

GEORGE D. PRENTICE, THE *LOUISVILLE ANZEIGER*,
AND THE 1855 BLOODY MONDAY RIOTS

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The exact number of people who lost their lives in the anti-foreigner, Bloody Monday riots in Louisville on 6 August 1855 may never be known. Contemporary accounts placed the number between fourteen and one hundred, and this range is not likely to be narrowed since no reliable inquiry was conducted at the time.¹ Whatever the correct number, 6 August 1855 was one of the darkest days in Louisville history. What could have caused nativist sentiments to reach such a peak in Louisville in the 1850s and how could so many lives, mainly foreign-born, be lost? Immediately after the riots, George D. Prentice, the editor of the *Louisville Daily Journal*, was accused of causing them by the vehemence of his editorials. This accusation took root, and even one hundred years later, on the anniversary of the riots, there was an attempt to have Prentice's statue removed from in front of the Louisville Free Public Library because of his supposed guilt.²

In recent years researchers have taken the position that there were several other factors which also contributed to the riots: resentment among natives created by the strong influx of Irish following the potato famine; increased German immigration after the failed revolution of 1848; reaction to the radical views expressed by some of the Forty-eighters as found in the *Louisville Plattform*; simple religious prejudice against

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1 For details of the number of dead claimed by various accounts, see Betty Carolyn Congleton, "George D. Prentice and Bloody Monday: A Reappraisal," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 63 (1965): 225, n. 46.

2 *Ibid.*, 228, n. 57.

Catholics, some of whom were German and many of whom were Irish; and a lack of sufficient polling places to accommodate the population. Various opinions exist as to the weight that may be assigned to each of these factors, but the general tendency has been to downplay Prentice's role. Charles Deusner, for example, concluded that, "There is no doubt that Prentice's editorials were a contributing factor, but neither the only nor the most important factor in creating the riots."³ Betty Carolyn Congleton would not even admit that much and argued that Prentice should be exonerated:

Louisville's election riots were the result of several underlying causes and one primary cause all of which appear to have been totally unrelated to George D. Prentice or the editorial policy of the *Journal*.⁴

William Mallalieu, writing in reply to Congleton, could not fully agree but said of Prentice: "He has been made a scapegoat for the sins of Louisville. But, as a leader of the American-Whig party, he cannot escape all censure."⁵ Wallace Hutcheon also tended to downplay Prentice's role, concluding:

In the end analysis, some of the blame that has been cast on Prentice should be shifted to other persons and factors, especially when one considers that Prentice did not begin his pro-Know-Nothing writings until April, 1855, and there had been much hatred and even some violence in Louisville over nativism and anti-Catholicism before then.⁶

It is true that Prentice was a recent convert to Know-Nothingism, and the writers cited are no doubt correct in maintaining that there were other contributing factors in the riots, although Congleton went too far in absolving Prentice of all

3 Charles E. Deusner, "The Know Nothing Riots in Louisville," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 61 (1963): 146.

4 Congleton, "Prentice," 231.

5 William C. Mallalieu, "George D. Prentice: A Reappraisal Reappraised," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 64 (1966): 44.

6 Wallace S. Hutcheon, "The Louisville Riots of August, 1855," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 69 (1971): 169.

blame. But the more interesting question in regard to Prentice is not to what degree he "caused" the riots, but whether he acted responsibly in writing the kinds of editorials he did, given the previous violence at the polls and the high degree of anti-foreign prejudice already existing in Louisville.

In order to shed further light on Prentice's role, it may be helpful to take an approach that has not yet been employed - to contrast Prentice's editorial style in the *Daily Journal* with that of the opposing *Louisville Anzeiger*, the leading German-language newspaper. Both will be examined in regard to their approach to the election which took place on 6 August and to the other events which led up to the riot. This inquiry will only indirectly address the question of whether Prentice "caused" the riots.

