Nativism, as defined in the Random House Dictionary, is, "the policy of protecting the interests of native inhabitants against those of immigrants." In practice, however, this rather mild definition has grown and intensified to encompass varying degrees of prejudice and mistreatment, not only of immigrants, but also of native-born Americans whose customs, traditions, and even religious beliefs have been perceived as "foreign." This is the story of Julia T. Murphy, a young Roman Catholic schoolteacher, and the practice of nativism in Fort Lauderdale.

Julia Murphy's father, Jeremiah A. Murphy, came to Florida in 1912, and settled on a farm just north of Lemon City. The Murphys had lived in Nebraska and Colorado, and appear to have been part of the large wave of migration from the Midwestern and Great Plains states attracted by agricultural opportunities offered as a result of Everglades drainage and subsequent land sales. Mr. Murphy was described as a "thorough Catholic gentleman," and was a fourth degree Knight of Columbus. 1 Julia soon joined him in Florida, as the family felt "that it was not well for her father to be alone." 2

Having been a public school teacher in Nebraska, Miss Murphy hoped to continue teaching in south Florida. She was offered a job as a second grade teacher in Fort Lauderdale by the Superintendent of Instruction for Dade County, Robert E. Hall. 3 Pleased by this opportunity, Julia and her father planned to build a home in Fort Lauderdale and bring the rest of their family from Nebraska. All appeared to be going well for the Murphys until the principal of the Fort Lauderdale school, James S. Rickards, found that his prospective new teacher was of the Roman Catholic faith. 4

Rickards promptly expressed his concern at this discovery to his brother, Clarence E. Rickard, who was serving as one of Fort

In 1915, the year that Broward County was created, Fort Lauderdale became the subject of much controversy when local school trustees, backed by prominent community leaders and a vocal segment of the population, turned down the appointment of a Roman Catholic schoolteacher, Julia Murphy. "Fort Lauderdale’s shame," as the incident was labeled by a St. Augustine newspaper, had its roots in events far beyond the small south Florida town. As this article demonstrates, the Julia Murphy incident was part of a long tradition of American nativism which reached a peak in Florida in the 1910s, promoted by figures such as Governor Sidney J. Catts and Georgia politician and editor Thomas E. Watson, a part-time Fort Lauderdale resident. Author L. Davis Givonetti, a resident of Pembroke Pines, holds a degree in History from Florida Atlantic University.

Following this article, the original reports from the Fort Lauderdale Sentinel and the Miami Herald are reprinted, describing the public meeting at which Miss Murphy’s appointment was rejected. In addition to providing detailed eyewitness accounts of the meeting, these articles reflect the strong differences of opinion on the issue held by the papers and their respective editors.
Lauderdale's school trustees. James Rickards had added an "s" to the end of his name when he was in college for an unexplained reason, while C. E. Rickard retained the traditional spelling. Both had come from Indiana three years earlier and rapidly established themselves as business and community leaders. While they may have disagreed over the correct spelling of their last name, the brothers were in complete agreement on how to handle the case of Miss Murphy.  

On July 17, 1915, C. E. Rickard and two other school trustees wrote a letter of protest to Superintendent Hall. The letter stated bluntly, "The local board's attention has been called to the fact that one of the grade teachers whom you propose to hire is a Roman Catholic. Our attention was called to this by local taxpayers and patrons of our school and while we do not in any way desire to interfere with your arrangements we are opposed to hiring and placing in charge of any of our school work any but Protestants." In addition to Rickard, the letter was signed by Clinton Kittredge and S. J. Clark.  

Kittredge was founder of the Fort Lauderdale State Bank, president of the Fort Lauderdale Mercantile Company, and "high in the Fort Lauderdale Masonic Order." Dr. Samuel J. Clark was a Fort Lauderdale dentist who had served on the county school board in 1912, and was a member of the Doric Lodge, Free and Accepted Masons. Clark revealed his feelings toward the Catholic Church in a September 10, 1915 letter to the Miami Herald, in which he stated, "You need only take off your Roman spectacles and look through a good clear American lens and you will see a spirit of Americanism springing up all over the country in defense of our public schools. I glory in Fort Lauderdale taking the lead." Clark wrote this letter in answer to one written by Bishop Michael J. Curley in defense of Miss Murphy which had appeared in the Herald on August 30. The Herald would not print Clark's letter, but the rival Miami Metropolis did, along with an editorial criticizing the Herald's refusal. This exchange characterized the editorial differences between the nativist Metropolis and the more open-minded Herald during this period.  

