

BY THE HAND OF GOD

James Montgomery and Redemptive Violence

by Brian R. Dirck

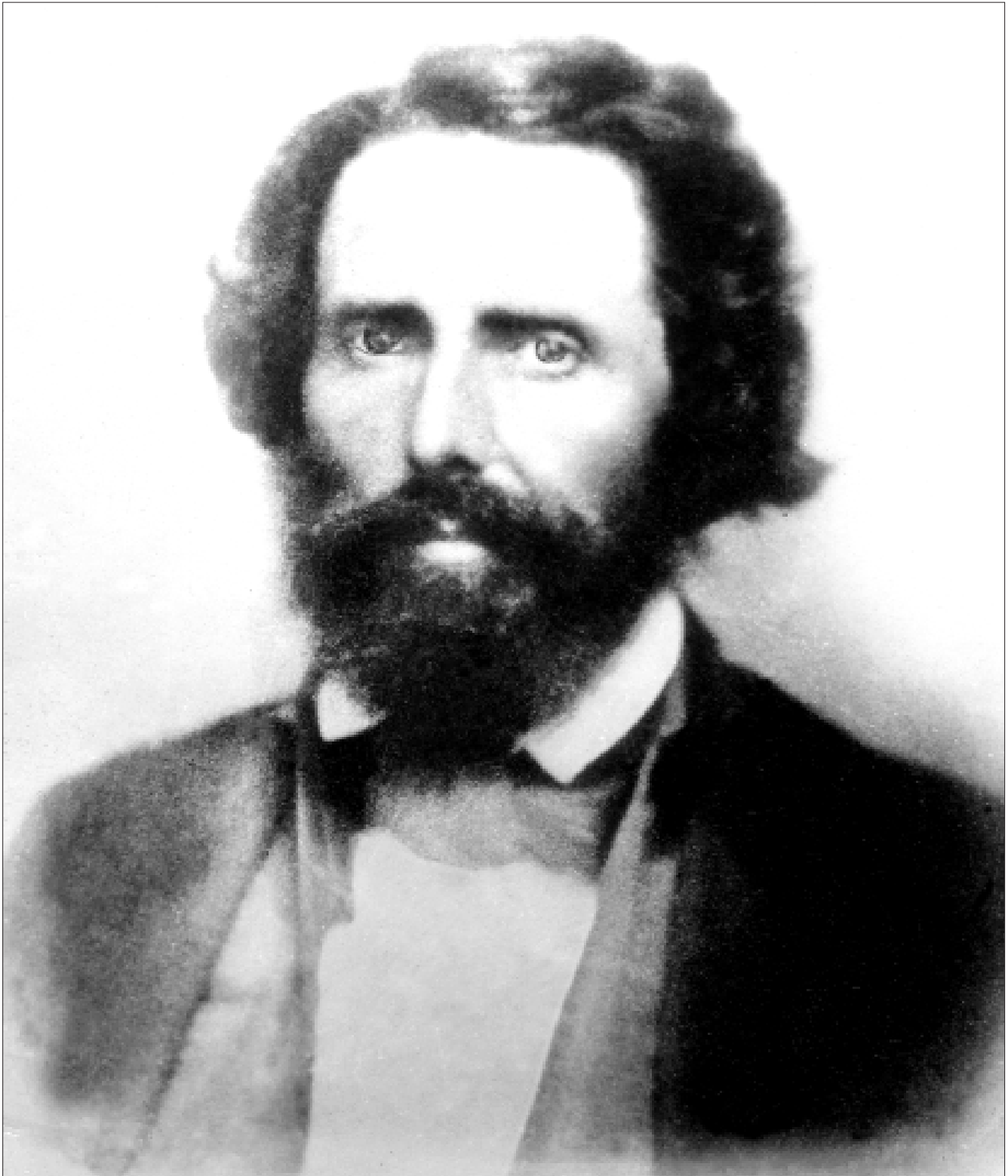
Record of Arms disbursed
by the Central Committee.
Received of Kansas Central Com-
Sharp Rifle No 15.175. also
Koolb revolver No 120.700
with accoutrements to be used
in defense of Kansas, and re-
turned if I leave Kansas, not
to be sold, and subject of
all times to their order
James Montgomery

The character of James Montgomery makes a brief appearance in *Glory*, a 1989 film about the African American Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry and its young abolitionist colonel, Robert Gould Shaw. In the movie Montgomery is introduced to Shaw as “a real jayhawker from Kansas,” whom Shaw, to his surprise, learns is the leader of another black regiment in the Union army. “You didn’t think yours were the only coloreds around, did you colonel?” Montgomery asks. He then invites Shaw and his men on a foraging expedition; eager to prove his troops’ mettle, Shaw accepts.

But *Glory*’s Montgomery has a sinister countenance. He sports a Southern overseer’s straw hat, and he exhibits a mixture of militant dedi-

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James Montgomery—a man of tranquility, a man of vengeance. On the facing page is an 1858 record of arms (Sharps rifles and Colt revolvers) dispersed to Montgomery “to be used in defense of Kansas.”



Of James Montgomery, Colonel Robert Gould Shaw (above) wrote in 1863, "I can't help feeling a great respect for him. He is quiet, gentlemanly, full of determination, but convinced that the South should be devastated with fire and sword."

cation to the Union cause and thinly veiled racism. Shaw's alarm grows when Montgomery pays him a backhanded compliment concerning the Fifty-fourth's marching prowess. "I am surprised by how well you handle 'em," drawls Montgomery. "See, I am from Kentucky originally, and we owned a few ourselves, so it comes naturally to me." *Glory* also depicts the foraging expedition into the town of Darien, Georgia, as a dirty little atrocity, with Montgomery as the instigator of violence directed toward suspected Confederate sympathizers and even his own soldiers, one of whom he shoots for assaulting a white woman. When Shaw tries to resist Montgomery's order to fire the town, the jayhawker with a peculiar gleam in his eye intones, "you see, secesh has got to be swept away by the hand of God, like the Jews of old. And now I shall have to burn this town."¹

1. The connection between Vietnam and *Glory's* depiction of the Civil War also has been made, in a different context, by Robert Burgoyne, *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at U.S. History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 30.

This vengeful, larcenous warrior is the Montgomery who is best known to moviegoers and Civil War buffs. But the truth, as usual, is more complicated. Several aspects of the film are simply wrong. The real James Montgomery originally was from Ohio, he never owned slaves, and he probably was not sufficiently familiar with the day-to-day operations of the slave system to lecture anyone on "how to handle 'em." He assisted runaway slaves on the Kansas–Missouri border, and while surely he harbored some of the racial prejudices of his day, his background, circumstances, and the company he kept (he counted John Brown as a friend) all point to a man who leaned toward the more enlightened side of nineteenth-century race relations. He certainly was not a transplanted Southern slavedriver.

The Darien raid likewise was a more complex matter than *Glory* indicates. Montgomery's occupation of the town did involve looting and property damage, which made newspaper headlines for all the wrong reasons. Some thought Montgomery's behavior could damage the cause of arming and accepting black soldiers. A New Englander complained that "if burning and pillaging is to be the work of our black regiments, no first-rate officers will be found to accept promotion in them—it is not war, it is piracy."² Robert Gould Shaw wrote several letters disavowing any willing role in "this dirty piece of business." Montgomery's zeal to wreck the town for no good military reason struck Shaw as dishonorable. "If it were a place of refuge for the enemy, there might have been some reason for Montgomery's acting as he did," he wrote, "but as the case stands, I can't see the justification for it." The looting did not help, either. "I do not like to degenerate into a plunderer and a robber."³

But Shaw was not unalterably opposed to making hard war on the South, informing his wife that "All I complain of, is wanton destruction." In his letters, Shaw sounds rather like a soldier trying to figure out what qualifies as "wanton" during a time of civil war. He plainly did not agree with Montgomery's take on the matter, but he was willing to concede that, right or wrong, the jayhawker was very sure of himself—and this was not necessarily a

2. Quotation by Thomas Russell Lowell in Dudley T. Cornish, *The Sable Arm: Black Troops in the Union Army, 1861–1865*, 2d ed. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1987), 150.

