In Search of Canaan

Athearn, Robert G.

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As darkness blanketed the city on a raw March evening in 1879, an Anchor Line packet boat, dimly bearing the name *Colorado*, felt its way through swirls of large wet snowflakes and gingerly touched the riverside wharf. With lines secured and the vessel made fast, the crew could go ashore to investigate the night life of St. Louis, another eight-day run from Vicksburg now at an end. Cabin passengers would have no trouble finding cabs to carry them quickly over muddy streets and into warm, waiting hotels. The unloading of crates and barrels consigned to wholesale houses could wait for daylight.

But part of the cargo was moved ashore that night. The deck passengers, who had paid four dollars apiece for passage and who had furnished their own bedding and food, fell somewhere between the categories of people and things. Two hundred in number, they were black southerners from far down river who were now bound for an unseen land of promise to the north. Tired, hungry, and frightened, they were told to go ashore. Obediently they groped for land, jostling each other in the darkness; and clutching their few ragged belongings, they sought any shelter that could be found along the cold, wet embankment.

A local newspaper reporter, whiling away a dull evening at his office, learned that one of the river steamers had landed with a strange and unexpected cargo. He sauntered through the gaslit night, mildly curious. As he neared the river he heard a low hum of voices, but there were no campfires or any sign of light. The huddled, shivering strangers, he learned, were from some of the river counties in Louisiana and Mississippi.
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When asked why they had come, they gave vague answers about having seen promising circulars that spoke of Kansas as a land of opportunity, a place that seemed far away and still undefined on a cold spring night.

Kansas? Pencil poised, the questioner asked for some elaboration. Well, they said hesitantly, there was talk that someone, presumably the federal government, was passing out forty-acre farming plots to former slaves in that new country. And that was not all. Each recipient was to be given mules, plows, rations, and other necessities with which to start a fresh agricultural life—merely for the asking. No, they were not sure, but it all sounded exciting; and fearing that indecisiveness might spoil the main chance, they had sold their belongings for whatever the goods would bring and had joined the rush toward the Vicksburg waterfront. Now, it began to appear, the wish had been the father of the thought. There was no welcoming committee at St. Louis, no governmental representative waiting to escort them to their new farmsteads, no one who seemed to know anything about the latest bonanza in the West.

Here they were, without a cent and with no hope for tomorrow, muttered one of the men. He thought they could not be worse off. That brought denial from some of the others, who said pointedly that they could be worse off. They could be down South. The assertion generated vigorous nodding among those within earshot.

What was so bad about being down South? the reporter asked. His question brought a flurry of answers. Cotton paid only about eight cents a pound, and the planters tended to fix their own prices, volunteered a self-appointed spokesman. "You've got to give the planter a bale of 400 pounds even, and furnish your own bagging for every acre," he explained, pointing out that this did not always leave much for the sharecropper.

That was part of it. Then there was the store system, so much complained about in company towns across the country. "We've got to pay fifteen to thirty-five cents a peck for meal, and if we get it on time, we've got to pay double, not only for that but for calico and other things, and when Christmas comes round and the old women and children ought to be getting something, there ain't nothing to get."

As the old man shook his head over the hazards of the credit system, another grim-lipped refugee commented upon a general complaint that had gained wide circulation throughout the North in post-bellum days. These people were frightened, he explained; their lives were filled with personal insecurity: "I know, within the last three years, of seventy-five men who left their houses at night, and were never found until the buzzards found them in the fields or in the valleys." The reporter made note of it, without comment. A few days later, when such arrivals made the matter more
newsworthy, his paper—which was of Republican persuasion—would advise such newcomers not to linger in Missouri, where “a Missouri Democrat would rather kill a nigger than eat his breakfast any day.” But there was no editorializing that night. The journalist wrote a straightforward account of what he had seen, and then called it a day. The next morning his fellow townsmen, who toyed with their breakfasts without entertaining any murderous thoughts, noticed a story that told of strangers on the shore. They learned that two hundred southern Negroes, en route to Kansas, had arrived and that they were “dead broke.”

