
ORIGIN STORIES AND BLEEDING KANSAS

by Rita G. Napier

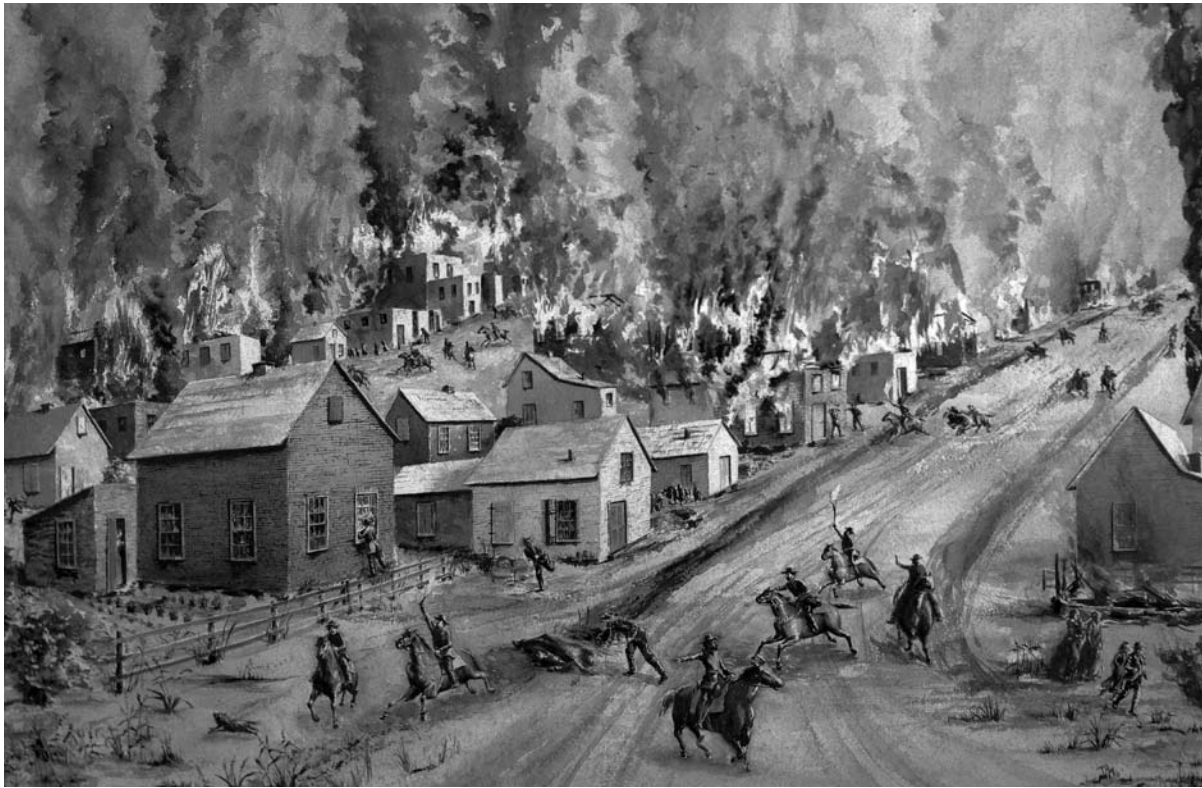
Long before all the contentious issues that would animate the history of Bleeding Kansas had reached resolution, Sara Robinson penned an engaging story of the early struggle for control of the territory. She was both a participant in and an eyewitness to the conflict. Mrs. Robinson was a woman of considerable intellect, with no small talent for expressing her ideas in an elegant and convincing way.

Robinson gave an enticing picture of the natural landscape: “The face of this country is beautiful beyond all comparison. The prairies . . . stretching away miles . . . seem never lonely or wearisome, being gently undulating, or more abruptly rolling; and at the ascent of each new roll of land, the traveler finds himself in the midst of new loveliness. There are also high bluffs . . . [and] ravines run from them to the rivers. . . . These ravines are in many instances pictures of beauty, with tall, graceful trees . . . standing near, while springs of pure cold water gush from the rock.”¹

While a land of beauty, it was also a place rich with agricultural potential. “The soil for richness,” she wrote, “can be surpassed in no country. . . . Vegetation is most luxuriant. The soil and climate are most admirably adapted to the raising of grains. . . . [and] the growth of melons, cantaloupes, tomatoes, squashes—in fact, vegetables of all kinds, is wonderful.” Robinson extolled the land in the territory and its potential for producing good crops in the hope of attracting other New Englander emigrants like herself, who would share in the great work of keeping Kansas free of slavery.

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1. Sara T. L. Robinson, *Kansas: Its Interior and Exterior Life* (Boston, Mass.: Crosby, Nichols and Company, 1856), 2–3. All subsequent references from Sara Robinson’s writings come from this well-received book.



