



In 1908 Samuel J. Reader aims and fires his "free-state rifle," which he used during the 1856 Battle of Hickory Point. His weapon is a full-stock Pennsylvania rifle.

Plows and Bibles, Rifles and Revolvers

Guns in Kansas Territory

by Dale E. Watts



Guns were among the most important tools used in territorial Kansas. Plows turned the soil, axes cleared away trees and shaped them into useable forms, saws produced finished lumber, and guns provided food, recreation, and the means of controlling humans and animals. Of course guns also carried a special symbolic meaning in the turmoil of Bleeding Kansas.

Violence played a relatively small role in this turbulence. No solid evidence exists to show that large numbers of people were killed because of political disagreements. Land disputes, robberies, and accidents were more deadly than questions of politics or slavery. In general, settlers were not fanatical in their attitudes toward slavery but rather were focused on such mundane matters as land acquisition, town development, and bringing their cultures to the West.¹ This fact was well expressed by Charles B. Lines of Wabaunsee, the “Bible and Rifle” colony of which so much has been made, when he wrote to his hometown newspaper in Connecticut on May 2, 1856:

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1. See 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.



Your readers may wonder why no more is said about the *political* affairs of Kansas, the prospect of her State government, &c. The truth is we have nothing to say. In the region where we dwell everything is as quiet in these respects as they are in Hamden [Connecticut]. We are busy in preparing to break up the land and provide our habitations, and hear nothing said by any one of a political character. We know of only two pro-slavery men in our vicinity, and have but little fear of any difficulty on that subject.²

The level of violence was no greater than that found in other areas and eras of the American frontier. In fact it was lower than in California where 583 people are reported to have died violently during 1855 alone, almost four times more than were killed during the entire territorial period in Kansas. Weak, fledgling social institutions allowed violence to flourish in the typical frontier situation.³ Kansas Territory suffered from impaired social controls because of the refusal of the free-state portion of the population to obey the laws and regulations of the territorial government, but this does not seem to have caused the area to be significantly more dangerous than other frontier regions.⁴

Most of the danger stemmed from rampant greed. A mania for land and its attendant potential riches swept in settlers and speculators from nearby western Missouri as soon as the Kansas–Nebraska Act opened the territory to whites in 1854. Shortly thereafter small but important groups began to arrive from the northeastern United States. This tiny ripple soon was overwhelmed by a wave of emigrants from the Old Midwest, the states of the Ohio River valley.

2. Alberta Pantle, ed., "The Connecticut Kansas Colony: Letters of Charles B. Lines to the New Haven (Conn.) Daily Palladium," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 22 (Spring 1956): 35.

3. W. Eugene Hollon, *Frontier Violence: Another Look* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 75; Michael Feldberg, *The Turbulent Era: Riot and Disorder in Jacksonian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 7.

4. For example, John Brown and others were formally indicted by a district court grand jury for conspiring to resist forcibly the territorial laws and the collection of taxes. Similar widespread resistance prevented effective governance in large parts of the territory. See Records, Second District Court for Kansas Territory, May term 1856, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society.

Most were peaceful settlers, interested primarily in securing a good living, but along with them came an undesirable contingent who would gladly steal from their neighbors, be they white, black, or red, free state or proslavery.⁵

The normal disjunction of the frontier, exacerbated by the slavery issue, ensured that Bleeding Kansas was not totally a myth. Violence and the fear of violence sometimes were entirely too real to settlers of all political factions, whether proslavery, antislavery, or somewhere in between.

Guns were the preferred weapons of both offense and defense. They were rather easily obtained, although numerous settlers reported not having firearms. Mass production of many types of guns had rendered them affordable to most who wanted them. Advances in design and technology had improved the effectiveness of guns; better gunpowder shortened the time of combustion of the charge, increased power, and reduced fouling in the bore; the percussion (cap-and-ball) system of ignition was faster and less affected by inclement weather than were earlier systems, such as the flintlock; new types of iron and steel provided added strength; and revolutionary breech-loaders, although still relatively uncommon, could be loaded and fired about three times faster than the venerable muzzle-loader. These advanced firearms, along with an abundance of surplus military weapons and traditional types of guns, provided Kansas settlers with a ready supply of armament.⁶

Guns came from a variety of supply sources. Many emigrants to Kansas Territory brought firearms with them. These might be old family pieces or might have been purchased at a commercial center somewhere between their former homes and their new ones. Such suppliers as the Biringer gun shop in Leavenworth could supply rifles of their own make

5. Robert W. Richmond, *Kansas: A Land of Contrasts* (St. Louis: Forum Press, 1974), 63–64; James R. Shortridge, *Peopling the Plains: Who Settled Where in Frontier Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 4.

6. Louis A. Garavaglia and Charles G. Worman, *Firearms of the American West, 1803–1865* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), 41.

or the latest of the patent arms. Woolfolk and Co. of Weston, Missouri, advertised in the *Atchison Squatter Sovereign* of February 3, 1855: “[We] have just received a splendid lot of Guns of the very finest finish, and made by the best manufacturers in the United States.”⁷ Towns all along the Ohio, Mississippi, and Missouri Rivers were well stocked with merchants who sold guns, usually of a good quality and sometimes of a fair price, to the emigrants.

The United States government perhaps was the largest purveyor of guns to the settlers of Kansas Territory. Hundreds of thousands of surplus or condemned arms were sold at auction, usually to large wholesalers. Some of these guns were original flintlocks from the early days of the nation, some were flintlocks converted to the percussion system, and some were outdated original percussion arms. Whatever their ages, they were inexpensive and marginally reliable.⁸

Much has been made of the New England Emigrant Aid Company as a supplier of firearms, especially Sharps rifles or carbines, to the free-state settlers of Kansas. The truth is that the company, *as a company*, did not give or sell arms to anyone.⁹ Some of the directors of the company, *as individuals*, did give or lend guns to antislavery emigrants, but the company could not become involved in such activity without alienating the significant portion of its supporters who were pacifists to a greater or lesser de-



Guns were among the most important tools used in territorial Kansas. Although violence was not nearly as prevalent during these years as embellished reports and illustrations such as this indicate, guns carried a special symbolic meaning in the turmoil of Bleeding Kansas.

gree. Consequently, in one representative case Eli Thayer, an official of the company, privately offered in January 1856 to lend free of charge one thousand guns to the executive committee of the free-state government.¹⁰

Other individuals and organizations also furnished firearms to the free-state cause in Kansas. Frederick Law Olmstead, the famous landscape architect, offered in October 1855 to supply as many rifles or muskets as were needed. He also provided funds for the purchase of the soon-to-be renowned Abbott Howitzer. On February 9, 1856, the Worcester [Massachusetts] Kansas League voted to give Samuel Pomeroy twenty-three rifles for the freestaters in Kansas. Overall, 165 men are said to have been outfitted with rifles and ammunition during Pomeroy's stay in Worcester.¹¹

7. *Squatter Sovereign* (Atchison), February 3, 1855.

