



Clarina Irene Howard Nichols was born in West Townshend, Vermont, in 1810. She married and had three children, but divorced in 1843 after thirteen tumultuous years of marriage. That same year she wed newspaper editor George Nichols, with whom she worked on his Brattleboro paper, the Windham County Democrat. In October 1854 Nichols moved to Kansas with the fourth New England Emigrant Aid Company party and later staked a claim in Douglas County, Kansas, about fourteen miles south of Lawrence.

“NOBODY OUT HERE KNOWS ANYTHING ABOUT WIMIN’S RIGHTS”:

Clarina Howard Nichols, Woman’s Rights, and Abolitionism in Kansas Territory

by Marilyn S. Blackwell

On August 3, 1855, four months after her second trip to Kansas, reformer Clarina Irene Howard Nichols voiced her frustrations about politics in the Lawrence *Herald of Freedom* by recreating what she called her “old wife’ character,” Deborah Van Winkle. It was a pseudonym she had used successfully in the late 1840s to advocate for married women’s property rights and to satirize partisan politics, an arena where women were scarcely welcome in the mid-nineteenth century. Now she resurrected Van Winkle to alert antislavery men that they were neglecting their female partners in the rush to defend their homes and liberties against proslavery forces. “The women of Kansas feels that slavery threatens *their* rights when it would parade a degraded, beastly womanhood, to be trampled beneath the contempt of their husbands, sons and brothers,” the matron exclaimed. Speaking for white women, she reminded free-state leaders that, “*Our* rights will never be won and secured while slavery tramples upon our black sisters.”¹ The parallel she drew between the wives, mothers, and sisters of free-state men and enslaved women connected woman’s rights to the contest over slavery and was designed to provoke free-state men into honoring the women in their own households.

An accomplished journalist, Clarina Nichols (1810–1885) had spent over a decade as editor of the *Windham County Democrat*, her husband’s newspaper, in Brattleboro, Vermont. By the early 1850s, she was well known as a delightful, if sarcastic, “editress,” a champion of free soil, and a ladylike lecturer on woman’s rights and temperance. Her carefully crafted public persona and her association with other activists in the early woman’s rights movement had fortified

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1. “Letter from Ottawa,” *Herald of Freedom*, August 11, 1855. I am grateful to Kristen Tegtmeier Oertel for discovering this letter and for her insights in connection with this project.

Nichols against critics of such “strong-minded” women as she sought to influence Vermont lawmakers to expand married women’s property rights.²

But when Nichols decided to cultivate her favorite causes in what she considered the congenial soil of Kansas, she bravely entered politics on her own. Passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act had opened the territory for white settlement under the policy of popular sovereignty. The act allowed residents of the region to determine whether to legalize slavery or not, effectively suspending the Missouri Compromise and igniting abolitionist furor. Congressional leaders and many Missourians assumed that Kansas would become a slave state balanced by a free state in Nebraska. Eager to activate her political ideals by saving Kansas from the scourge of slavery and hoping to boost her sons’ economic prospects in the West, Nichols migrated to the territory with the New England Emigrant Aid Company (NEEAC) in October 1854. Boston-based leaders of NEEAC, keen to advance free soil and capitalist development on the frontier, orchestrated emigration from New England to ensure that the territory would be flooded with voters committed to a free state.³ Nichols relished the moral basis of the project and anticipated the political possibilities of securing married women’s property and civil rights as well. Yet she shunned the notoriety often attached to radical advocates of woman’s rights. Therefore it is no surprise that when she found herself isolated on a homestead in southern Douglas County, without supportive colleagues and perturbed by the antics of proslavery men, she would vent her feelings anonymously.

Nichols’s advocacy for women in early Kansas has been well documented, but her accomplishments have generally overshadowed the impact the battle over slavery had on her politics and consequently on the larger woman’s rights movement. Through her own account in the *History of Woman Suffrage*, the publication of her papers in the *Kansas Historical Quarterly* in 1973

and 1974, and recent biographical studies, Nichols has become known for instilling married women’s property, equal custody, and school voting rights into the state’s constitution in 1859.⁴ Her invention of Deborah Van Winkle, a character who facilitated her career in Vermont, is rarely mentioned, yet the discovery of Van Winkle’s reincarnation in Kansas enriches our understanding of the difficulties Nichols faced in the pivotal summer of 1855.⁵

This article shows how the harsh conditions and racially charged political environment of the territory overshadowed Nichols’s campaign for woman’s rights. Whereas she sought to link her agenda with that of free-state men, they were too intent upon defeating proslavery forces and too divided among themselves over the subsequent status of blacks to seriously contemplate the separate rights of women. Hoping simply to capture their attention, Nichols inadvertently catapulted herself into the ongoing debate among free-state northerners over how to handle black freedom. Her thinly disguised column sparked an exchange with a respondent from Missouri who drew Nichols and one of her sons further into the debate over racial mixing, eclipsing woman’s rights. The interchange makes clear that Nichols had become a radical abolitionist and that race divided free-state men from each other nearly as much as from their proslavery opponents. Just as northern racism threatened to limit black freedom, so too it circumscribed Nichols’s efforts to promote equal citizenship for women and slowed the advance of woman’s rights on the western frontier.

With her husband George and their eleven-year-old son, Nichols arrived in the territory in April 1855, planning to rendezvous with her two oldest sons by a previous marriage, Chapin Howard and Aurelius O. “Relie” Carpenter. They had accompanied their mother

2. For Nichols’s political style, see Marilyn Schultz Blackwell, “Meddling in Politics: Clarina Howard Nichols and Antebellum Political Culture,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 24 (Spring 2004): 27–50; for an overview of Nichols’s career, see T. D. S. Bassett, “Nichols, Clarina Irene Howard,” in *Notable American Women, 1607–1950: A Biographical Dictionary*, ed. Edward T. James, Janet Wilson James, and Paul S. Boyer (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1971), 2:625–27; Diane Eickhoff, *Revolutionary Heart: The Life of Clarina Nichols and the Pioneering Crusade for Women’s Rights* (Kansas City, Kans.: Quindaro Press, 2006).

3. For recent analyses of the act, see John R. Wunder and Joann M. Ross, ed., *The Nebraska-Kansas Act of 1854* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008); for the NEEAC, see Gunja SenGupta, *For God and Mammon: Evangelicals and Entrepreneurs, Masters and Slaves in Territorial Kansas, 1854–1860* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996); Samuel A. Johnson, *The Battle Cry of Freedom: The New England Emigrant Aid Company in the Kansas Crusade* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1954).

4. Clarina I. Howard Nichols, “Reminiscences,” in *History of Woman Suffrage*, ed. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage (Rochester, N.Y.: Fowler and Wells, 1881) 1:171–200; Joseph G. Gambone, ed., “The Forgotten Feminist of Kansas: The Papers of Clarina I. H. Nichols, 1854–1885,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 39 and 40 (Spring 1973–Winter 1974); Eickhoff, *Revolutionary Heart*, 144–55; Kristen Tegtmeier Oertel, “‘A large-hearted, brave, faithful woman’: Clarina Howard Nichols,” in *John Brown to Bob Dole: Movers and Shakers in Kansas History*, ed. Virgil W. Dean (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 56–69.

5. For Van Winkle and Nichols’s politics, see Blackwell, “Meddling in Politics,” 35–36, 51–60. The letters in the *Herald of Freedom* were discovered after this article was published. For a full discussion of Nichols’s politics see Marilyn S. Blackwell and Kristen T. Oertel, *Frontier Feminist: Clarina Howard Nichols and the Politics of Motherhood* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010).

on her first trip to Lawrence, and while she was back in Vermont gathering the rest of her family, they had explored opportunities for staking out a homestead. They had also witnessed contention over two elections in which many Missourians crossed the border only to vote, upending the policy of popular sovereignty. The region was rife with angry conflicts over land claims between proslavery Missourians and free-state men, which gained political potency with the rising tide of sectional politics. The Nicholoses eventually registered a claim near Ottawa Creek at a crossroads with a short-lived post office called Lane, about fourteen miles south of Lawrence in Douglas County. Unlike either Lawrence or Osawatimie, where they had considered settling, the area was not a Yankee stronghold offering the comfort of like-minded neighbors. Claimants from Missouri, Tennessee, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Indiana—westerners with diverse political and cultural backgrounds—populated the area and far outnumbered migrants from New England. Exhausted by the pioneering regimen of planting and preparing food, Nichols attempted to maintain a semblance of cleanliness in a one-room, rude cabin without any domestic help and was barely able to maintain her correspondence with eastern free-soil editors eager for news about the free-state cause.⁶

One of several journalists who promoted free Kansas in eastern papers, Nichols recounted her adventures traveling west and boasted about conditions in the territory to encourage Yankee emigration, even as prospects for keeping slavery at bay without violence were rapidly slipping away. She was thoroughly committed to the same set of bourgeois values that animated NEEAC leaders and evangelical Christians who hoped to civilize the territory by recreating northeastern schools, churches, and institutions of social improvement on the western prairie. Publicly, Nichols was known for her support of political antislavery, not radical abolition, but it was not long before events in Kansas inflamed her moral indignation against the political power of proslavery advocates. Reporting about the first territorial elections—for a delegate to Congress in November 1854 and the territorial legislature in March 1855—Nichols demonized those Missourians, a “mass, low lived, drunken and reckless,” who flocked across the border to vote and pillage before returning home. By June 1855, with ten acres of corn planted and green

6. See Nichols’s letters to Samuel Woodward, editor of the (Keene) *New Hampshire American News* and its successor the (Keene) *New Hampshire Sentinel*, in Gambone, ed., “Forgotten Feminist,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 39 (Spring 1973): 50–57; (Summer 1973): 220–32.

