

The Sack of Lawrence

*Harold Dellinger, Special Projects Editor
www.WindingRiver.com*

In early May 1856, a Douglas County Grand Jury issued indictments against Andrew H. Reeder, Charles Robinson, James H. Lane, George W. Brown, George W. Deitzler, George W. Smith, Gaius Jenkins and Samuel N. Wood for high treason. Also indicted were the *Herald of Freedom*, a newspaper for inflammatory and seditious publication and the *Kansas Free State*, a newspaper for reporting resolutions in which resistance to territorial laws was advocated. The Free-State Hotel, owned by the New England Emigrant Aid Society, was indicted because it had been (it was alleged) constructed for military purposes, thereby endangering public safety.

On May 10, citizens of Lawrence adopted resolutions requesting the aid of Kansas Territorial Governor Wilson Shannon in resisting the buildup of guerrilla bands or border ruffians from Missouri who threatened the abolitionist stronghold of Lawrence, Kansas Territory. On May 12, Governor Shannon replied that there was no force approaching Lawrence except the legally constituted “posse” of United States Marshall Fain and Douglas (K.T.) County Sheriff Samuel Jones. Shannon said “I will in no way interfere with any of these officers in the discharge of their official duties.”

By the morning of May 21, 1856 more than 800 Missourians and other sympathetic members of the posse were camped on Mount Oread near the center of Lawrence. Those members of the posse without proper weapons were better furnished by the United States armory at LeCompton. The 800 members of the posse were led by ex-Senator David Rice Atchison with his “Platte County Rifles” and two pieces of artillery. Captain Dunn with the “Kickapoo Rifles,” Col. Warner D. Wilkes of South Carolina with a force, and Col. Titus of Florida, also with a force, were also present.

About 11 a.m. on May 21, United States Marshall Fain entered Lawrence with a guard of 10 men. Dietzler, Jenkins and Smith were arrested without incident, after which Fain and his guard dined at the Free-State Hotel. They did not pay for their meal. When Fain returned to the Border Ruffian camp on Mount Oread, he dismissed his guard, as well as the others gathered, and allowed them to serve as Sheriff Jones’ posse if they so desired.

By 3 p.m. on May 21, the main body of the Border Ruffians had descended upon Lawrence. David Rice Atchison addressed the posse as follows, “Boys, this day I am a Kickapoo Ranger, by God. This day we have entered Lawrence with “Southern Rights” inscribed on our banner, and not one damned Abolitionist has dared to fire a gun.”

Sheriff Jones led his posse north on Massachusetts Street where he presented the writs which allowed him to destroy the *Herald of Freedom* and the *Kansas Free State*. The type was dumped into the Kansas River and the other supplies were drug into the street.

The South Carolina flag was carried to the top of the Free-State Hotel and fastened to a chimney. The artillery pieces were put into position across the street from the hotel. A (some say) drunken Atchison fired the first cannon shot at the hotel but it missed the hotel completely. Several other cannon shots also failed to damage the hotel. Several powder kegs were exploded in the hotel but had little effect on the sturdy, fortress-like structure. Then the Free-State Hotel was torched room by room, and soon the building was engulfed in flames. A mighty shout by the posse was heard as the walls collapsed.

When the walls of the Free-State Hotel fell in, Sheriff Jones said “I have done it, by God. I have done it.” The principal stores of Lawrence were looted and ex-Governor Robinson’s new house was torched as well as an undetermined number of other residences.

Nary a single abolitionist or resident of Lawrence was killed in the “Sack of Lawrence,” but two Border Ruffians died as a result of their participation. One young man was killed when a brick fell off the Free-State Hotel and struck him in the head. A young Missourian accidentally shot himself in the shoulder and died as a result of his injuries.