

CHAPTER 6

Bleeding Kansas and Bloody Sumner

Two related republican traumas began in Washington, D.C., precisely two years apart. On May 22, 1854, Congress finalized the Kansas-Nebraska Act. On May 22, 1856, South Carolina's Congressman Preston Brooks brutalized Massachusetts's Senator Charles Sumner. Bleeding Kansas and bloodied Sumner embodied the same provocation: The defense of despotism over blacks savaged democratic process for whites—including for northern citizens.

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In sixty seconds, Brooks's assault on Sumner clarified the antirepublican lesson of a thousand-plus days of post-Kansas-Nebraska Act turmoil. The two republican traumas illuminated the South's two prime hot spots, far apart geographically but like twins in disruptive potential. The flighty Brooks, representative of the Lower South's center of secessionism, demonstrated South Carolina's potential for national havoc, if the edgy state could muster the daring to act. So too, convulsed Missouri, the Border South's most inflammatory locale, demonstrated the borderland's threat to national peace, especially about slavery in the Kansas-Nebraska territories.

In early December 1853, Illinois's U.S. Senator Stephen A. Douglas introduced an allegedly sectionally neutral version of a Kansas-Nebraska bill, opening the area for settlement without saying whether slaveholding settlers could come.¹ Douglas, leader of senatorial Northern Democrats, did not care if slavery entered these territories. He only cared that white settlers in a new area, not far-off congressmen, should decide whether to sustain slavery. Still, he hoped to remain silent about Congress's controversial Missouri Compromise of 1820, prohibiting slaveholding settlers from entering the Kansas/Nebraska terrain (as from entering all Louisiana Purchase territories north of the 36° 30' line).

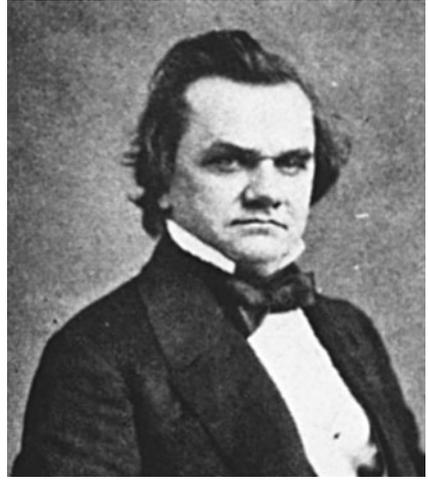
Missouri's Senator Davy Atchison, champion of western Missouri slaveholders, punctured Douglas's silence. Settlers would have scant chance to decide for slavery in Kansas, Atchison stormed, if the Missouri Compromise had barred slaveholding settlers. Atchison aroused fellow Southern Democrats in his Washington boardinghouse (the so-called F Street Mess) to give slaveholding settlers a detour around the Missouri Compromise prohibition.

Then U.S. Senator Archibald Dixon of Kentucky, a Whig, would not settle for a detour. He insisted that the Douglas bill must erase the prohibition. Southern Democrats wanted no Southern Whig to outflank them on a proslavery initiative. They accordingly pressured Douglas to accept Dixon's repeal of Missouri Compromise emancipation, as it applied to Kansas and Nebraska. Otherwise, Southern Democrats would oppose the Northern Democrat's bill.

Douglas knew that southern opposition meant no congressional act, no territory opened for white settlement, no transcontinental railroad traversing the terrain, and none of the boost to Democratic Party fortunes (and to his own presidential fortunes) that the Illinoisan expected from the law. Besides, by removing the congressional Missouri Compromise prohibition from Kansas-Nebraska, Douglas could restore sovereignty over slavery to the (white) local populace—his own Popular Sovereignty principle. Douglas finally agreed to be Douglas. He rallied half the Northern Democrats behind "his" bill, as Atchison, Dixon, and other Southerners had insisted on revising it, even while protesting that his surrender of the Missouri Compromise prohibition would raise "a hell of a storm" in the North.

The Illinoisan correctly predicted the political weather. "His" bill decimated that sacred Missouri Compromise. It invited slaveholders into U.S. territories where slavery had been barred. It defied the majority section's majority of citizens. It spotlighted how the southern minority section had long controlled national majoritarian decisions—by using its leverage in the Democracy, the nation's majority political party, to press Northern Democrats toward proslavery law. It highlighted how the northern majority could rescue majoritarianism from the minority. Yankee voters must throw out Northern Democrats who appeased the Slave Power.

In the fall of 1854, Yankee voters threw out 84 percent of the northern congressmen who had supported "Douglas's" bill. Still, during congressional debate on the Kansas-Nebraska bill, many Southerners had predicted that after enactment of the law, the political storm would ebb. Insulted gentlemen, went this southern argument, scorned banishment from a territory merely because of their (and slavery's) alleged barbarism. But after the Kansas-Nebraska Act removed the Missouri Compromise insult, continued this widespread southern prophecy, no longer proscribed slaveholders would silently concede icy Kansas (and icier Nebraska) to nonslaveholding settlers. The majority of settlers would decide slavery's fate; the more populated North could send more settlers; and potential slaveholding settlers would prefer the safely enslaved, more tropical, equally virgin acres of Arkansas and Texas. Then exclusively free labor settlers would turn Kansas and Nebraska territories into free states.



U.S. Senator David Atchison (left), frontier ruffian from the Border South's Missouri, who sought to force proslavery salvations on the nation and on U.S. Senator Stephen A. Douglas (right), suave nationalist from the Border North's Illinois. Courtesy of the Library of Congress (Atchison) and the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, Illinois (Douglas).

But Davy Atchison's countervailing predictions augured a persisting northern storm. When Atchison denounced the original Douglas bill, the western Missourian promised that once given a chance, his constituents would capture Kansas. Atchison delivered on his promise. A tiny minority of Missourians, under Atchison's leadership, grasped territorial Kansas for the Slave Power. Thus did Atchison, the first denouncer of "Douglas's" bill, become the prime post-act provocateur of Bleeding Kansas. Thus did occurrences after the Kansas-Nebraska Act, not the act itself, keep the Yankee storm howling for a thousand days and more.

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The persisting controversy repeated the history of the Fugitive Slave Law. In 1850, a border senator, James Mason of northwestern Virginia, first insisted on undemocratic procedures to return slavery runaways to their owners. As with the subsequent Kansas-Nebraska Act, northern outrage might have eased if Southerners had never used the antirepublican procedures. But with fugitive slaves as with Kansas, a relatively few border state citizens provocatively used the law.² They thereby turned the initial national wounds into lasting national sores.

This Border South intransigence is curious, for men from the least enslaved, most unionist part of the South initiated, then sustained, the two most Union-shattering slavery controversies of the 1850s. Why? Because wide-open republican procedures threatened the Border South's outposts of

slavery more than the Lower South's consolidated sanctums. When antislavery warriors agitated in Yankee communities, located only a few miles from southern communities with few slaves, the flight of blacks toward freedom could increase. White belt nonslaveholders' qualms about slavery could also increase, as could slave sales to the safer Lower South.

Potentially damaged slaveholders comprised only a small minority of the Border South population. Intransigent hotheads comprised only a small minority of border slaveholders. Still, a handful of worried slaveholders, by whipping up resentment of nearby Yankees' interference with the South's business, could precipitate closures of the half-open border. Theirs was the latest demonstration of a great pre-Civil War truth: In a majoritarian democracy, minorities often prevail.

