



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 July 25-31, 1854

In Washington City, Congress, trying to catch up with territorial events by approving funds to survey the land, created the position of Surveyor General for Kansas, Nebraska and New Mexico. The Surveyor, with an annual salary of \$3,000, 20% more than Governor Reeder's, would be the Pierce administration's highest paid agent in the area.

On 25th, the party of anti-slavery colonists left St. Louis aboard the steamer *Polar Star*, paying \$12 per passenger, higher than the fare negotiated by the emigration society. Economics dictated low fares when the river was high, and high fares when it was low. During that last week of July, in the midst of the annual summer drought, the Missouri was low.

After a three-day trip, the *Polar Star* arrived in the city of Kansas, where the settlers were met by Charles Branscomb and James Blood. Branscomb argued that they should settle where the Kaw River met the Missouri on the Wyandot reserve, but the consensus was that the Wyandot retained the rights to that prime spot. Blood advocated a townsite about 30 miles west on the Back Bone, where the Shawnee had already ceded their rights.

Because the days were hot, up to 120 degrees by their measurements, the men traveled at night, passing through "pugnacious and fire-eating Westport," on the 29th. There they met no resistance, despite an announcement in the *Platte Argus* of a \$200 reward for the capture of Eli Thayer, who'd remained in New England. On the last day of the month, they pitched a small city of 25 tents at the place near Blue Jacket's Crossing generally called Wakarusa.

That week, the town of Atchison, Kansas Territory, was officially organized in Weston, Missouri, by a group of "fire-eaters," the nickname for the most rabid of the pro-slavery Southerners. Dr. John Stringfellow was secretary; his brother's law partner Peter T. Abell, President, and James N. Burnes, another Weston lawyer, Treasurer. They located the town-to-be on the "Great Western Bend of the Missouri River," near Million's Ferry over the Missouri, a good site for a "jumping off place" into the west. The organizers might have christened the new

town Oldham, but John Stringfellow insisted it be named for Missouri Senator David Atchison.

Atchison was facing a challenge to his Missouri Senate seat from Thomas Hart Benton. Atchison and Benton symbolized both sides of Missouri politics, Geographically, Atchison represented the west, Benton the east. Ideologically, Atchison represented a radical Southern position, Benton a more compromising stand. Senators, at the time, were not chosen by popular election, but by the states' legislators. Campaigns were directed at the voters (men who were free, white and 21) but also at the legislators, whose votes could be secured by promises of favors, power, pork and cold, hard cash.

Atchison was glad to take credit for Benton's 1850 Senatorial defeat, after which Benton won the popularly elected office, a seat in the House. Representative Benton intended to obtain revenge by trouncing Atchison during the Senatorial election in spring, 1855. Atchison recognized a good campaign issue when he saw it. He began painting Benton with an abolitionist brush, accusing him in July 1854, of stirring "up a 'pestiferous agitation' by which his ambitious designs might be promoted, [appealing] to the freesoil and abolition fanatics...." (541)

Letter from "Charlestown," August 6, 1854, quoted in Louise Barry, "The Emigrant Aid Company Parties of 1854," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, Volume XII, Number 2, May 1943. Pg. 121.

Speech by Daniel Atchison, printed in the *St Joseph Gazette*, July 5, 1854, Pp 1-2.