

“Advocate the Freedom of White Men, As Well As That of Negroes”

The *Kansas Free State* and Antislavery Westerners in Territorial Kansas

by Bill Cecil-Fronsman

On January 10, 1855, the first edition of the *Kansas Free State* appeared, published in the free-state town of Lawrence. Its co-editor, Robert Gaston Elliott, claimed pride of place for it as the first antislavery newspaper printed in Kansas Territory, a claim subsequent historians have not sustained. Nevertheless, the *Free State* emerged as a leading voice in the Kansas free-state movement—the first antislavery paper written by and for westerners.¹

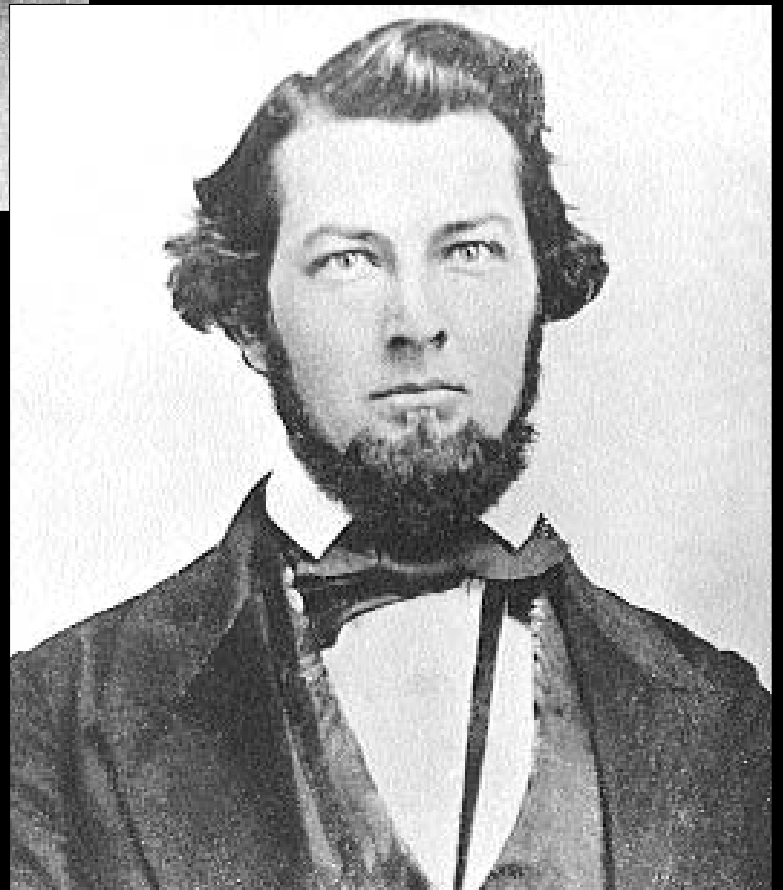
The significance of the *Free State* goes well beyond its relative position in the order of antislavery newspapers. This article will argue that the *Free State* helped shape the Kansas antislavery struggle by promoting what its editors saw as a pragmatic alternative. Positioning itself ideologically between abolitionist New Englanders and proslavery Missourians, the *Free*

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1. In “Autobiography of Robert G. Elliott,” *Kansas Historical Collections*, 1907–1908 10 (1908): 191, the former editor claimed that the *Kansas Free State* was the “first paper issued in Lawrence.” Herbert Flint, the most thorough historian of territorial-era newspapers and an admirer of the paper, awards that honor to its rival, the *Herald of Freedom*, the organ of the New England Emigrant Aid Company. Although the first edition of the *Free State* is dated January 3, 1855, it apparently did not appear until Janu-



Indiana-born Robert Garston Elliott settled in Lawrence, Kansas, and became co-editor of the Kansas Free State, a newspaper that rejected slavery without embracing abolition.



Although a South Carolina native, Josiah Miller opposed slavery. To promote the antislavery cause, Miller joined with his college classmate Robert G. Elliott in 1855 to establish the Kansas Free State newspaper.

State helped craft a strategy that united opponents of slavery around a common denominator. The *Free State* emphasized slavery's doleful effects on whites and made the harm inflicted upon the slaves themselves a secondary concern. Despite opposing efforts to exclude blacks from the territory, the editors eventually capitulated to the racist elements in their movement. To no small degree was the successful establishment of the Kansas free-state movement the result of the newspaper's ability to find this elusive common ground.

Miller's brief tenure in Bloomington may have shaped his subsequent outlook in Kansas. The positions Combs had staked out in Illinois closely resemble those taken by the *Free State*. Although Combs denied being a "ranting abolitionist," he denounced slavery and looked forward to the day "when the tightly riveted bands of oppression shall be rent asunder." With Miller as co-editor, the newspaper called for expansion, "free soil or no free soil," and urged the acquisition of Cuba, portions of Mexico, and Caribbean and Pacific islands. In addition, the

The "free state" label was to "comprise all [those] . . . in favor of making Kansas Free, not from any peculiar sympathy for the negro, or regard for his rights, but because it would be to the pecuniary gain of the masses to have it Free."