The minority of proslavery warriors located farthest north in the South faced increased trouble in the 1850s. More than ever in the particularly profitable presecession decade, Deep South purchasers drew slaves out of the Border South. More than ever, European and eastern free white laborers surged into border communities that had sold slaves. More than ever, Border South slaveholders' increasingly superfluous slaves had opportunities to flee over southern borders, to the increasingly antisouthern North.

More than citizens in other Border South states, Missourians resided inside a noose of free labor areas. All border slave states encountered a free labor neighbor to their north (Iowa in Missouri's case). But only Missouri faced an additional free labor neighbor to the east (Illinois). Only Missouri might encounter yet another free labor neighbor to the west (Kansas). And only in western Missouri, just across the Missouri River from Kansas, did a Border South state's largest concentration of most embattled slaveholders face a threat just over their border.

Proslavery Missourians also suffered the Border South's largest invasion of Yankee and European migrants. Between 1850 and 1860, the state's white population increased almost 80 percent, a Border South high. The surge reduced Missouri's percentage of slaves to under 10 percent, a Border South low (except for barely enslaved Delaware). In 1850, Missouri contained 15,000 more slaves than foreign immigrants. In 1860, the state contained 45,000 more European immigrants than slaves.

The unusually surrounded and diluted Missouri slaveholder outpost staged an unusually long-lasting debate over slavery during the 1850s. Since the Virginia antislavery debate of 1832, residents of Delaware and Maryland had often discussed whether slavery should end. Kentucky had also staged an extensive debate over terminating slavery in the late 1840s.³ But in the 1850s, Missouri smashed all Border South records for persistence of slavery debates and success of antislavery politicians.

Increasing percentages of nonslaveholders helped embolden Missouri's antislavery politicians. In the Lower South, the ratio of slaveholder to nonslaveholder families approached one to one. In Missouri from 1850 to 1860, the nonslaveholder majority soared from six to one to eight to one, a surge

encouraging to abolitionists. Worse, slavery barely existed in most Missouri locales. By 1860, only seventeen Missouri counties contained over 20 percent slaves, while seventy-seven contained less than 10 percent. Moreover, only three Missouri counties contained over 30 percent slaves, compared to fifty-one (of ninety-four) counties under 3 percent. In St. Louis County, Missouri's most densely populated and most antislavery zone, slaves comprised only 2.28 percent of the population by 1860.

St. Louis City, eastern Missouri's unofficial capital, lay a whole state removed from western Missouri's proslavery bastion. The city's isolated slaveholders battled not only against their paltry numbers and their economic irrelevance but also against a celebrity. Thomas Hart Benton, now in his seventies, had been the most powerful Missourian during the years between 1820 and 1850. In 1850, however, slaveholders, suspecting Benton of softness on slavery, ousted him from the U.S. Senate. In 1852, St. Louis non-slaveholders defiantly returned the alleged heretic to Washington, this time to a seat in the House of Representatives. Subsequently, eastern Missouri nonslaveholders' hero meant to bring his revenge to climax by trouncing western Missouri slaveholders' champion, U.S. Senator Davy Atchison, in the senatorial election of 1855.

During this, his last campaign, the embattled Benton was at his largest in girth and at his angriest in mood. The political colossus, once the duelist who had desperately wounded his latter-day friend Andrew Jackson, always remained the street fighter as the Democracy's best campaigner and the pompous intellectual as rednecks' adored champion. But even more now, Big Bully Benton defended the Union against politicians who agitated for or against slavery. He condemned Davy Atchison's championing of the Kansas-Nebraska Act as a crime against the nation as well as against white Missourians' interests. By irresponsibly agitating for slavery, Benton charged, Atchison caused many potential nonslaveholding migrants to veer toward Iowa. The blunderer thus prevented Missouri's full development as a western oasis for whites.

Benton denied that opposing proslavery agitation meant favoring anti-slavery action. He favored pure nonagitation: no agitation for or against slavery. If Missouri slaveholders hushed, the Union would be saved and white migrants would enrich Missouri. Then no one would notice Missouri's increasingly trifling number of slaveholders.

If we hush, Davy Atchison and his western Missouri supporters responded, Benton will drop his nonagitation disguise. After white migrants engulf Missouri, Bentonians will oppose slavery enough—and encourage enough slaves to run away—so that Missouri slaveholders will sell their endangered property to the Lower South. The ex-slave state will become Benton's dream: western laborers' lily-white mecca.

Benton's vision that nonagitation would make slavery irrelevant, like Atchison's vision that proslavery forces must agitate to survive, gave Missouri's famous senatorial election of 1855 more importance than a partisan brawl.

The contest effectively began a year before the Kansas-Nebraska Act, when Atchison momentarily dropped his previous insistence that Congress open Kansas to slaveholders. His angry western Missouri constituents then warned Atchison to resume their fight or forfeit their support. Atchison promised never again to relent. He and his constituents prayed that their proslavery wave, rising higher the more he campaigned atop it, might drown Thomas Hart Benton and eastern Missouri's antislavery movement before slavery faded from the Border West.⁴

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Missouri slaveholders worried not only about Benton's popularity and about Missouri's ever-whitening white belts but also about the lack of proslavery consolidation in their not very black belts. Missouri's center of slavery counties followed the Missouri River, down the state's western (Kansas) border and



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then eastward across mid-Missouri. The thin line of Missouri River counties possessed a fat proportion of slaves for Missouri—in the 20 percent range. But a population 20 percent black represented almost a white belt in the Cotton Kingdom. Inside Missouri's grayish black belts, manumission occurred more often than in the Lower South. Border slaveholders also more often allowed slaves to rent out their labor, save some proceeds, and eventually buy a manumission certificate.

In this somewhat freer atmosphere, heretics more easily encouraged slaves to flee. With or without whites' encouragement, blacks grew bolder, and not always with their feet. In the boldest strike during Kansas-Nebraska times, a Missouri slave named Celia, perhaps with the help of George, her black lover, murdered her master (alias, she alleged, her frequent rapist). The assassin(s) then burned up the corpse. White authorities captured and hanged Celia. But George's successful flight from Missouri, and the notorious murder itself, epitomized the way blacks invaded slaveholders' consciousness.⁵

Blacks' impact remains the most overlooked cause of the Civil War. Blacks never voted outside New England. They never served in Congress. But without blacks who sought freedom, no slaves would have been fugitives. Without fugitive slaves, no fugitive slave law crises would have erupted. Without the runaways, western Missouri slaveholders would have been less apprehensive about having free territory on a third, Kansas side.

The Platte County Self-Defensive Association embodied western Missouri slaveholders' retaliation.⁶ Slaveholders formed the organization in Weston, across the Missouri River from Kansas, two months after Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act and two days after four Platte County slaves ran away. The founding fathers included U.S. Senator Davy Atchison, Platte County's favorite resident, and ex-state attorney general Benjamin Franklin Stringfellow, Atchison's favorite lieutenant. The association pledged to capture Kansas, to expel free blacks and antislavery whites from Missouri, to try antislavery suspects without judge or jury, and to oust disloyal merchants. Vigilantes also intended to sweep away Thomas Hart Benton and nonagitation. They would turn the most endangered Border South locale into the borderland's base for proslavery agitation.

