



NEWS

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Kansas Troubles: This Week in Territorial History

June 13-19, 1854

Mid-June, the *Excel* steamed up the Kaw for its seventh trip of the season. Aboard was George S. Park, editor of the *Parkville Industrial Luminary*. Park invested heavily in the Missouri River town of Parkville, where he'd purchased the land, surveyed the lots and boosted the city as a gateway to the new territory. Platte County was Missouri's second largest county and the heart of Senator David Atchison's proslavery support, but Park's politics lay with the free-soilers. He further allied himself with New England when the Massachusetts Emigrant Aid Society published his description of the Kansas River journey later in the year.

Park noted which areas were still held by tribes. "The balance of the vast regions, drained by the Kansas river and its tributaries are now open for settlement, and will soon arrest the attention of the enterprising settlers." Looking north into the Delaware reserve he saw "high rich bottoms extending for many miles...vast thickets of grape-vines, pea-vines, raspberries, and paw-paws. The timber was principally oak, walnut, ash, hickory, mulberry, hackberry, linden, cottonwood and coffee-bean." Timber grew increasing scarce as the boat chugged west, however. Beyond what is now Lawrence "the prairie undulates gradually back from the river as far as the eye can reach."

The rolling landscape that Park described, the eastern edge of the American prairie, was a novelty, a vista tourists felt compelled to see. Twelve years earlier, novelist Charles Dickens was unimpressed by a minor prairie near the Ohio River. "Now a prairie is undoubtedly worth seeing... [but the] prairie fell, by far, short of my preconceived ideas...the excessive flatness of the scene makes it dreary, but tame." Another European, mapmaker Charles Preuss, kept a diary on his trip through what would be called eastern Kansas with John C. Frémont: "Eternal prairie and grass, with occasional groups of trees. Frémont prefers this to every other landscape. To me it is as if some one would prefer a book with blank pages to a good story."

The *Excel* stopped beyond what is now Topeka at an "Indian wood yard. Fifteen cords of wood were taken on board, for which was paid the sum of \$37.50. This is a new employment, as well as a profitable one for the red men; and the owners

promised to have fifteen or twenty cords more ready by the time the steamer returned.” Steamboats ran on wood, far more than they could carry aboard, so entrepreneurs cleared timber from riverbanks. Such employment could only be short lived on the prairie. Did anyone wonder how long the fuel would last when the Kaw filled with steamboats?

The river never became the commercial waterway boosters hoped. The June excursion was the *Excel's* last trip, but fuel wasn't the major problem. The river was too shallow except during the short rainy seasons spring and fall. By the end of the decade, newcomer John J. Ingalls explained the Kansas River to his family in the east. “It looks prettily on the map as you will see by referring to the atlas hanging in the front hall at home, but unfortunately that stream is only navigable by catfish, [and] by them only at certain seasons of the year.” (532)

Organization, Object and Plan of Operations of the Emigrant Aid Company (Boston: 1854) Pp. 9-19.

Charles Dickens, *American Notes for General Circulation* (Reprint, Vermont: Everyman, 1997) Diary entry, April 16, 1842, Pg. 322-323.

Charles Preuss, *Exploring with Fremont* (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1958) Diary entry, June 12, 1842, Pg 5.

John Ingalls, “The Sumner Years,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* Letter, March 15, 1859. Pg. 432.