A Little Satire on Emigrant Aid
Amasa Soule and the Descandum Kansas Improvement Company
Russell K. Hickman

The debate of 1854 over the Kansas-Nebraska measure aroused a furor throughout the country, and nowhere was the storm more violent than in New England. Extreme exasperation in that section with the "violation of a sacred pledge" in the Missouri compromise was a major factor in the launching, in the spring of the year, of the Massachusetts Emigrant Aid Company, and later of its successor, the New England Emigrant Aid Company. It was followed by a great host of organizations along similar lines, all with the immediate objective of "doing something" to put a quick stop to the onward march of the "slave power." Horace Greeley did his part in the New York Tribune to broadcast information concerning the new movement, while Henry Ward Beecher called upon all good men to resist the spread of the monster—slavery. Ministers of the gospel in large numbers throughout the New England states received the Emigrant Aid Company as a promising means toward the goal of freedom, and used their pulpits to promote the cause.

In July and August, 1854, when the first emigrant groups left for Kansas, under the auspices of the Aid Company, a great fanfare in the public press marked their progress toward the frontier. It was often stated that the company would be able to greatly help its emigrants in winning the soil of Kansas for the cause of freedom, as it was reputed to be a powerful organization of great resources. When the emigrant parties arrived on the border, however, they found things to be pretty much in a state of nature, and many were often greatly disappointed. This was particularly true of those who arrived in considerable numbers in the fall of the year, with high expectations concerning the preparations for their comfort by the company. That organization had made notable efforts toward this end, but was handicapped by a lack of time. Unfortunately its agents, in their eagerness to obtain emigrants, had enlisted many New Englanders or Easterners who were either fundamentally unfitted or unwilling to undergo the hard life of the frontier. When such persons arrived on the Kansas border, and realized that they must carve out their own homesteads by the "sweat of their brow," they often beat a hasty retreat to their more hospitable homeland. A
crescendo of unfriendly criticism then arose in New England and the East against the Emigrant Aid Company.1

With its mixture of climax and anticlimax, it was quite natural that 1854 should witness a burlesque upon the Kansas mania then prevalent. Of such a nature was the Descendum2 Kansas Improvement Company, which was founded early in November, at a meeting at Chelsea, Mass. The chief purpose of this organization was to enable his treasurer and chaplain, the "Reverend" Amasa Soule,3 to visit "Kansas and other places," in order to "civilize and otherwise astonish the inhabitants" by the "use of words, as stupendous and vast as the immensity of the country where they reside."4 The members of the organization advanced $100 toward his expenses, with the hope that he would overawe all whom he met "with the largest words known to lexicography or otherwise." The constitution which was adopted at this time provided that the annual meeting was to be held just before the treasurer left for Kansas, and made Soule perpetual treasurer.5

Amasa Soule left Boston November 7, 1854, apparently with Jerome B. Taft's company under Emigrant Aid auspices.6 After a slow trip up the treacherous Missouri, the party traveled overland from Kansas City to Lawrence, where they arrived November 22. Soule found this place to be a collection of "some fifty huts of different sizes,"7 offering poor accommodations for new arrivals,

1. Such complaints were particularly numerous in the early winter of 1854-1855, due to the number that returned to the East. In all justice to the Emigrant Aid Company, however, it should be pointed out that no other organization did as much to smooth the way for the settler. In the years after 1854 it was better prepared to receive settlers. The plan of artificially promoting emigration from the North had pronounced effects on the Missouri border. The emigration of large, organized groups led to the circulation of wild rumors that the aid companies were transporting the off-scourings of Eastern cities to Kansas, probably to vote in the territorial elections, and the return of the "dopey" seemed to corroborate the worst fears of the frontierman. The staking of claims in advance of the "Abolition hordes," and participation in the Kansas elections were then regarded as natural measures of self-defense by the citizen of western Missouri.

2. The term Descendum is probably a corruption of the word decent, which may be defined as meaning to discourse fully and at large. As a cure-all for the Kansas troubles, talk was perhaps the thing least needed, which makes the burlesque all the more appropriate.