8. For a listing of arms in one government sale at Fort Leavenworth, see *Daily Times* (Leavenworth), May 31, 1860; Garavaglia and Worman, *Firearms of the American West*, 234–37, also discusses the civilian use of condemned military arms.

9. See William H. Carruth, “The New England Emigrant Aid Company as an Investment Society,” *Kansas Historical Collections*, 1897–1900 6 (1900): 96.

10. R.G. Elliott, “The Twenty-First of May,” *Kansas Historical Collections*, 1901–1902 7 (1902): 525; Joel K. Goodin, “The Topeka Movement,” *Kansas Historical Collections*, 1913–1914 13 (1914): 150.

11. Letter from Frederick Law Olmstead, New York, October 4, 1855, quoted in James B. Abbott, “The Abbott Howitzer—Its History,” *Kansas Historical Collections*, 1875–1881 1–2 (1881): 224; Eli Thayer, *The History of the Kansas Crusade* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1889), 176.



Perhaps the most celebrated donation of arms was Reverend Henry Ward Beecher's procurement of rifles for the free-state settlement at Wabaunsee. The sometimes notorious preacher promised at a meeting in New Haven, Connecticut, in March 1856 to persuade his congregation in Brooklyn, New York, to contribute twenty-five Sharps rifles if the attendees at the meeting would pledge another twenty-five. That challenge was met, and soon boxes containing fifty-two rifles were on their way to Wabaunsee. Nothing is said to support the often repeated story of the boxes being marked "bibles" to prevent the detection of the rifles by proslavery Missourians, and thereby inadvertently imparting the name "Beecher's Bibles" to Sharps rifles. Instead the explanation is that the rifles were accompanied by a gift of twenty-five bibles from Beecher's Brooklyn congregation, creating the link between rifles and bibles.¹²

Many other instances of support for the free-state cause through the donation of firearms are documented. A rather rare exception was the refusal by the Quakers in Philadelphia in 1855, as devoted pacifists, to give James Abbott money for guns. Instead, some of them gave a contribution to help with his traveling expenses.¹³

Southern sympathizers also bolstered their adherents in Kansas Territory by supplying them with firearms; however, the documents to reveal this activity are relatively scarce. The *St. Louis Evening Post*, March 20, 1856, quoted a correspondent:

I leave on the A.B. Chambers this day for Kansas in company with about 300, the largest portion of whom are bound for Kansas. We have also some seventy or eighty cases of rifles for Southern people. You know a man from Mississippi was in New York buying rifles some time ago. I presume these are the same.¹⁴

12. One of the more recent repetitions of this story is in Frank Sellers, *Sharps Firearms* (North Hollywood, Calif.: Beinfeld Publications, 1978), 93; Pantle, "The Connecticut Kansas Colony," 3.

13. James B. Abbott, "An Account of Obtaining Sharp's Rifles," James B. Abbott Collection, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society.

14. *Evening Post* (St. Louis), March 20, 1856, in Albert R. Greene, "The Kansas River—Its Navigation," *Kansas Historical Collections, 1905–1906* 9 (1906): 337.

Undoubtedly many similar references could be found in Southern repositories, but these have been little investigated by students of Kansas history.

With this plethora of available weapons, one might presume that every settler in Kansas Territory was armed to the teeth. A few contemporary observers reenforced this presumption. Clarina Nichols, feminist and active free-stater, bragged in a letter of October 6, 1855: "Sharp's rifles are in all our cabins, and Kansas' freedom sworn upon all our domestic altars." The *Topeka Kansas Freeman* of February 9, 1856, spoke of a mania for military achievement and the use of firearms in Kansas. According to this report, all of the men carried "weapons of death" and even the ladies were frequently seen shooting at targets with a Colt revolver or a Sharps rifle. The "Amazonian warriors" toted guns and Bowie knives, causing "territorial officials to quail."¹⁵

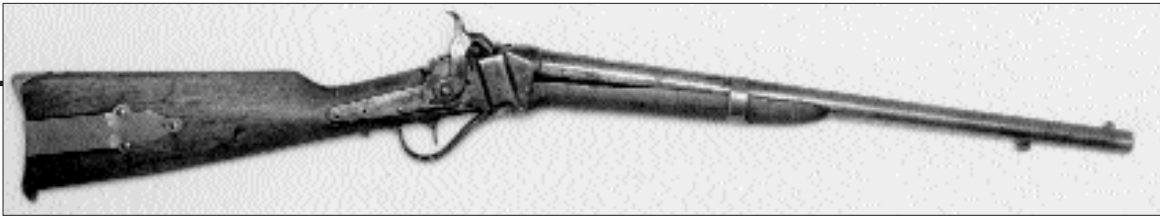
Other accounts, however, paint a much different picture of the situation. Some expressed ambivalence about the wisdom, morality, or practicality of relying upon weapons to solve the problems that were encountered in the new territory. Charles B. Lines, a resident in the supposedly warlike Connecticut Colony at Wabaunsee, said in April 1856:

"Plows" and "Bibles" will be more useful than "Rifles" and "Revolvers,"—and yet it may be well for those who trust chiefly in weapons of defense when exposed to molestation, to bring them along,—but my own mind is, as it has always been, in favor of peace, and as a means of promoting peace, to have little to do or say about deadly weapons.¹⁶

Samuel Adair, Congregationalist minister at Osawatimie and half-brother-in-law of the fierce John Brown, expressed strong questions about the religious implications of resorting to violence as his famous relative by marriage often did. Adair wrestled

15. Joseph G. Gambone, ed., "The Forgotten Feminist of Kansas: The Papers of Clarina I.H. Nichols, 1854-1885," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 39 (Summer 1973): 232; *Kansas Freeman* (Topeka), February 9, 1856.

