Immigrants or Invaders? A Document

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I. INTRODUCTION

IN SEPTEMBER, 1856, scores of Northern men converged at Mount Pleasant, Iowa, then the Western terminus of the Burlington railroad. Youthful Free-State partisans were launching an expedition to “Bleeding Kansas.” In all, 200 men and 20 wagons started for the territory, and they expected additional groups to join en route. During the last weeks of September and early October the wagon train crept across Iowa and Nebraska. On October 10, 1856, it entered Kansas. United States dragoons patrolling the territorial boundaries near Plymouth, Kansas territory, promptly halted, searched, and arrested the entire party on the grounds that it came to the restless territory as a military unit for warlike purposes. Only a month before, the territorial governor, John W. Geary, had outlawed armed bands of men as a step toward suppressing strife and turbulence in Kansas.1

Leaders of the Free-State company, Shalar W. Eldridge, Samuel C. Pomeroy, John A. Perry, Robert Morrow, Richard Realf, and Edward Daniels, angrily protested the arrest. They argued that Governor Geary had specifically approved the entrance of bona fide immigrant parties, and they asserted that they were legitimate settlers seeking homes in the territory. The arresting army officers disbelieved their statement, for they noted the absence of the usual complement of agricultural implements, household furniture, farm supplies, women, and children. A search of the wagons, despite the objections of the Free-State men, revealed a sizable cache of weapons and war supplies. Concealed in the wagons were 36 Colt revolvers, ten Sharps rifles, 145 breech-loading muskets, 85 percussion muskets, 115 bayonets, 63 sabres, 61 dragoon saddles, plus cartridges, powder, and one drum. Members of the wagon train conceded that they were organized as a military unit—for purposes, they said, of self-defence. They explained that this precaution resulted from reports of lawlessness in Kansas. At a hearing before Governor Geary near Topeka, Eldridge and his companions maintained that their party was a peaceful one. Geary

confiscated the munitions but released the men with a warning to disband at once. The Free-State men proceeded to Lawrence, entered the village in a dress parade carrying arms and flags not detected in the search, drew their wagons in a circle at the head of Massachusetts street on the banks of the Kaw river, and lit their camp fires for the last time. Next day, they dispersed.

The arrest and brief detention of the Free-State men occurred on the eve of the presidential election of 1856. In the following weeks the incident played a part in the Republican campaign to discredit the Democratic administration. Republican newspapers such as the Chicago Tribune and the New York Tribune promptly dramatized the arrest as an "outrage," "atrocity," "gigantic crime," and "high-handed invasion of the constitutional rights of American citizens." They pictured the Free-State men as peaceful settlers harrassed by rapacious army officers and double-dealing Democratic politicians. Horace Greeley described the Free-State men as earnest, weary immigrants "robbed of all their property, except the clothes they stood in." "Republican reader!" Greeley exclaimed, "Your money is paying for all this blood-thirsty wretchedness."

Only in later years did leading participants such as Shalor W. Eldridge and Robert Morrow admit that the wagon train was indeed a military unit intentionally prepared for war-making in Kansas.

A letter written as the wagon train trekked across Iowa frankly states the military nature of the expedition. The author, Edward Daniels of Ripon, Wis., was one of the leaders of the ill-starred venture. The 28-year-old Daniels was formerly state geologist of Wisconsin and a loyal Republican. Born in Boston, Daniels grew up in western New York, attended Oberlin College, and as a young man found employment in Wisconsin as schoolteacher and mining engineer. His close friend, Horace White of Beloit, was an agent of the National Kansas Committee with offices in Chicago. In letters and conferences White warmed Daniels' interest in marching to Kansas with expeditions organized and outfitted by the National Kansas Committee. Another close friend, Oscar Hugh LaGrange,
A Ripon schoolteacher, accompanied Daniels on the trip to Kansas.  

In his hastily scrawled account Daniels gave no hint that his company was an agricultural unit. He spoke of military matters: sentries, messes, officers, stacks of arms, and even a cannon which the company buried in a well-concealed grave near the Kansas-Nebraska border. Hurriedly but not without elements of literary grace he described the vicissitudes of military life. The mood and tone of the letter suggests a soldier writing to his worried family. As such, the letter could stand as a prototype for thousands of wartime letters written a few years later.

II. THE LETTER

OSCEOLA, 9 [IOWA.] SEP 26TH 1856

DEAR MOTHER AND SISTER

I write from my tent 10 o’clock at night. We are in the midst of Iowa pushing rapidly towards Kansas. Our journey has been exceedingly pleasant thus far. The weather very fine, roads good, and every condition of travel pleasant.