3. Robert Gould Shaw to Annie Kneeland Haggerty Shaw, June 9, 1863, Russell Duncan, ed., *Blue-eyed Child of Fortune: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 343.

bad thing. "From what I have seen of him, [Montgomery] is a conscientious man," he wrote, "and really believes what he says—that he is doing his duty to the best of his knowledge and ability.'" After he had a few days to think it over, Shaw was even more charitable, writing to his mother of Montgomery that "I can't help feeling a great respect for him. He is quiet, gentlemanly, full of determination, but convinced that the South should be devastated with fire and sword."⁴

Montgomery came across to Shaw as a serenely cocksure warrior who was certain about his own rectitude and that of the Union cause. "His perfect calmness at all times is very impressive," Shaw observed.⁵ Many people who knew James Montgomery also were struck by his unique combination of certainty, violence, and tranquility.

This makes him worth our attention. More colorful characters emerged from the wrack of Bleeding Kansas (it is difficult to top Jim Lane on this score). Some Kansans equaled or exceeded Montgomery in abolitionist zeal, and the war produced many violent men. Perhaps this is why Montgomery has received so little direct attention from scholars of the era; placed in the drama of Bleeding Kansas, Montgomery seems to fade into the background, a bit player behind Brown, Lane, and the other stars of the show.

But Montgomery to an unusual degree blended rigidity of moral purpose with an eagerness to destroy property and kill people, all in a way that made him look like an island of quiet purpose amid the swirling chaos that was America during the Civil War era. According to tradition, the word "jayhawk" was invented to describe the depredations of Montgomery and his men. If so, he did not lose much sleep over it, and the people who followed him apparently did not do so either. Why? Because during the most uncertain of times James Montgomery was blessed with an inordinate degree of confidence, about himself, his cause, and his behavior in the name of defending that cause. It is hard to say just where that confidence originated: his personality, perhaps, or his belief in God. Whatever the reason, he managed to cut a wider swath through Bleeding Kansas than might otherwise have been expected, and he earned the respect of more Kansans than might otherwise have been given to

him, precisely because he seemed so sure of where he was going and what he wanted to accomplish. This made him a relative calm spot amidst the chaos of violence and civil war, and in such a time and place, at least the appearance of calm translated into considerable moral authority.

The standard story for territorial Kansas—then and now—often has a deceptively simple quality. It goes something like this: in 1854 Kansas was organized under the theory of popular sovereignty. If the territory filled with freesoilers it would be admitted as a free state, if it were settled by slaveholders it would become a new home for slavery. In the ensuing months activists on both sides of the slavery question rushed to Kansas, with Missouri's proslavery "Border Ruffians" and their allies fighting in every way, legal and otherwise, to make Kansas hospitable for human bondage. On the other side abolitionists, many hailing from New England and backed by the money, guns, and rhetoric of abolitionist radicals, fought to make Kansas a free state, the place where they might begin to roll back the tide of slavery's inexorable western expansion. The resulting showdown triggered a shooting war that set the stage for the far more titanic showdown between North and South a few years later.

Extremists on both sides of the issue wanted such a stark, good versus evil sort of clarity to pervade their efforts. Proslavery people thought the abolitionist settlers coming east from places such as Massachusetts represented a particularly virulent brand of Yankee evil, to be countered using every means necessary. "I tell you to mark every scoundrel among you that is in the least tainted with free-soilism or abolitionism and exterminate [them]," wrote one. "Neither give nor take quarter from the damned rascals."⁶ For their part, antislavery Kansans called proslavery Missourians "ruffians," and "pukes," and feared "a war of extermination" in which they could expect no quarter from an unruly rabble bent on "making us truly white slaves in a Red Sea of evil."⁷

Thus could right-thinking slaveholders and right-thinking freesoilers identify the ground upon which they

4. Shaw to Sara Blake Sturgis Shaw, June 13, 1863, *ibid.*, 348.

5. *Ibid.*

6. George W. Martin, *The First Two Years of Kansas, or, Where, When and How the Missouri Bushwhacker, the Missouri Train and Bank Robber, and Those Who Stole Themselves Rich in the Name of Liberty, Were Sired and Reared: An Address* (Topeka: State Printing Office, 1907), 8.

7. Sara T. L. Robinson, *Kansas, Its Interior and Exterior Life* (Lawrence, Kans.: Journal Publishing Co., 1899), 78, 101, 102, 155; Michael Fellman, *Inside War: The Guerrilla Conflict in Missouri during the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 13–14.

stood. Abolitionists ordered their moral universe by comparing themselves with what they were not: Missouri Border Ruffians and “pukes.” Missouri slaveholders defined their place as a (literally) lily-white good people by disparaging those Yankee intruders and “black” Republicans from back east.

But Kansas was not nearly so simple. The territory attracted people from every corner of the nation.⁸ Montgomery’s home, Linn County, contained proslavery farmers, freesoilers, U.S. army soldiers charged with keeping the peace between white settlers and nearby Ottawa Indians, a proslavery colony of Georgians who had emigrated *en masse*, and their slaves.⁹ Many of these nominal proslavery settlers cared little about feeding the political gristmill of slavery and even less about the East Coast antislavery activists who sought to make Kansas a battleground over slavery. Often in Kansas a mutual hostility sprang up between easterner and westerner that had relatively little to do with North/South sectionalism. One rumor had the New England Emigrant Aid Society solving Yankee social problems by sending paupers out west.¹⁰

Antislavery Kansans seemed on the surface to be a homogenous lot, but even within the ranks of the abolitionist faithful ran streaks of doubt and uncertainty. Some sided with the moderate politics of antislavery activist Charles Robinson, while others preferred the more violent Jim Lane—and Robinson and Lane detested one another. Even staunchly antislavery Lawrence witnessed the creation of a vigilance committee whose self-appointed task was “to observe and report all such persons as shall, by the expression of abolitionist sentiments, produce disturbances.”¹¹

Proslavery Kansans likewise were rife with dissension. Contrary to the assertions of abolitionists, no unified wave of Border Ruffianism was rising inexorably from Missouri to drown the western plains. People crossed the border into Kansas for a multitude of reasons, some political, some not. Once they settled in Kansas, slaveholders were more diverse and divided than many antislavery

propagandists realized. Even slaveholding Indians resided in Kansas.¹²

The slaves themselves were not simple in their behavior and loyalties, either. Circumstances forced them to walk perilous social and cultural tightropes in a hostile white world. Abolitionist Kansans who raided Missouri to free slaves reported that on occasion the slaves refused to go, while those blacks living in Kansas found the racial territory treacherous. For example, in April 1855 a mob in heavily proslavery Fort Leavenworth grabbed a local free-state lawyer named William Phillips, perched him on a rail, and—after shaving half his head and dousing him in tar and feathers—proceeded to sell him in a mock slave auction, during which a black “auctioneer” sold him to the hooting and jeering proslavery crowd for one dollar.¹³ What was going through this African American man’s mind as he performed his role in this little drama? Was the exercise repugnant to him, or was he a willing participant? It is not difficult to imagine an abolitionist spectator scratching his head in confusion. On the other hand, the faux “auctioneer” was just as likely to engage in some difficult and dangerous act of resistance to slave rule, leaving in turn a bewildered white slaveholder, one who may well have concluded from the auction scene that blacks were quite content with their fate. Here was a telling illustration of just how tangled and ambivalent even the supposedly clear-cut loyalties of race and slavery could become in the territory.

