930.



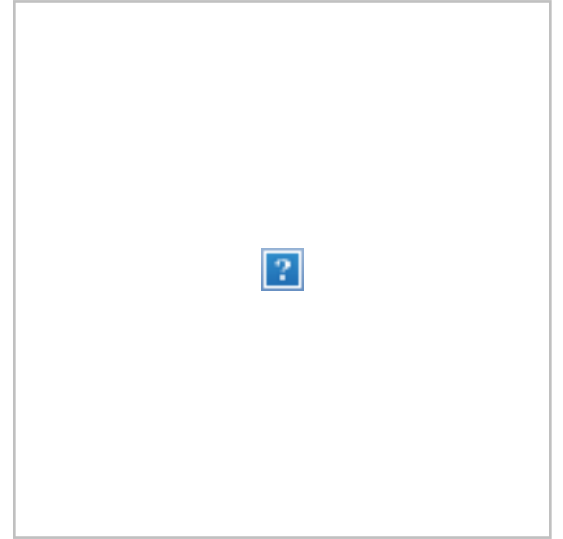
In 1924 famed sportswriter Grantland Rice dubbed the four members of Notre Dame's extraordinarily successful backfield The Four Horsemen.

By the mid-1920s, Notre Dame was by far the best-known Catholic university in the nation. As a consequence, it was

the first college football team with a truly national following as Catholics from Baltimore to Boise to Berkeley adopted the team as their own even if they never attended Notre Dame. These fans, known as "subway alumni," might root for Georgetown or Holy Cross as their local favorites, but they avidly read the details of Notre Dame's exploits in the Sunday sports sections. Irish Catholics especially identified with the David and Goliath quality of Notre Dame's rise. As a group, Irish Catholics had begun by the 1910s and 1920s to earn a measure of success and acceptance in a nation long hostile to Catholics. As they did so, they took enormous pride in the ability of Notre Dame to knock off teams like Princeton and Army. Keenly aware of this phenomenon, Rockne and his successors made it a policy (which stood until 1975) never

to play the other top Catholic college teams.

The team's success and national reputation increased the pressure on the school to adopt an official nickname. In the early days of intercollegiate sports, college teams had no nicknames; they simply played as Harvard, Northwestern, or USC. But by the 1920s teams began to take on nicknames, often courtesy of sportswrit-

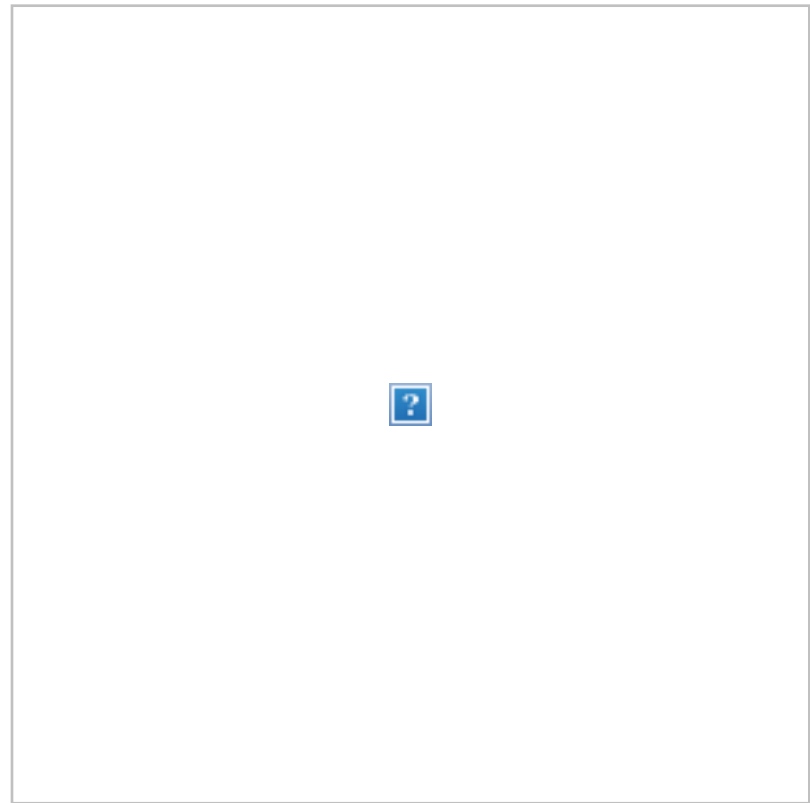


Knute Rockne first earned fame as a player for Notre Dame, He later took over as coach and led the team to four national championships.

