

FREESOILERS FOR GOD: KANSAS NEWSPAPER EDITORS AND THE ANTISLAVERY CRUSADE

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“GOD HELPS those who help themselves,” wrote Kansas journalist and freesoilier George W. Brown on January 27, 1855. “He has placed a power in our hands which, if rightly applied, will be sure to secure the good we desire.” Throughout the conflict over the extension of slavery into Kansas, which raged from passage of the Kansas-Nebraska act in 1854 until voters rejected the Proslavery Lecompton Constitution in 1858, freesoilers with interests in the territory often fortified their arguments with religious pronouncements. While sometimes soliciting God’s support for their cause, they more frequently proclaimed that he was already on their side. “We will engage in competition for the virgin soil of Kansas,” pledged Senator William H. Seward, “and God give the victory to the side which is stronger in numbers as it is in right.”¹

It was this conviction—that God would oblige the numerically superior force, if only because the odds favored it—that influenced the Massachusetts legislature to charter the New England Emigrant Aid Company in April, 1854.² Founded by Eli Thayer, the agency sought to populate Kansas with freesoilers, and to make a profit while doing so. Thayer discussed his motives bluntly. “In all my emigration schemes,” he wrote, “I intended to make the results return a profitable dividend in cash.” He had no trouble defending such a motive. “Why is it worse,” he asked, “for a company to make money by extending Christianity than by making cotton cloth? . . . The truth is that the highest civilization is the greatest creator of wealth.” There was nothing inconsistent about mixing

Prof. C. S. Griffin of the University of Kansas, read an early draft of this article. The author acknowledges he is indebted to him for his incisive critique.

1. *Herald of Freedom*, Lawrence, January 27, 1855; *Cong. Globe*, 33d Cong., 1st Sess. (1853-1854), appendix, p. 769.

2. In a Boston speech, Thayer used the phrase “Business anti-slavery.”—Horace Andrews, Jr., “Kansas Crusade: Eli Thayer and the New England Emigrant Aid Company,” *New England Quarterly*, Brunswick, Me., v. 35, no. 4 (December, 1962), p. 498.

Christianity with the profit motive, for in the end such wealth would inevitably benefit all of society.³

The confident entrepreneur worked diligently recruiting emigrants for his colonization scheme, frequently talking with church audiences, where host pastors would interject added counsel. One minister urged his flock to migrate without fear, safe in the knowledge that God would provide. “It has been a matter of faith with me,” he stated, “that God would open a way for decisive action on this great issue.” The company, which distributed a highly persuasive circular, received hundreds of letters of support from clergymen throughout the Northeast. “We *abhor* slavery,” wrote the Rev. S. B. Morley of Attleboro, Mass., “not for its occasional atrocities merely, but for its inherent, systematic wickedness, its unblushing repugnance to God’s law, its impious assumption of unlimited power over *men*, and *women*.” The fact that Thayer refused to allow critics’ arguments about the profit motive to discourage or defeat him, but developed instead a persuasive logic in which Christianity benefited from his economic philosophy, made him somewhat unique among his contemporaries, most of whom failed to integrate rational defense with emotional appeal.⁴

3. Eli Thayer, *A History of the Kansas Crusade—Its Friends and Its Foes* (New York, 1889), pp. 29-30, 60.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 126-127, 134-135. The circular was dated July 2, 1855, and contained the signatures of Lyman Beecher, Edward Everett Hale, Horace Bushnell, and 15 other New England clergymen and academicians.

Opposite page—George W. Brown (1820-1915) was one of the most zealous of the Kansas journalists who supported the freesoil cause. His *Herald of Freedom*, published in Lawrence, was the official organ of the New England Emigrant Aid Company. In his first editorial Brown announced that his paper intended to associate providential deeds with the cause of freedom. On March 10, 1855, he repeated the original prospectus, stating “our great object is to make Kansas a free State; and to that end we shall labor by encouraging emigration.”

The Herald of Freedom: An Independent Family Newspaper

The Herald of Freedom.

G. W. BROWN, Editor.

Lawrence, Saturday, March 16, 1855.

H. A. BILLINGS, Esq., is our authorized General Agent for the Herald of Freedom, and all his communications pertaining to the paper will be sent to him. Letters addressed to us at Buffalo, N. Y., will be promptly attended to by him. Emigrating parties and individuals en route for Kansas, passing through Buffalo, are requested to give him a call at his office at Williams' Hall, No. 150 Main street.

Printers Wanted.

Wanted immediately at this office two practical printers, one of whom is competent of doing press-work, and one to fill the post of foreman. None need apply but good workmen, of temperate and industrious habits.

Our Position.

In our prospectus for the HERALD OF FREEDOM, issued in June last, and very liberally copied by the press, we defined the position of our contemplated journal in the following language:

"THE HERALD OF FREEDOM will defend the principles of the Declaration of Independence, together with the compromises of the Constitution, as understood by its framers. In favor of the greatest area of freedom, it will labor to prevent the erection of any institution over the new Territory incompatible therewith."

"With correspondents and tourists who will report the progress of the settlements, and observations upon the fertility of the soil, salubrity of the climate, and internal resources, the editor feels confident that his paper will be a welcome visitant in every family, and serve as a guide to the emigrant in seeking a new home in the West."

In the leading article, published in the first number of the paper, in October last, we said further:

"Our great object is to make Kansas a free State; and to that end we shall labor by encouraging emigration. It is not our purpose to engage in a crusade against our southern brethren, nor upon their insinuations, so long as confined within their legitimate sphere. Our field is KANSAS, and here we shall labor, and here shall erect anew the altar of LIBERTY."

Of that number of the HERALD twenty-one thousand copies, instead of twenty thousand, as erroneously stated in the first number, was published and scattered broadcast over the country; and every one who read it, if he possessed common intelligence, must have understood our position, which was "to make Kansas a free State," and the means to be employed was to induce a heavy emigration of people from the non-slaveholding States to settle here; and not doubting but their proclivities were all for freedom, the issue would be decided properly.— Faithful to our position, we have labored on from week to week, giving a description of the face of the country, its progress, soil, climate, productions, and whatever we thought was truthful which would make it an object with our eastern

those assertions, and iterated and reiterated them again and again. They even claim that we endeavored to persuade them to pursue a similar course. We have been silent, preferring to devote our whole energies to the benefit of our readers, and not consume space with a personal defense. We should have done so still, had not these misrepresentations found their way into eastern journals, having been copied from those which gave currency to the report.

