

A Look at Early Lawrence: Letters From Robert Gaston Elliott

Edited by CAROLYN BERNEKING

I. INTRODUCTION

IN 1854, a young man came to Lawrence from his home in Cottage Grove, Ind., to establish the *Kansas Free State*, the first newspaper to appear with Lawrence on its masthead.¹ These were exciting and dangerous times for Kansas with all the prevailing issues of the antebellum days such as the free-state question, the border ruffian plunders, drought, and hunger. Robert Gaston Elliott was determined that his paper be "uncompromisingly opposed to the introduction of slavery into Kansas, as tending to impoverish the soil, to stifle all energy and enterprise, to paralyze the hand of industry and to weaken intellectual effort."² But a year after the first issue appeared the press was destroyed in the sack of Lawrence on May 21, 1856.³

Soon afterward Elliott was appointed as one of the delegates to the Philadelphia convention that established the precedent of admitting the territories to equal representation with the states.⁴ His trip east to attend the convention was also to buy a new printing press, but the closing of Missouri to northern travel prevented the reestablishment of the paper until the spring of 1857.⁵ Only two numbers of the paper were issued after that, its place of publication being the settlement of Delaware, just below Leavenworth, then the county seat.⁶

Robert Gaston Elliott was born in Union county, Ind., July 23, 1828, of South Carolina parentage, who left the South because of religious antipathy to slavery.⁷ Robert graduated from Miami

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1. Richard Cordley, *A History of Lawrence, Kansas* (Lawrence Journal Press, 1895), p. 24.

2. A. T. Andreas and William G. Cutler, *History of the State of Kansas* (Chicago, 1883), v. 1, p. 316.

3. William E. Connelley, *A Standard History of Kansas and Kansans* (Chicago, Lewis Publishing Company, 1918), v. 3, p. 1209.

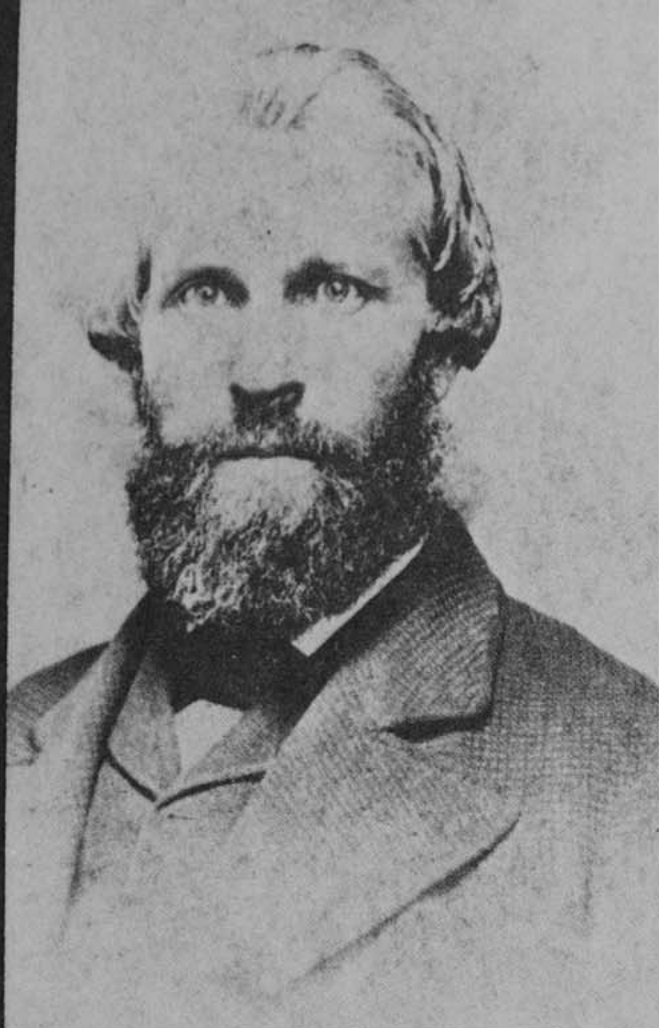
4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*

6. Original circular in possession of Maude Elliott and Mrs. Jeanne Aldrich: "The Lawrence Landing, Delaware City, is situated on the Missouri River five miles nearer Lawrence than Leavenworth, and twelve miles nearer than Quindaro or Wyandott. Freight from this point to Lawrence will be fifteen cents lower than from any other point on the Missouri River. Delaware has recently been purchased by a company of Free State men of Lawrence, who are earnestly at work improving the town. Hotels are already open for the accommodation of travelers. Daily stages will run from this town to Lawrence. A title in fee simple will be given for land in and around the town. The above facts the Kansas Emigrant will do well to consider."

