

Precis of
**Fashioning a 'Free State': Race, Violence,
and Myth-Making in Kansas, 1840-1880**

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On January 14, 1857, George Lewis wrote to John and Lucy Fitch at the request of their son, Edward, to describe the violence and lawlessness that pervaded the Kansas Territory. Lewis had recently lost his home and all of his possessions in the aftermath of a proslavery attack on the city of Lawrence. After explaining the extent of his loss and the crimes committed by the "border ruffians," Lewis proclaimed, "we hope for a bright future in Kansas. The proslavery party is busy at work, devising ways and means to make this a slave state: but it is too late in the day. It must be made a Free State. It shall be a Free State."¹ This impassioned rhetoric concerning the fate of the state translated into the letters and diaries of numerous antislavery settlers. Many white emigrants, on both sides of the ideological divide, argued that Kansas held a unique and powerful position in its ability to decide the slavery question. The events of the territorial period and the ultimate entrance of Kansas into the Union in 1861 ensured that the legacy of Bleeding Kansas survived into the post-war period as the founding doctrine of the "free state."

This simplified and celebratory version of the territorial era has been discussed by historians in various ways. In a piece on Reconstruction violence in Kansas, Brent Campney claimed, "state leaders began promoting a Free State narrative that depicted Kansas as a land of freedom and justice," particularly in contrast to the South.² By focusing on the

elements of race and gender, Kristin Oertel added to the argument that Free-Staters had to consider "the presence of both blacks and Indians in...their rhetorical discussions about slavery, freedom, and racial hierarchy."³ Kim Warren, studying the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, termed it the "symbolic power of Kansas," extending it beyond the territorial era and arguing, "for more than a century, Kansas has drawn people from across the nation to struggle with contentious issues that reflect problems throughout the country."⁴ Clearly, the "Free-State" myth (as this work will refer to it) influenced movements and groups of people far beyond those who fought in the battles of Bleeding Kansas.⁵ By examining the origins and limits of the myth and extending it beyond the territorial era, I argue that the founding doctrine of the state was not the "Free-State" legacy of Bleeding Kansas, but instead a racial hierarchy that defined the limits of the myth as it encountered two racially-diverse populations in a period of forty years. Beginning with the struggle to colonize and remove the Delaware in the pre-territorial period, coupled with efforts to repress and restrict the black in population in the statehood era, white Kansans illuminated the violent

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³ Kristen Tegtmeier Oertel, *Bleeding Borders: Race, Gender, and Violence in Pre-Civil War Kansas* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009), 5.

⁴ Kim Warren, *The Quest for Citizenship: African American and Native American Education in Kansas, 1880-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 10.

⁵ The terms "narrative" and "legacy" will also appear throughout the work, but will always refer back to the myth as discussed by the aforementioned historians.

¹ George Lewis to John and Lucy Fitch, Jan. 14, 1857, Edward Fitch Collection, Kansas Collection, RH MS P249, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas, Letter No. 21.

² Brent M.S. Campney, "Light is Bursting Upon the World!": White Supremacy and Racist Violence Against Blacks in Reconstruction Kansas," *The*

complications that arose when a “Free-State” legacy clashed with a hierarchy of race.

Organization of Chapters

In chapter one, the Delaware people emerge as a representative tribe that encountered cultural colonization in the pre-territorial era, yet raised successful forms of resistance that allowed for the maintenance of sovereignty.⁶ The various forms of cultural violence that the tribe faced necessitates that the definition of violence expand to include these equally damaging and destructive forms of white aggression. Similarly, the resistance posed by the Delaware people demonstrates the agency and presence of the tribe throughout the three phases of the state’s history. While scholars have recognized Native tribes in the context of the pre-territorial period, they often disappear from the historical narrative when John Brown arrives and the territorial disputes erupt. Violence against Native peoples seems to come to a screeching halt at the exact moment when whites began fighting whites in battles that foreshadowed the national struggle.⁷

While the importance of Bleeding Kansas cannot be denied, it must be examined as not only a struggle over Free

Soil, but also, as Elliot West proposed, a question of “nonwhite peoples already there, racial outsiders beyond the government’s reach with no obvious part to play in the national life.”⁸ As the territory entered the era of Bleeding Kansas and white settlement substantially increased, cultural violence was replaced by physical and property-based aggression as the majority of the white population sought Delaware lands and resources with the same fervor that they brought to ideological confrontations over slavery.⁹ By exploring these violent interactions in the pre-territorial, territorial, and even statehood eras, I propose that the hierarchy entrenched itself in the minds of white Kansans as the preferred policy towards groups with competing claims to Kansas soil.¹⁰

In the second chapter, the theme of violence endures as North and South collide in the isolated, yet destructive episodes of Bleeding Kansas. The rhetoric surrounding the aggression adopted an ideological tone and resulted in the white-on-white political violence that has become synonymous with the period.¹¹ The individual, in this case Edward Fitch, becomes central as the definition of

⁶ Kohn, Margaret, "Colonialism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2010 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2010/entries/colonialism/>. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines colonialism as follows: "When a power exploits a lesser power and uses the lesser power’s resources to strengthen and enrich the greater power." Due to its equally threatening and damaging nature, I extend this definition to include threats to culture and identity, as well as physical and property-based aggression.

