Feeding Kansas: Food, Famine, and Relief in Contested Territory

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Feeding Kansas: Food, Famine, and Relief in Contested Territory

A dissertation presented

by

Jerad Ross Mulcare

to

The Department of History

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the subject of

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Feeding Kansas: Food, Famine, and Relief in Contested Territory

Abstract

“Feeding Kansas” is an analysis of how food and its availability shaped the experiences of settlers and Native Americans in the two decades following the opening of Kansas Territory in 1854. From the outset, food was central to conceptions of the plains. White settlers arrived in Kansas expecting a verdant Eden; their expectations were quickly altered by the realities of farming and living in the semi-arid region. This dissertation argues that, in the face of these realities, there emerged a Kansas aid complex, an overlapping set of institutions and practices that provided settlers with options to receive various forms of aid when they needed it. This system was put to the test in 1860, when the territory was struck by a devastating drought that, over the course of the year, became a famine. I argue that hungry settlers and Natives had expectations that the federal government would intervene on their behalf to prevent outright starvation, but only the treaty claims of the latter proved strong enough an incentive for the Buchanan administration to take any action. White Kansans were ultimately saved by a private aid network, one orchestrated and operated by abolitionists who understood that to keep Kansas fed was to keep it free as well. In 1874, Kansans again looked outward for help, as a “Grasshopper Plague” occurred that summer, bringing many of the same issues to the fore. In 1874-75, I argue, changing demographics on the plains and a significantly more powerful post-Civil War federal government led to a different outcome. Kansans were once again fed, but it was
primarily because of the efforts of a group of Army officers stationed throughout the plains. Using promotional literature, travel narratives, diaries, newspapers, and government records, this dissertation reconsiders the “Bleeding Kansas” period, arguing that the divisive politics at the local and national levels concerning Kansas had a critical, heretofore under-examined environmental component.
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I could not have completed this dissertation without the help of Joyce Chaplin. Since entering graduate school she has been an unfailingly supportive and encouraging mentor and advisor. I have tested the patience of what an advisor should deal with, with my topic changes, desire to take a year off to work on a farm, and several bouts of serious doubt about the entire academic enterprise. Joyce supported my decisions at each of these points, but also lent the guiding hand I needed to keep me on track toward my goal. She is the type of graduate advisor that others should be judged by; she is remarkably attentive, but never overbearing. Throughout my graduate career I have been thankful that she has allowed me to pursue the questions that truly interest me, not simply limit myself to what interested me as first-year student. In addition to looking to her as a mentor and advisor, I also consider her a friend. Though my days of serving as her teaching assistant in Venice are over, I look forward to visiting La Serenissima in the future to share in some cicchetti and spritz, this time as a friend and colleague, not just a graduate student.

The remaining members of my dissertation committee, Rachel St. John and Walter Johnson, were also instrumental in helping me see this dissertation to the end. Rachel, from the outset, has been an enthusiastic supporter of this project, and she has consistently pushed me to make it better. Her expertise on the history of the American West has helped me better understand my own work in that context, and I learned much about nineteenth-century American history more broadly from her course at Harvard and her commentary on this work. Rachel also generously gave many hours of her
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I tested the central argument of this dissertation in 2010 at the annual conference of the Society of Historians of the Early American Republic. I am grateful to commentator, Greg Nobles, my co-presenter, MacKenzie Moore, and the many attendees whose offered incisive comments and suggestions on what directions I could take my research. Conevery Bolton Valencius gave a very close reading of two chapter drafts, and her comments were instrumental in making this dissertation better than it would be otherwise. Joshua Specht deserves thanks as well. Through many conversations about history and historiography, he helped me pinpoint what was interesting and novel in my work, which undoubtedly improved the final product.

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A small group of close friends in Somerville, Cambridge, and Boston have kept me sane over the years. I have shared more ideas, meals, and marathon TV-watching sessions with Sam Rosenfeld and Erica De Bruin than I can remember. I consider myself very lucky to have these two brilliant, lovely people as friends. Sam also gave this dissertation its title, for which he deserves my deepest thanks. Brian Goldstein, Theresa McCulla, Elisa Minoff, and Ramesh Nagarajan also made my time in graduate school special. Though we are now all spread out across the country, I look back fondly at our get-togethers, either on Springfield Street or Mass. Ave., and look forward to future visits.

Tom Wickman, Kaci White, and Merrimack Maple Whitman have always been eager to share a bowl of ice cream and a walk around their beautiful old New England neighborhood. Tom’s tenacity and seriousness with which he approaches his work has been a constant inspiration; I wish more of it would rub off on me!
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Without the support of my family, I could never have even entered graduate school, let alone complete this dissertation. My mother, Kimberlee Story, and my father, Mikal Mulcare, insisted on the importance of reading and education from as early as I can remember. I am thankful that they considered it important enough to not just pay for my undergraduate education, but also encourage me to study what I was interested in. Kimberly Mulcare, my step-mother, deserves thanks as well; she has always treated me with kindness and love, and has encouraged all of my endeavors, academic and
otherwise. I am lucky to have three amazing siblings: Matthew Mulcare, Courtney Sunderland, and Logan White-Mulcare. It is a constant source of comfort knowing that no matter what situation I find myself in, I will have at least three people who deeply understand me. My relationship with my grandparents, Carol Mulcare and Don Mulcare, has always been important to me, and remains so. I am incredibly lucky to have married into a wonderful family; the term “in-laws” does not do justice to the affection I feel for what I now simply consider my extended family. Monica Quinn and Rock Quinn have supported me at every step along the way. Caitlin Quinn-Smith and Ryan Smith, too, have been vital sources of support, and I am thankful that I get to call them siblings and friends.

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Introduction

[1] And I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals, and I heard, as it were the noise of thunder, one of the four beasts saying, Come and see.

[2] And I saw, and behold a white horse: and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer.

[3] And when he had opened the second seal, I heard the second beast say, Come and see.

[4] And there went out another horse that was red: and power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another: and there was given unto him a great sword.

[5] And when he had opened the third seal, I heard the third beast say, Come and see. And I beheld, and lo a black horse; and he that sat on him had a pair of balances in his hand.

[6] And I heard a voice in the midst of the four beasts say, A measure of wheat for a penny, and three measures of barley for a penny; and see thou hurt not the oil and the wine.

[7] And when he had opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth beast say, Come and see.

[8] And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.

Revelation 6:1-8, King James Version

Though the apostle John could never have conceived of Kansas, his description of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse is an apt summary of the tragedies that befell the region throughout the nineteenth century. Conquest, war, famine, and death all rode their horses into Kansas in the nineteenth century, changing the lives of individuals and the young nation as a whole. After the white horse had swept the plains free of those who had inhabited it for thousands of years, but before the
red horse of war pitted Americans against one another, a black horse galloped through Kansas Territory. By the time the rains began to fall again in 1861, many Kansans’ homes were abandoned, pocketbooks emptied, and families forever altered. Plus, the nation was going to war.

“Feeding Kansas” is an analysis of three distinct but related episodes, each of which shines some light on the importance and centrality of food and its availability to the early inhabitants of Kansas, and considers the ways in which Kansans, both white and Native, dealt with the black horse of drought and famine. The first episode occurred in the initial period of white settlement, beginning in 1854 when the territory was organized and opened for settlement under the terms of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. This period is one of the most studied in Kansas’ history, primarily because of its critical importance to debates about the expansion of slavery that would ultimately rend the fabric of the Union only six years after the territory was created. While white Kansans saw the territory as a stage upon which the political drama of the day could play out, they also looked at it as a place that would have to physically sustain and nourish them. It was this latter concern that forced Kansans to understand, construct, and engage with Kansas as a foodscape, a term used throughout the dissertation to refer to the ways in which people foregrounded concerns about food and its availability when making a home in Kansas. The influx of white settlers followed the migration of many Indian groups, who themselves had ideas about the landscape and its compatibility with their foodways. Just as settlers had expectations about the land, they also arrived with expectations about who would help them in periods of crisis. The violence of Bleeding Kansas, much of which explicitly targeted or tangentially affected food availability, was certainly a test of those expectations, and in the responses to that crisis one begins to see the development of a unique Kansas aid complex, wherein
Kansans looked to neighbors, fellow citizens across the country, and the federal government for assistance. The early territorial years, then, provided the foundations for expectations both about the Kansas foodscape and about who would help Kansans in times of trouble, two factors that would be thrown into high relief when the territory faced its most dramatic challenge in 1860.

That challenge, a drought and subsequent famine that occurred in 1860-61, is the second episode analyzed in this work. The boundaries of Kansas reached from the periphery of the Great Plains in the east, to deep into them in the west, and on the whole Kansas was a semiarid environment prone to periods of drought. This central environmental reality became considerably more complicated when the region was flooded with migrants, generally poor and unprepared for the realities of subsisting through sporadic but devastating dry spells. While 1859 was noticeably drier than the years before, when the rains did not fall in the spring and summer of 1860, Kansans knew something was wrong. By autumn and winter they had begun to starve. This drought and the famine that followed it is at the heart of this work, and I answer two related questions. First, how is it that a famine occurred in what was already one of the wealthiest nations in the world? Surprisingly, the answer has as much to do with national welfare policy (or the lack thereof) as it does the divisive, party politics of the era. Second, who did hungry Americans—Native and white—expect to help them when faced with food crises? In two chapters I argue for an important continuity from the earlier period analyzed, showing how Bleeding Kansas politics, generally considered to have been in a period of dormancy between the end of the violence in Kansas and the outbreak of the Civil War, shaped the

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ways that observers saw the crisis in Kansas and how they decided to respond to it. Responses to the
drought and famine generally reflected the divisive political climate of the day; proslavery and
antislavery Americans throughout the country viewed the events in Kansas through the lens of
politics and their public statements about those events were often contentious and antagonistic.

The final episode I consider is a relatively well-known “Grasshopper Plague” that devastated
crops throughout the Great Plains in 1874-75. There are critical continuities and divergences in the
shape the response took compared to that of 1860-61. Removed from the political context that bred
the violence of Bleeding Kansas and shaped responses to the earlier drought, Kansans and onlookers
did not engage in the same vicious rhetoric that defined the earlier episode. Settlers, who arrived in
record numbers during the decade following the Civil War, did, like their predecessors, look to
sympathetic neighbors and national aid networks. The scale of the locust infestation, however, proved
too massive for these sources of aid to handle. What was large and powerful enough to take on the
task in 1874-75, however, was the federal government, which had swollen in size and power after the
war. The U.S. Army, in particular, was engaged in a decades-long battle for control of the plains, and in
1874 turned their attention away from their Indian enemies and toward struggling white settlers who
had flooded into the region.

Each of these episodes have food, especially its availability, at their core, but as I argue, the
larger context in which they unfolded is critical to fully understanding them. Kansas in the nineteenth
century was contested territory, a region in which several important debates played out. The first
contest was over control of the land itself, with the U.S. government, its agents, and white settlers
playing the role of the white horse of conquest in the apostle John's apocalyptic vision. At first, the
federal government saw the area that would become Kansas as a buffer between the young nation and the powerful Native groups that dominated the plains, and a convenient place in which they could force Native groups in the east to “permanently” resettle. By mid-century, however, the seemingly insatiable American desire for land had brought thousands of white settlers into the region, further complicating the relationship between the people living there, and putting significant pressure on the government to once again do away with the Native peoples they found so troublesome.

This story of conquest was complicated by being linked to another contest taking place, one that was very specific to Kansas. Because the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which created Kansas Territory and opened it for white settlement in 1854, stipulated that the status of slavery in the new territory would be decided by territorial citizens themselves, the region became the center of intense vitriol and violence. Proslavery and antislavery settlers flooded the region, battling with words and weapons over whether Kansas would be a state free of slavery or open to the institution. The physical violence may have been local, but the contest itself was national, and even after the violence had abated in the territory, it was only a few short years before it exploded on the national stage, culminating in the American Civil War.

Finally, there was a more peaceful contest taking place concurrently with the conquest and violence of the period. While many white Kansans came to the territory for purely political reasons, others came as land speculators or simply farmers looking to establish themselves on cheap, plentiful land. In all cases, Kansans had an interest in promoting the territory as a verdant, fertile garden in the west, which was the image presented to early settlers by promotional materials and one that settlers themselves would continue to push even when faced with evidence to the contrary. Even after the
drought and famine of 1860–61, and the “Grasshopper Plague” of 1874-75, which should have been significant blows to the Edenic view of Kansas, Kansans fought back by promoting their home as the site of some of the nation’s finest weather and land.

These overlapping contests that were taking place in the mid-nineteenth century simultaneously informed and were informed by the crises that white and Native Kansans found themselves facing. As a rule, the reaction of Kansans to the drought, famine, and its relief efforts varied according to their political outlook. It was not mere coincidence that one could with near certainty determine another’s view on events in Kansas—all events, even the seemingly apolitical effects of a drought—by considering their political sympathies. Politically-minded Americans in 1860 could not help but read the environmental fact of drought in Kansas as deeply political and their responses were equally so. Even the expectations of the earliest settlers, who came to the region during the Bleeding Kansas period, were shaped by what they saw as their central mission: a moral and political duty to secure Kansas as a free state. Doing so, they argued, meant that the federal government owed them protection from proslavery forces’ destruction of property and life, and they later extended that argument to include protection from natural disasters, thereby creating a new set of expectations of federal government assistance—one informed by the unique circumstances of Kansas’ settlement.

**Historiography**

This dissertation lies at the intersection of several historiographies, some new, some rather old, all incredibly rich in their diversity of interpretations and understanding of the past. My approach to the
sources and general view of American history is heavily influenced by the narrative and investigative insights of environmental history and the history of the American West. These two fields have been the individual strands that form a double helix that has, in my view, given distinctive life and relevance to American history. “Feeding Kansas” uses ideas and approaches from these two related fields to make sense of an event—the 1860-61 drought and famine in Kansas Territory—that was hitherto been ignored, or at best, had its significance downplayed.

The focus of this dissertation on ideas about land and the ability to grow food on it, dramatic climatic events, and plagues of crop-destroying insects is testament to the importance and influence of environmental history. Environmental history is now a mature, if fractured discipline, but one that is sustained by a guiding principle: that humans are of nature, affect nature, and are affected by the natural world and its processes. Few subjects so clearly link these truths than food, which, as anthropologists pointed out long before historians, is simultaneously natural and subject to the human realms of culture, society, and politics. The history of food and its availability in the United States takes on particular importance, as historians have used the lens of food crises to show just how the “people of plenty,” with the centuries of economic abundance, have not been immune to being reduced to starvation, especially those on the periphery of society. This dissertation adds an

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2 For the most recent comprehensive historiographical essay covering environmental history, one that demonstrates just how diverse the field is, see Paul S. Sutter, “The World with Us: The State of American Environmental History,” *Journal of American History* 100, no. 1 (June 2013): 94–119, doi:10.1093/jahist/jat095.


important new episode to the growing literature on the relationship between the environment and its products (i.e. food) and the broader social and political contexts in which human activity take place.

Even as American food history has matured, few scholars have considered the complicated relationship between food availability and politics. That particular political views and events could so dramatically affect the ways in which groups respond to events like famines is an insight from the social sciences that has yet to deeply embed itself in American historiography. Specifically, this dissertation draws on the analyses of Amartya Sen and others, who, over the past three decades, have produced an enormous literature that focuses on the political-economic aspects of food, famine, and relief efforts. A fundamental thread running through most of Sen's work is the idea that food shortages are rarely simply the natural results of a lopsided Malthusian equation, where there are more mouths to feed than there are crops grown. Rather, Sen argues, famines are primarily political and economic events, with the determination of who suffers from them being largely the result of the shape social entitlement programs take in the famine-stricken regions. According to Sen, in a society of competing interests and unequal distribution of resources (that is to say every society) “the forces leading to famines affect different...groups quite differently, and famine analysis has to be sensitive to these differences rather than submerging all this in an allegedly homogeneous story of aggregate food supply per head.”

5 Drawing on Sen, Jenny Edkins, a scholar of international politics, has plainly, but

powerfully, described famine as “a relationship between winners and losers.” Furthermore, she argues that “practices of aid, like famines themselves, benefit some groups at the same time they make victims of others.”

Sen, Edkins, and others writing about famine and famine relief typically write about twentieth- and twenty-first-century famines, events that often affected millions of people, making many comparisons drawn between their work and an analysis of a mid-nineteenth-century American famine difficult to sustain. The 1863-65 famine in Kansas, which likely affected tens of thousands of people, is in many ways incomparable to something like the Bengal famine of 1943, where it is estimated that more than three million people died. However, the ideas that scholars like Sen have brought to the larger famines in history, namely that there is almost always a political context to famine and relief and that nature alone can rarely be blamed for famine, remain incredibly useful for understanding even smaller scale catastrophes.

“Feeding Kansas” is also informed by the “New Western History” that emerged in the 1990s, a pointed response to the earlier history of the American West that was so heavily shaped by Frederick Jackson Turner’s “frontier thesis.” When Turner considered American history, he saw the continual westward movement of a frontier line, whereupon Americans (always white, notably) would tame the free and wild lands of the American continent, a process that fundamentally shaped them, that made them resourceful and independent, that, in short, made them Americans. This view dominated the


view of American history for nearly a century, but has since been largely supplanted by the “New Western History” which rejects Turner’s idea that the process of westwardly expansion created and defined Americans, and instead considers the West foremost as a place—a place in which the main process that took place was “the convergence of diverse people,” typically through the methods of “invasion, conquest, colonization, exploitation, development, [and] expansion of the world market.”

Kansas in the nineteenth century was at the heart of many, if not all, of these processes. The opening of the territory to white settlement in 1854 brought together dozens of competing interests, some Native and some white, but all of whom would have to interact with one another, and, critically, do so in a particular natural environment that was defined not by its location at the “frontier,” but by its aridity.

This work is also situated within an ongoing debate about the role of the United States government in disaster relief and aid. Michele Landis Dauber, a legal scholar, has recently laid the foundations for a new understanding of the development of the American welfare state, arguing that the “activist state” that emerged during the New Deal era actually had its roots in the nineteenth century, a period that was previously thought to have been void of an active, effective central government. Dauber draws a connection between the twin pillars of twentieth-century social welfare policy in the United States—social security and unemployment protection—and the myriad interventions the federal government had made on behalf of Americans affected by disasters in earlier

8 Limerick, Milner, and Rankin, *Trails*, 85–86.

centuries. A key criterion for aid, Dauber argues, was whether those asking for it deserved it; that is, did the destitute shoulder the blame for their miseries, or were they “blameless” victims of forces outside of their control, be they natural or economic? Dauber’s work brings disaster relief into the argument about whether the federal government was truly “a midget institution in a giant land,” as historian John Murrin famously described it in a 1980 essay.

While Dauber uses federal disaster relief as her tool of choice to challenge the “midget institution” myth, other scholars have more broadly attacked the idea. In The People’s Welfare: Law and Regulation in Nineteenth-Century America (1996), legal historian William J. Novak carefully rejects what he sees as two persistent myths about the United States in the nineteenth-century: the “myth of statelessness,” in which the defining characteristic of the government of the period was its unimportance to the lives of Americans, and the “myth of liberal individualism,” a strain of thinking Novak attributes mostly to Louis Hartz, whose The Liberal Tradition in America (1955) argued that the dominant political ideology that guided nineteenth-century America was, in Novak’s words, “quintessentially Lockean, suffused with a passion for private right and predestined for market capitalism.” Novak takes on both of these myths, arguing that the lives of nineteenth-century Americans were suffused with government intervention, mainly in the form of various forms of

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regulation, ranging from the regulation of morals to the regulation of public health to the regulation of economic transactions among Americans. Where Murrin and others did not see the state at work at all, Novak sees it everywhere, influencing the everyday lives of Americans in the name of maintaining a “well-regulated society.” Kansans during the territorial period did engage with the state in a way that confirms this expectation of regulation; as I show in chapter 2, settlers affected by the violence of Bleeding Kansas appealed to the federal government for restitution on the grounds that the disruptive nature of that conflict was in part due to the failure of the government to fulfill its obligation of maintaining a well-ordered and lawful society.

Other scholars have joined Novak in demonstrating just how prevalent the nineteenth-century state actually was, and a recent work by Brian Balogh has synthesized their contributions and made its own claims about the nature of top-down governance in the century before the New Deal. In A Government Out of Sight (2009), Balogh argues that scholars like Novak are completely right; the federal government was not only active during the nineteenth century, but dramatically so, influencing nearly every facet of the lives of Americans. Balogh further argues, however, that a hallmark of the nineteenth-century American citizenry was its preference for “national governance that was inconspicuous. Americans preferred to use the language of the law, the courts, trade policy, fiscal subsidies – supported by indirect taxes – and partnerships with nongovernmental partners


instead of more overt, bureaucratic, and visible interventions into the political economy.\textsuperscript{15} Balogh’s interpretation, on the whole, is convincing, but the episodes analyzed in this dissertation serve as a counterpoint; white Kansans, faced with devastated crops from either drought or insects, looked directly to Washington for aid, expecting that the federal government, which they certainly recognized as a powerful force in their lives, to directly intervene. In other words, at least in the specific case of nineteenth-century Kansas, not only was the state prevalent, some were clamoring for an even stronger presence. Balogh’s argument of inconspicuousness also did not extend to the Native peoples of North America, all of whom were all too aware of the power and reach of the United States government, whose agents and army engaged first forcefully removed Indian groups from their homes in the east, and later turned to a policy of extermination on the plains.\textsuperscript{16}

Returning to disaster relief, which is the most applicable manifestation of the nineteenth-century federal government’s power when it came to the episodes analyzed in this dissertation, there have been challenges to the revisionists as well. Dauber’s intervention has been challenged by another historian, Gareth Davies, who argues that while Dauber and others are right to correct Murrin’s initial understanding of the scope and role of the federal government in the nineteenth century, in doing so they have overplayed their hand, creating an image of an active federal government that the evidence does not actually support. He writes that scholars like Dauber gloss over two critical points: first, although there was federal response to some disasters, more often than not, at least before the


War, there was no response at all. Active intervention from the government on behalf of citizens was
the exception, not the rule. Second, those disasters that the federal government did respond to
generally involved things that already fell under clear federal government purview, be it national
security, Indian relations, or management of federal territories. For instance, one of the strongest
pieces of evidence for the government’s role in natural disaster relief was the intervention of the
government on behalf of settlers after the New Madrid earthquakes that struck Missouri Territory and
the surrounding states of Arkansas, Kentucky, and Tennessee in 1811 and 1812.17 For Dauber, the
response of the federal government, which was to offer monetary aid to the affected settlers, is
evidence of an active proto-welfare state, the initial seed of what would become a flowering welfare
state in the twentieth century. Davies, however, points out the fact that the government aided the
residents of Missouri Territory because as a territory—not a state—they were “under special federal
protection.” Citizens of the states of Kentucky and Arkansas, who suffered similar damages because of
the earthquakes, received no aid from the government, nor was it even considered. In short, Davies
has revised the revisers, attempting to bring the debate back towards a middle point, challenging
what he sees as overstatements from both sides of the debate.8

17 For a deft blending of the cultural, social, economic, scientific, and environmental history of the New Madrid
earthquakes, one needs look no further than Conevery Bolton Valencius, The Lost History of the New Madrid Earthquakes
(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013). Valencius is not particularly interested in the federal relief efforts, but does
note briefly, on p. 43, that while the New Madrid legislation was a precedent for later disaster relief, it was in reality an
utter failure, exploited by “shysters” to line their pockets and increase their land holdings.

8 Davies takes particular issue with Dauber’s broad lumping of “disasters,” arguing that she makes claims about natural
disasters, but puts them in a category “with such obviously human-made events as Indian wars, the Whiskey Rebellion, the
Haitian Revolution, piracy on the high seas, and the War of 1812,” all of which, while “sharply disruptive emergencies,”
similar to fires and earthquakes, were “precisely [the] natural security threads...that had driven 13 mutually suspicious
states to form a federal union in 1788.” That the federal government would respond to these disruptions, then, is not at all
surprising, but also should not be taken as evidence that they were expected to do the same when it came to natural
Both of the disasters examined in this dissertation—the 1860-61 drought and famine, which is discussed in great detail, and the 1874-75 “Grasshopper Plague,” which primarily serves as a point of comparison for the earlier event—are useful for adding shade and nuance to the image that scholars like Dauber and Davies have been sketching out. The timing of the 1860-61 drought and famine, coming just on the eve of the American Civil War, and deeply embedded in the politics of that conflict, helps to reveal the particular historical contingencies one must consider when studying the response to disasters. The 1860-61 drought occurred during a transitional phase in how disasters were understood and responded to by Americans and their government. With very little precedent, hungry Kansans in 1860-61 made a compelling case that the federal government owed them protection from a natural disaster, and they did so not simply because they had nowhere else to turn. In fact, their continued existence despite federal inaction demonstrated how powerful other avenues for relief could be. While the government failed them in 1860-61, new circumstances—such as a federal government experiencing a dramatic swelling of power after the Civil War—allow Kansans to try again when faced with similar circumstances, and in 1874-75 they were able to successfully acquire federal relief, foreshadowing the even more dramatic expansion of aid and welfare services that would come in the twentieth century. The drought and famine in Kansas territory at once confirms Davies’ argument that the federal government was generally unresponsive to natural disasters, even when appealed to directly by suffering Americans, and complicates his argument that a territory, being “under special federal protection,” was somehow a shoo-in for federal relief. As I explain in chapters 3 and 4, the territorial designation of Kansas was a non-issue for President Buchanan and Congress, who

failed to aid the starving people of Kansas for reasons unrelated to the legal relationship of the territory to the federal government. Likewise, Dauber’s insistence that responses to natural disasters were generally couched in terms of hopelessness, and therefore blamelessness, is also challenged: one particularly damaging interpretation of the 1860-61 drought and famine by contemporaries was that hungry Kansans had brought their misery upon themselves, especially those who came to the region for political reasons.

At its center, *Feeding Kansas* is a work of Kansas history. It is informed by and complements the work of several recent historians of the period before statehood. A recent resurgence in studies of territorial Kansas has revealed new dimensions of the conflict; interpretations focusing on gender, media, and religion, among other topics, have greatly expanded our knowledge of Kansas’ turbulent early years. Historians writing about Kansas before its admission to the Union in 1861 have tended to focus their studies on the summer of 1856, “the summer of the Kansas Civil War,” more commonly known as Bleeding Kansas. Historian Nicole Etcheson, in a book titled *Bleeding Kansas* (2004), takes the event and makes a compelling argument for broadening its periodization. For Etcheson, the burst of violence in 1856 was really a slice of a much larger story; Bleeding Kansas “began with the Kansas-

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Nebraska Act of 1854 and continued into the bloody border conflict of the national Civil War.\footnote{Nicole Etcheson, \textit{Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War Era} (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 1. Etcheson was not the first to suggest that Bleeding Kansas should be read as a prelude to the Civil War, but her study is a forceful argument of that line of thinking, and the book has become the standard for a modern historical approach to the era. Before the ascendency of Etcheson's account as the ur-text for understanding Bleeding Kansas, the standard account was Alice Nichols, \textit{Bleeding Kansas} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954). Nichols's account was based on secondary literature, but for many years provided a touchstone text for approaching the history of the era. Etcheson's work is also responding to James A. Rawley, \textit{Race and Politics: “Bleeding Kansas” and the Coming of the Civil War} (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1969). Rawley put race at the center of the Bleeding Kansas conflict, arguing that rather than an anti-slavery or abolitionist outlook being the impetus for keeping slavery out of Kansas, free-staters had racist intentions, ultimately hoping for a territory free of African Americans.} I concur with this assessment, but I look to intervene in the debates over the legacy of Bleeding Kansas to show how the tense political situation of the early territorial years created a set of expectations in the minds of settlers as to who would help them in times of need. These expectations, first tested in response to the violence against bodies and property in the territory, crystallized throughout the 1850s, and held firm when settlers were faced with a dramatic climatic event in 1860-61. In short, in \textit{Feeding Kansas} I link the political story of Bleeding Kansas, a topic that has already been richly mined, to an environmental story about living in an environment that proved deeply challenging for early settlers, a subject that has been rendered invisible.

**Chapter Outline**

Chapter One, “Expectations & Arrivals,” provides critical background information on the opening of Kansas Territory to white settlement in the 1850s. Using the story of Watson Stewart, an Indiana man who immigrated to Kansas in 1856, I examine how promotional literature written by boosters and travelers had created a particular vision of Kansas in the minds of those willing to go there. Though boosters differed in their specifics, sometimes even offering conflicting descriptions of the plains, all
emphasized the particular ability of the lands in Kansas to sustain a bounteous harvest, season after season. It is in this context that I introduce the term *foodscape*, used throughout the dissertation to refer to the different conceptions that Kansans had of the usefulness of the land around them, particularly when it came to the amount and type of food that would be available to them. Promises of abundance were not the reason many came to Kansas during the territorial period, however. Rather, many of the first arrivals came because of a novel political arrangement—owing to the concept of popular sovereignty, the doctrine that guided the opening of the territory in 1854, the status of slavery would be decided by its earlier settlers. This led to the well-known events of what has been called Bleeding Kansas, an era marked by violence and corruption. What is less known, and what I argue, is that this political landscape and the natural landscape were in some ways part of the same story. Settlers understood their ability, and the ability of their political opponents, to engage with the Kansas foodscape in explicitly political terms, with proslavery Missourians arguing that it was unnatural for antislavery northerners to come to the unforgiving landscape of Kansas and attempt to farm, a line of reasoning that would continue to be used throughout the territorial period when Kansans faced climatic difficulties.

In the second chapter, “The Kansas Aid Complex,” I consider a second set of expectations that Kansans had. Beset with chronic illnesses, sporadic physical violence, and occasionally failing crops, Kansans in the 1850s were constantly on the lookout for help. In some cases, they could look to those nearest to them, their friends and neighbors in the growing towns and homesteads of eastern Kansas. In other cases, they looked more widely, appealing to hearts and minds across the nation. By looking at these differing appeals, I demonstrate how Kansans drew on particular political connections they
had with people throughout the country, especially the abolitionists, anti-slavery advocates, and other supporters of a free Kansas, all of whom could be rapidly communicated with via the preferred method of mass communication: the newspaper. Finally, and critically, I examine the ways in which Kansans, both white settlers and Natives, who faced increasing pressure on their land from the influx of settlers and the Bleeding Kansas violence, petitioned the federal government for aid. Despite having no clear precedent upon which to base their arguments, both groups argued that the federal government had a particular responsibility to aiding them during periods of crisis. For white settlers, their argument was novel, and was deeply embedded in the politics of Bleeding Kansas—men and women who suffered violence at the hands of “border ruffians” during the territorial period, which they believed set them back in their efforts to build a stable, productive life in Kansas, argued that Washington owed them aid in the form of monetary restitution for their losses. By examining these arguments for restitution, I show how a line of reasoning, specific to the context of Kansas politics and material wellbeing, developed and crystallized in the 1850s, creating a precedent for later appeals to the government.

“Feeding Kansas,” the chapter that gives this dissertation its name, takes the overlapping set of expectations described in the first two chapters and examines how they functioned in the woefully understudied drought and famine of 1860-61. That event, which affected more than a third of the population of the territory, has largely been forgotten, but at the time it was front page news throughout the nation. I show how hungry settlers drew on all parts of the Kansas aid complex that had developed in the half-decade before the drought, framing their arguments for aid, particularly those targeted toward the federal government, in ways that mirrored earlier appeals during Bleeding
Kansas. Likewise, some Native Americans in Kansas, who were also starving on account of their government-promoted shifts in subsistence, continued to press the federal government for aid based on treaty claims, and by using the logic of the government’s civilizing mission against it. Throughout, I demonstrate how the federal government dodged taking responsibility for the plight of white settlers and Indians alike, both of whom had very specific expectations. I turn, finally, to an analysis of the private aid network that emerged when federal appeals failed, arguing that the tireless efforts of several organizers, especially their deft use of national newspapers, were able to conquer dramatic distances and get food from as far as the east coast into the mouths of hungry settlers. Many of these men were the same who had aided Kansans affected by the violence of Bleeding Kansas a few years before, further demonstrating the extent to which the Kansas aid complex had crystallized and become a fundamental part of making a life in the territory.

Chapter 4, “'Buchananism' & The Politics of Hunger,” looks even more closely at just how dramatically the political partisanship of the 1850s could shape the material lives of settlers. Specifically, I examine in more detail the land policy pursued by the Buchanan administration, specifically the opening of the New York Indian Reserve and the Cherokee Neutral Tract, both actions that immediately threw into high relief the overlapping tensions of the era, including those between white settlers, Native landowners, and the federal government. Once again, the primacy of partisan politics becomes apparent. Settlers being forced off of their lands because of the Buchanan’s policy choices did not view their plight as the unfortunate consequence of a president just enforcing the law; rather, they argued that Buchanan was engaged in a particularly violent strain of politics, wherein he was heartlessly putting Americans out of their homes in the middle of winter because they were
political enemies. Buchanan’s supporters, too, were convinced that foul politics were at play in Kansas, with some arguing that starving Kansans deserved their fate for flooding into the territory and subverting the will of “bona fide” settlers, who they believed would undoubtedly have supported the expansion of slavery into the territory in the 1850s. Kansans, in short, were caught in a political battle that had ostensibly ended with the end of the Bleeding Kansas violence, but appeared to continue to cause them suffering for years afterward.

Finally, in the fifth chapter, I turn to a later disaster and consider it in comparison to the 1860-61 drought and famine. The “Grasshopper Plague” of 1874-75, with its colorful descriptions of trillions of insects descending on the plains, eating whole homes, and stopping trains dead in their tracks, is much more well-known than the drought and famine that capped the territorial years in Kansas. However, few historians have considered the “Grasshopper Plague” aside the earlier disaster. In “Insects & Armies,” I do just that, asking what it was, if anything, that made these two events different. What had 14 years changed? In some cases, the answer was not much. Relief for hungry farmers once again came from across the country, funneling through a national network of private aid. This time, however, it was not enough. Because the Homestead Act of 1862 had so dramatically increased the population of the plains, and because the Rocky Mountain locusts’ (the proper name for the “grasshoppers”) seasonal breeding descent from the mountains covered an almost incomprehensible amount of physical space, the efforts of private aid organizations, and even state appropriations fell short. However, stripped of the political context of the territorial settlement period, the federal government, whose power had been steadily expanding after the Civil War, finally found it appropriate to wade into the issue. I argue that 1874-75 marked a turning point in the American
response to natural disasters, as the activation of the U.S. Army to acquire and distribute supplies set a new precedent for government involvement in the aftermath of calamitous events.
Chapter 1: Expectations & Arrivals

Watson Stewart, an Ohioan who moved to Indiana to become a marble carver when he was 16, immigrated to Kansas Territory in 1856, becoming one of the earliest settlers in region. Stewart’s memoirs, which detail his journey to Kansas and the way of living there are incredibly rich in detail about the expectations and realities of moving to and living in Kansas. Drawn to Kansas in part by promises of its fertile, productive landscape, Stewart and other early settlers had a particular conception of the region in their mind. They had, in other words, visions of not just a verdant landscape, but of a specific *foodescape*, or way of conceiving of the land in terms of its ability to fulfill the primary human need of food. With this foodscape conjured in their minds, Stewart and his companions were stunned by the realities they faced in the region. By following Stewart and others in his party through their first few months of life in the newly-opened Kansas Territory, we begin to see how expectations about the landscape were dashed, and how Kansas, rather than being a verdant Eden in the west, could be a particularly unforgiving place to make a new home. The difficulties of making a new life on the prairies and plains of Kansas Territory were complicated by the violence that almost immediately befell the region, meaning Stewart and other newcomers had to navigate both the environmental and political realities of territorial Kansas, neither of which they were ultimately prepared for.
Settlers like Stewart did not arrive in an uninhabited land, of course. The influx of white settlers into Kansas Territory was one in a series of migrations that had taken place over many decades, and by the time the region was opened for white settlement in 1854, several diverse groups of Native peoples were living there. Some of those groups had called the lands home since time immemorial, their semi-sedentary lifestyles defined by the realities of the plains landscape, especially the presence of millions of bison, which provided a rich source of calories for these societies. Other groups had arrived more recently; the policy of Indian removal pursued by the federal government since the 1830s meant that thousands of Native people were forced from their homelands in the east into what was originally meant to be a permanent Indian Territory west of the Mississippi. Three decades of migration of these groups into what would become Kansas had, by the time settlers like Stewart began to arrive in the 1850s, created intense pressures on everyone trying to coexist in the area; food, especially the once plentiful buffalo, was harder harder to come by, which exacerbated the tense relationships between these groups. Thus, even for those more familiar with the realities of the Kansas foodscape, the initial period of white settlement was a time of confusion and flux.

Before following Stewart into Kansas, it is worth considering the context in which he moved, specifically the history of a particular act of Congress that opened the region up for white settlement, allowing Stewart, his family, and their companions to look westward for a new home.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act & The Emigrant Aid Company

The 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act, which opened the territory for white settlement and brought what were hitherto theoretical arguments about self-governance and slavery into a lived experiment, is a
fundamental starting point for understanding the history of the territory. The act, which had its basis in the concept of popular sovereignty—which, broadly speaking, argued for the supremacy of local self-government, holding that critical decisions about the shape of laws and institutions in territories should be made by the citizens of those territories themselves, as they would be in states\(^1\)—highlighted the critical connection between the expansion of the territory of the United States and the expansion of the institution of slavery. Much of the history of the United States can be viewed through the lens of expansion, but in the decades before the Civil War, expansion became intimately linked with slavery and the interests of Southern slaveholders. The first event that demonstrates this link was the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which admitted Missouri to the Union as a slave state, but also barred the expansion of slavery into other territories acquired in the Louisiana Purchase north of the thirty-sixth parallel. The debate over the status of slavery in Missouri was deeply divisive, and while the Missouri Compromise represented the agreement of pro-slavery and anti-slavery groups (Maine was admitted to the Union as a free state in order to maintain sectional balance in the Senate), it also made clear to many people that “the slavery issue could break the Union and should be removed from national debate.”\(^2\)

Indeed, the debate largely lay dormant until the beginning of a period of rapid expansion in the 1840s. The 1845 annexation of Texas, the acquisition of Oregon a year later, and the cession by Mexico of an enormous amount of territory after defeat in the U.S-Mexican War in 1848, all meant a

\(^1\) The concept of popular sovereignty, as it applied to the expansion of slavery, was first articulated by Michigan senator Lewis Cass in 1847. The doctrine was debated on and refined in the years following Cass’s initial proposal. For a brief history of this process, see David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis 1848–1861*, Completed and Edited by Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 56–62.

vast amount of new territory, much of which lay below the Missouri Compromise line, in which the slavery question would be put to the American people. The question was answered in 1850, with another compromise. The Compromise of 1850 admitted California to the Union as a free state—a victory for those opposed to the expansion of slavery—but also created the territories of Utah and New Mexico, leaving the status of slavery in those territories up in the air, to be decided at a later date.³

The Kansas-Nebraska Act was the product of the slavery-expansion debates that resulted in the earlier Missouri Compromise and the Compromise of 1850. In fact, immediately in the aftermath of the Compromise of 1850, pro-Southern, pro-slavery Democrats like David Atchison from Missouri and Stephen Douglas from Illinois worked together to convince President Franklin Pierce that the creation of a new territory west of Missouri was desperately needed and that it was vital that the same principle applied to the territories of New Mexico and Utah—that the question of slavery should be left up to popular sovereignty—be applied there. Douglas presented the Kansas-Nebraska bill on January 23, 1854, and in it proposed the creation of the Kansas and Nebraska territories, stating that “all questions pertaining to Slavery in the territories and in the new States to be formed, are to be left to the decision of the people residing therein, through their appropriate representatives.”⁴ The specifics of the bill were the subject of much heated debate in Congress, especially the fact that it essentially ignored the restriction of the Missouri Compromise and instead favored the popular

³ Etcheson, Bleeding Kansas, 12; Potter, The Impending Crisis 1848–1861, 106–113.

⁴ The quote from Douglas, and full transcripts of several Senate speeches that took place throughout the first half of the nineteenth century regarding the expansion of slavery, can be found in The Nebraska Question, Comprising Speeches in the United States Senate (New York: Redfield, 1854), 36.
sovereignty approach established by the Compromise of 1850. Northerners were particularly perturbed by this, claiming that Douglas, Atchison, and Pierce had worked together to craftily dismantle the power of the Missouri Compromise. Ultimately, the bill passed and the Kansas-Nebraska Act went into effect on May 30, 1854. While the months-long debate in Congress about the new territories was effectively over, the broader conflict was just beginning.

The proximity of the newly-created territory of Kansas to the proudly pro-slavery Missouri, combined with the fact that the fate of slavery would rest with the will of the people, compelled thousands of Missourians to make their way west. By the time the first territorial census was taken, nine months after the territory had been opened for settlement, more than 8,000 settlers and nearly 200 slaves were in Kansas, more than fifty percent of whom were from Missouri or other slave states. These so-called “border-ruffians” typically had little interest in permanently settling in Kansas, as land was still plentiful and cheap in Missouri, and there was no guarantee that their property, specifically their slaves, would be protected in Kansas. Instead, they simply intended to flood the territory in order to lend their political support to the pro-slavery powers that were working to ensure that when the time came for a decision to be made about the status of slavery in Kansas, the majority of people would support the extension of the institution and secure a future for Kansas that included the right to own human property.  

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5 Etcheson, Bleeding Kansas, 14–20; Recently, some scholars have suggested that the violence of Bleeding Kansas following the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which has caused historians to focus primarily on Kansas, obscures the important position of its neighbor to the north. For more on Nebraska’s role in the creation of the act and the act’s effects there, see John R. Wunder and Joann M. Ross, eds., The Nebraska-Kansas Act of 1854 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008).

