



Studio portrait of James and Annis Gleason. James built the office of the Herald of Freedom, and Annis, George Washington Brown's sister-in-law, worked at the paper as a proofreader. Courtesy of the Kansas Collection at Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas.

Imagining a Northern Kansas

by Courtney Buchkoski

In the spring of 1854, Eli Thayer contemplated how New Englanders could stop slavery's westward expansion. After he pondered the question "by day and dreamed of it by night," Thayer found the solution—organized, cooperative emigration. If New Englanders paved the way for an antislavery emigration west, perhaps they could solve the most pressing political and moral problem of the day. While Congress debated the Kansas–Nebraska Act, Thayer obtained charters for the New England Emigrant Aid Company (NEEAC) from his home state of Massachusetts and also Connecticut.¹ In July, he assembled a joint-stock enterprise, and by February 1855, the Massachusetts legislature had granted the NEEAC a charter with a capitalization of \$1 million. Thayer and his colleagues reasoned that if good, Christian families poured into the Kansas Territory, they could win the popular sovereignty vote and make it a free state. The NEEAC trusted that by harnessing democracy, the New England spirit of cooperation, and God's providential hand, Kansas, and eventually the entire American West, would be free from the hand of slavery.²

The product of common schools in Massachusetts, Thayer graduated from Brown University in 1845. Although of Puritan stock, he joined the Unitarians, a sect that had grown almost exclusively in New England. A fundamental tenet of the denomination was the belief in gradualism—salvation by moral improvement instead of bloody sacrifice.³ Thayer spent his early career founding the Oread Collegiate Institute, a school for young women, and became increasingly entrenched in politics, first as a member of the Worcester School Board in 1852, an alderman of Worcester in 1852, and a member of the state house of representatives in 1853.

As his political career matured, Thayer saw the importance of the western region grow as well. The northern commitment to free labor was matched by fear of the expansion of slavery west after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. Northerners worried that if the South added to its empire of slavery before the North could expand its empire of free labor, the North would soon fully succumb to the Slave Power. Instead of slavery gradually diminishing, as reformers hoped it would, it would be reinvigorated in the West, where land was abundant but workers were few.⁴ As Thayer watched the political tension

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1. David Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848–1861* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 160–67.
2. Eli Thayer, *A History of the Kansas Crusade: Its Friends and Its Foes* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1889), 18–27.
3. Daniel Walker Howe, *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy, 1805–1861* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 137–38.
4. John Craig Hammond, *Slavery, Freedom, and Expansion in the Early American West* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007); Michael A. Morrison, *Slavery and the American West: The Eclipse of Manifest Destiny* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

over slavery's expansion intensify, he proposed emigrant aid as a solution to potential disunion. His branch of the emigrant aid movement aimed to safeguard the West for free labor.

Thayer joined a growing number of white, evangelical, middle-class reformers who thought western colonization could solve the problem of disunion.⁵ As North–South sectionalism threatened to tear the nation apart, the West became an ideological battleground. Thayer envisioned his western settlers replicating New England's free labor alongside its institutions of education and religion.⁶ This free, Protestant West, a veritable extension of New England, would ensure the gradual elimination of slavery and end the South's dominance of national elections. As the northern public became increasingly concerned about the South's commitment to slavery, Thayer and his fellow emigration promoters presented westward expansion as the solution. Northerners before the war were unfalteringly committed to the idea of union. Union was a shorthand reference to the republic—the exceptional American experiment in self-government, appointed by God Himself, and the glue that held disparate regions together. Northerners were so obsessed with unionism, as Elizabeth Varon argues, that devotion to this cause may be considered the North's "civic religion."⁷

By the same token, northerners had crippling anxiety about disunion, an idea that encompassed the fears of factionalism, tyranny, foreign intervention, and civil war. Looking around a world that was increasingly falling into chaos, northerners developed new ideologies and movements to preserve the Union from the forces

that they thought might destroy it. To combat the expansion of slavery, for instance, northerners constructed a free-labor ideology that gained prominence in the 1840s under the name "free soil," affirming the superiority of the North's dynamic, expanding capitalist society because of the dignity it offered the average laboring man.⁸

Fear of disunion and the mission to combat threats to the Republic also pervaded Protestant churches and became an important motivator for reform movements, particularly those focused on the West. The reformers' solution to disunion was emigrant aid. Free-labor settlements in the West could stop slavery's expansion and ensure that the North never became politically subservient to the South. Emigration aid could also evangelize the nation. It could plant the institutions of the church and the state in these regions, bolstering the burgeoning union against the threat of slavery. If entire northern communities could move simultaneously, then reformers believed that they could secure the moral and political well-being of the Union. The West, reformers imagined, was the place where national problems could finally be solved.

At a moment when Americans feared the dissolution of the Union and looked toward compromise, the NEEAC put northern assumptions to the test, seeking to prove the superiority and profitability of free labor alongside its providential mission.⁹ While northerners theorized that free labor was more efficient than slavery, the NEEAC put the two side by side in Kansas, asserting that free-labor settlements would be so successful that southerners would gradually abandon the peculiar institution. Kansas would be the first step in a movement that would transform the entire nation. While this near-utopian vision did not come to fruition, it did present emigrant aid as a strategy that northerners used to influence western

5. By the 1830s, evangelical theology broadly synthesized evangelicalism, republicanism, and nationalism. See Mark Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) and Richard Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997).

6. Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 11.

7. Elizabeth R. Varon, *Disunion! The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789–1859* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 5.

8. Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, 11.

9. For more on fears of disunion, see Varon, *Disunion!*, and Gary Gallagher, *The Union War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

development and that prefigured the importance of planned emigration movements after the Civil War.

Despite its notable enthusiasm for the project and success in transplanting roughly three thousand emigrants to Kansas, the NEEAC was never as successful as its members hoped.¹⁰ As a result, the first historians to examine the emigrant aid company concluded that although the company was an interesting anecdote, it was largely a footnote to a wider national story.¹¹ Although Thayer's failure to achieve the material conditions he envisioned—Bleeding Kansas was anything but a gradual, reasoned debate about labor practices—the idea of emigrant aid took on a significant role in the debate over slavery's westward expansion. This sectional argument led directly to the rise of the Republican Party, Lincoln's election in 1860, and the start of the Civil War. The NEEAC's actions were debated in Congress, in newspapers, and by settlers fighting on the ground. It was not merely a debate over whether the South could bring its "constitutional property" into the West but specifically one about the North's ability to influence elections using subsidized emigration. The failure of the company to achieve results gradually and peacefully, and the violent southern reaction to its plan, helped end the conversation on gradualism altogether. The company's promotional campaign also led more New Englanders to imagine Kansas as part of the free North. The NEEAC's relentless promotion solidified western mythologies, including ideas of the vanishing Indian and the myth of the virgin

10. Ralph Volney Harlow estimated that 1,240 came in the first two years, and Elmer Leroy Craik estimated 3,000 total free-state settlers. Ralph Volney Harlow, "The Rise and Fall of the Kansas Aid Movement," *American Historical Review* 41, no. 1 (1935): 1–25; Elmer Leroy Craik, "Southern Interest in Territorial Kansas: 1854–1858," in *Collections of the Kansas State Historical Society, 1919–1922*, ed. William E. Connelley (Topeka: B. P. Walker, 1923), 345.

