Larry E. Tise, *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701–1840* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), explores the development of proslavery thought.

Harvey Wish, ed., *Ante-Bellum Writings of George Fitzhugh and Hinton Rowan Helper on Slavery* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1960), provides a concise selection of the two men's writings, with a valuable introduction by the editor.

CHAPTER 13

Yankees and "Border Ruffians" in "Bleeding Kansas": Sara Robinson and David Atchison

Sara Robinson loved springtime in her adopted eastern Kansas. In the spring of 1856, though, her enjoyment was soon replaced by thoughts of death and destruction. In May, proslavery southerners seized her husband and threw him in jail. Because she knew the "evil" men who were responsible, Robinson feared for her husband's life. She also feared that these men were not done with their awful work.

Robinson was correct. Less than two weeks after her husband's arrest, hundreds of armed proslavery men—"hoards" from hell, she called them—descended on antislavery Lawrence, Kansas. By sunset, they had looted and destroyed homes, businesses, and even the post office. They had ruined newspaper presses, and burned books and papers. On the edge of town, the Robinson home was a pile of smoldering ashes. Sara knew who was responsible for this attack. A pack of Missouri "Border Ruffians" may have done the work, but she knew there were others behind them. The real culprits were scoundrels like David Atchison!

In 1856, the Kentucky-born and frontier-bred Missourian feared for the property of *his* neighbors. A hard-drinking bear of a man, fond of profanity and sporting a Bowie knife, Atchison knew his Missouri neighbors well. Like all decent, hardworking white men, they sought only to better their lot in life. To do so they, like many Americans before them, had moved to the frontier, where they expected their property to be protected. But now they feared for one valuable kind of property—slaves. Slaveholders or not, these settlers saw slavery, like the frontier itself, as the key to individual advancement. They knew that it was protected in the states that they had moved from and also by the United States Constitution. They feared that Yankee abolitionists now threatened its very existence—and their rights as American citizens.

To Atchison, teetotaling, city folk from New England had no business settling so far from their homes. The Kansas territory rightly belonged to Southerners, especially the people right next door in Missouri. He feared that if the Yankees succeeded in keeping them out of this territory, slavery was at risk everywhere. Atchison had sat in the United States Senate for more than a dozen

Sara Robinson

David Atchison

years. As one of its highest ranking members, he had played a major role in making sure that slaveholders could live in Kansas in the first place. And now he was not about to let meddling Yankees take this land away!

David Atchison and Sara Robinson were key players in a civil war between Northerners and Southerners in the mid-1850s that led Americans to refer to "bleeding Kansas." Though not as well-known as some other defenders of slavery expansionism, Atchison's commitment to the cause ran straight from the halls of power to the bloody Kansas prairie. Likewise, petite, Massachusetts-born Robinson was not the most prominent opponent of slavery expansion in the 1850s. But her prolific pen helped publicize the plight of antislavery forces on the plains. As a result, she became one of the best-known Yankees in Kansas. As Kansas bled in the mid-1850s, this unpolished son of the frontier and determined daughter of New England were locked in a conflict that had much to do with bringing on the Civil War. At stake in Kansas, each believed, was the future of the nation.

"Compelled to Shoot, Burn & Hang"

No slavery expansionist ever exerted influence more effectively in the halls of power *and* on the Kansas sod than David Atchison. Whether from behind a podium or the barrel of a gun, Atchison worked to enforce the right of Southerners to take slaves into the Kansas territory in the 1850s. Atchison's early life provided ideal preparation for his dual role.

David Rice Atchison was born in 1807 in a Kentucky only a generation removed from its raw frontier beginnings. In the late eighteenth century, his father's family, of Scots-Irish descent, had moved there from Pennsylvania to

"bluegrass country" near present-day Lexington in search of a better life. Although David was born in a modest cottage on the family's farm, his father would find prosperity, and three more sons and a daughter followed. The growing family, however, did not provide all the labor for their roughly 450-acre spread. Shortly after David's birth, his father acquired one slave. Twenty years later, he had added seven more—a sign that the move to the frontier had paid off.

With the family in comfortable circumstances, in the fall of 1821, fourteen-year-old David headed off to Lexington's Transylvania College. There he made friends with classmates who would later help him in politics. Founded in 1788 by Presbyterians, Transylvania was one of the best-known and largest colleges in the country and in the 1820s could boast an impressive roster of graduates. Indeed, five of Atchison's classmates would go on to serve with him in the United States Senate, including the future Confederate president Jefferson Davis of Mississippi. By the time he graduated in 1825 at the age of eighteen, young Atchison had already decided on a career. After studying law for two years under a former Kentucky senator and member of Transylvania's faculty, Atchison opened a practice in Carlisle, Kentucky, some thirty-five miles northwest of Lexington.

Soon, however, the ambitious son of a Kentucky frontiersman grew restless. By the late 1820s, the frontier had moved west to the Missouri River. So in 1830 Atchison headed to Clay County in western Missouri, where he hung his lawyer's shingle once again. Fond of horses, hunting, and socializing, the burly six foot two inch Atchison fit in well with his new neighbors. He demonstrated what one newspaper would call an "easy and unaffected" manner and quickly established a thriving practice.

Atchison demonstrated his ample legal and political skills when he took on the potentially dangerous work of defending some unpopular newcomers to western Missouri. Soon after his arrival in Clay County, a small group of Mormons moved to nearby Independence. The Mormons were followers of Joseph Smith, who claimed to be a prophet and in 1830 founded the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in upstate New York. Smith moved his church to Ohio in 1831 and later the same year to western Missouri. Here, as elsewhere, the Mormons were harassed and assaulted by suspicious non-Mormons and in 1833 church leaders turned to Atchison for legal assistance. For the next seven years, Atchison devoted much of his time to defending the rights of Mormons against the depredations committed by his own neighbors. While risking the enmity of non-Mormons, Atchison won the support of his grateful clients and in 1834 they helped elect him to the lower house of Missouri's state legislature. There Atchison became a loyal follower of another Scots-Irish son of the frontier, President Andrew Jackson, founder of the Democratic Party and an advocate of westward expansion. Elected to a second two-year term in 1838, Atchison continued to straddle the divide between Mormons and non-Mormons. Although Missouri authorities would drive the Latter-day Saints from the state in 1839, Atchison as a division commander in the state militia defied the anti-Mormon governor's proclamation that Smith's followers "should be exterminated or expelled from the State." His troops, he declared, would not be permitted to "disgrace the State and themselves by acting the part of a mob."