The little city of Lawrence was “sacked” in May 1856, but, as depicted above in a painting by Laurretta Louise Fox, it was nearly destroyed by the infamous William C. Quantrill and his Confederate raiders on August 21, 1863. Both of these events have attracted much historical attention—in contrast is the September 1, 1856, “sack” of Leavenworth’s free-state businesses and homes, which has received very little.

In addition, Robinson described the climate as “exceedingly lovely. With a clear, dry, atmosphere, and gentle, health-giving breezes, it cannot be otherwise. . . . The summers are long, and winters short.” She did admit to some of the less tempting qualities of the weather. “But the changes of weather,” she wrote, “come suddenly. One may be dreaming all the morning, influenced by the pleasant temperature around him, of the fair Italian land; and, ere the sun finds its setting, may fancy himself nearing the [north] pole. Yet in all these changes no one takes cold.” Obviously this was a country to which people should delight to move.

This was a land, as Robinson saw it, “where all nature sang a continual song for freedom,” where “the clanking of chains was never [intended] to create a discord in that natural harmony,” and where the Missouri Compromise had been created to forever prevent slavery’s introduction. Liberty was threatened here in 1854, however, when Missourians and other Southerners combined to remove that protection. Now Kansas would be “cursed with the blackest of all villainies, the bitterest of all evils human slavery.” Now the “clanking chains” would replace the territory’s natural harmony with discord.

And who would live in this beautiful but imperiled land? Robinson characterized those who wished to make Kansas a slave state in extremely derogatory terms. Missourians were rough, brutal-looking men. They threatened the local settlers around Lawrence, simply walking into their homes and taking food without asking. They were, in fact, “whiskey-drinking degraded foulmouthed marauders,” who brought slavery into Kansas and would determine its future unless “freedom-loving New Englanders” rescued the territory.²

2. Robinson, *Kansas: Its Interior and Exterior Life*, 4, 6, 19–20.

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Forty-four years later Sara's husband, Charles Robinson—arguably the most important leader of the antislavery cause in Lawrence, a major force in the politics of the territory—published his account of the territorial struggle, *The Kansas Conflict*. The work was not, he admitted, an impartial history: "I make no pretense that this book, while it gives the conflict in Kansas from my point of view, is a complete history of that struggle."³ The book was broader in scope than Sara's, however, and it added more evidence to her narrative of the events of Bleeding Kansas: that slavery was the main cause of the conflict, New Englanders stood out as the leading warriors for freedom, and the village of Lawrence was the headquarters of the movement. Charles also demonstrated that antislavery leaders attempted to win control in a non-violent manner. They patiently endured attacks by proslavery partisans, according to Robinson, in order to hold the moral high ground. Even when proslavery leaders and their supporters used force to control the polls in crucial territorial elections and voted illegally, thus giving their side control over the legislature that would write the first laws for the territory, New Englanders maintained the peace. Only after the sack of Lawrence on May 21, 1856, did free-state forces take up arms.⁴

Together the Robinsons created an engaging and effective origin story for Kansas. Origin stories define the values of a society, though they do not necessarily provide accurate history. In the Robinsons' story the state was born in a struggle between slavery and freedom. The Missourians degraded Kansas by introducing human slavery there. New Englanders such as the Robinsons were the champions who saved Kansas for freedom. Though the story was intended in part to inspire prospective settlers who were willing to fight against slavery in Kansas, it also conveyed again and again the key values that New Englanders planted in Kansas, the ones to which each succeeding generation might aspire. In Kansas "all nature sang a continual song for freedom." Kansans should maintain that freedom, just as the state's pioneers once struggled against great odds to prevent the planting of slavery. The job of each new generation, the story suggests, is to nourish and grow that freedom.

Historians have long used the Robinsons' books as primary sources for the history of Bleeding Kansas. Although some opposition arose to their insistence that Lawrence was the seat of the free-state movement and that New Englanders were the key actors whose values guided the movement, the Robinsons' interpretation has had a persistent impact. According to Gunja SenGupta, the historian Allan Nevins wrote in 1954 that "the essentially moral struggle between the 'idea of freedom' and the 'idea of slavery' that bloodied the valleys of the Kaw and the Missouri in the 1850s culminated in the triumph of the 'great cause of human advancement.'" For Nevins, SenGupta explained, "it was this momentous sectional contest over liberty . . . that shaped the peculiar character and destiny of Kansas." In Nevins's estimation, one

3. Charles Robinson, *The Kansas Conflict* (Lawrence, Kans.: Journal Publishing Company, 1898), iv.

4. Robinson, *The Kansas Conflict*, 231–64; Robinson, *Kansas: Its Interior and Exterior Life*, 229–48.

hundred years after Bleeding Kansas, it was New England that gave the state its fierce attachment to freedom.⁵ A limited survey of more recent books on Bleeding Kansas and books on the Civil War indicates that the old story persists, although there have been intriguing attempts to bring new perspectives to research on and interpretation of the conflict.

