

# John Armstrong

---

John Armstrong was the closest free-stater living north of Albert Stokes on the northwest quarter of Section 28, also located on Washington Creek. John was born at Oxford, Canada West, on June 8, 1824, the son of Thomas and Sarah Dodge Armstrong. He was an avid abolitionist and always acted with the Abolition party before he came to Kansas. He voted for Martin Van Buren when the latter was the anti-slavery candidate for President. He well remembered the excitement in New York State and New England when the Kansas-Nebraska Bill passed, and he resolved that he would come to Kansas and help make it a free state. Leaving western New York on November 1, 1854, he arrived at Kansas City on approximately the 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> of November.

We found at Kansas City on the levee, one Hotel, one barn and six warerooms, and where now the market square is located was a horse mill. We went to Westport where there was quite a village and from there traveled west into Kansas.

At Kansas City, John met the notorious Sam Wood, and after ascertaining the latter's anti-slavery sentiments made arrangements with him to carry his baggage and trunks. There were five in this party which arrived in Lawrence on the night of November 20. Armstrong established his claim on Washington Creek and immediately became involved in the Underground Railroad.

A proslavery family named Bowen lived on an adjoining claim, which was traversed by a trail from McGee's Crossing (the main trail crossing the Wakarusa). This family had brought with them from Kentucky a family of slaves, including a father, mother and eight children, the eldest a boy about twenty. According to John's reminiscences, his sister, Sarah, taught these children their letters. They came to the Armstrong house on Sunday for this purpose, unbeknownst to their master. There were other slaves in the neighborhood (a few grown ones), but this was the largest slave family.

There were a few slaves who lived up on the head of Washington creek, in the proslavery settlement, where about sixty proslavery men lived. The Negroes told us that Bowen was afraid of our Sharps rifles. He thought they would shoot a mile.

Bowen's colored people built his log house and did general farm work. He brought them there in the spring of 1855, as early as April. He brought his own family at that time too. There might have been 3 or 4 in his family. His son-in-law was a part of the family. The negroes built a little cabin out about ten rods from the house. All of the buildings were of logs. The house was what is called a double-log house, two rooms and an open space between.

John states that the proslavery people would get drunk and come and threaten him. He told the Lawrence boys about it, and one night Capt. Randlet and a party of free-state men in Lawrence came out to his place on Washington Creek. From there they went over to Bowen's, cleaned out his whiskey and gave him three days to leave.

The Armstrong and Bowen cabins were only a quarter of a mile apart. The eldest colored boy came to John's house that night with the rest of the children and cried, "Master Armstrong! Some men have

come to Master Bowen's, and I am afraid they are going to kill us." John let them all in – the whole colored family – and asked them who was in the crowd, but the children did not know if the men they were free-state or proslavery men; they just wanted John to run them off. Armstrong had previously talked to them about leaving their master. But a *Lawrence Journal World* article states that “. . . the slave family wanted Miss Armstrong's brother (John) to start them on the way to Canada, but the risk was too great and he did not do so." They (the Bowens) took the slaves with them to Westport, Mo.

John Armstrong credited himself with persuading Jim Lane to come to Kansas. He had met Lane in the spring of 1855 on a boat on the Missouri River the morning after leaving St. Louis. John had been in Kansas since 1854 and had explored with Governor Robinson as far up as the Blue River. He recounted his meeting with Lane at an Old Settlers' Meeting in 1879:

Lane was on his way to Kansas, and when he found out that I had been in the Territory, he wanted to learn all about the country . . . I gave them a general description of the country from the mouth of the Kaw River up to where Manhattan now stands, and of all the country. The location of Lawrence and the Kansas bottom pleased my eyes better than any where else, and I gave them a glowing description of it, and told them that I believed that Lawrence was the place where we should eventually build up a great city. I know *I did prevail upon Lane to come to Lawrence, for three days after I got here he came up here with his family.* [emphasis author's]