Atchison was defeated in the Whig victory of 1840, but his political career was not over. While serving in the assembly, he played an important role in carving out several new counties in western Missouri, one of which would be named in his honor. In 1841, the new governor recommended Atchison's appointment as the first circuit judge for the area and he was quickly confirmed by the state senate. Riding his five-county circuit, the affable Atchison had numerous opportunities to win people over with frontier charm. Increasingly popular in Democratic Party circles, he was the logical choice to fill the seat of Missouri's junior United States senator, who died unexpectedly in 1843. As one Missouri newspaper put it, his "knowledge of the wants and rights of the hardy pioneer . . . will render him one of the most useful members of the Senate."

At age thirty-six, full of jokes and a good story, Missouri's new junior senator cut a popular figure in the Senate. It did not hurt that he knew several of his colleagues from his college days. Less than three years after he entered the Senate, fellow Democrats chose him as its president pro tempore (to preside over the body in the absence of the vice president) and repeatedly re-elected him to the post. In fact, few senators would ever put their ability to get along with people to better use in service of the "hardy pioneer."

It was an opportune time to do so. The year after Atchison entered the Senate in 1843, expansionist fever gripped the country. Before long, Americans would proclaim their nation's "Manifest Destiny" to overspread the continent. Expansionism quickly infected politics and in 1844 helped elect militant expansionist James K. Polk president. Before the end of his term, "Manifest Destiny" had been fulfilled. The United States had annexed Texas, acquired more than half of the Oregon Territory, defeated Mexico in the Mexican War, and seized from it the area between Texas and the Pacific, including California.

Missouri's "frontier" senator wholeheartedly supported an expansionist program. He had played a key role in promoting the settlement of Oregon, jointly occupied until 1846 by Great Britain and the United States. He supported legislation calling for fortifications along the Oregon Trail and land for settlers in the territory. He even supported an American claim to the Oregon Country all the way to the Yukon border. He voted for the annexation of Texas and war with Mexico. And after the Mexican War, when many Americans talked of building a railroad to the Pacific to open the West for further settlement, Atchison worked to prepare the way.

In 1854, Democrat Stephen A. Douglas introduced legislation to promote the construction of a transcontinental railroad line. As a senator from Illinois and land speculator in Chicago, Douglas desperately wanted the transcontinental route to link California to the Midwest. One obstacle, however, was the huge area on the plains that had not yet been organized as territory. Without territorial government to protect people and property, no railroad company would dare lay track over this land. But Douglas knew that getting Congress to agree to organize this area into a territory would be difficult. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 prohibited slavery north of the 36° 30′ parallel line, and the area in question lay above that line. No one had to tell Douglas that his Southern colleagues in Congress would not support the organization of more free territory and, ultimately, more free states. Yet Douglas thought he knew how to proceed. His legislation proposed, without mentioning the Missouri Compromise at all,

to create a new territory—Nebraska—and allow the settlers there to decide the slavery issue by popular vote. In other words, Douglas's bill refused to confront the legal prohibition on slavery in this area, but opened the possibility that Southerners could take their slaves into it.

For Atchison, that was not enough. The Missouri senator had been galvanized by Northern efforts to keep slavery out of the territory won from Mexico. As he told his constituents after the defeat of the Wilmot Proviso, which would have banned slavery from territory taken from Mexico, it was the free states' "fixed design" to prevent Southerners from further "participation" in the western territories and to reduce them "to a state of *helpless inferiority*." In other words, he had come to stand squarely with John C. Calhoun and other powerful Southern colleagues in the Senate over the absolute right of slaveholders to take their property into the new territory. **[See Source 1.]**

Atchison now put his talents to work behind the scenes to get the Missouri Compromise repealed *outright*. He had already worked closely with Douglas on other railroad legislation. Democratic President Franklin Pierce was under pressure from Northerners in his own party not to re-open—and inflame—the issue of slavery in the territories. Meeting with Douglas and Atchison, however, he agreed to support Atchison's position. Douglas then quickly amended his bill to include an outright repeal of the Missouri Compromise (and a division of the area in question into two territories—Kansas and Nebraska).

When Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act later in 1854, it was only because it garnered sufficient Southern support. Douglas had his Missouri colleague to thank for that. Many Northerners, of course, were outraged and would soon stream into the new Republican Party, which would take a stand against the further spread of slavery into the territories. Once word of Atchison's meeting with Pierce and Douglas leaked out, angry Northerners also realized Atchison's key role. One New York paper sarcastically reported that Atchison had dined at the White House, where "all talked lovingly about democracy." Some observers whispered that the Missouri Democrat was the actual author of the amendment repealing the Missouri Compromise. Almost overnight Atchison became to many Northerners the symbol of the "Slave Power's" influence in the Congress—living proof of the devious slaveholders' conspiracy to take over the government and spread slavery everywhere!

Atchison had little time to relish his victory. The ink from President Pierce's signature on Douglas's bill was hardly dry when disturbing rumors reached western Missouri and Washington. New Englanders, it was said, had already organized an emigrant aid society and armed it with five million dollars to assist the settlement of Yankees in the Kansas Territory. Under the Kansas-Nebraska Act's provision of popular sovereignty, which let the territorial settlers vote on the slavery issue, a meddling horde of abolitionists could soon take away the "right" of Southerners to occupy this land.

Atchison was not about to let abolitionist Yankees on the ground in Kansas overturn what he had just helped achieve in the halls of Congress. That summer, he raced home to spread the word about this threat and help his fellow Missourians counter it. Atchison, former commander in the state militia, knew that his fellow Southerners—and a lot of them—must be mobilized to meet this Yankee threat in no uncertain terms. In one speech, he urged his western Missouri constituents "to give a horse thief, robber, or homicide a fair trial, but to hang a negro thief or Abolitionist, without judge or jury." That sentiment, as he reported to Secretary of War Jefferson Davis, "met almost universal applause." Atchison went on to assure Davis that "we are organizing to meet their organization." Then he concluded ominously: "We will be compelled to shoot, burn & hang, but the thing will soon be over."

