In Search of Canaan

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In Search of Canaan: Black Migration to Kansas, 1879-80.


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The passengers who boarded Missouri River steamboats for the last leg of their migration to Kansas had no desire to stop anywhere short of that announced goal. Some of them landed at Kansas City, because they had no other choice, but most of them preferred to avoid that place because of its open hostility to the exodus. Wyandotte, just across the river, was regarded as a sanctuary. It was located on the magic soil of Kansas, a state whose very name was possessed of a special meaning to the pilgrims who sought this near-mythical land of promise.

As the Durfee neared Kansas City early in April, a local newspaper trumpeted the sour notes of hate and suspicion that the emigrants so earnestly had hoped to avoid. The Times warned that “five hundred penniless and destitute Negroes” were headed upriver. It accused St. Louis of having secretly paid the passage of what it termed “this cargo of human rubbish,” and it wondered why the western Missouri metropolis should receive and care for “the paupers and thieves of St. Louis.” Garrison the town, a reporter advised the residents of neighboring Wyandotte. Fend off this dangerous and undesirable army of indigents.

If Kansas City was militant, Wyandotte was merely puzzled by the development. Observing the arrival of ragged, hungry Negroes by the hundred, one of the white residents commented that it looked “like the alm houses of the Mississippi Valley had been searched to get them together.” The little Kansas town, of some five thousand residents, was totally unprepared for such a sudden and unexpected influx, but its residents recognized human need when they saw it, and they made strenuous efforts to
prevent suffering. Taking a cue from St. Louis, Wyandotte opened its churches, and all available means of shelter were offered to protect the strangers from the cold, driving spring rain. About three miles north of the city lay the village of Quindaro and the old Freedmen's University buildings, some of which now were put to use as temporary barracks. The university, founded by the Reverend Eben Batchley in 1857, had declined after the Civil War and had been taken over by Negro residents of the town, particularly by members of the African Methodist Church.

The Quindaro safety valve was helpful, but only to a degree. It diverted part of the flow, but "still they come," said one of Wyandotte's civic leaders. "We shall certainly be swamped. We are not panic stricken, although the shrill whistle of every boat which comes causes us many anxious thoughts." In his eyes the sudden presence of an army of sick, unwashed, poverty-stricken human beings was the equivalent of an invasion, and thus, as a "war measure," as a public necessity, he thought that the state of Kansas had the responsibility of aiding one of its beleaguered cities. 3

By the early days of April the Fanny Lewis and the Joe Kinney had deposited some 600 Exodusters; then came the Durfee with another 450. Back to St. Louis went the Joe Kinney after yet another load, and so the rotation continued until, by mid month, an estimated 1,700 to 2,000 were camped at Wyandotte's doorstep. "For the sake of God and humanity can you obtain free transportation for four hundred colored refugees on the K.P. & Santa Fe roads," begged Mayor J. S. Stockton, of Wyandotte, in a telegraphic appeal to Gov. John St. John at Topeka. 4 The little Kansas town was approaching the bursting point.

Meanwhile, as the numbers mounted steadily, the complexity of the situation grew. The sick were nursed by volunteers from the community, local doctors donating their services, and even patients who were ambulatory were watched with deepening concern as fear spread that they might be carriers of yellow fever. Each day brought reports of deaths among them, and even their dead bodies presented local authorities with fresh problems. By mid April the city and county authorities at Wyandotte were locked in an administrative impasse, the county claiming that it had exhausted its quarterly funds for the burial of paupers, and the city stoutly maintaining that it could afford to bury only its own dead. 5

Although the Wyandotte city fathers stated bravely that they were not inclined to panic, the avalanchelike proportions of the movement upon their city put them in a frame of mind that approached such a condition. Then, to irritate an already maddening situation, the Kansas City Daily Journal goaded them by inferring that their whole philanthropic effort was
shallow. R. M. Tunnell answered for the Wyandotte relief committee, grimly explaining that his group was making every effort to aid these sick, hungry people, and it was also doing everything in its power to find work for those who were strong enough to be employed. It was particularly discouraging to hear that a local farmer had tried to hire one of the young Negro boys for summer field work, offering to supply him with clothing, board, and room, but to no avail. The former southern field hands wanted at least fifty cents a day, nothing less, and until such wages were forthcoming, they proposed to wait and draw free rations at Wyandotte. Meantime, said Tunnell, fresh bread was being supplied daily, and rations of meat were issued when they could be procured. What was needed most was money for transporting these people to their desired destination, but cash donations were few. Only six dollars had been offered by mid April.