JOHN S. MANN, Esq., the able editor of the People's Journal, published at Coudersport, Pa., saw this statement, and wrote us a few days ago as follows:

"There is a strange report here that you have turned quietist on the slavery question. How is this? I make the inquiry, supposing the persons in Kansas who have made this charge to be entitled to credit. I have seen nothing in your papers, which indicated a change in your plan of action; but I have seen only two numbers of your paper published in Kansas."

Soon after we arrived in Lawrence, in November last, we made the acquaintance of a gentleman who is now engaged here in publishing a professedly anti-slavery paper. Sitting by his side one evening, we ventured to inquire his views as to the best policy to be pursued in publishing a paper in Kansas, whether it would be politic to engage at once in an anti-slavery discussion; or whether it would not be better to devote our energies, for the present in developing the resources of the country and, through that instrumentality, induce a heavy eastern emigration. He readily expressed an opinion in favor of immediate agitation. Without designing to give our own views, we used such arguments as suggested themselves to our mind at the time in favor of the opposite course, for the purpose of getting his ideas more fully on the subject. From that time until we read the charges of "neutrality and conservatism" in his paper, we never thought of the subject. Then, to a few of those friends who took interest enough in the matter to inquire about it, we ventured to explain what the facts were; and as we said before, should never have made it a subject of newspaper remark, had it not been for the wrong impression which has been given to our silence abroad. That the gentleman labored under the mistaken idea that the arguments advanced by us were designed as our sentiments we have little doubt, and will give him credit for honesty; nevertheless we think he has done us, probably unintentionally, great injustice, and we call upon him thus publicly to make due reparation. We appeal to him, or to the readers of our several papers, whether the HERALD OF FREEDOM has been less anti-slavery in tone than his, or whether it has been less firm in defense of the right.

The quotation made by another journal from the "Ohio Columbian" is not such

The Emigrant Aid Company.

We are sick, heartily sick, of seeing professedly anti-slavery journals pursuing a course, from week to week, which has a tendency to make Kansas a slave State. To think that anti-slavery men have given countenance, to any extent, to sustain those who are using all the energies they possess to destroy confidence in the most efficient agents now employed in populating Kansas with the advocates of freedom, is, indeed, humiliating.

When the freedom clause of the Missouri compromise was repealed, the friends of humanity all over the nation stood appalled at the spectacle presented them. They heard, in prospective, "the groans of departing slaves," and saw the "chains, shackles, negro-whips, and blood-hounds on the beautiful plains of Kansas." They waited patiently for a time; at length a light appeared in the East. The Emigrant Aid Company was organized, and as soon as the immense machinery sufficient to such an enterprise could be set in motion, they commenced sending forward pioneers. The 1st company, consisting of 31 persons, arrived in Lawrence on the 1st day of August last; the 2d party arrived the 13th of September, and numbered 130; the 3d party arrived the 8th of October, and numbered 162; the 4th party arrived October 18th, and numbered 230; the 5th party arrived November 20th, with 100 persons; the 6th and last regular party of the season arrived December 1st, and numbered 60 persons; amounting in the aggregate to six hundred and seventy-three. But this does not begin to show the number of persons introduced to emigrate.

In consequence of this organization, the efforts of our countrymen for the great movement to be effected by this Company into line. The number of persons, numbering fully 1000, in all, were introduced to the edge, to come in aid of the mutual efforts to derive from the Emigrant Aid Company.

Pioneers, who were their purpose to cause. Hundreds of individuals from every part of the State were awakened to the necessity of emigrating to Kansas. The public press, copied into the journal, by the Emigrant Aid Company, which was much towards the organization, and of THAYER'S great New York, New York, those connections the Settlers, doubt but which he lic mind, be brought to light, it would appear that, instead of sending "two or three hundred" into the Territory from the free States, it would be manifest they had influenced the settling of thousands among

yet to come. "It is a giant speculating scheme, and they care nothing in reality about the cause of freedom." We shall offset this statement with those made in Missouri that it is a great "negro-stealing enterprise set on foot by Eli Thayer, Amos A. Lawrence & Co.," and that those who came out "under their auspices are the serfs of the said Company."

We hail with pleasure every enterprise set on foot for colonizing Kansas with the sons of the free; and instead of discouraging any organization having that object in view, we shall do all we can to give them "aid and comfort." Others may pursue such course as they deem expedient, but we may be permitted to doubt the wisdom of their policy, if they are in fact, what they profess to be, the friends of the slave.

Material for Houses.

From the very great difficulty of procuring lumber for the erection of wood houses, it is evident that other material must be employed for this purpose, else the settlement of Kansas must be delayed for a long time, until saw-mills can be introduced into the Territory. From the abundance of stone, adapted to building purposes, as well as for conversion into lime, also sand and clay for making brick, we see no necessity of our complaining of a scarcity of building material. There is no section of the Territory, as far as we are informed, which is destitute of these elements of prosperity. The stone is usually near the surface, and can be quarried at a small expense; and there is wood enough to convert it into lime; these, with sand and water, is all that is needed for the construction of houses, save lumber for floors, and for finishing purposes. Lumber can be transported from St. Louis at a reasonable price. It is said that the river is navigable, for five hundred feet. Panel doors can be had for three dollars a-piece, also such. Such being the case, we see no necessity of delaying in the erection of any superior style of roofing can be had at St. Louis, cost not to exceed one hundred feet. It is known as "Composition Roofing," and is a good protection against the decay of only will be an excellent quality much durable, and in Kansas, in a few for publica- at Lake City mpered clay, ten inches are used for building purposes. With the Italian roof, which projects far over the sides, they are said to make a durable wall. The adobes are laid up in clay mortar, and may be plastered and finished with

The results of Thayer's carefully calculated efforts were readily apparent. On July 17, 1854, the first group of prospective settlers left Boston, and in St. Louis met agent Charles Branscomb, formerly a Holyoke, Mass., lawyer. Branscomb had departed for Kansas on June 28 with Dr. Charles Robinson of Fitchburg, Mass. Robinson had been in the territory five years earlier, was acquainted with the region Thayer hoped to settle, and was known by company trustees to be an ardent freesoilier. By July 28 Branscomb and the colonists had arrived in the Kaw valley, and on July 31 they established camp near a low ridge on the river's south bank, naming the settlement after Amos Lawrence, the company's chief benefactor.

