Public Abstract

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This dissertation examines opposition to nuns and convent life in America as it was expressed through vigilante violence, propaganda literature, and party politics. While nuns may seem like an unlikely target of hostility, a vast cohort of Americans singled them out as a serious threat to the republic. Between 1830 and 1860 a wave of sensational convent narratives flooded the literary market. Works such as AWFUL DISCLOSURES OF THE HOTEL DIEU by “escaped nun,” Maria Monk, warned of a Catholic conspiracy through the cloister and accused priests and nuns of sexual misdeeds, torture, and infanticide. Although investigators quickly unveiled Monk as an impostor, her book became the second best-seller after UNCLE TOM'S CABIN before the Civil War, and it has never gone out of print. In order to “protect” American women from the nun’s life, mobs stormed convents from Massachusetts to Maryland. By the 1850s suspicion of nuns became formally politicized by Know-Nothing legislators who established investigative “Nunnery Committees.” Despite this widespread opposition to nuns, few historians have examined the American campaign against convents. Yet hostility toward the cloister was central to anti-Catholicism in antebellum America and reflected wider cultural trends and values regarding religion, gender, and national identity. Although the Civil War quieted the outcry against nuns for a time, the campaign against convents also had far-reaching implications. Members of the second Ku Klux Klan relied on anti-convent propaganda to buttress their positions, and common stereotypes of nuns—first evident in nineteenth-century convent narratives—have also persisted in popular culture.