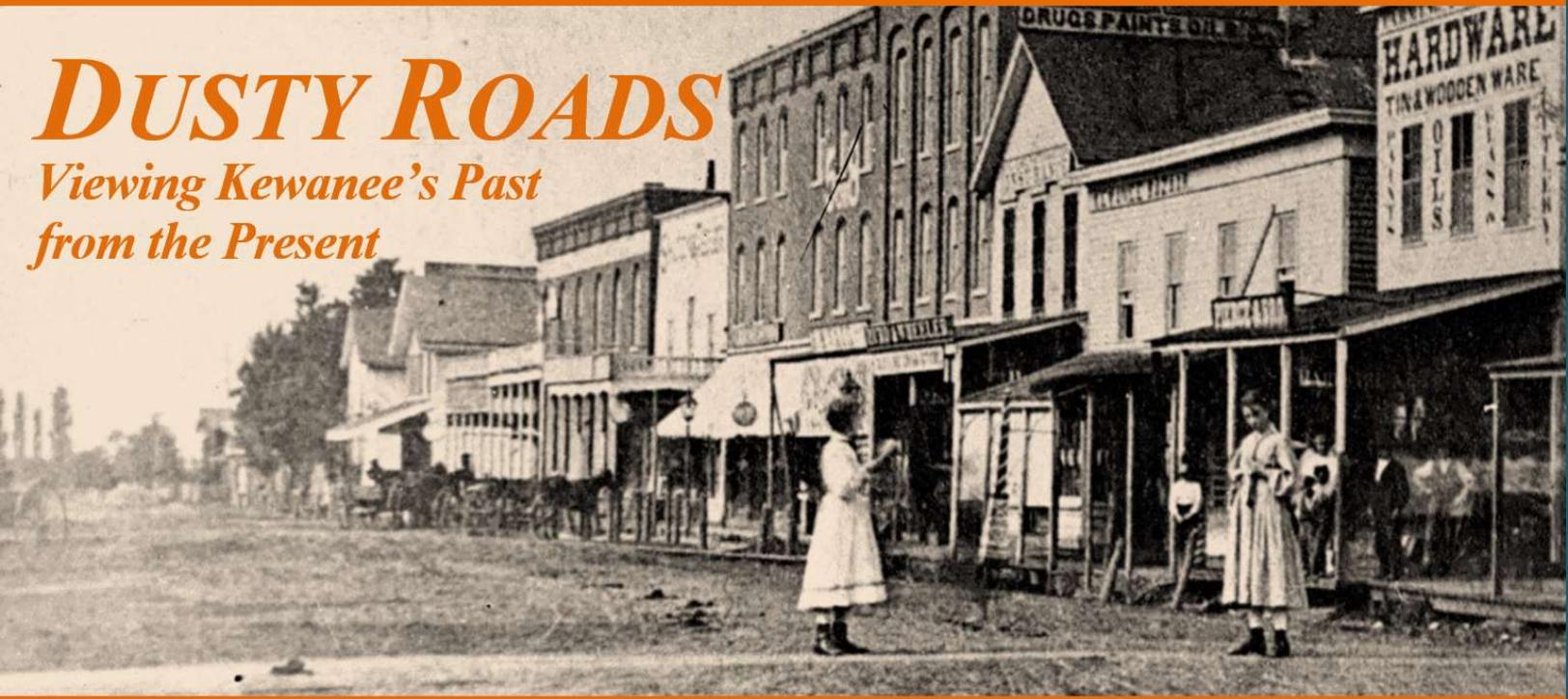


DUSTY ROADS

*Viewing Kewanee's Past
from the Present*



by Dean Karau

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Religious Bigotry in the Founding of Wethersfield

The Founders Feared an Expansion of Catholicism into the Mississippi River Valley

Thankfully, we now live in a time when religious prejudices no longer exist, that all peoples of the world, regardless of the religions they practice, no longer fear persecution for the exercise of their faith. Jews, Muslims, Catholics, and even non-believers now live peacefully and in harmony, side by side, with no animosity toward each other. Gone are all of the brutal conflicts deemed important by the gods of yesteryear.

So now we can safely discuss the religious prejudices that led to the founding of Wethersfield in the 1830s. The truth? It was all about stopping the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church from conquering the Mississippi River Valley.

The historian Arthur M. Schlesinger believed the prejudice against Roman Catholics to be “the deepest bias in the history of the American people.” Not necessarily the most violent, but one buried deep in the American consciousness since the founding of United States.

Anti-Catholicism arrived in the New World with the Pilgrims, following the “flames of the Reformation,” the European-wide rebellion against the excesses of the Roman Catholic Church.

There was a brief respite after 1776 and the War of Independence. But anti-Catholicism reappeared in the 1820s, especially in the Eastern urban areas experiencing rapidly increasing immigration of Irish and German Catholics, viewed by many as encouraged by Rome. The belief in manifest destiny seemed at risk by apparent Papal encouragement of westward movement of those immigrants into the Mississippi River Valley. The Catholic population was soaring, from 1% of the population with formal religious affiliation in 1776 to 37% by 1860.

Immigrants came from both the East and from New Orleans, the second largest immigration port in the U.S., and many were aiming for the upper Midwest.

While overstated, the Roman Church did establish seminaries in Europe to train priests, especially Jesuits, to eventually go to the Midwest and the Valley. But their effect was not particularly strong, and there was little organized opposition until the man known for the telegraph entered the fray.

Samuel F. B. Morse was trained as a theologian, became an artist, then an inventor, and then an anti-Catholic leader. After spending time in Europe in the



early 1830s, he became convinced of a Papal plot to infiltrate the U.S., in particular, the Mississippi Valley. He feverishly worked against the tide of immigration – “[w]e must stop this leaking ship, through which the muddy waters from without threaten to sink us.”

