

INTRODUCTION

JOHN NEWTON SARBER AND SARBER COUNTY ARKANSAS

Carpetbagger. For decades this term needed no explanation in the South. To label someone a carpetbagger meant that they were a northern white male who came south after the Civil War to take advantage of the suffering of the people in the South. Thieving-scoundrel and profiteering- villain became accepted synonyms. Reportedly, these unprincipled men were ne'er-do-wells who could put everything they owned into one piece of hand luggage made from carpet remnants.

This belief was even formalized by historian Alfred Dunning who maintained that the Unionists “unfitness” for the task of writing new constitutions for the Confederate States was “pitiful.” That belief became the accepted understanding among a generation of historians. For decades the Carpetbagger-Dunning school of thought was propagated in Arkansas History textbooks, and other books dealing with Reconstruction. The United Sons of the Confederacy, and the Daughters of the Confederacy, also helped demonize the carpetbaggers.

Nearly one hundred years after the Civil War, Richard N. Current offered a non-evaluation definition of a carpetbagger: “A white northerner who went South after 1870 and became involved in southern politics as a Republican before the end of Reconstruction.” This definition strips the term carpetbagger of its pejorative

meaning, but it also strips away the humanity of such an individual and leaves us with a lifeless definition that obscures the man and his story.

One such example is the story of John Newton Sarber, a native of Pennsylvania, who fought with the 2nd Kansas Cavalry during the Civil War. Following the war Sarber became very active in Radical Republican Reconstruction in Arkansas. There is a cliché among historians that the victors of a war write the history. This was not the case in Arkansas. In Arkansas, as in other parts of the South, the victorious Yankees controlled historical events for nearly ten years, but the defeated Confederates were the primary chroniclers of Reconstruction events. The ex-Confederate portrayal of events had a very definite pro-Southern/anti-Northern bias.

John Sarber was a lawyer; a member of the 1868 Constitution Convention; introduced the bill that created the institution now known as the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, had a new county named for him; served as a U.S. Marshal, but Arkansas History textbooks have ignored him. The level of Sarber's involvement in Arkansas' Reconstruction politics is evidenced in the *Arkansas Gazette's* frequent hostile attacks upon him. A listing of accomplishments does not tell us about Sarber the man, what forces shaped him, and if he fits Alfred Dunning's or Richard Current's definition of a carpetbagger.

John G. Price, editor of the *Daily Republican*, a Little Rock, Arkansas newspaper wrote on January 8, 1869, “We must content ourselves to be the victims of partisan correspondence and sensation reporters and patiently wait and hope until the coming of some better day when the world will be better prepared to judge us and [be] more charitably disposed to think kindly of us.” Perhaps that day has come.

CHAPTER ONE: EARLY INFLUENCES

**“As the twig is bent, the tree is inclined”
Alexander Pope, poet.**

The 1871 Arkansas State Legislature created a new county and named it Sarber County in honor of John Newton Sarber, the State Senator from Johnson County, Arkansas.

Why was a county named for Sarber only four years after he had taken up residency in Arkansas? Most Arkansas counties are named for U.S. Presidents, other men of national accomplishments, or early pioneers in Arkansas. What had Sarber done to warrant such an honor? Why is a man, who was so honored, rarely, if ever, mentioned in Arkansas History textbooks? Not all questions have an answer, but the answers to some of these questions begin in Pennsylvania.

The village of Lawrenceville, Pennsylvania two and a half miles northeast of Pittsburgh, on the southeast bank of the Allegheny River, provided the environment that first shaped the life of John Newton Sarber.

William Barclay Foster, a Virginia native and father of songwriter Stephen Foster founded Lawrenceville in 1814. William Foster bought the 123 acre farm known as “Good Liquor” from Andrew Hill for \$34,000, and then immediately sold thirty acres for \$12,000 to the United States Government for the establishment of the Allegheny Arsenal. Foster laid out the streets for the adjacent village, which he had intended to name Fosterville. Instead he decided to honor Captain James

Lawrence, of recent Revolutionary fame, who had given the fledgling nation the battle cry “Don’t give up the ship.”

The village took shape around the Arsenal, which played a major role in supplying munitions to the U.S. Army until the arsenal was abandoned in 1901. Occupations such as tinner, bricklayer, wheelwright, blacksmith, and scale-maker were common in this predominately working class village.

John and Hannah Havens Sarber, grandparents of John Newton Sarber, moved to Lawrenceville shortly after the older John returned from fighting with McKnight’s company in the War of 1812. Sarber, a native of New Jersey, established the Whitehorse Tavern in Lawrenceville and became an importer of foreign wines. He also served as Grand Master of the local Masonic Lodge and a Burgess of the Borough. On October 28, 1837, John Newton Sarber entered this family as the son of Stephen Henry and Lucy Cable Sarber.

Stephen Sarber, as his father before him, was very involved in the life of the Arsenal and the village. Prior to 1850 Stephen had served as Paymaster of the Arsenal. The 1841 City Directory for Lawrenceville listed Stephen Sarber as a Magistrate in the Council of Borough Officers and a Justice of the Peace and Town Clerk. By 1840 Lawrenceville had become a borough of Pittsburgh. John Newton

Sarber's involvement in politics and public service had its roots in the two generations of men who preceded him in the family.

