

Saline County, Missouri, and the Civil War

By Michael Dickey, Arrow Rock State Historic Site

Saline County history is a prime example of not only how the Civil War impacted Missouri it demonstrates the attitudes that shaped events leading the nation into war.

On June 1, 1847, Arrow Rock resident W. A. Beeding wrote to his cousin in St. Charles the following; “There is money to be made in this upper country speculating...Saline County consists of a great deal of wealth it is mostly all well improved and thickly settled by intelligent and respectable people.” Saline County was one of the excessively rich Missouri River counties, along with Boone, Manitou, Howard, Chariton, Cooper, Lafayette, Ray, Clay, and Jackson counties.

Saline County had more miles of riverfront and rich bottomland soil than any other county. Steamboat traffic on the Missouri River facilitated the movement of agricultural produce, manufactured goods and people to and from the county. From March to November when the Missouri River was free of ice the ports of Miami and Arrow Rock were constantly busy. The major east to west trails crossing the state passed through the county further enhancing commerce.

The vast majority of immigrants to this area were from the upper south states of Kentucky, Tennessee and Virginia. They were transplanting southern ideals and agricultural practices to Missouri. This meant that they brought African-American slaves with them. In its “Address to the American People” the Lexington Pro-Slavery Convention of 1855 openly declared that Missouri agriculture was prospering in the western counties because of slavery.

Frank Blair, Missouri’s most forceful antislavery agitator, declared in 1855 that the staple crops of the state, hemp and tobacco, could “only be cultivated by slave labor.” Hemp was fabricated into cordage and bagging used to tie and package cotton bales in the south. Saline County alone produced 18% of Missouri’s hemp crop. A plantation system developed for raising hemp and tobacco, closely modeling the cotton plantations of the South.

Other agricultural produce such as pork, beef, corn and salt were shipped to the Mississippi delta to feed the slaves working the cotton fields. Missouri mules, whose industry was rooted in the Santa Fe trade, formed the majority of draft animals used for plowing the cotton fields. In the 1850s, Arrow Rock residents Claiborne Fox Jackson and O.B. Pearson formed a partnership to regularly ship these locally produced commodities to the cotton district of Natchez, Mississippi. The economic prosperity of Saline County was thus tied directly to the prosperity of the cotton industry of the South. Slavery was the foundation of the economy for both regions and they nurtured and supported each other.

Economic power translates into political power. Consequently, Saline County Democrats were a key part of an organization known as the “Central Clique” or more derisively to its opponents as “Boonslick Democracy.” They controlled Missouri Democratic Party politics and ultimately influenced much of state policy. Two members Claiborne Jackson, and William B. Napton, Sr., sought to undermine the power of Missouri’s U.S. Senator Thomas Hart Benton. Benton was not

anti-slavery, but he opposed its expansion into new territories. Jackson and Napton penned a series of resolutions, which essentially made the following points:

1. Any attempt by Congress to regulate slavery is unconstitutional.
2. The establishment of free territories is an insult to slave holding states.
3. Only people residing in a territory at the time a state constitution was framed could vote to prohibit slavery. Future generations have no right to consider the issue of slavery.
4. Missouri would cooperate with other slaveholding states for their mutual protection against “northern fanaticism.”

The “Jackson Resolutions,” as these were known passed in both houses of the Missouri legislature by an overwhelming majority and signed by Governor Austin King on March 10, 1849. Within a few years, Benton was out of politics.

Religious and civil organizations in the Northern states calling for the abolition of slavery increased after 1833. These groups were labeled “free-soilers.” Most Missourians found them repugnant, and few within the state dared challenge the “peculiar institution” of slavery. One exception was British born George Howe Furse of Arrow Rock. Furse was a bookkeeper for former governor Meredith Miles Marmaduke and he tutored the Marmaduke children. Furse resented the way slaves were treated, especially after witnessing one man literally wear his fingers to the bone cutting hemp. He argued against slavery on an “intellectual plane to avoid arousing the hostility of the violent sect.” Word began to spread that Furse was an abolitionist. In 1856 the Furse family moved to Kansas to join with other abolitionists.

Saline citizens feared that the abolitionist movement would lead to a slave revolt. The response was to crack down on the black population. Arrow Rock passed this ordinance in 1849: “Be it ordained &c that there shall be appointed three persons to act as patrols for the Town whose duty it shall be to patrol the town and any negro found out from home after 10 o clock at night without a pass shall receive a whipping not exceeding 10 lashes.” Many communities and even the county government periodically authorized slave patrols.