The Platte County Self-Defensive Association patrolled the northwestern edge of southern Christendom. Its border ruffians were hard-drinking, hard-hating vigilantes. Davy Atchison epitomized their hard-bitten persona. "Bourbon Dave," as he was often called, was a coarse, charismatic frontier brawler, vicious to his enemies and charming to his friends. His crude charm won him numerous elections as U.S. Senate president pro tem (second in command, after the nation's vice president, and thus two heartbeats from the presidency). His face and figure announced a man never to be crossed: hulking frame, powerful visage, with a square chin, a thick nose, a prolonged forehead, and hair commencing far back, then erupting into a thick bush that defied orderly control.⁷

Republican niceties, Platte County rednecks vowed, would not sustain

antislavery in Kansas, or hand Missouri from Atchison to Benton, or allow blacks to flee. Antirepublican coercions, they believed, must supplement overly republican laws. No Missouri law, explained Benjamin Franklin Stringfellow, made “the expression of abolition sentiment . . . a penal offense.” No law allowed free blacks to be ousted if they inspired fugitive slaves to flee toward neighboring northern communities. No law stopped Missourians, white and black, from trading with abolitionists. No law recognized that “in a slaveholding community, the expression” of antislavery dissent was like “kindling the torch of the incendiary.”⁸

No language better illuminated why an All-Mighty Color Line could not segregate white liberty from black slavery, not when black men’s bloody chains demanded white men’s fettered freedom.⁹ No plea better demonstrated why political history and social history could not be severed, not when an establishment’s means of social control demanded political control.¹⁰ As the Platte County Self-Defensive Association expressed the very core of Missourians’ nationally fatal Kansas crusade, unless a system of coercive slavery limited a system of consenting democracy, blacks and whites “who at heart were against us” would destroy us.

The Platte County Self-Defensive Association struck its first unrepugnant blows not at black fugitives but at white citizens. On July 20, 1854, vigilantes expelled a Massachusetts native to Iowa. His crime? He supposedly favored a free soil Kansas. Three days later, patrolmen ousted a white drunkard. The evidence that he aided fugitives to escape? The testimony of one black (who could not testify in a legal court).¹¹

Their preliminary deportations finished, vigilantes sought their main prey. The Reverend Mr. Frederick Starr, a New Englander and a Yale graduate, privately aided Missourians who secretly deplored the institution. On July 29, 1854, the Platte Country Self-Defensive Association “arrested” the Yankee preacher. They demanded that he confess his private opinions.¹²

Starr savored the public spectacle. After donning white pants, a clean shirt, and garters, he rounded up his supporters. Then he marched on that supposed citadel of republicanism, the packed courthouse. Inside, the New Englander pulled out a huge jackknife, sliced off a six-inch plug of tobacco, jammed it between his lips, and demanded to know the charges.

Starr had taught slaves to read, slaveholding frontiersmen answered. He had helped blacks to purchase their freedom. He had ridden beside blacks in his carriage. Slaveholders would no longer abide his insurrectionary heresy.

Starr’s defense featured worse heresy. He followed, said the alleged traitor, Missouri slaveholders’ conventional wisdom. Yes, he taught slaves to read, but only with their masters’ permission. Should not masters transform slaves into better Christians? Did not better Bible readers make better Christians? Should not an imminent freedman be taught Christian uses of liberty? “My desire was to enable one man, if he should ever get his freedom, to become respectable & useful.”

John Vineyard, an owner of recent runaways and Starr’s prosecutor,

asked if the preacher always had masters' permission. Yes, the New Englander answered. Then you did nothing wrong, Vineyard conceded. G. W. Bayliss chimed in that four of his slaves could read the Bible. The crowd murmured approval.

The preacher pressed his advantage. Yes, he had helped a slave, as the master had requested, to save money toward purchasing freedom. But could not slaves, with masters' permission, work for wages? Could not a master sell a slave to anyone, including to the slave himself? You did right, muttered Vineyard, you did right.

Yes, a black rode beside me, cried the spellbinder. But true-blue Southerners cherished familial dependents. Only Yankees cringed from personal contact with blacks. Mr. Vineyard rides next to his black. Why can't I? Because I am too poor to own slaves?

The audience gasped. A shamefaced Vineyard moved that the association acquit Frederick Starr. Vineyard's surrender carried, with only twenty votes against it. In celebration of his vindication, Starr further explained his views. Manumission, he said, remained masters', not nonslaveholders', business. Native Southerners, not visiting Northerners, must generate southern anti-slavery opinion. But if insiders wished to free slaves, outsiders could prepare future freedmen and dispatch freed blacks to Africa. "If any man through love, justice, or duty sees fit to free his slave," we will mercifully remove that black "from the competition of the Anglo-Saxon."

That antislavery conclusion provoked Benjamin Franklin Stringfellow to deliver a proslavery harangue that would have done George Fitzhugh proud. Anyone who cheered Frederick Starr, declared Stringfellow, considered slavery "an evil to be borne, not an institution to be defended." Then we should rid "ourselves of such a curse." But the North suffered from a worse curse: free labor. Wage earners would be better off enslaved, for slaveowners bestowed kindly direction, while employers exacted cruel toil.

The courtroom audience gasped. Many rednecks rejoiced to be wage earners. They proudly belonged to no man. They would not be called worse off than blacks. They had come to oust Starr. They left determined to destroy Stringfellow.

In the next few days, Stringfellow frantically buttonholed everyone who would stop, trying to explain his overly orthodox orthodoxy away. Those disloyal to slavery, he said, had misquoted him. He had never said whites should be enslaved. He had always been loyal to his race. He would yet rout the disloyal Starr.¹³

Stringfellow considered his subsequently published *Negro Slavery, No Evil*, an uncompromising rout of Starr's antislavery sentiments. The pamphlet instead showed that the border remained too compromised for proslavery, Lower South style. Once again, Stringfellow proclaimed that free labor capitalism bred inequality and class war. But this time, he discreetly added that racial slavery made all whites equal. This time, he discreetly left unresolved how whites could be equal if a free labor economy generated inequality. This

time, he espoused another marvel. This time, he called slavery's territorial expansion the best route to abolition. He thereby repopularized the diffusion argument of Thomas Jefferson, the prince of Upper South apologists for slavery.

Unless slavery diffused over wide areas, Stringfellow explained in the Jeffersonian vein, slaves would be crammed into a suffocating area. Then plantations would become huge, relationships between slaveholders and slaves impersonal, and masters' personal benevolence unlikely. But if slavery spread, claimed the co-founder of the Platte County Self-Defensive Association, slaveholdings would be small, relationships intimate, and benevolence personal. Affection would spring up "between master and slave." The resulting black liberation would come the best way—after preparation, from love, to benefit family friends. Antislavery crusaders, then, should seek to extend slavery!

That view remained common among Missouri proslavery agitators. Stringfellow sounded like Robert H. Miller, editor of the proslavery *Liberty* (Missouri) *Tribune*. Unless you "go to Kansas now," declared Miller, "not only Kansas, but Missouri will be taken." Besides, since the Creator plans "to colonize the African race in their own native land, . . . they should be enlightened and Christianized. This can only be done by enlarging the area of slavery." In other words, the Platte County Self-Defensive Association stood for capturing Kansas to secure Frederick Starr's and Thomas Jefferson's panacea: abolition plus colonization!¹⁴

A Lower South slaveholder, reading incredulously about this ideological capitulation to Jefferson, would have understood why Missouri slaveholders considered their regime vulnerable, especially if neighboring Kansas became free soil. Imagine, forming an association to lynch a Yankee who disapproved of slavery for blacks, and instead almost lynching a Southerner who advocated slavery for all civilizations! Imagine, Stringfellow, the campaigner for George Fitzhugh's anti-Jeffersonian views, surrendering to Thomas Jefferson's vision of ending slavery!

