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2011 – Freedom's Frontier in the Flint Hills
(Laurie J. Hamilton, Editor)

Connecticut Yankees in Kansas

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Recommended Citation

Stubbs, Michael (2011). "Connecticut Yankees in Kansas," *Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal*.
<https://newprairiepress.org/sfh/2011/flinthills/4>

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The Field Journals are made possible in part with funding from the Fred C. and Mary R. Koch Foundation.

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HENRY WARD BEECHER
Mount Mitchell Prairie Guards

Connecticut Yankees in Kansas

Those of us who took Kansas or Missouri history classes may remember reading about Bleeding Kansas. This is the term used to describe the series of events that occurred after the creation of Nebraska and Kansas Territories in 1854. These events are now seen as the prelude to the Civil War.



The Bill that created Kansas Territory from Indian land also repealed the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which had limited slavery to the states in the South. The compromise had maintained the balance of power in Congress between the North and South. The Bill stipulated that residents would vote whether they would enter the Union as a state that allowed or prohibited slavery. Since Kansas Territory's neighboring state, Missouri, was a slave state, it was assumed that Missourians would easily sway the vote. If Kansas became a slave

state, the North feared that other new western states would follow, and the South's political power would forever be dominant. Congress had unwittingly created a battleground.

As Eli Thayer, a Massachusetts educator, said, "The repeal of the Missouri Compromise proved that the legislative restriction of Slavery was simply a delusion, and that the contest between Freedom and Slavery...must be carried on outside of legislative halls. It must be a contest on the prairies, and the power victorious there would, in due

time, govern the country.”

Thayer had foreseen the repeal of the compromise and had organized and chartered the Massachusetts Emigrant Aid Company in April of 1854. With the help of Horace Greeley, the *New York Tribune* editor, and prominent clergy such as Henry Ward Beecher, Thayer began promoting Free-state emigration to Kansas. Conversely, Missourians and southerners with their viewpoint also promoted emigration to Kansas to further their cause.

With the government backing the proslavery forces, President Pierce appointed proslavery officers for the Territory who did everything in their power to thwart the efforts of the Free-state emigrants. When elections for a Territorial Legislature were held in March of 1855, Missourians streamed across the border in large numbers and overwhelmed the polls. The resulting elected body became known to Free-state advocates as the “Bogus Legislature.” This legislature enacted extreme laws

such as making it a crime even to speak against slavery. Free-state leaders debated resistance to these laws but instead decided to elect their own government.

Incidents of violence between proslavery and Free-state emigrants flared until the fall of 1855 when a series of events escalated toward armed conflict. The Governor called out the militia and telegraphed the President to send federal troops, telling him that a rebellion had broken out.

Free-state forces responded by preparing for war. However, bitter winter weather descended on the Territory putting hostilities on hold. The incident became known as the “Wakarusa War.” Free-state leaders used the ceasefire to deliver speeches in the Upper Midwest and the East to raise money for arms and to lobby for admission to the Union as a Free-state.

Eli Thayer, the leader of what was now the New England Emigrant Aid Company, spoke of the need for emigration to Kansas at a series of

meetings in New Haven and other Connecticut communities. As a result of these meetings, plans for a colony of Connecticut emigrants were formed, but delayed until the spring would thaw the frozen Missouri River.

In spring of 1856, General Buford began raising recruits in Montgomery, Alabama for the purpose of marching to Kansas to drive out the Free-state settlers. When word reached the Northern papers, Free-state supporters were outraged. Henry Ward Beecher published his famous “Defence of Kansas” broadside where he said:

A battle is to be fought. If we are wise, it will be bloodless. If we listen to the counsels of men who have never shown one throb of sympathy for Liberty, we shall have blood to the horses' bridles. If we are firm and prompt to obvious duty, if we stand by the men of Kansas, and give them all the help that they need, the flame of war will be quenched before it bursts forth, and both they of the West, and we of the East, shall, after some angry mutterings, rest down in peace. But if our ears are poisoned by the advice of

men who never rebuke violence on the side of power, and never fail to inveigh against the self-defence of wronged Liberty, we shall invite aggression and civil war. And let us know assuredly that civil war will not burst forth in Kansas without spreading. Now, if bold wisdom prevails, the conflict will be settled afar off, in Kansas, and without blows or blood. But timidity and indifference will bring down blows there, which will not only echo in our houses, hitherward, but will, by and by, lay the foundation for an armed struggle between the whole North and South. Shall we let the spark kindle, or shall we quench it now?

Four days after Beecher's tract appeared, Charles Burrill Lines, published the following in the *New Haven Palladium*:

Notice is hereby given that a company is being formed for the purpose of emigrating to Kansas. Those, therefore, who desire to aid in establishing the Institutions of New England, and to secure for themselves and their families a good home in that delightful country, are requested to communicate with the subscriber as early as practicable.

That same evening, eighty-nine persons signed an agreement “to unite in a company for emigrating to Kansas.”

A series of meetings followed and a company called The Connecticut Kansas Colony was organized. Charles Lines was elected President of its Board of Directors.

