Samuel J. Reader's autobiography, volume 2

Section 2, Pages 31 - 60

This autobiography consists of two sections titled "Border War, Kansas Territory, 1856" and "Hickory Point." Sketches and watercolors by Reader accompany portions of the text. The Border War section describes events in which Reader participated as part of a free state militia. This section provides detail about Reader's militia activities, as well as his contact with John Brown and Aaron Stevens (Captain Whipple). The second section describes the Battle of Hickory Point, which occurred on September 13, 1856. The accounts in the autobiography are based on Reader's diaries.

Creator: Reader, Samuel James, 1836-1914

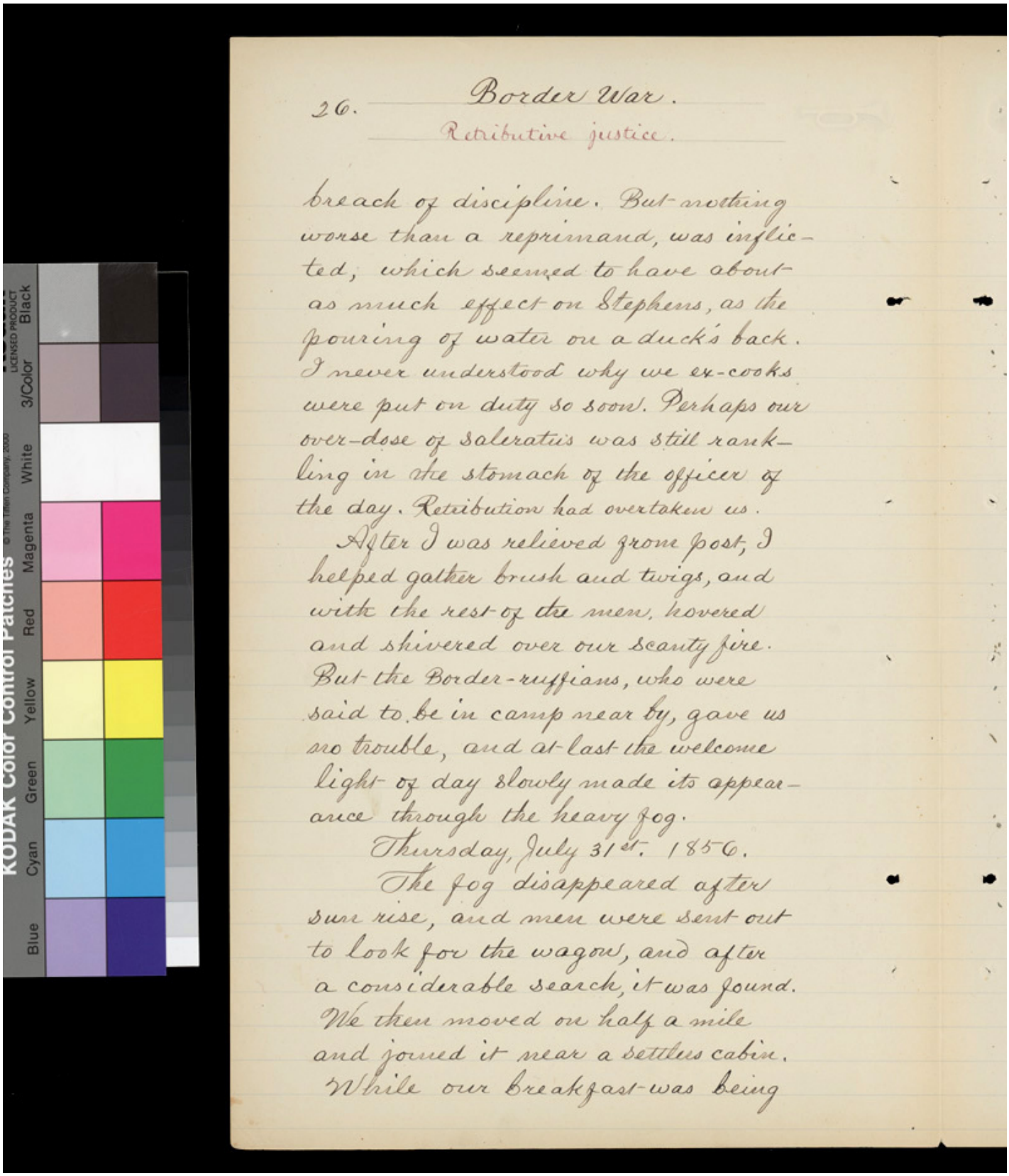
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26. Border War.

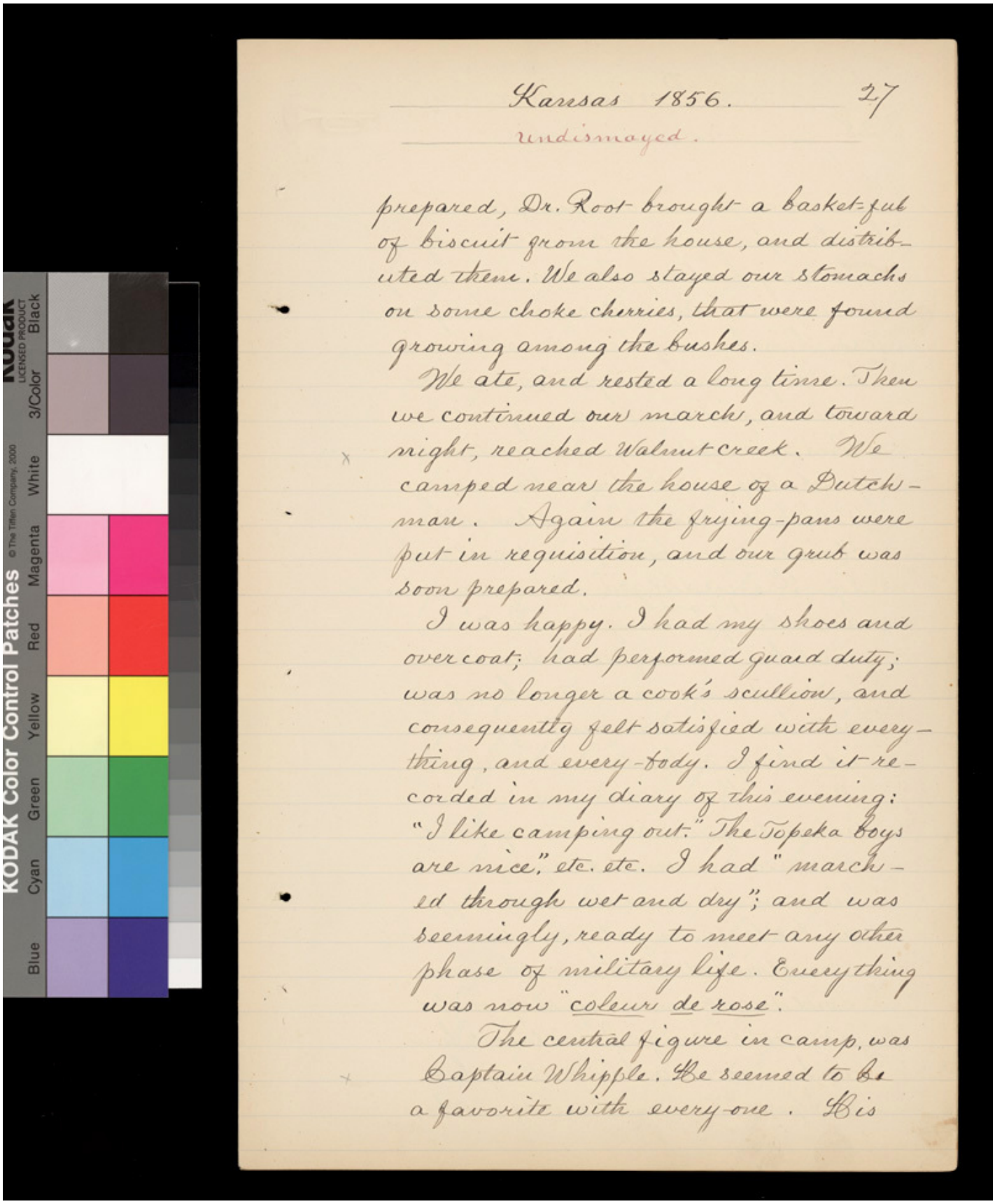
Retributive justice.

breach of discipline. But nothing worse than a reprimand, was inflicted, which seemed to have about as much effect on Stephens, as the pouring of water on a duck's back. I never understood why we ex-cooks were put on duty so soon. Perhaps our over-dose of saleratus was still rankling in the stomach of the officer of the day. Retribution had overtaken us.

After I was relieved from post, I helped gather brush and twigs, and with the rest of the men, hovered and shivered over our scanty fire. But the Border-ruffians, who were said to be in camp near by, gave us no trouble, and at last the welcome light of day slowly made its appearance through the heavy fog.

Thursday, July 31st. 1856.

The fog disappeared after sun rise, and men were sent out to look for the wagons, and after a considerable search, it was found. We then moved on half a mile and joined it near a settlers cabin. While our breakfast was being

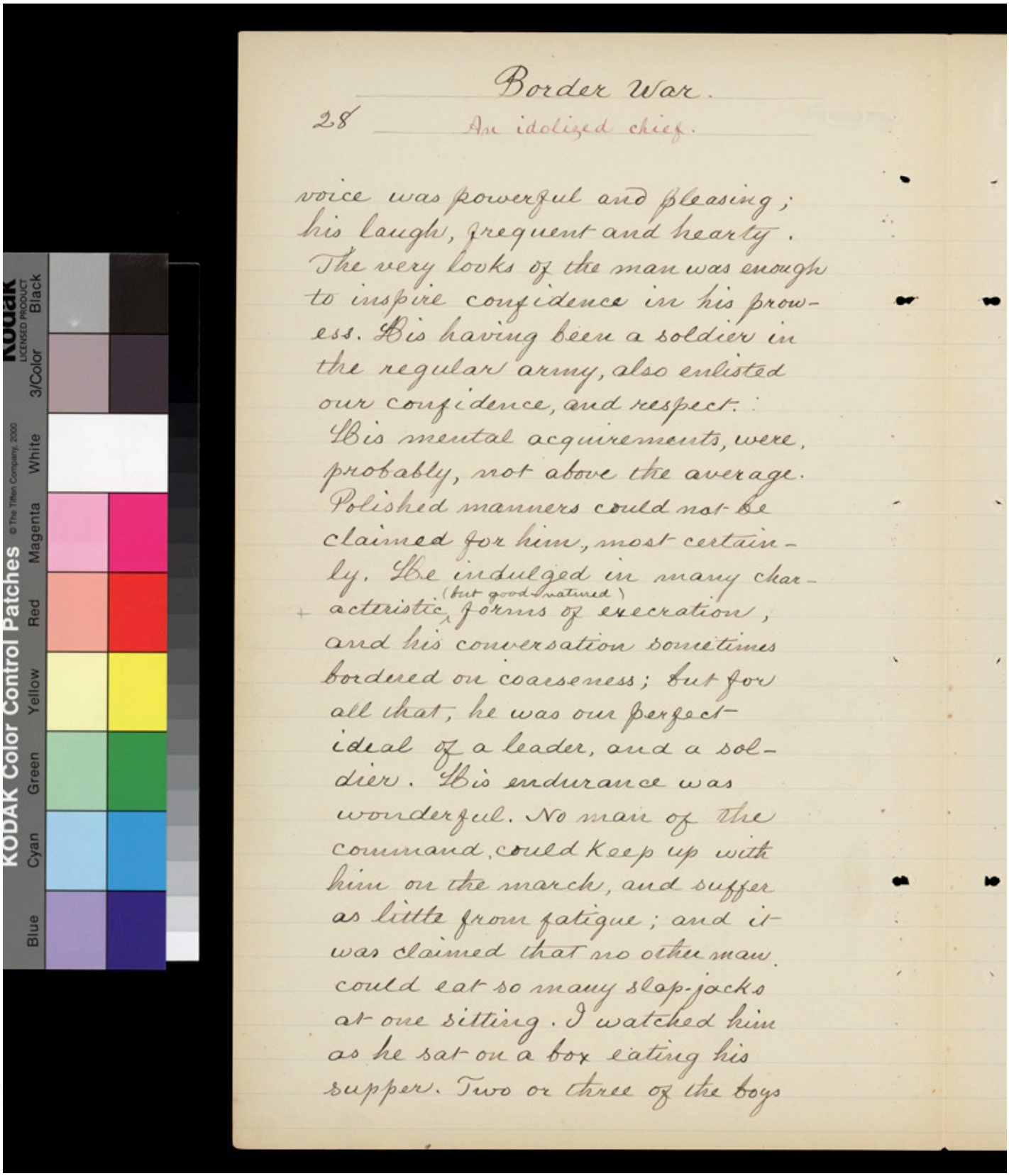


prepared, Dr. Root brought a basket-full of biscuit grom the house, and distributed them. We also stayed our stomachs on some choke cherries, that were found growing among the bushes.

We ate, and rested a long time. Then we continued our march, and toward night, reached Walnut creek. We camped near the house of a Dutchman. Again the frying-pans were put in requisition, and our grub was soon prepared.

I was happy. I had my shoes and overcoat; had performed guard duty; was no longer a cook's scullion, and consequently felt satisfied with everything, and everybody. I find it recorded in my diary of this evening: "I like camping out." The Topeka boys are nice", etc. etc. I had "marched through wet and dry"; and was seemingly, ready to meet any other phase of military life. Everything was now "coleur de rose".

