



# NEWS

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By Barbara Brackman

## **Kansas Troubles: This Week in Territorial History August 29-September 4, 1854**

On August 29<sup>th</sup>, what was known as the Second Party left Boston accompanied by three agents of the Emigrant Aid Company. Positive reports from the Territory encouraged several men to bring their families. Sixty-seven men, women and children left the Boston railroad station to the cheers of supporters and the words of a poem. John Greenleaf Whittier, a Massachusetts Quaker who shaped current events into poetry for anti-slavery newspapers, penned the *Song of the Kansas Emigrants* just for the occasion. Several Vermonters who'd packed their brass horns immediately put the words to the familiar tune of *Auld Lang Syne*. As they crossed the country, the emigrants sang:

*"We'll tread the prairies as of old  
Our fathers sailed the sea,  
To make the West as they the East  
The homestead of the free!"*

Their numbers doubled as sympathizers joined them. By the end of the week they'd broken into two parties in St. Louis, one aboard the *New Lucy* on the Missouri; the other in St. Louis waiting to board the *Clara*.

The drama was playing out just as David Atchison and the Stringfellow brothers had predicted. Four slaves had escaped into Kansas in July. In September, troops of poetry-spouting abolitionists armed with guns and cornets were picking up supporters in Albany and Chicago. By late fall, the Platte County Self-Defensive League claimed 500 members ready to defend Missouri against the slave-stealing army. Members of the League recognized each other by a password, "Kansas" or "Kan," and by a secret sign, a subtle addition to the wardrobe---"a skein of bleached silky hemp tied in a buttonhole of the coat." The hemp yarn represented the Missouri crop cultivated to fashion rope needed to bundle the cotton grown in the deep South. Hemp also signified the hangman's noose, a threat awaiting the abolitionist hordes.

The Self-Defensive League, the Blue Lodges and the Know-Nothings were just a few of the secret societies that thrived in mid-century male political life. America was a self-regulating democracy, where civilian armies, both secret and public,

marched parallel to the federal government's professional corps. "Our republicanism was fresh and wide-awake. The edge of George Washington's little hatchet had not yet been worn down," New Englander Lucy Larcom wrote of the era when the major holidays were "training days," celebrating the civilian militia.

Towns throughout the country were required by state authority to raise troops to keep public order, train for national wars and keep a check on the federal government's standing army. Thomas Low Nichols of New Hampshire recalled the annual muster of the civilian militia in his hometown. "Spectators gathered in crowds, drank sweet cider and New England rum, and ate molasses gingerbread...Our citizen soldiers were dressed in every kind of homespun fashion...variously armed, with [antique arms] captured with the Army of Burgoyne [and] fowling pieces, ducking guns, or rifles." Lew Wallace in Indiana remembered that most of his town militia was armed with "umbrellas, corn-stalks and hickory staves." The event "usually wound up with a drinking folic at the tavern," recalled New Yorker Horace Greeley. (509 words)

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Horace Greeley, *Recollections of a Busy Life* (New York: Treat, 1872) Pg. 100.

Thomas Low Nichols, memoir in *Forty Years of American Life 1821-1861* (New York: Stackpole Books, 1937) Pp. 440-441.

Lew Wallace, *An Autobiography* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1906) Volume 1, Pg. 17.

Lucy Larcom, *Memories of a New England Girlhood*, (Beverly, Massachusetts, 1854, Reprint: Gloucester, Massachusetts: Peter Smith, 1973) Pg. 98.