6 Etcheson, Bleeding Kansas, 29–42.
The idea to populate the new territory with people sympathetic to one's view of slavery was not missed by anti-slavery advocates. In fact, before the Kansas-Nebraska bill was even approved, Eli Thayer, a representative in the lower house of the Massachusetts legislature, had been desperately trying to secure grants and a charter to establish an organization to send people from New England to settle Kansas and secure it as a territory free of slavery. In early 1855, the Massachusetts legislature finally approved of Thayer's plan and granted his New England Emigrant Aid Company a charter, as well as $1 million in capital. Shortly after the charter was granted, the Company was reorganized and Thayer stepped down, allowing men like Amos Lawrence, a wealthy Massachusetts merchant and philanthropist, to take his place. From the very beginning, the Emigrant Aid Company was operated as both a business and a charity, and its particular function largely depended on who within the organization was wielding the most power at any given point. Clever businessmen and prominent Bostonians, like Amos Lawrence, Samuel Cabot, and John Lowell, were certainly sympathetic to those with strong anti-slavery sentiments, but generally worked to keep ideology as a secondary concern to the more important issue of creating a profitable organization. Other Company leaders, like Edward Everett Hale, a Unitarian minister in Massachusetts, understood the primary goal of the organization as protecting freedom in the American West—at any cost.\footnote{Ibid., 35–36; Etcheson's description of the formation of the New England Emigrant Aid Company, which I have summarized here, actually elides an interesting and rather involved history. A more complete version of how the Company was formed, with all of the details about its charters and grants, can be found in Samuel A. Johnson, The Battle Cry of Freedom (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1954), 3–32; Eli Thayer's own re-telling of the Company's founding can be found in Eli Thayer and Edward Everett Hale, A History of the Kansas Crusade, Its Friends and Its Foes (New York: Harper & brothers, 1889), 18–35, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gdc/scd0001.00050289643.}

Despite internal disagreements about how the Company should operate, the directors all agreed that getting New Englanders to Kansas was their number one priority, and they began in haste,
sending around 1,000 people to the territory in 1855. The 1855 census, which, as previously mentioned, found that more than half of all people in Kansas had emigrated from slave states, reported that only 4.3 percent had come from New England. The census was taken before the arrival of the bulk of those settlers sponsored by the Emigrant Aid Company, but the ratio of New Englanders to total population in the territory stayed relatively constant, with the 1860 census, taken during the period of drought and famine later discussed, finding them making up only 4% of the total. Despite being only a sliver of the total population, the transplanted New Englanders had a monumental effect on the history of Kansas, and, by extension, the history of the United States.

Almost immediately after the first New Englanders arrived in Kansas they encountered hostility from Missourians and other pro-slavery settlers, who had formed militia groups to protect, with arms if needed, the land they were claiming as their own. In response to this, the Emigrant Aid Company decided to supply its own settlers with arms and ammunition, and the transplanted New Englanders quickly formed their own militia groups.

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9 These New Englanders, even if they were only a small minority, had an enormous impact on both the history and historiography of the Bleeding Kansas period. There is likely an element of victors writing the history at play here, but a more powerful factor is that the anti-slavery and abolitionist New Englanders were deeply dedicated to spreading their arguments as widely as possible, which has resulted in innumerable evidence of their activity in the historical record. Letters to newspapers, private letters, printed broadsides and pamphlets—New Englanders relentlessly wrote down and disseminated their ideas in the 1850s, and the historiography reflects that. This is not to say that their importance has been overstated, however. I argue the opposite, in fact. New Englanders and other anti-slavery citizens throughout the United States may have sent a minority population to Kansas when the territory opened, but they maintained a deep interest in those settlers and when faced with natural disaster, quickly expanded their scope, arguing that because Kansas was so intimately tied to the future of the Union that citizens everywhere, and ultimately the federal government, had a particular responsibility to save Kansans.

10 Etcheson, *Bleeding Kansas*, 37; The official position of the New England Emigrant Aid Company, sworn under oath by several of the leaders, was that the Company itself had never spent any money on rifles for settlers, and had never facilitated the delivery of arms and ammunitions to Kansas. However, personal correspondence from Company officials
The two groups, although adversarial and armed, coexisted in relative peace until the election of the first territorial legislature in March of 1855 brought tensions to a head. On the day of the election, thousands of men from the western border of Missouri flooded into Kansas, overtook polling places, and cast votes for pro-slavery representatives, resulting in the election of pro-slavery candidates in all but one county. New Englanders and other free-staters were predictably upset and immediately called for the annulment of the results on account of fraud. And indeed, a commission appointed to investigate the election found that 4,908 of the 6,318 votes cast had been fraudulent. However, Governor Andrew Reeder’s hands were tied because too few official protests were filed for him to legally annul the election. The so-called “bogus legislature” met in early July and immediately adjourned to a site closer to the Missouri border. There they enacted the “bogus laws,” which included a remarkably comprehensive slave code to which any person applying to become an official voter in the territory would have to swear to support. This was the last straw for Governor Reeder, who moved to officially declare the legislature as fraudulent and illegal. However, President Franklin Pierce, well-known at the time as a Southern sympathizer, stepped in and had Reeder removed as governor, on grounds that he illegally speculated in Indian lands. With that, the “bogus legislature” was free to proceed in their mission to secure the future of slavery in Kansas.¹¹

Ultimately, the triumph of the “bogus legislature” so divided and galvanized settlers that it became inevitable that the new territory would become the site of very real violence. The following years were marked by the rise and fall of multiple competing legislatures (many of dubious legality),

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growing tensions, and bursts of violence, all of which historians now call “Bleeding Kansas.” The key events of the period are well-known: with the 1856 sacking of free-state stronghold Lawrence by “border ruffians,” abolitionist John Brown’s raid at Pottawatomie Creek (where he and a band of abolitionist settlers murdered five pro-slavery settlers), the Battle of Osawatomie in August 1856, and the Marais des Cygnes Massacre (where border ruffians killed several free-state settlers). Between the start of the violence at Lawrence in 1856 and the temporary cessation of it at the town of Trading Post (the site of the Marais Massacre) in 1858, a total of forty-nine people died because of their politics.12 The territory itself never seemed to recover from the years of tension and violence. As the rest of this dissertation will demonstrate, the same tensions that drove the violence of the 1850s would continue to manifest themselves, even during something as seemingly apolitical as a severe drought and famine.

**Foodscape**

Stewart and his family began their overland journey into Kansas by first traveling from Terre Haute, Indiana, to Jefferson City, Missouri, stopping in Champaign, Illinois; Springfield, Missouri; and St. Louis. Upon meeting the rest of their company in Jefferson City, Stewart’s brother, who had gone ahead into Kansas Territory to scope out the situation, reported on what he had seen in Kansas. “The information he brought was very encouraging, as to the country,” Stewart recalled, “but did not like the appearance of such of the company as he had seen, nor of the arrangement made on the

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company’s location for the comfort of its members.” Stewart’s brother was particularly concerned about the fitness of the company’s secretary, Henry S. Clubb. Clubb, a New Yorker, was, according to Stewart’s brother, “a man of no experience of Western life and a new country...unfitted to manage the affairs of the company.” This news aggravated Stewart, who decided to “withhold further payments until our arrival on the ground...after an examination of the conditions as we might find them.”

Stewart and his family had certain expectation after being convinced to put on the line not only their money, but their entire lives for the Kansas experiment, and were troubled by the first reports that things may not have been as they were described by earlier boosters.

Though they were now skeptical of what awaited them in Kansas, the Stewarts found northwestern Missouri delightful. “The spring season was on,” Stewart wrote, “all nature was smiling, wood and landscape were all in beautiful green, and we were starting out with joyous feelings.” Their delight was quickly hampered by many days of “rain falling in torrents,” which eventually “made some of the streams impassable.” The family “pushed through swollen streams that were unsafe” without injury, but were finally halted by their approach to the Osage River, which had flooded so badly that the “bottom land on the other side” of the bridge was completely saturated “for about seven miles.” After eight days of waiting, which the family spent with a “Northern man” who “had no slaves,” the water had receded enough for the family to cross over into Kansas. The ground, still saturated from the rainstorms, proved more problematic than the Stewarts expected. “In places the pulling was very

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hard and through mud and water, so that we had to attach one yoke of oxen with the horses in order to make any headway.\textsuperscript{14}

Watson Stewart, Miriam Colt, and other early settlers in Kansas were drawn to the region by and arrived in it with particular mental images of the Kansas landscape and what it could provide for them, all of which had been carefully crafted by boosters, writers, and travelers. Geographer Donald Meinig has called landscape “an attractive, important, and ambiguous term,”\textsuperscript{15} which is immediately obvious to anyone who spends any time trying to suss out its many meanings when used by geographers, historians, artists, and others. While the ambiguity of the term is to some degree what makes it so attractive to scholars, I have opted to use a fairly straightforward definition of it throughout this dissertation, one which has been defined by environmental historian Thomas Dunlap: Landscape “is the picture of the land people see as having significance for the nation and their culture.”\textsuperscript{16} I understand culture, here, in its broadest sense—as a category that includes the political, social, and economic relationships between people. All of these facets of the lives of individuals in a society are connected, and influence one another in myriad ways.

Much of the work done on landscapes has focused on broad categories like “nation” and “culture,” but people often live and think within much smaller entities, generally themselves and their families. Thus studying the landscape of settlement allows us to see how the lands of the American West were viewed by individuals who were willing to embed themselves in those landscapes, to

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 380–381.


understand how they envisioned themselves in an imagined picture of a place. Thus, the landscape of settlement exists within broader imaginative understandings of place, on the level of nations and culture, but also within the minds of individual people or small groups, whose basic needs, such as food, water, and shelter become relatively more important than those features that may be salient in a larger view.

If we take this ground-level view of landscape during the early period of settlement in Kansas, then we see that an important feature of the landscape was the ability of the land to provide one of the fundamentals of existence: food. By reading between the lines of booster literature and travel narratives, and putting ourselves in the shoes of settlers themselves, reading with eyes sensitive to the same features of the landscape that theirs would be focused on, we can gain a better understanding of what people expected when they arrived in the plains, which will in turn allow us to understand what happened when those expectations were met, exceeded, or dashed. We can, in short, begin to see how a particular foodscape\(^\text{17}\) shaped conceptions of the plains.

From the outset, Stewart’s decision to move to Kansas was one heavily influenced by the idea of the Kansas foodscape. Stewart moved to Kansas with a small group of men and women, including his wife, his wife’s mother, and their children, under the auspices of the Kansas Vegetarian Company, a group organized, according to the circular that announced their intentions, to settle Kansas with those willing to “promote social, moral, and political freedom.” Further, as their name implies, part of their mission included abstinence from “the flesh of animals” as well as “all intoxicating liquors as

\(^{17}\) Like landscape (though to a significantly lesser extent), foodscape has been used in ambiguous and contradictory ways. For a useful description of the various way the term has been used, see Jakob Wenzer, “Foodscapes,” ed. Peter Jackson (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 83–85.
beverages, [and] tobacco in every form. The organizers of the Vegetarian Company saw deep connections between these dietary restrictions and the fate of not only their own community, but also the nation as a whole. Their vegetarianism was rooted in scripture, and they understood their mission as being one of separating from a society they saw as “contaminated” by the vices of the material world. While these restrictions set Stewart and the Kansas Vegetarian Settlement apart from most settlers, their experience is representative of settlement in the sense that they arrived with a particular understanding of what to expect in the territory, mostly informed by promotional literature and early travelers' narratives that established the idea of a cornucopian foodscape, and were quite surprised by what they actually found when they arrived in the region.

**Competing Conceptions of Kansas**

On May 20, 1856, Watson and his family finally “reached the ‘promised land.”’ Because Watson’s brother, Samuel Stewart, had given them advance warning of what to expect, they “were not so badly disappointed as some others of our company.” In his memoirs, Stewart deferred to Miriam Colt, whose *Went to Kansas* (1862) described the scene. “We leave our wagons and make our way to a large

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camp fire,” Colt narrated, and “the ladies tell us they are sorry to see us come to this place, which plainly shows us that all is not right.”

Colt, Stewart, and other immigrants to Kansas Territory had done their homework before heading west. They depended on accounts of the region written by boosters, like Thomas Webb, secretary of the New England Emigrant Aid Company, as well as travelers who were ostensibly more objective, such as Joseph H. Moffette, who composed his *Territories of Kansas and Nebraska* (1855) after completing an “overland expedition” with Governor Isaac Stevens of Washington Territory, who was interested in finding an appropriate route for a rail link to the northwest. Those with railroad interests were often the biggest boosters of all, but the Stevens expeditions was ostensibly interested primarily in the profitability of bringing the railroad to Washington, not Kansas, so their account of the plains is somewhat less suspect than landowners in Kansas hoping for the arrival of the railroad to ensure their fortune. In the appendix of *Went to Kansas*, Miriam Colt quoted Moffette at length, specifically his description of the Neosho River, the site at which Colt, and later the Stewarts, would arrive to see “that all is not right.” The Neosho, according to Moffette, “flows about 150 miles through a highly productive, beautiful, well-timbered country.” The river had “a bold, rapid current, over a rocky bottom” with many tributaries, all capable of supporting “water-power to any extent.” Food obviously would not be an issue for the new settlers on the Neosho, as “the wild pea grows spontaneously in its

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21 Miriam Davis Colt, *Went to Kansas; Being a Thrilling Account of an Ill-Fated Expedition to That Fairy Land, and Its Sad Results* (Watertown, MA: L. Ingalls & Co., 1862), 44.

valley.” The settlers were expecting to find a region in which they could sustain themselves, an area so lush that food was growing of its own volition, before the working hand of the newly arriving settlers even improved things.

The scene the Stewarts came across was not particularly encouraging for a family that had just traveled hundreds of miles across the Midwest and then bedded down with strangers in Missouri waiting for the river to go down. The families that had arrived earlier were living in homes of wildly varying quality: the nicest lodging were claimed by Miriam Colt and her family, though even that 256 square foot log “Center House” was “without floor.” There was a “log and bark shack,” a “cloth shack,” and “an old Indian wigwam covered with tenting cloth.” The Stewarts moved into “a large tent, pitched on the high ground northeast of the old ford of the river,” which was inhabited by several other families.\(^{24}\)

How different this scene was from what was promised to the settlers by writers like Max Greene, whose *Kanzas Region* (1856) was no doubt an influence on the desire of many to move to the new territory. Greene’s description of Kansas was heavy with influence from Romantic writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. “Throughout the Osage country,” he wrote, “there are scenes of romantic loveliness; and some even bordering on the picturesque.” If that wasn’t strong enough, Greene continued: “In tranquil summer-time, it has the plain yet dreamy beauty of the Flemish landscape.” Leaving aside the fact that most immigrants to Kansas would have no experience outside their small communities, let alone the countryside of Flanders, the Stewarts, with their mud-caked

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\(^{23}\) Colt, *Went to Kansas*, Appendix.

boots and tired oxen teams, must have had Greene’s description in mind when they arrived, and were surely disappointed to find the reality of the settlement.25

This reality was shaped by the fact that the grasslands of the plains were radically different from the wooded regions of the East and Midwest, which meant that settlers would need to come to the plains equipped with new ways of thinking about their relationship to the land around them. While many promoters downplayed the differences between the regions, emphasizing, as did Moffette, the timbered portions of the Kansas, other promoters of settlement acknowledged the differences and worked to frame them as wholly positive. A striking visual example of this method of promotion comes from a railroad promotional poster from the 1870s (Figure 1.1). "If you want a farm or home[,] 'the best thing in the west' is the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad Lands in Southwest Kansas," the poster proclaimed in bold letters. At first glance, the railroad land commissioner seemed to be pushing an image of the plains that emphasized some generally preferred traits: "Temperate Climate, Excellent Health, Pure and Abundant Water. Good Soil for Wheat, Corn and Fruit." No mention was made, of course, of the attendant difficulties of settlement in a sparsely populated and unpredictable area of Kansas.26

25 Max Greene, The Kanzas Region: Forest, Prairie, Desert, Mountain, Dale, and River. Descriptions of Scenery, Climate, Wild Productions, Capabilities of Soil, and Commercial Resources; Interspersed with Incidents of Travel, and Anecdotes Illustrative of the Character of the Traders and Red Men; to Which Are Added Directions as to Routes, Outfit for the Pioneer, and Sketches of Desirable Localities for Present Settlement (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1856); Miriam Colt, reflecting back on the trials of early Kansas settlement, included passages from Greene’s book in the appendix of her Went to Kansas.

Figure 1.1 Atchison, Topeka, & Santa Fe Railroad Poster for Lands in Southwest Kansas, [c. 1870s], Kansas State Historical Society, http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/11829.
More interesting, however, was how the railroad advertisement highlighted the contrast between the different landscapes in which settlers might find themselves. Under the heading "Prairie versus Woodland" several images make a strong argument for the benefits of the former over the latter. Unlike "a start in the woods," which involved the hard and fruitless work of felling trees, a farmer who made his "start on the prairie," the image indicated, would be immediately able to begin work planting, the landscape already conveniently free of trees and other impediments to growing crops. "After six years of work and profit," the prairie farmer could look forward overseeing his rows of healthy crops from his substantial farmhouse. The farmer who chose the woodlands would, after ten years, still be hoeing his small garden outside of a dilapidated log cabin.27 Both approaches to promoting the landscape of the plains could be effective, but their dual existence made for a particularly confusing picture in the minds of settlers. Was Kansas an attractive spot to settle because it was like the Midwest and the East, with their timbered valleys and productive soils, or because it was unlike those regions, its relatively bare landscape essentially allowing a head start in the difficult process of building a home and farm?

The main problem, as Stewart saw it, was that most of the new settlers were so taken with the images of the plains pushed by boosters that they found themselves unable “to adapt themselves to conditions unavoidable in frontier life." Stewart implicitly cited the negative influence of the rosy reports of the territory by writers like Moffette, Webb, and Greene, noting that the settlers’ “expectations were too great as to the comforts and conveniences to be found under such conditions.”

27 Ibid. See also David M. Wrobel, Promised Lands: Promotion, Memory, and the Creation of the American West (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 76-78.
Stewart, a heartier Indiana man, suspected the problems were largely regional. “They were mostly from the far East,” he wrote of his dejected compatriots, “mechanics, professional men, and men from offices and stores in the cities, and altogether unable to adjust themselves to a frontier life.” Of the twenty-four settlers and families listed in the appendix to Miriam Colt’s *Went to Kansas*, eleven were from New York, New Jersey, or Pennsylvania.

Stewart, it turns out, was a keen observer of how demographic patterns that emerged during the territorial period in Kansas determined the expectations and experiences of settlers. In fact, as Stewart suspected, settlers who arrived in Kansas in the 1850s had differing, sometimes competing goals, some of which could be predicted by knowing from where the people were moving. Take, for instance, the initial twenty-nine settlers sent by the New England Emigrant Aid Company in 1854. Unlike Stewart, whose background in Indiana had trained his vision to look for lands that would allow for a productive agriculturally-based society, these men and women did not spend much time searching for just the right plot of land on which they could begin their agricultural endeavors; rather they moved west from Kansas City until they found a piece of land unoccupied by Indians or white settlers, and free of Indian claims. That town, named Lawrence, became the model for northern settlement. These northerners, led by company agents, were primarily interested in the potential for urban growth on a given plot of land, and immediately began building churches and schools within months of initial settlement, their vision of a town modeled after what had developed in the New

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29 Colt, *Went to Kansas*. 
England towns they had left behind.⁴⁰ Stewart’s contingent of northerners was engaged in a smaller-scale version of this town-building, being more interested in the establishment of the physical structures and institutions that would provide “comforts and conveniences” of daily life, rather than immediately looking to engage with the landscape as it actually existed in Kansas.

Though the general goal of town-building by northerners can be represented by Lawrence, that town’s growth far outpaced those that followed it. In 1855, Lawrence residents had a manic period of construction, building fifty buildings in just sixty days. “Large stone buildings, which would be an ornament to any place, are fast being erected, while buildings of wood and stone, are springing up with a rapidity almost equaling the wonderful genius of Aladdin,” wrote Sara Robinson, one of the earliest settlers to migrate to Kansas Territory, and wife of Charles L. Robinson, who would become the first Governor of Kansas when it became a state in 1861. Robinson, certainly no booster of Lawrence, or Kansas Territory in general, was taken aback by the speed at which the town was growing: “the little city of less than a year’s existence will, in intelligence, refinement, and moral worth, compare most favorably with many New England towns of six times its number of inhabitants.”⁴¹ The settling and development of towns along the rivers of Kansas by eager New Englanders was not just a feature of the first few months following the opening of the territory to white settlement; the scene that played out in Lawrence in 1854-55 was repeated dozens of times, as

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late as 1857. Quindaro, a free-state town established in December 1856, began its rapid growth in the early months of 1857. Quindaro was located on the west bank of the Missouri River, three miles north of Wyandotte City (later known as Kansas City), which was at the time closed to passage of free-staters, owing to the ongoing conflict over the status of slavery in the territory. Also like the towns before it, Quindaro’s boosters were eager to massage the facts about the region they were trying to build up. What was in reality rocky, hilly, and dotted with trees, was presented to potential settlers as a flat, treeless strip along the river; it was as if carefully laid out patches of land were just waiting for settlers to invest in and move onto.32

This manipulation of the understanding of the landscape of settlement was particularly powerful, as it targeted an audience that was already eager to stake claims on the land; telling people what they wanted to hear about the Kansas landscape, even on the level of the town, was enormously powerful, and these towns did not have any trouble attracting settlers and selling land. However, these sales were often to other speculators, very few of whom were interested in settling in the region long term, which would require a realistic engagement with the landscape. Because of this, these towns were especially fragile; the Panic of 1857 destroyed many of them outright, the speculative investments drying up instantly in the face of serious financial collapse, and serious climatic events like the drought of 1859-1860 spelled the end of others, as the reality of the Kansas landscape clashed with an unrealistic set of expectations and engagement with the land.33

32 Jeff R. Bremer, “‘A Species of Town-Building Madness’: Quindaro and Kansas Territory, 1856-1862,” Kansas History 26, no. 3 (Autumn 2003): 160; See also the illustration showing the difference between the plan for the city of New Babylon and the reality in Dick, The Sod-House Frontier, 54.

Watson Stewart’s frustration with what he saw as the unpreparedness of his companions from the east, with their hopes and visions of being able to rapidly establish towns that provided the same comforts as those they left behind, was echoed by pro-slavery observers. However, while Stewart was merely annoyed with the inability of easterners to “adjust themselves to a frontier life,” pro-slavery commentators had a nastier, baldly partisan take on the issue. This was especially true when it came to evaluating the settlers who had arrived in the territory under the auspices of the Emigrant Aid Company, who pro-slavery commentators quickly marked as counterfeit settlers, deeply unprepared for life in Kansas, and deeply misguided in their reasons for coming there.

The Squatter Sovereign, the leading, most widely read pro-slavery newspaper out of Atchison, argued that there were two types of Northerners: “the independent and dependent.” The former were honest and practical, and would undoubtedly become pro-slavery men after arriving in Kansas, recognizing that it was “better suited to slave labor,” regardless of their own personal opposition to owning and using slaves. The “dependent” Northerners, however, “are the subjects of the ‘emigration Aid Society,’ who come without means and with Utopian anticipations and are sadly disappointed and curse the men who sent them hither.” “We are not contending against the honest, but mistaken Free-Soiler,” the editors of the Sovereign wrote in March of 1855, “but with the scum and filth of the Northern cities; sent here as hired servants, to do the will of others; not to give their own free suffrage.” The distinction between the “honest, bona fide” settler and “an organized colonization with

offensive purpose” was, the Sovereign argued, obvious to anyone willing to give a fair look at the situation in Kansas.34

At the heart of the pro-slavery critique of aid society-assisted settlement was the claim that the settlers were lazy, ignorant, and unfit for the realities of life on the plains. Full engagement with the Kansas foodscape, which required serious effort and hard work, was the criterion by which a settler was judged to be “bona fide” or merely dependent. “They are not sent to cultivate the soil, to better their social condition, to add to their individual comforts, or the aggregate wealth of the nation,” the Sovereign wrote of the eastern settlers. “They are mostly ignorant of agriculture,” the paper continued, “of course have no experience as farmers, and if left to their unaided resources—if not clothed and fed by the same power which has effected their transportation—they would starve.”35

Though the Sovereign’s tone was grating, the editors were not wrong about the problematic relationship between the Emigrant Aid Company, the settlers, and the realities of surviving in Kansas. However, the claim that this was due to any laziness on the part of settlers is without any supporting evidence—what numerous diaries and letters show is that those settlers who came to Kansas, faced its realities, and did not immediately turn around, were engaged in a constant struggle to make their livings without the aid of the emigrant aid companies. The Sovereign, of course, also willfully ignored the fact that Southerners, too, organized settlement parties, not to mention the bands of pro-slavery marauders that poured over the Missouri border in the early 1850s—certainly no “bona fide” settlers.


However, the ignorance of the realities of life in Kansas was not a trait unique to those northerners who looked to recreate a New England lifestyle along the banks of Kansas Rivers. Families had “come from the North, East, South and West to make pleasant homes,” and the realities of the situation, according to Watson Stewart, made some of them “determined to turn right-about and start again on a journey.” Where they would go was an open question, but the answer was clear: anywhere but Kansas. Many of the families, however, had “invested their all in the company” and were stuck on the bank of the Neosho with nothing but “lost means and blighted hopes.”

With his fellow settlers complaining about the reality of life in Kansas, Watson Stewart believed he could see the writing on the wall; almost immediately after arriving in Kansas he spoke to Secretary Clubb, “became convinced that the company would prove a failure,” and bought some land northwest of the settlement, where he and his family would go on to build a home. Situated “in a beautiful grove on high ground,” Cottage Grove, as Stewart named his new parcel, was “the most beautiful of any in all the country.” Miriam Colt agreed, describing Cottage Grove as “on a high prairie swell, where nature had planted the walnut and oak just sparsely enough for both beauty and shade…the whole view is beautifully picturesque.”

Stewart separated from the Vegetarian Settlement primarily because he “found a majority of the company entirely unfitted to cooperate in securing the desired results” of settling a productive,


37 Ibid., 385.

38 Colt, Went to Kansas, 54.
self-sustaining community dedicated to “promot[ing] social, moral and political freedom.”

In particular, “too many came without means, expecting to get employment from the company,” and others, who, like Stewart, “had some means,” felt compelled “to withdraw from the company, not willing to entrust their money with persons whom they found to be impracticable in the methods of business.”

The only type of person more bumbling and clueless than a northerner was an Englishman, and Secretary Clubb, the New Yorker who originally hailed from Colchester, was particularly annoying to Stewart. “Wholly unacquainted with Western life,” Clubb had brought only a “small supply of groceries for the use of the company, such as sugar, rice, beans, crackers, dried and canned fruits.” Further, in June Clubb made a trip to Fort Scott to pick up “the goods, groceries, seeds, and some provisions belonging to the company,” and when he returned to the settlement, some settlers found it frustrating that despite these goods being “bought with the company's money,” they were “charged a very high price for them.” Potatoes in particular were problematic, as Clubb has paid four dollars per bushel, which was so high that some families “can't afford to have even one meal of them.” This was compounded by the fact that Clubb bought only enough potatoes to plant, effectively making them extremely expensive seed. While some suspected that Clubb had “misappropriate[d] the funds entrusted to him,” Stewart disagreed. Rather, he chalked up Clubb’s failure as a leader to the fact that he “knew nothing outside of office work.”

40 Ibid., 385.
41 Colt, Went to Kansas, 73.
So how did Stewart, Colt, and the heartier settlers fare in the territory? On May 28, several weeks after their arrival to Kansas, Miriam Colt, her husband, and her children headed about two miles distant from their initial point of settlement, and began planting corn on their new claim. Coming upon their claim evoked feelings of Romanticism and appreciation from Colt, who had been previously so worn down: a “carpet of green spread far and wide below, ornamented with thousands of new blown flowers, scenting the air with a mixture of their rich perfumes. Not a stump, fence, stone or log, to mar the beautiful picture.” Colt’s husband immediately set upon manipulating the landscape by plowing the field with the lone plow he borrowed from the company’s communal holdings. This first planting of corn was a fairly simple affair: “after the ploughing, the planting is done by just cutting through the sod with an axe, and dropping in the seeds—no hoeing the first year; nothing more is to be done until the full yellow ears are gathered in the autumn time.” The sight was so refreshing to Colt that it moved her to poetry:

> Speed the one plough boys, plant the bright corn;  
> Summer’s upon us—the work should be done,  
> That Autumn may crown with bright yellow ears—  
> Hope to enliven—and quiet our fears.43

Native Foodscape

The benefits of the Neosho River, upon which the Octagon company intended to settle, were certainly known to the Native inhabitants of the region as well. Miriam Colt’s memoirs are a rich source of

43 Colt, Went to Kansas, 56, 63–65.
information about the “four thousand Osages” who lived near the Neosho in a “city of wigwams.”

While Colt was interested in their dress and customs, she paid particular attention to their relationship with food, which determined much about how they would interact with the white settlers. The “wild peas and beans” that Cold had been tipped off to by Moffette’s circular were indeed abundant throughout the region, and apparently it was known that “they are eaten by the Indians.” Colt was also fascinated with the eating practices of the Osage. In late May, Colt and her husband were visiting Watson Stewart, and on their journey home they came across several Indians, with “one squaw...very busy cooking their supper.” The Osage woman “had two stakes driven into the ground, meeting at the top, and a chain suspended between them, on which hung a brass kettle filled with dried apples, stewing. Down below the fire, she was frying cakes in buffalo grease. Her dough was set up in a tin pan, and she was making them out round on the bottom of an iron dish, cutting them across grid-iron fashion. She had already a stack one foot in height; they looked brown and inviting.” Though inviting, Colt does not mention whether she or her husband ate any of the frybread, or even if the woman offered it to them.44

Colt also recognized that the existence of the Osage Indians living near them was intimately linked to the realities of food availability, particularly in the form of bison. In May, Colt wrote in frustration about the Indians, who, owing to the scarcity of game, “come thieving round—slying about—taking everything they can lay their hands on.” Though there were still some “deer, wild turkeys, prairie hens, and small game,” the prize the Osages were after was buffalo. Colt was relieved that “they are soon going two or three hundred miles west on their buffalo hunt,” and, further,

44 Ibid., 66–67.
believed that “these Osage Indians are at war with one of the savage tribes of the western mountains” over “their hunting grounds.” Colt hoped that the Osage would be victorious and “leave this part of the territory.”

Colt’s hope that the Osage would simply follow the dwindling herds of buffalo westward, presumably to meet their own demise somewhere far from the new settlement she and her family were attempting to establish, was out of line with the broader policy regarding Native Americans in Kansas and their relationship to food. By the 1850s, the foodscape of Native Kansas had been forcibly and dramatically altered by the federal government’s “civilizing” policy, which drew on a particular Jeffersonian idea about the relationship between people and land. In 1785, Jefferson, in a letter to François Jean de Beauvoir, Marquis de Chastellux, in France, famously articulated the capsule-sized version of his philosophy on the Native peoples of North America: “I believe the Indian, then, to be, in mind and body, equal to the white man.” This statement was a challenge to other views about American Indians, especially those of George Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, the French naturalist whose Histoire naturelle argued that the cold, wet American environment produced equally lackluster living specimens, human and otherwise. American Indians, in Buffon’s estimation, were small in stature, weak, and lacking in mental ability. Jefferson, in his Notes on the State of Virginia, completed


47 For a brief summary of the differences in understandings of Indians between Buffon and Jefferson, see Francis Paul Prucha, The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians, Abridged Edition (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 49; For a longer discussion of Buffon’s natural history in general, and Jefferson’s refutation of it, see Lee Alan Dugatkin, Mr. Jefferson and the Giant Moose: Natural History in Early America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), ix–xii.
and revised in the first half of the 1780s, directly challenged Buffon’s claims, arguing that Indians were in fact the opposite of how Buffon described them; they were brave, honorable, eloquent, and, ultimately, possessed a “vivacity and activity of mind...equal to ours.” Jefferson’s defense of the Indians was not an approval of their way of life; rather, it was to state unequivocally that they were not by nature an inferior group. Indians had the capacity, according to Jefferson, to become true equals to European Americans, if only some changes to their circumstances were affected. One of these circumstances was the Native relationship to land, particularly to the animals that roamed on it and the food that grew on it. Jefferson was particularly concerned with his observation that Native women had fewer children than their European counterparts, a phenomenon he attributed to Indians’ specific habits of procuring food, specifically hunting parties:

During these parties they are exposed to numerous hazards, to excessive exertions, to the greatest extremities of hunger. Even at their homes the nation depends for food, through a certain part of every year, on the gleanings of the forest: that is, they experience a famine once in every year. With all animals, if the female be badly fed, or not fed at all, her young perish: and if both male and female be reduced to like want, generation becomes less active, less productive. To the obstacles then of want and hazard, which nature has opposed to the multiplication of wild animals, for the purpose of restraining their numbers within certain bounds, those of labour and of voluntary abortion are added with the Indian. No wonder then if they multiply less than we do. Where food is regularly supplied, a single farm will shew more of cattle, than a whole country of forests can of buffaloes. The same Indian women, when married to white traders, who feed them and their children plentifull and regularly, who exempt them from excessive drudgery, who keep them stationary and unexposed to accident, produce and raise as many children as the white women. Instances are known, under these circumstances, of their rearing a dozen children.  


49 Ibid., 186.
At the heart of Jefferson's vision of Indians achieving their full potential and "becom[ing] one people" with white Americans was a shift away from the hunting and gathering lifestyle; for Indians to become American, they first had to be farmers.\(^{50}\)

In the civilizing program articulated by Jefferson and others, abandoning nomadic hunting patterns and settling in agricultural communities went hand in hand with rejection of Native deities and religious structures, and a push toward the adoption of Christianity. Thus, it is not surprising that the foremost agents of the civilizing program, especially in Kansas, were the various Protestant missions that began to dot the prairie in the beginning of the nineteenth century. For instance, it was only five years after the Shawnee bands living in Cape Girardeau, Missouri, agreed to move to vacated Osage lands west of Missouri\(^{51}\) that the Reverend Thomas Johnson, who had been ministering to white settlers in Missouri and Arkansas throughout the 1820s, moved his operation to Kansas, establishing the Shawnee Methodist Mission in 1830.\(^{52}\) Similarly, the Osage themselves were subject to the policies of the Neosho Mission, which was established in 1824, not far from where Miriam Colt and her family

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\(^{50}\) In a letter to Indian agent Benjamin Hawkins, Jefferson wrote: “In truth the ultimate point of rest & happiness for them is to let our settlements and theirs meet and blend together, to intermix, and become one people.” Quoted in Prucha, The Great Father, 50.

\(^{51}\) The 1825 treaty with the Shawnee can be found in Charles J. Kappler, comp., Indian Affairs, Laws and Treaties, vol. 2: Treaties (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1934), 262–264. It is worth noting that this particular treaty contains evidence of the already underway civilizing program among Native Americans. The Shawnee, according to the treaty, “had valuable and lasting improvements within the tract of land hereby ceded,” which the government recognized and agreed to compensate them for. This pattern of continual removal farther west indicates that even groups who adopted agriculture and the “civilized” lifestyle of white Americans were not safe from the pressures of white settlement.

had chosen to settle.\textsuperscript{53} When Colt revealed her hopes that the seasonal buffalo hunt would pull the Osage hunters away from her new home, she revealed her ignorance about the realities of mid-nineteenth-century federal policy regarding Indians. While the U.S. government, too, might have preferred Native Americans to disappear completely from the plains, they recognized that this was unlikely. Instead, they pursued a policy that sought to enfold Native peoples into a thoroughly agricultural way of life, to Americanize them. With this came the requirement for Native groups in Kansas to rethink their relationship to the landscape around them, and to fundamentally change their conception of their own foodscape. In some cases, this program met with success, but more importantly, it created a set of expectations among Indian groups as to the responsibility of the federal government for ensuring that if this new foodscape somehow proved inadequate or problematic, the government that forced it upon them would take responsibility for correcting it.

The Osages described by Miriam Colt, preparing for a lengthy buffalo hunt and “at war with one of the savage tribes of the western mountains,” were representative of just how destructive and chaotic the lives of nineteenth-century Native Americans in Kansas had become. Both the Osage and the Kansa, tribes closely related by their Dhegian-Siouan languages and centuries of intermarriage, dominated the eastern half of what would become Kansas as early as the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{54} This regional was particularly valuable as it gave these early eastern tribes access to a wide variety of foodstuffs, including bear and deer in the easternmost regions of their territory, bison to the west, deeper into the plains, and their choice to establish villages along rivers gave them fertile soil in which


they could grow corn, squash, and other crops. The natural features of the region allowed the Osage and Kansa to become a semi-sedentary people by the eighteenth century, planting crops in the spring, reaping their harvests, while also pushing into the plains in the summer and fall to hunt bison and other game. The lands on which they hunted, however, were controlled largely by the Comanche, an enormously powerful Shoshonean speaking group whose early acquisition and mastery of the horse had allowed them to establish and maintain control over a huge swath of the plains. As internal pressures within the Comanche empire built up, the Comanche were unable to control the periphery of their territory, including the bison-rich northern reaches of Comancheria, which simultaneously saw pressure from the Osage and other native groups who were increasing pushing further and further west. By the 1840s, the Osage and Kansa’s relatively stable method of subsistence in what would become eastern Kansas, as well as the bison-centered way of life for the Comanche, was coming to an end due to a collapse of the bison population caused by increased competition over the thinning herds. By 1855, the competition over the dwindling buffalo herds had brought the relationship between the Comanche and the Osage to a breaking point, and the two groups amplified their violent efforts to oust one another from the contested hunting grounds. This was precisely the


58 Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire*, 301.
violence the newcomer Miriam Colt noted when she described the Osage as being “at war with one of
the savage tribes of the western mountains.”

Even before the arrival of white settlers in Kansas, the lives of Native peoples in Kansas were
thrown into disarray by the forced migration of Indians from throughout the United States east of the
Mississippi into the region that would become Kansas Territory. The decades leading up to the
creation of Kansas Territory were marked by a federal policy that unrelentingly displaced Native
peoples from the east, partly through legitimate treaty-making and partly through brute force. Indian
removal from valuable eastern land was the goal, and the unorganized territory west of the
Mississippi, acquired from France and Spain in the first decades of the nineteenth century, was the
ultimate destination, as it was thought it would permanently relieve the pressure on Native groups
from white encroachment, as well as create a “buffer zone” between white society and the powerful,
hostile Plains Indians.59 Many Native groups had made new homes in what would become Kansas
throughout the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s; by 1846 there were 19 official reservations, representing at least
as many cultural groups. The Otoe and Missouri, the Iowa, the Sauk and Fox of Missouri, the
Kickapoo, the Delaware and Wyandot, the Shawnee, the Sauk and Fox of Mississippi, the Chippewa,
the Ottawa, the Peoria and Kaskaskia, the Wea and Piankashaw, the Miami, the aforementioned New
York Indians, the Cherokee, and the Quapaw all attempted to start life anew on the plains.60

On the whole, this carving up of the lands of eastern Kansas that had traditionally belonged to
groups like the Osage, Kansa, and Pawnee was devastating for those groups. When the Osage and

(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 16.

Kansa had given up much of their traditional lands in 1825 treaties that ceded valuable land to eastern tribes, they had left sites that had become centers of power, places where the seasonal balance between farming and hunting could be maintained, which in turn made the groups particularly vulnerable to surrounding groups like the Cheyenne, Arapaho, Kiowa, and Comanche. And once again, the already thinning buffalo herds saw more pressure, causing incredibly destructive violence for those groups that continued to fight over them.\textsuperscript{61}

The move did prove to be a boon for some groups. The Delaware, for instance, rapidly adapted to the realities of the Kansas foodscape. Whereas they had previous considered themselves primarily buffalo hunters, having living in Missouri and ranged westward, thereby contributing to the increasing competition for buffalo described above, their new location in Kansas was well suited to agriculture and cattle raising. To the chagrin of federal authorities, the Delaware never did become pure agriculturists or cattlemen, but the sheer volume of arable soil they acquired with their move to Kansas allowed them to largely remove themselves from the growing competition for buffalo that continued unabated in the western reaches of the region.\textsuperscript{62}

The organization of Kansas Territory and its opening to white settlement, which signaled the arrival of settlers like Watson Stewart and Miriam Colt, compounded the pressures on Native Kansans, both original occupants and emigrants. The Kansa Indians, for example, had the unfortunate occurrence of having their small reservation, created in 1847, be situated along the Santa Fe Trail, with


the booming trade center of Council Grove right in the middle of it. This brought both whiskey and disease, which so disrupted the traditional Kansa way of life that it took less than a generation after white encroachment into the territory for the Kansa to unable to continue to buffalo hunt in the west because of the pressures of plains tribes, and unable to establish a working agriculturally-based society due to utter impoverishment at the hands of white traders who would use liquor to ply the Kansa into making shockingly one-sided deals. By 1873 the Kansa were essentially wholly dependent on the meager treaty-guaranteed annuities to subsist. It was a story that repeated in the broadest sense with the Pawnee as well, who found themselves utterly dependent on the federal government after decades of bad crops, bad weather, and particularly bad trade relations with white newcomers to the region.

When Miriam Colt wrote about the Osages she encountered while beginning to settling in Kansas Territory, she would have been largely unaware of the degree to which the lives of her Native neighbors were being disrupted by her presence, and had been being disrupted for decades prior. While she picked up on the deteriorating relationship between the Osage and the Comanche, she did so because she saw all of the Native faces around her as a threat to her own safety. For them to head west in search of buffalo and never return would be the ideal outcome for Colt. Such an outcome was unlikely, however, and if Colt’s diary is any indication, she did not spend too much more time considering the issue. After all, she, too, was adjusting to a new home in an unfamiliar landscape.

