

The Wakarusa War

*Harold Dellinger, Special Projects Editor
WindingRiver.com*

On November 21, 1855, Charles Dow, a farmer originally from Indiana, was shot-gunned and killed by F.M. Coleman near Hickory Point in southern Douglas County, Kansas Territory. Coleman was thought to have Missouri tendencies but the immediate contention between Dow and Coleman was a dispute over property rights.

Coleman turned himself into Douglas County Sheriff Samuel Jones at the Shawnee Indian Mission in present-day Johnson County, Kansas. Sheriff Jones had been appointed Sheriff by the so-called “Bogus” Legislature of Kansas and was also serving as Postmaster of Westport, Missouri.

Coleman was released on bail as soon as he was able to appear before a judge. There perhaps was an existing “protection” order against Dow and in Coleman’s favor.

On November 24, Dow was buried. Two days later a large group of indignant citizens met at the “bloody spot” where Dow had been killed. The resolution they passed labeled Coleman a “willful murderer.” The meeting was organized by Jacob Branson, a neighbor of Dow and Coleman. Within days Coleman’s cabin was burned - not just once, but twice - as was the cabin of another neighbor thought to be sympathetic to Coleman. A “mob,” thought to be Free State in sympathy, was thought to be responsible.

Jacob Branson was arrested by Sheriff Jones and taken first to the Shawnee Indian Mission. As Branson was being transported by Jones to the territorial capital at LeCompton, a “gang” of Free State enthusiasts blocked the road, rescued him and returned him to the safety of Lawrence. Sheriff Jones retreated to the pro-slavery leaning settlement at Franklin some six miles south of Lawrence.

Sheriff Jones requested Territorial Governor Wilson Shannon to provide military support so that he might force the surrender of Branson and his Kansas defenders. Governor Shannon did issue orders calling out the Kansas Territorial Militia. The majority of those who answered the call were Missourians who entered Kansas in a large “posse.” Some 1,200 armed Missourians were, within days, camped in and around Lawrence, mostly on the Wakarusa River some six miles southeast of Lawrence. The other small Missouri camps included that of ex-U.S. Senator David R. Atchison, who led his “Platte County Rifles” to what is now North Lawrence.

Other groups of Missourians brought in at least two wagons of guns and seven cannons from the U. S. Arsenal at Liberty, Mo. It was also noted that the Missourians brought in and consumed large quantities of whiskey.

More than 500 defenders poured into Lawrence. They included John Brown and his sons with a load of weapons. A supply of Sharps Rifles was snuck into town. Four circular earthwork forts, linked by entrenchments and rifle pits, were constructed. Charles Robinson was elected Major-General of the newly constituted Lawrence Free State Militia.

All this was occurring in bitter, windy December weather, with most of Lawrence being huts and shacks. The Missourians camped out in tents.

When the residents of Lawrence were called upon to surrender Branson and his defenders, they refused and an attack seemed inevitable. The first major hostilities occurred when a brave but otherwise unnamed woman charged into the camp of the Missourians and tore down some tents and boundary markers.

Then on December 6, Thomas Barber was killed by a party of “pro-slavery” Missourians about a mile southwest of Lawrence. Barber and his family were among the defenders at Lawrence. Barber has become known as the first Kansas Martyr, and his killing is often considered to mark the beginning of the American Civil War.

Governor Wilson Shannon then intervened and negotiated a settlement that would allow Sheriff Jones to arrest Branson and his rescuers in Lawrence without further trouble. Some of the Missourians objected to the settlement, but a major snowstorm weakened their resolve and they soon scurried back to Missouri.

Sheriff Jones did not get his man.

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