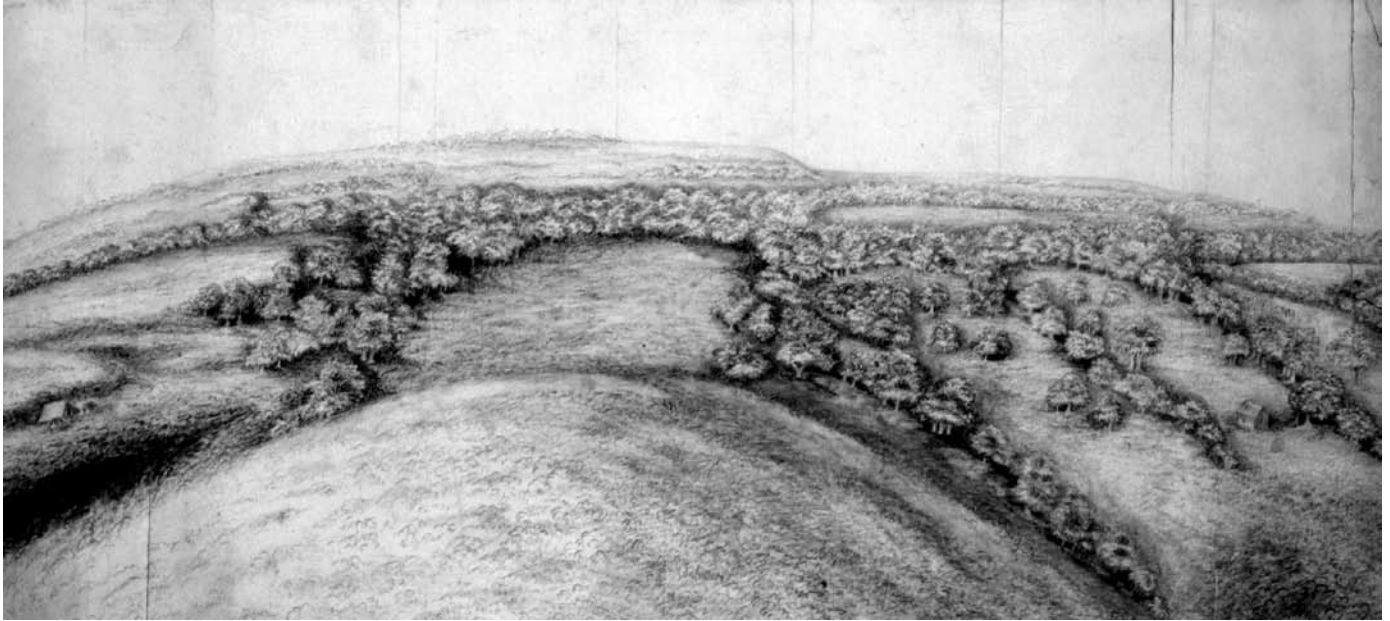
shoots in her garden, she was settled enough to write a glowing report about the beauties of the prairie and opportunities for purchasing land, cattle, and equipment, while exuding optimism that the determination and hard work of free-state migrants would soon overcome the treachery of Missourians.⁷

Yet as the summer progressed, territorial politics and conditions on the Nichols’s homestead deteriorated markedly, producing a gap in her reporting and considerable angst about the direction of the free-state movement. Refuting charges of election fraud, a proslavery legislature adapted Missouri’s code of laws for the territory, legalizing slavery and adding restrictions on abolitionist activity. Nationally, the Pierce administration encouraged the new government by replacing Governor Andrew Horatio Reeder, who had attempted to rectify electoral illegalities with a partial revote. Meanwhile, free-state men rallied around what appeared to be an abrogation of their right to the franchise, vowing to resist the “tyrannical enactments” of the “bogus legislature” and not, as NEEAC leader Charles Robinson remarked, to become “subjects, slaves of Missouri!”⁸

Other than outrage at proslavery Missourians, there was little to unite the majority of northern settlers who were confronted with a legislature they wished to repudiate. Northern Democrats and former Whig, Free Soil, and Liberty party men with considerable differences on other issues had migrated in anticipation of establishing free institutions, but the strength of their opposition to slavery varied widely. Abolitionists who believed slavery was morally wrong and sought its eradication nationwide were a minority among the champions of free labor, many of whom ignored slavery where it existed and were more intent on keeping slaveholders and blacks out of new territory to protect their own opportunities for land and fair wages. Other migrants were hardly politicized on the issue, as long as they could secure land rights for themselves; nor were they anxious to resort to violence against what appeared to be a proslavery majority. NEEAC leaders in Lawrence, who were committed to antislavery principles, played

7. *Ibid.*, 52, 228–30. For NEEAC and Christian evangelical values, see SenGupta, *For God and Mammon*, 79–89; for Nichols’s role in political antislavery, see Michael D. Pierson, *Free Hearts and Free Homes: Gender and American Antislavery Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 57–61, 71–74; Blackwell, “Meddling in Politics,” 40–41, 46–47.

8. See resolutions at the Big Springs Convention printed in R. G. Elliot, “The Big Springs Convention,” *Kansas Historical Collections*, 1903–1904 8 (1904): 376; and Robinson’s oration, July 4, 1855, in Frank W. Blackmar, *The Life of Charles Robinson: The First State Governor of Kansas* (Topeka: Crane, 1902), 404.



This pencil sketch of Lawrence from Mount Oread, attributed to "Mrs. J. H. Nichols," a member of the fourth emigrant aid party in 1854, was probably the work of Clarina I. H. Nichols. Although she and her family considered settling in Lawrence or Osawatomie, where they would have been surrounded by the comfort of like-minded Yankee transplants, they registered a claim near Ottawa Creek, an area populated by claimants from Missouri, Tennessee, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Indiana—westerners with diverse political and cultural backgrounds—who far outnumbered migrants from New England. Sketch courtesy of the Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, Lawrence, gift of the Department of Regional History of the Kenneth Spencer Research Library.

an outsized role in persuading these settlers they had been wronged by Missouri invaders and to resist the so-called bogus laws, even by force of arms if necessary. They demonized all Missourians as proslavery fanatics, despite the fact that a minority of those who crossed the border supported a free state. Like other westerners, this group of freesoilers resented the imposition of Yankee leadership in the region, believed that abolitionists were fanatics, and readily exploited racially based prejudices to prevent the northeastern contingent from dominating politics.⁹

Isolated on her claim in southern Douglas County, Nichols had limited access to news of deliberations in Lawrence because mail delivery was unreliable, and the burdens of caring for her family meant she had little time to contemplate politics. In mid-summer, her seventy-one-year-old husband was injured in a farm accident, leaving him incapacitated, and a hickory fence

rail hit her youngest son on the head, causing a concussion and inflammation in his brain. Both needed her nursing care for weeks. Meanwhile, fear permeated the region. Rumors that proslavery Missourians were ready to torch property in nearby Palmyra sent neighborhood men to help defend free-state settlers' claims.¹⁰ Feeling overworked, housebound in a pioneer outpost, and deprived of the political work she craved, Nichols sensed the dangers of rising militancy to her family and to the free-state cause, but more importantly, she lamented the absence of women's voices in the fray and missed the congeniality of her eastern friends and colleagues.

To counter that imbalance, Nichols resurrected Deborah Van Winkle to speak with eastern readers and to give antislavery men a piece of her mind as well. NEEAC leaders had hired George W. Brown of Pennsylvania to edit the *Herald of Freedom* and to promote free Kansas both in the territory and back east. Brown was a committed, if testy free-soil advocate who publicly disclaimed extreme abolitionism while airing his personal vendettas in print. Proslavery antics ignited his hot temper, and he aired rumors about the arrival of

9. Bill Cecil-Fronsman, "'Advocate the Freedom of White Men, As Well As That of Negroes': The Kansas Free State and Antislavery Westerners in Territorial Kansas," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 20 (Summer 1997): 102–15; Rita G. Napier, "The Hidden History of Bleeding Kansas: Leavenworth and the Formation of the Free State Movement," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 42 (Summer 2004): 42–61; Nichole Etcheson, *Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War Era* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 35–49; SenGupta, *For God and Mammon*, 41–47.

