

**Mrs. H. C. Root's Paper on the Life of John Ritchie**  
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*A Few Incidents In The Life of General John Ritchie*  
By Mrs. H. C. Root

*John Ritchie was born in Uniontown, Muskingum County Ohio, July 17, 1817. His parents moved to Westchester, Butler County, Ohio and then to Indiana, where most of his boyhood was passed. On January 16, 1838, when but twenty-one years old, he was married to Mary Jane Shelladay. They had fourteen children, only two of whom are living, Hale and John, both prosperous businessmen of this city. His wife Mary Jane died in 1880 and a year afterward he married Mrs. Hannah Beal. She survived him but a few years. He died at his home in this city on the corner of 11<sup>th</sup> and Quincy Streets in 1888.*

*Colonel Ritchie was a man of sterling worth and very positive ideas. His wife was a Kentuckian by birth, and the owner of a slave by inheritance, but on becoming of age and with the approval and consent of her husband she gave him his freedom. Thus freeing themselves of any interest in slave property, and being fully imbued with the "abolition spirit" when the Territory of Kansas became the battle-ground, they emigrated here, arriving in Topeka, April 3, 1855.*

*He pre-empted a quarter section of land and engaged in farming. He was a staunch friend to the negro, and at once became active in aiding and assisting slaves to escape north; and once at a meeting to provide aid for the negro he subscribed the munificent sum of \$1500.00. His home in Topeka at the corner of Monroe and Twelfth streets became one of the depots of the "underground railroad." He was uncompromising in his opinions; he believed that slavery was a great wrong, and, although the law at that time permitted and protected the owner of slave property, he took the position that it was contrary to Divine Law that one man should claim to own another, therefore he would obey the higher, rather than the law of man, by not only refusing to enslave anyone himself but in doing all in his power to aid and assist slaves to escape from their legal owners. He used to say that not less than \$100,000.00 worth of runaway slaves, had passed through his house in safety.*

*He was a "born fighter" for what he considered the rights of his fellowman. He was suspected in 1856 of harboring a runaway slave, and*

one Sunday morning at four o'clock forty United States soldiers came to his house and demanded admittance. He parleyed with them 'til after daybreak, when he permitted them to search his house. The slave they were seeking had been at his house the day before and at nightfall had been sent with a party to guide him on his way towards Holton, Kansas. John Ritchie took this method of detaining the soldiers to give the slave time to get as far away as possible. This is only one of the many instances in which he and his wife aided Negroes to escape.

At this time there was a spring under the hill east of Monroe Street, where they obtained their water supply, which was surrounded by a brush thicket. During the day slaves were secreted in this brush and Mrs. Ritchie would carry them food in her water bucket, and return with it filled with water to conceal the fact that she had taken food to them.

Colonel Ritchie was an active participant in the troubles of 1856 and was for a time a free-state prisoner in Lecompton prison, having been arrested with thirteen others on the absurd charge of mail-robbery; Four escaped, four were discharged and four including John Ritchie were committed. He shortly afterwards escaped. This accusation was simply a trumped up charge for political reasons, the pressing of which finally resulted in the killing of U.S. Deputy Marshal Arms. There were at the time Colonel Ritchie was arrested some ninety-nine free-state men confined at Lecompton and Tecumseh. Some eight-eight men were arrested in the charge of murder and manslaughter said to have been committed at Hicory [Hickory] Point. In 1857 there was a general amnesty understanding between the pro-slavery forces on the one side and the free state men on the other, whereby it was mutually agreed that bygones should be bygones, and the charges against these free-state men should be dismissed. But in direct violation of the "amnesty act," on the 20<sup>th</sup> of April, 1860, United States Deputy Leonard Arms, came from Lawrence to Topeka to arrest John Ritchie on that old warrant.