One way to explore the work that remains to be done and the question of how we might construct a new narrative is to examine underutilized documents that cast doubt on our long-held assumptions about Bleeding Kansas. The source that seems filled with the greatest possibilities is *Kansas Claims*. While it might be whimsical to imagine finding new evidence in a set of documents 151 years old, I did find stories in *Kansas Claims* that may offer us new ways of thinking about Bleeding Kansas and change the landscape of the history of the period.⁶

In the early 1970s, when I was searching for new material for a study on the origins and development of Leavenworth as a frontier community, I discovered a three-volume set of documents called *Kansas Claims*. They were produced in an attempt by the Kansas legislature to get the United States government to pay for the damages done in the Kansas civil war in 1856. Many of these documents pertain to what can only be described as a sack of Leavenworth's free-state businesses and homes, during which well-orchestrated groups took nearly every piece of merchandise from their stores and destroyed what they did not steal or consume.

These claims, with their many detailed accounts, call into question the inference long made by historians: that Leavenworth, along with being the most prominent proslavery city in Kansas, was essentially of one mind on the issue. A recent history of Kansas, for example, still describes the town as a proslavery bastion.⁷ The *Kansas Claims* suggests, however, that Leavenworth should either be seen as a city amicably accepting of free-state settlers or as a contested city. The claims describe in minute detail a large number of free-state business men, members of their families, and some of their employees who were attacked because of their antislavery beliefs, who watched as their properties were plundered, and who were driven out of town and told never to return.

In case after case plaintiffs and witnesses recorded a substantial number of prosperous free-state men and their families living in Leavenworth in

KANSAS A FREE STATE.
Squatter Sovereignty VINDICATED!
NO WHITE SLAVERY!

The Squatters of Kansas who are favorable to **FREEDOM OF SPEECH** on all subjects which interest them, and an unmuzzled **PRESS**; who are determined to do their own **THINKING** and **VOTING** independent of **FOREIGN DICTATION**, are requested to assemble in

MASS MEETING
at the time and places following to wit:

The following speakers will be in attendance, who will address you on the important questions now before the people of Kansas.

At Fair's Store	on Monday	September 24th at 2 o'clock	p. m.	Lawrence	Saturday Oct. 6th at 7 o'clock	p. m.
" Fort Scott	" Friday	" 25th "	" "	" " "	" " September 29th "	" "
" Buckner's Store, Little Sugar Creek	" Sat.	" 26th "	" "	" " "	" " "	" "
" Elgin Taylor's, Big Springs	" Monday	Oct. 1st "	" "	" " "	" " "	" "
" Okemuncie	" Tuesday	" 2d "	" "	" " "	" " "	" "
" Mr. Pennington's, Pennington's Creek	" Wed.	" 3d "	" "	" " "	" " "	" "
" " "	" Thursday	" 4th "	" "	" " "	" " "	" "
" " "	" Friday	" 5th "	" "	" " "	" " "	" "
" Springfield	" "	" 6th "	" "	" " "	" " "	" "

DR. CHAS. ROBINSON,
J. A. Wakefield, C. K. Holliday, M. F. Conway,
W. K. Vail, J. L. Speer, W. A. Ela, Josiah Miller, O. C. Brown, J. K. Goodin, Doct. Gilpatrick, Revs. Mr. Tuton and J. E. Stewart, C. A. Foster, J. P. Fox, H. Bronson, G. W. Brown, A. H. Malley and others.

TURN OUT AND HEAR THEM!

Kansas Territory, Bleeding Kansas, was scarred by violence, but it was also characterized by a plethora of elections, conventions, and mass meetings, which featured speeches in abundance. To promote the principles espoused by the newly formed Free State Party and the move for a constitutional convention, a series of meetings, advertised in this broadside, were held in September and October 1855, featuring Charles Robinson, arguably the most important leader of the antislavery cause in Lawrence and a major force in the politics of the territory. Along with his wife Sara, Robinson helped craft what became the standard free-state narrative.

5. Gunja SenGupta, "Bleeding Kansas: A Review Essay," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 24 (Winter 2001–2002): 318; see also Allan Nevins, *Kansas and the Stream of American Destiny: A Lecture Delivered at the Kansas Centennial Conference at the University of Kansas on April 30, 1954* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1954), and his classic work on the era, Nevins, *The Ordeal of Union*, 8 vols. (New York: Scribner, 1947).

6. The evidence for the claims cases is taken from U.S. Congress, House Report 104, *Kansas Claims*, 36th Cong., 2nd Sess., 3 vols. (1860).

