

Review Essay Series

BLEEDING KANSAS

by Gunja SenGupta

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

As mentioned in our autumn issue, now, as we approach the sesquicentennial of Kansas's birth as a territory, is an appropriate time to take stock of our state and region's history. And what better place to start than with the Bleeding Kansas era, an era that produced our "first histories" and has generated so much historical literature and debate ever since. It was a interesting, controversial, and emotionally charged time, and "No one outside of the original thirteen, and perhaps Texas and California," observed Roy F. Nichols in 1957, "has attracted more attention, historical or otherwise, than Kansas." One would be ill-advised to take this claim of historiographic significance into the early twenty-first century, but as we approach the 150th anniversary of Kansas Territory's birth, there are promising signs of a revival of interest.

In this outstanding review essay, Professor Gunja SenGupta, Department of History, City University of New York, examines the extensive territorial Kansas literature and suggests directions for future research. Her own very important and

"**T**hat Kansas has had a special character and peculiar destiny most of her citizens have always believed," remarked the distinguished historian Allan Nevins at a conference held at the University of Kansas on April 30, 1954, to commemorate the Sunflower State's dramatic conception one hundred years before. According to Nevins, the essentially *moral* struggle between the "idea of freedom" and the "idea of slavery" that bloodied the valleys of the Kaw and the Missouri in the 1850s culminated in the triumph of "the great cause of human advancement" over the desperate machinations of "an unprincipled group to present Kansas, in defiance of climate, soil and population, . . . as the sixteenth slave state." In Nevins's interpretation, it was this momentous sectional contest over liberty—rather than the cultural significance of the Turnerian "frontier"—that shaped the peculiar character and destiny of Kansas. While the New England mind that led the contest stamped upon the state's identity a western variant of Puritanism, the violence of the territorial era left a legacy of "bellicosity" and "extremism" that lived on in the agrarian revolt of the late nineteenth century. Kansas's part in the national debate over slavery gave the state an inconsistent and ambiguous relationship with the history of American liberalism.¹

Nevins's perspective on the enduring national and local implications of the Kansas conflict revealed perhaps more about the historiographical niche that Bleeding Kansas had come to occupy than it did about the distinctive character of Kansans. In the consciousness of historians, Bleeding Kansas was—and arguably remains—not only inextricably connected with the larger story of sectional conflict, with roots firmly entrenched in the historiography of Civil War politics, but also a chapter in the history of Puritan reform. Yet Kansas also was part of a cultural process or geographical space that historians starting with Frederick Jackson Turner in the 1890s recognized as distinctive enough to merit a history of its own.

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1. Allan Nevins, *Kansas and the Stream of American Destiny: A Lecture Delivered at the Kansas Centennial Conference at the University [of Kansas] on April 30, 1954* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1954), 3, 6, 8. Carl L. Becker emphasized the intellectual influence of Puritanism on the Kansas mind. See Becker, "Kansas," in *What Kansas Means to Me: Twentieth-Century Writers on the Sunflower State*, ed. Thomas Fox Averill (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 20–50.



It is time to re-examine the conflict between proslavery and free-state forces that occurred in Kansas prior to and during the Civil War.

widely respected work in this area includes “Servants for Freedom: Christian Abolitionists in Territorial Kansas, 1854–1858,” an autumn 1993 article in *Kansas History*, “‘A Model New England State’: North-eastern Antislavery in Territorial Kansas, 1854–1860,” in *Civil War History’s* March 1993 issue, and *For God and Mammon: Evangelicals and Entrepreneurs, Masters and Slaves in Territorial Kansas, 1854–1860*, published by the University of Georgia Press in 1996. As SenGupta demonstrates, Bleeding Kansas has “legitimate claims to a place in the histories of the West as well as the Civil War,” but “a review of the literature on the Kansas conflict for the past century suggests that it was sectional conflict that provided the frame of reference for much of the scholarship on the Kansas crisis over time.”

Nevertheless, Kansas historiography has been influenced more and more in recent years by the emergence of the “new” social and western history. Professor SenGupta’s essay challenges scholars to continue recent efforts to reconcile the “dynamic interplay between” these two “seemingly disparate realms,” and argues, “It is time to reconceptualize Bleeding Kansas to arrest its further marginalization as a serious subject of scholarship. It is time to break free of the tradition of simply narrating in ever greater detail the sequence of political events that constituted the Kansas conflict, asking instead, what did these events *mean*?”

Virgil W. Dean

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Over the years the historiography of the American West as it is now known has shared an inconsistent relationship with slavery and sectional discord. Dismissing the slavery question as a mere “incident” in the stream of U.S. history, Turner traced the sources of American exceptionalism to the toughening experience of westward expansion. It was the *process* of taming successive “frontiers”—“the hither edge(s) of free land”—that transmuted Europeans into individualistic, democratic, egalitarian, pragmatic Americans. Since the 1960s, on the other hand, it is to slavery expansion—among other things—that some practitioners of a “new western history” have pointed to expose the racialized and gendered nature of Turner’s frontier thesis. Yet, the “New West” was by no means defined exclusively or even predominantly by slavery or the sectional conflict it generated. The New West was a place (rather than a process) where ecology shaped new modes of production, where American Indians, Hispanics, and blacks as well as whites interacted and clashed over resources, where the challenges of settlement strained but did not necessarily destroy the traditional boundaries of gender roles and identities, where violence took on an intense and distinctive cast, and where the federal government assumed an unprecedented activist role. To Patricia Limerick, the New West embodied the “legacy of conquest.”²

Bleeding Kansas was, of course, both the West *and* a signal theater and symbol of sectional strife, with legitimate claims to a place in the histories of the West as well as the Civil War. How then did its two historiographical identities play out in relation to one another? A review of the literature on the Kansas conflict for the past century suggests that sectional conflict provided the frame of reference for much of the scholarship on the Kansas crisis over time. Nonetheless, developments in the historiography of the West exercised some influence—however oblique or sporadic—over historians’ interpretations of such issues as the salience of slavery and race in the politicization of the so-called frontier. The present essay begins by showing that for the first century or so after the curtain closed on Appomattox, the debate over whether the Civil War was an “irrepressible” struggle over slavery or a “needless war” engineered by a “blundering generation,” colored scholarly interpretations of a host of issues at the heart of the Kansas wars: how real was the threat of slavery expansion? Who devised the Kansas–Nebraska bill and why? What were the relative roles of New Englanders, westerners, and Southerners in determining the course and outcome of the Kansas conflict? What was the true legacy of territorial abolitionists, especially John Brown? What part did a vigorous, fractious, teeming territorial press play in fueling the embers of sectionalism? To what extent did frontier-related eco-

2. Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” *Proceedings of the Forty-First Annual Meeting* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1894), 79–112. On Turner’s view of the historical significance of slavery, see Staughton Lynd, “On Turner, Beard, and Slavery,” *Journal of Negro History* 48 (October 1963): 237. On the new western history, see Donald Worster, “New West, True West: Interpreting the Region’s History,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 18 (April 1987): 141–56; Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: Norton, 1987); see also Wilbur R. Jacobs, *On Turner’s Trail: Hundred Years of Writing Western History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994); Jon Gjede, *The Minds of the West: Ethnocultural Evolution in the Rural Middle West, 1830–1917* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

nomic imperatives such as land policy and railroad and town promotion sharpen the violence of territorial conflict, or mediate and muddy the polarities of slavery discourse?

The essay goes on to argue that the wide-ranging revolution in the writing of American history prompted in part by the social ferment of the 1960s complexly influenced the historiography of the Kansas conflict. It also inspired a reconsideration of abolitionism and the race question in the West and prompted renewed discussion of whether the struggle had more to do with the rights of white men than the freedom of black slaves. At the same time, the advent of the new history, grounded in the methodology of the behavioral sciences, did not bode well for the intellectual career of the Kansas struggle. With its deemphasis on particular events (including the Civil War) in favor of the *long duree*, and its preference for a multi-ethnic, gendered history “from the bottom up” over traditional politics, the new history thrust the interior story of Bleeding Kansas into the doldrums of scholarly inattention for years to come. The national political implications of the Kansas question, on the other hand, fared better. Historians studied political ideology and quantitative electoral data to revise traditional perspectives on the territory’s impact on the disruption of the second-party system in the 1850s.

The essay issues a call to rejuvenate interest in Bleeding Kansas by reconciling the politics of sectional conflict with the social and cultural insights of the new history in a dynamic interplay between the seemingly disparate realms of Civil War history on the one hand and the New West on the other. Historians began this process in the 1990s with exciting new essays on such topics as the gendered nature of territorial violence, how women’s political participation mediated sex roles and expectations on the frontier, and militant abolitionism’s appropriation of the symbol of the “savage Indian” in the West. The present piece concludes with suggestions for more work along these lines.³

Eric Foner’s observation that, “traditionally, the Civil War framed and provided unity to the inquiries of American historians” is nowhere more appropriate than in the context of Bleeding Kansas.⁴ The evolution of scholarly opinion on the origins and course of the Kansas issue may be traced as far back as the era of sectional conflict itself. In the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, contemporary chroniclers allowed their sectional loyalties to color their rendition of the conflict. By far the most influential corpus of literature—both scholarly and popular—issued forth from the pens of Northern, frequently New England, partisans. The antislavery, pro-Union slant evident in the works of Joshua Giddings and Horace Greeley found its classic expression in former free-soiler Henry Wilson’s multi-

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3. See especially Kristen A. Tegtmeier, “‘The Ladies of Lawrence Are Arming!’: The Gendered Nature of Sectional Violence in Early Kansas,” in *Antislavery Violence: Sectional, Racial, and Cultural Conflict in Antebellum America*, ed. John R. McKivigan and Stanley Harrold (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 215–35; John Stauffer, “Advent Among the Indians: The Revolutionary Ethos of Gerrit Smith, James McCune Smith, Frederick Douglass, and John Brown,” in *ibid.*, 237–73; Nicole Etcheson, “‘Laboring for the Freedom of This Territory’: Free-State Women in the 1850s,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 21 (Summer 1998): 68–87; see also Gunja SenGupta, *For God and Mammon: Evangelicals and Entrepreneurs, Masters and Slaves in Territorial Kansas, 1854–1860* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996).