After receiving the trustees' letter, Superintendent Hall contacted Julia Murphy to inform her that the offer of employment was being rescinded. Father James McLaughlin, SJ, pastor of the Church of the Holy Name in Miami, was informed of this action either by Julia herself or, more likely, by her father and, in turn, relayed the story to editor Frank Stoneman of the Miami Herald. Stoneman then contacted Hall, asking the superintendent his intentions. Hall arranged a meeting between himself, the editor, and the school trustees, to be held in Stoneman's office. There, Stoneman "told them plainly he would not allow the affair to pass unnoticed" if the school officials went through with their plan to fire Miss Murphy.  

The school trustees had apparently never wanted to take responsibility for their actions against Julia Murphy. They had initially tried to pass the responsibility to Hall, who did not wish to terminate Miss Murphy's employment opportunity, and had in fact stated, "I never have asked any of the applicants for teachers' positions what church they are affiliated with." When this tactic failed, as a result of Stoneman's intercession, they cited the opposition of the Fort Lauderdale citizenry, whose interests they were elected to represent. How the average Fort Lauderdale taxpayer could have known that a girl who had only arrived in Florida a few months previously, and did not yet live in Fort Lauderdale, was Roman Catholic remains somewhat of a mystery. It is likely that the majority of the people did not know until they were informed by outspoken community leaders. Two prominent local citi-
izens, Colonel George G. Mathews and Robert J. Reed, took the lead in this activity.

One of early twentieth century Fort Lauderdale's most influential and charismatic figures, Colonel Mathews had been born on his family's Alabama plantation in 1855. After the Civil War, the family relocated to Brazil with other disaffected southern families in the hopes of recreating the antebellum society that they had lost. In 1896-97, George Mathews served as American consul in Para, Brazil. He returned to the United States in 1902 and settled in Ocala, where he was elected to the Florida Legislature. After the panic of 1907, he gave up farming and, with no previous experience, entered the newspaper field. He edited and later purchased the Bartow Record in 1908, and edited the Tarpon Springs Leader in 1910.

Mathews was first attracted to the Fort Lauderdale area as a member of the legislative committee observing Governor Napoleon Bonaparte Broward's Everglades drainage project. He moved to the small village on the New River at the end of 1910, and in March of 1911 started the Fort Lauderdale Sentinel. He was elected Fort Lauderdale's second mayor two years later. As editor and publisher, Mathews was determined not to allow the "powers that be" to "control the policy" of his paper. He proclaimed that the views expressed in its pages would be "based upon years of reading and impartial reasoning." His editorial policy was perhaps best summed up by his statement that, "Some people do not want a paper that boldly stands for what they honestly believe to be right....Don't say anything about their religion or politics, and they will read the local happenings and think you are a good paper."

The other man who led the outcry against Julia Murphy, Robert J. Reed, was born in Chicago, Illinois, in 1850, "of good American ancestry," as a 1918 Sentinel article proclaimed. He attended business college for two years, after which he was "employed on the Chicago Board of Trade where he acquired a more perfect knowledge of men and business affairs." He may have also acquired a more perfect knowledge of nativist beliefs and operations, since the Chicago Board of Trade favored admitting only immigrants who had passed inspection by American consuls in their countries, and advocated strict literacy tests for all immigrants seeking to settle in the United States. This position, and a wave of similar sentiment across the country, resulted from the Panic of 1893, during which business failures, depression, and immigrant union members' participation in labor strikes did not help the status of those who were not "of good American ancestry."

