Letters of David R. Cobb, 1858-1864
Pioneer of Bourbon County
Edited by David Glenn Cobb

I. Introduction

David Ransom Cobb was born at Saxton's River, Vt., January 2, 1824. Family records do not indicate when he started West. He stopped for a time in Wisconsin, where his brother, Judson M. Cobb, the recipient of the first of these letters, then lived. David R. Cobb, like many others, was interested in taking up a good farming claim in the new territory. Eventually he located six miles west of Fort Scott and one-half mile north of the town of Marmiton, which had been incorporated early in 1858.1

David R. Cobb was always interested in public affairs, and held many offices. He was the first superintendent of schools for Bourbon county (1859), county clerk (1860), probate judge (1861-1863), a representative in the state legislature (1863-1864), postmaster at Marmiton (1865-1866), and county commissioner (1868-1870). He was active in local and state Republican party affairs. In the Civil War he served in the militia during the Price raid. He died at his farm, October 19, 1891.

In the first of these letters, Cobb tells of his arrival in Kansas territory. In it he also describes an unusual encounter between Free-Staters under James Montgomery and federal troops from Fort Scott. The other letters throw some light upon the social activities of the members of the 1864 legislature. The originals of these letters are in the possession of D. R. Cobb's grandson, who has written this introduction and edited the letters for The Kansas Historical Quarterly.

II. The Letters

Mapleton Bourbon Co. K. T. Apr 25th 1858

My Dear Brother Judd

You will doubtless be looking for something from me eer this. Well I should have written last week but the severe rains of Saturday and Sunday week swelled the streams so that it was impossible to get to the office or for the mails to [go] out.

We arrived at Ft. Scott and to Mapleton on friday found the people glad to see us.

1. His claim was located on the W½ and NE¼ NW¼ sec. 31, T. 25 S., R. 24 E., comprising 120 acres.—Records of the General Land Office, v. 184, p. 55, now in the National Archives, Washington, D. C.
We left Kansas City on Monday two weeks tomorrow with a two horse team loaded with provisions that Chap bought. So we put our valises aboard. The roads were very bad, and weather rainy. The team refused to work and we put up at Westport (Mo.) for the night—found another team in the morning, and took up our line of march walking and riding alternately. As to the country along the State line—tis somewhat broken for some 12 or 15 miles from the river, with small prairies and some timber of an inferior character. Then we came to some very good land and beautiful scenery, well located farms and good ranges—farther out the Prairies are larger with less timber but pretty well watered—couldn't say how it would be in dry time.

There is a large strip of country, say from 30 to 50 miles from the river, where the prairies are too large and a good deal less timber than I should wish to see and in all probability will not be settled up at present.

Passing along in the vicinity of the Marais des Cygnes or Osage river the country is more diversified, finer tillage lands, more timber, pleasanter country—and in fact a much better place to make a home.

The timber in this country is only to be found on the streams, and is not generally in abundance though in some localities there is sufficient for all ordinary purposes.

Passing the Marais des Cygnes (pro Marie de Sene) (Swan river) the land is good, scenery pleasant, and will in all probability support a dense population, and that e'er long too—most all the land is claimed up now, good claims now selling from 2[00] to $500, for prairie; and from 300 to $1000 for timber claims. The timber is chiefly Hickory, Oak, Black walnut, Sycamore—a little bass wood, Maple & cotton wood—Some of the trees are very large, say 5, 6, & 7 ft in diameter—but generally they are not overgrown—The Streams rise to a great height during the Spring and fall rains, overflowing the banks and covering the bottoms—There could be found mill privileges in almost any of these rivers if it was possible to find a good site where a mill would be safe in flood time—I was at Stream Mill yesterday when at a freshet this Spring the saw was covered with water, and now the water is some 25 to 30 ft lower.


3. Horace Greeley was impressed with the beauty of this region a year later.—Caldwell, Martha B., "When Horace Greeley Visited Kansas in 1859," *The Kansas Historical Quarterly*, v. 19, p. 120.
The Soil is what is called a limestone soil—water is found on low and high prairie at from 10 to 25 ft. Springs of water are more common than in Wis[consin].

The land on the Marmaton 4 is pretty good—some pleasant locations, and good farms—we tramped three or four days without finding anything that suited us exactly—and then came up to this place some twelve miles on the little Osage, 5 and 14 miles from the State line.

This place 6 (that is if it should ever be one) is on the north side of the river, on a beautiful site—the prairie sloping in every direction, good timber in close proximity and surrounded by a very fertile country and is well located and will be a town of some importance if nothing should happen to prevent.

I should have first described [the] general appearance of the country and will do so now—The south side of the river 7 is bluff and broken, with here and there a bold mound raising its lofty head overlooking the prairie, and between these mounds are to be found the most fertile farms in the country—on the north side banks are lower and the prairie and bottoms (one should hardly know the difference) as they recede, rise gradually, till a mile or two back they reach the high prairie which resembles in appearance the table lands of Mexico giving a variety of scenery unsurpassed for beauty and grandeur in the Western country—In fact Judd this is the most beautiful country I ever saw—that is a wild country—If the Lord is willing and nothing prevents I shall set my stakes here.