4. Eric Foner, *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 3.



William E. Connelley, a longtime director and secretary of the Kansas State Historical Society, was a prolific writer on the history of Kansas. In his work he questioned the integrity of the New England entrepreneurs, accorded the westerner James H. Lane greater credit in delivering Kansas to freedom, and defended the controversial abolitionist John Brown as a martyr.

volume *Rise and Fall of the Slave Power in America*. Wilson saw the Kansas–Nebraska Act, which unleashed the Kansas wars, as the most brazen of a series of measures launched by a conspiratorial “slave power,” and its chief architect, Stephen Douglas of Illinois, as a selfish opportunist. Nationalist historians such as James Ford Rhodes, who came of age in the 1890s, portrayed the Civil War as an irrepressible struggle over slavery in fulfillment of the nation’s progressive destiny. For the most part they agreed that the Illinois senator had courted Southern support to realize his own presidential ambitions at the expense of his country’s well being.⁵

The reign in American historiography of the “irrepressible conflict” interpretation of Civil War causation provided a hospitable climate for the persistence of what Kansas historian James C. Malin derided as the mythical assumption that “Kansas would have been made a slave state but for the antislavery crusade.”⁶ Published memoirs by northerners such as New England Emigrant Aid Company architect Eli Thayer and agent Charles Robinson not only nurtured and sustained the memory of the free-state movement’s legendary heroism but also valorized its Yankee legacy. Accounts by newspaper reporters sympathetic to the free-state cause such as Thomas H. Gladstone of the staid *London Times* reinforced this tendency. Not all historians of territorial Kansas, however, agreed on the primacy of the northeastern role. In his voluminous work on early Kansas, William E. Connelley, a longtime director and secretary of the Kansas State Historical Society, questioned the integrity of the New England entrepreneurs, accorded the westerner James H. Lane greater credit in delivering Kansas to freedom, and defended the controversial abolitionist John Brown as a martyr. Whatever the differences of opinion on the relative influence of the northeastern and western factions, however, most writers agreed that slavery had represented a fundamental threat to the future of Kansas.⁷

In the first half of the twentieth century several scholars mounted, among them, a multipronged revisionist challenge to the irrepressible conflict thesis—a challenge that offered fresh perspectives on the impulses behind the passage of the Kansas–Nebraska bill, sought to rehabilitate the historical reputation of

5. Joshua R. Giddings, *History of the Rebellion, its Authors and Causes* (New York: Follet, Foster, 1864); Horace Greeley, *The American Conflict*, 2 vols. (Hartford: O. D. Case and Co., 1864–1866); Henry Wilson, *The Rise and Fall of the Slave Power*, 3 vols. (Boston: J. R. Osgood and Co., 1872–1877). For a “nationalistic” perspective on the Civil War, see James Ford Rhodes, *History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850 to the Final Restoration of Home Rule in the South in 1877*, 7 vols. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1893–1906).

6. Robert W. Johannsen, “James C. Malin: An Appreciation,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 38 (Winter 1972): 465.

7. Eli Thayer, *A History of the Kansas Crusade: Its Friends and Its Foes* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1889); Thayer, *The New England Emigrant Aid Company and its Influence, through the Kansas Conflict, upon National History* (Worcester, Mass.: F. P. Rice, 1887); Charles Robinson, *The Kansas Conflict* (Lawrence: Journal Publishing Co., 1898); Sara T. L. Robinson, *Kansas, Its Interior and Exterior Life* (Boston: Crosby, Nichols and Co., 1856); Edward Everett Hale, “New England in the Colonization of Kansas,” in *The New England States*, vol. 1, ed. William T. Davis (Boston: D. H. Hurd and Co., 1897), 79–90; Thomas H. Gladstone, *The Englishman in Kansas: or, Squatter Life and Border Warfare* (New York: Miller and Co., 1857); William E. Connelley, *A Standard History of Kansas and Kansans*, 5 vols. (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co., 1918); Connelley, *James Henry Lane: The “Grim Chieftain” of Kansas* (Topeka: Crane and Co., 1899); Connelley, *John Brown* (Topeka: Crane and Co., 1900). The *Kansas Historical Collections* (originally known as the *Transactions of the Kansas State Historical Society*) (1881–1928) contain a wealth of primary and secondary sources on early Kansas history. See Patricia A. Michaelis, “Windows to Yesterday: The Journals of the Kansas State Historical Society,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 18 (Autumn 1995): 208–21.

Stephen Douglas, questioned the legitimacy of Republican apprehensions about the westward expansion of slavery, and countered the prominence of northeastern abolitionists in Kansas territorial historiography. Ralph Volney Harlow concluded that the Yankee-inspired Kansas Aid Movement had little to do with making Kansas a free state. Western pioneers accomplished that result. The Kansas Aid enterprise's main contribution was to inflame sectional passions in the North and the South.⁸ Illinois-born Frank H. Hodder of the University of Kansas, steeped in the methods of scientific history, drew upon local history sources in a project to demolish what Roy F. Nichols has described as "free-state hagiography." Although Hodder never completed his work on Kansas history, he left an indelible impression on the historiography of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. In addresses before the State Historical Society of Wisconsin in 1912 and the Mississippi Valley Historical Association in 1925, he presented a theory that was to become a staple of the scholarly cannon on Douglas's bill. Hodder argued that the Illinois senator supported the repeal of the Missouri Compromise because he needed Southern votes to organize the territory west of Iowa and Missouri as a necessary step in the construction of a transcontinental railroad west from Chicago in the senator's home state. Douglas was convinced that the superior energy of free-state migration would triumph in Nebraska as it had done in California. Accordingly, his concession to Southern interests was purely symbolic, a veritable bargain for the lucrative railroad prize the Northwest stood to gain.⁹

Hodder's railroad thesis found a receptive audience among an emerging school of "needless war revisionists" who dominated Civil War historiography in the 1930s and 1940s. Bred in an atmosphere of isolationism born of disillusionment with Wilsonian idealism and the results of the First World War, and perhaps predisposed by their Southern origins to cast a sympathetic eye on their section's role in the political crisis of the 1850s, scholars such as Avery Craven, James Randall, and Charles Ramsdell claimed that the Civil War need not have happened. By agitating the fictitious issue of slavery in the territories, meddling sectional extremists had led a blundering generation into an unnecessary war. Although Southern fire-eaters were made to share some of the blame, abolitionists came in for most of the opprobrium. In this context, Douglas emerged as a statesman-like voice of moderation amidst a din of abolitionist fanaticism. Revisionists insisted that like themselves, Douglas saw clearly what the Republicans were unwilling to grasp, namely that geography and popular sovereignty would keep slavery out of Kansas. Since the climate and soil of the territory would not support cultivation of staple crops, the conflict over slavery extension was superfluous. The North "fought rancorously for what it was bound to get without fighting," while

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8. Ralph V. Harlow, "The Rise and Fall of the Kansas Aid Movement," *American Historical Review* 41 (October 1935): 1-25.

9. Frank H. Hodder, "The Railroad Background of the Kansas-Nebraska Act," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 12 (June 1925): 3-22. Roy Nichols's observation about Hodder's work occurs in Nichols, "Kansas Historiography: The Technique of Cultural Analysis," *American Quarterly* 9 (Spring 1957): 86. Hodder's thesis led to a bitter debate with P. Orman Ray, who in *The Repeal of the Missouri Compromise* (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1909), maintained that David Rice Atchison of Missouri had initiated the Kansas-Nebraska bill. On the historiography of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, see Roy F. Nichols, "The Kansas-Nebraska Act: A Century of Historiography," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 43 (September 1956): 187-212.

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the South “contended for what in the nature of things it could never use.”¹⁰ Thus, in *Eve of Conflict: Stephen A. Douglas and the Needless War*, George F. Milton not only introduced new evidence purportedly in support of Hodder’s railroad thesis but asserted that Douglas had divided Nebraska into two territories, not to make the Southern one a slave state, but in the local interest of Iowa and Missouri, which had sent rival delegates-elect to Washington to represent the yet-to-be-organized territory of Nebraska. Douglas never doubted the moral wrong of slavery but “knew the compromises of the Constitution and felt the nation’s existence under it of paramount importance.” The Little Giant did not create the slavery issue. Rather, “when events forced him to bring in a territorial bill for Nebraska, he presented one that met the situation the best way he knew—by applying the principles of local self-government.”¹¹ The revisionist notion that slavery was but a chimerical issue in the sectional controversy over westward expansion harmonized well with Frederick Jackson Turner’s dismissal of black bondage as incidental to the march of the frontier.

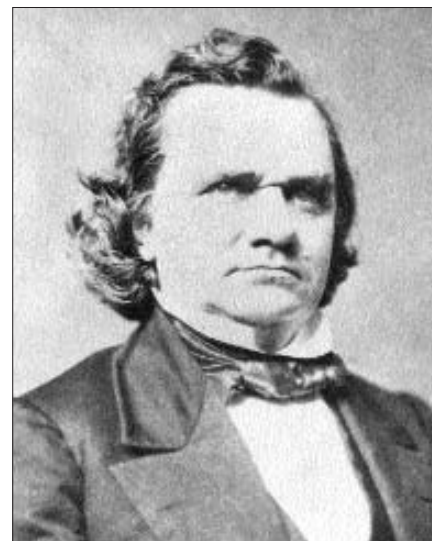
Perhaps the most persistent voice of revisionism on territorial Kansas for three decades spanning the 1930s through the 1950s belonged to a naturalized Kansan who had studied under Frank Hodder at the University of Kansas. Well known for his prodigious research and his unabashed iconoclasm, James C. Malin turned his prolific pen to the task of constructing a “new history” of Kansas in a series of articles and books on a range of issues from Indian policy through wheat cultivation to technology and historiography. In Malin’s version of events, the background of the Kansas–Nebraska Act, the salience of the slavery question in the West, and the relative roles of the friends and foes of slavery in territorial Kansas, including the abolitionist John Brown, all assumed the distinctive mantle of “needless war” revisionism. In *The Nebraska Question*, Malin concluded, on the basis of a demographic survey, that the region of northwestern Missouri was dominated by small farms and few slaves. Public opinion on the Missouri–Kansas border, therefore, echoed Douglas’s sentiments in favoring the organization of Nebraska and the construction of the Pacific railroad in the interests of the western residents’ own prosperity. A majority of Missourians did not sup-