After studying their plight, the civic leaders of Kansas City and Wyandotte concluded that possible solutions to the problem resembled the three “R’s”—relief, rehabilitation, or removal. Sheer numbers were drowning the relief efforts; for the same reason, rehabilitation was out of the question. The apparent answer lay in distributing the human backlog throughout Kansas, fragmenting it into segments that would be small enough for the little communities to the west to absorb them. But that would take time and money.

The situation called for energetic action. The flow of immigration had reached flood stage, and the two cities, particularly Wyandotte, were being inundated. Mayor George M. Shelley, of Kansas City, appealed to the secretary of war, George McCrary, asking that a portion of the Fort Leavenworth reservation be set aside as a temporary abode for these people and that government rations be issued to them. McCrary neatly sidestepped the request by explaining that Congress, then in session, was the proper source of money for emergency rations and that Shelley should look to that body for assistance. The mayor understood that he had been turned down. Adrift in the no man’s land of congressional debate, his application was bound to die of old age, for the southern congressmen, whose constituents were suffering from the loss of black labor on their plantations, would kill any measure designed to aid the fleeing refugees.

Wyandotte tried another approach. In an appeal addressed to “the generous citizens of the United States,” a civic committee asked the American public for contributions enough to meet the emergency. A brief statement, sent to newspapers across the country, explained the problem and concluded with the plea: “In the midst of this general suffering and great need for immediate aid we send this Macedonian cry for immediate
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assistance.” Reporters who mingled with the refugees readily admitted that indeed they were in dire need. Early arrivals from the South camped along the levee, living in tents, rough board shelters, and tin shacks, in which they huddled together, trying to stay dry and warm. Some begged door to door for food, while others sat mutely awaiting help. One old lady expressed the prevalent feeling of forlorn hope among them when she explained that the Lord would provide. “He brought us out of slavery, and He will take care of us in Kansas,” she calmly informed a resident of Wyandotte who visited the waterfront bivouac.

“They expected to be received with open arms and placed immediately on Government land,” wrote another observer, in puzzlement. Corvine Patterson and Henry Reed, both local Negroes, urged municipal authorities to allow these people to remain. The idea found some support among white community leaders, principally the Northrup brothers, who were local bankers. Some of the immigrants did stay, establishing little communities along the river bottom, one of which was first named Juniper Town, and later Mississippi Town because of the large numbers from that state; and out of that beginning came a permanent black settlement at the mouth of the Kaw (Kansas) River. Rattlebone Hollow, north of present Kansas City, and Hogg’s Town, at its extreme western limits, also grew from squatter seeds sown in this year of the Exodusters.

With each passing day, more arrivals swelled the refugee camps at Wyandotte, and rapidly the feeling of panic, so recently denied, came closer to realization. It was bad enough to listen to criticisms from neighboring Kansas City, but when Topeka chimed in, irritations in Wyandotte mounted sharply. The Topeka Commonwealth openly accused Wyandotte of not wanting the Negroes because it was a Democratic town and the influx might alter its political complexion. Those river-town Democrats were more afraid of the possible infection of Republicanism than of the threat of yellow fever, taunted the Topeka editor. The Wyandotte Herald lashed back angrily, saying that much had been done for these unfortunates and that politics had nothing to do with the situation. It was not that the city was opposed to black immigrants; it just did not want so many of them. As to politics, the editor remarked, Republican skirts were far from clean on the issue of race prejudice.