Reed came to Fort Lauderdale
in 1910, and operated Robert J. Reed and Son Company, a real estate business. His large tract of land southwest of Fort Lauderdale where he centered his real estate sales became known as the Reed Tract. Reed, who like his friend Mathews was known locally by the title of "Colonel," helped organize Fort Lauderdale’s Board of Trade and served as its president.21

A meeting of citizens to discuss the Julia Murphy case took place at three o’clock in the afternoon of August 24, 1915, at the Rex Theater on Wall Street.22 Although the trustees, Kittredge, Clark, J. W. Cosner, and C. E. Rickard, all attended, “not one of them took part in the discussion.”23 Instead, Colonels Reed and Mathews took the lead. Reed called the meeting to order, and called for the election of a chairman. Mathews was unanimously elected.24

Only two people present at the meeting spoke in favor of hiring Julia Murphy. When F. W. Dames, an architect, tried to speak on behalf of Miss Murphy, the crowd immediately hissed him, and Mathews ruled that he was out of order. When finally given the chance to speak, Dames stated that, “The Catholics pay $55,000,000 annually for the support of our public schools, and that is one reason why I feel that it’s an injustice to tax them and then discriminate against them.”25 Mr. Dames’ comments were met with calls of “Sit down!,” “Get out of here!,” “We don’t want Catholics!”26

Another advocate of Miss Murphy was Dr. D. T. Firor, pastor of the Lemon City Baptist Church. When Dr. Firor was able to find a lull in the cat calls, he stated that “No people have suffered as much as the people I represent. And yet we have a right to choose whom we will to teach in our schools. I am strongly against this discrimination.” The reverend was hissed off the floor as Dames had been.27

During the course of the meeting, Mathews asked Dames, “...if it were not true that marriages not performed by Catholic priests were held by Catholic priests void.” Mr. Dames replied, “We do not claim that a marriage performed by other than a Catholic clergyman is not legal.” Then, aptly sensing where this type of questioning could lead, Dames drew the attention of the meeting back to the subject of Miss Murphy by stating, “I do not believe that discrimination should be made against that Catholic girl, unless she brings into public school her religion. I would be just as much opposed to any Baptist, Methodist, or Presbyterian, or any other religious organization teaching their beliefs in the public schools.”28

At the close of the meeting, Colonel Mathews addressed his audience, stating “... it behooves every man and woman to look carefully to the way their children are being trained and to keep abreast of the activities of school organizations and everything having to do with the children. I would be a friend to the Hindu or the Mohammedan, and shake hands with him, but I might not want my children to embrace his religious faith.”29 Mathews’ speech continued in a somewhat rambling manner, with comparisons of Edison and Martin Luther, who, in Mathews’ words, “...stands first as a benefactor of the human race. He emancipated us from superstition and freed us from the designing hand of the priest.”30 The ballots were turned in, and a count of 181 to seven in favor of the trustees determined.31 The

Colonel George G. Mathews (left) and Colonel Robert J. Reed.
account given in Mathews’ Sentinel, that “The meeting was one of the most enthusiastic meetings ever held in Fort Lauderdale, and adjourned full of happiness and good humor,” was quite different from the somber account described by the Miami Herald, which concluded with “Just what the outcome of the meeting yesterday will be is problematical.” The decision certainly brought no “happiness and good humor” to Julia Murphy, who was not even present at the meeting to defend herself.

Beyond the immediate outcome of the August 24 meeting, a web of influences, both local and national, combined to place editor Mathews and real estate man Reed at the forefront of the school trustees’ campaign to deny employment to Julia Murphy. In addition to their local prominence, both men were members of the Patriotic Order Sons of America, or P.O.S. of A., a nationally influential nativist organization. The P.O.S. of A. claimed to be an offshoot of the Junior Sons of America, a nativist group formed in 1847. By 1888, the order had roughly 520 “camps” distributed along the eastern seaboard and in the Midwest. Their objective was to rid America of the foreign elements that they felt were corrupting the country. They included among these elements the Roman Catholic Church, which they considered a “political and religious system of foreigners antagonistic to the foundation of America.” In Fort Lauderdale, the order had met with much success, and had grown rapidly in popularity by the mid-1910s.