11. In some of the most comprehensive overviews of the Kansas–Nebraska conflict, the NEEAC is dismissed as a minor episode in a much larger political battle, and the founders are portrayed as opportunistic businessmen. A notable exception is Gunja SenGupta, *For God and Mammon: Evangelicals and Entrepreneurs, Masters and Slaves in Territorial Kansas, 1854–1860* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996).

land, which were vital to the long-term justification for the growth of the American empire across the century.¹²

Thayer's Vision

Thayer's plan to save the West from slavery intrigued reformers who were watching the drama of the Kansas–Nebraska Act unfurl in the halls of Congress. There, Stephen Douglas proposed a negation of the sectional boundaries of the 1820 Missouri Compromise, which banned slavery north of the 36°30' parallel. Instead, Douglas suggested popular sovereignty, by which voters in the territory would decide the slavery question. The proposal reignited the national debate over slavery and elicited renewed northern concern about its expansion into the West. Warnings from politicians such as Salmon P. Chase stoked public unease about the South. Chase called the bill part of "an atrocious plot" by the Slave Power to close off the West from free laborers "and convert it into a dreary land of despotism, inhabited by masters and slaves."¹³ Freesoilers denounced the bill as a plot to subvert the foundational liberties of the Union. The Committee of Boston Clergymen, headed by Lyman Beecher, collected 3,050 signatures from clergymen in the Northeast who opposed the bill, calling on men of all denominations to condemn it "through the Press and even the Pulpit."¹⁴

Amid the public panic about the bill, Thayer promoted popular sovereignty as a way to prove the North's superiority and start winning the West. Thayer insisted that a stream of white northern immigrants "clothed with moral power, enjoying the confidence, and wielding the pecuniary

12. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950); William F. Devereil, "To Loosen the Safety Valve: Eastern Workers and Western Lands," *Western Historical Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (August 1988): 269–85.

13. Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, 97; Leonard L. Richards, *The Slave Power: The Free North and Southern Domination, 1780–1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000).

14. "Appeal of the Independent Democrats in Congress to the People of the United States," *Cong. Globe*, 33d Cong., 1st sess. (1854), 281–82; Morrison, *Slavery and the American West*, 152; "Origins of the Clerical Protest," *New York Times*, April 24, 1854.

resources of the whole body of Anti-Slavery men in the North” would win Kansas to freedom. He harkened back to the cooperative emigration of the Puritans as evidence that settlers could transform a barren wasteland into a utopian society, envisioning himself as part of a cosmic battle in which northerners could prove once and for all the superiority of free labor. By reminding New Englanders of their colonial past, Thayer also replicated a vision of empire in which the settler who used the land best deserved to own it.¹⁵

Thayer asserted that the gradual emigration of northerners into “less civilized” regions would eliminate the western threat to the Union. Kansas would be transformed from an uncivilized wilderness into an extension of the North. The NEEAC promised to apply “New England energy, industry, and perseverance” to “found another New England” in Kansas. The company offered competitive advantages to induce New England settlers to move west, including reduced fares, protection against speculators, advice on suitable sites for settlement, and “the opportunity of forming communities at once,” which the company promised would increase the speed with which emigrants could enjoy the “benefits and privileges of settlement.” Company agents would facilitate travel and build settlements before many settlers arrived, enabling efficient and stable colonization. They pledged to immediately construct the churches, schools, and mills necessary to attract settlers. Requiring a \$100 investment per person, the company vowed that a person of “good moral habits, and reasonable and moderate desires” could always be able to “keep above want” in Kansas.¹⁶ And while settlers gained the benefits of cooperative colonization, the nation would benefit from the expansion of free labor and New England values. As southerners witnessed the success of these emigrants, they would have no choice, Thayer argued, but to adopt the more efficient free-labor system and re-

treat from inefficient slave labor.¹⁷

Like many freesoilers, Thayer believed that the West was best set aside for white settlers as a safety valve for excess northern populations. While settlement in Kansas would help solve the question of whether slavery could expand into the West, the territory was not to become a haven for free Black settlement. Thayer reiterated that the NEEAC sent settlers to the territory to build a free-labor society there but “had not exhausted their strength in deploring the ‘great sin of slavery.’” A far cry from an abolitionist, Thayer wanted to stop slavery’s expansion in order to reserve the West for white labor.¹⁸

Thayer also expected to make money. He envisioned the NEEAC as a profitable land company, working under a principle he deemed “business antislavery.” The company planned to invest early in the best territorial lands and sell them for a profit after the popular sovereignty vote made the territory a free state. Thayer insisted that making money through speculation was merely the practical application of Christianity. He explained that he had “no respect” for charity that excluded from its “enterprise the strength and effectiveness of money-making.” “Why is it worse,” he mused, “for a company to make money by extending Christianity than by making Cotton?” If free labor was the will of God, He certainly would bless the endeavor financially.¹⁹

By combining industry with antislavery ideology, Thayer was able to recruit high-minded abolitionists and reformers and shrewd businessmen to the same organization. Thayer first approached Amos A. Lawrence, one of Boston’s preeminent philanthropists, to fund early company efforts and connect Thayer to the business community. Uni-

15. Thayer, *History of the Kansas Crusade*, 15.

16. Thomas Webb, *Information for Kansas Immigrants* (Boston: Alfred Mudge & Son, 1855), 3, 8, 9, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts (hereafter AAS).

17. James Oakes describes this as a “cordon of freedom” that would hem slavery in until its own internal weaknesses destroyed it. James Oakes, *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861–1865* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014), xii.

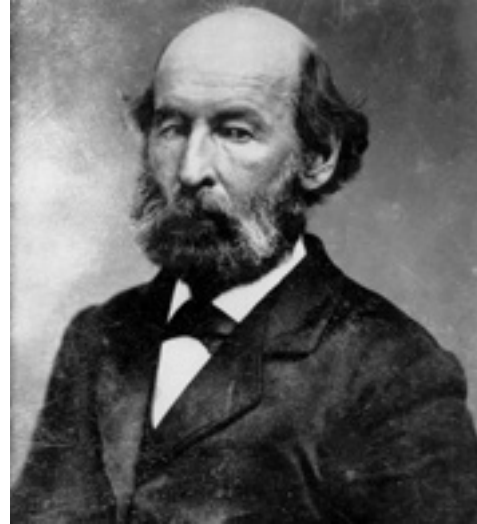
18. Thayer, *History of the Kansas Crusade*, 89.

