

GUTHRIE MOUND AND THE HANGING OF JOHN GUTHRIE

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THE HANGING of John Guthrie took place during a very turbulent time in Kansas history, when disputes and acts of violence were occurring between supporters of the Free-State and Proslavery causes. In the fall of 1854 secret societies were being formed in western Missouri to drive out the antislavery settlers in eastern Kansas.¹ During this same period, abolitionist John Brown was active in Kansas. A year before the Guthrie hanging Brown had lived near Osawatomie, just 30 miles north of the hanging site on Guthrie mound, and his fort on the Snyder claim was approximately 30 miles to the northeast of the mound. On December 20, 1858, he led an antislavery raid into western Missouri² on the Little Osage river (which flows next to Guthrie mound) just 15 miles east of the site of the hanging.

By the time John Brown left Kansas territory in 1859, a year before the Guthrie hanging, he was a legendary figure, known for his acts of violence against the Proslavery forces. Violent incidents were committed, too, by the Proslaveryites against Free-Staters, one of the last being the Marais des Cygnes massacre of May 19, 1858, in which 10 Free-State men were shot in execution-like fashion by a band of Proslavery men.³

The hanging of John Guthrie can be viewed as yet another example of territorial justice. But neither John Brown nor the men who hanged John Guthrie should be judged without understanding the prevailing attitudes of the time. That slavery was "a sin against God; a high-handed trespass on the rights of man . . ." was an attitude Brown had first encountered in 1834 at a meeting near his

home. Like most Puritan New Englanders in Connecticut, where he was born on May 9, 1800, Brown felt strongly against "Southern mob law,"⁵ and after hearing an impassioned speech by Lauren P. Hickok of Western Reserve College, Hudson, Ohio, he stood up "and vowed that here, before God, in this church, in the presence of these witnesses, he would consecrate his life to the destruction of slavery."⁶

John Brown believed, as perhaps did the men who hanged John Guthrie, that his cause was so just that it allowed him the right to take human life. It was the temper of the times. Genevieve Yost said "the slavery agitation made the difference between a lynching and a legal hanging quite often a matter of personal opinion and party affiliation."⁷

GUTHRIE mound is located in the northwest corner of Bourbon county on the Little Osage river. It is one and a half miles due south of Mapleton and 25 miles northwest of Fort Scott. In 1793 the Spaniard Pedro Vial traveled from Santa Fe to St. Louis with trading goods. Vial's precise route was down the upper Little Osage river valley in Allen and Bourbon counties. At this time Spain's eastern territorial border was the Mississippi river, "so he crossed no international boundary. A portion of Vial's route was later followed by the Santa Fe trail."⁸

In 1806 Lt. Zebulon Pike camped on what is now known as Guthrie mound. In the *Expeditions of Zebulon M. Pike*, Pike clearly describes the mound:

In about five miles we struck a beautiful hill, which bears south on the prairie; its elevation I suppose to be 100 feet [two hundred feet is more accurate]. From its summit the view is sublime to the east and southwest. We waited on this hill to breakfast, and had to send two miles for water. Killed a deer on the rise, which was soon roasting before the fire. . . .⁹

5. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

7. Genevieve Yost, "History of Lynchings in Kansas," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, Topeka, v. 2, no. 2 (May, 1973), p. 185.

8. Homer E. Socolofsky and Huber Self, *Historical Atlas of Kansas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972), no. 8.

9. Elliott Coues, ed., *The Expeditions of Zebulon Montgomery Pike to Headwaters of the Mississippi River*, reprinted from the original of 1810 (New York: F. P. Harper, 1895), v. 2, p. 396.

1. There were several secret societies: the Sons of the South, the Social Band, the Friends' Society, and the Blue Lodge.—Richard O. Boyer, *The Legend of John Brown* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), p. 495.

2. Stephen B. Oates, *To Purge This Land With Blood* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), pp. 261-262.

3. The massacre took place about four miles northeast of Trading Post in Linn county. In all, 11 Free-State men were taken prisoner by the Proslavery forces. Five of the men were killed, four others wounded, and two were unhurt.—Joel Moody, "The Marais Des Cygnes Massacre," *Kansas Historical Collections, 1915-1918*, Topeka, v. 14 (1918), pp. 214-215.