WHILE Robinson, Branscomb, and Thayer were among the most dedicated early freesoiliers, Kansas newspapermen gave greatest publicity to the cause. In doing so, the editors often accented their commentaries with religious allusions and imagery, clearly assuming that such references would further legitimize the cause to which they were committed. One of the more zealous journalists was George Brown, whose *Herald of Freedom*, published in Lawrence, was the official organ of the New England Emigrant Aid Company. In his first editorial Brown announced that his paper intended to associate providential deeds with the cause of freedom. On February 3, 1855, Brown declared that slavery had turned the South into "a desolate wilderness, as if cursed by God—as it doubtless is—a home for poverty, crime, and ignorance." This, he added, lowered the region's morality and encouraged not only dueling and assassination, but a host of additional evils which resulted from defiance of divine law.⁵

Two more freesoil papers appeared in Lawrence on January 3, 1855. Each had its own stance regarding slavery, but both joined Brown in calling for consolidation of freesoiliers into an effective party. The *Kansas Free State*, which carried the motto "Be Just, and fear not; let all the ends thou aim'st at be thy Country's, thy God's, and Truth's," was moderate in its attacks on slavery, and was edited by Josiah Miller and Robert G. Elliott, South Carolinians who had graduated from Indiana University. The *Kansas Tribune*, which de-

clared itself "Willing to Praise, but not afraid to Blame," was more radical. "On the question of slavery," announced editors John and Joseph Speer, ". . . we prefer honestly and openly to declare our unyielding opposition." In the second issue of their paper, the brothers clarified their forthright approach. They would not deliberately anger or antagonize their opponents, but they would also not waive discussion of the freesoil cause, "nor cease agitating it, through any blind policy or fear of pecuniary injury."

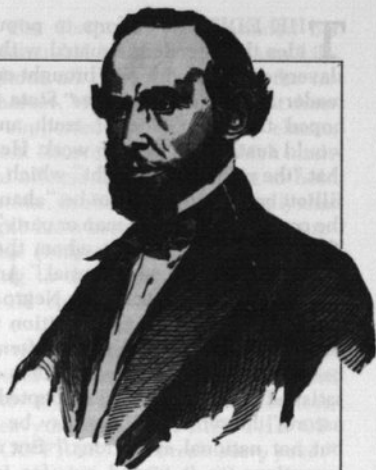
The *Free State*, meanwhile, attacked "the blighting curse of monopoly, not only the monopoly of class legislation which consigns a race to Slavery, but that which withholds from the poor and gives to the rich, what God designed equally for all—the freedom of the Soil." Miller and Elliott condescendingly reminded their readers that men were free and equal at birth, but that such inalienable natural rights could only be enjoyed "upon condition of recognizing the same in every individual of the meanest breed of the human family that creeps upon the face of the earth." Eager for early resolution of existing differences—not only between Proslavery and freesoil forces but within the latter camp itself—they printed a letter from Richard Mendenhall, a Quaker who contributed regularly to their columns. "Come, let us reason together," he urged, citing the same Biblical injunction often used by Proslavery forces; the invitation was "a scriptural exhortation and a good one."⁶

RESPONDING to pleas for freesoil unity, Lawrence residents met on January 29, 1855, to lay preliminary groundwork for a Free-State party. Each of the interests promoted by the three Lawrence papers—found representation at the meeting, for the participants included John Speer, Elliott, and S. C. Pomeroy, who was Thayer's financial agent. Reacting to concerns voiced at the meeting, Miller immediately urged freesoiliers to cultivate and use power wisely. In every instance, he argued, "the forbearing and inoffensive use of all this power of authority, or a total abstinence from it, where the case admits it, will show the gentleman in a plain light." Less than a month after the meeting, Brown was urging

5. *Kansas Tribune*, Lawrence, January 10, 1855; *Kansas Free State*, Lawrence, January 3, 1855.

6. *Herald of Freedom*, October 21, 1854, February 3, 1855.

Eli Thayer (1819-1899), founder of the New England Emigrant Aid Company, sought to populate Kansas with freesoilers and make a profit while doing so. This portrait appeared in the Lawrence *Herald of Freedom*, November 17, 1855, along with a biographical sketch of the entrepreneur, who the newspaper said, was held in highest affection by the people of the territory. Thayer, recruiting emigrants for his colonization scheme, was not deterred by his critics. "Why is it worse," he asked, "for a company to make money by extending Christianity than by making cotton cloth?"



citizens to abandon divisive argumentation. "Let the question be first, last, and all the time," the *Herald* declared, "KANSAS A FREE STATE." Then, true to Thayer's uncompromising stand, Brown felt obliged to add, "Better run the risk of excluding a portion of the people from the Territory, than hazard the destiny of any part of her *actual* population." Thenceforth, Brown often charged Miller and Elliott with being proslave in disguise, and the *Free State* suggested in return that neither Brown nor Thayer appreciated the need for pragmatism in the midst of diversity.⁷

During the spring and summer of 1855, each editor continued to weave commonplace religious attitudes into his columns. The focus was always upon attracting more freesoilers to Kansas and—more important—upon creating a freesoil government. On March 7, the Speers

