A Free-Stater’s “Letters to the Editor”

SAMUEL N. WOOD’S LETTERS TO EASTERN NEWSPAPERS, 1854

Edited by ROBERT W. RICHMOND

I. INTRODUCTION

SAMUEL Newitt Wood is perhaps best known for the part he played in the Stevens county “war” which involved the towns of Hugoton and Woodsdale in a struggle for the county seat and which drew to a close with the murder of Wood by Jim Brennan, June 23, 1891. However, this fatal participation in a Kansas county-seat fight was only the final chapter in a long and turbulent career which included newspaper work, politics, ranching, and railroad promotion.

Sam Wood was born December 30, 1825, at Mount Gilead, Ohio, and completed a common school education. Before he was old enough to vote he was involved in local politics and in 1848 supported Martin Van Buren, a Free-Soil candidate, for the presidency. Wood’s parents were members of the Society of Friends and as a result he was brought up to despise slavery. Because of his strong feelings on the subject he became active in the operation of the “underground railroad” through Ohio and conducted fleeing Southern Negroes on several occasions.

On June 4, 1854, Sam Wood was admitted to the practice of law and two days later was on his way to the newly-created Kansas territory, convinced that the Kansas-Nebraska act was wrong and that he should do something about making Kansas a free state. With his wife and two small children he went by wagon to Cincinnati where he secured steamboat passage to Independence, Mo. From the Missouri border the family again traveled by wagon, this time to a point about four miles west of Lawrence on the “California Road.” Here Wood settled and this claim was to be his home through the most difficult period of the Proslavery and Free-State controversy.

Wood was immediately involved in the political life of the territory and he was not hesitant about expressing himself regarding politics. He bought into the Kansas Tribune, Lawrence, which was first printed by John Speer in the fall of 1854. The Tribune was a typical frontier newspaper and its editorial policy, similar

ROBERT W. RICHMOND, state archivist of Kansas, is a member of the staff of the State Historical Society.
to that of other early Kansas newspapers, was extremely outspoken and biased. Such a policy appealed to the fiery Ohioan and he later (1859) carried it on in his own newspapers at Cottonwood Falls and Council Grove.

In November, 1855, a Free-Stater, Charles W. Dow, was killed by Franklin N. Coleman, Proslaveryite, near Hickory Point in Douglas county. A Free-State group held a meeting on November 22 at the scene of the murder and that night Samuel Jones, sheriff of Douglas county, arrested Jacob Branson, with whom Dow had lived, for taking part in the assembly. The sheriff and his posse started for Lecompton with their prisoner but before they reached their destination they were met by an armed band of Free-State men which included Sam Wood. Jones lost his prisoner to the opposition and the incident led to what has been known as the Wakarusa War.

Wood's part in the Branson rescue and similar incidents made him one of the territory's most unpopular citizens in the eyes of Proslavery partisans. Such notoriety did not bother Wood. In fact, he thrived on it and did all that he could to increase his unpopularity by encouraging Free-State settlers to come to Kansas. This he accomplished by returning on several occasions to the East where he spoke to potential settlers and by writing letters to Eastern newspapers.

The four letters that follow were selected from newspapers in the files of the Kansas State Historical Society and were all written by Wood during the first year of his residence in Kansas. They are excellent examples of the fervid Free-State messages that went to the East during the early territorial years and vividly express Wood's opinions of the Kansas political situation and also give some idea of what life was like on the Trans-Missouri frontier of the 1850's.

II. THE LETTERS

Westport, Jackson Co., Mo.,
June 28, 1854.

To the Editor of the National Era:

Dear Sir: I have left my Ohio home and friends, and have come here, for the purpose of selecting myself and family a future home in this, the fairest portion of God's earth. A struggle is before us. It looks as though the inhabitants of this county think that they can people, or dictate who shall people, the whole Kansas Territory. They in the start flocked into the Territory by hundreds. Men would take perhaps a dozen claims, stick their stake, mark their
names, get up a little meeting, resolve to protect each other and each other's claims. They also resolved, at all hazards, that Kansas belonged to, and should be settled exclusively by, slaveholders. After this, nine out of every ten return to their Missouri homes, supposing that they have fixed, beyond the possibility of repeal, the institutions of Kansas for all time to come. Meetings are held in Missouri, where lynching is publicly recommended, as the last resort, to drive those "white-livered Abolitionists" out of Kansas into Nebraska, which they condescendingly say is "set apart for us." A few Northern men already have been driven from the Territory; others frightened away. A few slaveholders already have moved in with their slaves.