As Topeka chided Wyandotte, other Kansas towns expressed their sympathy for these foot-loose people, inferring that it was the duty of all Kansans to lend a hand; however, few of them made offers of material aid. With some irritation the Wyandotte paper recorded a recent meeting at Lawrence, where a resolution of sympathy was passed. The document stated that “we regard the exodus of the colored people of the South as a
legitimate result of the injustice practised upon them, and since so many
of these people reach Kansas in poverty and suffering we should be untrue
to our history . . . if we did not extend to them a cordial welcome, and so
far as we are able to do so, relieve their distress, and aid them to find
homes on the free soil of Kansas.”

Fine, growled a frustrated Wyandotte editor. In principle there was
nothing wrong with such high-flown sentiments. But Topeka had no
conception of the complexity of the problem. Those who had been
dumped ashore, he said bitterly, were a lazy, shiftless lot, composed largely
of aged infirm men, decrepit women, and little children. The few among
them who were young and strong were inclined toward indolence. His
town was not a manufacturing center or a place with any visible sources of
material wealth, he continued, with mounting annoyance; it was more a
residential suburb of Kansas City than an economic entity. Under the
circumstances it appeared obvious to him that the contest into which the
little city had been thrust was an unequal one, and viewed in that light,
Wyandotte had done more than its share. Was it not time for high-minded
men in other Kansas towns to do likewise? 9

Wyandotte’s principal moral burden was the struggle with its con­
science. It was difficult to talk about such recent historial events as
“Bleeding Kansas” and “the spirit of John Brown” without showing at
least an outward sympathy toward the newcomers, if for no other reason
than the fact of their color. Yet, the sudden intensity of the movement, as
well as its unexpected volume, quickly turned open-handedness to thoughts
of economic survival. Even Wyandotte’s older Negro population reacted
negatively. V. J. Lane, editor of the Herald, later testified that “they were
as much opposed to it as the whites; and while there are a few of these
Mississippi and Louisiana negroes still there [in 1880], they do not associate
or affiliate with the older negroes. There is as much difference between
them as there is between the day and night, and the regular negroes
there do not want anything to do with them.” 10

During the week of April 17 to 24, at a time when some seventeen
hundred refugees were encamped on the outskirts of the city, the waning
philanthropic impulses of downtown businessmen finally expired. In this
case, forbearance foundered on an ancient Anglo-Saxon rock: the distaste
for those who accept charity in preference to honest labor. A representative
from the coal mines at Higginsville, Missouri, had offered to take fifty
men and their families and to pay the miners from one to three dollars a
day, but there was only a grudging and tentative acceptance among pro­
spective employees. When the time came for departure, they made excuses,
and finally they declined to go. None of those questioned about their
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decision wanted to live in the old Slave State of Missouri; they preferred Kansas, where they still believed that free land, farm equipment, and provisions awaited them. Nor did they want to be separated from the main group.

About the time that word of this refusal to accept alternatives spread throughout the business community, word came that the Durfee once more was on its way from St. Louis, bearing another boatload of Exodusters. To make matters even worse, two St. Louis Negroes who represented the Relief Committee of that city, visited Wyandotte in order to investigate the condition of the refugees. They brought the unwelcome news that the Joe Kinney, with more than two hundred additional immigrants, probably would be sent upriver about the twentieth of the month. The men sent back word that the residents of Wyandotte were very much excited and did not want any more of these people. As a further frustration, local contributions, which were calculated to alleviate the situation, still hovered around the six-dollar mark.

Tensions mounted and tempers grew taut. An eastern correspondent described the mood of local merchants when he wrote that the unfortunate proprietor of a drugstore, in front of which the itinerants were inclined to lounge, had discussed the situation “with frenzy in his eye” and had threatened to leave town unless matters improved. The reporter put his finger on the central problem when he said that “all Wyandotte waxes warm over the injustice of being obliged to bear the whole burden alone.” The emotional heat increased until Mayor Stockton, labeled by a local editor as “wishy-washy,” was forced to act. On April 18 he issued a proclamation, addressed to any and all steamboat lines or transportation companies, threatening legal action should they continue “importing destitute persons to our shores.” No one down river paid him any attention.

