

“Only a Passing Idiocy”: The Ku Klux Klan in Maine State Politics

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Abstract

During the late the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, French Canadians migrated in large numbers to the United States to fill existing labor gaps in New England’s textile mills. Urban centers like Lewiston-Auburn and Bangor were urban-industrial towns that tended to be oppositional to the state’s more rural and conservative demographic. This sparked a general counter-movement among Maine’s conservative Protestant population. Similar to other rural regions in the United States, the Ku Klux Klan played a role in this conservative backlash against Maine’s immigrant and Catholic population. Historians of race hatred, immigration, modernism, and labor articulate that the desire for an unskilled labor force, mixed with fears of modernism and Catholicism created a scenario for the Ku Klux Klan to oppose French Canadians and Franco Americans in Maine. Throughout the 1920s, the Klan sought to limit the economic and political influence of French Canadians and Franco Americans by utilizing hate rhetoric masked by the appearance of political power through the state’s Republican Party. Through utilization of English and French language newspapers, census data, agricultural reports, voting results, and oral histories, an in-depth analysis of the Klan’s actual power in Maine can be determined. A close examination of hate rhetoric will be presented and a discussion of the rise and fall of the Klan in Maine during the 1920s will be discussed.

Keywords: Ku Klux Klan, Hate, Maine

1. Body of Paper

Throughout Maine’s statehood, the state often appeared isolated from the rest of the United States. Its lower population density in comparison to other New England states played an important role in shaping the ruralism of the state.¹ Maine relied heavily on its natural resource economies throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and continued to do so into the twentieth century, even as much of the rest of the country, including its New England neighbors, became increasingly industrial and urban. The state depended on the production of oats, corn, and potatoes, mainly due to the fact that farmers produced these crops in high numbers.² Maine’s agrarian sector began to suffer due to competition from agricultural businesses in the Midwest, an event that preceded the rising industrialism in the state.³ Historians have shown that the crucial decade for American urbanization was the 1910s. In 1910, the US census reported that 54 percent of the nation’s population was rural, yet by the 1920 census, only 48 percent remained rural; the first census to indicate that a majority of the American population lived in towns and cities.⁴ In Maine, this decline in rural life occurred, but not at the same rate, dropping only 3 percent to 61 percent in 1920. Maine’s population reached 768,000 in 1920, yet less than 300,000 lived in an urban area; and most of those were rather large towns. With rapid industrialization across the urban centers of the state, many farmers relucted to leave the agrarian life and embrace industrialism. In 1915, the state’s Department of Agriculture published the *Fourteenth Annual Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture of the State of Maine*. The report addressed the state of the agricultural sector, improving health conditions, and different ways to approach agricultural concerns. The first section of the report addressed the difficulty of finding seasonal agricultural labor. Commissioner William T. Guptill wrote “At the present time the labor

conditions are such that it is well-nigh impossible to get help temporarily, for either the seed time or the harvest. I might say that it is well-nigh impossible to get help for any season during the year on their farm.”⁵ Maine’s agricultural industry experienced an economic shift, one that forced the farmer to rely solely on the labor they or their own machinery could provide because the declining economic value of their production did not provide them the financial security to employ more workers. The decline in agricultural profitability and strengthening industrial economy in Maine facilitated a shift in labor, one that slowly occurred throughout state.

The formation of Maine’s farming population sheds light into the general population of the state. Maine’s State Compendium report from 1920, a report documenting population, agriculture, manufacturing, and education in Maine shows that white males in Maine dominated the farming industry. In 1920, according to agricultural census data, there were 48,227 farms. Of these farms, white farmers owned 48,214 or about 99.7 percent of all the farms in Maine. Aroostook County, located in the most northern part of Maine, held the most native-born white farmers in the state and also produced the most cereal crops, such as corn, oats, and wheat.⁶ In the agricultural sector, Aroostook County proved to be the most profitable county in Maine, with a total crop value of over \$100 million in 1920. Aroostook County commanded 52 percent of the state’s total agricultural economy. Aroostook’s prosperity did not extend to all counties in the state. In smaller agriculturally-based counties, the value of crops represented a smaller portion of value than in Aroostook County. For example, when the value of cereals reached over \$50 million for Aroostook County, the next closest county, Penobscot County, only reached a little over \$8 million.⁷ The *Eighteenth Annual Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture of the State of Maine* vocalized the uncertainty and slow decline of Maine’s agriculture. It captures the mindset of the state’s farmers when it wrote, “They entertain much anxiety for the future of their great industry. What course to take, in what direction to move, they are uncertain. There appears little light ahead. Somewhat confused by present unusual conditions, many farmers are merely marking time.”⁸ While some counties in Maine held strongly to their agricultural connections, the state government recognized the concerns of smaller farmers and the changing economic system of the state. Although Maine maintained a dominant rural and agrarian culture throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it is clear from these agricultural reports that that sector experienced slow, yet persistent, decline. Maine’s urban counties, such as Androscoggin County, however, experienced a different transition into the twentieth century; a transition dominated by urbanism, modernism, technology, and immigration.

