



NEWS

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Kansas Troubles: This Week in Territorial History April 25 – May 1, 1854 (2004)

During the last week of April 1854, the Legislature of Massachusetts approved and Governor Emory Washburn signed the charter for the Massachusetts Emigrant Aid Company, permitting the company to invest in Kansas emigration by issuing stock worth five million dollars, sold in \$100 shares. Eli Thayer and his committee projected that 20,000 settlers would travel to the new territory in 100 parties of 200 people each, equipped with tools and machinery at the Aid Company's expense. The funds raised would also sponsor a newspaper and build hotels, lumber and gristmills. Once Kansas became a free state and an economically viable place to farm and settle, the Company would sell its land and businesses at a profit to be shared as dividends by investors.

The plan had flaws. Shares were expensive. Litigation-minded naysayers worried about liability. Reformers felt profit and idealism should not be mixed. Indeed, over the next weeks such concerns caused Thayer's Massachusetts Emigrant Aid Company to collapse. But his idea of assisted Kansas emigration for a political cause took hold, not only in the hearts of free-state philanthropists, but also in the imaginations of pro-slavery partisans. As newspapers around the nation published news of the Massachusetts plan, Southerners, and especially Missourians, terrified each other by conjuring up a vast conspiracy sponsored by New England's most powerful capitalists. Pro-slavery partisans incited their neighbors with images of hordes of "undesirables", primarily criminals and recent immigrants, bribed to settle in the Kansas Territory just long enough to vote for a free-state legislature.

The same week, Governor Clifford signed another bill with far reaching social consequences if only short term practical effect, recommending integrated schools in the city of Boston. Massachusetts, at the time, was the only state requiring children to attend school, yet children of African-American descent were confined to their own institutions. For almost fifteen years, activists led by William Cooper Nell had been petitioning the government to permit blacks to attend the city's common schools. The bill resulted in the opening of Boston's schools "to all the children and youth within its limits, irrespective of complexional differences," for the fall, 1855, term, an enormous victory for the city's black community, about 3% of the population. Boston's integrated schools were not a

permanent institution (the fight continues into our lifetimes) but the April, 1854, victory was a milestone in equal rights. (400 words)

Samuel A. Johnson, "The Emigrant Aid Company in Kansas," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* Volume 1, #5, November, 1932. Pp. 429-441.

"The Genesis of the New England Emigrant Aid Company," *The New England Quarterly*, Volume 3 #1, January, 1930. Pp. 95-155.

John T. Hilton, William C. Nell, et.al., *Triumph of Equal School Rights in Boston* (Boston: R. J. Walker, 1856) Pg. 1.