16. Pantle, "The Connecticut Kansas Colony," 22.



TOP: When Sheriff Samuel Jones and his posse “sacked” Lawrence on May 21, 1856, Samuel Pomeroy, one of the free-state leaders, cooperated with him by revealing where the arms of the town had been hidden. Perhaps this gun, Pomeroy’s own Sharps Model 1853 carbine, was among the confiscated firearms, although most private weapons were left with their owners. John Brown was thoroughly incensed by the perceived cowardice of the people of Lawrence. Three nights later he killed five of his neighbors between Brown’s Station and Dutch Henry’s Crossing, perhaps in an attempt to embroil such free-state luminaries as Pomeroy in an unavoidable fight with the proslavery faction. MIDDLE: Shortly before the Marais des Cygnes Massacre on May 19, 1858, Charles Hamilton and some of his men attacked Eli Snyder’s blacksmith shop. Snyder used this double-barreled percussion shotgun to repel the would-be assassins. During the course of the brief gunfight, Hamilton’s horse was wounded. This infuriated the “Fireater” and may have prompted him to execute his former neighbors whom he had captured earlier. BOTTOM: Thousands of settlers in Kansas Territory armed themselves with single-shot, muzzle loading percussion rifles such as this one from the Biringer Gun Shop in Leavenworth. These rifles were slow to load but were relatively inexpensive and highly accurate. Along with shotguns, surplus muskets, and revolvers, such rifles formed the bulk of the weaponry used in the territory.

with his competing obligations to protect his family and to maintain his position as a man of peace. He ag-
onized in a letter of July 1, 1856, to his supervisor at
the American Missionary Association:

I brought a rifle along with my goods when I came
to the territory. It has been used mostly in killing
squirrels, rabbits, prairie chickens, & wolves. I
once loaned it to a man who went to aid in the de-
fence of Lawrence. I might possibly use it before I
would see my house burnt down & my family
murdered or treated as some have been. Indeed, I
cannot say what I would do until I am tried.¹⁷

17. Samuel Adair to S.S. Jocelyn, Osawatomie, July 1, 1856, Samuel
and Florella Adair Collection, Library and Archives Division, Kansas
State Historical Society.

In May, Adair had denounced John Brown and his
followers for killing five of their supposedly proslav-
ery neighbors in the Pottawatomie Massacre. Later
he came to think that the killings perhaps had been
justified by the situation.¹⁸

A few confirmed pacifists settled in Kansas Terri-
tory. The majority of these were Quakers, who al-
ways had rejected war and violence. Others were
Christian or secular pacifists who were shaped by the
international peace movement that arose with aboli-
tion, temperance, and other reform efforts during the
first half of the nineteenth century.¹⁹

18. Gerald W. McFarland, *A Scattered People* (New York: Pantheon
Books, 1985), 150.

19. See Ronald G. Walters, *American Reformers, 1815–1860* (New
York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 112–21, for an overview of the peace move-
ment in the United States before the Civil War.



William H. Coffin, a Quaker resident of Leavenworth County, reflected the philosophical and moral struggle that pacifists endured. Nearly all had a deep hatred of slavery but did not accept violence as a proper tool to use for its destruction. Coffin, as a Quaker, had scruples against killing, but at one point in 1856 he decided that he must put aside his principles and protect his family. He loaded a heavy charge of buckshot into a double-barreled shotgun and vowed to shoot anyone who tried to break into his cabin. As the hours passed, however, he reassessed his decision. Could he actually gun down a man, for any reason? It soon became clear to him that he could not, so he drew the charge from the gun, put it away, asked his Lord for protection, went to bed, and slept peacefully. No one ever disturbed him or his family.²⁰

Inadvertently peace at times was augmented by the difficulty of procuring guns in the territory. Common lore would lead one to think that a flood of weapons accompanied the emigrants, but the documentary evidence brings this view into question. John Lawrie wrote in April 1857 from Lawrence, one of the best-provisioned free-state centers in Kansas: "I found that arms were really scarce. I expected to find plenty of improved fire-arms, [but] it was with the greatest difficulty I succeeded in getting an old condemned musket."²¹

In one of the most famous incidents of territorial history, the rescue of Jacob Branson in November 1855, neither the members of the sheriff's posse nor the rescuers were particularly well armed. Branson was an associate of Charles Dow, a freestater, at the settlement of Hickory Point on the Santa Fe Trail in Douglas County south of Lawrence. Dow was killed by Franklin M. Coleman, a moderately proslavery man, in the culmination of a land dispute. Shortly thereafter, Branson was arrested by Sheriff Samuel

Jones of Douglas County on a charge of threatening some of Coleman's associates because of Dow's death. As Sheriff Jones and his posse were conducting Branson to Lecompton, the territorial capital, for legal proceedings, a group of free-state men from the area of Blanton's Bridge on the Wakarusa River intervened and released the prisoner. About half of the rescuers had Sharps rifles, but the remainder was not so well armed: two had single-shot squirrel rifles; one had a "self-cocking revolver," probably a pepperbox; one had a small single-shot pistol; and one had nothing but a handful of large stones. The sheriff and his men had double-barreled shotguns and revolvers.²² No shots were fired to demonstrate the relative firepower of the two groups, but the fellow with the rocks was at a distinct disadvantage.

Even John Brown and his sons, who usually are depicted as crusaders who marched into Kansas with the single-minded purpose of fighting for freedom, had less than adequate weapons for their campaign. John Brown Jr. reported to his father in a letter of May 20, 1855, that he and his brothers had only one revolver, one "middling good rifle," one poor rifle, one small pocket pistol, and two "slung shot" among them. He thought that each man should have for firearms a large Colt revolver, a large Allen and Thurber revolver, and a minie rifle with a sword bayonet.²³

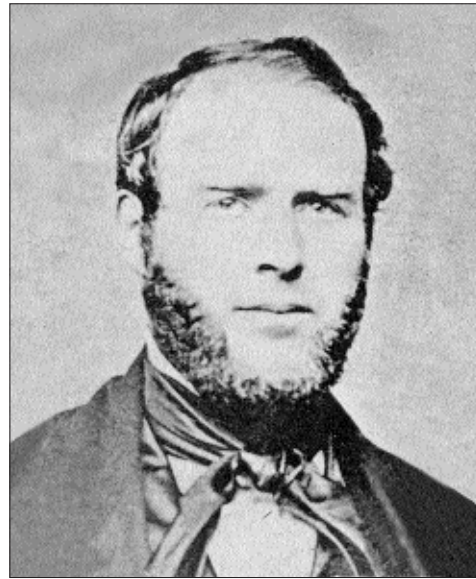
After John Brown Sr. came to the territory late in 1855, the armament of his little band of men improved somewhat but not dramatically. Gerritt Smith, the noted abolitionist, is reported to have pre-

