

Battle of Lexington State Historic Site Podcast Transcript

Narrator: In the years before the Missouri-Kansas Border Wars, Lexington, Missouri was a thriving crossroads that attracted traders, businessmen, and farmers. The town was situated not only along the Santa Fe Trail, but also in the rich Missouri River Valley, which was well-suited to the production and shipment of hemp and other cash crops. By 1855, Lexington was the fifth-largest town in Missouri, with the largest slave population in the state.

Lexington's wealth and strategic location assured its place as a military target. The three-day-long Battle of Lexington, fought in September 1861, was one of the largest battles in the Civil War's western campaign.

Battle of Lexington State Historic Site Resource Manager Janae Fuller describes Lexington in the years before the Civil War.

Janae: Many of the people that moved here to this area emigrated from the states of Tennessee, Virginia and Kentucky. They were commercial businessmen riding the success of the Santa Fe Trail and the riverboats. Others that came were planters from those areas and they brought with them expertise of raising hemp, which was used to make rope and bagging. There was also some Germans that moved to Lexington and they formed a lot of the businessmen in the community and operated a lot of the taverns in town.

Narrator: In 1854, the Kansas-Nebraska Act nullified the Missouri Compromise and gave homesteaders in the Kansas and Nebraska territories the power to decide slavery's status prior to their admission into the union. Early on, the Act was celebrated by southerners who were confident that Kansas would enter as a slave state. As northern emigrants began to fill the Kansas Territory, Missouri slaveholders became nervous. The stakes were particularly high for Missourians - A free Kansas would leave Missouri surrounded by free states on three sides, which meant slaves could more easily escape and slaveholders would have more difficulty protecting their slave property.

Like their northern counterparts, pro-Southern activists rushed to organize contingents to vote and settle in the Kansas Territory. Among these was the Lafayette Emigration Society, organized by Lexington leaders, including Colonel Oliver Anderson, in coordination with pro-Southern Missouri Senator David Rice Atchison.

Janae: In all these letters that Atchison and Anderson exchanged the Lafayette Emigration Society was born of that. It was basically formed to procure the settlement of bona fide pro-slavery emigrants to the Kansas Territory. The American Citizen newspaper in 1856 described the Society as "A group with a plan which, if properly carried out will result in defeating the efforts of the northerners who seek to make the Kansas Territory a harboring place for slaves from Missouri." We do know, in several letters that Atchison wrote, that he was headed south to try to draft people from the south to go up into Kansas and settle.

Narrator: The Lafayette Emigration Society's efforts trailed a similar enterprise of Major Jefferson Buford, an Alabama attorney who sold 40 slaves to aid the Kansas

settlement of 400 Southern colonists. Despite the efforts of Anderson and Buford, the risks of settling in Kansas were high for southern slaveholders. They would have to leave established settlements to face an uncertain future. If Kansas were to become a free state, slaveholders would be forced to either leave the new homes for which they had sacrificed their established lifestyles, or abandon or sell their slaves, whom they saw as valuable property.

Amidst violent attacks by free-state settlers, in retribution for the Southern emigrants' role in pro-Southern militia attacks, Buford's emigrants fled the Territory. In the wake of Buford's failed attempt to settle Kansas, the Lafayette Emigration Society never got off the ground.

Janae: We don't think that it was real successful because the Lafayette Emigration Society doesn't show up very long in the newspapers, we don't see too much evidence suggesting that they were successful in bringing emigrants into the state ...

Narrator: In addition to their efforts to populate Kansas with pro-slavery emigrants, Lexington's pro-slavery leaders used the town's strategic location to hinder the movement of free-state emigrants. These plans were hatched through a series of letters between pro-slavery Senator David Rice Atchison and Colonel Oliver Anderson a veteran of the War of 1812 and successful Lexington plantation owner.

Janae: ...but we do know that a lot of the letters that Atchison wrote back and forth to Anderson resulted in a campaign against northern emigrants to Kansas. For instance, there was a blockade along the Missouri River and often steamboats were stopped here at Lexington, they were boarded and the passengers were searched and their weapons confiscated if they were found...

Narrator: At Senator Atchison's urging, Colonel Anderson also raised a militia of Lexington men to protect pro-slavery settlers and vote in elections.

Janae: The majority of those living in Lexington were southern sympathizers; but there were some Germans who sided with the Union. And there were also many others who wished to remain neutral.

Narrator: Like Lexington, the State of Missouri was split on the issue of secession. However, Missouri's hopes for neutrality were dashed when Union forces seized the St. Louis arsenal and President Lincoln demanded that the state muster Union troops. After 1861, Missouri supported parallel Union and Confederate armies and governments.

