



# NEWS

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**By Barbara Brackman**

## **Kansas Troubles: This Week in Territorial History**

**May 23 – 29, 1854 (2004)**

The sun disappeared from the skies on May 26th, adding to the apocalyptic anxiety. An almost total eclipse was visible throughout the U.S. from the Missouri River to the Atlantic. Anti-slavery advocates seized upon the event as an appropriate metaphor in the week the Senate again approved the Kansas Nebraska Bill. "The sun has set for the last time upon liberties..Tomorrow's sun will rise in dim eclipse over them," mourned William Seward of New York to his fellow Senators.

In Boston, the sun set on liberty for an escaped slave named Anthony Burns, when his ex-master persuaded local police to enforce the law of the land and arrest him. Burns had found his way to Boston in March. He wrote to his brother, still in slavery in Richmond, Virginia, informing him of his whereabouts. After intercepting the letter, the slaveholder traveled to Massachusetts to reclaim his property.

Until 1850, Burns's owner would have received no assistance from Northerners. An escapee stepping over the boundary between free state and slave was legally free, but Congress had legislated Northern assistance in Southern slave extradition with the Fugitive Slave Act. Burns's arrest was a dramatic example of public enforcement of an unpopular law, shocking Bostonians who saw southern slavery reaching into the city that considered itself the heart of liberty. On the night of May 24th, a mob of 2,000 blacks and whites gathered before the courthouse imprisoning Burns. Led by abolitionist minister Thomas Wentworth Higginson, they battered a hole in the door in a failed attempt to free him. The major casualty was a deputy defending the jail, who died of a stab wound. The mob dispersed and President Pierce called out the Marines to restore order and accompany Burns on his trip south to Richmond.

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Frederick W. Seward, *Seward at Washington as Senator and Secretary of State* (New York: Derby & Miller, 1891) Pg. 464.

The attachment this week is a broadside printed in 1855 featuring a portrait of escapee Anthony Burns with imagined scenes from his early life. The broadside (a single sheet often printed on newsprint paper) is in the collection of the Library of Congress.