In Search of Canaan

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For the local committeemen, who had voluntarily assumed the task of caring for the transients, there was to be no rest. Before that Saturday evening was over, some of them may have wished that they were aboard the *Joe Kinney* as it disappeared up the Missouri, bound for the "happy land." As it was, they barely had time to wave farewell before whistles were heard from down the Mississippi, warning that more work was at hand.

It was the *Halliday*, with several hundred more migrants from the South. Their appearance was not, however, as discouraging as it might have been. Many of this latest group had an ample stock of household goods, even mules, wagons, cows, and calves. Better yet, a number of them had enough money for rail or boat fare to Kansas City.

The local reception machinery was once more put into motion, and beds were laid out in local churches to provide a place for those who were in need. When the *Annie P. Silvers* arrived the next morning, the reception committee heaved a collective sigh of relief. It brought only two Negro families, both of which were promptly cared for.¹

During the following week the Reverend John Turner, one of several local ministers involved in the work at hand, set about collecting money to buy boat tickets to Wyandotte for another four hundred hopeful Kansas settlers who were becalmed at St. Louis. The Mullanphy Board reluctantly produced enough for seventy-five passages, and by beating the bushes among other charitable institutions, Turner found enough money to pay for another one hundred fifty. The *E. H. Durfee*, of the Kansas City
Packet Company, was engaged for the trip, and on March 29 Turner and Capt. George G. Keith supervised the loading.

Once again there was some difficulty about collecting money from those who had funds, and in some cases, local committeemen were obliged to become quite firm. When the solvent and the insolvent were sorted out, some three hundred boarded the boat, only seventy of whom paid their own fares. Another hundred, who could not be provided for, were turned away, and they went back uptown to await further action from their sponsors.

It was morning before the Durfee was ready to clear for Wyandotte. The passengers had remained on the boat all night, sleeping wherever they could or conversing quietly with one another to pass the time. But at dawn there was renewed excitement and a murmur of anticipation. As the sun rose, hawsers were cast loose, and with the ringing of bells and the throb of the stern paddles, another boatload of southern emigrants moved out into the Missouri River. Those who saw off the latest contingent were satisfied with their work, and they presumed that others would take up the cause when the group reached Kansas. It was an assumption that was to disturb both black and white residents of that young state, for it was even less prepared to cope with the rush than had been the surprised municipality of St. Louis.²

Although the prominent members of St. Louis' black community who had worked so hard to help their distressed countrymen from the South drew great personal satisfaction from their endeavors, they now began to doubt that they could keep up the good work for any length of time. Local sources of financial aid were limited and were beginning to show signs of exhaustion. But the flow of humanity from the South gave no indications of abating.

The second week of April confirmed fears that the problem was far from solution. The Colorado returned with twenty-five adults and a few children, swelling the total on hand to about one hundred fifty. Funds were available to send all of these forward, but after that there would be no more money for others. Then came the Grand Tower, carrying two hundred fifty, or all that could be crowded aboard the already overburdened vessel. The latest arrivals would have to shift for themselves, remarked a local newspaperman. Some of them were able to do that. They had a little money, but this small reserve had cost some of them dearly. Simon Mitchell, of Vicksburg, admitted that he had sold his house, worth $400, for $6.00, and a spring wagon, valued at $40.00, had gone for $4.50. Others, who told similar stories, complained that what little they had was diminished by new demands from riverboat officers.
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For example, until now no charge had been made for dogs, but these arrivals had to pay $1.00 each for canine transportation, and children, who had been traveling free, now were assessed four dollars each.³

Behind the Grand Tower were the Halliday, the City of Vicksburg, the John B. Maude, and the Annie P. Silvers, each carrying a few more deck fares. They deposited another 186 hungry travelers on the levee. Few of this latest group had money to take them any farther, but they were under the impression that it made no difference, since the fares would be paid in some way or other. The newcomers sat around campfires, on temporary benches made from kegs and planks, waiting for someone to provide food, shelter, and travel funds. The Reverend John Turner and twenty-four other St. Louis blacks, who constituted the hastily assembled committee that had aided the first refugees, now faced a real dilemma. The group, known locally as the Committee of Twenty-five, was out of money and in debt. In desperation, Turner sent out another appeal: “Help us! in God’s name.”⁴

