OLD SACRAMENTO: CANNON OF CRISIS, CANNON OF FREEDOM

By Maria Butler

The shattered remains of the old cannon on the third floor of the Watkins Museum don't look very impressive today, but if the cannon could talk, what a story it could tell! Called "Old Sacramento" by Lawrence's early settlers, it was one of several Mexican cannons that were captured during the Mexican War by Col. Alexander Doniphan and his regiment of Missouri Mounted Volunteers during the Battle of Sacramento, near Chihuahua, Mexico, on February 28, 1847. When Doniphan and his men returned to Missouri they brought the cannons with them, and after they were paraded as trophies they were turned over to the Governor of the state.

In 1856, Old Sacramento was stolen from an arsenal in Liberty, Missouri and brought to Kansas by Sheriff Sam Jones and his band of pro-slavery border ruffians. When Jones and his

In a letter from Bickerton which appeared in the *Lawrence World* on Sept. 21, 1896, he states the photograph was taken the day after the battle of Ft. Titus, and he notes his presence at the breech. The other men are identified as (l-r) James Redpath, August Bondi, Tauy Jones, George B. Gill, and Owen Brown. The daguerreotype is attributed to John Bowles. Not all historians agree about the identifications in the picture.

gang attacked Lawrence on May 21, 1856, Old Sacramento was fired at the Free State Hotel by Col. David Atchison, who was reportedly intoxicated. The first shot sailed clear over the hotel, and when the cannon balls had little effect on the building, Jones and his men set fire to it instead. A group of Lawrence men led by Captain Thomas Bickerton later learned that that the

cannon was at a cabin in Franklin, a small pro-slavery settlement just southeast of Lawrence. During a late-night raid on August 12, 1856, Bickerton and his men set fire to the cabin and routed the pro-slavery men. Inside the cabin, Old Sacramento was found clad in a dress and bonnet, disguised as a dress-making dummy. The freestaters took the gun back to Lawrence, where it was hidden in a cellar.

The Lawrence men now had the cannon, but no shot for it. During Jones' raid, the offices and printing press of the *Herald of Freedom*, a Lawrence free-state newspaper, had been destroyed, and the lead type thrown into the river. The paper's publisher was imprisoned in Lecompton, so Bickerton confiscated the type, which was melted down and cast in sand molds to provide ammunition for the gun.

On August 15, 1856, Bickerton and his men took the cannon to Fort Saunders, a pro-slavery stronghold on Washington Creek. The fort was taken without a fight and burned after its inhabitants fled. The following night, the free-state forces attacked Fort Titus, the cabin of Col. Henry Titus south of Lecompton, where another group of slavery supporters was gathered. It was here that, as Thomas Bickerton wrote in a letter that was printed on August 7, 1896 in the *Lawrence Daily Journal and Evening Tribune*, "from that gun was fired the first cannon ball fired on the part of the north in the great struggle of freedom against slavery." With Bickerton at the breech, the cannon was fired repeatedly until Titus and his men surrendered. With each round, the Lawrence men shouted, "Here comes another issue of the *Herald of Freedom!*"
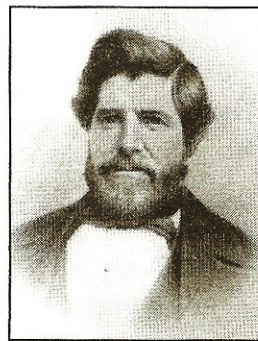
Old Sacramento was used again on September 13 and 14 at Hickory Point, a slavery stronghold in Jefferson County. As the victorious freestaters were returning to Lawrence,

they were arrested by United States troops and imprisoned at Lecompton. The cannon was stationed outside the jail. After Bickerton and his men were all released or had escaped from jail, they went to Lecompton and stole the gun back again. This time it was removed from its carriage and buried on Bickerton's property for safekeeping.
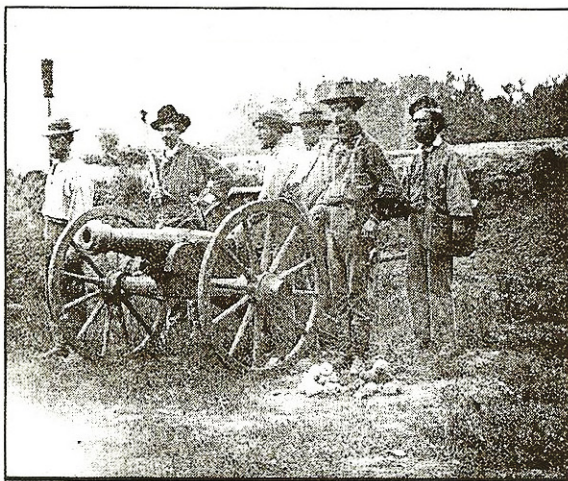

