

THE BATTLE OF THE SPURS.

An Historical Sketch by JAMES H. LOWELL.

THE story here given of this famous encounter, in January, 1859, on Straight creek, a few miles northwest of Holton, is largely from the reminiscences of Mrs. Julia A. Coffin, who lived in Holton at that time and remained a resident until the year 1912, when she joined a married daughter in Arkansas, and died there December 29, 1915, at the age of eighty-four years. The details here given, some of which will be new to the public eye, are in harmony with the excellent narrative of Mr. L. L. Kiene.¹ Mrs. Coffin met some of the actors in this drama at the time.

There came to Holton one night in January, 1859, three prairie schooners to stop till morning. The party in charge were given a meal in the hotel, and while there the cry of a child in one of the wagons led to the discovery that Negroes were in the wagons. They were mostly women and children, eleven in number. They were cared for, and the party left early in the morning. Holton was a station on Jim Lane's trail, as called, or underground railroad. The party in charge was John Brown, with Capt. Charles Whipple and J. H. Kagi. I will say here that Capt. Whipple in this narrative is no other than Aaron D. Stevens mentioned in other narratives. He bore the name of Whipple while in Kansas. He was a terror to the proslavery advocates, and both civil and military authorities were kept busy trying to catch him. He shared the same fate as old John Brown at Harper's Ferry. The fugitives had been taken from the farms of three persons in Missouri named Hicklan, Cruise and LaRue, and in the raid Cruise was killed. The weather was cold, and until they reached Topeka from Missouri, their thin clothing exposed the Negroes to much suffering. This was remedied there through aid procured by Daniel Sheridan, Colonel Ritchie and others.

On leaving Holton the party drove northwest, arriving at the log house of Albert Fuller on Straight creek, some six miles away, on January 29, 1859. The roads were bad, hard rains had set in, so they thought to stay at Fuller's overnight. A few hours after leaving Holton, a party of about thirty under command of John P. Wood, a deputy United States marshal, rode into Holton making inquiries as to the fugitives. During their stop a messenger was sent on by the Holtonites to give the fugitive party warning. The Fuller cabin was on the northeast quarter of section 10, township 6, range 15, and not on section 34 as given in other narratives. In the meantime the Negroes had been stowed safely in the cabin, and Captain Whipple had gone down stream to a convenient watering place and was watering his horse, when two of Wood's men came suddenly on him. "Have you seen any niggers around here?" asked one. "Yes," said Whipple, "there are some up in that cabin, I'll go over with you." On reaching the house, Whipple grabbed his rifle, saying: "If you move you're a dead man." The second man put spurs to his horse and made off.

Deputy Marshal Wood, waiting below, drew up his force in the shelter of the timber and sent a courier for reinforcements. Brown also was active and

1. "The Battle of the Spurs and John Brown's exit from Kansas," written by L. L. Kiene, will be found in *Kansas Historical Collections*, vol. 8, p. 443.

sent a man of the neighborhood named Wasson to Topeka for help. It was Sunday, but Colonel Ritchie and John Armstrong rallied a dozen men and by a forced march reached the field of battle January 31. Tom Anderson, a boy then, and a few others joined them. Meanwhile a deputy marshal, by threats and intimidation, secured a number of men in the country around. The man Whipple captured was paroled, on his promise to return to Holton, there to remain three days—a pledge he faithfully kept. The opposing forces were now in position for the conflict, with all the insignia of battle, the Negroes in the cabin; the cabin on one side protected by a steep bank of the river or stream. But, as might have been expected, John Brown, true to his instincts, did here, as always, the unusual thing. He had his human freight loaded up, declaring that he would cross the stream despite the high water.

"But," said one, "it is perilous to take the water here and a safe crossing is a few miles up stream." "I am going to stick to the Jim Lane road," said Brown, and on they went, a force of twenty-one men, Brown in the lead, confronting forty-five entrenched men on the opposite bank. The ford was reached and they were exposed to the fire of the marshal's force, but on through the stream, with undaunted nerve toward the position of the enemy, went Brown.

The spectacle of Brown leading his little army through the water, the wagons bringing up the rear, was enough. Out of their entrenched protection, Wood's men, whether by order or not, broke for their mounts and fled away to the safety of the protecting hills in one wild panic. The panoply of battle fell like a veil.

At the entrance to the farmhouse now on this battle site the passer-by will note a shaft made up of cobblestones cemented in form of a tapering monument, surmounted by a mail box, labeled "Fort Spurs."