The *Anzeiger* was founded on 1 March 1849 by Georg Philip Doern and Otto Schaeffer.⁷ Although they had begun publication with only three hundred subscribers, the *Anzeiger* was a newspaper with a future. It was published almost continuously until 1938 and was the most important of Louisville's German-language newspapers. When Otto Schaeffer retired in 1852, Georg Doern continued in control until 1877. Although he functioned as publisher and not as editor, he kept the *Anzeiger* on a steady middle course through a series of five editors in the seven years between 1849 and 1856. The Doern family had come to Louisville in 1842 when Georg Philip was twelve years old. He learned the printer's art at the *Beobachter am Ohio* and founded the *Anzeiger* before he was twenty-one years old.

Begun originally so that the Louisville Germans could keep up with events in their homeland, the *Anzeiger* was more and more drawn into local politics. In 1855 there was concern in Louisville that the upcoming 6 August election might not be

7 Karl J. R. Arndt and May E. Olson, *German-American Newspapers and Periodicals* (Heidelberg: Quelle and Meyer, 1965), 169.

peaceful. The attitude of the *Anzeiger* in this question is perhaps best summarized by a lengthy lead article which it published on 1 August as having been sent in by a local German citizen. The theme of the article and, indeed, the theme of the entire election campaign for the *Anzeiger* was: "Die deutsche Nation ist eine edele und gewissenhafte Nation und wird sich in den nächsten Wahlen demgemäß betragen."⁸ In spite of the widespread expectation that Know-Nothing rowdies might attempt to prevent the non-native-born from voting and in spite of the feeling among non-natives that this election was pivotal for their participation in the civic life of Louisville, there was on the part of the *Anzeiger* a constant desire to reassure German voters that their rights would be respected. There was no hint that if their rights were not respected, they should take matters into their own hands. The 1 August article gave voters the following advice:

Deutsch-amerikanische Bürger, der Tag der Entscheidung ist nicht mehr ferne, er bringt uns entweder Freiheit oder Slaveret, deswegen nehmen wir uns die Freiheit, Euch zu ermahnen, Euch vom Stimmkasten nicht abwendig machen zu lassen, Euch nicht einschüchtern zu lassen, durch Vorstellungen von Gefahren an den Wahlplätzen, gehet früh Morgens Eure Stimme abzugeben, ehe der Brandy noch seinen Einfluß übt, und es wird Euch Euer Recht werden.⁹

This assurance that if rights were properly exercised, they would not be abridged and even the touch of hyperbole in the choice of "freedom" or "slavery" contrasted with the venom-

8 *Louisville Anzeiger*, 1 August 1855, p. 2. For this and subsequent quotations in German, the author will provide his own translations in the footnotes. "The German nation is a noble and conscientious nation and will conduct itself accordingly in the next election."

9 *Ibid.* German-American citizens, the day of decision is not far away, it brings us either freedom or slavery, for that reason we take the liberty of admonishing you not to allow yourselves to be alienated from the ballot box, not to be intimidated by notions of dangers at the polls, go early in the morning to cast your vote, before the brandy works its influence, and your rights will be granted you.

ous attacks by Prentice against the foreign-born, both those who were citizens and those who were not. He classified all of them as "foreigners" and wrote of the "overweening and most pestilent influence of the foreign swarms."¹⁰ On 1 August, the same day the *Anzeiger* was assuring voters they would be able to vote peacefully, Prentice began an anti-Catholic, "American" prelude to the 6 August election by asking:

Are men fit to be American voters, and especially are men fit to hold office and thus to assist in wielding the power of government, who regard themselves as owing to our government no allegiance from which the Pope of Rome, an inflated Italian despot who keeps people kissing his toes all day, cannot at any moment release them?¹¹

The *Anzeiger* was not willing to enter the debate at that level. On 2 August, it simply replied that a country which tolerated bigotry made itself look ridiculous in the eyes of the world:

sobald gotrie, Partei wuthund Nationalitätssimpelei sich geltend machen, und die Majorität des Volkes duldet solchen Unfug, dann ist ein solches Volk kein freies mehr zu nennen und je mehr es sich mit seiner Freiheit und Intelligenz brüstet, um so lächerlicher steht es vor der Außenwelt da.¹²

In addition to his own invective, Prentice was also very quick to print every possible rumor which seemed to substantiate his general theory that there was a conspiracy between the Papists and the German infidels to take the election by whatever means possible. He reported on 2 August, for example, that, "A gentleman made known to us" that thirty armed men had been recruited by the foreigners to take charge of the polls on Monday. Not satisfied merely to report the rumor, he made it

10 *Daily Journal*, 2 August 1855, p. 2.