10. Nichols to Samuel Woodward, October 6, 1855, in Gambone, "Forgotten Feminist," 230; A. O. Carpenter, "Letter from Kansas," *Vermont Phoenix*, August 25, 1855.

Sharps rifles and the organization of militia companies to threaten the invaders. Yet he was also sympathetic to the notion of woman's rights, thereby affording Nichols an opportunity to voice her concerns.¹¹

Back in 1847 in the pages of the *Windham County Democrat*, Deborah Van Winkle had posed as an elderly and thoroughly Christian widow who recounted her travels on the railroad, knitting in hand, while commenting upon "wimin's wrongs." She affirmed, "I aint goin to tell anything I don't bleve as true as the gospels," and proclaimed women the intellectual equals of men because "women's sphere is God's sphere." They "must give character to and train the young immortal sperits, whether they chuse to or not," she insisted, "because they are *mothers*," unlike men. Daring to comment on politics, she even journeyed to Washington, D.C., to report about the shenanigans in Congress, where all the "crazy members" wasted the people's money and time with politicking and "quarreling" and southern Senator John Calhoun proved so intractable. "I had no idea," Van Winkle remarked, "that men, and well educated men too, could be so unmannerly and noisy."¹²

It was common practice for female journalists to devise pleasing, homey characters as pseudonyms and to anchor their columns in domestic scenes to validate their womanliness. Reformers Frances Gage of Ohio, known as "Aunt Fanny," and Hannah Cutler, who posed as "Aunt Patience," dished out housekeeping advice coupled with their feminist ideas.¹³ Nichols's model was a bit feistier: the hardworking, sharp-tongued wife of Washington Irving's kindly, dreamy-eyed country charmer Rip Van Winkle; her harping had apparently driven her husband to wander off and fall asleep. If not particularly likeable, Deborah Van Winkle nonetheless embodied the industrious, morally righteous, and intelligent wife in antebellum New England. Her unsophisticated—"country bumpkin"—dialect disguised the fact that she

was ready to debate politics with any man, in contrast to the retiring, but highly mannered "true woman" of the urban middle class. Deborah combined rural simplicity and practical knowledge with the virtues of moral motherhood. Nichols, who herself had been raised in a provincial backwater, framed her advocacy for women around the rights of mothers like Van Winkle who deserved equal property and civil rights because of their diligence in upholding familial responsibilities, whether growing food or training children.¹⁴ In Nichols's Kansas version, Van Winkle was a free-state settler working side-by-side with her husband, Jacob, and feeding hungry sons, the epitome of a self-sacrificing pioneer mother who simply wanted to say a few words about the shape of the new government.

Van Winkle established her pure motives and anti-slavery standpoint by opening her letter with the announcement that she was busy "extendin' the 'area of human freedom' down here on the Ottawa." Reading an antislavery speech from Philadelphia had inspired her to communicate with her eastern friends and colleagues, knowing they would recognize her "slip-shod, 'old wife' character." Though suffering from loneliness, she assured them that, "we aint like to starve, and we have better appetites than we brought from the East with us." Slipping seamlessly from cooking to politics, she remarked:

If our eastern friends could only see Jacob and the boys stowe away the bacon and johnny-cake and milk, they'd think the *cooks* in Kansas a hard-worked class, and expect we'd be votin' for slaves to du our work insted of runnin' bullets and sendin' the boys—with johnny-cake lunch in their pockets—to Palmyra, to keep the Missourians from burning down the town. By the way, Mr. Editur, if the Missourians would come and live among us, we reckon there wouldn't be any fightin'. We have several Missouri neighbors, and they are right peaceable people. We wish we had more of 'em. For, as I tell Jacob, the very air of Kansas smells of freedom; and nobody can breathe it long and curse the Yankees

11. On this arming, see *Herald of Freedom*, April 7, June 16, and July 21, 1855; for Brown's views on women, see "Female Physicians," January 27, 1855; "Female Employment," May 5, 1855; "Rights of Married Women," September 22, 1855, in *Herald of Freedom*.

12. *Windham County Democrat*, June 6, 1849, and December 30, 1847; see also, Blackwell, "Meddling in Politics," 35–36.

13. See Janet L. Coryell, "Superseding Gender: The Role of the Woman Politico in Antebellum Partisan Politics," in *Women and the Unstable State in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Alison M. Parker and Stephanie Cole (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2000), 86–94; Carol Steinhagen, "The Two Lives of Frances Dana Gage," *Ohio History* 107 (Winter/Spring 1998): 22–38; Elizabeth B. Warbasse, "Cutler, Hannah Maria Conant Tracy," in *Notable American Women, 1607–1950*, 1:426–27.

14. On the provincial middle class, see Catherine E. Kelly, *In the New England Fashion: Reshaping Women's Lives in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999), 5–10; for the country bumpkin in literature, see Kristen Van Tassel, "Nineteenth Century Antebellum American Literature: The Yeoman Becomes a Country Bumpkin," *American Studies* 43 (Spring 2002): 51–73.



Between Nichols's first trip to Kansas in October 1854 and her return in the spring of 1855, her two oldest sons remained in the territory to stake out a homestead. During this time they witnessed contention over two territorial elections in which many Missourians crossed the border only to vote, as depicted here in a contemporary illustration by Felix Octavius Carr Darley. The results of these elections upended the policy of popular sovereignty, and the angry conflicts over land claims between proslavery Missourians and free-state men quickly gained political potency with the rising tide of sectional politics.

because they love it and have brought it with them from Ticonderoga and Bunker Hill.¹⁵

By associating Van Winkle with the patriots of New England, Nichols confirmed her commitment to Revolutionary ideals before she revealed her political agenda. Deborah stood beside Jacob, a God-fearing partner, willing to shoulder hard work and loneliness to preserve American freedoms, even if the manly roles she was forced to assume made her cranky. Rather than “sendin’ the boys” to arms, she offered neighborliness, a form of traditional feminine peacemaking, to sway settlers from Missouri.

But proslavery Missourians were not her prime audience. Instead, she was anxious to challenge free-state men to surpass their Revolutionary forbears by acknowledging that the essential work of territorial women ought to provide the basis for full citizenship:

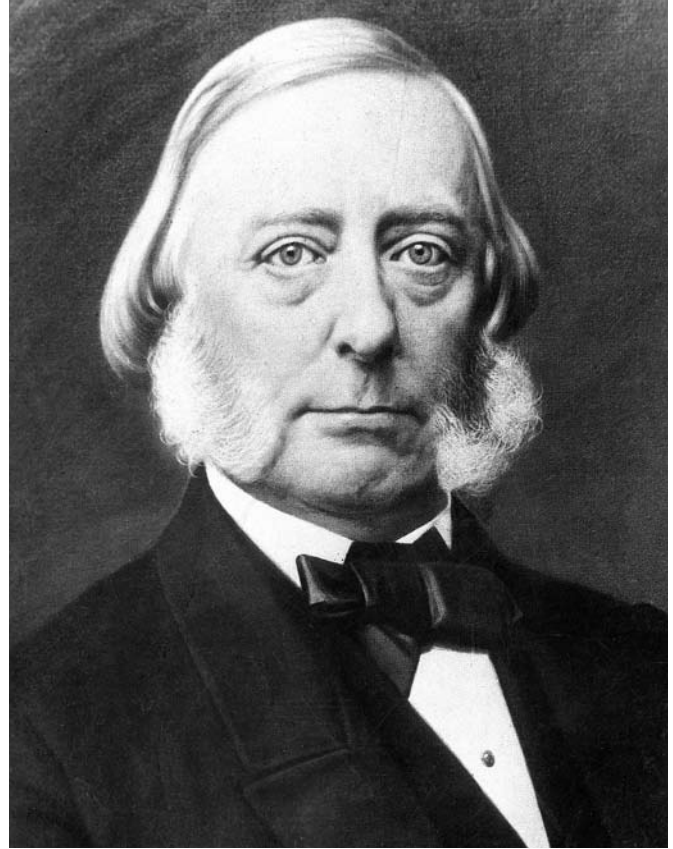
15. This and following quotations from “Letter from Ottawa,” *Herald of Freedom*, August 11, 1855.

