

9 Beautiful day. I spend my time in the office. I am reading law, politics & the history of Russia. Today bought a good deal of land at tax sales. The first investment of that kind I have ever made.

June 10th 1856 Beautiful day. Spend my time in my office.

11th Beautiful day — in my office — in the afternoon go over to Webster City with Willson & Salisbury.

12th Start horse back to Eldora Hardin Co 50 miles to see if I can get Willson nominated for the legislature. Get to Eldora. Stay at the house of Elsworth. In the evening see J.D. Thompson who is the leading Democrat there.

June 13, 1856 See Smith, Thompson & J L Hough. They talk all right. They are Democrats. Get on our way for Webster City about 1/2 past 3 o'clock P.M. Go 50 miles to that place by one o'clock A.M. I have a talk with Willson — the first man I have mentioned it to in relation to acting as District Judge in the new district that we hope to form. This is a profound secret with him & with me. See whether ever this ambition will be satisfied!

14 Stay at Webster City. They today raised the frame for a hotel 60 by 30 feet. They are driving things to a great rate. Bought my first horse for \$130 cash. A gray mare. Good little beast.

Sunday 15 Start for Otis Grove in Franklin Co. All right. Craigh shot a plover on the wing riding in a lumber wagon at good gate. Stayed all night at Reys on East side of the Iowa where Willson & Craig is laying of a town to be called "Canterbery".

16 Start with Willson for County seat of Franklin Co. Get things all fixed. Run our horses about 6 1/2 miles in 1/2 hour through the rain. Stay with Dr. Mitchel at Mains Grove.

17 Start for Otis Grove — Thence to Franklin Grove. Find few good democrats. Stay all night with W.E. Rogers on Sec 36 T. 93, R 24.

18 Go to Liberty in Wright Co thence to Newcastle or Webster City here meet Provost the Engineer who is running the R Road out to Dubuque.

June 19, 1856 Bring Provost to Fort Dodge. Maj Williams is away to Ft Des Moines. I show Provost the crossings of the Des Moines river at the Fort.

20 In my office — All quiet. Hot weather.

21st Hot day. I am in my office most of the day. I go down to Tolmans to show my land to a German. Hot ride. Kansas War Civil War has commenced to rage. What the result will be God only knows. Mr Buchanan

Bleeding Kansas

John Duncombe's faith in the Democratic Party was surely tested during the 1850s. That he remained a Democrat at all through these years of sectional political strife — to be followed by the Civil War, Reconstruction, and Republican hegemony of the late 19th century — indicates the depth of his commitment to partisan tradition and party leadership. In the prewar period covered by his diary, no issue aroused the ire of this party loyalist more than what he saw as the lawless tactics of antislavery forces in frontier Kansas.

In the early 1850s Congress was beginning to feel pressure from railroad promoters, land speculators, and western politicians to officially organize the territories of Kansas and Nebraska. In response, Illinois Senator Stephen A. Douglas introduced legislation that evolved into the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which provided for the organization of the two new western territories. Addressing the key political issue of the era head-on, Douglas's bill specified that "all questions pertaining to slavery in the Territories . . . are to be left to the people residing therein."

Antislavery forces, Free Soilers, and other elements of

the just-forming Republican Party were livid. The Kansas-Nebraska Act would allow voters in these territories, if they so chose, to establish slavery on Louisiana Purchase land lying north of latitude 36°30' — which runs along the northern border of Arkansas — thereby negating the Missouri Compromise of 1820. By the terms of the 1820 agreement, states formed north of the 36°30' line were to enter the Union as free states; states to the south were to be slave states. (Missouri had been an exception to this rule, entering the Union as a slave state in 1821.) In the view of Civil War historian James M. McPherson, by its wholesale affront to northern sensibilities, the Kansas-Nebraska Act "may have been the most important single event pushing the nation toward civil war."

Once the bill was passed in 1854, the political drama moved from Washington to Kansas, where proslavery and antislavery forces engaged in electioneering techniques that ranged from level-headed speechmaking to armed violence — thus "Bleeding Kansas." Iowa historian Leland Sage cautioned against exaggerating the extent of the violence, attributing to sensationalist reporting much of the hysteria coming out of Kansas in 1854

is the Democratic nominee for President. I have no doubt he will succeed in getting the vote, but it is hard to tell

Sunday, June 22d 1856 Hot day I feel very lazy. I have spent the forenoon in my office reading the News papers. I go to Webster City. Very hot.

