Civil War on the Kansas-Missouri Border: The Narrative of Former Slave Andrew Williams

edited by William A. Dobak

On the morning of August 21, 1863, a band of Confederate partisans led by William C. Quantrill rode into Lawrence, Kansas, burned most of the buildings on the town’s main street, and killed nearly 150 of the inhabitants. The raid became notorious as the greatest outrage perpetrated during the pro- and anti-slavery conflict in Kansas. At the time, survivors published a number of eyewitness accounts, some of which have been reprinted, but there may be only one reminiscence still extant by a black resident of Lawrence. It is contained in the manuscript narrative of Andrew Williams in the Kansas Collection of the Spencer Research Library at the University of Kansas.

The Quantrill raid was one of several events during the Civil War described by Williams, who was born a slave in Missouri in 1851, according to the 1900 United States census. A foraging party of the Sixth Kansas Cavalry liberated Williams and his family in the fall of 1862, and they moved to Lawrence the following spring after spending the winter at Fort Scott. Following Quantrill’s raid the family moved to Topeka, where Williams settled permanently. His name appears in the United States census for 1870, as well as in Topeka city directories for the four subsequent decades. He died of pneumonia on May 5, 1909.

The city directories list Williams’ occupation as “laborer,” but the 1900 census gives it as “landscape gardener,” and it was this specialty that brought him into contact with William Elsey Connelley, for whom he worked during the year before his death. An ethnographer, historian, and officer of the Kansas State Historical Society, Connelley urged Williams to write down his memories of the Civil War and Quantrill’s raid.

In fact, Connelley cited Williams as a source in his book, Quantrill and the Border Wars. Mentioning that there were two camps of recruits, one for whites and one for blacks, for the Union Army in Lawrence in August 1863, Connelley goes on:

The camps were about three hundred feet apart. In the negro camp there were about twenty recruits, most of whom escaped. Reliable negroes, among them the late Andrew Williams, of Topeka, say that almost all of them escaped. Williams lived in Lawrence at the time and escaped by running into the willow thickets across the river. Some thirty negroes got together in the dense jungle on the river bank two miles east of Lawrence, where they remained until late afternoon. Williams was there, and he said about half the colored recruits were there, having run at the sound of the first pistol.

Williams’ manuscript consists of nine sheets apparently torn from the 1892 account book of a livery

William A. Dobak has a bachelor’s degree from Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., and a master’s degree in American studies from the University of Kansas, Lawrence. He held a fellowship at the Center for the History of the American Indian, Newberry Library, Chicago, in 1973-76, and has been a ranger at Fort Laramie National Historic Site, Wyoming, and a research assistant at the Fort Worth Museum of Science and History. Currently on the staff of the Watkins Community Museum, Lawrence, he has had articles published in the Journal of the West and other history magazines.

The editor extends appreciation to past and present staff members of the Kansas Collection, University of Kansas Libraries.


stable. The top of each page lists the customer, the items purchased, the cost (e.g., "Set of harness—20.00"), and the dates of order and payment. The rest of the page is filled with Williams' dense penciled scrawl and idiosyncratic spelling. He wrote without punctuation or paragraphing, and the narrative has been divided into paragraphs in the interest of clarity. Evidently Williams wrote entirely from memory. Nevertheless, his recollection of the events he witnessed when he was between the ages of ten and fifteen agrees substantially with other eyewitness and secondary accounts.

I Belonged to Henry Williams

I Belonged to Henry Williams in 61 and in November 61 left my home near Mount Vernon, Lawrence county, Mo, and was run down in a railroad accident. He was a farmer, unmarried, and owned real estate worth $4,500 and personal property valued at $16,000. The former included twelve slaves, four adults and eight children, among them two eight-year-old boys, one of whom must have been Andrew Williams.

The 1860 U.S. Census for Mount Vernon Township, Lawrence County, Missouri, lists H. F. Williams, a thirty-seven-year-old native of Tennessee. He was a farmer, unmarried, and owned real estate worth $4,500 and personal property valued at $16,000. The latter included twelve slaves, four adults and eight children, among them two eight-year-old boys, one of whom must have been Andrew Williams.

5. Maj. Gen. Sterling Price was the commander of Confederate troops in Missouri in 1861. It may have been that Williams was "Run South from his home in Mount Vernon, Missouri, during Price's retreat from Lexington, a victorious battle for the Confederates which was fought in September 1861 at the town of Lexington, Missouri, near the banks of the Missouri River. On September 29 Price began a leisurely retreat toward southwest.