I sent back word to you by Mr. Bovay 8 who went with us to Mount Pleasant. We have 200 in our Company many of the very best of men. We are divided into messes of 6 each. One mess in a tent. Hugh LaGrange is in my mess with 4 other fine fellows. We march about 25 miles per day and will be in Kansas if we have good success in about 12 days. We have good news from there of peace and quiet. We are very much disposed to rejoice at this for although prepared to fight we do not at all crave the opportunity. We have three artillery and 2 rifle companies and will be joined by other parties till our number reaches 500.

We have just completed our military organization. Col. Eldridge is General, Gen. Pomeroy of Massachusetts and myself Adjutant Generals, Col. Perry of Rhode Island Colonel.

For three days I have had the entire control of this great train of 20 wagons and 200 men. It is an immense burden and yesterday when Gens. Eldridge and Pomeroy arrived I was very glad to lay aside the responsibility and care of my position for a time.


7. The letter is in the “Edward Daniels Papers,” ibid. Osceola was a station on the “Lone Trail,” according to William E. Connelley, “The Lone Trail,” Kansas Historical Collections, v. 13, pp. 268, 269. On September 17, 1856, the Chicago Tribune noted that Kansas-bound emigrants from Wisconsin were passing through Chicago and intended to travel “the Iowa route, via Burlington.”

8. Alvan Earle Bovay (1818-1905), a leading citizen of Ripon, Wis., and an energetic Republican party organizer.—See Samuel M. Pedrick, The Life of Alvan E. Bovay, Founder of the Republican Party in Ripon, Wis., March 20, 1854 (Ripon, Wis. [1897]), pp. 2-17.
The people are very kind here; as we pass they bring us many little luxuries and bid us Godspeed. We get melons, squashes, pumpkins and occasionally a few peaches and sweet potatoes. I have never enjoyed my meals better. We have several very good cooks. We have had 3 oxen given us since we started and numerable [?] chickens so we fare well for meat.

To-day as I stood addressing the men from the top of a cannon wheel I had mounted as a rostrum a man came up and addressed me whom I used to know at Oberlin. A very strange meeting [I] tho't. The boys are all asleep and no sound is heard save the stamping of the horses and the measured tread of the guards as they pass by my tent. I am sitting upon the ground writing upon a cartridge box and leaning against a stack of guns. We have had a fine meeting this evening in the open air which is warm and balmy. We have delightful music both vocal and other and our toilsome march is relieved by many happy hours. Still we think often of the luxuries & pleasant scenes of home. We get plenty of wild grapes. They make us many feasts and good sauce.

The wind blows my light. I must go and see to my guards and go to sleep next.

Write me to Lawrence, Kansas, where I hope to be next week.

Very truly yours

Edward Daniels

III. Epilogue

Daniels does not indicate whether he and LaGrange ever intended to settle in Kansas, but soon after their inglorious arrest at Plymouth, both men returned to Wisconsin and subsequently joined in the escapades of Sherman M. Booth, antislavery editor of the Milwaukee Free Democrat. Booth’s defiance of the Fugitive-Slave Act involved him in numerous lawsuits with federal authorities and temporarily made him a Republican martyr. In August, 1860, Daniels and LaGrange forced their way into the jury room of the Milwaukee Customs House where Booth was imprisoned and carried him to Ripon. With their assistance Booth eluded capture long enough to campaign for the Republican ticket in the Ripon area.

After Lincoln’s inauguration, Daniels was a member of Jim Lane’s curious “Frontier Guard” which stationed itself at the executive mansion in April, 1861. Later, Daniels and LaGrange organized the First Wisconsin cavalry regiment. Colonel LaGrange participated in the capture of Jefferson Davis and later served as superintendent of the mint at San Francisco. Daniels resigned his
commission during the war, purchased an estate in Virginia, and published the Richmond *State Journal*. He died in 1916, in his 88th year.9

Many years after the Eldridge wagon train disbanded at Lawrence, Daniels chose the rhetoric of the battlefield to praise the Free-State partisans. In a speech in the 1880’s, he portrayed them not as immigrants but as inspired warriors who sought to thwart a slave-ridden Democracy. Generously mixing his metaphors, he lauded his Northern companions, armed and aided by such groups as the National Kansas Committee, as “that Spartan band” who fought and won the “Thermopylae of freedom.”10