Samuel F. B. Morse, self-portrait

Others took up the cause. Reverend Lyman Beecher, father of Harriet Beecher Stowe (and seven ministers, too), developed his fear of Catholic control of the Mississippi River Valley as early as 1830, when he wrote to friends about the need to move to the West in order to combat the threat firsthand. In the same year, he then took the position of president of Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati.

Beecher supported Morse’s conspiracy theories, preaching powerful sermons that the immigrants were “a train of powder between the enemy’s camp and our own magazine, which, once ignited, would destroy the American republic.”

Beecher also saw Catholic schools as not intending to educate Catholics but to win over Protestant converts. He cited St. Louis University, which began as St. Louis Academy in 1818, then St. Louis College in 1820, and finally the university in 1832, staffed by Jesuits. Its ranks included the offspring of the rich, famous and powerful.

In 1834, Beecher gave a number of sermons described



Lyman Beecher

by some as “oratorical hell fire” on the “whoredom of Babylon” and the “foul beast of the papacy.”

In the Midwest, opponents to Catholics were similarly vocal. A Missourian wrote “[t]heir priests are coming in upon us, and with a zeal that ought to make the Protestant Church blush, they are establishing their schools and their nunneries throughout the land.”

But the Catholic Church also played into the hand of the anti-Papists, calling itself the “one perfect institution on earth.” As one commentator noted, “the popular delusions and the madness” of anti-Catholics were not necessarily “hallucinatory in origin.”

Nevertheless, this was the intellectual and religious

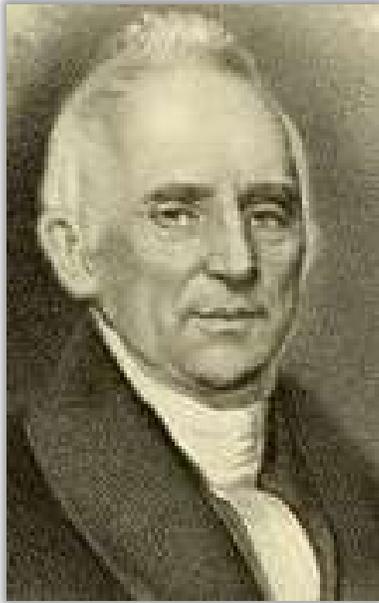


Ruins of burnt Ursuline Convent in Boston in 1834 after Rev. Beecher sermons

climate among Eastern Protestants in 1835, when the Reverend Caleb Jewett Tenney, pastor of the Congregational Church in Wethersfield, Connecticut, reached out to the Reverend Isthamar Pillsbury, who had just returned from an expedition to Illinois on behalf of the New York Association to found a colony in what became Andover.

Rev. Tenney, considered by many to be the father of Wethersfield, Illinois, sought Rev. Pillsbury’s opinion on developing colonies in the Mississippi Valley in general, and in Henry County in Illinois in particular.

Rev. Pillsbury reinforced Rev. Tenney’s belief in the necessity of colonizing the land in order to establish



Caleb Jewett Tenney

a Protestant foothold, while also making it clear that economic good fortune could follow as well.

In the fall of 1835, Rev. Tenney commenced a meeting at the Congregational Church to discuss the implementation of a plan to establish a new colony in Illinois. Attendees included many who eventually settled in

the Wethersfield Colony or their relatives, including Dr. Caleb J. Tenney, Selden Miner, Roger Wells, Martin Kellogg, John Francis, Chancey Coleman, Weltha Willard, Rev. John Marsh, Joshua Goodrich, George Wells, Horace Blaine, Henry Robbins, Col. Sylvester Blish, Rev. Samuel Redel, William Butler, Rev. Ithamar Pillsbury, Miles Adams, Elizur Goodrich, Samuel Galpin, E. Porter, Rev. Horace Hooker, William Tenney, George Shipman, Russell H. Nevins, Timothy Stillman, Allen Talcott, Rev. Geo. A. Calhoun, Francis Loomis, Edward Payson, D.D., Rev. Geo. Stebbins, Rev. John Woodbridge, Gersham Buckley, Geo. Buckley, Gardner Spring, D.D., Merritt

Butler, Osmond Harrison, Rev. Harvey Tolcott, Jeduthan and Jonathan Hubbard, Sullivan Howard, Geo. Richards, Jasper Gilbert, Rev. Alpha Miller, Nathan DeWolf, J. L. Belden, Nathan Kelley, Stephen Topliff, Dr. A. Welch, Geo. B. Holley, Rev. Chancey Booth, Richard T. Haines, Rev. Ralph Emerson, and Robert Gipson.

Those men formed the Connecticut Association of Wethersfield, Connecticut, drafted association articles, fixed the company's stock price, and began planning for the colony. During the winter, one hundred shares were taken and \$25,000 raised. By March of 1836, they were ready to proceed with an exploration committee to travel to Henry County to find and purchase land for the colony.

The Catholic feared invasion of the Midwest, as contemplated by Morse, Beecher, Tenney, and others, never materialized. But it proved to be a strong initial motivation for the eventual development of the village of Wethersfield and Wethersfield Township, which led to the development of Kewanee a little over a decade and a half later.

I will not posit that religious prejudice served a useful purpose. I would prefer to believe those men were ill-informed, and their moral and ethical compasses would read differently today. But then, given the state of affairs in today's world, even though we've excised religious prejudices from our lives, who's to say they still wouldn't be bigots today.



Dean Karau is a Kewanee native who moved away when he was 12 years old. Now retired, he continues to enjoy the outdoors, genealogy and history. He returns regularly to Kewanee to explore his roots and the history of Kewanee and Henry County.