“Immigrants continue to arrive,” warned a Wyandotte dispatch of the nineteenth; “the people are tired of receiving them.” The story explained that the end had come; no more would be allowed to land. Two days later, when the Durfee steamed into view, carrying another 240 black passengers, an official delegation stood waiting on the shore. When he was told that he could not unload them, Capt. George Keith objected angrily and then shoved off. He landed near the Plankinton & Armour packing plant, in Kansas City, amidst loud protests from officials of that city. But there being no municipal ordinance to cover the emergency, the authorities were obliged to accept the unwelcome travelers. A money-raising campaign was quickly launched, and within a few days the whole lot, except for one family, was shipped off to Manhattan, Kansas.
Meanwhile, Wyandotte's decision to put a freeze on black immigration remained firm; but there were some vexatious leaks in the municipal iron curtain, and the flow merely subsided to a dribble. One of the townspeople remarked that threats were being made openly by one of the local judges, and this was a dangerous augury. Worse, he said, were the threats of vigilante action and the possibility that these unfortunate people were "likely to be wiped out by the violence of public antipathy in Wyandotte."\textsuperscript{13}

This was more than alarmist talk. On the evening of April 24 a mass meeting was held at Dunning's Hall, where it was resolved that since warnings and waterfront confrontations had failed to stop the flow, a committee of public safety be appointed to "act in any manner they see fit" in dealing with the crisis. When a more level-headed participant suggested that this was too strong a stand and that the final vote be delayed, he was howled down. The motion passed, heavily. Those who opposed such drastic action met in a rump session after the others had gone home; they agreed to work within the law and to utilize their elected representatives to solve the problem. These men, including editor V. J. Lane of the Herald, were not opposed to fending off the exodus, but they feared the implications and the possible results of mob action.\textsuperscript{14}

As Wyandotte's civic leaders gathered in troubled caucuses, uncomplimentary rumors about the city's lack of humanitarian qualities spread throughout the land. Chicago papers retailed the story that Wyandotte was ready to assess a headtax of five dollars on each of the unwanted transients in order to keep them away. "Scurrilous lies," shouted the Wyandotte Gazette in an anguished denial. Even more annoying was the tale, widely broadcast from nearby towns, that Wyandotte's local volunteer Rifle Club was ready to turn back further attempted landings at gunpoint. Pure prevarication, said the Herald, vowing that its town never would act in violation of the laws of the land or at the expense of humanity.\textsuperscript{15}

Apparently it was money, rather than cooler heads, that stayed impending violence; for when most of the newcomers were shipped off to Ellis, Kansas, at a dollar a head, the town returned to near-normal. "Wyandotte breathes more freely," sighed the Gazette. Even better, it added, reverberations of the protest had reached down river as far as St. Louis. The exporters of blacks from that city now agreed to pay the fare of those aboard the Kinney, on its next trip, clear through to Leavenworth.\textsuperscript{16}

Mayor Stockton wanted to make sure that nothing would go wrong with this proposal. In his role as president of Wyandotte's Relief Committee, he telegraphed to his opposite numbers at St. Louis and asked for
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a parley. He and several of his associates from the Wyandotte business community arrived in the Gateway City on the twenty-seventh and made straight for Barnum's Hotel, where a conference had been arranged. The visitors assured their hosts, particularly the Reverends John Turner and Moses Dickson, that Wyandotte wanted to do its part, but it was simply the wrong city for philanthropy on such a large scale. It could not accommodate that many paupers; furthermore, the states of Kansas and Missouri ought to lend aid in problems of such magnitude. If any city was the chosen spot, surely it was Topeka, said Stockton, for it was headquarters for the Central Immigration Board of Kansas. Wyandotte's emissaries were effusive in their praise of Kansas, and of Topeka, in particular. The St. Louis group listened politely, then promised to get in touch with the Central Relief Board of Topeka and to redirect the traffic to places suggested by that body.17