The news item failed to excite any of the local Anglo-Saxon humanitarians. During the previous month the Belle of Memphis had unloaded over a thousand bales of cotton and about a hundred blacks of both sexes and all ages. These passengers had straggled through the city and had disappeared from the streets, part of the group having moved into vacant houses, causing no trouble at all. They were not tramps, the press had explained; rather, they were squatters who either would move on or perhaps would find work in the city.

Thus, when the latest group appeared, there was no rush to the waterfront, soup kettles in hand and hearts filled with compassion, to render first aid. Floods, earthquakes, and tornadoes—natural disasters that left hundreds homeless through violence—were much more compelling reasons for municipal turnouts. But there was no violence, disaster, or excitement in this happening.

The morning was quiet. A handful of tiny fires dotted the river bank, around which were gathered women and children, a few of the latter nursing at their mothers’ breasts. Some of the men warmed themselves; others wandered aimlessly up and down the levee, making small talk and munching on large chunks of bread purchased by the few who had any money. When asked about their plans, they were evasive because they had no plans or because they suspected the motives of interrogators.

Aside from the curious, the first person to show any particular concern for the refugees was Charlton H. Tandy, who admitted that their arrival was a complete surprise to him. As he walked among them, along the snow-covered levee, he saw that some of his people were hungry and without proper clothing, particularly the children who “were bare-footed and just as they came off the cotton-fields, in their cotton clothes, very ill-prepared to meet the weather we then had in the city of Saint Louis.”

Alarmed, Tandy went into action. First, he gathered together a number of the single men and led them into the city, where they were farmed out to families of his acquaintance. As he puzzled over the plight of the
others, a chance conversation gave him an idea. Why not try the Mullanphy Board? asked a former secretary of that charitable organization.

Tandy knew of its existence; almost everyone in St. Louis did. Thirty years earlier Bryan Mullanphy, the only son of a well-to-do merchant, had been sitting in a local saloon, having a friendly drink with one of his friends, and apparently the conversation had turned to the plight of poor emigrants—many of them Irish—who were stranded in the city on their way to the mines of California. Bryan, either worried about the fact that he had no children to receive his inheritance or engulfed by a momentary flood of sentimentality found at the bottom of a glass, suddenly asked the bartender for a scrap of paper, and upon it he dashed off the terms of his will. Within two years he was dead, and the public learned that he had left a half-million dollars to aid travelers who were stalled at the "Gate-way to the West."

Tandy, as well as most others, assumed that the fund was intended for emigrants, the bulk of whom were from Europe and were white. Yet, there were cases on record where money had been advanced to colored settlers who, in the past few years, had filtered out of Tennessee and Kentucky, bound for Kansas homesteads. Therefore, the suggestion, coming from a man who had served on the Mullanphy Board, appeared to have merit. It was worth a try. Losing no time, he headed for the board's offices, located at 307 Locust Street, and sought an interview with Theodore Laveille, a former innkeeper who now received $2,000 a year to manage the daily affairs of the agency.

The meeting was brief and devastating. No, said Laveille, there were just too many applicants; their numbers soon would exhaust the small funds available. When the amazed applicant collected his wits and offered a meek objection, Laveille cut him down, remarking that he did not wish to discuss the matter—and good day.

Angered but unwilling to take "no" for an answer, Tandy sought out the board's chairman, Frederick Hill, who remarked that as he interpreted Mr. Mullanphy's will, these strangers were not entitled to any assistance. He did not say that succor was reserved for distressed members of the white race; he merely left a strong implication that this was so. A lesser man than Tandy would have doffed his cap, shrugged his shoulders, and consoled himself with the fact that this had been going on for a long time. Instead, he went to the attack, insisting that he have an audience with the board itself. Hill told him to come back at three o'clock, when the gentle-men, as it happened, were to hold a regular meeting. Perhaps they would hear him.

