A Footnote to the Pottawatomie Massacre, 1856

Edited by Robert W. Johanssen

I. INTRODUCTION

On the night of Saturday, May 24, 1856, a group of armed men led by Old John Brown appeared among the settlements near Dutch Henry’s crossing, where the California road crossed Pottawatomie creek in eastern Kansas. Five of the settlers, James P. Doyle and his two sons William and Drury, Allen Wilkinson, and William Sherman, all Proslavery in their politics, were summoned by the group from their cabins. The next day their mutilated bodies were discovered, lying where they had fallen, murdered in cold blood.¹

Allen Wilkinson was the most prominent of the five victims. He was postmaster for the settlers along the creek, a member of the Kansas territorial legislature and a part-time member of the territory’s judicial branch. The following letters, written by a brother-in-law of Allen Wilkinson, Henry James, describe Wilkinson’s situation along the creek and the details of his murder. A native of Illinois, James had contemplated moving to Kansas territory. He visited Wilkinson late in April, 1856, just a month before the massacre and was favorably impressed with the country. During this visit Wilkinson transferred his land claim to James.

After the massacre Mrs. Wilkinson abandoned the land and returned to her former home in Tennessee. James gave up his own plans to move to Kansas and the land fell into the hands of a third party. Mrs. Wilkinson returned to Kansas in the fall of 1857 in an attempt to reinstate her claim to the land but was not successful. In the second of the two letters, James urged Sen. Stephen A. Douglas to help secure a grant of land for Wilkinson’s widow and children in compensation for the land lost in eastern Kansas. He also used the opportunity to present his own case for a similar grant.

The first letter has been reprinted from the file of the Alton (Ill.) Weekly Courier in the collection of the Illinois State Historical Library, Springfield; the second is a part of the “Stephen A. Douglas

¹ The Pottawatomie murders and their aftermath have been exhaustively studied by James C. Mains in his John Brown and the Legend of Fifty-six (Philadelphia, 1942).
Footnote to the Pottawatomie Massacre

Papers" in the University of Chicago Library and is here reprinted with the permission of that institution. The original spelling of the second letter has been retained.

II. The Letters

Greenfield, Ill. June 16 [1856]

To the Editor of the Alton Courier:

Dear Sir: I see in the Courier of last week that you deny the statement made by the Missouri Republican, relating to the murder of Allen, [sic] Wilkinson and others, on Pottawatomie Creek, Kansas Territory. In order that you and your readers may be convinced of the truth of that statement, will you be so kind as to publish the enclosed letter. The following is a copy:

Shermanville, K. T., May 28.\(^2\)

Henry James: Respected "Sir": I sit down, by the request of Mrs. Wilkinson, to inform you of her sad bereavement. On Saturday night, the 24th inst., they were aroused by some persons demanding admittance. They requested Mr. Wilkinson to dress himself. Four men, to them unknown, asked him if he would surrender?—He replied he would. Mrs. Wilkinson asked them to let him stay with her; told them that she was sick; but they gave no heed to her entreaties. She then asked them what they were going to do with him. They replied he is our prisoner; when two of them went before and two behind him, and conveyed him away, which was the last time she ever saw him. The next day he was found in some bushes murdered. Four others shared the same fate. It appears that eight men went to the house of Mr. Doyle, and enticed him and two of his sons out of the house. At the entreaties of Mrs. Doyle they left her youngest son, about 15 years of age.—They next came here, and then went on to Henry Sherman's and called out four men, inquired their names, and took William Sherman off with them. Dutch Henry was not at home. A meeting is being held to-day to prevent further outrages, and to take measures to ferret out the perpetrators of the deed.\(^3\) Mrs. Wilkinson has been sick with the measles. They turned Sabbath day, and she is doing as well as could be expected under the circumstances. The neighbors will do all in their power to make her comfortable. She wishes you to come on as soon as you receive this letter, or write to her and let her know if you cannot come, as she wishes to settle her affairs to leave as soon as possible.

Yours respectfully,
In behalf of Mrs. Wilkinson.

Mr. Allen Wilkinson was a brother-in-law of mine. He moved to

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2. Shermanville was located a few miles southwest of Osawatomie at the ford of Pottawatomie creek known as Dutch Henry's crossing, on land occupied by Henry Sherman. Apparently no town was ever laid out, although a post office was established there in 1855. Allen Wilkinson had been the postmaster.