7. *Ibid.*, January 31, 1855; *Herald of Freedom*, March 3, 1855. The running feud received Brown's extended attention on April 21, 1855, when he noted that Robert Elliott had fraternized with certain Proslavery Missourians, and had commented on their neat appearance. This, Brown concluded, was proof positive of Miller and Elliott's traitorship. On April 28, 1855, Brown acknowledged receiving Elliott's excuse—that the Missourians had caught him—but responded by suggesting that Elliott was probably "lurking in the vicinity" hoping to get an interview. When Miller and Elliott called a meeting on July 17, 1855, to discuss organization of a Free-State party, Brown accused them of seeking to divide the freesoil ranks. This time the Speers joined Brown in his attack.

published a statistical survey which purported to prove that slavery had restricted the numerical and financial growth of Southern churches. On March 10 Miller and Elliott reported on a sermon delivered by Rev. Thornton A. Mills, who sought to integrate Christianity and politics. Christianity, Mills suggested, was "an influence from Heaven to purify and exalt all human institutions." While God refrained from establishing the *form* of the political state—that was man's responsibility—he did prescribe its *spirit*. "The Scriptures," he reminded his congregation, "require rulers to be just, and enjoin the subject to be obedient." Slavery not only violated Christian precepts but raised a basic moral question. "It takes the labor of men without paying for it," Mills noted. "It paralyzes the operation of God's government and crushes hope, for man bends to slavery only as he is forced to it." Finally, the clergyman observed, it disregarded "the right of the slave in all his relations; whether to this family, or his race, or his God."⁸

8. *Kansas Tribune*, March 7, 1855; *Kansas Free State*, March 10, 1855. The article, entitled "Slavery vs. Religion," stated that there were 6,344 more churches in the free states, that they were worth \$45,226,521 more, and that they were capable of seating 3,107,986 more people. It did not mention the fact that 10 million more people lived in the free states.

THE EDITORS' efforts to popularize the idea that freedom equated with good and slavery equated with evil brought enthusiastic reader response. One *Free State* subscriber hoped that "the God of truth and justice" would sustain the paper's work. He suggested that "the principles of right" which Miller and Elliott endorsed could not be "changed to suit the convenience of any man or party" but were, "like God, himself, from whom they proceed . . . immutable and eternal." Another correspondent argued that if the Negro were actually inferior, his present condition would satisfy him and he would not so often choose to become a fugitive. "God renders every one satisfied with that state best adapted to him by nature," he wrote. "There may be individual but not national exceptions." But there were exceptions, as it turned out, for in the next breath he announced the natural inferiority of the American Indian, who was clearly content with his mode of life and to whom the notion of self-improvement was irrelevant. And the editors' own references to the "unholy institutions" of Roman Catholicism and Mormonism further confirmed the fact that one could rely upon religious imagery not only to bolster causes that one favored, but to attack those that one opposed. Nor were Proslavery forces immune to the temptation.⁹

In any event, since Miller and Elliott were not rigidly committed to program and policy—as was Brown, who faithfully adhered to the New England Emigrant Aid Company's position—they could afford to advocate compromise. While openly opposing slavery, they emphasized that devotion to the common cause must transcend differences of opinion between militants and moderates. Harmony, they believed, must precede all efforts to crush Proslavery forces. Since Kansas was home to militant Garrisonites, to slightly less zealous aid company emigrants, and to settlers only marginally committed to a freesoil policy, the quest for unity had to take priority.

On May 7, 1855, the *Free State* published an anonymous editorial which contended that since the Bible had not sanctioned the right of one person to the unremunerated services of another, slavery was clearly a moral evil. "The

9. *Kansas Free State*, February 24, April 7, 1855. Miller and Elliott attacked both Roman Catholicism and Mormonism on March 17, 1855, printing a letter which lamented the fact that no one had established a newspaper like theirs to combat those institutions.

Savior was no respecter of persons," the author observed, "yet his professing followers never recognize the negro as a brother or sister in Christ. They acknowledge the slave to be a man, yet they do not fulfil to him the golden rule. . . ." On May 12 Brown tried to clarify his position by denying that he was in league with the Garrisonites. Instead, he explained, the *Herald* hoped for emancipation through apprenticeship, which had proven its worth in Pennsylvania and other Northern states. On June 2 he announced that "freesoilers wish to keep all of God's free earth sacred to freedom," and on June 9 promoted settlement in Kansas by comparing its climate to the Garden of Eden. One week later Brown warned Missouri ruffians that "The God of battles will raise up armies in our defense, and the first blow struck by despotism towards enslaving our people will be the signal which will re-light the fires of freedom. . . ." ¹⁰

Thus, in the weeks and months following the freesoilers' first organizational meeting, each Lawrence paper carefully cultivated its readers' support. Discoursing upon the ills wrought by slavery, the editors urged their subscribers to see the connection between the cities of God and man. Letters from readers, along with guest editorials and articles, suggested that many Kansans viewed the issues similarly and were also working to enlist the support of others. Yet each paper had its own approach, with the principal contrast being that between the *Free State*, which pleaded for the formation of a united front, and the *Herald*, which consistently put militance before union. Always ready with an appropriate scriptural citation, the editors conveniently—or unwittingly—ignored problems of context and inconsistency. Arguing passionately for the cause of freedom, they overlooked the fact that their enemies were quoting Holy Writ with equal vigor.

But if they never openly recognized that Proslavery forces, too, claimed divine sanction, they were surely aware of their adversaries' increasing success. And undoubtedly that fact gave the editors added reason to intensify their appeals. Proslavery strength peaked on March 30, 1855, when hundreds of Missourians crossed into Kansas and cast illegal votes for representatives to a territorial legislature. With

10. *Kansas Free State*, May 7, 1855; *Herald of Freedom*, May 12, June 2, 9, 16, 1855.

a substantial Proslavery majority, that body convened northwest of Lawrence at Lecompton and received the support of Pres. Franklin Pierce despite the freesoilers' legitimate and persistent charges of fraud.