7. Craig Miner, *Kansas: The History of the Sunflower State: 1854–2000* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 48, 56.

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1856. They often described the buildings the freestaters put up as stores or boarding houses and the large sums they invested in stocking them, creating a detailed picture of western businessmen who started businesses, built up cash reserves, then moved to the next frontier to invest in better enterprises, at each step increasing their “opportunities.” Witnesses corroborate their stories. Though one must check the facts carefully, as with any primary source, these documents create a strong picture of a free-state business community in a proslavery city. If that were not startling enough, plaintiffs and witnesses then graphically describe the sack of the city on September 1, 1856.

The *Kansas Claims* have rarely been used by historians and in neither of the two cases where I have found them cited were they used to develop a study of Bleeding Kansas.⁸ The existence of a major unstudied but potentially very important episode in Bleeding Kansas and a rarely used set of documents that provides us with a map of the experiences of free-state supporters in Leavenworth certainly changes our understanding of where the focus of conflict was located, of who other free-state leaders were, and of what their major concerns were. It is a much more complex picture than we have yet imagined. It also indicates that the stories told by Sara and Charles Robinson reflect only a small part of what happened in Bleeding Kansas. It was most certainly a much more complicated story than has yet been written.

In *Kansas Claims* Thomas Slocum, former Leavenworth mayor, estimated that one-third of the permanent population of the town was driven away on the day it was sacked. Benjamin Luce, the owner of a hardware store, described the state of affairs in more detail: “Parties of armed men were riding furiously through the streets, calling upon the people to turn out and join in their ranks, accompanied with threats that all who refused to do so should be driven away . . . during that day a great many of the inhabitants were driven from the city, and some were put on board steamboats and forced to leave—men, women and children.”⁹

Jacob Strobel was one of those expelled. He moved to Leavenworth from Ohio in 1855 and opened a wholesale grocery and provision business on the steamboat levee. Like other grocers, he carried a substantial stock of alcoholic beverages in addition to flour, pork, butter, eggs, and much more. He also had other items such as sundries and perhaps some men’s clothing for sale. August Kessler testified that “about the fifth or sixth of September Mr. Strobel had to leave for fear of his life.” Another witness, Frederick Knopf, agreed. He believed Strobel fled because “he was afraid of being killed.” At one point, Strobel took refuge at the nearby fort for a few weeks. Upon his return, in early October, “armed men came to my store and asked me where I was from,” Strobel testified. “I answered, from Ohio; and then they said I was a damned abolitionist, and fired at me.

8. James Malin, *John Brown and the Legend of Fifty-Six* (Philadelphia, Penn.: American Philosophical Society, 1942); and Dale Watts, “How Bloody was Bleeding Kansas? Political Killings in Kansas Territory 1854–1861,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 18 (Summer 1995): 116–29.

9. *Kansas Claims*, 3:232.

The bullet passed me and went through my coat.” He and his wife then shut themselves in the cellar. He could hear the threats from outside the door to burn the house down or to hang him in the evening. Finally the attackers left, and Strobel’s wife got him “some soldier clothes” and some soldier friends walked back with him to the fort. Strobel and his family survived, but their losses were heavy. The claims commissioners awarded him \$2,300 but the claim was never paid.¹⁰

Jacob Strobel’s ordeal and others like it recorded in *Kansas Claims* and various national newspapers can be used as an introduction to the sack of Leavenworth on September 1, 1856. A careful examination of the evidence gathered by the claims commission three years after the violent incident and written up in the newspaper accounts of four prominent victims published only seven to nine days after the attack should expand our understanding of the little-known sack of Leavenworth and of violence in Kansas Territory more generally. These victims—men of both higher and lesser social status who settled in Leavenworth in 1854 and 1855 and set about establishing businesses and professional practices—wrote of their experiences for the *St. Louis (Missouri) Democrat*, which was reprinted by the *New York Tribune*. Their expulsion by proslavery forces at the height of the conflict, part of a larger attempt to eliminate all free-state people from the city, was still fresh in their memories, and the editor believed that their statements would help “establish the truth in regard to the wretched condition of things in the territory and especially in Leavenworth City.”¹¹ The pervasive sense of fear during those days in Leavenworth was merited. A man and his family could lose their entire investment in the business they had set up in the frontier city. Since in some cases owners had their entire savings tied up in a Leavenworth business, the prospect of losing everything was terrifying. Beatings also were not uncommon, the threat of hanging seemed real, and a few men were killed in the city.