"Homestead of the Free!"

As David Atchison's buggy raced over the rough western Missouri roads in the summer in 1854, some twelve hundred miles away in Massachusetts Sara Robinson was alarmed too. News of the Kansas-Nebraska Act had shocked antislavery New Englanders. Slavery had earlier been barred "forever" from this area, but now Kansas could eventually become a slave state, opening the door for slavery to spread even further. Thus, while Atchison rallied his neighbors to prepare for a Yankee invasion of the Kansas Territory, Robinson was busy preparing to keep Kansas free by moving there. Given her background, the life she would find on the Kansas prairie would be new in many ways.

Sara Robinson was born Sara Tappan Doolittle Lawrence in Belchertown, Massachusetts, in 1827 into very favorable circumstances. Her father, an attorney, became a Massachusetts state legislator at twenty-seven, later served in the state senate, and was eventually nominated for governor on a temperance ticket. He was also related to Amos Lawrence, whose father had made a fortune investing in textile mills in Lowell, Massachusetts. (See Chapter 8.) As a member of a leading New England family, Sara witnessed a steady stream of influential visitors to her father's house, including Senator Daniel Webster and writer Harriet Martineau. Unlike most young women of her day, she also had an opportunity to pursue education beyond the rudiments. She attended the Belchertown Classical School and the nearby New Salem Academy, where the curriculum included more than the "ornamental" arts often associated with female education. Sara learned Latin and was fluent in French and German. Meanwhile, her father would instill in her a love of literature and politics.

One incident marred Sara's privileged life—and changed its course. While a student, she suffered a severe fall on some stone steps. The accident injured her spine, causing temporary blindness. During Sara's long recuperation, her family brought in physician Charles Robinson, who had just recently established a practice in the area. Already balding, Robinson was physically unimposing. And he was surely not the most prominent man to set foot in the well-appointed Lawrence home. To his patient, however, he no doubt cut an impressive figure.

Nine years older than Sara, Robinson already had a lifetime of experiences under his belt—and harrowing tales to prove it. After graduating from Amherst College and then earning a medical degree, Robinson settled down in Belchertown, married, and fathered two children. By 1846, though, his wife and both infants had died, and shortly thereafter he suffered a breakdown. Robinson quit his practice and signed on as a physician with a party of gold seekers traveling to California. After a brief sojourn in the gold fields, he settled in Sacramento, where he practiced medicine and became a newspaper editor. There he also

took up the cause of "squatters' rights" in a fight that pitted settlers or "squatters" against land speculators. Robinson was shot during this struggle, but managed to fatally wound his assailant before passing out. Arrested and charged with conspiracy and murder, he was thrown onto a prison ship before being tried and acquitted. Robinson next won a seat in the California legislature, where he stood against the extension of slavery in the West. By 1851, however, Robinson had had enough of frontier life in the Far West. Recovered from his physical *and* psychological wounds, he returned to Massachusetts in 1851 to take up medicine again.

Under Robinson's care, Sara recovered completely from her injury. The patient and her physician soon began a courtship. Sara was slightly built, but Robinson found her "quite pretty" and an "exceedingly agreeable young woman, very unpretending, [and] plainly dressed." The couple married in 1851. While Charles practiced medicine and edited a newspaper, the Robinsons settled down, apparently to live out their lives in a quiet New England town. Douglas's introduction of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in Congress changed their plans.

In the spring of 1854, Charles Robinson attended an antislavery meeting conducted by an enterprising Yankee reformer and state legislator named Eli Thayer. Even before Douglas's bill passed Congress, Thayer founded the New England Emigrant Aid Society, chartered by the Massachusetts state legislature to move Yankees to the Kansas Territory and turn a profit by selling land and operating productive enterprises of its own. With their thriving businesses, churches, schools, and free farmers planted in the Kansas sod, Thayer believed, Yankees would demonstrate the superiority of free over slave labor. The antislavery Robinson saw an opportunity to do well by doing good and a short time later offered his services to Thayer.

Not everyone responded the same way to Thayer's pitch, though. His society, later reorganized as a company, was authorized to issue up to $5 million in stock. But there were few takers—until Sara Robinson's relative Amos Lawrence stepped in. Originally a moderate or "Cotton" Whig, Lawrence did not wish to endanger the Union, jeopardize the textile industry's close relationship with the cotton-producing South, or alienate his own party's southern wing. By 1854, however, he had changed his mind. Along with Patrick Jackson, another "lord of the loom," Lawrence also invested a substantial sum of money in Thayer's organization. In the process, these "men of affairs" took control of what was now known as the Emigrant Aid Company. They made sure that it disassociated itself from abolitionism. Lawrence demanded that no abolitionists—people who wanted to overturn slavery in the Southern states as opposed to those who merely wanted to halt its expansion—be allowed to serve as directors. He preferred to see Kansas fill up with hardworking, upright Yankees, but not at the expense of peace with the South.

Lawrence viewed Charles Robinson as the perfect man to spearhead the company's settlement of Kansas. Robinson had already traveled to Kansas, where "squatter sovereignty" would soon decide the slavery issue. He had earlier risked his life in a similar struggle in California. He was reliable—firmly antislavery, but no hothead. And, of course, he had married a Lawrence. In the summer of 1854, Thayer and Lawrence named Robinson a general agent of the company with a $1,000 salary and a commission on all company sales to settlers. They also sent him on a scouting expedition to find suitable spots for settlement. After returning to Massachusetts, Robinson left for Kansas once again at the end of the summer, taking a party of some seventy men, women, and children. The Quaker antislavery poet John Greenleaf Whittier wrote a poem for the departing settlers:

> We cross the prairie as of old
> The pilgrims crossed sea,
> To make the West, as they did the East,
> The homestead of the free!

Once there, Robinson selected a site along the banks of the Kansas River to serve as the company's headquarters. Then he laid out a town and named it Lawrence in honor of the company's chief benefactor.

Charles returned home in early 1855, and when he left again in March to lead another group of emigrants to Kansas, Sara accompanied him. Leaving Boston in a driving snowstorm, the party of some two hundred settlers traveled west by rail and steamboat and arrived in Kansas City twelve days later. Sara's diary noted the spring wild flowers in bloom. After buying provisions in Kansas City, Sara finally arrived at Lawrence in April.