3. The term "Reverend" is probably used here in a humorous sense—Proceedings of the first annual meeting at Chelsea, November 1, 1854, Chelsea (Mass.) Telegraph and Pioneer, November 4, in the "Thomas H. Webb Scrap Books" (library of Kansas State Historical Society), v. II, p. 7. The family biographies of Amasa Soule, and his son, Silas Stillman, make no mention of the elder Soule as a minister of the gospel. Amasa Soule was born at Woolwich, Maine, in 1804. Due to the death of his father, he became a cooper's apprentice while still very young, and attended evening school at the same time. Soule moved to Bath, Maine, where in 1831 he married Sophia Lowe. He later moved to Freeport, Maine, and about 1850 to Chelsea, Mass. (Manuscript biography, probably written by a daughter, Emily N. Soule, or Annie J. Proutin.)

4. Quoting from the proceedings, which are given on p. 345. The Descendum documents may be intended primarily as a take-off upon Soule, rather than the Kansas mania.


7. Ibid.
particularly in inclement weather, and he blamed the Emigrant Aid Company for promoting a false impression as to the new settlement. Soule arrived at a time when the dispute concerning the Lawrence townsite was at its height, with a scramble in progress for good claims in the vicinity. He was much impressed by the prevalence of the “grab game,” and the “jumping” of claims, and drifted southward some eight miles to the cabin of Stephen Ogden, an early emigrant from Massachusetts, near Coal creek. Soule took a claim here and built a log cabin in the timber near the creek, where he was joined in the fall of 1855 by his wife and children. In 1856 the entire family suffered from chills and fever, and Soule’s wife and daughters returned to Maine, where they remained three years.8

In 1855 Soule became a member of the Palmyra town company, which later granted land for the founding of Baker University.9 He was an ardent Abolitionist and admirer of William Lloyd Garrison, and likewise a strong advocate of temperance and reform in general.10 He supported the Free-State cause and later became a member of the Republican party, serving as a delegate from Douglas county to the Leavenworth constitutional convention of 1858.11 In December, 1859, he was elected from the eighth district (Douglas and Johnson counties) to the legislature of the new state government to be organized under the Wyandotte constitution.12 Unfortunately, Soule never lived to see the actual admission of Kansas into the union. He died in September, 1860, and the state legislature to which he had been elected did not convene until March, 1861.13

The sending of Soule to Kansas appears to have been the only activity of the Descendium Kansas Improvement Company. Moti-

8. Manuscript biography of Silas Stillman Soule, probably written by a woman member of the family.
10. Manuscript biography of Amasa Soule.
13. A son, Silas Stillman Soule, distinguished himself for his part in the rescue of Dr. John Doy, and for a similar attempt to rescue John Brown’s associates from the prison at Harper’s Ferry. Silas Soule took an active part in the struggles in Kansas, and kept the camp in the best of humor with song and story, and his unusual power of imitation of Irish and German characters. In 1860 he joined the rush to Pike’s Peak, and later he was an officer in a Colorado regiment. While in this position he refused to obey the order of Colonel Chivington to join in the massacre of a band of Arapahoe and Cheyenne Indians at Sand Creek in November, 1864. Early in 1865 he became acting provost marshal of Colorado. Soon after this Soule was killed, perhaps because of his refusal to cooperate with the military authorities. (MS. biography, written by the Soule family. (See the biography of Edward Wanshear Wynkoop, Kansas Historical Collections, v. XIII, pp. 76-77.) William L. G. Soule, another son of Amasa, was city marshal of Lawrence at the time of the Quantrill raid. For a description of his part in that tragic affair, along with that of his sister and mother, see O. W. McAllaster, “My Experience in the Lawrence Raid,” Kansas Historical Collections, v. XII, pp. 401-404.)
vated by humor and satire, the organization thus played a unique role in ridiculing the Kansas aid movement.

The following documents are the chief sources of information concerning the Descandum company and illustrate the jocular nature of its organizers. The third document, the letter of Amasa Soule from Lawrence, is a penetrating account of what he found there in 1854, as viewed by an Easterner.

**First Annual Meeting of the Descandum Kansas Improvement Company**

The meeting was held in Chelsea, Mass., on November 1, 1854. E. W. Arnold served as president of the gathering, T. P. Cheever, W. O. Haskell and T. H. Carruth acted as vice-presidents, and W. E. P. Haskell served as secretary.