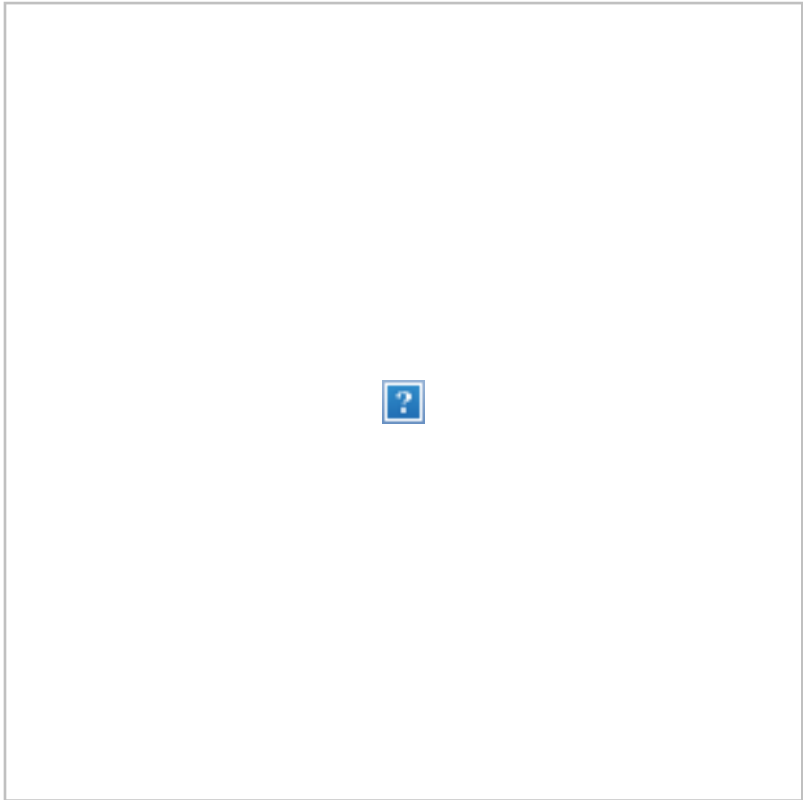
ers who were always eager to apply a catchy appellation. Most colleges were slow to choose an official name, but as time passed it became clear that they risked having sportswriters or students giving a less-than-suitable name to a college.

Georgetown, for example, gained its name “Hoyas” when its students took to chanting “hoya saxa!” at games—a mixed Greek (hoya) and Latin (saxa) phrase that translates as “what rocks!” The phrase might have referred broadly to the stalwart quality of Georgetown’s defensive line, but—students being students—likely referred more crudely to the players’, shall we say (ahem), testicular fortitude.

During its rise to national prominence, Notre Dame had been called many names, including simply the “Catholics,” but also the “Horrible Hibernians” and a host of other undignified appellations. The first known reference to the team as the “Fighting Irish” occurred in the Detroit *Free Press* in 1909, but the name failed to stick. Other nicknames like “Gold and Blue” came and went, as did the “Warriors” and “Ramblers.”



The legendary George Gipp carries the ball in 1919 for the as yet unnamed Notre Dame football team.



The Georgetown “Hoyas” in 1927

But in 1919, perhaps inspired by a visit to Notre Dame by Eamon de Valera, one of the key revolutionaries working to achieve Ireland’s independence, the name “Fighting Irish” returned as a favorite nickname among the school’s students. Rockne soon began using the name when talking to the press.

