

**PROPAGANDISTS FOR A FREE-STATE KANSAS:
NEW YORK TIMES' CORRESPONDENTS
AND BLEEDING KANSAS, 1856**
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With the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, Kansas Territory became the center of national attention until its status as a free or slave state was determined. Covered thoroughly by the Eastern press, Kansas was front-page material from the day the Kansas-Nebraska Act was first introduced to the acceptance of Kansas into the Union in 1861. The Kansas Territory witnessed several elections, territorial governors, and constitutions. Appointed in 1854 as the first Territorial Governor, Andrew H. Reeder was plagued by Missouri citizens crossing the border to vote in order to assure the election of a pro-slavery legislature. This first legislature, rightfully labeled as bogus by Free-State men, soon acted on its own, ignoring Governor Reeder in order to pass laws favoring the adoption of slavery.

In July of 1855, Wilson Shannon, who favored the pro-slavery cause, replaced Reeder—who was removed for land speculation—as Territorial Governor. Two months later the Free-Staters, far from inactive, framed a constitution at their convention in Topeka, where they also selected Reeder as their delegate to Congress. Of course the pro-slavery legislature had also elected a delegate, which resulted in the United States Congress appointing a committee to investigate the situation in Kansas. President Franklin Pierce denounced the Free-State Party's defiance of the Territorial Government. After the harsh winter of 1855-56, the Free-State Party renewed its activity and formed its own state government in Topeka.

This resulted in Governor Shannon calling for the arrest of various Free-State

supporters. Lawrence, a home to many prominent Free-State men and anti-slavery newspapers, received a visit from Sheriff Samuel J. Jones, a pro-slavery advocate who attempted to arrest certain Free-Staters. When the sheriff received a gunshot wound in the back a few days later, the Territorial Government called for a "posse" to arrest those Free-Staters Jones had failed to apprehend. Unfortunately, the posse turned into a mob, sacking Lawrence on May 21, 1856.¹

The year 1856 was a very important one for the future of Kansas as well as for the perception of the struggle in the rest of the United States. The special correspondents from the Northeastern press played a vital role in presenting the story of Bleeding Kansas. It was an extremely critical time for Kansas because public opinion was just being formed at this point. The special correspondents often played a dual role in the struggle for Kansas; many both reported and actively participated in the "cause," as they saw it. The articles written in early 1856 gave some of the most detailed recounting of specific events in Kansas.

The Northeastern press as a whole favored a free Kansas, and articles written in Kansas exclusively for the *New York Times* reflected this interest. This was obviously the case during the early months of 1856 when the majority of articles were dedicated to describing Border Ruffians and immigrants, descriptions that reflected the writers' other functions in the state. In the spring the Free-State Legislature met, and through the newspaper articles the purpose, goals, and integrity of the Free-State Government received thorough attention. After the Legislature recessed in

March, potentially damaging events to the Free-State cause were overshadowed by the sack of Lawrence in May, giving the correspondents a chance to condemn the pro-slavery Territorial Government. How the events and people were depicted shows that the special correspondents for the *New York Times* sought to shape early public opinion.

The special correspondents for the *New York Times* in 1856 were different from newspaper reporters today. Their narrative style was more personal because of their direct involvement in the events. Since this type of personal journalism relied on the authentic voices of correspondents, they limited themselves to events in which they were personally involved. They did so, however, without describing their part, if any, in the events. Having used pen names such as "Kansas," "T.," "Literal," and "Randolph," many of the writers were and remain truly anonymous. No known records exist at the *New York Times* that link specific writers with their pen names during the early years of the paper, with the exception of some Civil War correspondents.² William Hutchinson in later writings, however, identified his pen name as "Randolph." In his "Sketches of Kansas Pioneer Experience," Hutchinson also described the events that brought him to Kansas and his later involvement in Kansas Free-State politics.³ Along with Hutchinson, James M. Winchell also wrote for the *New York Times* in the same region of Kansas during 1856.⁴ Unfortunately, Winchell's pen name is uncertain, but it probably was "Literal."