By midsummer, it had become clear that freesoil forces would have no electoral recourse for at least two years. Accordingly, some Lawrence residents—among them Miller, Elliott, Robinson, Brown, and the Speers—met in August to lay plans for a convention to organize a Free-State party and wage legislative war on the Lecompton assembly. It would meet, they agreed, on September 5 at Big Springs, 15 miles west of Lawrence. Two days prior to that session, Elliott reminded his subscribers that while freesoilers were surely not obliged to obey the Lecomptonites, this hardly meant that they had no obligations at all. Certain "principles of natural justice," he observed, were "the Laws of that Higher Tribunal, from which no earthly power can absolve us." If the federal congress refused to acknowledge the Kansas Free-State party and its ambitions, Elliott warned, "we can fall back upon our own strength, and with the sympathy and assistance of thousands of Freemen, and the approving smiles of that Being who always espouses the cause of the oppressed, assert and maintain our rights by every means that God has given us." Thus, by early September, 1855, the *Free State* was also prepared to do battle for Kansas, and forcefully urged its readers to do the same.¹¹

SPURRED on by the threat from Lecompton, and by the urgings of the Lawrence editors, delegates to the convention at Big Springs drew up a Free-State platform and agreed to meet again on September 19, at Topeka, to call a constitutional convention. The resulting document, they hoped, would solidify the Free-State party and would enhance prospects for statehood. Brown was distressed by the delegates' decision to include in the platform a "Black Law" clause, which would effectively exclude Negroes from the territory, but accepted the majority's decision with relative equanimity. Then, on September 15, he published a lengthy editorial laden with Biblical injunctions which, it was clear, was intended to renew dialogue with his more timid

associates. The Scriptures, he reminded his readers, commanded Moses to "proclaim Liberty throughout all the land, to ALL the inhabitants thereof." Aiming his sights at freesoilers who supported the "Black Law" clause, and at a recent Lecompton statute which made it a criminal offense to deny the right to hold slaves in Kansas, Brown charged cynically that "Some people have been so foolish as to suppose that this [Moses'] instruction, if carried out according to the intention of the Divine Author, would conflict with the view of the Barons. . . ." The Bible, he pointed out, taught men to "Remember those who are in bonds as bound with them;" to "Cry aloud and spare not;" to "Loose the bonds of wickedness, undo the heavy burdens, and LET THE OPPRESSED GO FREE, and break every yoke." John and Joseph Speer, while equally unhappy with the clause, were considerably more restrained. On the same day that Brown issued his diatribe they wrote, simply, "Our motto should be, 'In essentials unity—in non-essentials charity'. . . ." To the *Tribune's* editors, therefore, Free-State unity had become essential but opposition to Negro exclusion had not. Faced with potentially disastrous division in the ranks, the Speers retreated pragmatically from their earlier unequivocal stance.¹²

The Topeka constitutional convention, originally scheduled for September, convened on October 23, 1855. Within short order, the delegates' differences had convinced E. C. K. Garvey, editor of the Topeka *Daily Kansas Freeman*, that "Except on the question of freedom for Kansas, there is no perfect unity of opinion in the Convention on any subject, political, social, or religious." Predictably, the perennial subject of the Negro's status within Kansas became the most divisive issue to confront the

12. Charles Robinson, *The Kansas Conflict* (Lawrence, 1898), pp. 170-171; *Herald of Freedom*, September 8, 15, 1855; *Kansas Tribune*, September 15, 1855. Brown, realizing that a large majority of the delegates had voted to include the "Black Law" provision, and believing this majority represented a corresponding majority of all Free-State voters, announced, "We shall not complain." He thought—like Miller and Elliott—that on this issue and at this critical juncture, unity was imperative. But he showed his displeasure at having to appear the hypocrite when he added, in the same editorial, that "we do object to their placing us in a position which will require us to stultify ourself, or give the lie to our entire past history." Temporarily, therefore, Miller and Elliott occupied the more comfortable position. Many years later Eli Thayer commented upon the situation which produced the "Black Law" clause. "There were many people from the South there," he wrote. "They were poor, and had never owned slaves; but their prejudice against free Negroes was much greater than against slavery. If there were to be no free negroes in Kansas, they were free-State men; if there were to be free negroes there, they were slave-State men." — See Thayer, *A History of the Kansas Crusade*, pp. 89-90.

11. *Kansas Free State*, September 3, 1855.



Josiah Miller
(1828-1870)



Robert G. Elliott
(1828-1917)



John Speer
(1817-1906)

Kansas newspaper editors publicized the freesoilers' cause, often sprinkling their columns with religious allusions and imagery. God was on their side, they were convinced, though they sometimes differed among themselves on how best to organize a state free from slavery. Two freesoil papers started in Lawrence on January 3, 1855, called for consolidation of freesoilers into an effective party. The *Kansas Free State*, edited by Josiah Miller and Robert G. Elliott, was moderate in its attacks on slavery. The *Kansas Tribune*, which was more radical, was edited by John and Joseph Speer. Edward C. K. Garvey, editor of the Topeka *Daily Kansas Freeman*, commenting on the Topeka constitutional convention which convened October 23, 1855, said there was no unity of opinion on any subject except on the

assembly. Although the final draft of the constitution contained no reference to Negro exclusion, a December referendum—by a vote of 1,287 to 453—directed the new Free-State legislature to exclude free blacks from Kansas by law. And by a vote of 1,731 to 46, voters overwhelmingly ratified the constitution itself.¹³ If residents of the territory were prepared to believe that God opposed slavery, they were by no means willing to assume personal responsibility for all of the consequences. God might well instruct his followers to “loose the bonds of wickedness, undo the heavy burdens, and let the oppressed go free,” but he had said nothing about granting blacks free access to Kansas.

MORE THAN 25 years later, Judge T. Dwight Thacher, who had arrived in Kansas in 1857 and had in the same year founded the Lawrence *Republican*, reflected that the whole purpose of the Topeka convention had been to maintain Free-State unity

until there were enough freesoilers in the territory to win by sheer force of numbers. Thacher believed that the large migration which took place early in 1857 virtually guaranteed Kansas' eventual status. But in the aftermath of the Topeka gathering, and without the benefit of Thacher's hindsight, Free-State advocates continued their appeals to Christian responsibility and Godly behavior. Even as residents prepared to cast their referendum votes, John and Joseph Speer, who now resided in Topeka, published a letter from Richard Mendenhall. The “wicked notion” that man had a God-given right to hold human property, declared the Quaker, could only originate with man himself. “God never intended that man in the Divine image should become a chattel, an article of merchandise, a thing to be sold in the market,” he wrote, “and I challenge the whole band of pro-slavery champions to show a line in the Bible to justify American slavery.” Whenever human and divine law conflicted, he added, the choice lay with God's dictum and was foreordained. Mendenhall emphasized that the Topeka convention had not, in territorial residents' eyes, settled Kansas' status, but had rather left grave

13. *Daily Kansas Freeman*, Topeka, November 1, 1855; Robinson, *The Kansas Conflict*, p. 219.



