

CHARLES S. MOREHEAD
and the
KNOW-NOTHING PARTY IN KENTUCKY

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Amanda Leavy Morehead died July 5, 1829 at the age of 25. She is buried in the Pioneer Cemetery, Hopkinsville, Kentucky. Her grave for nearly a century remained unmarked even though her husband, Charles Slaughter Morehead, whom she married July 10, 1823, a Hopkinsville attorney and State Representative at the time, would go on to become Kentucky's 20th governor. He would have the distinction of being the only governor elected by the American or Know-Nothing Party in Kentucky.

Amanda Leavy was the daughter of William Leavy of Lexington, an Irish Roman Catholic immigrant who had gained considerable wealth in the frontier Bluegrass town during the 1790s and early 1800s. This Irish Catholic connection will be of note later in this paper. Following Amanda's death in 1829, Morehead married her younger sister, Margaret Leavy, some two years later.

Who was this Hopkinsville attorney, Charles Slaughter Morehead? He was born near Bardstown, Nelson County, Kentucky, July 7, 1802, son of Charles and Margaret Slaughter Morehead. He was a first cousin to James Turner Morehead who served as Kentucky's Governor from 1834-1836 following Governor John Breathitt's death, and a cousin-one generation removed- to Simon Bolivar Buckner, Governor 1887-1891. His father, Charles Morehead, served in both the State House of Representatives (1798 and 1803) and the State Senate (1822-24) from Nelson County. His mother, Margaret Slaughter, was of the affluent Slaughter family that had settled Louisville in the late 1700s.

Morehead attended the common schools of Nelson County until old enough to attend Transylvania University in Lexington from which he was graduated in 1820. After graduation, he became a tutor at the school, studied law in the office of Henry Clay and received the LLB degree in 1822. It was during law school that he courted and, a year later, in 1823, married the charming--and wealthy--Amanda Leavy. Shortly after their marriage, the young attorney and his bride moved to Christian County and began the practice of law in Hopkinsville. Records of property transactions from James Morehead (later to be Governor) of Bullitt County, to Charles Morehead, his cousin, and from Armistead Morehead, his uncle, are recorded during the period 1823-30. Morehead owned considerable property in Christian County. He purchased two adjoining building lots in the Clark's addition in Hopkinsville in July 1828. This location would be probably somewhere between the present Drury's Market and the Post Office.

Morehead was elected by a heavy majority to the State Legislature in 1827 when barely eligible in age. He was re-elected for a second term. At the expiration of the second term and following the untimely death of Amanda, Morehead removed to Frankfort where he opened a law office and began practice. During this period of private practice, Morehead in 1831 married Margaret Leavy of Lexington, Amanda's younger sister, described by writers of the time as "beautiful, vivacious, loved gayety, patron of music and the dance." In 1832, Morehead was appointed Attorney General of Kentucky in which position he served for five years. During his term as Attorney General, Charles and Margaret built the beautiful brick home on Shelby Street in Frankfort. In 1838 he was elected to the State Legislature--this time from Franklin County--where he was continually re-elected until 1844. He served as Speaker of the House of Representatives for these three terms. Morehead was elected to the U. S. House of Representatives in 1847

by defeating S.F.J. Trabue, the Native American candidate, and was re-elected to serve until 1851. He was nominated for Speaker of the House by the Whigs but withdrew because of the Free Soil opposition. Morehead supported the Compromise of 1850 and was recognized a staunch Union man. Again, he re-entered politics in Kentucky and was re-elected to the State Legislature in 1853. Morehead was acknowledged as one of the top leaders of the Whig Party in Kentucky.

