

# The Founding Immigrants

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Dorset, Vt.

A PROMINENT American once said, about immigrants, “Few of their children in the country learn English... The signs in our streets have inscriptions in both languages ... Unless the stream of their importation could be turned they will soon so outnumber us that all the advantages we have will not be able to preserve our language, and even our government will become precarious.”

This sentiment did not emerge from the rancorous debate over the immigration bill defeated last week in the Senate. It was not the lament of some guest of Lou Dobbs or a Republican candidate intent on wooing bedrock conservative votes. Guess again.

Voicing this grievance was Benjamin Franklin. And the language so vexing to him was the German spoken by new arrivals to Pennsylvania in the 1750s, a wave of immigrants whom Franklin viewed as the “most stupid of their nation.”

About the same time, a Lutheran minister named Henry Muhlenberg, himself a recent arrival from Germany, worried that “the whole country is being flooded with ordinary, extraordinary and unprecedented wickedness and crimes. ... Oh, what a fearful thing it is to have so many thousands of unruly and brazen sinners come into this free air and unfenced country.”

These German masses yearning to breathe free were not the only targets of colonial fear and loathing. Echoing the opinions of colonial editors and legislators, Ben Franklin was also troubled by the British practice of dumping its felons on America. With typical Franklin wit, he proposed sending rattlesnakes to Britain in return. (This did not, however, preclude numerous colonists from purchasing these convicts as indentured servants.)

And still earlier in Pennsylvania, the Scotch-Irish had bred discontent, as their penchant for squatting on choice real estate ran

headlong against the colony's founders, the Penn family, and their genteel notions about who should own what.

Often, the disdain for the foreign was inflamed by religion. Boston's Puritans hanged several Friends after a Bay Colony ban on Quakerism. In Virginia, the Anglicans arrested Baptists.

But the greatest scorn was generally reserved for Catholics — usually meaning Irish, French, Spanish and Italians. Generations of white American Protestants resented newly arriving “Papists,” and even in colonial Maryland, a supposed haven for them, Roman Catholics were nonetheless forbidden to vote and hold public office.

Once independent, the new nation began to carve its views on immigrants into law. In considering New York's Constitution, for instance, John Jay — later to become the first chief justice of the Supreme Court — suggested erecting “a wall of brass around the country for the exclusion of Catholics.”

By 1790, with the United States Constitution firmly in place, the first federal citizenship law restricted naturalization to “free white persons” who had been in the country for two years. That requirement was later pushed back to five years and, in 1798, to 14 years.

Then, as now, politics was key. Federalists feared that too many immigrants were joining the opposition. Under the 1798 Alien Act — with the threat of war in the air over French attacks on American shipping — President John Adams had license to deport anyone he considered “dangerous.” Although his secretary of state favored mass deportations, Adams never actually put anybody on a boat.

Back then, the French warranted the most suspicion, but there were other worrisome “aliens.” A wave of “wild Irish” refugees was thought to harbor dangerous radicals. Harsh “anti-coolie” laws later singled out the Chinese. And, of course, the millions of “involuntary” immigrants from Africa and their offspring were regarded merely as persons “held to service.”

Scratch the surface of the current immigration debate and beneath the posturing lies a dirty secret. Anti-immigrant sentiment is older than America itself. Born before the nation, this abiding fear of the “huddled masses” emerged in the early republic and gathered steam into the 19th and 20th centuries, when nativist political parties, exclusionary laws and the Ku Klux Klan swept the land.

As we celebrate another Fourth of July, this picture of American intolerance clashes sharply with tidy schoolbook images of the great melting pot. Why has the land of “all men are created equal” forged countless ghettos and intricate networks of social exclusion? Why the signs reading “No Irish Need Apply”? And why has each new generation of immigrants had to face down a rich glossary of now unmentionable epithets? Disdain for what is foreign is, sad to say, as American as apple pie, slavery and lynching.

That fence along the Mexican border now being contemplated by Congress is just the latest vestige of a venerable tradition, at least as old as John Jay’s “wall of brass.” “Don’t fence me in” might be America’s unofficial anthem of unfettered freedom, but too often the subtext is, “Fence everyone else out.”

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