More surrenders followed. The Platte County Self-Defensive Association, after the debacle of Frederick Starr's victory over Benjamin F. Stringfellow, resolved that "those who hate slaveholders have no right to a slaveholder's money." Slaveholders must not trade with disloyal merchants. The association must enforce the extralegal decree.

In response, Weston's commercial establishment formed a countervailing extralegal association. Their association insisted that vigilantes obey the law, that accused heretics be tried in republican courts, that free blacks could remain in Missouri, and that law-abiding merchants or preachers could freely promote goods and ideas. If Stringfellow wished to rout white men's republicanism, he could have civil war here and now.

Once again, Atchison, Stringfellow, and the Platte County Self-Defensive Association retreated. They suspended economic nonintercourse. They postponed extralegal rule. But without antidemocratic vigilantism, how could western Missouri slaveholders survive their loose proslavery ideology and

looser slave controls, to say nothing of Benton's nonagitation, Starr's principles, runaway slaves, black Celias and Georges, and especially a wide-open, free soil Kansas neighbor? We must, Atchison and his supporters answered, strike first and hard in Kansas. After securing the neighbor for slavery, we must pour uncompromising proslavery repressions back on our compromised state and neighborhood.

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Most antebellum Americans (and most Southerners) doubted that slaveholding Missourians could capture Kansas. The weather and the soil seemed to forbid the institution so far north. Slaveholders could seize slave states down in torrid Gulf of Mexico climes. But up on the icy Kansas plains?!

The question missed a key point: The Kansas plains were as slaveholder friendly as any Border South terrain, including Missouri's. The eastern third of Kansas, where the battle for the territory would be decided, was a lush, undulating prairie, with the same weather and soil that nurtured slavery in western Missouri. The Missouri River, forming the northern third of the Missouri-Kansas border, could enrich slaveholders on the Kansas no less than on the Missouri side. Although the river eventually swerved eastward, to benefit central Missourians, eastern Kansans enjoyed alternate rivers, including the Kansas, Arkansas, Neosho, Osage, and Verdigris. Moreover, by 1854, farmers had worked Missouri's Missouri River Valley for a generation. Kansas's many river valleys contained untouched forests.

No wonder, then, that supporters of slavery who visited eastern Kansas in 1854, expecting to find a climate alien to slaveholders, enjoyed an exhilarating shock. "When I left home," wrote a North Carolinian in December 1854, I saw no "chance of introducing slavery into Kansas." But after touring the territory, "I am fully convinced that slave labor can be . . . profitably employed" on "the rich alluvial bottoms" and "the rich rolling prairie."¹⁵

Since eastern Kansas offered ideal Border South farming conditions, the territory stripped a big question to its essentials: Could the slavocracy retain even its most fertile Border South outposts, given its shortage of slaves and the North's abundance of free laborers? Even on the richest Border South terrain, neither sugar nor cotton could thrive; and whatever the profitability of a Border South grain or hemp or tobacco plantation, sugar and cotton plantations secured larger fortunes farther south. Yankee neighbors also made slavery riskier. For these reasons, northern and European free laborers had been speeding westward into Missouri, and slaves had been slowly draining southward to the tropics.

If climate doomed slavery in Kansas, in short, the doom would eventually engulf every Border South area. If majorities would decide slavery's fate, proslavery Missourians would have no chance for Kansas, just as the shrinking percentage of slaveholders in Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri had no chance to become a majority. But aggressive border slaveholders

had survived nonslaveholder majorities everywhere in the Border South. By condemning their opponents as heretics, and sometimes by adding physical intimidation to verbal coercion, the slaveholding 12 percent of Missouri's population had deterred the passive or indifferent or dissimulating (and bitterly racist) Missouri nonslaveholding majority from liberating blacks.

Atchison's border ruffians also meant to defy the inevitable free labor majority in Kansas. While a long-term slaveholder majority in Kansas looked impossible, a short-term minority takeover looked plausible. Most Yankees had to come from far away in order to settle in Kansas permanently. Missouri slaveholders had only to step over the border and stay only long enough to vote. If slaveholders seized the initial Kansas government, they could be hard to dislodge, whatever the numbers later against them, as they had been in Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, and Missouri (and as they had been hard to dislodge for half a century in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania).

A month before the Kansas-Nebraska Act passed, a headline-making northern initiative ironically aided proslavery Missourians. On April 26, 1854, the Massachusetts legislature chartered Eli Thayer's Massachusetts Emigrant Aid Society. Thayer aspired to buy presettlement Kansas land cheaply, to lure New Englanders to the plains, and to sell newcomers his lands. The land speculator did not plot to send antislavery gunmen or guns to Kansas. Nor did his society, soon reincorporated as the New England Emigrant Aid Society, ever arm a man. Missourians, however, thought they saw gunslinging, slave-stealing fanatics invading. If antislavery outlaws captured neighboring Kansas, Missouri slaves might flee across the border. Then many Missouri capitalists might cash out their slaves in Lower South slave auctions, making the evil ever more unnecessary up north.¹⁶

That perception intensified Missouri extremists' determination to capture the initial Kansas governmental apparatus. The perception also increased Missouri moderates' toleration for an Atchisonian capture. Missourians, while divided about whether to ease slavery (and blacks) away, concurred about who should decide such matters. Missourians must decide their own fate. Yankee meddlers must have no part in the decision, especially not with rifles, particularly not if outside fanatics emancipated Missouri by using Kansas bases to steal slave property. The image of New England thieves massing on Missouri's borders, an image that Atchisonians played up for every penny of its vast political worth, gave proslavery extremists a priceless boon.

The shrewd Atchison took every advantage of his heaven-sent (or rather Yankee-sent) opportunity to seize the initiative before Yankees overwhelmed his soon-to-be-outnumbered Missouri border ruffians. "We will have difficulty with the Negro thieves in Kansas," Atchison wrote Jefferson Davis in September 1854, but "our people are resolved to go in and take their 'niggers' with them." I have publicly advised "squatters in Kansas and the people of Missouri to give a horse thief, robber, or homicide a fair trial, but to hang a Negro thief or Abolitionist, without Judge or Jury." Since "we will

shoot, burn, and hang,” Atchison assured Davis, the antislavery threat “will be soon over.”¹⁷

In the first Kansas election, called to select a nonvoting delegate to the U.S. Congress in late November 1854, Bourbon Dave taught Missourians how to preclude any antislavery threat. Campaigning in western Missouri rather than in eastern Kansas, he told his constituents that “when you reside within one day’s journey of the territory, and when your peace, your quiet, and your property depend upon your action, you can, without an exertion,” spend a day in Kansas and “vote in favor of your institutions.” Atchison asked for 500 one-day Kansans.¹⁸

He received more than three times that number. On voting day, some 1700 one-day Kansans cast ballots, as opposed to only 1100 permanent Kansans. The one-day Kansans secured but a bauble: Kansas’s nonvoting territorial delegate to Congress. But the next Kansas election would select territorial legislators. In January 1855, Missouri’s stalemated U.S. Senate election increased the importance of that Kansas election.

