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The Five-Day Capitol

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The Five-Day Capitol



FIRST TERRITORIAL CAPITOL OF KANSAS

Deborah Clark

Courtesy Deborah Clark, United States Cavalry Museum, Fort Riley, Kansas

The First Territorial Capitol, located at Fort Riley, has seen many changes throughout its 158 years on the prairie.

This building, fashioned out of native limestone, was at the center of a bustling town, was the site where the first Territorial Legislature convened, was on the fringes of a military post, was in the eye of a storm, withered away by the forces of nature, painstakingly reassembled and restored, designated a Kansas State Historic Site, and today is a museum sustained by a volunteer non-profit organization. Inside the museum visitors can absorb the fiery history of the antislavery and proslavery disputes that dominated politics during the Bleeding Kansas era of 1854-1861.

The Pawnee Town Association, formed in September of 1854, selected a site near Fort Riley and began selling town lots immediately. The first territorial

governor, Andrew H. Reeder, and the commander of Fort Riley, Major W. R. Montgomery, were both members of the association and invested heavily in the venture of town building. Pawnee was located between the banks of the Kaw River, a military supply road, and the eastern boundary of the post. Once it became publicly known that the first territorial legislators would convene in Pawnee, hundreds of new investors purchased town lots, began building homes, and initiated businesses. The construction of the new capitol building began in April 1855. Large cottonwood trees furnished the lumber, and the hillsides provided the natural limestone walls. Construction was led by the

When the dust settled on March 30, 1854, polling places in Kansas had been overrun by over 4500 Missourian border-jumpers who all voted in favor of pro-slavery delegates.

Kuntz brothers from Pennsylvania, Bob and Silas, and labor was provided by the townspeople. The large two-story building you see today measures forty by eighty feet with an open floor plan, ideally suited to hold the large crowds the legislative sessions would draw.

When the dust settled on March 30, 1854, polling places in Kansas had been overrun by over 4500 Missourian border-jumpers who all voted in favor of pro-slavery delegates. The “bogus” legislature that was elected consisted primarily of Missouri and Kansas pro-slavery delegates, who outnumbered the Free-staters nearly thirty-to-one. The

men convened in the roughly-finished chamber on the second floor on July 1, 1855. Although the session opened enthusiastically, arguing soon ensued, and four days later the pro-slavery majority passed a bill transferring the seat of government to the Shawnee Indian Mission near Kansas City.

The town of Pawnee, weak from political upheavals and a growing cholera epidemic, was shaken to its core in September 1855. Representatives from Fort Riley announced that upon official surveying, the town was found to be on federal soil. Everyone was forced to vacate on or before October 10, 1855. All evidence of the town was destroyed by government decree, except the capitol building, which became a warehouse until it was struck in 1877 by a violent windstorm. The roof was lost and the interior was in shambles, but the walls stood firm.

The battered building became window scenery for passengers riding on the Union Pacific Railroad before the

turn of the century and was something of a curiosity. Fundraising and calls for its restoration began in Junction City around 1906. In 1926 the Union Pacific Railroad teamed up with the Kansas State Historical Society to ensure the success of the restoration project, which was completed in two years. The grand rededication, held on August 1, 1928, garnered a crowd of more than 15,000 people to celebrate the building’s restoration and the grand opening as a State Historic Site. The

“Five-Day” Capitol building is open and free to the public on weekends March through October, and the newly extended and renovated Kaw River Nature Trail is open year-round.

Theresa Young earned a Master’s Degree in Environmental History from Kansas State University in May 2013. She is a board member of the Partners of the First Territorial Capitol and is the former tourist counselor for the state historic site. She currently serves as a graduate editorial assistant for Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains.



*lithograph by John L. Magee (1856)
Attack by US Representative Preston Brooks of South Carolina
on US Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts on the Senate floor May 22, 1856.*