Bleeding Kansas: The Civil War Before the War

Bleeding Kansas refers to the period of Kansas's territorial history directly preceding the

American Civil War. Much like the actual Civil War, this period is characterized mainly by the

heightened sectional tensions between Northerners and Southerners and the extreme actions

taken by both sides. Bleeding Kansas is considered the "Kansas Civil War," and it is often cited

as a precursor to the actual Civil War. By examining the origins, the event itself, and the

aftermath of Bleeding Kansas, it is easy to see the connection between the fighting in Kansas and

the Civil War as a whole. Bleeding Kansas was a major cause of and influence to the Civil War,

which is clearly corroborated by the parallelism between the events.

By 1854, slavery had long-been a divisive issue facing the young United States. Beyond

the institution of slavery within the states themselves, and the morality and legality of such an

institution thereof, there lied another question: as territories made the leap to statehood, were

they to furnish the expansion of slavery westward, thus bolstering the cause of the South, or

disavow the institution of slavery entirely, strengthening the North? The slaveholding and

abolitionist states, of course, both believed that the newly-minted states should follow in their

diametrically opposed footsteps. This issue truly came to a head the first time in 1820, when

Missouri endeavored to join the Union as a slave state. The admission process heightened

sectional tensions everywhere in the nation. Eventually, an agreement was found in the bundle of

compromises known as the Missouri Compromise, which, among other concessions, drew a

metaphorical line at the latitude line 36°30' that prohibited the expansion of slavery in the

territories north of the line, barring Missouri. This compromise eased tension, but fully satisfied

no one. The question came up again following the Mexican-American War, when the Union had

to decide whether the ceded Mexican territory would be free or slave. The decision was solved

this time by the Compromise of 1850, which admitted California as a free state and opened the

new territories of New Mexico and Utah to choose whether to allow slavery or not. This concept,

known as popular sovereignty, opened the question up to the public: when they applied for

statehood, each territory would vote and decide for itself whether slavery would be allowed.

Until application, a territorial legislature would govern the legality of slavery. Both the Missouri

Compromise and the Compromise of 1850 paved the way to the ratification of the

Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854.

Prior to the introduction of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the expansion of slavery into the

Nebraska territory had already been prohibited by the Missouri Compromise. However, this bill

repealed the Missouri Compromise and opened up the Nebraska Territory—broken into the

smaller territories of Nebraska and Kansas—to the aforementioned concept of popular

sovereignty. Southerners were delighted with this bill: while the new territory of Nebraska was

far enough north that its free-soil status was for the most part unquestionable, the territory of

Kansas was another story. The bill opened up the opportunity for another slave state where the

South had assumed there would not be one. Plus, of the Missouri Compromise, their conditions

had already been met with the addition of Missouri as a slave state. Contrarily, this repeal

outraged Northerners: under the long-upheld Missouri Compromise, the entirety of the former

Nebraska territory was rightfully free territory. In his 1856 speech "The Crime Against Kansas,"

Senator Charles Sumner discusses the injustice of the repeal:

The Nebraska Bill was in every respect a swindle. It was a swindle by the South of the

North. It was, on the part of those who had already completely enjoyed their share of the

Missouri Compromise, a swindle of those whose share was yet absolutely untouched . . .

No other word [besides "swindle"] will adequately express the mingled meanness and

wickedness of the cheat. (Sumner)

Despite the outrage in the North and happiness in the South, both sides knew that the battle was

not over. Since the state was opened to popular sovereignty, the vote could still go either way.

On a wider scale, the repeal also heightened sectional tension, especially of the North to the

South; to Abolitionists, the Kansas-Nebraska Act proved that the South was willing to dishonor

past agreements in order to aid the expansion of slavery.

In response to the Act, settlers from the North and South moved to populate the new

territory, in hopes of skewing the vote to their side. The mindset of such settlers is illustrated in a

circular published in the South, quote: "The time has come for action—bold, determined action.

Words will no longer do any good; we must have men in Kansas, and that by tens of thousands. .

. . There are hundreds of thousands of broad acres of rich lands . . . Shall we allow these rich

lands and this beautiful country to be overrun by our abolition enemies?" ("Pro-Slavery

Southerners Urged to Settle in Kansas.") This sentiment was shared and practiced by both sides.