The slavery issue was rapidly coming to a head in the nation and Kansas Territory was the flash point between free-soilers and pro-slavery forces. Both sides worked feverishly to make Kansas a state in their fold. Claiborne Jackson preferred that Kansas remain “Indian country” rather than see it become a free state. In an 1854 letter to Senator David Atchison he wrote, “Indians are better neighbors than abolitionists by a damn sight. If this [Kansas] is to become ‘free nigger’ territory, Missouri must become so too, for we can hardly keep our negroes here now.” Saline County aided the pro-slavery Kansas faction in 1855. “From time to time, provisions such as bacon, flour, potatoes, etc. together with arms and ammunition, were sent into Kansas from Saline [County].” “Visiting dignitaries” from Saline County such as Claiborne F. Jackson, W. B. Crews, William H. Letcher, and Frank Mitchell made trips to Kansas to encourage and advise the pro-slavery camps. Captain John Reid, a Mexican War veteran, led a contingent of armed Saline County men to Kansas. Anger and bitterness between the two factions erupted into violence and

border warfare that continued right through the end of the Civil War.

Anti-abolition and anti-black sentiment reached its peak in Saline County in the summer of 1859, resulting in horrifying events. On May 13th, Benjamin Hinton of Waverly was found bludgeoned to death and his cabin ransacked. John, a slave at a nearby farm, was arrested for the murder after he was allegedly found in the possession of bloodstained money. As Judge Russell Hicks of the Sixth Circuit Court in Lexington prepared for a July 19 trial he received alarming news from Arrow Rock:

"Some days before the special term was held a Negro, named Holman, committed an assault upon a young man, named Durrett, inflicting a wound on one of his arms which greatly endangered his life... This occurred in the neighborhood of Arrow Rock. Again a short time before the special term, a negro, named Jim, was charged with attempted rape on a white woman in the vicinity of Marshall. Both of these negroes were in jail. And yet again on the day preceding the special term, a negro belonging to Dr. Price, at Arrow Rock had attempted rape upon a white girl, some twelve years of age. The girl was severely injured, and the negro on Monday night was hung. Dr. Price, being satisfied of his guilt, delivered him up to the citizens...."

On the day of John's trial, a large crowd filled the courtroom and Public Square in Marshall. John was tried and found guilty, and Judge Hicks indicated that his lawyers would have time to file an appeal. The reaction in the courtroom caused Judge Hicks to fear that if he publicly ordered the prisoner to jail, he would never reach it alive. Court was recessed for dinner, and when the crowd dispersed Judge Hicks walked with the sheriff to ensure John's safe arrival at the jail. Jim was ordered to remain in the courthouse under guard of the jury and deputies. When they reached the courthouse gate, Judge Hicks saw a mob coming over the courthouse fence and another coming down the street towards the jail. Judge Hicks could not keep up due to a limp, but the sheriff and his prisoner reached the jail ahead of the mob.

James Shackelford stood on the jail steps and harangued the crowd to action. The jailer was overpowered and the mob took John and Holman. Jim was then wrested away from the deputies and jury at gunpoint. The three men were taken to a walnut grove 200 yards north of the courthouse where Jim and Holman were hanged and John was burned to death at the stake. For nearly ten minutes, he screamed out to those he knew in the crowd, begging for help. Judge Hicks was so chagrined, mortified, and indignant at the lawlessness of the people and the contempt they showed for his court that he declared he would never again hold a term of court in Saline County. He tendered his resignation, which was accepted.

The raid on the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia by abolitionist John Brown and his followers in October of 1859 inflamed local passions further. Meetings were held throughout the county and speeches and resolutions were made condemning the raiders and "their sympathizers, aiders and abettors."

Shackelford, firebrand of the lynching, wrote a series of letters to the Marshall weekly essentially casting blame for the horrific lynching on the abolitionist movement. He also declared: "That in the event of the election of a black-republican president in 1860, that a convention of the

southern states be called to take such measures as will conduce to the great interests of the south." This, of course, was a direct attack on the Republican Party and their presidential candidate, Abraham Lincoln who were viewed in Missouri as "radicals."