When French Canadians migrated to the United States, they found a home in Androscoggin County, specifically the city of Lewiston. The county as a whole consisted of a largely urban population, constituting almost 40 percent of the entire state’s urban population.⁹ Specifically in Lewiston, French-Canadian immigrants comprised over 20 percent of the city’s population, a number significantly higher than any other town or county. As French-Canadian immigrants entered Maine, they left their former employment in low-skill manufacturing jobs or in the agricultural and lumber industries. The poor economy in Quebec influenced their move to find employment opportunities elsewhere. Mill owners in Maine soon sought out unskilled or low-skill manufacturing laborers from Quebec, sending recruiters to different Quebec towns to convince French Canadians to migrate south. As the number of French-Canadian immigrants increased, they built a reputation as a reliable and hardworking workforce. During the Great Depression, the Federal Writer’s Project, a program funded through the Work Progress Administration, sought to uncover the lived experiences of working people in the United States. Robert Grady, employed with the WPA, interviewed an anonymous French-Canadian who described the lives of French-Canadians in Maine and their employment experiences. After the interviewee described the declining lumber and agricultural industry, he reportedly stated, “The saw mills disappeared as the lumber gave out, but in their stead there appeared two woolen mills, two pulp mills, two box mills, and a number of smaller industries. A large proportion of the workers in these factories are French Canadians or their descendants.”¹⁰ The decline in value and reliance on the lumber and agricultural industry created a pathway for French-Canadians to dominate the mills, an increasingly valuable industry to be involved with in the state of Maine. The growing value in mills and the positive reputation French Canadians gained as employees aided in their ability to grow in numbers and receive more employment.

The increasing tensions between new labor demographics and native-born workers in Maine was not unique to the state alone, but appeared as a national trend. As the historiography shows, the 1920s represented a time of isolationism and a heightened sense of fear among white native-born Americans. The United States entered a recession following the end of the First World War. Economic hardship contributed to the development of nativist thoughts and rhetoric, and in different parts of the country, the Ku Klux Klan emerged as the power to further these nativist ideas and goals. The fundamental ideas behind the group were not new to American society, as the country experienced with the rise of earlier nativist societies like the Know Nothing Party, and other anti-Catholic, anti-black, and anti-Semitic movements.¹¹ The Klan may have been somewhat unique in their white-hooded robes, their oddly-named positions of power, and their own form of law and order, but their rhetoric and message carried similar themes of nativism and hatred common throughout US history. For an organization that prided itself on their secrecy, they often made a

spectacle out of their public protests and voiced their opposition to ideas that contradicted their brand of “Americanism.”

By 1923, the Klan became a noticeable presence in Maine, and a widely discussed newspaper topic. Both *The New York Times* and a local Maine newspaper, the *Lewiston Daily Sun*, reported on Klan activities in the state of Maine.¹² Governor Percival Baxter, a Maine Republican, held office from 1921 to 1924 where he advocated for an anti-Klan platform. As Baxter prepared to move out of office, the *Lewiston Daily Sun* published an article entailing his worries and his vision for the Republican Party of Maine. The article discussed the internal fractioning of the party, current election issues, and the Ku Klux Klan. Baxter, unlike other Republican politicians during this time, made it clear that the Klan represented a threat to governance and the political system. When discussing the Klan and the Republican Party, he reportedly believed, “On both sides of this unfortunate division are Republicans, and as a result the Republican party is endangered... I deeply regret that religious dissent is rampant throughout the State and that the split between races, sexes, and creeds daily grows wider.”¹³ Baxter’s public anti-Klan platform remained an anomaly in the Republican Party of Maine and by the time the gubernatorial election approached, the Klan emerged as the central issue and a key divider for voters.