A constitution was adopted, and a subscription of money received. The sum of $100 was given to the chaplain, Mr. Soule, who was scheduled to leave for Kansas November 7.

Resolved—That as members of the Descandum Kansas Improvement Company, and at its first annual meeting, we congratulate mankind, that the immense region of territory known as "Kansas and other places," is soon to be visited by the Rev. Mr. Soule, and that the vocabulary of that infant state is at once to be amplified and expanded with the largest words known to lexicography or otherwise.

Resolved—That the treasurer of this association, whether we regard his personal beauty, his ministerial dignity, his universal experience of human nature generally, and his equally subtle and magnificent spread of expression, possesses qualifications for this missionary enterprise, which would diffuse a paleness over the cheek of the Great American Traveler, and agitate into hysterical admiration the editor of the Habess Corpus.

Resolved—That as the sense of the stockholders of this company residing in Chelsea, the chaplain of Old No. 1 be requested to address the virgin inhabitants of the unsophisticated soil of "Kansas and other places," that he particularly inculcate to them, as provided in our constitution, the use of words, as stupendous and vast as the immensity of the country where they reside.

Resolved—That the appearance of Amasa Soule in the fields of "Kansas and other places," will be extremely cautionary to anti-negro sympathizers, sovereignists, unabolitionists, wild cats, catamounts, etc., and that to all such persons his roll of words must inevitably be—annihilation, devastation, determination, depopulation, expurgation, extermination, and abomination!!!

Resolved finally—That the idea of A. R. Soule "putting" off on this tour, without "heading" back again shortly or before, is not to be mentioned even to the "chaste ears." 14

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DESCENDUM KANSAS IMPROVEMENT COMPANY—CONSTITUTION

Art. 2. The object shall be to raise funds to enable the chaplain of Old No. 1 to visit Kansas and other places, for the purpose of civilizing and otherwise enlightening them, and he, the said chaplain, shall be perpetual treasurer.

Art. 4. The treasurer shall receive all the cash paid in, and dispose of it about right, and when a sufficient amount shall be raised, he shall put, with all comfortable speed, for Kansas and other places, and commence forthwith to civilize and otherwise astonish the inhabitants.

Art. 5. Any person of fair reputation, and decent wealth may become a member by taking one or more shares (not exceeding fifteen hundred) and paying therefor one dollar per share, and shall receive an equal and just dividend . . . , and in addition to which, each member shall have his name engraved with the largest kind of jack-knife upon the largest tree in all Kansas.

Annual meeting shall be just before the treasurer shall head for Kansas.

A. SOULE, Treasurer of the Descendum
Kansas Imp. Co.15

KANSAS LETTER OF AMA(110,550),(991,946)(110,550),(991,946)

LAWRENCE (Kansas Territory), Nov. 25, 1854.

I am now upon the soil of Kansas, where I arrived two days since after a travel of fifteen days, and at a distance of more than eighteen hundred miles from Chelsea. . . . We left Boston, as you recollect, on Tuesday, the 7th inst., and on Saturday following, we arrived at St. Louis, where we went immediately on board a steamer. . . . When we started from St. Louis, we began to think we were near the end of our journey; but the most tedious business that I ever engaged in was that same passage up the Missouri—that river of mud, crooks and shoals. The water being very low, we were subjected, some days, almost hourly, to being grounded upon the sand bars, that are continually shifting, so that no pilot can clear them. We were until Sunday following reaching Kansas City, a distance of 450 miles. This is a place of some importance in the estimation of the people about it. But in New England it would not make much of a show. . . . We found accommodations at a hotel, where we fared as well, probably, as we should at any place on the route, after leaving Michigan. The manner of living at the West being of that kind not suited to my taste, especially in Missouri. We left Kansas on Monday noon for the territory. . . . We hired two teams to haul our luggage about fifty miles, for which we paid one cent per pound, we traveling on foot.16 We could have procured special conveyance at one dollar and