The idea of "words no longer doing any good" is a grim foreshadowing of the violence that was

to occur in the territory's near future, as well as in the Civil War as a whole. It encapsulates the

mindset of those in Kansas—who resorted to violence—and the mindset of those in the

South—who resorted to secession, and then war.

Anti-slavery advocates from the North quickly emigrated to Kansas, intending to settle a free Kansas by whatever means necessary. Unwilling to let Kansas go without a fight, Southerners—called "Border Ruffians" by opposing press—crossed into Kansas from Missouri. Their first goal was to elect a pro-slavery candidate to act as a delegate to Congress in 1854. They succeeded; the Border Ruffians voted "early and often, as it turns out, since more than one thousand seven hundred fraudulent ballots were counted" ("War on the Border: Bleeding Kansas."). When legislative elections for the territory came up, the process repeated. Over six thousand ballots were cast, overwhelmingly for pro-slavery candidates; at the time, Kansas had only about three thousand registered voters ("The Bleeding Kansas Crisis Begins: 1854."). Northerners refused to acknowledge the new pro-slavery legislature, as they believed that the voting fraud invalidated the election. They set up an anti-slavery legislature in Topeka in August of 1855. In April, 1865, Congress investigated the Lecompton legislature, and found that it was "improperly influenced by outside forces" ("The Bleeding Kansas Crisis Begins: 1854."). However, Congress still recognized the Lecompton legislature as the true legislature of Kansas, and did not call for re-election. This only caused tensions to rise, eventually leading to violence throughout the state. This legislative ordeal proved a few points concerning the state of the nation. Even though in this case Congress was technically on the pro-slavery side by recognizing the illegitimate legislature, their choice proved to the South that they were willing to overlook such illegal activities. It also demonstrated the idea of making one's own government when the current government oversteps its power or strays too far from one's own ideas. In the case of Kansas, this idea led to two legislatures; however, although the difference in weight between the

two is major, the same idea applies to the South's decision to secede and establish a government of their own design.

While previous acts of violence and murders had taken place over slavery in the Kansas territory, the first major violent attack would come on May 21, 1856, in the anti-slavery town of Lawrence. This event is commonly referred to as the "Sacking of Lawrence"—and rightfully so. Pro-slavery forces invaded the town, led by Samuel J. Jones. A historian who chronicled the events of Lawrence a few years later described the siege in the following quote: "Nearly every house was entered, and many of them robbed. Trunks were broken open, clothing stolen, and everything taken off to which they took a fancy" (Cordley 101). Notably, the governor's house and a hotel were burned to the ground, while two free-state newspaper offices were ransacked as well; in total, the damaged and stolen property was valued to cost about $200,000 (101). A wood engraving created by Sara T.L. Robinson shows the ruins of the hotel after the siege (see fig. 1).
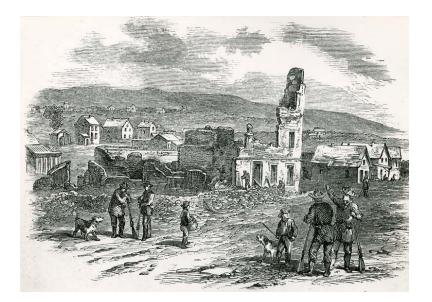
Fig. 1, Robinson, Sara T.L. "Ruins of the Free State Hotel, Lawrence, Kansas." *Library of Congress,* 1856. https://www.loc.gov/item/2006675561/. Accessed 22 Feb. 2018.

This image demonstrates the fact that the tensions in Kansas had grown beyond simple fighting words and voting fraud. The town was not only damaged, it was *ransacked*. In fact, Cordley states that even though the hotel was eventually lit with a torch and burned to the ground, the pro-slavery forces first attempted to destroy it with a cannon, and when that did not work, they attempted to blow it up with a keg of powder (100-101). Both of these methods damaged the hotel, but the clear intent of the pro-slavery forces was to demolish it. Luckily, the siege resulted in only one (accidental) death, but the intent to cause major damage is clear. Unfortunately, although to be expected, anti-slavery forces were outraged and quick to respond with violence in turn. After hearing of the Sacking of Lawrence, John Brown and a band of others decided to seek vengeance. On the night of May 24 and early morning of May 25, 1856, just north of Pottawatomie Creek, the men committed a brutal massacre. The victims were "cut, mangled, stabbed," shot, and one victim's skull was split open (Cutler). Both the Pottawatomie Massacre and the Sacking of Lawrence demonstrate the whatever-means-necessary and retaliatory attitude taken on by both sides. This attitude was also taken on to a lesser extent by both sides of the Civil War, an example being the "total war" methods used during Sherman's March to the Sea.