With the Klan the central issue in the 1924 gubernatorial election, nominees needed to take a position on the organization. William Pattangall, the Democratic nominee, consistently emphasized his opposition to the Ku Klux Klan. Nationally, the Democratic Party was hardly unified over the Klan issue, as many southern Democrats not only refused to denounce the Klan, but were in fact active members. Pattangall recognized the disadvantage he faced in this election as a Democrat and sought out help from the national Democratic Party. Pattangall attended the national convention where he sought a party unified in opposition to the Klan. The 1924 *New York Times* article, “How Klan Figures in Maine Election” gives insight on the different goals and values that Pattangall and his opposition, Ralph Brewster, held, while also attempting to determine how the Klan’s power in Maine grew. The anonymous journalist wrote, “The plan [to denounce the Klan] failed, for the convention, despite Mr. Pattangall’s advocacy of an anti-Klan platform declaration, refused to adopt it... The Maine delegates returned home... without the endorsement of their party.”¹⁴ If Pattangall successfully secured his party’s opposition to the Klan, it would have diluted the Klan’s power not just in Maine, but across the whole nation. The national Democratic Party’s unwillingness to oppose the Klan officially showed the lack of unity within the national party because of the Klan’s appeal to Southern Democrats, while it also revealed the support that the Klan gained on a national level. Pattangall’s opponent, Ralph Brewster, utilized a different method when dealing with the Klan, one similar to the rest of the Republican Party.

As the Republican nominee for the gubernatorial election, it only makes sense that Ralph Brewster gained the support of the Ku Klux Klan. Brewster ran against Frank Farrington for the Republican nomination, with Brewster ultimately winning the spot after a series of recounts.¹⁵ Farrington represented the more progressive wing of the Republican Party, and strongly opposed Klan-backed bigotry. After the recount, however, Farrington needed to help unite the Republican Party and supported Brewster. Attaining the Klan’s support became the key factor in Brewster’s bid for the governor’s seat. A *Lewiston Daily Sun* article reported on the accusation that Brewster sought the endorsement of the Klan. The 1924 article described the accusations made towards Brewster about his relationship with the Klan in Maine. Brewster reportedly stated, “I am not a member of any secret organization nor have I sought the endorsement of an secret organization in my candidacy.”¹⁶ While Brewster claimed he did not support the Klan or request their endorsement, he still missed an opportunity to outright denounce the organization. Brewster may not have necessarily needed the Klan’s support in the election, but he recognized the advantage their support gave him in gaining votes.

An amendment to the state constitution deciding whether public funds should be used in parochial schools became a key issue during the gubernatorial campaigns for the 1924 election. Opposition to parochial schools in Maine derived from native-born fears concerning the lack of assimilation among Catholic immigrants in the state. Franco-American families often sent their children to parochial schools to foster their culture, language, and religion, but this created opposition from Maine’s Republican Party and the Klan. Franco-Americans felt conflicted when deciding whether to send their children to parochial or public school, feeling that the former allowed a continued growth in Franco-American culture and language. The Klan, alongside many native-born Americans in Maine, feared the allegiances Catholic immigrants brought to the country and felt that parochial schools represented a place for the growth of anti-American thoughts. Eugene Farnsworth, an organizer for the Klan, became an outspoken champion of Protestantism and promoted a “100 Percent American” national identity. In the *Lewiston Daily Sun*’s 1923 article, “Names of Local Klan Agents Disclosed at Meeting in Auburn,” the paper quotes Farnsworth promoting Klan attitudes. Farnsworth reportedly stated, “If they are teaching Americanism in Parochial schools they are false to Rome. If they don’t they are false to America.”¹⁷ Farnsworth claimed that a person could not be both a Catholic and an American because the individual loyalties associated with both groups would cancel each other out. He believed that Catholics always answered to the Pope before they would answer to the United States government and based on that premise, he believed

Catholicism should not be supported directly or indirectly by public funds. Contrary to what Farnsworth and Klan-sympathizers believed, Franco-Americans laid their loyalties within the United States and sought to be the ideal immigrant and thus, the ideal American.