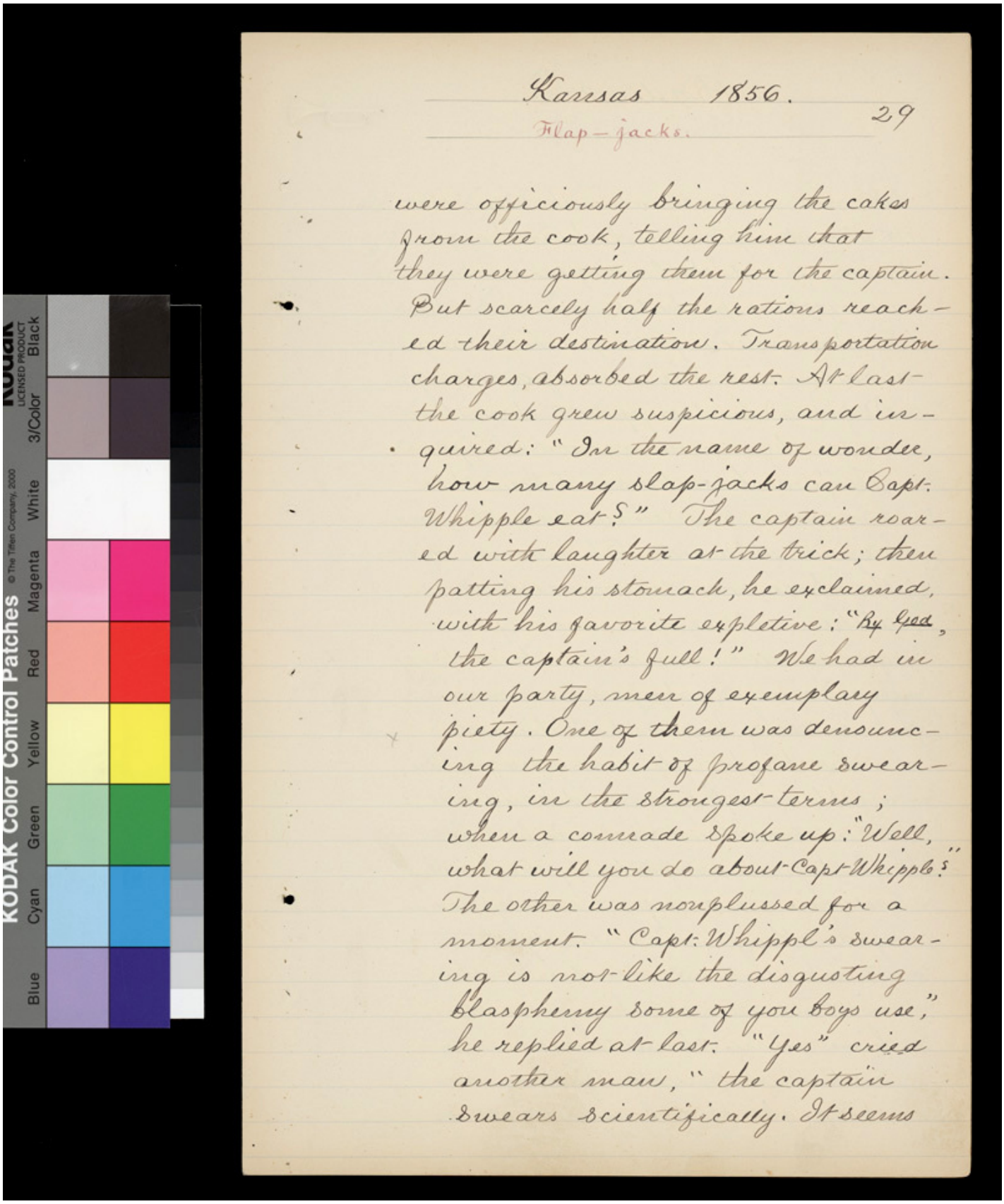
The central figure in camp, was Captain Whipple. He seemed to be a favorite with every-one. His



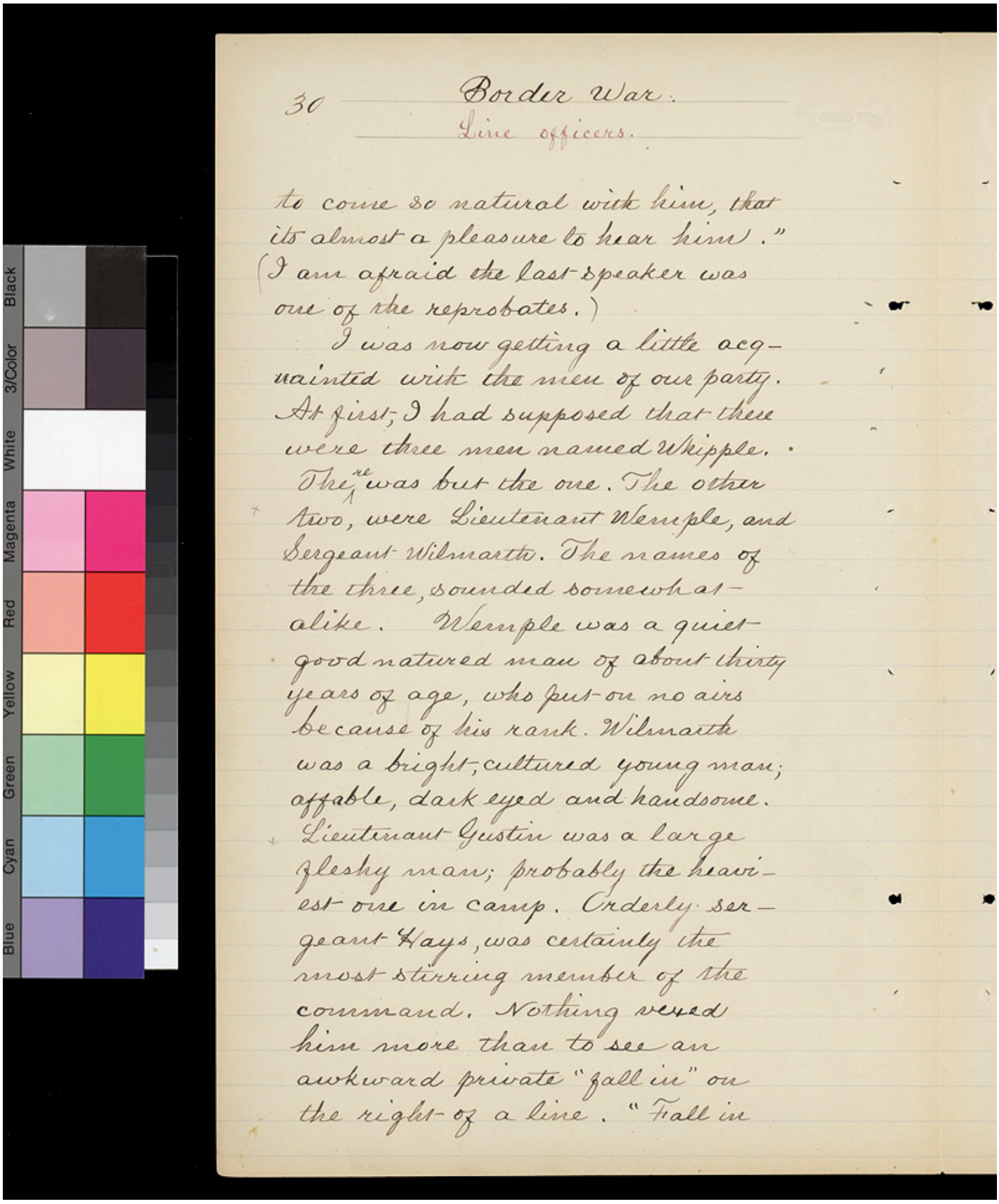
Border War.

28 An idolized chief.

voice was powerful and pleasing; his laugh, frequent and hearty. The very looks of the man was enough to inspire confidence in his prowess. His having been a soldier in the regular army, also enlisted our confidence, and respect. His mental acquirements, were, probably, not above the average. Polished manners could not be claimed for him, most certainly. He indulged in many characteristic (but good natured) forms of execration, and his conversation sometimes bordered on coaseness; but for all that, he was our perfect ideal of a leader, and a soldier. His endurance was wonderful. No man of the command could keep up with him on the march, and suffer as little from fatigue; and it was claimed that no other man could eat so many slap-jacks at one sitting. I watched him as he sat on a box eating his supper. Two or three of the boys

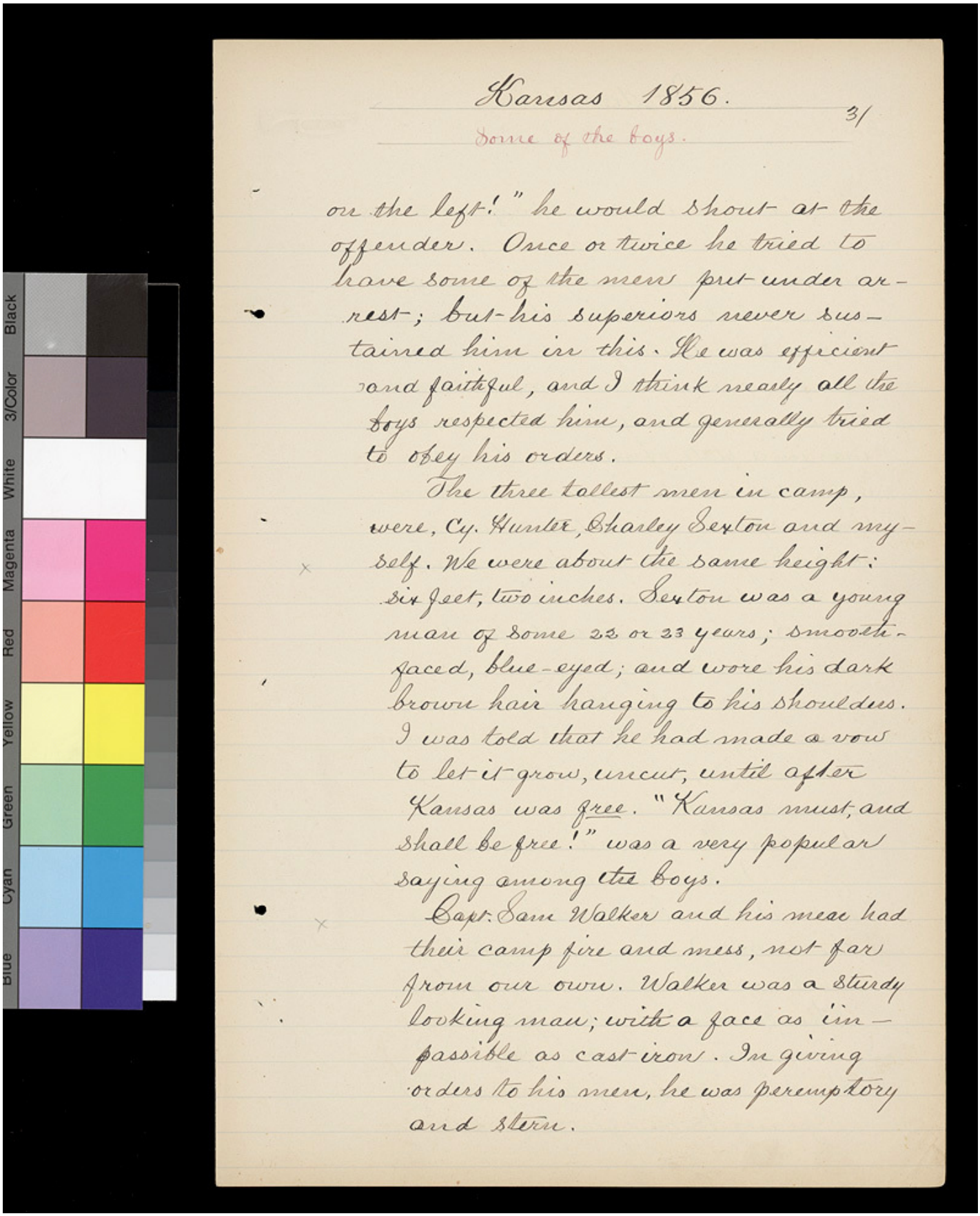


were officiously bringing the cakes from the cook, telling him that they were getting them for the captain. But scarcely half the rations reached their destination. Transportation charges, absorbed the rest. At last the cook grew suspicious, and inquired: "In the name of wonder, how many slap-jacks can Capt. Whipple eat?" The captain roared with laughter at the trick; then patting his stomach, he exclaimed, with his favorite expletive: "By God, the captain's full!" We had in our party, men of exemplary piety. One of them was denouncing the habit of profane swearing, in the strongest terms; when a comrade spoke up: "Well, what will you do about Capt Whipple?" The other was nonplussed for a moment. "Capt: Whippl's swearing is not like the disgusting blasphemy some of you boys use," he replied at last. "Yes" cried another man, "the captain swears scientifically. It seems



to come so natural with him, that its almost a pleasure to hear him." (I am afraid the last speaker was one of the reprobates.)

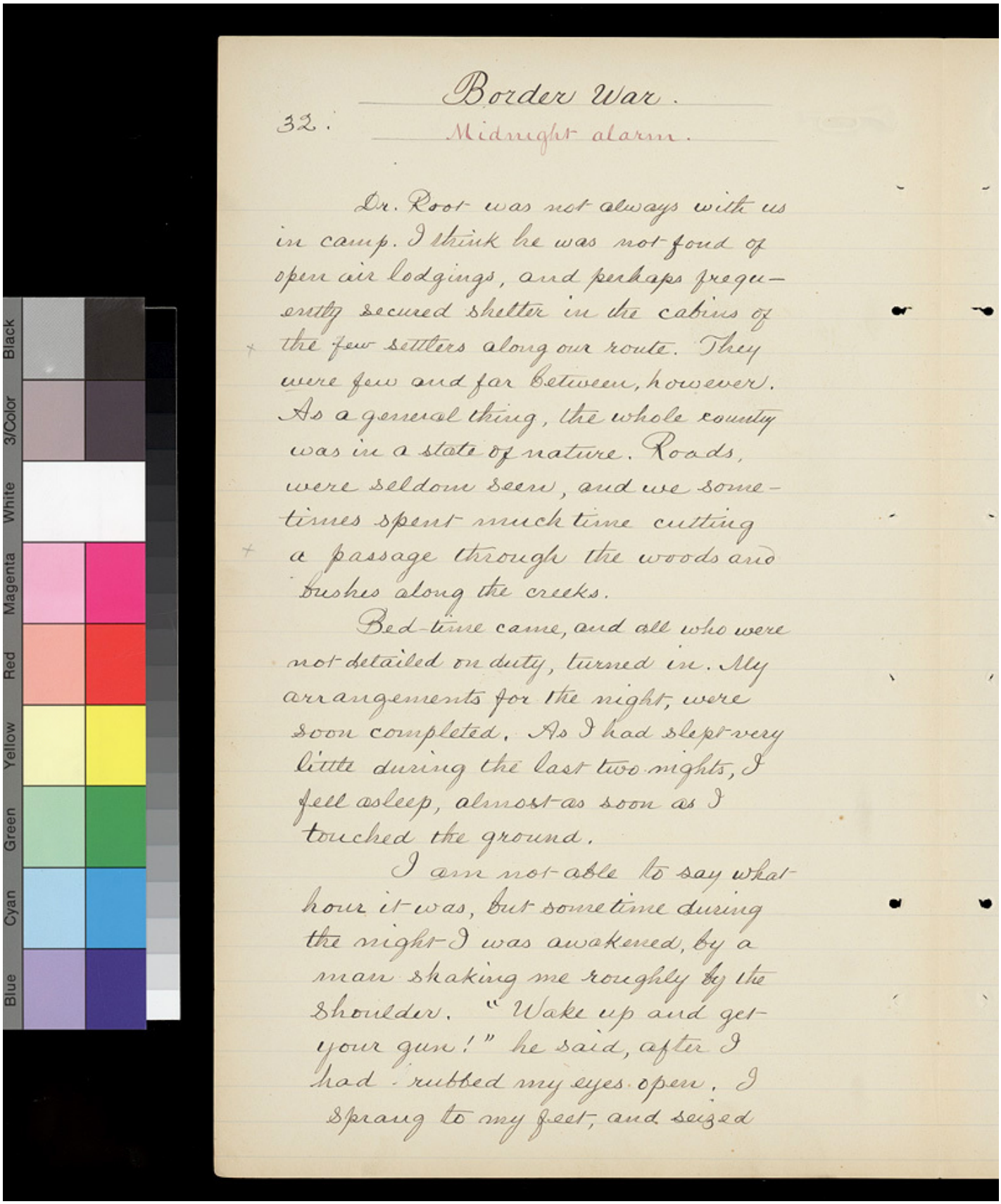
I was now getting a little acquainted with the men of our party. At first; I had supposed that there were three men named Wipple. There was but the one. The other two, were Lieutenant Wemple, and Sergeant Wilmarth. The names of the three, sounded somewhat alike. Wemple was a quiet good natured man of about thirty years of age, who put on no airs because of his rank. Wilmarth was a bright, cultured young man; affable, dark eyed and handsome. Lieutenant Gustin was a large fleshy man; probably the heaviest one in camp. Orderly sergeant Hays, was certainly the most stirring member of the command. Nothing vexed him more than to see an awkward private "fall in" on the right of a line. "Fall in



on the left!" he would shout at the offender. Once or twice he tried to have some of the men put under arrest; but his superiors never sustained him in this. He was efficient and faithful, and I think nearly all the boys respected him, and generally tried to obey his orders.