The founders of the paper were Josiah Miller and Robert Gaston Elliott. Born in 1828, Miller was a South Carolina native. His father had spoken out against slavery and moved the family to Indiana when Josiah was a boy. He attended Indiana University and later studied law in Poughkeepsie, New York. Instead of pursuing a legal career, Miller returned to the Midwest in 1853. He joined Daniel J. Combs as the co-editor of the Bloomington *Central Illinois Times*.²

ary 10. Although the first issue of the *Herald of Freedom* printed in Kansas is dated January 6, 1855, it apparently appeared on January 3, which would make the *Free State* the second antislavery paper to be printed in the territory. See Herbert Flint, "Journalism in Territorial Kansas" (master's thesis, University of Kansas, 1916), 51. Subsequent historians of Kansas journalism have accepted Flint's conclusions. See Douglas C. McMurtrie, "Pioneer Printing of Kansas," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 1 (November 1931): 10; G. Raymond Gaedert, "First Newspapers in Kansas Counties 1854–1864," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 10 (February 1941): 8. William E. Connelley, *History of Kansas Newspapers* (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1916), 45, writes that the *Free State* was "one of the first papers, if not the very first, established by the antislavery people in Kansas. It was perhaps the ablest paper published in Kansas territorial times."

2. On Miller's background, see *Kansas Free State*, February 18, 1856; Connelley, *History of Kansas Newspapers*, 27. Miller's family apparently moved back to South Carolina, as his subsequent correspondence indicates. See Josiah Miller Papers, Kansas Collection, University of Kansas Libraries, Lawrence. The Illinois State Historical Society does not have a

publication called for the United States to "organize the Territory of Nebraska," which included the land that subsequently became Kansas Territory.³

Passage of the Kansas–Nebraska Act in 1854 sparked Miller's interest in Kansas. The act stipulated that the territorial legislature would determine the status of slavery until Kansas became a state—the principle of popular sovereignty. Miller welcomed passage of the Kansas–Nebraska bill. Robert G. Elliott, his partner in Kansas, wrote that he saw it "as clearing the agenda for the determining conflict between two antagonistic and irrepressible elements of the government." To promote the antislavery cause, Miller decided to establish a newspaper in Kansas to espouse his principles. He formed a partnership with his college classmate Robert G. Elliott to accomplish the task. Like Miller, Elliott was born in 1828 into an Indiana family originally from South Carolina. He attended Indiana University, where he met Miller. After

complete run of the *Central Illinois Times*. The first extant issue (edited by D. J. Combs) is dated August 26, 1853. The first extant issue with Miller's name in the masthead is dated November 11, 1853.

3. *Central Illinois Times* (Bloomington), August 26, September 9, November 25, 1853.

college Elliott taught school in Princeton, Indiana, and later in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, where Miller contacted him. Both men settled in Lawrence.⁴

The *Free State's* focus was the midwestern emigrant, who by force of numbers would have to be the foundation of the Kansas antislavery movement. Although New Englanders provided key leadership roles, fewer than 7 percent of Kansans in 1855 were born in the New England states. In contrast, about one-quarter of the population came from the Midwest and Northern border states. It was to these westerners that the *Free State* hoped to appeal.⁵

It was no certainty that westerners would join with opponents of slavery. Historians have recognized that many westerners were staunchly racist. The *Free State's* proslavery opponents claimed to foresee a potential alliance between themselves and midwesterners. Atchison's *Squatter Sovereign*, the most militant of the proslavery newspapers, announced, "There will be many a good citizen settle among us from Illinois, Indian[a], and Ohio, whose notions of slavery are parallel with our own." The more moderate proslavery organ, Leavenworth's *Kansas Weekly Herald*, claimed that emigrants from the "Western, Middle and Slave States" were "not disposed to interfere with slavery where it exists." Because of their arrival, "The prospects for making Kansas a slave State, are bright and promising."⁶

To prevent such an alliance, the *Free State's* editors searched for a way to reject slavery without embracing abolition. "There are all species of Anti-Slavery—it being the generic term." The abolitionist, they claimed, was "the most radical and distinct species." Ignoring the range of opinion among different

schools of abolitionism, they defined its proponents in terms of William Lloyd Garrison. "He is opposed to the Constitution of this country—regards the Union as conceived in sin and brought forth in inequity—that there should be no union with slaveholders, or participation in the affairs of so corrupt a government as ours." Instead, the editors preferred the more inclusive "free state" label that was to "comprise all Free Soilers and a great many more such as are in favor of making Kansas Free, not from any peculiar sympathy for the negro, or regard for his rights, but because it would be to the pecuniary gain of the masses to have it Free."⁷

The quest to find common ground among opponents of slavery gave the *Free State* its identity. Miller and Elliott understood that challenging the racial assumptions of their constituency risked dividing the free-state movement they hoped to nurture. They concentrated on issues that were likely to win favor from all shades of antislavery opinion. They portrayed slavery as a threat to the well-being of whites. As the editors commented, "When we named our paper the '*Kansas Free State*,' we intended that it should advocate the freedom of white men, as well as that of negroes."⁸

The *Free State's* critique operated well within the familiar perimeters of the free-labor ideology: slavery created a backward and stagnant society. By the 1850s Northerners had come to believe their social order was demonstrably superior to the South's. Eric Foner argues that this consensus went beyond simply denouncing slavery: "It was an affirmation of the superiority of the social system of the North—a dynamic, expanding capitalist society whose achievements and destiny were almost wholly the result of the dignity and opportunities which it offered the average laboring man." Historians initially conceived of this ideology to describe the outlook of the Republican Party, which was emerging during the *Free State's* short-lived existence and by 1856 had won the loyalty of its editors. But as William Gienapp makes clear, "Belief in the values associated with free labor, including a

4. *Kansas Free State*, February 18, 1856; Flint, "Journalism in Territorial Kansas," 56–58; "Autobiography of Robert G. Elliott," 190–91.

5. James C. Malin, *John Brown and the Legend of Fifty-Six* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1942), 511–15, gives population figures. A rather haphazardly compiled subscription list from 1855 reveals that in addition to a wide range of Kansans, the *Free State* was sent to a substantial number of midwesterners, especially in Miller and Elliott's home state of Indiana. See Josiah Miller Cash Book and Subscription List, Miller Papers.

