

Lecompton Lodge No. 13

**A History of Lecompton Lodge No. 13, A.F. & A.M.
And Its Relationship to the Kansas Territorial
Spawning of the American Civil War**



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LECOMPTON LODGE NO. 13

Unless you are a history buff or a member of the Lecompton Historical Society, it may be a surprise to learn that this quiet little community between Topeka and Lawrence was once the focal point of national news. And it was not for a momentary coverage. For a five year period (1854 thru 1858) Lecompton was newsworthy as the Capital of Kansas Territory and the site of the spawning of the American Civil War. The nation's largest newspapers, such as the New York Times, frequently carried their largest headlines and had their lead stories on what was happening in Lecompton. To understand how this came about, it is helpful to review the circumstances which led to passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act by Congress.

The United States Congress which was elected in 1852 was an awesomely balanced "deck of cards." The Republican party was yet four years from its first national showing. The Whig party even with the big minority of 44% of the popular vote was a shrinking and dying force. In name and theory, control was held by the Democratic party under President Pierce with 51% of the popular vote and 86% of the electoral vote. But, the crown fit very tightly and caused many headaches.

The Democratic party was a rather loose alliance of some very dissimilar people. The keenest issue for divisive opinion was the practice of slavery. Generally speaking, slavery was favored only South of what was later to be known as the Mason-Dixon Line. This included Missouri, Kentucky, Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, and those other states laying more southerly. Strength of the Democratic party in the North was in the working class people. Strength of the Democratic party in the South was within the Establishment, dominated by plantation owning aristocrats.

The Establishment of the South realized that continuation of the status quo would bring a slow and constant diminishing of its power. It figured that with a good possibility of controlling Congress through the bond of Democratic party, the time was ripe for reversing the Missouri Compromise of 1820. Missouri had been admitted as a slave state in 1821 on the promise of the Missouri Compromise which noted that future states (excepting those that might someday be carved out of Utah Territory, New Mexico Territory, and Unorganized [later Oklahoma] Territory) would be admitted with a prohibition against slavery. Slavery was still quite legal and the very basis for the southern agricultural economy. The strategy unfolded by the southern Democrats was the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act set aside the Missouri Compromise and once again opened the possibility of slavery to the new states which were developing on the western frontier. It said that as a territory was coming into statehood, the people by vote were to determine whether or not the practice of slavery was to be allowed within the new state. Kansas Territory, of course, was the testing ground for this new policy. While national popular sentiment decried the practice of slavery, political control was held in the web of compromise known as the Democratic party. Even northern Democrats subscribed to the theory that "the people ought to decide" whether or not slavery was to be allowed.

For the next few years following 1854, Kansas Territory became a magnet for the adventuresome whether they favored slavery, abolition, or simply a new opportunity. Kansas Territory was where the action was and Lecompton was the Capital.

There was readily available eastern financing, both northern and southern flavored, to help people homestead and establish business enterprises on the western frontier. Simply put, both sides wanted to pack in homesteaders of their particular persuasion so that they in turn could properly pack the ballot boxes on that all important issue of whether or not to allow slavery. The southern plantation owners looked to acquiring large tracts of land to extend their agricultural empires, and sent their sons and friends towards Kansas Territory for that purpose. The northern abolitionist groups financed settlers who wanted to own and work small farms with their families. It was a mix doomed to volatility.

President Franklin Pierce, and later President James Buchanan were committed to maintaining law and order so that when the all-important voting time was to come the people could indeed decide. Although neither President was from the South, they both were instrumental to the Southern plan to extend slavery. From the present perspective it is impossible to rationalize any circumstance under which slavery should be tolerated. But this was the 1850's and the nation was delicately divided on the "necessary evil of slavery" without which the South would economically collapse. To assure the maintenance of law and order, federal troops were stationed in and around Lecompton to keep the free-staters and pro-slavery forces from breaking out in open warfare. It was not unusual for 600 federal troops, primarily cavalry and artillery, to be stationed near Lecompton which at its peak approached a population of 5,500 adventuresome souls.

