

The Missing Story
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I believe the American Civil War really began, not in April of 1861 at Fort Sumter in South Carolina but in 1855 in the Kansas Territory, when “Border Ruffians” from Missouri invaded Kansas during the territory's first legislative election and forced the election of a pro-slavery territorial legislature, marking the beginning of a vicious but undeclared war over whether Kansas would be a free or slave state that lasted for several years.

As a child, I heard stories of our family’s Unitarian and Universalist heritages that go back at least six generations, and the stories about Great-Great-Grandfather Ephraim Nute, a Unitarian missionary who founded a church in Lawrence, Kansas, intrigued me most of all. I wrote my first paper on Nute’s abolitionist work in Kansas when I was in the fifth grade. Nute and many of his parishioners had chosen to settle in Kansas as a way to tip the scales in favor of the Free Staters, in spite of the dangers they knew they would face there. Those Boston Unitarians who received so much attention for their anti-slavery convictions were for the most part quite insulated from the front lines where the violent work of abolition was carried out. Ephraim Nute was their man on the ground, and the letters he and his congregants wrote home were printed in newspapers nationwide. They informed and shaped the abolitionist movement in Boston after 1855. These brave individuals struggled against armed marauders, fought for their lives, refused to enact the Fugitive Slave Law, hid escaping slaves, and suffered starvation and disease.

Once a household name, Ephraim Nute’s renown faded out shortly after his death. Published in newspapers, his writings and contemporary writings about him were as

ephemeral as the politics he was a part of. When the political moment passed, so did his visibility. Until recently, the record of his and his parishioners' sacrifices has been shrouded in obscurity. I want to share our family's experience of trying to keep alive the memory and recover the history of our notable Unitarian ancestor, as well as suggest why I think he was allowed to disappear from our denominational history until Skinner House published my book, *The Incredible Story of Ephraim Nute: Scandal, Bloodshed and Unitarianism on the American Frontier*.

The precarious nature of what we call "history" is often not fully appreciated by popular culture. Unless something is written down, it is not even considered "history," but "myth," "legend," or "oral tradition." *Who* writes it down often determines whether or not it will be preserved. If an author is not rich, famous, connected with power, or highly educated, chances are slim that his or her writings will live on. Unless original documents are preserved by family members—unlikely in poorer families without properties to store them in—they will endure only by accident. Even if they are inadvertently kept and rediscovered later, they only survive if they are found by a party interested enough to preserve them further rather than destroying them.

Many of Grandfather Nute's personal papers covering his years in Bleeding Kansas and as a Unitarian chaplain supervisor of soldier's homes during the Civil War were destroyed as a consequence of poverty, natural elements, and acts of war. What papers remained after his death were soon lost by his very young family, which was reduced to poverty when he died. In our family, Nute's memory was passed down orally by his daughter, my great-grandmother, although she was born nearly twenty years after his

adventures in Kansas. She allegedly carried his memoirs of Bleeding Kansas and the Civil War—at least 600 pages—with her everywhere she went for years after he died. But eventually, she found herself desperately in need of money and sold the manuscripts for a mere \$25 to “the Peabody Library” at Harvard. The Peabody Library is now a natural history library. The memoirs are not in the present-day collection there.

My parents tried to find the memoirs at Harvard in the 1960s. The university suggested the papers might have been shipped out to Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago. At Meadville Lombard in the late 1980s, preparing myself for the Unitarian ministry, I was sure the lost papers would turn up in the floor-to-ceiling, un-catalogued collection of manuscripts stacked in a side room of the library, waiting for the funds and the patience to be processed. Eventually everything in the room was catalogued, but although some early hand-written church records from Grandfather Nute’s mission were found, the manuscripts were not.

In the early 1990s, my brother Bill was transferred to Kansas by his employer. On a trip to see him, my parents found a copy of the history of the Lawrence Unitarian Society put together by Cora Dolbee. Nute’s name appeared over and over again in this chronicle, much to our delight and astonishment. Bill then started to compile information on Nute to see if he could find a factual basis for any of our family stories. Searching the then-embryonic Internet, he began writing to various collections around the country for copies of Nute letters that had surfaced. He began to keep a timeline in which he entered every document he found to create a chronological record. In 2003, Bill turned the active part of the project over to

me. I continued to build the timeline and shifted my focus from searching for the memoirs to trying to reconstruct what they might have contained.

The research has been both exhilarating and frustrating. From having none of our great-great-grandfather's papers, we now have more than 1,200 documents. I found that many of the original letters Nute wrote to the American Unitarian Association had been discarded after edited excerpts from them were published in *The Unitarian Quarterly Journal*, the official mouthpiece and record of the AUA. When comparing the edited text to the letters we do still have, I inferred that a lot of interesting material was probably left out of what was presented to the Unitarian community. The original letters appear to be lost forever.

Many aspects of bringing Ephraim Nute back into the light would not have been possible before the full flowering of the Internet. One major source of his written work—sermons, speeches, and letters—was the body of historical newspapers posted online by libraries across the country. I found a wealth of documents by or about him in the press because he had been a newspaper correspondent during the Kansas years and for most of the rest of his professional life after he left Kansas.

Some clues as to how documents had disappeared surfaced in the library collections where his surviving letters are housed. I found a cover letter in one saying that a Nute letter had been found in a private home when the family was disposing of a historian's personal effects after death. In the old days, it appears, historical researchers often took documents home to copy and study. This letter was returned by the researcher's relatives to a collection it may not have come from in the first place. In another curious instance, I found one half of

a letter in the personal letters part of a manuscripts collection and the other half committed to microfilm as “unknown, undated” in another part of the collection. No-one had yet put the two halves together to make one complete letter.

Rev. Ephraim Nute Jr. and the other ordinary Unitarian citizens of pioneer Lawrence were not the literary giants of the nineteenth century whose every trace—even sales receipts—was preserved in the universities and libraries of New England. Nute and his fellow Unitarian Kansans lacked the wealth and leisure that would have allowed them to focus on writing and publishing as the more prominent Boston “Brahmin” Unitarians could. Their absence from the denominational story we most often tell ourselves reveals that we have too often taken the words of the well-educated, privileged and wealthy into our denominational mythology and canonized them as the only way to tell our story.

As a result, we have been led to believe that the slaves and troops were the only martyrs to the cause of abolition. But until now, we have only celebrated those who stayed in the East reading the Free-State Unitarians’ letters and writing about them in generalities. We can now begin to understand and embrace the vital contributions of the Kansas Free-Staters also.

The fate of Nute’s memoirs is a mystery that has dogged our family for several generations. It has been our fervent wish to find these manuscripts and close the gap between what we can document and the family stories. We all know that life is tenuous and that as it flashes by, memory passes also. This is how the winds of history blow. We strain to understand the currents of a previous time and their impact on real lives. This makes the recovery of lost people and manuscripts that much more exciting. In *The Incredible Story of*

Ephraim Nute I hope to bring a small group of very courageous Unitarians back into our living history and moral consciousness.