

John Stewart and Others of the Wakarusa/Kennedy Valley

The south bank of the Wakarusa was shared by another well-known abolitionist, John E. Stewart, also a Captain, who preempted the northwest quarter of Section 21, one mile east of Captain William B. Kennedy.

The quarter-section north of Stewart belonged to John Pieratt from Kentucky, who (although a Southerner) did not believe in slavery; he was a relative, by marriage, of William Kennedy. This area became a mini-settlement of free-state sympathizers.

John was a Methodist preacher, an Englishman by birth, and at one time lived in Salem, New Hampshire. While we may not know the exact location of John's claim, we do know it was a few miles south of Lawrence, and it became a well-known rendezvous for fugitive slaves. From Judge L. d. Bailey's account of Quantrill's raid, John had been a close friend and confidant of Quantrill, alias Charley Hart, during his early days in Kansas and in his company had succeeded in effecting the escape of slaves from Missouri into Kansas.

As it was only forty miles to the line which divided the slave state of Missouri from the free territory of Kansas it was easy for these young men, most of whom were bold riders and experts in the use of arms, to pass over the line, meet with slaves, then explain to them how short a run they had to make to gain their freedom, and give them full directions how to reach a safe hiding place at the Stewart farm. In the heavy timber that lined the banks of the Wakarusa near the farm there was a snug little cabin provided, and friends were always ready to guide the way and furnish provisions and other necessaries to the trembling fugitives, who were told that they would be kept there in safety until they could be sent on through Nebraska and Iowa to Chicago and thence to Canada. That was the program, and Stewart's farm was represented in fact to be the main depot for the Kansas branch of the famous Underground Railroad of which a good many Quakers and nearly all Abolitionists were the agents and conductors, as all will understand who have read the story of Uncle Tom's Cabin.

John later learned Charley Hart was not by any means the zealous, self-sacrificing friend of the fugitive and of freedom that he seemed and pretended to be.

In fact, it was eventually found out that while he and his friends were instigating and aiding slaves to run away, he was secretly and actively doing his best to help their masters to catch them and take them back. But this was a matter of business and only done for cash. Of course his associates were the most of them ignorant of this black hearted scheme of treachery but it is known that several victims were in this way foully betrayed and taken back to slavery, leaving of course any horses or mules they may have brought with them as the prey of the false friend who had first helped and then betrayed them. But at last suspicion was aroused and he was chased out of Lawrence by an officer who had a warrant for his arrest on the charge of horse stealing. He never returned 'til he came back on the morning of August 21, 1863, at the head of about 300 horsemen, well mounted, completely armed, and intent on wreaking vengeance upon the abolition town which had made itself famous the world over for its sturdy defense of freedom, but was held in most unutterable abhorrence all over Missouri for the same reason.

John Stewart was one of Dr. John Doy's rescuers. He was an ally of Joseph Gardner in that rescue and also in the attempt to arrange for Napoleon Simpson's wife, also a slave, to escape to Kansas. It was John who took Napoleon to his wife's cabin in Missouri at night, in a covered wagon, only to find her too ill to travel.

But Connelly gives us a less attractive glimpse of the man:

. . . Stewart had already won the nickname of the "Fighting Preacher," and had been actively engaged with old John Brown and Col. James Montgomery during the troubles in Linn and Bourbon Counties, and had taken part in bringing slaves out of Missouri. He was beginning to be suspected of entertaining loose notions with regard to property in horses as well as negroes, but his burning zeal in behalf of the Free State cause and the freedom of the colored race caused his irregularities to be winked at to some extent, by those who became aware of them and his excuses to be excused.

John N. Holloway goes even further, to portray Stewart as a scoundrel, if not a villain:

(Colonel James) Montgomery proposes to retire from the field, and attend to the improvement of his claim. He requested that the men be organized under Captain Stewart and Lieutenant Walker, who should be actively on the watch to keep the proslavery men in check. These, after performing a few praiseworthy deeds, began plundering, robbing and stealing, and running off the spoils to the north. They spread terror and ruin wherever they went, threatening pro-slavery men, many of whom fled the country with their families. They continued this dishonorable course, until they had brought disgrace upon their party, and aroused the whole country against them. Stewart was a Methodist preacher, commonly known in southern Kansas as "the fighting preacher," but he was better qualified for a spy, or daring and unscrupulous adventure, than anything else. He was in the employ of the government during the rebellion as secret agent, and did admirable service. He afterwards abandoned his family, and ran off with a strumpet to Canada . . ."

After reading of the many exploits of those involved in the Underground Railroad, I believe that John Stewart – even with his later excesses – ranks with the best of them in his unselfishness and daring efforts to aid the slaves in their desperate attempts to obtain freedom.

OTHERS

The area around the proslavery town of Franklin was heavily populated with free-state settlers. One of the better known families, with descendants still living in the community, was that of Richard A. and Margaret Cosand Cox. They came from Azalia (Bartholomew County), Indiana, where Richard was a "conductor" on the Underground Railroad. They owned portions of Sections 3 and 4 of Wakarusa Township, including the Franklin and Catholic cemeteries. Margaret acquired "the Gift of the Holy Spirit" and ministered to the poor, to Negro refugees and to prisoners.

In 1855, on October 12, William James Kennedy, along with three companions (W. J. James, Harrison Green, and Sam Parks), walked from Kansas City to the town of Franklin, Douglas County. Kennedy

owned several lots in Franklin and had operated a saw and gristmill until the supply of timber was exhausted. Later he operated a sawmill in North Lawrence for about two years before buying his farm east of Lawrence near Franklin. William J. was a cousin of William "Cap" B. Kennedy, their fathers being brothers. He married Lucinda Shields (daughter of Joseph Shields, another pioneer in the community), in March of 1857. William J. took an active part in the border ruffian troubles, holding the position of Lieutenant of the Franklin Company from its first organization until the trouble ended. He participated in all its engagements, and at the taking of Fort Franklin he was the first man into the fort, disarming Captain Ruckles, defender of the Fort. He afterwards distinguished himself by establishing order, and with his own hands emptied two barrels of whiskey captured by his men.

Flora Kennedy Cowgill, daughter of William J. and Lucinda, wrote of her experiences growing up on her father's farm. Before her enrollment in grade school at age five, she was expected to already know her letters and numbers. She had learned the letters from the printing on a flour sack from the Douglas County Mill. She wrote in her memoirs:

Also on a soda box was pictured a great, strong arm holding a hammer. The letters around it were "Arm and Hammer Soda." Ann taught me to read them – dear, little, old, patient Ann who had been born of slave parents, and, after being rescued by the Quakers' Underground Railway, came to us for protection. Quakers always have been firm advocates of education, so Ann could read and write and had a certain amount of general education. She seemed an oracle to me as she taught me all these letters. Then Father bought me a primer. In it I found the very letters that Ann had taught me . . . "

One other family that settled in Franklin was the Garretts, who located in the northwest quarter of Section 16, across the Wakarusa from the John Stewart claim. They first lived in a dugout cave while they erected a beautiful three-story home. Apparently the father, an army officer, and his wife had come to Franklin in the early 1850s with the high hopes and excitement of all early settlers. After the early deaths of the parents and the tragic deaths of two of the children, the remaining two children were left as orphans.