6. Eugene Berwanger, *The Frontier Against Slavery: Anti-Negro Prejudice and the Slavery Extension Controversy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1967) discusses western racism. *Squatter Sovereign* (Atchison), April 10, 1855; *Kansas Weekly Herald* (Leavenworth), May 23, 1857.

7. *Kansas Free State*, March 31, 1855.

8. *Ibid.*, October 29, 1855.

fervent desire to protect and expand northern society, was not confined to Republicans. All northerners shared these values.”⁹

The *Free State* characterized the North as a fluid, open society, where an individual’s opportunities were limited only by his talents and ambition. It rejected claims that the Northern poor were worse off than the South’s slaves: “These poor are not deprived of a single ‘inalienable right’ by law, but stands [*sic*] on an equal footing with the rich. They have also a perfect right to flee the country, without being pursued, either by a pack of bloodhounds or a fugitive act, where they could readily better their condition and live independently.”¹⁰

As was typical of Republican rhetoric before 1856, the *Free State* devoted little space to extolling the positive virtues of Northern society. Instead it used Northern achievements as measuring sticks to judge the South and found the region wanting. As Foner points out, Northern candidates amassed great caches of political capital by drawing invidious comparisons between the two regions. Such arguments “were far more effective politically than mere moralizing about slavery.”¹¹

The paper attacked slavery in terms that were likely to appeal to farmers seeking personal independence and advancement. It asserted that slavery was an institution that:

poisons and impoverishes the soil—that reduces the price of land from \$20 per acre to 12 1-2 cents per acre—whose only object is to wear out and ruin the soil . . . —an institution that paralyzes the hand of industry, and weakens moral and intellectual effort, that drives all energy and enterprise from its presence, and substitutes idleness, intemperance and debauchery—that decreases the white population, and annihilates the common school.¹²

9. Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War*, 2d rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 11; William E. Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party 1852–1856* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 357.

10. *Kansas Free State*, April 7, 1855.

11. On Republican rhetoric before 1856, see Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party*, 357; Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, 44.

12. *Kansas Free State*, January 3, July 16, 1855.

The *Free State* reported receiving a letter from a South Carolinian who could only get six dollars per acre for his farm. It reported on discussions with a planter who boasted at having “‘worn out’ four large farms, and that he was now, with his negroes, on the fifth, and did not know how many more he would want before he died.” It compared population figures in the free and slave states and concluded:

Let those who wish to see Kansas peopled twenty years hence with an active business population, as we see New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio and Illinois to-day, go for excluding slavery from the Territory. But those who would wish to see Kansas sparsely populated, millions of acres of land uncultivated, a barren prairie, with *land a drug* at a *bit* an acre, as is the case in Virginia, Kentucky, and Missouri, and in fact the whole South, should go for slavery in Kansas.¹³

Appeals such as this suggested that the editors welcomed the possibility that settlers would bid up land prices. The *Free State* warned its readers of slavery’s influence “in depreciating the value of every species of property.” Only a free society could guarantee success for those who wished to make money speculating in land. “Who ever heard of any speculations in town sites in a slave State? While thousands have enriched themselves by the increased value of town property in the States of Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin, and all the Western Free States, but the fewest number have made anything in this manner in the Slave States.”¹⁴

This kind of reasoning, however, was unusual for the *Free State*. Such appeals may have found receptive ears among antislavery settlers interested in land deals and other forms of speculation. But many antislavery emigrants, particularly those from the West, feared that land speculation might be an un-republican source of corruption. The free-labor ideology was not confined to former Whigs, who might have been more sympathetic to speculative profits. Miller and Elliott linked themselves to the traditions of the De-

13. *Ibid.*, January 31, October 8, 1855.

14. *Ibid.*, April 21, 1855.

mocratic Party. The *Central Illinois Times*, which Miller had helped edit before coming to Kansas, was a Democratic Party paper, although critical of the Franklin Pierce administration. Once in Kansas, the editors described themselves as “Democrat[s] of the Jefferson-

The *Free State’s* critique of slavery was much more in keeping with the principles of the Democratic Party. Rather than portraying slavery as a threat to speculative enterprises, it was more likely to portray the institution as a danger to personal independence.

Slavery is “an institution that paralyzes the hand of industry, and weakens moral and intellectual effort, that drives all energy and enterprise from its presence, and substitutes idleness, intemperance and debauchery—that decreases the white population.”

ian, Jacksonian stamp which is as different from the recent ‘old line’ kind as Heaven is different from the infernal regions.” Although suspicious of the current Democratic Party efforts, they identified the party as one “which endorsed the principles of justice and humanity.”¹⁵

Northern Democrats also accepted the free-labor ideology. Their reading of it, however, tended to stress the threats to free labor that stemmed from combinations of capital and from speculative ventures that failed to produce material goods. Miller and Elliott apparently did not see anything harmful in small-scale speculation. They owned several town lots that they rented and sold for profits. Jacksonian rhetoric made a rather amorphous distinction between small- and large-scale speculation. Speculation might be acceptable if the individuals profiting were directly involved in the hard work of promoting the economic growth of a community. Therefore Miller and Elliott welcomed “industrious and enterprising men” to the area. But “as for speculators, who wish to live and grow rich upon the labor of others, we do not want them.”¹⁶

15. *Central Illinois Times*, November 25, 1853; *Kansas Free State*, October 1, 1855, April 7, 1856.