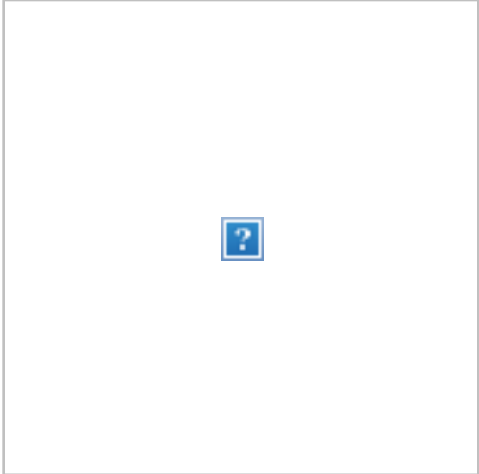
The turning point in the story came in 1925 when Notre Dame graduate Francis Wallace, then a sportswriter for the New York *Post*, began referring to the team as the “Fighting Irish” in his coverage of college football (his first choice was “Blue Comets” but that had not stuck). In 1927 Wallace moved to the New York *Daily News*, one of the largest circulation papers in the nation and before long the name Fighting Irish was known coast to coast.

But it still lacked official sanction from school officials. Understandably, Notre Dame President Fr. Matthew

Walsh, C.S.C and other school officials were leery of the name. It conjured up the longstanding stereotype that the Irish were prone to fighting and violence—the very stereotype Catholic colleges were committed to eradicating.

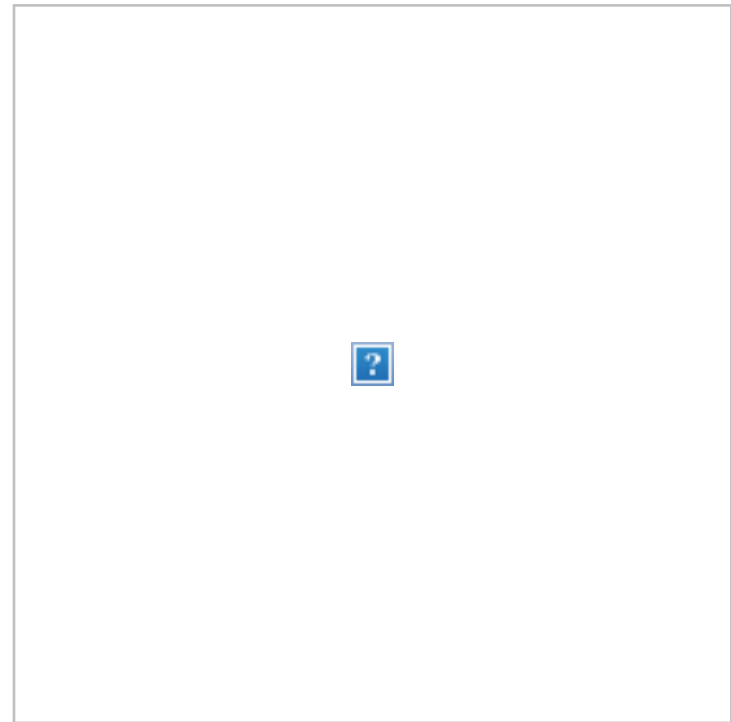
Yet there was something attractive about the name in a society that worshiped competitiveness and a fighting spirit. Perhaps, if properly presented, the name might make the American public think of the great contributions made by the Irish Brigade in recent wars, rather than the many riots of the nineteenth century in which Irish immigrants played a prominent role.

Notre Dame’s President Walsh was inclined toward this more optimistic interpretation and so when a reporter from the New York *World* wrote him a letter in the fall of 1927 seeking his opinion on the popular name, Walsh responded:



Rev. Matthew Walsh, CSC, Notre Dame’s 11th President who in 1927 set aside his reservations and gave official sanction to the name, “Fighting Irish” for the university’s sports teams.

The University authorities are in no way averse to the name ‘Fighting Irish’ as applied to our athletic teams... It seems to embody the kind of spirit that we like to see carried into effect by the various organizations that represent us on the athletic field. I sincerely hope that we may always be worthy of the ideals embodied in the term ‘Fighting Irish.’