As to the troubles and mess at Ft. Scott 8 and in this vicinity you will have doubtless have heard all the particulars before this will reach you—but will say that I was within a mile or two of the battle on the Yellow Paint last Wednesday— 9 saw the troops just before the collision—I happened on this wise Capt M—[Montgomery] of the Jay Hawkers as they are called, who are a self constituted com-

4. The Marmaton river rises in Allen county, flows east across Bourbon county, and joins the Little Osage in Vernon county, Missouri.
5. The Little Osage rises in Anderson and Allen counties, flows east across the northern part of Bourbon county, and joins the Marais des Cygnes in Vernon county, Missouri.
7. The Little Osage, near Mapleton.
8. Fort Scott was the scene of much friction between Proslavery and Free-State elements at this time.—Goodlander, op. cit., pp. 22–24; Robley, op. cit., pp. 93–94, 106–107.
9. This would be April 31, the date of Montgomery’s encounter with the soldiers.—Andrews-Cutler, op. cit., p. 1068; Robley, op. cit., pp. 102–104. Wilder, D. W., Annales of Kansas (Topeka, 1869), p. 216, is in error when he dates this fight late in March; so, also, is Sanborn, F. B., “Notes on the Territorial History of Kansas,” The Kansas Historical Collections, v. XIII, p. 290. Yellow Paint creek, or South Fork of Marmaton river, rises in southwest Bourbon county, joining the Marmaton about nine miles southwest of Fort Scott.—U. S. Geological Survey, Fort Scott Sheet.
pany of free state regulators—some 17 passed up the creek from Marmaton¹⁰ last Wednesday morning ordering all the proslaveryites¹¹ to leave the country immediately on point of death—also taking from them their horses, [and] arms—the proslaveryites despatched a messenger to the Ft for a company of troops to take them—So the Marshall¹² ordered out Capt Anderson with 20 regulars—they followed on their track passing by the Mill¹³ where the free state folks were holding a county convention, they soon surprised some 14 of the Jay Hawkers raising their horses—the latter mounted and fled for the timber, but the troops pressed them so hard that they were obliged to turn upon them and defend themselves—the J. Hs had just time to get a good position, having passed a little creek skirted with timber—they called upon the troops to halt, which was disregarded and they (the J. Hs) fired upon them, or rather six of them did, making in all 14 shots—the troops also fired, but having nothing but sabers & revolvers did but little execution wounding only one man—¹⁴ While the troops lost one man and two or three wounded, and two or three horses killed—The troops displayed a white rag, and came down and asked the privilege of carrying off their wounded—which was granted—The troops sent for reinforcements and the Jay Hawkers left—Such are the facts of the Battle on the Yellow Paint—

Yours

David

TOPEKA KAN. Jan'y 16, 1864

Miss Barrett;¹⁵

Dear Madam;...I reached Leavenworth on the night of the second day, cold, and disgusted with staging in mid winter. But the city was gay and joyous. There was in full operation the Grand Fair for the benefit of the invalid soldier. That night was the last.

¹⁰ Site of old Marmiton (or Marmaton), once the county seat of Bourbon county, was abandoned in 1855 when buildings were moved to a new location on a railroad less than a mile north.—Andrews-Cutler, op. cit., pp. 1071, 1086, 1106.

¹¹ Montgomery was avenging a recent raid by Missourians on the Little Osage. He avoided direct encounters with federal troops, this fight of April 21 being perhaps the single exception.—ibid., p. 1088; The Kansas Historical Collections, v. XIII, pp. 290, 291. See also, Dictionary of American Biography, v. XIII, p. 97.

¹² The Deputy United States Marshal John A. Little, under whose orders had been placed the two companies of the First cavalry, commanded by Capt. Geo. T. Anderson, which were ordered to Fort Scott from Fort Leavenworth in February, 1858.—The Kansas Historical Collections, v. V, p. 821; Robley, op. cit., p. 101.

¹³ Probably Ed Jones' new-mill, near Marmiton, often a rendezvous for Free-Staters. A meeting was held there April 21, 1858.—Andrews-Cutler, op. cit., p. 1088.

¹⁴ John Denton. The soldier killed was Alvin Satterwait.—Robley, op. cit., p. 108.

¹⁵ Frances A. Barrett was born at Alden, Erie county, N. Y., June 9, 1825. She came to Kansas territory in 1859 with her parents, who located near Marmiton, in Bourbon county. She taught the first school in Marmiton. On May 9, 1864, she was married to David R. Cobb. She died at Fort Scott, March 5, 1901.
Everybody with their wife and friend was out, to say nothing of the belles and sweethearts. Twas a brilliant success. Lotteries, mock auction and games lent their charms to drain to the dregs the pockets of the visitors.