In his April 21, 1916 edition of the Fort Lauderdale Sentinel, Colonel Mathews wrote favorably about the first state convention of the P.O.S. of A., scheduled to take place in Fort Lauderdale on May 5 of that year. In this article, he wrote, “Fort Lauderdale, because of its position in keeping the Church and State apart, is the best known town in the United States of its size.” By “keeping the Church and State apart,” Mathews was apparently referring to the policy of keeping Catholic teachers out of the Fort Lauderdale schools. The Julia Murphy case had set a longstanding precedent. Myra McIlvaine Marshall, a pioneer Fort Lauderdale teacher who arrived in 1916, recalled that, “For years after I came, no Catholic could teach in the Broward County schools.”

Robert Reed was the main speaker at a P.O.S. of A. banquet held in Fort Lauderdale on November 18, 1915. In phrasing similar to Mathews’ call for separation of church and state, Reed announced, “We do not care what church people belong to as long as they keep their hand off the Government.” In view of the tenets of the P.O.S. of A. and contemporary issues, including the Murphy case, there was little doubt that Reed’s statement was directed at the Catholic Church.

Of course, such sentiments were not unique to Fort Lauderdale or to the second decade of the twentieth century. Any discussion of anti-Catholicism in the United States would have to begin in the colonial period with the first British settlers, who came from a country with a strong anti-Catholic history and philosophy. England’s most notable political philosopher of the “Age of Enlightenment,” John Locke, believed that Catholics should not be given any opportunity to participate in government. This philosophy found its way into the laws of colonies such as Pennsylvania and Rhode Island, where Catholics were deemed unfit for any “office of trust or honor.”

A fresh wave of immigration, beginning in the 1830s, intensified anti-Catholicism, linking it inseparably in the minds of “old stock Americans” with nativism. Economic pressures created by the large number of newcomers and the subsequent competition for work in often depressed job markets created social pressures which found easy expression in religious biases. Many of the new immigrants were Irish Catholics. During the 1850s, nativism reached such widespread proportions that a nativist and anti-Catholic political party, the American or “Know Nothing” party, wielded considerable national power, running former President Millard Fillmore as a third party presidential candidate in 1856.

The decades following the end of the Civil War brought new waves of immigrants — many of them Catholic — and a new nativist reaction. Nativism began to decline in the mid-1890s, but experienced a resurgence in the decade prior to World War I, most evidently in the person of Thomas E. Watson, a part time
resident of Fort Lauderdale, and friend and mentor of Colonel Mathews. Tom Watson's political career spanned thirty years. He first gained fame as a leader of the Populist party in the 1890s, and supported Progressivism in the mid-1910s. By 1910, his popularity was in decline, and Watson turned his distrust of corporations and monopolies to a bitter hatred of Roman Catholicism. In his Jeffersonian Magazine of 1910, he began to write a series of articles titled "The Roman Catholic Hierarchy: the Deadliest Menace to our Liberties and our Civilization." The series lasted twenty-seven months and began an anti-Catholic crusade in the South that would continue until World War I. Watson's obituary in the September 27, 1922 New York Times commented, "For much in Tom Watson's violent career as a politician and journalist, the most charitable and plausible explanation is a certain mental instability, an overexcitability of temperament, even the presence of actual delusions such as the hallucination of persecution." 47

In 1911, Tom Watson, along with Civil War and Indian War veterans, Lieutenant General Nelson A. Miles, ex-Congressman Charles D. Haines, and Charles B. Skinner, formed a political secret society which would be instrumental in spreading nativist, anti-Catholic beliefs, the Guardians of Liberty. A spokesman for the organization, Billy Parker, paved the way for the Guardians of Liberty in Florida. Parker began to preach in Jacksonville in 1914. He would lecture in Fort Lauderdale on March 20 and 21, 1916, and Colonel Mathews strongly promoted his work. When Parker arrived in Fort Lauderdale the year following the Julia Murphy incident, Mathews wrote, "Resolved that our thanks are due and hereby extended to the Hon. Billy Parker for the able manner in which he has handled the subject of the aggression of the Roman Catholic Church, which is trying to destroy our public schools." 48