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“Troublous Times”

Within a few months of arriving in Kansas, Miriam Colt, Watson Stewart, and other newcomers had to come to terms with their new home. Colt was the first to express her deep displeasure with the territory, despite her earlier excitement about the ease with which the plow had turned up the soft soil, allowing her husband to easily plant the corn that they looked forward to eating. Three weeks after that plowing, Colt had cooled considerably on Kansas. “The disappointment in the company, the unsettled state of the Territory, the distance from my native land, and premonitions of greater trouble,” she wrote, “all combine to make me sad and sorrowful in this far-off land.” While parts of the landscape still appealed to her, Colt was ready to leave by mid-summer. In late June, Miriam Colt, her children, her husband, and many others living near them were taken ill by “fever and ague.” These illnesses lingered for months, with Colt and her family still feeling their effects well into August of 1856. The unrelenting sun, proximity to the Osage, who had since returned from their buffalo hunt and continued to agitate settlers by stealing their foodstuffs, and seemingly unending sickness served as signs to Colt that she and her family should leave the territory as soon as possible. On September 1, only four months after arriving, Colt, her husband, and their children were able to pay a small fee to ride along in a nearly-empty wagon that was heading to Missouri, where the Colts knew they could more easily make their way back to their original home in New York. On their way out of the Neosho valley, Colt took one last look at her home, the spot in Kansas where she and her family had tried to start a new life: “I keep my eye on the log cabin we have left;” she wrote, “could leave the cabin without a sigh, but for those left there must breathe many. We make a little descent, it shuts the
whole view from my eyes forever!” Like many others whose expectations of Kansas, built up by particular images put forth by boosters and travelers, were dashed upon actually attempting to settle the unforgiving terrain, Miriam Colt and her family had given up.

Watson Stewart, on the other hand, stayed in the territory, and made the best of what was a difficult period of establishing himself. The land was providing for him as he had expected. “The season was favorable to the growth of our garden stuff and other crops, and we began to have a few green things to eat,” he wrote. He continued, “We found fine blackberries along the edge of the timber, and especially an abundance of very fine ones along Big Creek, some eight miles south of our place. We had also bought a very good cow, and had plenty of milk and butter.” There were some setbacks, of course. “The river, in the spring, had flooded the low lands, and now malaria began to affect many of our neighbors,” Stewart said. Similarly, heavy dews had descended on the budding settlement, which Stewart believed were contributing “to the attacks of chills and fever.” All in all, however, Stewart was happy with his situation in Kansas—unlike Miriam Colt and her family, Stewart was able to adapt his concept of the Kansas foodscape to fit the reality of life there, and was able to continue to build a new life in the plains.66

Though Watson Stewart was able to adapt to the realities of the Kansas foodscape, the political landscape did take a serious toll on him. Just as Stewart and his family were planting their crops and building their home, he noticed that “in the North part of the Territory there was much trouble between the settlers from the North and the ‘Border Ruffians’ from Missouri.” Watson was not

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particularly worried, “but it was uncertain as to when the conflict might extend to us.” Though he did not know it right then, the conflict had already begun for him. A man from St. Louis, “Mr. Buxton,” had taken to living with the Stewarts several weeks before, and had recently gone to Fort Scott to collect the mail—a three-day round trip. “We began to feel some concern about Mr. Buxton and our household goods,” Stewart wrote, “after he had been gone about three weeks, with no word from him.” Stewart’s worry was well-founded. When Buxton finally returned, on foot, he told Stewart how “a party of armed men stopped him on the principal street and informed him that they wanted the horses.” Buxton had walked back home, which explained his delayed return. “We realized that we had indeed fallen upon troublous times,” Stewart wrote, reflecting on the theft.67

It was precisely these “troublous times” that would touch many of the settlers who remained in Kansas during its territorial years. Those that could withstand the difficulties of adapting to the foodscape still struggled with political realities that were borne out of the fight over the expansion of slavery. Persistent illness, crop failures, and the violence against body and property spurred on by the fight between “border ruffians” and “bona fide” settlers, all challenged the expectations that men and women had when coming to Kansas. To whom could settlers like Watson Stewart turn when faced with these common troubles in the contested territory of Kansas? How could the myriad Native groups in Kansas, all facing the same problem of adjusting to an increasingly crowded landscape and increasing pressure on its resources use their unique relationship with the federal government, one defined by legal treaties and land deals, obtain the help that they needed as well.

67 Ibid., 388.
Chapter 2: The Kansas Aid Complex

Just as they had certain expectations about what the land could offer them, settlers in Kansas Territory had expectations about what would happen if the land failed to provide what they needed. Droughts, floods, hurricanes, and other natural disasters were not unknown to Americans in the nineteenth century, and when settling Kansas, people brought with them certain conceptions of how they would be aided if they faced any of those disasters. There were relationships between neighbors, towns, states, and the federal government, each of which was expected to offer something to protect the settlers from total failure if nature proved uncooperative. This interplay between the very local and the national was fundamental to life in mid-nineteenth-century America, but it was particularly important in territorial Kansas. Settlers’ expectations about who would help them were bound up in these relationships, and so too was the reality of the response they received at all levels. When the first white settlers of Kansas encountered the problems that came with migration and settlement, they drew on existing networks of support and sought to create new ones.

The earliest Kansas settlers—those who immigrated to the region in the years before the Civil War—were the primary actors at the heart of what I have termed the Kansas aid complex. The Kansas aid complex was not a formal system, but instead was a set of institutions and practices that provided settlers with options to receive various forms of aid when they needed it. Neighbors, newspapers, and
governments were a few of the most important pieces of the Kansas aid puzzle, and struggling Kansans drew on all of these in varying degrees.

The Kansas aid complex had a spatial dimension to it as well. Imagine a set of concentric circles with a point in the very center. That point would be the settlers of Kansas who faced various hardships while establishing a home on the plains. When they needed help, they would generally reach out first to those within the smallest circle, those physically closest to them: their neighbors. If their neighbors could not provide the proper form of aid, for want of supplies or expertise, they would then go to the next circle, which included sympathetic people across the United States, usually reached by newspaper, which was the favored method of mass communication at the time. Finally, if that did not work, settlers would appeal to the federal government, or even the governments of other countries. The leap from neighborly assistance to nation-wide relief, including appeals to the federal government, was a very Kansas-specific feature of the aid complex, as the political instability of the region during its territorial period—there were, for instance, eleven different governors and four different constitutions that dictated policy in the territory between 1854 and 1861—made it nearly impossible for legislators to consider general poor relief laws, let alone for settlers to figure out what their relationship to local government was at any particular moment.¹

When neighbors failed to help, generally because they themselves were in need of aid as well, Kansans looked to citizens across the United States to provide them with relief supplies. These pleas across state lines were most often in the form of newspaper articles that detailed the hardships of Kansans were facing, and suggested way that readers could help. As newspapers in this period were

often mouthpieces for political parties, or at the very least carefully curated by editors with very clear political affiliations, appeals for aid were embedded in broader political events. It was generally the case that newspapers in the North were interested in helping Kansans who had emigrated from that region and southern newspapers published pleas on behalf of suffering southerners in Kansas Territory. Particular forms of distress, like drought, which affected large portions of the settler population, were more likely to trigger pleas for aid across the country, since the very nature of those disasters meant that one’s neighbors would be in trouble as well. Some men and women across the United States were moved enough by the reports in the newspapers that they petitioned state governments to issue relief to those in Kansas, but this was far less common and less likely to bear fruit than appealing directly to the kindness of strangers throughout the nation.

Likewise, settlers were far less likely to get aid from the outermost circles, which included the U.S. government. Despite the difficulties of asking for and receiving aid from the government, Kansas settlers still considered lawmakers in Washington as an important part of their network of relief options. As the nation was growing rapidly in the first half of the nineteenth century, the U.S. government found itself facing unprecedented requests for aid and relief after disasters of all types, and by the 1850s, when settlers began flooding into Kansas, there was still no clear policy regarding federal aid to states and territories. However, through the debates of the nineteenth century, including those about relief to Kansas settlers, a more coherent policy of disaster aid and relief began to emerge, eventually leading to the blossoming of a federal welfare state in the twentieth century. Though this revolutionary change in the role of the federal government was many decades off, the seeds of that change were sown in the same years settlers were starving in Kansas.
A closer examination of each of the elements of the Kansas aid complex will reveal how settlers understood their connections to one another and other private and government actors across the country, and will also demonstrated how they appealed to those parties in different ways.

Local Networks

The first people the struggling settlers went to for assistance and aid were the members of their local communities, drawing on the particular closeness and understanding that settler life created among those who ventured into the West. Settler society was a fragile thing—long travels, hard work, and unforgiving landscapes combined with death, disease, hunger, and thirst meant that it was effectively impossible to go it alone in the West, despite any lofty ideals about individualism.

One of the problems that most frequently appears in the records left by early settlers is that of disease and sickness, particularly cholera and typhoid. Many settlers fell victim to these bacterial diseases while traveling west and establishing their home. The effects of these illnesses were exacerbated by hunger and thirst, which were common among those who were rendered incapable of taking care of themselves. Importantly, settlers’ responses to sickness can reveal what they considered the most important source of aid in the Kansas aid complex: their neighbors. Like sickness, hunger was something that had very acute effects on the bodies of settlers, as it came coupled with discomfort and potential for death. Likewise, by looking at how settlers treated one another’s illnesses, we can glean something about what they might have expected to happen if they were visited by a prolonged drought that caused widespread hunger among their ranks. It was often the sick taking care of the sick, and the hungry aiding the hungry. The local component of the Kansas aid complex
was often sufficient to take care of the sick or infirm in the West, and it could even help with minor
bouts of hunger, but as explored in the next chapter, it broke down in the particularly extreme case of
the 1860 drought.

Hannah Anderson Ropes, who immigrated to Kansas Territory from New England in 1855,
personified the reliance of early settler communities on local networks of support. Ropes’ experience
in Kansas Territory was one of continual care-taking and calling on the sick, and she left a detailed
record of her ventures into the homes of sick neighbors.2 Her travels around her neighborhood
indicate the implicit expectations that settlers had about who would take care of them when they
encountered difficulties. One example of Ropes’ role in the community was when, in early October of
1855, less than a month after arriving in Kansas, her milkman “called to say there was a very sick man
in his cabin,” and told Ropes “he would like me to come in and see what I thought of him.” Ropes
hesitated momentarily, questioning the milkman on whether his (the milkman’s) wife was also ill,
implicitly suggesting that it was she would should have been taking care of the sick man bedded down
in their home. “He said he had no family but this man, who had been sick some time, though not
dangerously; but now he seemed worse,” Ropes recalled, “and he thought if I would stop with broth or
gruel when I went by, it would do him good to share it.” Though Ropes herself was subsisting on very
little food, upon hearing that there was no other woman to tend to the sick man, she set out for the
milkman’s cabin. “Of course I went,” she wrote to her mother afterwards.3

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2 Hannah Anderson Ropes, *Six Months in Kansas* (Boston: John P. Jewett and Co., 1856). The term “sick” or variants of it
(excluding “homesick”) appears more than fifty times in the book, an incredible amount for a book that runs just over 200
pages.

3 Ibid.. Details of Ropes’ own lack of food are found throughout *Six Months in Kansas*. Ropes would go on to become a
nurse during the Civil War, eventually working alongside Louisa May Alcott. One of the cruel ironies of the history of
That the milkman specifically asked for help from Hannah Ropes is evidence of his own tacit expectations of aid in the new community. He did not, for instance, take the man to a larger town where more doctors might be found. Similarly, he did not push the man out of his home and into someone else's. Instead, he recognized his own duties to the sick man, and when the man's illness because more than he could competently handle, he reached out to the very neighbors to whom he had been supplying milk for weeks. Aside from her very brief inquiry into why the woman of the milkman's house wasn't taking care of the sick man, Ropes did not hesitate to bring the man broth, despite the fact that she and her family were themselves hungry. This immediate reaction says something about the selflessness of Ropes, but it also indicative of her acceptance of her place in the Kansas aid complex. Just as she would expect to receive aid from neighbors in a dire situation, she understood the expectation for her help however possible.

The importance of mutual aid and neighborly assistance to settler life was also reflected in the very layout of the earliest settlements. When choosing a site for settlement, the first priority of those making the selection was locating a rich supply of potable water. The “live spring” was the most common source of water, and early settlers would expend much labor to establish homes in the vicinity of a spring, forming small communities of settlers sharing a water source. After “good timber,” the first feature of Barbour County mentioned by one of its boosters in a promotional broadside was its “pure running water,” as opposed to “standing stagnant pools.” The heart of Barbour County was

nursing is that so many selfless women lost their own lives by contracting the diseases of those they cared for. Ropes, ever careful to prevent herself from getting sick, died after she contracted typhoid pneumonia in January 1863. See Oertel, *Bleeding Borders: Race, Gender, and Violence in Pre-Civil War Kansas*, 166, note 49.
this water, “found in all our streams, which are supplied from never failing springs as their source.”

The springs were used to fill barrels with water for storage, and also used by those passing through to refresh themselves. Orinda Baker, who moved to Home Township (later known as Centralia) in 1860, noted in her recollection of the territory that “in the center of the tract of land comprising the settlement, a well had been dug to a depth of 80 feet, by the first settlers, and to it everybody came for water.” The importance of the well, whose “supply was inexhaustible,” extended far beyond just the plot surrounding it. Orinda Baker’s brother-in-law and his wife lived five miles from the Bakers, but when they were stricken simultaneously by “nervous fever” and typhoid, the water from the Centralia well provided them much-needed hydration. The people of Centralia would fill a “five-gallon cask” and “using the little mules and the little wagon” make the trek to the home of the ill settlers. This distribution of water carried on for five weeks, with fresh water from the well being brought every morning until the sick settlers had recovered enough to make the trek back to Centralia to be closer to family, and, critically, the source of fresh water that sustained them. The example of Orinda Baker and her family demonstrates how the “live spring” not only literally sustained life in the often dry heat of the plains, but also formed the nucleus of an increasingly complex and overlapping set of relationships between settlers. As Orinda Baker’s brother-in-law and his wife lay dying five miles away, the people of Centralia, who had easiest access to water, were “angels of goodness” who rallied around the Bakers and helped them help their kin.

4 “Barbour County Promotional Circular,” undated [c. 1854–1860], Kansas Relief Collection, Box 11, Folder “Kansas Central Relief Committee,” Kansas State Historical Society.

That both of these examples are women is not a coincidence. After decades of western history being dominated by stories of cowboys, prospectors, and young men looking for new beginnings, the past thirty-odd years has seen an immense increase in literature about women in the American West. The old stereotypes of women in the West—the placid “Madonna of the Plains” or the trouble-making “backwoods belle”—have fallen aside for a fuller image of how women experienced life on the frontier. What we now know is that women were vital parts of the entire process of migration and settlement, and this was especially true in 1850s Kansas. While life in the West was different from life in the East, the general cultural expectations of women were not radically different: women were primarily viewed as mothers, wives, caretakers, and managers of the home. Women played these roles in varying degrees, but very few were completely outside of these expectations. The idea of the woman as a caretaker was critical for the emergence of local networks of support, as the earliest settlements in the West were so sparsely populated that doctors were quite rare, leaving women to draw on the medical knowledge they had in order to help their neighbors, exactly as Hannah Anderson Ropes had done. Likewise, that the home was the woman’s domain was important because hospitals as we know them now were non-existent on the plains, and thus the home remained the

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primary place to rest, heal, and often die. It is not surprising that there were expectations for women to help the hungry and sick, who were too weak to leave their homes—after all, they would be sharing a physical space. Finally, women also led the development of broader formalized systems of mutual assistance. Because of a sense of family duty, women in the West actively worked to make their communities a better place to raise a family, and thus raised money for schools, churches, entertainment, and social causes. Before the emergence of these more organized forms of aid, however, there was the very basic neighborly assistance demonstrated by Ropes and Baker.

For the most part, the local element of the Kansas aid complex was an unorganized network of mutually beneficial relationships that grew organically in reaction to the realities of settlement. However, there was also local aid provided by the careful forethought and planning of the organizers of anti-slavery migration groups in the 1850s. The necessity and usefulness of a local system of support for settlers was explicitly written into the initial 1854 report of the Massachusetts Emigrant Aid Company, which would later be incorporated as the New England Emigrant Aid Company. Eli Thayer, a founding member of the group who wrote the report on behalf of the organizing committee, estimated that “much more than 200,000 persons” had immigrated to the “Western States” in 1853 and “the emigration this year will be larger still.” The journey had not been easy for these travelers,

however. “Persons who are familiar with the course of movement of this large annual throng of emigrants,” Thayer wrote, “know that under the arrangements now existing they suffer at every turn.” An immigrant who ventured into the West alone “suffers from the frauds of others—from his own ignorance of the system of travel; and of the country where he settles; and, again, from his want of support from neighbors—which results in the impossibility of any combined assistance, or of any division of labor.” Avoiding “these embarrassments” was the primary goal of the Emigrant Aid Company, and the group pursued that goal by providing inexpensive travel, lodging, food, and information to eager emigrants. Further, “by establishing emigrants in large numbers in the territories, it will give them the power of using; at once those social influences which radiate from the church, the school, and the press, in the organization of a community.” Though the reality of early Kansas settlement meant that many immigrants lacked the support of all the institutions Thayer listed, the underlying principle was clear: solid, supportive local communities were the first line of defense against perishing or failing in the West.

It was clear to some settlers, though, that their local networks of support were not enough to sustain them through the worst of times. During the first week of November 1855, Hannah Anderson Ropes, who had so willingly visited the sick in her town near Lawrence, vented her frustration with the remoteness and disconnectedness of her community. When a visitor arrived at her home with news

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8 Massachusetts Emigrant Aid Company, *Nebraska and Kansas. Report of the Committee of the Massachusetts Emigrant Aid Company, with the Act of Incorporation, and Other Documents* (Boston, 1854), 1–10; *Organization, Objects, and Plan of Operations, of the Emigrant Aid Company: Also a Description of Kanzas. For the Information of Emigrants*. (Boston: Alfred Mudge & Son, 1854), 3–8; An early, unsigned draft, presumably written by Eli Thayer, of the Company's Plan of Operation is even more explicit about the purpose of the Company being to “organize emigration to the West & to bring it under a system” (emphasis in original). See “Mass. Emigrant Aid Co. [Plan of Operation]” 1854, New England Emigrant Aid Company Collection, #624, Box 7, Folder 14, Kansas State Historical Society.
that “one of the party who arrived from the East, that bitter cold week, has been there sick ever since,” she was called upon to go visit the sick man, William Dillon of Michigan. “Here we are at the door of the sick man,” Ropes wrote in a letter to her mother. “He is in the chamber we occupied during our first week in Kansas—a thin, woman-featured face; light hair in profusion; clammy with perspiration; not more than twenty-three years old.” The young man appeared to be in the throes of a fever dream, answering Ropes’ inquiry into his health with the declaration that “he was very well, ‘a little crowded, just a little; it’s choking-like to be crowded,’” and gazed around the room. “What crowds you?” Ropes asked. “He shook his head and said: ‘Beds, Beds—very little room—great many beds!’” Ropes perceived that there was little she could do other than “wet his mouth and smooth [his] clothes.” She knew that Dillon “has a brother somewhere in the territory; but, so far, no clue whereby to find him has been discovered.” On her way back to her home, where she was taking care of “[her] own slowly-recovering invalids,” Ropes pondered the frustrating reality of depending on local networks of support, writing to her mother in New England, “if we could only borrow a telegraph wire from you who are so rich in means and appliances of inter-communication, or an express-train, just for one day, then this poor youth should receive the care and love of his brother.” When Kansans realized that their local networks of aid and support were not sufficient for averting the more dramatic hardships of settlements, they broadened their expectations of assistance to include people in other states.

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9 Ropes, *Six Months in Kansas*, 99–105. William Dillon’s brother did come back to town, a few days later, called by an “impression so strong that his [brother’s] cold had become a serious sickness.”
State Networks

Because of the unique circumstances of Kansas settlement—the slavery question being a prime factor in encouraging people to move to the territory—different sets of Kansans looked to different groups outside the territory for help in hard times. Although settlers from Massachusetts and other hardline anti-slavery states were a minority in Kansas for the entire territorial period, they were generally better organized and certainly more vocal than their pro-slavery opponents. Because of this, the historical record is replete with information about networks of support of anti-slavery settlers, and somewhat patchy when it comes to those who supported the expansion of slavery.

The states that drew the most requests for help from Kansans were Massachusetts and New York. There are two likely reasons for this: both states were financial centers and thus more likely to have the spare capital to spend on the cause of relieving hunger, and, importantly, both states were home to enormous populations of anti-slavery and abolitionist Americans. Despite living in very different places and very different circumstances, the best friend a Kansas settler could have in the 1850s was a rich philanthropist in the Northeast. New Englanders and New Yorkers may have been particularly receptive to the calls for help from Kansas because many of those in Kansas were transplants from the Northeast themselves. It was, after all, the New England Emigrant Aid Company that funded and organized much of the emigration of anti-slavery men and women from Massachusetts into Kansas. Some New Englanders felt a sense of obligation to keep alive and healthy those who were willing to sacrifice their relatively comfortable lives in New England for the harsh realities of farm life in Kansas in the name of anti-slavery causes.
Along with personal letters in and out of the territory, an important tool in circulating information about Kansas, and thus soliciting aid, either directly or indirectly, was the newspaper. The importance of newspapers in the nineteenth century cannot be overstated. As the primary organs of national communication, newspapers of the nineteenth century shaped understanding of and discourse about American politics, culture, and society. This is not to say that newspapers merely presented facts that informed the public. Rather, the newspaper was a convenient package of articles and editorials that contained important information about what was happening across the nation, but was also, in the words of one historian, "plagued by shallow commentary and manufactured opinion." As ever, shallow and manufactured did not translate into hollow and ineffectual; in fact, newspapers were remarkably powerful in crafting particular understandings about events occurring throughout the country. Kansas in particular grabbed the attention of the nation's papers in the 1850s, and troubles in the region provided fodder for thousands of articles and editorials. Kansans themselves surely knew about the spotlight being thrown on them by national newspapers, and certainly recognized that help during hard times could come from afar, especially if the pleas were bundled in a particular narrative of settlement.

Tellingly, William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator*, which had been published weekly since 1831, was a key outlet for news and information about hardships in Kansas during the early territorial period. By the 1850s, when the initial wave of emigrants left Boston and other places in the East and headed to Kansas, Garrison was a well-known—perhaps the best known—radical abolitionist, and *The Liberator* was both read by anti-slavery agitators and watched closely by pro-slavery opponents as

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well. From the outset, *The Liberator* served up information about the problems in Kansas, including explicit calls for aid and assistance to anti-slavery settlers. Throughout 1854 and 1855, *The Liberator* primarily ran pieces that reported on the initial immigration of settlers into Kansas and their encounters with the “border ruffianism” of their Missouri neighbors. By 1856 these general summaries and news items had shifted into explicit calls for material aid to struggling settlers.

One of the earliest of these articles appeared on February 15, 1856, when the paper reprinted a story from the *Salem Bugle* (a small Ohio newspaper). The article, which ran under the title “Material Aid for Kansas,” described the formation of a small aid committee in Ohio, “to collect funds for purchase of arms for the defense of the Territory, and for the supply of necessities of those whose substance was consumed by the late invasion of Lawrence.” The representative from Kansas who went to Ohio to solicit these funds was hoping to raise “the very moderate sum of $5000” from Ohioans. A similar, but lengthier article published six weeks later, described the “large and enthusiastic meeting [that] was held in the Assembly Chamber, at Albany,” on March 13. The goal of the meeting: “to devise means to aid the Freemen in Kansas, in their struggle with their enemies and the enemies of Personal and Civil Liberty.” The meeting was led by Staten Island politician Minthorne Tompkins, a supporter of the Kansas cause, but was dominated by Gerrit Smith, a radical social reformer who had briefly served in the U.S. House of Representatives. Smith, *The Liberator* reported, went on at length about the injustices of the Missouri Compromise and the Kansas-Nebraska Act, but eventually turned his attention to the less heady, more fundamental problems facing Kansas settlers in 1856. “Money is needed for Kansas—in the first place to buy bread for her people,” he wrote,

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recognizing the very real consequences that unmet material needs had on Kansans. “For while they should have been left in peace to cultivate the soil, they have been compelled to muster in camps—to carry arms by day and to sleep upon them by night. They need money, also, to procure arms to repel outrages and invasion,” he concluded. His speech was followed by applause from the audience. These were not simply reports of happenings throughout the country; these were examples of abolitionist action that The Liberator was implicitly endorsing and suggesting for its readership. That The Liberator, a prominent Boston newspaper, was reprinting articles from the small town of Salem, Ohio, and the state capital of New York, shows just how expansive and complicated the Kansas aid complex became beyond the local level.

These personal pleas for aid did not go unheard. A private letter from Colonel William Whiting of Concord, Massachusetts to The Liberator demonstrates how the cross-country relief network was built upon the kindness and generosity of individuals. After reading George Porter Paine’s description of what settlers in Neosho Falls were facing, Whiting “thought it would be well to read it to our Sunday School.” The children were apparently moved, as they decided to “take up a collection” and were able to raise $10.62 for the settlers in Woodson County. “It would have done your heart good to see the bright eyes of the dear little children sparkle when the amount collected was announced to them,” Whiting wrote to the editors of the paper. “[I]t is so much more blessed to (be able to) give than to (be obliged to) receive.”

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New York, the center of radical abolitionist thought in the 1850s and 1860s, was less often the original home of those who moved to Kansas, but still provided a critical link to a sympathetic audience. As in *The Liberator* and other newspapers in Boston, articles began to appear in New York newspapers in 1856 calling for material aid for struggling Kansans. On February 27, H. L. Jones, a Long Islander from North Hempstead, wrote to the *New York Daily Tribune* to call for aid to Kansas. Upon returning from a ten-day trip to Kansas, Jones used his “first leisure moment” to “[make] this appeal through your columns in behalf of the people of Kansas.” Jones found Kansans “suffering and needy,” but was careful to emphasize that they “are not mere beggars for a mere pittance to sustain life.” Rather, the settlement patterns of anti-slavery Kansans were disrupted by the violence of pro-slavery border ruffians, leading to a situation where “all progress in improving our country was at once stopped.” Of the request for aid, Jones wrote, “I solicit it not as charity, but as something which we have a right to expect from our Eastern brethren.” This was one of the clearest and most forceful articulations of an expectation for aid that formed a critical part of the Kansas aid complex, and would remain important as Kansas faced other difficulties in the future, including the drought of 1860.

Though not as active as the northern press, newspapers in the South also served as critical links in the Kansas aid complex. *The Charleston Mercury*, published in the South Carolina capital since 1822, was the antithesis of *The Liberator*, widely known as the authoritative mouthpiece of the anti-abolitionist, pro-slavery, and secessionist movements.⁴ Throughout the second half of the 1850s, the *Mercury* ran many columns calling for aid to the pro-slavery settlers who had immigrated to Kansas.

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Fewer southern women were willing to go to Kansans than were their northern counterparts, but they were no less interested in helping the cause in whatever way they could. Early in 1856, after the initial wave of immigrants had come to Kansas, and after the anti-slavery faction had drafted the Topeka Constitution, one woman wrote to the *Mercury* asking if they planned on asking for “contributions for the Kansas cause.” The editors published a reply, stating that “there is reason to expect that in a few days there will be a public demonstration upon the subject, and committees appointed to receive the contributions of our citizens.” Sure enough, a week later, in an article reprinted from the *Barnwell [South Carolina] Sentinel*, the *Mercury* reported that twenty-one men from Barnwell, “having consulted with many prominent slaveholders in the District,” had “call[ed] a meeting to raise a Kansas Aid Fund, for the purpose of assisting those of our own District who may feel disposed to emigrate to Kansas, and support Southern rights and Institutions.” The message was heard all through South Carolina; a woman, “One of the Daughters of the South,” from Pendleton, hundreds of miles north of Barnwell, and even further from Charleston, was immediately moved by the regional calls for aid, sending a valuable piece of jewelry to an aid collector. “If I were a man I would go with you,” she wrote. “Let me do what I can. Let me send a man. I enclose you a gold chain to

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16 “Kansas Aid Fund,” *The Charleston Mercury*, February 21, 1856, Issue 9532 edition. Barnwell was 100 miles from Charleston, and was an important antebellum town because of its location along the South Carolina Rail Road, which ran from Charleston to Hamburg, South Carolina, where it connected with the Savannah River.
do it,” she remarked to E. B. Bell, a “young Charlestonian and Carolinian” who was eager to send more pro-slavery men to Kansas.17

Newspapers throughout the nation, then, were both a way for Kansans to quickly and efficiently reach sympathetic readers thousands of miles away, and a medium through which those readers could plan and organize for the continued support of those struggling to survive the violent atmosphere of Kansas Territory. The newspaper, in short, provided a way for like-minded individuals to communicate with one another over vast distances. In the Kansas aid complex there emerged a distinctly national network, in that it spanned the entire country, but was fundamentally different than a network that engaged the nation itself; that is, one that included petitioning the federal government for assistance.

The Federal Government

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the federal government of the United States was not known for its generosity when it came to the relief of its own people, let alone others in the world. Congress and the President did factor into settlers’ understanding of the Kansas aid complex, but whereas they expected help from their neighbors and private citizens throughout the country who could be reached via newspaper, they understood the unlikelihood of receiving federal assistance. And yet, the fact that people in the past had asked for and received aid from the federal government meant that it would remain an important potential source for relief.

Like the local networks of aid, and the broader base of support by sympathetic citizens throughout the nation, the fundamental role of the federal government in the Kansas aid complex began in the Bleeding Kansas years, shortly following the period of initial settlement. A brief exploration of the history of a particular request upon the federal government by territorial Kansans demonstrates what sorts of expectations settlers had of their government, and shows an early example of the form of and method by which Kansans could petition the federal government for redress of their grievances. The political battle for restitutive payment by Washington for the property destruction in the Bleeding Kansas period, when examined in some detail, reveals many of the contours of petitions that would come later. Kansans were figuring out how to request aid from the government, and in doing so were more clearly defining their understanding of the relationship between a territory with a very particular and peculiar history and the federal government.

Though the summer of 1856 did not bring with it peace, it did bring new leadership eager to solve the problems that plagued the young territory. John W. Geary, appointed governor of Kansas Territory on July 31, 1856, arrived in early September with the intention of bringing peace to the fracturing region.\(^{18}\) Recognizing that the answers to the Kansas problem could be held by the people themselves, and hoping to root out the remaining handful of “marauders...who occasionally steal horses and rob families,” Geary left Lecompton on October 17 with his secretary, his orderly, and several others, including “a squadron of United States dragoons, under command of Brevet Major H.

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Day after day Geary and his team would march over the territory—described both as “a beautiful country” and “a dull, monotonous country”—until they reached a town, where Geary would then give a speech describing his ideal policies for the territory, followed by lengthy sessions of meeting with territorial settlers, sometimes numbering in the hundreds, who were eager to discuss the future of their chosen homes with their new governor.19

What Geary and his retinue discovered was that though the majority of the violence of Bleeding Kansas had ended by autumn of 1856, the development of the territory had been slowed and that real progress depended on a lasting peace. On January 12, 1857, the territorial Legislative Assembly met for the first time that year, and after a day of initial record keeping and committee-appointing, the Assembly received Governor Geary's annual address on January 13. His lengthy address touched on many different topics, outlining his vision for Kansans. Overriding everything, though, was the necessity of true peace in the region. Geary looked to the Legislative Assembly “for that hearty cooperation which will enable us successfully to guide the ship of state through the troubled waters into the haven of safety.” Geary framed his appeal to the Assembly in natural terms, arguing that the quieting of political fighting, both physical and verbal, allowed settlers to take full advantage of the natural gifts of the Kansas landscape. “All good citizens are disposed to deplore the errors and excesses of the past, and unite with fraternal zeal in repairing its injuries,” because “this Territory, unsurpassed by any portion of the continent for the salubrity of its climate, the fertility of its


20 Ibid., 621.
soil, its mineral and agricultural wealth, its timber-fringed streams, and fine quarries of building stone, has entered upon a career of unparalleled prosperity.” For Geary, the details of life in Kansas were all connected: now that settlers had put down their weapons, they could pick up their plows and take full advantage of what the landscape was providing them.\textsuperscript{21}

Full engagement with this “mineral and agricultural wealth,” Geary further argued, hinged on a proper response to the territorial settlers he had spoken with on his three-week tour of the territory, who remained unsatisfied with both the territorial and federal governments’ response to the violence of Bleeding Kansas, particularly when it came to monetary restitution for the damage to property and body. “In traveling through the Territory,” Geary’s address read, “I have discovered a great anxiety in relation to damages sustained during the past civil disturbances, and everywhere the question has been asked as to whom they should look for indemnities.” Kansans, he said, endured “burning houses, plundering [of] fields, and stealing [of] horses and other properties,” all of which “have been a fruitful source of irritation and trouble, and have impoverished many good citizens.”\textsuperscript{22}

Rather than appealing directly to the Assembly for compensation, Geary boldly pinned the responsibility on the federal government. After all, he argued, the violence in Kansas “cannot be considered as springing from purely local causes,” and was thus not “the subjects of Territorial redress.” Bleeding Kansas was perpetrated by “the citizens of nearly every State in the Union,” and “both parties...committed acts which no law can justify.” If the point was not clear enough, Geary summed it up: “It has been a species of national warfare waged upon the soil of Kansas...and


\textsuperscript{22}Ibid., 684–685.
peaceable citizens of Kansas have been the victims.” This clear division between a territory’s responsibility for itself and the federal government’s responsibility for it would become an increasingly important point throughout the last half of the 1850s, as the troubles in Kansas began to include not just violence from outside agitators, but natural disasters as well.

According to Geary, if the violence and destruction came from throughout the United States, then the U. S. Government held the final responsibility for aiding the aggrieved settlers. “In adjusting the question of damages, it appears proper that a broad and comprehensive view of the subject should be taken,” Geary wrote in his address to the Assembly, “and I have accordingly suggested to the General Government the propriety of recommending in Congress the passage of an Act providing for the appointment of a commissioner to take testimony and report to Congress for final action, at as early a day as possible.”

Geary’s stated concern for the settlers of Kansas in his address is somewhat surprising when viewed in comparison to his response to another governor who had made an effort to aid the struggling citizens of Kansas Territory. Earlier in January, less than a week before Geary would send his appeal to the Legislative Assembly, Geary had sent a reply to Governor Henry A. Fletcher of Vermont, who, in November 1856, approved the “Act of the Vermont Legislature No. 59 – An Act for the Relief of the Poor of Kansas.” The legislature had agreed to allocate $20,000 to Fletcher with the authorization to dispense that money “for the purpose of furnishing food and clothing to such of the

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23 Ibid., 685.

24 Ibid.
inhabitants of Kansas as may be in a suffering condition for the want thereof.” In his reply, Geary's tone was thankful, but he was quick to decline the aid “I am happy to inform you,” he wrote to Fletcher, “that I am not aware of the existence of any condition of things in this Territory that will render necessary the employment of the money you have so liberally placed at our disposal.” He did acknowledge that “there is doubtless some suffering within our limits,” owing to “past disturbances and the present extremely cold weather, but probably no more than exists in other Territories, or in either of the States of the Union.” In fact, Geary wrote, things were so good in Kansas that “so far as my observation has extended, the deserving and industrious portions of our population are in the full enjoying of more than an ordinary degree of contentment and prosperity, nothing further that “no man who is able and willing to work need be destitute of the means of a comfortable livelihood in Kansas.”

Geary’s reply belies the reality of conditions in the territory, even in towns like Lecompton, where he lived and from where he penned the letter to the Vermont governor. In his history of Geary’s tenure as governor, John H. Gihon, a Philadelphia doctor who moved to Kansas in 1856 to serve as Geary’s personal secretary, described the scene more accurately. “At the time these letters were passing,” he wrote, “there were, perhaps, two hundred men in the town of Lecompton, at least one half of whom were out of employment, though they were evidently supplied with funds from some invisible source to supply their immediate wants and support them in idleness.” The explanation for


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the unemployment became more acutely political as Gihon further described the “idlers”: rather than filling the demand for mechanics and other laborers, “it was much easier to lounge about the groggeries and denounce abolitionists.” According to Gihon, “it was quite apparent that most of the people about Lecompton had not come there to work,” and “it would, perhaps, have been a degradation for the most destitute of these gentlemen, who had come to the territory to advocate the cause of negro slavery, to resort themselves to manual labor.” For Geary and his administration, those suffering in Kansas did so by choice—a message that conflicted with his general push for restitution for settlers affected by the violence of Bleeding Kansas. The fact that Geary himself was a “firm and unwavering Democrat,” and his assistant Gihon a formerly vehement pro-slavery supporter (“daily accumulating evidences” had made him “acknowledge the truth” of the free-state arguments), but both could still place blame directly on pro-slavery forces in Lecompton and other towns, demonstrates the complicated reality of party politics in Kansas at the time.

Given the tense relationship between Geary and the legislature gathered in Lecompton, it is surprising that anything proposed made it through the approval process, but on February 23, 1857, the Assembly approved “an act to provide for the auditing of claims,” appointing a former Adjutant General of the Territorial Militia, Hiram J. Strickler, to the post of Commissioner of Claims. Shortly

\[27\] Gihon, Geary and Kansas, 217.

\[28\] Ibid., iv.

\[29\] The 1857 Legislative Assembly that met in Lecompton that January was primarily composed of pro-slavery Democrats, hostile to Geary’s policy of neutrality on the issue of slavery. According to John H. Gihon, upon convening the Assembly, the pro-slavery faction immediately held a secret meeting “in which it was resolved, that should any act pass both houses by a majority of votes, and then be vetoed by the governor, there should be a mutual agreement to disregard the veto, and pass the act by a two-third vote.” This plan set the tone for the entirety of the session, making it particularly difficult for Geary to implement any of his policy plans. For a thorough account of these legislative tensions, see ibid., 218–222.
thereafter, Strickler drafted and circulated a “notice to claimants” that outlined the path to obtaining restitution for damages against persons and property. For private citizens of the territory, the notice read, “the said Act provides for the taking of testimony in support” of “claims of all persons who may have sustained any loss or damage in consequence of, or growing out of the difficulties in this Territory, by way of loss of property or consequent expenses.” The testimony and any vouchers issued would be recorded in duplicate, “one to be laid before the next Congress of the United States, and the other before the next Legislative Assembly of Kansas Territory, to the end that proper and united efforts may be made to obtain from Congress compensation and indemnity for the losses, expenses and damages incurred by the citizens of this Territory, without distinction to party.”

Throughout the fall of 1857 and spring of 1858, Strickler compiled the testimonies of more than 350 citizens of Kansas Territory, and as early as January 1858 began sending out a formal report detailing his findings. This initial batch of testimonies was extended several times in 1858 and 1859 as more claims were made, and it changed further as others were verified or rejected. The process for filing a claim with the Claims Commission was involved, but fairly straightforward: first, the claimants had to present their claims in writing to an agent of the Commission on whatever date that agent was in their county (a listing of the specific dates began circulating among Kansans on August 28, 1857, with the earliest meeting being at Lecompton just a few days later on September 1); second, the

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claimants were expected to bring with them “two disinterested witnesses” who could confirm the accuracy of the “value particularized and stated”; finally, the claimants and witnesses would appear before a justice of the peace, swear on the accuracy of the claims, and then have their documents sealed and certified by the county clerk. Most of the process took place in these local, temporary claims courts, which, upon verifying the claims, passed them on to Strickler, who would issue a voucher to the claimant for the payment of restitution (Figure 2.1). Strickler was also responsible for compiling the claims, tallying their totals, and ultimately presenting a report and request for funds to Congress.\textsuperscript{31}

\textsuperscript{31} Strickler, “Report of H. J. Strickler, Commissioner to Audit, under The Laws of the Territorial Legislature of Kansas, the Claims of Citizens of That Territory for Losses Sustained in Carrying into Effect the Laws of the Territory, or Growing out of Any Difficulties in the Territory,” 2–3.
Strickler’s compilation of verified claims from throughout Kansas Territory, as presented to the Committee on the Territories in the House of Representatives on April 7, 1858, runs 671 printed pages and contains 357 claims totaling $301,225.11 in damages, of which $245,279.28 was “proven and awarded.” Nearly eighty-five percent—$215,311.38—of the certified claims fell under the “private class,” which included damages done to personal property and real estate owned by Kansans.\textsuperscript{32} The detailed stories in the individual claims are remarkably similar and offer a look at common experiences faced by settlers living in Kansas during the Bleeding Kansas years. In almost every case

\textsuperscript{32} Tabulated totals are available in ibid., 678.
the claimants were approached by “armed bodies of men,”\textsuperscript{33} described as “marauders”\textsuperscript{34} and “lawless bands of thieves,”\textsuperscript{35} who would proceed to restrain the claimants and steal their property, focusing primarily on firearms, ammunition, and what was often the most valuable possessions of settlers, their livestock. Corn and other crops were also popular targets. If fields of corn weren’t destroyed outright, they would be reduced to tillage by the horses of the raiders. Likewise, potatoes, wheat, oats, beans, beets, peas, and other fruits, vegetables, and grains were “consum[ed] or carr[ied] away.”\textsuperscript{36} Though guns, animals, and food were the things most commonly stolen or destroyed, there was not much that the raiding bands would not pilfer: “one lady’s bonnet,”\textsuperscript{37} “mathematical instruments,”\textsuperscript{38} a copy of the “Statutes of Kansas,”\textsuperscript{39} and an “imitation gold watch”\textsuperscript{40} were among the lengthy list of items for which the claimants demanded remuneration. Losing a fake gold watch was unlikely to compromise the livelihood of the aggrieved settlers, but the damage to their livestock and crops was a serious setback in their attempts to secure the basic material conditions that would allow one to live comfortably in the territory.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 33, 54, 70, 139, 241, 307, 568, passim.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 17, 46, 154, passim.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 391.

\textsuperscript{36} For a representative list of the types of foodstuffs destroyed, see the award schedule of Sylvestor H. Davis in ibid., 569.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 288.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 111.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 246.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 612.
Upon completion of his report, Strickler first submitted it to the Legislative Assembly of the territory, which essentially ignored it. By this time power in the Assembly had shifted in favor of the free-staters, who were “antagonistic to a voluntary recognition of the laws passed by the Legislature of 1855” and other pro-slavery dominated legislatures. They were particularly concerned that many free-state sympathizers “had not presented their claims” to Strickler and the entire process was too deeply embedded in political fighting to justify further action. In March, Strickler tested the federal waters by sending his report to Washington to be presented to Congress by Marcus J. Parrott, the territorial delegate. The report died on the federal level as well, and for similar reasons: “The unsettled condition of Kansas affairs and the continued troubles in the southern portion of the Territory, were regarded as sufficient excuse for the committee to refrain from making a practical report.”