Harper's Weekly published this well-known depiction some two weeks after Quantrill's raid on Lawrence.
a gaat the union in 62 they found that he was helping ReBels all he could and they a gain taken him prisoner and taken him from mount vernon one night in his night clothes and it was cold [crossed out in manuscript] they intended to kill him but only for a good union man andy mckance Saved him they let him free a gain and go Back to mount vernon he died from the exposer of Being taken in his night clothes to Spring field

in Septemb 62 the 6th kansas regiment was at mount vernon wee was Still at frank williams and Some of the solders was out forging and come to frank williams they had found out that he was a ReBBel they was after him But he had gone to the mill to get Bread Stuff that was all that saved him my mother and Six children was on his place and a mother coloored family and his 5 children the oldest a young woman a bout 21 he had 2 Boys one of them age 16 and one 15 all the Rest girls the Boy 15 always said he was a union man one of the solders asked him if his father had any arms a Bout the house he said yess the Solder could nott get under the house he said to the Boy go under that and Bring them out he went and brought out a Revolver and a Brand new gun the Solder thanked the Boy and give him 50 cents then the Solder asked the Boy if his father had any horses or cattle or hogs the [boy] told him where thar was a 100 head of hogs the Solder called in a Bout 20 men and they took Sharpined clubBS and kill 15 hogs and a lott of Sheep loaded them in the wagons and then they went out to the pastor drove off[f] the hole 30 head of horses and mules to mount vernon they taken all of the corn that was in the crib and taken about 40 hams midlens and Shoulders out of the smoke house they left 2 sides of meet taken all But the 2 pieces when they all load an Ready to go one of the ofisers said to my mothr dont you want to go to Kans and Be free my mother said vess Sir get your children in this wagon have you got any Beeed clothes asked the ofisier my mother Says no Sir go in the house and take your Mistises take all you want my mother Refused to do that and one of the solders wint in and taken an arm full of Beeed clothes and put them in the wagon By that time the children was all in the wagon weBid the colored family that did not want to leave good By and all so the white foalks then we went on our way to mount vernon where the Six kansas regiment was camped thar we staid a Bout 2 weeks

the Bush wackers was pretty bad a Round vernon thar was a Skirmish fight most any time we was in the way of the soldes figting and they wanted to Send us to fort Scoot that was in Sept 62 we left mount vernon and went to Sarcoxey a Bout Six miles from newtony we was thir a few days and then come the Big fight at newtony the ReBels had thir canons up in a Stone Barn they killed a lott of the union Boys but the union Boys cleaned them out when the Battle was over they Sent an escort with all of the colored people to fort Scoot the
Bush wackers was laying for us—new we were on the way to fort Scott—they knew right where we intended to comm—kept a Bout miles a head of us all the time—they knew we was going to camp on a creek in order to get water.

A Bout Six o clock in the evening we came to a great Big fine white house and was an old lady and her daughter—they were union folks

the caption that it was just one out Since 400 Bush wackers went By her house we turned right a Round and went just as fast as we could for five miles the same way we come and then arrived in a nother decription and traveled all night long Jet as fast as we could—the horse I was Riding gave out a Bout mid night and fell with me and could not get up and I had to take the Saddle and Bridle on [f] and leave him on the Road Side that all happened near lamoner [Lamar?] mousri

the next day we got in to fort Scott ther we found plenty of Soldiers—Blunt and Blair was ther—we staid at Scott all winter during the winter I Saw one man shoot and one man hung By order of Genearl Blunt

in the Spring of 63 we left fort Scott and mooved to lawrence in april and was living on mashstuchet Street in aug 63 when Quantrell done his murdering [f] he had a Bout 700 men he came write by our house it was a little after day light they had on all sorts of uniforms Some in ther Reed Sheart Sleoves we thought they was union men until in the crowd Said Brake Ranks then they Scattered in all Directions when we

10. James G. Blunt, a physician and an abolitionist, was lieutenant colonel of the Third Kansas Regiment in July 1861 and was ordered to Fort Scott. He was promoted to brigadier general of U.S. volunteers in April 1862 and assigned to command the Department of Kansas from May to September of that year. In October 1862 he left Fort Scott in command of the first division of the Army of the Frontier. Mark Mayo Boomer III, Civil War Dictionary (New York: David McKay Co., 1959), 71: James G. Blunt, "General Blunt's Account of His Civil War Experiences," Kansas Historical Quarterly 1 (May 1932):225-26. For further insight into Blunt's military activities in and around the Fort Scott area from August 1861 to October 1862, see Blunt, "General Blunt's Account of His Civil War Experiences," 214-26.

A resident of Fort Scott since 1859, Charles W. Blair raised a company there in 1861 for the Second Kansas Infantry and was elected its captain. After the Second's reorganization into the Second Kansas Cavalry, Blair was made major of the regiment in February 1862 and subsequently placed in command of the post of Fort Scott. United States Biographical Dictionary, Kansas Volume (Chicago: S. Lewis and Co., 1879), 766-77; Francis B. Heitman, Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1903), 1:222.

11. For information on William C. Quantrill and his guerrilla warfare, see Connelly, Quantrill and the Border Wars, and Albert Castel, William Clarke Quantrill: His Life and Times (New York: Frederick Fell, 1962).

12. The dead raider has been identified as "Rev. Larkin M. Skaiges... a Baptist minister who had taken an active part in all the raids into Kansas in Territorial times and had helped Sheriff Jones sack Lawrence, May 21, 1856." He was shot by fifteen-year-old William Spear, two of whose brothers had been killed by the raiders. A newspaper reporter who arrived at the end of the day wrote: "The first sight attracting my attention was a negro rushing through the streets on horseback, dragging the dead body of a dead rebel, with a rope around his neck hitched to a saddle. A crowd was following pelting the rebel with stones." Connelly, Quantrill and the Border Wars, 566, 581-82.