19. Thayer, *History of the Kansas Crusade*, 58, 60; Webb, *Information for Kansas Immigrants*, 23; Thomas H. Webb to Samuel C. Pomeroy, October 30, 1854, New England Emigrant Aid Company Papers, microfilm roll 1, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas (hereafter KSHS).

tarian minister and Worcester resident Edward E. Hale linked the company to religious circles. The NEEAC's first order of business was to secure the support of New England doctors, lawyers, merchants, politicians, and journalists. In 1854, Thayer undertook a promotional speaking tour in New England and New York, forming "Kansas" leagues of supporters and selling shares in the NEEAC for five dollars apiece. On this tour, he pledged that he would raise \$5 million and help twenty thousand New Englanders go west.²⁰

The NEEAC enlisted Horace Greeley of the *New York Tribune*, William Cullen Bryant of the *New York Evening Post*, and Thurlow Weed of the *Albany Journal* to further promote the venture editorially. The same pages that sported headlines warning of disunion advocated emigrant aid. The *New York Tribune* predicted that "the whole crowd of slave-drivers and traitors," even backed up by "a corrupt majority in Congress, a soulless partizan press," and an administration ruled by the Slave Power, would "prove totally insufficient to cope" with the stream of NEEAC emigrants headed west. As Thayer asserted and the newspapers repeated, immigrating to Kansas would be a moral, capitalistic, and politically expedient act, all at the same time.²¹

This combination of morality and moneymaking was attractive to potential settlers who viewed Thayer's plan as a part of their Christian duty. After attending one of Thayer's speeches, Isaac T. Goodnow of Massachusetts decided to settle in Kansas. He promoted the NEEAC in the *Greenwich Weekly Pendulum*, stating, "The only way to save the territory from the curse of human bondage, is for the men of puritan blood, the practical Christians of New England to rouse themselves, and emigrate by hundreds and thousands." Potential settlers



A portrait from the 1870s of Eli Thayer. Courtesy of the Kansas Collection at Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas.

flooded the company with requests to join its parties to Kansas, praising the benefits of communal organization. Franklin G. Adams asked to join a company of only New Englanders, calling it of "subject importance" that he travel with those who reflected the "excellence of the region." Others wrote to request more information on price, route, and benefits. The company advertised that the first party would depart in March 1854 and cost forty dollars per adult. Although the company charter required no pledge or obligation to vote, promising that emigrants were "free agents," settlers nevertheless wrote to assure NEEAC agents that they were "opposed to slavery in every form."²²

The NEEAC's 1854 promotional pamphlet assured settlers that the company's mission was uniquely moral among emigration aid schemes. Although other middlemen could help emigrants to Kansas, the NEEAC warned of the "stupendous" knavery of such agents, stating that its competitors would be quick to abandon the transplants. The NEEAC promised to fix the common problems of the emigrant by establishing communities in

20. Webb, *Information for Kansas Immigrants*, 32–33; New England Emigrant Aid Company, *History of the New-England Emigrant Aid Company: With a Report on Its Future Operations* (Boston: John Wilson and Son, 1862), 8, AAS; *Charter and By-Laws of the Emigrant Aid Company Incorporated by the State of Connecticut, 1854* (New York: A. Baptists Jr., 1854), 10, AAS.

21. John G. Brown to Thomas H. Webb, December 19, 1855, NEEAC Papers, microfilm roll 1, KSHS.

22. Franklin G. Adams to Edward E. Hale, December 25, 1854, NEEAC Papers, KSHS, quoted in Kevin G. W. Olson, *Frontier Manhattan: Yankee Settlement to Kansas Town, 1854–1894* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012), 31; *Charter and By-Laws of the Emigrant Aid Company Incorporated by the State of Connecticut*, 7; Henry O. Norris to New England Emigrant Aid Company, June 24, 1855, NEEAC Papers, KSHS.

large numbers, which would allow the settlers to quickly harness the “social influences which radiate from the church, the school, and the press.” The company offered half rates for transportation costs, boardinghouses and temporary houses, and steam and sawmills, as well as a printing press from which would issue “an index of freedom and good morals.”²³

NEEAC middlemen soon started the work of colonization, translating ideology into practical reality. The first party of emigrants arrived in Kansas on August 1, 1854, and founded a city they named Lawrence after their principal benefactor. Charles Robinson, known in New England for his involvement in the squatter riots of California, led the first party. By the end of 1854, the NEEAC had sent five parties and 750 settlers to Kansas. These settlers dispersed within the territory, founding the cities of Topeka, Osawatomie, Boston (later Manhattan), Hamden, and Wabaunsee. The company built nine mills, each costing between \$2,000 and \$10,000. In the summer of 1854, Robinson purchased a house in Kansas City, which the NEEAC operated as a hotel to serve as a stopping point before the final leg of the journey to Lawrence. In Lawrence, the company provided temporary huts as boardinghouses as it planned the construction of a Free State Hotel. Reverend S. Y. Lum of the Home Mission Board of the Congregational Church came in the second party of the NEEAC, which arrived in September 1854, and established a church. Lawrence donated funds for building a combined church and schoolhouse in his namesake town, while Robinson founded a Unitarian church in the same city, funded by ministers in Boston. The company also donated a building lot to Episcopalians.²⁴

The company predicted that these incentives would attract at least twenty thousand New Englanders and thirty thousand Europeans. The

project promised to benefit the eastern city and western territory alike, alleviating overpopulation in cities and aligning Kansas with the North. Thayer was confident that the project would be a quick success, determining the fate of the territories “in less time than the discussions of them has required in Congress.” Beyond the political and financial incentives, the NEEAC offered settlers the moral advantage of becoming “Founders of State” “which are prosperous and free.” The NEEAC promised that once Kansas was free, the company would select a new territory and make a similar arrangement, thereby creating a system by which the people, not politicians, could steadily limit slavery’s westward expansion and add territory to the North.²⁵

Promoting the Mythic West

Imagining the West as a virgin land ready for civilization involved the removal of Indigenous populations, not only physically but also in the American mind. If the NEEAC were to promote Kansas as part of the North, it would have to pacify the “uncivilized” and rough elements of the region. The NEEAC promoted Kansas as a land free of the threat of Indians, pushing back against the common idea of the West as full of dangerous “savages.” Instead, the company embraced the idea of Indigenous people as a disappearing race that would not threaten the long-term settlement of the territory.

Congress facilitated the dissolution of Indian claims to the region in 1853, adding a rider to a standard appropriations bill that authorized the president to negotiate with tribes west of Missouri and Iowa “for the purpose of extinguishing the title of said Indians.” More than ten thousand Indigenous people—including those from nations such as the Kickapoo, Delaware, Sac and Fox, Shawnee, Potawatomi, Kansa, Ottawa, Wyandot, Miami, and Osage—faced expulsion and were replaced, in part, by white northern reformers

23. Webb, *Information for Kansas Immigrants*, 5, 7.

24. New England Emigrant Aid Company, *History of the New-England Emigrant Aid Company*, 4; Samuel A. Johnson, “The Emigrant Aid Company in the Kansas Conflict,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 6, no. 1 (February 1937): 21–33.