Later, in an 1896 interview when he was seventy-two, Armstrong further elaborated on his this meeting:

If Jim Lane was the greatest man Kansas ever produced – and a good many people think he was – then John Armstrong deserves the credit of discovering the greatest man and starting him in the proper channel. Mr. Armstrong says he came to Kansas to make it a free state, and he didn't content himself with settling down in the Topeka town site, but he joined Stubbs' company at Lawrence, received his Sharps' rifle and marched and practiced with the boys. His meeting with Jim Lane is thus recounted by him: "I had shipped a large nursery stock to Kansas which I started in 1851 and I expected it to arrive in Kansas City as soon as I returned from up the country, but it only reached St. Louis that fall. I had to go to St. Louis to look after it and in the early spring of 1855 I shipped it to Kansas. The morning I left St. Louis the clerk of the boat came to me and said, 'Colonel Lane from Indiana and Thomas Shoemaker want to see you and have a talk about Kansas.' I went down to the ladies' cabin and was introduced to Colonel Lane and to Mr. Shoemaker, who had been appointed land receiver of the Kickapoo district. I had a pleasant talk with them, and from that time until we arrived in Kansas City we had frequent talks about Kansas. I became satisfied in my own mind that Lane's object was to organize a Democratic party in Kansas and be its leader. He wanted to settle in the biggest place in the territory and asked me particularly about what I thought would be the best place to go. I gave him the best information I could, and a couple of days after I arrived in Lawrence, Colonel Lane came there with his family. "I introduced him to the boys and we vied with one another in doing what we could for him in running out lines and building a cabin. The willingness of the free-state people to help him, and the willingness of the proslavery party to carry out the Douglas squatter sovereignty bill to the territory, the driving away of true settlers from the polls and the frequent raids of the border ruffians, was what, I think, made such men as James H. Lane and hundreds of others as radical as any of us."

Lane soon began to come over to the free-state side and became one of the great leaders for the cause; John became one of his lieutenants.

I also started an Underground Railroad in 1857 from Topeka to Civil Bend, Iowa. I hired a closed carriage and span of mules. I lived in Topeka then. I took up a subscription to start the thing, and amongst the number that gave me money was Dr. Charles Robinson, who was at Topeka at the time. He gave me ten dollars. I think Sam Wood gave

five dollars and Maj. J. B. Abbott five. They were attending the Legislature. I don't remember all that helped start the first train on the Underground Railroad and I helped establish the depots from Topeka to Civil Bend, Iowa.

In *Reminiscences of Slave Days in Kansas*, John tells how he encountered his first "passenger" on the "Topeka line" of the Underground Railroad.

The first slave I took out of Kansas was a woman. She got away from her masters, and came up to Howard's, who lived about 2 miles s.e. of Topeka, staid [*sic*] there about five or six weeks, when some proslavery men from Deer Creek found that she was there and took her back to Lecompton for the reward. One or two of Edward's boys was with the party that returned her. They lived on the Shunganunga near Frank Dawson's ... Howard had no chance to get the woman onto the Underground Railway. Her name was Ann Clarke. [. . .] When they got her back to Lecompton it was about evening. They sent out in the country for Clarke to come in and pay the reward. Ann went out in the kitchen to clean herself up. By this time it was pretty dark, and she was studying how to get away. They had given her some cakes to eat, and she put some of these in her budget (a small bag or pouch). The men were in a frolic, had been drinking some. The women only were watching her, but she kept on the watch herself for a chance to escape and finally seizing an opportunity when they were off guard, ran out of the kitchen and up a ravine which was situated near where the foundations of the Territorial Capital State House is in Lecompton.

