

The Fourth of July Celebration as Seen through the Eyes of Nineteenth-Century Artists

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Fireworks popping in the distance, flags whipping in the breeze, families gathering around picnic tables and grills: these are the sights and sounds that each modern American equates with Independence Day. In many respects, nineteenth-century Fourth of July celebrations were quite similar to today's celebrations as families and communities gathered to hear speeches, set off fireworks, and marched in civic parades. Contemporary artists, including John Lewis Krimmel, Lilly Martin Spencer, and Alfred Cornelius Howland, would record these patriotic festivities in great detail. Recently, scholars, such as Elizabeth Johns, David Lupin, and Milo Naeve, have recognized the subtle social issues underlying these seemingly innocent portrayals of common citizens celebrating the Fourth of July. There is, however, more to these holiday images than just a Hogarthian view of society; they also reflect the political evolution of a young nation still struggling to define itself.

This study will show that the nation's political climate exerted a powerful influence on the way nineteenth-century Americans portrayed their national holidays: while ostensibly celebrating our country's birth, nineteenth-century paintings of the Fourth of July were also loaded with references to war, racism, and isolationism. From the early halcyon days of promise and hope shortly after independence, through a period that saw two more wars on native soil as well as the rise of political sentiment that, in just one century, would turn its back on its immigrant roots, Independence Day would provide a brilliant backdrop for illustrating America's growing pains.

In the opening years of the nineteenth century, America's fight for independence was still a recent memory. It was a memory that included optimism for a new government that would prove to be the citizens' hope of the future.¹ Nowhere was this pride in the new nation more evident than in Philadelphia, the site of the First and Second Continental Congresses and the nation's capital from 1790-1800. Philadelphians enthusiastically embraced the Fourth of July, where, as in many other American cities, the holiday was a celebra-

tion of familial and societal ties. For instance, in a letter to his wife written on July 7, 1809, the famous Philadelphian sculptor Benjamin Rush described his Independence Day celebration: "On Tuesday, being the anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, most of our family, that is Sam, Wm Emely Anners, and Mrs. McDougal in the carriage, and James and I in the chair, fled from the noise of the city to our customary and delightful retreat on the banks of the Schuylkill, where we spent a pleasant afternoon on the side of a boat fishing."²

While Rush preferred to leave Philadelphia, the city's other citizens often celebrated the Fourth of July by gathering in the town square, as illustrated by John Lewis Krimmel in one of our earliest Independence Day depictions, *Fourth of July in Centre Square*, 1810-1812 (Figure 1). In this scene well-dressed families mingle in the sunshine on the right side of the composition, and, on the left, a seated old woman holds a bottle in her right hand while offering a cup to the male celebrants. Elizabeth Johns suggests that this narrative carries a moralizing statement against alcohol.³ Her assertion is supported by historians in their 1884, *The History of Philadelphia*, who explained that the Square was a popular place for the Fourth Celebration as vendors set up tables where they could sell food and liquor.⁴ In fact, contemporary critics underscored the moralizing undertone, when, during its exhibition in 1812, a review in the *Second Annual Exhibition of the Society of Artists of the United States and the Pennsylvania Academy, 1812* stated that the work was "Hogarthian" and "full of meaning."⁵

However, this painting is not only dealing with moral issues, it also reflects the contemporary political mood of the city and the nation. Krimmel has chosen Benjamin Henry Latrobe's city waterworks' pumping station to illustrate Philadelphia's still powerful political and economic status. This symbol of America's greatness was duplicated in prints by famous artists including William Birch, whose series of Philadelphia landmarks was avidly collected by famous politicians

This paper was originally written under the direction of Dr. Jehanne Teillet-Fisk. Her intelligence, wit, enthusiasm, and strength was an inspiration to all who studied under her. It is to her memory that this paper is dedicated.

¹ Milo M. Naeve, *John Lewis Krimmel—An Artist in Federal America* (Newark: University of Delaware, 1987) 44.

² L. H. Butterfield, ed., *Letters of Benjamin Rush* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1951) 1006.

³ Elizabeth Johns, *American Genre Painting—The Politics of Everyday Life* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1991) 4.

⁴ Thomas Scharf and Thompson Westcott, *History of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: L. H. Everts, Co., 1884) 1844.

⁵ "Review of the Second Annual Exhibition," *Port Folio* 2 (1812): 24.

of the day like the Vice President, Thomas Jefferson.⁶ Built to bring clean water from the Schuylkill River to a city that had been plagued by Yellow Fever, the station dominates the scene.⁷ With its neoclassical Greek façade, this monument was a testament to the advancement of technology as a symbol of hope and optimism for the future of the new country.