Edward C. K. Garvey
(1813-1884)



T. Dwight Thacher
(1831-1894)



S. S. Prouty
(1835-1889)

question of freedom for Kansas. T. Dwight Thacher, who founded the *Lawrence Republican* in 1857, believed that the large migration of freesoilers to Kansas in that year virtually guaranteed Kansas' eventual status, but most Free-State advocates were not complacent and reminded readers that God helps those who help themselves. The *Prairie City Freeman's Champion*, started in 1857 by S. S. Prouty, was another newspaper that was long on religious exhortation. Like other freesoil editors, Prouty may have differed with his fellow journalists on some points, but one of his themes was a familiar one: Providence would help promote and protect the cause of a free Kansas.

doubts regarding the strength and unity of the Free-State forces.¹⁴

John Speer thought the matter every bit as unsettled as did Mendenhall, and on March 3, 1856, referred again to "the God of battles, He who never deserts those who labor in the cause of right," and declared that "we will purchase with our hearts' blood six feet of God's Free Soil." On April 14, 1856, Speer published a letter written by John C. Fremont to Charles Robinson, who had become Free-State governor the previous month. "All history teaches us," wrote Fremont, "that great results are ruled by a wise Providence, and we are but units in the great plan." By mid-June, Speer had become visibly distressed by the Free-State party's ineffectiveness and by continued Proslavery attacks, including the arrest and imprisonment of Charles Robinson and George Brown, and an invasion of Lawrence which had resulted in the destruction of several buildings, including the offices of the *Herald* and the *Free State*. Somebody, Speer charged, had to be responsible for Kansas'

troubles, and it was certainly not "Nature or Nature's God." The blame, the former Pennsylvanian urged, rested squarely upon the shoulders of the Proslavery forces; freesoilers, he added, had waited long enough for a redress of grievances. "It is an old but true saying," Speer enjoined his readers, seizing upon the popular phrase used the previous year by Brown, "that 'God helps those that help themselves.'" ¹⁵

DURING the summer of 1856, Speer, whose *Tribune* had temporarily become the sole Free-State organ, shifted his attention to the national political scene, and endorsed Republican Presidential candidate Fremont. On July 28 Speer published an extract from the *Independent*, a New York religious publication, which had also endorsed Fremont. "With all the power God may give it," the journal declared, "it will urge the Christian public to do with their might what their hands find to do to save our beloved country from the death grasp of slavery. . . . duty to God and

14. S. S. Prouty, *Topeka Constitution Scrip: A Brief History of the Movement That Overthrew the Usurping Territorial Government of the Slave Power and Saved Kansas to Freedom* (Topeka, 1887), p. 13; *Kansas Tribune*, December 10, 1855.

15. *Ibid.*, March 3, April 14, June 16, 1856. Charles Robinson discussed the various military and guerrilla activities of 1856 in *The Kansas Conflict*, chs. 8 through 13. Brown summarized the warfare in the *Herald of Freedom*, November 1, 1856.

man precludes a moment's hesitation as to the course which ought to be taken by this paper."

By November, Brown had managed to resume publication of the *Herald*, and just prior to the election followed the *Tribune's* lead. For friends of freedom, he wrote, Fremont was the only choice. Quoting Psalm 136—"They that sow in tears shall reap in joy"—Brown recalled the depressing events of recent months and sought to bolster his readers' spirits. "If the joy shall be proportioned to the tears which are shed in Kansas by the widow and the orphan," he reflected, ". . . the future of our infant state will be a glorious one." Elsewhere in the same issue, he urged freesoilers to "look beyond the clouds and above the storm, to where the far-off 'silvery edge' gives promise of sunshine, and to deduce lessons from present dangers, that may indicate a way of escape in the coming morrow."¹⁶

In fact, the situation had already begun to improve. On September 15, 1856, United States troops had ended Proslavery agitation at both Lawrence and Topeka, and from that point onward increasing numbers of individuals, believing hostilities at an end, migrated to Kansas. Watching this steady flow, John Speer counseled that it was "the duty of every Christian and patriot to smother the kindling feelings of resentment and unite to preserve peace and harmony throughout our State and country." George Brown was less sanguine. Orienting his message toward Northern churchmen, he warned in April, 1857, that free-soil conventions, while encouraging the dissemination of ideas, could not in the final analysis produce unity. Hence, Biblical exhortation remained crucial to the cause. Brown pointed out that churchmen had received free-soil appeals for a quarter century or more, but that they had all too frequently sidestepped the issue by labeling slavery "a Divine institution." Freesoilers could no longer tolerate such cowardice, he warned, for liberty, equality, and all other human rights are "Heaven-born principles. . . . As the great organized bodies of the country, both political and religious, have decided that they cannot act against slavery either politically or religiously, the people have decided that it must and shall

be abated as a nuisance, and *Vox populi est vox Dei.*"¹⁷

Whether the people had made such a decision or not was questionable, and whether they agreed with Brown that mass opinion equated with God's voice was even more uncertain, but the *Herald's* editor refused to become sidetracked by those questions. What mattered was that, in the absence of hostilities, voter strength alone would determine Kansas' status. And there was surely no wisdom in diminishing the appeals to higher authority. Nor was Brown alone in his conviction that the deity must continue to inform Kansans of their responsibilities. During 1857, several new Free-State papers appeared, each stressing resistance to the forces of slavery, each appealing to Providence for guidance and encouragement. One was the *Leavenworth Times*, which became, on March 7, 1857, the first successful free-soil journal in a city long recognized as a Proslavery bastion. Another was the *Atchison Squatter Sovereign*, formerly a Proslavery paper which changed both management and mind in May, 1857. "The people can and must rule," declared editor O. F. Short, who believed with George Brown that "*Their voice is the voice of God.*"¹⁸

