



## Bible Riots Primary Sources

*Urban Trinity* tells the story of the anti-Catholic riots that rocked Kensington and Southwark in May and July of 1844. These events, the bloodiest urban encounters in the United States since the Revolution, had significant impact on the evolution of the city. They catalyzed the consolidation of Philadelphia—a county that included a small city proper and numerous surrounding districts, boroughs, and townships—into a single municipality that could be protected by a single police force. The events known as the “Bible Riots,” because they were sparked by the reluctance of Irish Catholic immigrants to have their children taught using the Protestant King James Bible, provided the impetus to set up a parochial school system in Philadelphia. That system eventually grew to become the largest Catholic school system in the nation. The riots revealed the deep tensions that brewed between native-born Protestants and Irish Catholic immigrants during a period of increasing immigration and rapid economic change.

For more information about the riots, clear and concise summaries can be found at both [The Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia](#) and [PhilaPlace](#).

The Bible Riots primary sources we have posted contain a series of images that you can use to help your students understand how propaganda was used to stir up Nativist sentiment and also the level of destruction that the riots caused. Suggested questions for each of the images follow. The images and questions can be used in a PowerPoint for a lecture or whole class discussion; they would also work well as a gallery walk.

**Image 1: “Death of George Shifler” Lithograph.** Shifler was a young Nativist who was fatally shot during the riot in Kensington’s Nanny Goat Market.

*What is the artists’ point of view about the riots and how is this perspective conveyed in the image?*

**The lithograph is clearly from a Nativist perspective. Key points:**

- **Shifler is holding an American flag**
- **Shifler and the men surrounding him are unarmed, and also clean and well dressed**
- **The term “murdered” is used**

## **Image 2: George Shifler Song**

*How does the songwriter both vilify Irish Catholics and extol the Nativists? Cite specific words and phrases*

- **Indicates that Shifler was “much loved”**
- **Says Shifler was his mother’s only son and that he left a widow behind**
- **Refers to Shifler as “noble”; he “nobly” dies**
- **Calls the Irish Catholics a “ruthless Foreign Band”**
- **Claims that Shifler said he was dying for “a glorious cause, In exercise of Freedom’s Rights, My Country and her Laws.”**
- **Encourages other Americans to protect their country against the “Foreign influence,” a clear reference to Irish Catholics**
- **Invokes the image of an insult to the flag that should now be rallied around**

## **Image 3: “To the Catholics of the City and County of Philadelphia” Broadside**

*What requests is Bishop Francis Patrick Kenrick making of the Irish Catholic community in the day after the Nanny Goat Market riot had settled down?*

- **To feel deep sympathy for those who were killed**
- **To avoid gathering in large numbers or doing anything to provoke the Nativists**
- **To turn to God and religion**

## **Image 4: St. Augustine’s engraving, 1830**

*What are the salient characteristics of St. Augustine’s Catholic Church in this depiction? (NOTE: St. Augustine’s was the largest religious structure in Philadelphia at this time.)*

- **It is a grand and substantial building with elaborate doors and windows, a bell tower, artful cornices, an elaborate iron fence, etc.**
- **The people outside are well dressed in bonnets, dresses, suits, etc.**

## **Image 5: St. Augustine’s engraving, May 8, 1844**

*What is the condition of the church following the rioting of May 3 - 6, 1844?*

- **Nearly all of its grand features are gone**
- **A burnt out shell and the fence are all that remain**

## **Image 6: A Full and Complete Account of the Late Awful Riots in Philadelphia, frontispiece, 1844**

*Based on the title and illustration, do you think the text will be neutral and unbiased? If not, will it take a pro-Nativist or pro-Irish Catholic perspective?*

- **Answers will vary, however, the following text from the opening of the book reveals a pro-Nativist bias.**

*THE unprecedented success of the newly organised party in the city of New York, who recently elected their candidate (Mr. Harper,) for Mayor, gave an impetus to the party in Philadelphia, who, some weeks since started a daily journal under the name of "The Native American," and have since been industriously placing before the public the political sentiments the advocate; and on the afternoon of Friday last (May 3d, 1844,) they called a meeting at the junction of Second and Master streets, Kensington. The meeting had organised, and one of the speakers was addressing the crowd, when, all at once, a rush from a concourse of Irish people, residing in that immediate vicinity, and who had surrounded the meeting, took place. The native Americans, so fiercely were they assailed by an overpowering force, were driven from the staging they had erected, and fled in all directions, pursued by the missiles and shouts of the Irish. This, of course, incensed men who had assembled peaceably to express their sentiments, as by the Constitution of the United States all citizens have an undeniable right.*

(The Historical Society of Pennsylvania has made a full transcript of the book available [here](#))

### **Image 7: Romish Ingratitude, Thomas Nast, 1872**

Although this political cartoon was published nearly thirty years after the Bible Riots, what does the image convey about ongoing antipathy toward Catholic immigrants?

- **The title implies a close connection between Catholics in the United States and the authority of the Vatican**
- **Irish immigration is depicted as hideous snake**
- **An "Uncle Sam" figure is using "order" to chop off the head of the snake**
- **The image of the fireplace indicates that the United States is a "home" in which there are voting rights (albeit only for men) and equal rights for all**
- **Catholic students are seen shunning the American public schools which are "temples of liberty" that welcome all children in favor of their own separate parochial schools**