The three tallest men in camp, were, Cy. Hunter, Charley Sexton and myself. We were about the same height: six feet, two inches. Sexton was a young man of some 22 or 23 years; smooth-faced, blue-eyed; and wore his dark brown hair hanging to his shoulders. I was told that he had made a vow to let it grow, uncut, until after Kansas was free. "Kansas must, and shall be free!" was a very popular saying among the boys.

Capt. Sam Walker and his men had their camp fire and mess, not far from our own. Walker was a sturdy looking man; with a face as impassible as cast-iron. In giving orders to his men, he was peremptory and stern.



Border War.

32. Midnight alarm.

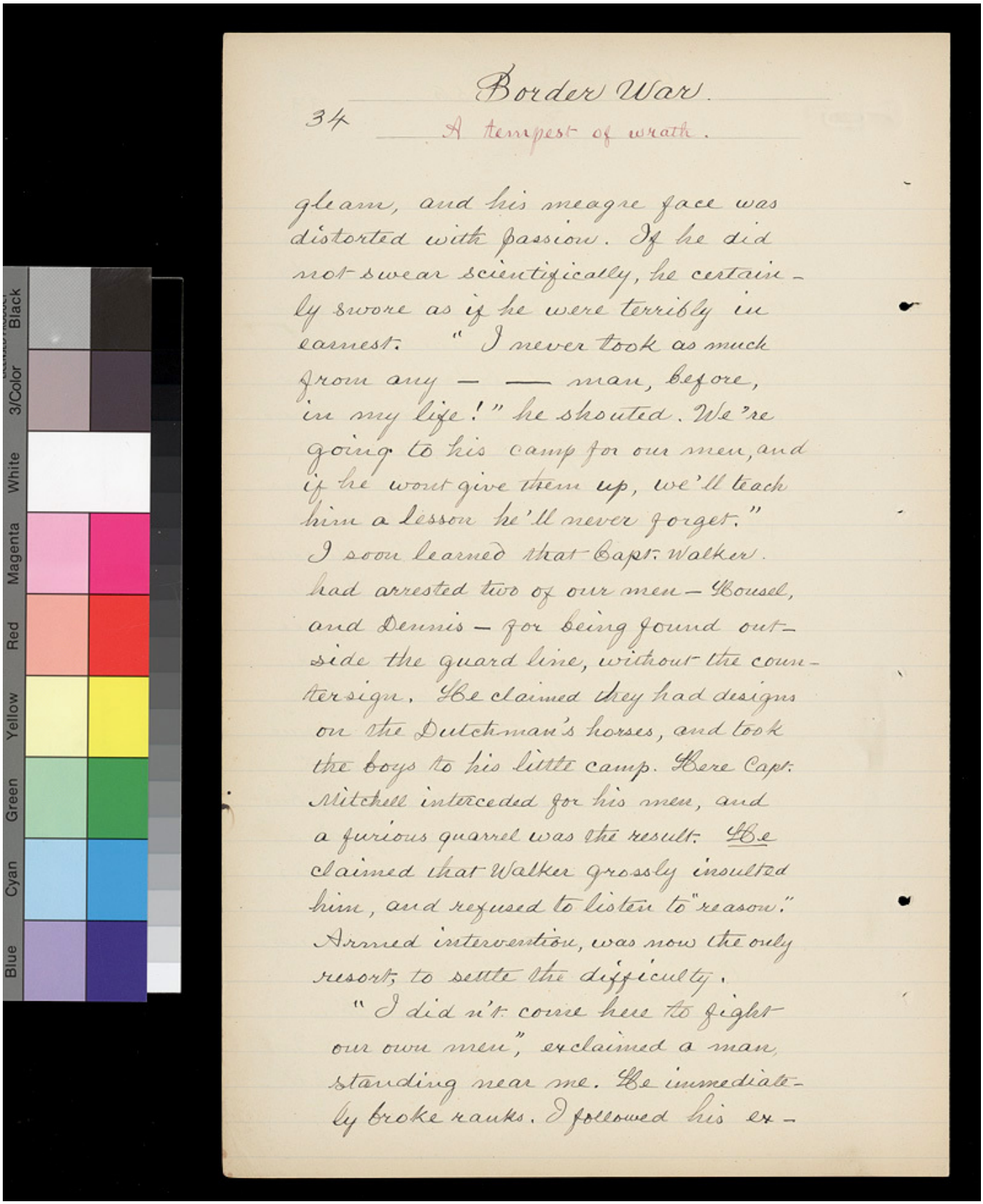
Dr. Root was not always with us in camp. I think he was not fond of open air lodgings, and perhaps frequently secured shelter in the cabins of the few settlers along our route. They were few and far between, however. As a general thing, the whole county was in a state of nature. Roads, were seldom seen, and we sometimes spent much time cutting a passage through the woods and bushes along the creeks.

Bed-time came, and all who were not detailed on duty, turned in. My arrangements for the night, were soon completed. As I had slept very little during the last two nights, I fell asleep, almost as soon as I touched the ground.

I am not able to say what hour it was, but sometime during the night I was awakened, by a man shaking me roughly by the shoulder. "Wake up and get your gun!" he said, after I had rubbed my eyes open. I sprang to my feet, and seized

my rifle, feeling sure the enemy was about to make a night-attack on our camp. There was no moon, but the camp fire was burning, so as to give considerable light. I saw Captain Mitchell apparently laboring under great excitement, and our men were rapidly falling into line, near the wagon. In another moment I was in the ranks, feeling bewildered, and uncertain from what direction the danger was to come. I was a little surprised, however, to see Capt: Whipple standing cool and quiet, near the fire. One of his men stepped up to him and enquired: "Captain, are we to fall in?" "Certainly," replied Whipple; but he made no move himself, and remained where he was, looking down into the fire.

All this time Capt: Mitchell was talking, and gesticulating in a most furious manner. His imprecations were fearful. In the uncertain fire-light his pale-grey eyes had a dangerous



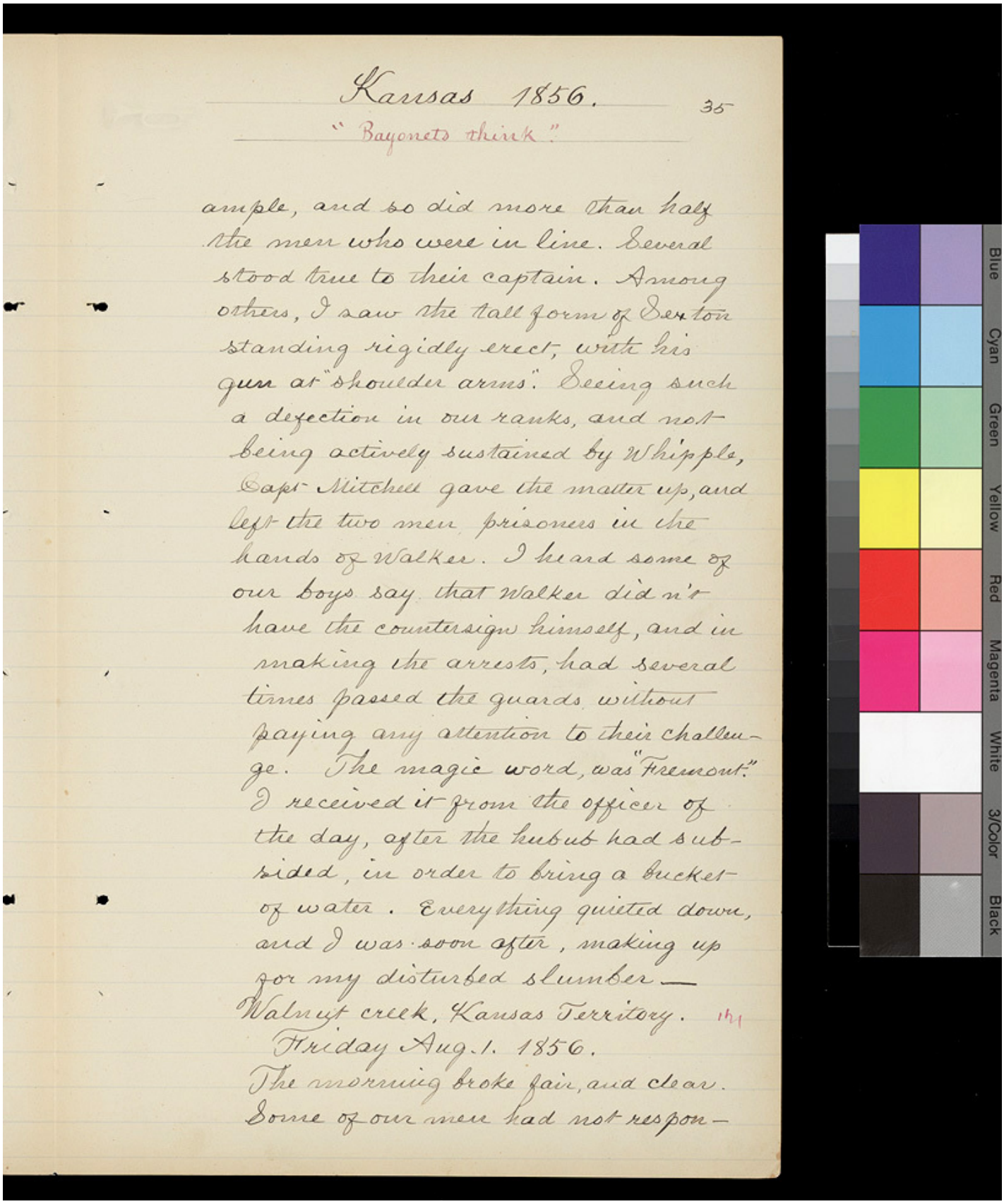
Border War.

34 A tempest of wrath.

gleam, and his meagre face was distorted with passion. If he did not swear scientifically, he certainly swore as if he were terribly in earnest. "I never took as much from any — —— man, before, in my life!" he shouted. We're going to his camp for our men, and if he wont give them up, we'll teach him a lesson he'll never forget."

I soon learned that Capt. Walker had arrested two of our men — Housel, and Dennis — for being found outside the guard line, without the countersign. He claimed they had designs on the Dutchman's horses, and took the boys to his little camp. Here Capt. Mitchell interceded for his men, and a furious quarrel was the result. He claimed that Walker grossly insulted him, and refused to listen to "reason." Armed intervention, was now the only resort, to settle the difficulty.

"I did n't come here to fight our own men", exclaimed a man standing near me. He immediately broke ranks. I followed his ex-



Kansas 1856. 35

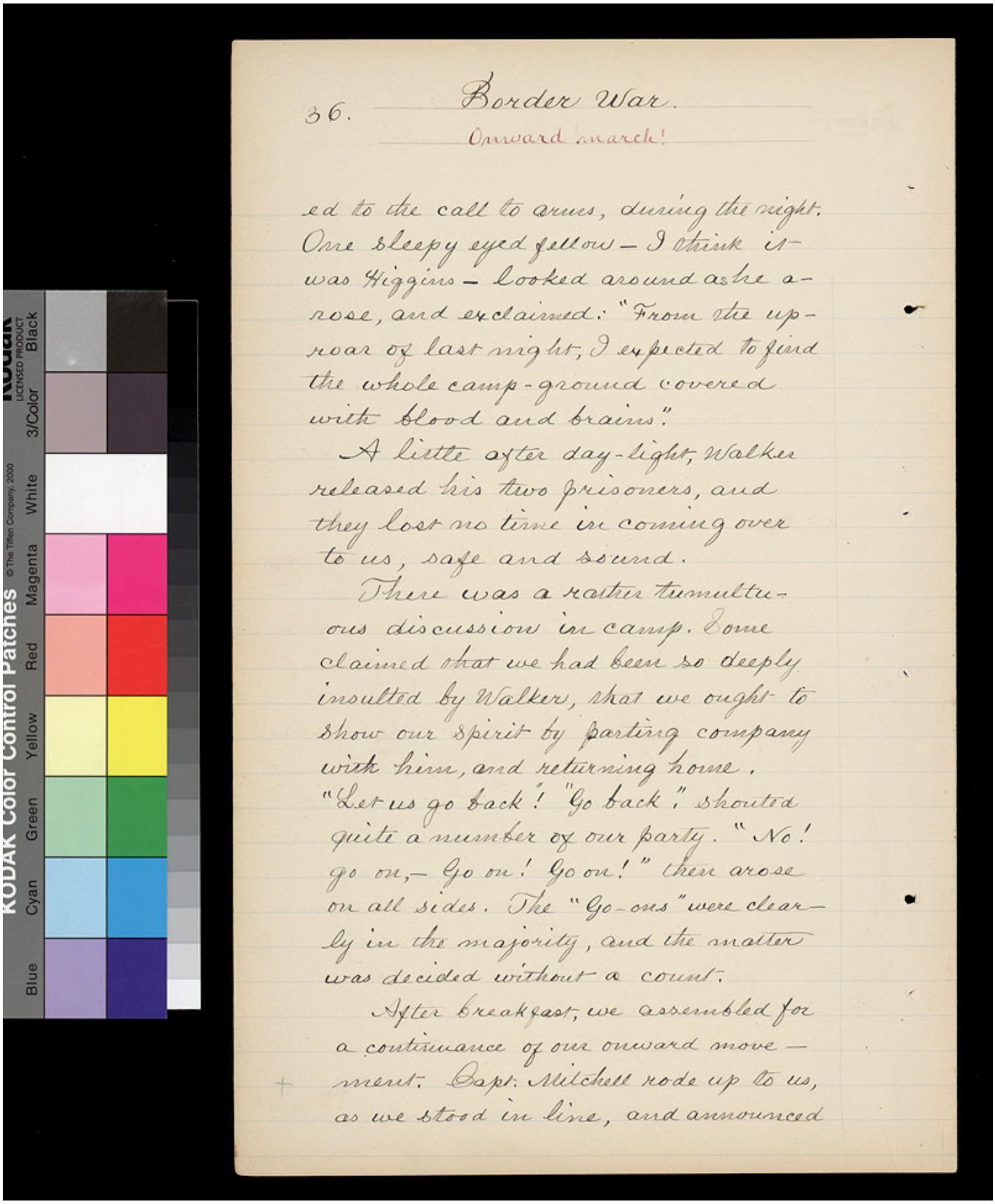
"Bayonets think."

ample, and so did more than half the men who were in line. Several stood true to their captain. Among others, I saw the tall form of Sexton standing rigidly erect, with his gun at "shoulder arms". Seeing such a defection in our ranks, and not being actively sustained by Whipple, Capt. Mitchell gave the matter up, and left the two men prisoners in the hands of Walker. I heard some of our boys say that Walker did n't have the countersign himself, and in making the arrests, had several times passed the guards without paying any attention to their challenge. The magic word, was "Fremont." I received it from the officer of the day, after the hubub had subsided, in order to bring a bucket of water. Everything quieted down, and I was soon after, making up for my disturbed slumber —

Walnut creek, Kansas Territory.