Those to whom the request was directed were sympathetic, but were somewhat nettled by the situation. Local contributors understood that employment was to be had on an Iowa railroad project, and thirty dollars a month was offered to prospective workers. When this information was relayed to the migrants, they sulked and said that they did not know where Iowa was. Besides, they had been told that Kansas was the promised land—no one down South had said anything about Iowa—and that was where they were going; no other place interested them.⁵

So they clung to the waterfront, cold and uncomfortable but stubbornly determined to reach Kansas. Canvas walls were hastily erected to ward off the raw wind that swept the river. A few camped on a Star Line wharf boat, awaiting the next Missouri River packet bound for Kansas. Two of the women found brooms and swept the deck clean where it was not occupied by the baggage. Fires were lighted on the levee, and those who had anything to cook brought out their fry pans; the others simply gathered around and warmed their hands. Before long, Turner found a few groceries, which the women now prepared. A cluster of children jumped rope nearby, cheerfully unaware that their elders had problems.⁶ As Turner watched the scene, he wondered how long he could find food for these troubled people. Fortunately, help was on its way. During the early days of April, Charleston Tandy and James Milton Turner made separate trips to Washington, D.C., to plead with the president and other officials for federal aid. Although neither of the men had any success, their presence in the East was noted by the press, and through interviews they put their case before the public. Tandy, for example, spoke
before a crowd of ten thousand at New York’s Cooper Institute. The aged, tottering politician Thurlow Weed was on the platform that night, denouncing the treatment accorded to southern Negroes, and when the hat was passed, it gathered $350. Tandy’s appearance before both houses of the Massachusetts legislature, as well as a speech at Faneuil Hall in Boston, generated more publicity. At St. Louis, the financial waterspout took on new life, and a few dying droplets turned into a small trickle.

A Zanesville, Ohio, sympathizer shipped off two boxes of clothing and $32.50 in cash, with the comment, “May the Lord’s blessing go with it and make it as the widow’s oil.” From Decatur, Illinois, came word that $157.35 had been collected and that it would be along shortly. A theological seminary at Oberlin, Ohio, sent three barrels of used clothing, as did the Second Congregational Church of that city, the latter group saying that it had $5 left over after paying shipping charges, and it, too, would go into the mail. Promises of aid came from a literary society in St. Paul, Minnesota, as well as from individuals in Philadelphia, Cleveland, Indianapolis, and smaller cities. A resident of Buffalo, New York, who had no money to send, offered the advice that Dakota, not Kansas, was the "promised land.”

Northern Negroes also responded. Mrs. Anna Douglass of Burlington, Iowa, sent a box of clothing; and John A. Brown, principal of a Negro school at Dayton, Ohio, calling the exodus a “providential act,” promised to give all the aid possible. “God bless the movement,” he added. Before long, small amounts of money were coming into St. Louis from all over the country. The Reverend Moses Dickson, pastor of the Eighth Street Baptist Church, reported that he had received $186.50 during the last three days of April alone.