The writers, though targeted as free-state supporters, were neither abolitionists nor New Englanders. All of them avoided overt involvement in the slavery controversy, but they nevertheless opposed slavery, were committed to the free-state movement, and preferred a non-violent approach to the issues. They had moved to Kansas to become urban pioneers and to establish flourishing businesses or professions or to work as skilled labor. Their main focus was the development of Leavenworth’s business community.¹²

Joshua A. Davies provided the best description of the situation faced by Leavenworth free-state men during the sack of their city. “About 700 men,” he explained, “composed of Georgians, South Carolinians, Missourians, and Alabamians, have been camping within six miles of the City of Leavenworth. On Saturday and Sunday, 30th and 31st [of August], they all came into the city to vote at the municipal election and to prevent

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10. *Kansas Claims*, 3:599–603. In the end, no claims were paid.

11. See the statements of the four men in the *New York Tribune*, September 11, 1856.

12. According to the *History of Kansas*, “The men who first settled Leavenworth were of an entirely different stripe from the founders of Atchison, Kickapoo City and Delaware City. They were either moderate Pro-slavery men or pronounced Free-soilers, who intended, to the best of their ability, to forget politics and possess the country for their homes and their firesides.” [William Cutler], *History of the State of Kansas* (Chicago, Ill.: A.T. Andreas, 1883), 419.

PROCLAMATION.

Whereas information has been received by me, that various Citizens of the City of Leavenworth, have received anonymous Communications requesting them

to leave the Territory of Kansas forthwith, and whereas such conduct is contrary to Law and good order, and subversive of the true interests of the Law-and Order party not only of this City, but of the Territory, and whereas it is the bounden duty of every Citizen, and particularly of every executive Officer, to comply strictly with the requirements of the late Proclamation of Governor Geary. Now therefore I, William E. Murphy Mayor of the City aforesaid, by virtue of the power and authority in me vested, do make known and proclaim, that I will rigidly enforce the Law against each and every violator thereof, and I hereby call upon all good, and law abiding Citizens, of this City, to frown down any secret Conspiracy against law, and to give me as their chief executive officer, that aid necessary to maintain the supremacy of the law.

In testimony whereof I have hereunto subscribed my name, and caused [seal.] to be affixed the Seal of the City aforesaid, done at my office this 29th day of September A. D. 1856.

WILLIAM E. MURPHY, Mayor.

Leavenworth City, K. T., September the 29th, 1856.

A few weeks after the "sack" of Leavenworth, which featured the forcible eviction of many free-state men and families, Leavenworth Mayor William E. Murphy issued this proclamation appealing for their return. The mayor promised to "rigidly enforce the Law" and appealed to all citizens "to frown down any secret Conspiracy against the law." Most likely, Murphy took this action under pressure from Governor John W. Geary, who was troubled by reports of depredations and petitions of grievance emanating from Leavenworth.

the Free-State men from voting. There was great excitement in the city all day Saturday and Saturday night by the firing of guns, and shooting by the mob incessantly."¹³

In the midst of this mob action, some of the proslavery partisans guarding the town went after Dr. Samuel Norton. A practicing physician and druggist who had helped form the town site company that founded Leavenworth, Norton had great expectations for the city. He wrote that he and the other founders had a lively interest in the unparalleled growth and future prosperity of the place; they believed that the town would only develop and become highly prosperous and the real estate become "exceedingly valuable" if it was a free-state city. Norton had also concluded that Leavenworth would only develop into a place where education was valued and supported

and internal improvements were pursued if freedom prevailed. Hinting at the dangers posed by such a view, he wrote, "I expressed my preference that it should be made such, and unfortunately, perhaps, but voted for the Topeka Constitution and with the Free State party." On the other hand, he was not a radical man and had "refrained from taking any active part in politics generally, and had endeavored to pursue a strictly conservative course." He had focused on his profession and investments.

Still Dr. Norton was targeted and forced to leave Leavenworth. Fred Emory, at the head of an armed company, went to Norton's home on September 2, 1856, and "asked if I was a law and order man," a term often used to describe proslavery men who adhered to the proslavery territorial government. Norton deliberately interpreted the phrase in a more common sense way and said to Emory, "I am Sir." But Emory was not fooled. "He next inquired in case of invasion if I would take up arms in favor of the proslavery party." Norton answered that Emory "knew that I was lame . . . but that I would do anything in my power consistently to protect the town." Emory replied, "That is right; that is sufficient. You can go to bed and sleep quietly." But Norton and his family were not safe; by the next morning Emory realized he had been hoodwinked. He came with an armed body of men and "in the most preemptory manner informed me that I must leave forthwith." Norton tried to reason with Emory so that he could have time to pack up his "large stock of goods," but the armed man ordered the doctor down to the boat. Norton hastened to get his family ready to depart. He had to leave his "stock of drugs and medicines costing me over \$4,000, besides all my family library, beds and bedding, household

13. *New York Tribune*, September 11, 1856; see also Davies petition, *Kansas Claims*, 3:1663.