At the appointed time, Tandy turned up, with twenty-five ragged
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refugees in tow, and encamped his little band in the board’s waiting room. Here they sat for two hours, hoping that the matter of black refugees would come under discussion; but it did not, and the members prepared to adjourn. Recognizing one of the members, Tandy leaned over the railing that divided the room and asked if he could speak to the board.

“I don’t know, Mr. Tandy, whether you can or no; I will speak to the gentlemen and see if they will hear you,” the man responded. For a third time the cause appeared to be lost, but Tandy, now having crossed his Rubicon, plunged on. Silently he stared into the eyes of the other man, radiating grim reproach. After a few moments of awkward silence the board member blurted out: “Gentlemen, we must hear what he has to say.”

Somewhat annoyed, but impressed by the appearance of a small mob in their modest quarters, the board members reluctantly concluded that they had better listen. Told that these people were stranded and that it had been Bryan Mullanphy’s intent to help such unfortunates, they argued that while this was true, previous cases had been few in number and the attendant expense proportionately small. Here, on the other hand, were upwards of two hundred people, with no assurance that they were not merely the advance guard of an army of indigents. It would just be too expensive.

There was another argument. To help the poor was a commendable act; to assist honest plowmen in their quest for western farms certainly was in accordance with the American dream. But as one of the businessmen pointed out, this was a different situation, and it was not right for St. Louis to export a lot of paupers to Topeka or to any other city. One had to think of the brothers in neighboring municipalities. In the end they gave Tandy one hundred dollars, with instructions to use it for food.

The small bequest did not solve the problem, for it did not answer the basic question of what to do if the trickle of blacks became a flood. Even as the Mullanphy Board issued its ration money, the Grand Tower was thrashing its way up river, and on it were said to be another five hundred refugees. Worse, rumor had it that another nine hundred waited at one of the Louisiana landings, clamoring for passage.

The businessmen of St. Louis watched the advance on an imaginary battle map with growing apprehension. Once more they reaffirmed their belief that it would be cruel, not only to Kansas, but to the refugees themselves, to direct this flood toward Kansas. That remained the principle. But, reasoned the thinkers, there were practical considerations. Local resources were not geared to cope with an invading army of indigents. If more hungry hundreds appeared, even such a social service as providing
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soup lines would gobble up the remaining funds. Thus, the only logical conclusion appeared to be the discovery of some means to halt the infiltration.

The men of the Mullanphy Board were not alone in their dilemma. Mayor Henry C. Overstolz, described as being “much at sea” over the problem, paced his office floor and foresaw a civic crisis comparable to the occurrence of some natural disaster, such as flood or plague. As an ordinary, rational human being, his inclination was to help the needy, provided they were few and not too needy. But as he remarked, to do so would not only establish a precedent; it would advertise St. Louis as a mecca for those waiting down river. He wanted to stem the tide, not swell it.

As the mayor pondered his problem, it grew. A local newspaperman, watching the levee seethe with migrant blacks, called the movement “Africa’s Exodus.” Only three days had elapsed since the Colorado had made port. “To put the question fairly and squarely, St. Louis is threatened with the influx of thousands of Negro families who are absolutely without means,” the paper elaborated.

No one had to qualify the situation with the words “fairly and squarely” for Henry Overstolz. It was threatening, no matter how one viewed it. But he was a man of action, the elected leader and protector of his people. Prussian-born, he had lived in America for most of his fifty-seven years, having made so much money at merchandising, and then in lumber, banking, and insurance, that he had retired twice before the age of fifty. Also, he had married wisely, selecting as his mate Philippine Espenschied, a daughter of one of the oldest and best-known wagon manufacturers in the West, and she, in turn, had presented him with six children. So the German, who had worked his way up the ladder of success in the New World, to be head of an insurance company and president of the Fifth National Bank of St. Louis, and then, in the American tradition, to political rewards for such financial leadership, was not likely to be without an answer when the hour of trial faced his city. In fact, a local historian remarked, only four years later, so great was the mayor’s power that it might have been dangerous in the hands of a lesser man, but he was said to have wielded it carefully and only for the public good. And that was just what Overstolz wanted historians to say. He knew that if he were to be remembered as a leader, he had to be firm in the present crisis. Thoughtfully stroking his heavy mustache, the stocky burgomaster pondered the problem and then undertook a little research.

