

THE NATION FOCUSES ON "BLEEDING KANSAS"

If a stranger had told you in 1853 that the newspapers would be full of news about Shawnee Mission, Topeka, Lawrence, and Pottawatomie Creek in the next three years, you would have thought he was insane. But history is full of such twists of fate, and the impossible becomes reality.

The reason for Kansas becoming headline news goes back to the rapid growth of California and interest in building a railroad across the continent. A survey had already been run for a railroad from New Orleans to the West Coast, and the Gadsden Purchase made it possible to build that railroad south of the Gila River. At the time it was thought there would be only one railroad, and northern states much preferred a more northern route. As a senator from Illinois, it was logical to Stephen Douglas that it be built west from Chicago. A railroad requires customers to be profitable, and settlers will not move onto land that has not been surveyed and where there is no government to protect life or property.

Douglas proposed the Kansas-Nebraska bill in 1854. It provided that Kansas and Nebraska territories be formed, and allowed the people who settled there to decide whether there would be slavery or not. This idea was called popular sovereignty. He knew there would be opposition, because it would overturn the long-standing Missouri Compromise, which had blocked any slavery north of 36°30'. Kansas and Nebraska were above that line. Southerners and President Franklin Pierce backed it; many northerners were opposed. The bill barely passed.

People on both sides realized it was important that their group get control in Kansas. Lying west of Missouri, it might threaten slavery in that state, so Missouri Senator David Atchison urged southerners to settle there. Many northerners also saw the importance, and the New England Emigrant Aid Company was formed to help New Englanders to settle there. Rev. Henry Ward Beecher said that rifles rather than Bibles would determine the issue, and boxes of "Beecher's Bibles" (rifles) were sent to Kansas.

Andrew Reeder was appointed territorial governor. When he called an election, nearly 5,000 Missourians crossed into Kansas and voted. Their vote was enough to win the election, and a pro-slave legislature was set up at Shawnee Mission. The anti-slavery people ignored it and set up their own legislature at Topeka.

Acts of violence often took place. A pro-slave posse attacked the anti-slavery community of Lawrence, threw its printing press in the river, and tore up the town. John Brown, an abolitionist, led a group of men to Pottawatomie Creek, a pro-slave town, and killed five men and boys, then split their skulls with a sword. North and South, Republicans and Democrats watched happenings in Kansas with horror, and each blamed the other for the violence.



Courtesy Library of Congress

Stephen Douglas