furniture, etc. . . . About thirty [other] persons were driven upon the same boat in a similar manner.”¹⁴

Milton E. Clark’s expulsion as an assumed free-state enemy was also sudden and quick. Clark regarded himself as neutral and uninvolved in the issues that rent Kansas Territory. As he wrote for the *Democrat* shortly after being released in St. Louis, “I am formerly from the State of Ohio, but since my residence in Leavenworth I have never taken sides with either party, nor have I proclaimed my sentiments.” He saw himself as a man “quietly attending my business.” The local proslavery men saw him as a threat. “I was told that I could not stay in the Territory unless I would take up arms against the d—d Abolitionists, as they meant to expel every one from the Territory.” In their overwrought state the proslavery men looked at any man who refused to take a public stance as a loyal proslavery man or who would not state he was willing to fight for the proslavery side as a potential threat; someone just waiting for the opportunity to rise up and join the “abolitionists” who were coming to take over the pioneer town of Leavenworth. So, two men entered Clark’s store without warning on September 2 and, “acting under orders,” took him prisoner and told him to leave immediately. Clark was not allowed to take away his large stock of groceries and was required to get special permission from Captain Emory just to take his trunk. When he debarked from the steamboat *Emma* in St. Louis, he wrote: “I am now in this city, nearly destitute of means.” While Clark was gone from Leavenworth his business was raided by the Kansas militia, which sent drays to cart away his goods. He testified before the claims commission in 1857 that his total loss was \$1,400.¹⁵

Nelson McCracken was a “man of property and influence” in the young city of Leavenworth. He had chosen, as had many others, to leave the Old Northwest Territory for the Kansas frontier in 1855. He, like Milton Clark, came from Ohio. McCracken’s move to Kansas Territory was carefully considered. He arrived soon after the territory was opened for settlement to select a desirable site for his store, warehouse, and dwelling so that he could reap the benefits of lower prices for land. When he reached Leavenworth in 1855, he “was highly pleased with the appearance of the town.” He selected a good location on the levee, perfectly situated where the stock he purchased and goods he handled for others could be easily unloaded from steamboats and stored in the warehouse he built there. He then boarded a boat bound for St. Louis, where he “bought a stock of groceries” and provisions to sell in his store. Soon he became well established “in the grocery, provision, forwarding and receiving business.”¹⁶

Though McCracken was a free-state man, he focused resolutely on his primary purpose—business. “I employed myself most studiously,”

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14. *New York Tribune*, September 11, 1856; see also, [Cutler], *History of Kansas*, 419–20; S. Norton, *et al.*, to Governor Geary, September 9, 1856, and Leavenworth Mayor William E. Murphy to Governor Geary, October 6, 1856, in “Executive Minutes of Governor John W. Geary,” *Kansas Historical Collections*, 1886–1888 4 (1890): 543, 596–97.

15. *New York Tribune*, September 11, 1856; see also “Executive Minutes of Governor John W. Geary,” 543; Clark petition, *Kansas Claims*, 3:1415–21.

16. *New York Tribune*, September 11, 1856; McCracken petition, *Kansas Claims*, 3:1746–52.

To examine how violent it was in Kansas Territory we have to ask what kinds of acts were violent.

he insisted, and found quick success and status in the community. He avoided politics by endeavoring "to keep myself out of improper places, avoiding all the collections [of people] where there was any probability of getting into any discussions on the exciting questions which were the cause of numerous troubles and outrages throughout the Territory." But as these troubles became more intense in the summer of 1856 it was more difficult to avoid involvement, and he "frequently heard from numerous friends that I was denounced as an Abolitionist, a traitor and as a very bad man in the community." Still McCracken persevered and prospered. "I paid no regard to such news," he wrote, "as it originated among a class of men who were not worthy of note," and he had few problems "until about the 18th of August." He then sensed that someone might be watching him and noted "there appeared to be considerable anxiety manifested by some of the so-called Law-and-Order party of our city." When a large order of goods arrived at his establishment by steamboat, a Captain Clarkson approached and began to question him closely about the contents of his shipment. McCracken answered somewhat vaguely, and Clarkson, charged with defense of Leavenworth, wanted specifically to know if there were arms and guns bound for Lawrence. "I told him there was eight kegs," McCracken wrote, "four of rifle and four of blasting powder." Clarkson remonstrated impatiently that "it was not blasting powder, but cannon powder, and was for [James H.] Lane and his men at Lawrence, who were his enemies, and that I could not send it out." Although McCracken sought to steer a neutral course in his business dealings, he had to be cautious and could not ignore Clarkson's demands without consequence; eventually the powder was unloaded and stored in McCracken's warehouse.¹⁷ By September 1, however, tensions in Leavenworth had increased substantially, and an armed band of mounted men, commanded by Captain Emory, assembled outside McCracken's place of business to demand that he surrender the powder. McCracken was sufficiently frightened by this experience that he tried to escape with his family on a steamboat headed for Weston, Missouri, but, like many others who sought this route of escape, the McCrackens were turned back by proslavery forces upon arrival in Missouri.