The valor displayed by Irish regiments, most famously The Irish Brigade, in the Civil War, Spanish-American War, and World War I helped improve the repu-

That settled it. The fact that many of the football team’s players were not Irish (some weren’t even Catholic), generated a few raised eyebrows. But Knute Rockne defended the name: “They’re all Irish to me. They have the Irish spirit and that’s all that counts.”

The rest is history. The University of Notre Dame went on to win national championships (in addition to earlier ones in 1919 and 1924) in 1929, 1930, 1943, 1946, 1947, 1949, 1964, 1966, 1973, 1977, 1988 for a total of 13 (some say 15, but you’ll have to look up the seasons of 1938 and 1953 to get the details).

In recent years, with teams under pressure from various interest groups to drop names like Redmen and Warriors, one occasionally reads of a movement among some Irish

tation of the Irish in America.

Americans urging Notre Dame to adopt a new

name (or at least to get rid of the pugilistic Leprechaun logo and mascot). But even with a team comprised of only a handful of Irish Americans, don't expect any change soon. The faithful wouldn't hear of it.

You can follow me on Twitter @InThePastLane

Sources and Further Reading:

Jay P. Dolan, *The Irish Americans: A History* (Bloomsbury Press, 2010)

John Heisler and Tim Prister, *Always Fighting Irish: Players, Coaches, and Fans Share Their Passion for Notre Dame Football* (Triumph Books, 2012)

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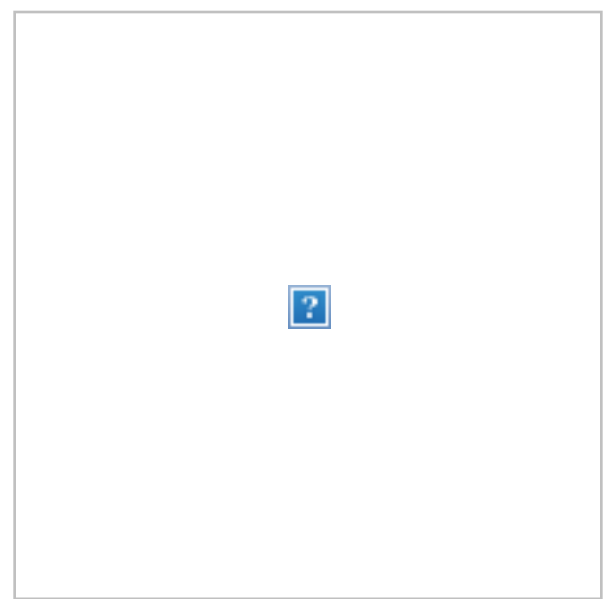
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This entry was posted in Iconic Images, Immigration, Irish American History, The Progressive Era and World War I, This Week in American History (HistWeek) and tagged anti-Catholicism, anti-Irish nativism, anti-Irish sentiment, college football, CSC, Francis Wallace, George Gipp, Grantland Rice, Horrible Hibernians, hoyas, hoyas, Irish Brigade, Knute Rockne, Notre Dame football, Notre Dame leprechaun, Notre Dame subway alumni, origins of the name Fighting Irish, Rev. Matthew Walsh, subway alumni, The Fighting Irish, The Four Horsemen, Thomas Nast, University of Notre Dame on January 1, 2013 [<http://inthepastlane.com/2013/01/01/why-notre-dame-originally-opposed-the-name-fighting-irish/>] .



The University of Notre Dame's leprechaun mascot.

Nativism Yesterday and Today – The Case of the Irish

People who rail against immigrants and minorities these days would do well to study up on their American history. Take for example the case of the Irish. Today the descendants of Irish immigrants constitute one of the most prosperous (second only to Jewish Americans) and powerful ethnic groups in America. But there was a time in the United States when Irish immigrants were feared and despised as a threat to all things American—from democracy, equality, and sobriety, to law and order and Protestantism.



An Irishman depicted as disruptive in “Uncle Sam’s Lodging House” (Puck Magazine, 1882)

Below you will find a collection of statements about the Irish made by native-born Americans in the mid-nineteenth century. Make sure you scroll all the way to the end to see a compelling list of statistics on Irish criminality, poverty, and ill-health.