Wyandotte's salesmen for the promotion of reverse immigration were successful. Early in May, one of the town's papers published the good news that the Joe Kinney had passed on up the river to Leavenworth with three hundred refugees, stopping at Wyandotte only long enough to unload forty-two hundred railroad ties. A week later it was announced that except for those who had obtained work or had rented farms in the neighborhood, all the remaining black transients had been shipped to Topeka via the Kansas Pacific Railway and had been deposited with the Central Relief Board in that city. “The exodus is over practically for the season, and entirely so as far as Wyandotte is concerned,” announced the Gazette triumphantly. This civic achievement having been accomplished, the temporary barracks, thought by many to have been inadvisedly constructed, were torn down, and the material was quickly sold. Wyandotte could now advertise: “No Vacancies.”18 There remained only a few lingering apprehensions that rival neighboring towns might take reprisals for the recent action, but Wyandotte’s more resolute businessmen assured each other that the action had been necessary and that growing western municipalities were made strong by resolution, not by pusillanimity.

Leavenworth, the next stop up river, had its own worries, but instead of thinking in terms of economic reprisal, it took a lead from Wyandotte's book and endeavored to keep the stream of westering blacks moving, rather than trying to halt or reverse it. In mid March, when news of the first large landings at St. Louis reached Leavenworth, its press had taken the view that the flight of these poor people from their southern homes was a gross outrage, one that not only would deprive the plantations of their needed labor but also would overburden young Kansas communities with objects of charity. Charges by the St. Louis press that Kansas did not want
Negroes were quickly denied. The young state simply did not want large masses of indigents, said the *Times*. It was not a matter of race prejudice. On the contrary, Kansas "extends an invitation to men of all races and nationalities to come and make their homes with her; we invite white men, black men and yellow men and men of every other color, only asking that they shall know what they are doing, and come prepared to take care of themselves till they can gain a support from their farms."  

Its conscience purged by statements of racial equality and good will toward all men, Leavenworth turned to the practical realities of its new situation and took stock. As the newly devised Wyandotte by-pass began to function effectively, pressure upon Leavenworth increased sharply; by riverboat and rail came fresh parties of blacks. When eight carloads of them, attached to a Missouri Pacific freight train, rolled into the city, the usual stories of hunger and sickness appeared in print. Of 132 newcomers, 21 were ill, principally from pneumonia. They were a "seedy lot," remarked a Leavenworth newspaper, forgetting its avowals of toleration, and there was "not a good field hand among them." The city council's response was a hastily raised fund to send these undesirables on to some other city. There were smiles of relief when the rumor passed that Jay Gould was hauling part of them westward over his Kansas Pacific Railway for nothing.

But in the meantime, immediate attention to the sick and hungry was required, a matter that does not appear to have deeply concerned the white people of that busy river town. As had been the case in other cities, the black population became involved in attempts to solve the problem, its members offering what little aid they could give. Typically, they were divided in their opinions about the wisdom of the movement. William D. Mathews, who was well known in the community, foresaw disaster if the hegira continued in its present form. Remarking that in the previous year a railroad at Cincinnati had offered him a job as an immigration agent among southern blacks, he explained that he had declined because he thought it was not in the best interests of his people to bring them north unprepared for their new life. All that could come of it, he concluded, would be an increase of prejudice against them in the North and West. He agreed with Frederick Douglass that the place for the Negroes was in the South, where, in time, they would become the ruling element. John L. Waller, a former slave, offered sharp dissent. "This is a Revolution, but a peaceable and quiet one," he wrote to Kansas Governor St. John. These people had been robbed of their liberty in the South, he argued, and he quoted Patrick Henry to the governor: here and now was the place to stand firm.
The leaders of Leavenworth's business community were not interested in the philosophical theories of early revolutionaries. They had no time to theorize. Overnight they had been presented with a problem, the solution to which had to be practical and immediate. More-thoughtful members of the community agreed that colonization of penniless and unprepared people far out on the western prairies was destined to end in failure and suffering. But their notions about alternatives did not include keeping these newcomers around. Faced by the problem of feeding destitute, hungry strangers, Mayor W. M. Fortescue asked Governor St. John if the state had made any arrangements to care for them. Equally important, he wrote, had the governor's office formulated any plans to send "into the interior the refugees arriving in our State"? Meantime, he promised, he would do the best he could in providing temporary assistance until they could be sent westward. 