Back in Leavenworth, McCracken saw that the store of George Wetherell, a free-state businessman, and two small buildings belonging to William Phillips, a well-known antislavery lawyer, had been set on fire, a very dangerous act in a wooden, highly combustible city. McCracken approached Emory on the street and asked him "what all this meant." Emory answered that "the time had come when there was to be a decided stand taken, and law and order had to reign." McCracken sought out William H. Russell, a prominent government freighter then operating out of Leavenworth and the head of the vigilantes, asking if he could stay and do business. Russell offered no compromise. Instead, he replied bitterly: "one thing [was] certain, every man that aided or assisted Lane and his men [who were expected to attack Leavenworth] or sympathized with the Free-State men of Kansas, would have to leave or suffer the consequences."

17. *New York Tribune*, September 11, 1856.

McCracken took this to mean he “would have to leave or be killed.” He and his family quickly boarded a steamboat for St. Louis, where he remained until it was safe to return.¹⁸

At the end of his statement for the newspaper, McCracken reflected on what was happening to him and to Kansas.



There have been armed bands . . . composed of men from Georgia, South Carolina, and Missouri, and some who were residents of the Territory, who have been parading around our town and vicinity, stealing men’s horses, destroying private property and killing innocent and unoffending men. I was compelled to leave my home in Leavenworth on very short notice, having scarcely money enough to bring my family to this city. I have left some \$12,000 worth of property in goods and real estate, all left exposed to an infuriated mob. Such outrages as I have witnessed in Kansas call loudly on the citizens of the States for redress, and I hope such a state of things will not be permitted to go unpunished.¹⁹

McCracken’s experience, along with that of other freestaters expelled from Leavenworth in 1856, makes clear that violence was often at the center of settlers’ experiences in Bleeding Kansas. There has been a tendency to determine how violent Kansas was during this period by counting the number of killings. Certainly the count has been exaggerated, but this approach does not take into consideration the myriad kinds and levels of violence experienced by settlers in the territory.²⁰

To examine how violent it was in Kansas Territory we have to ask what kinds of acts were violent. I suggest that we recognize actions that intimidated people so much that they were constantly in fear as a form of violence. People in the territory called it “terrorism.” If men destroyed all of a person’s property, whether a commercial business or farm, making it difficult if not impossible for him to make a living and feed his family, could not that be considered violence—and violence not just against the owner of the farm or business but against the family? Such an act

A year before Leavenworth’s proslavery partisans moved against their free-state neighbors, an outspoken “abolitionist” by the name of the Reverend Pardee Butler was arrested in Atchison by a group of residents who deemed “the presence of such persons highly detrimental to the safety of our slave property.” According to the local Squatter Sovereign, “it was finally decided to place him on a raft composed of two logs firmly lashed together . . . and, having attached a flag [a portion of which is depicted above] to his primitive bark, emblazoned with mottoes indicative of our contempt for such characters, Mr. Butler was set adrift on the Missouri.” When Butler made an ill-advised return visit to Atchison in April 1856, he was “stripped, tarred, and covered with cotton.”

18. *New York Tribune*, September 11, 1856; see also Rita G. Napier, “William H. Russell: Proslavery Partisan and Western Entrepreneur,” in *John Brown to Bob Dole: Movers and Shakers in Kansas History*, ed. Virgil W. Dean (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 46–55.

19. *New York Tribune*, September 11, 1856; McCracken was “among the largest claimants,” according to William Hutchinson, “Claims for Losses of Kansas Settlers During the Troubles of 1855 and 1856,” *Kansas Historical Collections, 1897–1900* 6 (1900): 361; see also “Executive Minutes of Governor John W. Geary,” 543; William H. Coffin, “The Settlement of Friends in Kansas,” *Kansas Historical Collections, 1901–1902* 7 (1902): 338.

20. Watts, “How Bloody was Bleeding Kansas?,” 116–29.

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produced real fear in women responsible for feeding their children. When men stole everything they wanted from a store and then destroyed all the other contents, should we not consider both the theft and the malicious, almost aimless destruction of the family's food and furnishings acts of violence? The same reasoning would apply to the acts of men who went to farms and took the horses, the only method of travel people had available, and killed the oxen, used to plow the garden and field, making it nearly impossible for the farm family to survive. Theft of harvested crops or garden vegetables was an attack upon a woman's ability to care for her family and could easily cause the family to become destitute. The character and extent of the violence perpetrated by proslavery partisans in the furtherance of their goal to cleanse the city of all freestaters provides a sharp snapshot of the proslavery movement in the midst of civil war.