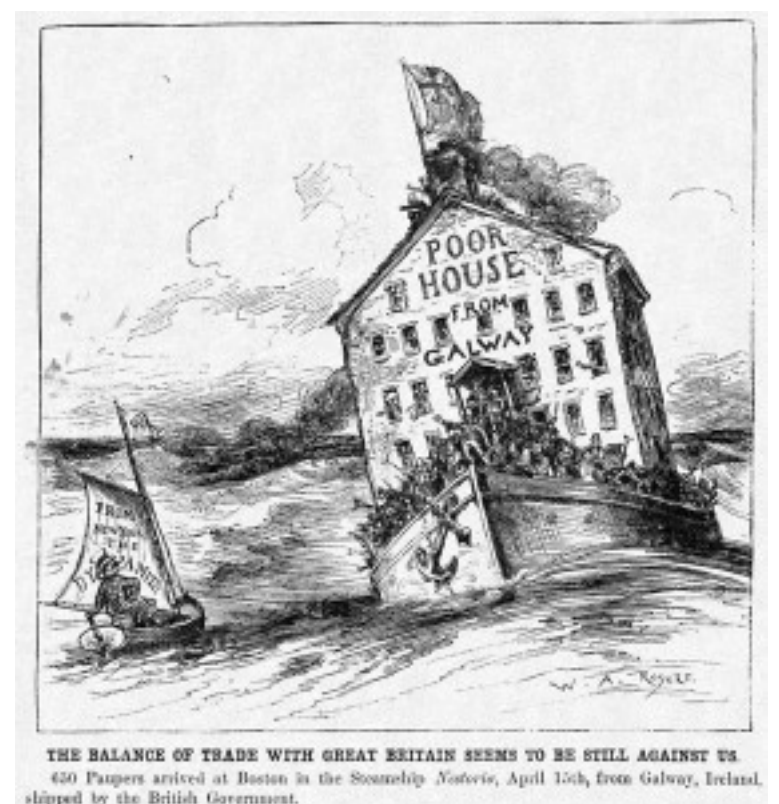
The Irish as Increasing Poverty

“We, as a people, are intolerant of ragged garments and empty paunches. We are a people who have had no experience in physical tribulation. As a consequence, the ill-clad and destitute Irishman is repulsive to our habits and our tastes. We confound ill-clothing and destitution.”

– *The Christian Examiner*, 1848

The Irish as a Criminal Element

“We have for nearly a quarter of a century been receiving several thousand Irishmen annually among us. We have given them land — almost for nothing; employment at far better wages than they could have obtained at home; and political rights equal to those which are enjoyed by the sons of the best and noblest Americans. They have



The image of the Irish as hopelessly poor and a burden to the US is captured in this image of a “Poor House

come to us steeped in ignorance and superstition; we have let them have their priests and their churches, and when fanatic Protestants have tried to disturb them, we have resisted it, and have successfully protected them in what we believe to be a mistaken course. They have so behaved themselves that nearly seventy-five per cent of our criminals and paupers are Irish; that fully seventy-five per cent of the crimes of violence committed among us are the work of Irishmen; that the system of universal suffrage in large cities has fallen into discredit through the incapacity of the Irish for self-government; yet we have never countenanced any invidious legislation against them, have never thought of depriving them of the political rights they abused, have never sought to protect ourselves against their misconduct.”

– *Harper’s Weekly* — Oct. 20, 1860

“Thousands are the children of poor foreigners who have permitted them to grow up without school, education, or religion. All the neglect and bad education and evil example of a poor class tend to form others, who, as they mature, swell the ranks of ruffians and criminals. So, at length, a great multitude of ignorant, untrained, passionate, irreligious boys and young men are formed who become the ‘dangerous class’ in their city.”

– Charles Loring Brace, Protestant minister and founder of the Children’s Aid Society, excerpt from his book, *The Dangerous Classes of New York and Twenty Years’ Work Among Them* (1872) (NOTE – Brace is talking about the Irish here)

The Irish as Bearers of Disease

“They [The Irish] have brought the cholera this year and they will always bring wretchedness and want. The boast that our country is the asylum for the oppressed in other parts of the world is very philanthropic and sentimental, but I fear that we shall before long derive little comfort from being the almshouse and the place of refuge for the poor of other countries.”