Those who contributed were curious to know the seriousness of the situation, how many indigents required help, and where their money was going. The St. Louis Globe-Democrat, a Republican journal, tried to answer the question. While a head count was hard to establish, it was estimated that by mid April 6,250 blacks had arrived, 2,300 of whom had been able to pay their own fares to Wyandotte. About 350 remained in St. Louis, awaiting transportation, of which 65 were ill enough to require medical attention. To help the needy, $1,969 in cash had been collected, supplemented by clothing and supplies valued at $850. By that date the Committee of Twenty-five’s finance committee was out of funds and owed $41 for groceries and $599 to the Missouri River Packet Company for transportation. The committee’s headquarters, located at 618 North Levee Street, also was used as a clearing house for transients who were
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looking for jobs in the city or were awaiting a chance to move on. "We contracted a big debt there," one of the committeemen later testified. By now, leaders of St. Louis's black community had concluded that relief operations were being handled inefficiently and that a more permanent, more efficient organization must be developed. A less complimentary interpretation, suggested by some of the dissidents, held that there was money to be made in this sudden and unexpected transient business. The finger was pointed at J. Milton Turner, secretary of the finance committee, who was charged with failing to account properly for some of the funds that he had collected in the name of charity. Outraged at the implication, or unable to make proper explanations, the accused resigned and went into business for himself. On April 14 he and seven others incorporated the Colored Immigration Aid Society. Its announced purpose was to raise funds for the establishment of Negro colonies in the West and to assist Negroes in their efforts to leave the South. Shares priced at a dollar minimum were offered to the public.

The secessionists called a meeting for Saturday evening, April the nineteenth, at the Lindell Hotel. At that time J. Milton Turner, who presided, announced that the Committee of Twenty-five had conducted its business in a "very random and irresponsible" manner, that it now was totally disorganized, and that it could not even get together to perform its duties. Listeners were told that the other Turner—the Reverend John—having plunged his committee into debt, was anxious to turn over both the work and the liabilities to the new group. Some two thousand dollars had been expended, explained J. Milton Turner, and now he, in turn, demanded an accounting of its disposition.

Clearly, continued the chairman, a new and nationally organized effort was called for, not only because of the St. Louis situation, but also to answer the demands of a growing dissatisfaction among southern Negroes. He revealed that there was the prospect of getting fifty thousand acres of land in Texas from a railroad company, but he did not regard that as any solution to the problems of his people. Blacks were leaving Texas; why should others want to go there? Before adjournment the organizers decided that their executive committee should have an all-white advisory board in order to give the work a wider base in the community. A meeting was called for Monday evening, to further perfect organizational details of this newest black-colonization project.

St. Louis was treated to, not one, but two, meetings. J. Milton Turner's Colored Immigration Aid Society held its meeting at the Lindell, as scheduled, but only nine or ten people attended. Turner casually mentioned that he had received $20 or $25—he had forgotten which—from "a
gentleman named Thomas.” Then came questions about money raised by the Committee of Twenty-five. Charles Stark spoke up and said that he had been made treasurer of that group and had received $206.95. Turner was surprised. He thought the figure was nearer $2,000. No, said Stark, only a little over $200. As a matter of fact, because the chairman had gathered in recent contributions, he had received little or nothing lately.

Meanwhile, St. Paul’s Chapel, at Eleventh and Christy avenues, was the scene of a rival strategy session. The Reverends John Turner and Moses Dickson had issued a call to the faithful of the Committee of Twenty-five, but only a dozen had shown up. However, the meeting proceeded. The little group first considered financial matters, and after hearing from Moses Dickson, of the finance committee, that not $200 but only $25 constituted the funds on hand, it turned to even more serious considerations. J. Milton Turner’s recent legal move, to incorporate a rival relief organization, now threatened the establishment. This dictated the severest kind of action.

In a proper parliamentary manner it was moved that the name of J. Milton Turner be stricken from the rolls of the Committee of Twenty-five. The motion also mentioned the touchy subject of money, revealing that the accused was known to have received contributions but that he had not surrendered any of it since April 11. As the instigator of the motion took his seat, the fray began; the ensuing debate reached violent proportions in a matter of moments.

The Reverend John Turner, ignoring his role as presiding officer, took the floor and announced that if J. Milton Turner and his group “wanted to go off and set up a kingdom for themselves they could do so,” but he did not propose that the secessionists should break up the present work. That was too mild a stand for John Wheeler, who was known for more extreme positions in local civic matters. He openly accused Milton of betrayal and called him the “Judas of the Committee.” The charge was a little strong for other participants, some of whom recognized both Milton’s political power and his prestige in the Negro community. Wheeler’s blast set off “a red-hot debate, amounting to a tip-top wrangle,” reported a local newspaper.