Thumbing the city ordinances, the mayor recalled that one of them provided for fines against any railroad bringing paupers to the city; the law applied to steamboat companies, as well. Municipal officials had the
power to require a one-thousand-dollar bond from any steamboat or railroad company to ensure against such an occurrence; that amount of money could support a goodly number of paupers, provided they did not stay too long. So, concluded the mayor, the law should be invoked against riverboat companies. But his legal advisers held up a collective staying hand and advised caution. The steamboats were common carriers, as were the railroads. The migrants had paid their passage, which was all that the transportation company could require of them.

Frustrated, the mayor tried another tack. It was an administrative rule of thumb that whenever public coffers were threatened and nothing in the municipal rule book applied to the emergency at hand, the ancient health problem was a reliable standby. In this case he could unsheath it for temporary use with apparent justification, for yellow fever had ravaged river towns with particular intensity in the recent past. Surely, people in rags must be potential disease carriers. So Overstolz sent out a hasty call to members of the City Board of Health, requesting an immediate special session.

Board members were understanding. They agreed that the approach of the Grand Tower, with its rumored cargo of civic problems, indeed called for action. One of them suggested that it was possible to stop the vessel and to quarantine its passengers, hold them for a few days, and then persuade them to go back home. His colleagues were more cautious. They pointed out that it would be costly to feed this great number and, worse, that once cared for, the inmates might elect to stay and take advantage of the free boardinghouse, confining as it might be.

Another problem vexed the Health Board. Supposing it interned and fed the unwanted visitors, hoping that they would then return home, where could people who were too poor to buy food find passage money? Capt. John P. Keiser of the Anchor Line, which did much business with both local and southern merchants, showed his firm’s civic spirit by offering to return the unwanted goods, free of charge. The board was pleased and thought the offer most generous, but there was no assurance that the emigrants could be prevailed upon to return, and there was no legal manner by which force could be used. All right, said one of the nettled members, if these people could not be coaxed or forced into going back, how about shipping them on up the river to Wyandotte, Kansas? If they wanted to go to Kansas, help them; it would cost only about three dollars a head, a very good investment considering the complications of the problem. It was an attractive idea, but it was set aside for the time being on the ground that Wyandotte might lose its municipal temper and ship the whole lot back on the first available steamer.
Still searching for an answer, but finding none, Mayor Overstolz did the best he could—he made a gesture. On March 15 he issued a public proclamation, warning impoverished blacks to stay away from St. Louis and advising them to remain in their southern homes. While this was fruitless, since a large percentage of those to whom it was directed could not read, and if they could, they were not likely to see the mayor’s manifesto, it would please southern planters who were losing their field hands at a critical time of the year. As the city fathers knew, these were very good customers.

City folks were both curious and puzzled by those who swarmed in and, like locusts, threatened the economic garden by the river. Caught by surprise, they tried to understand the reasons behind this unexpected thrust in their direction. Apparently it was a combination of hysteria and bonanza, a drive powered by terror from behind and golden dreams ahead. The “pull” factor, however, seemed to be the more powerful of the two. The rush upon Kansas was compared to that at Leadville, Colorado, during the same year; in each case, sudden affluence was the end in view.

“It is worse than the Leadville excitement,” wrote one who had visited the waterfront. “Outrageously absurd as it is, the children of Africa down there, with an ignorance as dark as their skins, have somehow got it in their heads that if they will come up to St. Louis they will be transported free of charge to the fertile plains of Kansas, and when there the Government will provide them with land, several hundred dollars, a mule and a plow.” He was dismayed to see some of them walk to the nearest railway station and confidently ask for the pass that they supposed awaited them. “Then they learn that they have been ‘fooled.’ But still they hope that in some mysterious way they will be transported to Kansas and all will come out ‘hunky-dory.’”

