



NEWS

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Kansas Troubles: This Week in Territorial History October 17-23, 1854

On October 21st, George W. Brown printed the first edition of *The Herald of Freedom*, the official organ of the New England Emigrant Aid Company in the Kansas Territory. The paper's masthead declared it to be from the town of Wakarusa, Kansas Territory, although Brown and his newspaper remained in Conneautville, Pennsylvania. "We had expected to have been on the ground in Kansas...but we were delayed in our departure, waiting for a rise in the Ohio River," he later explained. The Conneautville party finally left the next week.

In Peoria, Illinois, on October 18th, Abraham Lincoln continued his round of speeches against Stephen Douglas's policy of "Squatter Sovereignty" and the repeal of the Missouri Compromise. The Kansas situation was bound to bring violence, he predicted. "Will not the first drop of blood so shed be the real [death] knell of the Union?"

In October, Lincoln and Douglas debated at the State Fair in Springfield. Lincoln, a Whig, and Douglas, a Democrat, had often appeared at the same political barbecue or rally. They had met twenty years earlier, remembered Lincoln, both ambitious young men. "With me," he wrote in 1856, "the race of ambition has been a failure---a flat failure; with him it has been one of splendid success."

They were joined in this debate by Douglas supporter John Calhoun, also admired for his speaking style. Lincoln and Calhoun had also been appearing on the same political stage since the candidacy of Martin Van Buren. Always on opposite sides of issues from tariffs to slavery, they remained friends despite Lincoln's victory over Calhoun in an 1836 race for the state legislature. Springfield lawyer William H. Herndon characterized Calhoun as a strong and clear-headed speaker in the 1840s, "Lincoln's equal and the superior of Douglas." "I have heard Stephen A. Douglas say that the only man he dreaded in a political debate was Calhoun," recalled Kansan Jack Henderson years after all three politicians had passed from the scene.

But in 1854, Calhoun, after serving as Springfield's mayor, appeared to have no political future. Alcoholism was a factor. He had, wrote a 19th-century historian,

“few equals in point of ability, but he lacked energy and was the slave of the cup.” Herndon agreed: “Whisky ruined him long before he went to Kansas.”

Calhoun’s long friendship with Douglas and support for the local Democrat party inspired Illinoisans to suggest him as Surveyor-General for the new territories. Springfield’s postmaster wrote Douglas that Calhoun needed a job and his drinking was under control. “He is doing nothing, and is as poor as men generally get to be.... In justice to Calhoun, I will also state that his habits are, and have been for more than a year unexceptionable.”

Douglas may have sympathized with Calhoun’s notoriety as a drinker. He had a similar reputation. Lincoln recalled that when he kept a grocery store, he sold whiskey and “Mr. Douglas was one of my best customers.” After his first wife’s death in 1853, Douglas’s reliance on alcohol increased. A trip to Europe revived his spirits and the 1854 Kansas Nebraska Bill revived his career. But alcohol continued to be a problem, despite his second marriage in 1856 when “he became more tidy and trim in his appearance, and more careful in his habits, although even then there were rumors of occasional excesses,” recalled politician Carl Schurz. “There was something in his manners which very strongly smacked of the bar-room...Once at a night session of the Senate I saw him after a boisterous speech, throw himself upon the lap of a brother senator and loll there, talking and laughing.”

Douglas’s support assured Calhoun of the Surveyor-General position. In late October, Calhoun left for Kansas and the formidable job of sorting out the claims of the tribes and the sovereign squatters. (631 words)

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