13. On August 27, 1863, the Leavenworth Daily Conservative carried a story entitled, 'Spy Hung in Lawrence.' The 'spy' was a man named John Gallow who, it was claimed, confessed that he moved his family out of Lawrence the night prior to the raid and then rode in with Quantrill the next morning. After his confession the newspaper reported, "He was then hung." Burton J. Williams, "Quantrill's Raid on Lawrence: A Question of Complicity," Kansas Historical Quarterly 31 (Summer 1968):145.

14. During October 1864, General Price and the Army of Missouri were moving west across central Missouri toward Kansas. Union forces met Price's attack at the battles of Lexington, the Little Blue, and the Big Blue, which took place from October 19
Lawrence in ruins, as shown in Harper’s Weekly.

good men and as Brave men as ever went to war
they did not know any thing a Bout drilling and
done as good work as Regarars [Regulars] old
price thought they was Regarars Belouf he got
th[r]ough with them Some of topeka Brave
men fell dan handly the Brave guner went down
harvey young frank Brown John ward died from
wonds freed macka was taken prisner and
got a way By taken the gun from his gard G G
Gage doc hunt toon a good many other was per-
roled John Broner Jake Cline15

to October 21, and again on October 23 at the Battle of Westport,
where Price was repulsed by the Union forces. Castel, General
Sterling Price, 229-35.

15. While several regiments of Kansas volunteers were primary
forces opposing Price, sixteen regiments of the Kansas State
Militia were also called out to defend against the Confederate
raid. Howard N. Monnet, Action Before Westport, 1864 (Kansas
City: Westport Historical Society, 1964), 139-40. The “good men
and as Brave men as ever went to war,” about whom Williams
wrote, were members of the Second Cavalry of the Kansas Militia
and were ordered into action on October 10, 1864. Pvt. Daniel

in 1865 when linclon was killed I was working
for Bill Crawford on dear creek16 his farm it know
called Sanders farm Carr Crawford and I done
the farming

in 1866 Captain Beenteen came from fort Rily
down to topeka after wating Boy and he hired me
to go to fort Rily to wate on him and lieutenant
wallingford they Belonged to the 7 Kans

Handley, Battery A, joined in August 1863 at Topeka. He was
“killed in action on Big Blue, Mo., Oct 22, 1864.” Pvt. Harvey
Young, Company B, joined August 24, 1863, at Topeka. He was
“killed in battle at Big Blue, Mo. Oct 22, 1864.” Pvt. Frank Brown,
Company F, joined May 6, 1864, at Big Springs. He was later
reported “absent by permission of Colonel.” Pvt. John Ward,
Company B, joined March 26, 1864, at Topeka. He was “wounded
in battle Oct 28, 1864 in shoulder at Big Blue, Jackson Co. Mo.”
Pvt. Frederick Mackey, Battery A, joined August 1863 at Topeka.
He was “taken prisoner in action on Big Blue Oct 22, 64. Escaped
and returned to Co. Nov. 7, 1864.” Pvt. Gilford G. Gage, Battery
A, joined August 1863 at Topeka. He was “taken prisoner in action
on Big Blue Mo. Oct 22, 1864. Escaped and returned to Co. Nov.
2, 1864.” Capt. A. J. Hunslen, Co. B, joined August 24, 1863, at
Topeka. He was “taken prisoner in action with enemy at Big
calvary. I worked for them a few months then they was ordered further west the Indians was Bad out thir Captian Benteen asked me if I wanted to go with them I told him know I did not want to go he payed me and I came home it was not so ofel long Befor the Indians


16. Deer Creek flows through Monmouth, Topeka, and Tecumseh townships in Shawnee County and empties into the Kansas River. No record of a William or a Carr Crawford has been found.

17. Frederick W. Benteen (1834-1898) was a veteran of the Civil War, in which he attained the rank of lieutenant colonel. He served with the Seventh U.S. Cavalry from the regiment’s organization in 1866 until 1882. David W. Wallingford (1837-1888), a protégé of Kansas governor Samuel J. Crawford, was appointed to the Seventh U.S. Cavalry in 1866. He was dismissed in 1870 for associating with “a notorious prostitute or lewd woman” in the Perry House and American House hotels in Sheridan, Kan., an offense “to the scandal and disgrace of the military service…” Robert M. Utley, ed., Life in Custer’s Cavalry: Diaries and Letters of Albert and Jennie Barniss, 1867-1888 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 230-31, 279-80.

18. Williams is referring to the Battle of the Little Big Horn on June 25, 1876, where five companies of the Seventh Cavalry under the command of Gen. George Armstrong Custer were massacred by Indians. While Captian Benteen was present at the Little Big Horn, he and his troops had joined in defense with those of Maj. Marcus Reno. He was therefore unable to come to the aid of Custer and was spared the massacre. Benteen was promoted to the rank of major in 1882; he retired from military duty in 1888 and died of paralysis on June 22, 1898. Ibid., 250-51.