

Attempts to Stop the Bleeding: Aid Societies and Family Conflict during Bleeding Kansas in Linn and Bourbon Counties as a result of the George W. Clark Raid of 1856

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Abstract

The pre-Civil War conflict of Bleeding Kansas bore the burden of a nation, acting as a battlefield for free-state and proslavery parties. Chaos terrorized the Kansas Territory from 1854 with the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act until the Reconstruction Era. In the context of this societal clash, an intensification of family conflict transpired, increasing the hardships for domestic units already enduring the challenges presented by a frontier lifestyle. Focusing on the Kansas Relief Committee reports on the Clark Raid of September 1856, familial motives are revealed over ideological ones. While Bleeding Kansas has long been a topic of historical interests, it is necessary to shift the dialogue from a societal lens to a family oriented one. By understanding and examining the realities of family life in the Kansas Territory, specifically within Linn and Bourbon counties, a better awareness is achieved concerning the unrest. Instead of actions rooted solely in free-state or proslavery beliefs, evidence shows the aggression in southeastern Kansas found its foundation within the family.

Keywords: Bleeding Kansas, Family, Violence

1. Body of Paper

“When [Winter] shall have come, our brave but suffering people will be cut off, as by a wall, from the entire North, and unless previously provided for, will be left a prey to all the villains and devilish atrocities of the monsters who have thus far so cruelly scourged them. Who, then, shall succor the widow in her desolation? What hand shall feed her innocents, perishing by cold and hunger? In that sad hour where shall the brave defenders of Freedom look for relief?”¹

Thaddeus Hyatt- Kansas Relief Committee, 1856

2. Introduction

As the precursor to the American Civil War, Bleeding Kansas acted as a magnified stage for national political ideologies to clash. The result of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, this new Kansas Territory became open for settlement and was not subject to the previous slavery restrictions laid out in the Missouri Compromise. Instead, Kansas would adhere to the democratic principle of popular sovereignty allowing the population of the territory to determine the legality of slavery when it came time for Kansas or Nebraska to transition into statehood. This nullification of the Missouri Compromise because of the employment of Manifest Destiny-motivated popular

sovereignty resulted in a large movement to Kansas by settlers with incompatible beliefs, being free-state, proslavery, or abolitionist. All with their own agendas, these conflicting groups caused instability throughout the Territory from 1854 past 1861 when Kansas was admitted to the Union as a free state, finally subsiding during the Reconstruction Era of the 1870s. However, even with differing political mindsets, settlers were pursuing economic opportunity and not purely chasing ideological aspirations. Northern settlers' competition for land and political power with Southern populations inevitably led to the outbreak of violence known as Bleeding Kansas.

While the era of Bleeding Kansas has been approached from a variety of angles, a focus on families has been overlooked. Other similar areas of historical study, such as frontier violence in Texas, have begun to construct storylines with the family as a primary looking glass.² This is not to say that family was the primary motivation for all people involved in the conflict, however, the families of Bleeding Kansas seem to have fallen through the cracks of historical analysis as merely a minor factor. This work brings some of the more intimate familial details to light. And while attacking families seems to have been one of the main goals of the George W. Clark Raid of September 1856, it was not necessarily the reason proslavery settlers acted as aggressors. However, the subsequent reactions of the Raid's free-state victims were clearly based in familial motives, attempting to regain their rightful land claims. Through an examination of John E. Stewart's partisan reports resulting from the Clark Raid, it is revealed just how extreme and far reaching the devastation of these altercations could be, leaving many settlers homeless and without possessions. This raid, as well as the years of violence following, unfolded in Linn and Bourbon counties, an area in southeastern Kansas along the territory's border with the slave state, Missouri. By viewing this specific event through the lens of the family, it is revealed that the violence was not based purely in ideology but rather the desire for land and a protection of familial interests. The ruthlessness of the Clark Raid on free-state families in turn fostered a newfound reactionary violence in defense of the livelihoods that had been violated.