22. Charles H. Dickson, "The True History of the Branson Rescue," *Kansas Historical Collections*, 1913–1914: 294–97; William G. Cutler and Alfred T. Andreas, *History of the State of Kansas*, 2 vols. (Chicago: A.T. Andreas, 1883), 1:116. The squirrel rifle was a muzzle-loader of approximately .30 caliber, somewhat smaller and lighter than the deer rifle and used primarily for shooting small game; the pepperbox was an early type of revolver in which multiple barrels (usually six) turned around a horizontal axis, each being fired individually as it became aligned with the hammer.

23. John Brown Jr. to John Brown, Brown's Station, May 20, 1855, John Brown Collection, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society. The minie rifle was among the most advanced military firearms of the territorial period, being adopted as a standard weapon by the U.S. Army in 1855. It was loaded from the muzzle with a paper cartridge containing powder and a slightly undersized bullet, giving it the loading speed of a musket; however, its bullet had a hollow base that was expanded by the exploding charge into spiral grooves in the barrel, giving it the accuracy of a rifle.

20. No example of a proslavery pacifist in Kansas Territory has yet come to light, but several proslavery people are known to have taken action to prevent violence against freestaters; William H. Coffin, "Settlement of the Friends in Kansas," *Kansas Historical Collections*, 1901–1902: 335.

21. John Lawrie to Arthur Lawrie, White County, Indiana, April 16, 1857, quoted in V.E. Gibbens, ed., "Letters on the War in Kansas in 1856," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 10 (November 1941): 371.



Perhaps the most celebrated donation of arms to the free-state cause was Reverend Henry Ward Beecher's (left) procurement of fifty-two Sharps rifles, which were sent to Wabaunsee in 1856. Many other instances of firearm donations also are documented. A rare instance of refusal came from the Quakers of Philadelphia in 1855 when they denied freestater James Abbott (right) money to purchase guns.

sented Brown with "seven voltaic repeaters" [probably Volcanic or Smith and Wesson lever-action pistols or rifles] and seven muskets with bayonets to arm himself and his sons. These weapons do not appear in later lists of their armament, so they may never have reached Kansas. However, seven broad swords given by Smith apparently did arrive with Brown; they fit the description of the swords used by the Brown gang to hack to death five victims near Pottawatomie Creek in May 1856.²⁴

At the time of the Battle of Black Jack on June 2, 1856, the weaponry of Brown's men was still mixed and of doubtful quality. Brown carried a large Massachusetts Arms revolver, probably a Dragoon model. His sons and son-in-law, Henry Thompson, each had a revolver and a squirrel rifle. A man named Carpenter had a revolver. Theodore Weiner wielded a double-barreled shotgun. James Townsley had an old surplus musket, while August Bondi could only obtain "a flint lock musket of 1812 pattern."²⁵ Ironically, none of these champions of the free-state cause could boast of a Sharps rifle, the badge of their faction.

24. G.W. Brown, *Reminiscences of Old John Brown* (Rockford, Ill.: Abraham E. Smith, 1880), 5; S.J. Shively, "The Pottawatomie Massacre," *Kansas Historical Collections, 1903-1904* 8 (1904): 181.

25. August Bondi, "With John Brown in Kansas," *Kansas Historical Collections, 1903-1904*: 281; Bondi, *Autobiography* (Galesburg, Ill.: Waggoner Printing, 1910), 49.

This situation somewhat blunts the recurrent statements, both contemporary and modern, that the Sharps rifle was in the hands of nearly every free-state man and was largely responsible for the ultimate free-state victory. Probably Lawrence was reasonably well supplied with the new rifles. That town's Stubbs militia company was completely outfitted with Sharps. Eli Thayer contended, "Dr. Robinson's firm and decided policy, and the fact that the settlers were well armed with *Sharpe's rifles* and ready to use them, caused the retreat of the Missourians from Lawrence in December, 1855 [the Wakarusa War]." It should be noted that an unknown number of these rifles was lost to Lawrence on May 21, 1856, when Samuel Pomeroy turned them over to Sheriff Jones while the posse was in town to arrest several citizens and to destroy the Free State Hotel.²⁶

Other free-state communities, with the exception of Wabaunsee which generally stayed clear of the fighting, seem not to have possessed large numbers of Sharps. Orville C. Brown, sometimes known as

26. R.G. Elliott to Katharine Mayo, Lawrence, August 6, 1908, R.G. Elliott Collection, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society; Eli Thayer, *The New England Emigrant Aid Company* (Worcester, Mass.: Franklin P. Rice, 1887), 46; Shalor W. Eldridge, "Recollections of Early Days in Kansas," *Kansas Historical Publications* 2 (1920): 50-51. In a letter of May 23, 1856, Charles Lines said that "Pomeroy gave all the arms he controlled," presumably including the Sharps rifles. See Pantle, "The Connecticut Kansas Colony," 139.



“Osawatomie Brown” because of his role in founding the town, wrote to the Kansas Aid Society in March 1856: “we have not a Sharps rifle in this section that I know of.” Five months later during the Battle of Osawatomie, John Brown’s free-state command had only one Sharps rifle among some forty men.²⁷

To the south in Linn and Bourbon Counties the supply of Sharps was little better among the free-state forces. James Montgomery, the free-state military leader in the area, reported as late as 1860 that he had no more than a dozen revolvers and Sharps rifles for his entire command.²⁸

Those Sharps rifles that were in free-state hands, like all tools, were not always used for good purposes. Sarah Carver, the only woman known to have been killed during the Kansas territorial troubles, died at the hands of a gang of bandits, nominally freestaters, who attacked the settlement where she lived on the upper Neosho River, southeast of Emporia. On the night of September 14, 1856, the raiding party, armed with Sharps rifles, surrounded the cabin and “called out” Sarah’s mildly proslavery husband, to whom she had been married only for a year. He prudently disobeyed their orders. In the dark one of the raiders recklessly fired through a chink in the cabin wall. The bullet struck the seventeen-year-old Sarah in the side. She died a day or two later, having made her relatives promise not to seek any revenge for her death.²⁹

Despite myths to the effect that freestaters enjoyed a monopoly on the use of Sharps rifles in Kansas Territory, their opponents are known also to have carried these up-to-date weapons. The Liberty, Missouri, *Weekly Tribune* announced on May 9, 1856,

27. O.C. Brown to the Kansas Aid Society, Osawatomie, March 18, 1856, O.C. Brown Collection, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society; James Redpath, *The Public Life of Capt. John Brown* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860), 152.

