



NORTH GREENBUSH NOTES

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THE KNOW NOTHINGS OF NORTH GREENBUSH

In researching our Town's first election in 1855, I learned that the American Party swept the ballot. Further research showed the nickname for this party was the "Know Nothing" party. Members of this movement were required to say "I know nothing" when asked about their specific beliefs.

What did they stand for? Historians note that nationally they strongly supported public education and certain rights for women. Additionally, they were anti-Catholic, believing the priests and bishops were controlled by Rome. They also were anti-immigrant, opposed to the influx of Irish and Germans coming to this country in the late 1840's and '50's. Guess what religion most of these newcomers to America were?

I used the 1855 state census to learn more about our town's makeup. There were 2,057 inhabitants. 116 were Irish and 181 were German and most of them had arrived here after 1845. The primary occupation was servant. I don't know how religious they were. North Greenbush had no Catholic churches in town at this time, so they would have to worship in Albany, Troy or another town in Rensselaer.

To me, the larger question is why several community leaders were associated with these "Know Nothings"? Abram Witbeck, our first supervisor had been county sheriff and justice of the peace. Riner Defreest, the town's second supervisor was an extensive landowner and a descendant town's founding family. Up until 1850 both men were members of the main opposition party the Whigs.

As a national party, the Whig party collapsed by 1854 because of the slavery issue. Southern Whigs migrated to the Democrat Party while most of the northern Whigs formed a new party the American (Know Nothing) party.

Initially, the party was very successful. In 1856 they swept state elections in Massachusetts, Rhode Island and New Hampshire. On the national level, they captured 52 seats in the House of Representatives (electing the Speaker of the House), and six seats in the Senate. Locally, the American Party was victorious, winning most of the towns including Supervisor Riner Defreest in North Greenbush.

By 1858, the success story of the American Party was over. The newly formed Republican Party became the premiere national party thanks to their strong anti-slavery stance and the American party candidates changed their allegiances. North Greenbush Supervisor Defreest ran and won as a Republican and by 1860 when Abraham Lincoln became the first Republican President the American Party was just a distant memory.

Getting back to the fact that the American Party doctrines were anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant, why did North Greenbush leaders support these doctrines? Even as late as 1960, there were many who feared John F. Kennedy would "bring the Pope" into the White House. More recently, one of the country's most divisive issues has been immigration.

I would like to think the early North Greenbush officials and the general public focused on other American Party issues such as its strong educational support for the town schools. I think our citizens voted as much for the individual as a person rather than for a specific political issue. In reality the "Know Nothings" did "know something" after all.