3. Formation of Aid Societies

Even before the Kansas-Nebraska Act was passed in May of 1854, Kansas aid societies began to take hold in the Northeast. Starting with Eli Thayer, the Massachusetts Emigrant Aid Company was chartered in hopes of supporting settlers starting up in the territory.³ While some Northerners initially held doubts on the concept of an aid society, support blossomed by means of funding from wealthy patrons and through optimistic pioneers willing to migrate after word of Thayer's efforts went public.⁴ By 1855, this and other organizations consolidated to form the New England Emigrant Aid Company. Amos A. Lawrence was included in this group of philanthropic investors and also served as the organization's treasurer, at times using his own fortune to pay the company's overdrafts.⁵ While perhaps not the most profitable investment, this society intended to send settlers to this new territory at a reduced rate, create a chain of boarding houses in the territory, send machinery such as mills, establish a weekly newspaper, and once Kansas became secured as a free state, the society would liquidate their holdings and dissolve.⁶ Eli Thayer recognized that this goal of free soil in Kansas would not be an easy task, telling a convivial and amused New York audience, "As preparations for going there, seeing that threats had been made, it might be well for the Emigrant to be furnished with his Bible and his rifle; and if he were not protected in his rights according to the principles of the first, let him rely upon the execution of the latter."⁷

Like Thayer, Thaddeus Hyatt became the president of the New York Kansas League in August of 1854. Closely associating with the American Settlement Company, Hyatt boasted they had sent three thousand settlers to the territory in the first year and promised the establishment of mills and newspapers. Parallel organizations took hold in a variety of states, notably Ohio, Illinois, and Wisconsin.⁸ These societies soon sought the assistance of clergymen in their fundraising efforts. A June 27, 1856 circular written by Charles Lowell and a few other Boston clergymen for the religious leaders of the state reads:

Those who have gone out from among us, seeking only free homes in a free land, and that peaceably, have found only intolerance and persecution. Nay even their means of subsistence have been, destroyed, and liberty and life itself unhesitatingly sacrificed, that the Territory might be depopulated of Freeman, and made forever a dwelling place for only the master and his slave... Should this suggestion [for donations] meet your approval, will you bring the subject to the attention of your congregation... and transmit the amount collected.⁹

While these religious efforts did produce revenue, it was the threat of similar southern aid organizations that fueled much of the upswing of Free State monetary support.¹⁰ One of these concerns came to fruition in southeastern

Kansas during the summer of 1856 with the arrival of a colony of South Carolina men. These settlers were believed to be involved in “Dark Lantern Societies,” which aligned themselves under the Southern Emigrant Aid Society.¹¹

In June of 1856, Thayer, Hyatt, and fifty-five other leaders of various aid societies convened in Cleveland in hopes of establishing a National Kansas Committee. Reconvening in Buffalo, New York the following month, this committee would consist of Thayer, Hyatt, and among eleven others, Gerrit Smith. Smith considered the Kansas situation to be dire. He added:

You are looking to ballots, when you should be looking to bayonets; counting up voters, when you should be mustering armed and none but armed emigrants; electioneering for candidates for civil rulers, when you should be inquiring for military rulers... Political action is our greatest hindrance, because it delays the only remedy for the wrongs of Kansas... the action of armed men. If all manhood has not departed from us, we will not consent to leave of Kansas brethren to be butchered.¹²

Ironically, at this time, Smith was the vice president of the American Peace Society.¹³ Regardless of the extent to which other delegates agreed with Smith, the National Kansas Committee moved forward with Thaddeus Hyatt serving as president.

Despite optimistic beginnings, segmentation hindered an attempt at a unified national relief effort. Preexisting societies continued to work within their regional capacities and without much financial success. Even though some historians have argued the ineffectiveness of these organizations regarding the actual extent to which they assisted Kansans in the free-state cause, agents of the committee provided documentation of the conditions that these settlers faced.¹⁴

4. Kansas Relief Committee Reports

One among many agents for the relief committee was John E. Stewart. Stewart hailed from New Hampshire and became motivated to move west through his alignment to the Free State ideology. Traveling with his family in November 1854, Stewart braved the winter, building his claim. With his own land and political bias, Stewart became an active participant in the conflict in southeastern Kansas Territory. During March of 1855, Stewart became associated with the Wakarusa Liberty Guard, taking arms against Border Ruffians. He was actively and violently involved in the free-state cause: manning a station along the Underground Railroad, engaging in skirmishes alongside General Lane, and also becoming active with the Kansas Relief Committee - his only role examined in the content of this work.¹⁵

