

William Jessee

In Martha Parker's introduction to *Angels of Freedom*, she promised to endeavor to clarify which free-soilers were directly involved in the Underground Railroad and which ones revealed anti-slavery sentiments but may not have actually been involved in the transportation of slaves. One of these latter was William Jessee.

When a leader of the Ohio Emigrant Aid Society, Samuel Walker, staked his claim in what became known as Kanwaka on April 12, 1855, there were already two cabins to the south near the Wakarusa River. One, owned by Harrison Burson, was at the future site of Clinton (one-half mile west); the other, belonging to William Jessee, was on the future site of Bloomington. Both men were from Illinois, representing town companies from towns of the same name in that state.

After the Territorial Election held on March 30, 1855, Mr. William Jessee gave the following report to the protest committee:

To Mr. Reeder:

I came to the Territory for the first time about the middle of December 1854. I came to St. Joseph about the middle of November 1854 and left my family there and came over to look at the Territory. I came from McLean county, Illinois, and settled on the Wakarusa, in the second district, a mile and a half from Bloomington (where Clinton was located) on the last day of January . . . came there with a part of my plunder and my oldest son. In about two weeks I went after my family. I moved them there on the 28th day of February, 1855. I was at the election of the 30th of March, 1855. A day or two before the election one of the judges chose me for one of the clerks. On the morning of the election I started very early to go to the polls, and, after I had started a few minutes, I saw a wagon coming with a flag on the hind end of it. It passed me before I got to the polls. I was not out of the house much before the polls were opened, but went in to help them to prepare the poll books for the election. I saw a great many persons going backwards and forwards before the door and windows. The polls were opened and the commenced voting. Some persons came forward and voted. Others came, and the votes were objected to until they were proved to be actual settlers of the Territory. . .

William's testimony corroborates that of Dr. Eliab Macy and ends with the following description:

The man who was holding the watch in the election house I recognized afterwards as the one who gave me his name as Jones, the present sheriff, in Mr. Ramsey's house. What I saw of those persons, went off east by my house. I was home part of the time, and saw a number of horses and wagons pass. The man who was holding the watch in the election house I recognized afterwards as the one who I supposed there were near 400 strangers in the district then, so far as I know. I have not seen them in the district since. As far as I saw, they were pretty well armed with revolvers and bowie knives. Some of them had two pistols in a belt around them, and a bowie knife or two. I do not know whether any settlers of the district voted after this difficulty about the judges took place.

WILLIAM JESSEE

William and his wife Nancy settled on their claim in the southwest quarter of Section 13 (Clinton Township) just north of the town of Bloomington (established February 10, 1857). As a farmer turned politician, William was elected to the Territorial House on May 22, 1855, but as happened to Dr. Macy, his political life did not last long. He was ousted at Pawnee on July 2, 1855.

William found other ways to be active. Earlier in the summer he had been a delegate to two meetings of the free-state movement, one on June 8 and the other on July 11, in Lawrence. These two meetings were held to set up the first Free-State Convention held in Lawrence on August 14, 1855, to which he was a delegate.

His son, James, born May 8, 1838, likewise was active in the free-state cause, but in a different manner. Instead of following the governmental process, he chose to express his opinions in a more radical way by serving under the leadership of Col. Sam Walker and John Brown. These two men sent him out on errands of exploration, and although he was only sixteen, his youthful appearance proved to be an asset: he made an excellent spy. He helped storm Fort Titus, one-half mile south of Lecompton on August 16, 1856.

He also helped drive out the notorious McGee's. In addition, he went with Walker to Brown County to meet Jim Lane on his way to Kansas with a large body of men, and later he accompanied Walker to Lecompton, to free (with the aid of the U. S. troops) free-state men held prisoner there. James continued to participate in the conflicts between the free-staters and border ruffians until the summer of 1857, when they succeeded in chasing him out of Kansas.

James returned to McLean County, Illinois. There he found a new cause to which he could dedicate his life; the work of God. He became a Presbyterian minister and continued to preach until the Civil War interrupted his work. He enlisted on July 28, 1861, in Co. K, 8th Regiment Illinois Infantry and within a year was promoted to Sergeant. His engagements included Fort Donelson, Fort Henry, Pittsburg Landing, Champion Hills, Raymond, Jackson, and Vicksburg. During his service, James kept a diary in which he often reflected on the war, his thoughts and what he saw. He describes Mississippi during November 1862:

...for the whole county seemed to be a livid sheet of fire, mauls and fields were on fire, the fences all burned, the inhabitants had fled, the county was deserted and looked as though through some might revolution she had been converted into one vast desert.

James continued his narrative on December 31, 1863, by expressing his views on how the war should end:

Bring peace upon a sure basis, that of universal liberty, not till the *last slave* is freed need we expect peace, nor need we desire [it], at least we ought not to. I believe the war is a means inaugurated and being carried out by a wise and inscrutable providence for the liberation of this oppressed and downtrodden race. . . Also, a curse sent upon the country for the toleration of that inhuman practice human slavery.

Again, James Jessee ponders the end of the war:

I would be glad, would it end tomorrow and end right, but I would prefer ten years of war, and no more slavery, than peace tomorrow with slavery. Such is my abhorrence of that Barbarous Institution and such is my desire to see it abolished, and that entirely and forever more. Then let us hope and trust in Him that ruleth all things, assured that in due time all will be right, never ceasing to use the means he has placed in our hands.

While James was serving, his father William was busy at home in Bloomington. He was elected president of the Bloomington Town Company and proceeded to take the necessary steps to secure a clear title for the town site.

It was William's wife Nancy who played a major part in saving the life of Jim Lane of August 21, 1863, when William Quantrill and his guerilla army decimated Lawrence. In a taped interview at the home of Nancy's great-granddaughter, Carrie Jessee Shirley, on September 12, 1979, the following family lore was related:

Nancy Jessee, my great-grandmother, was living on the Wakarusa River. The men were all gone one day when Jim Lane, a patriot who came to make Kansas a free state, came riding up – his horse all lathered up - and said Quantrill's men were after him. So she began to clean house, rolling him up in a rug and setting furniture out in the yard; she hid his horse in the cornfield. The riders came in but didn't find him – that she saved Jim Lane's life.

As a token of gratitude, Jim Lane gave Nancy Jessee his photo, which she highly prized.

James Jessee did not re-enlist after serving his three-years and was discharged on August 2, 1864. He attended church on Sunday and prayer meetings during the week, and at one such meeting James met his wife-to-be, Maria Standiferd. After nearly a year of courtship they were married on July 13, 1865. The couple continued to live in McLean County, Ill. Until spring or summer of 1866, when they decided it was time to come back to Kansas, where they settled in Lawrence. There Maria gave birth to twin sons, Lincoln S. and Logan S. on March 21, 1867. Sometime later, James and Maria with their family moved to the community of Arvonina in Osage County.

Whether for economic or for health reasons, William and Nancy Jessee sold their land in Bloomington and moved to Lawrence. William may have been suffering ill health since the lot they bought in Lawrence was in Nancy's name and went directly to her in February 1869. Ironically, this lot (No. 20 of block No. 8) was located in "Lane's 1st Addition," part of land owned and developed by Jim Lane. Their house at 816 Mississippi is still standing.