The amendment that many Republicans and the Klan sought to limit public funding to parochial schools did not carry to all Republicans or members of the state. The idea that limiting this funding would only hurt Catholic parochial schools appeared to be false, as the amendment would cut funding to Quaker, Methodist, Baptist, and Protestant parochial schools, all schools that if this amendment passed, would suffer greater harm than Catholic schools.¹⁸ The power behind this legislation came from a strong encouragement on Eugene Farnsworth's part, when he declared that the United States "always has been and always will be a Protestant nation."¹⁹ This rhetoric did not bode well with many Americans and specifically, Franco-Americans, who turned to the United States' recognition of the separation between church and state. For the Franco-American population in Maine, they viewed this amendment as another attack on their culture, similar to the 1919 law passed prohibiting the use of the French language in public schools. After Farnsworth's speech, *Le Messenger*, a French-language newspaper read and produced by the large Franco-American population in Lewiston and surrounding areas, published an article questioning the right and basis for Farnsworth's claims. In the article "Le Ku Klux Klan," Louis-Philippe wrote, "Where does this claim that the American nation is Protestant come from? She is no more Protestant than she is Catholic and no more Lutheran than Methodist ... The separation of Church and State exists in the United States and we have no right to say that the nation is Protestant."²⁰ Philippe, and by extension, the Franco-Americans of Maine, recognized that Farnsworth, who claimed to promote the best for the United States and represent an organization fighting to keep the United States safe and pure from the social threat of immigrants, undermined basic constitutional values in the United States by promoting the country as Protestant. The two different positions for the amendment to limit the spending of public funds on parochial schools contributed to the broader issue of the 1924 election, the Ku Klux Klan.

By September of 1924, the Klan appeared as the central issue of the gubernatorial election. For months, William Pattangall based his campaign on anti-Klan rhetoric and accused Brewster of being a Klan candidate. Brewster, on the other hand, continued to state his positions of policy throughout the campaign, only commenting on Pattangall's accusations a handful of times. It became customary for Republicans in the state and across the country to avoid mentioning the Klan, finding that a lack of acknowledgement and denunciation proved to be the most beneficial strategy during contested elections.²¹ Pattangall's attacks on the Klan may have lacked major support, but in the city of Lewiston, his platform rang strong among one of the largest Franco-American populations in the state. Five days before the gubernatorial election, the city of Lewiston held its first Democratic rally, where Mayor Louis Brann and William Pattangall attempted to rally support for the party. In Pattangall's address to the attendees, he only discussed the Klan's influence in Maine and the impact they would have if Brewster won the election. Pattangall did not take the Klan to be a religious issue, but an issue of politics and morality. Pattangall reportedly stated, "Any rational Republicans, Democrats and even Klansmen will agree if they give the matter a little thought, that no secret society or order regardless of its standards, philosophy or aims has a place in the Maine politics and government."²² Pattangall's opposition to the Klan came from a need to preserve party politics and the legitimacy of government structures, because allowing a secret order to take government control undermined the validity of democracy. Pattangall worked to secure a Democratic victory, but on the day of the election, the Republican Party emerged victorious and, by association, the Klan claimed victory as well.

When Ralph Brewster won the gubernatorial election in 1924, the outcome did not come as a shock to the people of Maine. Since the Civil War, Maine most often supported the Republican Party. Brewster won the election by receiving 57 percent of the votes, a percentage not much different from previous years. According to Maine's *State Year-Book and Legislative Manual*, a book published every year compiling information about the state, during the 1922 election, the Republican candidate, Percival Baxter won the election with 58 percent of the votes and in 1920, the Republican nominee, Frederick Parkhurst, won with 66 percent of the votes.²³ The rhetoric leading up to the election showed a strong sense of confidence for Pattangall, who believed thousands of Republicans would cross party lines to support him.²⁴ His confidence continued to grow as he continued to attack the Klan, due to his belief that they carried some political power in the state. Pattangall believed that if Republicans won the election, the Klan would be the real winners. In his speech at Lewiston's Democratic rally, he reportedly stated "If Senator Brewster is elected it will be hailed as a Klan victory all over the country and not as a Republican victory."²⁵ Feeling that a Republican victory equaled a Klan victory shows the power of the Klan's rhetoric in the state, but this rhetoric did not translate into direct power. Previous election results coupled with the less than evident Klan power illustrates that in Maine, the Klan represented a vocal-hate minority, rather than a substantive political group able to create change through the Brewster administration. The Klan's public support of Brewster may have aided in bid for the governorship, but the Klan failed to influence or create laws in the state. While the organization lacked in their ability to create legislative change, instead, they influenced the way Franco-Americans in Maine voted during the election.