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Until the twentieth century, state legislators selected U.S. senators. In January 1855, Missouri legislators balloted on whether to return the Democrats’ Davy Atchison to his seat in the U.S. Senate or to replace him with a proslavery Whig, A. W. Doniphan, or with his Democratic Party rival, Thomas Hart Benton. In the prevote debate, Frank Blair, Jr., Benton’s chief lieutenant, denied that Bentonians sought to abolish black slavery. Rather, they sought to save white republicanism. All true republicans, emphasized Blair, believe democrats can discuss anything, from whether to rotate crops to whether to use slaves. All true unionists understand that Atchison’s proslavery illegalities would smash the national republic. All true entrepreneurs wince that Atchison’s antidemocratic repressions will deter free white laborers from the Kansas plains.

All Missourians should hope for a free labor Kansas, continued Blair, because only then would Kansas and Missouri flourish. Compared to slave labor, free labor brought more people, more enterprise, and more profits to an area. Missourians, by controlling Kansans’ trade, would boom alongside the free labor neighbor. The economic takeoff would bring still more free laborers to Kansas and Missouri. Still more people would mean still more prosperity. If Atchison’s antirepublican coercions prevailed instead, Missouri would receive sparse migrants, enjoy scarce free speech, and achieve scant prosperity.¹⁹

G. W. Goode answered for the Atchisonians. Are we “to remain a Slave State,” asked Goode? Or should we “humbly yield to an insidious influence?” Frank Blair claims to be no abolitionist. Yet he also claims a free labor Kansas would be most prosperous. “As a necessary corollary, he would have Missouri be a Free State,” for surely the gentleman favors “the greatest prosperity.”

Only an abolitionist, continued Goode, would think that he has “as

much right to discuss the emancipating of our negroes” as to discuss the rotating of our crops. Crops do not run away. No one calls crops an abomination. Blair’s freedom of speech meant license to spread the fatal judgment that slave “property is a curse.”

Goode urged agitation against that verdict. If slaveholders who lived “on the border of Kansas” stand “quietly by, . . . thousands of fanatics and Abolitionists of the North, will hasten hitherto, to aid in the work already begun.” Goode conceded that Benton might not share Blair’s “designs.” Benton’s insistence on nonagitation, however, encouraged Missouri slaveholders’ “listlessness.” Unless Missourians repudiated listlessness, agitated for slavery, and elected Atchison, antislavery would creep forward.²⁰

After the speeches ended, Atchison and the Whigs’ A. W. Doniphan each tallied around 37 percent and Benton around 25 percent of legislators’ votes.²¹ On slavery, Doniphan resembled Atchison more than Benton. “A large portion of my worldly wealth consists of slave property,” the Whig declared. Like Atchison, Doniphan lived in western Missouri’s Platte County, “in full view of the fertile plains of Kansas.” A free labor Kansas would “force me to leave my adopted State and seek in some more congenial clime of the sunny South that protection to my property which I could not enjoy here.”²² But Doniphan considered Whigs to be slavery’s best protectors. So he refused to throw his votes to Democrats. None of the three candidates could secure the required 50 percent of the legislators. Atchison’s old U.S. Senate seat would remain empty at least until the next legislative election, in 1857.

Atchison’s defeat augured later victory for his principles. Three out of four legislators voted for Atchison or Doniphan. Neither candidate could abide a Yankee takeover in Kansas or Benton nonagitation in Missouri. Of the two proslavery partisans, only Atchison wielded an organization capable of seizing Kansas. Atchison’s faction could end their political frustration in Missouri by storming inside Kansas voting booths; and Doniphan’s votes proved that Missourians’ disgust for neighboring free soiler meddlers spilled past Atchison’s partisans. For the Platte County Self-Defensive Association, the time had come to strike for Kansas.

Western Missourians struck triumphantly on March 30, 1855, Election Day for the first Kansas territorial legislature. An early 1855 census of Kansas territory demonstrated that Missourians comprised almost half of the resident voters. But Atchison refused to stake slavery’s chances on rallying an almost-majority of ex-Missourians in Kansas (some of whom favored Benton, nonagitation, and free soil). Instead, Atchison again campaigned in western Missouri, to rally one-day Kansans against permanent Kansans. “Eleven hundred” will come “over from Platte County to vote,” he bragged, “and if that ain’t enough, we can send five thousand—enough to kill every God damned abolitionist in the Territory.”²³

This time, Atchison predicted the right number. On Election Day, 4968 one-day Kansans overwhelmed the 1210 permanent Kansans who voted. The territorial census showed the extent of the fraud. Only 2905 voters inhabited

the territory! Atchison privately confessed that fewer than one-third of proslavery voters meant to stay in Kansas. “But we are playing for a mighty stake; if we win, we carry slavery to the Pacific Ocean; if we fail, we lose Missouri, Arkansas, and Texas.”²⁴

The first Kansas territorial legislature, convening on July 2, 1855, consolidated slavery in Kansas and therefore hopefully in Missouri. The new Kansas violations of republicanism barred opponents of slavery from holding office, from speaking for antislavery, and from serving on juries in cases involving slavery. Opponents of the fugitive slave law faced disenfranchisement. Aiders of fugitive slaves faced capital punishment. Opponents of these laws faced imprisonment for at least two years.

The edicts dissolved the question of whether slaveholders could capture the Kansas government. The capture had been accomplished. The new laws, Benjamin Franklin Stringfellow bragged, are “more efficient to protect slave property than any State in the Union” has passed, and they “have already silenced the Abolitionists.” Since “Kansas and Missouri have the same latitude, climate, and soil,” added Davy Atchison, the neighbors must “have the same institutions.” Either Missourians would enslave Kansas or “Missouri must have free institutions.”²⁵

Cool-headed observers of the ensuing Kansas bloodshed, then and since, have wondered why Kansas settlers created Bleeding Kansas over the slavery issue. The huge majority of settlers, after all, cared much more about land claims and land speculation. But the men who precipitated the crisis in Kansas were largely not settlers in the territory. They were largely one-day Kansans. They cared primarily about slavery’s fate where they were settled: in shaky western Missouri.

By crossing the border for a day to consolidate their regime at home, they established a new issue in Kansas territory. The issue no longer involved whether Kansas could legalize enslavement of blacks. The question had become whether Kansans could abide antirepublican repression of whites. Would the white majority allow an unrepudican government to hang them for helping a free black, or to jail them for mounting a republican opposition?

Northern settlers considered tyrannical power over *them* far more important than any land speculation. So too, Missourians in Kansas fought to keep the power they had dearly won. A very natural, very bloody war over white men’s republicanism in Kansas loomed, precipitated by very natural one-day warriors from a very exposed slaveholder outpost, who very naturally wondered whether Missouri’s slaveholding regime could survive if wide open republican governments assaulted it from yet a third side.

– 6 –

Proslavery momentum, having swept across the border into Kansas, spilled back into Missouri. Nine months before the first Kansas showdown, the

Platte Country Self-Defensive Association had faltered before the Reverend Mr. Frederick Starr. Two weeks after the first Kansas legislative elections, Atchisonians expelled a compatriot of Starr's, George Park, from Missouri.