15. Document of the Kansas State Historical Society.
16. The Thomas H. Webb handbooks for emigrants to Kansas, 1855, list the cost of transportation, for adults to Kansas City, as $40, with a slight reduction in summer. Meals to St. Louis were extra. More than one disgruntled emigrant who went to Kansas late in 1854 or early in 1855 wrote back that he could have done so cheaper and better on his own "hook" than under the auspices of the Emigrant Aid Company. Some blamed this upon the inability or inexperience of the agents who led the parties. If we admit the truth of this allegation, it is still probable that a lack of familiarity with frontier life was an important factor in the complaints.
fifty cents each, but we should have been nearly as long on the road as we were on foot. We were two nights upon the road, both of which we camped out, which gave the most of us the first taste of pioneer life. . . . We arrived in what is called Lawrence about noon of Wednesday, this being called a city. . . . Sufficient to say, there are some two hundred people located here, doing about nothing. They have some fifty huts of different sizes, some built of logs, some of turf, and others of poles, covered with grass,—the most of them uncomfortable, except in pleasant weather. They have one large camp, which they call a boarding house, where they feed some fifty or sixty human beings at two fifty per week, and in another camp some eighty feet long, they allow them to sleep, provided they can get any sleep. They lie upon the ground covered with such bedding as they may happen to have; those who have none go without, and when the weather is cold they are anything but comfortable. The principal food at this hotel is bread and molasses, with fresh beef fixed up (not cooked) in a manner that I shall not describe. The most who come seem to meet with sad disappointment, having got the impression from the Boston agents that everything needed is prepared for their reception on their arrival. I think the New England Aid Company have incurred a tremendous responsibility, in encouraging families to migrate hither at this season of the year. Women and children arrive here exhausted by travel. . . . You can imagine their condition on their arrival, with no other accommodations than those described.

The next question that suggests itself is, “what to do after they arrive?” Well, the first thing is to look out for a claim, . . . and here comes the tug of war. Every claim within a day’s travel of Lawrence is taken up, and, upon the rivers and streams, as far as can be heard from, not a vacant claim is to be found; for bear in mind that no timber, of any description, is to be found anywhere else, and but very little on the streams, and that of an ordinary quality. The soil, I think, is equal to any that the world can boast of, and the beauty of the country, as nature has left it, is unsurpassed. It is what is termed rolling prairie, . . . every acre of which is level enough for cultivation, and the soil seemingly of uniform richness. But how a settler, without means, can commence operations upon a claim from ten to twenty miles distant from materials for building and fencing, is what I cannot comprehend. Any person coming here to succeed, even tolerably well, must come with means to procure food until he can realize a crop, and also to furnish a team sufficient to haul timber for building, and breaking up of the soil, the

17. For a good description of Lawrence at this time, see the letter of Mrs. C. J. H. Nichols of Vermont, who went to Kansas with the fourth Emigrant Aid party.—Andrews, op. cit., p. 316.

18. Compare the following account by a member of the first spring party, which left Boston March 13, 1855, under the leadership of Charles Robinson.—Zion’s Herald & Western Journal, dated April 6, in “Kansas Territorial Clippings,” v. 1, p. 104 et seq.}

"In consequence of the exaggerated reports circulated in the East, by those who have most emphatically proved themselves to be either fools or knaves, hundreds are flocking to the country unappriied and unprepared to meet the privations to which they are exposed: the consequence is, that many fine families in comfortable circumstances will be ruined—begarred."

The writer continues that not one in a thousand came prepared to build a stone house. All depended upon timber, but the masses could do little, for lack of mills. The Aid Company had two mills, operating at exhorbitant rates, but their output, for months ahead, was spoken for by previous settlers. Hence many were forced to build sod houses. The mechanic had been told, that here was a paradise, but when he arrived, frequently could find no employment. The land not being surveyed, claims were less valuable than supposed, and many were consequently discouraged from making improvements. Provisions of all kinds were high in price, and scarce in quantity.
first ploughing of which is exceedingly hard. After all this is accomplished, I think he may be considered independent, according to my idea of independence.

