BAS 192 APA riot Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

The American Protective Association, the A.P.A., was anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant, anti-Irish, and anti-union. Butte may seem like a strange place for such sentiments to take hold, but they did, briefly, in the 1890s.

The A.P.A. was founded by Iowa lawyer Henry Bowers in 1887, primarily to combat perceived Catholic political influence. By the middle 1890s the organization had close to 100,000 members across the country, including as many as 2,000 in Butte.

On July 4, 1894, two saloon keepers on Broadway street displayed the A.P.A. banner. The most prominent, Thomas & Tickell’s bar in the Columbia Block at 30 West Broadway, the site of the newer building housing the Piccadilly Museum today, arranged red, white, and blue decorations to spell out “A.P.A.” Initial grumbling led to rocks and dynamite being thrown at the saloon in the early hours of July 4, ultimately culminating in a 12-hour-long riot.

The militia was called out from Helena, but it took hours for them to reach Butte. The riot was still in progress in mid-afternoon, with estimates of up to 2,000 men fighting and brawling in the block of Broadway between Main and Dakota Streets. Policeman Dennis Daly was either clearing the way for the militiamen to move in, or assisting with the arrest of one of the rioters when he was shot and killed. It may have been an errant bullet or a deliberate shooting, but his killer was never identified.

The Butte Miner newspaper loudly deplored the riot. “In the name of the one God whom Catholics and Protestants unite in worshipping—in the name of common sense and honest patriotism, why should these dissentions exist? What demon has taken possession of the American mind? In Butte above all cities in the land such an issue is to be deprecated. Here are to be found representatives of all nationalities, all beliefs, and all dogmas. For the good of the people, and in the interest of this fair city whose name and fame we all hold dear, let us have peace.”

Although Butte elected William Thompson, an A.P.A. supporter, mayor in 1894, by 1896 the organization was in severe decline, and Butte elected an Irishman, Patrick Harrington, mayor. Nationally, the A.P.A. lost influence as financial issues related to free silver came to the fore, and President William McKinley appointed Catholics to his cabinet. The A.P.A. was effectively dead by 1898, and disappeared completely with the death of its founder Henry Bowers in 1911.

The Columbia Block that housed the saloon where the riot began has been gone for more than 70 years, but William Thompson’s home at 304 West Granite Street is still standing.

As writer Edwin Dobb has said, "Like Concord, Gettysburg, and Wounded Knee, Butte is one of the places America came from." Join us next time for more of Butte, America’s Story.