

Bleeding Kansas

The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 instituted a policy known as popular sovereignty in the Kansas Territory, allowing the settlers to decide by vote whether the territory would be admitted to the Union as a slave or free state. Activists from each side flooded the territory in an attempt to influence the outcome, leading to violent, often deadly, clashes that foreshadowed the national civil war to come.

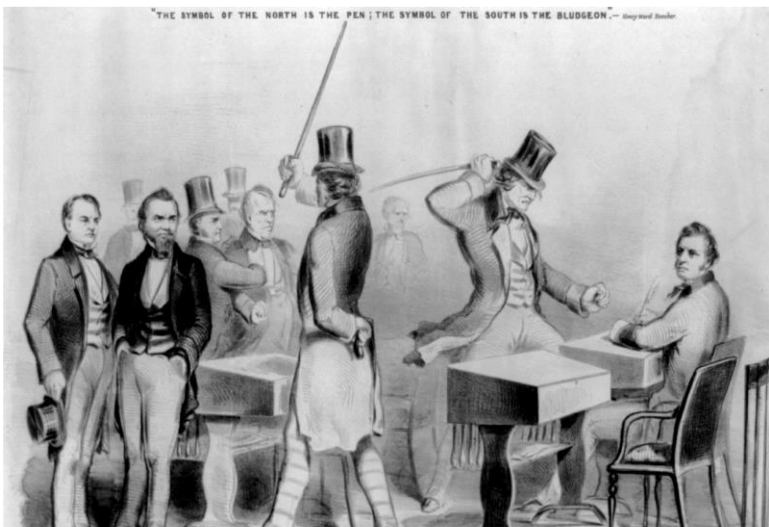
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The years of 1854-1861 were a turbulent time in the Kansas Territory. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 established the territorial boundaries of Kansas and Nebraska and opened the land to legal settlement. It allowed the residents of these territories to decide by popular vote whether their state would be free or slave. This concept of self-determination was called popular sovereignty. In Kansas, people on all sides of this controversial issue flooded the territory, trying to influence the vote in their favor. Rival territorial governments, election fraud, and squabbles over land claims all contributed to the violence of this era.

Three distinct political groups occupied Kansas: pro-slavery, Free-Staters and abolitionists. Violence broke out immediately between these opposing factions and continued until 1861 when Kansas entered the Union as a free state on January 29. This era became forever known as Bleeding Kansas.

During Bleeding Kansas, murder, mayhem, destruction and psychological warfare became a code of conduct in Eastern Kansas and Western Missouri. A well-known example of this violence was the massacre in May 1856 at Pottawatomie Creek where John Brown and his sons killed five pro-slavery advocates.

In the Fort Scott area, trouble began in the summer of 1856, when a group of about 30 pro-slavery settlers from South Carolina arrived in Bourbon County. It was suspected that they were sponsored by the Southern Emigrant Aid Society and were members of the Dark Lantern Societies. These societies terrorized Free-State settlers and attempted to drive them from Kansas.



On May 21, 1856 a proslavery group descended upon the town of Lawrence, Kansas and burned the hotel and newspaper office in an attempt to eradicate the “hotbed of abolitionists”.

A day after this attack, in the Senate chambers, Representative Preston S. Brooks of South Carolina viciously beat Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts with his cane because of Sumner’s speech regarding “The Crime against Kansas” committed by the pro slavery group.

Brook’s supporters sent him canes to replace the one he broke.

Three days after the Sack of Lawrence, an antislavery band led by John Brown, along with his five sons retaliated in the Pottawatomie Massacre. They killed five pro slavery advocates. After the attack John Brown’s name evoked fear and rage in slavery apologists in Kansas. It would not be the last time that John Brown would be heard from.

A Town Divided

Fort Scott and the surrounding area were not immune from the violence. The division of the opposing factions was clearly visible at the site of the "old fort." The military had abandoned Fort Scott in 1853. Two years later, the buildings were sold at a public auction and the former fort immediately became the nucleus of a rapidly growing town.

Two of the buildings became hotels. One, a former officer's quarters, was opened as the Fort Scott or Free State Hotel. Located right across the parade ground was the Western or Pro-Slavery Hotel, a former infantry barracks. The residents of Fort Scott were predominately pro-slavers, while Free-Staters and abolitionists dominated the surrounding countryside. Radicals of each faction terrorized the town throughout the Bleeding Kansas era.

By 1858, trouble had intensified in southeast Kansas. Radical elements from other theaters of the conflict were now converging on the Fort Scott area. James Montgomery became a leader of Free State forces and was involved in several violent incidents.

- In April of 1858, Montgomery and his men fought U.S. troops stationed at Fort Scott in the battle of Paint Creek. One soldier was killed in this encounter.
- In May of 1858, Montgomery and his men drove pro-slavery forces from Linn County. In retaliation, 11 Free-Staters were pulled out of their homes, taken to a ravine and shot down. This incident, known as the Marais des Cygnes Massacre, was rumored to have been plotted in the Western Hotel.
- On June 5, 1858, Montgomery and his raiders tried to burn down the Western Hotel. Several shots were fired into the hotel and surrounding homes, but the hotel was saved.

Violence such as this caught the governor's attention. On June 15, 1858, he held a meeting at the Western Hotel in order to settle political unrest. While this meeting nearly devolved into a riot, it was successful. Peace and quiet reigned for a brief five-month period.

Montgomery and his raiders struck again in December of 1858 when he rescued Benjamin Rice, a Free-Stater. Rice had been arrested for murder and was imprisoned in the Fort Scott Hotel. Montgomery claimed that Rice had been jailed illegally, so he came to Fort Scott to free him.

In the struggle following Rice's rescue, former Deputy Marshal John Little, a pro-slavery advocate, fired shots into the ranks of the Free-Staters. Little peered out of a window of his father's store (the former post headquarters) to observe the effects of the shooting. His movement was noted by a Free-Stater, who shot and killed him. Little's fiancé, Sene Campbell, wrote Montgomery a letter reprimanding him and saying that he was a "minister of the devil, and a very superior one too..."

Fort Scott

January 4, 1859

Montgomery:

Listen to me. Today I heard that you said in a speech a few days ago that you were not sorry you had killed John Little. That he was not killed too soon. Can you before God say so? Oh, the anguish you have caused. He was one of the noblest men ever created, brave and true to his country and to his word. You can't prove that he

ever injured an innocent person. A few days more and we were to have been married, then go south to trouble you no more.

But through your influence, he was killed. He was sent to another world without even time to pray or to say goodbye to his friends. But thanks to God, though you did kill his body, you can't touch his soul. No. No, it is in the spirit land. Now the cry of "the Osages are coming!" can awaken him no more. He quietly sleeps in our little graveyard.

But remember this. I am a girl, but I can fire a pistol. And if ever the time comes, I will send some of you to the place where there is "weeping and gnashing of teeth." You, a minister of God? You mean a minister of the devil, and a very superior one too. I have no more to say to you and your imps. Please accept the sincere regards of your future repentance.

Sene Campbell

Bleeding Kansas was part of the political storm that occurred throughout the United States before the Civil War. The anti-slavery forces prevailed as Kansas entered into the Union a free state on January 29, 1861. This turbulence illustrated the beginning of the terrifying bloodshed that was to come during the Civil War.

Source: (Excerpt from the National Park Service "No claim to original U.S. Government works.; Library of Congress)