The Methodist missionaries sent here for the purpose of enlightening and Christianizing the poor Indian, have their slaves to do the drudgery of the missions; thus, while they are enlightening and Christianizing one class of heathens, as an auxiliary in the good cause, they are grinding down and blotting out the very souls of other heathens. Indeed, it is a question whether they Christianize or heathenize the most. Of course, the influence of these large mission establishments is against us.¹

At Fort Leavenworth, the United States officers are degrading themselves and their calling, by going with the South, and hooting at Northern men, and even justifying lynching of them, for no other cause than that they are Northern men! A dark picture, truly; but think not that it has no bright side; Northern men have been found who could not be scared; settlements have been commenced, slaveholders have become frightened, already, we hear—"they will not trust their slaves there!" I have just made a trip over into the Territory, found on the Indian reserve scores of families from Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, and other States, and still they come.

Next week we are to have a general meeting up on Kansas river, where hundreds of freemen will be rallied; a fiat will then go forth that will sound the death knell to Slavery, in Kansas, at least.² All we ask is, for Northern men, and Southern men, tired of Slavery, who design emigrating here, to come now! Now is the time they can suit themselves with homes; and, above all, now, or soon, this Slavery question must be met, and settled. During our trip over into the Territory, we saw the Baptist missionary—a pure and warm

1. Wood was referring to the Shawnee Methodist Mission of which Thomas Johnson was superintendent. The mission, located in present Fairway, Johnson county, was under the direction of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and did have Negro slaves.
2. No record can be found establishing the fact that such a meeting was held early in July, 1854.
Anti-Slavery man. We also took dinner at the Friends or Quaker mission; found the superintendent, Friend Fayer, sick, but were kindly received by his family, and Richard Mendenhall, their teacher, and his amiable wife—all strong Anti-Slavery people, to whom we are indebted, not only for their kindness to us, but for much valuable information. Say to freemen, “Come on, secure a home, and assist in this great struggle between Slavery and Freedom!”

Our nearest post office at present is Westport, Jackson county, Missouri.

Yours, truly,

SAMUEL N. WOOD

WESTPORT, JACKSON CO., MO.,
July 12, 1854.

To the Editor of the National Era:

Presuming that you, as well as your numerous readers, would read with pleasure a line from this far-off Territory, I seat myself for the purpose of keeping you posted on Kansas matters. Since writing to you last, I have spent about ten days in the Territory, have been over much of the country south of Kansas river, and must say that I have viewed, to my mind, some of the best as well as most beautiful places in the world. Prairies could not be richer, nor scarcely better watered; it is true, in places, timber may be scarce, yet limestone exists in abundance, enough to fence in the whole country. Stone-coal, I am satisfied, exists in abundance. The want of timber will be but trifling, even where it does not exist.

Emigrants are pouring in from all parts of the country, a great majority of whom are non-slaveholders; yet great ignorance prevails among them on the Slavery question. Slaveholders finding, with all their threats and bullying, that Northern men could not be scared or kept out of the Territory, are now trying to control the public sentiment, and contend that we have no right to exclude slave property from the Territory, and that it stands in precisely the same relation as other property. By this means, they are gaining a foothold here, which, I fear, it will be hard to rout them from.

Would some one, who is capable, write a small tract showing the true relation between master and slave, asserting that Slavery
is a local institution, sustained only by positive law, and is without foundation in common or natural law, consequently cannot exist in Kansas without positive enactment, and the danger of letting it get a foothold; and then write another, giving a general comparison of the slave and free States, together with the expense Slavery is to the Government—let these two tracts be circulated over the Territory, and to my mind the work is done. Will not some of our Anti-Slavery-extension friends in the States take hold of this matter, and furnish us something on this subject at once, whilst the public mind is famishing for food upon this subject?

It is really a question which here takes precedence of all others, and will our friends in the States but furnish us the matter, we will distribute it broadcast over the whole Territory, and wake up a feeling that will die only with Slavery itself.

To members of Congress I would say, all the matter you can possibly send me, calculated to throw light on Slavery, shall be faithfully distributed among the Kansas settlers.

To emigrants from the North I would say, after you get into the slave States, believe nothing you may hear about Kansas. Every misrepresentation imaginable will be told, to discourage you from coming here; and even after you arrive, find Anti-Slavery men, as you will learn nothing of the Territory by inquiry.