Friday Aug. 1. 1856.

The morning broke fair, and clear. Some of our men had not respon-



36. Border War.

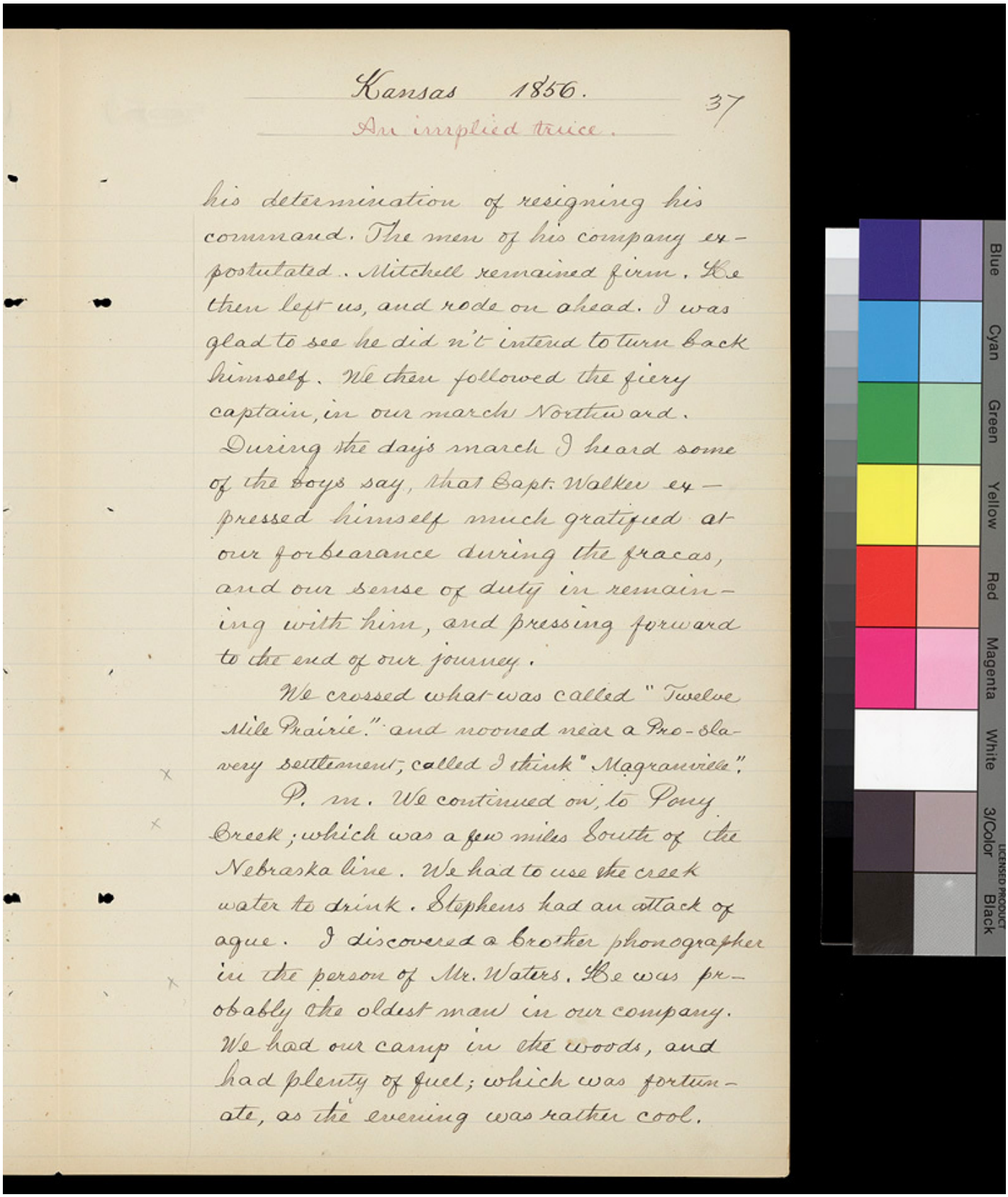
Onward march!

ed to the call to arms, during the night. One sleepy eyed fellow – I think it was Higgins – looked around as he arose, and exclaimed: "From the uproar of last night, I expected to find the whole camp-ground covered with blood and brains".

A little after day-light, Walker released his two prisoners, and they lost no time in coming over to us, safe and sound.

There was a rather tumultuous discussion in camp. Some claimed that we had been so deeply insulted by Walker, that we ought to show our spirit by parting company with him, and returning home. "Let us go back!" "Go back!" shouted quite a number of our party. "No! go on, – Go on! Go on!" then arose on all sides. The "Go-ons" were clearly in the majority, and the matter was decided without a count.

After breakfast, we assembled for a continuance of our onward movement. Capt. Mitchell rode up to us, as we stood in line, and announced

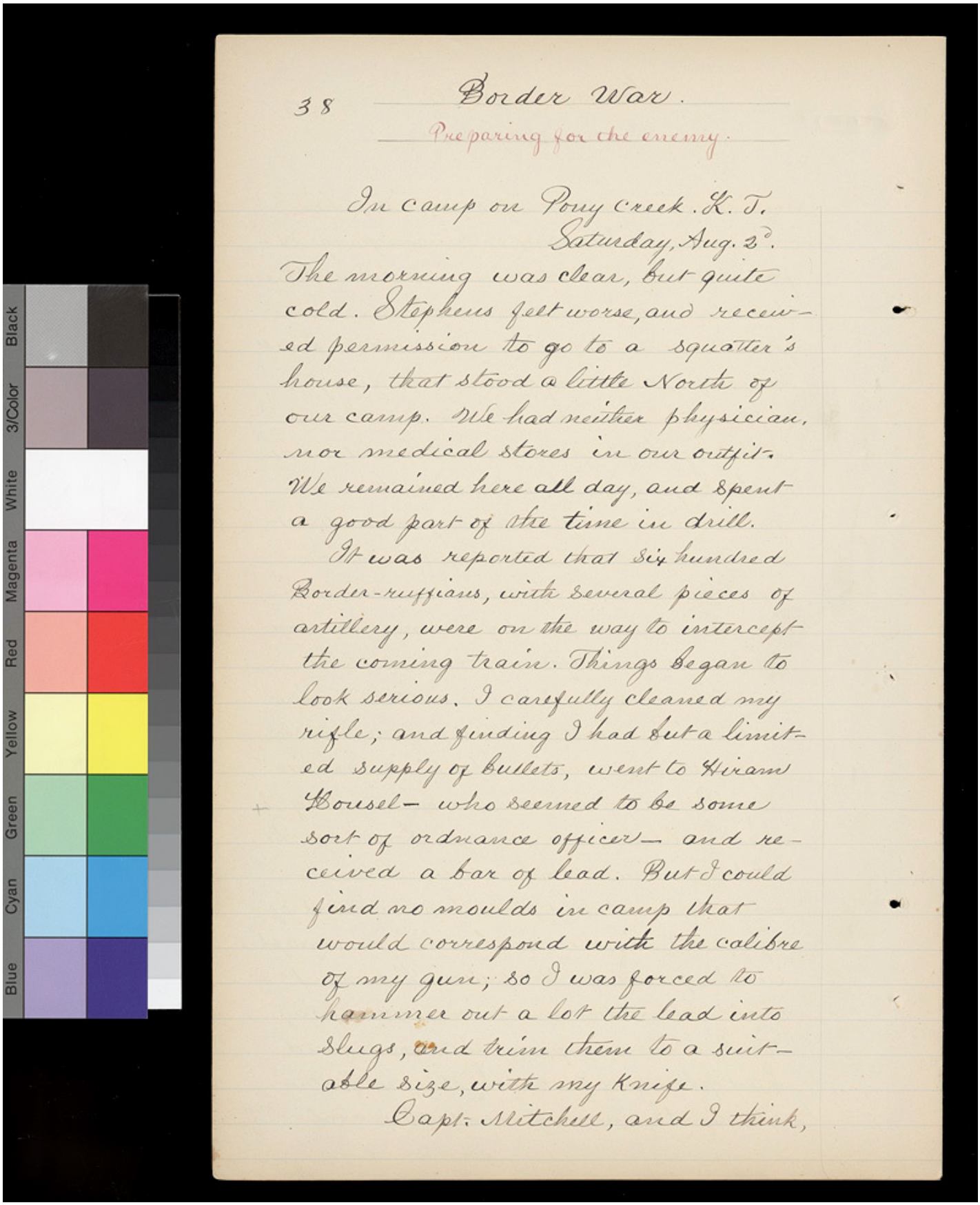


his determination of resigning his command. The men of his company ex-postulated. Mitchell remained firm. He then left us, and rode on ahead. I was glad to see he did n't intend to turn back himself. We then followed the fiery captain, in our march Northward.

During the days march I heard some of the boys say, that Capt. Walker ex-pressed himself much gratified at our forbearance during the fracas, and our sense of duty in remain-ing with him, and pressing forward to the end of our journey.

We crossed what was called "Twelve Mile Prairie." and neared a Pro-slavery settlement, called I think "Magrauvieks".

P. m. We continued on, to Pony Creek; which was a few miles South of the Nebraska line. We had to use the creek water to drink. Stephens had an attack of ague. I discovered a brother phonographer in the person of Mr. Waters. He was pr-obably the oldest man in our company. We had our camp in the woods, and had plenty of fuel; which was fortun-ate, as the evening was rather cool.



38 Border War.

Preparing for the enemy.

In camp on Pony Creek. K. T.
Saturday, Aug. 2d.

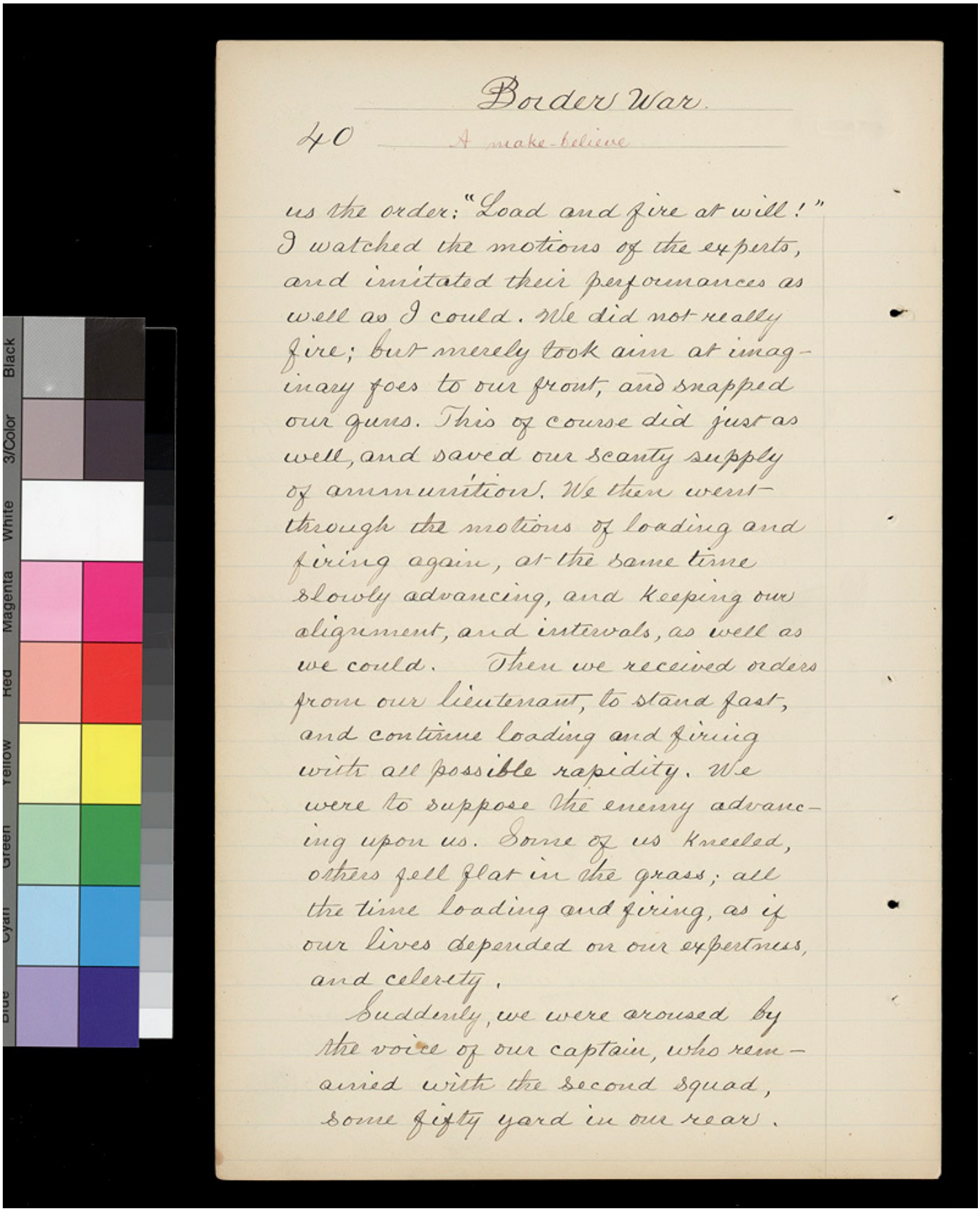
The morning was clear, but quite cold. Stephens felt worse, and received permission to go to a squatter's house, that stood a little North of our camp. We had neither physician, nor medical stores in our outfit. We remained here all day, and spent a good part of the time in drill.

It was reported that six hundred Border-ruffians, with several pieces of artillery, were on the way to intercept the coming train. Things began to look serious. I carefully cleaned my rifle; and finding I had but a limited supply of bullets, went to Hiram Housel — who seemed to be some sort of ordnance officer — and received a bar of lead. But I could find no moulds in camp that would correspond with the calibre of my gun; so I was forced to hammer out a lot the lead into slugs, and trim them to a suitable size, with my knife.

Capt. Mitchell, and I think,

most of the mounted men, had gone on to meet the on-coming train.