Historians have noted that the Compromise of 1850 was, perhaps, the high water mark of the Whig party nationally. Its decline along with death of a number of its leaders including Clay in 1852 was rapid after this date. A new movement in America came into prominence at about this same time--native-Americanism or "nativism." The movement had its beginnings in New York in the mid-1840s when the Democratic Party regained control of the city and parcelled out many of the jobs to their foreign-born political supporters. Charges of illegal voting by the "foreigners" led to much anger among their native-born compatriots. Nativism sprang into new life at this time, having its origin in the Democratic party, but soon attracting thousands from the Whig Party. The Nativistic Party polled 9,000 votes in the fall election of 1843 and the next spring carried New York City with most of the Whigs supporting it as the only way of defeating their opponents. From New York the movement spread to Philadelphia accompanied by riots between the natives and the Irish. Several lives were lost and some property destroyed, including one or two Catholic churches. In the fall elections the nativists carried both New York and Philadelphia with some help from the Whigs. The Whigs hoped for nativist support to help elect Henry Clay in 1844, but both states voted for James K. Polk. New York, however, elected natavists members to Congress and to the State Assembly.

The defeat of the nativists in 1845 led to the formation of the "Order of the United Americans," which was ostensibly non-political but often gave support to a candidate who was being opposed by a foreigner. In 1852 a new secret order

was established, with opposition to foreigners and especially Roman Catholics as its chief principle. This was the American Party or Know-Nothings--the name given to them by Horace Greeley because the real name of the organization was withheld from members until they were admitted to its higher degree so they could conscientiously say they knew nothing of such a society and did not belong to it. It was generally understood to be "The Sons of '76" or the Order of the Star-Spangled Banner." A year later, 1853, branches of the Order of the Star-Spangled Banner had been established in New Jersey, Maryland, Connecticut, Massachusetts and Ohio. A call was made for a national convention to meet in New York City on May 14, 1854, but the attendance was so small that a second meeting was called for the same place a month later. Thirteen states sent delegates to this convention, and regulations were devised which were followed throughout the existence of the order. There were local or district councils, city or county councils, a state Grand Council with a Grand President, and other elective officials for each state. The Grand Council chose the candidates that were to be supported in the state elections. At the top was a National Council composed of seven delegates from each Grand Council and two from each territory in which the Order was established. For a brief time this nation-wide political machine functioned efficiently and with a minimum of friction.

Temperance forces nationally, led by Robert J. Breckinridge of Kentucky, organized a political party--the "Sons of Temperance" - in 1854, but during the election campaign of that year it gradually became identified with the Know-Nothings. The new secret party was very popular in 1853-1854. Candidates who were unopposed sometimes found that they were defeated by a write-in vote. The old parties were handicapped in trying to fight a force that they could not identify. In 1854 about 75 Know-Nothing Congressmen were sent to Washington. In Massachusetts the Governor and all of the elected state officers were Know-Nothings. In 1855 the nativist party carried Rhode Island, New Hampshire,

Connecticut, Maryland, and Kentucky. Tennessee remained Democratic by only a slight margin. In New York, Pennsylvania, California, and Virginia the new party elected many state officials.

Success of the Know Nothing Party in the mid 1850s was due to several reasons: (1) Confusion of party alignments, (2) the slavery controversy and (3) the growth of a sincere nativist sentiment. To be sure, many members of the new party were scheming politicians and ambitious young men willing to play on racial and ethnic hatred to attract the hosts of political orphans after the demise of the Whigs and the defections of those from the Democrats.

The psychological appeal of a secret and mysterious organization undoubtedly attracted many followers in the formative years of the Party. Ulysses S. Grant reputedly joined a Know-Nothing Lodge just to see what it was like. Grips, passwords, signs, recognition phrases, distress signals, and other well-tested techniques were used to lure the curious into its ranks. There were two degrees of membership. To be eligible for the first the candidate had to verify that he was of proper age, born in the United States of protestant parents, and not married to a Roman Catholic. If he passed this test the objectives of the Order were explained to him. He was asked: "Are you willing to use your influence and vote for native-born American citizens for all offices of honor, trust or profit in the gift of the people, the exclusion of all foreigners and Roman Catholics in particular, and without regard to party affiliation?" The prospective member was required to renounce allegiance to all other parties, abide by the will of the party in supporting nominees for office, and to work persistently for a change in the naturalization laws. Having done this he was informed of all of the secrets of the order, given the passwords, grips, etc. Meetings were to be announced by distribution of white, heart shaped bits of paper. If danger threatened, they would be red in color.