Slowly, word filtered back to the levee: there were no free railroad tickets to Kansas, and it was doubtful that other reported fringe benefits existed. That brought a murmur of angered disappointment from those who had come north aboard the Colorado. One of the old men arose and gained their attention. He explained that the reported pot of gold at the Kansas end of the rainbow did not exist, and he asked if the disappointed emigrants from the South wanted to return. The answer was a sullen, determined no, and with that the old gentleman agreed. Together, he promised them, they would go forward and “walk into Jordan’s tide.”

The Colorado group generated both interest and sympathy among newsmen who wrote their stories with a warmth that avoided excessive sentimentality. They talked of the “poor creatures” who had crawled beneath tarpaulins along the levee, trying to escape the wet and cold of
night, and of sitting around tiny fires with the strangers, listening to accounts of hardships down South that surpassed any of the stories written by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Then came the Grand Tower, in the predawn darkness of the sixteenth, pouring ashore between five and six hundred more men, women, and children. This time, newspapermen, in search of human-interest stories, were harder to find along the waterfront. Southern merchants and St. Louis businessmen, with furrowed brows and annoyed countenances, formed the welcoming committee. Why have you come? and Why don't you go home? they asked. Then, as if to anticipate their own questions, a spokesman read the mayor's proclamation to the pilgrims, warning that the city of their choice was absolutely without funds to support them or to send them on to some more promising place. Not only was there no work to be had, but those who arrived without money or friends surely would experience “much suffering and destitution,” read that coldly official document.

The question of why they had come went without a satisfactory answer. When St. Louis and other cities to the west asked it, the responses were vague and varied. The overriding theme was traditional among most settlers along the American frontier—to better one's condition, particularly economic. But there were variations. Some talked of financial trickery among the southern whites, of petty persecutions, and, now and then, of discrimination by local law officers. When questioners suggested that denial of the ballot had sent these people fleeing, the responses were disappointing. A number of them said that this was true, and they showed resentment; but a great many others displayed a frustrating lack of interest in politics, admitting that they never had tried to vote.

If these colored agrarians were not all driven away from the South, then what were the attractions up river, particularly in Kansas? Newspaper reporters and businessmen at St. Louis, seeking answers to this puzzler, suspected that propaganda was involved. Occasional references to leaflets or broadsides sent one of the newsmen in search of evidence. All he could find was a small circular signed by a T. W. Raymor, a colored emigrant agent of Vicksburg, that warned against listening to anyone making false promises of free transportation to Kansas or free land upon arrival. Disappointed at his findings, the reporter concluded that even though Raymor had sounded a warning, he had made an implied promise. Even supposing that the victims had reached this happy conclusion, the danger of leading them astray was not imminent if one accepts the same reporter’s estimate that only one in five hundred of the newcomers could read.

More satisfied was the correspondent of a New York paper, who
chatted with the field hands and then revealed to his readers that bulldozing—political intimidation—was the reason for flight. He said that the southern Negro, tired of such practices, simply had decamped. Republican newspapers readily accepted this view because it fitted their preconceptions perfectly. During the coming months it was their favorite answer to the repeated question, Why have you come?13

Perhaps the most realistic answer came from an irritated old lady who responded to the query in exasperation, saying that she just did not know why she had left home. Advised that Kansas was big and flat and that it would take money to get started, her annoyance grew. Heatedly she said that if she had known there were no trees there, she never would have listened to all the talk. She had something in common with the city fathers who puzzled at the movement. She, too, wondered why.14

St. Louis Negroes were less inclined to ponder the origins of the movement. They knew something of southern political conditions, but they knew also that they were in no position to do much about it. Following Tandy’s lead, they offered to help, much in the manner of volunteer firemen who respond to an emergency, by giving what aid they could and as fast as possible. Private homes were opened, and quarters, often already overcrowded, were shared with their thinly clad countrymen from the waterfront. The overflow crowded into small churches, with pallets scattered on the floors to provide dry beds for the night. In near-military fashion these places of worship were converted into command posts, where strategy sessions were held and plans were laid to combat the deepening crisis.