25. *Nebraska and Kansas Report of the Committee of the Massachusetts Emigrant Aid Company* (Boston, 1854), 12, 28, AAS; Webb, *Information for Kansas Immigrants*, 5–9.

who boasted of benevolence. These nations had initially come to the territory because of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, and the federal government had promised that this would be their final move. Kansas had been Indian country, the northern part of Indian Territory. By midcentury, the legal narratives surrounding Indigenous claims to this territory were so convoluted that one contemporary observer said understanding the law was “about as easy as it would have been to unravel the knot of Phrygian or the riddle of the sphinx.” Settlers poured onto the Indian reserves beginning in the 1830s, using legal ambiguities to justify squatting on land that was not open to white settlement or available to sell.²⁶

William Phillips, a correspondent for the *New York Tribune*, concluded in his 1856 book *The Conquest of Kansas by Missouri and Her Allies* that the only way this territory could have been taken so quickly from these Indigenous and emigrant nations was by the machinations of the Slave Power—the cabal of southern politicians who used their federal power to protect the institution. In the South’s nefarious bid to give Kansas over to slavery, Indian agents first introduced the practice to the tribes there. Then, the Kansas–Nebraska Act failed to define the rights of settlers or lay out which lands were reserved for Indigenous nations. Members of the Slave Power in Congress informed their Missourian co-conspirators that this intentionally vague law allowed them to claim tribal lands by squatting. Despite the protest of the tribes that squatting was illegal, it continued under the guise of legal ambiguity. Only the emigration aid companies, Phillips concluded, could stop the corrupt theft of Indian lands by countersquatting on them.²⁷

26. Craig Miner and William E. Unrau, *The End of Indian Kansas: A Study of Cultural Revolution, 1854–1871* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1978), 3–6.

27. William Phillips, *The Conquest of Kansas by Missouri and Her Allies* (Boston: Phillips, Samson and Company, 1856), 11–25. For more on removal, see Kristen Epps, *Slavery on the Periphery: The Kansas–Missouri Border in the Antebellum and Civil War Eras* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2016) and Paul W. Gates, *Fifty Million Acres: Conflicts over Kansas Land Policy, 1854–1890* (New York: Atherton Press, 1966).

This was a narrative that suited the goals of the NEEAC and elided northerners’ complicity in Indian dispossession. Newspapers in the territory, especially in Lawrence, contributed to this narrative. The NEEAC lent George Washington Brown funds to start the *Kansas Herald of Freedom* in 1854. The company then sold subscriptions to settlers in Kansas and supporters in New England, creating an intellectual link between the regions. In a circular promoting the paper, Thayer promised that it would be “one of the mightiest agencies in making Kansas a free state.” With over one hundred subscribers in Thayer’s hometown of Worcester alone, the *Herald of Freedom* formed an imagined community between the East and West, especially as New Englanders paid increasing attention to the battles over popular sovereignty.²⁸

Brown’s editorials in the *Herald of Freedom* perpetuated the idea that the “Indian problem” in Kansas was resolved. With Indigenous people removed and the myth of the vanishing Indian fulfilled, white settlers could more easily civilize the West. Brown wrote that settlers needed to “reclaim this vast Territory from the control of the Indians, and deliver it into the hands of the white man, who will cultivate it, improve it, and make it subservient to the genteel prosperity of our country.” The company reiterated this message in its promotional pamphlet, which underscored the pacification of the “friendly Indians” whom the settler could help bring “under the influence of civilization and Christianity,” lest they “continue to melt away, until nothing remain of them.”²⁹

A central concern for the NEEAC was learning from the federal government when reservation lands, particularly those of the Shawnee, would be open to preemption. Preemption allowed squatters to purchase public land at federally regulated prices as long as the settler “improved” the land. In the *Herald of Freedom*, Brown formulated a settler

28. Thomas H. Webb to Samuel C. Pomeroy, October 16, 1854, NEEAC Papers, microfilm roll 1, KSHS; Stephen Barker, *Shall Kansas Be Free?* (Boston, 1855), Vault Material, KSHS.

29. G. W. Brown, “The Delaware Reserve,” *Kansas Herald of Freedom*, November 20, 1858; *Nebraska and Kansas Report*, 19.



An ambrotype of Sara Robinson, made in the 1850s by Thomas Webb. Courtesy of the Kansas Collection at Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas.

narrative that starkly laid out the colonial goals of settlement and the purported benevolence of the settler mission. He listed tribes whose lands should be settled in his own order of importance: first, the Delaware for their “unsurpassed” access to water and natural resources; then the Potawatomi, half of whom were “nearly civilized”; then the Kickapoo, Sac and Fox, and New York Indians in order of the size of their land holdings. Early settlers agreed. Thomas Webb thought Indian land “some of the richest and most desirable.” Charles Robinson similarly encouraged the NEEAC to buy Wyandot reservation lands, arguing that the eventual sale of these lands would ultimately be more advantageous to the company.³⁰

NEEAC settlers further assured northerners of the region’s pacification. Sara Robinson’s account of settlement, published in 1856, told of the

company’s first emigration party. Wife to Charles Robinson and a staunchly antislavery Christian, Sara Tappan Doolittle Robinson was educated, of Massachusetts stock, and well equipped to speak to northerners anxious about disunion. Her popular account of the territory, *Kansas: Its Interior and Exterior Life*, replaced the former myth of the region as the “Great American Desert, inhabited only by savages and wild beasts,” with idyllic tales of a landscape Robinson deemed the “Eden of America.” She described Kansas as a bastion of Christianity and recounted attending a “little white church upon the rolling prairie” that, standing on a hill and overlooking woodlands, “reminds one of dear New England.” In her account, even the most “savage” Indians or “backwards” former slaves could be brought into the white nuclear family and tamed into a picture of northeastern civility.³¹

In Robinson’s account, the only true threats to creating another New England were southerners bent on disunion. She warned northern readers of devious southern characters, one of whom told her that “Stephen A. Douglas was a better man than Jesus Christ” and “used every effort to break up the New England settlement.” Robinson’s industrious northerners were not deterred, however, proceeding with improvements including sawmills, boardinghouses, and stores.³²

In addition to imagining Kansas as a sound financial bet and a “virgin land,” free from the threat of Indians, NEEAC members also thought it ripe for the civilizing influences of religion. This would form another vital link between New Englanders and distant Kansas. In 1855, Thayer asked New England evangelicals to fund the NEEAC’s land purchases and building costs. Edward E. Hale mobilized the religious community’s wealth with what he called “The Ministers’ Movement.” Hale contacted the 3,050 ministers who had signed the petition against the Kansas–Nebraska Act, asking them to become lifetime members of the NEEAC

30. Thomas H. Webb to S. M. Cook, March 5, 1856; Thomas H. Webb to W. Willis, October 11, 1856; Thomas H. Webb to J. M. Robb, February 8, 1856; and Thomas H. Webb to S. N. Simpson, October 25, 1856, NEEAC Papers, microfilm roll 1, KSHS.

31. Sara Robinson, *Kansas: Its Interior and Exterior Life: Including a Full View of Its Settlement, Political History, Social Life, Climate, Soil, Productions, Scenery, etc.* (Lawrence, 1856), 2, 31.