Compiled by Stewart, informal census data of 1857 revealed a clear acknowledgement of the ongoing conflict, specifically in the southeastern region. Stewart compiled census data and sent it east to Thaddeus Hyatt acting on behalf of the Kansas Relief Committee. Beginning in late August of 1856, organized forces of free-staters and pro-slavers clashed in Linn and Bourbon counties following a summer of violence in the north of the territory, namely the sack of Lawrence and an attack on Osawatimie.¹⁶ The first of many altercations was the Battle of Middle, or Mound, Creek in which Free State men discovered and attacked a camp of proslavery men, capturing fifteen and wounding two. A week later, George W. Clark, the Pottawatomie Indian Agent who was murderous in northern altercations,¹⁷ conducted a raid along the various rural creek settlements in Linn and Bourbon counties, forcing many free-staters off their land. Most of the violence occurred during the first three days of September and was conducted primarily by Missourians and a few proslavers from both counties. As a result, thirty-one claims for damages were brought forth in a Congressional Report, twenty-three of those being in Linn County, the other eight in Bourbon.¹⁸ After being displaced in the fall of 1856, free-staters attempted to recover their claims, only to learn that proslavers had taken these plots for themselves. Land claim disputes rose to the forefront of tensions in the spring of 1857. The attempt to displace the displacers would inevitably lead to confrontation; more than likely escalating to extreme violence.

Noting the aggression during the fall and winter of 1856, Stewart's documents did not simply record the populations; he segregated the population into Pro-Slavery and Free State with an additional sub category of “families in distress” for the Free State faction. This division of the populations is the first hint of Stewart's free-state bias in these reports.

The Little Osage River area “is occupied mostly by P[ro] Slavery men each occupying 6 or 7 claims truly excluding Free State men. There are however 3 or 4 Free State men on this creek who have suffered much persecution.”¹⁹ This report tells of a man, Enoch Osbourn, who was driven off his claims repeatedly by proslavery

men causing “him and his family much suffering.” The Osbourn family is only a single example of how devastating this violence was to the families in this and other raids. Enoch Osbourn lost his position as an effective patriarch, unable to provide for and protect his dependants. The Osbourns were one of many who acknowledged needing some sort of assistance, whether it was through private means, such as neighbors or families protecting and aiding, or through public ways such as territory-wide relief committees sponsored by eastern funding.²⁰

A larger settlement at Marmaton Creek of ninety residents was broken down to thirty-three free-staters, forty-seven proslavers, and ten noncommittal men along with five free-state “families in peril.” While John E. Stewart focuses less on the family unit concerns, because Clark did not strike this creek as hard, he does emphasize the value of this area and the potential in this community unit. “There is room on this creek & its tributaries for at least [sic] \$200 Timber claims, plenty of Springs. Great abundance of coal of the best quality. A good water privileged well worth improving, as been used for a Government Saw mill.”²¹

Just down the river, the Lost Creek census report specifically tells of groups being disrupted by the Bleeding Kansas hostilities; five families were disturbed because of the raid. The report states, “Every family was driven off and most of their crops destroyed [sic].”²² As a result, a sixty-year-old man was obligated to return to work in order to sustain his family. I. H. Marrs, with seven children, was then forced to make rails for a neighbor because the raiders not only burned his crops, but also stole all of his household furniture that they could carry, burning what remained. These men even stole the well rope and his wife’s spinning wheel. The extent to which these ruffians attacked settlers was alarming. It was relatively normal to burn crops in these raids, but cutting off the water supply and most other subsidiary means left these families with few options beyond abandoning their claims.

The settlement on Little Sugar Creek consisted of forty-seven free-state settlers, with seven “in distress,” and only four proslavers. In this report, Stewart directly mentioned that the issues here are a result of Clark. Stewart noted that, “A number of the quiet settlers were taken prisoner & carried to Westport where they were tried by a vigilance [committee.]”²³ While being taken captive appears significant, Stewart provided no further details regarding it. Stewart also revealed that the store of Isaac T. Dement was robbed and burned to the ground. Additionally, “Every Free State family was driven off & most of their crops destroyed [sic].”²⁴ Once again, the devastation intentionally inflicted upon these families was severe enough to require either external aid or relocation.