Kansas’s legal and political institutions, the fabric of civilized life for most white Americans, also seemed unusually shaky. For farmers the law’s most important function was reliably safeguarding their land claims, and yet squatters from Missouri and elsewhere routinely violated such claims, dispossessing lawful owners and daring anyone to do something about it. Much like other comfortably reliable civic rituals, elections were riddled with ongoing accusations of voting fraud. Judges whose objectivity previously laid the foundation of law and order now withstood rumors of being unscrupulous partisans, bending the law to work their political will. “Our courts are the very mockery of justice,” complained Sara Robinson, the wife of the free-state governor of Kansas. Kansas witnessed the murder of at least one sheriff and outright intimidation of

8. See, for example, Thomas Goodrich, *War to the Knife: Bleeding Kansas, 1854–1861* (Mechanicsburg, Pa.: Stackpole Books 1998), 13.

9. G. Murlin Welch, *Border Warfare in Southeastern Kansas*, ed. Dan L. Smith (Pleasanton, Kans.: Linn County Publishers, 1977), 1–4.

10. Goodrich, *War to the Knife*, 32.

11. Robinson, *Kansas, Its Interior and Exterior Life*, 123–24.

12. Goodrich, *War to the Knife*, 24, 27.

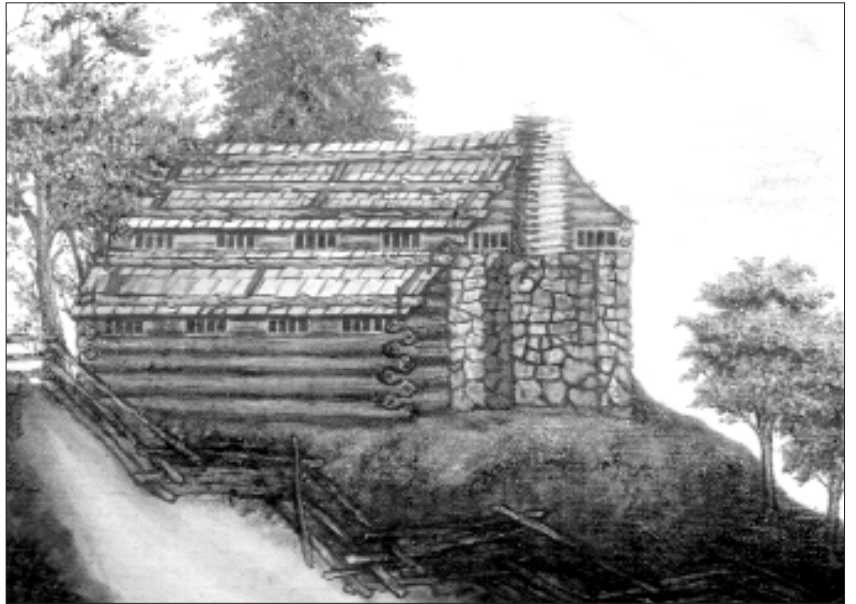
13. Martin, *The First Two Years of Kansas*, 13.

other law enforcement officials, including U.S. soldiers.¹⁴

Therefore, on many levels, Kansas made no sense. Far from having the certainty of an abolitionist/proslavery morality play, the territory instead housed a bewildering, disorienting collection of conflicting loyalties, purposes, and motives. "Chaos" was a common Kansas metaphor, as were frequent references in newspapers and elsewhere to unprecedented levels of confusion and anarchy. In his famous "The Crime Against Kansas Speech," Senator Charles Sumner referred to the people of the territory as suffering from "dimensions of wickedness which the imagination toils in vain to grasp." Sumner was famously prone to exaggeration, but people on the scene frequently resorted to images of pandemonium and even insanity to describe what they saw. One referred to the "madness of the hour" while another claimed that incidents of the border wars had left one poor woman "a raving maniac."¹⁵

James Montgomery stepped into this maelstrom during the summer of 1854. He left his home in western Missouri and purchased a plot of land in Linn County near Mound City, at the head of Little Sugar Creek. He could barely afford the move. Montgomery gave five dollars as a down payment to the seller, left his newlywed wife and two children (from his deceased first wife), and returned temporarily to Missouri, where he helped build a barn for a friend and earned enough wages to return and start his Kansas homestead.¹⁶

Montgomery was forty years old at the time. His life to that point had been unremarkable, so much so that there is much we do not know about him. He was born in the West-



After his home was riddled with gunfire and burned, Montgomery rebuilt his house into a stronghold. Constructed of the thickest logs available, his cabin was nicknamed "Fort Montgomery."

ern Reserve area of Ohio, the same region that fostered John Brown and quite a few other diehard abolitionists (although what effect this may have had on Montgomery is impossible to say). He worked as a schoolteacher in Kentucky and farmed in Missouri. Montgomery also filled time in both places as an itinerant preacher in the Campbellite faith, a rather obscure offshoot from Presbyterianism that placed heavy emphasis on personal salvation and gave a great deal of leeway to preachers in their interpretation of the Bible. Whether this fit Montgomery's already headstrong personality or whether it helped mold that personality into the often stubborn man Montgomery became is difficult to say. Historians have been unable to learn what caused him to stop preaching (or indeed whether he stopped at all), but the Campbellite faith's general individualism fit him well.¹⁷

Montgomery had some education but never much money. Legend has it that he moved his family from Kentucky to Missouri crammed in a dugout canoe he had made. He was antislavery, but at this point not fanatical-

14. Robinson, *Kansas, Its Interior and Exterior Life*, 123; James M. Hanway, "Colonel James Montgomery," *Ottawa Journal*, ca. 1871, in "Hanway Scrapbooks," vol. 5: 9, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society.

15. "Madness" and "Maniac" quotations in Goodrich, *War to the Knife*, 164, 170; Robert Hamilton Williams, *With the Border Ruffians: Memoirs of the Far West, 1852-1868* (1907; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 92.

16. William A. Mitchell, *Linn County, Kansas: A History* (Kansas City: Charno Press, 1928), 15; J. N. Holloway, *History of Kansas: From The First Exploration of the Mississippi Valley to Its Admission Into the Union* (Lafayette, Ind.: James, Emmons, and Co., 1868), 496.

17. See, generally, J.A. Shackleford, *A Compendium of Baptist History* (Louisville, Ky.: Hartford's, 1892), 313-16; Charles H. Lippy, *Bibliography of Religion in the South* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1985), 17-23; Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press, 1989).