For both legislative bodies—one at the territorial level, the other on the federal level—affairs in Kansas were still too hot of a political issue for members to be willing to involve themselves.

Though the push for claims risked expiring in the face of these obstacles, in 1859 a new governor and legislature breathed life back into it. Samuel Medary, a printer and newspaperman who had also served as Governor of Minnesota in 1858, was appointed to the governorship of Kansas Territory in November of that year. He took office on December 20, 1858, and two weeks later, on January 3, 1859, he met with the Fourth Territorial Legislature, first in Lecompton, then in Lawrence. One historian of the politics of Kansas has described the overall tone and timbre of Medary’s address to the new legislature as “a business document, notably free from allusions or recommendations.

calculated to rekindle excitement or revive old enmities.\textsuperscript{42} Like Governor Geary, Medary was a lifelong Democrat, but ultimately recognized that a peaceful Kansas was necessary for the territory to progress. Also like Geary, Medary viewed the collection and payment of claims as a fundamental piece of the puzzle of securing lasting peace in Kansas. Since there were some questions over the legitimacy of the claims contained in Strickler’s report (and concern that many claims went un-reported), Medary proposed the appointment of a group of three new commissioners to collect, audit, and certify any claims, with the hope that the matter could finally be settled and put to rest.\textsuperscript{43}

Circulated among legislators to support the case for restitution was a lengthy report that once again framed the issue as one concerning the relationship between the territorial settlers and the federal government. The report first explained why the claims acts repeatedly died on the floor of Congress, noting that, among other reasons, the “Secretary of the Treasury opposed the introduction of any matter having a tendency to deplete and embarrass the public treasury under present circumstances,” and Congress was “opposed to having the subject presented in any form that may revive former discussion on Kansas affairs.” In short, as the specter of disunion loomed large in the mind of the Congress of 1859, they were understandably hesitant to take any dramatic actions. The committee suggested that the best way to get congressional approval was to do all the heavy lifting beforehand and present the federal legislators with a package that could be passed with minimal, if


any, debate: “The whole subject must be compressed in a nutshell, and so presented as not only to avoid discussion, but to secure the support of men of all parties.”

Within that nutshell was a full articulation of the reasons that Kansans considered it a federal responsibility to aid settlers who suffered losses during the Bleeding Kansas period. “The Bill proposed looks to the General Government for indemnity for losses sustained by a great number of our citizens,” the committee argued, “on the general principle that a government is bound to protect the rights, persons and property of its subjects in return for the fulfillment of the duties of loyalty, obedience, support and contributions which the latter are compelled to yield.” Citing political theory ranging from “Roman Civil Law” to the “Common and Statute Law of England” and the “Code Napoleon,” the committee argued forcefully that “the duties of the Government and the governed are reciprocal,” and in the case of Bleeding Kansas, the federal government had not held up its end of the bargain. The committee at once applauded the government for the “experiment in self-government” that was the repeal of the Missouri Compromise and adoption of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and criticized it for “fail[ing] to perform its full duty by enforcing the principles of equal and exact justice and protection to all interests alike social and political.” It was well know, the committee argued, that opening the territory to settlement would “invite higher sectional interests” and the government had a responsibility to ensure that those sectional interests did not result in harm to those willing to settle the region. In the eyes of the committee and Governor Medary, “the moral as well as legal responsibility of the Government for the losses sustained cannot be denied or repudiated.”

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45 Ibid.
The Medary camp’s appeal to the Fourth Legislature was effective; on February 7, 1859, the legislature returned to Medary “An Act to Provide for the Payment and Adjustment of Claims,” which he immediately signed into law. The act called for the appointment of a three-member board of commissioners, each of whom represented a different political party, a choice that had as its “object...divest[ing] the Board of a partisan character, by combining therein representatives of the different phases of Territorial politics.”46 The goal this time around was to head off any arguments that the composition of the committee or the office that appointed it was politically influenced. The board members chosen were Edward Hoogland, a pro-slavery Democrat affiliated with Governor John Geary and the Lecompton government47; Henry J. Adams, a prominent free-state politician who had briefly been Governor of Kansas Territory under the Leavenworth Constitution48; and Samuel A. Kingman, a Whig-turned-Republican abolitionist who would go on to become chief justice of the Kansas Supreme Court.49 These three had been bitter political rivals only three years earlier, so their working together on the claims commission is a testament to the dedication of the Medary government to attempting to smooth over the rough history of Kansas Territory in order to help all of its citizens. A supplemental act passed by the legislature further insulated the commission from any potential charges of corruption, insisting that the three commissioners “enter into bonds to the Territory of Kansas...the

46 Ibid., 4.


sum of ten thousand dollars each,” to be returned to them “conditional upon the faithful discharge of their respective duties.” This sum was far more than they could expect to earn from their service; the enacted legislation put the commissioners’ compensation at five dollars per day on days they were actually engaged in taking testimony and issuing awards, and ten cents per mile while traveling between towns. If their desire for lasting peace was not strong enough, surely their economic interest would ensure a careful and fair approach to their appointed task.

While the commissioners had an economic incentive to properly undertake their duties, those wanting to make claims were actually disincentivized to do so under the same act. Just like the previous claims meetings under the watch of Hiram Strickler, the aggrieved had to travel to the nearest meeting, provide two witnesses, and copies of all of their paperwork. This alone was not too high of a hurdle, but Section 2 of the new law now required claimants to “pay officer’s and witness’ fees in the same manner as required by law in suits in said District Court.” Most likely this policy was to prevent the submission of baseless claims to the commission, but it would certainly also prevent those who might still be suffering the pecuniary effects of Bleeding Kansas from even bothering to make a claim. The commissioners recognized this and included such factors when submitting their final totals of claims made, noting that the sum owed to the people of Kansas was likely much higher than what they could verify through the rather strict apparatus as dictated by the law.

Between February 21 and July 11 of 1859, the new commissioners collected testimony from 463 aggrieved settlers in Kansas. The commissioners approved 417 of those claims, issuing debt certificates


59 Ibid., 4.
worth $412,978.03. Twenty-six of the 463 total claims were rejected outright, two were withdrawn by claimants, and 18 were temporarily “suspended for want of proof.” Those suspended claims would add another $25,972.03 to the total awarded, and the commissioners suspected that at least two-thirds of the claimants would come through with adequate proof as to secure an award. Ultimately, despite the administrative hurdles placed in front of claimants, the Hoogland, Adams, and Kingman commission collected more claims that the prior Strickler-led commission and awarded significantly more money (more than sixty percent higher) to Kansans. Even this high number was likely a dramatic underrepresentation of the economic devastation wrought by Bleeding Kansas, according to the commissioners. “From all our investigations,” they wrote, “we are confident that the entire loss and destruction of warfare, from Nov. 1, 1855, till Dec. 1, 1856...could not have been less than two millions of dollars.” Of that, they said “at least one-half...was directly sustained by and fell upon actual citizens of Kansas—the bona fide settlers.” This calculation was based on numbers both known and unknowable: the commissioners knew there were legitimate claims they had to reject for want of enough evidence to satisfy the requirements of the law, they knew there were proven claims presented to the Strickler committee the year before that were not re-submitted, and they were cognizant of the unknown “number of settlers who were driven away from the Territory,” who “have never returned, being spirit-broken and discouraged by the scenes of 1856”

In their report, Hoogland, Adams, and Kingman echoed (and, in fact, quoted at length) the statements made by Governor Medary and the Strickler commission regarding the responsibility of the federal government to pay out on these claims. The new commissioners ended their report with

52 Ibid., 6, 8.
an argument that reveals the ways in which they understood the material reality of settlers’
experiences to be intimately linked to the very particular national party politics that fueled Bleeding
Kansas. The backbone of the commissioners’ argument was that there were two classes of people
involved in the Bleeding Kansas violence: “bona fide settlers,” who undoubtedly had political leanings,
but whose opinions on the question of slavery remained “unobtruded,” versus “malcontents” bent on
“violent, bloodshed, and carnage.” The first group came to Kansas in order to secure a future for
themselves, to take advantage of the “salubrity of climate, fertility of soil, commercial advantages,
geographical positions, and mineral and agricultural wealth”—that is, the rich Kansas foodscape
beckoned, and they answered the call with noble intentions. These settlers, the argument went, were
overwhelmingly opposed to the “tyrannical and unconstitutional enactments, which had for their
ultimate object the establishment of an institution not consonant with the views and wishes of [the]
majority.” In other words, those interested in the long-term development of Kansas, those who were
willing to heed the call of the federal government to leave their homes and travel to the recently
organized territory, were almost wholly opposed to slavery, but upon arrival on the prairie were met
with those of the second type: violent partisans willing to destroy property and lives in the name of
their particular political interests. Though they were clear that “men of both parties, and their
families, had the same complaints to make against those whom they believed to have been their
enemies,” the commissioners noted that the evidence they had gathered made it clear that “the
excesses committed by those claiming partisanship in the war on one side, bear little quality with
those charged on the other.” Despite pinning the majority of the blame on the pros-slavery marauders,
the commissioners maintained that “the movement in regard to obtaining from the General
Government a just indemnity to the sufferers” was “not a party movement.” After all, being able to make such a claim was the very reason for the diverse partisan makeup of the commission. The movement, instead, was “founded on justice,” and it was “due to the people...who participated in the struggle of 1856, in defense of their honest convictions.”

Hoogland, Adams, and Kingman understood just how deep the animosity ran among Kansas settlers, even those “bona fide settlers” who had not come to Kansas with the intention to fight over their political beliefs. The brief history of the private claims for restitution of property and bodily damage they provided in their report, they argued, demonstrated “the dangerous tendencies that still exist, to a great extent, in the public mind, and must convince the most skeptical that real peace, friendship, cordiality, and neighborly sympathy will never have full sway over the hearts of those aggrieved, so long as their wrongs and sufferings remain unredressed.” Though the violence had subsided, and threat to body and property was at a low, the wounds that had opened up earlier in the territorial period still bled in 1859. The commissioners summarized their point in the form of a prophetic warning: “The old fires are liable to be relighted at any moment. Old antipathies will override all political issues, however important.” Though they could not know it, their prediction would be tested within a year of the release of the report, with the dry winds and scorching sun of 1860 bringing to the surface once again the deep divisions among Kansans.

White settlers affected by the violence of Bleeding Kansas were not the only people to petition the federal government for indemnity of their losses of property. In 1860, the chairman of the

53 Ibid., 7.

54 Ibid., 8.
Committee on Indian Affairs, Emerson Etheridge, put forth a bill in the house on behalf of the Shawnee Indians, who, like their new white neighbors, had suffered at the hands of raiders in the mid-1850s. Etheridge was a southern representative, first elected to the Tennessee house in 1845, then quickly elected to the Thirty-third U. S. Congress in 1853, but his policies were not reflective of those held by most southern politicians. Etheridge had voted against the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, and, after supporting a House resolution in 1857 that condemned the repeal of the Missouri Compromise (he was the only southerner to do so), was dubbed a “Southern Black Republican” by Democratic newspapers. In short, much of Etheridge’s political career was bound up in what was happening in Kansas in the 1850s, and his trained eye for the importance of Kansas affairs made him a particularly valuable ally for groups like the Shawnee who had also lived through the tumultuous years of Bleeding Kansas, but had hitherto been ignored.

The bill introduced by Representative Etheridge, *An Act to Provide for Depredations Committed by the Whites upon the Shawnee Indians in Kansas Territory*, was quite short and straightforward. The first section listed the request: $36,711 of federal money should be paid to “certain members of the Shawnee tribe of Indians...for depredations committed on their property by citizens or inhabitants of the United States.” The second gave the justification: the claims should be paid “under the rules and regulations prescribed in [the sixteenth section of] the ‘Act to regulate trade and intercourse with

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Indian tribes, and to preserve peace on the frontiers,” which was most recently revised and passed in 1834.\textsuperscript{56}

Etheridge’s short bill was accompanied by a lengthier report, however, that provided many more details about the offenses against the Shawnee and the justification for federal indemnity. Like the claims by white settlers, many of the complaints by the Shawnee were related to the destruction of their property, especially food. The report argued that Governor Wilson Shannon, “upon calling out a large body of militia to make arrests at Lawrence,” marched his troops through the lands reserved for the Shawnee “and encamped them upon this reserve.” Passing through the reserve was not illegal, but stealing property from Indians certainly was, and Shannon’s men helped themselves to “horses, corn, oats, beef, and other supplies...for which nothing whatever was paid.” The Shawnee did not complain at the time, and the next year saw the same thing happen, “in some instances...cattle were taken without pay by the regular troops.”\textsuperscript{57}

In February 1860, a year after Hoogland, Adams, and Kingman completed their work and submitted their request to Congress, the Shawnee broke their silence on the subject of the destruction of Bleeding Kansas, and “held a council at their council-house.” This council looked very much like the earlier claims commission meetings, with Shawnees looking for indemnity having to take an oath, catalog their losses, and provide “necessary corroborating proof.” Whereas the white settlers requesting indemnity articulated a justification that argued the federal government had a historical and moral duty to protect its citizens, the Shawnee argued on the much firmer ground of federal law.

\textsuperscript{56} An Act to Provide Payment for Depredations Committed by the Whites upon the Shawnee Indians in Kansas Territory, May 9, 1860, U.S. Statutes at Large 12 (1863) 15.

\textsuperscript{57} H. R. Rep. No. 36-320 (1863).
They first argued that the 1834 trade and intercourse act (the most recent in a series of revisions of a 1790 law) clearly protected them against the property destruction that occurred during Bleeding Kansas, citing the 16th section of that act:

That where, in the commission, by a white person, of any crime, offence, or misdemeanor, within the Indian country, the property of any friendly Indian is taken, injured or destroyed, and a conviction is had for such crime, offence, or misdemeanor, the person so convicted shall be sentenced to pay such friendly Indian to whom the property may belong, or whose person may be injured, a sum equal to twice the just value of the property so taken, injured or destroyed. And if such offender shall be unable to pay a sum at least equal to the just value or amount, whatever such payment shall fall short of the same shall be paid out of the treasury of the United States: Provided, That if such offender cannot be apprehended and brought to trial, the amount of such property shall be paid out of the treasury as aforesaid.\(^5\)

The requirement of the Shawnee to identify and bring to trial the perpetrators of the depredations was problematic, especially since the Shawnee had waited nearly half a decade to pursue indemnity. The Commissioner of Indian Affairs recognized this, however, reminding his readers in Congress that “it was impossible for them in most cases to identify the perpetrators, and thus bring them to justice, or attempt to do so, as the 16th section...requires.” He recommended that the legislators simply ignore that provision of the trade and intercourse act and make “an appropriation...sufficient to cover the amount of claims presented.”\(^5\)

The Shawnee, through the words of the Commissioner, also pointed to a treaty between the tribe and the federal government, ratified on May 10, 1854. The 14th article of that treaty made two things clear: first, “the Shawnees acknowledge their dependence on the government of the United

\(^5\) An Act to Regulate Trade and Intercourse with the Indian Tribes, and to Preserve Peace on the Frontiers, 1834, ch. 161, 4 Stat. 729-735.

States;” second, they would “abstain from the commission of depredations,” with the expectation that they would “be protected and...have their rights vindicated” by the federal government. Thus, while the Shawnee request for indemnity mirrored in some ways the white settlers’ request for the same, the Shawnee had to couch their request in the language of dependency, a tactic that would undoubtedly be anathema to the settlers who were engaged in a kind of balancing act where they needed to ask for help but did not want to appear needy or indigent.

Framing the issue of indemnity in terms of dependency worked both ways; the Shawnee saw their dependence upon the federal government as the key factor entitling them to aid, and Etheridge understood the importance of describing the dependent relationship of the Shawnee to Washington in the context of the entire civilizing mission that the federal government had been engaged in since the earliest removals. In his reasoning for why the Shawnee were owed indemnity, Etheridge reminded legislators that the Shawnee were “innocent parties to the troubles in Kansas,” and all reports indicated “that these Indians are peaceable, industrious, civilized, and owners of large personal property, and rapidly advancing in civilization and improvement.” He included excerpts from reports filed by Indian agents who worked with the Shawnee throughout the 1850s, each of which emphasized “the advancement of [the tribe] in agriculture and the arts of civilization,” specifically detailing “their fine houses, their well cultivated crops of corn, wheat, and grass, and not least, nor last, their fine stock.”

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Unlike the earlier series of bills requesting aid for white settlers, the Shawnee depredation requests found a quick acceptance in Congress. Representative Etheridge first introduced the bill on March 21, 1860, the House approved it and passed it on to the Senate on April 16, and the Senate sent it back to the House with two minor amendments on May 2. Less than a week later, on May 5, the Speaker of the House and the Vice President signed the final version of the bill, and four days after that, on May 9, 1860, the bill was enacted.\(^6\) It is unclear how the funds were distributed, if they were even sent to the tribe. Regardless, the direct path the bill took through Congress, compared to the years-long battle over the white settlers’ claims, demonstrates that an appeal to federal law was a much more effective means of securing aid at the federal level. The earlier commissions had made an indirect legal argument, citing broad ideals about the common law understanding of the reciprocal nature of the relationship between government and governed, but they could not point to specific documents that promised them any restitution for crimes committed against them. The Shawnee, on the other hand, not only had a convincing legal reason for requesting aid—holding the United States to its treaty obligations—but also were able to move on an opening provided by the civilizing policy of the federal government. Their lifestyle, particularly their relationship to food and animals, was so fundamentally important to the government, that it only made sense to compensate them for any losses of that property at the hands of troops and marauders in Kansas Territory.

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\(^6\) The legislative history of the Shawnee Depredations Act can be traced in Cong. Globe, 36th Cong., 1st Sess. 78, 1735-36, 1900, 1959 (1860).
Conclusion

Though many men and women went to Kansas in the 1850s in small family groups, or even alone, they also entered into a complex network of relationships that offered them some protection against the often harsh realities of settler life. This network operated on multiple levels, from the very local mutual aid between neighbors, to the sympathetic ears of private citizens throughout the country, to the less sympathetic federal government of the United States. Throughout the 1850s, Kansans faced hardships that resulted in the establishment and growth of these networks. By the 1860s, when the worst drought in Kansas Territory’s short history befall the already struggling settlers and Indian inhabitants, there existed a coherent set of expectations for who would help relieve the sufferings of Kansans. White settlers could look to their neighbors and sympathetic friends across the country, but found it difficult to convince the federal government to assist them, even when they framed their request in terms of the government’s responsibility to ensure the welfare of its citizens, especially those willing to participate in the “experiment” of popular sovereignty. Native Kansans had few outlets to call for help across the nation, and their cries were likely to fall on deaf ears anyway. What they did have, however, was a very strong link to the federal government in the form of treaty relationships, which turned out to be a vital tool for surviving the increasingly chaotic Kansas environment, as Native groups could petition the government not in lofty terms concerning the relationship between a nation and its citizenry, but in the concrete terms of legal agreements between independent groups.

However, one of the most important features of every level of the Kansas aid complex was the influence of the politics of the 1850s. Neighborhoods and towns were established as either pro-slavery
or anti-slavery, and rarely did those with opposing views on that subject live near one another without violence. Newspapers across the country were highly partisan and published appeals for aid only for those who shared their political views. And leaders of the federal government were aware of the political implications their support, or lack thereof, could have. This political element ran through the veins of the Kansas aid complex in the 1850s, but by 1860 the divisive politics surrounding the expansion of slavery had reached a peak. At the same time the rain stopped falling in Kansas, a storm was brewing across the nation; the Kansas settlers of 1860, including both those who had drawn on the Kansas aid complex before as well as those new to the territory, found the increasingly tense political situation dramatically affected the workings of the Kansas aid complex, just at the moment they needed it most.
Chapter 3: Feeding Kansas

“Let not the wailing winds of March be the requiem of the dead who shall have perished for want of your timely aid.”

—Thaddeus Hyatt, The Liberator, September 28, 1860

As farmers in Kansas Territory planted their seeds in the spring of 1860, some also buried their memories of the previous six years. “Bleeding Kansas,” the bout of political violence over the question of whether slavery would be allowed in the territory, was becoming the past, no longer defining the people of Kansas. While denizens of Kansas Territory buried their memories of Bleeding Kansas along with their seeds, they looked forward to reaping what they had sown in both cases: the harvesting of the crops in the summer would yield an abundance of food, and the end of violence would yield a unified, peaceful territory on the path to becoming part of the Union. Unfortunately for Kansans, neither dream would come true. On the one hand, it was nature that conspired against them, withholding the rain that was badly needed for the already dry region. On the other, it was people—politicians, to be precise—who used the drought and subsequent famine for their own ends, ensuring that the people of Kansas would get little respite from the contentious political climate that had led to Bleeding Kansas and was quickly leading to Civil War.
Starving Kansas

“The weather continues dry and warm,” began a short paragraph in the March 31, 1860 issue of the Emporia News, the main weekly newspaper of the small town in central Kansas. “But one light rain has fallen for several months,” it continued, “and yet the prairies are rapidly changing from brown to green, and the forests are putting on their leafy covering.” The paper’s tone was hopeful—the editors had noted the troublesome dry spell over the preceding months, but were convinced that “with a slight shower before long, which it is probable we shall get,” the spring planting of wheat would be ready “considerably in advance of last season.” After all, “no country on the face of the globe is so little affected by drouth as the soil of Kansas.” The paragraph concluded with a message addressed directly to the struggling farmers of the region: “[B]e not disheartened; for if ye sow not upon the waters, ye shall find it after many days.”

Seven weeks later, on May 19, the same paper again mentioned the dry conditions, this time with a significantly different tone. “The excessive drought that has prevailed so extensively throughout Kansas for the last six months, shows no sign of relenting,” the news item read. It lamented the fact that the “slight shower” that was hoped for in the previous article had not come: “A few timely showers would have made the fields, which suffered from the winter frosts, to have regained more than they lost. As it is, the wheat crop must be very light.” The paragraph concluded with two direct and ominous statements: “The grass upon the high prairies is drying up. The prospect

for good crops is not very promising.” Eighty miles northeast in Lawrence, similar reports were being printed. “The entire failure of the wheat crop, owing to the prevailing unprecedented drouth, has cast a shadow of gloom over the farming population of the Territory,” read the May 17 edition of the Lawrence Republican.3

Despite the murmurings in news outlets that crops were failing in Kansas, and settlers were at serious risk of a total loss of their investments in their homes and fields, new emigrants continued to flow into the territory, only to be faced with the hard realities of the dry season. In fact, this particular pattern of Kansas territorial settlement contributed to the problem, as new arrivals were generally the ones most at risk for devastation by the lack of crops, given that the only food they had was that which they carried with them and that which they could buy. On April 1, 1860, F. P. Baker and his wife Orinda arrived in Kansas Territory from their timber farm in Missouri, where they had become fed up with the “anti-Union sentiment which was growing more persistent each day.” For the Bakers, “the trials of those years” in Missouri, “on the timber-cleared farms, had prepared us for the frontier hardships in another State,” but the hardships “which are ordinary to a new country…were intensified by the terrible drouth which came upon the Territory in that year.” Baker recalled in vivid detail the scene in Kansas upon her arrival:

The buffalo-grass was cured on its roots, and afforded some sustenance for stock, but the streams were dry and water from other sources was almost unattainable. The terrible heat burned up every seed that was in the group. Not a drop of rain fell for many long, weary

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months and the earth was literally parched. The eyes of the cattle seemed ready to burst. It was necessary to drive them for miles to get water to cool their parched tongues.⁴

As reports of starvation and destitution reached places like New York and Chicago in the summer of 1860, some in Kansas became frustrated with the way newspaper reporters portrayed the territory. Upon learning that Thaddeus Hyatt, an abolitionist New Yorker who had been involved in assisting early antislavery settlers migrating into Kansas, was headed to Kansas from Washington to investigate the extent and effect of the drought, the Emporia News published a lengthy article condemning those who had been describing Kansas in the national media as desperate for outside help. Mockingly titled “Starvation in Kansas,” the article began by calling out Kansans from Mound City, a small town in Linn County, roughly ninety miles east of Emporia. According to the News, the Mound City citizens who had written to the New York Tribune “that the people of Kansas are about to starve if not relieved” were engaged in “the most approved style of modern beggary.”⁵

Both the content of the Mound City letter and its form troubled the Emporia News. The editors conceded that “Kansas has suffered from a terrible drouth during the past twelve months,” resulting in a “very large proportion of the crop of wheat—both fall and spring—[being] killed,” but countered with the claim that “there is almost enough of last year’s crop left for food, while the growing corn crop, much as it has suffered from the drouth, will far more than supply the home demand for that article.” In short, things were bad, “but, bad as it has been, we never yet have heard anybody speak of starvation as among even the possibilities.” Since starvation was not a possibility in the mind of the

⁴ Baker, “Recollections of Early Days in Kansas.”

⁵ “Starvation in Kansas,” Emporia News, August 18, 1860.
editors, it must have been a particularly odious type of settler who would paint a picture of Kansas that made its citizens seem weak or unable to care for themselves—hence the claim about “modern beggary.” The News set out to correct not only the narrative concerning the condition of the crops, but also of the character of the people of Kansas Territory. “There is really more improvement going on than last year...and the people have paid their taxes with even more promptitude than usual," the article read. “The people are not ‘asking one another what shall we do?’—they are doing—making the best of a bad season and trusting to their own energy and the crops of next season to bring all things around right again. They repudiate, utterly, any such idea as begging for the means of support from their Eastern friends—at least until they are really needy.” Accordingly, the beggars from Cloud City “do not represent the real sentiment of the people of Kansas, and belong to that class who ought to have remained at home tied to the apron strings of their mothers ere they had ventured to do anything in the way of ‘pioneering.’”

To further advance their claim that the drought in Kansas was in no way exceptional or worthy of particular concern or note throughout the nation, the Emporia News followed their lengthy screed against the Mound City “beggars” with printed excerpts of similar conditions in another part of the United States. “For the benefit of croakers at home and abroad, who are filling the air with evil prognostications concerning Kansas,” the introduction read, “we publish the following extracts from Southern papers, showing that dry weather and its effects are being even more seriously felt in the Southern States than here.”

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6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
A report from Savannah, Georgia, was evocative in its description of the climate in that region of the state. The way the writer described the scene in Georgia had much in common with how those in Kansas described what was going on as well. “It is exceedingly dry in this and adjacent counties. The corn crop is almost ruined, and with the most abundant showers for the future, the yield cannot be more than half the average. In some localities, the corn-stalks have fallen down, having first been burnt to a crisp.” Southerners were of course concerned with more than their food crops, and the report from Savannah included the news that “the cotton is doing little—that is, it has ceased in a measure to grow, and is beginning to shed its fruit.” In Fort Smith, Arkansas, the corn crop that had not yet “burnt to a crisp” and “fallen down” was being cut down by farmers whose fields “will not produce one ear of corn.” Those lucky to salvage some of their crop still “[would] not raise corn enough to feed their families till Christmas.” In Texas, “the corn is withered and destroyed, the grass on the prairies is burnt to a crisp, and the stock everywhere is famishing for food and water,” leaving the “prolific and beautiful land” of the country’s largest state “scarcely recognizable.”

Historical evidence in the form of letters and newspaper articles that confirm the existence of a drought in 1860 that covered a large portion of the United States is abundant, but can be further bolstered by tree-ring analysis. The series of wide and narrow rings that can be seen in the lower trunks of temperate forest trees are incredibly revealing to researchers. They not only encode the age of the tree, with different portions of each ring representing the seasonal growth cycle of the tree each year, but can also reveal something about the climatic conditions under which the tree lived. Through careful examination of the width of tree rings, and comparing them to tree ring patterns under known

8 Ibid.
weather conditions, researchers can determine certain historical weather patterns with a great degree of accuracy.\(^9\) Geographers and environmental scientists who have investigated the levels of annual precipitation in Texas and Oklahoma from 1750 to 1980 have shown the nadir of rainfall levels occurred in 1860, precisely when newspapers were reporting on the effects of dry weather on crops in Texas.\(^9\) It is likely, then, that wide swaths of Texas were indeed “scarcely recognizable,” since Texans as far back as the eighteenth century had not seen such an intense dry season as that of 1860.

The basic facts reported by the \textit{Emporia News}—that the Kansas drought was part of a larger pattern of dry weather descending on a large part of the nation—were correct, but the argument that because of that Kansans did not need to worry too much about the drought is puzzling. After all, the very language in the southern newspapers attests to the seriousness of the problem facing agricultural communities throughout the country. “It will be seen that no less than seven Southern States are at this time suffering all the disadvantages of a drouth as severe as that from which Kansas has been partially relieved,” the \textit{Emporia News} concluded, stating with confidence, “There will be no suffering for want of food in Kansas this year, if the people will but properly husband their resources and avoid the ‘panic.”’ It is difficult to see the leap of logic required to say that because the southern states were

\(^9\) A useful introduction to the methodology and history of dendrochronology and dendroclimatology, written primarily for a lay reader, can be found in H. C. Fritts, \textit{Tree Rings and Climate} (London: Academic Press Inc., 1976), 3–10.

experiencing a worse drought (which they were not, on the whole) that Kansans shouldn’t worry about the effects of the drought.”

Curiously, the Emporia News followed up its argument about Kansas’ rosy future with several reports from throughout the territory that generally indicated that despite the writers' confidence in the future, those reporting throughout the territory were not quite as sure about what the future held. A series of rain showers during the first week and a half of August had given some hope to farmer throughout the territory. “The rains which have visited many portions of Kansas during the last ten days, have revived the hopes of our farmers very much,” read one report. “Corn is doing very well, having received a new start from the recent showers,” read another. The coming of the rain even spurred one reporter to suggest that “it is not too late to sow buckwheat,” which, given the turn in the weather, “will yield handsomely.” The editors at the News let another newspaper have the final word, quoting the August 15, 1860 issue of the Leavenworth Times: “There is yet ‘corn in Egypt,’ and the people of Kansas will raise plenty to live on, croakers to the contrary notwithstanding.”

As summer turned into fall, rain remained an infrequent visitor to Kansas, and it became clear that the optimism of observers like the Emporia News and Leavenworth Times was likely misguided. On September 22, the Philadelphia Inquirer ran a lengthy article, mostly reprinting the account of a tour through Anderson County, Kansas by a correspondent for another paper, but also summing up that account in their own evocative language. “The condition of the people in that section,” the Pennsylvania editors wrote, “is distressing in the extreme. The people are returning home at the rate

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11 “Starvation in Kansas.”

12 Ibid.
of two hundred per diem; cabins are deserted, corn fields are scorched, springs and wells dried up, and
altogether, the state of things in that territory is...beyond all precedent, most disheartening.\(^{13}\)

The onset of fall also brought with it a host of medical issues. Of particular concern was
scurvy, a debilitating and often fatal disease caused by malnutrition, specifically a deficiency in
vitamin C. “Our most hideous disease this winter will no doubt be scurvy,” wrote a medical doctor, A.
Venard, to Thaddeus Hyatt in October 1860. “Last year we had none of it, up to last February and
March, which disappeared as soon as vegetables could be obtained for food,” he continued. “But now
it is appearing again, [and] vegetables do not exist.” Fearing “the ravages this coming winter,” Venard
then explained to Hyatt the necessity of “dried fruit of some kind which contains vegetable acid,”
noting that “perhaps dried apples would be the best you could obtain.”\(^{14}\) Unfortunately, Venard’s fears
materialized, with scurvy spreading throughout Kansas in the winter of 1860-61. In January 1861,
William Harrison, a citizen of Chelsea Township, and member of the Butler County relief committee,
wrote to Thaddeus Hyatt telling him that in Butler County they were lucky enough to have stores of
meat to last at least through April, “but no one can live long on meat alone without getting sick.”
Harrison and his family were eating mostly buffalo meat and some corn bread, “yet without
vegetables...myself and [my] family have been all afflicted with sores, which the Dr. says is the
scurvy.” Harrison further reported that “men are more afflicted than women,” and that many men in

\(^{13}\) “The Drouth in the West,” The Philadelphia Inquirer, September 22, 1860.

\(^{14}\) A. Venard, “Letter to Thaddeus Hyatt,” October 3, 1860, Thaddeus Hyatt Collection Box 1 Folder 9, Kansas State Historical Society.
Butler County had “sores over their hands...as big as ½ a dollar.” Like Venard several months before, Harrison’s request to Hyatt was specific: “What the people need is acid fruit to prevent scurvy.”

Some observers of the drought relished the economic opportunity provided by the creation of a starving market. In the summer of 1860, *Harper’s Weekly* published an article entitled “The Prospect in the Future,” which served as a clear announcement of how the natural disaster of drought could be a positive thing for certain groups, namely merchants and farmers (not those farmers *in* droughty areas, of course). “Throughout the Territory of Kansas and the State of Missouri the crops must be very poor...but in the great food-yielding States—New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Northern Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, Michigan, and Minnesota—the yield of both corn and wheat will be very largely in excess of the greatest product ever known.” All those except the ones in Kansas, that is. But the *Harper’s* writer had a plan for them as well: “It is plain too, as well from the drought which has prevailed in Missouri and several Southern States as from the unfavorable crop-reports from Europe, that there will be a fine market for all the food that can be grown in the West.” Thus there were two competing views on the starving settlers in Kansas: for some they were desperate charity cases, to which food and clothing must be sent; for others they were a “fine market” for the overwhelming amount of food being grown around them.

Not everyone who stood to benefit from food sales to Kansas actually did so. In October 1860, C. W. Holder, a man from Bloomington, Illinois, wrote to Colonel James Blood (former mayor of Lawrence) regarding the pending shipment of “2 car loads of Potatoes.” “We have now at the Ware

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15 “Statement of Mr. William Harrison” January 31, 1861, Relief Collection, Box 3 Folder “Butler County,” Kansas State Historical Society.

house more than enough to load 2 cars but from the difficulty in procuring [sic] sacks, we shall not be
able to get them off until Tuesday next," he wrote. “Our people as you are probably aware are just
recovering from the financial pressure of the past 3 years," he wrote, referencing the Panic of 1857 and
the subsequent nation-wide depression, “and though we have but little money, Providence has
blessed us with a bountiful crop,” which they would “gladly share with their suffering brethren in
Kansas.” Despite this generous offering, Holder wanted to make it clear that what he and the generous
settlers in Illinois were engaging in was not charity, but a business deal. “I hope the people of Kansas
will not regard this assistance as a charity but merely as a loan from their more fortunate neighbors
which I am sure will be cheerfully repaid should be ever be in a like situation,” he wrote. 17

Some went slightly further than Holder's implied loan, and attempted to set up mutually
beneficial deals between those needing food in Kansas and those needing stock animals in Illinois. On
August 26, 1860, William Powell of Springfield, Illinois, wrote to James Blood from Bloomington,
Illinois, after “notic[ing] a letter” from Blood to H.B. Hurd (secretary of the National Kansas
Committee in Chicago) requesting help for the “unfortunate settler of Kansas.” “Plenty of the finest
quality of Seed Wheat can be had in this neighborhood for a reasonable price in payment for Stock—
either Cattle or Stock Hogs," he proposed. “Cannot your people exchange Stock Hogs for Wheat to the
mutual advantage of both them and our farmers?” he asked. After all, “If your corn has failed, they can
have nothing to fatten them on, and I suppose would gladly exchange them for our Wheat.” 18 Blood

17 “C. W. Holder to James Blood,” October 27, 1860, James Blood Collection, Box 1, Folder 1, Kansas State Historical Society.

18 Perhaps sensing that Blood would question the intentions of such a blatantly self-centered donation, Powell offered an
interesting character reference, noting that “I take pleasure in refering [sic] you to Mr Lincoln at Springfield...who can vouch for my good faith etc." “W. H. Powell to James Blood,” August 26, 1860, James Blood Collection, Box 1, Folder 1, Kansas State Historical Society.
wrote back to Powell on September 3, and although his response is lost, Powell’s reply to Blood’s letter provides some clue as to how Blood responded to the proposition. “I waited a day at B[loomington] for an answer to my letter, but failing to hear from you as soon as I expected, I came down home, whence your letter followed me,” he said. Noting that only a few days before, he had received a donation of “some $600 to $700” from the Reverend Charles Reynolds of Chicago meant “for the purchase of Seed Wheat,” Powell chided Blood again for not acting quickly on the deal he proposed in his August letter: “It is particularly unfortunate that it could not have been done before, as a large quantity of the best winter wheat has been sold already or been sowed.” Finally, he reminded Blood once more about what he wanted: “If your people will make arrangements to send Stock Hogs or Cattle in exchange for wheat or Corn, I will gladly act as their Agent in exchanging the same without any charge for my services & do the best I can for them.”

Pumpkins proved to be remarkably sturdy in drought conditions and provided many much-needed meals to some settlers. In his history of Nemaha County, written in 1916, Kansan Ralph Tennal recalled how the “the now forgotten and unsung ‘punkin’ was the whole show” in 1860. Tennal relayed a story from J.T. Brady, an early settler, that emphasized the critical importance of the pumpkin to avoiding starvation during the worst months of the drought. Before starting for Pike’s Peak in 1860, Brady and another man decided to plant some crops in the spring of 1860 in Kansas, hoping to come back to a bountiful harvest after a hard summer in the mountains. What they found when they returned in the fall, however, was a scene familiar to many throughout Kansas. “The corn was twisted

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10 “W. H. Powell to James Blood,” September 12, 1860, James Blood Collection, Box 1, Folder 1, Kansas State Historical Society.
like burned bacon,” Brady said. “The bare ground looked as if it had been seared by a furnace. Nothing was raised.” A neighbor, Bierly Job, however, “had a tremendous crop of pumpkins” that had “refused to suffer a like fate. The hotter the weather got, the faster grew the pumpkins.” The huge vegetables “filled the furrows and the vines covered the hills and continued to bring forth more and more.” Those in the area suffering from crop devastation, like Brady and his companion, would come and get “a load of Job’s pumpkins.”

According to Brady, Bierly Job had planted the pumpkins among his corn crop, “as the old fashioned farmers used to do.” On the one hand, it is interesting to note that the original “old fashioned farmers” who pioneered the method of planting corn, squashes, and beans (the “Three Sisters”) together were, of course, Native America. Brady’s implication that this arrangement could have been responsible for the surprisingly growth and proliferation of the pumpkins is evidence of a fundamental understanding of the value of agricultural knowledge, including that gleaned from Native societies who had lengthier histories with the particular crops in question. On the other, it is unlikely that the particular arrangement of plants had anything to do with the success of the pumpkin crop. While the Three Sisters method of planting created a mutually beneficial relationship between all the component plants, those benefits were primarily only noticeable in normal, moist growing conditions, where the plants could trade nitrogen and other chemicals in the soil for maximum mutual benefit. In drought conditions, the benefits of planting corn and squash together were minimal. Both corn and squashes, including pumpkins, are naturally quite drought-resistant, due to their similar root systems, which extend deep into the soil, as well as have extensive horizontal

growth near the surface, allowing for uptake of water from a large portion of soil.\textsuperscript{21} That pumpkins swelled up through the drought while corn shriveled into dry husks seems to be more of a result of chance rather than an outcome of a particular “old fashioned” way of planting the two crops.

Though Bierly Job had the largest supply of pumpkins, others in Nemaha County began growing the vegetables as well. Orinda Baker, a settler from Centralia Township, and her family had also seized on the pumpkin’s ability to survive the dry conditions. “The pumpkins and sweet potatoes were grown on special plots which we could wet down from the well and thus make productive,” she wrote in 1901, reflecting back on her experience during the 1860-61 drought. Baker looked to the pumpkins as a source of comfort, using them to substitute for goods her family could no longer afford to acquire. “Most of the ‘coffee’ was made of dried pumpkins and sweet potatoes,” she wrote, “which we browned like coffee, and when these were boiled together, like coffee, the concoction was a very good substitute.”\textsuperscript{22} In fact, there was not much that the pumpkins of Nemaha County were not used to substitute for. J. T. Brady noted that “pumpkins were served for soup, for meat, and in pie for desserts. That crop made history and saved many a belt from being draw into unaccustomed notches.”\textsuperscript{23}

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\textsuperscript{22} Baker, “Recollections of Early Days in Kansas.”

\textsuperscript{23} Tennal, \textit{History of Nemaha County Kansas}, 277.
\end{flushleft}
The Kansas Relief Network

Relieving suffering Kansans in 1860-61 was a distinctly national affair. Individuals and organized private citizens throughout the country contributed to Kansas relief funds, moved money and goods across the country, and worked to distribute them equitably throughout the territory. This national network was itself political; it was built upon the scaffolding of the earlier emigrant aid societies that had sent settlers to Kansas in the 1850s to secure a future for the territory that was free of slavery. By the time of the drought, however, the New England Emigrant Aid Company had largely considered its mission complete, since the approval of the Wyandotte Constitution in 1859 had secured Kansas's future as a territory (and later state) free of slavery. The Company, however, was still interested in paying dividends to its investors, which required that the land held by the Company itself and its sponsored settlers steadily increase in value. As it became apparent that the drought was a serious one, Company officials worked to create various relief organizations throughout the United States with hopes that they could aid the increasingly destitute settlers of Kansas. Again, the dual nature of the Company was on full display here; their charitable impulse compelled them to help the starving settlers, but it was also a sound business decision, since keeping settlers healthy and happy on productive land was essential to their future profitability. 24

However, the relief effort was not simply a case of political allies helping one another. While the nation-wide relief network largely consisted of anti-slavery and abolitionist activists, it was a fact of settlement that most Kansans were not sent by emigrant aid companies, nor did they have

particularly strong views about the status of slavery in the territory. Many people were in Kansas to make a living, either through land speculation or smaller-scale farming. Those who organized and led the relief effort in 1860-61 were highly political, but a fundamental part of their mission was to distribute aid and help Kansans regardless of party affiliation or political engagement. The New England Kansas Relief Committee, which consisted almost exclusively of deeply-convicted antislavery advocates and abolitionists, insisted that any of their county-level agents responsible for distributing relief goods did so regardless of political alignment of those in need. An instruction broadside sent to county agents was very clear in its language:

You are to regard neither SECT NOR PARTY, SOCIAL POSITION OR COMPLEXION; the true question to be settled is not of what RELIGIOUS CREED OR POLITICAL FAITH are the applicants? not not [sic] are they BOND OR FREE? not are they RED, BLACK OR WHITE? but are they in need of the aid placed at your disposal? and will they make a JUDICIOUS use of the same? and are they without the MEANS to supply their necessities? if so, supply them.²⁵

Though it is impossible to say whether county agents did distribute according to the above principle, there is no evidence to the contrary. None of the extant accounts of distribution of goods include any sort of political test before goods were distributed. Thus, while the impetus for aid was likely a sympathy for free-staters who were starving in Kansas, those in charge of distributing aid did not discriminate based on politics, at least if their policies were upheld.