Capt. Whipple practiced us, for the most part, in what he called "the skirmish drill." Whether he had gotten his knowlede from "The Blue Book"; or had invented the tactical movement, himself, I am not able to say. It was something like this: Sergeant Hays formed the men in two ranks. We were then marched by the flank to a level piece of prairie, just West of our camp. We were halted and faced to the front. Our two lieutenants had command of the two lines of men respectively. I was in the first one. The stentorian voice of Whipple gave the command: "Front rank – forward – open order – march!" According to previous verbal instructions, given for the benefit of the raw recruits, our line moved out, the men on the flanks obliquing until there was an interval of some six paces between each man. We then marched forward in this order, a few rods, when our Lieutenant – I think it was Wemple – gave

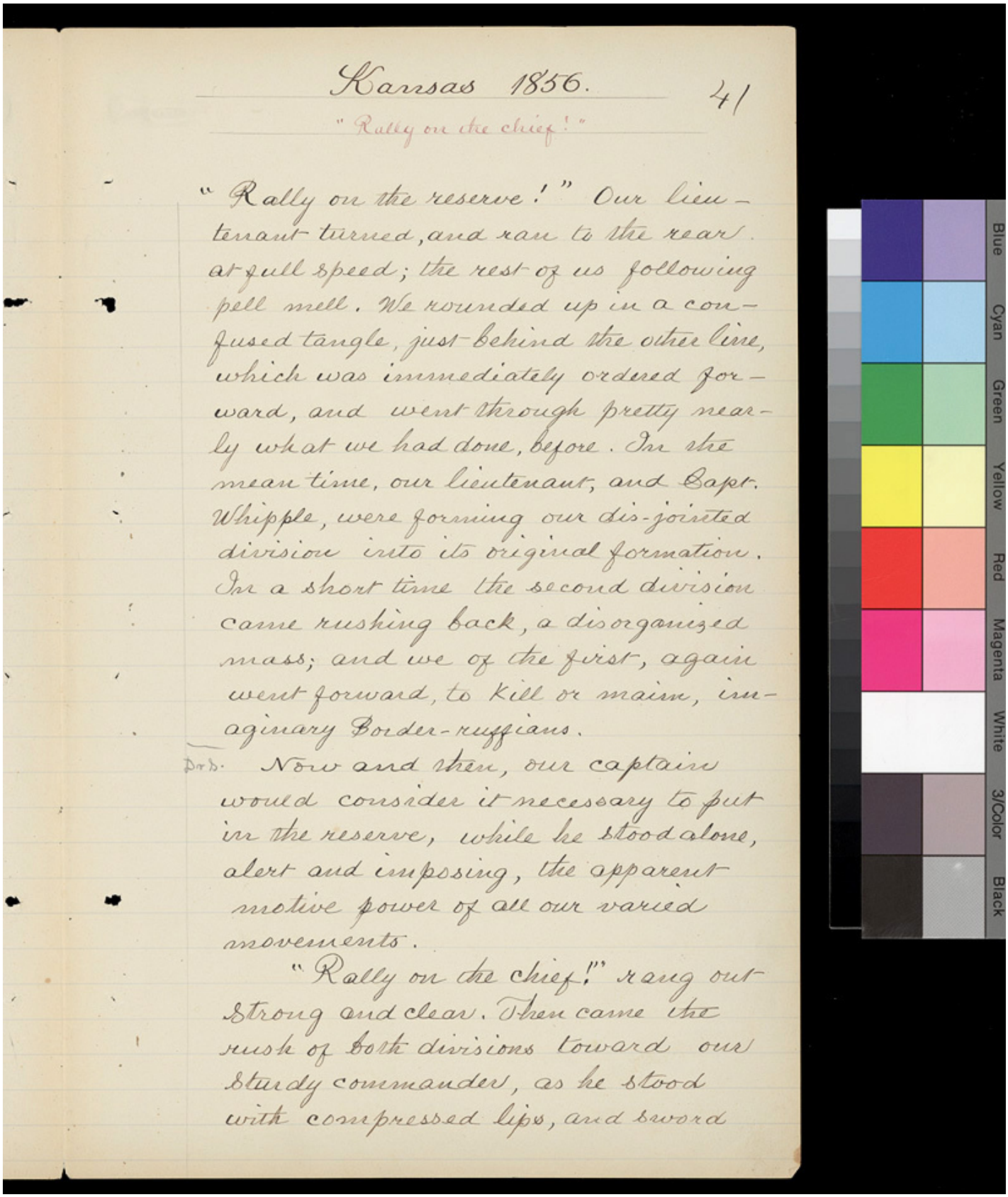


Border War.

40 A make-believe

us the order: "Load and fire at will!" I watched the motions of the experts, and imitated their performances as well as I could. We did not really fire; but merely took aim at imaginary foes to our front, and snapped our guns. This of course did just as well, and saved our scanty supply of ammunition. We then went through the motions of loading and firing again, at the same time slowly advancing, and keeping our alignment, and intervals, as well as we could. Then we received orders from our lieutenant, to stand fast, and continue loading and firing with all possible rapidity. We were to suppose the enemy advancing upon us. Some of us kneeled, others fell flat in the grass; all the time loading and firing, as if our lives depended on our expertness, and celerity.

Suddenly, we were aroused by the voice of our captain, who remained with the second squad, some fifty yard in our rear.



Kansas 1856. 41

"Rally on the chief!"

"Rally on the reserve!" Our lieutenant turned, and ran to the rear at full speed; the rest of us following pell mell. We rounded up in a confused tangle, just behind the other line, which was immediately ordered forward, and went through pretty nearly what we had done, before. In the mean time, our lieutenant, and Capt. Whipple, were forming our dis-jointed division into its original formation. In a short time the second division came rushing back, a disorganized mass; and we of the first, again went forward, to kill or maim, imaginary Border-ruffians.

D.D. Now and then, our captain would consider it necessary to put in the reserve, while he stood alone, alert and impssing, the apparent motive power of all our varied movements.

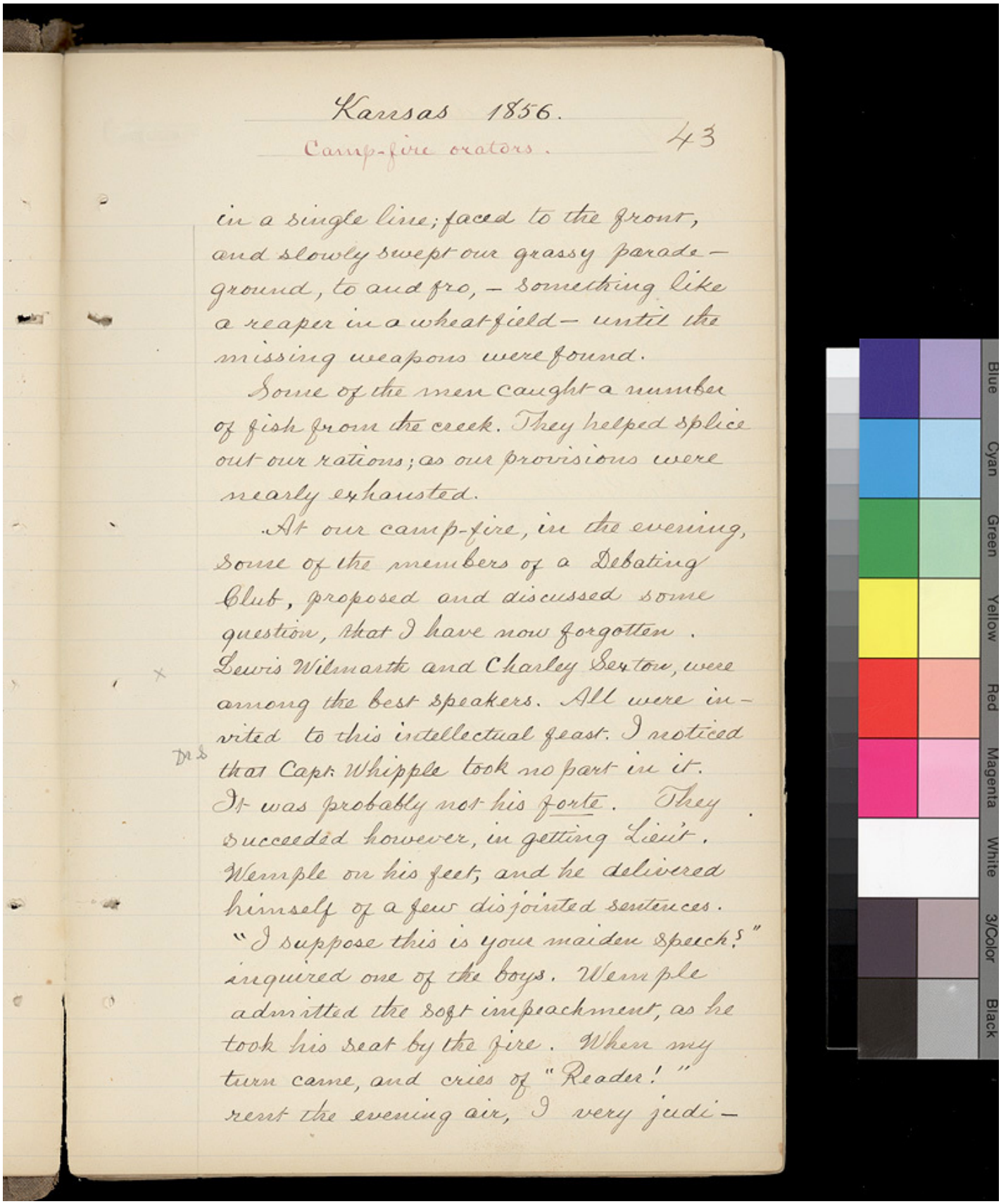
"Rally on the chief!" rang out strong and clear. Then came the rush of both divisions toward our sturdy commander, as he stood with compressed lips, and sword

poised in air, as we clustered at his back, like a swarm of bees in hiving time.

Again came formation, advance and retreat, as before.

Finally, while the whole force was out skirmishing, we heard our chief call out: "Rally on the camp!" I turned about, and saw Whipple running at full speed, in the direction of our camp. We followed. Being one of those nearest the captain, I determined to overtake him. He was a heavy man; I was long and light, and considered myself a runner. It was a miserable failure. Instead of lessening the distance between us, I began to fall behind him at such a rate, as to discourage further effort in that direction.

When we reached camp, it was discovered that two revolvers and a Bowie-knife, were missing. The manner of finding them was very simple. We were formed



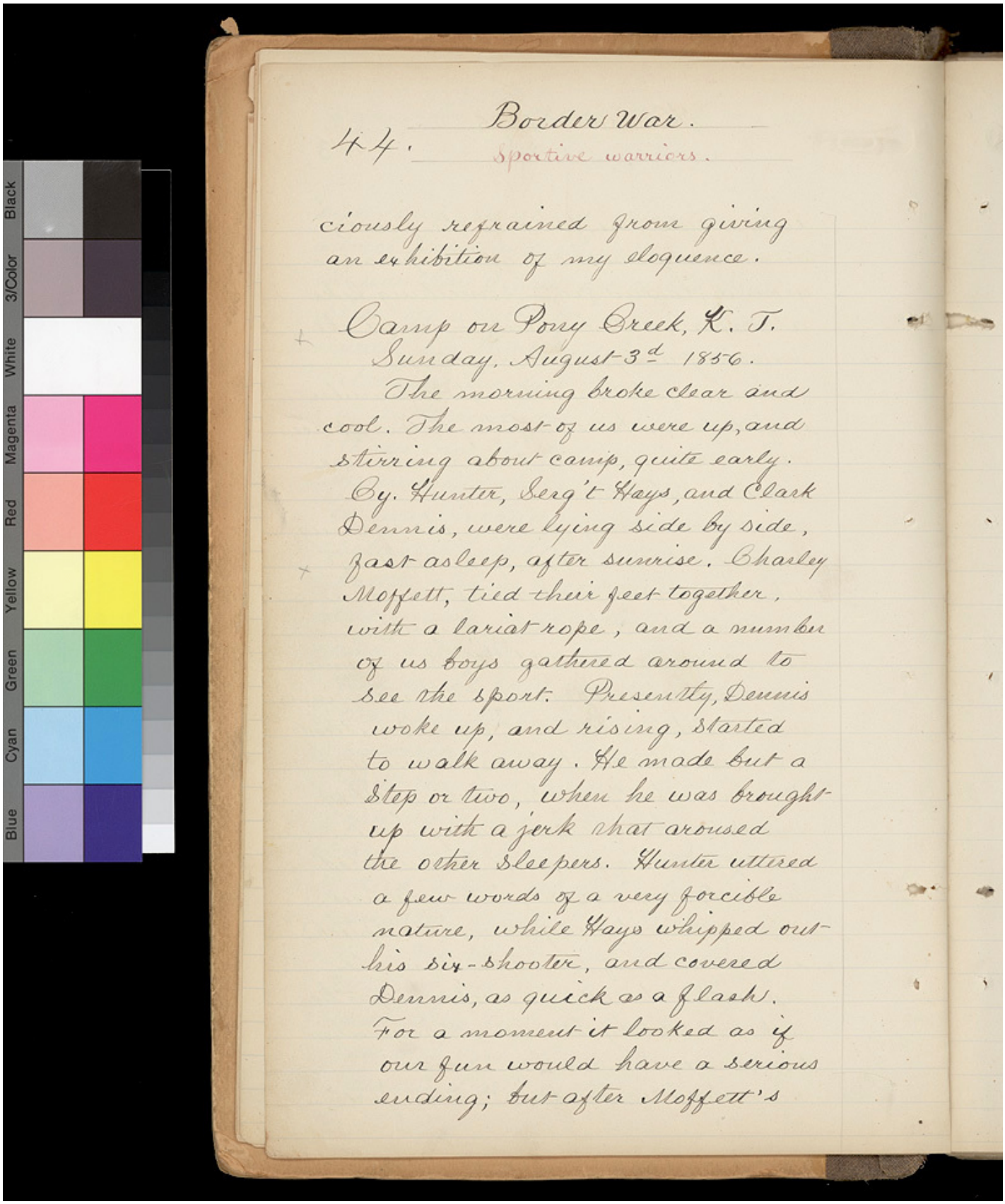
Kansas 1856. 43

Camp-fire orators.

in a single line; faced to the front, and slowly swept our grassy parade-ground, to and fro, – something like a reaper in a wheat-field – until the missing weapons were found.

Some of the men caught a number of fish from the creek. They helped splice out our rations; as our provisions were nearly exhausted.

