

Introduction

IN EARLY JANUARY 1856, the Kickapoo Rangers, a group of proslavery Missourians, left their homes to cross the border into the Kansas Territory. They had heard that the first election under the new antislavery constitution was shortly to be held near Leavenworth, and the rangers were determined to prevent the hated abolitionists from gaining ground in the neighboring territory. On January 15, the election went off peacefully enough at the private home of a Mr. Minard, who had agreed (with the help of armed antislavery, or free-state, men) to host the election. After sunset, however, about thirty Kickapoo Rangers surrounded his house, demanded the ballot box, and in the ensuing scuffle killed one man and wounded two others. When the news reached St. Louis several days later, the editor of a Republican newspaper expressed profound anxiety about the violence. He feared that the flames ignited in the feud between Kansas and Missouri would soon be “fanned into a wide-spread civil war.”¹

Why, in 1856, did residents of Missouri fear the outbreak of civil warfare? What in the state’s history caused these people to anticipate the imminent outbreak of a war that did not, in fact, begin for another five years? Why did the residents of such a prosperous and thriving state, one replete with natural resources and a diverse and growing population, have to cope with unparalleled suffering and even starvation during the war years? Finally, why did a state that traditionally yearned for moderation come to experience the bitterest internal violence of any border state during the Civil War? The answers to some of these questions, paradoxically, lie in Missouri’s rich land, wide rivers, and varied past. From its earliest days, Missouri has stood at the crossroads of America. Bordering both southern and western states, Missouri was a place where diverse economic interests, political views, and during the Civil War, military forces clashed. The results were passionate, violent, and lasting. Throughout the years of conflict, Missourians desperately sought out moderation and neutrality, but they were unable to achieve either. The violence in Missouri—a distinctive feature of the nineteenth-century West—helped immortalize the images of hardened western soldiers, fiercely independent states-rights settlers, and frontier outlaws and ruffians. Their troubled history also demonstrated that in Civil War-era Missouri, there were *many* sides. Men and women, federals and rebels, slave and freeborn, immigrants and natives, pro- and antislavery residents all faced complex choices within a state that experienced the bloodiest guerrilla fighting of the Civil War. No other state suffered as much from internal division during the conflict. This documentary history, therefore, emphasizes Missouri’s distinctive situation—a state caught in the crossroads between East and West, North and South, slave and free, order and chaos.

The region's mighty rivers drew Native Americans, explorers, traders, and in the late eighteenth century, settlers to the land that would become Missouri. In the early nineteenth century, farmers from Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia crossed the Mississippi River into the Missouri Territory, eager to profit from Missouri's waterways and western trails for transportation and commerce. The earliest settlements clustered along the rivers. In the north-central part of the state, along the Missouri River, these upland Southerners found a fertile land for their hemp and tobacco crops. The central counties along the Missouri River—called "Boon's Lick" after the attempt by Daniel Boone and his sons to start a salt-refining business there—included the prosperous slaveholding counties: Boone, Callaway, Howard, Monroe, and Randolph. (Today these counties are called "Little Dixie.") The southeastern bootheel section of the state that juts into Arkansas and Tennessee was home to ardently pro-Southern settlers who grew cotton and traded along the Mississippi. Farther north, across the river from Illinois, the first French and Spanish pioneers had founded St. Louis—soon to become the most important city in the American West. That city, which still retained some of its French ambience in the middle of the nineteenth century, drew a more diverse population of traders and merchants, shipbuilders and steamboat captains, European immigrants and travelers. It drew aspiring businessmen, including an unusually high number of lawyers, who were lured by land speculation and the concomitant land title business.² St. Louis served briefly as the state capital, after which the honor went to St. Charles, the "last civilized settlement" visited by the Lewis and Clark expedition. But in keeping with western ideas about democracy, the state legislature founded a new capital city in the very center of the state, a sign of their faith that the entire territory would soon be settled. According to historian William Parrish, the naming of the state capital in honor of Thomas Jefferson reflected the heritage of the many Missourians whose ancestors had originally come from Virginia.³

The southwestern part of the state, along the Arkansas border and in the rocky Ozark region, was less populated and harder to farm; the people who set down roots there relied on subsistence farming, hunting, and fishing for their survival and retained a fierce independence throughout the war. Settlements like Independence, not far from modern-day Kansas City, served as jumping-off points for settlers journeying to Oregon and California. Missouri also attracted European immigrants, including Germans who settled in the central region and in St. Louis.

Most of the early settlers were subsistence farmers who grew their own food, as well as lead miners, fur trappers, and traders. Though few settlers outside of the central Missouri counties brought slaves with them, the majority did bring a commitment to the ideas that opportunity for white males rested on the possibility of owning slave labor and that their independence was preserved by the system of slavery. As early as 1830, there were at least a few slaves living in every county

in Missouri, though the majority were concentrated in the north-central Boon's Lick area. Though slaves constituted a little less than 10 percent of the population, politicians had to pay attention to the powerful and influential slaveholding interests in the state, particularly the wealthy Boon's Lick aristocracy, whose social and political influence dominated the state until the Civil War. Because of their commitment to the institution of human bondage, these people supported the extension of slavery into the new western territories and strongly resented any threat of interference.⁴