28. Franklin B. Sanborn, “Some Notes on the Territorial History of Kansas,” *Kansas Historical Collections, 1913–1914*: 264.

29. Charles T. Gilman to A.G. Boone, Council Grove, September 16, 1856, Kansas Territory, Executive Department, Correspondence, Territorial Troubles, 1855–1856, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society; Flora Rosenquist Godsey, “The Early Settlement and Raid on the ‘Upper Neosho,’” *Kansas Historical Collections, 1923–1925* 16 (1925): 459.

that 150 supporters of the territorial government were at Atchison ready to march to Lawrence upon command; one company of them was armed with Sharps.³⁰ Two of them used their rifles to kill a young man from New York on May 20, just before they accompanied Sheriff Jones into Lawrence. John Brown’s opponents at the Battle of Black Jack had an abundance of Sharps while he did not, but they lost the battle anyway. On August 27, 1856, the Lexington, Missouri, *American Citizen* reported that the streets of that town were crowded with men ready to march for Kansas; they were “armed with bowie-knives, swords, revolvers, shot-guns, [and] Sharpe’s rifles.”³¹

In total among all of the various factions in territorial Kansas, the most authoritative student of the Sharps rifle finds that about nine hundred of these guns were used.³² However, he includes no information on the use of Sharps by either the proterritorial government or proslavery group, so the gross number probably is somewhat higher. Still, scattered among some twenty thousand to sixty thousand inhabitants of Kansas during the territorial period, nine hundred or even fifteen hundred rifles would not constitute a high proportion of the firearms used.

Although people had great expectations of the Sharps rifle and stories of its performance reached legendary proportions, it was not the super weapon that many made it out to be. Samuel Reader told a revealing story of the first day’s battle at Hickory Point in Jefferson County on September 14, 1856. Reader and his compatriots were besieging a small group of supposedly proslavery men who were firing from log buildings several hundred yards away. The freestaters had a few Sharps rifles, in which they had great confidence because of the stories told about their range and firepower, so they began to blast away at the enemy. To their amazement, their shots fell far short of the target. Try as they might they

30. *Weekly Tribune* (Liberty, Mo.), May 9, 1856.

31. John H. Gihon, *Geary and Kansas* (Philadelphia: C.C. Rhodes, 1857), 83; *Kansas Tribune* (Lawrence), June 6, 1856, quoted in James C. Malin, *John Brown and the Legend of Fifty-Six* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1942), 76; *American Citizen* (Lexington, Mo.), August 27, 1856.

32. Sellers, *Sharps Firearms*, 93.

could not hit the buildings, let alone do any harm to the occupants. Eventually, a lone figure emerged from the enemy's stronghold. Standing alone in the open, the man took aim and fired with an old Mississippi Rifle from the period of the Mexican War. As a puff of smoke arose from the gun, the horse of one of the free-state men dropped, severely wounded. The owner quickly decided that the old muzzle-loading rifle was superior to the modern breech-loading Sharps, at least in the matter of range.³³

Some patently absurd claims for the Sharps have been made over the years. In reality, the breech-loading mechanism of the rifle allowed a firing rate of something like ten shots per minute, about three times higher than a muzzle-loading musket and about ten times higher than a typical muzzle-loading rifle. This is a considerable advantage for the Sharps, but does not qualify it as a super weapon.³⁴

Admitting its technological advancements, the Sharps was more important as a symbol than as a weapon. It became accepted as the badge of the man who was willing to risk everything for the free-state cause, even though opposing forces also often used it. It came to stand as an indication of its user's openness to modernism and progressive trends because of the new technology and manufacturing advances embodied in it. It was taken as a manifestation of Yankee intelligence and ingenuity because it was thought that only New England capitalism could create such a marvelous device. New Englanders seem always to have felt that the Sharps was theirs alone.³⁵

33. Samuel Reader, "Autobiography," 36–37, Samuel J. Reader Collection, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society.

34. F.W. Blackmar, "The Annals of an Historic Town," *Annual Report of the American Historical Association* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1894), 494, referred to one hundred Sharps rifles that were "capable of discharging one thousand shots per minute." It is not clear whether he meant that each rifle could fire at that rate or that the total group of guns could discharge one thousand shots per minute. Some writers have taken the first meaning. That the mythology of the Sharps began early is demonstrated by Joseph Barlow's plea with Charles Hamilton, leader in the Marais des Cygnes Massacre in 1858, not to take his men against the freestaters because they had Sharps rifles that would kill half of Hamilton's men before they could get within gunshot with their shotguns and squirrel rifles. See Ed. R. Smith, "Marais des Cygnes Tragedy," *Kansas Historical Collections, 1897–1900*: 368.

35. James B. Abbott, "The Rescue of John W. Doy," *Kansas Historical Collections, 1886–1890* 4 (1890): 316.



A self-portrait by Samuel J. Reader, posing armed and ready for the 1856 Battle of Hickory Point in Jefferson County.

In reality the rifle, especially the Sharps, was not the most practical firearm for most conditions encountered in frontier areas such as Kansas Territory. It was relatively expensive and lacked the versatility of other types of guns. Josiah Gregg, an experienced frontiersman, weighed the relative merits of firearm types in 1845, even before Kansas came into being:

In the article of fire-arms there is also an equally interesting medley. The frontier hunter sticks to his rifle, as nothing could induce him to carry what he terms in derision "the scatter-gun." The sportsman from the interior flourishes his double-



barrelled fowling piece with equal confidence in its superiority. The latter is certainly the most convenient description of gun that can be carried on this journey; as a charge of buck-shot in night attacks (which are the most common), will of course be more likely to do execution than a single rifle-ball fired at random.³⁶

Besides covering a broader area when charged with shot, the smoothbore shotgun or musket also could fire a solid ball. Therefore, they could be used for hunting both birds and animals, as well as meeting differing offensive or defensive needs. The rifle enjoyed an advantage in accuracy, but its greater cost and infacility in firing shot were drawbacks on the frontier.