4. Oates, *To Purge This Land With Blood*, p. 40.





Zebulon M. Pike
(1779-1813)

John R. Guthrie was hanged February 5, 1860, on a small mountain or "mound" in the northwest corner of Bourbon county. It was a turbulent time when Kansas territory was a battleground between Free-State and Proslavery supporters, and the difference between a lynching and a legal hanging could be a matter of opinion. There are several versions of what actually happened, but regardless of which story is the correct one, Guthrie was hanged by several men high upon the hill which now bears his name. Guthrie mound is located on the Little Osage river one and one-half miles south of Mapleton and 25 miles northwest of Fort Scott. Lt. Zebulon Pike, *left*, camped on the site in 1806, and in his *Expeditions of Zebulon M. Pike*, described the "beautiful hill" and the "sublime" view from the summit. The mound, *below*, is called "Guthrie Mtn." on the map, *far left*. The U.S. Geological Survey maps from which this one is taken are dated 1958 and 1966 and are drawn on a scale of one inch to 2,000 feet. The view of the mound in the photograph is from just south of the park in Mapleton.



Pike did not realize there was water right below him in the little Osage river, and he sent his men back a considerable distance for water, which likely means he came from a southerly direction.

In 1932 Charles E. Cory also wrote about the beauty, shape, and location of Guthrie mound:

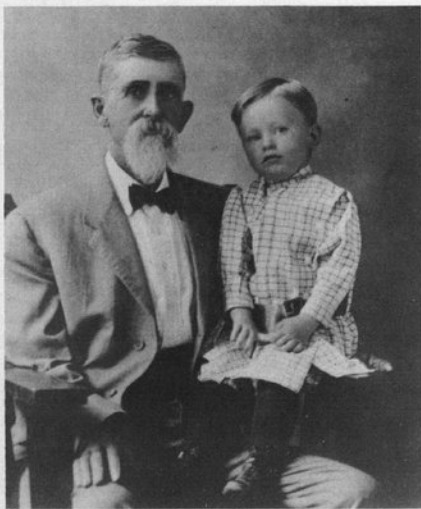
Just across the river south of Mapleton in the Little Osage bottom is a little round hill about three hundred feet high shaped almost exactly like an overturned soup bowl . . . that hill is the same "pretty little hill" where Lieut. Zebulon M. Pike ate the fried venison steak that September morning in 1806, as he notes in his journal. It is still called Guthrie mountain, and is one of the real beauty spots of old Bourbon.¹⁰

10. Yost, "History of Lynchings in Kansas," p. 187. Charles Estabrook Cory was born in present Ontario, Canada, in 1852. He came to Kansas in 1874, residing in the southeastern part of the state. In 1883 he entered the law office of Eugene F. Ware at Fort Scott. He was a practicing lawyer in Fort Scott for 50 years and died there in 1933.—*Kansas Historical Collections, 1901-1902*. Topeka, v. 7 (1902), p. 229; *Topeka Daily Capital*, November 7, 1933.

Over 50 years after Pike explored the region, the town of Mapleton was founded by settlers from New England. In 1857 a small group of men organized the Eldora Town Company. Some of these early settlers were: S. O. Himoe, E. P. Higby, Ellis Greenfield, Aristarchus Wilson, and J. R. Myrick. The name Mapleton was later chosen for the town because of "the magnificent and stately maple trees" that grew nearby on the Little Osage river.¹¹

Most of the families who settled in Mapleton were from New England and were antislavery. The old Myrick home on the southeast edge of the town was used during the Civil War as a hospital for wounded soldiers. It is said that a two-story stone building in the town was built

11. *Fort Scott Tribune*, September 1, 1966; A. T. Andreas and William C. Cutler, *History of the State of Kansas* (Chicago: A. T. Andreas, 1883), p. 1097.



Alpheus H. Tannar
(1836-?)



for the government by confederate prisoners and was used as a soldiers' quarters.¹² After the Civil War a number of slaves moved to the town with their families.

Mapleton was the location of a federal land office from November 1, 1861, until May 15, 1862,¹³ which indicates a considerable amount of activity in the area immediately after the time Guthrie mound received its present name. Therefore the hanging of John Guthrie with its North-South undertones is of some significance. The story of Guthrie's hanging was undoubtedly well known by the early settlers of eastern Kansas.

12. The stone building was later the home of the William Nesbitt family and was destroyed by fire in 1951.—*Fort Scott Tribune*, September 1, 1966.

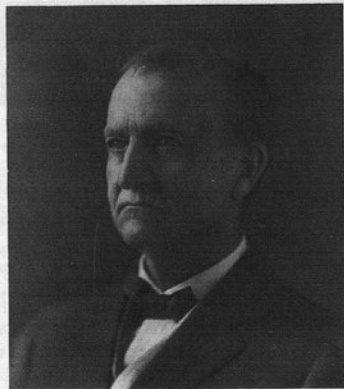
13. Socolofsky and Self, *Historical Atlas of Kansas*, no. 27.