Still another paper joined the Free-State ranks at the end of May. In his first editorial, Norman Allen of the Lawrence *Republican* proclaimed slavery morally wrong. "It violates every principle of natural and revealed justice," he wrote, "and at once reduces man from the sacred height of a person to the ignoble level of a thing." And on June 25 at Prairie City, 10 miles south of Lawrence, S. S. Prouty, originally a South Carolinian, began publication of the *Freemen's Champion*. Prouty, opting for "Liberty or Death" as his paper's motto, was long on religious exhortation. "Reader, if you would be happy in time and safe for eternity," he implored, "you must take the Bible for your guide, have God for your Father, Christ for your Redeemer, and the Holy Ghost for your Sanctifier; otherwise you live under condemnation, you will die accursed, and you will PERISH FOR EVER!"¹⁹

17. Robinson, *The Kansas Conflict*, p. 337; *Kansas Tribune*, Topeka, December 15, 1856; *Herald of Freedom*, April 11, 1857.

18. *Squatter Sovereign*, Atchison, September 12, 1857.

19. *Lawrence Republican*, May 28, 1857; *Freemen's Champion*, Prairie City, July 9, 1857.

16. *Kansas Tribune*, July 28, 1856; *Herald of Freedom*, November 1, 1856.

Prouty's stern admonitions may well have been a calculated attempt to warn freesoilers against excessive confidence now that the height of their troubles seemed to have passed. By focusing upon general religious considerations rather than upon the specific Scriptural injunctions against slavery which had characterized so many editorial messages in earlier months, he was clearly reminding his associates that God's expectations knew no season. And signs of growing confidence were, indeed, beginning to appear in the freesoil press. On July 4, 1857, for example, George Brown published a lengthy commentary entitled "The Past—A Plan for the Future." In it, he submitted that although victory was not yet assured, peace was finally in view. "With an abiding faith in the wisdom of Providence," he declared, "a firm reliance on His interposition to secure the triumph of justice, we have waited and watched the development of affairs. . . ." If that triumph should require force, there was no reason to shrink from it. In fact, he noted, "The Israelites, the chosen of God, did not hesitate to *borrow* the wealth of their oppressors in order to aid in working their way from Egyptian bondage." Brown hoped that delegates to the forthcoming Free-State convention would not hesitate to use aggressive tactics in their efforts to outmaneuver spokesmen for the Proslavery Lecompton Constitution. Recalling that the United States congress had twice rejected the Topeka Constitution as the basis for Kansas' admission into the Union, Brown counseled realism, urging delegates to abandon that document and to write a new charter which bore reasonable prospects of congressional acceptance.²⁰

Norman Allen, meanwhile, stressed the need for devotion to principle, whose potentiality was "omnipotent." He encouraged his readers to have confidence "in the inherent invincibility of truth," and in September suggested further that the "voice of God perpetually sounding through the soul of man" condemned injustice, rebuked hypocrisy, commanded mercy, taught love, and inculcated brotherhood. Not "until the 'divine constitution' of the human soul shall be changed" could God's voice "be hushed or made to give a faint or uncertain monition." In Prairie City that summer, Prouty's *Champion* carried a letter from a New

York reader which urged the education of Negroes, and which declared that God, when viewing the question of slavery, would eventually decide against the slaveholder. "Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord," the correspondent wrote, "and I will repay." Prouty himself quoted portions of an essay written by John Wesley, in which the cleric had enjoined his readers not to criticize their adversaries. "Let every man use his own judgment," Wesley had written, "since every man must give an account of himself to God. . . . If you cannot reason or persuade a man into the truth, never attempt to force him into it. If love will not compel him to come, leave him to God, the judge of all." By one means or another, God would emerge victorious, and with his victory the Free-State forces would triumph.²¹

In Topeka, Edmund G. Ross, who had become editor of the *Tribune* the previous December, took up another issue—the fugitive slave law of 1850. The statute, far more rigorous than its 1793 predecessor, removed the power of enforcement from state magistrates and gave it to federal commissioners. It also forbade alleged fugitives to testify in their own behalf, and increased penalties for aiding or concealing alleged fugitives. Congress, suggested Ross, had apparently overlooked an important though ancient law. The book of Deuteronomy, he noted, instructed that "Thou shalt not deliver unto his master the servant which is escaped from his master unto thee; He shall dwell with thee, even among you in that place which he shall choose in one of thy gates where it liketh him best: thou shalt not oppress him." Ironically, Ross added, the people who lived under that law were "not more than half civilized at best. . . ." ²²

The Free-State convention which met in Lawrence on December 2, 1857, reflected the concerns of men like Ross, Prouty, and Allen, and particularly those of Brown, when it voted to repudiate the Lecompton Constitution. Labeling it an "instrument hostile to the popular will," and appealing to "the God of justice and humanity for the rectitude of our intentions," the delegates vowed to prohibit the Proslavery charter from becoming "the organic law for the State of Kansas," and pledged "lives,

21. Lawrence *Republican*, July 23, August 20, September 17, 1857; *Freemen's Champion*, August 6, 13, 1857.

22. *Kansas Tribune*, October 24, 1857. The reference is Deuteronomy, ch. 23, verses 15-16.

20. *Herald of Freedom*, July 4, 11, 25, 1857.