11 *Ibid.*, 1 August 1855, p. 2.

12 *Anzeiger*, 2 August 1855, p. 2. As soon as bigotry, partisan rage, and nationalistic simplemindedness assert themselves and the majority of the people tolerate such nonsense, then such a people is no longer to be called a free people and the more it brags about its freedom and intelligence, the more ridiculous it looks to the world.

worse by adding gratuitously on the same day, "It is not improbable or unlikely that two-thirds or three-fourths of the thirty men are not even entitled to vote...."¹³ In its 3 August edition the *Anzeiger* denied there was any such plan and asserted that although the *Journal* talked about peace at the polls, it was inflaming the situation by printing such lies.

On the question of who would be judges at the polls and therefore determine who would vote, there was also a sharp difference between the *Journal* and the *Anzeiger*. The newly adopted Kentucky Constitution no longer required that the two judges at each polling place be from opposing political parties. It did not address the matter but certainly did not forbid their being from opposite parties. With the Know-Nothing party in control of the Louisville government, however, all of the appointed judges were Know-Nothings. The *Journal* was in full agreement with this tactic. It is a measure of the *Anzeiger's* moderation that it tried to make the best even of this situation by assuring its readers on 4 August that at least in the Fifth Ward there was one judge, Henry Tyler, who was friendly to the foreign-born.

At no time in the contest was there in the *Anzeiger* anything that remotely suggested the kind of martial language which became the daily stock-in-trade of the *Journal* or anything that suggested the *Anzeiger* knew of any plot by a so-called *Sag-Nichts* (Say-Nothing) party to use force at the polls in order to protect the rights of the foreign-born as Prentice had claimed. On the contrary, when the board of aldermen refused Mayor John Barbee's request that twenty special policemen be stationed at the polls to preserve order and when Barbee decided to go ahead with the plan anyway, the *Anzeiger* supported the idea and wrote on 4 August, "Für dieses Benehmen gebührt ihm der Dank jedes gut gesinnten Bürgers,"¹⁴ even

¹³ *Daily Journal*, 2 August 1855, p. 2.

¹⁴ *Anzeiger*, 4 August 1855, p. 3. For this conduct he has earned the thanks of every well-meaning citizen.

though Barbee was a Know-Nothing.

The *Anzeiger* evidently had received some assurances that the authorities would maintain order, for it also offered its readers advice on voting:

Wir muthen Niemandem zu, sich am Wahlkasten mit Rowdys herumzubalgen und sich Verwundung, vielleicht gar Tödtung auszusetzen; allein jedes Bürgers Pflicht ist es, an den Wahlkasten zu gehen. Hat die Behörde abermals versäumt, Vorkehrungen zu treffen, werden die Polls abermals von Rowdys beherrscht und hat der freie Bürger keinen Schutz in Ausübung seines Rechts, dann ist es immer noch Zeit, der Übermacht zu weichen.¹⁵

Prentice, on the other hand, was offering quite different advice. In its mildest form on 28 July, over a week before the election, he commented:

Our friends must so organize as not only to be able to cast their own utmost strength at the polls but to mark and exclude every fraudulent voter, no matter who he may be and under what pretext his vote may be offered.¹⁶