32. Robinson, *Kansas*, 12.

for a twenty-dollar donation. In a circular titled "Education, Temperance, Freedom, Religion in Kansas" the company promised that it would establish even more towns dominated by free-state men, acknowledging that to sway the state toward freedom, they needed, "first of all, the Gospel." Hale's circular promoted NEEAC settlements as missionary hubs that maintained regular sabbath schools and boasted that "traffic in intoxicating liquors scarcely" existed in towns started by the company. The leading Unitarian publication in Boston, the *Christian Register*, promoted the NEEAC's plan as the antidote to the "daily sneer that the churches and clergy of New England can talk about slavery, but do nothing" and promised that this would be the "God-directed Exodus which leads Freemen to Kansas."³³

The promotional effort resulted in hundreds of responses and further cemented the perception of Kansas as part of the North. One minister celebrated the chance to insert "an anti-slavery spirit into that swelling population," and another prayed that God would "deliver us from servile, Judas-like rulers" who were leaving the territory's fate to a popular vote. Nineteen New England clergymen started a letter-writing campaign asking all ministers in the region to raise \$60,000 to be invested in mills, churches, and bridges, promising that around every mill "springs up at once a free and freedom loving population." Led by Joseph S. Clark and Franklin Rand, the campaign promised that "the virgin soil lies open, and it only depends whether the good grain or the tares of the enemy fall first upon it, to decide its future destiny." This effort netted the company over \$1,500, much of which was gathered in special collections during Sunday services.³⁴

Northerners who settled the West with the NEEAC reiterated their effort to make Kansas an

33. "Education, Temperance, Freedom, Religion in Kansas," NEEAC Papers, KSHS; "The 3,000 Clergymen," *Christian Register*, June 23, 1855, Vault Material, KSHS.

34. W. C. Jackson to Eli Thayer, July 1855, and A. F. Jameson to Eli Thayer, September 1855, NEEAC Papers, microfilm roll 1, KSHS; "Aid for Kansas," *Salem Gazette*, October 16, 1855, Vault Material, KSHS; Harlow, "Rise and Fall of the Kansas Aid Movement," 4.

extension of their values and promoted the region as a good moral and pecuniary investment. Julia P. Lovejoy, a devout Methodist from New Hampshire, wrote that she went to Kansas in part because she could build an affordable house, but more to "labor for God and freedom here, where sin abounds." William Goodnow, whose brother Isaac moved to Kansas with the NEEAC, declared that cooperative emigration placed settlers "in a condition to be above want & care which is now the chief burden of your life." Another letter writer declared that "Kansas will be a glorious State if it is a free state," and with God's help, they could transform the territory from "a wilderness" to the home of "an enlightened people." In 1855, company secretary Thomas Webb visited Kansas and gave a glowing report of the settlements he toured. "The God of nature," he wrote, had poured down His blessings on the land, which Webb believed "was clearly designed to be, an earthly paradise." Everywhere he went, Webb claimed to meet families whose earnest hope was that the NEEAC could provide them more neighbors to aid in their settlement.³⁵ These waves of promotion from the pens of settlers, routinely found in eastern newspapers, pamphlets, and books, allowed northerners to imagine Kansas as an extension of their society, one that was under attack by avaricious southerners.

Western Realities

While the NEEAC's promotion succeeded in popularizing the concept of subsidized emigration and connected the territory to New England ways of thinking, sectional politics abounded. The notion that free and slave labor would directly compete in Kansas, eventually leading southerners to realize the inferiority of their ways, was a plan that relied on gradualism. By the mid-1850s, gradual solutions to the slavery problem, while hoped for by many in the North, were seeming less likely. The company's

35. Julia Louisa Lovejoy Diary, 1856–1864, Charles and Julia Lovejoy Collection, KSHS; William E. Goodnow to Harriet Goodnow, June 10, 1855, box 1, Isaac Tichenor Goodnow Collection, KSHS; "Letter from Kansas," NEEAC Vault Material, KSHS; Thomas Webb to NEEAC, September 8, 1855, NEEAC Papers, KSHS.

promotional mythology that emphasized the ease of moving west was contested by settlers who did not find organized emigration as easy as promised. The integrity of NEEAC agents was called into question, as they focused more on speculation than settlement. Additionally, southerners vehemently objected to the company's plans, considering any effort to make Kansas a free state an affront to their constitutional rights. Southerners meddled in the free-labor experiment, harassing settlers and violently rigging territorial elections. These slaveholders blamed emigrant aid for their violent opposition, accusing the NEEAC of corruption and igniting a stern defense of colonization by Republicans. Each of these practical realities made emigrant aid more controversial and further expanded its influence in the national debate about popular sovereignty.

Even with the subsidies provided by the NEEAC, the reality of western settlement was challenging. Settlers found that the company's promotional narrative, which emphasized the ease of travel and an honest approach to speculation, inaccurate. A man who traveled to Kansas with the NEEAC warned readers of the *New York Tribune* not to believe the "grossly exaggerated statements of this Company." Emigrants, he argued, should know "just what they will have to endure; no man should emigrate West unless prepared for toil and hardships of the severest kind." Emigrants would need money and energy, he argued, lest they turn back midway through the trip. Many emigrants found that the overland journey was more expensive and strenuous than they expected. Being antislavery did not prevent businesses from price gouging, as Samuel Adair found after paying five dollars a week in board and nearly ten dollars per bag of flour. The Edenic paradise depicted in NEEAC literature also failed to mention the "constant, piercing, prairie wind[s]," which "expel almost all the calorie that a man has in him." Faced with the realities of western settlement, Goodnow estimated that two-thirds of New England settlers "failed in the hour of trial" and went home. These settlers

did not find that organized emigration made their journey any easier and rejected the NEEAC's assertions to the contrary.³⁶

The "Kansas Emigrant's Lament," published in the *Kansas Herald of Freedom* in 1855, memorialized the pioneer struggle to tame Kansas:

I left my own New England,
the happiest and the best,
with a burning Kansas fever
Raging in my breast.

Oh that fair New England!
Oh that lovely home!
If I live to reach you, surely
I never more will roam.

I came to Lawrence city,
A place of great renown,
Alas! what disappointment
To find so small a town.

The houses were unfinished,
The people had no floors,
The windows had no glass in,
And sheets were used for doors.

I sought an Astor palace,
And a table where to eat,
They gave me poor molasses,
With some bread and salted meat.
Oh my mother's pantry!³⁷

This poem, which had served during the Civil War as a memorialization of Kansas pioneers' sacrifices to tame the West in the early years of the territory's settlement, later served as a critique of western promotion that oversold the ways in which Kansas resembled New England.

36. James Rawley estimated the number to be closer to one-third. James Rawley, *Race and Politics: Bleeding Kansas and the Coming of the Civil War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), 85; "What Causes the Discouragement of Emigrants—Let the Truth Be Known," *New York Daily Tribune*, December 29, 1854; Isaac T. Goodnow, "Personal Reminiscences, 1881," folder 18, box 12, Goodnow Collection, KSHS.

37. "Kansas Emigrant's Lament," *Kansas Herald of Freedom*, October 13, 1855.