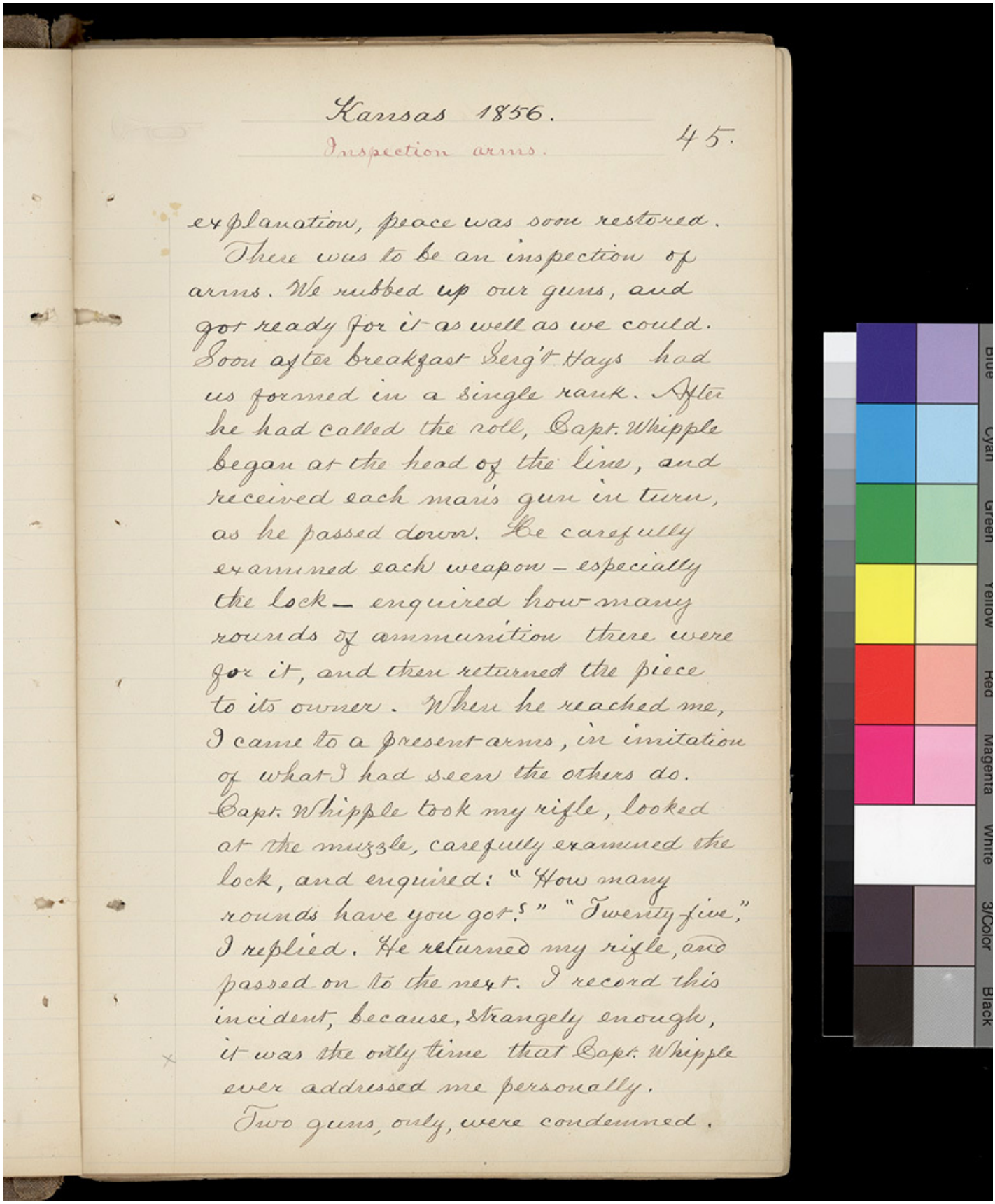
At our camp-fire, in the evening, some of the members of a Debating Club, proposed and discussed some question, that I have now forgotten. Lewis Wilmarth and Charley Sexton, were among the best speakers. All were invited to this intellectual feast. I noticed that Capt. Whipple took no part in it. It was probably not his forte. They succeeded however, in getting Lieut. Wemple on his feet; and he delivered himself of a few disjointed sentences. "I suppose this is your maiden speech?" inquired one of the boys. Wemple admitted the soft impeachment, as he took his seat by the fire. When my turn came, and cries of "Reader!" rent the evening air, I very judi-



ciously refrained from giving an exhibition of my eloquence.

Camp on Pony Creek, K. T.
Sunday, August 3d 1856.

The morning broke clear and cool. The most of us were up, and stirring about camp, quite early. Cy. Hunter, Serg't Hays, and Clark Dennis, were lying side by side, fast asleep, after sunrise. Charley Moffett, tied their feet together, with a lariat rope, and a number of us boys gathered around to see the sport. Presently, Dennis woke up, and rising, started to walk away. He made but a step or two, when he was brought up with a jerk that aroused the other sleepers. Hunter uttered a few words of a very forcible nature, while Hays whipped out his six-shooter, and covered Dennis, as quick as a flash. For a moment it looked as if our fun would have a serious ending; but after Moffett's



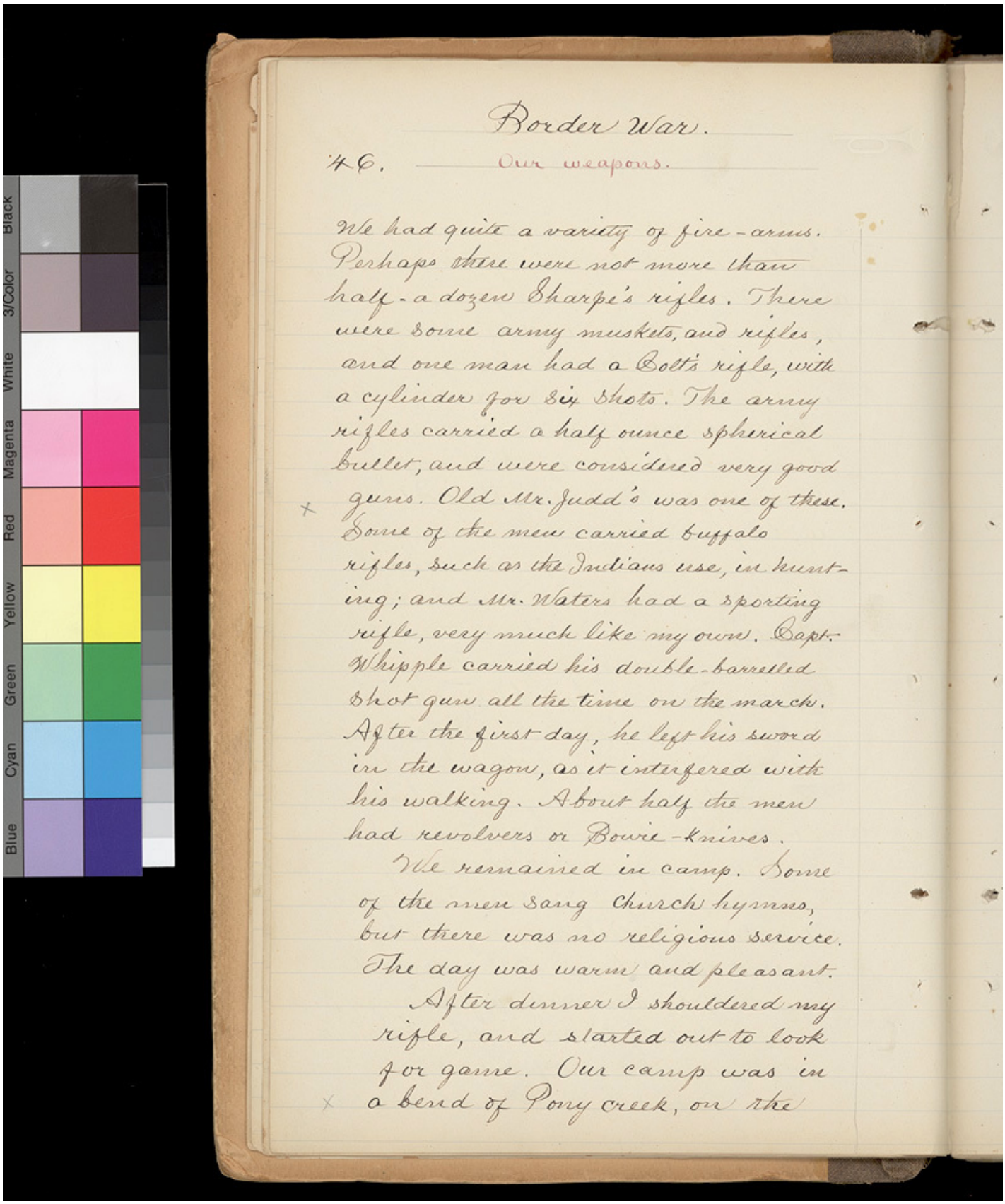
Kansas 1856. 45.

Inspection arms.

explanation, peace was soon restored.

There was to be an inspection of arms. We rubbed up our guns, and got ready for it as well as we could. Soon after breakfast Serg't Hays had us formed in a single rank. After he had called the roll, Capt. Whipple began at the head of the line, and received each man's gun in turn, as he passed down. He carefully examined each weapon – especially the lock – enquired how many rounds of ammunition there were for it, and then returned the piece to its owner. When he reached me, I came to a present arms, in imitation of what I had seen the others do. Capt. Whipple took my rifle, looked at the muzzle, carefully examined the lock, and enquired: "How many rounds have you got?" "Twenty five," I replied. He returned my rifle, and passed on to the next. I record this incident, because, strangely enough, it was the only time that Capt. Whipple ever addressed me personally.

Two guns, only, were condemned.



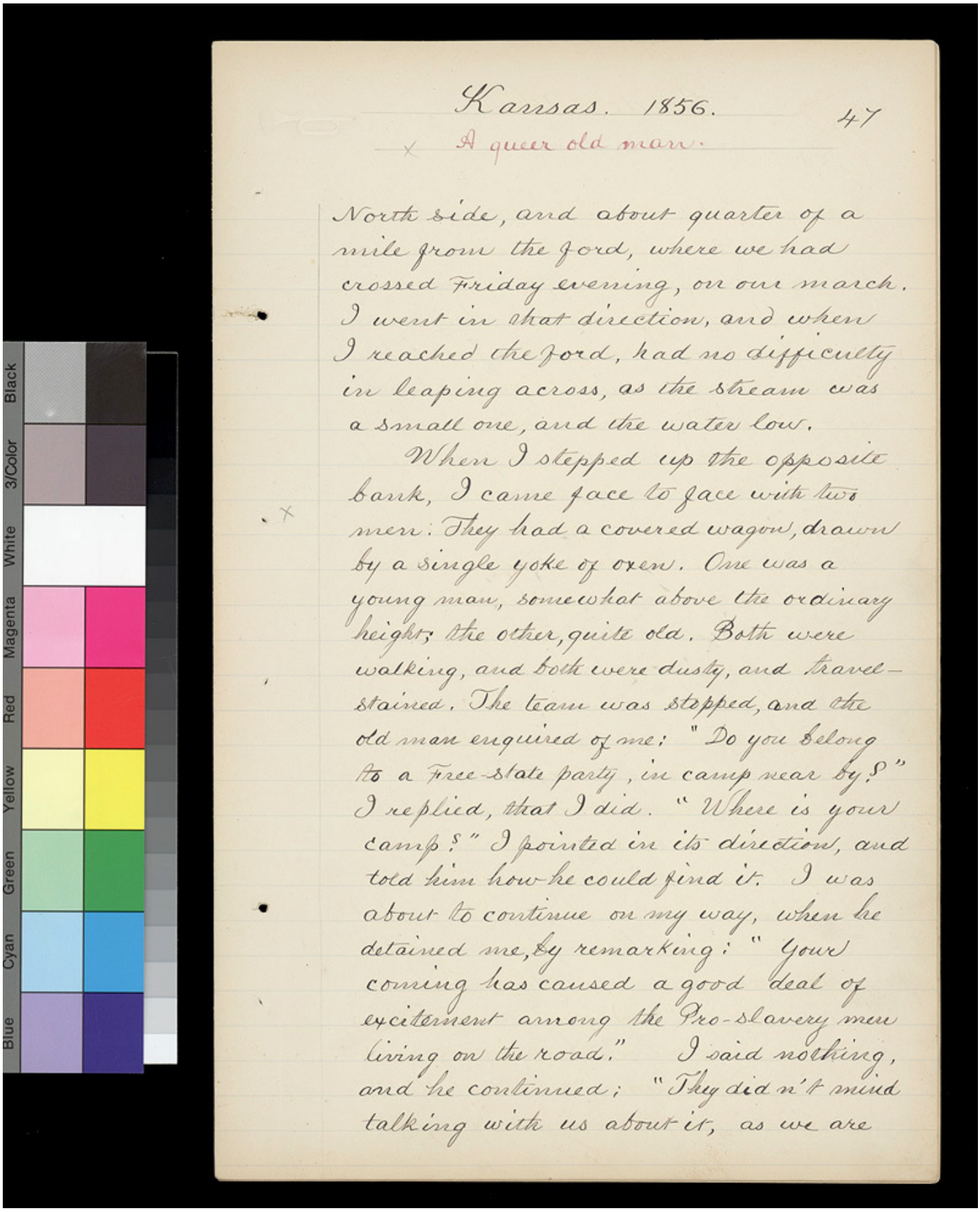
Border War.

46. Our weapons.

We had quite a variety of fire-arms. Perhaps there were not more than half-a dozen Sharpe's rifles. There were some army muskets, and rifles, and one man had a Colt's rifle, with a cylinder for six shots. The army rifles carried a half ounce spherical bullet, and were considered very good guns. Old Mr. Judd's was one of these. Some of the men carried buffalo rifles, such as the Indians use, in hunting; and Mr. Waters had a sporting rifle, very much like my own. Capt. Whipple carried his double-barrelled shot gun all the time on the march. After the first day, he left his sword in the wagon, as it interfered with his walking. About half the men had revolvers or Bowie-knives.

We remained in camp. Some of the men sang Church hymns, but there was no religious service. The day was warm and pleasant.

After dinner I shouldered my rifle, and started out to look for game. Our camp was in a bend of Pony creek, on the

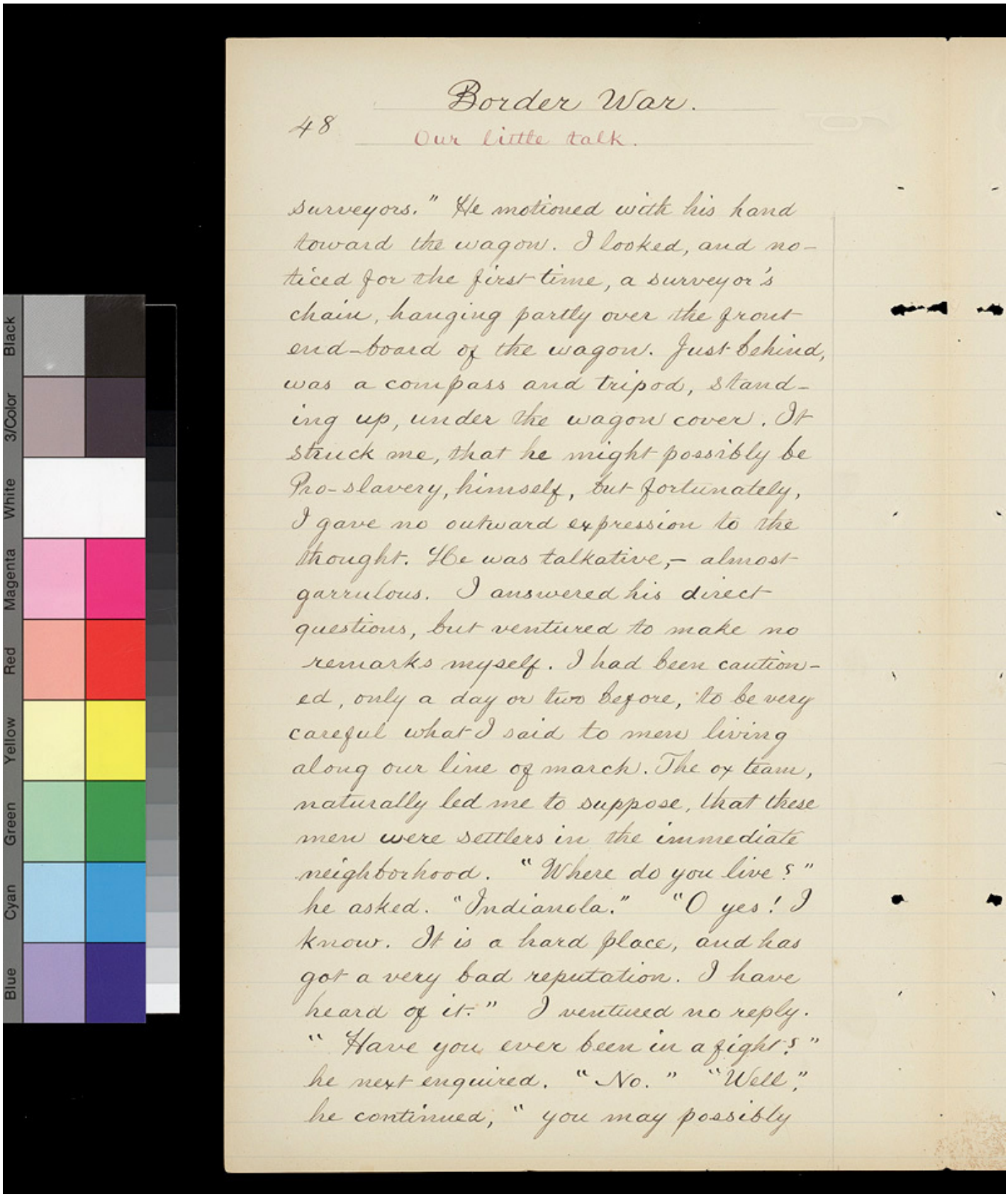


Kansas. 1856. 47

A queer old man.