The presidential election of 1852 all but liquidated the Whig party. Both of the candidates- Franklin Pierce, Democrat, and Winfield Scott, Whig - approved the Compromise of 1850. Scott and the Whigs carried Kentucky - but only Massachusetts

Tennessee and Vermont joined the state in this final Whig effort. The defeated party now deluded itself and the nation by asserting that the slavery issue had been settled in 1850. This was merely to live in the past and abandon the function of an opposition. The party of Pierce, in spite of its protests to the contrary, now supported the aggressive slave interests.

The vacuum created in Kentucky politics by the demise of the Whigs allowed the pressure of the Know-Nothings to move in. The formation of the Know-Nothing Party in Kentucky was based on the assumption that all foreigners were opposed to slavery and that the political strength of the North was due to the foreign vote. It was also believed that the racial feelings of superiority of the Anglo-Saxon Kentuckians plus old religious bigotries could be depended upon to cement the party together.

On May 30, 1854 President Pierce signed the Kansas-Nebraska Act which provided for these territories to be organized on a popular sovereignty basis. A specific provision repealed the Missouri Compromise and the general result of the new legislation was to completely nullify the Compromise of 1850. This was indeed the final blow to the old Whig party.

Another group of Kentucky Whigs turned to the Know-Nothings because they were tired of sectional disputes and preferred instead to hate foreigners and Catholics. This was an interesting phenomenon because Kentuckians had seen relatively few foreigners and the Catholics were among the most substantial citizens of the state. The 1850 census reported Kentucky with a total white population of 761,413. Of this number 31,401 or only 4.1 per cent were foreign born. This segment of the population was largely in four counties - Louisville and Jefferson Co., Kenton and Campbell in the Cincinnati Area and Maysville and Mason County--all along the Ohio River. Jefferson had five times as many foreign born as any other Kentucky County. The Roman Catholic population of Kentucky in 1850 was approximately 35,000 or 3 per cent of the total population. In this year there were 48 Catholic

Churches as compared with 798 Baptist and 530 Methodist Churches. The great center of foreign and Catholic population in Kentucky was Louisville. The city's total population in 1853 was 51,726 with more than 12,000 foreign born. The Catholic segment was estimated at not less than 15,000. The German element perhaps as large as 20,000 was especially active. By 1852 there were ten German Churches--eight Protestant and two Catholic, two schools, a bank, German language newspapers, and German political and social organizations.

It was against this background of nativism and religious bigotry coupled with the dissolution of the Whig Party in Kentucky that made the state elections of 1855 exciting. The political influence of George D. Prentice, editor and publisher of the Louisville Daily Journal (one of the forerunners of today's Courier Journal), made Kentucky's gubernatorial election of 1855 famous throughout the United States. Prentice had been a staunch supporter of the Whig cause for many years. In the spring of 1855 he maintained that the Whig party was not dead and that it was still "the great conservative party of the nation." But since the Whigs could not elect a ticket in Kentucky in 1855, he would choose the American Party over the Democrats even though "we may not agree with them in all their principles."

In 1854 and 1855 the Journal led the fight for Know-Nothingism in Kentucky. From editorial to editorial Prentice waged war on the opposition--first offensively and then defensively the editor espoused the cause. In answer to the charge of unconstitutionality, he argued that it was just as constitutional to vote against Catholics and foreigners as it was to vote against Whigs and Democrats. If Catholics were not elected to office their constitutional rights were not violated.

As a harbinger of what was to come in the fall election of 1855, the spring municipal elections in Louisville, Lexington, and Covington were carried by the Know-Nothings with large majorities. By early 1855 the nativistic party claimed a membership of 50,000 in Kentucky, and had high hopes of winning the gubernatorial

election. Its convention met in Louisville on February 22, 1855 and nominated William V. Loving for governor. Because of ill health Loving resigned and a new convention nominated Charles S. Morehead. It has been suggested that he was chosen because of the feeling that he was opposed to the anti-Catholic beliefs of the Know-Nothings in that he had married a Catholic. He was also originally from the strong Catholic community of Bardstown. The Democrats had thought of nominating Morehead in order to get the support of the old-line Whigs against the Know-Nothings until they were influenced by a circular from the Know-Nothing executive committee revoking the decree that marriage with a Catholic made one ineligible for public office.

