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Review of *The Nebraska-Kansas Act of 1854*. Edited by John R. Wunder and Joann M. Ross

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The Nebraska-Kansas Act of 1854. Edited by John R. Wunder and Joann M. Ross. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008. xi + 220 pp. Maps, notes, appendix, index. \$30.00 paper.

One of the most important actions affecting the settlement of the Plains was the passage of the Nebraska-Kansas Act, which created the territories of Kansas and Nebraska. In examining the passage of the bill and its aftermath, *The Nebraska-Kansas Act of 1854* brings into clear focus many of the events related to this legislation. Although the law was officially called "An Act to Organize the territories of Nebraska and Kansas," it was often referred to as "the Nebraska bill."

Collectively, the eight essays in this slender volume look at the national debate over the passage of the Nebraska-Kansas Act, the

act's relationship to the settlement of Kansas and Nebraska, and the positions taken by certain period leaders on the passage of the bill. Wrapped around the concept of popular sovereignty, the organic act allowed the settlers of the two territories to determine whether they would permit slavery within their borders. Shortly after the bill's passage, however, Kansas took center stage when proslavery and antislavery proponents made that territory a key battleground in their national struggle over the "peculiar institution." As John Wunder and Joann Ross point out in the opening essay, the subsequent political turmoil and brief civil war in Kansas led to that territory's history acquiring the label of "Bleeding Kansas." The "bleeding" of Kansas also heightened the North-South political divide and influenced the coming of the American Civil War. The national fervor over Kansas, however, left Nebraska in the background of the debates over the 1854 legislation's passage. Since there was no "Bleeding Nebraska," historical discussion about the Nebraska part of the act has also been overshadowed by Kansas. In response, *The Nebraska-Kansas Act of 1854* largely focuses on Nebraska, while not forgetting Kansas.

Readers who might choose to bypass this book because of its lackluster title will miss out on a fascinating collection of essays. Some of them take a new look at well-known subjects, such as Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass. Others tackle less familiar topics, such as the territorial statutory context of the Nebraska-Kansas Act and African American reactions to the passage of the bill. One of the most captivating essays is Nicole Etcheson's discussion of why popular sovereignty worked in Nebraska Territory. *The Nebraska-Kansas Act of 1854* offers a unique perspective on both the national impact of the bill and the history of the Great Plains.

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