



Groups seek removal of historic portrait outside House chamber

Antonio Caban

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STATE HOUSE — Education and religious advocates on Monday called for the relocation of a portrait depicting the state’s twenty-third governor, referring to him as “a symbol of bigotry” for his party’s support of a constitutional amendment they say restricts school choice.

A member of the short-lived “Know Nothing” political party, Gov. Henry Gardner served from 1855 through 1858. During that time members of the political movement successfully ushered through a constitutional amendment prohibiting public money from being used to fund certain institutions, like religious schools.

Dubbed the “Know Nothings” for their professed ignorance of their own political organization, the American Party emerged as an alternative to the Whigs and Democrats in the turbulent mid-19th century, adopting a nativist stance while also passing liberal reforms.

“The portrait is really a symbol of bigotry from a bygone era in Massachusetts, but the concern that we have is that it is in a prominent position right next to the entrance of the House of Representatives, and that it probably should be moved away from that area to some other less prominent area,” said Jamie Gass, director of the Center for School Reform at Pioneer Institute.

Gass described Gardner as the “driver” of the “anti-aide amendments,” which he said discriminated against Catholics. Gass added that he does not believe the portrait should be completely removed from the walls of Beacon Hill.

“It belongs in the State House. I mean, we’re not saying you should hide from history, we’re just saying it shouldn’t be in a position of prominence,” Gass said.

The research group hosted the event, which featured former U.S. Ambassador to the Vatican and former Boston Mayor Raymond Flynn as a speaker as well as members of various research, educational and religious organizations. The program included officials from the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom and the American Enterprise Institute.

Materials distributed by activists also noted successful efforts last year in convincing South Carolina officials to remove a Confederate battle flag from the state capitol grounds.

Susan Greendyke Lachevre, art collections manager at the State House, told the News Service she hung Gardner's portrait herself in the early 1990s and suggested a decision to move the portrait from its chronological place amongst past Bay State governors would be up to the Art Commission. "It would be difficult to find a more appropriate place," she said.

Gardner's presence at the State House goes beyond just the portrait. Last year, officials reburied a more than 220-year old time capsule that contained coins, local newspapers, and other items from 1855 that Gardner had placed in it.