Sara's new home, a partially built cabin, was a far cry from the one she had known back east. Her first morning there, she woke to find a cow standing in the middle of the unfinished dining room. Later that summer, the couple found a rattlesnake curled up behind the stove. Yet the raw circumstances failed to diminish Sara's enthusiasm. "We have reveled," she would write in her diary, "in flowers under our windows and at our doors." Eastern Kansas, she proclaimed, was the "Eden of America." Located on a hill overlooking Lawrence, her new home commanded a view "unequalled for extent, or variety of loveliness, for miles in all directions." From this perch, Sara would have a unique perspective on developments in Kansas: settlers pouring into the area, the intrusions of David Atchison's "ruffians," and the transformation of popular sovereignty into open warfare.

"White Slaves"

Sara was not in Lawrence long before she noted the continual "change of faces" as newcomers arrived and others left. The Emigrant Aid Company alone had led six parties and nearly six hundred settlers to Kansas in 1854. Many more, including Sara's group continued to arrive in 1855. To accommodate them, her husband's company had been busy founding other communities, including Topeka and Manhattan. In time, it would be responsible for sending about 3,000 settlers to Kansas. Yet New Englanders were always significantly outnumbered by other Northerners. Often they hailed from areas of the Old Northwest that had not been settled by New Englanders. Unlike the Robinsons, these free-state migrants had no desire to battle slavery. They were drawn to Kansas only to advance themselves. Southerners like Atchison never made any distinction among Northerners. But many free state settlers often resented New Englanders. With their schools and churches and opposition to alcohol and slavery, they seemed too anxious to impose their culture on the plains. As one newspaper editor

declared, they were "mere Sunday school *children*." Meanwhile, Missourians and other Southerners had also moved into Kansas by early 1855. Of the 8,500 people in Kansas by that the spring fewer than two hundred were slaves. Nonetheless, newcomers from the South—mostly Missourians—made up nearly 60 percent of the population, with strongholds at Leavenworth and Atchison, named in honor of Missouri's "frontier" senator.

The situation did not bode well for antislavery Yankees when popular sovereignty was put into effect. As it happened, Sara arrived in Kansas on the eve of elections for the territorial legislature. In fact, before leaving Kansas City for Lawrence she had noticed numerous "desperados" on their way into Kansas armed with whiskey and "death-dealing instruments" and talking loudly about driving out "free-state men." They were the fruits of David Atchison's work.

Atchison was not about to take any chances in this election. After all, whoever controlled the territorial legislature would draft the laws about slavery. "[W]e must meet and conquer [the abolitionists]," he declared, "'peaceably if we can[,] forcibly if we must.'" To that end, Atchison helped organize bands of armed Missourians—"Border Ruffians" as they came to be called in the Northern press—to cross the border by the hundreds to vote. Reportedly with revolver and Bowie knife strapped to his waist, he went with them. Although Atchison later denied that he carried weapons into Kansas or voted there, he did admit later that his presence was "great encouragement to the boys."

Whatever Atchison's role in the Kansas election, the vote in the spring of 1855 for the territorial legislature was decisive. The proslavery total was more than 5,400 of the roughly 6,000 ballots cast. "What a glorious thing it was," declared Atchison. Yet the Missouri senator may have done his work too well. The 1855 census found fewer than 3,000 voters in the territory. A later congressional investigation concluded that only about 1,400 of the votes were legal. Rather than settle the slavery issue in Kansas, the election only set the stage for violent confrontation.

Among free-state settlers, Sara Robinson's reaction—that Atchison's Missourians had stolen the election—was typical. "Will these frauds be allowed?" she wondered. Proslavery settlers in Kansas probably had enough votes to win without chicanery. Like many Northerners, however, Sara concluded that the election was "connived . . . to force slavery into Kansas against the desire of the actual settlers." Because the Missourians' "theft" of the election seemed so obvious to many Northern settlers—New Englander and non-New Englander alike—David Atchison had unintentionally given them the grounds to come together to defend *their* rights as voters. Many of these same Northerners were outraged by the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which had put popular sovereignty into effect. Now a defense of their liberties as white citizens under popular sovereignty became their rallying cry. When proslavery residents organized a territorial legislature that summer based on the spring election results, the administration of President Franklin Pierce recognized it as legitimate. Free soilers, however, quickly labeled it "bogus," created "by force and fraud." And they connected the most dire consequences to it. As Sara Robinson declared in her diary, "We in Kansas already feel the iron heel of the oppressor, making us truly white slaves."

United in the belief that proslavery forces were attacking their rights, free-soilers elected delegates to a convention that fall to write a free-state constitution. Comparing themselves to the revolutionaries of 1776, they declared that the people had the right to "abolish governments." Delegate Charles Robinson, who was opposed to slavery itself, proposed a provision for black suffrage in the constitution. But he quickly realized that calling for black rights would not unite white Northerners in Kansas. Only emphasizing "the invasion of their own civil and political rights" would do that. That insight paid off. In elections held by free-soilers early in 1856, Robinson was elected governor. The Kansas Territory now had two constitutions and two governments: the proslavery government at Lecompton, recognized as official by President Franklin Pierce; and the free soil government at Topeka, headed by Charles Robinson and quickly condemned by Southerners and Pierce as "treasonable."

Threatened by the "iron heel" of the "slave power," free-soilers prepared for armed conflict. Shipments of rifles from the East began to arrive in the spring of 1855, some purchased with funds from the New England Emigrant Aid Company. Others were financed by prominent Northerners such as Henry Ward Beecher, Catharine Beecher's brother. (See Chapter 10.) Some of the weapons arrived in boxes marked as books (and were quickly dubbed "Beecher's Bibles"). After the arms arrived, many Lawrence residents broke them in with target practice using pictures of David Atchison. In Lawrence, they also built a new hotel. With walls two feet thick and portholes at the top that could easily accommodate guns, the Free-State Hotel looked to proslavery men suspiciously like an abolitionist fortress. By the end of 1855, Sara Robinson's diary noted the "forts and entrenchments" thrown up around Lawrence and the companies of armed men who drilled near her home. It also detailed the deaths of two free-soilers at the hands of proslavery men.