10. Charles W. Ramsdell, “The Natural Limits of Slavery Expansion,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 16 (September 1929): 163, 167; quotation in Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Imperiled Union: Essays on the Background of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 205; Avery Craven, *The Repressible Conflict, 1830–1861* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1939); Craven, *The Coming of the Civil War* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1942); James G. Randall, “The Blundering Generation,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 27 (June 1940): 3–28; Frank L. Owsley, “The Fundamental Cause of the Civil War: Egocentric Nationalism,” *Journal of Southern History* 7 (February 1941): 16–17. Arguments against revisionism occur in Thomas N. Bonner, “Civil War Historians and the ‘Needless War’ Doctrine,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 17 (April 1956): 193–216; Stampp, “The Irrepressible Conflict,” in *The Imperiled Union*, 191–245. On Civil War historiography, see Thomas J. Pressley, *Americans Interpret Their Civil War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954); Eric Foner, “The Causes of the Civil War: Recent Interpretations and New Directions,” in *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War*, 15–33; James M. McPherson and William J. Cooper, eds., *Writing the Civil War: The Quest to Understand Columbia* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998); Roger L. Ranson, “Fact and Counterfact: The ‘Second American Revolution’ Revisited,” *Civil War History* 45 (March 1999): 28–60; John Y. Simon and Michael E. Stevens, eds., *New Perspectives on the Civil War: Myths and Realities of the National Conflict* (Madison: Madison House, 1998).

11. George Fort Milton, *Eve of Conflict: Stephen A. Douglas and the Needless War* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1934), 150, 154.

port the extension of slavery or the repeal of the Missouri Compromise until the interference of external agents forced them to change their stance in defense of their own property. Moreover, the great technological revolution of the nineteenth century had ensured the extinction of slavery, so that the issue of its extension into the territories was a mere abstraction manipulated by opportunistic freestaters to further their selfish political ends. Malin interpreted the renewed emphasis on personal freedom and states' rights as a reaction against the centralizing tendencies produced by the mechanical revolution sweeping through antebellum America. In Malin's account, Stephen Douglas emerged as a champion of self-government against the centripetal forces of economic progress, a statesman whose clashes with "fanaticism" resonated in the Kansas scholar's own discomfort with the alleged totalitarianism spawned by New Deal bureaucrats and liberal book editors.¹²

Malin's reading of the Nebraska bill was entirely consistent with his view of the events and actors of Bleeding Kansas. His revisionist project to debunk the northeastern antislavery movement deified by "irrepressible war" theorists consisted partly in resurrecting the role of proslavery partisans and western settlers in shaping the course of territorial history. As early as 1923 Malin had written the proslavery experience into Kansas history. In an essay he contributed to an anthology on territorial Kansas published by the University of Kansas to mark the centennial, he drew attention to the western free-state faction. He challenged the notion that Charles Robinson or James Lane deserved credit for the origins of a Topeka statehood movement, without which Kansas would have succumbed to slavery. Instead, he attributed to Virginia-born John Butler Chapman, a Douglas Democrat who served as a delegate to the Topeka Convention of September 1855, the primary authorship of a proposal that Kansas apply for statehood under its own constitution. Moreover, Malin maintained, *Kansas Free State* editors Josiah Miller and R. G. Elliott, who represented the western wing of the free-state movement, exerted decisive influence in crafting free-state policy in the summer of 1855, not only by penning "brilliant" editorials advocating the formation of a party to wrest political control of the territorial government but also by organizing the Sandbank Convention on July 17, 1855. It was this small meeting under a cottonwood tree near the bank of the Kansas River that issued a call for a convention to establish a free-state party with a platform broad enough to attract widespread territorial support. The convention was to meet in Big Springs, chosen "to avoid the pressure" of Lawrence and Topeka extremists. Malin concluded this essay with a lament about the "Kansas paradox" in which the Topeka movement bound free-state forces in Kansas to the Republican Party, an emblem of centralized authority that violated the very principle of local autonomy lying at the heart of the free-state movement in the territory.¹³



Historians originally considered Stephen A. Douglas, the chief architect of the Kansas-Nebraska bill, "a selfish opportunist" of the conspiratorial "slave power." Historical revisionists of the 1930s and 1940s later came to see the reasons for the Illinois senator's actions very differently.

12. James C. Malin, *The Nebraska Question, 1852-1854* (Lawrence, Kans.: n.p., 1953). On Malin's dislike of New Deal bureaucrats, see Johannsen, "James C. Malin: An Appreciation," 459.

13. James C. Malin, "The Proslavery Background of the Kansas Struggle," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 10 (December 1923): 285-305; "The Topeka Statehood Movement Reconsidered: Origins," in *Territorial Kansas: Studies Commemorating the Centennial* (Lawrence, Kans.: n.p., 1954), 33-69. Other early works dealing with Kansas proslavery include Walter L. Fleming, "The Buford Expedition to Kansas," *American Historical Review* 6 (October 1900): 38-48; Elmer LeRoy Craik, "Southern Interest in Territorial Kansas, 1854-1858," *Kansas Historical Collections, 1919-1933* 15 (1923): 342-426.



James C. Malin was perhaps the most persistent voice of revisionism on territorial Kansas for three decades spanning the 1930s through the 1950s. Well known for his prodigious research and his unabashed iconoclasm, Malin turned to the task of constructing a “new history” of Kansas.

In other works, Malin combined careful research into territorial correspondence, newspaper, and court records with interdisciplinary insights from biology, geography, and geology, to offer a provocative reinterpretation of Kansas historiography. Despite his overt rejection of Turner’s theory of the closing of the frontier, Malin’s sweeping tale of cultural adaptation in the grasslands of Kansas assumed the evolutionary overtones of Turner’s frontier thesis while embracing the deemphasis on slavery shared by both Turner and Civil War revisionists. He argued that under normal circumstances, individuals from the contiguous valleys of the Mississippi and the Ohio familiar with the material and cultural challenges of westward migration would have peopled Kansas from the start. The politically charged climate surrounding the territory’s organization, however, disrupted the natural course of its settlement and produced a combustible mix of ideologically driven populations confronting an alien natural environment and external political interference. The organized emigration from the distant realms of New England and the Deep South included settlers accustomed to forest lands and a corn culture who, in their drive to appropriate the territory’s wooded areas, invited disputes over land, exacerbated by the federal government’s delay in conducting surveys. The traumas of taming an unfamiliar timber-less prairie, town-site and railroad rivalries, the ambitions and machinations of appointed territorial officials, and the operation of external agents with a political or economic stake in the outcome of the Kansas contest, all intensified the usual fractiousness associated with westward expansion. These conflicts of interest and adaptation came to be cloaked in language invoking the principles of slavery and freedom. Local rivalries were framed in terms of national politics. The slogan “Bleeding Kansas” became invaluable ammunition in the political arsenal of the Republican Party. Out of this crucible of conflict there emerged a fierce commitment to local self-determination and a successful adjustment to a grasslands environment, the advent of a winter wheat culture, and a cattle industry.¹⁴

As Malin questioned the legitimacy of slavery as a real issue in the Kansas conflict, so he challenged the legacy of one of slavery’s staunchest and most controversial foes in the territory. In his magnum opus *John Brown and the Legend of the Fifty-Six*, the Kansas scholar set out to demystify the national folklore surrounding the “Old Hero” by methods he and his admiring peers claimed were “scientific.” Malin began—on the basis of exhaustive research in contemporary newspapers—by arguing that John Brown had been a more or less insignificant gadfly to mainstream free-state leaders in Kansas until his martyrdom at Harpers Ferry catapulted him to a heroic status in abolitionist lore and transmuted the Potawatomie massacre into a rehearsal for a holy crusade against slavery in the heart of slavery itself. Thereafter the legend of John Brown gained momentum, fed by controversy and Kansas’s evolving self-consciousness as a historic battleground for freedom. Malin went on to juxtapose this history of representation with the reality of Brown’s role in Kansas. Malin’s John Brown emerged as a failed swindler stained by a family tradition of insanity, whose move to Kansas was prompted more by the quest for a business deal than by any compelling sense of mission with regard to slavery or the Negro. While in the territory, a combination

14. James C. Malin, *On the Nature of History* (Ann Arbor: J. W. Edwards, 1954). Nichols, “Kansas Historiography,” 86–91.

of political and psychopathic impulses drove him to lead the Pottawatomie massacre. Malin contended that Brown sought to silence potential witnesses who had participated in the Pottawatomie session of Sterling Cato's proslavery court and were going to testify against him at the Lykins County session of the court in May 1856 on a charge of treason for resisting the proslavery territorial government. Moreover, the "frustrated old man" suffered from a perverse will to personal aggrandizement. The guerrilla war that followed the Pottawatomie massacre provided Brown an excuse to steal horses and other property from "innocent settlers." Harpers Ferry represented nothing more than a perpetuation of this penchant to pillage on a grand scale. The fury of Malin's "scientific" scalpel helped raze the "cult" of the Old Hero to the ground. Allan Nevins's overall interpretation of the Civil War as the product of an ultimately irreconcilable conflict over slavery together with the related problem of racial adjustment differed from Malin's revisionist reading of sectional conflict. Yet, Nevins's landmark synthesis *The Emergence of Lincoln* fortified the Kansas scholar's view of John Brown's hereditary insanity. It was a theory that persisted through the 1960s and 1970s in works as varied as those of David Potter, David Donald, and Eugene Genovese.¹⁵

Malin was a prolific writer on Kansas matters in a prolific era for Kansas scholarship. Indeed Roy F. Nichols observed in 1957, "No one outside of the original thirteen, and perhaps Texas and California, has attracted more attention, historical or otherwise, than Kansas." The centennial decade of the Sunflower State's birth produced several significant works, many of them underpinned by a revisionist skepticism about slavery's importance in the territorial struggle. Thus Bernard Weisberger, in an essay on the territorial press, contended that technology combined with the logic of the newspaper business and a healthy measure of Republican political zeal may have played a decisive role in shaping the Kansas imbroglio. The advent of the telegraph and the swift press made it possible for eastern newspapers to dispatch reporters to far-flung mining camps and army posts on the frontier in search of news that entertained and shocked as much as it informed. Weisberger argued that many territorial news-gatherers such as John Brown associates James Redpath and James Kagi were active free-state partisans who offered a sensationalist portrait of Bleeding Kansas designed to mobilize public opinion against "slave power" chutzpah. Likewise, Alice Nichols, a journalist native to Kansas, sought to penetrate the truth behind what she described as the "first great propaganda prelude" to the Civil War by redressing the alleged Northern slant of conventional wisdom on the subject. However lively, Nichols's account, based on secondary sources rather than archival research, did not advance any of the scholarly debates surrounding Bleeding Kansas.¹⁶

Malin's tale of cultural adaptation in the grasslands of Kansas embraced the deemphasis on slavery shared by both Frederick Jackson Turner and Civil War revisionists.