I’ve been thinking of the “progressive women” of the East, and so longed to see something from their pens. For, Mr. Editor, do you know I’m thinking that they have almost forgot “wimin’s rights,” since *men’s* rights are agin to be fought for in this republican country. Our old Revolutionary mothers—Heaven remember ‘em—had pretty much sich rights as we wimin of Kansas have—the right to bake johnny-cakes and help the men folks build log cabins, and fight for ‘em.

Nobody out here knows anything about *wimin’s* rights. The men here wouldn’t have any arguments like our eastern opponents—that “the women want the right to work out doors”—we all do that *with their consent*—“to turn soldiers”—they’d *make* ammunition of us—“drive cattle, cut wood”—these are feminine employments in a new Territory—and the like.

Even as she used Van Winkle to link woman's rights to America's founding period and women's pioneering contributions, Nichols ingeniously exploited the shift in gender roles that had evolved since the colonial era. By the 1850s, the ideal, if not the reality, of a distinct "woman's sphere" of domestic responsibilities was thoroughly entrenched among white middle-class women who expected their husbands to relieve them of exhausting outdoor labor and to only perform the womanly duties—household management, child nurture, sewing, reading, writing, and teaching—to which ladies were accustomed.¹⁶ That they might be expected to assist in battle, the most unfeminine of roles, was an even greater affront to the old matron, who could no longer "write a handsum hand" because she had "used [her] hands so hard doin' all sorts of things." Clearly, Nichols's demand for rights, fraught as it was with class and race superiority, did not include exchanging gender roles—no heavy work or fighting for her.

Rather than indicting free-state men, however, Van Winkle laid the blame squarely on the contest over slavery, hoping to generate as much fervor over woman's rights as over black freedom. Abandoned while men were politicking and arming themselves, free-state women were being "trampled beneath the contempt of their husbands, sons and brothers," just like "slavery tramples on our black sisters," she implied. Equating the plight of white and black women was a way of appealing to a sense of manly protection among antislavery men and linking white women to the cause of the enslaved, especially that of black women whose children and sexual virtue were under slaveholders' control. Nichols's class and racial viewpoint notwithstanding, she was a lone voice in Kansas willing to even mention rights for black women, whose status most white men rarely considered. To bolster their gentlemanly resolve even further, Van Winkle ended her tirade by challenging free-state men to outperform their rivals: "I tell Jacob, however, that as for the legal rights of white women, I'd sooner trust the Missourians than men of Massachusetts and Vermont; for thus far the 'chivalry' of Missouri has legislated better for married women and widows than have the 'justice-loving' men of those States." With this final blow, Van Winkle also insulted Yankee men by comparing them unfavorably to the slaveholders of Missouri, who had shown greater respect for married



Born in Pennsylvania in 1807, Andrew Horatio Reeder was appointed the first governor of Kansas Territory in June 1854. During his one tumultuous year in office, Reeder called for elections to choose a delegate to the U.S. Congress and to form a territorial legislature. Both elections saw widespread fraud when Missourians crossed the border in large numbers to ensure the selection of proslavery politicians and platforms. Reeder, pictured here, attempted to rectify electoral illegalities with a partial revote, clashed with the so-called bogus legislature, and was replaced by the pro-Southern president, Franklin Pierce. Once out of favor, Reeder escaped arrest in the territory by fleeing dressed as a woodchopper. He returned to Pennsylvania, where he died in 1864.

women with a more liberal code of property law than that of either Vermont or Massachusetts.¹⁷

Nichols's righteous indignation arose from her status as an educated, white woman of considerable refinement. Yet on the Kansas frontier, her social standing and influence appeared to be slipping away and disregarded as the contest over slavery became militant. Ironically, this resulted in a plea for protection from the harsh

17. In 1849 Missouri provided an exemption for a wife's real and personal property (which included slaves) from attachment for a husband's debts, whereas Vermont's 1847 law only exempted real, not personal, property. Nichols was mistaken about Massachusetts, which exempted both categories; she may not have been aware of a statute providing married women with separate property and inheritance rights, which passed in 1854. See Richard H. Chused, "Married Women's Property Law, 1800–1850," *Georgetown Law Journal* 71 (1983): 1403n233; Stanton, Anthony, and Gage, *History of Woman Suffrage*, 1:210–11.

16. See especially Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780–1835* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1977).

conditions in the contested territory as much as equal rights. But as a champion of mothers' natural rights, Nichols often merged the two concerns. She believed in a form of coequality rooted in the morality of the Bible, in which women's God-given responsibilities as wives and mothers were equal and complementary to men's, and she capitalized on this notion to claim equivalent property and civil rights with men.¹⁸

Whereas Yankee men were apparently deaf to Van Winkle's outcry, despite the slur she cast on them, a Missourian—a free-state supporter posing as "Back Woodsman"—surfaced to respond to her haughty ways. Ignoring her plea for woman's rights and her gratuitous gesture to their "chivalry," he defended the integrity of freedom-loving Missourians, who hardly needed any Yankees to teach them about liberty:

I hail from Missouri myself, and have undergone no change in my political views since coming to Kansas. I came, like hundreds of others, to escape the tyrannies and oppression of slavery, and have ever been opposed to its extension. I am proud to say it, and that without the fear of successful contradiction, that the free State voters who hail from Missouri, are as firmly devoted to their principles, and will labor as energetically for their extension, as will those from any other part of the Union, "Ticonderoga and Bunker Hill" included. We are as ready to avenge the wrongs perpetrated upon the people of this Territory as any person. . . .

Our principles were established before we became acquainted with the Yankees, therefore we object to their claiming us as the workmanship of their hands.

Contrary to Nichols's assumption, this Missourian was neither proslavery nor in need of conversion to the free-state cause. Even so, Back Woodsman was not eager to welcome blacks as fellow citizens, and he distanced himself from efforts to free them: "Don't understand me to say we are as humane as some profess to be, for we claim no relationship to the African, and shall not recognize them as brothers until their sable skins become white, and they comb their hair straight."¹⁹

18. For the theory of coequality among woman's rights leaders, see Nancy Isenberg, *Sex and Citizenship in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), xiii–xviii, 71–74; for Nichols's version, see Blackwell, "Meddling in Politics," 43–46.

19. "A Reply," *Herald of Freedom*, August 25, 1855.

Back Woodsman's response reveals the regional division among free-state men that evolved along racial lines during the summer of 1855. As they organized against the proslavery government, westerners' resentment against the minority of freestaters from New England mounted. Although educated, Yankees appeared to be self-promoting professionals and swindlers, ill suited to the frontier but proficient at political rhetoric and quick to resort to arms. Despite a significant ideological divide between abolitionists and free-soil advocates from New England, westerners joined proslavery men in quickly affixing the former label on all Yankees, demeaning them as extremists like William Lloyd Garrison and "true lovers" of blacks. Back Woodsman could be assured that even many readers of the progressive *Herald of Freedom* would countenance his views because abolitionists were considered a radical fringe ready to uplift blacks to the detriment of the constitutional rights of white men. Indeed, it was this preoccupation with men's rights that had precipitated Nichols's plea, but Back Woodsman was not listening, preferring instead to assert his regional identity in the conflict among free-state men.²⁰

It was not long before another letter appeared in the *Herald of Freedom*, from Ottawa Creek and written in Van Winkle's folksy style but authored instead by her nephew "Reuben Rustic," a parody of the western man. Though not in response to Back Woodsman, it also highlighted the sharp divisions between westerners and Yankees. Rustic reported on a political meeting in District 4 to elect delegates to the convention at Big Springs on September 5, the day free-state men hoped to organize a political resistance movement. George Nichols was too ill to attend, but Clarina's sons Howard and Relie Carpenter may have witnessed or heard about the proceedings and returned home frustrated with the outcome. According to Rustic, "Aunt Debby" was too busy tending the "sick folk" to write, but he readily recounted his observations about the "glorious little meetin'."²¹

Relie and his mother probably conceived this satire together, composing it in the style she used for Van Winkle; both were frustrated with territorial politics and neither could vote. Eighteen-year-old Relie had experience in newspaper work, having learned the

20. Cecil-Fronsman, "Advocate the Freedom of White Men," 109–11; Napier, "Hidden History of Bleeding Kansas," 52–55; SenGupta, *For God and Mammon*, 89–91; Elliot, "Big Springs Convention," 364–65; John McCool, "Conventional Wisdom," KansasHistoryOnline, Hall Center for the Humanities, University of Kansas, <http://www.kansashistoryonline/ksh/articlepage.asp?artid=285>.

21. "A New Correspondent," *Herald of Freedom*, September 8, 1855.



