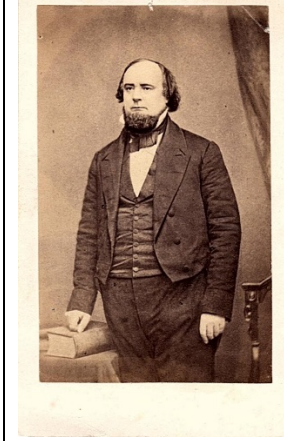


## Chapter 257 – Buchanan Still Tries To Save The Lecompton Constitution



**Dates:**  
February – March 1858

- Sections:**
- A Stubborn Buchanan Demands Approval Of The Lecompton Constitution
  - A Brawl Breaks Out On The Floor Of The House
  - A Stacked Sub-Committee Backs Lecompton As Is

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Date: February 1858

### A Stubborn Buchanan Demands Approval Of The Lecompton Constitution



James L. Orr (1822-1873)

As the evidence from the Kansas elections becomes clear in Washington, Northern Democrats – even in his home state of Pennsylvania -- turn up the heat on Buchanan to abandon his commitment to the Lecompton Constitution.

Still the President is undeterred, and, on February 2, he asks Congress to admit Kansas under the Lecompton constitution.

The Speaker of the house, James Orr of South Carolina is handed the task of setting up a select committee to deliver on Buchanan's wish. This leads to debates about which members will serve, and the extent to which they will delve into the events in Kansas that resulted in the final document.

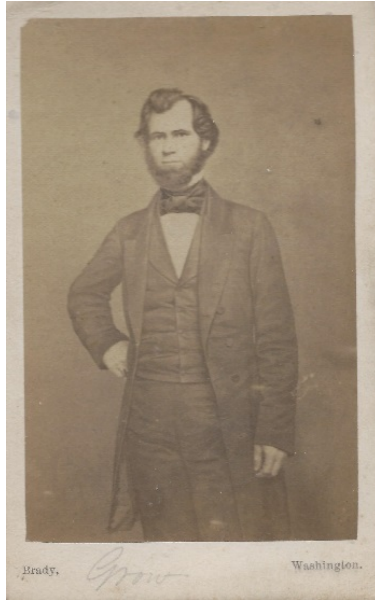
In the evening of February 4, opponents of Lecompton attempt to sneak through a proposal to arm the committee with broad investigative powers, likely to re-visit the fraudulent elections in the Territory.

When Buchanan's floor manager, Alexander Stephens, spots the move, he responds by scurrying around the capitol to round up enough southerners to block it.

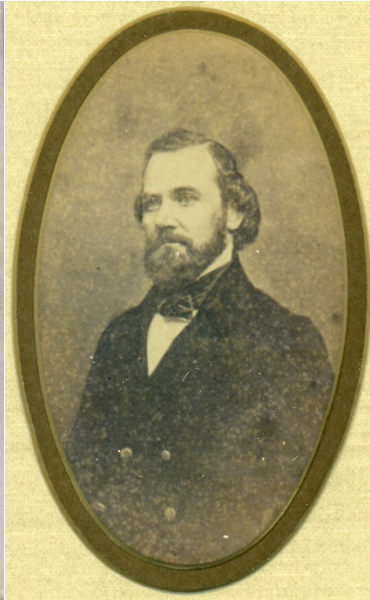
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Date: February 5, 1858

### A Brawl Breaks Out On The Floor Of The House



Galusha Grow (1823-1907)



Lawrence Keitt (1824-1864)

The maneuvering over the shape of the committee continues past midnight with tempers fraying. At roughly 3 am on February 5, 1858, congressman Galusha Grow, the leader of those opposing Lecompton, crosses over from the Republican's right side of the aisle to the left side to consult with fellow Pennsylvanian, John Hickman, a Democrat.

As he does so, the fire-eater Mississippian, John Quitman, asks to be recognized to join the debate. But Grow refuses to give up the floor.

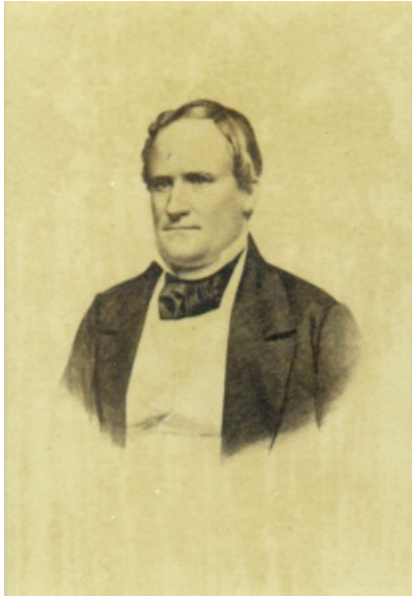
This prompts a shout from Lawrence Keitt, a participant in the earlier caning of Charles Sumner, demanding that Grow return to his side of the chamber. When Grow brushes him off declaring "it's a free hall," Keitt rushes to the front of the chamber and grabs him by the throat. Their verbal exchange is recalled as follows:

*Keitt to Grow: "you are a damned, black Republican puppy."*

*Grow to Keitt: "no negro-driver shall crack his whip over me."*

Keitt's assault sets off an outright brawl, while Sergeant-At-Arms, Adam Glossbrenner, waves the House Mace in a futile attempt to restore order.

Some thirty members join the melee, including Wisconsin's John "Bowie Knife" Potter, who will earn the nickname for his weapon of choice in a threatened duel with Roger Pryor of Virginia. Potter enters the fray by landing a punch on Indiana's John Davis with one hand, and on William Barksdale, with the other. When Barksdale responds by grabbing hold of Cadwallader Washburn, the latter's brother, Elihu, rushes to his defense. In the process of landing a blow, he knocks the Mississippi man's wig to the floor.



William Barksdale (1821-1863)



Elihu Washburn (1816-1887)

The fisticuffs continue until Barksdale put his wig back on sideways -- the sight sufficiently disarming to produce a truce among the exhausted combatants.

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Date: March 1858

### **A Stacked Sub-Committee Backs Lecompton As Is**

Despite the brawl, Speaker Orr goes on to stack the committee with pro-slavery sympathizers and to constrain their scope of inquiry.

This produces the outcome he wants -- a recommendation that Congress adopt the Lecompton Constitution as is, and admit Kansas as a Slave State.

The final report, delivered the first week in March, totally ignores the interference of the Border Ruffians in the process. It claims that the delegates who wrote the document were representative Kansans selected in legal fashion. It also says that the election of December 21, 1857 was legitimate and signaled support for the "Constitution With Slavery." Beyond that, it says the Free State forces have no one but themselves to blame for the results, given their "unfortunate decisions" to boycott various events.

Then comes an attempt to deflect criticism from Northern Democrats like Douglas who say that the public was denied its right to vote on the full Lecompton Constitution --the rationale being that the full U.S. Constitution was never submitted to a popsov-like referendum.

The leading Southern politicians quickly line up behind this narrative, including Alexander Stephens, James Mason, Robert Toombs, John Slidell and Sam Houston.

Like clockwork, Governor Joseph Brown proclaims that rejection will lead him to call a convention to "determine the status of Georgia with respect to the Union." Altogether the message is that a "no to Lecompton is a no to the entire South."