Leavenworth is the Gotham of Kansas. Tis commercial to all intents and purposes. The amusements of a city like those of a family indicate their taste, their education. A Mrs. Walters is their beau ideal of an actress, a prima donna whose excellence consists in her half disguised (I was going to say) vulgarity, but modesty would be a prettier word. But she caters to her audience, and receives her reward. It has its thousand advantages, its virtues, and its faults. We leave it and pass on.

The appearance of the country between Leavenworth and this city is perhaps more picturesque than with us—more rugged and broken in places, and then again broader, smoother prairies, surrounded with high bluffs in the distance advancing into the prairies as promontories to the sea—all add beauty and grandeur to the scenery.

We come to Kansas' noblest river, and cross the stream where a boat unites opposite shores

While the crescent moon's charmed ray
Kisses the waters where it lay;

and soon the light from an hundred houses tells us we are near the State Capital.

Topeka has grown some within the last year. The Capitol buildings add somewhat to the appearance of the principal street, Kansas Avenue, and is in fact an ornament to the place. There has been also several fine residences built, all worthy of the citizens.

The organization of the House, the caucusing for petty officers would be uninteresting I presume, so I omit. The Message of the Governor will appear in the Monitor probably, though I could hardly recommend its perusal.

The Sabbath here seems more like civilization—the good old Bell chimes forth its notes of peace, of rest, and love. The people are not a church going people if I was to judge from those I saw out last Sabbath and today (the last part of this letter is written on Sunday) The preaching in this city is of a rather higher order than what we usually get at Marmiton, singing passable perhaps—not so tonight.

The Ball has just been put in motion—I mean the soiries, sociables, etc. Yesterday the Ladies of the Presbyterian Church
asked us for the Hall for the purpose of holding a festival next
Tuesday evening a week. . . .

The Session is destined to drag itself out to its full length, fifty
days. Well it will soon wear away, and as I am on two Commit-
tees,\textsuperscript{16} one of which is quite an important one and the other a very
laborious one I shall be quite busy.

The weather is moderating—the snow almost all gone. . . .

Sincerely yours,

David R. Cobb

TOPEKA, KAN. Jan’y. 27th 1864

Miss Barrett,

Dear Friend;

Your very kind letter came safely by todays mail, and was
read with a great deal of pleasure. . . .

Topeka is quite gay this winter, and will be while the Legislature
is in session. Tuesday evening the first grand entertainment was
given by the ladies of the Presbyterian society. They have a peculiar
way of advertising their festivals; they will ask the House for the
use of their Hall for the purpose of holding a festival, well knowing
that about half of the members will oppose it—the resolution will
cause discussion and as by rule it must be laid over till the next day,
when it will come up again and pass.

Our Hall\textsuperscript{17} is about 45 by 80 feet, the Speaker’s stand at the mid-

\textsuperscript{16} David R. Cobb was in Topeka as representative of the 52nd district, one of four in
Bourbon county, in the Kansas house in the sessions of 1863 and 1864. He was a member of
the committees on ways and means and engrossed bills in the 1864 house.—House Journal
Kansas, 1864, pp. 72, 73; Holley, op. cit., pp. 178, 183; House Journals for 1863
and 1864, passim.

\textsuperscript{17} The rooms occupied by the state legislature prior to the completion of the east wing
of the new capitol, were in the upper stories of buildings on the west side of Kansas avenue,
Miss Barrett:

Dear Friend; The few weeks passed have been so thickly crowded with events, both political and social, that for a pastime for myself, I attempt to reproduce them in my feeble way, hoping they may be a source of pleasure to you.

The Senatorial question which has been before the Legislature for several weeks was discussed by some in a very humorous style, was the cause of a great deal of merriment and fun—and if the Grim Chieftain’s ears did not burn while the subject was under discussion then the old saying failed to prove true in one instance. The result you have no doubt heard. The Hon. Thos. Carney was elected by a two thirds vote. The opposition refusing to vote at all.18

Last night (Friday) the Senator elect, in honor of his election gave a Banquet at the Representative Hall, to which the members of both branches of the Legislature, distinguished strangers and eminent citizens were invited with ladies. After supper, the guests repaired to the Hall where sparkling Catawba gave point to wit, studied sarcasm, and strains of eloquence held a large audience in the highest enjoyment till past two o’clock in the morning. Oh! how I wish you might have been here.— Everything passed off pleasantly—all seemed to get their full share of the pleasures of the occasion. I should have said that the Hon. Gov. and lady received the guests in regular Court style. There was a dance going on at the same time in an adjacent Hall, where those who preferred tripped the fantastic toe to music’s sweetest strains till morning hours.

Socials, and festivals have been the order of the nights for the last few weeks—have attended some though not many. . . .

The weather has been most delightful since I have been here. You are having a very pleasant time for keeping school since the cold weather. . . .

Yours truly,

David R. Cobb.

18. On February 9, 1864, the legislature chose Governor Carney as United States senator for the term beginning March 4, 1865. There was some opposition to this action on the grounds that the next legislature was the proper body for choosing a senator. Governor Carney, however, never claimed nor took the senatorial office.—House Journal, Kansas, 1864, pp. 280-286; Dictionary of American Biography, v. III, p. 866.