

The Marais des Cygnes Massacre

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On May 19, 1858 Charles A. Hamilton (often spelled Hamelton) led a force of 25 to 30 armed men on a mission into Linn County, Kansas Territory (K.T.). Hamilton had been born in Georgia, lived in Missouri for a period of time, and had later settled in Linn County, K.T. The Hamilton force included both Missourians and Kansans depending, of course, how you figured it.

Hamilton was one of the several pro-slavery settlers run out of Linn County by “Free State” Guerrillas led by Free Stater James Montgomery. The Hamilton men were part of the 500 or so pro-slavery attendees at the “Papinsville Meeting” which was held in the small Bates County town of the same name on May 17, 1858 to discuss how to deal with the “Free State” threat.

Hamilton entered K.T. near Trading Post, just over the Missouri-Kansas border in Linn County. Hamilton apparently had a list of those he wanted to round up. Patrick Ross and John Campbell were gathered up near Trading Post, as were several others. Most went peacefully, if with apprehension, but blacksmith Eli Snyder (or Snider) resisted. He fired both barrels of a shotgun at Hamilton and managed to escape, although slightly wounded. Snyder is thought to have threatened Hamilton some weeks earlier.

Perhaps 20 Linn County residents were detained by Hamilton, but several were released because they were too young or too old - or not guilty enough.

Eleven Kansas settlers, who included the almost-blind Austin Hall, were marched to a ravine on the Marais des Cygnes River about one-half mile from the Missouri-Kansas border. The 11 were ordered into the ravine, and the Hamilton men were lined up before them and ordered to present arms. At least one of Hamilton’s men refused to get in line and left, saying he would have no part of such an act. After some hesitation, the order to fire was given and Hamilton fired the first shot.

William Stilwell, Patrick Ross, William Colpetzer, Michael Robinson and John Campbell were killed. Five others were wounded. Only Austin Hall (the blind man) escaped injury by feigning death. None of the designated 11 was thought to have any affiliation with James Montgomery.

The Marais des Cynges Massacre became famous in part because of the poem “Le Marais du Cygne” by John Greenleaf Whittier, which includes the following lines:

A blush as of roses
Where rose never grew!
Great drops on the bunch-grass,
But not of the dew!
A taint in the sweet air
For wild bees to shun!
A stain that shall never
Bleach out in the sun!

The Marais des Cygnes massacre site became a Kansas State Historical Site in 1941 and later, a National Historic Site. A large monument to the massacred martyrs has been erected in the Trading Post Cemetery, where most of the victims are buried.

Only one man in the Hamilton force was ever actually tried and convicted for his part in the Marais des Cygnes massacre. William Griffith, probably of Bates County, Mo., was arrested some five years later in Platte County, Missouri and hung on October 30, 1863. Will Hairgrove, one of the wounded survivors, acted as the executioner.