The Democrats nominated Beverly L. Clarke to oppose Morehead. Their Convention professed devotion "to the great principles of civil and religious liberty" and passed a resolution "that all secret political oath-bound associations, by whatever name known, are anti-American and adverse to the principles of true Democracy." The resolution further castigated those who belonged to secret societies and charged that their members were unworthy the confidence and support of a truthful, brave, honest, and free people."

The Whigs did not nominate a candidate. It was generally assumed that the Know-Nothings were the Whigs in disguise, but the Democrats invited the Whigs to join them as a means of saving the Union. They charged that the principles of Know-Nothingism had nothing to do with the issues of the day and that it was senseless to try to solve problems by ignoring them. Could they be loyal to the great Clay and still be Know-Nothings?

The campaign was waged in the usual manner of Kentucky politics in the mid-nineteenth century. There was an abundance of oratory, mass meetings, name calling, and lies. The Journal reported the following terms were applied to the Know-Nothings: "liars and perjurers," "horsethieves," "a lousy Godless, Christless set of blackguards," "infernal scamps," "hell was so full of them that their legs stuck out of the windows." Needless to say the Journal was able to return taunt for taunt.

John J. Crittenden used his prestige as well as his eloquence to foster the Know-Nothing party. A mass meeting at the Louisville Court House brought out an estimated 5,000 persons to hear him speak.

This election was considered a turning point in American history. The fate of the American party in the nation depended upon the outcome of this Kentucky campaign.

As the election day, August 6, drew nearer the tension mounted and the big question was whether or not there would be bloodshed at the polls. As early as July 12 the Journal charged that the anti-Americans hoped for violence in order to have an excuse for losing the election; at the same time denied the accusation that it was trying to foment trouble because it had warned of the possibilities of riots. On July 31 Prentice's paper made its appeal to the Americans by speaking of the anti-Americans as "determined, bitter, and unscrupulous," of their "lavish expenditure of money," and of "their threats." The American party, according to the Journal, was the only one to which the South could look to protect its peculiar institutions and the only one from which the whole country could expect peace, prosperity, and the maintenance of its consitutional liberty. The opposition was "a dangerous coalition of Abolitionism, Roman Catholicism, and Foreignism."

As many had feared, election day in Louisville was accompanied by rioting, mobs, murder, arson, and corruption at the polls. The disorders were so violent that the day has since been known as "Bloody Monday." Many conflicting stories were told as to what happened and who was responsible. At least twenty-two persons were killed and many others injured, twenty houses were burned, and other property destroyed. A group of buildings on Main Street between 10th and 11th occupied chiefly by Irish tenants was set on fire. The owner was shot and left to be burned. A rumor that powder was stored in the basements of the Catholic Churches resulted in a crowd breaking into St. Martin's Church on Shelby Street. Bishop Spaulding wrote at the time "we have just passed through a reign of terror,

surpassed only by the Philadelphia riots. Nearly a hundred poor Irish and Germans have been butchered or burned."

Who was responsible for this outbreak? The Catholics, the "foreigners" and the Democrats blamed the Know-Nothings and especially George D. Prentice and the Louisville Journal. The Journal forcefully denied that it was responsible for inciting the riots and put the blame on the Anti-American editors. Beverly Clarke charged that a thousand armed abolitionists were brought in from Cincinnati and New Albany to assist the Know-Nothings on election day. Both sides were guilty of intemperance and fanning the flames of passion in their followers, but the evidence suggests that the greater blame should go to the Know-Nothings. But in spite of the charges and counter-charges regarding which was responsible for "Bloody Monday", they were both in agreement that there was no justification for the plunder, arson, and murder of August 6, 1855.