As special correspondents for the *New York Times* in 1856, James M. Winchell's and William Hutchinson's writings often reflected their current involvement in Kansas politics, according to Richard J. Hinton, also a reporter in Kansas in 1856.⁵ That activity was evident in how they described the "Border Ruffians" and

the "legitimate immigrants" from the abolitionist aid companies back East. Winchell, who was active in bringing anti-slavery settlers to Kansas, was one of the nine directors of the American Settlement Company, one of many anti-slavery aid companies that heavily subsidized Free-State settlers.⁶ Hutchinson was even more directly involved when during the winter of 1856-57 he returned to his home state of Vermont to raise and bring a party of settlers back to Kansas. Along with their interest in bringing in settlers, both Winchell and Hutchinson worked to gather donations for the Free-State cause. As voting members of the Kansas State Central Committee--a fund raiser for the Free-State movement--both Winchell and Hutchinson were appointed as Commissioners with the express purpose of visiting New York to raise capital and men.⁸ The correspondents' other activities outside of reporting for the *New York Times* were never mentioned in their writings, but there is little doubt about what side they supported.

The anti-slavery correspondents accused the pro-slavery forces of trying to influence the status of Kansas by sending temporary pro-slavery settlers with their families to the territory and using the murderous Missouri "Border Ruffians." These settlers were criticized for being members of immigrant aid companies where money was collected and divided among immigrants to pay for land and other expenses. The abolitionist aid companies served essentially the same purpose, but unlike their pro-slavery counterparts the anti-slavery immigrants' sincerity in creating permanent settlements never was doubted. William Hutchinson, or "Randolph," claimed that when Kansas became a slave state, the pro-slavery immigrants planned to sell their land "and none will remain longer in the Territory, after accomplishing their object, unless they choose to." To tarnish further the

image of the pro-slavery aid companies, Hutchinson suggested that they were managed by clandestine lodges that required oaths of silence.⁹

With the coming of spring in 1856, Hutchinson focused his attention on a specific group of immigrants from the South known as "Buford's Company." Under the direction of Major Jefferson Buford, this group was the only southern immigrant aid company mentioned by name in the newspaper articles. Hutchinson questioned their status as immigrants by attributing to them such inflammatory statements as "We have sworn to make Kansas a Slave State and wipe out Abolitionism. If we cannot do it fairly, we shall by force of arms."¹⁰ Major Buford, or Buford of Alabama, did work very hard to gather men from pro-slavery states. How he did this is not completely clear; however, according to Noble L. Prentis, Buford "issued a call for 300 men, offering by way of inducement, transportation, support for a year, and the satisfaction of a chance at an abolitionist." On the other hand, Alice Nichols in her book claims "he wanted 300 settlers who were, he said, "industrious, sober, discreet, reliable men, capable of bearing arms but not prone to use them wickedly or unnecessarily."¹¹ The ultimate purpose of "Buford's Company" is not evident from the sources, but it seems that Hutchinson was more interested in presenting the negative side of the pro-slavery immigrants.

The correspondents, however, left their most venomous attacks for the Missouri "Border Ruffian," whose only purpose was to create havoc for all civilized people. Hutchinson wrote, "for in no other civilized land can there be found so obscene, depraved, brutish race of beings, . . . who talk of nothing sensible or moral--but especially of the last few weeks, they talk mostly of killing Abolitionists in Kansas, [and] ravishing the women, . . ."¹²

Such colorful descriptions certainly sparked interest back East, and during the winter months of 1856, all writers really could do was either predict upcoming atrocities or rehash old ones. After reading Hutchinson's description of the rowdy immigrants and Border Ruffians, readers could only conclude that the South had nothing positive to add to Kansas.

Journalists often contrasted pro-slavery immigrants with anti-slavery immigrants, but they did not limit their criticism to one side or the other when money was concerned. When a party of settlers from New Haven, Connecticut, arrived in April of 1856, they were described as being in good health and well armed with Sharps Rifles to be used in defense against Border Ruffians. The correspondents always stressed that Free-Staters abhorred violence and only intended to use their modern Eastern Abolitionist-funded weapons for self-defense. On the other hand, the Border Ruffian was pictured as a dangerous Bowie-knife-wielding fiend.¹³ When matters turned to money, however, both sides were criticized by Hutchinson. Buford's company came under fire for incurring debts in Kansas City that it could not pay. These debts were described as "a tax of several hundred dollars upon the people." The New Haven party was guilty of paying out a total of ten thousand dollars in supplies in St. Louis and Kansas City. Hutchinson editorialized, "I disapprove the policy in any party of paying to Missouri so liberally for articles that can be bought in Lawrence quite as cheap, adding the cost of freights."¹⁴ Anti-slavery immigrants, usually praised, were important but not above reproach when money for the Free-State case was involved.