16. On Democrats, see Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, 18; Marvin Meyers, *The Jacksonian Persuasion: Politics and Belief* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1957), chapter 1; Bruce Collins, “The Ideology of the Ante-bellum Northern Democrats,” *Journal of American Studies* 11 (April 1977): 103–21. Miller and Elliott’s investments in town lots are discussed in several of Miller’s letters to his parents. See Miller Papers, Oc-

It mobilized westerners who were most likely to believe that slavery threatened white interests. It alleged that the poor whites of the South were among slavery’s greatest victims. In the South, “White labor is disregarded and in all those branches in which the slave can be made to operate advantageously, labor is depreciated; consequently the poor white man is either brought near the condition of the slave or driven to the free States.” An editorial added that slavery “is the cause of oppressing the poor white population by a competition of slave labor, decreasing the prices and thus casting them out of employment.”¹⁷

Besides denying common whites their economic independence, slavery allegedly denied them their ability to be the social equals of their slaveholding neighbors. The paper ran an article from the *Richmond Examiner* that denounced “The Modern Abomination of Free Schools.” The editors observed: “The servility of the slave naturally increases the spirit of intolerance and tyranny in the master, which is exercised not only towards the slave but towards all others.” Although slavery’s defenders in Kansas characterized the South as a white man’s democracy, the *Free State* claimed otherwise:

It is a well known fact that in most slaveholding States, the man who expresses his opinion in op-

tober 15, November 11, 1855; Josiah Miller Account Books; *Kansas Free State*, August 6, 1855.

17. *Kansas Free State*, June 4, May 7, 1855.

position to Slavery, is instantly cast out of society; is looked upon with a suspicious eye whenever seen; is subjected to the scoffs, scorns and intrigues of the mass of his neighbors and acquaintances, and cannot leave home without running the risk of encountering an infuriated mob determined either to lash his opinions or his life out of him.¹⁸

Miller and Elliott drew upon this assessment to mobilize opposition to the proslavery “bogus” legislature. In a territory with fewer than three thousand eligible voters, more than sixty-three hundred ballots were cast during the first territorial elections. On March 30, 1855, thousands of Missourians entered Kansas and elected a staunchly proslavery legislature. In the coming weeks the *Free State* reported on the failure of the Pierce administration and territorial officials to overturn the election results. Antislavery Kansans who might have had little sympathy with slaves could see a clear threat to their own indepen-

slavery and crushing all opposition to it.” By the mid-1850s this image was serving as a potent weapon in the political upheaval that followed the creation of Kansas Territory. Michael Holt notes that Republicans “sought to persuade Northerners that slaveholders meant to enslave them through their control of the national government and to enlist Northern voters behind the Republican party in a defensive phalanx to ward off *that* slavery . . . by driving the Slave Power from its control of the national government.” William Gienapp maintains that the core message of Republicans in 1856 was “that the slaveholding oligarchy posed a threat of unprecedented magnitude to the survival of the Republic, its values and institutions.” As slavery threatened westerners’ personal independence, the slave power threatened their collective liberty.¹⁹

The *Free State’s* editors viewed slavery as a corrosive influence on the republic. The framers of the

In “most slaveholding States, the man who expresses his opinion in opposition to Slavery . . . cannot leave home without running the risk of encountering an infuriated mob determined either to lash his opinions or his life out of him.”

dence from an outside conspiratorial force. Miller and Elliott saw the Kansas episode as a local illustration of a nationwide pattern. The “slave power” had taken over Kansas.

Starting in the 1840s Northerners began to speak of a “slave power.” Historian William L. Barney describes this notion as “an alleged conspiracy of slaveholders and their Northern lackeys who were said to be masterminding a vast plot to subvert the liberties of Northern whites by capturing control of the federal government for the purpose of expanding

Constitution allegedly intended slavery to disappear. But although slavery was now secure, “the Slave Power . . . is not content, but demands the acquisition of more domain, and the re-establishment of that most infamous of all traffics, the slave trade.” This conspiracy theory gave the editors a lens through which to perceive events in Kansas. When President Pierce replaced territorial governor Andrew Reeder with Southern sympathizer Wilson Shannon, the *Free State* commented: “We have no doubt that his [Reeder’s] removal was done simply to gratify the contin-

18. *Ibid.*, April 7, 1855, March 3, 1856. On the arguments of proslavery Kansans, see Bill Cecil-Fronsman, “‘Death to All Yankees and Traitors in Kansas’: The *Squatter Sovereign* and the Defense of Slavery in Kansas,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 16 (Spring 1993): 22–33.

19. William L. Barney, *Battleground for the Union: The Era of the Civil War and Reconstruction 1848–1877* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1990), 47; Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1978), 191; Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party*, 365.

ued demands of the slave power." Following the takeover of Kansas by proslavery forces, the paper reported "how the vast machinery of our government is worked by 350,000 slaveholders of the South, and that the many millions of the North submit with perfect obedience." The editors warned that if successful, slaveholders "will succeed not only in establishing negro slavery, but white slavery in the Territory of Kansas." As the paper warned of slavery's negative effects on whites, it drew upon images of white men debased to the level of blacks to attack the "bogus" legislature. "We are slaves. We are ruled by the iron rod of a foreign master. We are now fit companions in condition with the African."²⁰

Paralleling the *Free State's* concern with the influence of the slave power was its obsession with a more tangible entity, the New England Emigrant Aid Company. Organized in 1854 by Eli Thayer, the Aid Company was both a business enterprise and a humanitarian effort to promote antislavery settlement. To the *Free State's* editors, however, it shared much with the forces of slavery it purported to oppose. Both were illegitimate outside agencies that conspired to deprive free men of their liberties. Like slaveholders, the Aid Company conspired to monopolize the region's assets. Both were dangers to the small-scale western entrepreneurs whom the *Free State* promoted.²¹

