



# NEWS

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By Barbara Brackman

## **Kansas Troubles: This Week in Territorial History September 5 – 11, 1854**

David Atchison was traveling through his western Missouri district, campaigning for the spring Senatorial election as he gained support for a pro-slavery Kansas. On the 7<sup>th</sup>, he was in Liberty, looking well, noted the *Liberty Tribune*, "as well as it is customary for an old bachelor who has sworn eternal hostility to band-boxes and apron strings."

In the City of Kansas, the second group of anti-slavery colonists stopped over. Among them was a financial agent hired by the Emigrant Aid Company. Thirty-eight-year old Samuel Clark Pomeroy had served a term in the Massachusetts legislature and been a member of the Liberty Party, a single-issue party aligned with the most radical abolitionists. A graduate of Amherst College, he'd taught school in New York. The Fitchburg, Massachusetts, *Sentinel* praised Pomeroy's appointment: "He is cool, judicious, enterprising, and bold as a lion. He is also a capital speaker, and can inculcate New England principles in his public as well as private capacity."

As financial agent, he answered to Amos Lawrence, treasurer of the Company. If Eli Thayer with his impassioned speeches was the organization's heart, Lawrence was its head. The Lawrence family made their fortune in cotton, establishing New England mills named Cocheco and Salmon Falls that transformed the South's raw cotton into the North's calico prints. As a "Cotton Whig," Lawrence balanced his reformist instincts with a tolerant attitude towards Southern slaveholders, but the Kansas Nebraska Act with its repeal of the Missouri Compromise had radicalized him. "We went to bed one night, old-fashioned, conservative, compromise, union Whigs and waked up stark mad abolitionists."

General Pomeroy (he was generally called General Pomeroy) was one of several agents authorized to pay for land, tools, construction and travel with the money Lawrence donated and raised in New England. How Pomeroy, a former schoolteacher, earned the title of General is a mystery. Albert Richardson in his 1869 book tells one story. On the September 1854, trip to Kansas, a fellow

pilgrim said, “Pomeroy, a man of the frontier without a handle to his name is a nobody. Now what shall we call you? You were once a member of the Massachusetts general court (legislature)...’ The newcomer was accordingly introduced as General Pomeroy and never lost the prefix afterward.”

Richardson’s story may well be true, but it was also a common joke at a time when Americans were inordinately fond of titles. As English immigrant Jean Rio Baker noted, “Colonels, Majors, Captains, Judges and squires, [were] as plentiful as blackberries.” Twenty years earlier, Frances Trollope overheard a similar story in Cincinnati, when General M’s war record was called into question. “I was not aware of his being in the army.’ ‘No, sir...but he was surveyor-general of the district.”

Moritz Busch explained the American fixation to his German readers. Aboard an Ohio River boat, he was amused to find “a cargo of such distinguished and learned people.... At breakfast I became acquainted with at least a half dozen majors and captains, and in fact, I myself was honored at various times with the rank of a ‘Captain.’ This matter, which leads to many a delightful caricature, is due in part to the militia and in part to the Mexican War.”

The local militias were democratic armies in which troops elected officers whose qualifications included charisma, generosity with a whiskey cask and occasional military experience. Every town had a militia and with it a ration of majors, captains and colonels. The Mexican War of the late 1840s added officers with real field experience to the mix. By the end of the century, Civil War veterans who inflated their war records meant that a man without a title was indeed a nobody. Journalist William Allen White summarized the situation in his description of Colonel William Rockhill Nelson of the *Kansas City Star*. “Not that he was ever colonel of anything. He was just coloneliferous.” (600)

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Jean Rio Baker diary. Kenneth L. Holmes, editor. *Covered Wagon Women*, Volume 3, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987) Pg. 226.

Moritz Busch, *Travels Between the Hudson and the Mississippi, 1851 – 1852* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1971) Pp. 108-109.

Fitchburg (Massachusetts) *Sentinel*, September 8, 1854

Letter to Giles Richards June 1, 1854, Amos Lawrence, *Letterbook*, Volume 2.

Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (London: Whittaker, Treacher & Co., 1832) Pg. 182.