



Historians Corner, Paul R Petersen

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General Thomas Ewing Jr. Not the man we thought we knew

Why was a noted and famous general who commanded over 6,000 Federal troops in the District of the Border comprising the most contentious and fought over ground along the Missouri-Kansas border transferred to a relatively unknown and insignificant post in southeast Missouri in relative obscurity during the closing chapter of the Civil War?

Thomas Ewing Jr. was born in Lancaster, Ohio to a successful lawyer. Thomas Jr. followed in his father's footsteps and also studied law in Ohio before the war becoming a lawyer in 1855. He then traveled to Kansas in 1856 and became embroiled in early Kansas political corruption. Much of the corruption centered on acquiring land grants to construct railroads in Kansas. Men like "Charles Robinson, Thomas Ewing and Marcus J. Parrott, were endeavoring to secure land grants and plotting a scheme to get them into their own hands, and swindle the people of Kansas out of any benefits from them. Inquiry was thus directed at Ewing for enriching himself in questionable land deals involving the buying of Indian lands for the western railroads. His involvement in Kansas politics got him elected the first chief justice of Kansas in 1861. Ewing was thirty-four years old and described as "a man who believed that he had 'few equals in mental vigor.' He was intensely ambitious and hoped to secure election to the U.S. Senate. With that goal in mind he sought favor with Senator James H. Lane, the 'King' of Kansas politics." Ewing resigned his judgeship in 1862 to enter the military. Seeking favor of Senator James H. Lane, he was assigned as colonel of the 11th Kansas Jayhawker Regiment where he fought in several minor battles in Arkansas. Although he possessed no military experience Ewing with Lane's help was promoted to brigadier general on March 13, 1863, and given command of the

District of the Border in June, which comprised Kansas and western Missouri.

After taking charge of the District of the Border Ewing set up his headquarters in Kansas City in the finest hotel in town. He brought with him his Kansas Jayhawker cronies and placed the most notorious Kansas Redlegs, known as "professional thieves, robbers, murderers and arsonists," on his headquarters staff. As soon as Ewing moved to Kansas City he ordered three companies of the 9th Kansas Jayhawker Regiment to report to his headquarters. Along the way they were ambushed by Quantrill's men and suffered thirty-three killed. The next day Col. Edward Lynde of the 9th Kansas Jayhawker Regiment while on patrol boasted that he killed more than one hundred guerrillas between June 18 and 20. Most of the killed were noncombatants, not soldiers. In further retaliation Ewing had women relatives of Quantrill's men arrested and jailed in Kansas City and assigned the men who survived the earlier ambush as their prison guards. Ewing's own command of the 11th Regiment served as the provost guards. The women's guards systematically undermined the building they were housed and in a few days it collapsed killing five young Southern girls. The plot to murder the girls was overheard and recorded by eyewitnesses. Ewing was kept notified in the progress of the building and had his adjutant file a false report saying the building was safe. Ewing left Kansas City right before the building collapsed, just as he had been informed, so to remove himself from any blame being attached back to him. Afterwards Ewing refused to allow an investigation into the matter. Quantrill sent a letter to General Ewing demanding the release of the women who had escaped

death in the prison collapse instead of sending them to the Gratiot Street Prison in St. Louis where Ewing had originally intended. He said that if his request was not immediately complied with he and not they would be responsible for the consequences. When Ewing read it, he "threw it on the floor and rubbing it under his foot bade the bearer to go and tell Quantrell and his outlaws to go to Hell and do their worst." The result was Quantrill's Lawrence Raid.

As a reprisal for Quantrill's raid Ewing issued his infamous Order #11 depopulating five Missouri counties of Southern sympathizers. Before the order went into effect Jayhawkers swarmed through the Missouri countryside murdering civilians, plundering their property and burning down their homes. In Kansas City Ewing's chief-of staff, LtCol. Preston Plumb had been assigned as his replacement as head of the 11th Regiment and also given duties as the provost marshal while in Missouri.

The black marks on Ewing's legacy were adding up quickly. Ewing was unable to put a halt to Quantrill's operations. Ewing was responsible for the arrest and premeditated murder of five Southern girls, the most heinous and barbaric act committed during the Civil War. Ewing depopulated five Missouri counties called the harshest military measure directed toward a civilian population in American history. As

an example the population in Cass County before Ewing's order was 9,794; after the order was executed less than 600 were allowed to remain. But the actual cause of Ewing's fall from grace is recorded below.

Preston Plumb of the 11th Kansas Regiment, was General Thomas Ewing's chief of staff and acting as the provost marshal of Independence practiced another wily method of robbery on Missouri's peaceful citizens. As provost marshal Plumb had enormous discretionary power over civilians around Independence. He could force labor from the citizens and seize any property he deemed needed for the military or for his own personal use. Plumb once had four Redlegs seize a noted and wealthy Unionist and livestock dealer, A. S. H. Crenshaw. The 11th Kansas Regimental quartermaster seized all of Crenshaw's corn and hay then burned down his house. Then Plumb's Redlegs drew their pistols and roughed Crenshaw up making him believe he was going to be hanged. They offered to buy Crenshaw's stock for \$1.00 a head. Fearing for his life Crenshaw signed a bill of sale for \$650 for 100 cattle and 30 hogs. The Redlegs said they would give him \$150. Again they offered Crenshaw \$1,200 for thirty-one mules and horses. This was followed by another so-called "sale" that took fifty-eight mules the last of his stock. Crenshaw was kept in jail for over a year where he was mistreated becoming ill and went blind and never receiving a dime for his property from Plumb or Ewing. Ewing finally released Crenshaw after forcing him to promise to keep his treatment a secret. A board of Federal officers convened a military court martial which acknowledged that General Ewing and his subordinate officers were all guilty of a conspiracy to rob and murder Crenshaw. Ewing was eventually reassigned to the small post of 900 men at Fort Davidson in Pilot Knob in southeast Missouri. There he fought a minor skirmish with General Sterling Price's forces in September, 1864, before abandoning the fort during the first night. Suffering from criticism over his military command and charges of corruption and illegal operations Ewing resigned five months later before the war ended and returned to civilian life. After the war Ewing attempted to run for governor of Ohio in 1880 but the reminder of his wartime atrocities kept him from office.

Article submitted by author

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Photo of Thomas Ewing Jr. - Greg Walter Collection.

References: Report of the Headquarters Board of Officers, Kansas City, September 6, 1864, Thomas Ewing Family Papers, Library of Congress

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