Yours for the right,

S. N. Wood. 6

KANSAS, Wednesday, Aug. 2, 1854.

Yours of July 14 is just received by the hand of a friend. I am fifty-five miles from the Post-Office, in what I deem a first-rate country—timber, perhaps, a little scarce. But I have not time, now, to describe the country. Some will get sick and go home, yet hundreds of first rate families are staying. Log cabins are going up in every direction. If your wife and daughter could consent to live for a time in a cabin sixteen feet square, and do without a thousand luxuries and many necessities which you enjoy in New-York, you could live very well. Furniture of all kinds here is very high. Did I live even in New-York, I would ship all necessary articles of household goods, but no unnecessary ones. Provisions I do not think are high. Corn Meal 40 cents; Oats 30 cents; Wheat $1 per bushel; Flour $3.50 per 100 lbs.; Bacon about 6½ to 8½. 7 Goods are some higher—I speak of the Westport market.

Now, after answering many questions you have not asked, I will just say that I believe a newspaper establishment here, right where

7. This is a cent per pound price on bacon.
we are, would be a paying concern. I know of no way for a printer to get employment now but to establish an office himself. You, of course, would know the expense of one best. I suppose $500 would fit up an office for this country. I have to-day talked with a number of settlers, and all say "Bring along a Press," yet you could not look for pecuniary help here now. It is poor, hardworking men we have here now.

The fare from New-York to Cincinnati, I believe, is $16; from Cincinnati by steamboat to St. Louis, $9; from St. Louis to Kansas 8 the best landing and most convenient place varies. I paid $10, $16, $9—$55; wife $55—$70 from New-York. Goods from New-York I think would average $2.50 per 100 lbs.; or perhaps you could come quicker from New-York by Chicago. The fare from Chicago I suppose to be about the same as to Cincinnati; from Chicago to Alton, Ill., or Rock Island about $5; from Alton or Rock Island to St. Louis, about $9. There is also a railroad building from Indianapolis, Ind., to St. Louis. If it was finished it would be the best way to come from New-York via Cleveland through Ohio to Indianapolis, thence to St. Louis. You might ascertain whether the road is finished. My figures via Chicago are mere guess-work.

At Kansas you are sixty miles from us, and about eight miles from the Quaker Mission among the Shawnee Indians, which is on the road. If you come, write to me; I will try to meet you at the Mission, or arrange with them to bring you here. Of course you can share our cabin until better provided for. You say you are an "Abolitionist." Does that mean a Garrisonian, a Gerrit Smithite, or what? 9 As to myself, I am an Anti-Slavery man, and could now take by the hand an "Abolitionist" of any kind. Any other queries I will with great pleasure try to answer. Send me a number or two of The Tribune; I used to read it in Ohio. I believe it is conservative, seeking popularity. But enough.

Yours for Freedom the world over, Sam'l. A. Wood. 10

P. S. Kansas will be free! Thirty Massachusetts men arrived yesterday.11

8. Present Kansas City, Mo.
9. William Lloyd Garrison, publisher of the Boston Liberator, and Gerrit Smith, New York philanthropist, were both active in the movement against slavery. However, the two were opposed in theory. Smith believed that political action should be used in bringing about reform while Garrison thought that political parties could never succeed in securing emancipation for the slaves of the South.
11. The pioneer party of the Emigrant Aid Company of Massachusetts, numbering 29 men, arrived in Kansas City on July 26, 1854. They moved into the territory immediately and camped on Mount Oread, August 1, 1854.—Louise Barry, "The Emigrant Aid Company Parties of 1854," The Kansas Historical Quarterly, Topeka, v. 12 (May, 1943), pp. 115-125.
Free-Stater’s Letters

Kansas Territory, August 20, 1854.

To the Editor of the National Era:

Since the publication of my former letters in your paper, I have received hundreds of letters from all parts of the country, inquiring about Kansas. Although wishing to impart all the information in my power, yet were I to devote all my time to letter-writing, one-half at least would go unanswered. A few put me under personal obligations, such that I am obliged to write at least to them. Others, whose letters may be unanswered, will from this learn the reason why.