– Philip Hone (wealthy businessman and Mayor of NYC, 1826-1827), August 1832, in the midst of a major cholera epidemic linked to Irish immigrants.

The Irish as Spreaders of Vice and Disorder

“The vice and drunkenness among the lowering laboring classes is growing to frightful excess, and the multitudes of low Irish Catholics ... restricted by poverty in their own country run riot in this ... as long as we are overwhelmed with Irish immigrants, so long will the evil abound.”

– John Pintard (NYC merchant and philanthropist), 1841

The Irish as Corrupting American Democracy

“The average Catholic Irishman of the first generation, as represented in the [New York State] Assembly ... [is a] low, venal, corrupt, and unintelligent brute.”

– Theodore Roosevelt, ca. 1885

“[W]hen a Catholic Irishman, leader of the Irish Catholic party, announces and boasts that he will decide political conflicts in this neighborhood as suits his good pleasure by means of the good suffrages of thirty thousand Irish Catholic voters upon whom he can count, the people have an opportunity to see just what sort of an institution the Catholic church is in politics and to understand what a farce it would be to pretend that free government can continue where it is permitted to touch its hand to politics, or, indeed, to exist, for where it exists, it will not leave politics alone. This is a Protestant country and the American people are a Protestant people.”

– *NY Herald*, October 24, 1880 (quoted in Griffen, p. 268)

“We in this city have got to submit to be ruled by the dregs and outcasts of Ireland. Men who know not a letter of the alphabet, who have been in this country 1 mo. Or 6 days ... decide who shall represent us in Congress.”

– a *New Yorker* in 1834

“Tammany’s ... official and administrative criminality ... is filthifying our entire municipal life, making New York a very hotbed of knavery, debauchery, and bestiality... while we fight iniquity they shield or patronize it; while we try to convert criminals they manufacture them.”

– Rev. Charles Parkhurst, 1892

Note – Tammany is the Irish-dominated political machine

“Tammany Hall bears the same relation to the penitentiary as the Sunday-school does to the church.”

– 1876 (from Carruth, *Giant Book of Quotations* 409)

Note – Tammany is the Irish-dominated political machine



Famed political cartoonist frequently depicted the Irish as violent ape-like beasts for Harper's Weekly. Here he portrays a St. Patrick's Day parade.



The Irish politician as the corrupt “boss” of an urban political machine like New York’s Tammany Hall

The Irish as Unwanted Labor Competition

“The increased emigration from Europe in the late years has operated adversely to the interests of the native laboring and mechanic classes in this city, both by crowding them out of employment, and diminishing the rewards of industry. Needy foreigners accustomed to live upon less than our own countrymen, are enabled to produce articles cheaper and to work for lower wages.”

– Association for the Improvement of the Condition of the Poor, Ninth Annual Report, 1852, p. 22 (quoted in Robert Ernst, *Immigrant Life in New York*, p. 103)

“WANTED– An English or American woman, that understands cooking, and to assist in the work generally if wished; also a girl to do chamber work. None need apply without a recommendation from their last place. IRISH PEOPLE need not apply, nor anyone who will not arise at 6 o'clock, as the work is light and the wages are sure. Inquire 359 Broadway.”

– classified advertisement in New York newspaper, ca. 1840 (from Ernst, ch 6 fn 40)

The Irish as Possessing an Alien Culture

“I am sorry to find that England is right about the lower class of Irish. They are brutal, base, cruel, cowards, and as insolent as base ... my own theory is that St. Patrick's campaign against the snakes is a Popish delusion. They perished of biting the Irish.”

– George Templeton Strong, wealthy New York merchant, 1863 (from his diary)

“Our Celtic fellow citizens are almost as remote from us in temperament and constitution as the Chinese.”

– George Templeton Strong, wealthy New York merchant, 1863 (from his diary) July 7, 1857

The Irish as “Invaders”

“Suffolk County is only a New England county cork'; Boston is but the Dublin of America.”