Later activities highlighted the nativist feelings of the period. As Parker spread the Guardians' anti-Catholic message throughout Florida, the secret order began to play an important role in the state's politics. As the 1916 elections approached, Senator Nathan P. Bryan planned to obtain an appointment for his friend Pete Dignan, a Roman Catholic, to the position of postmaster in Jacksonville. The Guardians of Liberty took action. They appealed to Governor Park Trammell, whose term was expiring and who was running for Congress, to run instead for the senatorial seat against Bryan. The governor was easily convinced. In addition to the added prestige of the Senate seat, there is evidence that Trammell may have shared the sentiments of the Guardians of Liberty; on April 24, 1916, he had three nuns arrested for teaching black children in St. Augustine. 49

During the course of the campaign, Senator Bryan denounced the Guardians of Liberty at a meeting in Jacksonville on February 23, 1916. Colonel Mathews commented on
Bryan's statements in the *Fort Lauderdale Sentinel* the following month, stating that the senator, "...surely is ignorant of the great numbers of people who belong to these orders...orders that we belong to will only take in white members who are native born Americans."52

While Governor Trammell was running against Senator Bryan in 1916, Sidney J. Catts was campaigning for the governorship. Catts was a former Baptist preacher who identified with and was thought to belong to the Guardians of Liberty. He campaigned on a platform of temperance, populist economic and social reform, and strong, open anti-Catholicism. In one instance he promised to make legal searches of convents for weapons believed to be stored for the overthrow of the United States government by Catholic conspirators.53

In Fort Lauderdale, Catts had many supporters, among them Colonel Mathews, who wrote, "Mr. Catts is not fighting the individual Catholic; he is fighting the Hierarchy which is ruling the men and women to their ruin."54 Mathews printed a similar statement in the *Sentinel* on April 21, 1916, proclaiming that the paper, "...has never fought the individual Catholic," and that "Some of the best friends we have in the world are Catholics."55 These exact words were also spoken by a man that Mathews had once described as "the greatest character in our history," a man from whom Mathews wished to "draw pleasure and accumulate knowledge."56 This man, whom Mathews counted among his close friends, was Thomas E. Watson.

Watson was no stranger to Fort Lauderdale. In 1905, he had purchased the Las Olas-by-the-Sea hunting lodge, which he and his family had used as their winter home until 1914.57 When staying at the lodge, Watson occasionally sent his yacht up the New River to pick up Mathews.58 Colonel Mathews defended Watson vigorously during the Georgian's trouble with the U.S. mail, and advertised the sale of Watson's magazines.59 Tom Watson likewise wrote
favorably of Colonel Mathews in his *Jeffersonian*. In one instance, Mathews had been invited by a certain patriotic order to speak in Jacksonville, and was given the use of a Baptist church in that city to present his lecture. The pastor, Reverend A. W. Hobson, became upset at seeing his church “used for a speech against popery,” and wanted Mathews’ presentation stopped. Coming to Mathews’ defense, Watson wrote, “The fearless Christian gentleman who assails Roman idolatry, Mary worship, papal impostures, and political priesthood, renders a service to the State, to the people, AND TO GOD.”

In an article printed in the *St. Augustine Meteor*, the *Fort Lauderdale Sentinel* was described as a “Watsonian sheet,” and Fort Lauderdale as a “nest of as short sighted bigots as could be found anywhere in the world.” The article’s title was “Fort Lauderdale’s Shame,” and it pertained to the Julia Murphy incident.

Despite the surge of anti-Catholic feeling throughout Florida during the mid-1910s, exemplified by the political rhetoric of Sidney Catts and Park Trammell and the activities of organizations such as the P.O.S. of A. and the Guardians of Liberty, the Julia Murphy incident drew considerable negative attention to Fort Lauderdale. The *Ocala Banner* stated that the act of the Fort Lauderdale trustees had both good and evil consequences. “Its evil side was the thing itself. Its good side was the almost universal protest which followed it and which still pursues it.”