The governor's race was won by Morehead by a majority of 4,403. Thirteen state senators were elected by the Know-Nothings to seven for the Opposition. The Americans won the House of Representatives by sixty-one to thirty-nine. Six of the ten Kentucky Congressmen were elected by the nativistic party. From a total of 103 counties, 53 voted to Know-Nothing representatives and 52 supported the Know-Nothing candidate for governor. There was considerable evidence to substantiate the claim that many of the Whigs went over to the Know-Nothings. Forty counties which had voted Whig in 1852 elected the Know-Nothing ticket in 1855. This election showed that the majority of Kentuckians were so conservative in their Union sentiment that they were willing to ignore sectional issues.

The inaugural address of Governor Morehead was indicative of what the new administration would be like. If the Know-Nothings expected their new governor to pursue a course of intemperance and bigotry toward foreigners and Catholics they must have been disappointed. The governor said that "the constitution of our State secures to all the enjoyment of equal rights and privileges. The native

and the adopted citizen are placed on terms of perfect equality, and while the party which has elevated me to office desires a revision and modification of the laws in relation to emigration and naturalization, it neither proposes nor desires to impair this equality."

The election of 1855 was the high-water mark of Know-Nothingism in Kentucky, but the faithful interpreted it as a fore-runner of the presidential election of 1856 when their party would capture the White House. The National Convention met in Philadelphia on February 22, 1856 with all but four states sending delegates. Crittenden and Davis of Kentucky had been mentioned for the nomination, but the prize went to Millard Fillmore with Andrew Jackson Donelson as the vice presidential nominee. The Democrats nominated James Buchanan and John C. Breckinridge; the Republicans, John C. Fremont and W. L. Dayton. The Whig National Convention met at Baltimore and endorsed the Fillmore-Donelson ticket--feeling that this action assured the election of Fillmore.

The national Know-Nothing ticket was enthusiastically supported in Kentucky. Senator Crittenden and Governor Morehead spoke for Fillmore both in and out of Kentucky. Thomas H. Clay, eldest son of Henry Clay, now Grand President of the Council of Kentucky, exhorted the party members to "stand to your arms and be of good cheer!"

The result of the voting in Kentucky was: Buchanan 74,642, Fillmore 66,416 and Fremont 314. For the first time since 1828 Kentucky had given a majority of her votes in a presidential contest to a Democrat. The influence of the Democratic vice presidential nominee, Breckinridge, was considerable, but the Know-Nothings had lost some of their strength because of the fanaticism that had broken out in Louisville in 1855. The election in Louisville in 1856 was unmarred by any of the unpleasantness of the previous year.

By 1858 the Democrats were in control of both houses of the Kentucky Legislature and they were able to send Lazarus W. Powell to the United States Senate. In 1859 John C. Breckenridge, then Vice President, was elected to the Senate to take his

seat on March 4, 1861. The Democrats had also captured all but two of Kentucky's representatives to Congress. The fortunes of the Know-Nothings were at a low ebb in 1859. The Know-Nothing or American name had been discarded and the candidate for governor was Joshua Bell who campaigned under the label "Opposition." The Democrats nominated Beriah Magoffin, who won the governorship by a majority of 8,904 votes. By 1860 the American party in Kentucky was dead.

Returning to Charles Slaughter Morehead, now Governor Morehead, who entered upon the Governorship with such pomp and pagentry as had not been seen in Frankfort previously. He was only the third resident of Frankfort to become the Chief Executive, he and his wife were well known and extremely well liked in Frankfort social, civic and political circles. On inauguration day, they were driven from their home in an open carriage around the city, heralded and followed by bands of music and applauding throngs of people. The gala inaugural ball which followed the ceremonies was one long to be remembered by Frankfort residents. The Governor's Mansion (now the Lt.Governor's mansion) underwent a complete renovation and for four years would see an almost daily round of banquets, public dinners, theatricals, balls. The Moreheads loved gayety. According to his contemporaries, "Governor Morehead was, perhaps, the handsomest as well as one of the most polished and talented of all the past Kentuckians who had made the mansion his home, and his wife one of the most elegant of women; and his sons and daughters were bright, affable and dashing. They seemed to live for pleasure in their high position, and to do graceful acts of kindness that have embalmed their memories sweetly in many hearts and homes."