The mayor, against whom no charges of being wishy-washy would be leveled, was good to his word. When the Joe Kinney arrived, early in May, its black passengers were not allowed to land. Fortescue, cash in hand, carried out his "forwarding" promise by handing Captain Keith $250, along with the suggestion that Atchison was a more appropriate destination for his cargo. True, Leavenworth was in debt, and it had no means of financing such civic enterprise; but this was a special occasion, one in which the city administration, supported by contributions from local businessmen, acted in what frequently has been termed the "best interests" of the municipality. When the Joe Kinney reached Atchison, its reception was far from friendly. Bitterly recalling that the unwelcome passengers had been deflected from Leavenworth, an Atchison businessman dourly remarked that "they sent them on up to us; we thought that was a pretty sharp trick on their part." Lamenting the failure of his city's warning system, he explained that the steamboat "came up very quietly and got a good many ashore before we knew of it. Some parties went down to try to induce the captain to load them up and take them away again, but could not prevail upon him to do so." Apparently, ready cash for a continued voyage was not forthcoming, or perhaps Captain Keith had ascended the Missouri River as far as his resources and his patience would take him.

Atchison's concern over the unexpected and unexplained influx typified that of river towns from Kansas City northward. In March, at a time when the local press proudly announced the arrival in Kansas of some twenty-five hundred "intelligent and thrifty" white immigrants in the course of a single day, there was sympathy for the few Negroes who were already struggling for an existence in agricultural colonies to the west.
But as the *Atchison Daily Champion* pointed out, Kansas was a new state, one that needed capital, not labor, and it was hoped that the driblet of impoverished blacks then entering the state would not increase. The paper praised the efforts of Wyandotte, condemned the southerners roundly for their treatment of the former slaves, and called upon Congress to discourage a major movement of these unhappy people out of the South. 24

The circumstances surrounding the arrival of some three hundred destitute blacks aboard the *Joe Kinney* hardened Atchison's attitude. "They consisted principally of old men, women, and children," complained city attorney H. C. Solomon, "and were in a state of the most abject poverty, with no means, ragged, filthy, and dirty. They were taken charge of by the city authorities." Fear, rather than philanthropy, motivated this action. As Solomon explained, some of them had measles, and the dread of cholera always was present; consequently most of their old clothing was burned.

When asked about the attitude of Kansans, in general, toward the black settlers, Solomon spoke frankly: "I am positive that it is the universal sentiment, not only in the city of Atchison and the county, but in the northern part of the State of Kansas, where they have come in in large numbers, that they are a detriment to the State, because they are paupers; they do not produce anything, and the large portion of those who are able to work will not work." As had been the case at Wyandotte, the crisis at Atchison produced instant legislation. Called together to devise some means of turning away "detrimental" immigrants, the city council quickly passed an ordinance prohibiting railroads, boat companies, and all transportation companies from bringing paupers into the city. 25

The policy of restriction generated complaint. The Reverend R. De Baptiste, pastor of a Negro congregation in Chicago who visited Atchison, admitted that aid was being given, but not in any spirit of brotherhood. He decided that part of the reason was because "they have a Democratic administration there, in the city of Atchison, and they were not inclined to show them any great friendship or kindness." Had it not been for the churches, he said, these people would have been without shelter. 26

Defenders of Atchison's civic spirit were annoyed by suggestions that too little had been done for the black transients. They pointed the finger at members of that race who had lived in and around the city for some time and who now showed very little disposition to help their troubled brothers. "We thought that perhaps it would be as well to have the colored people, who were in large numbers there [at Atchison], take charge of them," the city attorney later told a congressional committee. "They at first refused to have anything to do with them, so the mayor and city

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council met in special meeting and appointed a committee of citizens to take charge of them. The colored people who resided in the town were finally induced to open their churches, and they were put in there temporarily, and provided for by the city."