The NEEAC found it nearly impossible to maintain both a divine mission and a profitable ledger. Its vision of the West as a blank slate did not take into account the many other hardships along the journey, including the imperfections of its own agents. The moral failings of emigration agents, northerners such as Charles Robinson who were hired by the company to lead settlers into the territory, often proved a disappointment. As one missionary bemoaned, once “outside the restraints of eastern society,” NEEAC agents acted out of “the native depravity of the human heart.” He reported hearing profanity and claimed that the sound of rifle fire desecrated the sabbath. Reverend W. D. Haley accused agents of using dangerous and cheap boats for transport. He suggested that the company consult western men instead of its New England agents, who had “so far been green as grass.” “Poetry,” Haley concluded, “is a very good thing in its place, but I assure you by the time that emigrants arrive here they have got all over their singing enthusiasm” and too often had faced hardship “because your eastern agents know absolutely nothing about western travel.”³⁸

Company agents complained about the West in private letters, also finding the NEEAC’s mission hard to fulfill in practice. As Samuel Pomeroy concluded, “It is particularly unpleasant in the western world.” Capricious agents, assigned the duty to help immigrant parties, abandoned this task to pursue personal profits. Pomeroy, having obtained permission from the company to “make investments in Kansas Territory for his private benefit,” pursued those opportunities at the expense of the company. A company of Germans led by E. B. Whitman was delayed a week in Lawrence as other company agents scrambled to locate an otherwise occupied Pomeroy. Charles Branscomb, who ran the company mill, was caught in 1858 skimming profits, as was B. Slater, who later faced an outpouring of requests for refunds on boat passages. Charles Robinson used his post

in the company to gain political power, and the company eventually told him that he could “serve Kansas better” by pursuing his private interests on his own.³⁹

The promotion of Kansas as an ideal western region that would quickly become a veritable copy of New England relied heavily on common mythologies of the West. Ideas of Kansas as a virgin land, ready to be converted by pious northerners from its interminable desert climate into a garden of Eden, butted up against the realities of pioneer living. The disappearance of Indigenous people came about through interventionist federal policies rather than the civilizing nature of emigrants. Nevertheless, the NEEAC promotional effort did succeed in placing Kansas on the mental map of northerners, who would take credit for its colonization.

Emigration Aid Debated

Thayer’s vision of solving the problem of disunion through emigration also failed. As white southerners increasingly embraced slavery as beneficial, they considered the work of the NEEAC an intrusion upon the intentions of popular sovereignty. The concept of emigration aid became the wedge that escalated the political crisis in the Kansas Territory to violent proportions. Benjamin F. Stringfellow’s proslavery book *Negro Slavery, No Evil* pushed back against the free-labor idea, promoting slavery as a positive good and the only possible future for Kansas, whose timberless climate could be tamed only through coerced labor. Stringfellow was a key figure among proslavery Missourians who, with Senator David Atchison, advocated for southern control of Kansas. Emigrants from New England to Kansas, he wrote, were not honest farmers but “really negro-thieves, their purpose not to procure a home in Kansas, but to drive slaveholders therefrom.” The company sent “paupers, who have sold themselves to Ely Thayer & Co.” In at least one case, this claim of

38. Samuel C. Pomeroy to Thomas Webb, September 15, 1855; W. D. Haley to Edward E. Hale, March 9, 1855, NEEAC Papers, microfilm roll 1, KSHS.

39. Thomas H. Webb to Martin F. Conway, July 6, 1858; Office of the New England Emigrant Aid Company to Charles C. Robinson, October 4, 1856, NEEAC Papers, microfilm roll 1, KSHS.



*Eli Thayer's home on Mount Oread, in Massachusetts.
Courtesy of the Kansas Collection at Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas.*

thievery was true. John Doy, one of the emigrants in the first party of the NEEAC, moved to Lawrence in 1854 with the sole motivation of helping fugitive slaves escape. In 1859, he was captured with a group of African Americans near Oskaloosa and taken to Missouri, where he was convicted of “negro stealing” before being “rescued” from jail by abolitionist friends.⁴⁰ The sustained interest in this debate in both the North and South further established the image of Thayer’s company as the aggressor in debates surrounding the expansion of slavery in the West.

Proslavery Missourians opposed Thayer’s plan almost as soon as NEEAC settlers arrived in the territory in 1854. On July 29, even before territorial governor Andrew H. Reeder arrived in Kansas, the Platte County Missouri Self-Defensive Association promised to remove sponsored emigrants from the territory.⁴¹ As Missourian Matthew R. Walker reminisced, common rumors held that the NEEAC sent emigrants under contract to vote for freedom and that they would overtake Missouri after winning Kansas. Missourians believed the New

England settlers had guns and bowie knives prepared for election day and that Reeder was delaying the territorial elections until the spring to allow as many NEEAC emigrants as possible to vote. Slaveholders also spread rumors that aligned the NEEAC with radical abolitionists, perhaps the most unpopular group of reformers in the 1850s.⁴²

The company fought back against these charges as best it could. Missourians claimed in ad hominem attacks that Robinson supported miscegenation and said that “after forming a free State, with free suffrage, by amalgamation of the Indians with the negroes . . . amalgamation with whites would be an easy matter.” Robinson retorted that he was “not a friend of amalgamation.” Thayer denied any ties to abolitionists, mocking settlers who “wasted all their energies in sighing and weeping for the ‘poor slave’” and advising these “tearful specimens to stay at home.”⁴³

These rumors, alongside a deep devotion to slavery, incited Missourians to commit significant election fraud on March 30, 1855. This election resulted in the formation of an overwhelmingly proslavery territorial government in LeCompton, which free-state opponents proclaimed a “bogus

40. Benjamin F. Stringfellow, *Negro-Slavery, No Evil* (St. Louis: Nieder & Co., 1854); John Doy, *The Narrative of John Doy of Lawrence Kansas: A Plain, Unvarnished Tale* (New York: Thomas Holdman, 1860).

41. Pearl Ponce, *To Govern the Devil in Hell: The Political Crisis of Territorial Kansas* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 42.

42. *Report of the Special Committee Appointed to Investigate the Troubles in Kansas* (Washington, DC: C. Wendell, 1856), 897–99.

43. Thayer, *History of the Kansas Crusade*, 89; *Report of the Special Committee*, 897–99; Ponce, *To Govern the Devil in Hell*, 58.

legislature." Although the census preceding the election recorded 2,905 voters in the territory, more than 6,000 votes were cast, mostly for proslavery candidates. Reports flooded into Congress and newspapers of Missourians voting repeatedly by changing their hats and coats, of election judges eliminating oaths so that nonresidents could vote, and of southerners intimidating northern voters at the polls with bowie knives. When freestaters disputed the election, President Franklin Pierce sided with the slaveholder narrative about the NEEAC. Pierce blamed the controversy on the "extraordinary measure of propagandist colonization" that sought to "prevent the free and natural action" of the territory's inhabitants. The NEEAC, Pierce argued, intentionally used "language extremely irritating and offensive" to Missourians, which awakened "emotions of intense indignation." The emigration aid company's promise to upend Missouri's domestic peace, Pierce concluded, had led to a confusing mishmash of accusations of fraud on both sides. Pierce sided with Wilson Shannon, governor of the Kansas Territory, who had declared the representatives "duly elected."⁴⁴