One could wish that a lengthy list of accomplishments might be made for Morehead's term as Governor. The beginnings of a state-supported teacher education program at Transylvania was initiated--and promptly and overwhelmingly voted down during the second session of the Legislature. The geological survey initiated under his predecessor was completed, changes in the prison system were made and an annual state agricultural fair was authorized. Not much. But it must be remembered that

by now the dark storm clouds of the War Between the States were looming over and sweeping aside nearly every domestic issue of substance.

Following his term of office, Governor Morehead moved to Louisville where he resumed the practice of law with his nephew, Charles M. Briggs. The popular ex-governor was welcomed in Louisville with much ceremony. He was received at the railroad depot by a committee of prominent citizens and escorted to the Galt House, formally welcomed, and made an address.

Within a few months, events on the national level were coming to a climax. Morehead was conservative and a staunch believer in keeping the Union intact--he deeply deplored the secession of South Carolina and was conspicuous among the conservatives who were laboring to avert the war. He was elected a delegate to the Peace Conference in Washington, February 1861. It was useless and a failure as was the "Border State Convention" the following May at Frankfort to which he was also a delegate.

According to historical records of the time, at midnight on September 19, 1861 by order of Federal authorities Governor Morehead was arrested at his home. The arrest was made apparently without cause, without warrant, and without legal authority. He was secretly conveyed by Union soldiers in a small boat across the Ohio River so that civil law could not be invoked to release him. He was taken by train to Indianapolis, then to New York where he was held as a prisoner of state at Fort LaFayette, off New York harbor. Some months later he was transferred to Fort Warren at Boston. Governor Morehead's sole offence apparently was being considered a Southern sympathizer. Perrin notes that he was the very first and most noted victim of Federal oppression and outrage in the country. During his months in prison he was poorly fed and clothed and exposed to bitter cold in the rigorous climate of New York and Boston. These conditions would eventually hasten his death.

Morehead, because of the intercession of Crittenden and Breckinridge, was released from prison in January 1862. He returned to Louisville where he was

advised that Union authorities were again preparing to arrest him. He fled to Canada, then to Europe and back to Mexico. He was not allowed to return to the United States until after the War. When he did return he found that his considerable fortune in land and slaves was all but gone or destroyed. He returned to his plantation near Greenville, Mississippi which he found in shambles. Gradually the land rebounded. Governor Morehead visited Frankfort in August 1868 for the first time since before the War. He was enthusiastically welcomed by the city and by State officials. Everywhere in Kentucky, he was given a hero's welcome.

Returning south in the Fall and in the midst of a plantation beginning again to become productive, with a new and promising legal career in his adopted state, Morehead died suddenly on December 23, 1868 in the 66th year of his age. His remains were brought back to Frankfort where he is buried in a plot overlooking the city and the Kentucky River. He was survived by his wife, Margaret; a daughter, Mrs. Amanda Walker, and sons, John, William and Frank Morehead. The 1869 Legislature memorialized Morehead with a monument at his grave site.

His widow, Margaret, died two years later and she, too, is buried at his side in the Frankfort cemetery.

What of our Amanda, his first wife, the older sister of his second wife, Margaret? Her grave in Hopkinsville's Pioneer Cemetery remained unmarked from about 1905 when many broken stones along with brush and briars were removed until this past summer when the local chapter of the Sons of the American Revolution with the help of other organizations placed a marker on her grave site. On June 1, 1992, Kentucky State-hood Day, her name will appear on a large granite monument along with 162 other known persons buried in Pioneer Cemetery. The monument will be unveiled in appropriate Bicentennial ceremonies. Again, too, participants in the ceremony will have an opportunity to be a part of an interesting chapter in Kentucky history--and one in which Hopkinsville had a front row seat.