

Busy in the Cause: Iowa, the Free-State Struggle in the West, and the Prelude to the Civil War

Michael A. Morrison
Purdue University

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2015 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution

Recommended Citation

Morrison, Michael A. "Busy in the Cause: Iowa, the Free-State Struggle in the West, and the Prelude to the Civil War." *The Annals of Iowa* 74 (2015), 423-425.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12240>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

cemetery's story to life. Property owners past and present were less helpful: the developer filed lawsuits and eventually abandoned the project; the archdiocesan archivist stonewalled requests for information.

The authors draw thoughtful conclusions about what society owes the dead it decides to relocate, and they suggest a template for how that can be accomplished with respect and dignity, while at the same time recording what can be learned from the site. The experience in Dubuque underlines the challenges of such an undertaking, perhaps making a case that avoiding the disturbance of burial grounds may be the best policy except in the most compelling cases of public need. This volume itself honors the lost cemetery by gathering together what can be known about it and providing rare evidence from a pioneer immigrant cemetery in a river town. By doing so, it makes an important contribution to the history of Dubuque, Iowa, and American burial practices.

Busy in the Cause: Iowa, the Free-State Struggle in the West, and the Prelude to the Civil War, by Lowell J. Soike. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014. xvi, 288 pp. Map, illustrations, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$30.00 paperback.

Reviewer Michael A. Morrison is associate professor of history at Purdue University. He is the author of *Slavery and the American West: The Eclipse of Manifest Destiny and the Coming of the Civil War* (1997).

In this deeply researched, closely argued, revelatory, and highly readable monograph, Lowell Soike situates the Kansas territorial crisis within the larger context of midwestern sectional politics. He clearly shows how Iowa was both affected by and itself influenced events in that troubled territory. It did so primarily in three ways: as violence escalated in Kansas, the state sent settlers, furnished arms from its arsenal to free-state combatants, and offered a refuge to antislavery forces who temporarily fled the territory. Iowa also provided a training ground for John Brown's supporters who would attack Harpers Ferry in October 1859. After the violence in Kansas abated (it never completely disappeared), settlements in Iowa, particularly those populated by evangelicals, were havens for slaves fleeing Kansas as they passed through the state on their way north to freedom.

Whereas most studies of the conflict focus on the pro- and antislavery struggle within the territory, Soike's is an outward-looking perspective that demonstrates how it shaped Iowans' growing commitment to the Free-State cause. Encouraged by David Rice Atchison and Benjamin and John Stringfellow, unorganized proslavery bands dramatically upped the level of violence, closed the Missouri River to northerners

migrating to the territory, and for good measure plundered the emigrants' belongings. Iowans previously unconcerned with the outcome in Kansas increasingly and fervently became Free-State sympathizers.

Soike's argument is nuanced and balanced. He reveals differences between those who favored aggressive retaliatory measures against proslavery forces in Kansas and raids in western Missouri to free the enslaved on the one hand, and, on the other, "conservative Free State men who wanted the movement's actions kept defensive and lawful" (107). There were limits to the antislavery sentiments, however. Many Iowans — indeed most northern Republicans — strongly supported and abetted a Free-State resolution in Kansas to ensure white, free-labor settlement there without necessarily advocating immediate abolition everywhere in the United States.

Iowa Democrats, fearing that Free-State arrivals would "dictate to us a government to preach Abolitionism and dig underground Rail Roads" (211), asserted (one would hardly say they proved) that the emigrants were the source of all the conflict in that unhappy territory. Democratic editors insisted that western Missourians were the "victims of northern aggression by organized Free-State colonization" (211). Ironically, Democratic efforts to assail the Underground Railroad and in so doing incite racial intolerance and bigotry led Republican leaders to oppose the attacks and pass measures for black equality. Taken together, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, repeal of the Missouri Compromise ban on slavery, and staunch Democratic opposition to the Free-State movement and support for proslavery forces in Kansas had the effect — if not the intent — of reducing the party to minority status in Iowa by the late 1850s.

One of the many qualities of this book is Soike's ability to give a human face to abstract political conflict in Iowa and armed combat in Kansas. A case in point is John Brown's legacy and influence. After his trial and hanging, free-soil Kansans remembered his attacks on slavery and raid to liberate slaves in western Missouri. Brown's opponents denounced him for his killing — brutal murder, actually — of five proslavery settlers along Pottawatomie Creek. Moreover, Brown's violent opposition to slavery in Kansas, his Missouri raid, and the attack on the arsenal at Harpers Ferry fired the hearts of other Iowans like Charles Ball, Edwin Morrison, Albert Southwick, and Joseph Coppoc. Quakers all, they were inspired to launch a similar raid to aid the escape of 25 slaves owned by Morgan Walker of Missouri. Like Brown's assault at Harpers Ferry, the raid ended in abject failure and the deaths of Ball and Morrison. Their zeal could not compensate for the combination "of having too few men and equipment, of having selected poor leaders, of suffering

abandonment at the scene by wagon mates, and of being betrayed by a presumed friend" (191). Idealism had its limits.

This is a work of a mature scholar. Soike brings to this study a wealth of knowledge amassed over 36 years as a historian at the State Historical Society of Iowa. By recentering the Kansas imbroglio away from Congress and out from the territory, he has made an important contribution to understanding the way the territorial issue transformed Iowans who thought of themselves as westerners into partisans of the Free-State movement and participants in a sectional conflict that issued in and was resolved by the Civil War and more than 640,000 deaths.

Necessary Evil: Settling Missouri with a Rope and a Gun, by Joe Johnston. St. Louis: Missouri History Museum, 2014; distributed by the University of Chicago Press. 336 pp. Maps, illustrations, bibliography, index. \$24.95 paperback.

Reviewer Catherine McNicol Stock is the Barbara Zaccheo Kohn '72 Professor of History and director of the American Studies Program at Connecticut College. She is the author of *Rural Radicals: Righteous Rage in the American Grain* (1996); and *Main Street in Crisis: The Great Depression and the Old Middle Class on the Northern Plains* (1992).

Necessary Evil is not intended as an academic history of vigilante violence in Missouri in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. It includes no overview of books on similar topics, no footnotes, and only a brief bibliography. The author freely admits that he "created" and "added" some of the details in his descriptions of events (12). Similarly, Johnston asserts that "the level of vigilante activity . . . of this length and depth of depredation, happened only in Missouri" without providing specific data to back up the statement (8). For readers in Iowa, this is particularly disappointing, because one of the frontier areas that Johnston claims did not fall into the habit of solving every problem through vigilante justice was Iowa. It would be interesting to know more about how different parts of the Midwest came to develop so differently.

For a non-academic audience, *Necessary Evil* proves a literally unforgettable read—full of violent deaths, torture, revenge, all in the name of what Johnston calls justice. Each chapter concerns a different saga of vigilantism, beginning with the "Mormon wars" and including the regulator movement, Wyatt Earp, the Bald Knobbers, and other infamous and anonymous vigilantes. As his title reveals, Johnston believes that this carnage was a "necessary evil," a stage of society on the way to a more regulated community. He even suggests that we can turn our horror at the pain and suffering of the victims into "love" for the perpetrators and ap-