Early the next year, proslavery forces moved to put down the "treasonous" free-soil government. As it assembled at Topeka and Charles Robinson and other leaders took their oaths, a proslavery sheriff wrote down their names. Then a judge called a grand jury to indict the free-state officials, who had returned to Lawrence. The jury also ordered the destruction of the new Free-State Hotel and free-state newspapers in Lawrence as nuisances. Soon, as Sara Robinson noted, "rumors were afloat" in Lawrence that large companies of men were gathering to attack the town. If the free-soil leaders were not handed over, Lawrence would be sacked. If these rumors were true, she concluded, the "bloody tools of slavery," would "strike the blow at the foot of all republican liberty."

"Blow Them to Hell with a Chunk of Cold Lead"

On May 20, a federal marshal entered the "nasty Abolition town," as one Southerner called it, to make several arrests. The next day, a proslavery sheriff accompanied by up to seven hundred men arrived to carry out the rest of the court order. After failing to bring down the Free-State Hotel with cannon shots, the intruders finally gutted it with fire. As the hotel went up in flames, the invaders ransacked the town. The Robinson home, of course, was a prime target, and by the end of the day it had been consumed in flames.

Sara Robinson never saw the burning embers of her home. Nearly two weeks before the attack on Lawrence, Topeka government officials decided that Charles Robinson, a warrant hanging over his head, should travel east to seek assistance for the beleaguered free-soilers. Sara accompanied him. Shortly after boarding a Missouri River steamboat, however, the "governor" was arrested. As he was hauled off to jail in Leavenworth, Missourians threatened to kill him. Already one free-soiler entrusted to proslavery authorities had not lived to tell about it. Sara was terrified, but continued on. Hidden in her clothing were papers handed to her by a congressional committee investigating conditions in Kansas. Her mission was to deliver them to Republicans in Washington, D.C. After arriving in the East, Sara also worked to secure her husband's release. That summer, she sent a letter to Amos Lawrence's mother, Franklin Pierce's aunt. She, in turn, sent it to the First Lady, who then gave it to the president. Later in 1856, Charles would be released unharmed after nearly four months in captivity. Meanwhile, Sara's role as a publicist for the free-soil cause in Kansas had begun. **[See Source 2.]**

The "sack of Lawrence," as free-soilers called it, was the opening engagement in a guerrilla war on the eastern Kansas prairie in the late 1850s. Only a few days later, an abolitionist named John Brown, who had arrived in Kansas just the year before, decided to take action. Brown believed that the free-soil movement in Kansas was ineffectual. Charles Robinson, he concluded, was "a perfect old woman." Convinced that it was time to fight violence with violence, Brown led a band of men on a killing rampage near Pottawatomie Creek in southeastern Kansas. When they were done, five nonslaveholding Southerners lay dead, shot and viciously mutilated with swords. By the end of the year, roughly fifty more free-soilers and proslavery settlers lay dead in "bleeding Kansas."

Both free-soilers and proslavery forces were to blame for the guerrilla war that raged in Kansas until 1861. As ballots gave way to bullets, the Emigrant Aid Company and those who supported it bore some of the blame. So did David Atchison. Responding to Brown's attack in August, Atchison marched a "Grand Army" of roughly 450 Missourians into Kansas and engaged in a battle with Brown and his men that left six more dead. Even before that, however, the actions of his armed "Border Ruffians" led many free-soilers to arm themselves. Moreover, many of his speeches were incendiary, calling on Southerners to counter the "abolitionist" migration with organized armed efforts of their own. As he declared in one such message, "We want men—armed men."

As open warfare broke out on the Kansas prairie in 1856, it was no accident that Atchison's public pronouncements became fodder in a propaganda war between Northerners and Southerners. And no one better illustrated how effective that propaganda could be than Sara Robinson. In *Kansas: Its Interior and Exterior Life,* published in Boston in 1856, Robinson recounted her move to Kansas. Based on the diary she had kept, it offered an insider's history of the free-soilers' travails. As more news about events in "bleeding Kansas" filled the nation's newspapers, her book found a receptive audience among shocked Northerners and racked up impressive sales. No one did more to arouse Northerners over the threat of the "slave power" to white liberties in Kansas. **[See Source 3.]** Sara was in the East, of course, when the proslavery posse descended

on Lawrence and destroyed much of the town. But that did not stop her from offering her own version of events that day. In her retelling, David Atchison himself stood before the "vile" invaders and exhorted them to do their duty to "your Southern friends." Then he concluded: "If one man or woman dare stand before you, blow them to h——l with a chunk of cold lead." **[See Source 4.]**

Ironically, for all of Atchison's inflamed rhetoric, he did not wish to see proslavery men commit violent acts that might play right into free-soilers' hands. Thus, when proslavery forces surrounded Lawrence the year before its "sack," Atchison helped negotiate a peaceful resolution. His role in the sack of 1856 is debatable. Robinson's version of Atchison's speech was one of several that circulated in the Northern press afterward—all of them different. One Missouri newspaper and Atchison himself later denied that he gave any of those speeches, although he admitted that he had made several that day. He went on to claim that he had actually sought to restrain the proslavery sheriff who led the posse into Lawrence. "I spoke," he said, "in the interest of peace—exerting myself to check, not to incite, outrage."

If Atchison's role that day is unclear, his subsequent actions are not. Already in 1855, he had lost his Senate seat in a fight in the Missouri legislature between his backers and Democrats who refused to side with slavery expansionists. Yet Atchison had lost none of his desire to fight the "abolitionist" threat. And in doing so, he demonstrated that he had learned something from free-soilers. Sara Robinson and other free-soil propagandists had effectively portrayed free-soilers as martyrs, oppressed by the "slave power" and its clever leader, David Atchison, who intended to rob whites of their rights and debase them to "slavery." And they had found in a defense of popular sovereignty an effective way to unite free-state whites. As Kansas descended into guerrilla war, Atchison turned to similar appeals. Proslavery forces in Kansas were martyrs. They faced a clever leader (Sara's husband!) who carried out the abolitionists' designs to destroy the South. And whites had to unite to prevent their own degradation at the hands of the wicked enemy. As Atchison declared in 1856, the loss of Kansas imperiled the entire white race. Whites, he asserted, would "sink to the level of the freed African." **[See Source 5.]**

For Atchison, however, it was too late. In another territorial election in 1857, free-soilers won. And for all his militant rhetoric, Atchison's efforts to rally the South to support the proslavery cause in Kansas fell short. Southerners outside Missouri failed to move there in numbers matching those assisted by the Emigrant Aid Company alone. Atchison repeatedly condemned complacent fellow Southerners for failing to see that the battle there would determine the future of the entire South and for failing to do their part in shaping the outcome. As he lamented in 1857, "our friends in the South are very apathetic."