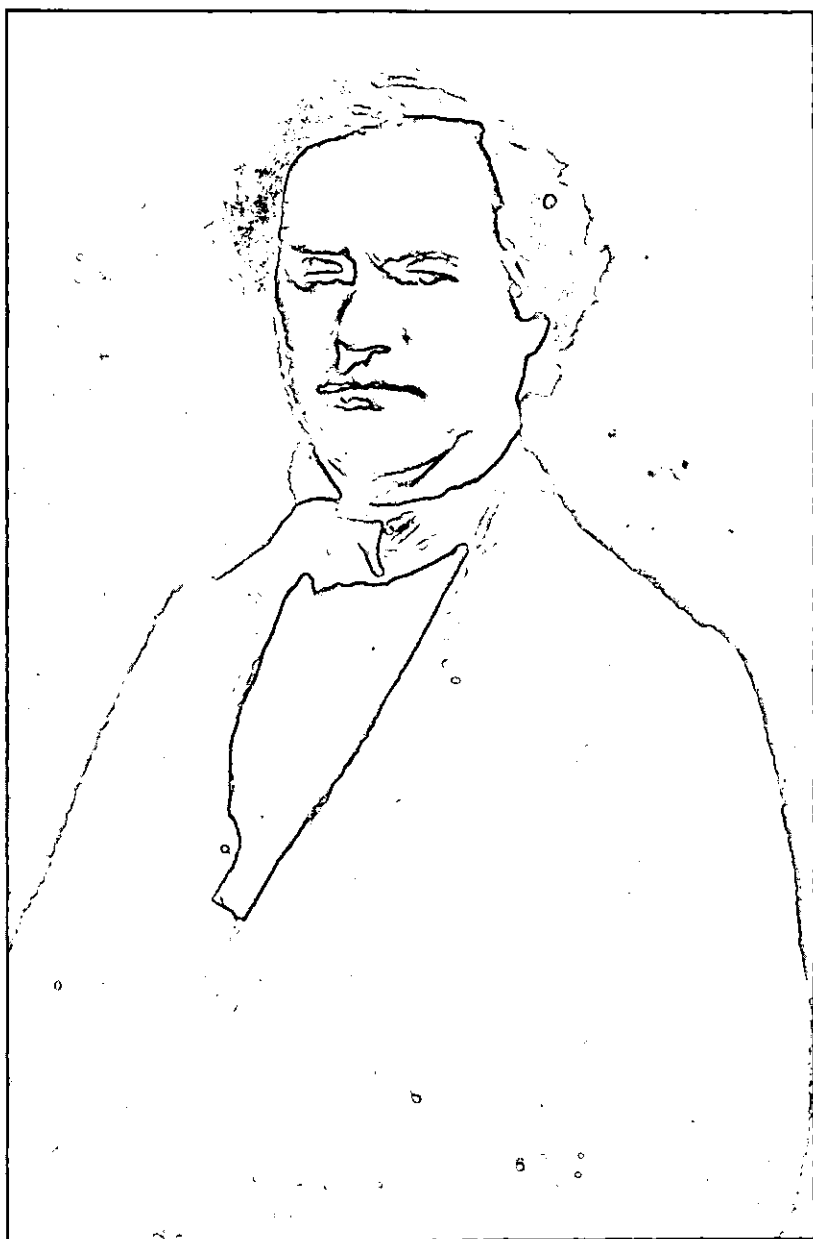
Overzealous Know-Nothings could easily have seen in this a call to take charge of the policing of the polls.

As election day approached, Prentice's rhetoric became more and more hysterical. On 3 August he exhorted his readers to: "Work as though the inquisition and the rack and torture were in full view, and the yells and shouts of the foreign enemy were heard near at hand to drag you to them."¹⁷ He continued in the same issue to paint an apocalyptic picture of what the victory of the opposition would mean:

15 *Ibid.*, 4 August 1855, p. 2. We do not expect anyone to scuffle with rowdies at the polls and to expose themselves to injury, perhaps even death; however it is every citizen's duty to go to the polls. If the authorities have again neglected to take precautionary measures, if the polls are again ruled by rowdies and if the free citizen has no protection in the exercise of his rights, then there is still time to give way to superior force.

