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The Nebraska-Kansas Act of 1854

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Wolferman uses primary documents and accounts and interweaves local, state, and national history throughout Sibley's story. The background information supplied by the author places the biography in the context of important issues of the period, such as the frontier, American Indian history, slavery, women's roles, and the Great Awakening. Wolferman has made the biography accessible to readers of varying backgrounds and knowledge. The work would be enlightening for anyone interested in the general history of the frontier Midwest, educational history, or women's roles as they fit within the framework of this period of Missouri history.

The Nebraska-Kansas Act of 1854, edited by John R. Wunder and Joann M. Ross. Law in the American West Series. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008. xi, 220 pp. Maps, notes, appendix, index. \$30.00 paper.

Reviewer James L. Huston is professor of history at Oklahoma State University. He is the author of *The Panic of 1857 and the Coming of the Civil War* (1987); and *Securing the Fruits of Labor: The American Concept of Wealth Distribution, 1765–1900* (1998).

Of the thousands of laws passed by the U.S. Congress, the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 stands by itself in terms of the monumental consequences it produced: the death of one political party, the rise of another, the promulgation of civil war. *The Nebraska-Kansas Act of 1854* — in their introduction the editors explain the reversed order of the state names in the title of the book — consists of seven essays taken from a conference held in Lincoln, Nebraska, in 2004. Overall the essays are excellent and well worth reading by anyone interested in the antebellum era. But there is an overarching problem: the essays really do not explain why the law had the impact it did.

The introduction ably summarizes the content of the seven contributions. Mark E. Neely questions the importance frequently given the *Appeal of the Independent Democrats*; by an interesting and incisive overview of meetings and speeches after January 1854, he finds few contemporary references to that propagandistic publication. Indeed, Neely finds it difficult to explain why the act created a firestorm. He postulates that in the North a residual ideal of honor and faith produced the inflammatory Northern outburst more than any rational thinking about the "slave power." From a different angle, but with a similar result, Brenden Rensink questions why Northerners exploded in fury over the legislation because, except for the explicit repeal of the Missouri Compromise line, it was typical, not atypical, of most territorial legislation. Rensink validates Stephen A. Douglas's claim that the

Compromise of 1850 revoked the Missouri Compromise. Since the publication of this work, two of the authors — James A. Rawley, who wrote on Douglas, and Phillip S. Paludan, who investigated Lincoln — have died. Both wrote fine summaries, but neither produced much that is not known; Rawley stressed Douglas's advocacy of popular sovereignty and his ongoing political struggles with events in Kansas while Paludan focused on Lincoln's outrage, which stemmed from the enactment's perpetuation of an immoral institution and the possibility that slavery might become a national institution. Tekla Ali Johnson and Walter C. Rucker discuss African American responses to the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Johnson argues that after the legislation passed, Frederick Douglass embraced violent means to attack slavery. Rucker found much the same response throughout the free black community in the North. Both Johnson and Rucker range much further than the law's passage and its immediate aftermath, giving a broad description of how desperate African Americans were becoming due to national political trends between 1820 and 1860. In the final essay, Nicole Etcheson examines the Territory of Nebraska. She notes that no violent eruptions occurred there and that popular sovereignty worked quite well because the migrants were mostly Northerners who had no desire to plant slavery.

The problem with the essays is that they merely explain why the Kansas-Nebraska Act was so normal and typical; what they do not explain is the maniacal Northern response to it. If the law was so typical, why did Stephen Douglas himself say to an Illinois audience in 1849, in connection with the continuing fight over the Wilmot Proviso, that the Missouri Compromise "had become canonized in the hearts of the American people, as a sacred thing, which no ruthless hand would ever be reckless enough to disturb"? Even Douglas knew — or should have remembered in 1854 — the power that the Compromise held over the Northern imagination.

Almost as disturbing, the authors disregard the congressional elections of 1854. Those elections gave birth to the Republican Party, almost instantaneously killed the Whig Party, and transformed the North into an antislavery hothouse. The congressional election of 1854 — one of the greatest upheavals in American political history — goes untouched in this volume, even though the heart of that upheaval lay in the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

The political context surrounding this legislation — although known to all of the volume's authors — has not been given its due. The Northern response had a snapping quality to it, and the snapping — like the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back — had been

building ever since 1844. Just to point it out: the United States warred on a sister republic, Mexico, in order to seize lands from her by military conquest; high offices were filled by the most outrageous proslavery propagandists (John C. Calhoun and Abel Upshur); the Wilmot Proviso had been defeated; the North was subjected to a Fugitive Slave Law that moved Southern slave law into the North, generating one riot after another; and filibusterers were invading Cuba and Nicaragua in a search for more slave territory. Given this record, Northerners rationally surmised that a slave power existed, that it was aggressive, and that it was using the federal government to war on foreign nations to get territory for plantation slavery. When the Kansas-Nebraska Act repealed the Missouri Compromise line, the surmise was confirmed: the slave power would stop at nothing to get more land — it would acknowledge no limits to its desires and would honor no previous written commitments. It is this context that is lacking in these essays and detracts from their many fine contributions.

Hell Gate of the Mississippi: The Effie Afton Trial and Abraham Lincoln's Role in It, by Larry A. Riney. Geneseo, IL: Talesman Press, 2006. xiv, 323 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$19.95 paper.

Reviewer Michael A. Ross is associate professor of history at the University of Maryland at College Park. He is the author of *Justice of Shattered Dreams: Samuel Freeman Miller and the Supreme Court during the Civil War Era* (2003).

When the steamboat *Effie Afton* crashed into the Rock Island Bridge and caught fire in May 1856, steamboat men watching on shore cheered. Although they mourned the loss of a sister vessel, they applauded the flames that engulfed a portion of the hated bridge. The Rock Island Bridge, the first to span the Mississippi, had been built on an already treacherous stretch of river known for powerful cross-currents and dangerous submerged rocks. The bridge magnified those problems as waters eddied and swirled around its seven unforgiving stone piers. After 20 steamboats crashed into it, insurance companies raised their rates for boats that traveled under the bridge.

Outraged by his boat's demise, Jacob Hurd, the *Effie Afton's* owner, went to court, demanding that he be paid damages and that the bridge (which was quickly repaired) be declared a nuisance and removed permanently. The railroad, in turn, charged that Hurd had deliberately crashed his boat into the bridge in an effort to destroy the span. In *Hell Gate of the Mississippi*, Larry Riney skillfully recreates the *Effie Afton* trial — the famous 15-day courtroom drama that made headlines across the country in September 1857.