Following the massacre, true battles erupted across the territory. Three of the most influential battles that occured between anti- and pro-slavery forces were the battles of Black Jack, Fort Titus, Osawatomie. The first of these occurred on June 2, 1856, and was an attack of anti-slavery men, led by John Brown, against a company of pro-slavery men, led by Henry C. Pate. Pate's company eventually surrendered, "after exchanging shots several hours from the ravines and tall grass" (Robinson 294). According to Charles Robinson, an anti-slavery advocate

from Lawrence, "No serious harm was done" (294). The Battle of Black Jack itself was

relatively minor, but it was the first true battle of the Kansas Territory and set the stage for the

battles to come. The next major battle, the Battle of Fort Titus, was preceded by two smaller

fights at other forts: one at Franklin, near Lawrence, and another called Fort Saunders. These

three "forts" were not forts in the traditional sense; all three were simply fortified log cabins,

stocked with supplies for pro-slavery forces (Cordley 113). Anti-slavery forces from Lawrence

attacked the other two forts first before quickly moving to Fort Titus. Fort Titus had proved

particularly bothersome to Lawrence because the men that frequented the fort were well-known

to "harass freestate men and ravage the country" (Cordley 115). On August 16, anti-slavery

men, led by Samuel Walker, attacked the pro-slavery forces at Fort Titus, led by Henry T. Titus.

The pro-slavery forces put up a fight, but eventually surrendered. Colonel Titus and the

remaining pro-slavery men were captured, which is depicted in an illustration by George G.
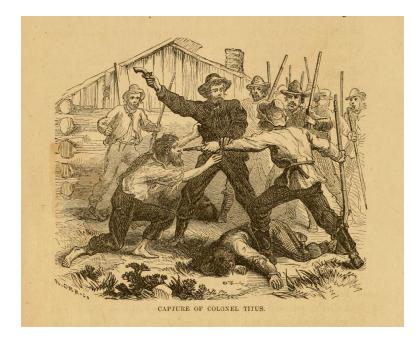
White (see fig. 2).

CAPTURE OF COLONEL TITUS.

Fig. 2, White, George G. "The Capture of Colonel Titus." *Civil War On The Western Border*, 1867, www.civilwaronthewesternborder.org/content/capture-colonel-titus. Accessed 23 Feb. 2018.

The final major battle, the Battle of Osawatomie, occurred on August 30, 1856. This battle would prove to be the height of the conflicts, after which the violence in Kansas would begin to settle out. General John W. Reid led a force of 400 pro-slavery men against a force of only about 40 anti-slavery men led by John Brown. Severely outnumbered, the anti-slavery men knew they could not prevail and eventually retreated. The town was looted and eventually burned to the ground. These three battles, and the other battles fought in Kansas, are the most obvious parallel between Bleeding Kansas and the Civil War. Simply put, Bleeding Kansas demonstrated that the issue of slavery could only be solved through war. For a nation so divided by that very issue, such a demonstration was a big step away from peaceful resolution,

Although more minor skirmishes and acts of violence would occur, the violence for the most part came to an end with the departure of John Brown from the territory and the

appointment of the new territorial governor, John W. Geary, in 1856. Geary, though disliked by

anti-slavery advocates and hated by pro-slavery advocates, managed to build a truce between the

two sides. This peace was broken sporadically in the next few years, but it held. Eventually, in

1861, Kansas was able to enter the Union as a free state—but only after the secession of southern

states.

Altogether, it is clear that Bleeding Kansas greatly influenced and was ultimately a cause

of the American Civil War. This is clearly demonstrated by the many parallels that run between

the two events. Bleeding Kansas heightened sectional tension and distrust between the North and

the South, and it provided the South with a close-to-home example of a secession-like movement

in its dispute over the territorial legislature. It also exemplified the whatever-means-necessary

attitude that was seen on both sides of the Civil War. Finally, and most importantly of all,

Bleeding Kansas proved that the question of slavery—the irreconcilable difference that was

tearing both the territory and the nation apart—can only be answered through warfare.

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