Far outnumbering stories of Free-State immigrants were appeals for more men and money. Tales of impending doom for Kansas followed by the

"destruction of the Union" were the correspondents' strongest images. Hutchinson, for example, predicted that "the downfall of our nation must date from the conquest of Kansas. The veil is now fully removed, and we see clearly the hellish designs of our Southern enemy." Appeals such as this were usually followed by a call to arms such as this: "the South is leagued against you and us. How can our appeal be resisted? We want thousands of brave men."¹⁵ The correspondents also wanted money. Hutchinson himself later described his and Winchell's roles as distributing agents for the National Central Committee, which he said collected and disbursed many thousands of dollars.¹⁶ The correspondents knew how important it was to maintain interest in the Free-State cause in order to assure a steady flow of donations and settlers.

By the spring of 1856 news coverage from Kansas had become less speculative; there were now enough events to keep the writers busy reporting on political affairs and personalities in the Free State Legislature. Although James M. Winchell and William Hutchinson played no official political role at this time, they remained active in Free-State government and in 1859 would help frame the State Constitution.¹⁷ While organized opposition to the Territorial Government was growing, the correspondents' articles reflected their own ideas on the ultimate shape of the new Kansas government, and they were not above taking sides, even at the meeting of the Free-State Legislature.

The principal objective of the articles written about the meeting of the Free-State Legislature was to show the need for establishing a second State Legislature. After the first meeting on March 4, 1856, Hutchinson, who was present, reported that the legislature was indeed representative of the entire Territory and that it was determined to break away from

the pro-slavery Territorial Government. At the time, President Pierce even labeled the meeting of this "second" legislature as "treasonable," prompting the newly elected Free-State Governor Charles Robinson to emphasize once again the crucial importance of such a legislature. The Territorial Government, said Robinson, was an "instrument of oppression and tyranny unequalled in the history of our Republic." He also believed that "every election held under the Territorial Government was carried by armed invaders from an adjoining state, and for the purpose of enacting laws in opposition to the known wishes of the people."¹⁸ Realizing that an accusation of treason by the President of the United States could well discourage some Free-State supporters, the correspondents emphasized the need for a separate legislature. In addition to that, the correspondents were faced with another problem, namely to discourage possible compromise between the Free-State Legislature and the Territorial Government.

The possibility of such a compromise had emerged in February of 1856 when the Territorial Government had offered to reconvene the first "pro-slavery" Legislature in order to repeal any "obnoxious laws," as well as to call for a new Constitutional Convention. All of this was proposed in order to keep the Free-State Legislature from meeting, according to Hutchinson. Although, the Free Staters did not trust the Territorial Government, the mere offer of such a compromise strengthened their confidence, convincing them that they would be recognized as the legitimate State Government. Hutchinson interpreted the offer of a compromise as a sign of weakness by the Territorial Government and went so far as to claim victory for the Free Staters. Going even further, Hutchinson claimed that the pro-slavery forces were in league with the "Executive in Washington" and were

banding together to defeat the Free-Staters. However, the Free-State forces, because of their noble and pure cause, would ultimately emerge victorious. In this light, compromise or "dividing the glory" was tantamount to defeat. Hutchinson concluded that the fact "that they ask us to undo what we have done, is conclusive evidence that they regard our present position as formidable."¹⁹ The Free-Staters recognized that, if they were to compromise and call off their legislature's meeting, the progress they had made so far would be lost. Therefore, only a total victory by the Free-State case would assure the anti-slavery status of Kansas.

Aside from refusing to compromise, it was just as important to maintain the integrity of the Free-State Legislature. To weed out undesirables, the correspondents of the *New York Times* focused on what they saw as a corruption in their party. The Free-State politician who received the bulk of the criticism was Colonel James H. Lane, a former Democratic congressman from Indiana and future United States senator from Kansas, who together with others had earlier attempted to subordinate slavery to other issues. Colonel Lane, it seems, felt that including grievances in addition to slavery might possibly widen the appeal of the party. However his plan failed, and slavery became the only issue that the Free-State Party would deal with. The fact that Colonel Lane later joined the Free-Staters naturally damaged his credibility and his standing with a good number of people, including the correspondents for the *New York Times*.²⁰