Park, a Vermonter, had founded the town of Parkville on the Missouri River. The *Parkville Luminary*, Park's newspaper, had condemned Atchisonians' repressions of Kansas white republicanism. On April 14, 1855, the Platte County Self-Defensive Association threw the *Parkville Luminary's* press into the Missouri River. Border ruffians warned Park and his associate editor that they would be spilled into the same watery grave, if they resided in Missouri three weeks hence. Moreover, if the alleged heretics moved to Kansas, "*we pledge our honor as men to follow and hang them.*"²⁶ Park left for the North. So, within the week, did Frederick Starr.

A month later, the rape of republicanism in the western Missouri/eastern Kansas corridor came to a fetid climax. A gang of twelve seized William Phillips, an alleged antislavery sympathizer, in Leavenworth, Kansas, across the Missouri River and slightly south of Weston, Missouri (the center of the Platte County Self-Defensive Association's agitations). The kidnapers forced their victim across the river. Then they stripped Phillips, shaved his head, smeared him with tar, decorated him with feathers, and hoisted him atop a rail. The vigilantes carted their decked-out prey through the Weston streets while "a number of niggers and boys" banged old pans and rang loud bells. They stopped at the slave auction block near the St. George Hotel. There "an old nigger auctioned him off & bid him in at 3 to 5 cents."²⁷

William Phillips finally escaped to the North, where he published a book on the savagery. This white citizen turned into a humiliated black, with blacks assisting in the shaming, excoriated the illusion that black slavery was the best cornerstone for white republicanism. The old amused query, "are you 'sound on the Goose Question,'" exclaimed Phillips, is no laughing matter "in Western Missouri." Did Americans "feel . . . indignation" about enslavement "of the press and of speech in France or Austria"? Well, the "veriest tyrant in Europe *dare* not exercise so fearful and despotic control over opinion."²⁸

Just as the previously faltering Platte County Self-Defensive Association caught its despotic stride in Missouri after conquering Kansas, so supporters of Atchison, after faltering in the 1855 legislative election for a U.S. senator, captured not one but both of Missouri's U.S. Senate seats in 1857. Atchison, now too notoriously controversial, stepped aside as candidate, to further his party's victory. In January 1857, Missouri's legislature elected two of his less notorious colleagues, Tristram Polk and James Green, to the U.S. Senate.

Since the politically astute Atchison felt compelled to step aside, most Missourians obviously thought Atchison went too far, in violating republicanism for whites. But since Atchison's adherents prevailed, most Missourians obviously thought that Yankee slave stealers went too far, and at Missouri slaveholders' very door. That southern readiness to see Yankee neighbors as holier-than-thou robbers always gave the South's most provocative defenders

a leg up, if they dared to pitch the South into a brawl. Missouri's Atchison had dared—and then had shrewdly stepped aside. Alabama's William L. Yancey would repeat the statecraft in 1860–61.

– 7 –

Seventy-two hours after the Missouri legislature endorsed Atchison's adherents, without electing Atchison, Bentonians shed the camouflage of nonagitation, without Benton's endorsement. On January 16, 1857, the *St. Louis Democrat*, controlled by Frank Blair, Jr., and B. Gratz Brown, declared that Bentonians must now oppose not just proslavery agitation but also slavery itself. The substitution of "free white labor for servile black labor" declared the *Democrat*, would be "wise and lofty statesmanship."²⁹

In retaliation, Atchison supporters introduced a resolution in the Missouri legislature, calling emancipation "impolitic, unwise, and unjust." The resolution invited yet another legislative debate on slavery. On February 12, 1857, in the Missouri House of Representatives, B. Gratz Brown accepted the invitation.

Brown was a blueblood from the Kentucky Blue Grass. Both his grandfathers had been U.S. senators. Raised in Frankfort and educated at Lexington's Transylvania University and at Yale, he favored Cassius Clay's gradual emancipation proposal during the Kentucky antislavery debate of 1849. A few months after Kentucky voters rejected Cassius Clay, Brown joined his cousin Frank Blair, Jr., in Missouri. There, hiding his antislavery inclinations, he only agitated, Benton style, against proslavery agitation.

As he shed the nonagitation disguise before the legislature on February 12, 1857, B. Gratz Brown looked to Atchison's followers as incendiary as they thought he sounded. A slender man of middling height, he seemed to swell as one's eye swept up his frame. His head, too large for his body, hinted at intellectual power. His thatch of red hair, towering atop his head, hinted at a Jacobinical intelligence.³⁰

He would no longer be driven into hiding, he warned, "by the arraignment, in the cant language of the day," of being disloyal "to the institutions of the State." Were colonial Virginians forever loyal to primogeniture? Were American Revolutionaries eternally loyal to King George? With the cry for perpetual loyalty, "bigots intimidate fools. Loyalty to existing institutions shuts out all reform."

Brown proposed no legislative antislavery reform, for "*there is, sir, already a gradual emancipation act in force in Missouri.*" The state census of 1856 showed that even in the twelve most enslaved Missouri River counties, the white population had grown twice as fast as the black since 1851. In the rest of the state, the white population had increased ninety times faster than the slave. This is nonlegislative emancipation "on its largest, proudest, grandest scale—emancipation gathered as a triumph in the forward march of the white race."

Brown applauded freedom's march "not so much for the mere emancipation of the black race" as for "THE EMANCIPATION OF THE WHITE RACE. I seek to emancipate the white man from the yoke of competition with the negro." He also sought to liberate white orators from the dictatorial "spell which has silenced many voices." But silent migration would accomplish almost all the liberating. White migrants' westward surge would drive almost all blacks out of Missouri. That magic moment "is almost upon us." He would then introduce an antislavery law, to free the trifling few slaves remaining. Or as Brown's compatriot, James Gardenhire, put it in yet another legislative debate on slavery eight months later, Missourians would not so much abolish slavery "as simply let it go."³¹

Slaveholders would hardly let slavery go. Nine days after B. Gratz Brown spoke, the legislature approved Atchisonians' resolution against legislative emancipation, 107–12.³² The 90 percent margin demonstrated Border South slavery's stubborn staying power, even when it was most besieged. Still, Benton's former apostles were not yet seeking legislative emancipation, and Benton himself wanted no part of any siege. Benton called it "the greatest Outrage" that his ex-lieutenants, Blair and Brown, had begun "a new slavery agitation," contrary "to the whole policy of my life, *which has been to keep slavery agitation out of the state.*"³³ Atchison supporters, as it turned out, had been paranoid to suspect Benton but prescient to suspect Blair.

Whatever Benton preferred, his young turks had brought agitation against slavery into the state for the duration. In Missouri's urban centers, the Brown-Blair party's successes appalled proslavery men throughout the South. In the late 1850s, Jefferson City elected James Gardenhire mayor, while St. Louis elected Frank Blair, Jr., to Congress and the equally antislavery John Wimer as mayor. Missouri's persisting slavery debates in the 1850s, unlike Virginia's one-shot affair in 1832, had spawned a permanent southern antislavery party. The new organization controlled 10 percent of the Missouri legislature and over 50 percent of Missouri urban governments. The heretics stood poised to collaborate with a northern antislavery party—poised to become founding fathers of a Southern Republican power base for Abraham Lincoln.

