



# NEWS

6425 SW Sixth Avenue

Topeka KS 6615-1099

785-272-8681

[www.kshs.org/sesquicentennial/](http://www.kshs.org/sesquicentennial/)

A weekly series from the Kansas Territorial Sesquicentennial Commission

Available online at [www.kshs.org/sesquicentennial/series.htm](http://www.kshs.org/sesquicentennial/series.htm)

By Barbara Brackman

## **Kansas Troubles: This Week in Territorial History November 7 – 13, 1854**

Mid-year election results surprised no one who'd predicted the Democrats' ruin. Franklin Pierce's party, which had carried every free state but two in the 1852 Presidential election, lost every free state but two in November, 1854. In Massachusetts, however, a Know-Nothing sweep shocked the country. Whigs and Democrats each won only a single seat in the state legislature, while the third-party Know Nothings sent 377 candidates to run the state. Know Nothings also elected the Congressional delegation and Governor Henry Gardner.

More lodge than political party, the Know Nothing or American Party was based on a network of secret cells that identified each other by signs and passwords. With over a million members by late 1854, their signs did not remain secret long. Opposition newspaper editors delighted in revealing the rituals. "In New Hampshire when a Know Nothing meets one he suspects of belong to the order, he puts the forefinger of his right hand into his bosom, resting it upon the angle of the vest, his others being outside and his thumb sticking out. The other one, if he knows, rest his right thumb in the angle of the vest and the rest of the hand outside. The first then asks, 'What is the time?' Answer: 'Time for Work.'"

Another password "Have you see Sam?" resulted in another nickname for the party, Sam or Uncle Sam, reflected in the *Chelsea Telegraph's* election comments. "Massachusetts has given herself an all-fired thrashing! This K.N. business is the greatest avalanche we ever knew. Monday night we went to bed in Massachusetts, but Tuesday morning we waked up in *Sam machusetts*. Awful fellow, that Sam!"

The Know Nothings vilified immigration, Roman Catholics and alcohol. Many were also anti-slavery, one reason the party succeeded in a Massachusetts infuriated by the Anthony Burns affair and the Fugitive Slave Act. Surely, many Kansas emigrants cheered Know Nothing victories that November. The idea, however, is pure speculation. Historical evidence of Kansans meeting in American Party enclaves is lacking--we know nothing.

As November weather descended upon the western landscape, disappointment was a theme in travelers' observations. "I will never forget the depression I felt

when I first had a view of [Kansas City] then containing about 500 inhabitants,” recalled James McClure, years later. “All the business was done on the river front, and the buildings were old and dilapidated, the sidewalks unpaved, and the streets muddy and cut up with ruts by the heavy [Santa Fe] freight wagons.” An investor offered McClure a fifteenth of the town, but he thought \$300 an extravagant price and turned him down.

William Hutter continued to report on Kansas for his Pennsylvania newspaper. On the 13<sup>th</sup> he was in Lawrence. “I must confess I was disappointed in the appearance of the place.” The settlers hadn’t erected any frame houses, despite the Aid Company’s steam mill that could be sawing boards from what Hutter viewed as abundant timber along the river. “They reside in dwellings with thatched roofs of prairie hay. Their buildings look like great hay stacks with stove-pipes through their tops.”

Further west, at a camp on Rock Creek, north of today’s Wamego, a group affiliated with the Aid Company wrote to the *Boston Journal*, complaining about their situation. Land near Lawrence, the Aid Company’s principal settlement, had been claimed, but “no more efforts have been put forth to select locations for [later] parties arriving.” The settlers, who’d arrived at October’s end, set out on their own to find a town site and chose badly. Rock Creek, about ten miles north of the Kaw, was on a waterway too small to provide the two basic necessities, water and wood. Within the year the group abandoned the site. Boston publisher Charles Stearns, considered a Garrisonian abolitionist by less radical free-state settlers, was Secretary of the town’s company. Expressing dissatisfaction to some Lawrence residents, Stearns was warned that sending complaints east would earn him, “a coat of tar and feathers.”

Unaware of dissension between early and later immigrant parties, 55 people left Boston for Kansas on November 7<sup>th</sup>, among them Amasa Soule and son William Lloyd Garrison Soule. Five days later they boarded a boat in St. Louis. “We began to think we were near the end of our journey,” but the eight-day trip up the Missouri River was “the most tedious business that I ever engaged in.... The water being very low, we were subjected, some days, almost hourly, to being grounded upon the sand bars.” 745

—

Fitchburg *Sentinel*, November 24, 1854.

Worcester *National Aegis*, February 7, 1855, pg. 4, December, 19, 1855, pg. 3.

Letter from George O. Willard published in the [Boston?] *Journal* January 7, 1855. Quoted in Louise Barry, “The Emigrant Aid Company Parties of 1854,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, Volume XII, Number 2, May, 1943.

KANSAS TROUBLES: This Week in Territorial History – Add 3

Letter from Amasa Soule, November 25, 1854, published in the *Chelsea Telegraph and Pioneer*, quoted in Barry, pg. 151.

James R. McClure, "Taking the Census in 1855," *Kansas Historical Collections*, Volume 8, pg. 228.