There are two or three obstacles in the way of settlers locating here, one of which is the monopoly claimed by what is called the first and second New England Cos. They have selected a site and laid out a prospective city two miles square, and each member claiming, in addition to his city lots, one hundred and sixty acres, which, with the city site, includes all the timber for many miles. One fourth of the city property is granted to the “New England Emigrant Aid Company,” in consideration of erecting a mill here, which may possibly account for the interest they take in inducing emigrants to locate in this vicinity.20 One other obstacle is, the location of what is called the “Indian reserves,” which includes the best of the territory that I have yet seen. The Shawnee reserve . . . is generally well wooded, and the most inviting tract of country, in my opinion, that can be imagined.21 Upon the opposite side of the river is the “Delaware reserve,” . . . said to be of equal quality. . . . As far as can be seen from this side, it is heavily timbered, and indeed possesses all, or nearly all, the valuable timber that I have seen or heard of in the territory. But Yankee avarice has its eye upon it, and unblushingly declares that the Delawares shall be dispossessed of it for the benefit of Christian civilization.22 I, in my verdancy, imagined that in a journey of nearly two thousand miles, I could out-travel the selfishness of my race; but that spirit I found was more than a match for steam engines, as far as speed is concerned. Instead of forming a brotherhood, where the good of the whole is the great object of each, I find the grab game to be the recognized system. I hear daily the complaints of claims being “jumped,” . . . and then rejumped and rejumped, if you will allow the term, until the jumping of claims would seem almost to be reduced to a system.23 From the time

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20. In the spring of 1855 the property stake of the Emigrant Aid Company in Lawrence was reduced to ten of the 230 shares of town stock, of which two shares were held in trust for a university. In 1857 the company owned real estate, hotels, mills, or other valuable property in Kansas City, Lawrence, Topeka, Manhattan, Osawatomie, Quindaro, Waukesaa, Burlington, and Atchison, and later invested in Chaffin and Batcheller. The Aid Company hoped ultimately to realize a profit on this investment in the cause of freedom.

21. In 1854 the Shawnee Indians, by treaty with the United States, greatly reduced their large reservation south of the Kansas river, thereby throwing open to settlement that portion west of their new reserve. The new line of their reserve fell a few miles east of Lawrence. Soule apparently refers to their diminished reserve, which was then not open to settlement, but which was illegally squatted upon by a few settlers.

22. In 1854 the Delawares also greatly diminished their reserve, the ceded portion to be held in trust by the United States, until offered at public sale. These trust lands near Fort Leavenworth were not open to settlement in 1854, but this was disregarded by the settlers, who speculatively occupied them. The commissioner of Indian affairs, Meehan, made a fight to the finish against this occupation, but failed. The staking off of these lands encouraged settlers to occupy or encroach upon other holdings of the Indians throughout Kansas, even though not ceded by the treaties of 1854, and particularly the nearby Delaware reserve. Charles Robinson became interested in these lands as a promising speculation, and as early as 1854 bought legs for the Emigrant Aid Company from the Delawares. Like Governor Bueler, Robinson also interested himself in the valuable Kansas half-breed lands along the Kansas river. Concerning the speculations of Robinson, see the article by Paul Wallace Gates, entitled “A Fragment of Kansas Land History,” The Kansas Historical Quarterly, v. VI (August, 1897), pp. 227-240.

23. This comment may be a trifle strong for 1854, but claim troubles became very common by 1856 and 1857. The settlers organized claim clubs to obviate such difficulties, until the arrival of the surveys and law and order, but these organizations apparently did not include all the settlers, and functioned imperfectly, particularly in partially settled areas. It was also difficult for new settlers to tell what land was already claimed, especially when the claimant did not reside on his claim, or had not properly improved it. In this claim technique the Easterners, being less familiar with frontier customs, were more likely to become involved in disputes with previous claimants.
I landed at the City of Kansas, I have been so ill as to almost unfit me for anything like exertion. . . . [Soule here states at some length that the continued exposure has brought no improvement.] I am now at the cabin of your citizen, S. Ogden, who has taken a claim some eight miles from Lawrence, and has erected a comfortable cabin. . . . I have found this the most comfortable lodgement since I arrived in the territory. . . .

[Soule states he will try to be present at Lawrence at the election of November 29, 1854, and vote.] But what the qualifications for electors are, I am not informed; at any rate, there will be strenuous exertions made by the people from Missouri to carry it to suit their feelings. Numbers have already arrived here for that purpose, assuming to have claims which, if valid, will probably allow them to vote. I think the indications are strong that a proslavery man will be returned.23 . . .

In conclusion, allow me to say, that among the last that I forget, shall be my friends in Chelsea. Descandum.24

23. John W. Whitfield, the Proslavery candidate, was elected territorial delegate to Congress.