Montgomery recruited from among the ranks of other freesoilers in the area and led what he called a “self-protective association.” He and his men frequently raided proslavery towns and farms in Missouri, stealing livestock, burning barns, and liberating slaves. This sketch, entitled *Breaking Up a Pro-Slavery Camp*, accompanied an article on territorial Kansas published in the May 1887 issue of *Century Magazine*.

ly so. He moved from the free state in which he was born into two slaveholding states, he tutored slave owners’ children as a schoolmaster, and he bought the land on Sugar Creek from a proslavery Missourian.¹⁸

Proslavery people dominated the area he chose for his new home, and as a freesoiler Montgomery found himself a member of an embattled minority. Proslavery Kansans and Missouri Border Ruffians ordered all anti-slavery emigrants to clear out of Linn County, and apparently most obeyed. Montgomery did not. He stayed because of an innate stubbornness, because his antislavery politics had hardened into real, uncompromising conviction, and probably because he could not afford to move his family to another claim among more amenable neighbors.¹⁹ At some point he was “interviewed” by a proslavery delegation. Apparently they found his answers unsatisfactory, for soon thereafter his house was peppered with gunfire and then burned.²⁰

Still refusing to leave, Montgomery girded for combat. He acquired a Colt revolver and a Sharps carbine, and he rebuilt his house into a stronghold—nicknamed “Fort Montgomery” by the locals—using the thickest

oak and walnut logs available and set vertically, “so cleverly and accurately put together that there was nowhere a crevice large enough for a bullet.” The house had only one small window set high up to discourage potshots. Montgomery also dug an escape tunnel leading into the local brush and a prearranged hiding place.²¹

While he was thus engaged in fortifying and arming himself, Montgomery began recruiting from among the ranks of other freesoilers in the region. By 1857 he led what he called a “self-protective association” whose numbers varied from fifteen to fifty. They conducted frequent raids into Missouri against proslavery farms and towns, stealing horses and livestock, burning barns and crops, and carrying off slaves. Montgomery “made it a rule that all members in service should be mounted on a stolen Pro-Slavery horse or mule,” claimed an anonymous writer.²² They also policed their own neighborhood, serving warning to proslavery Kansans that they would not tolerate their politics or violent behavior. They issued warnings for slave owners and their allies to clear out of southern Kansas and “threatened to mete out summary punishment should he catch them in their disgraceful acts.” Montgomery made it clear that this extended not only to unruly types or illegal squatters but to all supporters of slavery. He reserved his particular ire for “manstealers” who tried to return runaway Kansas slaves back into bondage. He arraigned these men before a “jury” of his jayhawkers, who according to one account “were terrifying to the slave-hunters, and effectually barred the enforcement of the fugitive slave law in Kansas.” Montgomery usually allowed convicted manstealers to leave the

18. Mitchell, *Linn County, Kansas*, 16–17.

19. Holloway, *History of Kansas*, 501.

20. William P. Tomlinson, *Kansas in 1858: Being Chiefly a History of the Troubles in the Territory* (New York: H. Dayton, 1859), 166.

21. Holloway, *History of Kansas*, 502; Mitchell, *Linn County, Kansas*, 17–19.

22. “The Fort Scott Difficulties and Gov. Robinson,” *Freemen’s Champion* (Prairie City), July 8, 1858, also in “Kansas Biographical Scrapbooks,” vol. 144: 5–11, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society.

territory upon taking an oath never to return, but he was involved in at least one execution.²³

One incident in particular marks Montgomery's rise as a border raider to be reckoned with. In December 1858 he led a large expedition of sixty to one hundred armed freesoilers from Linn, Osage, and Bourbon Counties into Fort Scott, long hated as the "bastile of the proslavery party" in southern Kansas. Their goal was the liberation of Benjamin Rice, one of Montgomery's close comrades, who had been imprisoned for deeds committed prior to a general amnesty issued by Governor James W. Denver. Montgomery and other freesoilers believed the amnesty should have absolved Rice of past wrongdoing, and they saw his arrest as an act of bad faith. They accordingly rode into Fort Scott at dawn with guns drawn, and during the ensuing firefight proslavery man John Little took a bullet in his forehead as he was wiping dust from a window pane to shoot at the raiders. Montgomery and his men freed Rice and beat a hasty retreat out of town, but not before pilfering some money and other items. Little was "a very fine young man" from a good Southern family, according to proslavery Kansans, and his death caused a sensation in their ranks.²⁴

The Fort Scott raid, a high profile affair, generated local press coverage and made Montgomery a celebrity in Kansas and Missouri. "[H]is name was a terror to pro-slavery men," noted an observer. But he also directed scores of smaller scale operations. Some thought he was responsible for most of the outlaw activity in southern Kansas and laid the blame for horse thievery, robbery, and outright murders directly at his door. In May 1858, for example, rumors flew that Montgomery and his men had embarked on a drunken spree in Douglas County, where Montgomery supposedly robbed a store and post office owned by proslavery man James M. Wells. After leaving

Wells's store, they robbed Sheriff Pat Cosgrove of seventeen dollars, a revolver, and a gold watch.²⁵

Perhaps Montgomery himself robbed and looted in this manner, or maybe men acting in his name committed these depredations without his direct control or knowledge. In the realm of public opinion, it did not matter. His name was attached to enough jayhawking to convince plenty of Kansans that he was little more than a brigand, using antislavery political talk to paper over his penchant for mayhem. "He was frequently cursed and denounced in public meetings" by conservative antislavery men, according to one account. A letter from "Many Citizens" to Governor Denver complained that "Bands of Companies under the command of James Montgomery of Sugar Mound have been reigning as despots." The *Lawrence Republican* saw him as a loose cannon who had trouble distinguishing between true Border Ruffians and merely proslavery Kansans who wanted to be left alone. When Montgomery's raiders "wreak their vengeance on peaceable proslavery men," the *Republican* warned, "they injure themselves, their friends, and their cause."²⁶

On the other hand, his friends painted a benevolent picture of him, declaring that "he was conscientious, honest, [and] tender-hearted towards those in distress." They argued that Montgomery actually served as a restraining influence on the more violent jayhawkers he led.²⁷ Some believed that his direct supervision of free-soil raids was short-lived and that truly violent men such as Charles "Doc" Jennison actually committed the depredations for which many Kansans continued to credit (or blame) Montgomery. Nor did he seem to be growing wealthy from his deeds. Montgomery remained "as poor as afflicted Job, [and] he never bettered his condition by spoils taken from the enemy."²⁸

23. Welch, *Border Warfare in Southeastern Kansas*, 72; Holloway, *History of Kansas*, 504, 514; "The Fort Scott Difficulties and Gov. Robinson," 7; "James Montgomery," *Kansas Magazine* 1 (January to June 1872): 91.

24. On the Fort Scott raid, see T. F. Robley, *History of Bourbon County, Kansas* (Fort Scott, Kans.: Monitor Publishing, 1894), 127–33; Hanway, "Colonel James Montgomery," 9; Jay Monaghan, *Civil War on the Western Border, 1854–1865* (Lincoln: Bison Books, 1984), 100–1; H. H. Johnson, "Early Kansas Days, Personal Recollections," *Salina Farmer Advocate*, March 21, 1879, 257; William Smith to Samuel McKittrick, February 28, 1859, reproduced at <http://www.kancoll.org/articles/wmsmith.htm>.

25. James Hanway, "James Montgomery," in "Kansas Biographical Scrapbooks," vol. 63: 309; Welch, *Border Warfare in Southeastern Kansas*, 92–93; Goodrich, *War to the Knife*, 220.

26. Hanway, "James Montgomery," 309; "The Fort Scott Difficulties and Gov. Robinson," 4; Hanway, "Colonel James Montgomery"; "Many Citizens" and *Lawrence Republican* quotations in Welch, *Border Warfare in Southeastern Kansas*, 90, 94.

27. See, for example, a description of a "conciliatory" political speech Montgomery was said to have given in 1859 in B.F. Simpson, "A Battle of Giants," "Miami County" clippings, vol. 2, 36–39, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society.

28. Theodosius Botkin, "Among the Sovereign Squats," *Kansas Historical Collections, 1901–1902* 7 (1902), 433; Stephen Z. Starr, *Jennison's Jayhawkers: A Civil War Cavalry Regiment and Its Commander* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), 31; Holloway, *History of Kansas*, 512–14.

Fort Scott. Jan 14 - 1854

Montgomery

Listen to me.