15. James C. Malin, *John Brown and the Legend of Fifty-Six* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1942); Nevins, *The Emergence of Lincoln* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1950). For a critique of Malin's interpretation of John Brown, see Stephen B. Oates, *Our Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln, John Brown, and the Civil War Era* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1979), 22–51.

16. Quotation by Nichols is in Nichols, "Kansas Historiography," 85. Bernard A. Weisberger, "Newspaper Reporters and the Kansas Imbroglio," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 36 (March 1950): 633–56; Alice Nichols, *Bleeding Kansas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954).

*The Buchanan
administration's
campaign against
the Emigrant Aid
Company united
congressional
Republicans and
Know-Nothings in the
company's defense.*

In an arresting, analytical departure from the political framework of early Kansas history, Paul W. Gates, on the other hand, placed the territory's civil wars in the context of competition for western lands. Gates's *Fifty Million Acres* demonstrated that a chaotic federal land policy exacerbated conflicts among land speculators and railroad promoters, squatters and transplanted eastern Indians. No sooner had the free-state cause triumphed than economic interests cemented new intersectional alliances that pitted entrepreneurs and land jobbers on both sides of the slavery issue against ordinary settlers. Gates's careful research and graceful prose style fortified the revisionist case for slavery's illusory role in the territory—if only implicitly. Other works that appeared in the 1950s chipped away at the notion that New Englanders had determined the outcome of the Kansas conflict. Interestingly enough, an anthology on territorial Kansas published by the University of Kansas to commemorate the centennial contained essays on a range of topics, none of which featured northeastern abolitionists in a starring role: the Topeka statehood movement, political geography, the activities of federal troops stationed in the territory, banking and currency, the importance of the overland traffic in building Atchison, and the experiences of ethnic communities such as those of the Germans.¹⁷

Samuel Johnson's excellent monograph on the New England Emigrant Aid Company represented the one major exception to the trend to debunk the Yankee role in the Kansas struggle. Defending the Emigrant Aid organization against the charges of opportunism leveled against it by its contemporary and modern detractors, Johnson argued that although the organization's architects hoped to make money for their stockholders, their primary purpose was not merely to preserve freedom in Kansas but "to block forever the further expansion of slavery." Although the company contributed only a fraction of Kansas settlers, it exercised a disproportionate influence in shaping the free-state movement in the territory. It established antislavery towns; ran a major free-state newspaper, the *Herald of Freedom*; encouraged its agents on the ground to assume political leadership; and supported the antislavery cause with advice, money, and later Sharps rifles. The Buchanan administration's campaign against the Emigrant Aid Company united congressional Republicans and Know-Nothings in the company's defense, forcing the administration to abandon the Kansas struggle to save the Democratic Party in the approaching election. This opened the way for free-state settlers to take control of the territorial government. Johnson may have exaggerated the role of the company in directing the course of events in the territory itself. Nonetheless, his skillful weaving of institutional history with the larger debate over westward expansion represented a valuable contribution to Bleeding Kansas historiography.¹⁸

Yet another influential rebuttal of certain revisionist propositions came in a 1957 essay by Roy Nichols on the origins of the Kansas–Nebraska Act. Nichols argued that in the 1850s, as a disorganized party system stood poised for reinteгра-

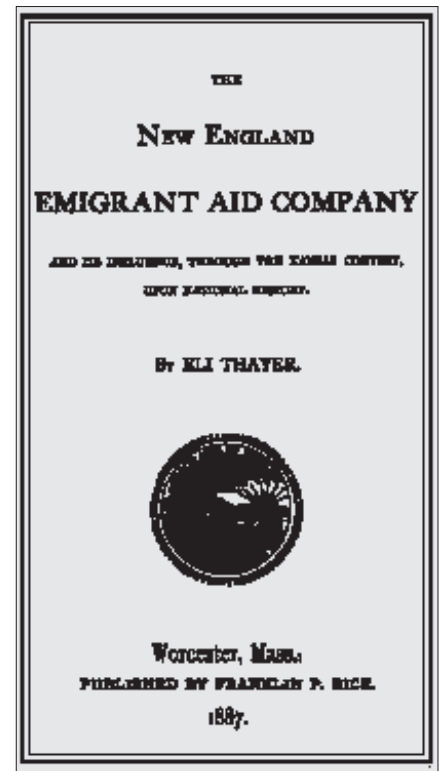
17. Paul W. Gates, *Fifty Million Acres: Conflicts Over Kansas Land Policy, 1854–1890* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1954); *Territorial Kansas: Studies Commemorating the Centennial*.

18. Samuel A. Johnson, *The Battle Cry of Freedom: The New England Emigrant Aid Company in the Kansas Crusade* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1954). William Frank Zornow, *Kansas: A History of the Jayhawk State* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957), includes material on Bleeding Kansas.

tion into a new order, a complex sequence of political maneuvers shaped successive drafts of the Nebraska bill so that the final measure bore little resemblance to Stephen Douglas's original proposal. In particular, a group of slave state Democrats including David R. Atchison of Missouri, embittered by the Pierce administration's attempts to woo Barnburner and "soft-shell" Democrats by admitting them to patronage, decided to use the new Nebraska bill as a test of Democratic orthodoxy. The measure would, incidentally, advance Atchison's political interests in the Missouri senate race against the free-soil Democratic veteran Thomas Hart Benton. The Southerners made the incorporation of an explicit repeal of the Missouri Compromise a precondition of their support of the bill to organize the territory west of Iowa and Missouri. Thus the final outcome of the cloakroom negotiations over Nebraska represented "the work of many hands and the fruit of much strategic planning." Nichols's portrayal of Stephen Douglas as a helpless pawn buffeted by a storm of circumstances beyond his control did not fit the revisionist image of a self-assured statesman piloting a sensible compromise measure through a tormented sea of sectional discord.¹⁹

Indeed, even as Nichols wrote, American society stood poised on the threshold of an age of social ferment that would help revolutionize the writing of U.S. history and sweep away the final vestiges of "needless war" revisionism. The protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s prompted a rediscovery of the theme of conflict in American society and inquiries into the dynamic interactions of diverse social groups in a multi-ethnic, multicultural body politic. Using techniques of statistical and cultural analysis borrowed from the other social and behavioral sciences and humanities, practitioners of a new American history "from the bottom up" restored the voices and reconstructed the experiences of the historically invisible—women, people of color, and the poor. The wide-ranging influence of the new history dismantled the ethnocentric and gendered boundaries of Turner's frontier thesis in an intellectual revolution that emphasized the cultural complexity and diversity of the American West. Conceptualized as a region rather than a process, the New West became a theater where a variegated cast of protagonists—not just the cowboys, missionaries, miners, and fur traders of yore, but also women, American Indians, African Americans, and Hispanics—encountered one another as they negotiated the challenges of their physical and cultural environment.²⁰

The advent of the new history did not immediately and explicitly transform scholarship on Bleeding Kansas. Yet, the primacy of race and racism as categories of scholarly analysis did spur renewed interest in the racialized character of the slavery extension controversy in ways that implicitly challenged the Turnerian notion of the frontier as a liberating force. When the outbreak of race riots in the urban North drew attention to the fact that racial injustice was not the exclusive



Although the New England Emigrant Aid Company contributed only a fraction of Kansas settlers, it exercised a disproportionate influence in shaping the free-state movement in the territory.

19. Nichols, "The Kansas-Nebraska Act," 187-212; see also Nichols, *Blueprints for Leviathan: American Style* (New York: Atheneum, 1963); Robert R. Russel, "The Issues in the Congressional Struggle Over the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, 1854," *Journal of Southern History* 29 (May 1963): 187-210.

20. On the "new history," see Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig, eds., *Critical Perspectives on the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), reprinted in pamphlet form as *The New American History* series by the American Historical Association. On the history of the West, see Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest*.

Although the Wyandotte Constitution permitted African Americans to settle in Kansas, it denied them suffrage and provided for the establishment of a segregated school system.

domain of the South, several historians scrutinized the free-state movement's attitudes toward African Americans. In a study of the frontier against slavery in the Old Northwest, Iowa, California, Oregon, and Kansas, Eugene Berwanger argued that pervasive Negrophobia constituted the very *raison d'être* of free-state sentiments in the antebellum West. His case study of Kansas suggested that the territory drew a majority of its free-soil population from the Old Northwest, Missouri, and the rest of the border South who brought with them the antiblack prejudice widespread in their native states. These settlers opposed slavery primarily because they believed the institution would lead to the unwelcome presence of a large free African American population in their midst. Negro exclusion was hotly debated at every stage of the Topeka movement and proved vital in securing the alliance of midwestern free-soilers. Although the Wyandotte Constitution under which Kansas was admitted to statehood in 1861 permitted African Americans to settle in the state, it denied them suffrage and provided for the establishment of a segregated school system.²¹

While Berwanger focused on the Negro question in the West, James Rawley explored the impact of race prejudice on national politics. In his work on Bleeding Kansas and the coming of the Civil War, Rawley contended that the controversy over slavery in the territories was "in the main a white man's quarrel over white men's conflicting rights." It was not slavery *per se* but rather *African* slavery, and the shared commitment of Southern Democrats and Northern Republicans to white supremacy, that limited the political choices available to the pre-Sumter generation and generated an irrepressible conflict. Bleeding Kansas became the defining symbol of the clash of interests that lay at the heart of Civil War causation: for the free-state forces, slavery extension threatened to pit black labor, both slave and free, against free white labor, while to slavery's friends, non-extension ultimately spelled the subversion of race control through emancipation and amalgamation. The "caucasian consensus" on Negro inferiority produced violent sectional strife that culminated in freedom for white men in Kansas, but not equality for African Americans, whether slave or free. Rawley's frontier, like Berwanger's, failed to liberate white emigrants from their race prejudice or potential black settlers from its effects.²²

Although many reviewers applauded Rawley's work for its exhaustive archival research and the insights it provided into the inner dynamics of national party politics, a few criticized his emphasis on race at the expense of the institution of slavery itself, as well as his monolithic portrayal of the Civil War generation's thinking on race. After all, Rawley wrote in an age that witnessed a veritable historiographical *volte face* in scholarly assessments of Northern abolitionism. This reconsideration began in the 1960s with the restoration of the despised "fanatics" and allegedly irrational cranks of the revisionist era to their exalted post-emancipation stature as moral heroes by the so-called "neo-abolitionist" partisans of the New Left. It proceeded through the 1970s and the 1980s to a new appreciation of the infinite complexity and diversity of the crusade against slavery in terms

21. Eugene H. Berwanger, *Frontier Against Slavery: Western Anti-Negro Prejudice and the Slavery Extension Controversy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1967).

