

## **“Bleeding Kansas” 1853-1861**

The Compromise of 1850 brought relative calm to the nation. Though most blacks and abolitionists strongly opposed the Compromise, the majority of Americans embraced it, believing that it offered a final, workable solution to the slavery question. Most importantly, it saved the Union from the terrible split that many had feared. People were all too ready to leave the slavery controversy behind them and move on. But the feeling of relief that spread throughout the country would prove to be the calm before the storm.

On December 14, 1853, Augustus C. Dodge of Iowa introduced a bill in the Senate. The bill proposed organizing the Nebraska territory, which also included an area that would become the state of Kansas. His bill was referred to the Committee of the Territories, which was chaired by Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois.

Douglas had entered politics early and had advanced quickly; at 21 he was Illinois state's attorney, and by age 35 he was a U.S. Senator. He strongly endorsed the idea of popular sovereignty, which allowed the settlers in a territory to decide for themselves whether or not to have slavery. Douglas was also a fervent advocate of Manifest Destiny, the idea that the United States had the God-given right and obligation to take over as much land as possible and to spread its "civilizing" influence. And he was not alone. A Philadelphia newspaper expounded Manifest Destiny when it proclaimed the United States to be a nation rightfully bound on the "East by sunrise, West by sunset, North by the Arctic Expedition, and South as far as we darn please."

To fulfill its Manifest Destiny, especially following the discovery of gold in California, America was making plans to build a transcontinental railroad from east to west. The big question was where to locate the eastern terminal -- to the north, in Chicago, or to the south, in St. Louis. Douglas was firmly committed to ensuring that the terminal would be in Chicago, but he knew that it could not be unless the Nebraska territory was organized.

Organization of Nebraska would require the removal of the territory's Native Americans, for Douglas regarded the Indians as savages, and saw their reservations as "barriers of barbarism." In his view, Manifest Destiny required the removal of those who stood in the way of American, Christian progress, and the Native American presence was a minor obstacle to his plans. But there was another, larger problem.

In order to get the votes he needed, Douglas had to please Southerners. He therefore bowed to Southern wishes and proposed a bill for organizing Nebraska-Kansas which stated that the slavery question would be decided by popular sovereignty. He assumed that settlers there would never choose slavery, but did not anticipate the intensity and forcefulness of the Northern response. This bill, if made into law, would repeal the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which said that slavery could not extend above the 36' 30" line. It would open the North to slavery. Northerners were outraged; Southerners were overjoyed.

Douglas was stubborn. Ignoring the anger of his own party, he got President Pierce's approval and pushed his bill through both houses of Congress. The bill became law on May 30, 1854.

Nebraska was so far north that its future as a Free State was never in question. But Kansas was next to the slave state of Missouri. In an era that would come to be

known as "Bleeding Kansas," the territory would become a battleground over the slavery question.

The reaction from the North was immediate. Eli Thayer organized the New England Emigrant Aid Company, which sent settlers to Kansas to secure it as a free territory. By the summer of 1855, approximately 1,200 New Englanders had made the journey to the new territory, armed to fight for freedom. The abolitionist minister Henry Ward Beecher furnished settlers with Sharps rifles, which came to be known as "Beecher's Bibles."

Rumors had spread through the South that 20,000 Northerners were descending on Kansas, and in November 1854, thousands of armed Southerners, mostly from Missouri, poured over the line to vote for a proslavery congressional delegate. Only half the ballots were cast by registered voters, and at one location, only 20 of over 600 voters were legal residents. The proslavery forces won the election.

On March 30, 1855, another election was held to choose members of the territorial legislature. The Missourians, or "Border Ruffians," as they were called, again poured over the line. This time, they swelled the numbers from 2,905 registered voters to 6,307 actual ballots cast. Only 791 voted against slavery.

The new state legislature enacted what Northerners called the "Bogus Laws," which incorporated the Missouri slave code. These laws leveled severe penalties against anyone who spoke or wrote against slaveholding; those who assisted fugitives would be put to death or sentenced to ten years hard labor. (Statutes of Kansas) The Northerners were outraged, and set up their own Free State legislature at Topeka. Now there were two governments established in Kansas, each outlawing the other. President Pierce only recognized the proslavery legislature.