The Marias des Cygnes report unveiled the clear intent of the Border Ruffians. Being right on the Missouri border, the thirty-four proslavery settlers and twenty-four free-staters was not surprising. Not only was the settlement’s school ruined, but the lives of Sam Nickels, an insignificant player in the grand scheme of the free-state cause, and others viciously assaulted. “Sam Nic[kels] was compelled [sic] to leave his home to preserve his life he was hunted day after day... while absent the ruffians drove his family out consisting of a wife & 10 children out of the house and burned it down.”²⁵ The targeting and head hunting of Nickels put the border conflict beyond just ideological differences. The motives for this action, and Clark’s raid overall, was to gain access to the best claims by displacing the current settlers. The most effective way to remove these persons was to actively attack the family unit. If a man could no longer support his family, especially with winter quickly approaching, he was forced to relocate or receive aid to survive.

The last of Stewart’s reports of this violent attack on the family was the census reporting on Big Sugar Creek. A sizeable community like Little Sugar Creek and Marmaton, Big Sugar Creek was populated by thirty-one free-staters and twenty-five proslavery settlers (two of whom owned three slaves each). Among the thirty-one free-state residents, thirteen were disturbed, including three widows. The most appalling acts by the proslavery men were against J M Arthur who was “driven from his home & his life [stricken], his crop of about 50 acres destroyed, his house burnt down. After being robbed, & the person of his wife violated.”²⁶

In all of the census reports, solutions, or at least improvements, were proposed to aid these families and communities while highlighting the economic opportunities the settlements already possessed. Reporting on Little Osage, Stewart suggested that more free-state men move into the area to balance out the proslavery population while noting the condition of the prairie and timber as ideal for raising livestock.²⁷ The Lost Creek report recommended implanting a blacksmith as well as having slated religious services. John E. Stewart closed with a note on a plentiful supply of stove coal for anyone who would bring a steam mill on the creek.²⁸

Overall, this informal census data was weighted with substantial free-state bias. It was no coincidence that the reports composed by anti-slavery forces depicted the settlements this way, especially because they were under the direction of Thaddeus Hyatt’s relief labors. Regardless, they exhibited the struggles these people faced, even if somewhat exaggerated. It is evident that by looking at the numbers, 118 free-state and 94 proslavery, the once dominant proslavery faction was becoming the minority.²⁹ Even with the proslavery stronghold of Fort Scott, these rural settlements felt surmounted by the recently settled free-staters. As a result of Stewart’s slanted reports, there was a large free-state immigration to the area the following spring. This influx of settlers increased tensions even higher, as well as allowed for retaliation against the Border Ruffians.

5. Further Comments on the Clark Raid

While Stewart's reports provide the most details of the Clark Raid, a local compiled history of Linn County originally published in 1927 also mentions the occurrences of the first few days of September, 1856. This work is a collection of accounts by residences of the area involved with, or descended from those engaging in the early settlement of the area and the Bleeding Kansas events that followed. Quite similar to the Kansas Relief Committee documents, these stories adhere to free-state sympathies:

George W. Clark made his raid through the county, starting from West Point, Missouri, with five hundred cutthroats. They covered a swath ten miles wide, burning every house occupied by a free state man, running off all the cattle and horses, and impressed men with wagons to haul away what they plundered from the houses. In this raid they violated women.³⁰

Another account within the local history stated:

In 1856 General Clark of Georgia fame marched his army of border ruffians through Linn County. There was but little here for them to destroy at that time but that little they effectually disposed of. Such free state men as they were able to capture they took with them and sent under guard to Westport, Missouri. Many of them never returned. Murder and disease relieved both captured and captor. The more fortunate anti-slavery settler upon the approach of the invading army escaped through the brush, leaving his family to the tender mercy of men whose mission it was to drive away all opposition to making of Kansas Territory a slave state.³¹

These two brief mentions provide a moderate affirmation of Stewart's reports, but yet again come from the same skewed viewpoint. Detrimental to the true facts of the Raid in their own rights, these retroactive commentators recalled the events decades later. With Stewart's reports immediately following and settlers' post- Civil War recollections, the real extent of property damages and personal suffering remains unknown.