In the days of Kansas Territory, the federal administration was in Democratic control and largely most sympathetic to the

South. Most, if not all, of the government jobs in this action spot of Kansas went to Democrats. The six territorial governors appointed by the President, except James Denver, were for the sake of appearance northerners. Denver was a native of Virginia, educated in Ohio, and mellowed in California where he served in state government and as a California Representative to the U.S. Congress. All of the Territorial Governors were active politicians, Democrats, and all save one practicing attorneys. The numerous lesser political appointments, where figurehead appearance was not overriding, went largely to Democrats of southern heritage. Thus, the "Establishment" of this developing state of Kansas was under the practical control of southerners in the positions of official importance backed by the might of the United States Army.

It was in this atmosphere that Lecompton Lodge Number 13, Ancient Free & Accepted Masons was formed in 1857 working under dispensation. Lecompton Lodge Number 13 achieved full status at the 1858 meeting of the Kansas Grand Lodge, following the report of the Committee on Lodges U.D.:

To the M.:W.: Grand Lodge of Kansas

We, the Committee of Lodges U.D., beg leave to report, that on close examination of the proceedings of the following lodges, to-wit: King Solomon, Ottumewa, Emporia, Lecompton, Oskaloosa and Tecumseh, we find them correct, and recommend that charters be granted them.

Fraternally submitted,

J. SAQUI,

E. T. CARR. Committee

Which was adopted, and the charters issued and enrolled on the books of the Grand Lodge, with the numbers as follows: King Solomon, No. 10; Ottumewa, No. 11; Emporia, No. 12; Lecompton, No. 13; Oskaloosa, No. 14; Tecumseh, No. 15.

Lecompton Lodge No. 13 held regular communications on the Saturday on or before the full moon and two weeks thereafter. The membership rolls in one of the first years consisted of Master George C. Vanzandt, Senior Warden, James G. Bailey, Junior Warden F.F. Bruner, Treasurer William Morrow, Secretary A. McKinney, Senior Deacon D.C. Westervelt, Junior Deacon John A. Davis, Tyler David L. Martin, and members Shadrack Greene, R.H. Patty, E.L. Fant, Thomas J. Watson, W.T. Ellis, William M. Douglass, William Weer, Edward W. Wynkoop, William A. Norton, William H. Christian, M.S. Winter, L. McArthur, Lyman Evans, Elisha Diefendorf, George W. Gray, Albert Walter, L. Rosenbrook, and John C. Bailey. While the lodge survived but 7 years, it is believed that the following men headed it, if only temporarily: William Weer, James G. Bailey, J.M. Pelot, and Shadrack Greene. Both Pelot and Greene were active officers in the Grand Lodge of Kansas.

J.M. Pelot, M.D. was a Lecompton physician. His Grand Lodge service included being Grand Lecturer and Grand Orator at the State Communication held in Lawrence on October 18, 1859. He gave a particularly eloquent address which is preserved in the Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Kansas. Some especially interesting excerpts follow:

This auspicious event suggests a comparison with the early history of masonry in Kansas as incidentally connected with social and political life in the Territory. I apprehend that no apology is needed for introducing this delicate subject at this time; for though politics should be carefully excluded from our secret chambers, yet to allude to political events that illustrate the strength, wisdom and beauty of masonry, in a judicious and impartial manner, cannot arouse political feeling, and cannot fail to be attended with benefit. When questions of public interest appeal to the business and bosom of every man in the community, and when the camp usurps the functions of the forum, popular excitement necessarily runs higher than where one nation is arrayed against another. Motives, which the calmer and thoughtful portion of the people would not have dream of entertaining, now take full possession of their breasts, and deeds of excess are committed under the pleas of self-defense, retaliation, and even patriotism. The revolutionist, when not a knave, is generally a monomaniac, wherever found. One grand, absorbing idea takes possession of his soul, and all his faculties are engaged in its development. Thus it was with us. Our history is rich in illustrations of mercy, brotherly love, and forgiveness, by men usually foremost in the bloody drama. I can only relate a few that came under my personal observation.

In August, 1856, when the citizens of Lawrence and Lecompton met only at the point of the bayonet, I had the honor to accompany Acting Deputy Grand Master, O.C. Stewart, to Lawrence, for the purpose of instituting the lodge and installing the officers at that place. We saw numbers of armed men, and heard of numbers of prisoners who had been arrested for encroaching on the bounds of a corps d'armee, and without that universal passport which masonry gave us, we certainly would have shared the prisoner's tent. But we were not molested nor insulted in our peaceful mission, and the brethren received us hospitably and parted with us fraternally.