When the flames of contention finally burned low and the orators had exhausted their supplies of invective, it was concluded that no matter what one thought of J. Milton Turner, the Committee of Twenty-five had outlived its usefulness and that a more permanent organization was needed. Thus the Colored Refugee Relief Board, with offices at 903 Morgan Street, came into being.11

Although Wheeler’s words were harsh, there was some truth in them.
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The announced purpose of Turner's Immigration Aid Society—to be financed by charitable contributions—was to send Negro farmers into what he described as the “rich and growing West.” Granting that charges accusing him of mishandling funds may have been exaggerated, or may even have been without foundation, it is easier to show that he saw some financial benefit to be derived from the business of immigration. John H. Johnson, who had known Turner from boyhood, agreed with Sen. Henry W. Blair, who later said of the undertaking: “It looked like a scheme to raise funds to purchase lands in Kansas that are to be sold out afterwards on the installment plan.”

Circumstances appear to have governed Turner's attitude toward the exodus. At first he charged southerners with “extortion, murder, rapine, arson and barbarous outlawry” and urged Negroes to leave the South. But when it became clear that his immigration plan was a failure, he opposed the exodus, asserting that the South was the true home of the Negro and that there he should remain.

The running battle of the blacks was well covered by local reporters, who were amused at the sudden interest in philanthropy shown by some members of the St. Louis Negro community when eastern money in support of the cause began to appear. The resulting publicity, however, caused some concern among business leaders. If the word spread throughout the disaffected plantation areas of the South that not one, but two, St. Louis committees were raising money to help westering immigrants, the whole movement might be accelerated, rather than slowed. The split also was regarded as being detrimental to the case of the refugees. Civic leaders who worked in behalf of these unfortunates in both St. Louis and at Wyandotte, feared that eastern philanthropists now would hesitate, not knowing the proper place to send their contributions. They suggested that J. Milton Turner’s group disband.

The Missouri Republican, a leading St. Louis newspaper whose politics were Democratic, lamented the fact that the flow continued. About two percent of the arrivals had died, it reported, and another ten percent were sick. Like it or not, the municipality would have to fight the spread of disease, and if it did not want to absorb a large group of indigents, it would have to provide for some means of getting them out of town, preferably to Kansas, to which place these people stubbornly insisted that they wanted to go. The editor was annoyed at the nation’s Republican press, particularly the newspapers of New England and the Middle Atlantic States, for publicizing the exodus and for calling it a significant event. He noted that while these journals expressed sympathy for the southern Negro and talked loudly of tyranny in Dixie, none of them had invited
the refugees to its city. Instead, he said, they usually applied Horace Greeley's advice, suggesting, "Go West, young black man," go west to Kansas, "where John Brown's soul is doing perpetual guard duty." 13

Fears that the influx of colored immigrants would continue to clog the levees at St. Louis were justified. By late April it was estimated that between 8,600 and 9,000 had arrived since the movement began, only about 2,400 of whom had been able to pay their fares to Kansas. 14 If these figures were at all accurate, this meant that since the estimate at mid month, approximately 2,500 more had arrived, most of whom had no money to continue their travels. Missouri River packets continued to carry away all who could buy tickets and those for whom passage was supplied by contributions. On April 14 the E. H. Durfee left for Wyandotte with 300, and five days later the Joe Kinney took another 250. That left behind some 60 or 70, most of whom were sick.

The relief was only temporary; new arrivals from the South came in daily, sometimes in dribs and drabs, at other times in substantial numbers. John Turner's Colored Refugee Relief Board contracted with the Missouri River Packet Company to provide passage to Kansas at $3.00 per head for adults and $1.50 for passengers between the ages of twelve and twenty-one, smaller children being carried free. The company also allowed as many transients as could be accommodated to live in its wharf boats until they were ready to go on. A correspondent from an eastern newspaper mingled with wharf-boat residents, observing their daily lives with fascination. Roustabouts piled baggage and household goods onto the decks, while relief committee members brought in supplies of firewood and food to be prepared on the adjacent shore. At night the campers moved around in the firelight, some carrying on animated conversation about joyful days ahead, while others joined in group singing or dancing. At last, when the excitement had subsided, they lay down and slept on the shore or scattered about on the bare boat decks. 15