Meanwhile, the damage caused by "bleeding Kansas" had been done. One obvious casualty was Atchison's reputation. More important blows struck the Union and the proslavery cause, itself. "Bleeding Kansas"—and the free-soil propaganda that emerged from it—enraged many Northerners, who in the late 1850s continued to stream into the anti slavery-expansion Republican Party. The new party's platform condemned the fraudulent voting and violence in Kansas—and called for its admission as a free state. Enraged by the "crime against Kansas," Republicans in Congress also blocked its admission under the

LeCompton constitution. Southerners, in turn, saw in this party a growing "abolitionist" threat to slavery.

By 1857, David Atchison realized the futility of the struggle in Kansas. By then, he had retired to his 1,500-acre farm in Clinton County, Missouri. There he watched the growing sectional crisis lead to secession and war. As the owner of sixteen slaves, he had a large personal stake in the institution that he had defended so boldly. During the Civil War, he supported a pro-Confederate government in Missouri as well as the Confederate war effort. After the war, he returned to his farm where he lived, a life-long bachelor, until his death in 1886.

Meanwhile, Sara Robinson saw Republicans bring Kansas into the Union as a free state in 1861 and her husband's election that year as the new state's first governor. She also had to witness, however, another "sack" of Lawrence when pro-Confederate guerrillas invaded it in 1863, destroyed much of the town, and left nearly 150 people dead. After the war, Sara and her husband lived on Oakridge, their country estate four miles outside Lawrence. Sara and her husband never had children. But as they surveyed Oakridge, the Robinsons could take satisfaction in something else: they had done very well indeed by doing good. And Sara could take delight every spring in the prairie's brilliant display of flowers. After Charles died in 1894, Sara continued living there until she died in 1911.

Only much later would historians get a reminder of Sara Robinson's and David Atchison's impact in the 1850s. Modern historians calculate that far fewer people actually died in "bleeding Kansas" than previously thought. Fewer than sixty people lay dead by 1861—not two hundred as so long thought. That longstanding overestimate reveals a lot about the impact of this bloodshed on the popular imagination. And that, in turn, is testament to the power of the propaganda war waged over Kansas. Robinson's and Atchison's war of words played a large role in shaping—and distorting—perceptions of Northerners and Southerners. As those words hardened feelings on each side, the entire nation verged much closer to a real war.

PRIMARY SOURCES

SOURCE 1: *"Address to the People of the Southern States"* (1849)

In response to Northern efforts during the Mexican War to limit the spread of slavery into western territories, South Carolina Senator John C. Calhoun drafted an address that was signed by David Atchison and forty-seven other congressmen. On what grounds does it defend the right of slaveholders to move into federal territories?

SOURCE: John C. Calhoun, "Address to the People of the Southern States" in Richard K. Crallé, ed., *Works of John C. Calhoun* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1968), VI, pp. 302–304.

[W]e hold that the Federal Government has no right to extend or restrict slavery, no more than to establish or abolish it; nor has it any right whatever to distinguish between the domestic institutions of one State, or section, and another, in order to favor the one and discourage the other. As the federal representative of each and all the States, it is bound to deal out, within the sphere of its powers, equal and exact justice and favor to all. To act otherwise, to undertake to discriminate between the domestic institutions of one and another, would be to act in total subversion of the end for which it was established—to be the common protector and guardian of all. Entertaining these opinions, we ask not, as the North alleges we do, for the extension of slavery. That would make a discrimination in our favor, as unjust and unconstitutional as the discrimination they ask against us in their favor. It is not for them, nor for the Federal Government to determine, whether our domestic institution is good or bad; or whether it should be repressed or preserved. It belongs to us, and us only, to decide such questions. What then we do insist on, is, not to extend slavery, but that we shall not be prohibited from immigrating with our property, into the Territories of the United States, because we are slaveholders; or, in other words, that we shall not on that account be disfranchised of a privilege possessed by all others, citizens and foreigners, without discrimination as to character, profession, or color. All, whether savage, barbarian, or civilized, may freely enter and remain, we only being excluded.

We rest our claim, not only on the high grounds above stated, but also on the solid foundation of right, justice, and equality. The territories immediately in controversy—New Mexico and California—were acquired by the common sacrifice and efforts of all the States, towards which the South contributed far more than her full share of men, to say nothing of money, and is, of course, on every principle of right, justice, fairness, and equality, entitled to participate fully in the benefits to be derived from their acquisition. But as impregnable as is this ground, there is another not less so. Ours is a Federal Government—a Government in which not individuals, but States, as distinct sovereign communities, are the constituents. To them, as members of the Federal Union, the territories belong; and they are hence declared to be territories belonging to the United States. The States, then, are the joint owners. Now it is conceded by all writers on the subject, that in all such Governments their members are all equal—equal in rights and equal in dignity. They also concede that this equality constitutes the basis of such Government, and that it cannot be destroyed without changing their nature and character. To deprive, then, the Southern States and their citizens of their full share in territories declared to belong to them, in common with the other States, would be in derogation of the equality belonging to them as members of a Federal Union, and sink them, from being equals, into a subordinate and dependent condition.

SOURCE 2: *Report of the Committee to Investigate the Troubles in Kansas* (1856)

When Sara Robinson traveled east after the arrest of her husband in Missouri in May 1856, she carried with her documents to alert Republicans to the situation in Kansas regarding territorial elections. The House of Representatives had already formed a committee to investigate what Republicans called the "crime against Kansas," and the documents carried by Robinson were evidence for that investigation. This excerpt from the final report contains some of the committee's conclusions. To what does the report attribute the outcome of the elections in Kansas? How does it reflect a fear that the rights of whites were threatened by proslavery forces in Kansas?