There were many organizations that emerged in response to the drought and famine of 1860-61—the New England Kansas Relief Committee, the New York Kansas Relief Committee, the Kansas Relief Committee, and others—and together they constituted a powerful but informal network of

²⁵ “New England Kansas Relief Committee Circular” (Lawrence, KS, 1861), Kansas Relief 1860-1861 Collection, Box 9, Folder “Documents concerning New England Kansas Relief - and contributions to relief fund,” Kansas State Historical Society.
relief workers. Despite being so loosely organized, the various committees did have a rough power structure, with Thaddeus Hyatt, William F. M. Arny, and Samuel C. Pomeroy being the de facto leaders of the relief effort. Hyatt was the head of the National Kansas Committee, an off-shoot of sorts of the New England Emigrant Aid Committee, and was immediately deeply involved in building a national relief effort as the drought became a famine in the winter of 1860-61. Both Hyatt and Arny had been involved in the earlier efforts to aid settlers affected by the violence of Bleeding Kansas, with Arny acting as the General Transportation Agent for the National Kansas Committee in the 1850s. Likewise, S. C. Pomeroy was tied to the territory's earlier history through his involvement with the New England Emigrant Aid Company. Together, Hyatt, Arny, and Pomeroy served as the primary points of contact for those interested in once again helping the people of Kansas.

Assuming his role as General Transportation Agent once again, William F. M. Arny became deeply involved in relief efforts after learning that President Buchanan and Congress had no intentions on initiating any larger-scale federal intervention on behalf of Kansans. The first two weeks of November 1860 proved to be incredibly busy for Arny, who, on November 16, returned to Chicago from a short trip into the surrounding states of Indiana and Ohio, where he was able to “effect arrangements with railroads for transportation of articles for relief.”26 Though the Midwestern relief effort was officially headquartered in Chicago, Arny spent most of his time in the small town of Mendota, Illinois, where he was more easily able to handle shipping problems that came up. The work in Mendota was exhausting; throughout the winter Arny personally handled thousands of packages

addressed to Kansas, including barrels of flour, grain both bagged and loose, seeds, and clothing. As Arny's warehouse in Mendota was the last stop manned by a relief agent before the goods were to arrive in Kansas, he was responsible for gathering all of the incoming material and packaging it into parcels appropriately sized for individuals and families in Kansas. Some goods were specifically addressed to particular Kansas towns, or even individual settlers, which further complicated Arny's packaging and shipping operation.27

The sheer amount of relief goods piling up in Chicago, Mendota, and other places along the distribution path forced a new problem on Arny: a lack of bags in which to pack, store, and ship the goods. In 1860 the 30,000 miles of railroad track that covered the country east of the Mississippi could hardly be called a coherent transportation network; only about half of the track shared a standard gauge, and there were only a few bridges that could support rail traffic across many major rivers, including the Mississippi and Missouri.28 Because of this, any goods traveling to Chicago and from there to Kansas had to be moved manually between rail lines and across rivers, in a time and labor intensive manual process known as transshipment. “Transshipment of freights being necessary at the Illinois, Mississippi, and Missouri rivers,” the Chicago Tribune wrote in a front-page article on November 16, 1860, “everything must be sent forward in bags.” According to the Tribune, Arny was sitting on “considerable quantities of grain” and had “exhausted all the means in his possession to

27 An overview of Arny's efforts to organize and distribute relief goods can be found in Lawrence R. Murphy, Frontier Crusader: William F. M. Arny (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1972), 84–98.

purchase sacks and pay freights.” Thus, the call went out: “All persons who can donate GRAIN SACKS, or material to manufacture sacks, are requested to forward the same to W. F. M. Arny, No. 204 Lake street, Chicago.” Arny also offered to forward sacks to other collection sites, though he preferred they handle the issue themselves, asking via the Tribune that “Committees and agents in the States who receive donations of grain...take up subscriptions in their town, to buy sacks to put it in.”

These sacks were to be marked either “W. F. M. Arny” or “S. C. Pomeroy,” depending on their point of departure and their intended destination, but in both cases the sacks reportedly had a lasting legacy in Kansas. In January 1902, reflecting on the years leading up to statehood, a territorial settler named Edwin C. Manning described to attendees of the twenty-sixth annual meeting of the Kansas State Historical Society how by January 1861 “empty, fine-woven manilla sacks, with ‘W. F.’ or ‘Arny’ or ‘Agent’ in sight; and if perchance a Kansas zephyr lifted a faded calico dress, the impertinent eye would see ‘W. F. M. Arny’ staring at the landscape from a sheltering petticoat.” At the same time Manning was describing this, a short book appeared that consisted of several short historical articles that ran in the tiny Onaga Republican newspaper. The book contained recollections of early settlers near Onaga, a small town in northeastern Kansas. One such settler recalled a remarkably similar scene to the one described by Manning, though he certainly lacked Manning's more evocative writing style: “In 1860 aid was distributed among the destitute. This aid consisted of corn, beans, and other things, and was shipped in grain sacks with S. C. Pomeroy’s name on them, as he was the general agent for aid distributed in Kansas. These sacks were afterward made up into pants, and when there was a

29 “The Kansas Famine.”

gathering of men and boys they looked rather picturesque with ‘S. C. Pomeroy’ showing in various parts of their attire.” In 1916 another early settler recalled seeing pants made of the sacks in Chelsea Township, more than 100 miles south of Onaga, in the south-central part of the territory. “Sometimes it would be ‘S. C. Pomeroy’ on one leg, ‘Kansas Relief’ on the other and ‘Atchison’ somewhere else,” he wrote. “A pair of pants worn by ——— Bixler took the cake. He was both broad and tall and on the broadest part of his pants in black letters was ‘Kansas Relief, S. C. Pomeroy, Atchison, Kansas.'”

Arny’s primary responsibility was managing the transportation of relief goods from Chicago to Atchison, where they could be distributed to Kansans. Arny achieved this by using the railroad network that was rapidly developing in the 1850s, and that by 1860 had created a link between Chicago and the Missouri River. Relief goods that made it to Chicago would be labeled and packaged by Arny and his companions, then loaded on a railroad car on the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad. A spur of the CBQ crossed the Mississippi near Quincy, linking up to the Hannibal & St. Joseph Railroad, which ran straight west across Missouri all the way to the bank of the Missouri River in St. Joseph. The car with the relief goods could then take two paths. The least efficient route was to be shuttled along another short spur to the town of Winthrop, south of St. Joseph, and directly across the river from Atchison, Kansas. In the early months of the relief efforts, the goods were ferried across

31 F. F. Crevecoeur, Old Settlers’ Tales: Historical and Biographical Sketches of the Early Settlement and Settlers of Northeastern Pottawatomie and Southwestern Nemaha Counties, Kansas, From Earliest Settlement to the Year 1877. (Onaga, KS, 1902), 84.

32 Martin Vaught, “Chelsea Township,” in History of Butler County, Kansas, ed. Vol. P. Mooney (Lawrence, KS: Standard Publishing Company, 1916), 109. Several more descriptions of these sacks and their importance as clothing in Kansas can be found in Terry Thompson and Barbara Brackman, “Fabric and Conversation Prints,” in Kansas Quilts & Quilters (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 93–105. Unfortunately, if any of these grain sacks have survived into the twenty-first century, they have not been acquired by any public archives. The Kansas State Historical Society keeps a replica of the sacks as part of a teaching kit on the territorial era.
the river to Atchison, where they were accounted for and distributed. In the winter, however, the Missouri was frozen and impassable, necessitating that the goods be hauled manually across the river and stored in a warehouse on the western bank.\textsuperscript{33} The more efficient route, made possible by the completion of the road between St. Joseph and Atchison in September 1860, was to ship goods directly to the relief distribution site there.\textsuperscript{34}

On the ground in Kansas, no one was more important than Samuel C. Pomeroy, who was stationed in Atchison and was responsible for fairly distributing the goods that Arny was shipping across the country. Getting Pomeroy to agree to help had taken some effort by Hyatt and Arny, however. When the two men approached Pomeroy in 1860 and asked him to join them in the effort to collect and distribute relief goods, the speculator and budding politician demurred, telling the two men that from his position in Atchison, on the Missouri River, everything appeared fine. Hyatt and Arny convinced him to at least venture deeper into the territory to get a sense of how other towns were faring, and Pomeroy agreed. After a tour through the territory he changed his mind on the necessity of imminent aid for Kansas, but he still hesitated, citing the political implications of his potential involvement. “You know how everybody who had anything to do with the aid funds for years ago were talked about,” he told Hyatt, referring to the accusations that those involved in the early emigrant aid companies’ activities had used their position to advance themselves politically and materially. “You know, too,” he continued, “that I mean to be a candidate for the United States senate. If any money is raised for these people here, and you mix me up in it, it will kill my political prospects."


They will accuse me of stealing the relief funds.” Despite this risk, which would turn out to be accurate, Pomeroy did agree to work on behalf of hungry Kansans, telling Thaddeus Hyatt, “I’m going into this work with you, if there should be any need for it whatever may become of the Senatorship!” With that, Pomeroy established his relief distribution depot in Atchison, and began handing out supplies as quickly as he was receiving them.

Atchison was an ideal location for distributing relief good because it was close not only to Missouri River, where the railroad from the East ended, but also very early established itself as a frontier depot; settlers looking to begin or continue a journey west, either to the Rockies or beyond, found Atchison, as early as 1858, a convenient point at which they could acquire the necessary goods for their overland journey. By early 1860 the town was constantly bustling with activity, as the many roads into the town had been improved by town boosters, and many of the streams that might have had to have been forded were equipped with bridges, making travel in and out of Atchison extremely efficient. During the winter of 1860-61, Kansans took advantage of this lattice of trails, paths, and bridges that covered the territory, but this time pointed their wagons and teams east, hoping to reach the aid supply depots in the northeastern part of the territory. Despite the relatively developed network of paths and roads leading to Atchison, it remained and arduous journey, especially for those

35 Pomeroy would indeed go on to be the first U.S. Senator from Kansas, serving in that position from the state’s admission into the Union in 1861 until 1873, when he left office deeply mired in a scandal involving his alleged bribery of a Kansas state senator to vote for Pomeroy’s reelection. Pomeroy’s quote is related by Hyatt in “Kansas Famine Fund of 1860-61: A Letter to the Hon. E. G. Ross, Editor of ‘Ross’s Paper,’” printed for private circulation by Chiswick Press, London, (February 10, 1872), Harvard College Library; A brief summary of the Hyatt pamphlet, which was written as a defense of the character of Pomeroy as he was facing accusations of corruption and bribery, is available in Glick, “The Drought of 1860,” 482, note 6.

deeper into the territory. John Roberts, a farmer from Butler County, roughly 140 miles from Atchison, made the trip to that town in late October, arriving on November 5 with nothing but his wagon, two yoke of oxen, and $40 he made from selling his stock before leaving his county (Figure 3.1). On arrival in Atchison, needy settlers crowded the offices of the Freedom’s Champion, the Atchison-based newspaper, which had become the central depot for relief goods (Figure 3.2). There they waited for whatever aid they could get, crowding the streets with their wagons and teams (Figure

Figure 3.1 “Famine in Kansas.—Team Struggling through the Snow” New-York Illustrated News, February 23, 1861.

37 Samuel Clarke Pomeroy to Thaddeus Hyatt, November 5, 1860, Thaddeus Hyatt Collection (microfilm edition), Kansas State Historical Society.
Pomeroy was commonly faced with dozens of people asking for aid, and sometimes only had enough on hand to distribute a small amount to each person, but maintained an even temper and tried to be equitable in his distribution.\(^3\) A correspondent for the *New York Times* vividly described the scene in Atchison, a sight that moved him to beg his readers to continue to send aid:

“The scenes at this office baffle all description. To see stout-hearted men shed tears over their inability to help those they have left behind, caring nothing for themselves is a sight of noble tenderness and independence which way well challenge a parallel anywhere else on the American Content. Help them!” The correspondent also wrote of “two poor women” who arrived in Atchison “in quest of clothing” They had walked ten miles, “having traveled through the deep snow” only to find out that the depot was out of clothing.\(^3\) On the whole, however, Pomeroy was able to distribute aid to most who needed it, even if it was only in small amounts. He was also able to forward some seed and supplies to locations deeper into the interior of Kansas, in hopes of shortening the trip that Kansans in the southern and western extremes of the territory would have to make.\(^4\)

\(^3\) Glick, “The Drought of 1860.”


\(^4\) Glick, “The Drought of 1860.”
Figure 3.2 "The City of Atchison, Kansas" The New-York Illustrated News, March 30, 1861.
Figure 3.3 "Scene in Atchison, at the Office of the Kansas Relief Committee. Destitute Citizens Waiting for the Supplies" New-York Illustrated News, January 12, 1861.
Some Kansans were worried that the efforts of Hyatt, Arny, and Pomeroy to reach out to sympathetic people in others states would not be enough to curb the hunger and desperation that were slowly spreading over the territory. George Porter Paine, a Kansan from Neosho Falls, located on “part of the land known as the New York Indian Lands,” wrote to The Liberator in early December 1860 to plead on behalf of the destitute in his area. “[N]o agent of the Aid Society now seeking relief for Kansas has visited our county to ascertain the wants of our inhabitants,” he wrote. This was not an indictment of Hyatt and the relief agents, however. “[W]e sanction and approve of the action of Mr. Hyatt and others in relation to the needs of Kansas,” Paine wrote, “yet we believe that the scale upon which they are acting is so large that many of the most needy will escape their notice.” Those that were farthest from the primary relief depot in Atchison, or in isolated regions of the territory that
were difficult to travel through would be most at risk of being overlooked. “[S]mall places, like ours, will hardly feel any effect” of Hyatt’s relief efforts, Paine wrote.

The citizens of towns like Neosho Falls, which were either too far from the relief depots or too small for Hyatt and others to focus their attention on, did not just depend on direct appeals to newspapers, like the one George Porter Paine sent to The Liberator. Paine and other community leaders knew that piggy-backing on the already overextended relief network orchestrated by Hyatt would be difficult, so they took matters into their own hands, creating a smaller sub-network. Paine and the citizens of Woodson County had resolved in a November meeting to send their own agent, James Crane, “to go East and solicit contributions of provisions, clothing and money.” The speed at which Crane had to work to effectively collect and ship relief goods to Woodson County necessitated the assistance of others, and friends of The Liberator were willing to step in. Crane was to visit Boston in December, but would “not have time to remain to solicit contributions,” Paine told the readers of The Liberator. Instead, R. F. Wallcut, a Boston publisher and close associate of Liberator editor William Lloyd Garrison, agreed to “receive, at the office of the Liberator, donations of all kinds to await Mr. Crane’s arrival.”

Another hurdle that Hyatt, Pomeroy, Arny, and others had to overcome was a sense of skepticism of some throughout the country as to severity of the drought or the necessity of external aid. From the historian’s vantage point, there is an overwhelming amount of evidence to support the claim that at a minimum there was a drought bad enough to necessitate aid from whatever sources


42 Ibid.
were willing to part with their money and goods. Kansans were undeniably starving; there are too many independent reports to think otherwise. However, contemporaries did not have the benefit of searching dozens of newspapers or digging through archival materials to confirm or deny what they were hearing about Kansas; rather, they depended on their own more myopic sources of information, generally a local newspaper, which would print not only local news but news from throughout the country and abroad as well. Because of this dependence on a relatively small amount of informative materials, there were cases where the lack of reporting on the effects of the drought at the very local level was read as evidence of its benignity.

On December 13, 1860, as Kansans were getting deeper into winter, when it was becoming increasingly clear to concerned observers like Thaddeus Hyatt that the drought of the previous few months was quickly slipping into a famine, the Kansas Chief, a newspaper from the town of White Cloud published a missive titled “On the Aid Question.” By the time they published this, relief efforts were well underway, and the Chief had caught wind of the fact that some people in Germantown, Ohio, were refusing to donate money or goods to Kansans “under the plea that they do not believe the reports of suffering out here, because they have seen nothing of the kind in the Chief.” The Chief responded with its own incredulity: “Had we known that so much depended on what the Chief said, we would have taken especial pains to copy the numerous reports of destitution which we found in our Kansas exchanges.” In short, the Chief was outing the deniers of the Kansas famine and turning their own weak excuse for inaction against them.43

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In their address to the skeptical residents of Germantown, the editors of the *Chief* explained how they primarily traded in news that affected those who lived in and near White Cloud, and looked to correct the too-narrow view of the situation in Kansas that the Ohioans had held based on apparently only reading that single Kansas newspaper. “The reason why we did not, from the beginning, publish long details of destitution, was that they were chiefly confined to the localities far distant, and did not come under our personal observation,” the editors wrote. They explained to readers that they were “inclined to wait until the stern reality presents itself in an unmistakable form” before publishing, wanting to avoid any sensationalist articles. By mid-December, however, the suffering in Kansas was sensational enough to warrant a clear declaration from the conservative editors: “We now say, distinctly, that thousands in Kansas are suffering for the necessaries of life...and need all that can be raised for them.”

Ohioans and other outside observers could hardly be blamed for their confusion, however, because while some papers like the *Chief* remained silent on the issue of drought and famine until deep into winter, others, early on, directly attacked outsiders who claimed to be witnessing the beginning of a potential catastrophe. When the Pittsburgh *Dispatch* reported on the drought in Kansas in October 1860, describing the “awful” extent of the dry conditions, one Kansan wrote to the paper, annoyed that “the Pennsylvania newspapers can inform us of matters that exist in our own rude tenements about which we know nothing.” The Kansan, from Riley County, noted that it was “true that the crops are a partial failure,” but bristled at the *Dispatch*’s implication that Kansas was emptying out because of the unrelenting hot, dry weather. “It is true that some new comers have gone

\[44\] Ibid.
to the States to winter their cattle,” the Kansan wrote, “but all whom I have seen said they would return next spring. They did not see the last rains, which have brought on the grass, there being more hay put up this year than I ever knew before.”\(^45\) While rebukes like this made some observers question the actual extent of the drought, others provided a simple, and ultimately convincing, argument for why reports varied. Only a few days after the letter denying the famine appeared in Pennsylvania papers, the \textit{New York Times} printed a lengthy article describing what its Kansas correspondents had seen in the region, and briefly explained why some in Kansas denied the drought while others cried out in starvation. “The discrepancy between the accounts received from the Territory itself as to the state of affairs there, is easily enough accounted for,” the writers said. “There are counties in the eastern section that are not in want,” having been “blessed with occasional showers” that allowed “partial crops [to be] raised.” Beyond those pockets, however, “all crops have proved an entire failure.”\(^46\) The \textit{New York Times} was unwilling to let the lucky few who had received a few showers or had access to stores of crops speak for the masses of Kansans who were at risk of starving if their pleas were not heard and given serious consideration.

Despite being overwhelmingly busy in the winter, Hyatt and other agents did find time to reflect on the historical place of their efforts to obtain relief for the suffering, and in doing so attempted to blend historical precedent and nationalist politics in such a way as to induce people to make donations. “Ye, who sent your cargoes of flour to the Greeks in 1828, and filled the holds of your vessels with corn for the Irish in 1847, will not allow us to \textsc{starve},” read a broadside written by the

\(^{45}\) The letter to the Pittsburgh Dispatch is reprinted in “The Kansas Famine Denied,” \textit{The Philadelphia Inquirer}, October 29, 1860.

prominent Kansan Marcus J. Parrot in December 1860, “because we are your own children, and living on a part of your own fair heritage.”\textsuperscript{47} Essentially, the relief agents sought to remind Americans that they were historically a generous, giving people, and that there was no reason why that generosity should not extend to their fellow Americans. This message likely would have been particularly resonant with those in the east, who on the whole supported the Union and the idea of a strong, united nation. After all, if the bond between the states was not strong enough to support cross-state relief efforts, if men in Cincinnati or New York could not sympathize with Kansans in the same manner they did Greeks or the Irish, how could they ever expect their ideas to hold up? None of this was explicitly stated in the broadside, but given the circumstances, and the deep political involvement of its primary author,\textsuperscript{48} it is at least plausible that this was the line of argument that was being implied.

Further, the historical argument represented by the Parrott appeal had embedded in it a wealth of assumptions and expectations about the role the federal government should play in relief efforts, drawn primarily from the way the government had and had not responded to crises outside of the United States. The reference to the Greek War of Independence is particularly important, as that event had triggered a brief debate in the House of Representatives about the historical role of the


\textsuperscript{48} Parrott was the delegate to Congress for Kansas Territory from March 1857 until its admission to the Union in 1861. He was deeply involved in both territorial and national politics, running unsuccessfully for a U. S. Senate seat in 1861. For more, see Kristina Gaylord, “Marcus J. Parrott,” Kansapedia, May 2012, https://www.kshs.org/kansapedia/marcus-j-parrott/16918.
United States government in aiding the destitute throughout the world, one of the earliest of a string of debates that could continue throughout the nineteenth century.

The Greek War of Independence was sparked in 1821 by revolts throughout the Peloponnese, and lasted through 1828, when the Greeks, along with key European allies, drove the Turks out of the peninsula, freeing the Greeks from nearly four hundred years of Ottoman rule. While both sides committed innumerable acts of violence against the other, ensuring that no population of the Peloponnese was spared the horrors of war, American observers took particular interest in the plight of Greek Christians dying at the hands of Ottomans. Edward Livingston, who would become Secretary of State in the Andrew Jackson administration, was in 1827 a congressman representing Louisiana, and was one such observer. On January 2, 1827, he proposed to his colleagues a bill that would appropriate $50,000 “for the suffering inhabitants of Greece.” Livingston immediately noted that such an “act of general charity” was “not forbidden by our Constitution.” The constitutional question, he argued, had been settled many times over in the past. “The inhabitants of St. Domingo, driven from their country by a destructive insurrection, took refuge here, were hospitably received by our citizens, and generously supported from the National Treasury,” he argued. Likewise, he pointed towards federal aid to Cuban exiles as evidence of a historical precedent for humanitarian intervention in conflicts that did not directly involve the United States.49


50 For Livingston’s discussion of the Greek Revolution see 4 Annals of Cong. 170 (1794). There were two main reasons for American interest in the Greek War of Independence. First, the legacy of the American Revolution led many Americans to support similar revolutions throughout the world, the most obvious of which was the French Revolution. The war in Greece that broke out in 1821 was of particular interest to Americans because it pitted Christian Greeks against Muslim Turks who had ruled the region since the fall of Constantinople in 1453. The second reason Americans supported the Greek Revolution was their general interest in ancient Greek political culture, particularly its focus on democracy and liberty.
Livingston’s choice of requesting $50,000 was not an arbitrary decision, but rather another appeal to precedent. Embedded in the number was a reference to a previous act of benevolence on behalf of the federal government, which Livingston made explicit reference to in his address to Congress. In March 1812, a massive earthquake leveled Caracas, Venezuela, which was at the center of newly-started efforts to secure independence from Spain. The earthquake nearly completely destroyed the city and killed more than 10,000 people. President James Madison appropriate $50,000 for relief supplies to be sent to suffering Venezuelans. Despite the United States being actively engaged in hostilities with the Spanish in East Florida and the Spanish being allies of Great Britain, whom Madison and Congress had just declared war on, supplies were sent to hungry and desperate citizens in Caracas. “Spain never complained that this was a breach of neutrality,” Livingston argued, and “the nations of Europe never considered it as an act inconsistent with the laws of nations.”

Madison’s contribution to the relief of Venezuelans was likely not simply out of the goodness of his heart. After all, this was the same person who, as a Congressman in 1794, opposed any aid to French emigrants from Saint-Domingue because it might set “a dangerous precedent.” “He acknowledged,” wrote on Congressional reporter, “that he could not undertake to lay his finger on that article in the Federal Constitution which granted a right to Congress of expending, on objects of benevolence, the

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51 3 Reg. Deb. 577–580 (1827); Margaret M. Mulrooney, ed., Fleeing the Famine: North America and Irish Refugees, 1845–1851 (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 49.
money of their constituents. In 1812 Madison still would have been unable to find constitutional justification for foreign aid, but the political climate of the period made him far more receptive to the idea.

In addition to his mentioning of the Greek War of Independence, with its implied critique of the federal government’s seemingly incoherent policy on humanitarian relief, Marcus J. Parrott’s plea included a reminder about the good work done by private American citizens in 1847, when millions of people in Ireland were starving due to a combination of the widespread potato blight and an oppressive political and economic relationship with England. Parrott’s request was a reminder about how generous Americans could pick up the slack when the government failed to provide relief to the destitute. After all, more than $500,000 in relief goods was sent to the Society of Friends in Dublin throughout the late 1840s, when the Irish were suffering from starvation and dislocation, all of which came directly from private sources, as the U. S. government had developed a policy that specifically sought not to aid the Irish, a fact that Parrott’s sympathetic readers would remember.

Because it was closest in time to the settlement of Kansas and the drought and famine of 1860–61, the response—or lack thereof—of the U. S. federal government to the Great Hunger in Ireland would have immediately resonated with Parrott’s intended audience of generous citizens in America, who had just seen their government’s response to aiding a starving population. In 1846 President James Polk, as well as then Secretary of State James Buchanan, were persuaded by George Bancroft, the U. S. minister to London at the time, to consider the economic and political benefits that

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52 4 Annals of Cong. 170 (1794).

would come from maintaining a hands-off approach to the situation in Ireland. Bancroft argued that the potato blight in Ireland would necessarily drive up demand for American corn, which would obviously lead to increased prices and thus commercial expansion, and less obviously lead to political supremacy over Britain, which would become dependent on American foodstuffs and thus weakened in the broader political competition between the two nations. The appeals for famine relief that emerged in both the House of Representatives and the Senate in 1847, which proposed the distribution of $500,000 to aid the Irish, either died in committee or withered away under the threat of veto by President Polk, who, despite personal sympathy for the Irish, maintained that such relief would be unconstitutional. Polk was mindful of the politics of the situation, however, and was careful not to risk the future political support of the increasing number of Irish immigrants in the country—in his communications with Congressmen about the relief bills, he continually reminded them that he was personally sympathetic, but ultimately his hands were tied by the Constitution, an argument that foreshadowed the one to be used by James Buchanan in 1861 when faced with the reality of famine in Kansas. Ultimately, as historian Timothy J. Sarbaugh puts it, “economic opportunism and a laissez-faire interpretation of the constitution were the key components in shaping the American government’s official response to the famine in Ireland.”

If white settlers looking to the federal government for aid during the 1860–61 drought were confused by the varied responses of Washington to suffering outside the borders of the country, the

54 This summary of the U. S. response to the famine in Ireland is drawn from Mary E. Daly, “The Operations of Famine Relief, 1845–47,” in The Great Irish Famine, ed. Cathal Póirtéir, The Thomas Davis Lecture Series (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1993), 123–34; Mulrooney, Fleeing the Famine; Sarbaugh, “Charity Begins at Home.”

55 Sarbaugh, “Charity Begins at Home,” 35.
response to Native inhabitants within the borders was more straightforward, though probably frustrating. A month before Marcus J. Parrott submitted his appeal on behalf of white settlers, drawing on the lengthy history of federal response to disasters, Commissioner of Indian Affairs A. B. Greenwood submitted his office’s annual report to the Secretary of the Interior, Jacob Thompson.

Greenwood’s report, dated November 30, 1860, vacillated between an optimistic outlook for tribes like the Creek, who were described as “peaceable and steadily advancing in agriculture,” and deep concern for tribes like the Choctaw, who were suffering from “the unprecedented heat and long continued drought of the last summer, which caused almost a total failure of their crops.”

Because the “general and excessive drought the past season has been most severely felt throughout the extent of the southern superintendency,” which included the lands in the unorganized Indian Territory south of Kansas, in what is now Oklahoma, Greenwood implored the Secretary of the Interior to convince Congress “to furnish food to supply their wants for another year, and thus avert the dangers of famine with which they are now threatened.” His request was straightforward: “To prevent starvation among the suffering Indians during the approaching winter the assistance of government should be rendered; and I have the honor to suggest that a recommendation be made to Congress at an early day for an appropriation sufficient to meet their immediate and pressing demands, and to supply them with food to relieve their future wants.”

Because the drought had “utterly destroyed crops which in the spring of the year indicated a most abundant harvest,” the Choctaw themselves could shoulder no blame for their predicament,

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57 Ibid.
according to Greenwood, who couched his appeal for aid for the Choctaw in terms of the government's continuing “civilizing” mission. “Loss of their crops from any cause cannot reasonably be anticipated by Indians,” he wrote, “and as many of the tribes depend for a subsistence entirely upon the products of their labor in the cultivation of the soil, a total failure to realize any return for their toil soon reduces them to a condition of comparative if not absolute poverty.” If the United States was serious about shaping its Native population into farmers and Christians, as the Jeffersonian ideal that dictated the period's Indian policy demanded, then Greenwood believed it was the responsibility of the federal government to ensure that one bad harvest did not unravel the entire mission. Greenwood was obliquely suggesting to Congress that their failure to act would be inconsistent with the overall aims of their Indian policy.

Greenwood’s report resembled Marcus J. Parrott's report about white settlers in Kansas in that it made an appeal to historical precedent in order to strengthen his request for aid for some of the Indian groups who fell under his purview. Greenwood gave two specific examples of times when the federal government had appropriated funds in order to keep Indians from starving: first, an Indian appropriations bill that was approved on May 31, 1832, which granted the Secretary of War $5,000 to buy corn and other goods, and deliver them to hungry Seminoles suffering from a drought that occurred that year; and second, a bill passed six years later, on July 7, 1838, that appropriated a much greater sum—$150,000—to the Secretary of War, to be used “for the purpose of affording temporary subsistence to such Indians west of the Mississippi, as, by reason of their emigration, or the territorial

58 Ibid.

arrangements incident to the policy of setting apart a portion of the public domain west of the Mississippi, for the residence of all the tribes residing east of that river, were unable to subsist themselves. Greenwood suggested that the case for helping the Choctaw in 1860 was even stronger than the one that led to the 1838 appropriation, arguing that the “applicability of this latter precedent is obviously strengthened by the fact that the reasons which induced that appropriation in the absence of any allegation of the failure of crops or scarcity of provisions, are not so forcible as those now suggested by the indigent and suffering condition” of the Choctaw. After all, the Choctaw had “made reasonable efforts to secure the ordinary means of subsistence,” but had their “prospects…blasted by an agency beyond their control.”

The Choctaw, though starving and facing a potentially devastating winter of hunger and distress, did find the time and energy to formulate their own appeal to the federal government, and they chose to engage Washington on its own terms, couching their request for aid in both the language of Washington’s “civilizing” policy and its legal responsibilities as outlined in earlier treaties. “In consequence of the unprecedented heat and long continued drought of the last summer, which caused almost a total failure of their crops,” Greenwood wrote in his report, “a bill to provide for indigent Choctaws, and for other purposes, was passed by the general council of their nation.” Faced with “the horrors of famine with which they are menaced,” Choctaw leaders had gathered to devise a

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60 The quoted passage is from Greenwood’s report addressed to the Secretary of the Interior, Jacob Thompson, which can be found in Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, November 30, 1860 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1860), 11–27; The bill in question is An Act Making Appropriations for the Current and Contingent Expenses of the Indian Department, and for Fulfilling Treaty Stipulations with the Various Indian Tribes, for the Year One Thousand Eight Hundred and Thirty-Eight, U.S. Statutes at Large 5 (1856): 298–301.

61 Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, November 30, 1860, 27.
way to bring relief to the hungry members of their tribe. By January 1861 the representatives of the Choctaw Nation had formalized their request for aid, and presented it to the U.S. Senate.

In their address to Congress, Peter Folsom, the President of the Senate of the Choctaw Nation, and William Roebuck, the Speaker of the House of the same government, crafted a carefully balanced appeal, simultaneously painting a picture of destitution while maintaining the image of the Choctaw as active participants in the agricultural lifestyle that defined the U.S. government’s Indian policy. “Almost daily the homes of those of our citizens who have been somewhat more favored, and enabled to raise a small surplus of corn, are besieged by families of poor starving women and children who are without a morsel of bread,” the leaders wrote. “If such be the condition of the indigent now, at harvest time,” they continued, “can you picture yourselves what will be their condition during the coming winter?” Knowing that an image of starving women and children could be read uncharitably by outside observers, who might blame their predicament on some inherent laziness, the two Choctaw men headed off the potential criticism, noting that the Choctaw were not “paupers or mendicants, but a loyal and industrious people.” It was “the intervention of providential causes” that kept the Choctaw from “producing a sufficiency of the staff of life,” not “any want of industry on part of the people.” These claims mirrored those made by white settlers suffering from the drought, but the Choctaw were engaged in a larger discussion, where the appearance of “industriousness” was paramount for convincing the government that the tribe was upholding its end up a bargain struck with Washington.

62 Ibid., 18.

63 U.S. Congress, Senate, Memorial of the Choctaw Nation of Indians, In General Council Assembled, Praying the Payment of the Amount Due the Choctaws under the Treaty of June, 1855, 36th Cong., 2d sess., 1861, S. Misc. Doc. 9.
The Choctaw were able to strengthen their appeal for federal relief by directly referencing the agreement reached between themselves and the U.S. government in an earlier treaty, a tactic that was available only to them, not white settlers, as the Choctaw were approaching the Senate not as needy American citizens, but as a sovereign people insisting that another government honor its promises. “Under these appalling and distressing circumstances,” the Choctaw representatives told the U.S. Senate, “we have a right to call upon your honorable body to speedily appropriate the necessary amount to pay the Choctaw people the debt which, under the award of the Senate of the United States, made in accordance with the stipulations contained in the treaty of June, 1855, has been ascertained to be due them.” The 1855 treaty in question was one in a string of nineteenth-century treaties between the Choctaw and the United States regarding payment for the lands and livestock the tribe ceded during their removal from Mississippi to the Indian Territory. By 1855 debates between the two groups had become intense, and the two parties agreed in a treaty to refer the questions of appropriate payment to the U.S. Senate, who would make a final decision on what would be an equitable payment. In 1859, the Senate finally came to the conclusion that the Choctaw were owed nearly $3 billion. A year later, the Choctaw leaders, watching many in their communities become increasingly hungry and desperate, looked to the Senate to begin actually paying out part of that award. “All we ask is that you discharge the amount guarantied to us by your own solemn covenant and treaty stipulation,” they wrote, suggesting that the only rational course of action, if the

64 Ibid.

government was acting in good faith, would be to uphold the stipulations of the treaty and to do so quickly.66

The argument of the Choctaw leaders was effective; several months after their address to the Senate, Congress paid from the award fund $250,000 in cash and another $250,000 in bonds. Unfortunately for starving Choctaws, the start of the Civil War coincided with the approval of funds, and the money set aside from famine relief by the Choctaw General Council was quickly used to cover other costs. Further, the same Choctaw leaders who had told U.S. Senators only a few months before that they had “been taught to look upon and feel towards the government of the United States that it was their friend and guardian,” decided that the best course of action for their tribe would be to align themselves with the Confederacy, which immediately put a stop to the $250,000 in bonds that were about to be delivered to the tribe.67 Thus, hungry Choctaws likely remained so, but their engagement with the federal government during the drought demonstrated how effective having a legal link to federal policy could be in securing relief from famine.

In addition to their direct appeals to the federal government, some Native groups also tried to tap into the nation-wide network of newspapers that was covering the story in Kansas. It is not clear how many times Native writers penned appeals to newspapers, but at least one example survives that shows how such messages were received and understood by sympathetic newspapermen. In February 1861, an article appeared in the Chicago Tribune entitled “Famine Among the Indians.” In it, the writer quoted the “eloquent and sad appeal of the Chief of the Pottawatomie Indians in Kansas, for help to

66 U.S. Congress, Senate, Memorial of the Choctaw Nation of Indians, In General Council Assembled, Praying the Payment of the Amount Due the Choctaws under the Treaty of June, 1855, 36th Cong., 2d sess., 1861, S. Misc. Doc. 9.

67 Ibid.; Debo, The Rise and Fall of the Choctaw Republic, 74.
save his tribe from starvation, which read simply: “If you will help us we will live; if not we shall die.”

The writer also noted that “not only the Pottawatomies, but the Ottawas, Osages, Sacs and Foxes, Kaws, and a branch of the Chippewa tribe are in a state of destitution bordering on famine,” and that “two members of the [Potawatomi] tribe have already perished from hunger.” Interestingly, the quote from the “Chief of the Pottawatomie Indians” was attributed to “the venerable Lassomboni” and the writer claimed that Lassomboni’s “wigwam once stood on the spot where Chicago is now built.” It is difficult to say for certain what intentions the writer had with including this line, but it seems likely that he was making an implicit argument that Chicagoans in particular had a responsibility to send help to the very people whose land their city was built on. If the writer only indirectly commented on the moral obligations of Chicagoans, he took a more direct approach in his proposals of practical action that needed to be taken, returning to that source of relief that seemed most appropriate in the case of feeding starving Indians: “It is the duty of the General Government to take prompt action for the relief of the tribes before the adjournment of Congress.”68 The appeal on behalf of the Pottawatomie from the Chicago newspaper did not appear to hold as much weight as direct petitions to Congress holding them to treaty agreements, and in the absence of any direct requests for early annuity payments per treaty stipulations, the plight of Lassomboni and his people did not trigger any action from the federal government.

Ultimately, when it came to keeping Kansas fed in 1860-61, the federal government had failed all of those who lived within its borders. White settlers in particular came to depend on the aid of private citizens throughout the country, whom they reached primarily through printed appeals in

68 “Famine Among the Indians,” Chicago Tribune 22 February 1861.
newspapers across the nation, and even those Native groups who were able to use their unique legal relationship with the federal government to compel it to move on the issue found themselves shortchanged. A relief network built by enterprising politicians and philanthropists proved adequate for preventing mass starvation among Kansans. But the work of the organizers faced its biggest challenge in October through December of 1860, when President Buchanan issued a proclamation that he would be opening up the New York Indian Reserve, a valuable tract of land favored by thousands of squatters in Kansas (and legally belonging to a diverse group of Native peoples), for public sale. This event would force the white settlers, who until then had depended on private sources of aid, to engage with the federal government over the thorny issue of its responsibilities toward its citizens, especially those in organized territories that could not look to state governments for aid.
Chapter 4: “Buchananism” & The Politics of Hunger, 1854–1861

Concurrent with the increasing hunger spreading across Kansas, and the efforts of the emerging relief network to relieve it, there emerged a new problem centered on the land policies of the Buchanan administration. On August 21, 1860, President Buchanan issued a proclamation that ordered the opening to public sale of the lands in the New York Indian Reserve, the large, valuable reserve ostensibly set aside for members of the Haudenosaunee (also known as the Iroquois or Six Nations) in a series of earlier treaties, but home to thousands of white Kansans who were squatting on the land illegally. Buchanan's succinct proclamation declared that the land office in Fort Scott, Kansas Territory, would be handling the sales, and would be doing so on two specific days. On the third and seventeenth of December, buyers interested in those public lands “not covered by individual Indian locations” that were located within Bourbon, Allen, Woodson, Greenwood, and Butler counties could make the trip to Fort Scott to secure a holding through the process of preemption, which was a convoluted and messy process for acquiring legal title to the lands of the west.¹

Thaddeus Hyatt, who had been carefully observing the situation in Kansas and reaching out to philanthropists and other citizens through newspapers and private letters, recognized that the opening of the New York Indian Reserve would be devastating for at least 5,000 drought-stricken men and women in Kansas, who were squatting on the New York Indian Reserve and whose general state of impoverishment due to the failed crops would prevent many from being able to preempt the lands they had begun improving.² On October 15, 1860, Hyatt dramatically expanded the scope of his appeals by speaking directly to the president of the United States. A letter drafted the next day indicates some of what was discussed in the meeting between the two men. In the letter, Hyatt described to President Buchanan “the deplorable and starving condition of that scorched and famine-stricken land” and “implore[d] of the Executive, as an act of clemency in behalf of its suffering inhabitants, that all Government lands now offered for sale in that Territory may be witheld [sic] from market, and more especially those lands embraced in what is known as the New York Indian Reserve.” In the letter, Hyatt tried two different methods to get Buchanan to consider stopping the land sales. First is a simple appeal to his emotions, of the type that appeared in newspapers throughout the summer. “You need be informed, sir, of but half the desolations and heart-rending scenes I have witnessed among the heroic and industrious, but unfortunate people, to arouse your utmost sympathies,” Hyatt wrote. He continued by describing some of those “heart-rending scenes,” noting that “[s]ome have already died, others are daily dying; while the hours grow darker and the days wax

longer for the living to whom relief comes not, and whose eyes are aching with watching for the succor that delays.\(^3\)

Going straight to Buchanan, instead of attempting to obtain relief from Congress, is evidence of Hyatt’s understanding of the realities and complexities of the Kansas’s territorial status and how it was linked to the federal government. The territorial clause of the constitution, Article IV, section 3, clause 2, gave the legislative branch plenary power over the territories of the United States. It is quite clear in this: “The Congress shall have Power to dispose of and make all needful Rules and Regulations respecting the Territory or other Property belonging to the United States.”\(^4\) While this generally held true with matters related to Kansas—it was, after all, an act of Congress that created and opened the territory in the first place—in practice the ability of Congress to manage the affairs of the territories hit a wall when it came to federal land management. Because the United States owned hundreds of millions of acres of land by the mid-nineteenth century, Congress found itself unable to manage it efficiently and left much of the issue of land sales up to the Executive.\(^5\) Congress even codified this peculiar relationship between the two branches when they included in an 1820 act (3 Stat. L. 567) a provision that explicitly conferred authority on the President to be able to issue proclamations that

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\(^3\) Thaddeus Hyatt, “Letter to James Buchanan,” October 16, 1860, Thaddeus Hyatt Coll. #401 Box 1 Folder 9, Kansas State Historical Society.


would open up public lands for sale, precisely what Buchanan was doing with the New York Indian Reserve. Hyatt could certainly have gone to Congress for aid, but since it was the President using his power to dispose of public lands that Hyatt saw as the problem, he decided to target Buchanan directly. This did have its benefits, which Hyatt surely understood. Unlike Congress, which could be slow and ineffectual, the President could be reached directly and rapidly. Further, eliciting action from the President meant convincing one person (with perhaps a few more key cabinet members, like the Secretary of the Interior) of the importance of action, not an entire legislative body representing the concerns of the entire nation.

