

## THE POTTAWATOMIE MASSACRE May 24-25, 1856

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Before he migrated to Kansas Territory, John Brown had gathered from contributors in the East, arms and ammunition for the several abolitionist settlers already in Kansas. They needed weapons more than bread, son John Brown, Jr. had written him. John Brown had also acquired and hauled to Kansas several antiquated broadswords donated by an old military man by the name of General Lucius V. Bierce.

In May 1856, John Brown was irritated at the weak passive resistance offered by the citizens of Lawrence to the sack - albeit "legal" sack - of Lawrence as perpetrated by Sheriff Jones of Douglass County and troops from Missouri.

The settlers along Pottawatomie Creek and its tributaries included several advocates of both the Free State cause and of the pro-slavery cause and probably several moderates of both sides. The organizer of some of the pro-slavery settlers was said to be Henry Sherman, whose commercial concerns in the area - at "Dutch Henry's Crossing" where the California trail crossed Pottawatomie Creek - dated back several years in the vicinity.

Several of the abolitionist settlers along Pottawatomie Creek were advised to move along elsewhere by some of the pro-slavery settlers. "Dutch Henry" (whose brothers were called "Dutch Pete" and "Dutch Bill," by the way) and James Doyle were thought to be behind some of these threats. John Brown intended to stop the threats. Along the way he found a use for the old broadswords.

Within a couple of days of the inglorious "Sack of Lawrence," John Brown put together his own company of men to make things right. Joining John Brown were four of his sons - Owen, Frederick, Salmon and Oliver - his son-in-law Henry Thompson and Theodore Weiner. They were to be transported to Pottawatomie Creek in a wagon owned by James Townley. The broadswords were sharpened by a young boy named Blaine Fuller at a "little station" that had a grindstone. Perhaps this was the camp of John Brown, Jr. and his "Pottawatomie Rifles," who were otherwise not involved in this action. They had plans to march on Lawrence.

Townley attempted to withdraw from the company when he learned the details of the plan, but John Brown pulled a pistol on him and said it was necessary "to strike straight into the hearts of the Pro-Slavery Party." Townley complained that he was sick, but John Brown felt his pulse and suggested all Townley needed was "a smell of blood."

At about 11 p.m. on the evening of May 24, 1856, the James Doyle cabin on Mosquito Branch of Pottawatomie Creek was surrounded by John Brown's company. Several "savage dogs" owned by Doyle were dispatched by broadsword so that the Doyles and others in the neighborhood would not be alerted.

The Doyle men, which included three sons of Doyle, were ordered into the yard and told they were prisoners of the northern army. The youngest son was left behind after the pleadings of Mrs. Doyle but the others were taken about 300 yards away and hacked to death with the broadswords. Then, somewhat impulsively, John Brown shot the already-dead James Doyle in the forehead.

John Brown's company next stopped at the cabin of Allen Wilkinson, which was further south nearer Dutch Henry's Crossing. It was now almost certainly after midnight on the morning of May 25, 1856. Wilkinson had been a member of the Territorial Legislature when it convened at the Shawnee Indian Mission. Wilkinson was drug out of his cabin and taken about 150 yards from the house. He was found the next morning with major gashes to his head and body and his throat had been slashed - twice.

They next visited at the cabin of James Harris, who it seemed worked for “Dutch Henry” and lived very close. They were looking for “Dutch Henry” Sherman himself, but he was not present nor was Judge George Wilson who was apparently also one of those being sought. William Sherman, a brother of “Dutch Henry” was found at the Harris’ place. He was taken a short distance away and killed. His skull was split in two places and his left hand was almost completely severed from his arm.

John Brown did not equivocate about his actions. He said later, “God is my judge. It was absolutely necessary as a measure of self-defence (sic), and for the defence (sic) of others.”