Supplying this small army of emigrants kept members of the Relief Board busy. On the evening before the Joe Kinney sailed, for example, Moses Dickson and some of his helpers arrived at the wharf with 300 loaves of bread, 258 pounds of meat, 4 barrels of crackers, 2 barrels of beans, and 1 barrel of corn meal to be distributed among the passengers on their way to Wyandotte. 16 John H. Johnson later estimated that between seventeen and twenty thousand dollars were thus expended that spring and summer, most of which came from New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and other outside sources. 17 Up to June 9, said Johnson, almost 74,000 rations, worth about ten cents each, had been distributed. By then the board had received 350 packages of clothing—hats, boots, shoes, caps—
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valued at $4,329.10, almost all of which had come from the East. In addition came garden seed, farm implements, and even soap, pins, and needles.\(^{18}\)

As the weather warmed, some of the problems facing the stream of arrivals and their sponsors were modified. Now it was a matter of food, clothing, and transportation, without the complicating factor of cold, wet weather. But as the numbers swelled and as the physical problem of handling growing numbers of bodies increased, both white and black St. Louis worried. Charlton Tandy later revealed that, according to records kept by the Relief Board, over twenty thousand Negro men, women, and children passed through St. Louis in the “Exodus year” of 1879.\(^{19}\) How many more transients, who did not require or obtain assistance, entered and left the Gateway City is a matter of conjecture.

By and large the Exodusters, as they came to be called, were peaceful and law-abiding; they caused law officers almost no difficulty. Most of them were confused and frightened, and they were herded in docile groups to places of food and shelter. Far from being a danger to public order, the strangers continued to serve as the victims of St. Louis Negroes, who enticed them into saloons, gambling houses, and brothels and stole their baggage under the guise of caring for it in the name of the relief committee. Before long, charges of more serious misconduct were heard.

On the evening of March 30 a local Negro named Henry A. Green attended one of the meetings held at a local church in behalf of the refugees, and in answer to appeals for help, he volunteered to take Sylvia Ann Craxton, aged eleven, home to sleep with his own children. Later that evening the child was found wandering around the city, in a daze, and upon being questioned, she said that she had been raped. On May 6 Green came up for a trial, and after brief testimony and only a few minutes of deliberation by the jury, he was found guilty and was sentenced to twenty years in the penitentiary.\(^{20}\)

While problems such as these disturbed the city fathers, the main difficulty was financial and to some degree emotional. Later in April, for example, a group of St. Louis businessmen met to ponder the problem of expediting the movement out of their city. The Reverend John Turner, representing the Relief Board, suggested that the flow be turned in the direction of the Neosho Valley, in southeastern Kansas, to which place emigrants could be sent by rail for $3.75 a head.

“I don’t think much of that,” said Meyer Rosenblatt, collector of the city of St. Louis; “you might as well send them to Wyandotte.” He argued that Wyandotte was not only located “right in the heart of the promised land,” it was also on a main transportation route, where both
rail and boat services were available. He preferred the speedier means of travel. "Don't send them by the circuitous route of the river; too much time is wasted and money expended in doing so," he argued. "Get old emigrant cars for $120 each. A great number of persons can be crowded into them, and the transportation will be more rapid while the expense will be less."

Rosenblatt's desire to get the job done quickly, cheaply, and by the most direct route met with the disapproval of some Kansans. Businessmen from Wyandotte who attended the meeting were not enthusiastic about his choice of destination for the emigrants. One of the reasons that they had come to St. Louis lay in the hope that some city other than theirs could be found as the main target for the westward thrust. But despite their objections, Wyandotte continued to be the next stop for the black emigrants.

