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2020 - The Flint Hills: Rooted In Stone (Larry Patton, editor)

Mount Mitchell, Witness To History

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Recommended Citation

Stubbs, Michael (2020). "Mount Mitchell, Witness To History," *Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal*.
<https://newprairiepress.org/sfh/2020/history/8>

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The Field Journals are made possible in part with funding from the Fred C. and Mary R. Koch Foundation.

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Kelly Yarbrough

MOUNT MITCHELL, WITNESS TO HISTORY

The past, the present and the future are really one: they are today.

Harriet Beecher Stowe

In northern Wabaunsee County along the bluff south of the Kansas River, there is a prominent hill that stands out in an uninterrupted line of tallgrass prairie against the sky. Grass and sky—it's a view that kindles a spark of ancient memory in our DNA. Human beings evolved in grassland, and our souls remember that home.

This landform has been considered a sacred place by Native People for hundreds of generations. It's been witness to the westward expansion of the United States. A trail used by mountain men in the 1820s, explorer Charles Fremont in the 1840s, and European Americans in the 1850s crosses its eastern flank. The Underground Railroad helping enslaved people seek their freedom in Canada also used this route.

Known in the 1850s as Mitchell's Hill, it's now called Mount Mitchell Heritage Prairie Park. It became a "mount" in the 1950s when Will Mitchell, son of free-state leader Captain William Mitchell, bequeathed the hill, a portion of his parents' farm, to the Kansas State Historical Society. Captain Mitchell had been the leader of the Wabaunsee Prairie Guards, the local free-state militia who had gone to the aid of Lawrence during the Border War. The

Mitchell log cabin was used as a station on the Underground Railroad from 1857 to 1861. Will's gift stipulated that the hill be forever known as Mount Mitchell, and that it become a public park dedicated to telling the story of his father and the Connecticut Kansas Colony.

In 1854, Congress determined that the residents of the newly created Kansas Territory would decide by vote whether they would enter the Union as a state that allowed slavery or one that banned it. In the first election for territorial officers in 1855, proslavery advocates from Missouri, who were not residents of the territory, overwhelmed voting places and fraudulently elected a proslavery government. Free-staters responded by creating a parallel government. By the end of that year, Eastern papers were proclaiming "Civil War in Kansas" as conflicts between pro- and anti-slavery forces erupted into violent confrontations.

In the spring of 1856, abolitionist and free-state advocates in New Haven, Connecticut, including William Mitchell and many associated with Yale University, joined together to form the Connecticut Kansas Colony. They vowed to establish "the New Haven of the West" on the Kansas prairie.

Shortly before the fifty-seven men, four women, and two children departed for the territory, a rally was held in their

honor at the Old North Church on the New Haven Green.

As an eyewitness reported:

In its course someone remarked that these men were leaving their homes to help save their country from the further blight of slavery, and that they should not be allowed to depart without proper means of defense, whereupon at once one of the audience became aroused, and to the surprise of the rest, and even himself, called out, "I'll give a Sharps rifle." This 'started the ball,' wholly unanticipated. It was instantly followed by others from all parts of the house, until fifty rifles were offered, Mr. Beecher pledging twenty-five from his own congregation in Brooklyn. Such an extraordinary meeting had never been held in an American church, and its proceedings were heralded all over the land, producing from the pro-slavery press a storm of unmitigated denunciation and abuse.

This account fails to mention that Beecher had become national news only weeks earlier when he was quoted as saying that the:

Sharps Rifle was a truly moral agency, and that there was more moral power in one of those instruments, so far as the slaveholders of Kansas were concerned, than in a hundred Bibles. You might just as well ... read the Bible to Buffaloes as



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to those fellows who follow Atchison and Stringfellow; but they have a supreme respect for the logic that is embodied in Sharp's rifle.

When Beecher sent Charles Lines a check for the rifles, it was accompanied by a letter and twenty-five Bibles, a gift from one of his parishioners. The letter was reprinted in newspapers throughout the country, North and South. Often the headline was, "Bibles and Rifles for Kansas." It was from this

sequence of events that the Colony began to be referred to as the "Beecher Rifle Colony" and the Sharps rifle took on the nickname "Beecher Bible."

The Kansas Historical Society accepted Will Mitchell's gift of thirty acres in 1953. Three years later on the centennial of the colony's arrival at Wabaunsee, they completed another stipulation of the gift and erected a monument to Captain Mitchell and the Colony on the hill's summit.



Ms. Carrie
Letitia Huckaby

Unfortunately, that was the extent of the fulfillment of Will Mitchell's vision for a public park, and for fifty years it remained undeveloped. In 2005 when local people heard rumors that the society was planning to return the property to Will Mitchell's heirs, they organized a grassroots effort to gain local control of the property so that Will's vision of a public park could be realized.

That grassroots group, known today as the Mount Mitchell Prairie Guards, with initial help from Audubon of Kansas, succeeded in gaining control of the property in 2006. Composed of local residents, friends, and supporters from throughout the country, the Prairie Guards have recently expanded the park from its original thirty acres to 270 acres. They've developed the park's infrastructure, building walking trails, erecting historical interpretive signage, improving the access road, and building a parking area. Today, local people and visitors from afar enjoy the park.

Students from multiple school districts, homeschoolers, scouting groups, travelers, birders, prairie enthusiasts, walkers, and geocachers all use the park.

With our current climate favoring woody encroachment of the prairie, Will Mitchell's vision has been expanded by the Prairie Guards to include prairie restoration and maintenance essential for maintaining a healthy remnant prairie ecosystem.

As members of the Children & Nature Network, the park's managers provide educators with an outdoor classroom for teaching history, geography, geology, biology, astronomy, and civics. During their visits children also receive the benefits of exercise and fresh air.

The Mount Mitchell Heritage Prairie is recognized by the National Park Service as a Network to Freedom site of national importance to the commemoration of the Underground Railroad. The Topeka Fort Riley Road, which runs through the park, was the westernmost route of that trail to freedom. Captain Mitchell and his sister Agnes hid escaping slaves in the loft of their log cabin north of the park.

The park is one of the most popular attractions in the Freedom's Frontier National Heritage Area and along the Native Stone Scenic Byway. It is also a hands-on resource for the Flint Hills Discovery Center; feature of the Kansas River Trail, a National Water Trail; and a major feature of the envisioned Kaw River Historic Corridor between Lawrence and Fort Riley.

Michael Stubbs is a local historian of the Border War and Wabaunsee County. He is president of the Mount Mitchell Prairie Guards and is active in history organizations and prairie preservation.