3. The indignation meeting of the settlers along Pottawatomie creek was actually held on May 27, indicating that the letter, although dated May 28, was probably written the day before. After denouncing the massacre, the settlers, "without distinction of party," pledged themselves to aid in bringing the guilty parties to justice.
Kansas Territory from Tennessee last November, one year ago. He was the second settler on Pottawatomie Creek. He was a member of the Legislature. I was at his house last April, left there for home on the 23d of April, all was quiet there then.

Respectfully yours,
HENRY JAMES.

CARLINVILLE [ILLINOIS] January 18 - 1858

TO THE HON S. A. DOUGLAS

Dear Sir

in 1854 my brother in law moved to Kansas Territory he was the Second Settler on pottawatomie creek he wrote to me describing the Beauty of the Country and fertility of the Soil in April 1856 I went to see him and was pleased with the Country I Bought his claim he being a poor man had no other way of raising money to pay for his land when it came into market he was to buy the adjoining claim with no improvement but a log cabin which he could get for a Small Sum his improvement that I bought of him about 40 acres brok and under good fence a log cabin Smoke house and a good hewed log house nearly finished a good old Indian orchard of about 40 bearing trees Some of them grafted he was to have part of the crop that year and remain on the place till I came he planted a piece of corn for my use which was the last work he ever done which was on the 23 of May a month previous to this in April I was there bought his claim paid part down he gave me a Quit claim deed and my intention for a preemption rite which I sent to Mr Calhons office and the money to pay him as law directs then I left the territory for home in Illinois

4. Allen Wilkinson thus apparently moved to Kansas territory in November, 1854. The "Tract Books" of the General Land Office cite February 1, 1855, as the date of his settlement in the Pottawatomie creek area. Wilkinson's whereabouts between November, 1854, and February, 1855, have not been determined. Although Wilkinson migrated from Tennessee, his home had earlier been in Illinois. Louisa Jane Wilkinson, his wife, was a Tennessean.

5. Wilkinson was not the second settler on Pottawatomie creek, if the dates of settlement on the land entries be taken as guides. For a list of settlers along Pottawatomie creek, with their dates of settlement, see Malin, op. cit., pp. 760-763.

6. Wilkinson was elected to the lower house of the territorial legislature on March 30, 1855, the first legislative election in Kansas territory.

7. John Calhoun, a former resident of Illinois and a close friend of both Lincoln and Douglas, had been appointed surveyor-general of Kansas and Nebraska territories by President Pierce. Calhoun received declarations for pre-emption rights at his office in Wyandotte before the Lecompton land office opened in April, 1857. No record of the pre-emption right James mentions, however, has been located in the land records (U. S. Surveyor General of Kansas and Nebraska, "Correspondence: Deputy's Reports and Miscellaneous, 1856-1858," Kansas State Historical Society; Jane F. Smith, Interior Section, National Archives, to the author, April 29, 1935). The lands in eastern Kansas were not ordered into the market by President Buchanan until 1858. In anticipation of this order, many land
now Mr Douglas I must let you know who I am 20 years ago I lived in Carrolton Green County I worked with Mr Scott at Tailoring I had the honor of an introduction to you by Mr Scott I afterwards Settled in Greenfield Shook hands with you there a time or two when you and Mr Browning were there you use to Send me congressional document for which I return you my thanks my brother in law then lived in Greene Cty and taught School—

now to return to my Brother in law was murdered on the 24 of May at midnight by the Old Brown and company he and old Mr Doyle and his two Sons and a Mr Sherman known as the Pottawatamie Murders you know all about it for you have read Mr Oliver miner report to congress his name Allen Wilkinson a pro-slavery man he was a member of the first legislator Judg Cato was at his house he and his Clerk Mr Hutchison and the debetry marshal holding Court for Franklin County they can testify to our trade &c in consequence of civil war in the territory my wife would not go where her Brother was murdered So we moved to Missouri we did not like there we moved back to Ill.

when they murdered my brother in law the[y] took his onley horse and other things they broke up the widow and his 2 little boys General Whitfield took her in charges raised money for her and helped her and her 2 little boys to her Fathers in Tennessee the claim was a valuable one it is now in possession of a Stranger now Mr Douglas would it not be write to ask congress to grant her and her 2 little Sons the claim they once lived on if it is not entered

claimants, like Wilkinson, sold their claims; others sought to evade the pre-emption law by signing their claim over to a local money lender or land speculator.—See Paul Wallace Gates, Fifty Million Acres: Conflicts Over Kansas Land Policy, 1854-1890 (Chiaca, 1954), p. 103.