North side, and about quarter of a mile from the ford, where we had crossed Friday evening, on our march. I went in that direction, and when I reached the ford, had no difficulty in leaping across, as the stream was a small one, and the water low.

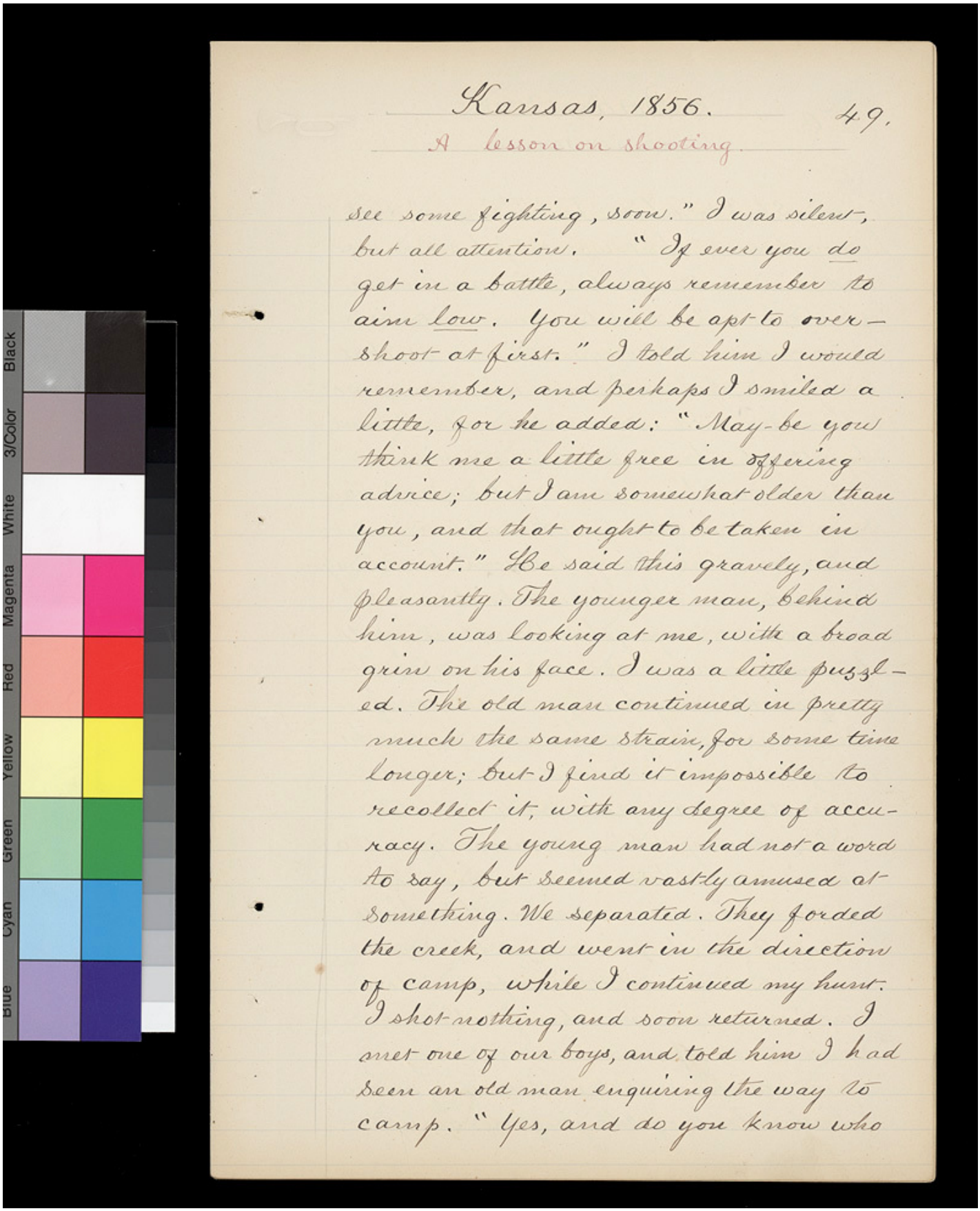
When I stepped up the opposite bank, I came face to face with two men: They had a covered wagon, drawn by a single yoke of oxen. One was a young man, somewhat above the ordinary height; the other, quite old. Both were walking, and both were dusty, and travel-stained. The team was stopped, and the old man enquired of me: "Do you belong to a Free-State party, in camp near by?" I replied, that I did. "Where is your camp?" I pointed in its direction, and told him how he could find it. I was about to continue on my way, when he detained me, by remarking: "Your coming has caused a good deal of excitement among the Pro-slavery men living on the road." I said nothing, and he continued; "They did n't mind talking with us about it, as we are



Border War.

48 Our little talk.

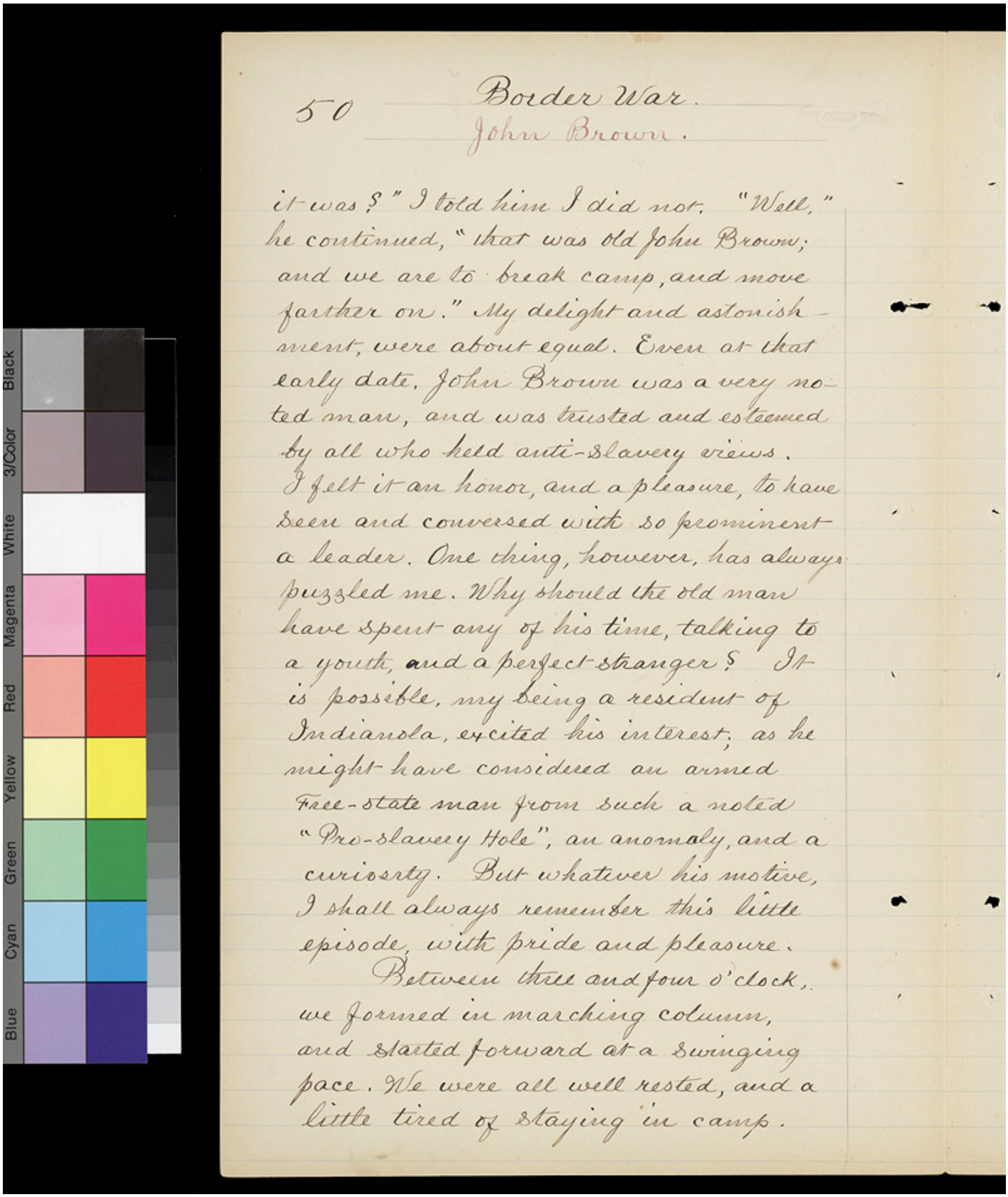
surveyors." He motioned with his hand toward the wagon. I looked, and noticed for the first time, a surveyor's chain, hanging partly over the front end-board of the wagon. Just behind, was a compass and tripod, standing up, under the wagon cover. It struck me, that he might possibly be Pro-slavery, himself, but fortunately, I gave no outward expression to the thought. He was talkative,- almost garrulous. I answered his direct questions, but ventured to make no remarks myself. I had been cautioned, only a day or two before, to be very careful what I said to men living along our line of march. The ox team, naturally led me to suppose, that these men were settlers in the immediate neighborhood. "Where do you live?" he asked. "Indianola." "O yes! I know. It is a hard place, and has got a very bad reputation. I have heard of it." I ventured no reply. "Have you ever been in a fight?" he next enquired. "No." "Well," he continued, "you may possibly



Kansas, 1856. 49.

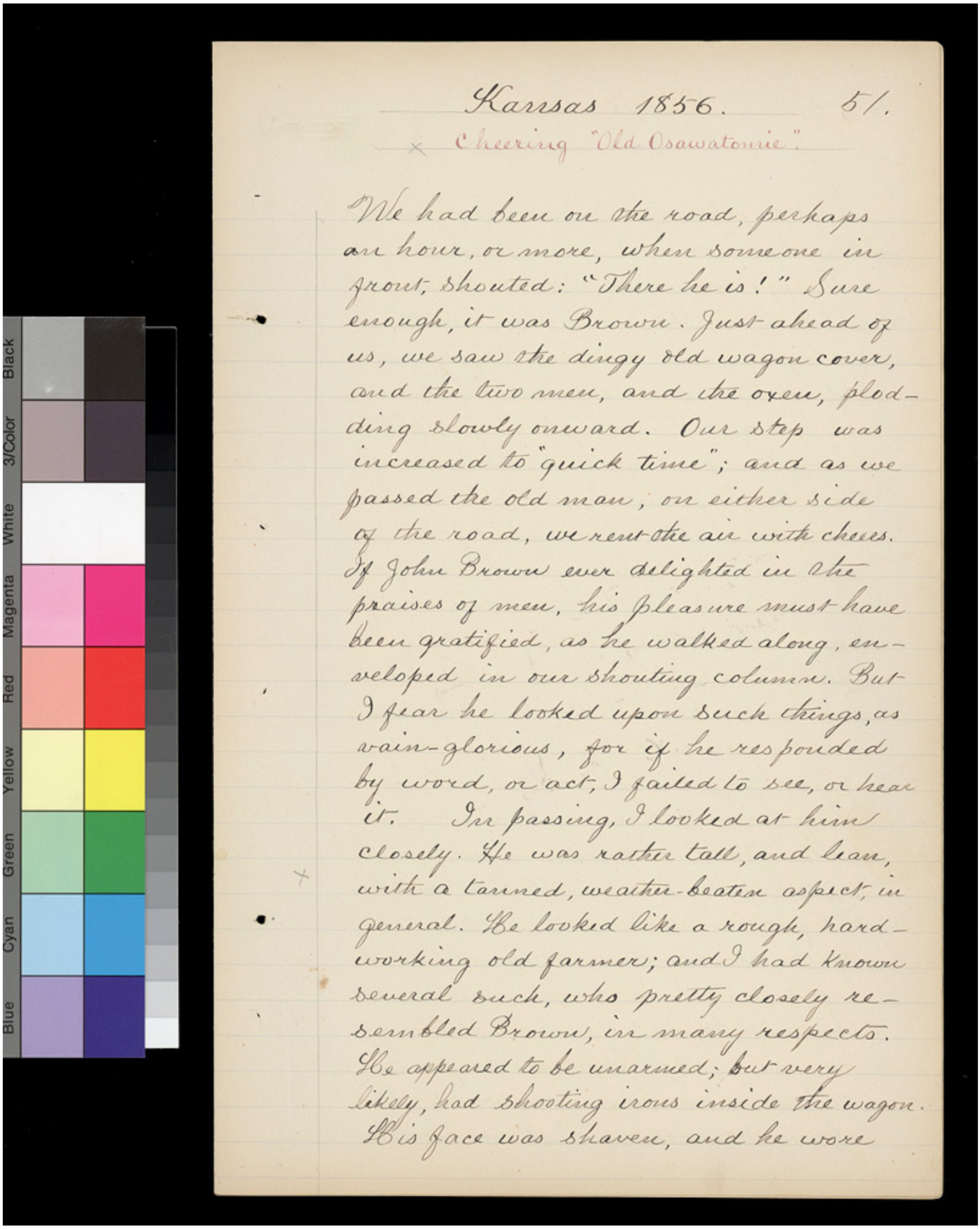
A lesson on shooting.

see some fighting, soon." I was silent, but all attention. "If ever you do get in a battle, always remember to aim low. You will be apt to over-shoot at first." I told him I would remember, and perhaps I smiled a little, for he added: "May-be you think me a little free in offering advice; but I am somewhat older than you, and that ought to be taken in account." He said this gravely, and pleasantly. The younger man, behind him, was looking at me, with a broad grin on his face. I was a little puzzled. The old man continued in pretty much the same strain, for some time longer; but I find it impossible to recollect it, with any degree of accuracy. The young man had not a word to say, but seemed vastly amused at something. We separated. They forded the creek, and went in the direction of camp, while I continued my hunt. I shot nothing, and soon returned. I met one of our boys, and told him I had been an old man enquiring the way to camp. "Yes, and do you know who



it was?" I told him I did not. "Well," he continued, "that was old John Brown; and we are to break camp, and move farther on." My delight and astonishment, were about equal. Even at that early date, John Brown was a very noted man, and was trusted and esteemed by all who held anti-slavery views. I felt it an honor, and a pleasure, to have seen and conversed with so prominent a leader. One thing, however, has always puzzled me. Why should the old man have spent any of his time, talking to a youth, and a perfect stranger? It is possible, my being a resident of Indianola, excited his interest; as he might have considered an armed Free-state man from such a noted "Pro-slavery Hole", an anomaly, and a curiosity. But whatever his motive, I shall always remember this little episode, with pride and pleasure.