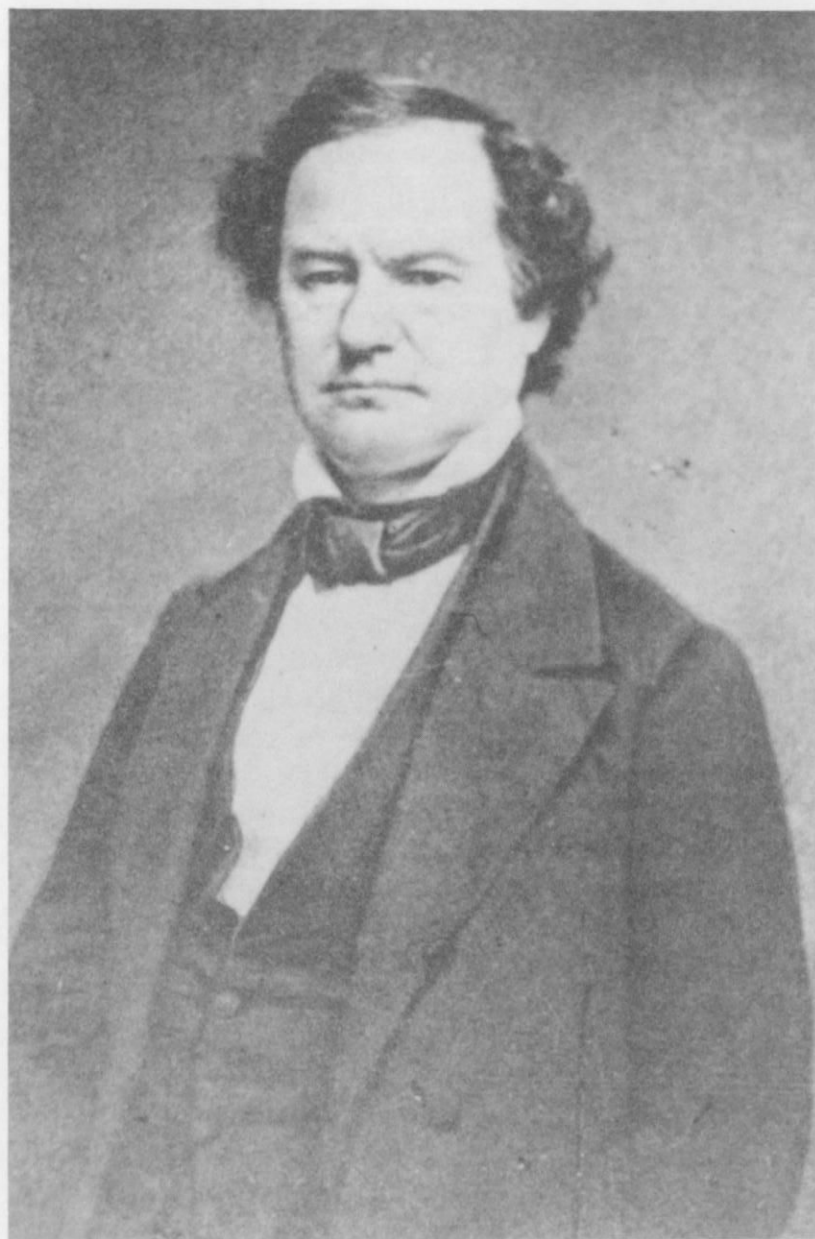
16 *Daily Journal*, 28 July 1855, p. 2.

17 *Ibid.*, 3 August 1855, p. 2.



George D. Prentice

The Filson Club



George D. Prentice

The Filson Club

The bitterness of the foreign element would burst forth in double volume, and the Catholics, now crouching with subdued but rankling venom, awaiting our subjugation by their political allies, would spring forth with the fury of the tiger. Their breasts are now swelling with the hope of revenge, and our defeat would end in our political destruction, and probably our religious ruin.¹⁸

On 3 August he announced that, "The war has opened. The parties have taken their stations."¹⁹ By election day he was urging his readers to "Keep steadily in mind the sacred end for which the great American Party are waging the war."²⁰ After recounting the principles of the party which should sustain and strengthen them, he issued his battle cry: "Let us whip the foreigners as Washington did at Yorktown."²¹ And finally came the infamous exhortation, "Americans, are you all ready? We think we hear you shout 'Ready'. Well, fire! And may heaven have mercy on our foe."²²

In her attempt to exonerate Prentice from blame, Betty Carolyn Congleton asserts that these last lines were obviously meant only metaphorically. She writes that, "No one ever imagined that such paragraphs were literally designed to incite violence. The native born citizens of Louisville knew full well what Prentice meant."²³ This is hardly convincing if one considers the totality of Prentice's statements leading up to those of 6 August. Surely his admonitions came very close to a literal call to arms, and he could easily be misunderstood when he wrote:

Our friends must be prepared to stand up at the polls to-day in defiance of whatever they may meet there. They may have to encounter brazen faces and brass knuckles. But our countrymen have encountered worse things in their contests

18 *Ibid.*

19 *Ibid.*

20 *Ibid.*, 6 August 1855, p. 3.