John Lewis Krimmel would return to Philadelphia's Independence Day celebration in his 1819 painting, *Central Square on the Fourth of July* (Figure 2). As with his earlier depiction, the artist shows a public celebration in the same square in Philadelphia and again takes aim at the drunken revelries that drove the city of Philadelphia to enact ordinances against public drinking on Independence Day.⁸ Here, the elderly woman with her cider and apples has again set up shop on the left side of the painting as a fiddler and soldiers celebrate around her. A gentlemen behind her holds up a bottle, while his friend, sitting on the far left side, raises his glass in a toast.

However, with the memory of the War of 1812 still fresh in the public's consciousness, the emphasis has shifted from a celebration of the family unit to a celebration of American military and political power. In Pennsylvania, the victorious conclusion of the War of 1812 was considered an important key to the success of a burgeoning Republican party.⁹ According to the *Carlisle Gazette*, Philadelphians revealed in their toasts at Fourth of July celebrations that they believed the English were the aggressors who threatened America's autonomy.¹⁰ Even though the War of 1812 had ended in a stalemate after the Battle of New Orleans, Americans thought of the conflict as a second bid for independence from England.¹¹ In jotted notes on a preparatory watercolor sketch, Krimmel refers to this new mood as he scribbles, "Battle of Trenton/ Death of Genl. Mercer/ General Jackson/ The Hero of South." The artist has juxtaposed the Revolutionary War and General Mercer to the War of 1812 and General Jackson, a connection that would have been well-understood by contemporary Philadelphians. In each war, General Washington and General Jackson were considered individually responsible for America's successful bid for independence. It was thought that the Battle of Trenton, which resulted in the death of the war hero General Mercer, and the Battle of New Orleans, led by General Jackson, were turning points in their respective wars.

Krimmel took these historical legends and converted them into an iconography that would have spoken to America's

political future as a strong democracy. On the left, two symbols of the Revolution are proudly displayed: the American flag and a portrait of George Washington.¹² By including the flag in the composition, Krimmel is referring to a newly popular Fourth of July icon, made so by Francis Scott Key's *Star Spangled Banner*. The flag is underscored by the first President of the United States, who, by the beginning of the nineteenth-century, had achieved cult status. Below the president's portrait is a painting of a naval battle, an obvious reference to the American naval fleet. Although the War of 1812 had ended inconclusively and resulted in the Hague Treaty, the American naval fleet had consistently displayed its superiority over its smaller British opponents. In tandem with the Stars and Stripes, a Pennsylvania regimental flag flies on the right side of Krimmel's work, its motto, "Virtue, Independence, Liberty," prominently lettered along the bottom of the banner. The Pennsylvania banner has been placed on equal footing with the Stars and Stripes suggesting the Keystone state's important contribution to America's independence. A depiction of the Battle of New Orleans is displayed underneath the Pennsylvania banner. It was the Battle of New Orleans that the nation would point to as evidence of military superiority and the success of a brand new democracy outlined by President James Madison's message to Congress announcing the end of the war: "War has been waged with a success which is the natural result of the wisdom of the Legislative Councils, of the patriotism of the people, and the spirit of the militia, and of the valor of the military and naval forces of the country."¹³ The country's rose-colored opinion of the outcome of the War of 1812 was important for its own self-image as it asserted newfound political and economic strength to a growing international community.¹⁴

By the middle of the nineteenth century, war would again stir the patriotic fires as evidenced by Lilly Martin Spencer's 1864 work, *The Artist and Her Family at a Fourth of July Picnic: A Day to Remember* (Figure 3). Spencer continues the early nineteenth-century tradition of depicting familial ties in this picnic populated by aristocratic families and their black servants. It is during America's War Between the States that the American flag would become an integral and personal part of the Fourth of July celebration. During the Civil War, Northern thinking would move from the flag as an impersonal symbol used to mark government buildings and occasions to a more personal relationship built on the blood spilled by sol-

⁶ S. Robert Teitelman, *Birch's Views of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: The Free Library of Philadelphia, 2000) 69. For the engraving of the Waterworks, see plate 28.

⁷ Penny Balkin Bach, *Public Art in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1992) 27.

⁸ Scharf 1844. Poulson, Zachary. *Daily Advertiser* (July 4, 1821).

⁹ Victor A. Sapio, *Pennsylvania and the War of 1812* (Lexington, KY: The UP of Kentucky, 1970) 193.