It was a very brushy ravine. She hid in a thick place in the brush, and hid there until most morning. They came out and hunted for her, coming very near her. When it became light enough she followed the ravine up s.e. and came up out onto the top of the hill on the edge of the prairie. Being now daybreak, she could see all about and took her bearings. She finally saw a man coming along the road s.w. of Lecompton and running east towards Lawrence. He had a book under his arm. She thot [*sic*] a man with a book must be free-state, and went out to talk to him. It was Dr. Barker, the father of Senator Barker of Douglas County. She asked him who lived in the different houses. Finally she found that he was Dr. Barker, a neighbor of G. W. Clarke who owned her (jointly with Col. Titus). He lived east of Lecompton and was credited with the murder of Thomas Barber in 1855. He was a former Indian agent and a prominent border ruffian. He had been out to see a sick woman, and was returning home. She [the slave woman, Ann] asked him to take her to his house and help her get free. He told her to go farther south, to walk down the ravine and come up back of his house. He kept her at his house a day or two, hitched up his team, put in several comforts, covered her over and took her down towards Lawrence, to the house of the father-in-law of George Earle, who brot [*sic*] her up to me at Topeka, to the residence of Mrs. Scales . . . Mrs. Scales kept her hid for a week before Mr. Scales found it out. Capt. Henry came in on her one morning when she was helping Mrs. Scales wash dishes. He was a strong proslavery man, and was boarding at the house. Mrs. Scales said, "You can keep a secret?" He did and never gave us away . . . We kept her there for about six weeks at our house, while I made arrangements to take her to Iowa.

Much has been written about this house – the residence of Mrs. Scales – at 429 Quincy Street in Topeka. There is some discrepancy as to who actually built it. Armstrong, in his *Reminiscences*, states that

Mrs. Scales, when he built the house placed a sugar hogshead, (a cask capable of containing large amounts of liquid), which he had shipped things from the east in, down in the cellar. When Ann came, we put some straw, clothes, and blankets into the hogshead, and had her stay in it. Mrs. Scales kept boarders, and during the day, while they were out, Ann used to come up in the kitchen and do a great deal of housework.

A newspaper article from 1913 also states that "[t]he stone house at 429 Quincy Street was erected by a Mrs. Scales, who emigrated from New York." But the *Topeka Mail & Kansas Breeze* article from 1896 states that at the time of that interview, John Armstrong was still living in "the little stone house at 429 Quincy in Topeka, where he had lived ever since coming there in the early 1850's," and a 1910 newspaper article states that the house was built by John Armstrong himself. A 1929 newspaper article

corroborates this, stating that “. . . it was constructed in 1856 by John Armstrong, a pioneer in Topeka, when the town had scarcely two dozen houses to break the nakedness of the plains.”

Whether built by him or not, the house eventually came into John Armstrong’s stewardship – if not ownership – when, after the sudden death of their younger daughter, “the Scales family moved from the house and returned east, leaving Armstrong in possession of the place.” And there can be no doubt as to its usage in Armstrong’s hands. “From this time on the place was the center of a very flood of anti-slavery sentiment. And at this time came the hogshead from New Orleans, and the disappearances of many slaves from the homes of their masters.”

“I suppose I have kept three hundred slaves in the house at 429 Quincy St., all told,” Armstrong is quoted as saying in the 1910 newspaper article, “and every one of them was taken north and eventually reached Canada.”

Many newspaper articles over the years have recounted the legend of the little stone house in Topeka. From the *Topeka Daily Capital* of April 21, 1929:

[I]n the basement was placed an immense hogshead, big enough to hold a score of persons comfortably. The hogshead originally had contained sugar, and was shipped up the Mississippi River to St. Louis, up the Missouri to Westport Landing, thence up the Kaw to Topeka. Emptied, it was put in the basement before the joists for the building were laid. At the time Armstrong obtained it, he thought that it would make an admirable hiding place for fleeing slaves . . . Armstrong was the first Topekan to have a station on the Underground Railroad. He received the blacks at night, placed them in the cellar and held them until it was safe for them to continue their journey.

Southern soldiers, in pursuit of the escaping Negroes, often halted in Topeka. Pitched battles, in which deaths sometimes occurred, took place in this vicinity. The Old Topeka House, situated where the post office now stands, was thought to be the hiding place of the slaves. This frequently was searched, but the fugitives never were found.