On March the seventeenth, as local Irishmen marched through muddy streets chanting the praises of the Lord’s chosen people, a handful of His troubled children gathered at one of the churches to talk about some of the less blessed. Charlton Tandy, now regarded as a leader, presided. One by one the speakers rose, but most of them were more inclined to point the finger at southern oppressors, who were accused of driving these black Jews from Egypt, than to offer concrete aid or even helpful suggestions.

John H. Johnson, a young Negro attorney and a clerk at the local custom house, was sympathetic. He had talked with some of the arrivals and they had complained vehemently of political, social, and economic oppression. But as a member of the resolutions committee, just organized, he shared Tandy’s view that the call was for action, not vindication. He proposed the creation of a Committee of Fifteen, which would be charged with the task of raising money for relief. The group was appointed, along with a number of subcommittees that included some local preachers, and
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to start the ball rolling, a hat was passed. Returned to the chairman, it yielded fifty dollars.15

Three nights later a large gathering of blacks, along with a few whites, again met in one of the churches, Tandy presiding. Apparently the money-raising program had stalled, or Tandy was still embittered at the parsimony of the white community, for he opened the meeting with a bitter attack upon the Mullanphy Board. A mere hundred dollars, he scoffed; why, he had known of cases where a single white family had received three times that much to reach its western destination. What kind of justice was that?

Others were in an equally grim mood. One angry man proposed a group of stinging resolutions that condemned southerners for their past actions, but he overshot his mark, carrying on at such lengths that there were cries from the floor commanding him to sit down. Disorder mounted. Someone suggested, as a diversionary tactic, that the minutes of the previous meeting be read, a motion that was carried amidst the hurling of random imprecations and the noisy singing of “Hang Jeff Davis on a Sour Apple Tree” by a group of dissenters who directed their displeasure at no one in particular.

The turmoil subsided momentarily when James Milton Turner rose and asked for recognition. He was one of the black community’s best-known members, and he commanded respect, if not affection. Although he was not yet forty, he had risen from slavery, had attended Oberlin College, and had served in the late war, having been wounded at Shiloh. After the war he taught school in Kansas City, and in the spring of 1871 he was appointed Minister Resident and Consul General to Liberia, partly, it was said, because in 1870 some twenty thousand Negroes had cast Republican votes at his advice. It was now less than a year since he had come home from Liberia, and as a man reputed to be the first Negro to be awarded a diplomatic post, he was something of a local celebrity. When he asked to be heard, the crowd listened.16

Turner was a moderate. Attacks upon the white establishment struck out at the group from which he had received all his political rewards. But discounting any such debts, he was not inclined toward extremism, and he saw no point in the resolutions proposed from the floor by the appointed Resolutions Committee. John W. Wheeler, who was also well known to the black community, rose to support Turner’s position. Negroes, he said, could not afford to array themselves against the whites, and he thought that nothing would be gained by assuming a militant stance. His people needed help, and he preferred that they should ask for it, not demand it. Wheeler, who would be remembered as one of Missouri’s more flamboyant
Negro editors, often was vehement in his writings, but his social and economic views were basically conservative, as he indicated on that March evening.17

But moderation was not popular that night. There was excitement in the air, the thrill of togetherness, and had anyone thought of it, the clenched fist might have been raised in defiance to the established order. As it was, apparently fists were in evidence, for reporters wrote of renewed argument, increased disorder, and "then supreme confusion that promised to end in a free fight." At the critical moment, just as name-calling and angry gesticulations threatened to dissolve into a donnybrook, one of the white women in the audience, who was known for her sympathy and good works among the Negro residents, arose and asked for order.