¹⁰ Sapio 50.

¹¹ Reginald Horsman, *The New Republic* (Hirlow, England: Longman, 2000) 253.

¹² Naeve 167-168.

¹³ Madison to Congress, February 18, 1815, in *Annals of the U.S. Congress*, 13-3, 255.

¹⁴ Horsman 253.

diers defending the honor of the country for which it stood.¹⁵ Consequently, by the time of the Centennial, when technology had advanced to allow the mass production of flags, each citizen could display his own Stars and Stripes.¹⁶ In response to the accessibility of this venerable symbol, Spencer has placed flags in the hands of children, a small girl at the apex of the composition and a boy at the lower left side.

In what has become a traditional genre theme, the Fourth of July appears as a pleasant family outing with the traditional Independence day trappings playing backstage to the gathering of family and friends. As with its predecessors, however, this image is loaded with references to the current political and social pressures of mid-nineteenth century America. The stratification of society is evident as the whites, in their expensive clothing, are waited on by their black servants. David M. Lubin suggests that during this period Spencer's genre paintings portrayed an American family in crisis—a theme born from her own experience with a chronically unemployed husband and thirteen children to raise on her painting income.¹⁷ He suggests that the children, who are too young to understand patriotism, are the ones holding the flags—a reference to the turmoil of the Civil War and its effect on the family.¹⁸

After the Civil War, the nature of the Fourth of July celebration slowly changed as former icons such as George Washington were supplanted by flags and other uses of the red, white, and blue. Fourth of July parades also became more popular as shown by Alfred Cornelius Howland's nostalgic 1886 visit to his hometown in *Fourth of July Parade* (Figure 4). As one of the first Independence Day paintings to depict a parade, and especially one that involves a flag, it is closer to our modern image of Fourth celebrations. Participants in Howland's parade consist of columns divided by functional groups composed of band members and war veterans. Escorted by little boys who are the next generation's soldiers, Howland's Civil War veterans proudly wear their tattered uniforms as they carry a large flag down the small town's main street. Like its predecessors, Howland's image portrays everyday citizens celebrating the birth of the nation. Also, like its predecessors, the *Fourth of July Parade* is loaded with political connotations. In this case, it took the Nativist Movement, or as they were popularly called, the Know-Nothings, to bring the use of parades and flag-waving to the fore during Fourth of July celebrations. Until the mid-nineteenth century, parades

had played a minor part of Independence Day which were dominated by public speeches and family gatherings. However, on July 4, 1845, three thousand Nativist men, women, and children carried the Stars and Stripes in the form of small pennants and huge banners as a new icon to their beliefs.¹⁹ The purpose of the parade was to honor those Nativists who had been killed, or "martyred" in Nativist rhetoric, in street battles the year before against perceived "foreigners" in Philadelphia.²⁰

Racism and religious intolerance had existed in America since the colonial period when the predominantly Protestant English settlers brought their biases with them to the New World.²¹ During the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries their religious prejudice grew to include fears of Catholic conspiracies which could undermine the economic power of the perceived "native" Protestant population.²² This party, which had sprung to prominence from its roots as a local Nativist group called "The Order of the Star Spangled Banner," espoused racial purity, "old-fashioned" American values, and isolationism.²³ In looking at the Know-Nothing history between their infamous 1844 Fourth of July parade and the height of their strength at the beginning of the Civil War, there is an obvious pattern of aggrandizement. Even before their emergence from secrecy, the Native American party used public lectures and parades to boost membership and spread their dogma.²⁴ Popular patriotic imagery of the eagle and the Declaration of Independence were used on their pamphlets and other publications. The American flag figured prominently in their literature as evidenced by the cover of the *Know Nothing Almanac* published in 1856 (Figure 5).

After the riots of 1843, the Know-Nothings chose the Fourth of July with its traditional format of speeches and parades to stage their protests. During the parade they consciously used the loaded meanings of patriotic iconography that had come to be associated with Independence Day in conjunction with their ideology. Even though previously small-scale Independence Day parades may have utilized a flag, the Know-Nothings recognized the potency of this symbol and saturated their parade with its image. Each Know-Nothing group, or "ward," marched together as a unit with their leaders in the front while their members followed behind carrying a banner and great numbers of flags.²⁵ Journals and newspapers across the nation reported this event in great detail to an avid audi-

¹⁵ Scot M. Guenter, *The American Flag, 1777-1924—Cultural Shifts from Creation to Codification* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1990) 87.