Isolated on her claim in southern Douglas County, Nichols had limited access to the free-state press because mail delivery was unreliable, and the burdens of caring for her family meant she had little time to contemplate politics. The harsh nature of life in early Kansas Territory is demonstrated in this photograph of settlers in front of a home built by William H. R. Lykins weeks before the first New England Emigrant Aid Company party arrived in what would become the Lawrence area in 1854. Nichols's life in a pioneer outpost at times left her feeling deprived of the political work she craved and lonely for the congeniality of her eastern friends and colleagues.

printer's trade from his stepfather in Brattleboro, Vermont, and worked briefly for the *Kansas Free State* and the *Herald of Freedom* in Lawrence. With a sufficient secondary education, he followed his mother's lead in corresponding with Brattleboro papers soon after their arrival in the territory, though he wrote without the romanticism about the venture that she displayed and initially expressed little interest in politics. During the winter, however, the younger Carpenter became irritated by the closed-mindedness of western men and their disdain for Yankees and abolitionists, which inflamed his political instincts. "Never fear for Kansas, she will be a Free State," he affirmed for Brattleboro readers in early August. By that time, the territorial legislature had outlawed talk of abolition, making it punishable by imprisonment and hard labor, so there was good reason for both Relie and his mother to remain anonymous.²²

22. A. O. Carpenter, "Letter from Kansas," *Vermont Phoenix*, August 25, 1855; for Carpenter's previous letters, see *Vermont Phoenix*, February 24, May 5, June 9, and July 25, 1855; (Brattleboro) *Weekly Eagle*, December 29, 1854. See also, "A. O. Carpenter," in *History of Mendocino County, California*, ed. [Lyman L. Palmer] (San Francisco: Alley, Bowen, 1880), 632–33. For George Brown's response and the text of the gag law against abolitionism, see "The Fatal Day," *Herald of Freedom*, September 15, 1855.

Posing as a typical western man, Reuben Rustic boasted about the efficiency of western-style politics in the Ottawa Creek region, indicating his disdain for Yankee ways:

I couldn't help noticin' how much quicker the boys here do up sich business than the Yankees do, at Lawrence; I don't know what's the reason of that, unless its 'cause we're kind of a mixture, of Missourians, Tennesseans, Buckeyes, Hoosiers' and tip't off with Yankees.

So you see when we come together, it a'int the same old tune, over and over and over agin, and nuthin' at last but a bag of wind; no, no, I tell you what, when we git together, we do something for certin', and the reason is 'cause we're western men and know what the western country needs; 'zackly so Mr. Eeditur.²³

23. This and following quotations from, "A New Correspondent," *Herald of Freedom*, September 8, 1855.

Rustic exhibited the kind of presumptuous ignorance that Relie abhorred. With little thought, except for their own fortunes, these western men had crafted the “verry best” platform, according to Rustic, “‘cause we know it ALL.” They proposed a “Free State—*total exclusion of the African race.*” Rustic elaborated, “we won’t be bothered with niggars no how you can fix it; but if we’re goin’ to have niggars why we want them to have masters, and not to be runnin’ in among us and ‘malgamatin’ with the whites—that’s it.”

But just as the platform was ready to be approved, a singular “feller,” who turned out to be an “ABOLITIONER,” disrupted the ready consensus by objecting to the “black plank.” According to Rustic, “he wouldn’t walk on it; well of course the fat was all in the fire, and now there must be some spoutin’ done.” Surprisingly, this “critter” was not some “kind ‘o varmint[s], . . . he look’t jist like the rest of us,” Rustic reported, but his single-minded philosophy was more bothersome:

He told us that Washington, Jefferson, and C. M. Clay were all opposed to slavery, and after they’d ‘mancipated their slaves they didn’t ax for a BLACK LAW to drive ‘em out of the United States;²⁴ nor they didn’t steal niggars nuther; he said everyone opposed to slavery was an antislavery man and more or less an abolitioner. . . .

His bringin’ in Washington and Jefferson into our little “one horse” convention, sort o’ bothered some of us a little; then he talked about the Free Soil platform; no more slave territory, nor no more slave States; donation of land to actual settlers; cheap postage etc., etc.; but he said two words were enough for a platform at this time—just FREE STATE.

Adhering to the civic values of the founding fathers and politicians like Kentuckian Cassius M. Clay who refused to adopt the southern proslavery position, the abolitionist elevated democratic ideals over partisan politics and the self-interest of settlers. Unfortunately, Rueben Rustic had little understanding of those principles:

24. In his will, George Washington emancipated his slaves after his wife’s death; she freed all the family’s slaves a year after his death. Thomas Jefferson freed seven of approximately two hundred slaves, all of whom were members of the Hemings family. Colonel Cassius Marcellus Clay (1810–1903) of Kentucky, cousin of Senator Henry Clay, advocated gradual emancipation; his antislavery activities infuriated other southerners.

Well, Mr. Editor, it did sort o’ seem as though he was in favor of the principle of human rights all the time; but we concluded this ‘ere feller didn’t know it all, for he’d only been on one side of the question, while sum of us, leadin’ chaps, had been on all sides, and, at last, been hangin’ on the fence ‘till we’d jist as leave drop on one side as t’other. . . . We thought we know’d something about human rights too, and we think we are as near human as men generally get to be, and that ‘aint all, “charity begins at home,” and that ‘aint all nuther; this feller won’t take any pains to secure himself a half section of land by pre-emption, like some of us are doing;²⁵ he won’t even sign a petition to our Legislature to locate a country seat in the center of our county: no, nor he’s never joined the “BLUE LODGE” nor pledged himself to go for slavery and get a half section, and if slavery wouldn’t carry, why then go total exclusion and git a half section any how; so if a feller won’t take care of himself why we’ve no need of him.²⁶

Clearly, Rustic adhered only to the human right of self-interest and was willing to sell his vote to the highest bidders, even to the most avid proslavery men associated with Missouri’s secret Blue Lodges. Nor could Rustic grasp why the “abolitioner” would resurrect such “old-fashioned chaps” as Washington and Jefferson; instead he expected him to be hiding “behind some niggard pew, a whisperin’ to the darkies, to take stock in the *under-ground railroad.*” Dismissing the unfathomable tenets of the past, Rustic concluded: “every age has its great men, and the men of the present age are the ones for the present use, and so sure as we run back into old antiquated forms just so sure we will run into the doctrines of emancipation, equalization, amalgamation, abolition, revolution, and dissolution; . . . but let us be a tryin’ to secure the Union, and while we’re a fightin’ for the Union, if we get a half section of land, why of course that is our business.”

25. Under the federal Preemption Act of 1841, each citizen or head of family who staked out and registered a section (160 acres) with the land office and verified residency of fourteen months, was eligible for preemption rights to purchase the land at a low price set by the government and not less than \$1.25 per acre.

26. Secret Blue Lodges of Missouri organized to defend slavery and sought to extend it into Kansas through emigration and orchestrated voting. See Etcheson, *Bleeding Kansas*, 32–34.

Notwithstanding his preconceived notions, patriotism trumped other sentiments for Rustic, who pursued the abolitionist further to determine why black exclusion would harm the Union. Fearing the varmint was “off on a nigger trail” and not in “his den,” Rustic was pleasantly surprised to find him “out with his ax a whalin’ away on a big oak as hard as he could crack it—jist like other men.” In response to his query, the abolitionist explained that omitting blacks was “anti-republican; it excludes men who are now citizens of these United States, and if you exclude one man or one class of men of course you have the right to exclude others.” Astonished, Rustic retorted, “you want to bring in niggers who are as ignorant as a mule and let them vote and marry your daughters, etc., etc.?” The exchange prompted the abolitionist to show how blacks belonged alongside all classes of men: “As to that Sir, I don’t expect to engage in dragging men in or dragging them out of the Territory—neither negroes, Indians, Irish, Germans or Catholics. I have no fears as to our country’s bein’ overrun with any one or all these races together; republicanism or democracy is the doctrine, Sir;—or, ‘equal and exact justice to all men.’” Doubting that Rustic was persuaded, the abolitionist noted cynically that the federal government had already prohibited blacks from attaining preemption rights to claim land in the territory, and “if you wish to set yourself up as a *watch dog* for the Missourian’s plantation you have the fugitive slave act to indemnify you.”²⁷ To purify your neighborhood, he reassured, “just get your bloodhounds and take your stand.”

Yet, as every man in the territory knew, the real concern of exclusionists was the potential loss of political power and the specter of racial mixing. “The great colossal bugbear is a big nigger at an election,” the abolitionist noted, but he reassured Rustic that there were thousands of free blacks throughout the United States who did not vote and “besides, if a man is intelligent and honest, why would we ask whether he be Dutch, Irish, red, yellow or black—so far as his vote goes.” As for amalgamation, the abolitionist responded, “all I can say is this: the man who feels sensible that he cannot with safety trust himself in the same State with the Indian or African, of course I would expect that man to go total exclusion or leave the State.” After this insult, Reuben Rustic hurried away to hunt his oxen, knowing there would be little patience for anyone countenancing such comments. To imply that

27. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 imposed penalties on federal and state officials for failing to capture alleged runaway slaves, punished anyone aiding fugitives with fines and imprisonment, and extinguished fugitives’ legal rights.