Today I heard you paid a
 speech a few days since, that you
 were not sorry you had killed
 John Little, that he was not killed
 for no reason.

Can you before God pay so?
 O, this acquish. you have caused
 He was one of the noblest men
 ever created, born and bred to
 his country and world. You can't.

In this 1859 letter, Sene Campbell lashes out at Montgomery for killing her fiancé John Little and showing no remorse for his grievous deed.

Was Montgomery an unprincipled bandit or an antislavery hero? It is hard to say. Nearly all available evidence comes from secondhand accounts of his deeds (or rumors thereof), written by Kansans who usually had pro- or antislavery axes to grind and colored their opinions accordingly. One man's depredation was another man's crusade. The Fort Scott raid, for example, seemed to many antislavery men a justifiable assault on a proslavery stronghold, but that same raid struck proslavery Kansans as little more than a spasm of organized thievery and murder. Montgomery's "self protective association" was of necessity a shadowy outfit, fluctuating in numbers and personnel as circumstances dictated. It no doubt attracted men whose antislavery pretensions were but a superficial covering for the desire to rob and pillage. Montgomery probably could exercise only sporadic control over their behavior; he could not have prevented bands of marauders from using his name when he was not present.

Less important perhaps than the question of the types of raids Montgomery led is the question of how he came to lead any raids at all. Many violent, determined men resided in Kansas, any number of whom aspired to

leadership. But it was James Montgomery who climbed the ladder of respectability (or notoriety) within Kansas's antislavery ranks, not only among fellow Linn County freesoilers but also among antislavery men everywhere in the territory.

Many Kansans found Montgomery an inspiring figure. He was "a man who had done more hard service in the cause of freedom than any other man in Kansas," wrote James Hanway from neighboring Franklin County. Others also took issue with his reputation as a hothead and ruthless scourge of Missouri. "[H]e has been in possession of information relative to the proposed action by a rump of Border Ruffianism," wrote an admirer, and "all his action has been with a view to head them off. . . . James Montgomery has acted in a prudent yet determined manner." People who knew and liked him emphasized his personal honesty and his restraint when conducting raids into proslavery areas. To them, Montgomery "was a humane man." His admirers thought they saw the signs of a gifted, divinely anointed leader in his swift ascent. Others compared him to the seventeenth-century Puritan leader of England, Oliver Cromwell, and still others claimed he was a born leader and "pioneer in the great struggle for human rights."²⁹

But in the 1850s Montgomery's God-given leadership talents were harder to identify. At first glance nothing about him seemed particularly inspiring. He was commonplace in physical appearance, a bit on the tall side (about six feet) and "lightly but lithely built," according to one account. People noticed his high forehead and "keen, bright blue eyes," which gave him an air of intelligence. He was soft-spoken and articulate with "an agreeable voice." The only known photographs of Montgomery depict him as rather bland, particularly in comparison with pictures of the cold, quietly furious John Brown or Jim Lane's disheveled-looking wildness. Compared with them Montgomery seems sedate, dressed in a

29. Hanway, "Colonel James Montgomery"; Hanway, "James Montgomery"; "The Fort Scott Difficulties and Gov. Robinson," 8-11; R. I. Holcombe, *History of Vernon County, Missouri* (St. Louis: Brown and Co., 1887), 219; "A True Statement of the Doings and Policy of Captain James Montgomery," *Freemen's Champion*, July 1, 1858, "from the *Lawrence Republican*."

plain black suit and sporting a simple beard and curly dark hair. He hardly looks the part of a hardcore jayhawker.³⁰

If Montgomery's appearance was not enough to stimulate his followers and allies, then he might have used some spectacularly violent act to inspire respect and awe. This ploy proved useful for Doc Jennison, who gained notoriety when he settled a political dispute in 1859 between the citizens of Mound City and Paris by pointing a loaded cannon at the Mound City courthouse. John Brown's murder spree on Pottawatomie Creek likely inspired followers among the more violent abolitionists, as well; other jayhawkers—Marshall Cleveland, for example—built a following by cultivating a Robin Hood-style persona as the "Phantom Horseman of the Prairie."³¹

Montgomery did not posture like this. His most flamboyant public incident occurred on January 4, 1858, when he destroyed a ballot box he believed—with good reason—had been stuffed with illegal proslavery ballots during the territorial referendum on a proslavery constitution. Pushing his way through the election-day crowd in the Sugar Mound post office, Montgomery dramatically declared, "Freemen of Linn [County]! I have defended your rights in past time, and I am here to defend your rights today!" He then smashed the box, shouting "Thus, Freemen of Linn, I right you!"³²

The incident earned him an indictment from the territorial courts (for which he never was tried). No doubt this heightened his standing in some free-soil quarters. But ballot box vandalism, justified or not, struck some Kansans as excessive. Even his more ardent supporters distanced themselves from the deed. James M. Hanway, who rushed to defend Montgomery in print, nevertheless cautioned "not that we would consider that his acts were right or expedient" and acknowledged that the ballot box affair was "generally denounced as wrong."³³

Montgomery displayed considerable personal courage. Merely remaining in Linn County, within easy reach of his many proslavery enemies, took nerve. He had "fortress" Montgomery, but even the strongest house could not withstand a determined assault. Frequently he

used the secret escape tunnel to hide out for days at a time from proslavery mobs. He also feared isolated attempts on his life by lone spies and bushwhackers hiding in the brush, waiting to catch him unawares as he walked to his outbuildings or emerged from his hiding place. He worked out a secret code with his wife whereby she could signal him where he lay hidden that the coast was clear and she could deliver food for him. "When she called the cows he knew that at that spot she dropped a package of food for him which she had concealed under her skirts," an ally later remembered.³⁴ This sort of tenacity was admirable enough. But how inspiring is a man hiding in the woods?

An aspiring frontier leader also made use of stormy "stump" oratory. Jim Lane built his political following in Kansas using a speaking style so brash, profane, and unrestrained that it shocked even those Kansans accustomed to the wild speeches of the time. Many thought Lane was an embarrassment, but many others did not. "His oratory was voluble and incessant, without logic, learning, rhetoric, or grace," recalled a Lane observer, "and yet the electric shock of his extraordinary eloquence thrills like the blast of a trumpet." Men would follow such a trumpet, and Lane used his oratorical blasts to win a sizable following in Kansas's antislavery community.³⁵

Numerous eyewitnesses noted that Montgomery spoke effectively. But he was not given to attention-getting political rants. People described him more as an intellectual type, "quiet, modest and silver-tongued." E. S. W. Drought of Kansas City, who first met Montgomery during the war, later wrote, "I had formed the idea that he was a rough frontiersman. . . . but to my great astonishment I found him to be one of the mildest and gentlest of men." This was all well and good, but given the temper of the times a voice "low and musical" and a temperament mild and gentle would not likely goad followers to jayhawk with reckless abandon. Even Lane's enemies grudgingly admitted that he was a very effective demagogue, but no one described Montgomery in such terms.³⁶

30. For descriptions, see Hanway, "Colonel James Montgomery"; Holloway, *History of Kansas*, 497; Holcombe, *History of Vernon County, Missouri*, 219, 243. For a description of Montgomery during a meeting with Governor Denver, see Monaghan, *Civil War on the Western Border*, 105.

31. Starr, *Jennison's Jayhawkers*, 24–25, 29.

32. William P. Tomlinson, *Kansas in 1858*, 185–92.

33. Hanway, "James Montgomery," 309; see also Goodrich, *War to the Knife*, 30–31.

34. Mitchell, *Linn County, Kansas*, 19. For information on runaway slaves working the farm, see Hanway, "Colonel James Montgomery," 9.