22. James A. Rawley, *Race and Politics: "Bleeding Kansas" and the Coming of the Civil War* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1969), x.

of its origins and outcome, its principles and politics, its sociology and psychology, its means and ends.²³

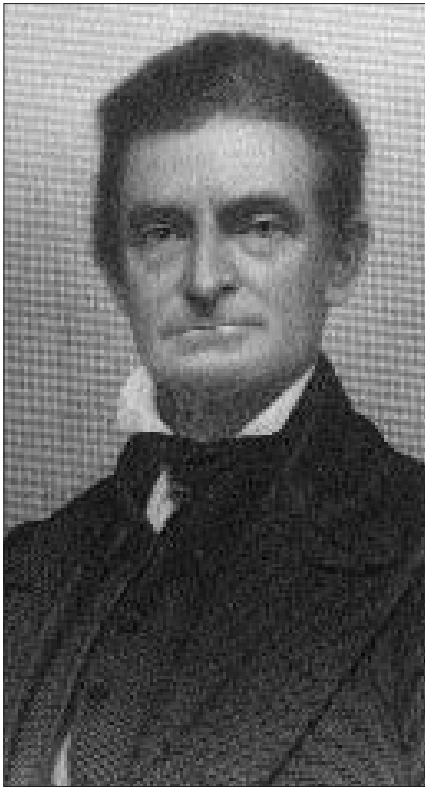
In the scholarly consciousness, Bleeding Kansas emerged as part of this multidimensional crusade against slavery, ensuring a renewed surge of interest in the free-state movement. That a significant new essay on territorial Kansas by Michael Fellman should appear in a 1978 anthology entitled *Antislavery Reconsidered* suggests this resurgence of interest in the conflict's northeastern legacy. Fellman analyzed an array of literary documents—letters, journals, diaries, and newspaper accounts—to explore the “popular ideological developments that led up to and lent meaning to the guerrilla struggle.” He argued that the stridently sectionalized stereotypes that the opposing sides constructed of themselves and of the “other,” were not, as Paul Gates had suggested, cynical rationalizations to cloak the contender's greedy scramble for land. The “direct experience of physical contact and competition” with Southern frontiersman in Kansas parlayed a genuine suspicion of the South and the fear of competition from slave labor into the construction of emotionally charged sectional identities. Northerners scorned the “border ruffians” as infantile, drunken, subhuman “pukes”—living embodiments of the savagery of slave culture, while assuming a hyperbolic sense of self as legatees of the Puritans and American revolutionaries who must arrest the West's regression to frontier mores. On the other hand, the proslavery forces defined themselves as defenders of law and order, of home and church, of private property and patriarchy against the Jacobin-like depredations of the “nigger stealing” scum of Northern cities. These polarized images recast the usual frontier violence over land claims, water, and transportation into the language of slavery and sectional conflict, lending a new meaning and intensity to the “rehearsal for the Civil War” in Kansas. Fellman urged that the orgy of corruption into which post-bellum Kansas eventually sank not be read back into “an easy condemnation of the purposes of the battle for the covenant, nor of the motives of the warriors.” Fellman did well to remind us that the ideological impulses underlying sectional conflict in Kansas were perfectly sincere. Yet his depiction of Bleeding Kansas as a bipolar contest between slavery and freedom obscured the complex divisions within the free-state movement along sectional and philosophical lines.²⁴

Ironically enough, even as historians affirmed that men and women in Kansas fought and died over the very real issue of slavery, a new school of thought with roots in the intellectual revolution of the 1960s threatened what some critics saw as a return to the revisionist notion of the slavery debate as an “abstraction.” Rejecting methodologies that relied exclusively on literary sources as elitist, the so-called new political historians of the 1960s and 1970s employed the quantitative research techniques of behavioral scientists to undertake structural analyses of long-term political trends based on voting behavior and legislative roll calls. The popular electorate, they concluded, did not necessarily share the same concerns as

A new school of thought with roots in the intellectual revolution of the 1960s threatened what some critics saw as a return to the revisionist notion of the slavery debate as an “abstraction.”

23. On abolitionist historiography, see Merton L. Dillon, “The Abolitionists: A Decade of Historiography, 1959–1969,” *Journal of Southern History* 35 (November 1969): 500–22; James L. Huston, “The Experiential Basis of the Northern Antislavery Impulse,” *ibid.* 56 (November 1990): 609–40.

24. Michael Fellman, “Rehearsal for the Civil War: Antislavery and Proslavery at the Fighting Point in Kansas, 1854–1856,” in *Antislavery Reconsidered: New Perspectives on the Abolitionists*, ed. Lewis Perry and Michael Fellman (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 287–307, quotations on 290, 307.



Views of abolitionist John Brown ranged from seeing him as a “hard-headed, secular prototype” of a radical activist to a delusional maniac. Regardless, no territorial activist emerged from the 1960s revolution in abolitionist historiography with his reputation so thoroughly rehabilitated as the man from Osawatimie.

did political elites, North and South. The most significant contribution of the new political history—the thesis that ethnocultural conflicts at the local level, rather than national issues such as slavery, determined antebellum voting behavior—did much to advance our understanding of the complex, multidimensional, indeed multilayered nature of antebellum political behavior. Yet, as historians such as Eric Foner and Don E. Fehrenbacher noted, the theory that ordinary voters cared more about such issues as temperance, religion, ethnicity, and immigration, made it rather difficult to explain the advent of the bloodiest conflict in American history. Indeed, heeding Samuel Hays’s call to place *structure* over *event*, many practitioners of the new political history all but abandoned the quest to understand why the Civil War happened.²⁵

Arguably, the new political history influenced scholarship on the Kansas conflict in two ways. For one, its subordination of specific events to long-term developments and underlying structures served to diminish interest in the local dynamics of Bleeding Kansas—a fact reflected in the dearth of scholarly monographs in the 1970s and 1980s devoted entirely to territorial Kansas. Indeed, for historians coming of age in the 1980s, Roy Nichols’s 1957 observation that Kansas had evoked more learned interest than any other state in the Union outside the original thirteen plus California and Texas, sounded sadly quaint. The second result of the quantitative wave in American political history was to complicate our understanding of the Kansas issue’s relationship with the national political realignment of the 1850s. What were the relative influences of partisan spirit on the one hand and sectional loyalty on the other in determining how congressmen voted on the Kansas–Nebraska bill? How did Kansas shape the rise of the Republican Party? What role did the Lecompton controversy play in undermining the Buchanan presidency and precipitating disruption of the national democracy?

Joel L. Silbey and Thomas B. Alexander, both leading pioneers of the “new political history,” stressed the persistence of party unity in congressional voting behavior even in the heightened sectional climate surrounding the passage of the Kansas–Nebraska bill. Gerald Wolff gave sectionalism the edge in determining the Senate vote on Nebraska but documented the superior influence of party in shaping congressmen’s responses to issues such as homestead and tariff legislation even after 1854. Yet, as Fehrenbacher pointed out, the fact that the Kansas–Nebraska bill received 72 percent of the Democratic votes in both houses and 27 percent of the Whig votes, 89 percent of the Southern votes, and 36 percent of the Northern votes, suggested the extent to which the parties themselves had assumed sectional identities.²⁶

25. Foner, “The Causes of the American Civil War,” 17–20; Don E. Fehrenbacher, “The New Political History and the Coming of the Civil War,” *Pacific Historical Review* 54 (May 1985): 117–42. Michael F. Holt, a former “new political historian” critiqued this mode of analysis in his work *Political Parties and American Political Development From the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 291–302.