In case the simple emotional appeal did not affect Buchanan, Hyatt’s second method was a mix of indictment and reverse psychology. “Had the blood of this poor people in 1860 been as valuable for coinage into votes as it was in 1856, your department would have long since been made aware of their miseries,” Hyatt asserted, hoping, perhaps, that in effectively accusing the president of engaging in some cruel political calculus, he could induce him to prove that his sympathies were neither temporally nor politically limited. Surely, Hyatt argued, if the president had been made aware of what opening the New York Indian Reserve to public sale would do to starving Americans, he would never had signed off on it. What was “a mere mechanical duty” to the uninformed Buchanan was “in its terrible workings a practical cruelty, such as no Despotism on earth would intentionally be guilty of.”

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6 A summary of the numerous congressional acts that acknowledged and endorsed the President’s ability to handle land sales in territories can be found in “Memorandum Regarding the Power of the President to Set Aside by Proclamation or Executive Order Public Lands for Indian Reservations and Other Public Purposes, and the Right of the President to Revoke Such Order,” Indian Affairs and Treaties, vol. 3, ed. Charles Kappler (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1913), 692-695.

7 Hyatt, “Letter to James Buchanan.”
This was a clever play by Hyatt, who in short was giving Buchanan the benefit of the doubt, allowing him to claim ignorance of the side effects of what was a routine land policy decision.

Hyatt’s argument that the opening of the New York Indian Reserve would devastate the already struggling population of settlers living there was not an observation unique to him. It was drawn, in fact, from stories Hyatt heard while speaking directly to Kansans. One such Kansan, Samuel Ayers, a doctor from Massachusetts who had moved to Kansas Territory in 1857 to help develop Linn County, recognized the historical precedent for worrying specifically about land sales.8 “In the west portion of the county, where the lands were last year ordered to be sold,” Ayers told Hyatt in September 1860, “the destitution is peculiarly great, because the people have no money, and they have no money because they were last year forced to pay for their lands.” He continued, “Many of the poor settlers had no alternative but to mortgage their claims to raise the money demanded of them by the Government.” He then put it plainly: “The drought has come, and pay day has come!” Ayers knew well what would happen to the people in Kansas if they defaulted on their debts. “These poor people,” he wrote, “unable to even subsist and quite unable to pay borrowed money, will be driven from their claims, and lose all.” Ayers cut directly to what he saw as the root of the problem, telling Hyatt that “[h]ad we a homestead bill, this state of things could not exist” directly referring to Buchanan’s veto of a Homestead bill that had made it through Congress earlier in 1860, a bill that would have given squatters two more years to build improvements and secure funds before being expected to preempt

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any lands they were on. In Emporia, settlers told Hyatt that “many had to use their last dollar to save their claims, and...a considerable number borrowed money and mortgaged their land, expecting to pay it out of this year's crops.” According to Hyatt, another settler, a farmer in Coffey County, D. K. Debble, “complained of the hardship of having to pay for their lands” and noted that “more than half the people had to borrow money to pre-empt their lands.”

Another settler, David Reese, “here since early in ’56,” claimed that the opening of the New York Indian Reserve would not just be worse than earlier land sales, but possibly the worst thing that had happened to the territory, including the violence of Bleeding Kansas. He had “gone through the troubles” in the mid-1850s, and he described how he “was taken prisoner and dragged away from my family; saw my neighbors’ houses burnt and robbed.” Despite surviving Bleeding Kansas, for Reese, “this hour is a darker one for Kansas than even that!” The cause of Reese's dark vision of Kansas was simple: “Then we had money; now we have none.” Surviving the violence of Bleeding Kansas was possible, according to Reese, because early settlers in Linn County, blessed with bountiful crop yields and adequate starting capital were able to weather the storm. In 1860, however, the total failure of crops, combined with being forced to transition from squatters to legitimate landowners, looked to Reese to be a fatal combination.

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9 Gates, Fifty Million Acres, 89.

10 The descriptions of the territory and the settlers' understandings of the cause of their suffering are extracted from Thaddeus Hyatt, The Prayer of Thaddeus Hyatt to James Buchanan, President of the United States, In Behalf of Kansas, Asking for a Postponement of All the Land Sales in That Territory, and for Other Relief; Together with Correspondence and Other Documents Setting Forth Its Deplorable Destitution from the Drought and Famine (Washington, D.C.: Henry Polkinhorn, 1860), 30–48.
To fully understand how the drought was so tightly interwoven with political and economic concerns, it is important to have a clear picture of how settlers dealt with the policies that were most central to their lives, one of which was the ability to use and own land in the West. While title for western lands remained in the hands of Indians or the federal government, those settling generally did so as squatters, having no legal claim to the land they were using. The primary means by which these settlers could gain legal title to real property in the West was through the process of claims making, or preemption, which was formally outlined in an act of Congress in 1841. Preemption was a process directly linked to the government’s decision to open up publicly held lands for private purchase. The Preemption Act of 1841 outlined the distribution of “the proceeds of the sales of the public lands” and detailed the requirements of “grant[ing] pre-emption rights.” The latter was of most interest to those squatting on public lands in the west. The relevant sections said that heads of families, widows, and single men over 21 who were U. S. citizens (or on the path to naturalization) could qualify to purchase up to 160 acres of land, provided they “inhabit and improve” the land, and “have or shall erect a dwelling thereon.” There were a few other restrictions on which lands could be sold: lands were available only if “Indian title had been at the time of such settlement extinguished,” and if the lands were not “reserved for the support of schools,” railroads, or “other public improvement[s].” Settlers could buy lands that fit these criteria before they went on sale publicly for $1.25 per acre, a very low price, but not an insignificant amount for families who were mostly growing enough crops for subsistence, not profit. Despite these seemingly clear-cut methods of claims making

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11 The full text of the act is available in Preemption Act of 1841, 5 Stat. 453 (1841); A summary of the key parts of the 1841 and 1843 Preemption Acts was “prepared and published for gratuitous distribution among settlers” by several attorneys in Montana. Their guide contains useful commentary of certain sections of the acts, giving an idea of how the legal documents were interpreted by those who would be dealing with any conflicts that would arise because of them: Dexter &
and preemption, those attempting to secure their lands were frequently confused. A short primer for new immigrants to the territories of the West warned readers: “The requirements of the pre-emption law are so complicated and frequently so ill-understood, that many claimants lay themselves liable by some trifling neglect to a forfeiture of the claim.”

Settlers were eager to make their claims official, but doing so meant paying for their lands and it often took several years after their arrival before they were able to do so, a fact that complicated and compounded the problems facing hungry Kansans. Many would have to borrow money to pay for their claims, and generally expected to pay down their debts by selling part of their crops from the following seasons. That the ability to pay for their lands depended in part on the whims of nature did not seem to factor into the minds of Kansans who had been led to the territory by the promises of abundance by boosters. Squatters in need of loans to preempt their claims had no problem finding creditors, as capitalists from the east coast had recognized early on the possible profits from lending to cash-strapped settlers. They generally loaned money at an interest rate of around 40 percent, though in some cases it was as high as 120 percent, amounts that would require rapid, bounteous harvests for newcomers to afford to pay.


Although Thaddeus Hyatt and others calling for the postponement of the opening of the New York Indian Reserve did so primarily out of an economic concern for white settlers who were squatting on the land, the tract was also the center of a larger controversy regarding the treaty relationship between the federal government and the legal occupants and owners of the land—the so-called "New York Indians." The New York Indian Reserve, a strip of land that was only twenty miles wide, but more than one hundred miles long (east-to-west) totaling 1,824,000 acres of prime prairie land, was created through a series of treaties negotiated between 1838 and 1857, known collectively as the Treaties of Buffalo Creek. The "New York Indians" who negotiated the Treaties of Buffalo Creek with the United States were representatives of the Seneca, Onondaga, Cayuga, Tuscarora, Oneida, and St. Regis (Mohawk), the historical constituents of the Haudenosaunee, known to Euroamericans as the Iroquois Confederacy and the Six Nations. Once an enormously powerful political group, by the early nineteenth century the Haudenosaunee were witnessing the waning of their population, land, and power. Pressure from white settlers pushing deeper into the interior of the New York caused Native leaders to negotiate treaties with the United States to secure lands further west, ostensibly free from white encroachment.

Four key treaties were at the center of the relationship between the Haudenosaunee and the United States as it existed in 1860. First, an 1831 treaty negotiated between U.S. officials and representatives of the Menominee nation, in which the Menominee agreed to cede 2.5 million acres of their land in Wisconsin, a portion of which would be set aside for relocation of the "New York

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14 Ibid., 32–33.

Indians." This arrangement was a win-win for the United States; they would not only acquire an enormous, valuable tract near Lake Michigan, but could also offer a small portion of it to the Haudenosaunee, clearing the hinterlands of New York for further white settlement. In 1838, the U.S. negotiated another treaty with the Haudenosaunee, which was directly related to the terms of the Treaties of Washington. The first Treaty of Buffalo Creek saw a group of Senecas agree to "cede and relinquish to the United States all their right, title and interest to the lands secured to them at Green Bay by the Menomonie treaty of 1831," other than a small strip of land that some Senecas had actually been living on. Further, the Seneca and other tribes agreed to sell their current lands in New York (which were to immediately be opened to white settlement) in exchange for both money and land. "In consideration of the above cession and relinquishment, on the part of the tribes of the New York Indians, and in order to manifest the deep interest of the United States in the future peace and prosperity of the New York Indians," the 1838 treaty reads, "the United States agree to set apart the following tract of country, situated directly west of the State of Missouri, as a permanent home for all the New York Indians, now residing in the State of New York, or in Wisconsin, or elsewhere in the United States," land that would become the "New York Indian Reserve." The 1838 treaty was followed by two more, both of which were meant to clear up some discrepancies in the original treaty. The 1842

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16 This description of the Treaty of Washington, which was actually two treaties negotiated over several years, is significantly simplified. The Menominee were initially unsatisfied with the terms of the treaty, and worked to renegotiate and adjust it, resulting in slight changes to the agreement. This general outline of the terms of the treaty, however, is sufficient for understanding how it would become connected to the New York Indian Reserve in Kansas. See "Treaty with the Menominee, 1831. February 8, 1831. 7 Stat. 342. Proclamation, July 9, 1832," Indian Affairs and Treaties, vol. 2, ed. Charles Kappler (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1904), 319-323.

Treaty with the Seneca was necessary because the Tonawanda Band of Senecas was not present at the 1838 treaty negotiations, and had their reservation sold off without their permission. The 1857 Treaty with the Tonawanda saw the Tonawanda Band secede politically from the larger Seneca nation, sell the land in Kansas that they had never agreed to accept, and purchase back their reservation in New York.

Ultimately, only a few “New York Indians” actually made their way onto their new land in Kansas—one estimate put their total at 32 in the late 1850s, compared to the 5,000 white settlers who flooded the tract by 1860. Because of this, the Buchanan administration—primarily his Secretary of the Interior, Jacob Thompson—argued that the “New York Indians” had not actually removed to the agreed-upon reservation, and thus they had forfeited their rights to the land under the agreements in the previous two decades of treaties. Thus, the administration could, and would, open the reservation to public sale, allowing white settlers who would make productive use of the land to do so unimpeded by what were now considered void Native claims (this despite the fact that those very settlers were asking for the land to not be opened, albeit for their own selfish reasons).

Hyatt’s two-pronged approach to convincing the President to consider the implications of his land policy was partly successful—Buchanan did not agree to stop the lands sales, but he did at least

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20 Gates, Fifty Million Acres, 34. See also the U.S. Supreme Court decision that outlines the entire affair with the “New York Indians,” and which ultimately concludes that President Buchanan opened the reserve for public sale against proper judgment, if not the law, New York Indians v. United States. 170 U.S. 1 (1898).
accept the premise that he was not fully informed about the detrimental effects of the opening of the reserve, and asked Hyatt to gather more information for him before he made any decisions. Hyatt immediately got to work, writing a letter on October 16 to Jacob Thompson, the Secretary of the Interior, who was presumably at the meeting with Hyatt and the president. Hyatt reminded Thompson that the president had requested more information, specifically “What amount of lands are offered for sale in (the New York Indian Reservation) Kansas?” and “What is the urgency of the necessity for the sale?” To speed along the reply, Hyatt fell back on the same emotional appeal he had made earlier to the president, telling Thompson: “By furnishing these dates...you will perform an act of humanity, that will fill the hearts of thousands with gratitude towards yourself and the administration—while all the people, despite the asperity of party strife, will join in approbation of the act.” The potential for political exultation was apparently not enough to move Thompson, as he did not respond to Hyatt with any information.21

Thompson’s silence frustrated the time-pressed Hyatt, who, a week later, on October 24, sent the Secretary another letter, this time leaving out any pleasantries and simply beginning his letter, “Sir: Will you please answer the following queries?” Between the time of his initial letter and his most recent one, Hyatt expanded his questionnaire from two questions to six. He asked Thompson to pull data from census returns and let him know “What is the present population of Kansas...What amount of corn and provisions were raised this year...What amount of corn and provisions have the people on hand for the coming winter...What amount of money and moveable wealth was there in Kansas, and

21 Hyatt’s letter to Secretary Thompson is included, with other correspondence regarding the drought and its relief, in Hyatt, The Prayer of Thaddeus Hyatt to James Buchanan, 9.
how distributed... What amount of public lands are now offered, or about to be offered, for sale in said Territory, in what localities, and date of sales?" Furthermore, he asked Thompson for these records to be categorized "county by county" and by the date on which the census was taken. Hyatt's line of questioning revealed something about how he understood the famine facing Kansans. His emphasis on the amount of money and goods circulating throughout the territory was an indirect statement that he viewed the famine not as the result simply of an unprecedented drought, but as an unfortunate weather event befalling a particularly vulnerable population, already poor and struggling, who would be made even more vulnerable by having the land on which their homes sat thrown open to sale.²²

Hyatt was also interested in ascertaining some of the very basic facts about the weather and its effect on Kansas. In addition to his letter to the Secretary of the Interior, Hyatt wrote to Secretary of War John B. Floyd to inquire about rainfall totals. “Being about to furnish the President with some statistics in reference to the unprecedented drought which has afflicted Kansas Territory for more than fourteen months,” Hyatt wrote, “I have to request that you will favor me with replies to the following queries.” He had only two questions for Floyd: “What amount of rain has fallen in that Territory during the last fourteen months?” and “What has been the state of the atmosphere?” Secretary Floyd, like his colleague in the Interior, did not respond to Hyatt's questions.²³ Hyatt wrote a similar letter to Joseph Henry, the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institute, asking him how much rain had fallen over the fourteen months prior, and what was the “average fall of rain in that Territory for

²² Ibid., 9–10.

²³ Ibid.
the last ten years.” Henry, unlike the other government officials Hyatt had written, did reply, and did so quickly and with a wealth of information. Less than a week after receiving Hyatt’s letter, Henry sent Hyatt a table containing the amount of rain in Kansas Territory over the previous year, collated from Smithsonian Institute measurements, “Army Meteorological Observations,” and the “Meteorological Registers” of two Kansas citizens. “It is evident from the facts thus furnished,” wrote Henry, “that a severe drought has prevailed during the past season in Kansas Territory.”

After more than a month of tirelessly working on behalf of hungry Kansans—going to Kansas himself to survey the situation, writing letters to newspapers and friends, and corresponding with government officials—Thaddeus Hyatt, in late October, sent President Buchanan a comprehensive collection of information about the drought and its relationship to the land sales the president had approved. The printed packet, running 68 pages, contained copies of all the letters Hyatt had written to officials, the one reply he received from the Secretary of the Smithsonian, and an enormous cache of reports and interviews Hyatt had gathered during his September “journey through Kansas,” which “covered nearly one thousand miles and occupied twenty-five days.” Hyatt pleaded again with Buchanan to stop the land sales in Kansas, this time arguing that surely there was enough evidence that the land sales would be devastating to the already poor and hungry settlers. “I ask respectfully in their name,” Hyatt wrote on behalf of those in Kansas, “that your Excellency will grant a contingent and temporary postponement of ninety days.” Not only would the ninety-day postponement offer some initial relief to Kansas, it would give Hyatt more time “to accumulate proof upon proof of the utterly impoverished condition of the people.” Hyatt would not be satisfied until Buchanan truly knew

24 Ibid., 11–17.
the direness of the situation in Kansas. He ended his introduction to the collection of documents with a forceful statement about the seriousness of the claims within it, and a subdued indictment of Buchanan and his lack of action. “With the greatest deference to your Excellency,” Hyatt began, “let me say that an array of facts such as is now presented by me here, and under oath, would, if present in a Court of Chancery, be sufficient for obtaining an injunction in any case of a parallel character.”

If history was any indicator, however, the prognosis for the settlers on the New York Indian Reserve was not good. At the same time he was opening the reserve for public sale, there was indeed a “case of a parallel character” already in progress, one that had been raging for over a year, and one that was just as troubling for observers.

On November 19, 1860, the New York Times ran a column that linked Buchanan’s hesitance to aid the starving in Kansas with his administration’s actions with regard to another piece of valuable Indian land that white squatters had made their home. “Along the Southern border of Kansas, adjoining the Indian territory, lies some of the most productive soil of the West,” the editors wrote, describing the 800,000 acres referred to as the “Cherokee Neutral Tract,” which was a region measuring 50 miles north to south and 25 miles east to west. The Neutral Tract had been ceded to the Cherokee in the 1835 Treaty of New Echota, one of several treaties between the U.S. Government and the Cherokee concerning the removal of the tribe from the state of Georgia. Very few Cherokees

25 Ibid., 5–6.


27 Gates, Fifty Million Acres, 153.

actually took up residence on the land, a fact that emboldened the eager squatters of the territorial period to settle on the tract despite it being technically off-limits. “The free settlers hastened thither,” the New York Times editors wrote, “built their houses, and put land under cultivation, and were enjoying a degree of prosperity unknown in other portions of the Territory.”\textsuperscript{29} The Neutral Tract was appealing enough to white settlers to bring between 600 and 700 of them within its borders by 1859, and more than 2,000 by 1860 when the Times described the scene.\textsuperscript{30} One fact about these squatters caught the attention of Missourians who shared a border with the productive section: they were overwhelmingly antislavery. In the words of the editors of the Times, the 2,025 settlers living prosperously on the Neutral Tract were “greatly envied by the neighboring slaveholding population of Missouri,” who quickly reminded local land officials, as well as the federal government, that the lands were not available for settlement and insisted on evicting the growing antislavery community.\textsuperscript{31}

Missourians looking to oust the antislavery settlers on the Cherokee Neutral Tract found a sympathetic ear with Alfred Burton Greenwood, who was appointed Commissioner of Indian Affairs in the U.S. Department of the Interior by President Buchanan in 1859, after a long career as a lawyer, judge, and Congressman from Arkansas.\textsuperscript{32} On November 29, 1859, Greenwood communicated to George Butler, local Indian agent for the Cherokee, that he should travel north from the Indian

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\textsuperscript{29} “The President's Bounty to Kansas.”

\textsuperscript{30} Gates, Fifty Million Acres, 154.

\textsuperscript{31} “The President's Bounty to Kansas”; Though it is unstated in the New York Times editorial, historian Paul Wallace Gates argues that the Missourians were particularly worried about the settlers on the Neutral Tract because there were rumors of a plan to aid in the freeing of slaves from the neighboring state. See Fifty Million Acres, 154.

Territory (what is now the state of Oklahoma) into the Neutral Tract and “give public notice in the most conspicuous manner” that all of the settlers there should vacate the land immediately. “[I]f any intruders are found within the reserve after the 1st day of April next,” Greenwood told Butler, “prompt measures will be taken to expel them from the aforesaid tract of land by military force, and...no further leniency will be extended to them under any circumstances whatever.” The settlers pushed back, telling Butler and Greenwood that they believed they were settling on the New York Indian Reserve, not the Cherokee neutral lands, and that it was not until more recent surveys (those insisted on by proslavery Missourians) that it was even clear where the Cherokee lands were located. Though white settlement of the New York Indian Reserve had been largely ignored by officials (at least until 1860), the excuse did not sit well with Greenwood. “The Cherokee lands, as well as the New York tract,” he wrote in March 1860, “were alike secured to those tribes originally by solemn treaty obligations, which should have been sufficient to protect them from trespass by all law-abiding citizens.” Greenwood held fast in his insistence that the lands be vacated, but his tone in the spring of 1860 was different than it was in his earlier warnings of military force. While countering their weak claims about being confused about the Cherokee lands, Greenwood told the settlers: “However much my sympathy may be invoked in behalf of those who are regarded as my neighbors, still the law is imperative, and must be obeyed.”

Greenwood’s sympathy was short-lived, however. A month later, on April 21, 1860, he instructed Elias Rector, the Superintendent of Indian Affairs in Fort Smith, Arkansas, to send the

34 Ibid., 444-445.
agent Robert J. Cowart into the Cherokee lands “to investigate as quietly as possible the cases of all white persons found within the limits of his agency,” and to report on his findings. It was not until August 20 that Cowart arrived in Kansas. “I visited those lands and notified many settlers in person, and wrote and put up notices in every prominent neighborhood on the entire tract, requiring all persons other than Indians to leave by the 25th of September thereafter,” he told Greenwood in a report from November 9, 1860. Cowart appeared to have ignored Greenwood’s request to investigate “quietly,” as he not only told the settlers to vacate the tract, but also warned them that if they did not do so, he would “be up with troops for their removal.” When he arrived again on October 10, he did so as promised, “supported by Captain Sturgis, with fifty mounted troops.” 35

Cowart, Sturgis, and their troops found that none of the settlers had left the Cherokee lands, and, further, that new ones had actually arrived. After two days of “talking with and admonishing the people, telling them they well knew themselves to be intruders and should leave without further trouble,” Cowart ordered the troops to burn a single cabin located on the Spring river, making clear the seriousness of his demands. The single cabin was apparently not enough to scare off the settlers, so Cowart and his men proceeded through the region, burning more homes, “amounting in all to some twenty cabins occupied” and several “out-houses that were dilapidated and deserted, amounting in all to 50 or 60 cabins.” In his report to Greenwood, Cowart did not that he “was careful to preserve every article of furniture of every character, as also the provisions of every kind for both man and beast, including corn-fodder and hay and the like.” 36 The items Cowart listed were exactly

35 Ibid., 446-447.

36 Ibid., 449-450.
the things that settlers had petitioned the government for restitution for after the raiding of the
Bleeding Kansas years, so it was important for Cowart to note the difference between his violence,
which was intended solely to force people off their claims (it would be less expensive to just move
than to attempt to rebuild on the Cherokee lands, especially under threat of another burning), and
that of the mostly proslavery raiders of years prior, who sought complete devastation of property in
order to force settlers out of Kansas completely. The settlers, too, were evidently aware of how
powerful a symbol a scorched earth policy (or lack thereof) could be. The New York Times,
sympathetic to the antislavery settlers, claimed the scene unfolded slightly differently: “Two weeks
ago armed bands of men, led by Government agents, entered this tract and commenced a campaign
which for savage ferocity and inhumanity can only be equaled in the history of Indian outrages. They
proceeded from house to house; drove the inhabitants into the fields, and burned their cabins, and
often their household goods, before their eyes.”

What offended commentators most about Cowart’s cabin-burning campaign was not simply
the violence against the property of settlers, but that it happened in the middle of a winter, to a group
of people who were already facing severe hardships as the seriousness of the famine of 1860 was
becoming apparent. “Victims of an official blunder,” the editors of the New York Times wrote, “the
people, in a year of famine, suffering and apprehension, might have expected delay and indulgence,”
but this was an “unhappy miscalculation.” The settlers on the Cherokee lands had ignored the
warnings of Cowart and others because they “could not bring themselves to believe that an eviction so
sudden, needless, and ruinous would actually be enforced on the threshold of Winter.” The Times also

37 “The President’s Bounty to Kansas.”
recognized the undeniable political element at play: “…if the Winter left them undisturbed, the forthcoming Republican administration would interfere for their relief.” For some observers of affairs in Kansas, then, the Cherokee land sales in the middle of winter were clearly part of a larger political battle taking place in the country, and it could only be the machinations of Democrats, led by Buchanan, that would put so many settlers out of their homes and into a brutal Kansas winter.

Being forced out of one’s home in the middle of winter during a famine was, not surprisingly, an unpleasant affair. One settler whose home was burned by Cowart and his dragoons “made his escape by living eight days in the woods, with no food except nuts and other eatables furnished him by nature.” After eight days the settler had traveled only fifteen miles north to Bourbon County, where he was taken in by others and declared his intention to take up permanent residency there, giving up on his claim in the Cherokee Neutral Tract. Others did not even make it into other towns; one observer reported to the New York Times that “women and children are now sheltered in the bushes along the creeks, mourning their hard fate.” The same reporter described how one witness “knew of a case where this Col. [Cowart] came to a house in which a lady was sick, having a child but two days old.” The woman begged Cowart and his men to leave her alone, but the “pleading was in vain.” Cowart “ordered his men to carry her out on her bed and lay her upon the prairie,” which they did, then promptly burned her home.

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38 Ibid.


The *Times* editors ended their coverage of the affairs on the Cherokee tract with a searing indictment of Buchanan. “It is superfluous to say that it lies entirely within the power of Mr. Buchanan not only to postpone the land-sales, but to put an instant stop to the brutalities we have described,” they wrote. The editors mocked a personal donation by Buchanan, arguing that “had he substituted for the hundred dollar check, an order for the suspension of evictions...he would have given a cheaper and far more satisfactory evidence of repentance.” The editors’ mention of the suspension of evictions, “such as are not uncommon in the highlands of Scotland or the bogs of Ireland,” was one of the few direct references to the Irish famine to be found in all of the commentary surrounding the Kansas drought and famine. The language of the editors regarding the suspension of evictions is telling: they “are without precedent in our boundless country,” indicating that the editors believed the response to eviction was nearly unthinkable in America, and especially in Kansas, where the land was plentiful and the soil rich. Evicting white citizens from their homes into a freezing winter landscape was something only the old, deeply corrupt and monarchical societies of Europe would do. Americans, especially Kansans, the argument went, were witnessing thoroughly un-American behavior from the Democratic president and his subordinates.

The intense debates and, finally, physical violence that surrounded the New York Indian Reserve and the Cherokee Neutral Tract were only obliquely about the very people who the land was supposed to belong to. Granted, the “New York Indians” and the Cherokees were only nominally invested in the land; very few Native people lived on those particular tracts, primarily because white settlers in the 1850s rapidly occupied them, only a short time after the lands were set aside for the

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41 “The President's Bounty to Kansas.”
various Native groups. That being said, there were Indians in Kansas in 1860-61, and they, too, were
starving, and they had just as much of an interest in keeping their lands. For example, in July of 1861,
J.B. Abbot, an agent among the Shawnee, wrote to the Superintendent of Indian Affairs in the
Shawnee Agency, M.B. Branch, explaining to him that the Shawnees under his purview were
complaining that the federal government had missed an annuity payment of $89,000, money that was
vital to the Shawnee since the “almost total failure of the crops last summer has left a large majority of
the tribe destitute.” The Shawnee did not want to starve, obviously, but they were also concerned that
without the annuity promised to them they would be forced to “sell their land, which if they are
compelled to do at this time will have to be done at very low rate[s].” Here again the politics of land
sales come to the fore. Whereas white settlers opposed land sales because they could not afford to
preempt the lands they had been squatting on, Native landowners opposed them because it would be
a buyers’ market in which speculators or other interested parties could easily acquire the land for
cheap prices.

As discussed above, many observers in Kansas saw the opening of several theretofore Indian-
owned lands to general sale as an attack on the anti-slavery settlers who had settled on them. Rarely
were these settlers or the government approving the opening of the tracts particularly concerned with
how the sales would affect the small Native populations to whom the land belonged. However, in
other parts of Kansas Territory, observers saw the divisive politics of slavery at play even in land sales
that seemingly affected only Native groups. In June 1860, Alfred Gray, a young resident of the town of

42 J.B. Abbott to M.B. Branch, July 8, 1861, Eastern Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma Digital Collection,
Quindaro wrote to George W. Patterson, a powerful New York politician who had connections to the national Republican network, complaining about a poisonous land swindle that was taking place. Gray was asked by John Pratt, a Baptist missionary to the Delaware Indians in Kansas, to explain to Patterson the questionable nature of a treaty being brokered between the Delaware and the U.S. government, represented by Thomas B. Sykes. Though Gray wasn’t present for the negotiations—few were, since the “council room was…cleared of all except the agents, four chiefs & the Interpreter”—his unnamed “reliable sources” described how Sykes had plied four Delaware headmen, who were only nominally involved in the political affairs of the tribe, with “Strychnine & rain-water—more commonly known in this country as ‘Rot-gut’” and convinced them to cede their most valuable lands. These Delaware leaders were “uneducated” and “not acquainted with the English Language at all,” so it was particularly easy for a “bought up interpreter” to make sure a deal would be made that was favorable to Sykes.⁴³

Gray did not need to know what exactly went on behind the closed doors of the treaty-drafting session to know something was rotten. “The full details of this Treaty – we have not learned, but enough is known to discover the imposition upon the Indians & this Section of the country & here it is: this democratic agent, a bogus Democratic R. R. Co of Leavenworth City—Democratic capitalists of the same place, a pack of Federal Thieves & Murderers who infest our fair Territory, commissioned by a corrupt administration, as well as the Department at Washington, are a Company who are to receive the major portion of these beautiful lands under the mane & style of the ‘Leavenworth &

⁴³ Alfred Gray, “Letter to Geo. W. Patterson,” June 18, 1860, Alfred Gray Collection, #361, Box 1, Folder Correspondence 1855–1879, Kansas State Historical Society.
Pawnee Railroad Company. This Rail Road Co. avows the paternity of this illegitimate offspring, begotten by governmental officials.  

Thaddeus Hyatt's plan to induce President Buchanan to aid Kansans by stopping the land sales failed. The president did not use the power of the executive to postpone the sales, nor did he push Congress to do the same. Rather, he donated $100 of his own money, implicitly telling Hyatt that while he was personally moved by the content of Hyatt's report on the conditions of Kansans, he did not agree that it was the result of his administration's policies, or that any official course of action was necessary. Thus, the land policy of the federal government that observers in Kansas saw as being at the core of the process of turning a drought into a famine continued unabated. Thaddeus Hyatt, however, refused to let the inaction of Washington be a death sentence for hungry Kansans, and immediately turned his attention back to building a strong national network of private support for the aid and relief of the destitute and starving in Kansas Territory.

Buchananism

The opening of the New York Indian Reserve, announced by President Buchanan in 1860, had provoked a strong response from Thaddeus Hyatt and other concerned parties, who saw in the president's land policy a potentially devastating effect on the struggling settlers who occupied the lands in question. Hyatt had carefully presented to Buchanan a request to postpone the sales, giving the president an opportunity to save Kansans from further suffering, but the President, even after being presented with detailed reports from the territory, had offered only a personal donation,

44 Ibid.
effectively ending the potential for governmental involvement in the relief efforts. For some observers, Buchanan’s inaction was part of a darker political machination. In a letter to the *Lawrence Republican*, O. H. Sheldon, a young member of the Kansas Territorial Legislature who would go on to become a state senator the next year, argued that there was another, more sinister layer of intent behind allowing the land sales to continue. “One half of the mortgages on our lands are held by Lecompton Democrats, who have no sympathy for ‘Black Republicans,’” he explained. Those Democrats were “ready and willing to take our lands as soon as the law will allow them.”

In his complaints about the poisonous effects of “Buchananism,” Sheldon was drawing on a sentiment that was common among anti-slavery advocates in Kansas. An 1850s lithograph called “Liberty, the Fair Maid of Kansas, in the Hands of the Border Ruffians,” (Figure 4.1) depicted five of the nation’s foremost pro-Southern Democrats (including James Buchanan, Franklin Pierce, and Stephen Douglas) as terrorizing the plains, forcing liberty-loving Kansans (represented by a flag-draped young woman, naturally) to beg for mercy. In the image, Douglas clutches the scalp of a dead Kansan, while Buchanan triumphantly displays the pocket watch that he pilfered from the body of another downed Kansan whose neck Buchanan is still gripping. That many Kansans and other observers throughout the nation suspected Buchanan was at least partly responsible for the famine should not be surprising, given the amount of distrust and vitriol generated during the 1850s, as represented in the “Liberty” image.

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45 O. H. Sheldon, “Crops in Osage County,” *Lawrence Republican*, August 30, 1860; Sheldon’s letter is also reprinted in Hyatt, *The Prayer of Thaddeus Hyatt to James Buchanan*, 45–46; A short history of Sheldon’s life and political accomplishments was presented to the Kansas State Senate after his death in 1879 and is available in “Proceedings of The Senate of the State of Kansas” (Topeka: Geo. W. Martin, Kansas Publishing House, January 22, 1879).
Though he was the target of vicious private and public attacks, stemming from his perceived mishandling of Kansas affairs generally, and specifically his pursuit of his land policy during an unprecedented famine in the territory, Buchanan had his supporters as well, some of whom were quite vocal when it came to deflecting from the president the blame for the misery in Kansas. William Montague Browne, a young Anglo-Irish immigrant, arrived in the United States in the early 1850s, quickly finding work as a journalist with the New York Journal of Commerce in 1855 or 1856. The members of the editorial team of the Journal were particularly close with James Buchanan, who was at the time minister to the United Kingdom, but was beginning his campaign for the presidency. Browne
was tasked with reporting on foreign affairs, and, like the rest of the editorial team, found ways for his reporting to support the Democratic candidate and denigrate his critics overseas, most likely in an attempt to secure the favor of Buchanan, who would presumably reward his supporters with government positions. The tactic worked, as Buchanan, in 1859, helped place Browne at the helm of the *Washington Constitution*, formerly known as the *Washington Union*, a newspaper that historians have argued was little more than the administrative organ of the Buchanan White House.\(^{46}\)

Browne, who, in the years following the opening of Kansas Territory and the ensuing violence, had written numerous attacks on “black Republicans,” calling them “traitors,”\(^{47}\) found the pleas of Thaddeus Hyatt and other eastern abolitionists too much to bear in 1860. On October 20, Browne published a lengthy response to a letter from Thaddeus Hyatt that had been making the rounds in other newspapers. Under the heading, “Is it retribution?” Browne printed a brief extract from Hyatt’s letter, describing it as “a picture which, if correctly drawn, must excite wide-spread sympathy.” On the latter point, regarding sympathy, Browne argued that “even the generous South, forgetting that these sufferers are (many of them) the mere mercenaries of the Emigrant Aid Society—thrown into Kansas for the sole purpose of carrying on an aggressive war against her institutions—will, when satisfied

\(^{46}\) William M. Browne’s editorship is discussed at length in E. Merton Coulter, *William Montague Browne: Versatile Anglo-Irish American, 1823-1883* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1967), 1–28. Coulter contends that the *Constitution* was not simply the mouthpiece of the Buchanan administration, because there is no evidence that Buchanan himself ever saw any editorials before they were published. He concedes, however, that the paper was run by two staunch Buchanan Democrats and published only articles favorable to the President.

\(^{47}\) Ibid., 15.
that this alleged distress is real, respond far more readily in charity than any one of the active abolitionists.\textsuperscript{48}

Southerners, Browne claimed, were more than willing to help starving Kansans, but only if they legitimately required helped. He suspected they did not. Hyatt, according to Browne, simply could not be trusted. After all, he wrote, abolitionists had lied about all manner of conditions in Kansas, and “it certainly would not be strange if some, remembering the monstrous fictions which the Kansas shriekers circulated in 1856, for the basest of purposes, should be disposed to inquire if black-republicanism has not some object now to accomplish by imposing a false tale of distress upon the Eastern public.” If the accusation sounded too sinister and far-fetched to be credible, Browne reminded his readers that “the utter baseness and atrocity of such a proceeding is no argument against its probability, because the men who invented the Kansas fiction of 1856 are capable of anything politically vile.”\textsuperscript{49}

This strain of distrust for Thaddeus Hyatt in particular had precedent; one month earlier, on September 20, 1860, the editors of the \textit{Auburn Docket} had commented about the rumors circulating about Hyatt. “This gentleman seems to be an especial object of aversion with some of the Democratic journals of this Territory,” the editors wrote. “They are using their utmost endeavors to throw obstacles in his pathway,” by both besmirching his name, and, more importantly “creat[ing] the impression that there is no necessity for the work in which he is engaged.” The Democratic

\textsuperscript{48} A clipping of the October 20, 1860 article in the \textit{Washington Constitution} is attached to the end of Thaddeus Hyatt, “Letter to [Thomas] Webb,” October 22, 1860, Kansas Relief 1860-1861 Collection, Folder Correspondence, Kansas State Historical Society.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
newspapermen, according to the editors of the *Docket*, were of the class that, having lost the fight for the expansion of slavery into Kansas, looked to at least make as much money as possible off their land holdings. “Supplied, themselves,” the editors wrote, “with an abundance of ‘pap’ from Uncle Sam’s great dish, they know that they will not starve, and they do not care whether others do or do not.” Asking how much these Democrats would be willing to part with to save their fellow Kansans, the editors answered for the opponents: “Not one cent, unless they knew they could get it back with an hundred per cent. profit.” The editors reiterated that the “destitution of the people in the Territory has not been over-estimated,” despite the claims of critics. Further, it was the “course pursed by the Administration” that had put settlers in the precarious position of abandoning their homes, or attempting to pay for them, using money they would otherwise use for food. The *Docket* editors summed up their defense of Hyatt in terms that highlighted the divisive legacy of the Bleeding Kansas era. Thaddeus Hyatt was investigating the drought and famine in Kansas and relaying his findings to the press in New York and Washington because “[t]he Eastern States, knowing the difficulties with which the people of this Territory have had to contend, have not forgotten them; but, in view of their own abundance, are able to assist them, and they are willing to do so if our people actually need aid.” Democrats who had personal issues with Hyatt, going back to his involvement with the New England Aid Company, then, were being chastised for making him appear untrustworthy and raising skepticism of the extent of famine in Kansas. “The only result, then, of these attacks against” Hyatt, the editors wrote, “will be to create an impression in the East of a state of things that does not exist.”

50 “Thaddeus Hyatt,” *Auburn Docket*, September 20, 1860. This article is affixed to a report from an aid committee meeting held Shawnee County on September 11, 1860, available in Kansas Relief Collection, Box 4, Folder “Shawnee County,” Kansas State Historical Society.
Simply denying the drought, however, was not Browne’s aim with his editorial. In fact, the attack on Hyatt’s credibility was merely an aside to Browne’s real point: that if there was a famine occurring in Kansas Territory, the sufferers were facing a “retributive penalty called down by the course of the abolitionists in crowding the Territory unnaturally for a mere partisan purpose.” In a sense, Browne was right. The influx of underprepared settlers brought by the various abolitionist aid groups did cause a serious problem when the drought began in 1859; these were not people with the means to subsist through a bad growing season, unlike some of their peers from the farming states of the Midwest, who arrived with more resources and skills. Browne, though, understood this pattern of settlement to be something sinister, and thus argued that the starving abolitionist settlers had to lie in the bed they had made. He was quick to note the obvious problem with his logic: “The only object to this view is that the penalty, we presume, bears as heavily on the honest settler as on the mere abolitionist missionary, and that those who are primarily responsible for the present distress in Kansas—Thaddeus Hyatt and his associates, for example—apparently entirely escape the retribution.” If Hyatt and other organizers were able to enjoy full bellies in Washington, Boston, and New York, Browne hoped they would as least “feel pangs of conscience equal to those of actual hunger,” as “it is fit that they should at least suffer as a punishment, while they contemplate some of the frightful consequences of their own work.”\footnote{Hyatt, “Letter to [Thomas] Webb.”}

Browne was not alone in his understanding and explanation of why Kansans were facing starvation. The editors of the New Orleans Daily Picayune, argued along similar lines a month later, giving their thoughts on the matter in their November 18, 1860 issue. The month between the reports

of the Constitution and the Picayune had been full of enough reports of “famishing settlers in Kansas” that even “with every allowance for natural alarm, and some for interested exaggeration, there is no doubt that great destitution prevails in a large part of the country.” The Picayune recognized several overlapping facts that contributed to the suffering of the Kansas settlers. First were the simple realities of the drought: “the failure of crops, from the nearly total lack of rain,” led to “parched soil” that “refused to bring forth expected harvests.” Second, those with means saw their funds deplete rapidly “in the purchase of absolute necessaries, at an exorbitant rate.” Third, those less fortunate—debtors and poor farmers—“manage to subsist by mortgaging their farms to the usurers that swarm to such scenes of distress,” which ultimately left them only with “the prospect...of being turned out of their homesteads.” Finally, the editors of the New Orleans paper made it clear that, like Browne and his Washington Constitution, they saw the starving settlers as evidence of a deeply misguided and “unnatural” pattern of settlement. “The failure of the crops in the Territory is natural,” the editors conceded; “that there is so much suffering there,” however, “is in a great degree the work of politicians.” The Picayune’s account of Kansas settlement mirror that of Browne, with the editors arguing that “the settlement of Kansas was not a natural one—the regular growth of an expanding population seeking homes in pursuance of their own proper tastes and capacities.” Rather, emigrant aid companies “excited multitudes with partisan passions,” and sent the eager partisans “out to occupations of which they knew nothing,” in a “territory of which they had not studied the climate,” saddling the settlers with “unaccustomed labor and hardships.”

