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Tales Of Courage In The Heartland

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Untitled Quilt 4
Letitia Huckaby

TALES OF COURAGE IN THE HEARTLAND

Be ye Steadfast and Unmovable

1 Corinthians 15:58

I have not the least fear that a hundred men bred under New England influences will be too eager or too war-like. You have been taught to create wealth and not to rob it; to rely on intelligence and rectitude for defense. And you will not be in any danger of erring on the side of violence. But you are sent for the defense of great rights. You have no liberty to betray them by cowardice. There are times when self-defense is a religious duty. If that duty was ever imperative, it is now, and in Kansas.

On March 22, 1856, Henry Ward Beecher, an anti-slavery preacher, presided over a meeting at North Church in New Haven, Connecticut, where he gave a rousing speech to colonists departing to Kansas. Following the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act, colonists began moving to the territory in an effort to make Kansas a free state. Beecher claimed that victory in Kansas was “but one bud on the tree, one blossom among the thousand that are afterwards to bloom,” and that a victory in Kansas would help the country return to God before it gave in to further temptation. Praising the colonists for their bravery and sacrifice, Beecher extolled that “their labors would be crowned with abundant success.”

Professor Silliman of Yale College followed Beecher’s exhortations, giving a short speech in which he imparted the

importance of self-defense as a religious duty. To the travelers, the professor bequeathed one Sharps rifle, which set off a chain reaction of donations in kind. At the end of the meeting, twenty-seven Sharps rifles had been pledged to the party, with the promise of twenty-five more from Beecher's congregation. These colonists and their supporters knew they were headed straight into a lion's den but understood the need to defend themselves.

The group, composed mostly of men, set out on the last day of March 1856 to help free Kansas during one of the most contentious periods of Kansas history. They were known as the Beecher Rifle Colony or the Beecher Rifle Church as early as 1899. Ongoing clashes with pro-slavery advocates had begun in Kansas in 1854 and continued to simmer even after Kansas was admitted into the Union as a free state in 1861. These conflicts, commonly referred to as "Bleeding Kansas," were skirmishes between anti-slavery advocates in Kansas and pro-slavery advocates, often from Missouri, which had been a slave state since 1821. Though the Beecher Rifle Colony entered a contentious Kansas armed to fight, the church and Christianity were always focal points for these colonists, and they leaned heavily on their faith to guide them through this trying period.

Traveling by train, steamboat, and wagon, the group arrived that spring in Wabaunsee, located one hundred miles west

of the Kansas-Missouri Border. Though the church was not officially organized until the following summer, the group maintained regular public worship, establishing a Bible class and Sabbath school. By July 1857 they had organized the First Church of Christ at Wabaunsee, holding their first meeting outdoors in a grove. Reverends from Manhattan and Lawrence were invited to that first meeting—Reverend S.Y. Lum of Lawrence to preach, and Reverend Blood of Manhattan to give the fellowship. A group of twenty-eight colonists received services that day, and though the church was congregational, it was "[yet] so general ... that any true child of God can easily fellowship with us."

Though these parishioners immediately set out to establish their Christian faith, they arrived in the midst of the struggle with pro-slavery factions. Lawrence, a staunch anti-slavery Union hub, was frequently attacked by pro-slavery forces from Missouri, and colonists from Wabaunsee set out to assess the situation. Though the Beecher colonists had only been in Wabaunsee for three weeks, William Mitchell and J.P. Root were appointed to travel to Lawrence to gather more information about ongoing conflicts. Upon their departure, just outside of Lawrence, they were fired upon and kidnapped by the Leocompton Riflemen. These pro-slavery forces in the area questioned and held the men for being



Henry Ward Beecher and Sister Harriet Beecher Stowe
From the Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection



Her Seed
Letitia Huckaby

“Free State men.” In the face of the Beecher colonists’ ongoing refusals to cooperate, the pro-slavery forces decided to punish Mitchell, yelling, “Hang the abolitionist!” With the help of sympathetic onlookers, Mitchell survived the incident, eventually making his way back to Wabaunsee with Root, the pair of them alternating turns upon the one mule that was returned to them. The two had been held for so long, however, that their families back in Connecticut had been notified of their deaths.

This was not the last time that members of the Beecher Colony would interact with pro-slavery factions. Shortly following their first encounter with the Lecompton Riflemen, Mitchell, now Captain Mitchell, led his company known as the Prairie Guards to aid in the defense of Lawrence. They were away for six weeks and were credited with saving Lawrence during the “Battle of the 2,700.” Free State forces were away fighting the Battle of Hickory Point on September 14, 1856, when border ruffians amassed at Franklin preparing to attack Lawrence. The Prairie Guards attacked the pro-slavery forces as they began to march towards Lawrence, causing them to retreat.

These instances of courage demonstrate the Beecher colony’s commitment to their faith and upholding their Christian values. The group emigrated to Kansas for the purpose of helping Kansas become a free state, understanding that slavery was

antithetical to their moral and religious beliefs. The story of the colony hailing from Connecticut is a story of courage. These men, many of them college-educated, left the safety and relative comfort of their homes in Connecticut to move to an unknown, often vicious and battle-worn territory thousands of miles away from their homes and families. While they were not inherently violent, many of them did think that self-defense, especially in the cause of freedom, is a sacred duty. The most important of these Christian duties was the defense of themselves, and the inherent protection of the country from the stain of slavery. The sacrifices these settlers made created lasting effects on the state and on the country. With their help and dedication to their faith, they contributed to making Kansas a free state, a nickname that persists today.

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