



NEWS

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By Barbara Brackman

Kansas Troubles: This Week in Territorial History Week of January 4 - 10, 1854 (2004)

In Washington City, Senator Stephen A. Douglas was chairman of the Committee on the Territories, a powerful position in a country with an abundance of “unorganized” land beckoning to railroad builders, farmers, land speculators, and politicians. On January 4, 1854, his committee suggested a bill to organize a new territory west of the states of Missouri and Iowa, land ranging from the Canadian border down to what is now the northern border of Oklahoma. Initially called Nebraska, the vast space was named for the river we today call the Platte, the river Native Americans called “Ni-bthaska.”

Douglas represented the free state of Illinois, but was a slaveholder. His late wife Martha had inherited a Mississippi plantation worked by more than 100 African Americans in slavery. In the same way he had made a personal compromise between keeping slaves and representing those opposed to the “peculiar institution,” Douglas believed he’d found a way to compromise between North and South. The men who settled the new territory would vote on whether slavery would be permitted, thus removing the decision and any political backlash from Washington.

Douglas hoped his bold gesture would propel him into the White House in the election of 1856. Hindsight permits us to see that Douglas’s bill to organize the Nebraska Territory with a popular vote on slaveholding was disastrous for both his country and his own political life. Within the year, he was so vilified throughout the Northern states that he joked he could ride from Boston to Chicago on a path brightly lit by the fires of his own burning effigies.

While many in the northeastern states worried that opening a new territory might open a Pandora’s box of troubles, many in the slave-holding state of Missouri wanted to settle the land west of the Missouri River. The city of St. Joseph invited hopeful emigrants to a “Nebraska Convention,” opening January 9. The result of the two-day meeting would be a petition demanding that the government “take measures promptly for throwing open the territory to settlement and extinguishing the Indian titles.” Organizers also invited politicians with an interest in pleasing the voters of the western states. Senator Douglas and Iowa’s Senator A. C. Dodge turned down the requests, but Senator Dodge assured the Missourians



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that organizing a Nebraska Territory had long been a priority. "For ten years I have been the ardent friend of this measure...The friends of progress and expansion will triumph and the best interests of the public [will be served] by opening to settlement the fat lands West of Missouri and Iowa." [425 words]

Letter from A.C. Dodge to *St. Joseph Gazette*, December 15, 1853, published March 22, 1854