Franco-Americans in Maine represented an increasingly large urban population. Their ability to embrace urbanism became the anti-thesis to Maine's traditional values of an agrarian economy and a rural landscape. The Klan emerged as the defender of these values in Maine, and to many white, native-born Mainers, they needed to embrace the organization that claimed to stand for their values. The Klan represented an opposition to Irish Americans and Franco Americans because of their Catholic identities, and native-born Mainers, already looking at this demographic to blame for a struggling economy, continued to back Maine's Republican Party. Franco Americans faced much opposition from the organization and relied on their ability to vote as their source of agency. In the 1924 election, residents in Lewiston overwhelmingly voted for Pattangall, the Democratic nominee. Over 70 percent of Lewiston's population voted for Pattangall, a city dominated by industrialism and Franco Americans.²⁶ A *New York Times* article, "How Klan Figures in Maine Election," from 1924 described the layout of Maine's economy and the upcoming election. When referring to the growing Franco-American population, the journalist reported, "Heretofore the French-Canadians in those counties of this State in which they are most numerous have generally voted the Republican ticket, but on the anti-Klan issue raised by Mr. Pattangall they may not do so this year."²⁷ Franco Americans in Maine realigned their political affiliations to the Democratic Party based on local Democratic opposition to the Klan's rhetoric, a feat evident by the overwhelming support for Pattangall in a city such as Lewiston. While Franco-American opposition may not have been as substantial as intended in combatting the public threat of heightened Klan power, the role of the organization in Maine local politics only decreased after this election.

In 1926, the majority of the nation looked to Maine's special election, due to its importance in deciding what political party controlled the Senate. The election in Maine drew up a wide array of opposing views and crossing party lines. The Ku Klux Klan opted to place their support behind Fulton Redman, the Democratic nominee, and pushed a campaign that attacked Arthur Gould for his campaign spending, a notion that proved to be unsubstantiated after investigation.²⁸ Alongside the Klan, Ralph Brewster, who won the gubernatorial election in 1924, also voiced his opposition to the Republican nominee and supported Redman. Yet, long-standing Democratic cities and towns in the state, such as Lewiston, appeared to largely support the Republican, Arthur Gould. After the election, *The New York Times* reported on the election results and where cities placed their votes. In the 1926 article, "Gould Wins in Maine; Gives Republicans Half of the Senate," the journalist described the political fight up to the election, and the result after. When describing Klan influence in the election, the article stated, "Democratic cities like Lewiston, Biddeford and Rockland all went against his own party voting against him to punish the Klan... The vote from the rural districts also indicated that the Klan vote did not come out in full."²⁹ Similar to the 1924 election when Franco Americans appeared to cross party lines to vote for Pattangall, the way the city of Lewiston voted for the Republican candidate shows how Franco Americans transcended partisan lines once again to support an anti-Klan candidate. Lewiston, dominated largely by Franco Americans who voted for Democratic candidates in the past, continued to use their power of voting to voice their opposition to the Klan and Klan-backed politicians, assisting in the Klan's decline throughout the state.

By 1930, Klan power in the state of Maine had almost disappeared, if not completely vanished. Little is known about the causes of their decline, but certain indicators shed light on this fall. The organization suffered in the latter half of the 1920s, with financial troubles and internal factions. These factions continued to divide the Klan with the arrival of Edward Gayer, the new King Kleagle in Maine, prompting many Klan members to leave and follow Eugene Farnsworth. The *New York Times* reported that Klan membership in Maine continuously declined, especially in the Portland area.³⁰ Many local and national politicians predicted that the Klan would not be a lasting or influential political organization. While they aligned with both the Republican and Democratic parties in Maine whenever their religious intolerance and bigotry fit with either party's message, many believed this vocal-hate minority was a temporary issue. In the *New York Times* article, "The Ku Klux Mischief," the journalist reported on the foundation of the Ku Klux Klan and their influence, if any at all. When describing the Klan as a national and local issue, the journalist put it best by writing, "The Ku Klux hullabaloo is deplorable, but presumably it is only a passing idiocy."³¹ The Ku Klux Klan's power across the state mirrored the Klan's power across the nation; a temporary movement that sought to infringe upon the lives of those not white, native-born, and Protestant by attempting to disrupt political institutions. While the early 1920s showed a Klan filled with political power, a closer examination of the Klan in Maine shows that their use of hate rhetoric was only temporary, one that ceased to exist by the end of the decade.

2. Endnotes

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