The story of the sack of Leavenworth and the expulsion of its free-state settlers also brings into focus the character of the free-state men of Leavenworth. Bleeding Kansas was much more complex and in some ways very different than Sara and Charles Robinson's stories conveyed. Leavenworth's antislavery citizens favored a state free of slavery and opposed the proslavery partisans even when their lives were threatened, their families endangered, and their livelihoods put at risk. To incorporate their stories into the larger narrative of Bleeding Kansas, to understand the event in all its complexity, we need to determine if there are other cases like theirs in Kansas. Studying the seventy-seven claims cases in Leavenworth will clarify the events of conflict in Leavenworth in 1856. It may also allow us to answer some other crucial questions.

For example, what was the relationship between free-state Leavenworth and free-state Lawrence? Why did the men of Lawrence not go to the aid of the Leavenworth men being robbed, attacked, driven away and, in some cases, killed? Were there any connections between the two groups at all? Were there other free-state groups we have not examined? Did they share the same definitions of liberty and freedom? Were their views of how to resolve the conflict compatible? What other crucial issues might have separated them?

We must examine the proslavery role more carefully as well. Clearly the proslavery goal in September 1856 was to cleanse the city of all those who did not support the expansion of slavery into Kansas. Why did the more levelheaded leaders such as William H. Russell, the co-owner of the largest government freighting business in the West and the leader of the vigilantes, not exert more control over the proslavery mobs? Was there no one to stop the more violent attacks or did no one care anymore?

These are just a few of the questions that might allow us to get a clearer understanding of why Leavenworth was sacked and how that action fits into the larger story of Bleeding Kansas. Local people called it a reign of terror in Leavenworth, perpetuated by terrorist groups of local proslavery men, Missourians, and other men from Southern states who were recruited to help "protect" the city and drive out freestaters. Murders were not prevalent, but those that did occur caused residents to believe mob threats and encouraged people to leave as

they were told. The sacking of the largest city in Kansas was a major event in Bleeding Kansas that has been missed or ignored by most historians and it and other important stories in the *Claims* need to be restored to history.

Bleeding Kansas is even more complex than we have thought. The sack of Leavenworth does not fit easily into the Robinsons' origin story. We need to break loose from that old narrative and create a story that integrates the freestaters of Leavenworth and their resistance with that of the antislavery movement in Lawrence and elsewhere around the territory—a narrative that depicts the story of Bleeding Kansas more accurately. That new story will both revise our understanding of the free-state movement in those vital days, and also will provide a different perspective on the proslavery party in 1856.

Certainly a fuller depiction of the men and women of Leavenworth will add a new dimension to our knowledge of the free-state movement. These folks meant to take full advantage of the business opportunities open to them as pioneers and residents of what was, at the time, Kansas's most urban locale. Leavenworth's Missouri River location offered easy access to a transportation system that linked them to major markets in the North and the East most of the year and offered the freedom to buy and sell wherever they wanted. These urban pioneers also recognized the strong possibilities provided by the less modern but well-established freighting business, which transported trade goods and army supplies into the new West. Add to that the money generated by the military at the fort and the excellent opportunities for speculation in town lots still available in 1855, and it is easy to see why these merchants flocked to Leavenworth. It is also easy to see why they stood for a free state, in which Leavenworth, as Samuel Norton put it, would be a place where education was valued, internal improvements were sought, real estate increased in value, and residents prospered.²¹ The sack of Leavenworth called all these expectations into question. The violence of the affair, as attested in the *Kansas Claims*, must have been especially frightening to the town's free-state population not only because of its terrible results, but also because the spiteful, malicious, and sometimes purposeless violence of some of the marauders made it impossible to predict what would happen next. That ability to intimidate is at the very heart of terrorism.

So, as we reflect on Kansas at 150 and look to the future, we must examine these and other under-utilized documents and consider the questions they raise. In answering these new questions we must avoid, however difficult, the old assumptions about Bleeding Kansas so that a more complex and complete Kansas identity—a more accurate origin story—can emerge. Our objective, of course, is always a better understanding of this place we call Kansas. KH



Reportedly designed by the territory's first governor, Andrew H. Reeder, the official Kansas territorial seal featured a pioneer settler opposite Ceres, the goddess of agriculture. Near the top is a banner reading "populi voce nata," a Latin motto translated "born by the voice of the people" or "born of the popular will." Either way, it makes obvious reference to the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which repealed the Missouri Compromise ban on slavery in the region and turned the decision on this critical issue over to the settlers in what became known as "popular sovereignty." The violence in places like Lawrence and Leavenworth made dangerously clear, however, that Kansans were not of one voice on the question.

21. *New York Tribune*, September 11, 1856.