21 *Ibid.*

22 *Ibid.*

23 Congleton, "Prentice," 227.

with foreigners.²⁴

In lumping all foreign-born, both citizens and non-citizens, into the same group and in telling his readers to come to the polls prepared to meet physical opposition, he encouraged the worst of the rowdies and Know-Nothings.

In case any of the Germans should fail to understand his message, he hinted, again on election day, that they might come to physical harm; he implied that Germans should understand who will be in charge at the polls: "Surely none of them can be so ignorant as not to understand, that, if a collision be provoked by them, it will occur. And if it do occur, there is but one way in which it can possibly terminate."²⁵ In retrospect these sinister words take on a prophetic quality. However the "collision" began, we know today how it terminated.

The last words of the *Anzeiger* to its readers before the election, however, could hardly be more different. Since the *Anzeiger* was not published on Mondays, the Sunday, 5 August edition contained its last admonitions. It first reminded its readers that they had come to America to enjoy freedom:

Die Freiheit ist das hohe Gut, das unsere besten und klassischen deutschen Dichter besungen;--die Freiheit ist es, die wir im alten Vaterlande, in den herrlichen Gauen des Rheinthal's, so eifrig zu erstreben suchten; der Drang, die Rechte eines freien deutschen Mannes zu genießen und auszuüben, trieb uns Deutsche fort vom heimatlichen Heerde....²⁶

Having placed before them this high goal of freedom and individual rights, the *Anzeiger* urged its readers not to be afraid

²⁴ *Daily Journal*, 6 August 1855, p. 2.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Anzeiger*, 5 August 1855, p. 2. *Freedom* is that grand possession of which our best and classical poets sang; - it is freedom which we sought so eagerly to strive for in our old homeland, in the splendid districts of the Rhine valley; the urge to enjoy and practice the rights of a free man drove us Germans away from our native hearth.

to vote. Rather than saying they should take charge of the polls, as Prentice had implied to his supporters, the *Anzeiger* feared that there was a danger that its readers would not even show up at the polls and would thereby lose their highest right:

Denn was kann ein *freier* Mann höheres verlieren als sein Stimmrecht und somit seine *Freiheit*. Wer nicht einmal den Versuch wagt, zu stimmen, verdient den Namen eines freien Mannes nicht?²⁷

In spite of this strong admonition to vote, it offered in the very same column, under the heading "Good Advice," this counsel concerning the threats of the Know-Nothings:

Während wir unseren deutschen Mitbürgern ernstlich anrathen, als Männer sich nicht von der Ausübung ihres heiligen Rechtes -- des Stimmrechtes -- durch meistens falsche Vorspiegelungen abhalten zu lassen, müssen wir auf der andern Seite dieselben ermahnen, jede Gelegenheit zu vermeiden, welche zu brutalen Scenen führen könnte.²⁸

Far from urging its readers to be prepared to meet force with force, the *Anzeiger* asked that they avoid every circumstance that could increase the danger of violence. The best way to do this would be to go as early as possible to the polls and not to get together as groups and go on a "Spree" before voting and not even to have long discussions in the pubs beforehand. The *Anzeiger* believed that the voters would be protected at the polls and that "der einzelne Bürger, der ernst und im Bewußtsein seines Rechtes an den Poll geht, schwerlich behelligt werden wird."²⁹ Re-emphasizing the point about not even going in groups, the *Anzeiger's* final advice was not to act in a provoca-

27 Ibid. For what can a *free* man lose that is higher than his right to vote and thereby his *freedom*? Whoever does not risk making the *attempt* to vote, does not deserve the name of a free man.