In the manner of the old-fashioned schoolma'am, she scolded the unruly audience, shaming them for such disgraceful conduct and sharply demanding instant reform. Sheepishly, like naughty children, they subsided. The most extreme of the impromptu resolutions were withdrawn. As the "official" proposal, they adopted one in which the South was criticized in less revolutionary tones for bulldozing, Ku Kluxism, intimidation, and degradation. The meeting was closed by passing the hat, which yielded fifty dollars, and the chastened participants quietly went home.18

By the time that members of the St. Louis black community and a handful of concerned whites had gathered on that tumultuous evening, the problem at hand was approximately ten days old. While the movement had not yet reached flood proportions, by then an estimated fourteen hundred southern Negroes had reached the city, some of whom had continued by rail or Missouri River steamer, having enough money of their own to pay the required fare. On that morning the City of Vicksburg landed, bringing an additional forty refugees, who were in worse circumstances than their predecessors. Without money and clothed in rags, they possessed nothing in the way of household goods except a few cracked dishes, pots, kettles, and pans and some blankets and quilts. A determined but somewhat discouraged delegation of their countrymen met them at the Anchor Line wharf and took them to St. Paul's chapel, which was located at Eleventh and Christy avenues. When a polite inquiry was made, suggesting that perhaps they would like to return home, there were no affirmative responses. With a shrug of their collective shoulders, the committeemen set about farming out the latest batch of arrivals to anyone who would volunteer shelter.

By now about a thousand of these arrivals remained in the city, perhaps ten of whom each day found some kind of employment. Private
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homes had taken as many as possible; the rest crowded into the churches, where they lined up before the soup kettles by day and slept together on the floor at night. The others drifted about town looking for work or just loafing on street corners, uncertain as to how they should pass the time.¹⁹

For those who had money, the problem was solved. Saloons and gambling joints along Christy Avenue, operated by enterprising members of their race, did a thriving business. Not only were local palaces of pleasure open to visitors, their proprietors were even willing to accept talented strangers into their ranks. Travelers who were ignorant of the big town’s opportunities were enlightened by representatives who were so aggressive that they even boarded incoming vessels and explained new fields of economic endeavor to prospective clients. For example, when the John B. Maude arrived—a steamer named after a prominent and highly respectable St. Louis merchant—it was met by a delegation of local blacks who awaited it “for the purpose of getting women to accompany them to their haunts of vice.” The boarding party was repulsed, but the counterattack was not a complete success. A few aggressive invaders dodged past the defenders and made their pitch, to which several of the female pilgrims listened and then went ashore to turn a penny.²⁰

Editors puzzled over the membership of the hegira. They were not by nature a migratory race, wrote one. They preferred to live in the poverty of the southern cotton fields rather than to venture north in search of a better living, and as a rule, they bore much abuse from their old masters, who understood this tendency to remain rooted. It therefore followed, he concluded, that stories of political terror and economic injustice toward southern blacks must be true.²¹

As documentation for this thesis, the case of Curtis Pollard was cited. His was a story that might have dovetailed into Uncle Tom’s Cabin without further editing. Pollard, who was then sixty-nine, had farmed in Madison Parish, Louisiana, for the past fifteen years. During Reconstruction years, when the federal army supported black aspirants to office, he had served in both houses of the state legislature. His departure for the North had come quite unexpectedly; while helping some of the emigrants haul their worldly goods to the Grand Tower, then tied up at Delta, Louisiana, he had been compelled to take passage himself. A band of men, brandishing cocked guns, accused him of encouraging the others—a charge that he denied—and ordered him aboard. Leaving his teams, as well as a weeping wife and children behind, he had borrowed the four-dollars fare, and now he was a transient in St. Louis, without funds and fleeing to some undecided and unknown destination. The South was rid of another accused agitator, or in the local parlance, a “smart nigger.”²²
Stories such as Pollard's generated sympathy among white residents, but they were reluctant to open their purses or to accept the black immigrants among them. Evidence indicates that the desire to get them out of town overshadowed any philanthropic impulses that spoke of supporting them for any length of time. Even the Mullanphy Board was moved from its intransigence. While at first it refused to grant more than the one hundred dollars intended for food, it now decided that the founding father must have intended to aid black as well as white emigrants, and somehow $187.50 was produced to buy seventy-five boat tickets to Kansas. Tandy later recalled that, eventually, the board donated about $450.28