Lucy Sarber, a native of Virginia, died at age 30 in April 1849 following the birth of a son Stephen Jr. The U. S. Census Mortality Schedule for 1850 lists her death due to "childbed fever." A month earlier, Stephen Sarber had left for the California gold fields. He was Vice-President of the Pittsburgh and California Enterprise Company. This was one of many such joint-venture companies that sprang up across the United States. Each member of the Pittsburgh-California wagon train paid \$260.00 to provide funds for company's wagons, mule teams and other provisions. Colonel Samuel W. Black, age 32 from Pittsburgh, led the wagon train of over one hundred men. The Argonauts were in St. Joseph, Missouri by April 20, 1849 and departed the next week. It was estimated that it would take sixty days, from that point, to reach California. In his book, *The World Rushed In*, J. S. Halliday described the men of the Pittsburgh-California Enterprise Company as being "gold seekers joined together more as ambitious businessmen than as care free adventurers"

The prospect of becoming rich, by finding gold, was probably enticement enough, but a devastating fire on April 10, 1845 provided added incentive. The fire destroyed 10,000 buildings in Pittsburgh, left 12,000 people homeless, and did an estimated nine million dollars in damage. Plus, the Depression of 1848 heavily

impacted the iron industry in Pittsburgh. The road to California was the road to possible financial recovery for many of the men from Pittsburgh. Stephen Foster's *Oh Susanna*, published in 1848 with lyrics: "I'm going to California some gold dust for to see" became the anthem of the California gold rush.

The 1850 U. S. Census shows John Newton Sarber, called "Newt" by his family, as age twelve. Along with three other Sarber children (Richard, 9 yrs; Emily 7 yrs; and Harriet 3 yrs.), John lived in the household of Rebecca Williamson Foster, (widow of James Foster), age 45. There appears to be no kinship connection between the Sarber and Foster families, but they were apparently good friends, and both families had been active in the life of the Lawrenceville Borough.. 1820 the senior John Sarber and William B. Foster were administrators in the Orphans' Court for the children of a Mrs. Wilson Williams. What relationship the senior Sarber, and William Foster, had to Mrs. Williams is unknown.

The 1850 U.S. Census shows Mrs. Foster as a widow and owner of a grocery store, on Butler Street, in Lawrenceville, which by then had a population of 15,000. The Stephen Sarber family had lived on the corner of Market and Butler Streets. The Sarber children did not lack for companionship in the Foster household; however, it must have been a time of anxiety and stress for the children, who at that time must have viewed themselves as orphans. They were grieving for their

mother, plus, they had no assurance that their father would return alive from California.

Also living there was Samuel Foster; age 20 a blacksmith; Louisa Graves age 14; Isaac White age 26, a tinner, his wife Harriet and their daughter Maria. One year old Stephen Sarber lived down the block from his siblings in the home of his Sarber grandparents.

Stephen Sarber's success, of lack or it, in the gold fields is unknown, or if he went strictly as an entrepreneur of the wagon train, but in 1851, he returned to Pittsburgh, and President Franklin Pierce re-appointed Sarber the Postmaster of the Allegheny Arsenal, a position he had held prior to going to California.

The signing of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, May 30, 1854, changed the course of American History and the life of the Sarber family. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 held back the expansion of slavery to other states as it outlawed slavery above latitude 36 degrees, 30 minutes. The Kansas-Nebraska Bill put the decision of whether or not to allow slavery in a new territory in the hands of its settlers. If the majority of the settlers of a territory voted for slavery, then it would become a slave state upon admission to the Union. If the majority of the settlers voted to be a free soil state, then it would be admitted as a non-slave holding state.

The first test of "popular sovereignty" was Kansas Territory. U. S. Senator William H. Seward threw down a challenge on the Senate Floor. "Come on then,

gentlemen of the South. Since there is no escaping your challenge, I accept. We will engage in a competition of the virgin soil of Kansas, and God give the victory to the side that is stronger in number as it is in right”

Stephen Sarber resigned his position as postmaster in 1855 and leaving behind his widowed mother in the care of his sister, Mary Sheridan. (his father having died in 1850), migrated to Kansas Territory (K.T.) with his children and his new wife Agnes Johnston, one of fifteen children of William and Elizabeth Johnston. Multiple reasons may have given the impetus for such a move, but moving from Pittsburgh, 10th largest city in the country with a population 50,519, to the open virtually uninhabited plains of Kansas Territory must have had yet another tremendous impact on Newton and the entire family.

Since the Pittsburgh California Enterprise Company took the northern route to California, Stephen Sarber was one of the estimated 90,000 men who traveled through what was to become Kansas to the gold fields.

Kansas historian Charles R Tuttle attributes that event [the gold rush] to have been one of the major causes for families from the East moving to Kansas Territory in 1850s. The popular term for the region, “The Great American Desert” may have restrained immigration previously, but when gold seekers saw that vast, futile and uncultivated land, it held as much lure for them as had gold. Finding gold was an intangible dream; cheap futile soil was tangible.

The increasingly fervent rhetoric of the abolitionists permeated all the northern states, and those abolitionists who had ventured into Kansas Territory “wrote back as with pens of flame, vivid description of events, which caused the nerves of men to tingle as they read.” The anti-slavery movement was not a new cause in Pittsburgh. As early as 1837, abolitionists in Pittsburgh had organized themselves into groups. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s book *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, was published March 18, 1852, and by May of that year 20,000 copies had been sold in Pittsburgh alone. Andrew Carnegie urged that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, be taught in every schoolroom and Sunday School in Pittsburgh.