The *Miami Herald* was adamantly in stating that Miami had nothing to do with the affair. Alluding to the recent passage of legislation creating Broward County, the paper commented, “When the trustees of that district base their objection to a teacher on the ground that she is of a religious faith not approved of by the people of the community, then Miami and Dade County have the right to object to the act, for those outside of the state will not discrimi-

nate between Broward County and Dade, between Fort Lauderdale and Miami.” As stated previously, the *Herald* also printed a letter written by Bishop Michael J. Curley defending Miss Murphy. Curley called the incident “unAmerican, unChristian, unprincipled, unpatriotic, and flagrantly unjust.” He went on to say, “The public school, however, the Lauderdale trustees and ‘patriots’ to the contrary notwithstanding, is not a Protestant institution, neither is it a Catholic institution. It is a public institution.”

However, the citizens of Fort Lauderdale had made their decision. A dedication ceremony took place on September 16, 1915, in front of the new Fort Lauderdale school. The American flag was presented and raised by Colonel George G. Mathews and the Patriotic Order Sons of America. Meanwhile, Julia Murphy had been denied a teaching position in the public school because she was Roman Catholic.

Despite this disappointment,
Julia and her father were joined by her mother, Bridget, and the family moved from the Lemon City area to Miami within the year. By 1917, Miss Murphy was able to secure a teaching position with the Riverside School on Lawrence Drive in Miami, although the following year she was working as a cashier with the Miami Telephone Company. The Miami city directories through the early 1920s show the Murphys at their home at 1225 10th Street in Miami, apparently living quiet lives and not singled out for the part they had played in one of the more controversial episodes in Fort Lauderdale’s history.  

Dedication of the new Fort Lauderdale school building, 1915 (courtesy of the Fort Lauderdale Historical Society).

Notes

3. Ibid.
4. Curley papers, 4H12.
5. Fort Lauderdale News, June 14, 1960; Rickard/Rickards biographical file, Broward County Historical Commission archives, Fort Lauderdale.
6. Curley papers, 4G22.
8. Ibid., August 13, 1936.
10. Miami Herald, August 26, 1915.
11. Curley papers, 4H12.
17. Fort Lauderdale Sentinel, May 12, 1916.
18. Ibid., August 6, 1916.
19. Ibid., April 19, 1918; Robert Reed biographical file, Broward County Historical Commission archives.
21. Fort Lauderdale Sentinel, April 19, 1918; “Broward County’s Development During the Great War,” Broward Legacy, vol. 10, nos. 3-4 (Summer/Fall 1987), 48.
22. Fort Lauderdale Sentinel, August 27, 1915; Miami Herald, August 4, 1974.
24. Fort Lauderdale Sentinel, August 27, 1915.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Fort Lauderdale Sentinel, August 27, 1915.
29. Ibid.
31. Ibid.; Fort Lauderdale Sentinel, August 27, 1915.
33. Fort Lauderdale Sentinel, March 17, 1916.
34. Ibid., April 21, 1916.
35. Delta Kappa Gamma, Chapter XI, “Pioneer Women in Education,” transcript of oral history interview conducted June 3, 1962, manuscript in Broward County Historical Commission archives.
36. Fort Lauderdale Sentinel, November 19, 1915.
37. Bennett, Party of Fear, 17.
38. Ibid., 19.
39. Ibid., 29.
40. Ibid., 85.
41. Ibid., 179; New York Times, September 27, 1922.
42. Higham, Strangers in the Land, 72.
43. Ibid., 179; New York Times, September 27, 1922.
44. Higham, Strangers in the Land, 179.
47. Woodward, Tom Watson, 422; Bennett, Party of Fear, 181.
49. Fort Lauderdale Sentinel, March 17, March 24, 1916.
51. Fort Lauderdale Sentinel, March 31, 1916.
54. Ibid., April 21, 1916.
55. Ibid., January 24, 1913, May 19, 1916.
57. Kirk, Robert Mathews interview.
58. Fort Lauderdale Sentinel, January 24, 1913.
59. Ibid., March 31, 1916.
60. Ibid., September 17, 1915.
61. Ibid., September 24, 1915.
63. Ibid., August 30, 1915.
64. Fort Lauderdale Sentinel, August 13, 1915.