



NEWS

6425 SW Sixth Avenue

Topeka KS 6615-1099

785-272-8681

www.kshs.org/sesquicentennial/

A weekly series from the Kansas Territorial Sesquicentennial Commission

Available online at www.kshs.org/sesquicentennial/series.htm

By Barbara Brackman

Kansas Troubles: This Week in Territorial History August 8-14, 1854

Across the Missouri River from St. Joseph, speculators platted the town of Wathena. "It is eligibly situated for a town ...the California and Oregon road from St. Joseph passes through the place. ...This will be one of THE towns in Kansas Territory," said an article in the *St. Joseph Gazette*. The editor also enthused about Leavenworth: "On a beautiful eminence, has a rock shore, the ascent from the river being very gradual back for about half a mile...Leavenworth it is thought by many will be the great city of Kansas."

On the 12th, west of the proposed town of Wakarusa on the Kaw, settlers met at the Hoosier Millers' claim to form a vigilante court. In a territory without federal land oversight, self-regulatory judicial systems filled the vacuum. The *National Intelligencer* reported on this convention of "actual settlers" that took place "on Back Bone Ridge in the valley of the river Kansas," noting that although the discourse was "very stormy and full of excitement and violent talk," the resulting association was satisfactory to all concerned. The term "actual settlers" was apparently a "newly adopted Territorial cognomen for the abolition party."

They elected John A. Wakefield as chief justice. Wakefield, born in South Carolina, had lived in various parts of the upper Midwest. On his way to California with his family that summer, he'd halted at a spot on the California Road. Wakefield's qualifications for chief justice were a law degree, maturity (at 60, he was older than most of the settlers) and a black stovepipe hat. Other officials elected were William Lyon as treasurer and William Lykins as marshal, deputized to carry out Wakefield's decisions.

The September 12th meeting drew people from the pro-slavery, anti-slavery and neutral camps. New Englanders who'd arrived during the past few weeks met old settlers like Wakefield and Lyon, who'd been improving their claims for three or four months. Missourians and other Southerners, western farmers from Indiana, and anti-slavery pilgrims from Massachusetts met to negotiate their perceived rights to the land, an emotional issue made more emotional by a contrast in cultural styles. The New Englanders were surprised to see the amount of liquor consumed at a political event and astonished by the speechmaking, described by one of them as "bombast, rant, and an almighty patriotic devotion to the great

principles of the star-spangled banner and revolutionary blood. It beat everything I ever listened to in my life.” None of the New Englanders was elected to an office.

In Washington, the administration appointed George W. Clarke of Van Buren, Arkansas, to replace Richard C. S. Brown, who’d died of cholera in June on his way to take over as agent to the Potawatomi. Clarke, like most other territorial appointees, was a loyal Democrat whose efforts had boosted Pierce into office in 1852. A newspaper editor and former state representative, he probably owned slaves in Arkansas, and probably brought at least two enslaved women (Ann Clarke and Judy Clarke) when he moved his family to Kansas.

Under the spoils system upon which the government was based, his position was quite a political plum. An Indian Agency offered power and profit to those who placed their own welfare above that of their charges. Agents had insider knowledge useful for speculation in former tribal lands; they commissioned traders who might offer bribes and kickbacks for the rights to sell goods to the tribe, and the agent dispersed the regular federal annuity payments. Clarke quickly took advantage of at least the last opportunity, skimming fifty cents off the top of each payment to members of the Potawatomi tribe. (600 words)

James A. Clifton, *Prairie People* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, pg. 373.

Letter from John Mailey, August 12, 1854, quoted in Louise Barry, “The Emigrant Aid Company Parties of 1854,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, Volume XII, Number 2, May, 1943. Pg. 123.

Martha J. Parker and Betty A. Laird, *Soil of Our Souls: Histories of the Clinton Lake Area Communities* (Lawrence, Kansas: Coronado Press, 1976) Pg. 75.

National Intelligencer, September, 1854

St Joseph Gazette, August 9, 1854.