Problems with the Aid Company pre-dated the paper's existence. When Miller and Elliott first arrived in Lawrence, they found little welcome from the Aid Company. A group of settlers under its auspices had founded the town. Eli Thayer, its founder, had arranged a loan to George W. Brown to found his *Herald of Freedom*. When Miller and Elliott arrived, Brown was about to start publishing his paper in Lawrence as a virtual company organ. The company had little interest in seeing a rival press enter its domain and refused to help the young entrepreneurs. Miller and Elliott consequently had difficulty finding

a building to house their press, eventually settling on an unfinished shack. Miller recalled that when he and Elliott came to Lawrence, "There also seemed to be a spirit of monopoly. The East wished to have all the glory of making Kansas free. They did not like to see any papers established but those in their employ, as they tried to exclude us from this place."²²

Complicating relations between the Aid Company and the *Free State* was Josiah Miller's legal practice. Miller represented a group of squatters whom the Aid Company was seeking to dispossess. At issue was whether its town site claims took precedence over those of the squatters. Miller successfully defended the squatters and forced a favorable settlement. The paper explained that its conflict with Charles Robinson, general agent of the Aid Company, had arisen because the *Free State's* editors had stopped Robinson's "swindling operations." "Because we did this," Miller and Elliott charged, Robinson "seeks all the vile means he can to crush us to the earth and drive us from the Territory."²³

From the start, the paper's conflict with the New England Emigrant Aid Company was a major focus. In the opening issue Miller and Elliott proclaimed, "We come not, then, as the peculiar advocate of any section. We disavow all connection with Emigrant Aid Companies—have nothing to do with them, and have no confidence in them." The paper served as a forum for those who felt badly used by the Aid Company. Clark Stearns, a squatter who initially had occupied part of the town site that the company acquired, drafted a letter that condemned what he called "the aristocracy of Lawrence." Stearns urged the paper to denounce oppression of all sorts, "not only of the slaveholder toward the slave, but of the capitalist towards the poor man."²⁴

22. Flint, "Journalism in Territorial Kansas," 49–54; McMurtrie, "Pioneer Printing of Kansas," 11; Johnson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 81, 89–90; *Kansas Free State*, February 18, 1856.

23. Flint "Journalism in Territorial Kansas," 67; Johnson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 80; *Kansas Free State*, July 30, 1855. Robinson never acknowledged the legitimacy of the claim against the Aid Company. "These town-site jumpers had no more legal or equitable title to this one hundred shares than Franklin Pierce or Jeff Davis." See Charles Robinson, *The Kansas Conflict* (Lawrence: Journal Publishing Co., 1892), 88.

24. *Kansas Free State*, January 3, 24, 1855; Johnson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 79.

20. *Kansas Free State*, March 3, May 21, August 6, 1855.

21. See Samuel A. Johnson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The New England Emigrant Aid Company in the Kansas Crusade* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1954).

At times the paper merged antislavery imagery and anti-Aid Company appeals. It sounded surprisingly like its proslavery rivals when they justified taking over elections on the grounds that Aid Company men were not independent voters but rather pawns of its founders. When a proslavery meeting claimed that the “labor of *white slaves* is not adapted to these latitudes,” the *Free State* responded: “There is no doubt that there are some grounds for this allusion to white slaves, as there were never any slaves of the South who served their masters more faithfully than do a few of the eastern emigration . . . Agents of the company.” The paper also announced that it would not be influenced by the “aristocratic hirelings of the Aid Company.”²⁵

The *Free State* embraced the critique of privileged institutions that had been a staple of Democratic Party rhetoric for more than a generation. It attacked the Aid Company as an institution that sought to derive riches without work. The Aid Company supposedly was more interested in enriching its investors than in opposing slavery. “One-fourth of the lots in Lawrence have been set apart for the Company.” These properties serve “as an inducement for persons to take stock, that any investment which they might make in Kansas, would suddenly become valuable, that even their property in one locality would declare a large dividend to the Company.” An article attacked the company’s “*fictitious* claims which have been marked out by visitors or by those who have left the country without designing to return and have entrusted them to agents to be sold on speculation.”²⁶

Miller and Elliott claimed that the Aid Company was not only a pernicious speculative monopoly but an entity that accomplished virtually nothing. Under the headline “Emigrant Aid Company Again,” the *Free State* reported that “Every day we meet numbers of persons bitter in their denunciations of this grand humbug. Indeed it seems that almost one-half of those who have come out under its auspices and

nearly all others who have become acquainted with its operations, confess that this bogus Company is nothing more nor less than a grand swindle.” It mocked claims that it had encouraged settlement by building sawmills and a hotel: “The mill here has been a perfect nuisance. The Hotel, which has been building ever since the Company had an existence, still lingers. It is now up one story, the work having stopped, and the contractor has taken his hands off, not being able to get his pay.”²⁷

Connected to the editors’ hostility toward the Aid Company was their sense that eastern emigrants looked down on westerners. If New Englanders saw their role as a “civilizing mission” to the West, the *Free State* denounced those who sought to transform Kansas into a “model New England State.” Such people “work themselves into a belief that Western men. . . are of an inferior order of people, unfit for social intercourse.” The Aid Company allegedly failed because “there were many Western men from the Free States, who did not like to be taught morals by the people of Eastern cities, or how to develop a new country by the wealthy aristocrats of Boston, who knew nothing of practical life.”²⁸

The *Free State* bemoaned easterners’ alleged tendencies to claim credit for settling Kansas with freestaters. A letter from “A Western Man” attacked the *Herald of Freedom* for ignoring the contributions of westerners: “One who knew nothing more of the Territory than what he learns from the *Herald* would readily suppose . . . that all that has been done in Kansas towards settlement and improvement has been done by the Eastern Emigrant Aid Company or the few Eastern settlers that are here.” The *Herald of Freedom*, with its wider circulation outside Kansas, could tout the schools, churches, and other modes of “civilization” that it was introducing into Kansas. “Western and Southern men have become tired hearing of these intimations that none of these things can

25. Cecil-Fronsman, “‘Death to All Yankees and Traitors in Kansas,’” 29; *Kansas Free State*, February 7, August 27, 1855.