One wants to know “if the lands here are subject to pre-emption?” another, if we “get them for nothing, or how to pay twenty-five cents per acre, the cost of survey,” &c.—things that are known all over the States weeks before we can possibly know them here, as we are fifty miles in an Indian country, and the same distance from Westport, Missouri, our nearest post office. Another wants to know “what kind of winters we have here, what kind of summers,” &c. forgetting that I am just from Ohio and have not resided in Kansas yet three weeks. Another wants to know “if we have the ague here, and if so, whether as bad as in Illinois,” a place I never set foot upon, and so on ad infinitum.

But hundreds of questions are asked which are all right; and, so far as I possibly can, I wish to write one general answer. The lands purchased of the Indians embrace nearly fifteen millions of acres; of this, all except about eight hundred thousand acres belonging to the Weas south of Kansas river, and the Delawares and Iowas north of said river, are subject to pre-emption. As to the Homestead bill, we know nothing of it here, whether passed or not, or whether it would apply to the Kansas lands or not.12 I think the Shawnee lands, south of Kansas river, will be first settled, they appear to be settling fastest between Kansas and Wakarusa rivers, on the California road.13

To reach here, a person coming by the Missouri should land at Kansas, cross the Shawnee Reserve thirty miles, to Wakarusa ferry.14

12. There was a homestead bill under discussion in congress during 1854 but the Homestead act did not become law until 1862. The Pre-emption act of 1841, in effect when Kansas became a territory, allowed squatters to buy their claims, prior to public auction, at $1.25 an acre. On July 25, 1854, congress extended the pre-emption privilege to settlers on unsurveyed public lands in Kansas to which Indian rights had been ceded. For a complete study of the land question in the territory see Paul Wallace Gates, Fifty Million Acres: Conflicts Over Kansas Land Policy, 1854-1890 (Ithaca, N. Y., 1954).

13. The California road was the same as the California-Oregon trail in eastern Kansas. George A. Root, “Ferries in Kansas,” Pt. 13, The Kansas Historical Quarterly, v. 6 (February, 1937), pp. 16-19, states that the only known ferry across the Wakarusa was that of Charles Bluejacket, located where the Oregon trail from Westport crossed the stream, Sec. 12, T 13 S, R 21 E. According to Root this service was begun early in 1855 which would be a year later than Wood’s reference but it is possible that the ferry was in operation during the summer of 1854. There was another crossing of the stream directly south of Lawrence, Sec. 19, T 13 S, R 20 E, but no record has been found of a ferry in use there.
and you come to the promised land. As to holding claims here, I refer the reader to the Constitution of the mutual Settlers’ Association, which, of course, you will publish.\textsuperscript{15} These laws will be respected, and justice administered here as peaceably as in the States. Claims are, however, frequently sold by settlers.

I think this Territory is well watered; springs exist in abundance; prairie could not be richer, timber may be scarce in places, yet limestone and coal exist in abundance. Our timber consists principally of walnut, oak, cotton wood, blue ash, &c. Soil of all kinds, from clay loam to rich, sandy soil; good clay, for brick or potter’s ware, can now be found. This part of the Territory is very rolling. I am at least five hundred feet above Kansas river, and only three miles from it, on the richest of soil. A pleasant breeze greets us from the southwest; to inhale a draft of it is almost equal to a drink of water. I am satisfied that the country must be healthy, much more so than in Ohio. Possibly some may have the ague along the river, or other streams on the low lands. I think no difficulty would be experienced in securing a location for a “colony of any size,” where water, timber, and stone, exist, sufficient for all purposes; yet, to secure such a place now, emigrants would have to go further west.

The Kansas river is nearly as large as the Missouri. Steamboats have been up one hundred and seventy-five miles, to Fort Riley, and I think, with small boats, it may run that high the year round.\textsuperscript{16} There are good water privileges in the Territory. Horses, oxen, cows, and in fact all kinds of stock, are high—cows, from $25 to $40; oxen, from $75 to $100 per yoke; good horses, from $100 to $150 per head. All kinds of furniture high—at least one-third higher than in Ohio. Bacon, 8½ cents per lb. Flour, $3.50 per 100 lbs. Store goods a shade higher than in Ohio. I speak of the Kansas market in Missouri.