With no federal recourse, quarrels between settlers intensified in Kansas. In a monthlong skirmish between November and December 1855 called the Wakarusa War, settlers violently disputed the territorial claims of their neighbors. The simmering tensions between free-state and proslavery factions erupted when proslavery settler Franklin Coleman shot free-state settler Charles Dow nine times in the back over a land claim. Coleman argued that he had acted in self-defense. The proslavery sheriff, Samuel Jones, sided with Coleman and arrested Dow's friend Jacob Branson for disturbing the peace. When a free-state mob broke Branson out of prison, Governor Shannon called upon the Kansas militia to stop the rioting. Instead, Jones induced an

44. Rawley, *Race and Politics*, 87–89; *Report of the Special Committee*, 343–46; "Kansas Election. Qualification of Voters!! Dissection of the Oath prescribed by the Governor," *Squatter Sovereign*, March 27, 1855, 2; James D. Richardson, *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, vol. 7 (New York: Bureau of National Literature, 1897), 2887–88.

army of 1,500 Missourians to cross the border and enter Lawrence. Charles Robinson raised his own army of 800 free-state men. A peace treaty between Robinson and James Lane temporarily halted the violence, but the skirmish marked the beginning of Bleeding Kansas. Settlers remained uneasy. Appealing to a need for self-defense, the NEEAC clandestinely provided its settlers with the opportunity to purchase weapons from New England vendors. The New York State Kansas Committee, a club affiliated with the NEEAC, made direct payments to the company to buy Sharps rifles that were then sent to Kansas.⁴⁵

In the midst of this violent struggle, proslavery factions felt they needed reinforcements. Southerners became increasingly worried about the influence of NEEAC settlers on the Kansas question. In 1855, an appeal in the *Montgomery, Alabama, Advertiser and Gazette* admitted that Missouri could "no longer stand up single-handed, the lone champion of the South, against the myrmidons of the North," declaring it time for "bold, determined action" to counteract the northern invasion of the territory. Alabaman Jefferson Buford responded, calling for three hundred men to join him in claiming forty-acre homesteads in Kansas and funding the expedition by auctioning forty of his slaves to the tune of \$20,000. Carrying two banners, one reading "The Supremacy of the White Race" and the other "Kansas, the Outpost," Buford entered the territory with four hundred men in April 1856.⁴⁶

These southern settlers immediately clashed with the free-state faction during the Sacking of Lawrence. As subscriptions to the NEEAC surged that spring, violence continued. When Sheriff Jones went to Lawrence to arrest free-state settlers for their actions during the Wakarusa War, resi-

45. Nicole Etcheson, *Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War Era* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 82–88; Samuel A. Johnson, *The Battle Cry of Freedom: The New England Emigrant Aid Company in the Kansas Crusade* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1954), 123–33.

46. "An Appeal to the South from the Kansas Emigration Society of Missouri," (*Montgomery, AL*) *Advertiser and Gazette*, 1855, in Walter L. Fleming, "The Buford Expedition to Kansas," *American Historical Review* 6, no. 1 (October 1900): 38.



1856 photograph of the Howard Committee, which was established to investigate claims of voting fraud in Kansas Territory. Front row, left to right, Mordecai B. Oliver, William A. Howard, John Sherman. Back row, William Blair Lord and John Upton.

dents drove him out of town, shooting him in the process. The next time Jones entered the city, he brought a posse of eight hundred southern settlers, including those from the Buford party, who brought along their banners. The attack on Lawrence, the first city established by the company and the center of free-state activity, was a referendum on the North's continued efforts to send settlers to the territory. The *Herald of Freedom* was a primary target of the attack, as proslavery forces arrested G. W. Brown. Brown spent four months in prison after a proslavery jury indicted him for high treason. Missourians effectively silenced the NEEAC by arresting Brown and crippled the company by burning down its Free State Hotel. As news of the attack traveled east, the nation was shocked to learn that the gradual, peaceful method of popular sovereignty had turned to violence instead of proper democracy.⁴⁷

In 1856, Congress published a 1,200-page report that investigated the "troubles in Kansas."

Much of the report considered emigration aid and whether pro- and antislavery elements had unduly used the method to influence the election. The majority report, written by William A. Howard of Michigan and John Sherman of Ohio, concluded that the elections were "controlled not by the actual settlers, but by citizens of Missouri." The writers determined that the "vast majority" of votes were illegal and the election was marked by "shameless fraud," claiming that the Kansas legislature, as a result, had no power to pass valid laws. They found that the NEEAC had acted lawfully in aiding settlement and lamented that if Congress had left the territory alone, natural emigration patterns would have resulted in a free state. Instead of Kansas "endangering the harmony of the Union," it "would have strengthened the ties of national brotherhood." Northerners defended the work of the company as an extension of free labor, while their opponents pointed to it as an intentional provocation of disunion.⁴⁸

The minority report, compiled by Mordecai Oliver of Missouri, called the majority opinion "highly partisan" and identified the NEEAC as a primary aggressor in the election. Southerners argued that the NEEAC had provoked violence by importing illegal voters into the territory and blamed the company for interfering in a free election. They reported that the company settlers had no families and intended to return east after the election and lamented that without company interference, they would have had a "quiet election." The minority report concluded that any competing parties from Missouri "were formed solely and expressly for the purpose of counteracting" the NEEAC.⁴⁹

Popular sovereignty's biggest promoter, Stephen A. Douglas, accused the NEEAC of abusing the concept for its own material gain. The violence in Kansas, he reported, was the result of "two rival and hostile systems of emigration." He condemned the NEEAC as an "experiment in foreign interfer-

47. National Kansas Relief Committee Minutes, n.d., folder 3, box 1, Thaddeus Hyatt Collection, KSHS.

48. *Report of the Special Committee*, 2, 5, 8.

49. *Report of the Special Committee*, 1177, 68, 83, 928, 884.

ence" supported by vain government men who linked "their political fortunes" to emigration companies. Missourians testified to their belief that the North wanted "to carry and control the elections" and furthermore attack the institution of slavery in their state. In his testimony, Thayer denied these accusations and swore that he never paid for an emigrant's passage, made no conditions about emigrants' political opinions, and did not arm emigrants. In fact, he retorted, "the moment they arrive at the place named in their ticket all connexion between them and the society ceases."⁵⁰

In response to this report on Kansas, Senator Charles Sumner, an abolitionist, took the floor and gave his now infamous speech, "The Crime against Kansas," in which he condemned the Slave Power and demanded the immediate admission to the Union of Kansas as a free state. In his opening remarks, Sumner declared that while he had no desire to debate slavery, he could not "allow the subject to pass away, even for this hour, without repelling, at once, distinctly and unequivocally, the assault which has been made upon the Emigrant Aid Company of Massachusetts." The recent congressional investigation, as well as President Pierce's remarks, he maintained, maligned the company and its intentions. Sumner argued that the company had done nothing illegal or unconstitutional. In fact, to oppose the NEEAC was to oppose the very constitutional right of northerners to immigrate. "The outrages in Kansas," Sumner said in the opening of his lengthy rebuttal, "are vindicated, or extenuated, by the alleged misconduct of the Emigrant Aid Company," of which Sumner declared the NEEAC "Not Guilty!"⁵¹

After establishing that there was nothing inherently illegal about cooperative emigration, Sumner set out to disprove rumors about the NEEAC. He rejected the claim that the company was injecting

50. Stephen A. Douglas, "Admission of Kansas," March 20, 1856, no. 34, Senate Reports, 34th Cong., 1st sess., vol. 1; Cong. Globe App., 34th Cong., 1st sess., 286, 288.