No suspicion was attached to the little stone building, just back of the Topeka House. It was so small and innocent appearing, and there seemed no places in it where anyone could be concealed. But had the pursuing soldiers only known it, on many occasions there were a dozen or more slaves concealed in the hogshead at the time they were futilely searching the Topeka House.

From the *Topeka Daily Capital* of Tuesday, July 5, 1938:

**“Old ‘ Underground Railway’ Cabin in Topeka on Block”**

Slaves were hidden in the basement, which was entered by a long passage that originally reached to the Shunganunga Creek draw near what is now Fifteenth Street. The entrance to this passage still remains in the basement of the house.

The house contains three rooms, one large room on the main floor and two smaller rooms in the basement.

Cottonwood was used in the frame of the structure, but it is the walnut siding that gives the house its principal claim to architectural distinction.

The little stone house and the activities that took place there are perhaps best described in an earlier *Topeka Daily Capital* article, which states:

Slaves were hidden in the cellar . . . there were oftentimes as many as a dozen runaway slaves taken care of by Mr. Armstrong and other anti-slavery people . . . The old stone house, which was the refuge of so many runaway slaves, has never been remodeled except for a new roof some years ago and is now the home of a colored family who probably do not know the same roof which shelters them, sheltered people of their own race over fifty years ago who were trying to escape the bonds of slavery.

For the runaway slaves, the stay at the Scales/Armstrong house at 429 Quincy St. in Topeka was only the beginning of what could turn into a harrowing journey to freedom. In the 1910 *Topeka Daily Capital* article, Armstrong related that

. . . [w]e used to ford the Kaw River about where the bridge now stands always traveling by night and lying under cover during the day. Holton was the first station north and from there we went to Nebraska City and crossed the Missouri River at that point. After reaching Silver Bend, Iowa, we turned the slaves over to the *Quakers* and from that point it was an easy matter to place them on Canadian soil . . . I sometimes rode a pony on my trips, but unless I had some women in the party I usually walked and slept on the ground.

I took up one other woman. I don't remember how she came to me. A Mr. Mills, a Topeka man, went with me all the way thru and returned with me . . . The road was about this way: We went first to Rochester, to Bowker's in the night. The next stopping place would be Holton, at Smith's or at Reynold's, who lived a mile west of Holton, on the Creek. Another place was five miles north of Holton, where Brown was caught at the Battle of the Spurs. In crossing that creek, I got stuck, and had to get the woman out of the buggy. This was on the Jim Lane road. On my way up that first time I followed the track of Kagi [*John Brown's right-hand man who later died in the raid on Harper's Ferry*], who had started out three weeks before me to visit his father . . . We afterwards sent several women up. Some came from Missouri, some from Kansas.

Armstrong and Mills took the slaves from Topeka north over the Lane Trail. They were covered in a wagon, which was closed. The wagon had a false bottom to be used in cases of emergency; over this false bottom were spread hay and straw. The first stopping place north of Topeka was the farm of William Bowker. William Owens lived next door to Bowker, and sometimes his house also was used as a station on the Underground Railroad.

On his first trip with the slave Ann Clarke, Armstrong recounts, "We started in the very last days of February 1857, and I was gone three weeks. We went to Civil Bend, Iowa, to Dr. Blanchard. From there we sent her on the Chicago. The trip was without incident as far as Nebraska City. Approaching there, Armstrong concealed the Negroes beneath the false bottom in the wagon bed. Border ruffians halted him and looked in his wagon for slaves, but did not find them. That night Armstrong drove to Civil Bend, several miles up the Missouri. Kagi had been sent ahead of this first consignment over the underground, and was waiting for Armstrong at Nebraska City. He conducted the cargo of slaves to the ferry at Civil Bend, where he aided Armstrong to cross the Missouri River. The crossing was a dangerous matter, as ice was running in large pieces. The ferryman had to be persuaded with a Colt's navy (revolver) before he would undertake the passage. The boat was carried down the river half a mile by the ice but finally made the east shore safely. The slaves were delivered to Dr. Ira D. Blanchard, who lived near Civil Bend on the Lane Trail, and a few miles from Tabor, Iowa. Kagi's father lived at the time in Nebraska City and he also aided Armstrong to escape from the town with the slaves. The Underground Railroad over the Lane Trail was in operation as long as it was necessary for slaves to leave Kansas for Canada.