8. Orville H. Browning, a resident of Quincy, Ill., was active as a Whig in local Illinois state politics. In 1861 he was appointed to fill out Douglas' unexpired senate term after the latter's death.

9. Mercedal Oliver, a Whig representative from Missouri, was the minority member of a three-member congressional committee appointed to investigate the troubles in Kansas. The committee was in Kansas at the time of the Pottawatamie massacre. The two Republican majority members, John Sherman of Ohio and William A. Howard of Michigan, refused to look into the affair on the ground that it was outside the committee's jurisdiction. Oliver dissented from this decision, conducted an independent investigation of the massacre, and presented the testimony to congress in the form of a minority report.—House Reports, 34 Cong., 1 Sess. (1855-1856), No. 200, pp. 68-109, 1152-1188.

10. Associate Justice Sterling G. Cato of the Kansas territorial supreme court held circuit court for Franklin county at the house of Henry Sherman in late April, 1856. Allen Wilkinson had been appointed district attorney pro tem for the session. Cato was to open court in near-by Paola, Lykins (now Miami) county, on the Monday following the massacre.

11. John W. Whitfield was at this time serving as Kansas territorial delegate in the house of representatives. In 1853 Whitfield had been appointed Indian agent to the Pottawatamie Indians, and in the following year was elected as a Democrat to represent Kansas territory in congress.

12. According to the "Tract Books" of the General Land Office, John Stroup filed claim to the Wilkinson land on May 12, 1857, citing February 14, 1857, as his date of settlement.
and paid for I am not posted whither the land Office is open to enter preemtion writes or not—13 her husband was her Support and he is taken from her his two little Sons are promising little boys their names Harvey and Archey now congress Could grant them a piece of land to each one and not miss it. it would help and console them much but never repay for the loss of a husband and Father and not onley give them a piece of land but to Mr[s] Doyle and all other widows that lost their husbands in that war—and as to my Self I have had nothing but bad luck Since I Started to the Teritory I am an old man my trade has gone down and I am badley worsted by the loss Sustained would it be presumtious in me to ask congress to Grant me a piece of land—the Government would never miss it—but it would help me and mine much in my declining years to the grave.

my brother in law was a friend of yours he was a firm Demo- cratt as to my Self I have allways been a Democrat if you wish to know about me I will refer you to Mr Burk of this place, or the prominent men of Greene County. I did think of writeing to the Hon Mr Harris 14 but if you have time and I am worthey of your attention will you please inform me what to do or how to proceed. I have voted for you and Mr Harris and if I live I expect to vote for you for the next President. we have had publick meetings Sanctioning your Course in Congress there is a Great reaction Creating in your favor all over the State and likewise all over the Union you Sir are aprised of all of this—15

respectfully and Fraternaley your humble Servant

HENRY JAMES

P S I can Send you copeys of all the letters that the widow Sent to me relating to the murder of her husband and the Deed of the land he gave me and likewise my letter to the Alton Courier which the Editor published 16 the black republicans published that those 5 men was engaged in hanging a free State man and like

13. The land office at Lecompton opened after James had left the territory. He was probably unaware at the time he wrote this letter that the office had opened to receive pre-emption rights.

14. Thomas L. Harris was a Democratic representative in congress from Illinois, residing in Petersburg, Menard county, Ill.

15. Reference is here made to the course followed by Stephen A. Douglas in the United States senate in the struggle over the admission of Kansas under the Lecompton, or Proslave, constitution.

wise Gov Carys Book 17 about Kansas tells nearley the Same tale I refer you to the widow[']s affidavit and Mrs Doyle in Mr Oliver report he was taken from the Side of his Sick wife at the midnight hour and Murdered in cold blood the letters will testify to the truth

H. J.

17. James probably refers to John H. Gilson's Geary and Kansas, Governor Geary's Administration in Kansas, With a Complete History of the Territory Until June, 1837 (Philadelphia, 1857). Gilson was private secretary to Gov. John W. Geary. In his book Gilson dismissed the Pottawatomi massacre in one short paragraph (p. 87), concluding: "The excuse given for this act, is, that the persons killed were there assembled to assassinate and burn the houses of certain free-state men, whom they had notified to quit the neighborhood. These five men were seized and disarmed, a sort of trial was had, and in conformity with the sentence passed, were shot in cold blood."