In 1860, enslaved persons only made up 9.7% of Missouri's population and about 3% of the total in the United States. In contrast, the total population of Saline County was 14,699, and one third, or 4,876, were slaves. There were only a handful of free blacks in the county, and their freedom was constantly in jeopardy. Property rights of slave owners were a key political issue for the citizens of Saline County. Claiborne Fox Jackson won the 1860 election as Missouri Governor. Abraham Lincoln, "the black Republican," though elected President, failed to get a single vote in Saline County. Immediately upon assuming office, Governor Jackson issued a call for volunteers for the Missouri State Guard to resist any effort of the federal government to curtail slavery in Missouri.

The bombardment of Fort Sumter on April 14, 1861 electrified Saline citizens. At meetings around the county citizens debated the merits of secession as opposed to remaining in the Union. Former Governor Meredith Miles Marmaduke remained a staunch Union supporter. His son, Lt. John Sappington Marmaduke was torn over which side to choose though he leaned towards the South. His father told him, "John, there can be but one result. You will sacrifice your profession. Secession will fail. Slavery will be abolished. But you must decide for yourself following your own convictions." Marmaduke carried this message to his fellow Saline citizens but he was a minority voice. John resigned his commission and eventually became a major general in the Confederate Army and later a governor of Missouri. Brother Vincent Marmaduke remained loyal like his father but was arrested and accused of disloyalty by Federal authorities in 1862. After he was released, he enlisted in the Confederate Army and rose to the rank of major. Their cousin, William S. Jackson resigned his army commission at the beginning of the war and formed a unit known as the Saline Jackson Guards. Later in the war, they operated as partisan guerillas, commonly referred to as "bushwhackers".

Few Missourians favored secession and hoped to simply maintain the status quo leading to failure of Governor Jackson's efforts to get the state to secede. Following the capture of Camp Jackson near St. Louis and then Jefferson City, Jackson and pro-secession legislators retreated to Boonville. Following the rout of the State Guard at the First Battle of Boonville, the secessionist legislature fled first to Neosho Missouri, then Little Rock Arkansas and finally Marshall Texas to establish a government in exile. Pro-Union legislators declared their offices "vacated" and created a new government, totally loyal to the Union. Thus Missouri has the distinction of having dual governments during the war.

Secessionists began shooting at passing riverboats from the Arrow Rock bluffs. The Federals responded by sending a gunboat to shell the town of Arrow Rock on the night of August 9, 1861. Damage was minimal but it was a harbinger of worse things to come. In December of 1861, General Henry Halleck ordered 400 men of Merrill's Horse Cavalry to Saline County to seize any munitions and they captured a supply wagon destined to General Sterling Price's army. On December 5, Colonel Frederick Steele in command of Merrill's reported camping on the farm of the "notorious Claiborne F. Jackson" and raising the Stars and Stripes over the "traitors house." The following day, they destroyed the Arrow Rock ferryboat and several kegs of gunpowder

found hidden in warehouses after exchanging shots with guerillas on the Howard County side of the river. The Arrow Rock post office was closed for several months and for the rest of the war, town government was virtually suspended. The collapse of civil government was a scene repeated throughout the county during the next four years.

Union men were few in the county and most were under threat for their lives. Governor Marmaduke was one of the few who was not molested or had his property damaged. Dr. Glen O. Hardeman lived at "Lo Mismo" farm, just west of Arrow Rock. He had informed Federal authorities as to the identity of some local bushwhackers and consequently, he was a marked man. His wife Permelia wrote to him about a visit to Lo Mismo by the bushwhackers:

"October 17th, 1862 – My Dear Husband, We were visited last night about two O clock by the bushwhackers. I was up with the baby when they came. They first surrounded the house when three or four of them ran up on the Portico and ordered you to open the door. I told them you was not at home... They then said if I did not open it they would break it open... young Odonnel came into my room and called for a candle, said they wanted to search for arms. They got both of the guns and then went up stair, took some of my bed blankets, three pair of coarse sox... They even took as small a thing as comb and brush."

It was not the last visit of the bushwhackers to Lo Mismo. Fortunately Dr. Hardeman was away serving as regimental surgeon of the 71st Enrolled Missouri Militia. Union men often found serving in the military safer than staying at their homes. The majority served in pro-Union Enrolled Missouri Militia groups that garrisoned the larger towns throughout the state. Most were so poorly trained and equipped they were better for little lese than guard duty. The Missouri State Militia was a different matter and they frequently met the guerillas on their own terms.