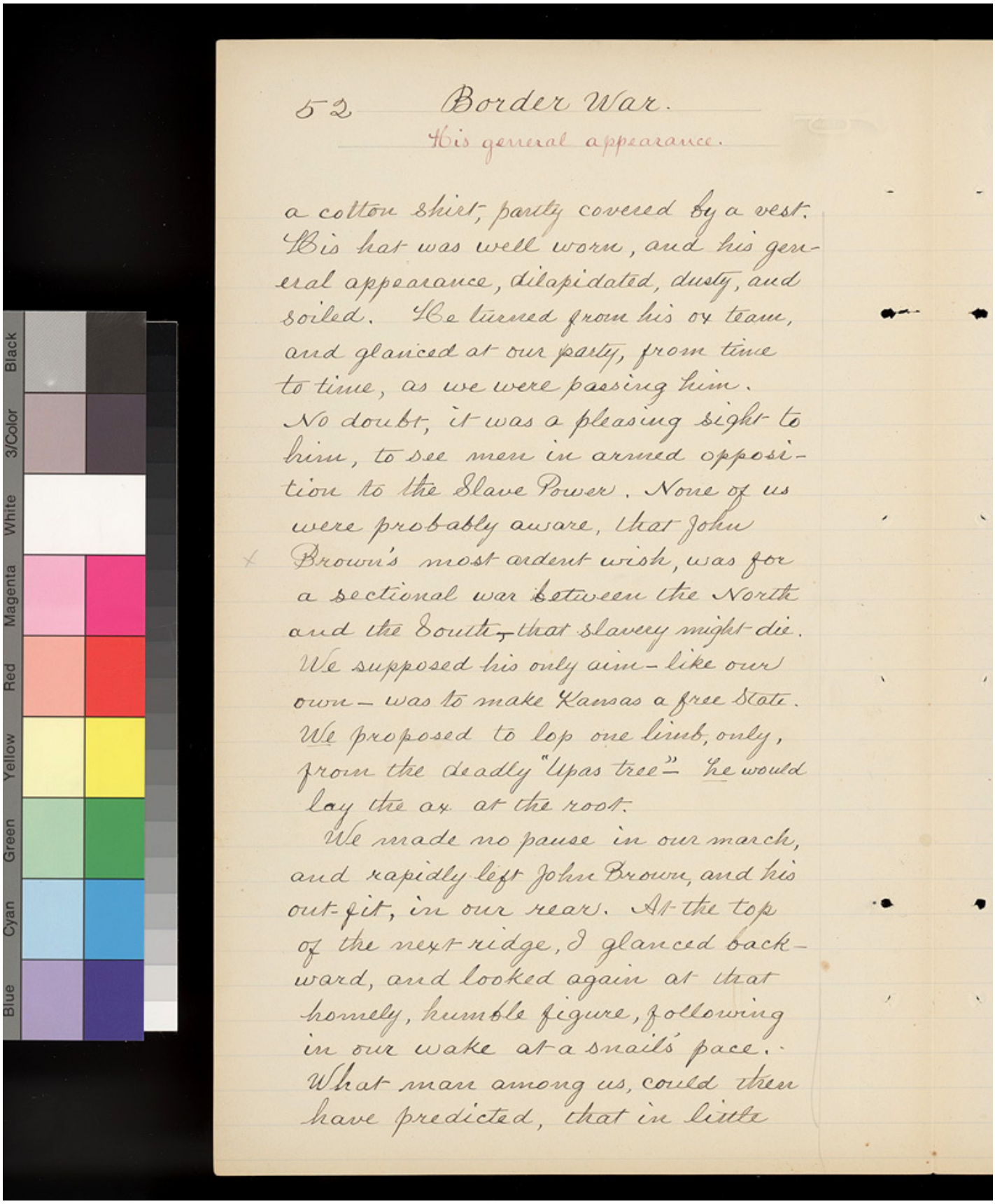
Between three and four o'clock, we formed in marching column, and started forward at a swinging pace. We were all well rested, and a little tired of staying in camp.



Kansas 1856. 51.

Cheering "Old Osawatomie".

We had been on the road, perhaps an hour, or more, when someone in front, shouted: "There he is!" Sure enough, it was Brown. Just ahead of us, we saw the dingy old wagon cover, and the two men, and the oxen, plodding slowly onward. Our step was increased to "quick time"; and as we passed the old man, on either side of the road, we rent the air with cheers. If John Brown ever delighted in the praises of men, his pleasure must have been gratified, as he walked along, enveloped in our shouting column. But I fear he looked upon such things, as vain-glorious, for if he responded by word, or act, I failed to see, or hear it. In passing, I looked at him closely. He was rather tall, and lean, with a tanned, weather-beaten aspect, in general. He looked like a rough, hard-working old farmer; and I had known several such, who pretty closely resembled Brown, in many respects. He appeared to be unarmed; but very likely, had shooting irons inside the wagon. His face was shaven, and he wore



52 Border War.

His general appearance.

a cotton shirt, partly covered by a vest. His hat was well worn, and his general appearance, dilapidated, dusty, and soiled. He turned from his ox team, and glanced at our party, from time to time, as we were passing him. No doubt, it was a pleasing sight to him, to see men in armed opposition to the Slave Power. None of us were probably aware, that John Brown's most ardent wish, was for a sectional war between the North and the South, that slavery might die. We supposed his only aim – like our own – was to make Kansas a free State. We proposed to lop one limb, only, from the deadly "Upas tree" – he would lay the ax at the root.

We made no pause in our march, and rapidly left John Brown, and his out-fit, in our rear. At the top of the next ridge, I glanced backward, and looked again at that homely, humble figure, following in our wake at a snail's pace. What man among us, could then have predicted, that in little

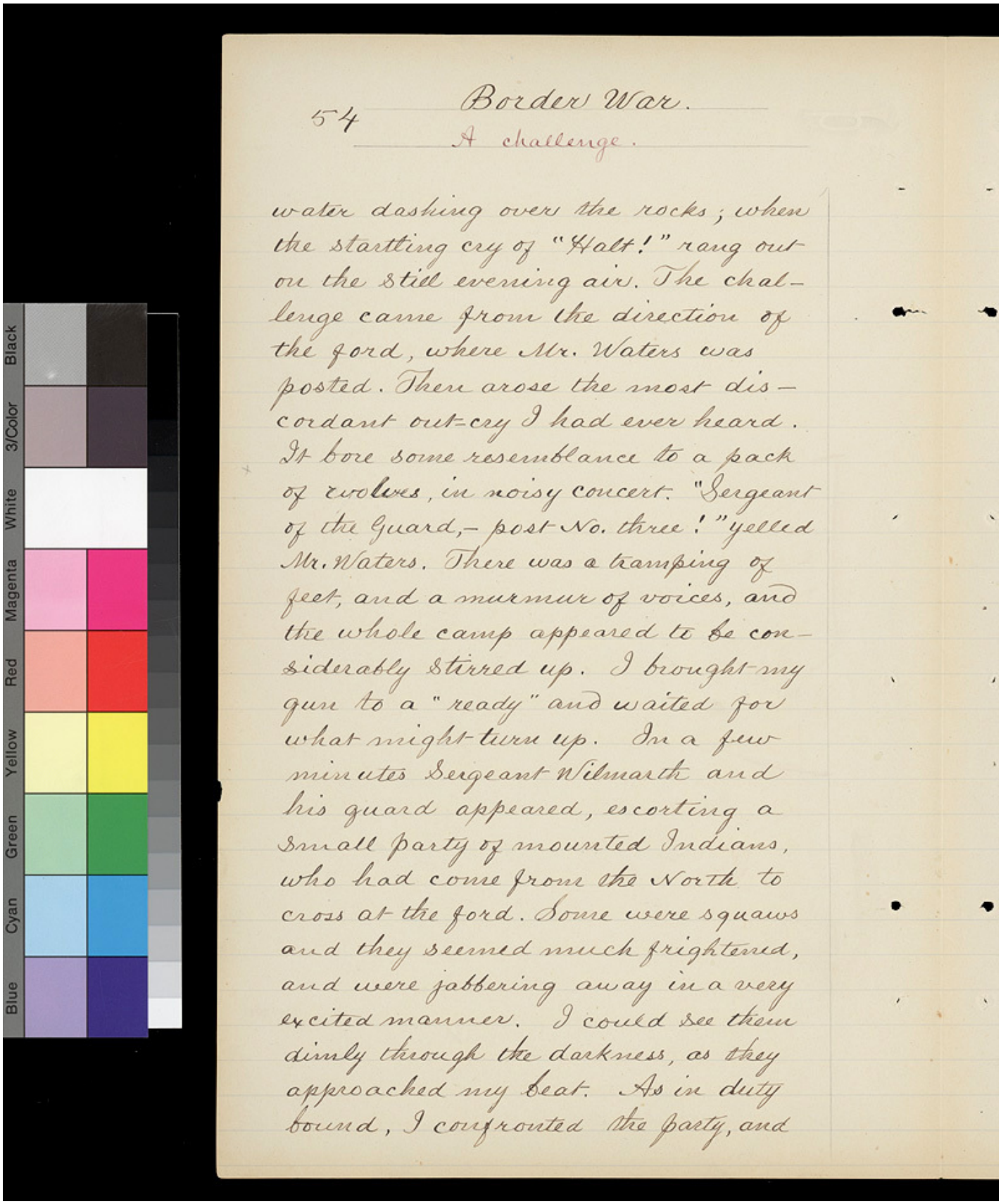
more than three years, he would shake this American republic, from center to circumference!

Not long after this, we reached the boundary line, and crossed into Nebraska Territory; and toward evening came to quite a large stream of water, and went into camp on the South bank. There was an excellent ford, with a good rocky bottom, close to camp, and quite a water-fall a little below us, called Nemaha Falls.

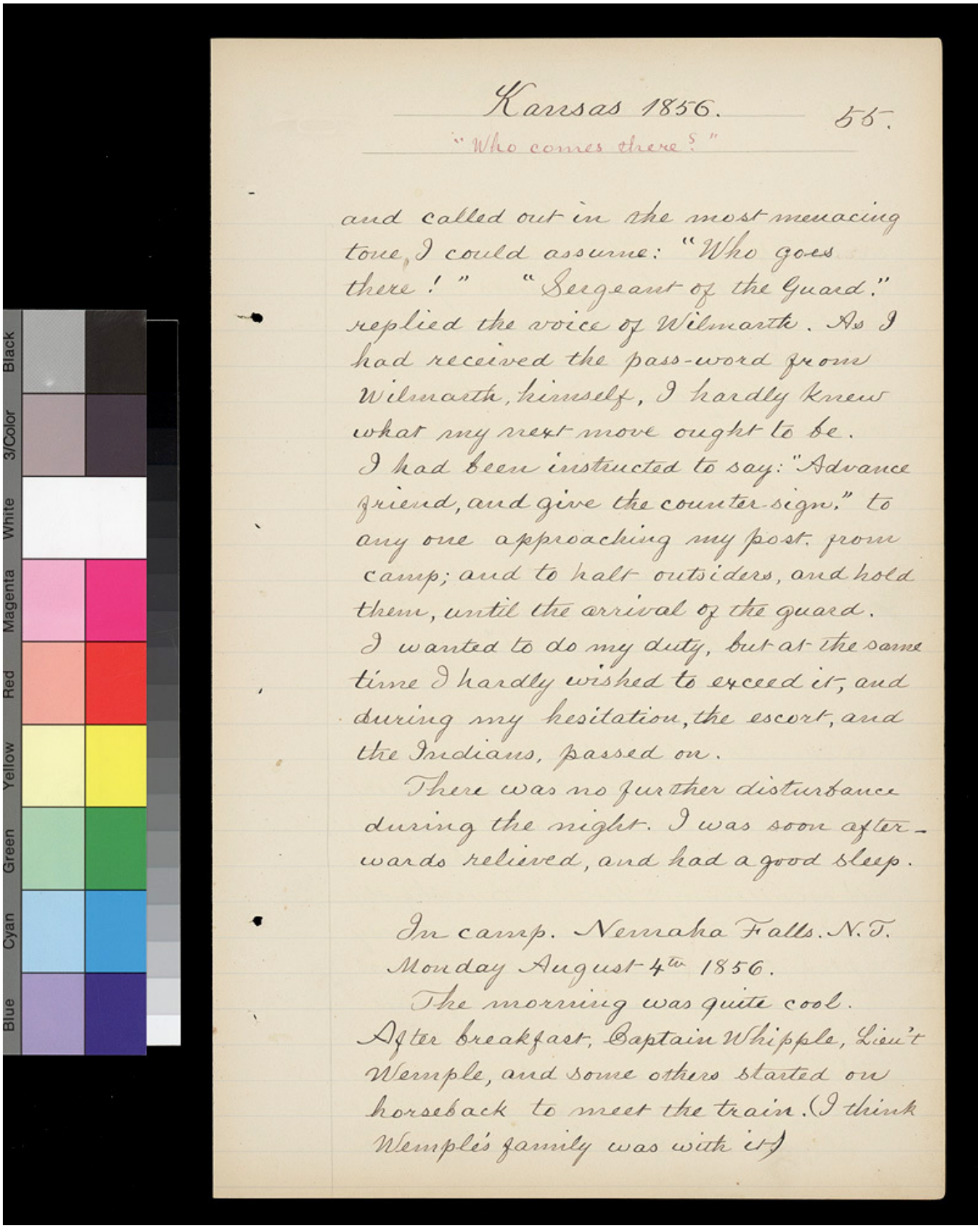
The camp was pleasantly located in a body of timber, and we were soon enjoying our supper, and new surroundings.

I was put on guard duty, and served early in the evening. Sergeant Wilmarth posted me on the road just South, and a little East of camp. The countersign was some kind of Indian word, that I had to repeat, mentally, many times to remember,

It was a quiet, star-light night, just cool enough to be pleasant. I had walked my beat for an hour or two, with no sound, beside the



water dashing over the rocks; when the startling cry of "Halt!" rang out on the still evening air. The challenge came from the direction of the ford, where Mr. Waters was posted. Then arose the most discordant out-cry I had ever heard. It bore some resemblance to a pack of wolves, in noisy concert. "Sergeant of the Guard,— post No. three!" yelled Mr. Waters. There was a tramping of feet, and a murmur of voices, and the whole camp appeared to be considerably stirred up. I brought my gun to a "ready" and waited for what might turn up. In a few minutes Sergeant Wilmarth and his guard appeared, escorting a small party of mounted Indians, who had come from the North to cross at the ford. Some were squaws and they seemed much frightened, and were jabbering away in a very excited manner. I could see them dimly through the darkness, as they approached my beat. As in duty bound, I confronted the party, and



Kansas 1856. 55.

"Who comes there?"

and called out in the most menacing tone, I could assume: "Who goes there!" "Sergeant of the Guard." replied the voice of Wilmarth. As I had received the pass-word from Wilmarth, himself, I hardly knew what my next move ought to be. I had been instructed to say: "Advance friend, and give the counter-sign." to any one approaching my post from camp; and to halt outsiders, and hold them, until the arrival of the guard. I wanted to do my duty, but at the same time I hardly wished to exceed it, and during my hesitation, the escort, and the Indians, passed on.

There was no further disturbance during the night. I was soon afterwards relieved, and had a good sleep.

In camp. Nemaha Falls. N.T.
Monday August 4th 1856.

The morning was quite cool. After breakfast, Captain Whipple, Lieu't Wemple, and some others started on horseback to meet the train. (I think Wemple's family was with it)