The Sharps rifle essentially was a specialized assault weapon that had little application except in warfare, and comparatively few people were assaulted by or assaulting anyone else in Kansas. Consequently, the Sharps was not the most used firearm, nor necessarily the most important. It was merely one of many types that played a significant role in early Kansas history.

Samuel Reader wrote of the armament at the first day's battle at Hickory Point: "We had all sorts of guns; perhaps not more than one-third of our force had Sharp's rifles. Kickapoo Stevens was armed with a Hall's breech-loading rifle, and there were a good many condemned United States rifles and muskets. The rest of us were armed with sporting rifles and shotguns." The different group of free-state men involved in the second day's battle were similarly armed. When arrested for disobeying Governor John Geary's order disbanding all armed parties in the territory, this group surrendered thirty-eight U.S. muskets, forty-seven Sharps rifles, six hunting rifles, two shotguns, and twenty revolvers.³⁷ This is a represen-

tative mixture of arms that were typical, except that many other kinds are documented, and shotguns were more important than these lists would indicate.

Many instances of the use of shotguns can be found in the Kansas records. F.M. Coleman, as previously mentioned, gunned down Charles Dow on November 21, 1855, as they walked through their disputed claims at Hickory Point in Douglas County. His shotgun was loaded with irregular bits of lead that had been cut off a bar with a knife. On May 19, 1858, Eli Snyder used his shotgun to repulse an attack on his blacksmith shop near Trading Post in Linn County by Charles Hamilton and several of his proslavery supporters. Snyder wounded Hamilton's horse, enraging Hamilton and possibly provoking him to murder a group of prisoners in a nearby ravine; the slaughter became known as the Marais des Cygnes Massacre. In one of the most famous killings in territorial Kansas, free-state leader James Lane shot his neighbor, free-state leader Gaius Jenkins, on June 3, 1858, in another land dispute. Lane's defense was that he did not think the buckshot from his shotgun would kill Jenkins as he was wearing a heavy coat.³⁸ These are renowned instances in which shotguns were employed, but for every case in which a shotgun was used in warfare there were many in which smoothbores provided meat for otherwise empty tables.

As previously noted regarding John Brown's men and others, surplus military firearms were among the most common in Kansas. Many were supplied by supporters in the East, and hundreds or thousands were auctioned at such military posts as Fort Leavenworth. A notice in the Leavenworth *Daily Times* of May 31, 1860, announced the coming sale of "Fire

36. Josiah Gregg, *Commerce of the Prairies* (New York: J. and H.G. Langley, 1845), 48–49.

37. George A. Root, ed., "Diary of Samuel Reader," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 1 (November 1931): 39. A surprising number of Hall breech-loaders appear in territorial records. Hall rifles and carbines were adopted by the U.S. Army in the early 1820s. By the 1850s many had been condemned by the government and were for sale on the open market at a low price. Their distinctive loading mechanism consisted of a pivoting

breechblock, the front of which swung upward upon the release of a catch so that powder and ball could be loaded without ramming them down the entire length of the barrel. See Cutler and Andreas, *History of the State of Kansas*, 150.

38. *Report of the Special Committee to Investigate the Troubles in Kansas*, 34th Cong., 1st. sess., 1856, H. Rept. 200, serial 869, 59; R.B. Mitchell to James W. Denver, Paris, Linn County, May 27, 1858, Kansas Territory, Executive Department, Correspondence, Territorial Troubles; James Christian to J.H. Shimmons, Arkansas City, January 7, 1884, James H. Lane Papers, Kansas Collection, University of Kansas Libraries, Lawrence.



Another Reader sketch of Hickory Point features Colonel James H. Lane (right, on horseback) and free-state men. As Reader wrote of the armament, "We had all sorts of guns." In this depiction Lane carries a revolver, possibly a Colt, in his holster; the man with Lane has a Sharps carbine and a flintlock holster pistol; and the men on the left are equipped with a Sharps carbine, revolver, either a Pennsylvania rifle or Sharps carbine, and a Pennsylvania rifle.

Arms, Swords, Saddles, Harness, etc."³⁹ Muskets and rifles were predominant among these arms, but carbines, pistols, and revolvers also were prominent. These would serve as affordable weapons for emigrants to the territory.

Muskets had most of the advantages of a shotgun; they were quick to load, powerful, and could fire both shot and ball. Rifles were slower but more accurate than the smoothbores. Carbines, pistols, and revolvers were easily portable and were particularly suited for use on horseback. Generally they were not practical for hunting, with the exception of the occasional buffalo hunt in which firing occurred at very close range by mounted hunters.

Among the most popular of the long guns was the American rifle in several variations. A few of the old-style long-barreled full-stock Pennsylvania, or Kentucky, rifles would have found their way to the territory. These had been developed by German settlers in eastern Pennsylvania during the mid-eighteenth century and had spread from there along the Appalachian Mountains to the south

and the Ohio River valley to the west. As technology changed and as the rifles moved into new geographical regions, their style evolved. The percussion system replaced the more cumbersome flintlock. Barrels became shorter. Full stocks were reduced to half stocks. The old deer rifle became, in differing locales, a light squirrel rifle or a heavy Plains rifle.⁴⁰

Many references to the American rifle can be found in the stories of Kansas Territory. "Pap" Austin is credited with wreaking havoc among the proslavery forces at the Battle of Osawatimie with his large rifle called "Kill Devil." It fired a one-ounce ball and undoubtedly had nearly the effect of artillery.⁴¹ A more romantic, and yet perhaps more typical, tale of the use of the American rifle was told by Ely Moore Jr. when he described a journey to Denver, still a part of Kansas Territory, in 1858. Moore and a group of men from LeCompton headed for the Rocky Mountains to try their luck at gold prospecting. During one

39. *Daily Times*, May 31, 1860.
 40. See Garavaglia and Worman, *Firearms of the American West*, for a discussion of the evolution and use of the rifle in the West. A more general view of the overall development of the American rifle can be found in Joe Kindig Jr., *Thoughts on the Kentucky Rifle in Its Golden Age* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1960), 25–40.
 41. Cutler and Andreas, *History of the State of Kansas*, 2: 876.