The cruelty and brutality of the war in Saline County matches almost anything you hear of in the Middle East. In July of 1862, two men named Walker and Ricehouse reported that Judge Robert Smart of Miami was harboring bushwhackers. Judge Smart was shot and killed by Federal troops when they approached his house. A friend of Judge Smart's named John Dickey rode into Miami in March of 1863 at the head of Blunt's company of guerillas and they promptly rounded up Walker and Ricehouse. Twelve miles east of Miami they had dinner at a farmhouse and the farmer suspected nothing was wrong as they were all so cordial with other. They went out to Edmondson Creek and the guerillas tied nooses around the men's necks, then drove their horses out from under them. The guerillas used the dangling bodies for target practice, shooting them almost to pieces. After the war their remains were taken from the creek bank to the Miami cemetery. Dickey was later mortally wounded in a skirmish on the Saline – Lafayette County line but was credited with killing three or four soldiers before he expired.

Skirmishes frequently occurred in the countryside. Scarcely a week passed without some action occurring, usually amounting to one or two of the combatants killed. However, the plundering and pillaging of the rural population became truly unbearable. Incidents such as that described by Permelia Hardeman were commonplace. Commerce was brought to a complete standstill, farmland sat fallow, and banks were rendered insolvent. Old Santa Fe trader Philip Thompson wrote: "We are in a bad state of affairs."

On August 5, 1864, guerillas burned the courthouse in Marshall after "plundering some of the

inhabitants and shooting five negroes in town and four a short distance from town." Lt. Colonel Bazil Lazear of the 1st Cavalry M.S.M. arrived in Marshall on the 7th and took stern action. He wrote to his superiors, "This is certainly the most rebellious county I have been in. I have arrested several women that I will send in due time, and have arrested several of the worst rebels that I am holding hostage for the lives of Union men... This county needs rough handling, and as the guerillas have threatened what they will do, I have warned and notified their friends that I would hold them responsible for the acts of the guerillas, and will retaliate for any violence done the Union men either in person or property."

A "Lt. Durrett" of the Saline Jackson Guards was captured allegedly at a church service and wounded in the process. Durrett was summarily tried, propped up against a picket fence and executed for burning the Marshall courthouse and for "being a bushwhacker generally." Life was equally dangerous for civilians. No one could ever be sure who was knocking on the door regardless of their appearance. Armed men appearing to be guerillas would demand provisions. After receiving the requested provisions, they would ride into the brush, change into Federal uniforms and come back and arrest the individual for aiding and betting the enemy. Guerillas employed the same tactic using captured Union uniforms but frequently hung their victims. It was a no win situation for civilians as no sane person would refuse the demands of any group of heavily armed, desperate looking men. Blacks, as if they were to blame for causing the war, were especially targeted and murdered with abandon by the guerillas.

The war continued in Saline County long after General Lee's surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia at Appomattox Courthouse on April 9, 1865. Although the Confederacy was in ruins many of the bushwhackers simply refused to give up. Many had operated outside of any Confederate sanction and were simply gangs feeding on the chaos of war. Captain James Eads wrote to Captain C.G. Laurant on May 1, 1865: "I have today about 100 men in the brush, and will keep every efficient or available man in the brush until we kill or drive out every bushwhacker and murderer who infests this country."

The lawlessness spawned by the war actually seemed to get worse in the county and civil and military authority seemed incapable of stopping it. Finally on April 22, 1866 exasperated citizens met in Marshall and formed a vigilante group christened the "Honest Man's League" with the express purpose to "repress all lawlessness in the county, and bring to a swift and severe punishment all offenders against justice and law." Branches were established in towns throughout the county and many members were veterans of both the Confederate and Union regular armies. After several ruffians were shot, hanged or driven out of the county by the League, peace was restored.

However, Saline County never regained the economic and political prestige it enjoyed prior to 1861. Saline County had cast its lot on the losing side. The hemp market went bust because jute rope and baggage from India could be imported more cheaply. The slaves that supported the plantation system were emancipated and the plantation themselves were broken up and sold off for smaller yeoman farms. The political power was gone, because it had derived from the slave-based economy and it was the Radical Republicans who now dictated state policy.

However, the real price of the Civil War for Saline County was much more than the loss of

economic or political prosperity. Anthony O'Sullivan a former Saline County resident eloquently but mournfully counted the cost: "We mourn the unhappy condition of our country and the amount of human suffering we have witnessed. Our imagination carries us to the homes of our fellow citizens – seats around the domestic hearth are vacant. Thousands of maimed and emaciated, with no means for future support, fill our soul with agony, and we are ready to exclaim – My God, my God why hast Thou forsaken us?"