Giles in his "Thirty years in Topeka," says; "Leonard Arms arrived at Colonel Ritchie's home about sundown. He had a friend with him but it did not appear that he had arms from his home in Lawrence, for he borrowed a revolver in Topeka. Upon reaching the place of Colonel Ritchie he met him in company with Mr. Harvey D. Rice in the yard. Leaving his horse and carriage in care of his friend, Arms called Ritchie aside and made known to him the purpose of his visit. Ritchie told him that he should not be arrested, and walked to his house, followed by Arms. Upon entering his house, Ritchie got his pistol and awaited Arm's coming. The marshal entered the house, pistol in hand, and the two men

stood confronting each other, each ready to fire at a moment's notice—the marshal insisting upon Ritchie's surrender, and Ritchie with vehemence replying that he should not be arrested alive. At length conversation ceased, and the deadly arms were lowered. The marshal turned to the door and called his friend to come to him, and apparently was disposed to make no further attempt at arrest. In a minute after, however, he turned again upon Ritchie and uttered the sentence, 'By God! You have to go!'—advancing towards Ritchie who stepped backwards to an adjoining room, both with revolvers pointed at each other. Ritchie then said 'Stand back or I will shoot you!' Arms advanced a pace and Ritchie fired. The ball took effect in Arm's neck, and he fell and expired without uttering a word."

Colonel Ritchie surrendered himself on the same evening, and the following day the trial before Justice Joseph Miller. He was defended by James H. Lane, Lorenzo Dow, and A. Winants. The citizens here were greatly excited, but sympathized and upheld Ritchie in his defense of his life and liberty. The utter disregard of the "amnesty act" of 1857 made between the contending forces if persisted in, would have caused the renewal of the civil strife. Most of the citizens attended Ritchie's trial and at midnight, Justice Miller rendered the following decision:--

"I have had the matter under consideration since the commencement of the trial, and believe that I realize the importance of the position that I occupy, and that I have endeavored carefully to scrutinize the evidence with that candor and impartiality which the subject under consideration so justly demands, and after fully weighing the evidence with all the ability which my poor, feeble nature possesses, have come to the honest conclusion, in view of my responsibility to my God, my country, and myself, that John Ritchie has committed homicide, but one justifiable in the sight of God and man. This being my honest conviction, the court deems it to be its duty to acquit the prisoner at the bar, charged with the murder of Leonard Arms, and discharge him from the custody of the law."

A few days afterward, the citizens of Topeka held a mass meeting and passed certain resolutions, among which were:--"Whereas; An attempt has been made by a man claiming to be a deputy United States marshal to arrest one of our fellow citizens upon accusations preferred during the contentions in the early settlement of this Territory, which attempt has resulted in the death of the person so claiming to be such deputy: therefore be it resolved, by this mass meeting of the people of Shawnee County, in solemn convention assembled, that while we sincerely deprecate the lamentable homicide which has resulted from this

*ill-advised action of the person so claiming to be a deputy United States marshal, we yet stand unequivocally upon the rule of action enunciated by the people of Kansas in 1856;*

*That the aforesaid accusation and prosecutions are wholly fictitious, unjust and tyrannical;*

*That all attempts to serve process upon them, and all parties making such attempts, are deserving only of the utter reprobation and scorn of every law-abiding citizen;*

*And that in the future, as in the past, we will resist with every legitimate and proper means within our power, every effort to compass the arrest and prosecution of our citizens upon the said accusations, in whatever shape the attempt may be made."*

*These resolutions were unanimously adopted and no further attempt to arrest Mr. Ritchie was ever made.*

*At the breaking out of the civil war, he enlisted as a private in Company A. Fifth Kansas Cavalry, known as "Lanes Guards," and was made Captain. The Colonel of this regiment was killed in battle and Captain Ritchie was in direct line of promotion. At this time Charles Robinson was Governor, but as he and Mr. Ritchie had had some differences, he refused to advance him to the Colonelcy, which act was so resented by Mr. Ritchie, that he resigned his position as Captain. Soon afterward in 1861, he was commissioned by the Government to raise an Indian Regiment, and was made Colonel of it.*

*While this Regiment was on duty in Missouri, Colonel Ritchie received certain orders from General Blount, which did not meet with his approval, as he positively refused to obey, saying to the officer who brought the command that "he received his order from above." For this act of disobedience he was court-martialed and confined in prison for some time. He was afterwards paroled and came home. Through the influence of Senator James Lane, he was never tried for this offence, and a short time before the war ended these charges were dismissed and two weeks before the close of the war he was brevetted Brigadier General.*