26. *Kansas Free State*, March 3, 17, 1855.

27. *Ibid.*, April 14, July 9, 1855.

28. Gunja SenGupta, *For God and Mammon: Evangelicals and Entrepreneurs, Masters and Slaves in Territorial Kansas, 1854–1860* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 79–82; *Kansas Free State*, February 7, 1855, February 18, 1856.

29. *Kansas Free State*, March 3, 1855, March 3, 1856.

“Many Western men from the Free States . . . did not like to be taught morals by the people of Eastern cities, or how to develop a new country by the wealthy aristocrats of Boston, who knew nothing of practical life.”

come from any other quarter except the East.”²⁹

The *Free State* shared with its proslavery rivals a contemptuous view of eastern emigrants. It was an article of faith among proslavery ideologues that Aid Company promoters gathered up eastern emigrants from the poorhouses of Northern cities. Miller and Elliott acknowledged that the “wholesale charge of pauperism . . . is entirely unjust, and unworthy of notice.” Nevertheless, eastern emigrants were soft and unprepared for the harsh western environment. “It appears never to have entered their minds that for a time they *must* forgo all the luxuries and conveniences, and many of the comforts to which those in the older settlements are accustomed.” They “are accustomed to every convenience of life.” They allegedly lacked the metal needed to conquer a rough territory. “If it is cold and disagreeable, and the taverns crowded to overflowing, they become at once discouraged.” In contrast, westerners are “prepared to go when they please and come when they please, so that there is no danger of them ever becoming discouraged.”³⁰

The East–West rivalry appeared in the *Free State*’s political activities. The first major test for the antislavery coalition was the March 30, 1855, election for a territorial legislature. An antislavery convention met in Lawrence before the election, although internal conflicts allegedly prevented it from coming up with a winning ticket. The convention initially nominated several westerners. But this ticket allegedly did not “suit the fancy of some Eastern men.” One nomi-

30. For proslavery critiques, see Cecil-Fronsman, “Death to All Yankees and Traitors in Kansas,” 29. *Kansas Free State*, February 24, May 28, October 29, 1855.

nee, Edward Chapman, was cast off, and another, C.W. Babcock, declined to run. “We were thoroughly convinced that no man could carry so many of the Western Free State voters, especially the Missouri part, as could Mr. Chapman, and that his name and Babcock’s were essentially necessary on the ticket to carry the Western Free State vote.” The paper neglected to mention that Babcock was representing litigants in a suit against the Aid Company and that Chapman’s antislavery credentials were suspect. Nevertheless, the *Free State* claimed that the final slate was “no union ticket, as it gives nothing to the Western Free State men, many of whom consider it an abolition ticket, and will either not vote at all, or vote pro-slavery.”³¹

Divisions among antislavery settlers proved less significant than the thousands of Missourians who crossed the border and secured the election of a proslavery legislature. Miller and Elliott tried to mobilize opposition in the months that followed. But they grew increasingly restive with the actions of their potential allies from the East. On July 4, 1855, Aid Company leader Charles Robinson delivered a blistering attack on slavery, slaveholding, and slaveholders. The *Free State* declared that it “was a most splendid anti-slavery address” but questioned its tact. “Had it been spoken in Union Hall on some Saturday evening, would have told with powerful effect.” Since it attacked so many people, “instead of producing a harmonious union of good feeling among all, had a tendency to drive [away] many on the pro-slavery side, who otherwise would have

31. *Kansas Free State*, March 31, 1855. On Babcock and Chapman, see Robinson, *The Kansas Conflict*, 79, 83.

32. *Kansas Free State*, July 9, 1855.

acted with us."³²

The outcome of this incident was that Miller and Elliott called a meeting to plan a more pragmatic strategy. Gathering near the bank of the Kansas River, the "sandbank convention" resolved to organize a free-state party. It called for an assembly of elected delegates that would draft a platform sufficiently broad to attract as many opponents of slavery as possible. The result was that in September the Big Springs Convention met. At the convention, delegates agreed to establish a free-state party, using both

to the perception of truth, they have hugged their effete, senseless, and rotten institutions until they have become the most contemptible among nations."³⁴

The second edition of the *Free State* called for a prohibition law: "The voice of humanity, and of justice, demands the banishment of this agent of strife, taxation, poverty, and crime." The next issue proclaimed, "The man who retails intoxicating drinks among his neighbors does vastly more injury to society than the man who counterfeits money, or steals horses." It used anti-Indian imagery to characterize

The free states are "more culpable and more responsible for the extension of slavery than the slave States." The small number of slaveholders could not alone be "responsible for so poisoning and adulterating" the American body politic.

the name and the policy advocated by Miller and Elliott. Eventually, the Free State Party helped to establish the Topeka Movement and parallel government to battle the proslavery "bogus" government. The pragmatic strategy proposed by the *Free State* helped establish the direction taken by antislavery Kansans.³³