As a result of their support for slavery, most Missourians voted Democratic throughout the decades before the outbreak of the Civil War. After the war with Mexico, as new territories were brought into the Union, the political lines in Missouri became more sharply drawn. Proslavery Democrats firmly believed that they could not survive without slave labor; they also believed that if new neighboring territories (like Kansas) came into the Union as free states, their own right to slave property would be endangered. The powerful Central Clique of the Boon's Lick area, composed of prominent slaveholders with a great deal of political pull, was able to bring an end to the career of longtime senator Thomas Hart Benton when he publicly voiced his opposition to the extension of slavery. On the other hand, the old Whigs in the state soon joined with Free Soil Democrats (that is, Democrats who opposed the extension of slavery into new territories and states). Whigs and Free Soil Democrats were more numerous in urban areas such as St. Louis.⁵

The state's growing ethnic diversity also influenced political debates over the expansion of slavery into the federal territories. Before the early 1830s, German immigrants had brought their families to the central region of Missouri, whose rolling hills reminded them of the wine-growing regions of their homeland. This group differed sharply from the so-called Forty-eighters, German immigrants who escaped the failed democratic revolutions in Europe and moved into Missouri in the late 1840s and early 1850s. The earlier settlers considered themselves more cultured and aristocratic than the newcomers, and they had a much more tolerant attitude toward the institution of slavery. Those fiercely outspoken Germans who had fled political persecution in their homeland allied themselves with the new Republican Party. Their loyalty to the Union and their antislavery sentiments brought them into direct conflict with pro-Southern, proslavery groups. Both groups disliked and despised the Irish immigrants who had fled famine and poverty and who settled Missouri around the same time. These differences played out in politics as well. The earlier, more prosperous immigrants voted Democratic, because of their inclinations toward slavery and because the Whigs and later the new Republican Party expressed antiforeigner sentiments. The state as a whole remained solidly Democratic, but as new immigrants came in, they were able to change the political climate in the areas in which they settled, particularly in St.

Louis. In the momentous 1860 presidential election, the state voted for the most pro-Union Democratic candidate, Stephen A. Douglas, if only by a bare majority. The fact that so many Missourians voted for Douglas demonstrated only that they remained committed to the Union, not that they were changing their minds about slavery. The fact that most of the Boon's Lick slaveholders cast their ballots for John Bell, the candidate of the new Constitutional Union Party, indicated that the wealthy planters believed their interests—that is, slavery—were best served by a platform that favored the status quo but that they remained uncomfortable with Douglas's staunch support of a permanent Union. Both choices indicate a consistent desire for moderation, even as Missourians themselves participated in mounting violence throughout the state. But the ethnic and political divisions in the state only grew as the pro-Union element gained in strength and influence and as threats against the institution of slavery grew.

From the early 1850s through the mid-1870s, almost every community in Missouri suffered terrible internal divisions. As Missouri's neighbors—free states to the north and east, slave states to the south and east, and federal territories to the south and west, including troubled Kansas—quarreled among themselves over the era's most controversial issues, some Missourians' commitment to moderation began to falter as well. Missourians took up arms in defense of their communities, for and against slavery, for and against the Union, and ultimately against each other. While shipping and trade bound the state's economic interests firmly to the Union, probably at least one-third of its residents either actively opposed the Union or were uncommitted to any national government, favoring their own personal independence over all. Civilian commitment to the Confederacy, combined with a background of border violence, rendered life nearly unsustainable for many Missouri families caught between opposing forces. The civilians who found themselves in the path of partisan warfare, the contending armies, and even the enmity of their neighbors lived in a state of bitterness and violence that outlasted even the war.

Missouri contained within itself elements so antagonistic that it became home to two wartime governments: the Union administration at Jefferson City and the pro-Southern one in exile in Texas. Unlike recruits from virtually every other state in the Great Interior, Missourians fought in significant numbers in both armies: 110,000 enrolled on the side of Union, and 30,000 joined the rebels. An additional 10,000 to 14,000 fought in the Missouri State Guard, an organization that was formed from the Missouri state militia in 1861 and, while never officially a part of the Confederate armies, usually fought against the federals. Thousands more battled illegally as "bushwhackers," or guerrillas, or found their way into other partisan groups. From its troubled and violent place at the crossroads of the nation, Missouri's war was distinctive, yet it also reflected issues and experiences touching all Americans of the era, Northern and Southern, white and black.

Not the least of these was the issue of emancipation. The end of slavery did not come swiftly or easily in Missouri, but the process revealed dramatic swings in public opinion in the border state. Before the secession crisis and into the first two years of the war, voters had supported a moderate proslavery stance. Yet the state was one of the first to emancipate slaves and took a progressive line on black people's civil and political rights in the later years of the war. This change can be attributed in part to weariness with guerrilla violence and in part to the rise of the radical Republicans in state politics, but it still represented a significant shift in popular opinion, especially considering the polarized population. When the war ended, most Missourians were able to bury old enmities and even some of their prejudices, but they held on to others. The radical Republicans who governed Missouri's state and national politics ensured that at least until the early 1870s, black men had some voting rights. Unfortunately, many of their progressive reforms were rescinded by the early 1870s with the revival of the Democratic Party and the defeat of the radical Republicans. On the issues of social and political equality for black people, real change would take more than a century.