26. Joel H. Silbey, “The Civil War Synthesis in American Political History,” *Civil War History* 10 (June 1964): 130–40; Sibley, *The Partisan Imperative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Sibley, “The Surge of Republican Power,” in *Essays on American Antebellum Politics, 1840–1860*, ed. Stephen E. Maizlish and John J. Kusma (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1982), 199–229; Thomas B. Alexander, *Sectional Stress and Party Strength: A Study of Roll-Call Voting Patterns in the United States House of Representatives, 1836–1860* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1967); Gerald W. Wolff,

Quantitative analyses of political behavior prompted some revision of conventional wisdom on the impact of the Kansas question—especially President Buchanan’s Lecompton policy—on the collapse of the second-party system. David Meerse studied differences in popular voting patterns between metropolitan and rural areas of the North to challenge the traditional notion that Northern repudiation of the Buchanan administration’s Kansas policy translated into a Democratic debacle at the polls in the congressional elections of 1858. Meerse argued that outside certain metropolitan districts, Democrats won more votes in 1858 than they had in 1856. Democratic electoral losses, where they occurred, had more to do with local issues than with outrage over Lecompton or the English bill. Bruce W. Collins reinforced Meerse’s findings on the Democrats’ political fortunes during the Lecompton crisis with the help of data from state elections. He asserted that the Democratic Party pursued a dual electoral strategy in November–December 1857, with the administration placating Southern interests with a proslavery policy in Kansas while the state Democrats appealed to their local constituencies on economic issues such as banks and soft money. Although the panic of 1857 together with the Lecompton imbroglio enhanced the appeal of the Republican Party in the North, the outcome of elections to state offices suggested the continued vitality of the Democratic Party outside Pennsylvania—a fact that historians preoccupied with congressional elections had hitherto ignored.²⁷

If rank and file voters cared more about party than section, if they expressed so little concern about slavery in the West in general and about Bleeding Kansas in particular, why did the sectional, free-soil Republican Party ultimately triumph, paving the way to Appomattox? Quantitative electoral data alone did not provide satisfactory answers to the problematic Civil War, leading historians to explore subjects some new political historians had decried as elitist, namely political ideology and leadership. Michael Holt, a former doyen of the new political history, argued that the sectionalization of American politics did not occur spontaneously but rather was the product of “traditional partisan strategies.” Republican politicians in search of a defining issue on which to build a winning political party used the idiom of “republicanism” to propagandize the Kansas crisis: “The ostensible division of Kansas between Northerners and Southerners over the question of slavery extension, when the real division was over the legitimacy of the territorial legislature, gave Republicans in the East a marvelous opportunity.” They exaggerated pro-Southern outrages in Kansas, lumping them with Washington’s Kansas policy as evidence that the national democracy had cast its lot with “unrepublican” forces determined to break the law, ride roughshod over majority rule, and violate white civil liberties. Preston Brooks’s unseemly assault against Charles Sumner lent these charges credibility. Bleeding Kansas joined “Bleeding Sumner” in sectionalizing American politics not because of disagreements over black slavery or black rights but rather in defense of the cherished American values of republicanism.²⁸

Quantitative analyses of political behavior prompted some revision of conventional wisdom on the impact of the Kansas question on the collapse of the second-party system.

The Kansas–Nebraska Bill: Party, Section, and the Origin of the Civil War (New York: Revisionist, 1977); Fehrenbacher, “The New Political History,” 130.

27. David E. Meerse, “The Northern Democratic Party and the Congressional Elections of 1858,” *Civil War History* 19 (June 1973): 119–37; Bruce W. Collins, “The Democrats’ Electoral Fortunes During the Lecompton Crisis,” *ibid.* 24 (December 1978): 314–31.

28. Michael H. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1978), 194.

Some historians believe it was the failure of the Know-Nothing Party to deal with the slavery extension issue that paved the way for the triumph of the Republicans.

However insightful Holt's work was in many respects, critics contended that it did not fully explain why the Kansas-Nebraska Act had spurred the demise of the Whig, rather than the Democratic Party, thereby facilitating the ascendancy of the Republicans.²⁹ It remained for William Gienapp to weave the insights of the ethnocultural thesis together with the ideological dimensions of the slavery controversy into a compelling analysis of political realignment in the 1850s. Gienapp argued that the turmoil unleashed by the Kansas-Nebraska Act offered the Whigs an opportunity for a comeback, but they failed to grasp it. The outbreak of ethnocultural clashes over nativism and temperance destroyed the Whig coalition in the North and propelled the meteoric rise of the Know-Nothing Party. It was the failure of the Know-Nothing Party to deal with the slavery extension issue that paved the way for the triumph of the Republicans. Not only did the party of Lincoln coopt the ethnocultural issues that had fueled Know-Nothingism, they capitalized on the fury of the Kansas tempest. Calling for renewed attention to the importance of specific issues in determining political behavior, Gienapp suggested that the caning of Senator Charles Sumner by Preston Brooks together with Southern outrages in Bleeding Kansas such as the sack of Lawrence moved Northern voters deeply. The Republicans broadened their appeal by interpreting both events as a slave power assault on the constitutional guarantee of free speech. They tied the Democratic Party successfully to the alleged Southern siege of "Northern (white) liberties, Northern Manhood, Northern equality." Thus Kansas played a central role in the creation of a Republican majority in the pre-Civil War North. Mark J. Stegmaier reinforced this point by showing that the 1858 Leocompton debate between Senators William H. Seward of New York and James Henry Hammond of South Carolina marked the transition of slavery discourse from the question of westward expansion to an argument over the relative merits of free and slave labor.³⁰

While a majority of political historians explored the Kansas question in relation to the second-party system's collapse, intellectual historian James Huston took on the broader issue of the meaning of popular sovereignty for the nature of democracy itself. He analyzed the debate between Stephen Douglas and the antislavery clergymen who petitioned Congress against the Kansas-Nebraska bill to show that the two sides embraced mutually antagonistic definitions of democracy. The clergymen believed that the purpose of democratic government was to obey a universal moral code that governed human existence, while Douglas held that democracy embodied the process by which

29. For instance, see Major L. Wilson's review of Holt's book in the *Journal of Southern History* 44 (November 1978): 635-36. This question was relevant in light of the variety of reactions the Kansas-Nebraska Act produced at the local level. See Morton M. Rosenberg, "The Kansas-Nebraska Act in Iowa; A Case Study," *Annals of Iowa* 37 (1964): 436-57; Eric J. Cardinal, "Antislavery Sentiment and Political Transformation in the 1850s: Portage County, Ohio," *Old Northwest* 1 (1975): 223-35; Victor B. Howard, "Presbyterians, the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the Election of 1856," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 49 (Summer 1971): 133-56.

30. Quotation in William E. Gienapp, "The Crime Against Sumner: The Caning of Charles Sumner and the Rise of the Republican Party," *Civil War History* 25 (September 1979): 232; see also Gienapp, *Origins of the Republican Party, 1852-1856* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); "The Crisis of American Democracy: The Political System and the Coming of the Civil War," in *Why the Civil War Came*, ed. Gabor S. Boritt (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 79-124; Mark J. Stegmaier, "Intensifying the Sectional Conflict: William Seward Versus James Hammond in the Leocompton Debate of 1858," *Civil War History* 31 (September 1985): 197-221.

people chose the laws that would rule them. The true radicalism of the Democratic Party lay in its endorsement of the relativistic notion that process, rather than outcome, determined morality in politics. No episode demonstrated the tension between the clergymen's morally absolutist "democracy by scripture" on the one hand, and Douglas's "democracy by process" on the other, than the controversy over popular sovereignty unleashed by the Nebraska bill.³¹

Bleeding Kansas appeared not only in works on national party politics but also in biographies. Not surprisingly, no territorial activist emerged from the 1960s revolution in abolitionist historiography with his reputation so thoroughly rehabilitated as John Brown of Osawatimie. As early as 1959 the neo-abolitionist scholar and civil rights champion Louis Ruchames had offered a paean to John Brown in a documentary history of the Old Hero's life. Brown, Ruchames wrote, belonged to a company of Americans who cherished the "highest ideals of equality and democracy, influenced by the best in the Judaeo-Christian tradition and all that was good and noble in the thoughts and actions of the Founding Fathers." For white anarchist champions of black liberation such as Truman Nelson, on the other hand, Brown represented a hardheaded, secular prototype of the radical activists of Nelson's own day. A more complex portrait of the martyred abolitionist emerged in the works of the biographer James Oates. Oates's John Brown was a package of paradoxes—"honest, deceitful, generous, dogmatic, affectionate, and egotistical by turns." Not the ordinary abolitionist of Malin's construction, Brown's upbringing in the mystical tradition of New Light Calvinism shaped his sense of divine mission to purge America of the sin of slavery with blood. He emigrated to Kansas to strike a blow for freedom. Rejecting Malin's argument that the Old Hero massacred proslavery associates of Sterling Cato's Pottawatomie court for political reasons, Oates advanced the "retaliatory blow" thesis: Brown killed both to avenge proslavery outrages such as the sack of Lawrence as well as to generate a "restraining fear" among the more notorious perpetrators of threats and atrocities against free-state settlers. Historians who had long pronounced the abolitionist a delusional maniac stood on shaky ground because not only was insanity a "clinically meaningless" label, Oakes contended, but also because the evidentiary basis of the madman thesis rested on affidavits collected after Harpers Ferry by Brown's lawyers in the hope that a plea of insanity would save their client's life. John Brown was no more disconnected with reality than was the Kansas conflict that he so searingly touched.³²

Even as historians reconsidered the legacy of one controversial American who saw sectional conflict over slavery as the very mettle of westward expansion, they paid renewed attention to another whose western vision strove valiantly and failed colossally to mute the slavery debate. The definitive word on Stephen A. Douglas—who was supposed to have started it all in Kansas—came in a sweeping biography by Robert W. Johannsen. Johannsen's

*Kansas, asserted
one historian, played
a central role in
the creation of a
Republican majority
in the pre-Civil
War North.*

31. James L. Huston, "Democracy by Scripture Versus Democracy by Process: A Reflection on Stephen A. Douglas and Popular Sovereignty," *Civil War History* 43 (September 1997): 189–200.

32. Louis Ruchames, ed., *A John Brown Reader* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1959), 15. On Nelson and John Brown, see Oates, *Our Fiery Trial*, 46; Oates, *To Purge This Land With Blood: A Biography of John Brown*, 2d ed. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984); see also Jeffrey Rossbach, *Ambivalent Conspirators: John Brown, the Secret Six, and a Theory of Slave Violence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982).

The local history of the Kansas struggle did not inspire full-length scholarly monographs until the 1990s, but the role of the press and the pulpit in territorial strife, among other specific topics, remained popular subjects of inquiry.

Douglas was a quintessentially *western* man, “Young America personified” who, however relentless in his pursuit of power, embraced a Unionist vision as broad and unfettered as the prairies of his adopted state. For Douglas, America’s destiny lay in the West which must be integrated into a progressive national civilization through territorial acquisition, homestead legislation, railroad building, and other internal improvements. It was the Illinois senator’s devotion to his western plan coupled with his desire to heal divisions within the Democratic Party that prompted him to *lead* rather than merely *acquiesce* in (as Roy Nichols, among others had suggested) the project to repeal the Missouri Compromise. A free-soiler at heart, Douglas not only believed that popular sovereignty would allow the nation to dispense with the thorny slavery problem and turn its attention to the more important issues of national expansion and development, but also that it would ensure the triumph of Northern interests and institutions in the West. He clearly had misjudged the extent of antislavery sentiment and apprehensions about rising Southern power in the free states. Thus, while the doctrine of popular sovereignty alienated Southerners who feared its potential to create new free states, Northerners decried his indifference to the immorality of slavery and denounced him as a minion of an aggressive slave power.³³ Ironically enough, it was this pragmatic political personage who seemed out of touch with the pulse of the nation on the “realness” of the slavery question in a way that his allegedly mad, failure of a compatriot, John Brown, was not.