Although the paper challenged New England leadership, one should be cautious about juxtaposing the two sides. Easterners and the *Free State* shared common commitments that went beyond opposition to slavery. For example, New Englanders promised to struggle against the "twin evils of slavery and Romanism" and supported reforms such as temperance. *Free State* editorials assumed the anti-Catholicism that was common to its age. It attacked the Aid Company's willingness to use evil means to achieve a good end as "that Jesuitical policy." It portrayed "Italy, Spain, Portugal, and, indeed, almost every Catholic country" as "abhorring all change, and blind

the scene in a liquor shop: "There was a horrid sound of moaning, croaking and yelling; like a gang of savage Sioux dancing around their scalps; with a strong mixture of idiotic shouts, insane merriment, and drunken speeches, of laughing, quarreling and 'expatiating,' well seasoned with oaths and vulgarity." A correspondent described the proslavery legislature as having "been drunk every night, and two or three street fights have occurred among them."³⁵

In addition, the *Free State* was more like its eastern compatriots than one might assume in matters of race. The conventional wisdom of historians is that the western settlers were sharply different on critical matters of race from their New England counterparts. Eugene Berwanger draws a sharp distinction between settlers "who had previously lived in New England or New York and who had migrated to Kansas under the auspices of the New England Emi-

33. James C. Malin, "The Topeka Statehood Movement Reconsidered: Origins," in *Territorial Kansas: Studies Commemorating the Centennial* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Publications, Social Science Studies, 1954), 40–50.

34. SenGupta, *For God and Mammon*, 92; *Kansas Free State*, April 14, March 3, 1855.

35. *Kansas Free State*, January 24, 31, July 30, September 10, 1855. Ironically, the *Herald of Freedom* not only questioned the *Free State's* anti-slavery credentials, it also called Miller a "habitual drunkard." SenGupta, *For God and Mammon*, 90.

grant Aid Company" and "settlers from the Old Northwest and nonslaveholders from the border slave states." The former "regarded slavery as a moral evil and endorsed the policy of equal rights for all individuals regardless of race." In contrast, the latter were "generally unconcerned about the moral correctness of slavery. Moreover, many of them saw in the movement a chance to exclude all Negroes from Kansas." Berwanger maintains that many westerners were "more anti-Negro than antislavery. Their principal objection to slavery was motivated by the realization that it would increase the Negro population, a population they did not want living in the territory." James A. Rawley describes the western settlers as those "who wished to see Kansas become a free state yet did not desire freedom for Negro slaves or welcome the coming of Negroes."³⁶

Although the paper focused on the debilitating effects slavery had on whites, it did not fan the flames of racism among its readers. It made occasional references to slave crimes and limited use of racist language to inspire support from its followers. For example, it claimed that Kansans should support its opponents only "if you want the miserable, ignorant, ragged, filthy slave to supplant the industrious intelligent free laborers." But this kind of rhetoric was not a normal part of the *Free State's* message.³⁷

The *Free State* was caught between its editors' antiracist sentiments and their desire to mobilize their constituency. That constituency included elements who wanted a "black law" to keep African Americans out of the territory. James C. Malin notes that Miller and Elliott "were personally pro-Negro" but adds that the paper "had been the spokesman for the westerners; and they had emphasized not only that westerners were in the majority among the exponents of anti-slavery sentiment in Kansas, but also that the anti-Negro or black law sentiment predominated overwhelmingly."³⁸

The editors stated their opposition to such laws in

36. Berwanger, *The Frontier Against Slavery*, 97–101; James A. Rawley, *Race and Politics: "Bleeding Kansas" and the Coming of the Civil War* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1969), 98.

37. *Kansas Free State*, October 29, 1855, October 3, 1857.

38. Malin, "The Topeka Statehood Movement Reconsidered," 42.

the opening edition of the paper. Northern racism legitimized Southern slavery. The editors regarded "the free States as being more culpable and more responsible for the extension of slavery than the slave States." The small number of slaveholders could not alone be "responsible for so poisoning and adulterating" the American body politic. Slavery rested on Northern complicity. "The Black laws of Illinois and Indiana are fully as abominable as anything in the slave code of Louisiana."³⁹

The *Free State* regularly ran articles that denounced slavery in language that would please an abolitionist. One column described slavery as "a moral evil" and denied that the Bible recognizes "the right of one man to the labor and services of another without remuneration." It added that "The Savior was no respecter of persons, yet his professing followers never recognize the negro as a brother or sister in Christ." Other columns denied that slavery was a benign institution. "If the state of slavery is attended with the enjoyment of blessings, where lies the necessity of an *act to reclaim fugitive slaves?*" asked one correspondent. Why would someone "run off penniless, with no prospects of obtaining either food or clothing, and at the same time going into a cold, frozen region?" The editors denounced the act under which several free blacks, "citizens, who were unlawfully confined in the prisons of Charleston, for no other crime than that of having a dark skin."⁴⁰

Not only did it defend slaves' rights, the *Free State* also defended the rights of free blacks. When a free black attempted to move to Kansas, Missouri authorities seized him as a fugitive slave and sent him to jail. He spent seven months there while the sheriff unsuccessfully sought his master. To meet costs the sheriff hired out the individual to the highest bidder:

Now here is a free man, while attending to his own lawful pursuits, is snatched up, just because he was a negro, confined about eight months in Jail and then is sold for an indefinite period as a

39. *Kansas Free State*, January 3, 1855.