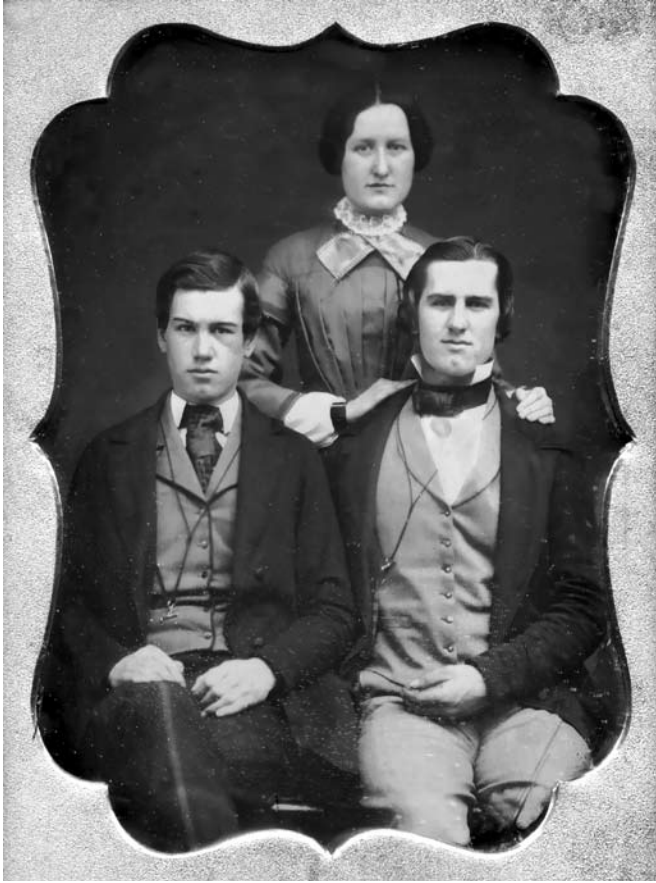


In her letters to newspapers, Nichols tried to connect the plight of white and black women in an attempt to generate as much fervor over woman’s rights as over black freedom. Abandoned while men were politicking and arming themselves, free-state women were being “trampled beneath the contempt of their husbands, sons and brothers,” just like “slavery tramples on our black sisters,” she implied. An example of a black woman who seems to have escaped from slavery, in that she wore a wedding ring and slaves were not legally allowed to marry, is seen in this tintype found amongst the possessions of a Kansas family known for helping slaves escape along the Underground Railroad.

white exclusionists like himself lacked sexual self-control in regard to non-white women was too outrageous for Rustic, who concluded “there’s no knowin’ what such fellers may do” next.²⁸

With the “abolitioner” as his spokesman, Relie Carpenter exposed the hypocrisy and racism embedded in the demand for a free white state. The character embodied a moral commitment to human rights held by a minority of radicals who had probably been silenced at the district caucus. Nichols was no doubt responsible for helping to inspire Relie with her humanitarianism and served as a model of political activism for her son, but he had his own motivations for engaging in the controversy. Close to his mother in temperament, he had

28. “A New Correspondent,” *Herald of Freedom*, September 8, 1855.



Nichols had three children with her first husband, Justin Carpenter: pictured in 1853, from left to right, Aurelius O. "Relie," seventeen, Birsha C., twenty-two, and Chapin Howard, nineteen. Relie, in particular, became involved in his mother's political causes. He and his mother probably created the character "Reuben Rustic," a parody of the western man and nephew to Deborah Van Winkle. In a series of letters to various newspapers, Rustic demonstrated what the Nicholoses saw as the arrogance of many in the West, who were willing to sell their votes to the highest bidders, even to the most avid proslavery men. Photograph courtesy of the Grace Hudson Museum and the Sun House, Ukiah, California.

suffered under the sneers and arrogance of Missourians and other western men who disparaged his Vermont heritage. The subsequent election and appointment of men whom he considered illiterate and unqualified to legislative and judicial offices upended his sense of the democratic process, and he was dismayed by the endless bickering and political posturing as free-state men established claims in Lawrence and elsewhere.²⁹ While he also partook in the scramble for land, it was Carpenter's youth, his idealism, and his sense of Yankee

29. A. O. Carpenter, "Letter from Kansas," *Vermont Phoenix*, June 9, 1855. Relie probably chafed under the supervision of editors at the *Kansas Free State*, who clashed openly with Brown at the *Herald of Freedom*, where Relie also worked briefly; for antagonism between the editors, see SenGupta, *For God and Mammon*, 89-91.

superiority that drove his disgust at the extent of illegal, self-serving activity and outright injustice perpetrated in the territory. With a philosophy rooted in the republican principles of America's founding fathers, the "abolitioner" represented the conscience of the nation, a hardworking man committed to universal human rights, including suffrage and integration for blacks. Without condoning interracial marriage or sex, he even inverted the segregationist charge that abolitionists would destroy the white race by fostering interracial relations. Instead, he implicated the sexual appetites of white men, not blacks, for perpetrating miscegenation.³⁰

Though it was intended to influence the upcoming Big Springs Convention, unfortunately Reuben Rustic's letter was published two days after the meeting, where a united Free State Party emerged. The delegates repudiated the authority of the proslavery legislature, proclaiming that they had "been robbed by force of the right of suffrage and self-government." To distance themselves from radicalism, they denied the "stale and ridiculous charge of Abolitionism" or any interest in interfering with slavery where it existed and determined to make Kansas a place for "free white men" by excluding all blacks from the territory.³¹

This disappointing result may not have immediately registered with Clarina Nichols, for the day after Relie mailed Reuben Rustic's letter, her husband died.³² Mourning for the sympathetic companion who had supported her reforming crusade, she faced the task of burying his remains on the prairie without extended family and friends who would have normally provided comfort to a bereaved widow. Despite her grief and relentless farm work, three weeks later she sent another missive from Deborah Van Winkle to the *Herald of Freedom* in response to Back Woodsman, having recently read his reply. Witty and quick with words, Nichols rarely missed an opportunity to engage with any correspondent who acknowledged her columns, and she was particularly anxious to defend herself politely when slighted. Apologizing for riling "enny body's feelin's," she denied targeting settlers like Back Woodsman and praised him as a "ready writer" who "knows how to string his ideas in proper order." She disclaimed having spoken about "Yankee air" or seeking to convert Missourians. Yet, she

30. For the rhetorical use of amalgamation against the abolition movement, see Bruce Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women: Gender in the Antebellum City* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002), 150-54.

31. Resolutions of the Big Springs Convention printed in Elliot, "Big Springs Convention," 375-76.

32. Nichols to Samuel Woodward, October 6, 1855, in Gambone, "Forgotten Feminist," 230; *Herald of Freedom*, October 27, 1855.

FREE STATE CONVENTION!

All persons who are favorable to a union of effort, and a permanent organization of all the Free State elements of Kansas Territory, and who wish to secure upon the broadest platform the co-operation of all who agree upon this point, are requested to meet at their several places of holding elections, in their respective districts on the 25th of August, instant, at one o'clock, P. M., and appoint five delegates to each representative to which they were entitled in the Legislative Assembly, who shall meet in general Convention at

Big Springs, Wednesday, Sept. 5th '55,

at 10 o'clock A. M., for the purpose of adopting a Platform upon which all may act harmoniously who prefer Freedom to Slavery.

The nomination of a Delegate to Congress, will also come up before the General Convention.

Let no sectional or party issues distract or prevent the perfect co-operation of Free State men. Union and harmony are absolutely necessary to success. The pro-slavery party are fully and effectually organized. No jars nor minor issues divide them. And to contend against them successfully, we also must be united.— Without prudence and harmony of action we are certain to fail. Let every man then do his duty and we are certain of victory.

All Free State men, without distinction, are earnestly requested to take immediate and effective steps to insure a full and correct representation for every District in the Territory. "United we stand; divided we fall."

By order of the Executive Committee of the Free State Party of the Territory of Kansas, as per resolution of the Mass Convention in session at Lawrence, Aug 15th and 16th, 1855.

J. K. GOODIN, Sec'y.

C. ROBINSON, Chairman.

Herald of Freedom, Print.