35. William E. Connelley, "The Lane Family," *Kansas Historical Collections*, 1923–1925 16 (1923): 35.

36. "Colonel Montgomery and His Letters," *Kansas Historical Collections*, 1913–1914 2 (1915): 259; E. S. W. Drought, "James Montgomery," *ibid.*, 1897–1900 6 (1900): 342–43. For information on Lane as a demagogue, see Starr, *Jennison's Jayhawkers*, 13; Goodrich, *War to the Knife*, 196–97.



Montgomery brought another dimension to Kansas that converted his fairly ordinary attributes into a recipe for leadership. This sketch of Montgomery and the Militia was published in J. N. Holloway's *History of Kansas*.

Armed and angry men would not at first glance instinctively follow a man like James Montgomery, but he was not without talent. He had some education and decent speaking skills. He was brave and resourceful. But Kansas possessed a fair number of men with similar pedigrees.

Montgomery brought another dimension to Kansas that converted this set of fairly ordinary attributes into a recipe for leadership: an abiding, palpable certitude, an attitude of unflappable confidence. It was an almost priceless gift in a territory where whites, blacks, Indians, "ruffians," and the like were rarely certain of anything, and it was the secret of his success as a jayhawker and border raider.

Part of this sense of certainty lay in the social realm of manhood. American society expected men of that time to be decisive, surefooted, and clear about what they wanted to do in the sphere of public life. Montgomery seems to have possessed a heightened personal sense of how his own manhood should be equated with iron resolve. He constructed an interesting little story about himself, claiming that while living in Missouri he had been warned against purchasing land in Kansas because peo-

ple with antislavery sympathies were unwelcome there. Instead, he was told, plenty of good land could be had in Bates County, Missouri. Montgomery went to Bates County and stayed for about a week. He did not like the place, and, "his high sense of honor stung by reflecting upon the reasons which had turned him from his plan of entering Kansas," he decided to go there after all. According to Montgomery, he had brooded upon the subject for days when, suddenly at his dinner table, he was struck with a moment of decisive clarity and resolved with clenched fists and steady eye to venture forth into Kansas. "From that moment henceforth I was a man," he recalled.³⁷

He also harbored the moralistic certainty that fired so many other social activists in nineteenth-century America. In this age of singleminded reformers, the Theodore Dwight Welds, Lyman Beechers, and William Lloyd Garrisons relentlessly pursued perfection of mankind and America in the name of God and right. Montgomery had the zealous certainty that animated many temperance advocates of his day. He was said to be a teetotaler in his personal habits, and several of his raids looked like temperance crusades. In one expedition he "cleaned out the saloons" in Linn County "and started the drunken rounders in a bunch toward the state line." At Trading Post, Kansas, he smashed casks of whiskey and poured their contents into a nearby river.³⁸

Montgomery also espoused the certainty born of his faith, a strict Christian piety in the cause of which "he never swore an oath, or said an indelicate word; he called for a blessing at every meal he ate, [and] carried a Bible with him constantly." He combined his religion and his politics to the point that at least one contemporary characterized him as an "abolition preacher."³⁹ Montgomery's hatred of slavery grew from biblical roots, as did his actions taken in defense of the antislavery cause. The Bible justified many deeds in Montgomery's mind. He dismissed the execution of Missourian Russell Hinds by a Kansas vigilance committee with an almost matter-of-fact reference to

37. Holloway, *History of Kansas*, 496. For information on the role of decisiveness in determining manhood at the time, see E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), esp. ch. 8–9.

38. Mitchell, *Linn County, Kansas*, 21–23. For information on the passionate zeal of Jacksonian reformers, see generally Ronald G. Walters, *American Reformers, 1815–1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), ch. 1–3.

39. Holcombe, *History of Vernon County, Missouri*, 219.

divine law. "He was a drunken border ruffian, worth a great deal to hang but good for nothing else," Montgomery sneered. Hinds "had caught a fugitive slave and carried him back to Missouri for the sake of a reward. He was condemned by a jury of twelve men, the law being found in the 16th verse of Exodus XXI."⁴⁰

The combination of American legalism and biblical injunction served Montgomery well by providing him a sort of dual moral scaffolding upon which he could hang his deeds. John Brown comes readily to mind as a comparable example, and in many ways the two men led parallel lives. Both were from the same area of Ohio, both were nondescript mediocrities as they entered middle-age and abolitionist activism (albeit Montgomery had not compiled the record of abject failures that dogged Brown), and both ended up on the leading edge of the controversies in Bleeding Kansas. As comrades-in-arms, Brown spent more than one evening at Fort Montgomery.⁴¹

But Montgomery and Brown also exhibited interesting differences. Brown considered himself an instrument of God, a belief that struck some as arrogant. In fact, Brown leavened this with an almost equally powerful belief that he was an imperfect instrument and that his sins and shortcomings were palpable. "When I think how very little influence I have ever tried to use with my numerous acquaintances and friends, in turning their minds toward God and heaven," he wrote in an anguished letter to his father, "I feel justly condemned as a most wicked and slothful servant."⁴² Brown always feared he might come up short, and it gave him (at least in private) a measure of humility and even ambiguity—if not about God's antislavery will, then at least about his own ability to act in the name of that will.

Montgomery, however, maintained a nearly absolute certainty about God's will and his own destiny. God reigned supreme, yes, but Montgomery seemed to feel little of Brown's angst concerning his worthiness to act in the

name of that supremacy. He knew he was the hand of God, and he knew with equal conviction that he was an effective appendage for God's will. This gave him a healthy ego. Brown may have seemed arrogant, but Montgomery really was self-centered and even a trifle overbearing. "In the most arbitrary manner [Montgomery] declared that he was and would continue in command," grumbled a fellow jayhawker during the Fort Scott raid. He often talked as if he were on a leading edge of a global controversy. "The eyes of the civilized world were turned to Kansas," he declared at a Linn County meeting. For some, this was too much. "Colonel Montgomery seemed to think that he was the idol of the Free State men," said a detractor.⁴³

Brown, on the other hand, followed a God whose purposes were maybe a bit too inscrutable. Montgomery himself believed Brown left too much in the hands of an unknowable God. "Captain Brown may feel confidence in his peculiar views," Montgomery once said, "but for my part, although believing in a general providence, I believe it my duty to so plan and arrange my acts, as if every thing depended on my own individual act." Those words summarize what Montgomery brought to the fray and what set him apart from other violent Kansas men. "I believe Montgomery to be a good man," Brown once said, but "he has a mind of a peculiar mould." By that he meant a mind too independent and cocksure, which after awhile became too much for Brown to stomach. After an initial attempt to coordinate his guerrilla activities with Montgomery's, Brown sniffed that the jayhawker "had ideas of his own," and he drifted away to plan his own operations.⁴⁴

What Brown considered an overly stubborn self-reliance struck others as an admirable certainty and a usefully discernable moral compass in a time and place that lacked good references. Particularly during border raids into Missouri and other jayhawking activities, people noticed that Montgomery seemed to have created for himself a private system of conduct, a mental dictionary of morality. He "acted from the impulse of his own feelings

40. Montgomery quotation in Starr, *Jennison's Jayhawkers*, 33–34. Exodus 21:16 (King James version) reads, "And he that stealeth a man, and selleth him, or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to death."

41. Mitchell, *Linn County, Kansas*, 20; Stephen B. Oates, *To Purge This Land With Blood: A Biography of John Brown* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 254.

42. Brown quotation in Louis A. De Caro Jr., *Fire From the Midst of You: A Religious Life of John Brown* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 145.