Only an especially obtuse cynic could now think that Davy Atchison's fear of antislavery politicians in Missouri, and thus his agitation in Kansas, had been only a self-serving myth, concocted merely to steal political power. Free laborers' migration into Missouri, the drain of Missouri slaves southward, urban free white laborers' loathing of George Fitzhugh-style colorblind proslavery, some blacks' resistance to slavery (epitomized by George and Celia), the pretenses of Frank Blair, Jr.—all these trends had swelled in Missouri's cities as the Civil War approached. Like borderites who insisted on the Fugitive Slave Law, Atchison supporters gambled that only intense and sometimes undemocratic agitation could seal the slavocracy's borders and deter slavery's slow erosion in the northernmost South. By cajoling some voters, transforming others into one-day Kansans, and intimidating others, Atchison had turned the innervating stalemates of 1854–55 into the exhilarating

triumph of 1857. But the triumph deepened resentment of the Slave Power in St. Louis and lesser towns. Furthermore, the rape of Kansas republicanism fanned white republicans' rage at the Slave Power beyond Missouri, in the North and in Kansas itself.

By mid-1856, Yankee migrants to Kansas outnumbered Missouri migrants. Slavery's foes also bore better arms, partly financed by officers of the New England Emigrant Aid Society (the society itself never financed a rifle). As free soiler protests mounted, the Atchison forces countered with the same antidemocratic repression that had expelled Frederick Starr and George Park from Missouri. In a preventative strike on May 20–21, 1856, over 500 proslavery vigilantes, including Davy Atchison's Platte County Rifles, massed against free soilers' Kansas stronghold, the town of Lawrence, some twenty-five miles west of the Missouri border. The proslavery mob battered Lawrence's main hotel, torched the free soil leader's house, and heaved the free soilers' press, the *Herald of Freedom*, into the Kansas River.

On May 23–24, 1856, a northern herald of freedom retaliated against this so-called Sack of Lawrence. John Brown, the same warrior who would assault Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in 1859, massed six followers, including four of his sons, against slumbering proslavery settlers on the Pottawatomie Creek, some thirty miles south of Lawrence. Brown and his henchman dragged five men from rude log cabins. They shot their victims, slit them open, and mutilated their corpses.

With Brown's celebration of an eye for an eye, the nation's problem was not just that proslavery violence spawned antislavery violence. The worse problem was that more Kansans and more Northerners than John Brown, whatever they thought of black slavery, already preferred civil war to slaveholder repressions of white men's republicanism. Thanks to the aftermath of the Kansas-Nebraska Act that Davy Atchison's followers had spawned, a continuing Kansas crisis loomed huge on the national horizon.

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On May 22, 1856, exactly two years after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, one day after the Sack of Lawrence, and one day before the Pottawatomie Massacre, violence inside the U.S. Senate brought the crisis of white republicanism sharply into focus. When Preston Brooks of South Carolina and the national House of Representatives invaded the U.S. Senate chamber to smash Charles Sumner of Massachusetts into silence and unconsciousness, slaveholders achieved none of Davy Atchison's gains in Missouri. They only popularized a symbol of gutted republicanism in the North. Before Brooks's brutality, most Northerners had considered Charles Sumner an overly learned, overly abusive fanatic. After the brutalizing, Sumner, unable to return to the Senate for two and a half years, silently epitomized white men's right to speak, whether in the U.S. Senate or in Kansas.

Some Southerners, understanding this counterproductive result, wished

Preston Brooks had merely verbally assaulted Charles Sumner or only cuffed the irritant, preferably outside the Senate chambers. But even they believed that the infuriating New Englander had invited a correction.³⁴ Charles Sumner's speeches on slaveholders' barbarism, researched exhaustively, memorized totally, rehearsed privately before the mirror, were infuriatingly calculated insults.

Sumner delivered his especially insulting oration, "The Crime Against Kansas," to the Senate on May 19 and 20, 1856.³⁵ The Massachusetts free soiler particularly condemned a trio of senators: Virginia's James Mason, Illinois's Stephen A. Douglas, and South Carolina's Andrew P. Butler. Sumner called Mason, who had inaugurated the Fugitive Slave Controversy of 1850, the exemplar of slave-selling Virginia, "where human beings are bred as cattle." The Massachusetts orator castigated Douglas, who had acceded to southern demands for Missouri Compromise repeal, "as the squire of Slavery, its very Sancho Panza, ready to do all its humiliating offices."

Sumner at least chose his first two targets appropriately, for Mason and Douglas had been centrally responsible for late proslavery laws. They also could defend themselves in the Senate. Poor befuddled Andrew P. Butler, in contrast, had never accomplished much in the Senate. He now remained in South Carolina, unable to control his saliva after a stroke. Yet Sumner mocked the convalescent as discharging "incoherent phrases" and "loose expectoration," whenever he opens "his mouth." To this image of spittle flying aimlessly, Sumner added hints of the South as a brothel. Butler, snarled Sumner, rushed "forward in the very ecstasy of madness," having "chosen a mistress," that "harlot, slavery, . . . to whom he has made his vows, and who, though ugly to others, is always lovely to him."

This humiliating language aroused universal southern rage. Whether Southerners wished to perpetuate slavery or to reform it or to remove it, they loathed officious insulters who called them tyrannical champions of brothels. With his speech, Charles Sumner not only shamed an ailing elder but also touched a raw nerve. By connecting the choice for slavery to a choice for a mistress, he indirectly alluded to masters' supposed ecstasy in the arms of hapless female slaves. The competition was on among Southerners in Washington, D.C., to scream back at his holier-than-thou attitude, even to slap his leering face.

Preston Brooks became the natural Southron to do the honors, since Andrew Butler was his cousin. But less natural—more demanding of explanation—is why Brooks's response went way beyond a tirade, immensely beyond a cuffing. Why did Preston Brooks savage Charles Sumner more horrendously than the southern code of honor required, indeed more terribly than the South Carolinian intended? If Brooks had struck, as he had planned, only a blow or two, wounding Sumner for only a week or two, Northerners would have been less enraged. But the uncontrolled nature of Brooks's rampage, blasting a senator out of Congress for many months, extended the

northern outrage, just as the Atchison takeover in Kansas extended Yankees' initial fury at the Kansas-Nebraska Act for a thousand days.

Charles Sumner perhaps psychosomatically extended his illness long after he was physically cured. But Brooks's extended assault would have wrecked anyone's physical health for a few months, extending through the presidential election campaign of 1856. That is when northern furor over the mugging most counted. The question, then, is not only whether the victim extended the recovery but also why the assailant extended the brutalization.

The answer transcends Preston Brooks. The South Carolina congressman's assault was a minute-long spree of relief, following almost a hundred hours of torment, about whether he could summon the nerve to strike at all. Brooks here offered a preview of the convulsive consequences of South Carolinians' repressed rashness. In 1860, after agonized hesitation, the state would finally dare to strike for disunion, in the manner of Brooks's unstoppable rage. Four years earlier, when the irresolute South Carolina congressman at last brought himself to swing the stick, he was too ecstatic to stop. In his desperation to achieve the precipitancy that he shuddered to begin, Charles Sumner's assailant was the essential South Carolinian.