51. Charles Sumner, "The Crime against Kansas": Speech of Hon. Charles Sumner, in the Senate of the United States, 19th and 20th May, 1856 (Boston: John P. Jewett, 1856), 2.

obscene amounts of money into the territory, noting that although the NEEAC had a capitalization of \$1 million, it had used only \$100,000. He further rejected claims that the company knew the date of the election in advance, that it paid emigrants, and that it "encouraged any fanatical aggression upon the people of Missouri; for it has counselled order, peace, forbearance." Furthermore, Sumner asserted that the NEEAC did not recruit emigrants based on their political opinions, send anyone to control elections, or align with the abolitionists. How, Sumner asked, could it be true that the company wanted to send settlers only temporarily to the territory when its entire business model hinged on land speculation profits?⁵²

Two days after giving this speech, Sumner was nearly killed in an attack on the Senate floor by Representative Preston Brooks, a proslavery Democrat from South Carolina. While this attack has often been described as retaliation for Sumner insulting Andrew Butler, a cousin of Brooks, Sumner's speech emphasized the centrality of emigrant aid to the sectional dispute. The question of who had the right to colonize the West, in addition to the clear indication that southerners would not accept losing an election, bolstered the new Republican Party. This party, composed of mostly former Whigs and free-soilers, had formed in 1854 as a direct response to the Kansas-Nebraska Act. In 1856, the party's platform promised to "prohibit in the territories those twin relics of barbarism: polygamy and slavery." The nominations in the 1856 election illustrate the importance of Kansas to the impending sectional crisis. Republicans nominated anti-slavery candidate and western explorer John C. Frémont. Democrats nominated James Buchanan, who had been minister to Great Britain in 1854 and thus had no connection to Bleeding Kansas. The Democratic platform furthermore endorsed the principle of popular sovereignty as the only solution to the slavery controversy, indicating that the fraud apparent in Kansas would merely be repli-

52. Sumner, "The Crime against Kansas," 53-55.



Masthead of the Herald of Freedom in its second iteration.

cated by southerners elsewhere. The problem of Kansas was now both a national and a sectional one.⁵³

By the end of the 1850s, it was clear that northerners considered the territory part of their orbit, considering violence there to be attacks on northern values. The debate over Kansas emigration pushed many northerners beyond animosity and toward full support of disunion. On January 15, 1857, eighty-nine delegates met in Worcester, Massachusetts, to declare themselves in favor of disunion, “believing the existing Union to be a failure, as being a hopeless attempt to unite under one government two antagonistic systems of society.” A primary pillar of their evidence was the crisis in Kansas and the trampling of northern rights there. Thomas W. Higginson argued that disunion was not “a desire, merely; it is a *destiny*,” as war would come first to the West, erupting in Iowa and Kansas. Delegates referred to the “virgin soil of Kansas” as tarnished by the animosity between North and South, between freedom and slavery.⁵⁴

As the skirmishes of Bleeding Kansas culminated with the competing Lecompton and Leavenworth constitutions in 1857 and 1858, NEEAC

settlers embraced increasingly important roles in the territory. Charles Robinson, who had served as the free-state party’s territorial governor, became the first state governor in 1861. Samuel C. Pomeroy became one of the state’s first senators in the same year. Charles Branscomb served in the Grant administration and ran for Kansas governor in 1886. Isaac Goodnow served as superintendent of public instruction and helped found what is now Kansas State University. George W. Brown founded the city of Emporia and drilled three oil wells in Miami County in the 1860s, later moving to more lucrative oil sites. Franklin G. Adams became a probate judge and the first president of the Kansas State Historical Society. NEEAC settlers held prominent political and societal roles in Kansas and continued to correspond with the eastern middlemen who had sent them there. While the NEEAC did not exactly replicate New England in Kansas, its subsidized emigration continued to influence the region’s development.

Thayer, still having never been west, continued to be an enthusiastic promoter of cooperative emigration. As he later explained in a history of the company, he wanted the NEEAC to “grow and expand” until it became “the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night to the lovers of Freedom all over the Earth.” He decided that after Kansas and Nebraska were “redeemed,” the society would use the same method to create pockets of free labor in

53. Quoted in Thomas V. Cooper and Hector T. Fenton, *American Politics from the Beginning to Date* (Chicago: Charles R. Brodix, 1882), 39–40.

54. J. M. W. Yerrinton, *Proceedings of the State Disunion Convention* (Boston, MA: 1857), 3, 12, 30–31, 47.

the West and South. In 1857, Thayer won a seat in Congress. Kansas had catapulted his political career from the local to the national stage, where he planned a broader application of free-labor imperialism.⁵⁵

Conclusion

Emigrant aid during Bleeding Kansas taught northern reformers several important lessons about the realities of sectionalism in the 1850s. The South would never gradually abandon slavery when faced with the example of free labor. It was also unlikely that southerners would suddenly realize the superiority of the North's institutions. The Slave Power would continue to rig elections and incite violence in opposition to northern settlement in the West. The events of Bleeding Kansas, and especially the failure of the North to reform the South using targeted emigration, drove a nail into the coffin of gradualism.

The Republicans, who ran the government during the Civil War and afterward, realized the power of emigration, seeing it as a way to redistribute populations in ways that deeply influenced politics. Republicans federalized the idea of emigrant aid, starting during the war with experiments in land reform to benefit the formerly enslaved, such as the colonies at Port Royal and Davis Bend.⁵⁶ Later, Republicans took over the task of subsidizing westward expansion from private reformers,

finally implementing the Homestead Act, which settlers had long desired, in 1862. In addition to the subsidies provided to settlers, Republicans embraced the business implications of emigrant aid, subsidizing railroad expansion in anticipation of settlement. Amid all this expansion, Republicans continued to use the moralistic language of reform to justify colonization. While colonial middlemen such as Thayer increasingly saw their private entries into emigrant aid falter in the postbellum years, their combination of free labor, evangelicalism, and capitalistic speculation persisted.

Thayer's promotional vision connected the distant West to the debates of the East, contributed to sectional concerns about disunion, and bound the nation together in a debate over the wisdom of an organized, cooperative emigration movement. In the process, Kansas became part of the imagined North. As Indigenous peoples were dispossessed through the aid of the federal government, the territory came to be perceived as a virgin land, ripe for settlement by upstanding Christians. Emigrant aid promoters created a vision of the land that would persist far beyond its Civil War-era context, as the mythology of the western pioneer took root in the American mind. This imagination was vital not only in cementing the idea of Kansas as part of the growing United States but also in connecting it to a specifically northern vision of expansion.^[KH]

55. For more on the Civil War and the postbellum activities of Thayer and the NEEAC, see Courtney Buchkoski, "'Luke-Warm Abolitionists': Eli Thayer and the Contest for Civil War Memory, 1853–1899," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 9, no. 2 (June 2019): 249–74; *Nebraska and Kansas Report*, 32.

56. See Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).