



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 May 9 - 15, 1854 (2004)

On May 10, 1854, the world was scheduled to come to an end. Millerites, followers of an apocalyptic New York prophet named William Miller, believed that his precise calculations based on literal Biblical interpretation predicted the second coming of Christ. Miller first foretold that the last day would be October 22, 1844, inspiring the faithful to quit their jobs, sell their land and wait. Sunrise on the morning of October 23rd astonished over 100,000 Millerites, an event that came to be known as "The Great Disappointment." Undaunted, Miller rescheduled the apocalypse several times, losing more adherents with each disappointing sunrise. After daylight on May 11, 1854, die-hard Millerites recalculated an end date of May 19, 1855.

But for the Shawnee tribe a part of their world did come to an end on May 10th. Tribal leaders brought to Washington by the Reverend Thomas Johnson signed over a million and a half acres to the U.S. government. The treaty excepted 200,000 acres for those Shawnee who wished to remain in northeastern Kansas. People who consented to become farmers would accept deeds to 200 acre parcels, a plan that never was carried out.

Throughout the spring of 1854, talk of apocalypse was in the air. Rhetoricians prophesied the end of liberty at each step in the Kansas Nebraska Bill's journey through the legislative process. By May 15th, the Bill was lodged in Congressional committee in one more attempt to kill it. Stephen Douglas, a skillful dealmaker as all successful Senators must be, worked to extricate his bill by persuading three representatives viewed as "anti-Nebraska" into changing position. One Northerner, Nathaniel P. Banks of Massachusetts, and two Westerners, John Wentworth of Chicago and James Henry Lane of Indiana, added to the two-thirds majority Douglas needed to remove the latest roadblock. Lane's vote would surprise his hometown. On the morning of the 15th, the Lawrenceburgh *Independent Press* had noted, "J. H. Lane is opposed to the Douglas Nebraska Bill. We are glad to hear this. It is indeed what we had reason to expect from the position he took when canvassing the district."

Historians do not know what Douglas promised, but Banks was soon elected Speaker of the House. Gossips long alleged that James Lane had been promised the Senate seat he desired.

Voting with Douglas, however, did few Northern politicians any good in the short run. Weeks earlier Washington insider Benjamin French had written in his diary: “I prophecy---and I hope I am a false prophet---but I do prophecy that if [Kansas Nebraska] is pressed through, that not a single northern man, from President Pierce down to the most insignificant politician who goes for it, will be sustained by the people of the free states!” (500 words)

Benjamin Brown French, *Witness to the Young Republic* (Hanover, N.H. University Press of New England, 1989) Dairy entry, January 29, 1854. Pp. 244-45.

Lawrenceburgh (Indiana) *Independent Press*, May 15, 1854.