Within a few days after the [Kansas-Nebraska] law passed, and as soon as its passage could be known on the border, leading citizens of Missouri crossed into the Territory, held squatter meetings, and then returned to their homes. Among their resolutions are the following:

"That we will afford protection to no abolitionist as a settler of this Territory."

"That we recognise the institution of slavery as already existing in this Territory, and advise slaveholders to introduce their property as early as possible."

Similar resolutions were passed in various parts of the Territory, and by meetings in several counties of Missouri. Thus the first effect of the repeal of the restriction against slavery was to substitute the resolves of squatter meetings, composed almost exclusively of citizens of a single State, for the deliberate action of Congress acquiesced in for thirty-five years.

This unlawful interference has been continued in every important event in the history of the Territory; *every election* has been controlled, not by the actual settlers, but by citizens of Missouri; and, as a consequence, every officer in the Territory, from constable to legislators, except those appointed by the President, owe their positions to nonresident voters. None have been elected by the settlers; and your committee have been unable to find that any political power whatever, however unimportant, has been exercised by the people of the Territory.

In October, A. D. 1854, Gov. A. H. Reeder, and the other officers appointed by the President, arrived in the Territory. Settlers from all parts of the country were moving in in great numbers, making their claims and building their cabins. About the same time, and before any election was or could be held in the Territory, a secret political society was formed in the State of Missouri. It was known by different names, such as "Social Band," "Friends' Society," "Blue Lodge," "The Sons of the South." Its members were bound together by secret oaths, and they had pass-words, signs, and grips, by which they were known to each other; penalties were imposed for violating the rules and secrets of the order; written minutes were kept of the proceedings of the lodges; and the different lodges were connected together by an effective organization. It embraced great numbers of the citizens of Missouri, and was extended into other slave States and into the Territory. Its avowed purpose was not only to extend slavery into Kansas, but also into other territories of the United States, and to form a union of all the friends of that institution. Its plan of operating was to organize and send men to vote at the elections in the Territory, to collect money to pay their expenses, and, if necessary, to protect them in voting. . . . While the great body of the actual settlers of the Territory were relying upon the rights secured to them by the [Kansas-Nebraska] law, and had formed no organization or combination whatever, even of a party character, this conspiracy against their rights was gathering strength in a neighboring State, and would have been sufficient at their first election to have overpowered them, even if they had been united to a man.

SOURCE: *Report of the Special Committee Appointed to Investigate the Troubles in Kansas, with the View of the Minority of Said Committee* (Washington, D.C.: C. Wendell, Printer, 1856), pp. 2–3.

SOURCE 3: *Sara Robinson on "Bleeding Kansas"* (1856)

Sara Robinson's diary, published as Kansas: Its Interior and Exterior Life, *reflected the views of many antislavery Kansas settlers. How does this free-soil propaganda tract appeal to a largely Northern female audience?*

The whole country was moved at the prospect of such an outrage as this bill proposed—the annulling of a sacred compact, the breaking of a plighted faith. How, through all that long season of discussion upon the bill, more than three months, every freedom-loving heart was moved to hope this great wrong might not be committed! How every honest feeling was stirred at the eloquent words of . . . all our noble men in Congress, who battled mightily against this evil! We can never forget what indignation fired the veins of all lovers of God and men, as the wires brought news of the indignity offered to New England's three thousand protesting clergymen, and what shame mantled the cheek of many to remember that the Benedict Arnold of the age should have been born of any *woman* in a beautiful, thriving town nestled amid the Green Mountains. Well will the North remember how the womanly element mingled its influence to stay this current of evil; how the protests, with many thousands of names, poured in through all the avenues of communication to the capital. Woman's heart was touched; all the deep sympathies of her nature were stirred; and, while hourly she prayed that no new field of suffering and woe should be opened for her down-trodden and oppressed sister, she acted too, and, through the melting snows of early spring, each woman in many towns was called upon for her signature, by one of her own sex. Could she see this great country—only a little less in extent than Italy, France, and Spain, together—thrown open to the

SOURCE: Sara Robinson, *Kansas: Its Interior and Exterior Life* (Boston: Crosby, Nichols and Company, 1856), pp. 7–8.

foul inroads of slavery, so that no woman with black blood in her veins could be a welcome inmate of her father's house, feel safe in the protection of a husband's love, or, in caressing the children God gave her, call them her own, and make no effort in their behalf? No. It was not thus, thank God! Men felt, and women felt. Notwithstanding all that was done, and all that was felt, the bill, odious in the sight of God and hateful to man, was passed. Mr. Sumner made his final protest, for himself and the New England clergy, against slavery in Kansas and Nebraska, upon the night of the final passage of the Nebraska and Kansas Bill, May 25, 1854. After a most stormy and contentious debate, on Sunday morning the bill was passed. The slave power was again triumphant. A consolidated despotism was striving to crush out every aspiration for truth, for goodness, for freedom, from every free-born soul. Southern men argued that by this new compromise the agitation in our country would cease, and peace be restored. How has it been? Civil feud, strife, and continual agitation, have been the result in all communities. The "crime against Kansas" consummated in Congress, the infraction of solemn obligations, has been acted over in frauds upon the ballot-box in Kansas, and has been the occasion of robberies, murders, civil war, in her fair borders.

SOURCE 4: *Sara Robinson on the "Sack" of Lawrence* (1856)

In Kansas: Its Interior and Exterior Life, *Sara Robinson described the proslavery assault on Lawrence in May 1856 that left the Robinson home destroyed. What techniques does she use to arouse sympathy in readers?*

Tuesday, the 20th, was a still, calm day. O how calm it was! The hurrying bands of horsemen, brutal in their aspect, and uncouth, that had been for days flying over the prairies, making a blot on creation's fair face, were nowhere to be seen. No more the vile men, in companies of two, three, or more, came spying about the dwelling on Mt. Oread,[1] to ask for water, and saying "The head of the house is not at home?" knowing well by what acts of villany [sic] he was taken prisoner at Lexington, and was yet a prisoner. So perfect was the semblance of quiet and peace, that a little party, who sat in the evening's twilight, in front of the same dwelling, wondered if indeed the threatened evil might not again pass by, as on so many previous occasions. A smaller guard than usual were actually on the watch. But, when the morning sun arose on the 21st of May, 1856, hordes of men, armed with United States muskets, were marshalled upon Mt. Oread. While wronged innocence had slept quietly, they in the darkness had gained the height. The fair summit of Oread never before witnessed such an assemblage of creatures calling themselves men. Humanity stands aghast at the idea of

1. The hill overlooking Lawrence and the site of the Robinsons' home.

SOURCE: Sara Robinson, *Kansas: Its Interior and Exterior Life* (Boston: Crosby, Nichols and Company, 1856), pp. 240–241, 242–243.

brotherhood with such a ragged, filthy, besotted set. But it is only tools the slave power wants, and these could steal, plunder and kill. . . .