hunt on their trip they killed “a fine buck, some wild turkeys, and a buffalo calf.” An early-morning attack by Cheyennes presented the party with the opportunity to test their muzzle-loading rifles against two Sharps rifles that they were carrying in reserve. In this case the Sharps proved superior, killing two of the raiders at a distance of some quarter of a mile.⁴²

Handguns also played a role in Kansas territorial history. The best-loved of the revolvers among the Kansas settlers were the Colts. Stage drivers, Pony Express riders, merchants, farmers, and many others in this frontier environment felt more confident when they had a Colt revolver within reach. Most often mentioned were the Model 1849 pocket revolver and the M1851 Navy or belt revolver, but a few of the earlier Patterson and Dragoon models probably also found their way into the civilian population. A shipment of Navies from eastern abolitionists intended for John Brown was intercepted by the citizens of Lawrence and distributed among the townspeople. Many of the serial numbers have been recorded, so revolvers from this group could be identified if they could be found. The use of many other brands of revolvers also is documented; however, none of these seems to have commanded the attention and loyalty that were shown the Colts.⁴³

The role of the military in Kansas territorial history, puzzlingly, has been largely ignored.⁴⁴ However, one area of military history has drawn substantial notice: the free-state militia. The flamboyant Jim Lane and other militia leaders could not be ignored at the time and have not been since. Their weaponry was largely dependent upon the guns that individual members had available; in other words, muzzle-loading rifles, muskets, shotguns, pistols, and revolvers,

with a substantial sprinkling of improved arms such as the Sharps. Colonel Lyman Allen’s regiment at the time of the Wakarusa War in 1855 listed 156 Sharps rifles and 169 surplus U.S. rifles and revolvers among its ten companies. However, other units were not so well armed. The “Sewannoe Company,” regiment unknown, had a conglomeration of eight rifles (presumably not Sharps), two shotguns, two muskets, and two revolvers; two men had “no arms.”⁴⁵ The “Old Free-State Guards” in Osage County had brand new “six-shooter rifles,” probably Colt revolving rifles. This was perhaps the only type of Colt firearm that was almost universally despised. It had a nasty habit of discharging all six of the chambers in its cylinder at the same time, with disastrous results for the shooter who normally had his left hand supporting the barrel in front of the cylinder. The “Guards” sent their worthless revolving rifles into Missouri where they were sold for a high price. They used the money to buy “good rifles” of an unreported type.⁴⁶

The official territorial militia had a surer supply of firearms because it received a yearly requisition from the U.S. government; however, the quality generally was marginal. Governor Andrew Reeder announced on July 3, 1855, that the territory was entitled to two thousand muskets or their equivalent in other military supplies. In February 1857 Governor John Geary inquired of the colonel of ordnance at Fort Leavenworth about the 137 10/13 muskets that had been Kansas’s undelivered quota for the previous year. He wanted to trade some of the muskets for Colt revolvers.⁴⁷ Geary stored part of the territorial muskets in the basement of Sheriff Samuel Jones’s log house, which was serving as the governor’s residence.

Others of the muskets were kept in the office of the territorial surveyor general John Calhoun. These apparently were only used during the “candle-box

42. Ely Moore Jr., “The Lecompton Party which Located Denver,” *Kansas Historical Collections, 1901–1902*: 448–49.

43. William Hutchison probably to John Brown, n.d., John Brown Collection. Massachusetts Arms and Adams revolvers are the two specifically mentioned in the records. Undoubtedly Remington and other companies were represented by the end of the territorial period. See Bondi, *Autobiography*, 44, 49; Wayne R. Austerman, “John Bull’s Revolvers in the American West,” *Man at Arms* 10 (November/December 1988): 16.

44. See W. Stitt Robinson, “The Role of the Military in Territorial Kansas,” *Territorial Kansas* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 1954), for an exception to this lack of attention to the military.

45. Muster roll, First Regiment, William I.R. Blackman Collection, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society; Abbott, “An Account of Obtaining Sharp’s Rifles.”

46. Cutler and Andreas, *History of the State of Kansas*, 2: 1531.

47. *Journal of the Council of Kansas Territory* (Shawnee Manual Labor School: Public Printer, 1855), 18; John Geary to colonel of ordnance, Lecompton, February 27, 1857, in “Executive Minutes of Governor Geary,” *Kansas Historical Collections 1886–1890*: 734.

affair" in the spring of 1858. Samuel Walker, the new antislavery sheriff of Douglas County, had been informed by a spy of fraudulent election returns that had been hidden in the wood pile at the surveyor general's office by Calhoun's assistant L.A. McLean. When the sheriff's posse arrived to confiscate the candle box and the returns in it, McLean's cronies grabbed the muskets in an attempt to resist. However, the office spy had hidden all of the percussion caps, so the guns could not be fired.⁴⁸

Subsequent governors made requests similar to those of their predecessors. Governor Samuel Medary, in 1860, asked for twenty holster pistols with detachable stocks, ten regular holster pistols, twenty belt pistols, twenty percussion pistols, one Colt revolving rifle, ten Sharps carbines, ten long-range rifles, and thirty cadet muskets. He was informed that the Colt holster pistols and rifle were not available but that Colt belt pistols, Sharps carbines, and fifty-two muskets would be furnished.⁴⁹

Regular U.S. soldiers in territorial Kansas generally carried standard equipment. As is typical when no declared war is in progress, standards were allowed to slip somewhat, but altered regulations in 1855 led to the acquisition of new uniforms and arms. Most of the military men involved in Kansas affairs were dragoons. As mounted troops, they were the most mobile of the time and, consequently, could move quickly to contain free-state rebellions, dis-



William Arny claimed to have given this Colt Model 1851 Navy revolver to John Brown during his time in Kansas Territory. Brown reportedly returned the gun when he learned that Arny had expressed disapproval of the plans to invade the South. However, the revolver quite likely was part of a shipment of Colts from Brown's eastern supporters that was intended expressly for him but was intercepted by free-state leaders in Lawrence and distributed to their partisans. Why would Arny have given the gun to Brown if it already was his, and why would Brown have returned it to Arny? The story may be true, but it is not supported by other evidence.

burse ruffians, protect travelers on long-distance trails, expel squatters from Indian reservations, or enforce governmental policies among Plains Indian tribes.⁵⁰

Dragoons, or cavalrymen, normally were armed with short-barreled carbines or musketoons. The most common were the Hall breech-loading carbines and the government-made muzzle-loading musketoons. Sharps carbines soon became very popular. Augmenting the fire power of the shoulder arms were various holster pistols. The M1842 single-shot pistol was most in evidence, but the M1855 pistol with detachable stock and the Colt revolver sometimes appeared. In 1857 Colonel Edwin Sumner's company of the First U.S. Cavalry, a successor of the dragoons, carried English designed Adams revolvers in its western campaign against the Cheyennes. These well-made handguns could have been manufactured in Britain or by the Massachusetts Arms Company in the United States.⁵¹

48. George A. Crawford, "The Candle-Box under the Wood-Pile," *Kansas Historical Collections*, 1907-1908 10 (1908): 200, 203.