... fortunes, and sacred honors, in ceaseless hostility to the same."²³

The issue which generated this oath was a forthcoming territorial referendum on the question of slavery in Kansas. Scheduled for December 21, the referendum was a bit of subterfuge devised by the Proslavery majority at the October constitutional convention in Lecompton. That assembly had written a document which recognized slavery, but because Kansas voters had elected an antislavery Topeka legislature on October 5, it seemed inevitable that they would also reject the Lecompton charter. Accordingly, the Proslavery forces now chose to submit a referendum which ignored actual acceptance or rejection of the constitution. Instead, citizens were asked to vote "for the constitution with slavery" or "for the constitution with no slavery." Since a portion of the document guaranteed that the "right of property in slaves now in the Territory shall in no manner be interfered with," the referendum was, in actuality, a vote for or against the future importation of slaves. In either case, the Lecompton Constitution would become binding, and Kansas would enter the Union as a slave state. The Topeka oath of December 2, 1857, was therefore a Free-State pledge to boycott the election.²⁴

But the oath was also a pledge to vote against the constitution on its own merits when afforded the chance, and that opportunity arose in January, 1858. In this second referendum, likewise called by the Lecompton legislature, the choice was to accept or reject the document itself and, predictably, the Proslavery forces now resorted to boycott. The vote was surely decisive—Charles Robinson later claimed that 10,226 individuals had voted against the constitution and only 161 had voted for it—but President Buchanan, eager to appease Southerners, submitted the document to congress with the recommendation that it admit Kansas as a slave state. Although the senate supported Buchanan, the house voted to resubmit the document to the voters, and set August 2, 1858, as the date for the new referendum. Buchanan added an extra inducement, promising Kansans four million acres from the public domain in return for ratification.²⁵

Thus, the stage was set for the final round of exhortation, and during the spring and summer of 1858 editors throughout Kansas admonished their readers to remain true to the cause. In Leavenworth, Champion Vaughan, editor of the *Times*, referred to the forthcoming election as the "Lecompton Villainy," and warned the Proslavery element that although it might go so far as to bribe residents to vote for the document, "in the name of God and Humanity we will proudly reject it and spurn those who offer it!" In Lawrence, Norman Allen printed a letter from his partner, T. Dwight Thacher. Written on June 21, 1858, the letter castigated churchmen for their continued inaction on the subject of slavery. "There is hardly a church in our whole land," wrote Thacher, "which has enough of the spirit of manliness, to say nothing of Christianity, to place the sin of Slavery in the same category with other great sins, and treat it with precisely the same plainness and boldness that it does *them*." There was hope, however, for "True Christianity has no sympathy with sin of any kind, and the *Truth* will not be bound."²⁶

S. S. Prouty was also interested in truth. On May 20, 1858, he told his readers that "Every man held in bondage . . . is a disgrace to labor and a hindrance to its progress and recognition as the truest worship of God and Nature." On June 10, recalling the earlier despoliation and violence, he wondered whether it was not "a sin and shame for a man to render his dwelling place so repulsive when the Creator has spread before him a feast upon which to gratify his senses all life long." Individuals should not have such difficulty living in harmony with one another, Prouty declared, for "Nature is inscribed everywhere with its simple gospel, which includes all the Love and Duty the Creator has designed for man. . . . Everything in Nature is convincing proof that man was designed that he might, by obeying natural laws, enjoy the life which the

26. By this point, a Leavenworth Constitution had also come into existence, primarily as a result of frustration over inability to secure admission to the Union under the Topeka Constitution. Major clauses in the Leavenworth document, which was completed on April 3, 1858, and ratified by popular vote in May, were Art. I, Sec. 6, which prohibited slavery; Art. I, Sec. 22, which stated, "No indenture of any persons made and executed out of the bounds of the State shall be valid within the State;" and Art. II, Sec. 1, which guaranteed universal male suffrage. The word "white" did not appear in the constitution. The congress received the charter on January 6, 1859, but took no action.—See Wilder, *Annals of Kansas*, pp. 216-219; Frank W. Blackmar, *The Life of Charles Robinson, the First State Governor of Kansas* (Topeka, 1902), p. 241; Leavenworth *Times*, May 8, 1858; Lawrence *Republican*, July 8, 1858.

23. D. W. Wilder, *The Annals of Kansas; 1541-1885* (Topeka, 1886), p. 199; Lawrence *Republican*, December 10, 1857.

24. Robinson, *The Kansas Conflict*, p. 374.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 375, 377.

Creator has bestowed." God intended man to be happy; harmony was the natural state of man's affairs while violence and disunity were unnatural; it was therefore one's duty "to live so in accordance with God's laws, that his life shall be a perfect anthem of praise and perpetual thanksgiving." And on July 29, 1858—four days before the new referendum—Prouty urged freesoilers to reject the document and with it the Proslavery influence—"men who have proved themselves atheists to God and traitors to Humanity. . . ." ²⁷

The results justified his hopes. Residents cast 1,959 votes for the Lecompton Constitution and 12,372 votes for the alternative proposal, namely, to wait until a census had established that Kansas had sufficient population to merit a representative in congress.²⁸ Kansans, therefore, had chosen to remain residents of a territory within which slavery existed, and to work for its eventual exclusion, rather than become residents of a state within which slavery was legal. Not until January 29, 1861, did Kansas finally enter the Union as a free state.

No single point of view had prevailed among freesoil editors during the struggle to make Kansas a free state. But when S. S. Prouty wrote, on September 16, 1858, that "Progress is

the great law of God," he was restating the religious resolve that had been omnipresent throughout the conflict: God's presence in human affairs; His support for the freesoil cause; his fundamental laws of truth, goodness, and beauty; and his abhorrence of the non-productive life, best illustrated by the Proslavery South. "Every man feels that he ought to be a freeman; that he is entitled 'to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,'" Gov. Salmon P. Chase of Ohio had told a Cincinnati audience in October, 1858. "Man holds this right from God. Community holds this right from God for the protection of man. Liberty is inalienable. It cannot justly be taken from one man and transferred to another. And it is for this reason that I condemn the institution of slavery."²⁹ In assuming the right to associate God's name with all those who condemned slavery, Chase echoed the words of the newspapermen who had labored to bring God to the aid of a free Kansas, who had so confidently announced that Providence stood ready to aid in the promotion and protection of their cause, and who had announced his disappointment over their failures, and his joy in their every success.

27. *Freemen's Champion*, May 20, June 10, July 29, 1858.

28. *Ibid.*, September 9, 1858.

29. *Ibid.*, September 16, 1858; *Leavenworth Times*, October 16, 1858.