June 23. I go out to see Mr Knickerbocker who is running the Rail Road Survey across Boon River. I stay with him all day. He runs the line across Boon river about 20 links north of the correction line. I suffer from heat to day.

24 Start with Mr Knickerbocker to go to Fort Dodge. We look out the route.

Kansas affairs are in a very critical state. The President is doing his best to keep all quiet by the aid of the United States troops

A fine shower of rain today.

June 25, 1856 Hot day. A little shower of rain Stay in my office nearly all day Go to see big saw mill saw for the first time. Karr comes in to prove up his preemption on Maj Williams claim. The time for the decision is fixed on the 25th day of August, 1856, at 9 oclock A.M. Smith & Busy come in to prove up their preemption They are two birds that were feathered out for jumping claims.

The Black Republicans begin to get sick of Kansas

& begin to talk about "ten cent Buck" & "not one drop of Democratic blood &c"

The latest news from Kansas shows that the U.S. troops are doing their best to disarm the fighting men of all sides in Kansas. Several small battles have been fought & in fact we are in the midst of civil war. The notorious Lane is encamped near Iowa City with about 400 men en route to Kansas. Treason stalks abroad. What the result will be no one can tell.

June 26th 1856. Warm day. A fine rain which cools the air and makes it very comfortable I spend my time in my office. I have been trying to attend to the claims of Maj Williams. I bought me a buggy & harness for which I am to pay the Sum of \$125 on — or before the 10th day of September next. Now I own horse saddle bridle buggy & harness. Each the first I ever owned. I am chosen to make the 4th July oration of this County at Webster City I think I have a very short time to do the work I fear I shall make a very poor effort as I have business for almost every day to that time

I have been reading the Democratic Review. It is a very good work now My health is good. And I have a very comfortable living except my board at Dr Olneys is most shamefully bad and has been for the last three months.

It is a great disgrace that we curse

June 27, 1856 Thos Sargent & self start for Boonsboro

and 1855. Most Kansans, said Sage, were just interested in finding land and building homes; few had time to engage in political struggles in an ongoing way.

Still, the nation watched Kansas with growing discomfort. "Border ruffians" were brought in from Missouri to stuff ballot boxes and perform other mischief for proslavery forces. New England philanthropists underwrote the clandestine activities of free-state zealots. Terrorists from both sides rode into Kansas by night to wreak havoc on selected opposition targets, then retreated to safe havens in Missouri (proslavery) or Iowa (anti-slavery). From the start, Kansas politics were hopelessly contentious and conducted with unusual passion, and so they remained until Kansas entered the Union as a free state in 1861.

John Duncombe's observations about the "civil war" in Kansas reveal a young man trying to find a moral basis for his party's position on the issues. Occasionally his defense of the party left him tied up in rhetorical knots, as in his diary on March 26, 1856, when a meditation on the authenticity of his own religious faith set Duncombe off on a rambling diatribe in which he denounced the clergy, called for a restoration of the "old estab-

lished rules," and lamented his neighbors' obsession with material wealth. Somehow in his mind Duncombe connected all this with the dispute over the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Though he wrote very little about slavery itself, he had strong opinions about the tactics of the antislavery forces, as he noted on June 3, 1856: "Unless the Strong arm of the Laws quells this state of thugs, in a few years perhaps less, 'our glorious country' and our 'model republic' will be a sordid mass of ungovernable Elements, pregnant with Strife and civil wars."

Duncombe remained a loyal Democrat all his life, which in Iowa came to mean that his political opportunities were limited. Yet perhaps because of his reputation for integrity and hard work, he survived Iowa's great antebellum political transformation, when the Democratic heritage of early Iowa was eclipsed by the new ideology of Republicanism. Despite these changes in the context of Iowa politics, John Duncombe would remain a prominent public figure in Fort Dodge and in Iowa long after the Democratic Party of George Wallace Jones and Bernhart Henn faded from view.

— by Bill Silag