52 “Starving Kansas,” The Daily Picayune, November 18, 1865.
After his lengthy vituperative screed against Hyatt and other abolitionists, Browne did conclude with a more generous take on how Americans should respond to the famine in Kansas. He once again expressed doubt that Kansans were “in a state next to starvation,” especially “in a rich, prosperous country, teeming with plenteous crops!” However, he allowed that it could be true, and if it was, “our charitable citizens have quite as loud a call on them from Kansas as from the more distant sufferers in Syria.” Sending aid to Kansas, then, was worth considering, as keeping Americans—even political enemies—from starving was ultimately a noble cause. “Kansas aid,” Browne concluded, “will not be treasonable when it is intended to rescue even an abolitionist from starvation.”

The editors at the Picayune in New Orleans echoed this sentiment as well. “Considering...that among the sufferers must be many of our own kindred, who went there carrying in their bosoms the most loyal feelings towards us...to establish a community of Southern interests,” the editors wrote, “it would be just, as well as humane, to add southern contribution to those which the North is called upon to make in this emergency.” If Kansas was starving, then “Southern people, too, ought not to forget the instincts of humanity.”

Thaddeus Hyatt, in Washington at the time Browne’s piece in the Constitution was published, quickly reacted to it. In a letter to the Boston abolitionist and Kansas aid organizer Thomas Webb, Hyatt said that he would be coming to Boston in early November to report on his progress in convincing President Buchanan to move on the Kansas aid question. In addition to a conversation with Buchanan, in which “the Pres. wished more authoritative data to go on,” Hyatt recognized the


54 “Starving Kansas.”
importance of the Constitution article, as it revealed at least some in the Buchanan administration’s opinion about Hyatt and his efforts. Hyatt told Webb he was in the process of compiling a report that would “make a pamphlet from 16 to 24 pages, and presents a picture of the most sorrowful character” (the pamphlet would swell to 68 pages by the time Hyatt actually sent it to Buchanan). Heading off Browne’s accusation of dishonesty, Hyatt said he would swear to the veracity of the document under oath.55

Responding to Browne’s invective and Buchanan’s lingering doubts was incredibly time intensive, and Hyatt knew that time was the one thing that he, Webb, and other organizers could not gather more of. In his letter to Webb he also asked the Bostonian to quickly attempt to obtain several thousand dollars to send to Samuel C. Pomeroy in Kansas, who would immediately use it to buy food and supplies to distribute to hungry settlers. Hyatt had just sent $400 of his own money to Pomeroy, hoping to slow the misery, but told Webb that it was vital to keep the interest up in Boston, as Hyatt himself was preoccupied with responding to the deep doubts express by Browne and Buchanan. “The poor are starving,” Hyatt wrote, and “I am not at this moment in a condition to do any more.”56

Though Democratic hardliners questioned the extent of the famine, outright denied it, or accepted it as fact but blamed it on the victims, President Buchanan himself did at least find enough merit in Hyatt’s report to move him to donate some of his own money to the cause. On November 13, 1860, Buchanan sent Hyatt a check for $100, money that came directory out of his personal account.


56 Ibid.
with Riggs & Co., and was marked as his “subscription for the relief of the suffering people of Kansas” (Figure 4.2).

President Buchanan's personal donation was met with skepticism and disgust by some commentators. The New York Times published a lengthy attack on Buchanan after they verified that he had in fact donated the money. The verification, which came in the form of “an actual copy of the order upon which the money was obtained,” was necessary, according to the Times, because the idea that Buchanan, “touched with the suffering of Kansas, had given a hundred dollars for their relief, is evidently deemed so improbable as to demand more than ordinary proof.” At the core of this doubting of Buchanan's motives was an apparent mismatch between his sudden support of the Kansas relief effort and the policies his administration had pursued during his time as President. Buchanan had only acted with “inveterate and remorseless malignity” toward the settlers in Kansas, and, the Times argued, it was his “tortuous Territorial policy” that was at least partially at fault for turning a drought into a famine. The editors put it plainly: “The ills which Kansas endures are very largely derived from the misgovernment of this administration.” While they conceded that “drought is not a visitation of
Presidents but of Providence,” the *Times* editors argued that the Buchanan administration had created an environment in which drought—generally an inconvenience, not a death sentence—could descend into a devastating famine. It was “the poverty which preceded the bad harvest” that “renders the people wholly unable to support the deficiency of breadstuffs.” That poverty, the editors continued, was “well known to have originated chiefly in the precarious tenure by which property and life have been held, and the cost of popular self-protection, incident to such savage and vindictive mismanagement as the affairs of the Territory have been deliberately subject to.”

This reference to the mismanagement of affairs in Kansas was loaded with several assumptions and claims, some of which were explained further by the editors, and others that would have been clear only to those closely following the ongoing national debate about the territory. In the latter category was a continuation of the indictment of the federal government that was first articulated by those who advocated for federal aid following the violence of Bleeding Kansas. Throughout the second half of the 1850s—precisely the time that Buchanan was President—multiple parties petitioned the federal government to make monetary restitution to the settlers whose homes and lives were destroyed by the violence of the early years of settlement. The various “claims commissions” took testimony, verified it, and submitted lengthy reports to Congress, arguing that the federal government had a fundamental responsibility to protect the property and lives of all Americans, especially those who were willing to risk everything in the democratic laboratory that was territorial Kansas. This was precisely the “precarious tenure by which property and life have been held” that the *Times* was still writing about late in 1860.

57 “The President’s Bounty to Kansas.”
Though Thaddeus Hyatt likely agreed with the general thrust of the *Times* attack on Buchanan, eliciting such reactions was never his intention when he decided to publish the $100 check from the President. Ironically, Hyatt had publicized the donation in an effort to put pressure on Republican leaders—his ostensible allies—who he felt had let national political strategizing cloud their judgment when it came to helping Kansas. Specifically, Hyatt was frustrated with two men: Charles H. Dana and William H. Seward. Dana was the managing editor of the *New York Tribune*, second only to the more well-known Horace Greeley. In late August 1860, Hyatt sent a letter to Dana (Hyatt was on bad terms with Greeley at the time) detailing the suffering from the drought in Kansas and the imminent famine if relief supplies were not collected quickly. According to Hyatt, “Dana did not publish this letter” because “another election was just on; the politicians were afraid I would again as I did in '56 divert subscriptions from their coffers.” Four years earlier, in 1856, Hyatt “had the misfortune to meet with a severe rebuff from one of the chief managers of the Freemont [sic] Campaign, for getting contributions for Kansas when they wanted every possible dollar to help carry the election.” Hyatt recalled being told: “the best way to help Kansas [was] to elect Freemont.” While it was perhaps less of an obvious party organ for the Republicans than the *Washington Constitution* was for Democrats, the *Tribune* was certainly in the business of getting Republicans elected to office.

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59 Thaddeus Hyatt, “Thaddeus Hyatt to the New York Tribune,” August 24, 1860, Thaddeus Hyatt Coll. #401 Box 2 Folder 1, Kansas State Historical Society.

60 Hyatt, “Kansas Famine Fund of 1860-61: A Letter to the Hon. E. G. Ross, Editor of 'Ross's Paper.'”
and Hyatt believed that Dana had put this political function ahead of the ability of the paper to arouse national sympathy for starving settlers.

Seward frustrated Hyatt even more. Upon hearing that Hyatt was beginning to ask for aid for Kansas, Seward, who by late summer and early fall was campaigning for Lincoln, “made a dash into Kansas himself...and then made a flaming speech to the County about Kansas, her rich prairie, and herds of fat cattle!” Reflecting on the famine in a letter from 1872, Hyatt wrote, “Mr. Seward’s sudden apparition upon the horizon of Kansas at this critical moment; the rapidity with which he darted into it, and shot out of it, and the dealt out his ‘soothing-sirrup’ speech to the political babes of his party, and the country, read in the light of my 1856 experience, shewed me at once what was the matter.” This infuriated Hyatt because it worked so well that it seriously delayed his attempts of alerting the nation to what was happening in Kansas. “But Mr. Seward was successful,” he recalled, arguing that Seward’s trip to Kansas had convinced the country “that there was not the least danger of a famine! that Kansas was able to take care of herself, and that she needed no help!” Seward, one of the most prominent Republicans in the country, had effectively stopped Hyatt’s campaign for Kansas relief before it could get started, all in the name of advancing the prospects of a Lincoln presidency. “So between the suppression of my letters by Dana and Seward[‘]s lying,” Hyatt wrote, “I had no chance to arouse the country until after the fall election. And the first subscription for Kansas which I then got I

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received from old Buchanan! The President! This check for $100.00 I published to shame the Republicans of the country for their apathy.\textsuperscript{63}

\textbf{State of the Union}

When President Buchanan gave his fourth, and final, State of the Union address to Congress on December 3, 1860, affairs in Kansas were important enough to warrant more than ten mentions, and the famine in particular was how he chose to end his final official address. As his lengthy speech wound down, he succinctly described the situation in Kansas: “It has been represented to me from sources which I deem reliable,” he began, indirectly citing Thaddeus Hyatt’s detailed report, “that the inhabitants in several portions of Kansas have been reduced nearly to a state of starvation on account of the almost total failure of their crops, whilst the harvests in every other portion of the country have been abundant. The prospect before them for the approaching winter is well calculated to enlist the sympathies of every heart.” Buchanan did more than simply describe the scene, however. He concluded his discussion of Kansas—and concluded his speech altogether—by making a plea to Congress to act on the information: “The destitution appears to be so general that it can not be relieved by private contributions, and they are in such indigent circumstances as to be unable to purchase the necessaries of life for themselves. I refer the subject to Congress. If any constitutional measure for their relief can be devised, I would recommend its adoption.”\textsuperscript{64}

\textsuperscript{63} Hyatt, “Thaddeus Hyatt to the New York Tribune.”

Buchanan’s appeal to Congress must have been confusing to his opponents, and can certainly be read in at least two conflicting ways. On the one hand, the President was acknowledging that private contributions, like his very own $100 check, were ultimately not going to be effective in the face of increasingly obvious devastation being caused by the lengthy drought in Kansas. On the other hand, he was passing the problem off to Congress, precisely when he was coming under direct fire for mishandling the situation. His opponents would surely have agreed that the problem was large enough to necessitate the aid of the federal government—after all, that is precisely that they had been arguing for in several different contexts, including famine relief, for the entirety of Buchanan’s presidency. A second, more generous reading of Buchanan’s appeal to Congress was that it was a genuine attempt to put the issue in the hands of those who had the authority to do something about it. Buchanan had responded sympathetically to the famine as a private citizen, donating $100, but was unable or unwilling to singlehandedly shift the federal government’s general policy of not intervening on behalf of settlers facing disasters.

Congress was unlikely to help, however; never during the drought did they ever move on any legislation related to relief, or even acknowledge that there was a problem. Buchanan’s attempt to pass the buck to Congress likely had the same result as an earlier effort by Kansans themselves to secure some aid from the legislative body. At some point late in 1860, Kansans attempted to force the hand of Congress by bringing out the old American trump card: taxation without representation. In an unsigned open letter addressed to both houses of Congress, Kansans collectively argued that “ever since our migration to this Territory we have been taxed for the support of the general Government in the same manner as the citizens of the States, but have had no voice in appropriating the money
which we have paid." Because such an arrangement was "a violation of the maxim which our fathers asserted and vindicated, to wit: 'Taxation and Representation are inseparable.' the Kansans believed the taxes they had paid since the creation of the territory should have been remitted immediately. The petitioners subtly continued a line of argument they had been using; that is, settlers pushing further west were explicitly engaged in a national project of settlement and expansion, and by risking their lives for that project that could reasonably expect the federal government to assist them when necessary. While it seemed clear that Congress had no intentions of moving on any relief legislation, the plea for remittance of taxes was still framed in such a way that communicated that Kansas believed they were only asking for what they had rightfully earned by their participation in the project of national expansion. They told the members of Congress that they were "obliged to go as suppliants for charity to the doors of our fellow citizens in the States" because they were running out of options. "We would gladly be relieved from such necessity," they continued, "by that act of justice which we now ask of the Representatives of a country which can well afford to be ever generous to the pioneers of its extending power."65

The end of the Buchanan presidency and the admission of Kansas into the Union in 1861 signaled a new era of hope for those settlers who were suffering through the Kansas winter. Kent Jarvis, who lived in Massillon, Ohio, wrote to his friend Orinda Baker in 1861, informing her that he had received a letter from her about the plight of the people in Kansas, as well as a letter from another woman in the new state, "fully corroborating your statement." Jarvis wrote to let Baker know that he

65 “Kansas Territory Citizens to the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America” c 1860, Orville Chester Brown Coll. #301 Box 1 Folder 11, Kansas State Historical Society.
and others were working diligently to secure aid for the Kansans, and that they had “ask[ed] our Legislature to make an appropriation of some $10,000 to purchase necessary seed, grain, etc.” In his letter, Jarvis, unlike many other concerned citizens, never once mentioned the drought itself, preferring instead to talk about its results: the “destitution” and “suffering in Kansas.” Perhaps he simply felt no need to comment on what was obvious, but a closing comment makes it clear that Jarvis viewed the “destitution” and “suffering” as not simply the unfortunate result of a climatical catastrophe, but the sinister outcome of the particular political climate in Kansas: “Now that Kansas is a sovereign State, and no longer, I trust, to be subject to misrule and the blight of slavery of ‘Buchananism,’ she will rise in her own native majesty by developing her natural resources, and show to the world that a ‘Nation is born.’”

Although Congress never took up the Kansas cause—Buchanan’s call to action fell upon deaf ears—and the President did ultimately open the New York Indian Reserve for public sale, the people of Kansas did not starve. The “blight of slavery and ‘Buchananism’,” that observers like Kent Jarvis wrote about had created roadblocks for expedient and comprehensive relief to the struggling territory, but in the end the relief efforts of Thaddeus Hyatt, Samuel C. Pomeroy, and William F. M. Arny, and the innumerable donors and distributors across the United States prevailed. South Carolina’s secession from the Union, which occurred barely two weeks after Buchanan’s final address, along with the initial formation of the Confederate States of America in February of 1861, and the firing on Ft. Sumter in April of that year, has largely erased the Kansas famine and its relief from the

historical record. If the battle over relief in Kansas was at its heart a manifestation of the growing political divide in the country, it follows that when that divide cracked wide open in the winter and spring of 1860-61, national attention would turn to what it saw as the more serious story.

Hyatt, Pomeroy, and Arny continued their work, however, and moved a staggering amount of relief goods, including seed, clothing, food, and money, into Kansas, even while the nation was fracturing at a rapid pace. On May 27, 1861, the relief committees in Kansas exhausted their provisions and ceased major operations, with just a trickle of seed grain and garden seed still being distributed throughout that summer. Based on the records kept by the committee in Atchison, by the time relief efforts ended Pomeroy and the county agents had collected and distributed 14,423,424 pounds of provisions and seed. They had also used $104,081.37 to cover freight charges, a number that could have been dramatically higher if Arny and Pomeroy had not been able to secure reduced or free fares for much of the shipping. Arny reported that in addition to the freight charges, he had spent $47,437.96 purchasing provisions and supplies.\(^67\) Crucially, the lengthy dry period finally gave out in early 1861 as well. In January of that year, while Pomeroy was busy putting relief goods into the hands of hungry Kansans, several heavy storms battered large portions of Kansas. The rain from those storms, coupled with an unusually early start to the warm weather of spring, meant that the snow that blanketed the region began to melt away by early February.\(^68\) With the return of good weather, Kansans were able to take advantage of the newly-soaked soil and plant the thousands of pounds of seed that had been donated. The crisis had been averted, or at least softened, by the actions of the relief agents, who were

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\(^68\) Parks, *The Darkest Period*, 118.
able to overcome skepticism of political enemies and bring adequately relief into the territory. The relief agents could not change one fundamental fact about Kansas, however: it remained a semiarid landscape, one that would undoubtedly be frequented by more devastating dry spells in the future. While their experience showed them the kindness and ability of a national relief network, and the potential callousness of the federal government, Kansans did not seem to learn any lessons about the realities of trying to farm in a region so susceptible to dramatic climatic events. They were able to weather many minor seasonal dry spells that followed, but the arrival of staggering numbers of locusts into the region fifteen years later would further test the protocols for relief that had been developed during the territorial period.
Chapter 5: Insects & Armies, The “Grasshopper Plague” of 1874–75

“Until 1895, the whole history of the state was a series of disasters, and always something new, extreme, bizarre, until the name Kansas became a byword, a synonym, for the impossible and the ridiculous, inviting laughter, furnishing occasion for jest and hilarity.”

—Carl Becker, “Kansas” (1910)

On a “clear, hot July day” in 1874, a farmer in Nebraska stood outside and watched as “a haze came over the sun.” In one sense, this may have been a relief; the summer of 1874 was a particularly hot one, and farmers across the plains were struggling to keep their crops alive in the face of yet another dry spell. Things quickly took a sinister turn, however. “The haze deepened into a gray cloud,” the farmer wrote. He continued:

Suddenly the cloud resolved itself into billions of gray grasshoppers sweeping down upon the earth. The vibration of their wings filled the ear with a roaring sound like a rushing storm. As far as the eye could reach in every direction the air was filled with them. Where they alighted, they covered the ground like a heavy crawling carpet. Growing crops disappeared in a single day. Trees were stripped of leaves. Potatoes, turnips and onions were pursued into the earth. Clothing and harness were cut into shreds if left exposed. Wheat and oats were mostly in the shock, by the grasshoppers covered the shocks, cut the bands and gnawed the grain.

Everywhere the earth was covered with a gray mass of struggling, biting grasshoppers. Turkeys and chickens feasted on them. Dogs and swine learned to eat them—the latter making them their chief food for many days. It was hard to drive a team across a field because the swarm of grasshoppers flew up in front, striking the horses in the face with a force that made them wild.
We thought when they were filled they would fly away. Not at all. They liked us so well they concluded to leave their children with us. The mother grasshoppers began to pierce the earth with holes and fill the holes with eggs. Each one laid about one hundred eggs. Then they died and the ground was covered with their dead bodies.¹

Within days, accounts of the descent of the grasshoppers had reached eastern newspapers, which covered the story with the same excitement they had covered earlier disasters in the region, like the drought and famine of 1860-61. On August 1, 1874, the New York Tribune published two brief announcements that began to demonstrate the scope of the grasshopper problem. One report, from St. Louis, noted the “great quantities of grasshoppers” that “appeared in Western and South-Western Kansas, and are destroying everything. Much damage and distress are apprehended.” Another report came from St. Paul, Minnesota, more than 500 miles away, and warned that the mass of grasshoppers could cover an area of land even more expansive than that. “Grasshoppers are rapidly moving eastward in myriads,” the report read, “and will doubtless reach Wisconsin, perhaps Illinois, before the flying season is over.” Perhaps knowing their audience, they concluded: “It is now absolutely certain that other States than this will complain of the scourge next year, and if the clouds of insects continue their present movement, even Central and Eastern States will not escape.”²

The observer from St. Paul would turn out to be wrong—for biological reasons, the grasshoppers would not, could not, make it much beyond where they had landed. In reality, they never extended their reach much beyond the western portion of Missouri, Minnesota, and Iowa. However, the Minnesotan was right to emphasize the sheer volume of grasshoppers and their potential for

¹ The evocative image of the locusts alighting on the fields of Nebraska comes from a first-hand account by the historian Addison E. Sheldon, from his Nebraska: The Land and the People, vol. 1 (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co., 1931), 494.

devastation. Owing to a population boom following the passage of the 1862 Homestead Act, which promised essentially free land in the West for those willing to live and work on it, the plains in 1874 were dramatically more populated than they had been during previous disasters. If observers in 1860-61 thought the devastation of 30,000 Kansans was bad, they could hardly imagine the scope of a disaster that had the potential to affect populations numbering in the millions (see fig 5.1 to get a sense of how large an area the grasshoppers ultimately affected).

![Map of North America Illustrating The Country East of the Rocky Mountains Subject to the Ravages of the Rocky Mountain Locust](image)

Figure 5.1 "Map of North America Illustrating The Country East of the Rocky Mountains Subject to the Ravages of the Rocky Mountain Locust," extracted from Fourth Annual Report of the Kansas State Board of Agriculture. (Topeka, KS: Geo. W. Martin, 1875), 47. The entire shaded area is noted as being "Country subject to Ravages," while the western edges of Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, the eastern half of Nebraska, and almost the entirety of Kansas are classified as "Country ravaged in 1874, and which suffered most."

While the private relief network built and maintained by Thaddeus Hyatt, William Arny, and Samuel Pomeroy effectively handled the needs of starving Kansans during the 1860-61 drought, such efforts would fall short in the face of the grasshoppers. Relief committees like those from earlier years
were certainly assembled, and many goods and funds were funneled into the hands of those on the
plains, but the sheer size of the population and scope of the problem necessitated the involvement of
a new ally. In 1874-75, the federal government, which had been so reluctant to help Kansans in the
1850s and early 1860s, was finally compelled to extend its ample resources to the needy in the plains.

The years following the Civil War saw an unprecedented explosion of population flooding into
Kansas and other western states, indicating that the drought and famine of 1860-61 did not leave a
black mark on the region as some had feared it might. Nor did it appear to create a more realistic set
of expectations for what getting a start in Kansas would be like given the sometimes unforgiving
landscape. The story of the struggle of Kansans to come to terms with the landscape they chose as
their home did not end in 1861, however. There was, of course, the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, which
brought devastation to Kansans and others on a scale that had been inconceivable to American
observers, and which has subsequently spawned innumerable analyses and narratives. The drought
of 1860-61 and the Dust Bowl of the 1930s mark the dramatic bookends of a period in which natural
disasters repeatedly visited the earliest settlers of Kansas, who faced the challenges in some ways that
were remarkably similar and others that only made sense in their specific historical context. By
considering another event that occurred in the decades between these two critical events, we are able
to begin to see in even more detail what made the 1860-61 drought, famine, and relief efforts so unique
and also influential in the development of Kansas.

3 Paul Bonnifield, The Dust Bowl: Men, Dirt, and Depression (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979); Donald
Worster, Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s, 25th Anniversary Ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Both
Bonnifield and Worster's books owe some of their prominence to another historian, William Cronon, who made them the
subject of what has become a classic study of environmental historiography, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and
Narrative," The Journal of American History 78, no. 4 (1992): 1347–76; See also Harry C. McDean, "Dust Bowl
Populous Plains

One defining feature of Kansas in the decade immediately following its admittance into the Union was its explosive population growth. The 30,000 starving Kansans described by Thaddeus Hyatt and other observers in 1860 had constituted a significant portion of the population then—just under a third of the 107,206 people counted in the federal census that year. By 1870, that number would have had far less of an effect when trying to stir the sympathies of Americans, as it would have made up less than ten percent of Kansas’s 364,339 citizens. The population in Kansas had boomed. The 364,339 Kansans in 1870 represented a 239.8 percent increase over the population in 1860, at a time when the overall decennial growth rate in the United States was at 26.6 percent (a rate that was itself quite impressive). The growth rate in Kansas for the next decade, between 1870 and 1880, had slowed to 173.4 percent, but this still represented a shockingly higher percentage than the national growth rate, which had effectively held steady at 26 percent. The 1890 census showed that the growth rate in Kansas had slowed to a more reasonable 43.4 percent, and that Kansans at that time made up more than 2.27 percent of the entire population of the United States, a figure that remains the high point of Kansas population relative to the size of the nation. By 1900, immigration to Kansas had largely stabilized, with decennial growth rates dipping into the single digits. In short, the decades following statehood were marked by soaring population growth, which would serve to amplify some of the problems that settlers had faced in the territorial period.⁴

The dramatic expansion of the population of Kansas after its admission to the Union in 1861 was owed mostly to the passage of a critical piece of legislation: the Homestead Act of 1862. Though the 1840s and 1850s had seen continual debate at the national level about a homestead bill, with members of first Free Soil Party (formed in 1848) and later the Republican Party (formed in 1856) arguing for the importance of offering free land those willing to settle on and improve it, it was not until the ascendancy of Abraham Lincoln that a bill was able to make it into law. Southern senators had blocked the homestead bills of the 1850s, fearing an expansion of anti-slavery sentiment into the West, and President Buchanan had vetoed a bill that made it through Congress in 1860, arguing that, among other reasons, it would be unfair to “old settlers” who had paid for their lands, and that it would promote speculation. As described in the previous chapter, Buchanan’s political opponents saw his particular land policy decisions as being deeply partisan, arguing that Buchanan’s southern sympathies were keeping him from making decisions favorable to actual settlers. By 1862, however, the White House was firmly in favor of a homestead bill, and the Congressional block was broken by the absence of the opponents of a liberal land policy, who had seceded from the Union in 1860-61. President Lincoln signed the Homestead Act on May 20, 1862, and it went into effect on January 1, 1863.

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7 Ibid.
Following the protocol of the Homestead Act became the favored method of acquiring land in Kansas, almost instantaneously supplanting the method of preemption that had been established in 1841 and had been so devastating to early settlers in Kansas who struggled to pay for their lands while also trying to feed and clothe themselves during particularly dry and challenging years. Under the Homestead Act, heads of household, or those who were at least 21 years old and U.S. citizens (or on the path to citizenship), who had “never borne arms against the United States Government or given aid and comfort to its enemies” (a clause intended to exclude Confederate soldiers from acquiring claims), were able to secure 160 acres of publicly owned land for only a nominal fee, provided they agreed to live on and improve the land for at least five years. Because the law also allowed for the acquisition of lands already opened for sale via preemption, many settlers who would have previously chosen to preempt their lands seized the opportunity to secure that land for essentially free, causing the confusing preemption method to fall out of favor.

In addition to an influx of settlers, the years after the Civil War saw a dramatic expansion of the scope and power of the federal government, a fact that would come to be important when Kansans were once again faced with environmental catastrophe. This was, of course, the period in which the federal government secured its primacy over the states with the passage of Fourteenth Amendment, ratified in 1868, which ensured that “No state shall make or enforce any law which shall

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8 Gates, Fifty Million Acres, 243–244.

9 The entirety of the Homestead Act of 1862 runs only two printed pages, a testament to its simplicity relative to the Preemption Act of 1841. See An Act to Secure Homesteads to Actual Settlers on the Public Domain, U.S. Statutes at Large 12 (1863), 392-393.

abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.” Whereas previously the rights of citizens could be defined and circumscribed by states themselves, now the federal government extended protection of all the rights enumerated under the constitution, a move that fundamentally reshaped the relationship between states and the federal government, expanding the power of the latter.

Another way in which the federal government was extending and growing in power, and one that was of particular concern to Kansans, was the United States’ engagement in a substantial, if fractured, campaign against the various plains peoples who were living in the vast swath of land between the Mississippi River and the Pacific Ocean. Continuing a policy of displacing whole groups of people and appropriating their lands, and, in fact, amplifying that policy, became one of the main goals of the U.S. Army after the Civil War, a conflict that swelled the numbers of available federal troops. Between 1865 and 1891 the Army used its roughly 27,000 enlisted men, stationed in forts that dotted the landscape of Kansas, Nebraska, the Dakotas, Texas, Indian Territory, Colorado, Nevada, Montana, and beyond, to wrest control of valuable lands from dozens of Native groups, ostensibly creating an environment in which white settlement could continue to push westward.12 While the increasing presence of federal authority, in the form of armed U.S. Army soldiers and officers, symbolized an unrelenting enemy pushing even deeper into Native-controlled territory, it was


undoubtedly a boon to the white settlers who were eager to stake claims on the plains landscape. It would, in fact, be the presence of these soldiers that would ultimately save white settlers not only from having to engage themselves in extended warfare with the people whose lands they were invading, but also from the devastating “attack” of the grasshoppers that would make that very land nearly uninhabitable.

By 1874, when the grasshoppers were beginning to cover the plains, many Americans had begun to make new homes in the region. This dramatic growth of population in the middle of the century would magnify the misery and distress caused by a disaster like the Grasshopper Plague, and would complicate the efforts to help those affected, and, further, would increase pressures on Native groups who were engaged in a decades-long battle with the United States for control over the continent’s extensive lands.

The “Grasshopper Plague”

A word about “grasshoppers.” Though nearly all commentators in the 1870s referred to the insects that devastated the Great Plains as grasshoppers, the more accurate term is locust. Understanding the difference between these two terms requires a short detour into taxonomic classification. You begin to see beings that resemble locusts by moving through the Insecta class to the order Orthoptera (meaning straight-winged), which includes grasshoppers, crickets, and roaches, among others. Grasshoppers are separated from their Orthoptera siblings and classified in the family Acrididae, which contains more than 10,000 species of insects sharing a few common traits: antennae that are shorter than the body, feet with three joints, and a unique arrangement of reproductive organs of
females. Of these 10,000 species, only 10 are considered locusts, a label given only to those
grasshoppers whose numbers can rapidly swell and who travel in swarms. The name comes from *locus
ustus*, Latin for “burnt place,” clearly a reference to the devastation the insects leave in their wake as
they move across a landscape.\(^3\)

Only one species of locust has called North America home: *Melanoplus spretus*, otherwise
known as the Rocky Mountain locust.\(^4\) The insect owes its name to its preferred breeding ground,
which was at high altitude in the Rocky Mountain range, particularly in Colorado, Montana,
Wyoming, and British Columbia, where the frequently dry air and soil allowed it to deposit eggs with
minimal risk of disruption from moisture. This aridity came at a price, however. When the young
insects hatched, their ravenous hunger was difficult to sate in the mountains and valleys of the far
West, so they often looked eastward, towards the grasslands that covered the central part of North
America. The nineteenth-century entomologist Charles V. Riley, who remains an authority on the
locust, described their now famous descents onto the plains: “Prompted by that most exigent law of
hunger—spurred on for very life—it rises in immense clouds in the air to seek for fresh pastures


\(^4\) In 2014 the International Union for Conservation of Nature declared the Rocky Mountain locust to be extinct. Though this marked their official extinction, the species was absent from the continent as early as the first decade of the twentieth century, with the last known living specimen found in 1902. With the extinction of the Rocky Mountain locust, North America joined Antarctica in having no native locust species. See Axel Hochkirch, “Melanoplus Spretus,” *The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species*, accessed May 13, 2015, http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/full/51269349/0, though note that the entry contains a typographic error stating that the “species suddenly disappeared at the end of the 18th Century,” rather than the nineteenth. The leading analysis of the extinction of the Rocky Mountain locust is Jeffrey A. Lockwood and L. D. DeBrey, “A Solution for the Sudden and Unexplained Extinction of the Rocky Mountain Grasshopper (Orthoptera: Acriddidae),” *Environmental Entomology* 19 (1990): 1194–1205.
where it may stay its ravenous appetite." Riding the winds that come down off the Rockies, “often at the rate of fifty or sixty miles an hour, the darkening locust clouds are soon carried into the more moist and fertile country to the southeast, where with sharpened appetites, they fall upon the crops like a plague and a blight.”

This was precisely what happened in 1874; billions of Rocky Mountain locusts, in a hungry frenzy, migrated onto the fertile landscape to their east, precisely where new settlers and farmers were trying to maintain their crops. The timing could not have been worse, as the region had once again been suffering a prolonged dry period, with only minimal rains falling in 1873 and 1874. In Kansas, one town reported only 7.5 inches of rainfall for the entire year of 1873, making it the driest year on record. This persistent dryness had two devastating effects: first, it caused plants to fill their leaves with sugars and other nutrients, straining their protective cell walls, and making them a ripe (quite literally) target for hungry locusts; second, the fungal diseases that could quickly decimate locust populations were nonexistent in dry weather, which allowed the locusts to maintain incredible numbers as they landed on crops in Kansas and other plains regions.

Governor Thomas Osborn of Kansas, sensing an impending crisis if the state government did not step in, issued a proclamation on August 28, 1874 that called for a special session of the legislature, an act that demonstrates just how serious he considered the problem. In his brief proclamation, Osborn described how the “western and new settled portion” of Kansas had “been invaded by an army of grasshoppers,” which had “destroyed the growing crops on which the people relief for subsistence,

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16 Lockwood, Locust, 22.
thus rendering destitute very many of our citizens and threatening great suffering among the
people...unless speedily relieved." Osborn understood his role as governor as requiring prompt
attention to “the first duty of the State, a fostering care and protection for all her citizens,” but
acknowledged that he alone could not issue relief. Because “The State has no power to afford
necessary relief in the absence of legislation providing therefor,” Osborn summoned the Senate and
House of Representatives to meet in Topeka on Tuesday, September 15, where they were to “consider
and determine such measures as will best accomplish” relief for the settlers affected by the
grasshoppers.17 The importance of Osborn’s call for a special session cannot be understated. It was an
unprecedented event; though the Kansas constitution allowed for the calling of a special session by
the governor, that had not been done in the first thirteen years of the state’s existence, and it wouldn’t
be done again until a decade after the Grasshopper Plague. For Osborn, the already existing and
potential devastation of crops in the newly settled parts of Kansas was serious enough to meet the
qualification of “extraordinary occasions,” as required by the constitution, and thus the call went out
to representatives to make their way to Topeka in haste.18

The special legislature met on September 15, 1874, and authorized two separate relief acts. The
first created a bond program, wherein authorized counties in Kansas could issue “special relief bonds”
at an extremely low rate, and the second appropriated $73,000 which would be used to purchase


18 For a description of the process of calling a special session, and a brief timeline of the few times it has happened in
Kansas’ history, see Gordon L. Self and Jill A. Wolters, “Legislative Procedures for Special Sessions” (Topeka, KS: Office of
the Revisor of Statutes, Legislature of the State of Kansas, 2013), http://www.ksrevisor.org/rpts/LegislativeProceduresforSpecialSession_2013.pdf; “Special Sessions of the Kansas
those county bonds. Several counties were given specific caps on the amount from the appropriation they could use for buying bonds, none of which totaled more than $5,000. Elias Stover, the Lieutenant Governor, quickly adapted to this complex plan and, working with county officials, was able to arrange for the delivery of more than 60 railroad car-loads and 8,000 “packages” of relief goods—mostly corn and seed for the following spring. Other state legislatures approved similar, though often less convoluted, appropriations for relief. The state legislature in Iowa in 1874 approved the use of $50,000 for purchasing seeds to be distributed in the spring of 1875. In Minneapolis in early 1875, Minnesota lawmakers approved an act that appropriated $75,000 for the purchase of seed grain, and another $25,000 for immediate food relief.

Fearing that these appropriations would be inadequate, Stover, two months after the legislature met, also organized the “Kansas Central Relief Committee,” which was modeled on the earlier relief committees that had sustained Kansans during the 1860-61 drought and famine. On November 20, 1874, Stover issued a letter addressed to “the Citizens of Kansas and the People of the Eastern States.” He briefly recounted the legislative actions of the months before, noting that “the Legislature held, that under the constitution it had not the power to make appropriations adequate to the emergency, directly from the treasury,” and instead had pushed for the complex county bond plan. “For various reasons not necessary here to enumerate,” he continued, “the legislative action has failed to relieve the wants of the people.” What was necessary to relieve all Kansans was more money


from within and without the state, and Stover explained how the establishment of the committee was an attempt to provide a legitimate avenue for national donations. “If there are those outside of this State who desire to aid us in supplying the wants of our hardy, industrious but now unfortunate pioneers,” Stover told his eastern audience, “this Committee affords them a medium through which their contributions may be judiciously applied...and fully accounted for.” Stover’s call across the nation was answered; by the time the Kansas Central Relief Committee ceased operating in 1875, it had collected $73,863.47 in cash, and another $161,245 in supplies that were shipped into Kansas in 265 car-loads and 11,409 packages. In total, Stover’s committee distributed $235,108.47 in cash and supplies to needy Kansans, more than three times the amount approved by the state legislature in their bond scheme. This was by all accounts a success, but many hungry farmers yet remained in Kansas and other regions affected by the locusts, so the struggling citizens had to continue looking for solutions to their problem.

The Unadaptable Foodscape

The descent of the Rocky Mountain Locust onto the plains in 1874-75 resembled the 1860-61 drought in that settlers saw their crops disappear to forces out of their control, but it differed in that the later disaster also represented a failure of Kansans to adapt their understanding of the Kansas foodscape to the realities of the region. Specifically, the earlier disaster left fields burnt up and seeds

22 “Kansas Central Relief Committee Address,” November 20, 1874, Kansas Relief Collection, Box 10, Folder 1, Kansas State Historical Society.

unsprouted in the ground, leaving a landscape bare of edible foodstuffs; the latter destroyed crops, but
the locusts themselves were a potential source of energy, meaning the plains, despite appearing as a
scorched wasteland, were actually blanketed in edible insects.

Charles V. Riley, Missouri’s first State Entomologist, was the first observer to suggest eating the
Rocky Mountain Locust as a possible solution for curbing the hunger of afflicted farmers. Owing to his
professional (and personal) interest in the insects, Riley was familiar with the history of locusts and
other insects being used as food in other parts of the world, and it had become an object of his
research in the 1870s. In 1875, however, he “was governed by weightier reasons than mere curiosity” to
consider the locust as food, having witnessed families in Kansas, Nebraska, and Missouri “brought to
the brink of the grave by sheer lack of food.” Riley experimented with the insects, finding that the
“flavor of the raw locust is most strong and disagreeable,” but cooking them made them “agreeable,
and sufficiently mild to be easily neutralized by anything with which they may be mixed.” What made
the locust so incredible, though, was precisely that one did not need to disguise its flavor to be able to
consume it without disgust, a feature that made it particularly useful for feeding people without other
foods to mix it with. “They require no disguise,” he wrote, “and herein lies their value in exceptional
emergencies; for when people are driven to the point of starvation by these ravenous pests, it follows
that all other food is either very scarce or unattainable.” Riley suggested boiling the bodies of the
locusts into a broth or soup, or frying them in their own oil, as methods of making them palatable
with minimal preparation. Recognizing that his suggestion would “provoke...ridicule and mirth, or
even disgust,” as “the vast majority of our people, unaccustomed to anything of the sort, and
associating with the word insect or ‘bug’ everything horrid and repulsive,” Riley also noted that the
insects provided ideal fodder for stock animals, and suggested that settlers unwilling to eat the pests themselves would do well to maintain enough stock to fight off the insects during their next visitation.24

Americans had mixed reactions to Riley's suggestion that they begin to think of locusts as less of a pest and more of a source of calories conveniently brought to one's doorstep by the billions. An article in the New York Times praised Riley's research on the edibility of the locusts, acknowledging that his idea was not only ingenious, but had "abundant Scriptural authority" backing it up. While seemingly genuinely supportive of the idea, the Times noted the unlikelihood of the idea taking off, and dedicated the remainder of the article to suggestions of how to make them palatable to Americans, using humor to simultaneously acknowledge the absurdity of eating insects and the absurdity of not doing so. The Times argued that Americans needed to reconsider what they considered "food," suggesting a change in name for the locust might help: "The hitherto undesired locust is the new bird for table consumption. We call it a bird in order to elude, if possible, the popular prejudice against eating insects." For those in the West, "every wild creature is classed as 'vermin,'" the Times noted, but such an understanding of animal life was limiting, and hungry farmers needed to think about the insects as fowl, perhaps taking "the place usually occupied by quail or canvas-backs" on American plates. Despite their tongue-in-cheek endorsement of Riley's ideas, the writers of the Times were skeptical that Americans could overcome their biases. "After all," they wrote, "it must be confessed that there is against all unusual articles of food a popular prejudice which is difficult to

24 Riley's detailed suggestions for how to cook and consume the Rocky Mountain Locust, including his brief history of insects as food, can be found in John S. Marmaduke, ed., Eleventh Annual Report of the State Board of Agriculture of the State of Missouri for the Year 1875 (Jefferson City, MO: Hogan & Carter, 1876), 140–147.
conquer. The human stomach is a fastidious organ. Who eats a doubtful egg?\textsuperscript{25} The piece in the *New York Times* demonstrates that while Charles Riley’s insect-eating idea may have made total sense, scientifically and ecologically, it was up against the strong cultural norms regarding what was food and what it was not, and even supporters of the idea recognized it was unlikely to appeal to those who would actually have to partake in a locust-based diet.

Farmers in Kansas, Nebraska, Minnesota, and other regions affected by the locusts did not heed Riley’s suggestion; the American repulsion to eating insects seemed too big of a hurdle to overcome, even with senses altered by hunger. Further, Riley’s argument that the locusts would provide ideal fodder for stock animals if humans were unwilling to eat the insects themselves proved to be untrue in practice. While pigs and chickens did feast on the locusts, in the process of digestion the meat and eggs of the animals were darkened by a reddish-brown oil imparted by the locust bodies. This not only gave them a repulsive, foreign appearance, but farmers willing to try to eat the products anyway reported that the taste of the flesh or eggs was ruined by the pungent flavor of the locust.\textsuperscript{26} In addition to the foul taste of animal products, the vast quantities of locusts available to the stock animals caused some of them to eat so much that they gorged themselves to death, causing a serious monetary loss for an already struggling population.\textsuperscript{27} Finally, farmers also complained that the locusts contributed to their misery by contaminating their water supplies, upon which both humans and non-human animals depended for sustenance. Farmers reported that the locusts’ excrement and


\textsuperscript{26}Alexandra M. Wagner, “Grasshoppered: America’s Response to the 1874 Rocky Mountain Locust Invasion,” *Nebraska History* 89 (2008): 156.

\textsuperscript{27}Lockwood, *Locust*, 3–4.
decaying bodies had “poisoned” springs, wells, and streams, making them undrinkable. As Charles Riley would surely tell them, nothing about the locust was actually toxic, but despite the suggestions of the entomologist and others, American farmers remained revolted and repulsed by the idea of consuming the insects, rejecting them as food based on their smell, taste, and appearance.

Though eating the locusts was apparently beyond the limits of reasonable response by most farmers, they did not sit idly by while the insects destroyed their homes and crops. The built environment of the plains landscape—at least what was left of it that the locusts could not or did not consume—provided a convenient weapon in some cases. “At times they came in such immense clouds, that on the north and west sides of buildings, bushels of them could be gathered, partially stunned by the sudden contact,” wrote one observer. For those locusts who did not stun themselves on the sides of buildings, farmers brought the fight to them, firing guns at the insects, swinging ropes into masses of them, and shaking them loose from the bare stalks of their crops. Farmers then proceeded in various ways to attempt to eradicate the stunned pests. An 1875 article in Harper’s Weekly, and its accompanying image (Figure 5.2), described one such method: “The people often turn out as represented in the picture, and after first piling some hay or straw in the centre of a field, they will commence at the outskirts, and sweep these insects toward the funeral pile prepared for them.” After the farmers had fully swept over their land, and “millions have deposited themselves on the heap,” the entire pile was “touched with a match, and the whole mass is burned.”