S. B. PRENTISS, S. C. HARRINGTON,
J. S. EMERY, J. HUTCHINSON

7. Connelley, *A Standard History of Kansas and Kansans*, v. 3, p. 1209.



Robert Gaston Elliott (1828-1917), founder of the *Kansas Free State* at Lawrence, and writer of the accompanying letters, and Hattie Anderson Elliott, recipient of some of the letters before her marriage to Elliott. Photos courtesy Maude Elliott, Lawrence.

University in Indiana in 1850. It was at college that he met Josiah Miller who became his partner on the *Kansas Free State*. After coming to Kansas in 1854, Robert took a leading part in the Fremont campaign of 1856, and was elected to the territorial legislature of 1857-1858. In 1860 Kansas suffered from a severe drought. Elliott became one of the secretaries of a territorial relief convention which was held at Lawrence in November, 1860.⁸ He served on the state Board of Agriculture from 1867-1869,⁹ and was elected superintendent of public printing in 1857.¹⁰ After his term as senator he acted as deputy in the office of the Douglas county treasurer, and later was elected county treasurer.¹¹ He died in Lawrence July 17, 1917.

The following letters which were written by Elliott to his sister, Mary Jane Elliott of Cottage Grove, and to his fiance, Hattie Anderson, give interesting personal details of these early days.

8. *Kansas Historical Collections*, v. 7 (1901-1902), p. 203.

9. *Ibid.*, v. 16 (1923-1925), p. 677.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 659.

11. Interview with Maude Elliott and Mrs. Jeanne Aldrich, January 5, 1976.

II. THE LETTERS

DEAR SISTER

DELAWARE KANSAS May 8th, 1857

From the accompanying circular you see in what place I have determined to locate. It is a place which was famous last season for Ruffianly outrages. The Free State men were all driven out of this neighborhood and some of their houses burnt, and [it] was one of the strong holds of the Tory party. A wonderful change has however been wrought, and these same men who were leaders in marauding excursions are the first to take us by the hand and the most anxious to induce the "Northern Vagabonds" and "Nigger Thieves" to settle in this place. The growth and prosperity of the Free State towns notwithstanding the difficulties under which the party has labored, when compared with those controlled by the Tory party affords a practical demonstration of the good effects of Northern Emigration and Free institutions. Those under control of Northern men have grown up rapidly and made fortunes already to many of those interested in them whereas those under Tory control have become about as worthless as a dead horse a hundred miles from a button factory.

As you see from the circular the *Lawrence paupers* have bought out the greater part of this town, which consisted of 25 or 30 shanties becoming quite weatherbeaten in their appearance with not a single improvement in progress, the levee and streets as nature made them (extremely rough) 3 whiskey shops, one furnished with a billiard table and gambling room. The population comprised about a dozen very respectable proslavery men a score or two bloated ruffians loafing about the whiskey shops to sponge a glass of grog off some liberal tippler who might ask them to drink—about fifty hungry sheep-killing looking dogs and about a half Dozen ragged thickclipped niggers. With natural advantages as good if not better than any point in the Territory, ruin, decay and desolation were beginning to stare it in the face. As soon however as the new company took hold of it everything took an upward tendency. A contract for grading the levee and a portion of the streets at a cost of \$13,000 has been given and a good portion of the work done, 30 or \$40,000 will be expended by the company for this purpose. Hundreds of tons of freight are landed here for Lawrence and points in the interior.

The proslavery men are as anxious to see Free State men settle here as we are, as they know from experience as well as we do that these are the class of settlers to enhance the value of their property. Two of the strongest of the proslavery men have sub-