¹⁶ Guenter 88.

¹⁷ David M. Lubin, "Lilly Martin Spencer's Domestic Genre Paintings in Antebellum America," *Picturing a Nation: Art and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century America* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1994) 159-202.

¹⁸ Lubin 191.

¹⁹ Guenter 56.

²⁰ David H. Bennett, *The Party of Fear* (Chapel Hill: The U of North Caro-

lina P, 1988) 48.

²¹ Bennett 17.

²² Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery—The Northern Know-Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992) 9.

²³ Anbinder 21.

²⁴ Anbinder 21.

²⁵ John Hancock Lee, *The Origin and Progress of the American Party in Politics* (Philadelphia: Elliott & Gihon, 1855).

ence. As the Know-Nothing movement gained membership and popularity it was consistently in the news and in political offices. With their public relations acumen as exhibited in the impressive 1844 Fourth of July parade, it would appear that the increased importance of the flag as a patriotic emblem received a tremendous boost.

Thus, Howland's seemingly innocuous painting of a hometown parade is celebrating more than just a country's birth. It has become a holiday that was used as a platform for such patriotic groups as the Know-Nothings, Daughters of the American Revolution, and various veterans' associations to advance an isolationist propaganda. By the end of the nineteenth century, Independence Day had evolved into a holiday that celebrated the closing of America's open-door policy to immigrants, who according to these groups, threatened the purity of American blood. Groups, like the veterans portrayed in this painting, supported the isolationist policies that, in their view, protected those native to America from the barbarians knocking at the door.

Although this study is restricted to the nineteenth century, it is relevant to note that the national political climate

continued to influence patriotic displays and celebrations throughout the twentieth century. For example, with the advent of World War I in Europe, there was a dramatic increase in patriotic images as in the paintings of Childe Hassam including the New York street scene, *The Fourth of July 1916*. By the last half of the twentieth century, the celebration of the holiday had taken a back seat to the continuing dominance of the cult of the American flag. Perhaps no other American artist as emphatically reflects this evolution as Jasper Johns who transformed the flag from a symbol to a formalized statement of form and color. But even Jasper Johns could not escape the association of the flag with summer holidays when he included flag images in his autobiographical work entitled, *Summer, 1985*. Even today, in our post-9/11 world volatile global events are shaping the way Americans address the iconography that defines the character of our country. We can only wait to see how today's artists will interpret a sorely-tested democracy as we struggle to redefine ourselves as Americans through the lens of the Independence Day celebration.