An Irish domestic servant depicted as brutish, violent, and incompetent. “The Irish Declaration of Independence That We Are All Familiar With,” Puck, May 9, 1883.



An Irish couple depicted as beast-like and poor. “The King-A-Shantee,” Puck, Feb 15, 1882

–Theodore Parker, *The Material Condition of the People of Massachusetts*, 1860 (quoted in Bean, 71)

The Irish as the Vanguard of a Vast Papal Plot to Overthrow the American Republic (note – by “Catholics” these writers are specifically worried about the huge numbers of Irish immigrants, the vast majority of whom in the 1830s and 1840s are Catholic)

“The [Catholic] conspirators against our liberties who have been admitted from abroad through the liberality of our institutions, are now organized in every part of the country ... They [Catholics] are already the most powerful and dangerous sect in the country, for they are not confined in their schemes and means like the other sects, to our own borders, but they work with the minds and the funds of all despotic Europe. ... We may sleep, but the enemy is awake; he is straining every nerve to possess himself of our fair land. We must awake, or we are lost. Foundations are attacked, fundamental principles are threatened, interests are put in jeopardy, which throw all the questions which now agitate the councils of the country into the shade. It is Liberty itself that is in danger, not the liberty of a single state, no, nor of the United States, but the liberty of the world. Yes, it is the world that has its anxious eyes upon us; it is the world that cries to us in the agony of its struggles against despotism, THE WORLD EXPECTS AMERICA, REPUBLICAN AMERICA, TO DO HER DUTY. ... [to] defend ourselves from this new, this subtle attack ...

– Samuel F. B. Morse, *The Foreign Conspiracy against the Liberties of the United States* (New York, 1835)

“[T]he principles of the court of Rome [the Vatican] are totally irreconcilable with the gospel of Christ; liberty of conscience; the rights of man; and with the constitution and laws and of the United States of America ... the influence of Romanism [Catholicism] is rapidly extending throughout this Republic, endangering the peace and freedom of our country.”

– Constitution of the American Society to Promote the Principles of the Protestant Reformation, 1840 (New York)

“If we do not provide the [public] schools which are requisite for the cheap and effectual education of the children of the nation, it is perfectly certain that the Catholic powers of Europe intend to make up our deficiency, and there is no reason to doubt that they will do it, until by immigration and Catholic education we become to such an extent a Catholic nation, that, with their peculiar power of acting as one body, they will become the predominant power of the nation, or if not predominant, sufficient to embarrass our republican movements, by the easy access and powerful action of foreign influence and intrigue.”



The Pope in Rome looks to overthrow the American republic. Thomas Nast, “The Promised Land” Harper’s Weekly, Oct 1, 1870

– Rev. Lyman Beecher, in his 1835 booklet, “A Plea for the West.”

Some Stats on the “Irish Problem” in mid-19th century America

[All stats drawn from the appendix to Robert Ernst, *Immigrant Life in New York City*]

55% of those arrested NYC in the 1850’s were Irish-born

35% of the prostitutes arrested in NYC in 1858 were Irish-born.

70% of all admissions to Bellevue Hospital (NYC’s public hospital) in the 1850s were Irish

85% of foreign-born admissions to Bellevue Hospital (NYC’s public hospital) in the 1850s were Irish

63% of foreign-born admissions to the NYC Alms House (Poor House) 1849-1858 were Irish

56% of all prison NYC Prison commitments in 1858 were Irish-born

74% of foreign-born prison NYC Prison commitments in 1858 were Irish-born

70% of persons convicted of disorderly conduct NYC Courts of Special Sessions, 1859, were Irish-born

74% of persons convicted of drunk and disorderly conduct NYC Courts of Special Sessions, 1859, were Irish-born

This entry was posted in Antebellum America (1815-1861), Immigration, Irish American History, New York City, Quotes (HistQuote), This Week in American History (HistWeek) and tagged anti-Irish nativism, anti-Irish sentiment, Irish American immigration, nativism on November 15, 2012 [<http://inthepastlane.com/2012/11/15/nativism-yesterday-and-today/>] .