As Reuben Rustic, Nichols's son Relie Carpenter reported on a political meeting held in District 4 to elect delegates to the convention advertised above. The Free State Convention at Big Springs, scheduled for September 5, was organized "for the purpose of adopting a Platform upon which all may act harmoniously who prefer Freedom to Slavery." This political resistance movement organized to oppose and provide an alternative to the proslavery legislature, which the free-state partisans called "bogus."

argued, there were settlers in her neighborhood who were proslavery, "'till they got their eyes annineted by Missouri eye-salve to see the 'tyrannies and oppression' of slavery attempted to be fastened on the suvrin' squatters of Kansas."³³

Rather than addressing woman's rights, Van Winkle felt compelled to counter Back Woodsman's racism in an effort to promote black freedom. In parallel with Rueben Rustic's political arguments, she reminded Back Woodsman that Yankees gleaned their talk of human rights from the Bible, showing the connection between her religious faith and politics. "Now, nabor 'backwoodsman,'" she recalled, it was George Whitefield, "the great and good Methodist," who replied, "when a drunken fellow reeled up to him and claimed to be one of his converts, 'Well . . . you may be one of *my* converts,

certainly you ain't one of the Lord Jesus Christ's."³⁴ Appealing to God's law, Van Winkle insisted, "there are very few Yankees who haven't learned from their Bibles that the good Father recognises the 'Africans' as his children and teaches the common brotherhood of all races of men." In comparison to Back Woodsman, who professed little "humanity," she proclaimed to be a true Christian:

I count nobody as humane that ain't a christian in practice. Christ was the divine embodiment of humanity, and he taught us, poor, dependent critters, to meet the wants

33. This and the following quotations from "Reply to Backwoodsman," *Herald of Freedom*, October 6, 1855.

34. Nichols refers to the eighteenth-century evangelist George Whitefield of England, who traveled throughout the colonies converting followers through emotional religiosity, helping to precipitate the Great Awakening. She may not have known that he owned slaves and supported the institution. Given her strong stance on temperance, in this instance she may be suggesting that, despite apparent conversion, it was impossible for a drunkard to adhere to God's law.

of others with fraternal sympathy and material aid. He gave to us—black skins and white skins, straight hair and curly hair—that blessed Republican Platform, “Do unto others” etc. And mind neighbor, this Bible platform han’t but one plank, and that is broad enuf to hold all human interests; there ain’t a shake in it either, and when Missourians and Yankees in Kansas, come to all stand on that platform, there won’t be no need of a “black plank” from the forge of the old fellow that “sows tares,” to secure the freedom of Kansas from African Slavery, or the slavery of caste.³⁵

No, no, Aunt Debby’s a one idee woman on this African question, she don’t want but one plank in her social or political platform, and that one the broad platform of universal brotherhood, whose steersman abjured all distinction but moral ones, and rebuked respectors of persons; who identified himself with the most unfortunate and miserable, saying “in as much as ye did it (the kind or unkind act) unto one of the least of these, ye did it unto me.”

Van Winkle’s sermon expressed her Christian sympathy for the oppressed. Using the spiritual authority and benevolence commonly attributed to white middle-class women, she hoped to silence Back Woodsman with the irrefutable morality of Scripture. Her reference to the famous eighteenth-century evangelist George Whitefield and the biblical parable of the tares sown in God’s wheat field implied that her opponent and others favoring a “black plank” exhibited a Christian falsity of the worst kind, hidden from true believers in the golden rule of justice for all. Even though she believed salvation was offered to all of humankind, she cautioned Back Woodsman about his prospects in the afterlife:

I take it for granted, nabor, that you recognize the African as included among the subjects of gospel salvation, and travelers to the same eternal home. If so—for I suppose you intend to go to Heaven—ain’t it wise to make up your mind to recognize them

35. Nichols refers to the biblical parable of the tares (Matthew 13:24–30), which warns against Christian falsity. Satan, the sower of the tares (weeds), threatens to destroy the wheat (true Christians).

as brothers here. It won’t look well there or be quite heavenly, to pout and talk about skins and hair, as title deeds to a heavenly relationship—will it, nabor? It is well to remember that the grave and Heaven are waiting for us all.

With her husband’s body recently laid to rest, Nichols may have been preoccupied with thoughts of heaven, but the moral principle she expressed through her religiosity was also an effective way for a woman to engage in politics. Despite her denial that Yankees sought to convert their fellow free-state Missourians, she preached a higher law of God’s creation to Back Woodsman, reminding him of the Christian roots of American republicanism.

Raised as a Baptist, Nichols was animated by her faith in a benevolent God and her duty to seek personal and societal salvation by adhering to a divine law. Like many evangelical reformers, she believed in her ability to effect change through moral suasion and sought to extend that influence by injecting Christian morality into politics. Opposed to human bondage as a restriction on personal liberty, she was forthright in expressing racial egalitarianism, though it contradicted popular beliefs about blacks in northern as well as southern households. With little interracial experience, Nichols gleaned her rhetoric from radical abolitionist women and men, who were committed to dispelling American racism.³⁶ Two years later, she would begin putting her beliefs into action by welcoming black children into her home in Quindaro, where she and her daughter opened an integrated school, and by helping to protect black fugitives from slave catchers.³⁷ Van Winkle expressed this integrationist goal in her closing words to Back Woodsman: “I remain yours truly for black and white, Missourians and Yankees—God bless us all, with a knowledge of that truth which makes the free man and free woman.”

This singular reference to “woman” was indicative of the degree to which Nichols’s political agenda had been reordered in light of territorial politics. Just as she was dragged into the debate over race, so too the

36. For the religious roots of antebellum social reform, see Robert H. Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 5–8, 184–90; Douglas M. Strong, *Perfectionist Politics: Abolitionism and the Religious Tensions of American Democracy* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 12–43, 135–36; see also, Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women*, 83–85, 180–3.

37. Nichols to Susan Wattles, May 2, 1859, in Augustus Wattles Collection 533, Library and Archives Division, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka. Nichols’s only daughter and eldest child, Birsha C. Carpenter, twenty-six, accompanied her mother on her return to Kansas in March 1857.

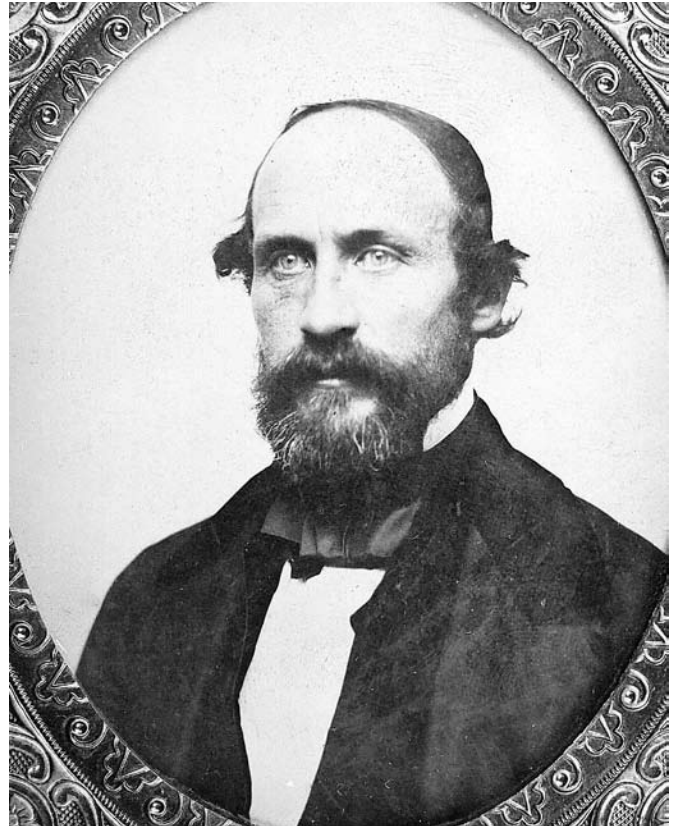
preoccupation with racial difference—based as much on political calculations as on the deep-seated emotions whites harbored about black freedom and citizenship—threatened to obstruct free-state unity. Two weeks after her letter appeared in the *Herald*, free-state men wrote their own constitution in Topeka. Charles Robinson, whom Nichols knew from her association with NEEAC, welcomed her woman’s rights agenda and urged her to come and speak to the delegates, but she was still in mourning and her family had caught the malarial fever common in the region. Both Howard and Relie suffered from the disease, and a few weeks later she succumbed as well, relying on Relie to nurse her back to health. Despite the efforts of Robinson and other antislavery men, some of whom were even supportive of black suffrage, the proposed constitution confirmed Nichols’s fears that free-state men would fail to uphold her Bible platform; in conjunction with the ratification vote, they proposed a popular referendum that would exclude blacks from the territory.³⁸

While free-state men wrangled over the treatment of blacks, Back Woodsman determined to have the last word with the preachy Aunt Deborah Van Winkle. Not surprisingly, her identity was no secret to him: “Though I’m a man without education, and have never written enny articles for a newspaper,” he remarked, “to have to contend against one who has sot in the editur’s chair—the odds is against me considerably.” That said, he exposed her bias against Missourians and ridiculed her Yankee evangelism as an oddity in the territory:

Now, Aunt Debby, when you see a Mis-sourian that’s not gabbin’ and spoutin’ ’round about this, that and the other, you must not set him down as an idiot, for I was taught to “think twice and speak once” ’fore I said any thing.