43. Simpson, "A Battle of Giants"; Tomlinson, "1858," 168; Robley, *History of Bourbon County, Kansas*, 129.

44. Hanway, "Colonel James Montgomery," 9; Oates, *To Purge this Land with Blood*, 254.

ending, of course, that it should refer our applica-
 tions to the Federal Court; and promising to do
 what he could to reform abuses in that department.
 Times are quiet now, and our lives
 as safe as they would be in any country,
 fugitives too, are as safe here, as
 they would be in Canada. Two more have come
 to us since my last writing.

In a letter to George Stearns, written November 27, 1860, Montgomery mentions the fugitive slaves who have taken refuge with him. Montgomery was dedicated to ending the immoral institution of slavery, his hatred of which grew from biblical roots.

and thoughts," noted one Kansan, and he was always "prepared to justify in his own mind" his behavior.⁴⁵

Montgomery's admirers found his code admirable, placing him above the run-of-the-mill brigands who used Kansas's political turmoils to justify their thievery and other excesses. "He was a different kind of man" from Lane or Jennison, argued T. F. Robley. "He was no coward, assassin, crank, fanatic, or murderer." He had a code that separated his men from bandits. For example, Montgomery "allowed them to take food for themselves and their horses, but never tolerated pilfering in any form, nor vile language nor unbecoming conduct." He allowed no molestation of women, and he gave stolen horses away to needy Kansans when they were no longer needed. During the Fort Scott raid he let his men raid nearby stores for clothing but prevented them from having a go at the local bank's safe.⁴⁶

This code gave him what Robert Gould Shaw later described as Montgomery's "perfect calmness." Some Kansans ascribed it to his innately Christian character. He is "a humane man," noted one, and there is "nothing fierce or savage in his character. [He is] a devout Christian, he believes in the practical supremacy of Higher Law."⁴⁷ In fact he was quite savage, but for many his violence was to a great extent redeemed—or blotted out entirely—by a divinely ordained serenity. Others saw it as a martial value that separated Montgomery as a true soldier from ordinary highway robbers. He "would never

stoop to dirty work," according to fellow Kansan H. H. Johnson, "but would always stand up to an open fight."

But the same "could not be said of some of his followers," Johnson cautioned. This was not through a lack of effort on Montgomery's part. He tried to compel his men to obey his rules. Anyone who did not obey these orders was expelled from Montgomery's command. He presumed to "order from the territory any man he chose," claimed a follower. Just how successful Montgomery was in implementing his particular warrior's code is open to question, but even his detractors noted that, during raids in which his leadership was highly visible, the men under his command engaged in surprisingly little looting.⁴⁸

Montgomery's value as a leader was highly contextual. His attributes were appealing only when thrown against the sharp relief of the territory's nagging uncertainties about itself and its future. Once Kansas stanchd the bleeding, once the swirling mess of confused relations among whites, blacks, Indians, Yankees, slaveholders, "pukes," and the like settled into relatively normal channels, mere hubris might not be such an alluring leadership characteristic.

This as much as anything explains James Montgomery's gradual slide back into relative mediocrity after 1860. By that year Kansas seemed considerably less chaotic. The constant mayhem of Bleeding Kansas had subsided into the occasional spasms of mischief that frontier Americans could usually tolerate. It was no longer fertile soil for the violent crusading of Jim Lane (who had left the territory) and John Brown (who had left and subsequently was

45. Hanway, "James Montgomery," 309; "Letter from Governor Robinson, Lawrence, July 15, 1858," *Freemen's Champion*, July 22, 1858; Robley, *History of Bourbon County, Kansas*, 131.

46. Robley, *History of Bourbon County, Kansas*, 119; Mitchell, *Linn County, Kansas*, 23; Holloway, *History of Kansas*, 544.

47. Holloway, *History of Kansas*, 496.

48. Johnson, "Early Kansas Days, Personal Recollections"; Welch, *Border Warfare in Southeastern Kansas*, 95; "The Fort Scott Difficulties and Gov. Robinson," 7. About Montgomery's leadership, see, for example, Goodrich, *War to the Knife*, 222.

hanged for his 1859 raid into Harpers Ferry, Virginia). Charles Jennison was a wanted man with a price on his head after he orchestrated one vigilante execution too many, and Marshall Cleveland, the “Phantom Horseman of the Prairie,” would soon cross into Missouri with an army detachment hot on his heels. The war eventually revived the fortunes and careers of some jayhawkers, but in 1860 Kansas finally was settling down.⁴⁹

In this new set of circumstances Montgomery seemed to be flailing about, unsure of his bearings, his trademark clarity diminished. He contemplated a raid to free John Brown from his Virginia jail but thought better of such an impracticable scheme. He looked around for more accessible enemies nearer home but found this difficult in a Kansas that soon would become a free state, once and for all. “We are neither Democrats or Republicans, but abolitionists. We are determined that slaves shall never be retaken in Kansas,” he announced, trying gamely to keep up the appearance of opposing an ongoing proslavery threat. He also tried to acquire backing from New England abolitionists to start a Republican newspaper in Kansas, but nothing came of that venture. East Coast intellectuals had forgotten about Kansas; he could no longer plausibly claim that the “eyes of the civilized world” were upon him. Montgomery was stuck in a backwater.⁵⁰

In the summer of 1861 he managed to parlay his political connections and military reputation into a colonelcy and an appointment commanding a regiment of Kansas volunteers. The unruly behavior of his new command appalled him, particularly their well-deserved reputation for drunkenness. “While in camp at Kansas City, an intoxicated trooper passed the colonel’s [Montgomery’s] headquarters,” remembered one soldier. “He was quite profane and noisy; the colonel sent his orderly to bring him to his tent. He asked the man if he could not behave himself as a soldier should.” Only temporarily chastised, the man returned to camp the next evening “howling drunk,” whereupon Montgomery had his head shaved and drummed him out of camp. The men also were not the best battlefield soldiers. During one skirmish in Missouri, Montgomery was compelled to seize a rifle himself and replace a man who was firing wildly. In addition, Montgomery’s bugler

managed to blow the wrong call for a retreat, thus confusing and stampeding the entire Union force. A militia-man sardonically noted that “He was the only officer I saw on the field who was not using profanity to the full strength of his voice.”⁵¹

However restrained he might have seemed publicly, Montgomery had grown discouraged, and he was tired of the border war. “Everything is going wrong here,” he complained to Lane from Osawatamie in December 1861. His badly equipped and badly supported men lacked ammunition, weapons, and artillery support. All the while, Montgomery warned Lane, the Confederates were massing their forces along the Missouri–Kansas border. Montgomery was convinced of an imminent large-scale assault on Kansas, and he warned Lane, “I am in no condition to fight if the enemy comes in force. The measles are still raging in our camps, and our regiments are reduced to mere skeletons.”⁵²

The cause of arming black soldiers looked like a natural new outlet for his energies, but here he met with frustration as well as success. Recruitment of black men to serve the Union army actually began in Kansas as far back as the summer of 1862 but did not acquire real vigor (or legality) until the following year, when Congress’s Confiscation Act opened the door for putting black men in the Union’s service as “contraband of war.” Montgomery wanted to get in on the project, probably as much from a desire to regain some of his lost stature as from genuine abolitionist conviction, but leading jayhawkers Jim Lane and Charles Jennison elbowed ahead of Montgomery in public opinion and political circles. Lane brought his usual manic energy to the recruitment and arming of black soldiers, while Jennison’s name was floated for a possible colonelcy in a state-raised African American unit. Montgomery responded to the latter possibility by undermining Jennison in a testy letter to Governor Charles Robinson, in which he called Jennison “an unmitigated liar black leg and robber” and declared that “I cannot imagine any greater calamity that could befall the blacks than the appointment of Jennison to command them.”⁵³

51. Drought, “James Montgomery,” 342–43.

52. James Montgomery to James Lane, December 8, 1861, in U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, ser. 1, vol. 8 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1902), 415–16.

