

The Battle of Osawatomie

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By late August 1856, Abolitionist John Brown had organized his “Kansas Regulars” by no authority other than himself and his principles. The bylaws of the “Kansas Regulars” required the members of the company to exhibit sensible and moderate behavior with “uncivil, ungentlemanly, profane and vulgar talk or conversation to be...discountenanced.” Captured foes were not to be harmed or executed unless given a fair trial.

John Brown was reacting, in part, to an increased aggression by pro-slavery forces out of Missouri. On August 17, 1856 at Leavenworth a border ruffian from Platte County, Mo. by the name of Fugit or Fugert bet his drinking partner \$6 that he could scalp an abolitionist within two hours. Fugit then shot a passerby out of his carriage and scalped him with a bowie knife while he was still alive. A second such incident occurred that day in Leavenworth which was a strong pro-slavery town.

On August 23, Major John W. Reid left Westport, Mo. with more than 300 men on a mission to attack Osawatomie, Topeka and Lawrence all in the Kansas Territory (K.T.). Reid had achieved some fame for leading the charge at the Battle of Sacramento in the Mexican War. Other officers present included ex-Missouri Senator Atchison of Plattsburg and Col. A.W. Doniphan of Liberty in Clay County, Mo. A large force of pro-slavery volunteers was picked up along the way, including Reverend Martin White, who was a slaveholder from Missouri with a long history of disputes with John Brown.

The Missourians reached the outskirts of Osawatomie, K.T. very early on the morning of August 30, 1856. One of the sentries was Frederick Brown, the wild card “hero” of the Battle of Black Jack. Frederick Brown greeted the advance of Reid’s force with “I know you” to the Reverend White. As Frederick Brown was reaching for his revolver he was shot dead by Reverend White.

News of Frederick Brown’s death and the approaching pro-slavery army was taken to John Brown at his camp near Osawatomie. John Brown and his friend, Luke Parsons (who had originally come to Kansas as a member of a vegetarian colony) headed toward Osawatomie and the entire abolitionist force of 38 men soon followed. Parsons admitted he had never been under fire and he asked Brown what to do. Brown told him to “take more care to end life well than to live long.”

John Brown decided not to try to defend the blockhouses in Osawatomie itself, but to attack the Missourians from the timber on their flank on the road into town. Brown’s men caused considerable confusion and damage at first but then the cannons were turned upon them and Major Reid led a charge into their midst. Brown’s men were forced to retreat through the timber and over a swollen creek holding their weapons high to avoid getting their powder wet.

Osawatomie was pillaged and then burned.

The Missouri forces lost between 20 and 30 men. Abolitionists killed included Frederick Brown, David Garrison, George Partridge and Theron Powers. Several abolitionists were captured including Charles Kaiser, who was executed two days later. Kaiser was a veteran of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848 and a dedicated revolutionary.

On August 30, 1877 a monument at Ninth and Main in present day Osawatomie was dedicated to those who had died defending Osawatomie. Frederick Brown’s body and those of Garrison, Partridge and Powers are interred there, but the remains of Kaiser were never located. John Brown’s name is also on the monument, but he is buried elsewhere.