On what was thought to be the eve of a great battle, a certain commander-in-chief of one party blundered into the camp of his adversary. Of course he was detained a prisoner of war, until it was discovered that he was a mason, when he was immediately released and escorted beyond the reach of danger.

A colonel, who had rendered himself conspicuous, was, after a hard fought battle, taken prisoner and conducted to headquarters for court-martial, when it was confidently expected

that his life would pay the forfeit of his unenviable notoriety. An officer who knew him to be a brother, declared that he would die before the prisoner should be injured. The court sat, and for some inexplicable reason, his judges were lenient and the prisoner was released.

I heard of a judge whose court was broken up and whose life was spared only by the interposition of his masonic brothers. I saw a poor fellow brought into camp as a spy. He protest his innocence, and plead to be allowed to return to his unprotected wife and children, who were suffering in his absence. But all in vain. Finally he resorted to a mystic sign, when the commander saw the force of his arguments and turned him loose.

There should be little doubt that masonry was a sorely needed civilizing influence in the strife-torn Kansas Territory. These people absorbed in the patriotism of their clashing ideologies were often jarred to their humane sensibilities by the common teachings of masonry. There are many other stories hewn of the same stone as the above remarks by Dr. Pelot. One of these of very special interest to Lecompton was recorded at the 1906 meeting of the Grand Lodge of the State of Kansas. Brother William Yates was presented as the only living charter member of Lawrence Lodge No. 6, which was one of the original five lodges when the Kansas Grand Lodge was organized. Brother Yates responded to the very hearty welcome accorded him by stating that this was the happiest moment of his masonic career, and presented the following communication, which he had prepared, but owing to his feeble physical condition, was read for him:

To the Most Worshipful Grand Lodge of Kansas:

It is with a heart full of gratitude that I have been spared with health and strength to be with you on this occasion. It may be of interest to relate a few of the incidents of my pioneer life, when the future of this Territory was hanging in the balance. I was living on a piece of land afterwards known as the Reeder's Float, five miles west of what is now the City of Lawrence; just west of me, at Lecompton, was headquarters for the Southern Confederacy. We always went well armed. I never went out to milk my cows without a revolver in my belt. I became acquainted with Sheriff Jones. While we differed in political views, yet we knew each other as Masons. One day a gang of rebels assembled with the intention of making a raid on my stock, intending to drive some fat steers into Lecompton to be slaughtered for beef, when Sheriff Jones told them, 'If you attempt to touch that man or his stock, you will do it over my dead body.' Many times Sheriff Jones and myself met on the high hills and warned each other of approaching danger. I had a neighbor by the name of Stewart: we also knew each other as Masons. One day he came to me stating that his family was sick and the medicines wanted could not be obtained at Lecompton. I

escorted him to Lawrence, holding his horse in front of the store while he bought what was needed. Everyone noticed that he was a stranger, but as he was with me, they were sure he was a free state man.

February 22, 1906

Wm. Yates

In the Kansas Territorial power struggle, certain communities took on identities of being allied with a particular side while some other villages (principally those that were very small) managed to maintain enough neutrality to avoid being labelled. Lecompton was at the forefront of the Southern or pro-slavery cause. Self proclaimed leader of the Northern or free-state cause was Lawrence, a scant 18 miles away. Other towns with a pro-slavery outlook at that time were: Atchison, Leavenworth, Marysville, Doniphan, Delaware City, Wyandotte, Franklin, Indianola, Hardville, and Tecumseh. Free-state identity was held by Topeka, Quindaro, Prairie City, Manhattan, Grasshopper Falls, Wabaunsee, Ozawie, Sumner, Easton, Osawatimie, Garnett, Mound City, Ottawa, Emporia, and Burlington. Cities uneasily mixed were: Shawnee, Olathe, Paola, Fort Scott, Council Grove, St. Marys, Holton, Big Springs, White Cloud, and Palmyra. There was no pattern of grouping or districting. A community of one flavoring would often have an "enemy camp" community located less than five miles beyond its border. Some of these couplets were Lawrence/Franklin, Topeka/Indianola, Manhattan/Juniata, Atchison/Sumner, and Grasshopper Falls/Hardville.

