

## “Man of Infamy Not Forgotten”

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No event in Franklin County history is more famous or historically significant than the story of the Pottawatomie Massacre.

A vigilante-style multiple murder, the massacre was one of the bloodiest preludes to the American Civil War and is mentioned in generations of history textbooks.

The principal figure in the story, of course, is John Brown—a fascinating character who is regularly praised as a hero and denounced as a madman.

Our neighbors in Miami County like to claim “Osawatomie” Brown as their hero and madman. But Franklin County actually has the stronger claim on him for it was here that John Brown and his family settled while they stayed in Kansas.

Actually, Brown never established a permanent home anywhere in the state. He came to Franklin County in October of 1855 solely for the purpose of keeping slavery out of the territory. Five of his sons had arrived earlier that year and took claims along some of the runs on the south side of Middle Creek.

Most of the Browns’ land, known as “Brown’s Station,” lay to the west and south of the Ruhamah Baptist Church and included the present church grounds.

A rough map, drawn by John Brown Jr. in 1855 and sent to his father back East, confirms the locations of these claims.

His family in this area also included a sixth son and son-in-law who arrived with Brown, and a sister and brother-in-law, the Orson Days, who lived one mile southwest of present-day Rantoul. Another sister-in-law and brother-in-law, the Samuel Adairs, lived near Osawatomie.

Brown lived only a year and seven months in Kansas, traveling throughout the border area from his arrival in 1855, and departure in 1859, but it was a period of considerable activity. It also was a period of considerable violence, beginning with the event known as the Pottawatomie Massacre.

In 1856 the free-state men in southeast Franklin County banded themselves together into a company called the Pottawatomie Rifles. Their purpose was to protect each other from the threats and raids of their pro-slavery neighbors and Missouri “border ruffians.” “Old” John Brown was named their captain, the nickname being used to distinguish him from John Jr.

In May of that year, the alarm came that Lawrence, the free-state headquarters, was in danger of being sacked. The Pottawatomie Rifles set out at once to help defend the town but learned they were too late while encamped near “Ottawa” Jones’ house on Tauby Creek.

The grave news from Lawrence was immediately followed by equally alarming news from home: Radical pro-slavery men were threatening to drive out or kill all the free-state men along Pottawatomie Creek.

Enraged by the two events, Brown quickly gathered together four of his sons and three other men and set off on a secret mission. By dawn of May 24, 1856, the eight men arrived back along the Pottawatomie and spent the day resting in a camp about a mile upstream from “Dutch” Henry’s Crossing, the present site of Lane.

Late that night, Brown armed his men with freshly sharpened swords and led them off into the darkness on a crusade he thought was morally justified. By dawn, five of the most belligerent pro-slavery men along the creek were dead.

Each had been called out of his cabin, briefly interrogated, and them silently slain with a blade.

“Old Man Doyle” and his two sons were the first to die. Allen Wilkinson, the first postmaster at Shermanville (Lane), left a wife sick in bed with the measles. The bloody body of the German-born “Dutch” Bill Sherman was found partly awash in the creek. His brother, “Dutch” Henry for who the crossing was named, was another target, but he was away from home that night.

Reactions to the brutal slayings were those of relief, terror, outrage and chagrin. Locally, the free-state settlers were relieved, but also frightened about reprisals. Pro-slavery settlers were terrified and many quickly packed up and fled to Missouri.

Across the nation the response was predictable—shock and anger in the South, while anti-slavery sympathizers bemoaned the vigilante tactics use to further their cause.

It was a pre-emptive strike that helped to squelch pro-slavery settlement in Franklin County and elsewhere in Kansas. But it also begat more violence.

The cabins of Brown’s sons and others were burned to the ground. The Battle of Blackjack near Baldwin occurred soon after with Brown leading free-state forces. Taury Jones’ house was looted and burned by Missourians searching for Brown. The Battle of Osawatomie was fought that fall, during which one of Brown’s sons was killed.

Brown spent the rest of his days in Kansas as a fugitive. He established “Underground railroad” lines through Franklin County and elsewhere in Kansas to escort runaway slaves to freedom.

His end, of course, came at the infamous and unsuccessful raid on the federal arsenal at Harper’s Ferry in West Virginia in 1859. He had hoped to use the weapons to start a slave uprising in the South. Two more of his sons were killed in this futile mission, and Brown was captured, tried and hanged.

Today, historians still debate the contradictory character and crusade of this man . . .a gentle and religious man who devoutly believed in freedom and the value of every human being, black or white. But a man who could also ruthlessly kill to further that belief.