Bleeding Kansas represented a major theme of works dealing with Douglas’s adversary within the National Democracy—President James Buchanan. Beginning in the 1970s David Meerse undertook to revise the Buchanan legacy with respect to Kansas. He refuted Allan Nevins’s charge that Buchanan submitted to the pressures of Southern extremists and retracted, against his will, his initial commitment to submit the Lecompton Constitution to the bonafide residents of Kansas Territory. Nor was Buchanan the legalist of Roy Nichols’s construction, who believed that only the “social institutions” of a new state (slavery) merited popular ratification. Instead, Meerse argued that when the president submitted Lecompton with slavery to Congress, he urged that qualified voters be allowed to amend the state constitution immediately after Kansas became a state. Buchanan knew that a tide of free-soil emigration to territorial Kansas had decided the slavery issue *de facto*, so that his suggested course of an amendment to the constitution would lead to the abolition of slavery immediately after statehood. Thus he crafted a suffrage residency policy that acknowledged this political reality, while at the same time providing a middle ground on which his party, North and South, could unite “in the face of that reality.” In a subsequent essay, Meerse rejected the theory that Buchanan used his powers of patronage to force his party members to obey his dictum on Lecompton.³⁴

While the national implications of the Kansas wars attracted scholarly attention in the post-1960s era, few historians turned their gaze to the territorial theater of conflict itself, as mentioned before. David M. Potter offered a succinct treatment of territorial Kansas in his larger work on the crisis of the Union, arguing that

33. Robert W. Johannsen, *Stephen A. Douglas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), vii, 16.

34. Elbert B. Smith, *The Presidency of James Buchanan* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1975); David E. Meerse, “Presidential Leadership, Suffrage Qualifications, and Kansas: 1857,” *Civil War History* 24 (December 1978): 293–313; Meerse, “Buchanan, the Patronage, and The Lecompton Constitution: A Case Study,” *ibid.* 41 (December 1995): 291–312.

Bleeding Kansas was largely a propaganda war that the South had lost by 1857. James McPherson and Kenneth Stampp traced the process by which Kansas evolved into a disruptive sectional controversy in their works on the Civil War era. Biographies of Governor Charles Robinson and Missouri senator David Rice Atchison that appeared in the 1960s and 1970s devoted a great deal of attention to territorial Kansas. Particularly useful was Don Wilson's portrait of New England Emigrant Aid Company agent Charles Robinson, who became the first governor of the state. Wilson offered valuable insights, not only into the free-state philosophy and activism of this Massachusetts native, but also into his cultural accomplishments and his efforts on behalf of education.³⁵

Although the local history of the Kansas struggle did not inspire full-length scholarly monographs until the 1990s, a steady stream of articles that appeared mostly in local journals—especially the publications of the Kansas State Historical Society—added a wealth of valuable detail to the familiar outlines of the Kansas conflict. The role of the press and the pulpit in territorial strife remained a popular subject of inquiry as did the mechanics of territorial government and the dynamics of territorial politics.³⁶

A great deal of this modern scholarship shed more light on the northeastern than the Southern or western experience in the territory. Bill Cecil-Fronsman



Studies of territorial women represent some of the most successful efforts to integrate the history of sectional discord with the story of westward expansion. Historians discovered that women defended their homes with arms and used the veil of domesticity to smuggle weaponry across enemy lines, thereby blurring the lines between private and public embodied in the prevailing cult of separate spheres. This unidentified woman was a resident of Leavenworth during the state's early years.

35. David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848–1861*, completed and ed. Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), 217–19; Kenneth M. Stampp, *America in 1857: A Nation on the Brink* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 144–81; James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 145–69; Don W. Wilson, *Governor Charles Robinson of Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1975); William E. Parrish, *David Rice Atchison of Missouri: Border Politician* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1961); Donald Eugene Day, "A Life of Wilson Shannon, Governor of Ohio, Diplomat, Territorial Governor of Kansas" (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1978).

36. Erik S. Schmeller, "Propagandists For a Free Kansas: New York Times' Correspondents and Bleeding Kansas, 1856," *Heritage of the Great Plains* 23 (Summer 1990): 7–14; David W. Johnson, "Freesoilers For God: Kansas Newspaper Editors and the Antislavery Crusade," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 2 (Summer 1979): 74–85; William H. Seiler, "Magazine Writers Look at Kansas, 1854–1905," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 38 (Spring 1972): 1–42; Don W. Wilson, "Barbed Words on the Frontier: Early Kansas Newspaper Editors," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 3 (Autumn 1978): 147–54; John R. McKivigan, "James Redpath, John Brown and Abolitionist Advocacy of Slave Insurrection," *Civil War History* 37 (1991): 293–313; Charles Richard Denton, "The Unitarian Church and 'Kansas Territory', 1854–1861," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 30 (Autumn 1964): 307–38; David Edwin Harrel, "Pardee Butler: Kansas Crusader," *ibid.* 34 (Winter 1968): 386–408; Cecil Currey, "Quakers in 'Bleeding Kansas,'" *Bulletin of the Friends Historical Association* 50 (1961): 96–101; Calvin W. Gower, "Lectures, Lyceums, and Libraries in Early Kansas, 1854–1864," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 36 (Summer 1970): 175–82; Thomas Schoonover, "Foreign Relations and Kansas in 1858," *ibid.* 42 (Winter 1976): 345–52; Ebba Schoonover and Thomas Schoonover, eds., "Documents: Bleeding Kansas and Spanish Cuba in 1857, A Postscript," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 11 (Winter 1988–1989): 240–42; Russell E. Hickman, "The Reeder Administration Inaugurated, Part 1," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 36 (Autumn 1970): 305–41; Hickman, "The Reeder Administration Inaugurated, Part 2," *ibid.*, 424–55; John L. Madden, "The Financing of a New Territory: The Kansas Territorial Tax Structure, 1854–1861," *ibid.* 35 (Summer 1969): 155–64; David E. Meerse, "The 1857 Kansas Territorial Delegate Election Contest," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 4 (Summer 1981): 96–113; Tony R. Mullis, "John Geary, Kansas, and the 1856 National Election," *Heritage of the Great Plains* 25 (Winter 1992): 13–23; William H. Beezley, "Land Office Spoilsmen in 'Bleeding Kansas,'" *Great Plains Journal* 9 (1970): 67–78; Gary L. Cheatham, "'Slavery All the Time, or Not at All': The Wyandotte Constitution Debate, 1859–1861," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 21 (Autumn 1998): 168–87; I. E. Quastler, "Charting a Course: Lawrence, Kansas, and its Railroad Strategy, 1854–1872," *ibid.* 18 (Spring 1995): 18–33; Joseph G. Gambone, "Economic Relief in Territorial Kansas, 1860–61," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 36 (Summer 1970): 149–74; Gambone, "Starving Kansas: The Great Drought and Famine of 1856–60," *American West* 8 (July 1971): 30–35; Dale E. Watts, "How Bloody Was Bleeding Kansas? Political Killings in Kansas Territory, 1854–1861," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 18 (Summer 1995): 116–29; Watts, "Plows and Bibles, Rifles and Revolvers: Guns in Kansas Territory," *ibid.* 21 (Spring 1998): 30–45; James E. Sherow and William S. Reeder Jr., "A Richly Textured Community: Fort Riley, Kansas, and American Indians, 1853–1911," *ibid.* 21 (Spring 1998): 2–17.

The American Missionary Association, the American Home Missionary Society, and the New England Emigrant Aid Company represented a wide spectrum of opinion on black slavery.

helped redress this bias with some excellent work on the ideological sources of Southern proslavery and western free-soilism. His essay on the proslavery philosophy of the Atchison *Squatter Sovereign*, edited by Virginians John H. Stringfellow and Robert S. Kelley, placed the paper's politics in the context of the raging debate over proslavery republicanism. The *Squatter Sovereign* insisted that slavery created an egalitarian social order populated by an independent yeomanry essential for the preservation of republican virtue. By contrast, Northern-style industrial capitalism produced an exploitative aristocracy and debased hirelings of the sort that were pouring into Kansas under the auspices of the emigrant aid companies. In a piece on the Lawrence-based *Kansas Free State*, Cecil-Fronsman argued that this western organ embraced a Jacksonian democratic perspective on free labor republicanism, portraying slavery as a threat to personal independence rather than as an obstacle to speculative enterprises. It reached out to poor white Southerners by suggesting that the competition of slave labor crushed their productive capacity and undermined social equality. At the same time, the westerners alleged that the New England Emigrant Aid Company's attempt to "monopolize the region's assets" assaulted the interests of small-scale western entrepreneurs. The *Free State*, however, shared some common ground with the Yankees in its critique of Catholicism and its initial support of black rights. The editors of the paper reluctantly adopted Negro exclusion as a pragmatic middle-ground strategy to broaden the appeal of the free-state platform and played a seminal role in bringing about the Big Springs Convention, which organized the Free State Party. Cecil-Fronsman's portrait lent depth and nuance to the inter-relationships of local parties to the Kansas conflict within the broader context of Civil War politics.³⁷