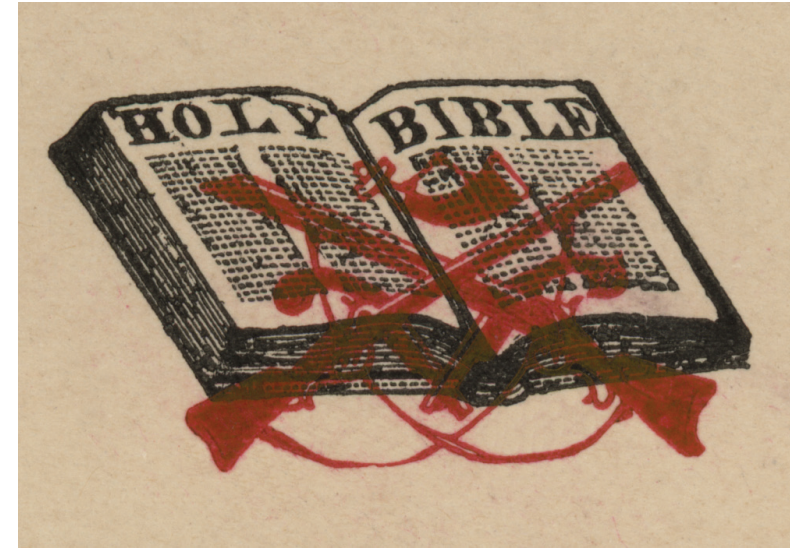
On March 22nd, a meeting was held in New Haven at the Old North Church, where Henry Ward Beecher and Charles Lines made rousing speeches. A resident historian described the meeting:

In its course some one remarked that these men were leaving their homes to help save their country from the further blight of slavery, and that they should not be allowed to depart without proper means of defense, whereupon at once one of the audience became aroused, and to the surprise of the rest, and even himself, called out, “I’ll give a Sharps rifle.” This ‘started the ball,’ wholly unanticipated. It was instantly followed by others from all parts of the house, until fifty rifles were offered, Mr. Beecher pledging twenty-five from his own congregation in Brooklyn.

When Beecher sent Lines funds for the rifles, he also sent a letter and twenty-five Bibles. This letter was re-printed in newspapers throughout the country. Quite often the headline was, “Bibles and Rifles for Kansas.” It was from the sequence of events that began at Old North Church that the Colony began to be referred to as the “Beecher Rifle Colony,” and the Sharps rifle took on the nickname “Beecher Bible.”

When the Colonists left New Haven on March 31st, it was national news. There was apprehension that there might be some trouble due to the notoriety of their departure and the presence of their now famous Sharps rifles. But the journey was without conflict until they reached Lexington, MO, near Kansas City. In Lines’ words, “A large number of armed ruffians came on board and uttered sundry denunciations of the Yankee abolitionists, but as they looked into the faces of courageous men well armed they exhausted their zeal in vile language, while we moved on our way rejoicing.”

Charles Lines kept a diary of the



BIBLE AND RIFLE
Wabaunsee County Historical Society

SHARPS RIFLE
Courtesy of Michael Stubbs

Company's progress in the form of letters sent to Eastern papers. They were widely reprinted and circulated so that the entire country was aware of the Colony's experiences in Kansas.

The springtime beauty of Kansas and the tallgrass prairie overwhelmed the Company. Lines wrote, "Those of your readers who have seen prairie only as it lies flat in Illinois and other Western States, can have but a faint idea of what has ravished our eyes and delighted our hearts in this Kansas region."

Company members arrived in Lawrence between the 12th and 16th of April. The editor of *The Herald of Freedom*, wrote of their arrival, "They are a hearty, resolute, freedom-loving looking set of fellows, and we wish their fondest anticipations of life in the West be fully realized."

On April 15th, an evening meeting of welcome was held by the town's leaders. Speeches were made and friendships initiated. The Company was invited to join in the Free-state Government and told that "should oppression rage anew, and

destruction again threaten our families and our homes, we know that in you we shall find brave hearts and strong arms—that your lives are ready to be sacrificed for this common cause—the maintenance of our rights."

Charles Lines replied to their warm welcome, "[this] tells the people of the East that you appreciate and are grateful for the efforts they are making in behalf of this great enterprise." He said that more emigrants would come because:

They believe this is the ground where the final contest is to decide whether freedom or slavery shall rule the destiny of this great country! And they come here with a determination outweighing all other considerations, to take part in that struggle. They intend to make homes, and they intend them to be in a Free-state...the country is aroused and the time has come when the question must be settled.

The entire company arrived at Wabaunsee on the 28th of April. Soon after their arrival, they formed a militia with nearby settlers calling themselves



BEECHER BIBLE AND RIFLE CHURCH
Dan Jacobson
Courtesy of Russell and Gene Jacobson

the Wabaunsee Prairie Guards. They were enrolled as Company H of the Free Kansas Militia. William Mitchell was elected Captain of the 40-member company. They were called to the aid of Lawrence and spent six weeks under the command of Jim Lane fighting proslavery ruffians in battles and skirmishes. At one time, they manned the defensive fortification on Mt. Oread known as Lane's Fort.

In June of 1857, the Connecticut

Kansas Colony dissolved, joining with earlier settlers to form the "Wabonsa [Town] Company". Later that year the First Church of Christ at Wabaunsee was formed. By 1862, parishioners had built a native stone church, which is now called the Beecher Bible and Rifle Church.

Michael Stubbs is a historian of Kansas and the Flint Hills. He is the founder of the Mount Mitchell Prairie Guards and an activist concerned with community affairs. One of his projects was naming all the roads in Wabaunsee County. He lives near Eskridge.