The transients had no argument with their hosts. While a few may have found friends in St. Louis and concluded that the place had possibilities, most of the arrivals had started for the land of promise—Kansas—and that is where they wanted to go. A number of northbound packet boats stopped at St. Louis after mid March, some bringing as many as five hundred blacks; others, no more than a handful. Those who had any money at all went on by rail or by Missouri River steamboat; the remainder either waited for the next steamer or simply were stranded, without funds. Less than a week after the Colorado's arrival, arrangements had been made to send forward its leftovers, as well as those who had arrived later on the Grand Tower, the Maude, and other boats. Passage was secured on the Missouri River steamer the Joe Kinney, which was bound for Wyandotte and points beyond and was scheduled to sail on the twenty-first.

Of those who wanted to go, about three hundred had the necessary $2.50 deck fare; another one hundred fifty presumably were without any funds. The Transportation Committee, made up largely of prominent men from the city's Negro community, provided money. As is sometimes the case in the administration of welfare funds, the screening process failed to separate the needy from the greedy. An undetermined number—probably quite small—failed to make an accurate report of financial status in accepting free passage. There was a moment of embarrassment when one old fellow with $800, who had sworn that he was penniless, dropped his pocketbook and the contents spread over the deck. Shamefacedly admitting the size of his bankroll, he surrendered $2.50 and joined the ranks of paying passengers.

There were administrative lapses. Willis Carter, presumed to be one of the group's leaders, collected money from sixty or seventy travelers with the promise that he would obtain the necessary tickets. Then he passed them out at random, some of the recipients having paid nothing at all. Those who had entrusted him with their money set up a loud clamor, accusing Willis of chicanery and even of downright theft. It looked for a
And Walk into Jordan’s Tide

time as though the self-appointed ticket agent, surrounded by the angry mob, would come to bodily harm. Only the intervention of the boat’s officers and members of the Transportation Committee prevented blows from falling. Getting the misspent money back was like trying to unscramble eggs, and after fruitless appeals, those in charge were forced to take up a subscription for passengers who had paid but had received nothing.

Then came the next excitement: boarding. The wharf, to which the Joe Kinney had come for its passengers, became the scene of a momentary camp meeting, with chanting, singing, and the sound of joy taking on a near-religious fervor. This was the day of jubilee; next stop, the promised land. It was also a moment of relief, the end of waiting. “Nearly all were merry,” wrote a witness to the happiness, “the committeemen because they were ridding themselves of a part of their burden; the refugees because they imagined their fondest hopes were soon to be realized.”

They filed across the gangplank, this strange ragged army, which marched upon some unseen objective, cheerfully unconcerned about the problems that lay ahead. “Some carried bundles of clothing, crockery, baskets and boxes of eatables,” noted a local scribe, “while others, divested of all but wearing apparel, and possessing none too much of that, moved along freely and joked with those who were burdened.” Mothers anxiously watched their progeny, fearful of losing some of the smaller pilgrims in the rush to get aboard. But one young woman came aboard, head bent down and crying; she had buried her child only that morning.

It was six in the evening before loading was completed. Roustabouts, shouting “All aboard for Ka-an-sas!” having called out their final warnings, now began to take in lines preparatory to sailing. Passengers crowded along the portside railings and took a last look at St. Louis. Suddenly one of them began to sing, and the crowd joined in:

Oh, Kansas! sweet Kansas!
We’s boun’ fur de happy lan’ ob Kansas.

They were still singing as the Kinney cleared the wharf, and with stacks smoking and paddles slowly foaming the mud-colored water, it splashed off into the gloom.24
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