In the mean time, the forces, variously estimated from five hundred to eight hundred, had been marched down to the base of the hill and formed into a hollow square. Gen. D. R. Atchinson made the following speech, which was received by the unceasing yells of the crowd:

"Boys, this day I am a Kickapoo Ranger, by G—d. This day we have entered Lawrence with Southern Rights inscribed upon our banner, and not one d——d abolitionist dared to fire a gun.

"Now, boys, this is the happiest day of my life. We have entered that d——d town, and taught the d——d abolitionists a Southern lesson that they will remember until the day they die. And now, boys, we will go in again, with our highly honorable Jones,[2] and test the strength of that d——d Free-State Hotel, and teach the Emigrant Aid Company that Kansas shall be ours. Boys, ladies should, and I hope will, be respected by every gentleman. But, when a woman takes upon herself the garb of a soldier, by carrying a Sharpe's rifle, then she is no longer worthy of respect. Trample her under your feet as you would a snake!

"Come on, boys! Now do your duty to yourselves and your Southern friends.

"Your duty, I know you will do. If one man or woman dares stand before you, blow them to h——l with a chunk of cold lead."

SOURCE 5: *David Atchison on the "Abolitionist" Threat* (1856)

In an address intended to arouse Southerners, Atchison and several other slavery expansionists published an address that focused on the dire consequences awaiting the South if proslavery forces lost in Kansas. How do they use racial fears to enlist support? How does the image of free-soilers presented here compare to the free-soilers' image of proslavery forces?

"Kansas they [the abolitionists] justly regard as the mere outpost in the war now being waged between the antagonistic civilizations of the North and South, and, winning this great outpost and standpoint, they rightly think their march will be open to an easy conquest of the whole field. Hence the extraordinary means the abolition party has adopted to flood Kansas with the most fanatical and lawless portion of Northern society, and hence the large sums of money . . . expended to surround . . . Missourians with obnoxious and dangerous neighbors. On the other hand, the pro-slavery element of the law and order

2. Proslavery sheriff Samuel J. Jones.

SOURCE: Leverett Wilson Spring, *Kansas: The Prelude to the War for the Union* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1887), pp. 173–174.

party in Kansas, looking to the Bible finds slavery ordained of God. . . . Slavery is the African's normal and proper state. . . . We believe it a trust and guardianship given as of God for the good of both races. . . . This is . . . a great social and political question of races, . . . a question whether we shall sink to the level of the freed African and take him to the embrace of social and political equality and fraternity; for such is the natural end of abolition progress. . . . That man or state is deceived that fondly trusts these fanatics may stop at Kansas. . . . The most convincing proof . . . of this was recently given before the congressional investigating committee. Judge Matthew Walker . . . testified . . . that before the abolitionists selected Lawrence as their centre of operations their leader, Governor Robinson, attempted to get a foothold for them in the Wyandotte reserve. . . . Robinson, finding it necessary to communicate their plans and objects, divulged to Walker (whom he then supposed to be a sympathizer) that the abolitionists were determined on winning Kansas at any cost; that then, having Missouri surrounded on three sides, they would begin their assaults on her, and as fast as one state gave way attack another, until the whole South was abolitionized. . . . We are confident that . . . the abolition party was truly represented by Robinson, who has always been their chief man and acknowledged leader in Kansas. . . . It was proved before the investigating committee that the abolition party had traveling agents in the territory whose duty it was to gather up, exaggerate, and report for publication rumors to the prejudice of the law and order party. . . . In the present imperiled state of your civilization, if we do not maintain this outpost we cannot long maintain the citadel. Then rally to the rescue."

Questions to Consider

1. The 1855 census in Kansas found fewer than 200 slaves out of a population of roughly 8,500. In the minds of free-soilers like Sara Robinson and slavery expansionists like David Atchison far more was at stake in Kansas than those small numbers suggest. In fact, each believed that it would be disastrous if the other side won the territory. What did free-soilers and slavery expansionists believe was at stake in Kansas? What threat did each side see in the other?
2. Based on the information in this chapter, do you think free-soilers and slavery expansionists had an accurate perception of one another? In what ways may their perceptions have been distorted? In what ways were they accurate? Was the threat that each side saw in the other real, or was it overblown?
3. To what extent did this conflict reflect cultural differences that had little to do with slavery? Did Atchison and Robinson reflect those differences?
4. Sara Robinson and David Atchison were engaged in a propaganda war to determine the fate of Kansas. What messages or characteristics did their propaganda have in common? Whose do you think more accurately reflected the situation in Kansas? How did each side use race to rally people to its cause?
5. From the source selections, whose argument do you find more convincing, Atchison's or Robinson's? Why? Cite specific examples in the sources of passages or statements that help sway you for or against each writer.

For Further Reading

Richard H. Abbott, *Cotton & Capital: Boston Business and Antislavery Reform, 1854–1868* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991), provides useful background regarding the role of Amos Lawrence and the New England Emigrant Aid Company in "bleeding Kansas."

Nichole Etcheson, *Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War Era* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2004), focuses on the way the struggle over Kansas was interpreted by whites as a battle for their own political liberties.

Michael A. Morrison, *Slavery and the American West: The Eclipse of Manifest Destiny and the Coming of the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), provides an overview of conflict over the extension of slavery into the West and its role in the sectional crisis.

William E. Parrish, *David Rice Atchison of Missouri: Border Politician* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1967), offers a sympathetic treatment of its subject and remains the only full-length biography of him. (A biography of Sara Robinson is yet to be written.)

Gunja SenGupta, *For God and Mammon: Evangelicals and Entrepreneurs, Masters and Slaves in Territorial Kansas, 1854–1860* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), examines the relationship between commercial concerns and ideology in the battle over Kansas.