The only recent historian to closely review Stewart's reports, G. Murlin Welch, did so in the late 1970s. Appropriately, Welch recognized the bias of the author and questioned his accuracy. For example, the population numbers most likely did not include those living in nearby towns which were almost exclusively proslavery.³² He concluded that the free-state settlers were becoming too numerous in the area in the eyes of proslavery settlers and had to be removed without likelihood to return, noting that the nature of the plundering was to the extreme that "thereby eliminat[ed] the means of livelihood."³³ Welch placed the desire for land claims resulting in permanent removal of opposing sentiments from the region as the primary goal of the Clark Raid. This work takes that a step further to link the family and the land. By acting to achieve permanent removal of free-state settlers from the land, proslavery aggressors intentionally targeted families as the means for purging the land.

6. Stone and Southwood

In addition to these accounts of the Clark Raid, the story of Stone and Southwood displayed the effects of the conflict on two family units more intimately. The notable case of William Stone and "Preacher" Southwood is often referenced as an example of a land disagreement gone wrong. As a result of the same September 1856 Clark raids, Stone was forced off his land and "compelled" to sign a bill of sale for his property with border ruffians, endorsing the order to a man named Jobe. While Stone was absent, Southwood took the land as his own. When Stone returned in June 1857, Southwood pretended to have bought the claim from this Jobe. In a somewhat civil negotiation, another house was built on the claim, and the families divided the land. This did not resolve the conflict and they disagreed on access to the water well that Stone had dug. "On one occasion Mrs. Southwood attacked Mrs. Stone while at the well, knocked her down with a handspike, and dangerously beat her."³⁴ The conflict of Bleeding Kansas had not only engraved itself so deeply into society that it could be seen broadly in legislative and judicial divide, but also so finely that it manifested in a scuffle between two women over water. Stone and Southwood exemplify the daily strain on families forced to coexist in this hostile environment. The resulting conflict was infecting whole family units, not just the men taking up arms. The behavior exhibited by the women shows the extent that Bleeding Kansas had planted itself in the family unit. While not all claim disputes ran the same course as Stone and

Southwood, the displacement and destruction as a result of claim disagreements were prevalent as observed in squatters and federal courts records.³⁵

7. Conclusion

Within the context of the wide sweeping conflict of Bleeding Kansas, the Clark Raid during the first days of September in 1856 left a trail of devastation through free-state claims. The reports of John E. Stewart on behalf of the Kansas Relief Committee display the extent and ruthlessness of the active parties in southeastern Kansas. By attacking the family, Clark's posse hoped to drive settlers off of the profitable claims, allowing these proslavers to take them as their own. The detailed catalogues of family displacement illustrate just how deeply family and land claims are joined. The accounts do allow for the observation of destructive attacks on settlers and the resulting displacement, breakdown, or need for assistance. Of the twenty-three families noted as being in distress, the committee provided relief to all. As an inevitable result, efforts to protect one's land, or assault another's, consequently brought the family under fire. These broader strokes of the Bleeding Kansas conflict placed Linn and Bourbon counties into the network of aid societies back east. The focus on specific interruptions to families of settlers and the room for opportunity generates a further interest in the Kansas Territory, whether it involved potential financial donors or claim seekers. These reports reinforce the inseparable connection between the conflict and the families who endured its percussions.

As a result, of the Clark Raid, free-state settlers in Linn and Bourbon Counties began to organize reactionary forces. This event was the jumping off point for future turmoil that burned through southeastern Kansas for the following years. Clark's extensive attack on these settlers led to the rise of figures such as James Montgomery and hundreds of other Jayhawkers seeking retribution, often being joined by John Brown and his men. While this work does not include the subsequent aggression in this portion of the Kansas Territory, there is no doubt that because of this event and others targeting families the passion behind the bloodshed would not have burned as deeply.

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