Notwithstanding the threats and browbeating of the Missourians, the greatest proportion of the settlers here are Northern people—nine-tenths of the balance honest Southerners, who are coming, as they say, to get rid of slavery. I was much mistaken in the character

\textsuperscript{15} On August 12, 1854, a meeting of the Actual Settlers’ Association was held at the home of B. W. Miller near Lawrence and at that time the Wakarusa Association combined with it. The new organization took the name of the Mutual Settlers’ Association of Kansas Territory and had as its purpose the protection of the claims of bona-fide Free-State settlers. S. N. Wood was one of the most active members of the group.—D. W. Wilder, \textit{Annals of Kansas}, 1541-1885 (Topeka, 1886), p. 48; William E. Connelley, \textit{Kansas and Kansans} (Chicago, New York, 1918), v. 1, pp. 357-360.

\textsuperscript{16} Wood was not alone in his optimism about the navigation of the Kansas river but unfortunately that stream did not live up to expectations. Generally speaking, the attempts at regularly scheduled navigation were unsuccessful although when Wood wrote his letter the Excel, a little stern-wheeler, had made the run to Fort Riley.—Edgar Langdort, "A Review of Early Navigation on the Kansas River," \textit{The Kansas Historical Quarterly}, v. 18 (May, 1950), pp. 140-145.
of the Missourians. A few fanatics, who were resolved to extend slavery at all hazards, seem for the time being to give tone to the whole people; but a better acquaintance convinces me that a great majority of the people condemn the violent resolutions of Westport and other places. But the die is cast. Westport will be another Alton. Blood is in her heart. Hundreds will shun her; and Kansas, only four miles further, will reap the fruits of her treason.

"Do you apprehend any serious difficulty with the slaveholders?" is frequently asked. I answer, no; although they have boasted and threatened much, yet they are not fools, and well know the shedding of Northern blood to sustain slavery here, would raise a storm that would end only with slavery itself. Northern men need not fear; all they have to do, is to be true to themselves, and not, coward-like, knuckle to the demands of these slaveholders, and padlock their lips, and "wait till the proper time to meet this question." Now is the proper time—now is the time that the slaveholders are moving heaven and earth to establish slavery here; and now is the time, like men, we should meet them, and not, like cowards, cry, "Hush, be quiet; don't agitate the question now; wait till we are stronger."

One explanation is necessary here. In speaking of the mission establishments, in my last, I did not make the proper distinction. My remarks were true as to Johnson's mission; but since, I have become acquainted with Dr. Still, a true man, who also has a mission here.

One word to newspapers which copy my articles. Do not put words into my mouth which I never utter. Copy exact from the Era, or not at all. Much injustice was done me in former articles by a portion of the Eastern press. Besides, those copying my sayings will do me a favor by complying with the "courtseries of the press."

One word to emigrants. Those who have money can do well here. Lands which can be got for nothing now, by paying a year hence Government price, I honestly think in two years will be worth $25 to $30 an acre. No new country ever settled one-fiftieth part as fast as Kansas is now settling. Emigrants are arriving in

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17. Wood's reference to Alton was in regard to the riots that took place in that Illinois city in 1837, when the Rev. Elijah P. Lovejoy was murdered and his newspaper plant destroyed on November 7 because of his anti-slavery stand. The violence and bitterness in St. Louis and Alton could be likened to the Kansas-Missouri border difficulties.—See Theodore C. Pease, The Frontier State, 1818-1848 (Springfield, 1918), pp. 364-370.

18. Kansas City, Mo.

19. Dr. Andrew T. Still came to Kansas in 1853 with his father, a Methodist missionary, and engaged in farming and the practice of medicine. He served in the territorial legislature in 1857 and with several volunteer military organizations during the Civil War. His greatest fame was gained in the 1870's when he became the world's first osteopath. The Stills were members of the Northern branch of the Methodist church.
scores; tents are stretched all over the prairie; cabins are going up in all directions. Labor is plenty. A man, though poor, if he can and will work, can do well here. A man with only a team is independent. But to those who have no means, can’t nor won’t work, Kansas is no place for you.

Emigrants must expect to meet some hardships. We have no fine houses to receive you in; everything is inconvenient yet; settlers are generally of the right kind, with pioneer hearts. Society is good; we are all sociable, accommodating, and the person who now has the will, and meets these difficulties, and gets his choice of the land, will never regret it. Were I in Ohio today, with my knowledge of Kansas, I should lose no time in coming here, pitching my tent, building a cabin, and preparing for living. Understand me, I urge no one to come; for, as in all new countries, many chicken-hearted ones will get home-sick, and leave. But if you have made up your minds, and are coming, now is the time. The sooner here, the better for you.

I am, truly, yours, 

SAMUEL N. WOOD. 20