My own monograph combined the approaches of social and political history in an attempt to offer a multilayered interpretation of Bleeding Kansas as a microcosm of the larger history of sectional conflict and rapprochement. The book's northeastern protagonists—the American Missionary Association, the American Home Missionary Society, and the New England Emigrant Aid Company—represented a wide spectrum of opinion on black slavery, ranging from racially egalitarian Christian abolitionist absolutism on the one hand to free labor pragmatism on the other. Nonetheless, refracted through their common Victorian cultural/incipient capitalist prism, Yankee confrontations with the allegedly parallel unprogressive forces of "slavery, rum, and Romanism" in the territory evoked compelling public images of civilization and savagery, freedom and dependence that helped broaden the appeal of antislavery politics in the North. At the same time, the book examines proslavery activism in Kansas, arguing that conflicting notions of republicanism and capitalism defined the ideological boundaries of the slavery debate. It analyzes statistical and manuscript sources to sketch a portrait of slavery in the territory, suggesting that the institution's precarious existence exposed the hollow foundations on which the defiantly optimistic rhetoric of pro-Southern forces rested. The book goes on to contend that the neat moral polarities of slavery discourse in Kansas obscured a more ambiguous reality. Whiggish Southern-

37. Bill Cecil-Fronsman, "'Death to All Yankees and Traitors in Kansas': The *Squatter Sovereign* and the Defense of Slavery in Kansas," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 16 (Spring 1993): 22–33; Cecil-Fronsman, "'Advocate the Freedom of White Men, As Well as That of Negroes': The *Kansas Free State* and Antislavery Westerners in Territorial Kansas," *ibid.* 20 (Summer 1997): 102–15, quotation on 109.

ers used fraudulent voting as well as appeals to anti-abolitionism, nativism, and racism to fight not only their free-state foes but their proslavery business and political rivals as well. Schisms within a competitive, business-minded pro-Southern elite prompted some proslavery entrepreneurs to forge economic alliances with their Yankee adversaries, thus facilitating a sectional truce *even before* the slavery question was fully resolved. These alliances recall C. Vann Woodward's thesis of a partnership between the business interests of the North and South at the African Americans' expense embodied in the Compromise of 1877. My work concludes that if "the gory sectional encounters of Bleeding Kansas provided a foretaste of the impending crisis of the Union, their aftermath may have represented, in microcosm, the larger history of sectional reunion and national reaction following Reconstruction."³⁸

The post-1960s scholarship discussed above viewed Bleeding Kansas primarily through the prism of sectional conflict. Recent works, however, reflect the concerns of western history. Studies of territorial women represent some of the most successful efforts to integrate the history of sectional discord with the story of westward expansion. Nicole Etcheson's account of eastern women's free-state activism, Glenda Riley's commentary on the variety of frontierswomen's experiences, and Kristen Tegtmeier's analysis of the gendered nature of sectional violence are cases in point. Many new western historians have suggested that westward expansion spelled more drudgery than opportunity for women. Etcheson and Tegtmeier demonstrated that Kansas was different from other frontiers in that the political context of its settlement exacerbated the usual difficulties westbound women settlers faced even as it created opportunities to challenge traditional norms of sexual behavior. The antislavery activism of Etcheson's protagonists helped reconcile them to the difficulties of re-creating eastern-style domesticity in the West. Tegtmeier took on the broader issue of "gender as ideology" particularly in relation to changes in the meaning and uses of antislavery violence. Through a subtle textual reading of documentary and literary sources of pioneer women's experiences and their fictional representation, she showed that sectional confrontation in the territory strained and redrew the boundaries of Victorian gender norms. Women defended their homes with arms and used the veil of domesticity to smuggle weaponry across enemy lines, thereby blurring the lines between private and public embodied in the prevailing cult of separate spheres. At the same time, free-state encounters with the border ruffians made it difficult to sustain the masculine ideal of the "Christian gentleman" whose internalized discipline was supposed to hold base inner drives such as violence in check. The political realities of Bleeding Kansas forced a transition of antislavery means from pacifism to armed resistance, now constructed as manly, as "brave, yet quiet." Thus, Tegtmeier concluded, the role of violence in antislavery reform "underwent a transformation in tandem with changes in what it meant to act manly or womanly."³⁹

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38. Gunja SenGupta, *For God and Mammon*, 157; see also SenGupta, "'A Model New England State': Northeastern Antislavery in Kansas, 1854–1860," *Civil War History* 39 (March 1993): 31–45; SenGupta, "Servants for Freedom: Christian Abolitionists in Territorial Kansas," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 16 (Autumn 1993): 200–13.

39. Etcheson, "'Laboring for the Freedom of this Territory'"; Glenda Riley, "Kansas Frontierswomen Through Their Writings: The Memoirs of Georgiana Packard," *Kansas History: A Journal of the*



The small proportion of African Americans in the territorial population probably accounts for the relative dearth of sources on blacks, but some researchers have found that it is possible to tease out of white-generated documents some sense of the African Americans' historical agency.

Scholarship on pioneer women suggests the possibilities of reshaping the analytical boundaries of Bleeding Kansas by placing it not only in the political context of the slavery debate and partisan realignment of the 1850s but also in the broader cultural context of Victorian America. John Stauffer's intriguing piece on the symbolism of the American Indian in the revolutionary ethos of John Brown, among others, represents another avenue with the potential of enriching the political history of sectional conflict and the cultural history of the West by fusing them. Stauffer showed that abolitionists appropriated the cultural symbol of the "savage Indian" to justify the use of antislavery violence as a tool to advance civilization. In the process, they obliterated nineteenth-century America's "cultural dichotomy of savagery and civilization." A fascinating quotation in Bill Cecil-Fronsman's piece on western free-labor republicanism suggests that the imagery of Indian "barbarism" was harnessed for purposes other than the rationalization of abolitionist violence. The *Kansas Free State* buttressed its plea for temperance reform by describing a grog shop as the scene of "moaning, croaking and yelling; like a gang of savage Sioux dancing around their scalps." In this instance, Indian symbolism served to fortify rather than dismantle the cultural boundary between civilization and savagery. The diverse meanings and uses of the Indian as a metaphor in public conversations about slavery and freedom, primitivism and progress, offer a promising field of inquiry.⁴⁰

The invisibility of African Americans as anything other than objects of white discourse represents perhaps the most serious weakness in the existing state of Bleeding Kansas historiography. The relative dearth of sources on blacks no doubt has something to do with the small proportion of African Americans in the territorial population. While unmediated access to black voices remains elusive, it is possible to tease out of white-generated documents some sense of the African Americans' historical agency. For instance, the correspondence of ministers belonging to the American Missionary Association contains frequent references to the slaves' penchant for education and free blacks' entrepreneurial ventures. Moreover, Zu Adams's *Slavery* collection lodged in the Kansas State Historical Society harbors a potential mine of information about the forms of resistance mounted by enslaved men and women—from running away on the "underground railroad" and participating in territorial battles to poisoning their masters. The story of Bleeding Kansas will remain unfinished as long as historians fail to take account of the myriad ways in which African Americans helped define the debate over freedom in the territory as well as in the nation at large.


Proslavery women constitute another obvious research topic waiting to be tapped. Unfortunately, they did not leave as clear a trail of their ideas and experiences as free-state women did. Yet, pro-Southern newspapers combined with census materials and local court records in county historical societies, if read imaginatively, may well reveal more about this shadowy group than we think. Adams's *Slavery* collection intriguingly illuminates the impact of westward ex-

Central Plains 9 (Winter 1986–1987): 182–89; Tegtmeier, "The Ladies of Lawrence Are Arming!" 219, 224, 216; Joanna Stratton, *Pioneer Women: Voices From the Kansas Frontier* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981).

40. Stauffer, "Advent Among the Indians," 238; Cecil-Fronsman, "Advocate the Freedom of White Men, As Well as That of Negroes," 112.

pansion on slave mistresses in the territory. For instance, the wife of slaveholder Judge Rush Elmore confided to Governor Andrew Reeder that she, who had never cooked a meal before her move to Kansas, was now forced to do all manner of housework and minister to her sick slaves as well.⁴¹ In addition to reconstructing the historical experiences of Southern women, historians need to pay attention to the gendered underpinning of conflicting sectional discourses on slavery in the West. Stephanie McCurry has argued that proslavery republicanism upheld patriarchy as much as slavery as a guarantor of the autonomy, honor, and social equality of white men across class lines. Free labor republicanism, on the other hand, attributed to women a special civilizing mission in sustaining the “trophies of free labor” in the West. How did women’s experiences on the ground influence these gender notions embedded in discourses about slavery and freedom and shape each section’s perception of the other?⁴²

Yet another direction for further research consists in exploring the impact of the West on popular—as opposed to elite—political ideology. Newspapers and tracts on the slavery question tell us a great deal about the creators and arbiters of opinion, but not enough about how such opinion may have shaped the ideas and activities of the ordinary border ruffian or the average artisan emigrant from the East. Fortunately, the abundant archival riches of territorial Kansas history offer innumerable sources for such study. To cite an example, the congressional *Report of the Special Committee to Investigate the Troubles in Kansas* (1856), better known as the *Howard Committee Report*, contains the testimonies of proslavery men who voted illegally in territorial elections. These testimonies provide valuable clues to the popular operation of proslavery republicanism with its apprehensions about the subversion of outside agitators. Likewise, the narratives of antislavery settlers included in the Thaddeus Hyatt Collection at the Kansas State Historical Society illuminate how the experience of westward migration mediated free-labor consciousness “from the bottom up.”

It is time to reconceptualize Bleeding Kansas to arrest its further marginalization as a serious subject of scholarship. It is time to break free of the tradition of simply narrating in ever greater detail the sequence of political events that constituted the Kansas conflict and asking instead, what did these events *mean*? As a peculiarly militantly sectionalized frontier that daily challenged the social conventions of North Atlantic civilization and the received identities of its members, territorial Kansas offers a particularly exciting medium for studying the dynamic interactions between West and East, between politics and culture, between popular ideology and sectional violence. Historians must seize the intellectually versatile moment it represents to hybridize seemingly insular realms—of Civil War history and the social history of the West, of sectional politics and cultural exchange. Such fusion will revitalize and enrich our understanding of old questions and raise a host of new ones. 

The invisibility of African Americans as anything other than objects of white discourse represents perhaps the most serious weakness in the existing state of Bleeding Kansas historiography.

41. SenGupta, *For God and Mammon*, 123.

42. For gender notions in Southern proslavery republicanism, see Stephanie McCurry, “The Two Faces of Republicanism: Gender and Proslavery Politics in Antebellum South Carolina,” *Journal of American History* 78 (March 1992): 1245–64.