Thomas Bickerton ca. 1865

For many years after its early period of service to the free state cause, Old Sacramento was fired only in celebration. When the steamboat *Lightfoot*, the first boat built in Kansas specifically for trips between Kansas City and Lawrence on the Kansas River, made its first landing (and its last, but that's another story) in Lawrence on April 7, 1857, Bickerton was there to fire a salute to the opening of steamboat navigation on the Kansas River. Mrs. Bickerton had the honor of setting the match to it when the gun was fired thirteen times in honor of Lincoln's election. On January 29, 1861, Old Sacramento was unearthed again and fired thirty-four times to celebrate Kansas' admittance to the Union as a free state. It was fired throughout the Civil War to mark Northern victories as well. Eventually, Capt. Bickerton turned the old cannon over to the city.

Old Sacramento was fired for the last time on July 13, 1896. Two of Lawrence's citizens had drowned in the

Kansas River, and city officials tried to raise the bodies from the river by firing the cannon over the water. It was overloaded with a charge of mud and grass, and exploded, causing no injuries but sending pieces through the roof of Bowersock Mill that damaged the machinery. Shortly there-
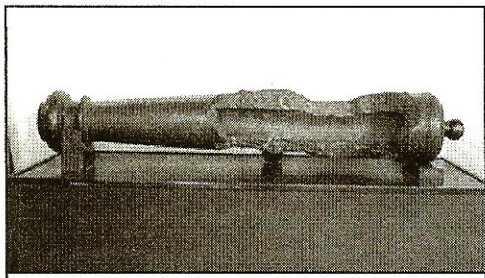
Old Sacramento on display at Watkins Museum

after, the "old relic" was given to the University of Kansas, where it resided in the Dyche Museum (now the Museum of Natural History) for many years. Now on permanent display at the Watkins Museum, the remains of Old Sacramento serve to remind us of our forefathers' determination to ensure that Kansas would enter the Union a free state.

Of further interest might be **Civil War Valor in Stone & Bronze**, an illustrated slide/lecture presentation presented by Randall Thies on Aug. 14th at 7 p.m. at the Lawrence Public Library. This program is free to the public.

Lawrence: An Armed Camp in Feb. 1856

One hundred and forty-five years ago Lawrence was an armed camp with men standing guard in hastily-built forts and women manufacturing cartridges for Sharps rifles in anticipation of a raid from Missouri. Quoting the *St. Louis Intelligencer*, Feb. 18, 1856, "Our people are holding themselves in readiness for an attack at any hour, although I think there is no danger until the weather moderates, and, in fact, I shall not look for it until the first of March...."

According to this article, four circular forts had recently been built in downtown Lawrence, each five ft. high with ditches outside. Citizen soldiers who were quartered in temporary barracks inside the forts kept constant vigil.
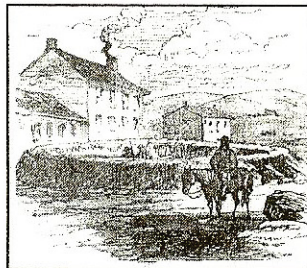
Ft. Necessity, or Ft. Smith as it was called by some, was near the foot of Mass. St. and was designed as a retreat for women and children if Lawrence should be fired upon. An American flag flew from the center of the fort.

Ft. Hunt, named for Supreme Court Judge Morris Hunt, stood fifty rods south of Ft. Necessity and a few rods east of Mass. St. Judge Hunt had 12 men under his charge, each armed with a Sharp's rifle.

Ft. Holliday was a few rods west of Mass. St. and was designed to protect the town from cannon at Mt. Oread. This was the best-built of the four fortifications.

Ft. Dirkey was northward of Ft. Holliday and was designed to protect against an attack from the west.

A circular redoubt was thrown across Mass. St. between Fts. Hunt and Holliday to serve as a resort for the citizens with arms in case of a charge from the south. Breastworks were erected between houses along Mass. St. and, together with Ft. Necessity formed a fence on both sides.

Check out **Kids, Let's Build a Mud Fort!** for children 6-12 yrs. old with Katie Armitage & Debbie Hadel-Kelley on Aug. 13th & 14th from 9—11 a.m. Call Lawrence Parks and Recreation at 785-832-7930 for reservations. Maximum of 15 children/15 adults per session. There is a fee for this program.

Today, no vestige remains of these fortifications to recall those stirring times.