*Colonel Ritchie was a member of the Leavenworth Constitutional Convention and of the Wyandotte Constitutional Convention, in which he took an active part, and made one of the strong speeches against the proposed provision to exclude free Negroes from the state. It is said he is the person to whom the credit should be given for making Topeka the Capital City. His fine work consisted in the wording of the "Bill" by which the capital cannot be moved except by a majority of all the votes cast. In 1855 on what is now the corner of Sixth and Kansas Avenue, Colonel Ritchie built the "Ritchie Block," a three story brick structure,*

*and the first building of any pretentious erected here. In it the first Legislature met; here also the first dramatic entertainment was given.*

*Colonel Ritchie was both public-spirited and generous and it is said he has given away more land than any other man in Kansas. He was an active and earnest member of the First Congregational Church of this city, and gave most of the stone used in building the first church on the north-west corner of Seventh and Harrison Streets. The Rev. Lewis Bodwell, its first pastor, said of him, "his promise stood, All the stone needed to complete the building, quarried and delivered free at the spot;" a promise which he faithfully kept, often hauling the stone himself. "In building and twice rebuilding the church his teams, and helpers and hands were never once needed—and lacking. It was in his mind 'the Kings business' and it seemed to me always had the precedence."*

*An incident in the church illustrates his positive character. A misunderstanding arose between him and Dr. Erastus Tefft, then a Deacon of the Church, about some contributions, and the Colonel asserted that Deacon Tefft had lied. A church trial resulted, and it was the decision that Colonel Ritchie had spoken hastily, and should apologize; and at the earnest solicitation of his friends, he finally agreed to apologize, he caught the eye of Deacon Tefft and saw triumph therein. This was too much for the Colonel, and he shouted; "I will apologize for I have promised to, but Dr. Tefft did tell what was not true. You can turn me out of your church, but you can't turn me out of the Church of Christ."*

*Washburn College is also a monument to his generosity, and of his earnest desire for a Christian church and a Christian education for all races. It had its origin in the General Association of the Congregational Church composed of ten members, seven ministers and three laymen, ... He gave the three lots on the corner of Tenth and Jackson Streets, and \$1,000.00 in cash toward the erection of the building therein. He also gave the 160 acres on which the College now stands. It has always seemed to me, that Washburn College little appreciated his gift, which was in reality the founding of the school, or they would do something in recognition of his valuable efforts and the enthusiasm with which he helped to found it. It was a great sacrifice to him financially, as he mortgaged his home claim to be able to purchase the land. Some of the buildings might at least be named in commemoration of his generosity. It will be remembered that this college was first called "Lincoln College" after President Lincoln, the name being changed in consideration of the \$2,500.00 donation by Mr. Washburn, who made the gift on condition that it bear his name. To this change Colonel Ritchie was much opposed,*

*it being one of the pioneer institutions to admit the colored man to all its educational advantages, and the name of "Lincoln" seemed more appropriate for such a college. Colonel Ritchie was always violently opposed to the sale of liquor and was in favor of extending the right of suffrage to women. In the early days he induced his wife to go with him to the polls and cast her vote; when she offered her ballot to the Judge of Election, he calmly looked at her and said, "Madam, you can't vote, not in that garb."*

*Colonel Ritchie was an ardent admirer of John Brown, assisting him to escape from an attacking party, when he was leaving Kansas for the last time and sharing his bed with the old hero the last night he ever spent in the state.*

*His connection with early Kansas history has not always been appreciated. He was often called a "crank" for he was a man whose opinions were in advance of his day. In character, honest, benevolent, generous, fearless in his expression of disapproval; a friend and champion of the poor and needy. Loyal to his country and with an abiding belief in the prosperity and greatness of Kansas and Topeka.*

*The press has truly said of him: "Take John Ritchie our from the history of Kansas and a golden link is forever lost from the chain of events from early territorial times until the present."*

(Read before the Native Sons and Daughters of Kansas, April 27, 1903.)