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30 Lockwood, Locust, 49–50.
conflagration had died down, “the farmers then plow their lands and sow their crops, in most cases with good success.” 31 Those less inclined to start a fire on their dry homesteads took a slightly different approach. “Several farmers owning large farms have constructed pits and trenches,” read one report. “In these[,] locusts, whose bodies would have filled 10 or 15 bushel baskets, have been drowned.” Unlike the burning method, though, the drowning-in-a-trench method seemed largely ineffectual. “[T]heir places have been quickly taken by other locusts,” an observer reported regarding the drowned insects. 32

Figure 5.2 “Clearing a Field of Grasshoppers,” Harper’s Weekly, July 3, 1875.


A Prayer Answered?

The fundamental importance of the politics of slavery to the 1860-61 relief efforts is thrown into high relief when one considers the response of Missourians to the 1874-75 Grasshopper Plague. This was a radical departure from the response of Missourians in 1860-61, which ranged from quiet observation to outright denial and hostility. This response was not simply the result of St. Joseph's importance as a key terminus for railroads heading toward Kansas, either. Around the same time as the St. Joseph committee was celebrating its establishment of a functional aid supply to Kansas, the press in St. Charles published a sad tale of a desperate Kansan who had arrived in the small town outside of St. Louis, nearly 250 miles away from the border with Kansas. The “scourge” of the “late grasshopper visitation” had forced the Kansan, “his wife, daughter and son” to leave their home and attempt to make their way back to their former home in Illinois. On their journey through Missouri the wife and daughter had taken ill and died; upon arrival in St. Charles the son, too, had become ill, “burning up with fever.” After a week of living in an “old shanty” in the small Missouri town, the young boy died as well, leaving the Kansan “penniless and heartbroken.” This description was not paired with an explicit call for donations, but there is no doubt the heart-rending scene was meant to elicit sympathy for the struggling citizens of the state’s neighbor to the west.

33 “St. Charles News Clipping,” November 18, 1874, Kansas Relief Collection, Box 10, Folder “1874 Correspondence,” Kansas State Historical Society.
Missourians may have shown an unprecedented concern for the material well-being of their neighbors in Kansas, but it is possible that that concern was primarily motivated by a sense of impending disaster, a fear that the insects would not stop at the border between the two states and would soon be descending on the fields of Missouri farms as well. By early 1875, some locusts had crossed into Missouri, though they remained only in the westernmost part of the state, on the border with Kansas.\footnote{Neely, The Border between Them, 203–205.} In May 1875, Charles Henry Hardin, the Governor of Missouri, was worried about the potential for further devastation in Missouri that he began to consider solutions to the problem. The first solution was to call for an official day of fasting and prayer, a method suggested to the Governor by several devout Missourians in the spring of that year.\footnote{Lockwood, Locust, 39.} Hardin was evidently convinced by the suggestions of these citizens, and on May 17 he issued what would become known as his “Grasshopper Proclamation”:

\begin{quote}
Whereas, owing to the failures and losses of crops, much suffering has been endured by many of our people during the past few months, and similar calamities are impending upon large communities, and may possibly extend to the whole state, and if not abated will eventuate in sore distress and famine;

Wherefore, be it known that the 3\textsuperscript{rd} day of June proximo is hereby appointed and set apart as a day of fasting and prayer, that the Almighty God may be invoked to remove from our midst those impending calamities, and to grant instead the blessings of abundance and plenty; and the people and all the officers of the State are hereby request to desist, during that day, from their usual employments, and to assemble at their places of worship for humble and devout prayer, and to otherwise observe the day as one of fasting and prayer.\footnote{Buel Leopard and Floyd C. Shoemaker, eds., The Messages and Proclamations of the Governors of the State of Missouri, vol. 5 (Columbia, MO: State Historical Society of Missouri, 1924), 483.}
\end{quote}
Hardin’s call for prayer marked a curious departure from the handling of the drought and famine 15 years before. There were certainly those in 1860-61 who viewed the drought and famine through a spiritual lens, but calls for an official, government-sponsored day of prayer were largely outmoded even then. Thaddeus Hyatt, in 1860, had penned his “Prayer for Rain,” which on the surface seemed a sincere appeal to God to save Kansans, with lines like “Rain for the land, O God! / O! send thy pleaders rain! / Let not their piteous cries come up / Before thy Throne in vain!,” but Hyatt’s “prayer” was meant to be a dramatize the events in Kansas, to drive home to readers of the newspapers that published the poem the severity of the drought.37 In private letters or other public messages, Hyatt never indicated he believed praying to God could actually aid the hungry in Kansas. In fact, it was his 68-page “Prayer to James Buchanan” that consumed most of his energy in the fall of 1860, an indication of exactly who he considered to have the power to save Kansans.

In 1860-61, calls for prayer for rain were only suggested by the deeply devout, primarily those affiliated with Christian organizations, like the Home Missionary Society, who were interested in saving the souls of settlers in the West. For example, the Reverend Lewis Bodwell, an agent for the Home Missionary Society, who had been in Kansas since 1856, wrote in 1860 to his colleagues in the Christian organization, asking churches across the country to join him in a day of prayer. For Bodwell, the “severe affliction” of “drought, of almost entire failure of crops, [and] an unprecedented pecuniary

37 Hyatt’s “Prayer for Rain” appears in full in James C. Malin, “Dust Storms: Part I, 1850-1860,” The Kansas Historical Quarterly 14, no. 2 (1946): 142–143. The poem, which originally appears in the Lawrence Republican is read by Malin as purely a rhetorical flourish, not as a serious appeal to the divine for intervention.
pressure," were sure signs that God was testing his subjects, and was on the verge of dispensing his mercy at the first sign of praise from those in Kansas.\textsuperscript{38}

In 1874-75, Governor Hardin’s proclamation notwithstanding, hungry settlers largely looked to their earthly companions for help in times of need, and some even mocked the idea of supernatural intervention. “We all know that looking for rain will not bring it,” one observer wrote in the summer of 1874, “nor will gazing steadfastly at the barometer affect the movements of the instrument.” Talking about the drought, particularly to God, “will not make one drop of rain water more or one grasshopper less. Yet for the last six weeks the useless employments we have mentioned have occupied most of the time of our adult citizens, and men have gone about with their eyes cocked at the brazen heavens after the manner of a goose going under a gate.”\textsuperscript{39} Another Kansan made the connection between what was going on around him and the plagues that befell the biblical Egyptians, but understood it in a thoroughly worldly, Kansas-specific context. Writing to the editor of the New York Tribune, Kansan “H. Z. F.” described how “drouth, chinch-bugs, and locusts or grasshoppers” were “destroying crops and devastating the country,” much like the plagues of the Bible. “In addition to these grievous plagues,” however, Kansans also had to deal with more destructive forces. The Kansan argued that the way to understand what was happening in Kansas was “by substituting dishonest politicians for ‘frogs that went up into the kneading-troughs,’ and land agents for ‘lice that covered the land.”\textsuperscript{40}


\textsuperscript{39} “The Drouth,” Junction City Union, August 1, 1874.

\textsuperscript{40} “Inducements for Emigration to Kansas,” New York Tribune, August 24, 1874.
these settlers understood the Grasshopper Plague primarily through a secular lens, they did not push their own Governor to pursue the day of prayer policy that the Governor of Missouri had insisted on.

If Governor Hardin’s call for prayer was primarily motivated by a desire to stop the locusts from spreading beyond the western edge of Missouri, one observer noted that the Missouri leader was engaging in unnecessary prayer, as the biological reality of the Rocky Mountain Locust would keep it contained. As he watched farmers in Missouri and states further east begin to panic at the prospect of a continuing locust invasion, William Grosvenor, an editor of a newspaper in St. Louis, wrote to the editors of the New York Tribune, criticizing Governor Hardin for his ignorant appeal to the heavens. “[T]he Governor, instead of stating the facts, has issued a proclamation appointing a day of general fasting and prayer,” an action which “has greatly intensified and extended the alarm, caused a great panic in many counties really in no danger, and through a large region trade is arrested.” Hardin, according to Grosvenor, was “very pious, but has not much knowledge.” Grosvenor drew on the work of State Entomologist Charles Riley, citing the expert’s work on the Rocky Mountain Locust, particularly the details of the insect’s life cycle. Specifically, he noted that the insects appearing in western Missouri in the spring of 1875 were the spawn of the more “active” and “voracious” insects that arrived in the fall of the previous year. The “young locust, hatched in this climate,” was weaker than the “original stock,” and, most critically, “cannot reproduce itself.” Fears by Missourians who were not on the border with Kansas, then, were misplaced according to Grosvenor, and those “far beyond the region in which the insect has actually appeared,” like in Illinois and Indiana were being foolish for worrying. Because of actions like Governor Hardin’s call for a day of fasting and prayer, people in the Midwest were unnecessarily concerned; “some of the papers, instead of giving the facts, have
increased the alarm by highly sensational articles." It was not just small papers that were trading in misinformation, either. “Even so sensible a paper as The Chicago Tribune gives a most absurd account,” Grosvenor wrote, “two columns in length, prognosticating dire destruction to the gardens of Chicago and the crops of Illinois.” 41 For Grosvenor, then, a thorough scientific understanding trumped any supernatural appeals, which only served, in his view, to further mystify the insects and spread panic among people that had nothing to worry about.

Entomologist Charles Riley had a similar reaction to Governor Hardin’s proclamation, but instead of suggesting that Missourians simply wait for the locusts’ natural lifespan to come to an end, he argued that prayer would be fine as long as it was accompanied by full engagement in the material world. Writing to the St. Louis Globe on two days after the Hardin issued his proclamation, Riley noted that he “deeply and sincerely appreciate[d] the sympathy thy Governor manifests for the suffering people of our western counties,” though his suggestion of collective prayers that “the great Author of our being may be invoked to remove impending calamities.” However, “without discussing the question as to the efficacy of prayer in affecting the physical world, no one will for a moment doubt that the supplications of the people will more surely be granted if accompanied by well-directed, energetic work.” He pointed to a recent historical case—that of Lord Palmerston, the British Home Secretary, who, facing suggestions by church groups in 1853 to declare a day of fasting in order to eradicate cholera, argued that prayer would not help as much more practical, scientific solutions, such as feeding the poor, “cleans[ing] the cesspools, ventilat[ing] the houses and remov[ing] the causes

and sources of the contagion.”42 Riley told the St. Louis paper that he “would like to see the prayers of the people take on the substantial form of collections, made in churches throughout the State, for the benefit of the sufferers, and distributed by organized authority.” Better yet, he argued, instead of focusing on ineffectual prayer and fasting, “State authorities, if it is in their power, should offer a premium for every bushel of young locusts destroyed,” thus creating a bounty system that would incentivize people to actually do the physical work required to keep Missourians and others from starving.” In other words, simply prayer seemed unlikely to work, but could be assisted along by labor. “We are commanded by the best authority to prove our faith by our work,” the entomologist told readers in St. Louis, a message he hoped authorities like Governor Hardin would take to heart.43

Despite appearances, Hardin, too, might have been skeptical about the efficacy of prayer. Though it was not known until many years later, Hardin had actually consulted with Charles Riley and was convinced of the expert’s arguments that the locust problem might take care of itself. Riley had told Hardin that the young locusts would likely begin to fly away from Missouri, northward, not eastward, at the beginning of June. Thus Hardin’s choice of June 3 as the date of fasting and prayer appears in hindsight to be as much as shrewdly calculated political play based on scientific information as it was a legitimate appeal to God.44 In fact, Hardin did not even consider himself a

42 Riley’s letter to the St. Louis Dispatch is quoted at length in Gilbert Waldbauer, “Millions of Monarches, Bunches of Beetles,” in A World of Insects: The Harvard University Press Reader, ed. Ring T. Cardé and Vincent H. Resh (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 112–26; A brief history of Lord Palmerston’s involvement with the cholera epidemic in 1853 can be found in Christopher Lawrence, Medicine in the Making of Modern Britain, 1700–1920, Historical Connections (New York: Routledge, 1994), 49.

43 Quoted in Waldbauer, “Millions of Monarches, Bunches of Beetles,” 120–121.

44 Hardin and Riley’s discussion of the timing of the exodus of the locusts was brought to light by Leland Ossian Howard, the fourth chief entomologist in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and is recounted in Lockwood, Locust, 42.
devout Christian at the time he issued the proclamation (he did so at the insistence of his wife)\textsuperscript{45}, and had hedged his bets with what he considered a more practical solution: asking government officials for help. On June 1, 1875, only two days before the official day of fasting and prayer, Hardin wrote to Frederick Watts in Washington, asking the Commissioner of Agriculture for seeds to be planted in June in Missouri. “Almost every green substance has been consumed,” he told Watts. “Wheat, corn, oats, flax, timothy and clover and all the garden production have been totally consumed,” he continued. Missourians near the border were “destitute and have not the means to purchase either provisions or seeds,” so Hardin appealed to “the kindness and generosity of the General Government in the distribution of seeds,” asking for corn, pea, bean, beet, carrot, parsnip, turnip, and radish seeds, all of which could be planted in the late spring and early summer. Like organizers of the relief efforts during the Bleeding Kansas era and the 1860-61 drought, Governor Hardin had secured the cooperation of the railroads, obtaining reduced or free freight for any goods that the federal government was willing to ship to hungry Missourians, a fact that he communicated to Watts, likely hoping it would speed up the process of acquiring aid by simplifying some of the logistics that the government would have to consider.\textsuperscript{46}

General E. O. C. Ord and the Call for Federal Intervention

Commissioner Watts did not respond to Hardin, but he did not need to; by the time he received the Missouri Governor’s letter, Congress had already moved on the issue, deciding to

\textsuperscript{45} Mary Barr Hardin, \textit{Life and Writings of Governor Charles Henry Hardin} (St. Louis: Buschart Bros., 1896), 134.

\textsuperscript{46} “Charles Henry Hardin to Frederick Watts” (Letter, Jefferson City, MO, June 1, 1875), Charles Henry Hardin Collection, Missouri State Archives.
continue their intervention in the plains by appropriating additional money to purchase and ship seed to farmers in Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, and other afflicted regions, an action that was prompted months earlier by a General in the U.S. Army stationed in Nebraska, who had witnessed the devastating effects of the locust infestation first-hand.

The involvement of the U.S. government in relieving the struggling settlers and farmers on the plains marked the most dramatic departure from the response in 1860-61. Whereas in the earlier drought and famine people appealed to the federal government—arguing that it had a responsibility to help settlers who had participated in the grand experiment of popular sovereignty that had been initiated with the opening of Kansas Territory, and who had received only a paltry personal check from the President—in 1874-75 the government heeded the pleas of hungry Kansans and others, and rose to the occasion, providing generous monetary and material aid.

In 1860-61, the private national aid network headed by Thaddeus Hyatt, William Arny, and Samuel Pomeroy had emerged in response to the failure of the federal government to grant relief supplies to hungry Kansans; in 1874-75, the situation was reversed. The private aid network reemerged, but for various reasons, one of which was being stripped of its deeply political context, aid organizers were unable to drum up as much support for feeding the struggling farmers in Kansas and elsewhere throughout the plains. Seeing this, it was the federal government—or at least a few particular representatives of it—that felt compelled to step in to keep people from starving to death after the dramatic descent of the locusts from the Rocky Mountains.

In late October 1874, General Edward O. C. Ord, stationed at the Headquarters of the Department of the Platte in Omaha, Nebraska, wrote to his superior in Washington, Adjutant General
of the U.S. Army Edward Townsend, to suggest that the government do something to feed and clothe the hungry and cold farmers who were affected by total losses of their crops. He had an idea: the army should distribute extra food from their stores to the starving. It was not an idea that came to him out of the blue, however; in fact, it appears that Ord was passing along a suggestion from actual hungry Nebraskans. “To-day several citizens have besought me to apply for authority to send rations to the famine-stricken families of Southern and Western Nebraska,” he wrote to Townsend. The citizens had brought with them “letters...referring to statements of reliable men there, which report immediate supplies of food necessary.” If the supplies were not delivered, “quite a number of the poor at remote places will perish of hunger.”47 Ord’s emphasis on the remoteness of the particular citizens he was interested in helping is important, as it reveals to a careful reader that once again, as it did in 1860-61, the particular settlement pattern of newcomers had a serious effect on their likelihood of surviving any setbacks in the sometimes harsh environment. As settlers, drawn to the plains by the promise of free land under the Homestead Act, pushed farther west into the interior of places like Nebraska and Kansas, they found themselves cut off from some of the basic sources of aid. Ord drove the point home in his letter to Townsend, telling the General that “there is need of food at once, or more cases of starvation will occur, principally because, with some food on hand, though not enough for all who require it, and no facilities to send it where it may be most needed, the aid societies cannot reach the most destitute cases.”48


48 Ibid.
After noting how the private aid network was unable to help to the extent needed, Ord took the unprecedented step of suggesting that the U.S. Army itself should intervene.\footnote{Army activism was not wholly unprecedented. Federal troops had assisted Americans affected by the Chicago fire in 1871, yellow fever in Memphis and Shreveport in 1873, and the flooding of the Mississippi in 1874. However, in the first two events there were easy cases to be made about public safety; in the latter, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers had already been deeply involved in managing the river. To assist hungry farmers in the plains was something totally new for the military men. See Michael L. Tate, \textit{The Frontier Army in the Settlement of the West} (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 216.} “I therefore request authority to send, by reliable officers, to each of four of the most stricken counties two or three thousand rations of bread or flour and pork,” he told his superior. Further, he asked for “authority to use such Government transportation as can be spared to carry the supplies donated to such places where I hear from officers of the Army it is necessary to save life.”\footnote{“Senate Report, Ravages of Grasshoppers,” 4.} Ord’s organizational choices—to send officers into counties to distribute food, only after receiving confirmation from “organized county committees” of the amounts of “those in danger of starvation”—clearly drew on earlier private aid networks, with their county committees and distribution agents.

The initial response of the top brass in Washington was tepid, which should not be surprising given that Ord’s suggestion was unprecedented; the federal government—especially its military arm—had never been in the business of distributing food and supplies to needy American farmers. In fact, the primary business of the Army at this point was wresting control of the plains from the Native groups who, to the chagrin of land-hungry settlers, speculators, and railroad interests, would not willingly continue to be pushed into “permanent” reservations that had a tendency to remain in Indian hands for about as long as it took the ink to dry on the treaties between tribes and the federal
government. By 1874, Ord himself had a distinguished career in killing Indians, having killed at least ten Chetcoe and Rogue River Indians in Oregon in 1856. Ord’s unprecedented request for aid to white settlers, one that did not directly involve the broader mission of Native land expropriation and extermination, unsurprisingly drew varied reactions from his superiors.

Ord’s letter to Townsend had made the rounds among military leaders, many of whom warned against the policy the General had suggested. The Commissary-General A. E. Shiras pushed back against the idea on grounds that the military could not afford such an expenditure. “[T]he appropriation for the subsistence of the Army for the current fiscal year is so far exhausted,” he wrote to the Secretary of War, “that it will be impracticable for the Subsistence Department to afford any relief to the destitute inhabitants of Nebraska.” Another General, Phillip Sheridan, head of the Military Division of the Missouri in Chicago, objected to Ord’s plan, but did so on more cryptic grounds than his colleague in the Commissary Department. “It is a little unwise to compromise the Government by the action of its military officers in regard to any general distribution of supplies to the people residing in the section devastated,” he wrote. Sheridan’s argument appears opaque at first glance, but what he seemed to be arguing was that authorizing military personnel to engage in relief efforts could have two negative side effects: first, it could create a precedent for such actions in the future, altering the expectations of Americans in such a way that the Army could not possibly fulfill them; and second, that distributing supplies in a “general” fashion could lead to accusations of corruption, of the kind witnessed in earlier relief efforts by private parties. On the second point, he noted that “[e]xisting

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51 White, “It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own”: A New History of the American West, 104–105.

orders provide for relief of distressed persons in individual cases.” If starving farmers on the plains wanted help, they should appeal directly to government officials themselves, making a case for why they were owed relief; getting the Army entangled in determining who deserved relief, and how that relief would be equitably distributed, would be a very bad idea, Sheridan implied. Sheridan further argued that his rejection of Ord’s plan was in the best interests of not only the government and Army, but also of the starving people themselves. “There may be a good deal of suffering,” he wrote, “but if the Government takes any advanced steps to relieve it, the suffering will be magnified a hundred times more than it really is.” What precisely Sheridan meant by this is difficult to ascertain, but it was likely a continuation of his implied critique of federal aid; getting the government involved in trying to aid the destitute could only result, in Sheridan’s mind, in a complication of the matter and thus a worsening of the effects felt by settlers and farmers. Sheridan’s final comments on Ord’s appeal to Washington officials was direct: “While I recommend the approval of what has already been done, I would advise a good deal of caution to be exercised in any issues that may be made in the future.” For Sheridan, then, the best plan of action would be no action at all.\footnote{Ibid., 5. Sheridan’s critique of Ord’s plan is read by the writer and entomologist Jeffrey Lockwood as a “non sequitor.” While certainly opaque, when read in the longer context of federal aid for hungry settlers, Sheridan’s letter begins to make some sense. See Lockwood, \\emph{Locust}, 82; Paul Andrew Hutton, \\emph{Phil Sheridan & His Army} (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985), 162–163.}

General Ord was not satisfied with the path of inaction proposed by his superiors and colleagues. Perhaps sensing that his own plan to relieve settlers using Army supplies would be a hard sell, Ord had already sent Major Nathan Dudley on a tour of Nebraska, having him compile a detailed report of the status of farmers in the state. Dudley’s tour through the state was similar to that of another Army officer, Major James Brisbin, who in September had visited many of the same sites that
Dudley would, and had confirmed to General Ord the reports of destitution that were being relayed to
the military men by hungry citizens in Nebraska.\textsuperscript{54} Between October 29 and November 6, 1874, Dudley,
along with a retinue of twenty-seven other men, traveled from Fort McPherson through Red Willow,
Frontier, Furnas, Gosper, and Harlan Counties. In form and intent, Dudley's tour through the
southwestern counties of Nebraska mirrored that of Thaddeus Hyatt, William Arny, and Samuel
Pomeroy a decade and a half before. Dudley and his men traveled from town to town, recording the
state of destitution among citizens there, and speculating on which locations might make good
distribution sites should relief efforts be approved. The scenes Dudley encountered were remarkably
similar; in each of the counties he visited he found men, women, and children starving or near
starvation. In Red Willow County, one man approached Dudley "with quivering lips and moistened
eyes," saying "he did not know where he was to obtain a further supply" of relief materials, now that
the meager rations received from private donors had run out. In another town, Dudley found a widow
and her five children "wholly destitute," leaving her with thirty pounds of pork to survive the coming
weeks. One town was almost completely abandoned, save for "two families," each "without at least ten
or fifteen days' provisions."\textsuperscript{55}

When General Sheridan reported up the chain of command that he thought the Army
distribution plan was unwarranted and unwise, General Ord immediately fired back by sending
Dudley's report, which he argued would "show that unless relieved soon many poor frontier people
will certainly starve to death, while the Army store-houses within 100 miles are filled with provisions."

\textsuperscript{54} For details on Brisbin's earlier journey through Nebraska, see Tate, The Frontier Army in the Settlement of the West, 219.

\textsuperscript{55} "Senate Report, Ravages of Grasshoppers," 5-8.
Ord appealed to his superiors on moral grounds, noting that he was well aware “the laws may prohibit the use of solders’ rations for other purposes than that for which they are purchased,” but surely such a legal restriction could be overlooked when put up against starving citizens. “I do not believe that Congress would hesitate to approve any issue of supplies necessary to save lives of our own people,” he wrote, “and recommend that authority to make such issues only be at once granted, until Congress can be applied to to provide for them.”\textsuperscript{56} Further, Ord argued, the federal government had a duty to those farmers willing to venture onto the plains in an effort to improve themselves and their country. “These people have been largely induced by donations of Government lands to settle where they now are,” Ord wrote, referring to the effect the Homestead Act had on the population. Plus, he wrote, “they have also been promised assistance in their distress if they would remain. With the mercury ranging below zero and their stock in a state of starvation, it is now impossible for them to leave, even were they so inclined.” If farmers were stuck and starving, Ord argued, the government had a moral duty to attempt to assist them. “[W]ith a little aid from the Government in their hour of need,” Ord told his superiors, “they will gladly remain and become useful citizens.”\textsuperscript{57}

Whether by laying out a convincing moral case, or by sheer persistence, General Ord finally found sympathetic ears up the ranks in November 1874. William Belknap, the Secretary of War, was himself cool on Ord’s idea, but found it compelling and reasonable enough to send a formal proposal to President Ulysses S. Grant. Belknap’s proposal was more limited that Ord would have liked; he asked the President only for authorization to distribute extra Army supplies like blankets, caps, coats,

\begin{footnotes}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid., 4-8.
\item Ord’s moral case for government intervention is quoted in full in Lockwood, \textit{Locust}, 81–82.
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and boots, all of which “could be issued without much loss to the United States.” Grant immediately signed off on the idea, relaying the following message to both chambers of Congress: “I have the honor to lay before Congress a communication of the Secretary of War relative to the action taken in issuing certain supplies to the suffering people of Kansas and Nebraska, in consequence of the drought and grasshopper-plague, and to respectfully request that such action be approved.” It took Congress until February 1875 to actually approve the program, but Grant’s suggestion was force enough to get the engine turning. With his short statement to Congress, President Grant had done what President Buchanan could not (or chose not to) do in 1860-61: wield his executive power on behalf of hungry settlers and farmers in Kansas and the surrounding region.

Within weeks of the President’s approval, General Ord, assuming (correctly, it would turn out) that Congress would also approve the plan, began distributing clothing and supplies to destitute settlers from an Army depot in Omaha. A contemporary, General John Pope, who, during the month-long letter-writing campaign between Army officials regarding relief supplies, had written on behalf of hungry Kansans, was stationed at Fort Leavenworth to distribute supplies to those in Kansas who needed them. While Ord and Pope were deeply involved in the process, for the most part the Army


60 General Townsend, after acquiescing the Ord’s idea of distribution of relief goods, told General Pope that it was critically important that he keep accurate records, because “issues heretofore may have caused scandals in Congress by the irresponsible manner in which they were made.” While Townsend was not specific, it is possible that he was referring to the bribery scandal involving Samuel C. Pomeroy’s 1873 Senate run. Pomeroy’s involvement in the 1860-61 relief efforts had been a continual point of contention among his supporters and opponents, who, respectively, looked to his handling of funds during that event as evidence of his noble character or his bald opportunism. While the 1873 scandal involved
was actually quite hands-off. Instead of trying to organize their own methods of distribution, the military personnel generally handled the acquisition and shipping of supplies, eventually leaving them in the hands of the local relief agents who were already established in counties throughout the afflicted states. In total, throughout the winter of 1874-75, the federal government, through its Army agents, distributed 10,004 heavy coats, 6,285 lighter coats, 20,664 pairs of shoes, and 8,454 woolen blankets. The warmth provided by these goods undoubtedly saved many struggling families from death or dislocation. The winter, after all, was particularly harsh. One Lieutenant who helped distribute goods in Nebraska described the state many found themselves in: “[U]pon entering the poor huts,” the Lieutenant found “women and children crouched shivering around their dull fires in the midst of a cloud of pulverized snow driven in upon them by the storm.” Saved from freezing to death, settlers and farmers in Kansas, Nebraska, Minnesota, and the Dakotas could thank General Ord and President Grant for their unprecedented plan to aid the needy throughout the plains.


61 “Relief of Grasshopper Sufferers: Letter from the Secretary of War, Transmitting Reports of the Quartermaster-General and Commissary-General of Subsistence, Made in Compliance with the Act of February 10, 1875, for the Relief of Grasshopper Sufferers,” H. Exec. Doc. 28, 44 Cong., 1 Sess., 1875-1876 (hereafter cited as “House Report, Relief of Grasshopper Sufferers”).

62 Lieutenant Theodore E. True is quoted in Fite, “The United States Army and Relief to Pioneer Settlers, 1874–1875,” 103; The winter distribution of coats and other supplies is described in Wagner, “Grasshoppered”; Lockwood, Locust, 83; Tate, The Frontier Army in the Settlement of the West, 220.
Feeding Kansas, Again

Just as quickly as Ord, Pope, and other military personnel began distributing warm clothing to desperate citizens, they began agitating once again for an approval of the distribution of food and seed, which they argued was critical for keeping the now warm population alive through the winter and spring. Major Nathan Dudley, whose tour through Nebraska provided some of the evidence required to convince federal authorities to move on the relief issue, took matters into his own hands in at least one case. Deep in the winter a young boy had approached Dudley at Fort McPherson, his home military post in Nebraska, and told the officer how he had traveled to the fort to obtain food for himself and his mother and five siblings who were starving at home. Though technically illegal at the time, Dudley offered the boy thirty pounds of bacon and two sacks of flour, in addition to the clothing he was authorized to donate. Describing the event to his superior in a later report, Dudley remarked “If the Commissary General elects to do so, he can deduct its value from my pay.” Dudley's willingness to buck authority and put his own money, and, ultimately his position in the Army, on the line resonated with Congress, who in February 1875 finally officially approved the distribution of clothing and supplies, and also appropriated $150,000 for shipments of food to settlers affected by the Grasshopper Plague. Congress also approved an additional $30,000 in seed to be distributed, which was what was finally reaching Missouri in the late spring, on the heels of Governor Hardin's day of prayer.63

63 Dudley’s address to the Commissary General is quoted in Fite, “The United States Army and Relief to Pioneer Settlers, 1874–1875,” 103–104; See also Tate, The Frontier Army in the Settlement of the West, 221; “House Report, Relief of Grasshopper Sufferers”; On the origins of the $30,000 seed appropriation, see Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture for the Year 1875 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1876), 8.
The U.S. Army, with an efficiency that outpaced even that of the highly organized 1860-61 aid network constructed by Thaddeus Hyatt and others, immediately used the funds to ship and distribute the goods throughout Kansas, Nebraska, Minnesota, and the Colorado and Dakota Territories. The scope and scale of their relief efforts was stunning. By the fall of 1875, according to a report presented to Congress by the Secretary of War and the Commissary General, the army, with approval from the President and Congress, had distributed nearly 2,000,000 food rations to 107,535 different individuals, 43,942 of which were children. Drawing on information about standard food rations in the army, one historian has calculated that the federal government likely distributed “over 700 tons of salted or fresh pork, nearly 1,000 tons of cornmeal, 150 tons of beans and sugar, 100 tons of coffee and tea, and almost 40 tons of salt,” ensuring that citizens not only avoided going hungry in 1874-75, but could also enjoy meals that resembled what they would have been eating anyway.

The Army’s involvement in the relief of victims of the Grasshopper Plague was unique insofar as the military men were helping Western farmers specifically, but it did fit into a larger picture of a federal government that was rapidly expanding in scope and power after the Civil War.

With the rapid acquisition and distribution of federal resources by representatives of the government in Washington, the destitution and destruction of the Grasshopper Plague of 1874-75 effectively came to an end. Much like the 1860-61 drought and famine, the 1874-75 Grasshopper Plague quietly disappeared from the front page of newspapers as a new, successful harvest followed in the wake of the locusts, which had moved north, in much smaller numbers, in the summer of 1875.

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64 A detailed breakdown of exactly where rations were distributed and in what amounts is available in “House Report, Relief of Grasshopper Sufferers,” 6-20.

65 Lockwood, Locust, 84.
economic devastation wrought by the locusts was significant, however. From 1873 to 1877, the insects caused more than $200 million in damage to crops and homes, much of which occurred in the 1874-75 “Plague” years.66 Also as in 1860-61, Kansans and their neighbors in the plains owed a great deal of gratitude to the various sympathetic individuals across the country that had kept them from perishing from outright starvation. This time, however, thanks were also due to another source: the U.S. government, which, for the first time in the nineteenth century accepted arguments that it owed citizens in the West as much protection from disasters as it did those in cities like Chicago, where the army had stepped in to aid those whose lives were nearly destroyed by the fire of 1871. This was a dramatic departure from the decades leading up to the 1870s, and marked a turning point in what one could expect from the federal government when it came to responses to natural disasters like drought, locust invasions, or floods in the West. Though a thorough policy regarding humanitarian aid on behalf of citizens affected by natural disasters did not cohere until the early twentieth century, the intervention of the federal government via its army provided a model that would be recreated several times throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century—the response to the 1874-75 Grasshopper Plague created a new relationship between the government and the governed.67

One recipient of the spring seed approved by Congress and delivered by the army summed up the economic, political, and moral implications of this shift in federal policy in action, telling the Commissioner of Agriculture that the government’s intervention not only saved him from hunger, but


67 On these later nineteenth-century relief efforts, modeled on the 1874-75 distribution, see Tate, The Frontier Army in the Settlement of the West; Wagner, “Grasshoppered,” 166.
also restored his faith in his country. “The seed is most acceptable, for it relieves me from a state of
hopelessness,” the unnamed farmer told the commissioner, “but it cannot do me half as much good as
it does to know that we have a Government that cares for her distressed people.” 68

68 The unnamed “correspondent” is quoted in Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture for the Year 1875, 8.
Conclusion

In the late 1860s, the guitarist and artist Henry Worrall moved to Topeka from Cincinnati, despite the protestations of his friends, who “were in the habit of making aggravating remarks in their letters about the ‘drouth of 1860,’ and the general and special dryness of Kansas.” In 1869, a group of Worrall’s Cincinnati acquaintances visited Topeka, and upon their arrival they were greeted with a charcoal sketch titled “Drouthy Kansas” (Figure C.1). In “Drouthy Kansas,” Worrall took aim at the legacy of the 1860-61 drought by presenting a caricatured Kansas landscape, where corn grows so tall it requires a ladder to reap, where sweet potatoes are so large that they require the work of four men to remove them from the ground, and where there were pumpkins and watermelons bigger than horses.

Worrall’s choice to illustrate how abundant rainfall was by showing a house, overtaken by water, floating down the river, was eerily prescient; in 1884 an abundance of rainfall in the Ohio River Valley caused the Ohio to overflow, covering houses and buildings with water, ruining many crops, and

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1 A Topeka newspaper ran a history of Worrall’s painting in 1875, noting also that many Kansas settlers “would never have come to Kansas to be ruined and undone by grasshoppers” had “Drouthy Kansas” not been so effective an image. See The Commonwealth, March 31, 1875.

2 Worrall’s sketch for his friends was quickly put on the cover of the Kansas Farmer magazine in 1869. In the 1870s it was even more widespread, appearing on a land advertisement in 1875, and a popular 1877 promotional book, Clinton Carter Hutchinson, Resources of Kansas: Fifteen Years Experience (Topeka, KS: Commonwealth State Printing House, 1871), 41; That “Drouthy Kansas” appeared in Hutchinson’s book is not a surprise, as the book, according to one of the earliest historians of Kansas, “takes a rose-colored view of everything relating to Kansas.” See Wilder, The Annals of Kansas, 550; For a recent historical treatment of Worrall’s art and its many forms and venues, see Susan McCarthy, “Tired of Dorothy and Toto?: Three Nineteenth-Century Icons of Kansas,” Kansas History 36, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 22–39.
causing a rather serious famine in Ohio, which was home to many who had helped Kansans during their periods of climatic difficulties.³

Figure C.1 Henry Worrall, Drouthy Kansas, 1873; oil on canvas, 14 x 24". Courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka.

Worrall’s image of Kansas is a reminder for readers now that Kansas in the nineteenth century was a land of many contests, not all directly related to the contest for the expansion of slavery that was so crucial to the initial opening of the territory to white settlement. There was also a contest over how Kansas should be represented in popular imagination, specifically how its climate and landscape should be described. Though the idea of the “Great American Desert” was never quite as powerful and important as some later historians would remember it, there were certainly observers who saw events

³ John L. Vance, ed., The Great Flood of 1884 in the Ohio Valley: The Rise and Fall of the Waters from Pittsburgh to Cairo, with Accounts of the Destruction of Property, and Incidents by Eye-Witnesses and Sufferers; Together with Useful and Important Information and Statistics. Also, the Work of the Gallipolis Relief Committee (Gallipolis, OH: Bulletin Office, 1884).
like the 1860-61 drought and the 1874-75 Grasshopper Plague as evidence that Kansas was prone to natural events, owing primarily to its relatively dry and unpredictable climate, that could have devastating effects on those willing to settle within the region.

Worrall’s “Drouthy Kansas” mocked this view of the plains, representing a competing view of Kansas as a verdant garden the productive potential of which could easily withstand a disaster or two every century. In the contest over the image of Kansas, at least in its nineteenth-century incarnation, before the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, Worrall and his side clearly won. The solidification of the image of Kansas as an Eden in the West came in 1893 at the World’s Columbian Exposition (also known as the World’s Fair) in Chicago. While “Drouthy Kansas” did not appear at the Kansas Pavilion, Worrall was closely involved with the design and management of the exhibits. The centerpiece of the pavilion was undoubtedly influenced by Worrall’s earlier painting, with its enormous corn stalks and wheat sheaves standing proudly at the center of the rotunda.  

While millions of people flowed through the Kansas exhibits at the 1893 World’s Fair, several hundred members of the American Historical Association gathered to hear the essay of a young professor from Wisconsin named Frederick Jackson Turner. Turner’s essay, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” established his “frontier thesis,” and idea that held sway over the study and understand of the American West for over half a century. That Turner's frontier thesis was articulated at the same time and place as Kansas put forth its image of abundance and fertility was not merely coincidence. The closing of the frontier and the opening of a hopeful vision of the plains

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went hand in hand, and both represented a particular understanding of the American West that had emerged in the nineteenth century and taken firmer shape by the 1890s.

In short, by the late nineteenth century, the image of Kansas as a verdant garden, capable of weathering even the most devastating of storms (literally and metaphorically), had crystallized. By 1893, the memory of events like the 1860-61 drought had been pushed away by the laying of track by the ATSF and Kansas Pacific railroad companies, and the images they sold to a public eager to believe in the worth and opportunity represented by the plains. Art and representation, which was for Henry Worrall initially a satirical jab at his friends' view of Kansas, became, in the words of one “an effective social force,” a vehicle “to convey their aspirations for the state.”

Despite the satirical nature of “Drouthy Kansas,” Worrall was not in denial about the severe effects that unfortunate weather circumstances could have, or about the importance of aid efforts in relieving the suffering of citizens. In April 1884 Worrall provided an image to *Harper's Weekly* to accompany a brief entry about relief efforts being undertaken for struggling citizens in the Ohio River Valley, which had undergone massive flooding a few weeks earlier (Figure C.2). The entry describes “a train of thirty-one freight cars, loaded with grain” leaving from Kansas, “to the relief of the sufferers by the floods in the valley of the Ohio.” Before the cars were sent off to Ohio, they were “rudely but effectively decorated with designs in color,” two of which Worrall sketched out for readers to see.

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5 McCarthy, “Tired of Dorothy and Toto?: Three Nineteenth-Century Icons of Kansas.”
In his sketch “Departure of the ‘Corn Train’ from Wichita, Kansas,” Worrall shows the train, with its painted boxcars, leaving Wichita, with the smoke pouring from its engine mirroring the smoke billowing from the smokestacks behind it. The message is clear: you saved us, we are doing perfectly well, we would love to return the favor. With the help of one another, we can move into a prosperous future together, the image seems to say. Indeed, the whole affair echoes the nature of the 1866 letter between C. W. Holder and James Blood, described in chapter 3, that established the idea of famine.
relief as being a “loan” to be repaid in kind whenever it was needed. Worrall drew in more detail two of the cars, one of which made clear the underlying issues at stake: “Given 1874” on one side, “Returned with Interest 1884” on the other. Between them: “Corn with compliments of Wichita and Sedgwick Counties, Kansas to the Ohio Valley.” The Harper’s writer summed up the situation: “The citizens of Ohio contributed largely to the relief of the Kansas brethren during the drought of 1874, and their generous gifts are now returned with interest.” Why no event like this took place after the 1860 famine is a mystery, but likely has something to do with the fact that as the crops returned in 1861, they brought with them the start of the Civil War, which distracted not only Kansans, but the entire nation, and put the importance of the famine and relief efforts in the back of people’s minds, where it has remained.

That the 1860-61 Kansas drought and famine has been all but forgotten is both surprising and unfortunate. Surprising because it was a remarkably well-known event throughout the nation while it was occurring, with discussions about the famine and famine relief circulating in both private letters and public newspapers in multiple states. The historical amnesia of this event is unfortunate because it is remarkably illustrative of several important broad themes of nineteenth-century historiography (among them sectional politics, charity and charitable organizations, and Western expansion) as well as the more specific themes of food history and famine history. Given that a recent book on the role of food in westward expansion fails to even mention the 1860 famine is indicative of how undeveloped

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6 “C. W. Holder to James Blood,” October 27, 1860, James Blood Collection, Box 1, Folder 1, Kansas State Historical Society.

7 “For The Ohio Sufferers,” Harper’s Weekly, April 5, 1884.
the theme of famine is in nineteenth-century American historiography. While this dissertation shows how a specific famine in Kansas was related to the broader political and environmental realities of a growing United States, it is likely that there are dozens of other similar incidents which could shed light on many facets of American history. For this to happen, however, historians will have to begin to take the topic of food and its availability seriously, and it remains to be seen whether they will do so.

Thaddeus Hyatt, the philanthropist and organizer most responsible for soliciting and distributing aid in Kansas in 1860-61, understood the fading memory of the drought and famine as an unintended and unfortunate consequence of the relief effort itself. In 1872, reflecting on the famine years a decade earlier, Hyatt wrote in a private letter to a critic of the relief efforts, “the attempt to prevent a famine, and which, thank God, was finally successful, actually had the effect to create a disbelief in some minds of any danger of one having ever existed! [There] are people who always want somebody to die first before they are ready to admit the existence of any thing calculated to endanger life.”

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8 Reginald Horsman, Feast or Famine: Food and Drink in American Westward Expansion (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008).

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