THE HANGING of John Guthrie took place on February 5, 1860. There are several versions of the story. One version is that a young man named Guthrie, a school teacher near the Kansas-Missouri state line and a Free-State sympathizer, was riding a horse and leading another when several Proslavery sympathizers ambushed him. He was accused of being a horsethief and was hanged for the alleged crime. However, the true motivation for the hanging was his position in the North-South conflict.

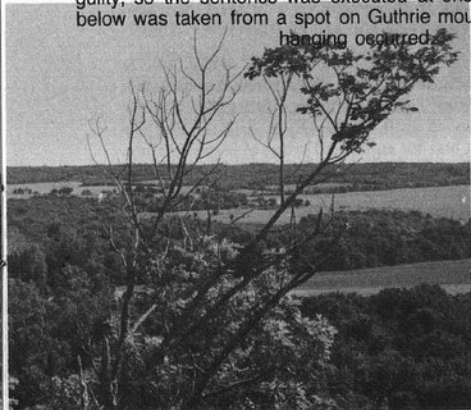
Another version states that Guthrie had hired a horse from a livery stable in Osawatimie. The stable owner is said to have come and claimed his horse after the hanging and verified that it was rented and not stolen.¹⁴

14. *Topeka Daily Capital*, November 20, 1928.

There are several versions of the story of John Guthrie's hanging, two of them with definite North-South undertones. One story, told by Alpheus H. Tannar, *left*, had a Free-State interpretation. Writing to his parents February 12, 1860, Tannar told how Guthrie had been taken captive by Proslavery men without authority, accused of horse stealing, and hanged without even a mock trial. Tannar, a pioneer settler of Bourbon county, is shown in the photograph with his grandson, Clare Tannar, taken about 1906. Charles E. Cory, *right*, gave the general Southern view of the hanging. In a 1932 letter he noted that "horse stealing and nigger chasing" were in a class by themselves in the early days, and because there were no courts that citizens respected, they took the law into their own hands. The farmers who captured Guthrie adjourned to the top of the hill, elected court officials, and conducted a trial. The sheriff they elected had no place to hold the prisoner after he was found guilty, so the sentence was executed at once. The photograph below was taken from a spot on Guthrie mound near where the hanging occurred.



Charles E. Cory
(1852-1933)





A third version of the story says that Guthrie was "a young Missouri school teacher" going to his new school near Guthrie mound:

. . . When Guthrie arrived at the school house, a stranger requested the teacher to hold the reins of some horses while the fellow got a drink at the school's well. In a few moments an angry posse rode up and accused Guthrie of stealing the horses . . . the stranger had disappeared. Refusing to accept Guthrie's version, . . . the mob seized the pedagogue and dragged him up the mound to lynch him.

Realizing he would not escape death, he bitterly assailed his executioners for lynching an innocent man. Boldly and openly shouted that if they killed him, each of them would meet a horrible death with his boots on. . . .¹⁵

Regardless of which story is the correct one, John R. Guthrie was hanged by several men from either a hickory or an oak tree high upon the hill which now bears his name.

15. Columbus *Daily Advocate*, November 3, 1955. See, also, Fort Scott *Tribune*, September 1, 1966.

There may be some truth in other tales about John Guthrie's hanging, but in some ways they resemble ghost stories of Ozark and Appalachian rural areas. Stories persist, for example, that before he was killed Guthrie assailed his executioners for lynching an innocent man and shouted that they would all meet horrible deaths with their boots on. The present owners of Guthrie mound tell how every one of the Proslavery sympathizers involved in the hanging died an unusual death, a seeming fulfillment of John Guthrie's curse. Local history differs about Guthrie's burial place. This headstone is in a small cemetery near the southwest corner of the mound. Some say he is buried there or on the mound itself. Others believe the cemetery at Mound City in southern Linn county is the final resting place of the legendary John Guthrie. Wherever his grave, the hanging victim of Guthrie mound lives on in the history and folklore of Kansas.

Alpheus H. Tannar expressed a Free-State interpretation of the event in a letter from Mapleton to his parents.

Last Sunday night at about 1 o'clock a man, named John R. Guthrie was hung about a mile & a half from here on top of what is known as Tigret Mound or Gutheris Mound. he was left suspended until Monday Eve. . . . The proslavery's hung him for an alleged crime of horse stealing. They arrested him without authority or shadow of law & never gave him even a mock trial, as had generally been the case.¹⁶

In a 1932 letter, Charles E. Cory gave the general Southern interpretation of the hanging of the young school teacher:

Away back in the later territorial days . . . everybody knows that at that time in those parts, horse stealing and

16. Alpheus H. Tannar to parents, February 12, 1860. "Tannar misc.," manuscript department, Kansas State Historical Society. Alpheus Hiram Tannar was born in Ohio in 1836 and came to Kansas in 1857 residing on his farm in Bourbon county on the Osage river, near Mapleton.—*Kansas Historical Collections, 1915-1918*, v. 14, p. 224.

nigger chasing and homicide were offenses in a class by themselves. The hard-headed and hard-fisted farmers thereabouts gathered in a hurry. But there were no courts that they respected or had reason to respect. What to do?

