



Historians Corner, Paul R Petersen

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Missouri's Provisional War-Time Governor - Hamilton Gamble

Very little is known about Missouri's appointed provisional Civil War governor. Apologists have tried to paint him as a true conservative, who truly had the citizen's well-being at heart, who tirelessly tried to protect the State against what has been discovered as a cruel and unconstitutional Union occupation. Though records can be argued showing that Missouri's provisional governor tested the political winds and played both sides of the fence his actions show his true nature and philosophy.

Hamilton Rowan Gamble was born in Winchester, Virginia on November 29, 1798. After studying law he was accepted to the bar in Virginia in 1817. Shortly thereafter, Gamble became prosecuting attorney of the Circuit Court of Howard County, Missouri. In 1818 Gamble moved to St. Louis, Missouri and became clerk of the St. Louis Circuit Court. Becoming a strict Unionist Gamble sided early with the radical abolitionists. While serving as circuit attorney in St. Louis Gamble was forced from office due to his heavy drinking habits. In 1824, Governor Frederick Bates appointed Gamble secretary of state, and he moved to St. Charles, then the capital of Missouri.

Gamble was part of a clic of important personages living in Missouri prior to the Civil War. He served in the law firm with Edward Bates. In 1827 he married Caroline Coalter whose sister was married to his law partner. Bates was selected to be United States Attorney by President Abraham Lincoln. Bates tenure as Attorney General generally met with unfavorable reviews. Bates was the one responsible for carrying out Lincoln's unconstitutional war policies, including the arbitrary arrest of Southern sympathizers and Northerners who opposed his policies. In 1846, Gamble was elected to the Missouri Supreme Court and in 1852 had become Chief Justice of the Missouri Supreme Court. He voted against his colleague's decision in the Dred Scott Decision guaranteeing rights of slave owners to their property when traveling to other states.

As the secession crisis deepened, Missouri attempted to follow a policy of armed neutrality, in which the state would not support either side in the war but remain in the Union. A special election in February established a Missouri Constitutional Convention to determine the relationship between Missouri and the United States. The convention voted against secession and affirmed the state's neutrality. President Lincoln would not honor Missouri's decision to remain neutral so he called upon Federal troops to depose Governor Claiborne Jackson and chase the state's duly elected representatives from the capitol at the point of Federal bayonets.

Gaining influence from his associations with such men Gamble was eventually appointed provisional governor of Missouri after Governor Jackson was deposed. With martial law in effect the Federal military supported the minority of anti-secessionists that remained and appointed Gamble as an unelected puppet of the Union forces. Gamble was appointed with the understanding he would remain governor until the next election was planned but with a radical Republican in office the election was repeatedly postponed.

During the Civil War, Gamble led the state through perilous times, unsafe conditions bordering on anarchy between Unionists and Secessionists within Missouri and from neighboring states, attempts by Radicals within his own party to remove him as governor, and disagreements with generals in the Union army which required President Lincoln's intervention. Gamble's repressions often directed themselves at Missouri's guerrilla forces and to those who supported them. His wartime decisions caused great hardships on Missouri's Southern citizens. Confiscation of Southern property and death to all sympathizers were but a small portion of brutality displayed. In 1862 Gamble issued an edict ordering all able-bodied men to join the "loyal militia"

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or to "leave the State.," This forced all formerly neutral-citizens either into the regular Southern ranks or with guerrilla commands such as Colonel William Clarke Quantrill's.

Other policies that Gamble supported were:

1. Hang or shoot all suspected guerrillas or Southern sympathizers on the spot without benefit of trial.
2. Seize all property of guerrilla soldiers or suspected guerrilla sympathizers.
3. Burn and destroy homes, livestock, and property of all guerrillas and their sympathizers.
4. Refuse the right to vote or hold civil office for any Southern sympathizers or those who refuse to take a loyalty oath.
5. Level loyalty bonds against Southern sympathizers to guarantee their nonsupport of guerrilla activity, then find excuses to accuse them of disloyalty so their property could be seized and sold for profit.
6. Refuse the right of military pardons or paroles or exchanges of guerrilla soldiers as afforded to regular army soldiers.
7. Seize guerrillas' relatives for imprisonment or banishment from the state.
8. Deny all guerrillas and their sympathizers rights when captured as afforded prisoners of war.
9. Seize suspected disloyal citizens and imprison them without benefit of trial or a reading of the charges brought against them in accordance with constitutional law, thus denying the writ of habeas corpus.
10. Deny Southern sympathizers the right to freedom of religion by forcing compulsory prayers in support of the president of the United States and the Federal government.
11. Force citizens in the vicinity of guerrilla activity that results in destruction of property to pay for repairs and to contribute hard labor to repair destroyed property.

12. Use of noncombatants for human shields while on dangerous military operations not in accordance with the rules of war.

During the Civil War, Gamble started construction of a large elaborate stone mansion in Pleasant Hill, Missouri. He died on January 31, 1864, before he could finish the house, but his widow and son completed the work in 1866. The brutality sanctioned by Gamble during the war was not soon forgotten. Shortly after finishing the mansion, one night his family disappeared, leaving their evening meal uneaten on the table as though they intended to return within a few minutes. Gamble's family were never seen again in Missouri. Only recently, it has been discovered that Mrs. Gamble and her son are buried in Salt Lake City, Utah, where they evidently escaped retribution from the citizens whose lives they destroyed.

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Governor - Hamilton Gamble

Photo courtesy Wilson's Creek National Battlefield, National Historic Site.