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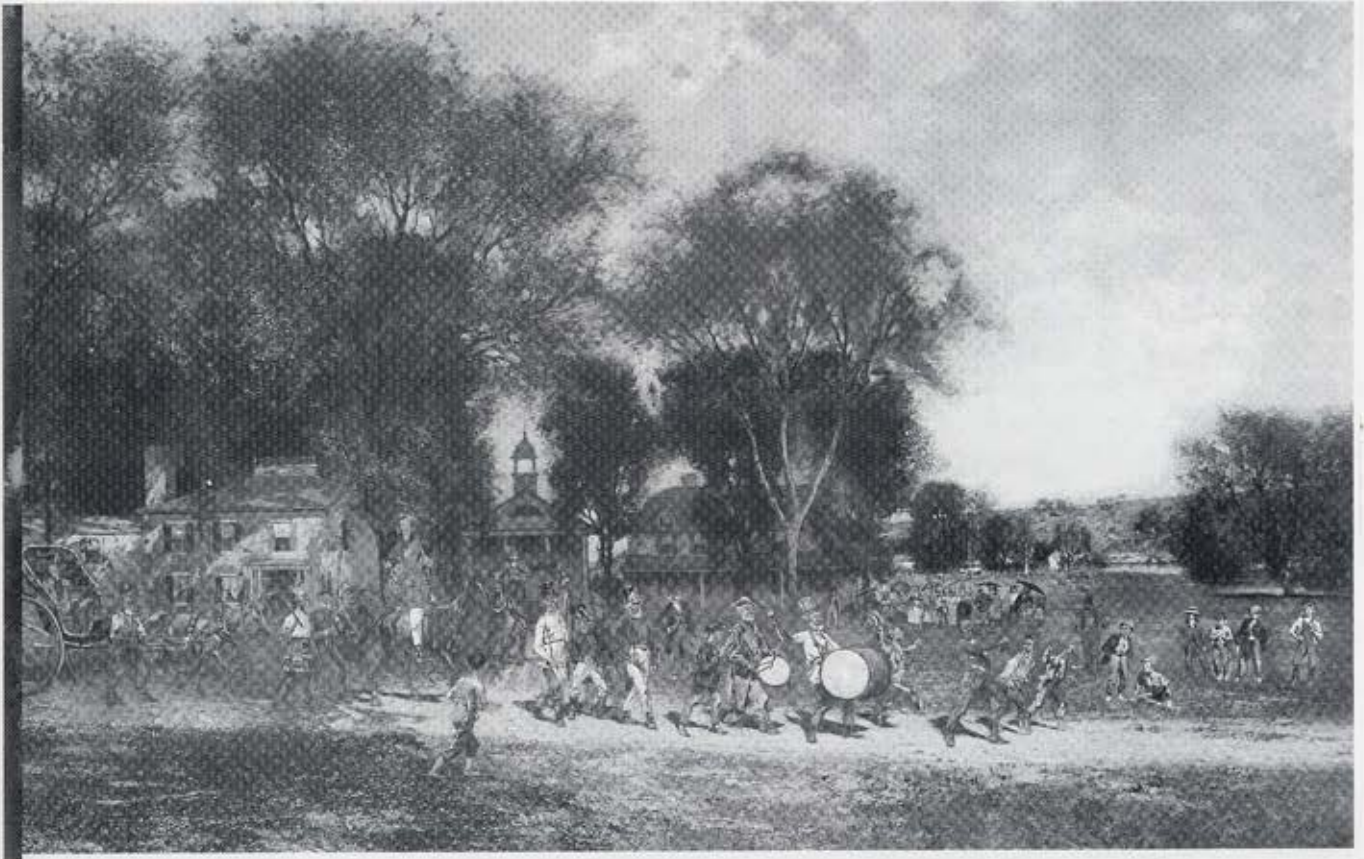
Figure 1. John Lewis Krimmel, *Fourth of July in Centre Square*, 1810-1812, oil on canvas, 23 x 29 1/8 inches. Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts.



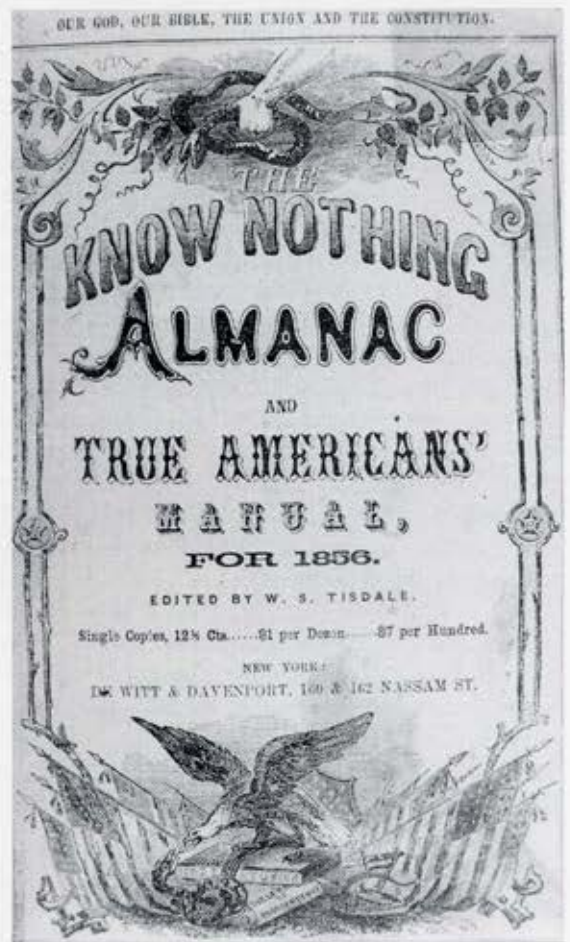
Figure 2. John Lewis Krimmel, *Central Square on the Fourth of July*, 1819, pencil, india ink, watercolor on paper, 5/16 x 18 1/8 inches. The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.



Figure 3. Lilly Martin Spencer, *The Artist and Her Family at a Fourth of July Picnic: A Day to Remember*, c. 1864, oil on canvas, 49 1/2 x 63 inches. National Museum of Women in the Arts.



[above] Figure 4. Alfred Cornelius Howland, *Fourth of July Parade*, c. 1886, oil on canvas, 24 x 36 1/6 inches. High Museum.



[right] Figure 5. Unknown, Cover of *The Know Nothing Almanac*, 1856.