John Brown himself left Kansas forever over the Lane Trail in late January 1859. On his last exit from Kansas, while delivering slaves, he ran into trouble north of Holton, Kansas. He sent a farmer named Wasson, whose anti-slavery sentiments were well-known, back to Topeka to tell Colonel John Richie that John Brown was surrounded in a cabin (Fuller's) on Straight Creek. It was Sunday morning when Wasson reached Topeka, and Richie and his family were part of a congregation gathered at a schoolhouse which stood at Fifth and Harrison and served as the meeting place for Congregationalists. A commotion was heard at the rear of the building causing people to turn toward the door. John Armstrong walked immediately to Richie's seat and whispered in his ear. They both left the church and after hastily collecting a few men, hurried to the aid of the "Old Puritan". They helped disperse the enemy at the crossing on Straight Creek near the Fuller cabin, in the Battle of the Spurs.

This battle, which occurred on January 31, 1859, received its name from Richard J. Hinton, an eastern correspondent who had come to Kansas. "As spurs were the most effective weapon used, the title is not altogether inappropriate. Not a shot was fired on either side.

A different explanation for the battle's odd name was written by G. M. Seaman:

Some (of the men) had gotten their horses and some were afoot, but as they got out of the woods those that were afoot grabbed hold of the tails of the horses of those who were mounted and away they went sailing over the prairie, hence it was dubbed the "Battle of the Spurs."

John Armstrong went on to live a long life. As stated above, he was still living in the stone house in 1896. The 1910 Topeka Capital article states that Armstrong, then 86, was living at Keith's Hospital. He died less than a year later, on Dec. 19, 1911. His obituary appeared in the Topeka State Journal for December 20, 1911:

**Pioneer is Dead.**

John Armstrong, 87 years old, and the last survivor of the handful of pioneers which selected the location for a city where a town site company a fortnight later founded Topeka in December 1854, died last evening at St. Patrick's Hospital and will be buried in Rochester Cemetery, where he already has had his monument erected and inscribed with the exception of the date of his death\* . . . He was active in making Kansas a free state and established an underground railroad north from Topeka. He was with both Lane and Brown in their border warfare. He never married, remaining true to Eunice Scales, a young woman he met shortly after coming to Topeka, but who died of smallpox before their wedding could be arranged.

The above sad account may hold a key to the fervor with which John Armstrong approached his Underground Railroad activities.

The peculiar recklessness and energy for excitement that possessed John Armstrong might be hinged on a pathetic romance that filled his life during the first two years in Kansas. Mrs. Scales brought with her two daughters when she came to Kansas and old-timers who know the facts state beyond a doubt that the Scales home was a popular place in the eyes of the young men of Topeka. But above all suitors for the younger of the two daughters stood John Armstrong. He had followed the family from New York to Kansas and in this Far Western State stopped with them and continued the avowal of his loyalty.

All went well with the pioneer lovers and the affair was settled in the minds of Topekans. Then Miss Scales died with a contagious disease after a sickness of but a few days. After the funeral John Armstrong walked the streets for many days, seemingly without energy.

Was it John Armstrong's abolitionist fervor that brought him to Kansas, or did he follow his heart here and turn to anti-slavery zeal only after his heart was broken? One thing is for certain; it has been 145 years since John Armstrong set foot on Kansas soil, but his footprints left an indelible imprint on the struggle to make Kansas free.