For three decades before the Civil War, most South Carolinians (and few other Southerners) had seen only two choices. They could strike for disunion. Or ultras could allow slavery to fade undramatically from the South. As Brooks explained the choice in Kansas, if the South allows the territory to become "a hireling State, . . . Abolitionism will become" Missouri's "prevailing sentiment. So with Arkansas—so with Upper Texas." Then we should "put our house in order to die by inches." But if Kansas becomes "now a point of honor with the South," the "slavery question" will be "settled, and the rights of the South are safe."³⁶

Still, Brooks worried, in the South Carolina manner, that the state's strike would be counterproductive, unless the whole South backed up the precipitators against the wealthier, more populated North. In the Nullification Controversy of 1832–33, South Carolinians had climbed out on a precarious limb, naked of any other state's support. Declaring the national tariff law null and void in their state, nullifiers had promised disunion, if the federal government enforced the nullified tariff. But when all other southern states rejected nullification, nervous precipitators had settled for a compromise.

Ever after, South Carolinians, the Southerners most likely to dare disunion, were scared of their own daring, ashamed of their own fright, and infuriated at those who laughed at their charges and retreats. At midcentury, these reluctant revolutionaries had staged an especially inconsistent performance, hurtling ahead, then tumbling backward from disunion after the Compromise of 1850. Preston Brooks had then been one of the most ardent Carolina revolutionaries—and one of the most reluctant.

When honor came calling again in 1856, Brooks raced out, again and again, to assault Charles Sumner, only to quail, again and again. His problem

was partly physical, again mirroring South Carolina's predicament. Just as the North and the rest of the South could turn tiny South Carolina's honorable charge into dishonorable flight, so the stronger Sumner could force the weaker Brooks into contemptible retreat. The virile and handsome Sumner towered over the slight, limping, dissipated Brooks. Yet a South Carolinian must correct the insulting Sumner, Brooks believed, or other Southerners' dishonorable stupor would continue.

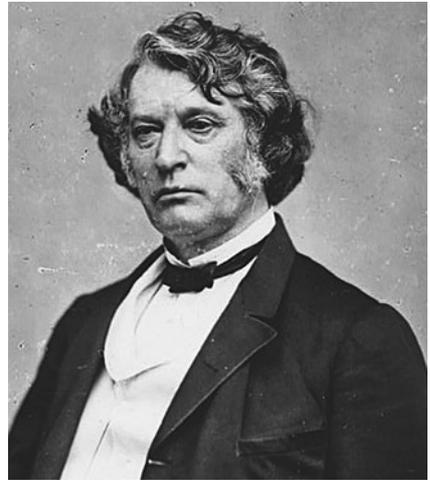
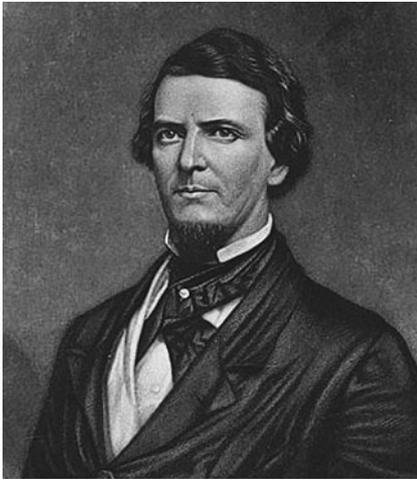
Immediately after Brooks heard that Sumner had mocked Butler, the mercurial South Carolinian determined to "avenge the insult."³⁷ Then the avenger stalled, as had South Carolina so often. Brooks decided to wait for the printed version of Sumner's speech. Upon reading the published oration two days later, Brooks searched for Sumner. Then he aborted the search. That night, he barely slept. Upon rising on May 22, he charged out to intercept Sumner as the insulter walked to the Senate. After hours of storming through Washington streets, Brooks decided his effort would exhaust him. Then the stronger Sumner would prevail. So he again withdrew. Sumner stepped into the Senate, unaware that he was hunted prey.

The harried hunter now waited at the Senate door for his prey to leave the chamber. Sumner stayed at his desk. Brooks entered the chamber. He sat three seats from the senator. A lady watched from the Senate gallery. Brooks asked that she be removed. She stayed. The South Carolinian retreated to the lobby.

Finally, the lady left. Only then did the assailant bellow that he could "stand this thing no longer." Brooks strode into the senatorial chamber. He rushed up to the seated Sumner. Screaming of "a libel on South Carolina, and Mr. Butler, who is a relative of mine," Brooks struck, as he had intended, a light blow with the smaller end of his gold-headed walking stick. Then, liberated at last, the exhilarated revenger could not restrain himself. Again and again, he clubbed Sumner, this time with the thick end of the cane. The wounded Sumner instinctively thrust himself backward and erect, ripping his desk from its moorings, then reeling as consciousness faded. When Sumner started to fall, Brooks caught him, propped him up, then struck again and again with the splintering cane.

John J. Crittenden, the Kentucky successor to Henry Clay's seat, lurched up to the assailant. "Don't kill him," he cried. Laurence Keitt, Brooks's young South Carolina colleague in the House, intercepted Crittenden, raised yet another cane, and screamed, "Let them alone, God damn you." Thus did South Carolina almost brutalize not only Massachusetts, center of free soil extremism, but also Kentucky, center of border compromising.

That preview of the secessionists' double enemy among white men, inside and outside the South during the Civil War, flickered but briefly. Georgia's Senator Robert M. Toombs restrained Keitt from assaulting Crittenden while Brooks smashed the unconscious Sumner to the floor. Then the assailant strode away from the desecrated Senate chamber. He left behind the most vivid imaginable symbol of the North's reaction to the Slave Power. Not even congressional gag rules against discussing slavery, not even unrepresentative



The slighter Preston Brooks (top left), whose ambush of the stronger Charles Sumner (top right) underlined the question of the decade: Would southern antimajoritarian defenses continue to maul northern majoritarian processes? Courtesy of the Library of Congress (Brooks and Sumner images) and the Library Company of Philadelphia (Brooks/Sumner drawing).

procedures to return fugitive slaves, not even unrepugnant laws in Kansas compared symbolically with the senator soaking freedom's chamber with his blood, unable to speak, unable to rise, a free white debater lashed more insufferably than a supposedly trashy slave.

For all this, Preston Brooks received applause, first from Southerners in

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Washington, D.C., then in South Carolina. While many Southerners privately thought that, as usual, South Carolina had gone a little too far, most of them publicly castigated Charles Sumner for pushing oratorical insults way too far. Border politicians such as John Crittenden condemned Brooks. But this important exception aside, most Southerners cheered Preston Brooks's silencing of an unbearable Yankee with all the passion of William L. Yancey's loathing for his stepfather. Isolated South Carolinians usually postured, then retreated. But Preston Brooks, tremulously, had finally done it—and had usually won southern huzzahs. It was all another ominous rehearsal for 1860–61.

As echoes of southern applause for Preston Brooks cascaded around an appalled North, so did Charles Sumner's whispered lament, before he lapsed again into unconsciousness: "I could not believe that a thing like this was possible." But the famed Massachusetts poet and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson better summed up the more extreme Northerners' thought. "I think we must get rid of [black men's] slavery," wrote Emerson, "or we must get rid of [white men's] freedom."³⁸

Most northern citizens still doubted that they had to rid the South of black slavery to eliminate Slave Power outrages against Yankee whites. But Bleeding Kansas and bloody Sumner had generated an anti-Slave Power storm that consumed northern political attention as the presidential election of 1856 approached. Yankees' determination to obliterate the Slave Power's antirepublican defenses especially threatened to seal the fate of the dying National Whig Party.