28 Ibid. While we earnestly advise our German fellow citizens not to allow themselves to be kept by mostly false illusions from exercising their sacred right, the right to vote, we must on the other hand admonish the same to avoid every opportunity which could lead to brutal scenes.

29 Ibid. The individual citizen who goes to the polls in a serious mood and with a consciousness of his rights will hardly be bothered.

tive manner:

Wenn ganze Haufen zusammengehen, dann scheint dieß schon eine Herausforderung zu sein oder ist ein Beweis von Furcht vor Angriffen. Alles dieß kann der Sache nichts nützen. -- Nüchtern u. unerschrocken an die Polls -- Das ist Morgen die Lösung.³⁰

The *Anzeiger* encouraged its readers to believe in the democratic process even though it seemed obvious that they were outnumbered and that nearly the entire electoral apparatus was in the hands of their opponents. The torrent of hate emanating from the *Journal* did not sway the *Anzeiger* from its course of making every effort to avoid giving offense or occasion for the Know-Nothings to resort to violence.

In the days after the riots, Prentice was still fully convinced of the righteousness of his position and said he felt no cause for remorse. The fault, according to Prentice, lay entirely with the other side. He wrote on 9 August:

With shameless effrontery, and in the face of undeniable facts, the anti-American newspapers of this city are striving to ward off from their party the odious responsibility of having caused the disgraceful riots and horrid butcheries of Monday.³¹

His American party was, he said, also above all reproach: "It can fearlessly stand up before the community, whose peace has been thus ruthlessly destroyed, and say with conscientious truth, 'Shake not thy gory locks at me! Thou canst not say I did it.'"³²

The *Anzeiger* did not, of course, agree with this assessment and like Louisville's other newspapers called Prentice sharply to task for his editorials. But the *Anzeiger* went further and asked a question of the entire Louisville community in

30 Ibid. If whole crowds go there together, then this seems to be in itself a challenge or is proof of fear of attacks. - Sober and unafraid to the polls - that is the motto tomorrow.

31 *Daily Journal*, 9 August 1855, p. 2.

32 Ibid.

regard to the future: Does Louisville want to be a civilized city or not? If not, the *Anzeiger* is prepared to leave:

Die Gesammtheit der Bevölkerung soll entscheiden, ob Louisville sich noch zu den *gesitteten* und *civilisirten* Städten der Welt zählen dürfe; Jeder erwäge diese Frage und wenn wir eine Majorität gegen uns haben, so verzichten wir auf jeden Anspruch noch ferner Bürger dieses Dorfes Louisville zu sein.³³

Fortunately for Louisville, its German-American community, and the *Anzeiger*, the madness of Know-Nothingism soon passed. The *Anzeiger* continued to be published, and Georg Philip Doern eventually enjoyed a prominent place in Louisville life. Better days were ahead.

In conclusion, one may safely say that the contrast in approach to the election and its aftermath taken by the *Journal* and the *Anzeiger* could hardly be more pronounced. In the debate concerning George D. Prentice and the Bloody Monday riots, the issue has too often been narrowly framed in terms of Prentice's role in "causing" the riots. But there are more interesting questions which bear on Prentice's place in history. Did he act responsibly before the election, given what had happened in Louisville previously and given the degree of tension already existing? Did he in the aftermath of the election recognize that the shrillness of his rhetoric could well have been a contributory factor? The answer to both questions is, regrettably, no. The journalistic contributions of George D. Prentice to the election of 6 August 1855 were irresponsible; they did not serve the causes of decency and order. His reputation must ever bear this reproach. Georg Philip Doern and the *Louisville Anzeiger* showed a far nobler and more lasting vision of the role of the journalist in the conduct of

33 *Anzeiger*, 11 August 1855. The whole populace should decide if Louisville may still count itself among the well-mannered and civilized cities of the world; each one should weigh this question and if we have a majority against us, then we give up every claim to continue to be a citizen of the village of Louisville.

elections. If Prentice had assumed anything like the tone of the *Anzeiger*, his name would not be forever linked with the Bloody Monday riots of Louisville.