The last major power play of the pro-slavery forces was the Lecompton Constitution which was developed in September through December 1857. It was necessary that the people of Kansas Territory vote on and approve a constitution before statehood could be established. The constitution was to establish the basic rules for state government. It also had to be approved by the United States Congress. Southern influence still swayed the Territorial government in that Fall of 1857. Part of the reason that Southern interests held essentially all of the Territorial legislative seats was that the free-state side had become frustrated with fighting the system and was boycotting rather than remaining an ineffective minority opposition to the actions of the Kansas Territorial Legislature. The pro-slavery dominated legislature was scheduled to have its formal meeting for adopting the Lecompton Constitution on October 19, 1857. When the sixty delegates arrived at Constitution Hall in Lecompton, they found their entry blocked by a horde of free-state men from Lawrence and Topeka. Territorial Governor Walker called for help from the U.S. Army and the constitutional convention proceeded several days later. The resulting document was a classical piece of political shamming. Just two choices were allowed, both of which would permit some form of slavery to exist in the proposed state of Kansas. The first, and predictably unpopular, choice was outright approval of slavery. The second choice would allow

present owners to keep the slaves they had without bringing new slaves into the state. Little reflection was needed to see that this was in fact no great limitation when it is realized that the offspring of slaves, just like livestock, were property of the owner. Rather than submitting to such chicanery, the free-state people refused to vote.

A second election shortly followed. This one was to determine the various state offices should Kansas be admitted as a state. The free-state people did participate in this balloting on January 4, 1858. The pro-slavery people not only lost the election, but also managed to lose the ballot boxes. These unsuccessful attempts at rigging the election so disgusted the great majority of the people whatever their political alignment, that the matter was resolved with the potential state offices (Governor, U.S. Senators and Representatives, etc.) going to the free-state proponents.

The battle was not quite over, for the bogus Lecompton Constitution was yet to be submitted to the U.S. Congress. On congressional vote, the Senate accepted the Lecompton Constitution while the House of Representatives rejected it. The matter was referred back to Kansas Territory for development of another State Constitution which would be approved by the people and then by both houses of Congress. That objective was reached by the Wyandotte Constitution, which was modelled on that of the State of Ohio and contained the critical phrase "Kansas shall be a free state."

No doubt a good many people of Kansas Territory who had at one time favored the pro-slavery cause considered the issue resolved with passage of the Wyandotte Constitution. They were weary of the struggle and controversy. They were willing to be absorbed into the growing population of free-state immigrants and get on about the business of making a livelihood for themselves and families. Those people who felt otherwise or who had been strongly identified with the pro-slavery cause quietly moved out of the Territory. It is likely that Doctor Pelot's address to the October 1859 Grand Lodge in Lawrence was his Kansas swan song.

Lecompton Lodge No. 13 probably faded more than it died. The Kansas Grand Lodge proceedings for 1861 showed sketchy information on No. 13. It was still listed as having 27 members; but 5 members had dimitted, likely moving from the area. From about 1860, it is probable that Lecompton Lodge No. 13 existed more in theory than in fact. The charter of Lodge No. 13 was officially revoked in 1865.

Shawnee Lodge No. 9, located at neighboring Big Springs, was suffering a similar fate. It had been chartered a year earlier in 1857, but by 1861 was down to just 4 members. Brother Isaac

N. Roberts made a special plea for Shawnee No. 9 in the form of the following resolution:

Resolved, That where the members of a lodge in good standing and who have paid their Grand Lodge dues, but have been by dismissions or other casualties reduced to a number less than seven, such reduction shall not necessarily cause a forfeiture of their charter.

The tactic was immediately successful for one year as the matter was referred to the Committee on Chartered Lodges for reporting at the next Annual Communication. The charter of Shawnee Lodge No. 9 at Big Springs was officially revoked in 1867.

The withering of Lecompton Lodge No. 13 was to leave Lecompton without masonic activity for fifty-six years until Lecompton Lodge No. 420 A.F. & A.M. was chartered in 1921. Big Springs was to be 120 years without a masonic meeting until Lecompton Lodge No. 420 moved to the former Big Springs school building in 1987.