

Chapter 217 – The Pro-Slavery Forces In Kansas Steal Another Election



Dates:
March to July, 1855

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Date: March 30, 1855

A Second Fraudulent Election Ends With A “Bogus Legislature” For Kansas



A Determined Looking Guy

In addition to the Ostend Manifesto debacle, President Pierce is also plagued by further events in the Kansas Territory during the spring and summer of 1855.

Word has already gotten out that the first test of popular sovereignty in the territory was a fiasco, with the Missouri Border Ruffians usurping the process to elect their pro-slavery candidate for the U.S. House. The fear among Pierce, Douglas and other Democrats is that ex-Senator David Atchison and his Platte County Self-Defense Association will repeat the fraud in the election of a territorial legislature, scheduled for March 30, 1854.

The group’s two leaders – Atchison and Benjamin Stringfellow – have already started a campaign encourage Southerners to bring their slaves into Kansas as a precedent-setting tactic. The response, however, is tepid, and a census in January 1855 shows only 192 slaves present out of a total population of 8,000.

As the election date nears, their attention shifts to repeating the strategy which worked the first time – namely, importing residents of Missouri to stuff the ballot box in favor of pro-slavery candidates.

The Blue Lodge men issue *Stringfellow’s Exposition*, claiming the legality of all citizens who show up, regardless of their residence. Between March 28 and 30 they run ferryboats across the Missouri River carrying some 800 voters per day. When the polls open, they show up en masse, often armed with Bowie knives, and identified by badges made from hemp, one of Missouri’s leading cash crops.

Once again this form of intimidation pays off.

The Pro-Slavery ticket records 5,427 votes – some 90% of the total cast, and roughly 2500 more than are actually eligible to participate.

Even David Atchison, who resigns his seat in the U.S. Senate in December 1854, expresses some doubt about the means taken to deliver the end he demanded.

I did not vote...but I was on hand. I know that it was a matter of doubtful policy to go into the territory on the day of the vote, but...it was great encouragement to the boys (to) carry everything in the territory.

Date: April 6 – July 2, 1855

The Pro-Slavery Legislature Meets And Reeder Is Assaulted For Opposing It

This time, however, Governor Reeder refuses to go along with the results. After interviewing various election judges, he decides on April 6, 1855 to throw out the ballots in six districts – a move that provokes threats to his personal safety among pro-slavery supporters.

Reeder is sufficiently upset by the fraud that he travels to Washington to inform Pierce of the problems in Kansas and to try to gain his agreement to hold a “do-over” election. On his way there, he stops in his old home town of Easton, Pennsylvania and delivers a speech which describes the violations of the Border Ruffians, and calls out both Stringfellow and Atchison by name.

After meeting with the President, Reeder returns to Kansas in June thinking he has approval to hold a second election, this time overseen by military force to insure compliance on voter residency.

The call for a second, fair election is also heard from Free-State men who assemble in an organized fashion in the town of Lawrence on June 8, 1855. They condemn what they call the “Bogus Legislature” and demand that Reeder shut it down before it begins to act.

This doesn’t happen, and on July 2 the Pro-Slavery legislators gather in the frontier town of Pawnee, some 100 miles west of the Missouri border, near Fort Riley. Banners wave, signaling their aims: “Kansas for the South, now and forever; Negro Slavery For Kansas; Hemp For Negro-Stealers; The South And Her Institutions.” They officially declare Kansas a Slave State, and pass a law stating that the publication or circulation of all anti-slavery material will be punishable by two years of hard labor. A local ditty recognizes this act of censorship:

If any Yankee in this territory shall circulate an Abolitionist note...brave Stringfellow or Atchison...may cut his accursed anti-slavery throat!

To further intimidate dissenters, shouted out voice votes are used to pass legislation, and all attempts by the minority to call for new elections are beaten down. In turn, the handful of anti-slavery representatives resign, saying that the current body is “derogatory to the respectability of popular government.”

Reeder responds by vetoing some of the acts, including their decision to move the capital from Pawnee to Shawnee Mission, nearer the Governor’s headquarters. He also begins to speak out against the bullying tactics of the Pro-Slavery supporters, which leads to a violent confrontation at his office at the Shawnee Methodist Mission. On July 2, 1855 Stringfield and several of his backers burst in to ask Reeder if he is the source of disparaging comments about them appearing in the press. When Reeder says yes, Stringfield reportedly knocks him to the ground, kicks him, and attempts to draw a pistol before being restrained by rescuers, including U.S. Attorney Andrew Isacks.