49. Samuel Medary to H.K. Craig, Lecompton, July 2, 1860, "Governor Medary's Administration: Executive Minutes and Correspondence," *Kansas Historical Collections*, 1889-1896 5 (1896): 626-27; Craig to Medary, Washington, D.C., July 14, 1860, *ibid.*, 627.

50. See reports from field commanders to various territorial governors, Kansas Territory, Executive Department, Minutes.

51. Carbines were short rifles and musketoons were short smoothbores. Both were used primarily on horseback where they were easier to handle than were full-sized rifles or muskets. Garavaglia and Worman, *Firearms of the American West*, 125-38, 146-49; Austerman, "John Bull's Revolvers in the American West," 16.



During the early years of the territorial period most infantrymen would have used smoothbore M1842 muskets or conversions of earlier flintlocks. Soon, however, the replacement of these would have begun. The same regulations of 1855 that produced a new pistol/carbine for the dragoons also required a minie rifle or rifled musket for the infantry. These fine arms could be loaded as rapidly as muskets but were much more accurate because of the rifling or grooves in the barrels that caused the bullets to spiral on line to their targets. They also were equipped with an automatic percussion priming system to remove the need to install a priming cap before each shot, but this proved unsuccessful and was eliminated in later models.⁵²

These details of the firearms that were used in Kansas Territory, however, are not nearly as important as is their cumulative impact on the emerging state's early history. However, as has been demonstrated, not everyone in territorial Kansas was heavily armed and not everyone accepted weapons and violence as a legitimate means of reaching their goals. Still, nearly every man and many women and children used guns in some capacity, be it aggressor, defender, or provider.

In whatever ways guns were used, they should be considered as tools. They helped men and women accomplish important tasks. When viewed in this way they lose some of their mystique as instruments of death and take their place in the ranks of tools that have been used by people for good and evil throughout human history. Guns, as tools, were neither inherently good nor bad in territorial Kansas. Before crops became established or during the great drought of 1860, they sometimes provided the only food available. Sometimes they murdered a neighbor for his land or a stranger for his money. Sometimes they supported a cause which, both then and now, could be considered good or bad, depending on individual

perspectives. Of course, guns did not do anything on their own. Like all tools, they were inert objects subject to the will of their users.

This is not to say, however, that guns did not have some unique significance. They were designed almost entirely to kill, man or animal. As the most powerful killing machines available to individuals at the time, they must have played a strong psychological role, especially among men. Anecdotal evidence indicates that women saw guns, when they dealt with them at all, as a means of providing security, be it defense against enemies or the providing of food. These were also important considerations for many men, but they seem to have looked upon guns differently than most of their female counterparts. Firearms were assigned to the male world. The use of guns perhaps served as a rite of passage into manhood for many boys. Guns augmented the strength of men, which was considered one of their most important attributes, especially on the frontier. In addition, in somewhat tumultuous areas such as Kansas, the willingness to use firearms and other weapons against political enemies often was taken as a sign of total commitment to one's own cause, and the refusal to take up arms was denounced as cowardice or treason.

The final, and perhaps greatest, significance of guns in Kansas Territory was their impact as symbols. Probably the Sharps rifle was not the best weapon for the most common conditions in the territory; it may not even have been the best weapon in the scattered skirmishes that threatened to tear Kansas apart; but nothing else could match the Sharps as a symbol of the free-state cause. Praises were sung to its functionality, sleekness, and firepower. Most importantly, it became a badge of the devoted freestater. At times the mere possession of a Sharps could mark a man as an enemy of the territorial government and its supporters.

Colt revolvers enjoyed almost as lofty a symbolic position as did the Sharps. Kansas before, during, and after the Civil War contributed one of the pivotal chapters to the writing of the Colt legend. "Good guys," "bad guys," and many in between at some time relied on a Colt revolver, even if the gun were

52. Norm Flayderman, *Flayderman's Guide to Antique American Firearms . . . and Their Values*, 6th ed. (Northbrook, Ill.: DBI Books, 1994), 461.

C. SHARPS'
PATENT BREECH-LOADING AND SELF-PRIMING
Rifle, Carbine, Shot Gun, and Pistol,
MANUFACTURED AND SOLD BY SHARPS' RIFLE MANUFACTURING COMPANY,
AT HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT.



Probably the Sharps rifle was not the best weapon for the most common conditions in the territory; it may not even have been the best weapon in the scattered skirmishes that threatened to tear Kansas apart; but nothing else could match the Sharps as a symbol of the free-state cause.

only kept tucked away in a drawer for personal protection. Other brands were not at all uncommon, but time and again Kansans, especially those of the territorial period, pleaded in their letters for their correspondents to send them a Colt revolver or they expressed their delight at already possessing one or more of these most esteemed handguns. Not identified with any political faction in Kansas, the Colt became a symbol of self-reliance on the frontier. A man with a Colt was the equal of any.

In Kansas the man with a Sharps or Colt or a hundred other types of gun often was seen as perpetuating the glory of the American minuteman. He was armed to repel any aggressor, public or private. The

freestaters took up arms, in part, to protect themselves from a government that was, to them, every bit as oppressive as England had been under King George III. The proslavers and National Democrats took up arms, in part, to support that government so it could establish and maintain law and order. Both were worthy goals from their respective points of view. Both sides used firearms as tools in the struggle for political control of Kansas. Meanwhile, for every man who shouldered his "musket" and marched into battle, a thousand used their guns in less stirring, yet absolutely vital, pursuits that paved the way for the generally peaceful final resolution of the disputes of Bleeding Kansas. 