Now, Aunt Debby, where is the Missourian in your broad neighborhood that would have voted for a slave State, that would now vote for a free State? Now if you can find him, let’s know where he is. As innocent as you pretend to be, your intention was to set forth the idear to the public that you was doing a great work in your neighborhood, and so you are, but

38. Nichols to Samuel Woodward, October 6, 1855, in Gambone, “Forgotten Feminist,” 230; Nichols, “Reminiscences,” 186; on the Topeka Convention, see Etcheson, *Bleeding Kansas*, 74–76.



Charles Robinson, born in Massachusetts in 1818, led the New England Emigrant Aid Company’s first party to Kansas Territory in July 1854. Robinson, pictured here in 1861, established the company’s headquarters in Lawrence, from which he and others helped to lead the free-state movement. Robinson was amongst the delegates who gathered at Topeka on October 23, 1855, in opposition to the proslavery territorial government and with the purpose of drafting a constitution under which the territory might be admitted into the Union. Robinson supported Nichols’s woman’s rights agenda and urged her to come and speak to the delegates at the convention.

the effect is entirely different from that which you represent.

You also state that you didn’t say any thing about “Yankee air”; so say I; but take the preceding paragraphs and what do you say? Your remarks about the reply of Whitfield to the fellow who reeled up to him and claimed to be his convert, is no figure at all; you haven’t had any reel up to you and make such claims since you came here. Why, the District Convention only furnished one of your faith, and he came here a full member, and so you stand two against twenty-five or thirty of the old fellow’s forge men that sows tares.

In this way, Back Woodsman coupled Van Winkle with the lone abolitionist, both of whom were out of step with the majority at the local political caucus. "This is a fearful odds, Aunt Debby," he noted, "and you should study with diligence your Yankee Bible, and pray fervently if you wish to succeed."

Not content with relegating her to a tiny minority, Back Woodsman undermined Van Winkle's credibility by questioning her interpretation of scripture:

Are you sure that your Yankee Bible is a correct translation of the old Greek and Hebrew Bible, or is it one similar to those that the Latter Day Saints use?³⁹—if, so, you had better procure a Western testament, they are what we western people, and also a majority of the eastern people use; they don't say anything about black brothers or sisters; and I believe when we all get to Heaven we'll all be white, for that great man Christ, that you speak of, I think is a white man, and you know that he says we shall all be like Him. So, now, Aunt Debby, it 'aint worth while for us to be quarrelin' about the niggers, nor claimin' kin with 'em; let's make Kansas a free white State, and God the Giver of all Good will take care of de poor nigger.⁴⁰

Whereas Nichols had sought to inject woman's rights into the political debate in Kansas, now she was embroiled in a challenge to her integrity as a Christian. Her righteousness evidently riled Back Woodsman even more than her previous claims to a superior Revolutionary heritage. He insulted her by association, implying her ideas were connected with those of the Mormons, notorious for their religious heterodoxy and plural marriage. Finally, he reaffirmed his support for a "free white state," proving that she and other Yankees had little persuasive power.

Indeed, neither Nichols nor other abolitionists would hold sway in 1855. In late November a land dispute in Lawrence resulted in the murder of Charles Dow, a

free-state man, which immediately jettisoned free-state defenders and proslavery militiamen into opposing armed camps. Relie Carpenter rushed to defend Lawrence against a threatened invasion by Missourians, armed with his ardor and a note from Nichols to the Committee of Safety dedicating him to the cause. He was ready to "shed his blood and die in defence [*sic*] of it," she claimed, suggesting that she would come herself if she could. Though the so-called "Wakarusa War" was averted, it was only a matter of time before hostilities erupted again. Meanwhile, ratification of the Topeka Constitution, including the exclusion of blacks, united free-state men around the creation of a white state, a platform that remained in limbo in the wake of escalating violence and lack of federal support until it was largely abandoned two years later.⁴¹

But what of woman's rights? Would any free-state men act in accord with Nichols's plea, even though she had been unable to wield much influence in the territory? Years later she claimed that Charles Robinson and six other delegates "voted for the exclusion of the word 'male' from qualification for elector" at the Topeka Constitutional Convention; whereas Robinson remembered that seven members voted for black suffrage, putting themselves "completely outside of all healthy political organization," and only some of those same men "voted to strike out the word 'male' as well as 'white' from the constitution." Support for woman's suffrage made "their political damnation sure," according to Robinson, but a majority did direct the legislature to provide separate property and equal custody rights for married women. Not a guarantee of specific rights, the clause was at least evidence that some sympathy existed for wives' economic and familial rights, if not woman's suffrage, among free-state men. This was enough to reassure Nichols that perhaps the "air of Kansas" could eventually resuscitate women as well as blacks.⁴² In the meantime, she would have to wait until free-state men had secured political power for themselves before they were willing to entertain the notion of equal citizenship for women.

39. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints relied upon the *Book of Mormon*, supposedly written by prophets living in ancient America and published in 1830, as well as the Bible.

40. "Reply to Aunt Deborah Van Winkle," *Herald of Freedom*, November 10, 1855. Dated October 16, the letter did not appear until after the Topeka Convention adjourned, perhaps because Brown was opposed to black exclusion.

41. *Vermont Phoenix*, February 16, 1856. For the free-state response to the murder of Charles Dow, see *Herald of Freedom*, November 24 and December 1, 1855; on the Wakarusa War and its aftermath, see Etcheson, *Bleeding Borders*, 79–88. Over 75 percent of voters supported black exclusion; in District 4 there were only three (4.2 percent) votes against it. See SenGupta, *For God and Mammon*, 99–100.

42. Nichols, "Reminiscences," 186; Charles Robinson, *The Kansas Conflict* (New York: Harper, 1892), 176–77. For the Topeka Constitution, see Daniel W. Wilder, *The Annals of Kansas* (Topeka: Kansas Publishing, 1875), 73–83.

At the close of 1855, Nichols returned to Brattleboro, ostensibly to settle her husband's estate, but also to recoup her equanimity after months of upheaval and sickness. Her experiences in Kansas had clearly shifted her political perspective. Not only was she publicly committed to abolition, but she had also witnessed the dangers slavery posed to the Republic, leading her to abandon her longstanding pacifism. Without weakening her convictions about pursuing woman's rights, Nichols subsequently devoted herself to the free-state cause in the eastern press. That did not prevent her from politely reminding the "warm-hearted, honest yeomanry" of Kansas to uphold the standards of "noble manhood," restore black rights, and release the "'inalienable' rights of woman" as they attempted to write a set of laws.⁴³ After proslavery men effectively blockaded the Missouri River, Nichols remained in the East for over a year, writing and lecturing to support free Kansas and anxiously awaiting news from her sons. Shortly after proslavery forces perpetrated the infamous sacking of Lawrence, destroying the *Herald of Freedom* and thereby any influence Nichols may have had with free-state men, Relie was wounded at the Battle of Black Jack in

June 1856. By that time Nichols was convinced that "the white freeman and his wife and little ones are bound in the same bundle with the slave." To condone slavery anywhere was to plead "guilty to the *sin* and penalty of oppression," she concluded.⁴⁴ Not so, according to her nemesis Back Woodsman, yet in the fall of 1855 they had temporarily circled each other under the political umbrella of free-state unity.

Four years later, when hostilities finally subsided, Nichols appeared at the Wyandotte Constitutional Convention eager to use the political capital she had garnered as one of the mothers of a free Kansas. The Republican majority honored her service to the free-state cause by giving her a respectful hearing that would have been unlikely in 1855; the new constitution guaranteed wives' property and equal custody rights and granted women an equal role in school affairs. Despite this accomplishment, racial prejudice, the status of blacks, and political calculations surrounding statehood curtailed Nichols's promotion of woman's suffrage and would continue to impede progress on the issue through the Civil War and Reconstruction era.⁴⁵ [KH]

43. Nichols to *Herald of Freedom*, March 8, April 26, and May 17, 1856, in Gambone, "Forgotten Feminist," 237–50; quotations on 240, 247.

44. Nichols to Emma [Brown], May 24, 1856; to Samuel Woodward, July 8, 1856, both in Gambone, "Forgotten Feminist," 253–54.

45. Blackwell, "Meddling in Politics," 55–61. Woman's suffrage became entangled with black suffrage in Kansas again in 1867, when voters defeated both issues in a popular referendum. See Ellen Carol DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in America, 1848–1869* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978), 79–104; and Blackwell and Oertel, *Frontier Feminist*, 188–96, 222–35.