Janae: ...they had a northern army called the Home Guard, and they had a southern army called the State Guard. They also had two governors at one time. They had Claiborne Fox Jackson, who was the southern governor. And they had Gamble who was the northern governor. There were really two governments that were trying to operate the state during the Civil War. One of them, the southern government, was in exile down in Neosho, Missouri, and even though they voted to secede from the Union, it really never carried any clout because there was not a quorum; so, Missouri officially remained in the Union.

Narrator: Missouri's parallel forces collided in the Battle of Wilson's Creek, near Springfield. After gaining control of Southwest Missouri, Confederate Major General Sterling Price marched his State Guard to the strategic Missouri River

town of Lexington. John Maki, from the Battle of Lexington State Historic Site recounts the battle.

John: And by the time he reached Lexington he had over 18,000 men. Men were coming in and joining him and wanting to get in the fight and they were bolstered by the big victory they had had down at Wilson's Creek. The Union garrison at Lexington was only approximately 3,000 men and they were made up of men from northern Missouri, some Illinois cavalry, and also a unit of the Irish brigade out of Chicago under the command of Colonel Mulligan. Some of the first fighting that took place in town, took place just south of town in Macphelia Cemetery. Over the next few days the Union troops were slowly moved in toward their entrenchments.

One of the places in Lexington was the Anderson house and the Union forces were using that as a field hospital. Price realized that it was a strategic position and ordered the house taken. So the State Guardsmen came in, took the house. Mulligan felt that was a violation of rules of war and ordered the house re-taken. There was a fight that took place in the house. One of the incidents that occurred in the house, a young Union man named George Palmer, he would later be awarded the Medal of Honor for actions he did in that house. Later Price again assaulted the house, drove the Union troops out of the house. The rest of the fight, the State Guard kept the house, used it as a sniping position to fire on the Union troops.

Later in the fight, as the Union troops were forced further and further in a tighter ring around, they lost all their water, they were running low on ammunition, and it was looking more desperate. The State Guard realized there was a lot of hemp bales and rope, coils of rope down in the riverfront, so they used this as a moving breastworks to move even closer to the Union line. Those were so tightly packed that it was hard to fire a round into that that would penetrate and they got closer, closer, and eventually on September 20th, 1861, the Union garrison surrendered and all the men were taken prisoner, as well as Mulligan. The men were paroled, Mulligan was kept for a short period of time until also exchanged. Price never stayed more than a few weeks after the fight because afterwards all his men started disappearing, going home, and going about their regular business, so Price left town.

Narrator: Evidence of the battle can still be seen at Colonel Anderson's home, now part of the Battle of Lexington State Historic Site, and the Lafayette County Courthouse.

John: There is a cannonball imbedded in one of the columns of the courthouse, and there has been a lot of controversy whether it is a Union cannonball or a cannonball from the State Guard. We do have an account from Mulligan saying that he never fired on the *new* town, which is where the cannonball is, that he only fired toward the *old* town. So we really suspect that the cannonball was an errant shot from one of the southern batteries that hit the column in the courthouse.

Narrator: When the smoke cleared, Price's State Guard had suffered 100 casualties, with 25 killed and 75 wounded. 39 Union forces were killed and 120 were wounded. After the battle, Union Commander General John C. Fremont struck with force, pushing General Price's State Guard back to southwest Missouri and maintaining Union control of Lexington for the remainder of the war.

When the war ended, Lexington's economy floundered. Plantation owners who had relied on slave labor to help produce cash crops struggled to find a niche. With the expansion of railroads in the post-war years, river towns like Lexington lost prominence.

Janae: Lexington really got hit pretty hard by that. They didn't have slavery any more, so the cash crop, such as hemp and the rope and the bagging were not produced and that was the major source of income here. The decline of river transportation, the steamboats going up and down the river, and also the loss of a railroad to a different location, devastated the local economy. The new state constitution, which disqualified many of the pro-southerners from voting or holding public office was also devastating to the citizens here in town. Anyone wishing to register to vote had to take what was called a test oath and swear their loyalty past and present to the Union. Lexington's, I guess you'd say their economy didn't really recuperate at all until they began mining coal at the turn of the century. The coal industry helped them to regain their feet a little bit. Lexington then found out that the soft coal didn't work very well, and so that industry also kind of faded out.

Narrator: Despite its economic struggles, Lexington maintains a rare antebellum charm with few modern encroachments.

Janae: Today Lexington's population is the same as it was in 1855. And you'd say that our major economy right now is Agro-tourism, tourism and also agriculture and orchards and vineyards, so we've kind of come full circle.