40. *Ibid.*, April 7, May 7, 21, 1855.

slave, to pay said charges. This is a very easy method of making slaves, in this boasted land of Freedom. But it is the necessary and inherrant [*sic*] workings of the Institution.⁴¹

Despite the editors' personal sympathies, they accepted the views of a key element of constituency on exclusion. An important part of their support came from men such as N.B. Blanton, who wrote the paper, "This Territory will be better off without a State Constitution, than to have one that will admit free negroes and runaway slaves." Blanton railed against "abolitionists" who were allegedly encouraging blacks to migrate to Kansas. "They will come, because the climate is milder; and another reason is, the abolitionists will encourage not only free negroes to come, but there is some of them mean enough to entice slaves to leave their masters." Blanton concluded, "If there is to be negroes in Kansas, let them be slaves, and have masters to be responsible for their mean conduct." Miller and Elliott believed that attitudes such as these could destroy the movement to keep slavery out of Kansas. "A great many Western emigrants are in favor of a Free State provided they keep free negroes out, but if we have to tolerate negroes, they should be slaves, &c." Without their support, the Free State Party was doomed.⁴²

When the Free State Party met for the first time at the Big Springs Convention, the most hotly debated issue in the platform was the proposal to exclude blacks from the territory. After a seven-hour discussion the resolution passed with only one dissenting vote. The *Free State* previously had editorialized against such laws. But as Elliott later recalled, the delegates' position was "if we are to have the negro (pronounced nigger), we want to be masters of them." The editors celebrated the ability of diverse elements to find a common ground: "We are told by reliable men from Missouri, that nothing that has yet taken place, has so disheartened the pro-slavery party as the union and compromise at the Big Springs." The paper acknowledged its previous position but af-

firmed its willingness to compromise. "We are opposed, in principle, to the Black Laws, but if the majority say that they will go for slavery, if we do not give them a Black Law, then we say, for the sake of policy, that they should have a Black Law. We prefer a Black Law to Slavery."⁴³

Despite its importance in the political realm, the *Free State* was not economically successful. Early in its history, the paper claimed a circulation of fifteen hundred. Yet the constant pleas for support and reminders to its readers to pay for their subscriptions call into question how financially successful was the paper. On February 18, 1856, Josiah Miller announced that he had left the paper the previous November. Miller reported that although he had lost two thousand dollars "the paper was in a very flourishing condition, with prospects every day brightening." Miller publicly claimed to have left for "personal reasons." But his letters to his parents complained how Elliott was unable to hold up his end of their common expenses. They agreed to dissolve the partnership. Elliott told Miller that "he had no other occupation but—I being a lawyer could get along better than he." Miller took several town lots but left the paper to Elliott. After leaving the *Free State*, Miller served as a probate judge and postmaster and held seats in the Kansas house and senate before his death in 1870.⁴⁴

Robert G. Elliott maintained the paper through the spring of 1856. As tensions between proslavery and free-state factions mounted, the paper warned of another invasion. "The warrior emigrants from the South . . . are organized as the militia of Kansas, and furnished with Government arms." Two days after Elliott's words were disseminated, on May 21, 1856, the invasion occurred. The proslavery militia sacked Lawrence. Oblivious to the divisions within the Free State Party, the posse attacked both easterners and

41. *Ibid.*, October 22, 1855.

42. *Ibid.*, March 3, October 29, 1855.

43. R.G. Elliott, "The Big Springs Convention," *Kansas Historical Collections, 1903–1904* 8 (1904): 373; *Kansas Free State*, September 24, October 22, 1855.

44. *Kansas Free State*, February 18, 1856; Miller to Father and Mother, November 26, 1855, Miller Papers; Connelley, *History of Kansas Newspapers*, 27–28.

westerners. Charles Robinson's home went up in flames. Cannons failed to level the Aid Company's Free State Hotel; the militia torched it instead. It dumped the presses of the *Herald of Freedom* and its western rival, the *Kansas Free State*, into the Kansas River.⁴⁵

hopes of making the town a railroad hub. Elliott wrote to his sister, "These same men who were leaders in marauding excursions are the first to take us by the hand and the most anxious to induce the 'Northern Vagabonds' and 'Nigger Thieves' to settle in this place." Flooding washed out the town's levees and

"We are opposed, in principle, to the Black Laws, but if the majority say that they will go for slavery, if we do not give them a Black Law, then we say, for the sake of policy, that they should have a Black Law."

The loss was total. Elliott sued several members of the posse, unsuccessfully. He spent part of 1856 in Indiana, where he campaigned for the Republican ticket. He had hoped to return to Lawrence but found a rival, the *Lawrence Republican*, already present. In 1857 he threw his lot in with a group of Lawrence investors who were seeking to challenge Leavenworth as the dominant town along the Missouri River. He joined them and set up shop in the town of Delaware where for several months the *Free State* found a new home. The city fathers, originally ardent proslavery advocates, had recruited antislavery businessmen in

the investors' plans with them. The *Free State* folded and Elliott returned to Lawrence, where he remained active in civic affairs until his death in 1917.⁴⁶

The *Free State* disappeared from the scene, but its goal was accomplished. Midwestern emigrants joined the free-state movement. They became part of a broad coalition that secured control of the legislature in 1857 and rejected an effort to bring Kansas into the Union as a slave state in 1858. By 1861 when Kansas became the thirty-fourth state, little doubt remained as to what its status would be. It entered the Union as a free state.



45. *Kansas Free State*, May 19, 1856; Alice Nichols, *Bleeding Kansas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), 105–8.

46. Flint, "Journalism in Territorial Kansas," 159; Carolyn Berneking, ed., "A Look at Early Lawrence: Letters From Robert Gaston Elliott," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 58 (Autumn 1977): 284; "Autobiography of Robert G. Elliott," 194.