⁷ This phenomena is contributed to by the aforementioned work by Oertel, who discussed the impact of “redness” on attempts to define white identity in Kansas. However, the author mostly relegated Native peoples to the pre-territorial era, failing to fully consider the impact of the Native population in light of the pivotal events of the 1850s.

⁸ West, 12.

⁹ For an excellent account of the many intrusions of whites upon Native lands see: Craig Miner and William Unrau, *The End of Indian Kansas: A Study of Cultural Revolution, 1854-1871* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1978)

¹⁰ For the key scholarship on the Delaware see: C.A. Weslager, *The Delaware Indian Migration: With the Texts of Two Manuscripts (1821-22) Responding to General Lewis Cass’s Inquiries About Lenape Culture and Language* (Wallingford: The Middle Atlantic Press, 1978). And C.A. Weslager, *Delaware Indians: A History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1972).

¹¹ Some of defining scholarship on Bleeding Kansas, particularly in reference to this thesis, is the abovementioned work by Kristin Tegtmeier Oertel. Also see Nicole Etcheson, *Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War Era*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004). For an exhaustive work on Kansas history see, Craig Miner, *Kansas: The History of the Sunflower State, 1854-2000* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002).

“liberty” and the “Free State” narrative were created and contested during the mid-1850s. Fitch, as an active “Free-State” member, proved indicative of the party mentality when he heralded “liberty” as a cause in the territorial fight, yet simultaneously participated (both directly and indirectly) in the cultural and physical violence being carried out against the Delaware. The “Free-State” claim, made in the midst of Native colonization and removal, proved contradictory as white settlers disregarded indigenous groups in their conception of the state as a beacon of national freedom. Instead, the effort to obtain Native lands defined “liberty” in Kansas in racialized terms. The ideological battles manipulated the limits of that definition, though it never extended beyond the confines of the racial hierarchy upon which settlers, like Fitch, had constructed it in the pre-territorial era.

As the first to challenge to the “Free-State” legacy, the third chapter examines the Exodusters who fled the failed Reconstruction of the South for a “free” Kansas in 1879. This group is often portrayed in terms of the atrocities they faced in the South and the effect that had on their massive emigration to Kansas in the late nineteenth century. In terms of how this oppressed population fared in the “land of Old John Brown,” the consensus seems to recognize only race-based violence as it compares to the Jim Crow South, defined by a scale that is a direct product of Southern Reconstruction.¹² When the former slaves arrived in the state, many whites Kansans utilized social, political, and economic discrimination to push the black emigrants out in an effort to maintain white dominance. Though many white settlers proudly claimed a “Free-State” legacy, what emerged in the post-war years was a state marked by attempts to justify and defend a set of racial beliefs established in the pre-territorial era.¹³ As

the Exodusters poured into the state, white Kansans took violent and repressive measures in order to reassert the racial hierarchy and ensure white supremacy, thus effectively disproving the “Free-State” narrative.¹⁴

Taken together, these three chapters aim to expand the discussion of violence and subjugation in Kansas beyond the territorial era, reveal the racially-based justifications that supported these exchanges between whites and nonwhites, and explore the nature of white identity as it progressed through three phases of the state’s history. As Native populations encountered white missionaries, federal agents, and settlers, cultural and physical violence, justified by a set of racial beliefs, was entrenched in the state’s tradition before (and after) it bled in the name of “liberty.” When the territory entered the era of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, white identity shifted and antislavery settlers began imagining the state as a vanguard of “freedom” and “liberty,” while simultaneously colonizing and removing Native populations. The myth of the territorial era – crafted by settlers like Edward Fitch – was embraced by white Kansans in the post-war years, and then challenged by the Exodusters who, in their quest for freedom, resurrected the racial hierarchy and the return to violent measures.

The ‘Color Line’ in Kansas, 1878-1900,” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (April 1983).

¹⁴ For the primary scholarship on the exodus see: Robert G. Athearn, *In Search of Canaan: Black Migration to Kansas, 1879-1880*, (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1978). And Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1977). Painter ends her chapter on the Kansas Fever Exodus by arguing that the Exodusters fared well in Kansas when compared to their experience of the violent South. The work focuses mostly on their reasons for leaving and spends limited time discussing their experience of Kansas.

¹² West, 12-13.

¹³ For a discussion of blacks in Kansas see, Randall B. Woods, “Integration, Exclusion, or Segregation?”