Amidst a growing public clamor against the black surge and despite the restrictive immigration regulations devised by the city council, the movement into Atchison continued. The city's older Negro population displayed an increasing resistance through studied indifference to the problem, while the whites wrestled with their consciences and loudly proclaimed that the question of race was not involved. Edward Mills, a local grain dealer and member of the city council, insisted that if these people were as hard-working and as capable as the white immigrants, he would welcome them with open arms; it was not a question of color, but one of economic condition among the Exodusters. H. C. Park, editor of the Democratic Daily Patriot, represented the more inflexible view. When asked what he thought of the movement, he said that he did not think that there was a man, woman, or child in Atchison who wanted it. He did not go out of his way to deny race prejudice, but he argued that beyond this, there simply was little or no demand for farm labor in the neighborhood. Attorney Solomon agreed that little work was available, pointing out that this was the oldest and most heavily settled part of Kansas, where the steady white immigration over the years had more than supplied what extra farm labor the area required. The result was that nine-tenths of the blacks who arrived immediately became objects of charity. Even those who earlier had gained an agricultural foothold had experienced great difficulty, Park said. "We have in our county a little colony, you might call it, of colored farmers who have been there for a good many years, and I think it has not proved a success by any means." 28

For a few there were jobs to be had in the towns. Green Smith, for example, arrived from Vicksburg with the May rush into Atchison and found a position in a local grain elevator.29 He had read one of the circulars being handed around among field hands in Mississippi, and after reading of new opportunities in Kansas, he had decided to move. While his new home had not proved to be a land of milk and honey, he admitted that conditions here were better than those at Vicksburg. This was one of the ironies of the situation, and the dilemma into which small Kansas business communities were pushed. When the Green Smiths wrote letters to relatives in the cotton fields, unhappy southern Negroes took hope, sold out, and joined the rush. By finding work for the arrivals, Kansans merely aggravated their own problem; but when they made no effort to

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find places for them, they were criticized by humanitarians for being heartless, selfish, and racially prejudiced.

This was part of the reason that some of Atchison's residents, Republicans as well as Democrats, took a calloused view and opted for exportation. Before the flow began, they assumed a loftier position and had expressed great sympathy for a benighted people, but when the dikes broke and the great wash of humanity hit their city, self-interest rose to the top, as cream rises on milk, and businessmen closed ranks to save themselves from the flood. Criticism of their efforts to lend at least temporary assistance simply hardened their resolve to pass along the burden.

Added to this was the frustration that Atchison's city fathers experienced when they tried to persuade the Exodusters to leave town, if for only long enough to find work on nearby farms. They were reluctant to leave their own kind, those with whom they had come north, and they preferred any menial job in town to leaving the others. Even at harvest time, when jobs were available at $1.50 a day, they were generally reluctant to move into the country. It was not surprising, therefore, that the white community accused them of being lazy.

Faced by stubborn black resolve to go west together, the residents of Atchison concluded that perhaps this was the best of all solutions; it appeared to please everybody. The inevitable committee was appointed, to work with the overseer of the poor, and in the city attorney's words, "that committee took measures to send them out to the interior of the State, and also to get them out of the State, if possible." One of the councilmen, who once had served as general passenger agent for the Central Branch of the Union Pacific running westward from Atchison, admitted that "we shipped a great many out on that line of road, and gave them a free ticket if they had nothing to buy their tickets with—to get rid of them." This final act of philanthropy was financed at public expense.

A number of interior towns were the recipients of these shipments, in varying numbers and with widely divergent responses by those communities, but it was Topeka that bore the brunt of the load. This was the capital, the official residence of Gov. John Pierce St. John, the fifty-six-year-old chief executive officer of Kansas, who was a prohibitionist and a man deeply concerned with the problems of human relations. It was to him and to his office that Kansas mayors turned in search of help in solving their new-found and unexpected problem.
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