53. James Montgomery to Charles Robinson, August 3, 1862, Charles Robinson Collection, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society.

49. *Ibid.*, 184–85; Starr, *Jennison’s Jayhawkers*, 34–35.

50. For information on his proposed Virginia raid, see Hanway, “Colonel James Montgomery,” 10; Goodrich, *War to the Knife*, 249; Monaghan, *Civil War on the Western Border*, 117.

The political intrigue and jockeying for promotion among Lane, Jennison, and other jayhawkers left Montgomery weary and disgusted, and in December 1862 he left Kansas for Washington, D.C. There he lobbied abolitionists, war department officials, congressmen, and President Lincoln, seeking command of a black regiment. The recently issued Emancipation Proclamation, with its impetus to put African Americans in uniform, aided his cause, and in early 1863 Montgomery received permission to raise a new unit among the droves of runaway slaves that had taken refuge behind Union army lines in the Carolina theater of operations.⁵⁴

He now led black soldiers rather than jayhawkers, but Montgomery used much the same methods: make war on the property and livelihood of white Southern slaveholders, the better to make them feel the pinch of war and defeat. In the Second Regiment, South Carolina Colored Volunteers, he commanded soldiers who if anything displayed greater motivation and zeal in their work than did the jayhawkers, and these men quickly became the scourge of Confederates living up and down the Carolina and Georgia coast. Darien was just one of a series of such raids, including a particularly successful excursion up the Combahee River in June 1863 that laid waste to several large rice plantations and freed more than 800 slaves, 150 of whom became new recruits in the Second South Carolina.⁵⁵

There were those who liked and approved of Montgomery's methods. "Montgomery gives none under his command time to rot, sicken and die in camp," wrote George Stephens, a soldier in the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts, "No sooner does he accomplish one object than he has already inaugurated the necessary steps for the accomplishment of another." But what had once struck Kansans as an admirable sure-footedness now looked more often like callous indifference. "His conceptions of foraging were rather more Western and liberal than mine," wrote Thomas Wentworth Higginson. For others in the North, his actions had become an embarrassment. This included Montgomery's superior officer, General David Hunter, who worried that Montgomery's raids might push an already desperate enemy into more rash, eye-for-an-eye behavior. Until the enemy resorted to "every conceivable species of injury," Hunter warned

Montgomery, "it will be both right and wise to hold the troops under your command to the very strictest interpretation of the laws and usage of civilized warfare."⁵⁶

Montgomery also found himself embroiled in an ongoing dispute concerning the pay inequity between white soldiers and the black troops under his command. The situation called for tact, caution, and an appreciation for ambiguity. Montgomery possessed none of these qualities, and his particular brand of self-confidence, certainty, and egotism now did not serve him well at all. Calling his men together on September 30, 1863, Montgomery rather imperiously laid out his credentials as a fighter and friend of African Americans. "You want plain talk and I shall give it to you. I am your friend," he announced, "I made the first anti-slavery speech ever made in Kansas. . . . I fought six years in Kansas for nothing and I do not come here for pay. I can make \$5,000 a year. I get only \$2,200 here. I sacrifice my ease and comfort (for I enjoy myself at home.)." He then proceeded to berate the men for their greed and ingratitude. "You ought to be glad to pay for the privilege to fight, instead of squabbling about money."

Montgomery followed this singularly unsympathetic observation with a nearly incoherent string of bigoted nonsense. "You want to be placed on the same footing as white soldiers," he said, but

you must show yourselves as good soldiers as the white. . . . You are a race of slaves. A few years ago your fathers worshipped snakes and crocodiles in Africa. Your features partake of a beastly character. Your religious exercises in this camp is [*sic*] a mixture of barbarism and Christianity. I am disgusted with the mean, low habits you have learned from the low whites. . . . Your beauty cannot recommend you. Your yellow faces are evidences of rascality. You should get rid of this bad blood.

True to his ego, Montgomery offered to rectify the situation, declaring, "I should be glad to make you as good soldiers as the white."⁵⁷

56. Donald Yacavone, ed., *A Voice of Thunder: The Civil War Letters of George E. Stephens* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 241; Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 114; David Hunter to James Montgomery, June 9, 1863, in U.S. War Department, *War of the Rebellion*, ser. 1, vol. 14 (1902), 466–67.

57. Yacavone, *A Voice of Thunder*, 277–79. Montgomery's speech is quoted in a letter from Stephens to Thomas Hamilton dated October 3, 1863. Stephens was a correspondent for a black newspapers in Philadelphia as well as a soldier in the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts.

54. Cornish, *The Sable Arm*, 73–78.

55. Stephen R. Wise, *Gate of Hell: Campaign for Charleston Harbor, 1863* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), 48–51.

Where did this come from? Unfortunately, the record on Montgomery's life has many blank spots, including his racial views. We know that he backed the radical abolitionists in Kansas, was a friend of John Brown, and helped runaway slaves escape to freedom. But it is entirely conceivable that he did all of these things and at the same time held bigoted and arrogant views of African Americans. Or, perhaps his views of black people had for some reason deteriorated during the war to the point that he could deliver such a harangue. In the end, it is difficult to say exactly what Montgomery was thinking when he lashed out at his men in this manner.

The men's reaction was entirely predictable. Many were veterans of the recent bloody and heroic assault on Battery Wagner and had seen Robert Gould Shaw die in that battle. They were stunned. "The Colonel spoke nearly an hour and I cannot stoop to give all the bad epithets directed to our regiment," wrote George Stephens. "We had not the remotest idea that he entertained such a spirit of hatred for our regiment." Not surprisingly, the men lost whatever respect they once might have entertained for Montgomery. "We should be glad to pay for the privilege to fight?" scoffed Stephens. "After we have endured a slavery of two hundred and fifty years we are to pay for the privilege to fight and die to enable the North to conquer the South—what an idea!"⁵⁸ Here Montgomery's "plain talk," his straightforward sense of certainty, hindered much more than it helped.

In the meantime, Montgomery's health had begun to deteriorate. Stephens noted that prior to his speech Montgomery "had been sick some time past" and had been absent from command. As far back as 1860, some in Kansas had noted that Montgomery seemed to be suffering from a variety of ailments, including a hacking cough that sometimes left him doubled over in the saddle. He resigned his commission in September 1864 and returned home to Linn County, Kansas. There he lived in relative quiet until his death in 1871.⁵⁹

58. Ibid.

59. Ibid., 277.



Montgomery lobbied abolitionists, war department officials, congressmen, and President Lincoln seeking command of a black regiment. Early in 1863 he received permission to raise a new unit among runaway slaves who had taken refuge behind Union army lines. Contrabands such as these composed Montgomery's Second South Carolina Infantry.

Did social, cultural, and political confusion create the violence that became endemic to Bleeding Kansas? In most other frontier settings, the answer surely would be yes. It is nearly axiomatic that territories lacking basic legal and political structures encourage the sort of confusion and displacement that creates violence. Kansas had its share of this sort of thing.

But Kansas's unique political environment made it a special case. To encourage acts of what their followers might call "righteous violence," both pro- and antislavery leaders had to foster not a sense of chaos but rather a sense of certainty, a sense that things could be put right again with a pistol or a Sharps rifle. Kansas was promising territory for leaders who could carry within themselves an inflexible moral roadmap and the nerve to act on it. James Montgomery built a brief but effective career by doing so. 