



NEWS

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Kansas Troubles: This Week in Territorial History May 30 – June 5, 1854 (2004)

Cannon fire echoed through Washington City on May 30th as supporters of the Kansas Nebraska Act fired 100 volleys to celebrate President Franklin Pierce's signature. The territories were now open for white settlement. Kansas was defined by three of today's boundaries, Missouri on the east, Nebraska on the north and the Cherokee Territory (now Oklahoma) on the south. In 1854, the western borders of both territories extended to the peaks of the Rocky Mountains, the continental divide. Daniel W. Wilder, in his *Annals of Kansas*, noted that Kansas spanned a distance as great as the journey between Boston and Sandusky, Ohio.

Settlers would elect legislative representatives to draft constitutions dictating a free economy or slave. Conventional wisdom in Missouri was that Nebraska, next to the free state of Iowa, would choose a free economy based on small farms. Kansas, bordering the slave state of Missouri, would likely be settled by slaveholders bringing a type of plantation economy built on hemp production, the labor intensive product that had brought prosperity to western Missouri.

Anti-slavery partisans considered Pierce the worst of the "doughfaces," Northern politicians with Southern sympathies. Consistently rated as one of America's poorest Presidents, he governed by delegating decisions to southern cabinet members and Congressional leaders like Secretary of War Jefferson Davis and President of the Senate David Atchison.

But Pierce's problems went beyond administrative style; he lacked emotional strength and just plain luck. By the time he was elected, Franklin and Jane Means Appleton Pierce had lost two of their three sons to disease. Pierce, an alcoholic, continued to binge drink while in the White House. Jane Pierce, a reclusive, pious woman, strongly opposed her husband's political career. Just before his inauguration, the first family was shattered when remaining son Bennie was crushed and killed in a train wreck before their eyes. The First Lady believed the trauma to be divine retribution for Pierce's political aspirations. Her years in the White House were marked by deep mourning.

Pierce's vice president William Rufus King was elected to office in the fall of 1852 while gravely ill. He took the oath of office in Havana, where he hoped the tropical climate would restore his health, but died there six weeks later. The Constitution had no provision for vice-presidential succession at the time. The President of the Senate, David Atchison of Missouri, took over King's legislative duties, but Atchison was never legally Vice-president (or President for a day, as folklore about him recalls.) He was an exceptionally powerful leader during the first years of Pierce's administration, considered one of the strongest advocates for the Southern point of view. Atchison's constituents in western Missouri considered him a hero for his stand on slavery in the territories and the Kansas Nebraska Act.

"Old Davy's" boys held a meeting in Westport on June 3rd, resolving that slave owners planning to emigrate to Kansas would transport their human property and claiming the right to protect it. Bostonians, on June 2nd, held a much larger meeting as fifty thousand people watched a shackled Anthony Burns march through the streets on his way to board a ship returning him to slavery in Richmond, Virginia. (525 words)

Daniel W. Wilder, *Annals of Kansas* (Topeka: Kansas Publishing House, 1875)
Pg. 46.
