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Kansas Troubles: This Week in Territorial History

July 18-24, 1854

In Buffalo on July 19th, Eli Thayer bade farewell to his party of New Englanders headed for Kansas as they boarded a steamboat to cross Lake Erie to Detroit. Two New Yorkers, newspaperman Daniel Anthony and physician John Doy, joined them in Buffalo, bringing the total to 29. In Detroit, they caught a train bound for Chicago, then transferred to a St. Louis line. They arrived in St. Louis an hour late for their scheduled Missouri River steamboat and laid over for the weekend. "Saw nothing of cholera," Anthony wrote his editor at the Rochester paper.

In St. Louis, the men met with Charles Robinson, returning from the Territory, where he and another employee of the aid organization, Charles Branscomb, had scouted possible town sites and revisited a spot Robinson recalled from his 1849 California trip, the southeast edge of Back Bone Ridge overlooking the twin valleys of the Wakarusa and the Kaw. They also spent time over the border, assessing the mood in western Missouri.

Robinson must have told them about meetings in Weston, Independence and Westport, where Missourians vowed to bar anti-slavery settlers from the Territory. Among the organizers of those meetings was Dr. John Stringfellow, who "continually [reiterated], with horrid oaths, that'If he had the power he would hang every abolitionist in the country, and every man north of Mason and Dixon's line was an abolitionist,'" recalled Robinson's wife Sara. Stringfellow and his older brother Benjamin, a lawyer in Weston, had come to western Missouri from Virginia a decade earlier. Because there were two Stringfellows, people confused them. Many believed they were the same person, a man with a memorable name who seemed to be in two places at once, a paragon of proslavery politics combining Benjamin's legal know-how and John's speaking style.

On the 20th, the Stringfellows, Senator David Atchison and others announced the formation of the Platte County Self Defensive Organization with John as secretary. This public organization reflected the goals of several rumored secret organizations with names like the Sons of the South and the Blue Lodge. The secret arm of Platte County's public Self Defensive Organization was the Kansas

League, described in the history of the county as “a subsidiary institution to carry into effect the decrees of the.... Association. It was comprised, chiefly, of the same persons, bound to secrecy by an oath and holding meetings in the dark, wherever and whenever called out. Through the agency of this institution newspapers were surpassed and Northern Methodists silenced.”

Like the Stringfellows, the emigrant aid organization seemed to be in two or three places at once. Begun in March by Eli Thayer, incorporated in April as the Massachusetts Emigrant Aid Company, reorganized in May, re-incorporated in June as the New England Emigrant Aid Company with local offshoots known as Kansas Leagues, and chartered in July by the Connecticut and the New York Legislatures, the organization had managed by the 20th to assist a mere 29 men to travel west. The publicity, however, inspired a disproportionate ratio of anxiety in the hearts of slave-holding Missourians, who felt threatened by an onrushing horde of easterners. (516)

Daniel R. Anthony, letter, July 24, 1854, quoted in Louise Barry, “The Emigrant Aid Company Parties of 1854,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, Volume XII, Number 2, May, 1943. Pp. 119-120.

William Paxton, “Annals of Platte County,” *History of Platte County, Missouri* (1885) Pg. 184.

Sara T.D. Robinson, *Kansas; Its Interior and Exterior Life* (Boston: 1856) Pg. 10.