



Historians Corner, Paul R Petersen

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The Undiscovered Truth About Lawrence, Kansas 1863

A Legacy of Lies

Every historical account attests to the fact that in 1863, along the Missouri-Kansas Border at the height of the Civil War, the abolitionist town of Lawrence, Kansas was a quiet village inhabited by peaceful, unarmed civilians. When the truth was finally discovered and told in the 2011 book *Quantrill of Lawrence – The Untold Story*, the world recoiled in disbelief at finally learning the truth.

For two years previous to the year 1863 armed bands of Kansas Jayhawkers had spearheaded their attacks on Missouri farms and plantations from the center of abolitionist activity at Lawrence. Their patriotism was much less a factor than their desire for the established wealth they saw lying across their border.

In their raids for plunder the Jayhawkers developed the usual method of burning a house down, killing all the livestock that couldn't be driven off, shoot the old men and young boys, sexually abusing the women, and many times raping the Negro servants in the presence of their owners. There were many instances where the Jayhawkers were murdering old men in their 80's and shooting down young boys as young as 10 years old. Most were not permitted to be buried. A genocide of brutal proportions. Of only those numbers recorded during the war Jayhawkers were responsible for burning down over 2,700 Missouri homes along the border many times wiping towns off the map forever. One resident was quoted as saying one could ride for ten miles without ever seeing a standing house, only the charred remains of chimneys remaining.

While the murders by the Jayhawkers took place in Missouri the plunder was hauled back to Lawrence to enrich the coffers of the Kansas leaders. These Kansas plunder trains were sometimes five miles long loaded down with every kind of household furniture imaginable. Even tombstones from Missouri cemeteries were taken back to Kansas to use as paved paths for their houses. Every house contained a great amount of stolen loot. What was left was sold at weekly auctions on the streets to the local

citizenry. During the height of their pillaging in 1863 there was so much plunder being stored in Lawrence that special buildings had to be built to hold it all. All existing warehouses were filled to capacity. A great deal was shipped on local wagon trains to be hauled west to the mining camps further west. It was recorded that at least \$20,000 to \$80,000 weekly of Missouri plunder was shipped from Lawrence and surrounding towns. Lawrence came to be known as "The Citadel of Stolen Goods" and her citizens were affectionately labeled as "pirates of the prairies."

There were three abolitionist newspapers operating in Lawrence inciting rebellion with each trying to excel each other in their virulent articles enticing their readers to plunder the Missouri countryside and exterminate the entire population. And when forbearance ceased to be a virtue Colonel William Clarke Quantrill led his guerrilla band on to Lawrence. They had no illusions about the course they'd chosen. Their homes had been destroyed. Their families made destitute. Their fathers and brothers shot down like dogs. Their mothers and sisters physically and sexually abused. Their property all stolen and taken back into Kansas to enrich the coffers of some scheming abolitionist. They were prepared to fight to the death.

In 1863 there were approximately 2,500 citizens in Lawrence. Acknowledged accounts stated that "almost every man in town owned a Sharps carbine," the most deadly and accurate weapon of its day. Almost every person in town was in possession of a stolen horse taken out of Missouri and the town's stables were full of stolen livestock and equipment. With the archival of historical records and development of modern databases now available it has been discovered that at least 40 percent of the male citizens of Lawrence were in the Federal military with the rest being in the Kansas militia. There were very few men in Lawrence who were not in the town's militia. Whether young or old they could all be found in uniform drilling and doing daily patrols. There were two companies constantly patrolling. One company was led by Lieutenant Tobias J. Hadley of the 5th Kansas Jayhawker Regiment

Petersen continued from page 5.. and the other by Major Edmund G. Ross, a citizen of Lawrence leading Company E, 11th Kansas Jayhawker Regiment. A Federal officer, Colonel Francis B. Swift was in command of thirteen companies of militia in and around Lawrence. With an average of 80 men in each company, that made approximately 1,000 soldiers guarding the town's defenses. Besides Lawrence having a large militia they had five defensive forts 100 feet in diameter with blockhouses placed in the most strategic locations on the likely avenues of approach to the town.

Lawrence proved to be a viable military target. It was a Northern recruiting center. It was a way station for numerous Federal units traveling along their way and in many instances Kansas Jayhawker regiments started from and returned with their plunder back to Lawrence. It housed a vast amount of military stores and supplies. It was headquarters of the noted Redlegs, the most vicious murderers and thieves in Federal uniform.

What Quantrill and his men found as they attacked the town was an armed camp. On the highest point overlooking the town were rifle pits surrounding Mount Oread with a flag to display if any approaching enemy was sighted. On the outskirts of the main town was a camp of 40 recruits uniformed and fully armed standing guard. The Johnson House Hotel was the headquarters of the Kansas Redlegs where around 30 Redlegs were staying. Further down the street was the largest building in town, the Eldridge Hotel, four stories tall, which served as a fort with iron grills on the windows and rifle ports built into the facade every six feet apart with walls 18" thick. It housed a wide array of Federal officers and served as a barracks on occasion. In the basement was kept a large store of arms and ammunition. When Quantrill entered the town he found the Eldridge Hotel overflowing with Federal officers. Next door to the Eldridge was the town armory with a warning bell to rally the troops in case of attack. And next to the armory was a Federal recruiting station where men were plied with liquor in order to compel them into military service or enticed at the point of a bayonet.

Besides the large amount of soldiers in town there was a large contingent of 400 soldiers stationed across the Kansas River adjacent to the town. A ferry connected the town to the military camp. They would be expected to cross the ferry and assist the town during an attack but when the guerrillas did attack the soldiers were so overcome with fear that they stole down to the ferry and cut the rope to keep the guerrillas from confronting them.

Quantrill's men were outnumbered 4 to 1 by the Kansas soldiers stationed in Lawrence but their overpowering numbers and defensive protections did little to protect them against the "Cavaliers of the Bush".

There was nothing left for the Southerners living along the Missouri border to do but to avenge their loved ones and avenge their destroyed homes. Quantrill's guerrillas never hesitated to rise to the challenge and ride for Lawrence and revenge. One Federal officer was quoted as saying, "We better consider the rebels all have very good guns and shoot very straight." It proved to be a very prophetic statement on that fateful 21st of August, 1863. There are many reasons why Lawrence was laid in ashes. Being an innocent, peaceful town was not one of them.

Article by Paul R. Petersen