Just across the river south of Mapleton in the Little Osage bottom is a little hill. . . . They adjourned to the top of that hill. There they elected a judge and a sheriff and a prosecuting attorney. After the verdict and the proper sentence, the sheriff had no place to keep the man, so he executed the sentence at once by hanging him to the limb of a jack oak tree nearby. His body was buried where it was cut down. It is there yet.¹⁷

After the hanging, the Fort Scott *Democrat* stated that more lynchings like this should be done and it praised the vigilantes who had hanged Guthrie.¹⁸

Scott Northway, who still lives on his father's farm in the Little Osage valley west of Guthrie mound tells an interesting version of the story told him by his grandfather, Samuel Northway: After the hanging the local people were too afraid of the lynch mob to take down the body right away. It hung there for three days and nights. On the third night, five Free-State sympathizers got a wagon, drove it up on the mound, cut down Guthrie's body, and carried it to a cemetery (which later became a cemetery for the federal soldiers in the Civil War) in Mound City. The five men were Samuel Northway, Moses Waddell, Alf Tannar, a Mr. Danley,¹⁹ and a Mr. Murrel.

Mr. and Mrs. Raymond Cobler are the present owners of Guthrie mound, Mrs. Cobler living there her entire life. She tells how her father knew every one of the Proslavery sympathizers "by name" who was involved in the hanging of the young man. Mrs. Cobler relates how every one of them died a rather unusual death. One man in his old age purchased house slippers so he could "slip away from Guthrie" he said, and a few days later fell down his stairway and broke his neck. Scott Northway tells how another man involved in the hanging spent his last years sitting in his rocking chair, his mind gone, tapping his cane on the floor. Every time he tapped the floor he muttered, "Guthrie, Guthrie, Guthrie."

Although there may be some truth in other tales of the hanging, they resemble ghost stories of the Ozark and Appalachian rural areas:

17. Yost, "History of Lynchings in Kansas," p. 187.

18. Fort Scott *Democrat*, February 16, 1860.

19. Possibly this was Lewis Danley. A Lewis Danly, residing in Bourbon county, is listed on the 1860 federal census, together with his wife Caroline and their three sons.—United States Census Office, *Eighth Census*, 1860, for Kansas, Bourbon county, p. 4.

Strange things happened . . . to Guthrie's executioners. One fell in a well and drowned. Another carried his shotgun to the corner of a rail fence and blew off his head. Others died from knife wounds or hot lead. . . .

But the most horrible death of all was reserved for one of the hangman. Natives claimed he suffered the worst agony of any person who ever died along the little Osage. His was a long drawn out, slow, agonizing death. He died, they say, from screw worms boring in his head in much the manner that similar worms infect cattle. And they found him dead with his boots on. . . .

All his hangmen died with their boots on and not one was granted a peaceful passing with the family group drawn around the death bed.²⁰

According to Northway, Danley, who lived near the hill and had helped cut down Guthrie's body, constructed a cross out of the long-lasting wood of the Osage Orange tree and placed it where Guthrie had been hanged. Over the years the tall oak or hickory tree on which Guthrie was hanged died, and Danley's cross gave rise to the local legend that Guthrie's body was buried on the mound itself, or in a small cemetery to the south of the mound. The Northway account is that neither legend is correct, but that Guthrie's body is buried in Mound City.

TODAY the town of Mapleton continues with three churches, post office, gas station, welding shop, two auto and farm machinery repair shops, and several homes and buildings. The recent development of Hidden Valley lake, a resort area to the northwest of the town, has helped bring people and business to the community. If the fall frosts are right, Guthrie mound's maple, oak, and hickory trees turn yellow, red, and purple hues each season. Free-State and Proslavery issues have been largely forgotten and one black family lives in the community. The main concerns today are roads, crops, schools, and the weather.

In 1928 the Topeka *Daily Capital* reported that "Guthrie was an orphan and had been in the territory too short a time to make many friends. So he was soon forgotten."²¹ Over 120 years have passed since the day Guthrie mound received its name in that turbulent era of Kansas and American history. Yet the history of that era, that area, and that young school teacher still fascinates many who hear it. The orphan, John R. Guthrie, has not been totally forgotten.

20. Columbus *Daily Advocate*, November 3, 1855.

21. Topeka *Daily Capital*, November 20, 1928.