

0. A SON of the SOUTH - Story Preface

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Jesse James as he appeared circa May 22, 1882. Image online via the Library of Congress.

Jesse Woodson James was the son of a preacher (Robert Sallee James) and a tall, strong-willed woman (Zerelda Elizabeth Cole). The couple met at a revival meeting in Stamping Ground, Kentucky (named for herds of bison which once grazed there) and married three days after Christmas, 1841.

After Robert graduated from Georgetown College, the young couple decided to move from Kentucky to northwestern Missouri. Robert and Zee (as his wife was known) settled in Centerville (later known as Kearney). Their Clay-County neighbors helped them build a log-cabin home and the couple became farmers. Robert also pastored a small church - New Hope Baptist - outside town.

Their first child was a boy - Alexander Franklin James. Frank, as he was known, was born at the family farm on January 10, 1843. Eighteen months later, a second son - named after Reverend James - was born, then died thirty-three days later.

Jesse entered the world on the 5th of September, 1847. He was two years old when his sister, Susan Lavenia James, was born on November 25, 1849.

History records that Rev. James (who had a Master's Degree) was a better preacher than a farmer. His efforts helped the congregation to expand while slaves helped the family's hemp crops to grow. Part of the Southern economy, plant fibers from the James farm ultimately became twine and hemp bags used in the slave-intensive cotton industry.



In early 1850, when Jesse was still a toddler, the lure of gold in California profoundly impacted the young boy's family. Rev. James agreed to serve as a wagon-train chaplain for local men seeking to find gold in California.

Although he planned to return home before long, the young father found it hard to say good-bye:

It was said that young Jesse, crying and clinging to his father's leg, begged him not to leave, but Robert had made a promise, and with much regret, he departed. (Ted P. Yeatman, *Frank and Jesse James: The Story Behind the Legend*, page 26.)

Before the end of his first summer away, thirty-two-year-old Rev. James was dead of a fever. Some accounts say he contracted cholera from contaminated water at the Hangtown (now Placerville, California) gold and mining camp in the Sierra Nevadas. A local newspaper, the *Liberty Tribune*, published a glowing obituary:

He was a man much liked by all who enjoyed his acquaintance; and as a revivalist he had but few equals in this country. We think within the bounds of reason when we affirm that more additions have been made to the Baptist Church, in Clay County, under his preaching (length of time considered) than under that of any other person. . . Peace to his ashes. (Quoted by Yeatman in *Frank and Jesse James: The Story Behind the Legend*, page 26.)

It is said that later, when the toddler was a grown man, he tried to find his father's unmarked grave. He could not.

We are left to ponder unanswerable questions:

- Would Jesse have turned out differently had his father lived?
- Would Rev. James, a Southerner, have supported the South when war came to Missouri?
- Could he have envisioned that his adopted state would eventually see more Civil War fighting than any other, save Virginia and Tennessee?

Why did so much bloodshed occur in Missouri?

See [Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](#)

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/A-SON-of-the-SOUTH-Jesse-James>

See [Learning Tasks for this story online at:](#)

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/A-SON-of-the-SOUTH-Jesse-James>

Media Stream



Jesse James in 1882

This portrait image of Jesse James depicts him as he appeared circa May 22, 1882.

Click on the image for a better view.

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Robert S. James, Father of Jesse James

Photo and information, courtesy Clay Platte Historical Society.

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<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Robert-S.-James-Father-of-Jesse-James>



Stamping Ground, Kentucky

Image online, courtesy the epodunk.com website.

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Centerville, Missouri - Map Locator

Image online, courtesy the epodunk.com website.

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<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Centerville-Missouri-Map-Locator>



Clay County, Missouri

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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Boyhood Home of Jesse James

The James-Samuel farm, as it appeared in 1877, was the boyhood home of Jesse James. It was at this modest-appearing farm that Jesse's father, Robert, ran a commercial hemp business in the 1840s.

Random House tells us more about some of the activities which went on [at this farmstead](#): *Jesse's father, Robert James, ran a commercial hemp operation on this farm in the 1840s, using a team of child slaves in the labor-intensive task of harvesting the crop and preparing its fibers for sale to rope makers, who manufactured baling twine and bagging for the cotton plantations of the Deep South.*

Here in Clay County, Missouri, slaveowners were integrated into national markets, particularly Southern markets, reinforcing their cultural identification with Dixie and belying the frontier image that clings to Jesse James.

Click on the image for a better view.

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Wagon Train, 1864

Image, Library of Congress.

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Hangtown Gold Camp

Photo, courtesy Eldorado Historical Society.

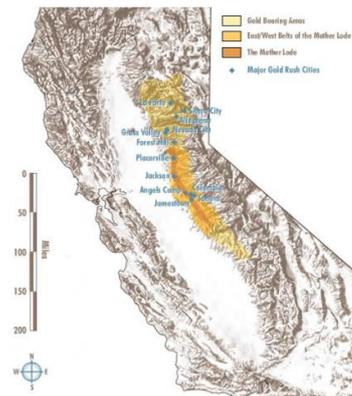
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Hangtown Historical Landmark

Image online, courtesy noehill.com website.

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Location of Major Gold-Rush Cities

Map, USGS (United States Geological Survey).

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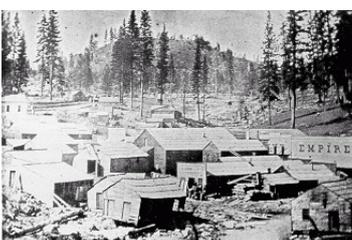


The Miner's Ten Commandments

Library of Congress, digital image (rbpe.00200300).

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Placerville Gold Camp, c. 1850

Image, Wells Fargo Bank History Room.

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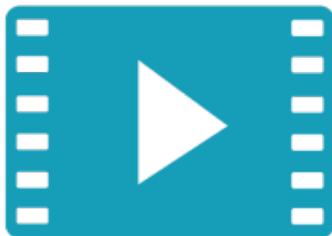


Map of America at the Start of the Civil War

Harper's Weekly, 23 February 1861. Image, Library of Congress.

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Bad Blood: Border War that Triggered the Civil War

Trailer from *Bad Blood: The Border War that Triggered the Civil War*, a co-production of KCPT Kansas City Public Television and Wide Awake Films.

Online, courtesy Wide Awake Films Channel on YouTube.

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California Gold Rush

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