During these weeks, black committee members experienced further frustrations. In mid May, Charlton Tandy returned from his eastern junket, where he had sought political support and financial contributions. At a meeting held in the Eighth Street Baptist Church he told his listeners that the black schism was not confined to their city. Upon reaching Washington, D.C., he had sought out Frederick Douglass, the great Negro emancipationist, hoping to use his influence in getting an audience with the president. Although Tandy had met Douglass several times in St. Louis, he was now given a frigid reception. "I don't know you, sir; you had better get some old time Abolitionist to introduce you," said Douglass, who flatly refused to cooperate. Tandy then turned to another of his race, Professor Richard T. Greener, of Howard University, who performed the requested service.

When Tandy's acceptance by the "old-time Abolitionists" throughout the East became apparent, Douglass sent word that he was ready to receive the emissary from St. Louis. Tandy told his supporters at the Baptist church meeting that he had replied, "Go to the Devil," and the audience erupted in loud cheers.

This annoyed J. Milton Turner, who had become the gadfly of the relief group that he had left. He now jumped to his feet and delivered a highly eulogistic speech in behalf of Douglass. The chair tried to quiet him, saying that a resolution offered by Tandy—one that strongly censured Douglass—was not debatable; but Turner drove on, unwilling to yield. After considerable confusion and turmoil in the heavily packed church, a development that had become a regular occurrence at these meetings, it was ruled that Turner would not be heard. The complainant merely turned up the volume and ignored the dictum until he was drowned out in
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the uproar of protest. To restore peace and to prevent a possible outbreak of fisticuffs, it was decided that the motion should be tabled. Satisfied that he had achieved a standoff, Turner sat down. 22

Squabbles among individuals were merely scattered oratorical fire-fights; the main battle centered about the question of coping with the influx. Local Negroes, who were prominent or who sought prominence in the new situation, were concerned primarily with feeding, housing, and supplying further transportation for their brothers from the South. City fathers, on the other hand, wanted either to turn back the flow or to divert it elsewhere—at a minimum cost.

In June, Thomas C. Bedford, of Vicksburg, filed a suit against the Memphis and St. Louis Packet Company (popularly known as the Anchor Line), asking ten thousand dollars in damages and alleging that the company's vessels had broken the law concerning overloading. When questioned at St. Louis, company president John A. Scudder, whose vessels normally carried only freight, explained that it was all due to a misunderstanding; he thought that he had permission from the authorities to carry as many as three hundred passengers. Of more interest to residents of St. Louis was the remark, made in connection with the story, that "this suit grows out of the late exodus of Negroes from the South." 23 By inference, the crisis had passed.

At times it appeared that this might be the case. During the late spring an old and unused foundry was converted into barracks to provide the immigrants with more suitable housing. A newspaper reporter, visiting the place during the first week of July, found only a dozen refugees there, four of whom were sick. 24 By now, a nationally known relief agency, the Western Sanitary Commission, had joined the work, and it attempted to provide emergency relief services at the old foundry. However, this latest volunteer group was obliged to give up very shortly, being out of funds, and the facility was therefore closed. Newcomers again resorted to camping along the river banks or in wharf boats of the Missouri River Packet Company. James Yeatman, president of the Sanitary Commission, expressed regret at having had to retreat from the battlefront, but he was obliged to admit that the task was just too formidable. He had entered the work thinking that the movement would be of short duration and that those who were in distress could be helped for a relatively small amount of money. He was wrong on both counts. After having expended six thousand dollars, Yeatman discovered that the flow of newcomers had not abated and that there were no indications that it would. The only solution that he could offer was to inform southern Negroes that no more
help could be expected in St. Louis and that if they came, they would be on their own.25

St. Louis businessmen must have nodded their heads in assent. They had been saying the same thing for weeks. When Yeatman complained that he had appealed in vain to city authorities for help in carrying on his work, no apologies were forthcoming. Philanthropic efforts, financed from the outside, were welcome, but money from local Caucasian sources was increasingly hard to come by. Funds expended merely seemed to generate the arrival of fresh hordes from the South. Gradually the St. Louis business community was hardening its attitude to such a degree that critics must have thought it downright misanthropic.