The most interesting article on Colonel Lane's political maneuverings was written by the correspondent using the pen name "Literal," who was most likely James H. Winchell. Supposedly writing a retraction of an earlier letter in which Lane had been unfairly characterized, Literal now portrayed Lane's character in

the same negative way, adding that the Colonel's sensitivity to public opinion was directly related to his desire to become a United States Senator. Literal went on to explain that being truly devoted to the Free-State cause, he could not possibly support Colonel Lane until he attempted "to pursue a line of rigidly honest policy."²¹ The correspondent's real complaint with Lane related to his earlier willingness to subordinate the slavery issue, and as even Hutchinson said, "Lane is not able to show a clean hand when driven to define his position, which he generally does after all the rest have taken sides-so [he] can contrive to jump between them and not flounder."²² Oddly, Hutchinson served on the staff of Colonel Lane during this time in a capacity that is unclear.²³ In his later writings Hutchinson seems to ignore his earlier criticisms of Lane. Regardless, the articles in the *New York Times* show that the correspondents were truly concerned with the reputation and image of the Free-State Legislature and sought to protect it through their writing.

Those who returned to Lawrence soon felt the consequences of meeting as a separate legislature. Throughout the proceedings there had been rumors that the Territorial Governor, Wilson Shannon, had ordered the arrest of all the Free-State legislators for treason. In fact, in his speech to the Topeka Legislature, Free-State Governor Charles Robinson addressed that very possibility and directed the legislators to offer no resistance for "men who are ready to defend their own and their country's honor with their lives can never object to a legal investigation into their actions."²⁴ Yet, this would be the very thing that led to the sack of Lawrence.

In late April of 1856, Governor Shannon decided to act and sent Sheriff Jones to Lawrence in order to arrest members of the Free-State government. Carrying a four month old warrant to S.N.

Wood, Sheriff Jones attempted to arrest Wood, but not for his recent activity. The old warrant was a result of Wood's part in the rescue of Jacob Branson, a farmer and Free-State supporter, on November 26, 1855.²⁵ The appearance of Sheriff Jones provided Hutchinson with an opportunity to make the law of the Territorial Government seem not only inadequate but downright foolish. Referring to Jones as "Sheriff (?) Jones," Hutchinson suggested that the Sheriff's authority would not or even should not be respected.

To further discredit Sheriff Jones, Hutchinson related an incident demonstrating the Sheriff's ineptitude. This article was one of the best examples of the personal journalism of the time. Hutchinson declared that Jones, while attempting to make an arrest, had his weapons taken from him by some not-so-innocent bystanders--apparently without his realizing it. Unable to carry out his duties, Jones lost his temper and threatened to arrest his man "even if it cost every life in Lawrence." The following day he returned and attempted to arrest Samuel Tappan, a Free-State newspaper reporter from the *St. Louis Democrat*. But Tappan was not to be intimidated and "began to revolve his fists, telling Jones that he stood in no fear of him." Hutchinson defended the actions of the citizenry and wrote that the whole affair was all Governor Shannon's fault since he sought to force a confrontation in front of the Howard Committee in order to discredit the Free-State movement.²⁶ This United States Congressional Committee was holding its hearings in Kansas at this time in order to determine which State Government's delegates to the Congress to accept as legitimate.²⁷ Hutchinson's story of what happened is very similar to other reports; except for some overly dramatic dialogue, Sheriff Jones and the citizens' behavior is fairly realistic.²⁸

While defending the actions of the

Lawrence citizens in this case, Hutchinson was considerably more cautious in his portrayal of an incident a few days later during which Sheriff Jones was wounded in the back by an unknown assailant. Realizing how such an incident could damage the image of the law abiding Free-State movement, Hutchinson chastised the cowardly attempt on the Sheriff's life. He also pointed out that this was the first time blood was shed by the Free-State men and hastened to add that the act was committed by "some wreckless [sic] spirit" and that "he only should be held responsible."²⁹ The shooting of Sheriff Jones could have been far more damaging to the reputation of the Free-State cause had it not been for the over-reaction of the Territorial Government, which was soon to overshadow the incident.