After the attack Reeder writes to his wife saying that she may never see him again.

Date: July 4, 1855

Free State Supporters Begin To Get Organized

Pressure on the Governor mounts on the 4th of July, 1855, when a large turnout of Free State advocates appear on the village green in their home base of Lawrence, Kansas, to declare their new “Declaration of Independence.” The principal spokesman at this event is Charles Robinson, who henceforth plays a key role in opposing the Missouri take-over.

Robinson is raised in Massachusetts by abolitionist parents and becomes a practicing physician before being bitten by the gold rush craze in 1849 and heading cross country to California to try his hand at mining. He also starts up a newspaper dedicated to protecting the land claims of the prospectors. One such dispute ends with Robinson shot in the chest and arrested for murder, after he kills his assailant with an iron bar. He is ultimately exonerated, enters politics, and serves in the California state legislature as an anti-slavery proponent.

In 1854 Robinson is back in Massachusetts as an agent for Eli Thayer’s New England Emigrant Aid Company. In this role he actually leads the first contingent of settlers to Kansas, arriving at Lawrence on August 1, 1854.

In his remarks to the crowd on the Fourth, he asserts that the actions of the Missouri ruffians have turned the true Kansans into “white slaves” by violating their rights to elect a government of their own choosing.

The doctrine of self-government is to be trampled under foot here...the question of negro slavery is to sink into insignificance, and the greater portentous issue is to loom up in its stead, whether or not we shall be the slaves, and fanatics who disgrace the honorable and chivalric men of the south shall be our masters to rule at their pleasure.

Robinson’s message resonates with his Lawrence audience, and they agree to convene a follow-up meeting on August 14 to work toward overturning the “bogus legislature.”

SIDEBAR: Abraham Lincoln's Reactions To The Early Turmoil In Kansas

On August 24, 1855 Abraham Lincoln sends a letter to his closest lifelong friend, Joshua Speed, summarizing his current opinions about the events in Kansas. Speed is raised on a hemp plantation in Louisville, Kentucky, before moving to Springfield as a merchant, and then rooming with Lincoln as he begins his legal career. The letter itself follows the second fraudulent election in Kansas, with the Pro-Slavery forces in control of the legislature – and before any organized response from the Free Staters.

It expresses Lincoln's belief that Kansas will become a Slave State, while also announcing that he will oppose such an outcome and seek to restore the 1820 Missouri Compromise boundary line. But a loss in Kansas would be no reason, he says, to abandon the Union -- rather a signal to take greater care to protect its bonds.

Lincoln also gently chides Speed for opposing the tactics of the Border Ruffians and wishing for a Free State Kansas, while being unwilling as a Southerner to vote for anyone who would voice those positions in the political arena.

Dear Speed:

...You know I dislike slavery; and you fully admit the abstract wrong of it. So far there is no cause of difference. But you say that sooner than yield your legal right to the slave -- especially at the bidding of those who are not themselves interested, you would see the Union dissolved. I am not aware that any one is bidding you to yield that right; very certainly I am not. I leave that matter entirely to yourself.

I do oppose the extension of slavery, because my judgment and feelings so prompt me; and I am under no obligation to the contrary. If for this you and I must differ, differ we must. You say if you were President, you would send an army and hang the leaders of the Missouri outrages upon the Kansas elections; still, if Kansas fairly votes herself a slave state, she must be admitted, or the Union must be dissolved.

That Kansas will form a Slave Constitution, and, with it, will ask to be admitted into the Union, I take to be an already settled question.

In my humble sphere, I shall advocate the restoration of the Missouri Compromise, so long as Kansas remains a territory; and when, by all these foul means, it seeks to come into the Union as a Slave-state, I shall oppose it.

In my opposition to the admission of Kansas I shall have some company; but we may be beaten. If we are, I shall not, on that account, attempt to dissolve the Union. On the contrary, if we succeed, there will be enough of us to take care of the Union. I think it probable, however, we shall be beaten.

You say if Kansas fairly votes herself a free state, as a Christian you will rather rejoice at it. All decent slaveholders talk that way; and I do not doubt their candor. But they never vote that way.

Although in a private letter, or conversation, you will express your preference that Kansas

shall be free, you would vote for no man for Congress who would say the same thing publicly. No such man could be elected from any district in a slave-state. You think Stringfellow & Co. ought to be hung; and yet, at the next presidential election you will vote for the exact type and representative of Stringfellow. The slave-breeders and slave-traders, are a small, odious and detested class, among you; and yet in politics, they dictate the course of all of you, and are as completely your masters, as you are the master of your own negroes.