Most settlers who had come to Kansas from the North and the South only wanted to homestead in peace. They were not interested in the conflict over slavery, but they found themselves in the midst of a battleground. Violence erupted throughout the territory. Southerners were driven by the rhetoric of leaders such as David Atchison, a Missouri senator. Atchison proclaimed the Northerners to be "negro thieves" and "abolitionist tyrants." He encouraged Missourians to defend their institution "with the *bayonet* and with *blood*" and, if necessary, "to kill every God-damned abolitionist in the district."

The northerners, however, were not all abolitionists as Atchison claimed. In fact, abolitionists were in the minority. Most of the Free State settlers were part of a movement called Free Soil, which demanded free territory for free white people. They hated slavery, but not out of concern for the slaves themselves. They hated it because plantations took over the land and prevented white working people from having their own homesteads. They hated it because it brought large numbers of black people wherever it went. The Free Staters voted 1,287 to 453 to outlaw black people, slave or free, from Kansas. Their territory would be white.

As the two factions struggled for control of the territory, tensions increased. In 1856 the proslavery territorial capital was moved to Lecompton, a town only 12 miles from Lawrence, a Free State stronghold. In April of that year a three-man congressional investigating committee arrived in Lecompton to look into the Kansas troubles. The majority report of the committee found the elections to be fraudulent, and said that the Free State government represented the will of the majority. The federal government

refused to follow its recommendations, however, and continued to recognize the proslavery legislature as the legitimate government of Kansas.

There had been several attacks during this time, primarily of proslavery against Free State men. People were tarred and feathered, kidnapped, killed. But now the violence escalated. On May 21, 1856, a group of proslavery men entered Lawrence, where they burned the Free State Hotel, destroyed two printing presses, and ransacked homes and stores. In retaliation, the fiery abolitionist John Brown led a group of men on an attack at Pottawatomie Creek. The group, which included four of Brown's sons, dragged five proslavery men from their homes and hacked them to death.

The violence had now escalated, and the confrontations continued. John Brown reappeared in Osawatomie to join the fighting there. Violence also erupted in Congress itself. The abolitionist senator Charles Sumner delivered a fiery speech called "The Crime Against Kansas," in which he accused proslavery senators, particularly Atchison and Andrew Butler of South Carolina, of [cavorting with the] "harlot, Slavery." In retaliation, Butler's nephew, Congressman Preston Brooks, attacked Sumner at his Senate desk and beat him senseless with a cane.

In September of 1856, a new territorial governor, John W. Geary, arrived in Kansas and began to restore order. The last major outbreak of violence was the Marais des Cynges massacre, in which Border Ruffians killed five Free State men. In all, approximately 55 people died in "Bleeding Kansas."

Several attempts were made to draft a constitution which Kansas could use to apply for statehood. Some versions were proslavery, others Free State. Finally, a fourth convention met at Wyandotte in July 1859, and adopted a Free State constitution. Kansas applied for admittance to the Union. However, the proslavery forces in the Senate strongly opposed its Free State status, and stalled its admission. Only in 1861, after the Confederate states seceded, did the constitution gain approval and Kansas become a state.

## **“Bleeding Kansas”**

**Answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper**

1. For what reasons did most Americans embrace the 1850 Compromise?
2. What is the idea of popular sovereignty?
3. What is the idea of Manifest Destiny?
4. In order to fulfill its destiny what was America making plans to build?
5. In order to ensure that the terminal would be in Chicago, what did Douglas know would have to happen?
6. What did Douglas regard the Indians as and see the reservations as?
7. How did Douglas bow to southern wishes?
8. Did Douglas think that settlers would vote for slavery?
9. What did the Kansas-Nebraska Act do?
10. What was the Northerners reaction to this law?
11. Was Nebraska ever in question if it would be a free or slave state?
12. Why was Kansas's status as a free or slave state more in question?
13. What was the New England Emigrant Aid Company and what was its purpose?
14. What were “Breecher’s Bibles”?
15. What happened in November 1854? Why?
16. Who were the “Border Ruffians”?
17. What were the “Bogus Laws” and what did they do?
18. What was the reaction of the Northerners to the “Bogus Laws”?
19. Why did most settlers come to Kansas?
20. What did Atchison proclaim Northerners to be?
21. What did he encourage Missourians to do?
22. Why did the Free State settlers hate slavery?
23. What did the Free Staters vote?
24. Did the Federal government go along the recommendation of the three-man congressional committee?
25. What happened on May 21, 1856?
26. What happened at Pottawatomie Creek?
27. How did violence erupt in Congress?
28. In all how many people died in “Bleeding Kansas”?
29. Why was Kansas not admitted as a Free State until 1861?