The sack of Lawrence gave plenty of ammunition to the correspondents in their efforts to show just what the pro-slavery forces under the alleged direction of the Territorial Government were capable of doing. Hutchinson did not need to elaborate on the events of May 21, 1856, for the action of the so-called "posse" in Lawrence spoke for itself. Only two arrests were made, and the force that had been called to quell the uprising in Lawrence took matters into its own hands under the direction of the now recovered Sheriff Jones. Ultimately the Free-State Hotel, two newspaper offices, and Governor Robinson's house were destroyed.³⁰ Hutchinson's depiction of these events is consistent with the findings of later research. As he later said, "The sacking of Lawrence May 21, 1856, by a posse of United States officers, will be ever memorable, and I stood near General Atchinson when he pointed their cannon at the Free-State hotel. I saw and heard all."³¹ The posse in fact was not able to destroy the Free-State Hotel with a cannon and had to satisfy themselves with

setting it on fire, leaving only the outer brick shell. There was only one death that day—a member of the posse was killed by falling bricks from the Free-State Hotel.³² The Territorial Government's role in this senseless act of violence provided the journalists with plenty of evidence to support their struggle for a free Kansas.

An analysis of the *New York Times'* coverage of "Bleeding Kansas" during the first several months of 1856 clearly shows that the special correspondents not only wrote from the perspective of the Free-State movement but were open advocates of the Free-State cause, and in some instances were directly involved in the movement's politics. These involvements colored their descriptions of pro-slavery immigrants and the Free-State Legislature. They refused to accept the possibility of a

legitimate Southern immigrant and did their best to discredit Southern immigrant aid companies. When the Free-State Legislature met in Topeka, the correspondents defended its legitimacy and attacked anyone who threatened its functioning. When writing about the events leading up to the sack of Lawrence, however, the correspondents' defense for Free-Staters was not as clear-cut as before. The sack of Lawrence overshadowed any weakening of the correspondents' writings and gave them fresh material to demonstrate pro-slavery atrocities for months to follow. The *New York Times* correspondents provided their readers with personal accounts of the events that were, in the main, factually correct and contributed in part to deciding Kansas' destiny.

NOTES

1. William F. Zornow, *Kansas: A History of the Jayhawk State* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957), 69-73; Robert W. Richmond, *Kansas: A Land of Contrasts* (Forum Press: Arlington Heights, Illinois, 1989), 66-78.
2. John Rothman, Chief Archivist of the *New York Times*, telephone interview by author, 2 November 1989.
3. William Hutchinson, "Sketches of Kansas Pioneer Experience, *Kansas Historical Collections* 7 (1901-1902): 390-391.
4. Col. Richard J. Hinton, "Pens That Made Kansas Free," *Kansas State Historical Society* 6 (1897-1900): 375, 379.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Bernard A. Weisberger, "The Newspaper Reporter and the Kansas Imbrogiolo," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 36 (March 1950): 640.
7. Hutchinson, "Sketches of Kansas Pioneer Experience," 392.
8. Daniel W. Wilder, *The Annals of Kansas, 1541-1885* (Topeka: T. Dwight Thacher, Kansas Publishing House, 1886), 143.
9. *New York Times*, 27 February 1856.

10. *New York Times*, 20 May 1856.
11. Noble L. Prentis, *A History of Kansas* (Topeka: Caroline Prentis, 1909), 95; Alice Nichols, *Bleeding Kansas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), 85.
12. *New York Times*, 25 February 1856.
13. *New York Times*, 26 April 1856.
14. *New York Times*, 20 May 1856.
15. *New York Times*, 25 February 1856.
16. Hutchinson, "Sketches of Kansas Pioneer Experience," 406.
17. Wilder, *The Annals of Kansas*, 261.
18. *New York Times*, 20 March 1856.
19. *New York Times*, 27 February 1856.
20. Zornow, *Kansas: A History of the Jayhawk State*, 70.
21. *New York Times*, 27 February 1856.
22. *New York Times*, 29 March 1856.
23. Hutchinson, "Sketches of Kansas Pioneer Experience," 406.
24. *New York Times*, 20 March 1856.
25. Prentis, *A History of Kansas*, 90.
26. *New York Times*, 2 May 1856.
27. Zornow, *Kansas; A History of the Jayhawk State*, 72; Richmond, *Kansas: A Land of Contrasts*, 73-74.
28. Sara T.D. Robinson, *Kansas; Its Interior and Exterior Life* (Lawrence, KS: Journal Publishing Company, 1899), 229.
29. *New York Times*, 3 May 1856.
30. *New York Times*, 30 May 1856.
31. Hutchinson, "Sketches of Kansas Pioneer Experience," 393.
32. James A. Rawley, *Race and Politics* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1969), 130-131.