In Search of Canaan

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John St. John was mentally and emotionally prepared to answer the call. As a lawyer, politician, and humanitarian, he blended perfectly into the intellectual landscape of "bleeding Kansas," where a little more than two decades earlier John Brown had attracted national attention. Even though that old fanatic long since had been swung to martyrdom, Kansans were aware that his spirit still hovered over them and that his mission was still theirs. Unconsciously, the more avid humanitarians among them awaited the emergence of another torchbearer, hopefully one whose political antennae were tuned to their particular set of signals.

In addition to the fact that St. John was on the "right side," from the viewpoint of reform-minded Kansans, he had all the qualifications of birth and breeding that the voters regarded as essential. As an Indiana boy who had struggled alone since the age of twelve to gain an education, achieve membership in the Illinois bar, and finally earn a lieutenant colonelcy in the federal army during the Civil War, he exemplified fulfillment of the nineteenth-century American dream. Horatio Alger, a contemporary, easily could have used St. John's success story as another example of "risen from the ranks" in one of his numerous accounts depicting opportunities in the land of plenty.

In 1869, after practicing law briefly at Independence, Missouri, St. John packed his books and followed the westward movement toward a younger part of the country. The residents of Olathe, Kansas, who watched the newcomer hang out his shingle, remembered him as a strong-featured young man whose bristling handlebar mustaches accentu-
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ated piercing eyes and whose general bearing spoke not only of a war veteran mature beyond his years but of one who understood his goals and was determined to achieve them. That he quickly entered the political arena surprised no one in Olathe; it was almost expected of any young lawyer in a small western town.

The choice of Kansas as a place to carve out a career was, in his case, correct. St. John’s espousal of the antiliquor crusade and his enthusiasm for women’s rights rang all the correct bells in a society whose heritage found many of its roots in New England, a place where moral indignation sprang forth from the soil full blown and righteously angry. As a candidate for political office, he found his Huguenot background to be another asset; it reassured voters that his French blood bore no papist taint.

Armed with membership in the G.A.R., with impeccable moral and religious equipment, and with Republican party credentials, Olathe’s latest political knight-errant presented himself to his neighbors and asked for their blessings. They responded by sending him to the state senate in 1873, and five years later their faith was vindicated when Kansas voters made him governor.¹

No one who knew St. John personally or even by reputation was surprised at his sponsorship of the beleaguered blacks. Any young and ambitious member of the Republican party of 1879, especially one whose humanitarian qualities were advertised as his political stock-in-trade, would have shown little hesitation in extending the welcome mat to hungry, ragged blacks fresh from southern plantations. To condemn southerners for their treatment of that race, to accuse them of reenslaving the Negro despite the North’s valiant efforts to “reconstruct” the South, was the hallmark of sincere and heartfelt Republicanism during the post-war years. Consequently, to receive these refugees with open arms was natural, for it was assumed that their flight stemmed from persecution, prejudice, and cruelties beyond the imagination of even Harriet Beecher Stowe, that they had just escaped from the dark ages, where ignorance and barbarity reigned. To lend succor was not merely an act expected of an enlightened people; it also had overtones that hummed with vibrations from earlier religious and moral crusades and held much promise of higher rewards. It was comforting to think that the leader of the new crusade was named St. John.

The governor’s enemies contended that his sympathy for the helpless and impoverished legions at his doorstep was sired by political expediency, that the newcomers were to be used as shock troops in a counterattack against a new and dangerous alliance of Greenbackers and Democrats, the rising power of which threatened Republican dominance; and therefore,
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the whole business was said to have been born more of cynicism than out of sympathy.2 An outrageous lie, said his supporters; and they cited St. John’s earlier experiences with racial intolerance to show that his present attitude was sincere. The reference was to a wartime experience. When young Captain St. John had come home on leave to Charleston, Illinois, in 1862, he brought with him a Negro servant, who lived in the captain’s home during a brief period. For this the officer was indicted under the so-called Logan Black Law, an act passed in 1853 to prevent the immigration of free Negroes into the state. Although St. John was not convicted of the charge, his political supporters in Kansas later argued that the experience nevertheless had left its mark upon him.3

The battle over the governor’s motives in the matter of the Exodusters came out into the open on April 20. On that evening, Topekans met at the local opera house, and St. John was in the chair. He did more than preside; he led an emotionally charged audience, which created the Freedmen’s Fund, subscribed over five hundred dollars on the spot, and passed a resolution pledging further aid to the black unfortunates. The governor’s activist role pleased his followers, but it failed to convince his opponents that his action had philanthropic roots. They sought some assurances that the bill for his political ambitions would not be left on their doorsteps. That Topeka did not intend to support a large black population became clear when the resolution, which promised immediate aid to the suffering, emphasized as its long-range goal the transportation of refugees “to places where they may enjoy rights and privileges with all other citizens.” Presumably, Kansas towns further west could expect to be called upon to do their duty.4

Although the mass meeting ostensibly was called to help alleviate a burning social problem, it created others. A fairly substantial group of Topekans opposed the influx, and some of them pointed the finger at St. John, accusing him of aggravating the situation by welcoming the blacks. The whole thing was rigged, they said. After St. John and others had made what one critic called “inflammatory speeches,” the governor reached into a pocket and drew out a list of committee members that had been made up in advance and in anticipation of the committee’s creation. Just as quickly, St. John’s brother-in-law was named superintendent of the new organization. Another instant appointment was that of Judge N. C. McFarland, who was instructed to take the money just collected and make straight for Wyandotte, where help was needed. The “Judge,” whose title was honorary—“titles are a plenty out there,” he confessed later, when referring to Kansas—left for Wyandotte the next day, and by that evening he had furnished arriving blacks with one hundred loaves of bread and fifty

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pounds of bacon. Part of the money that he spent came from the purse of Susan B. Anthony, who attended the mass meeting and encouraged subscriptions by offering ten dollars to support yet another cause.\textsuperscript{5} It was not just a handful of unhappy small merchants who opposed St. John’s program of aid. Milton H. Case, a successful attorney who became Topeka’s mayor in the spring of 1877, argued that such a small city as his—he guessed its population to be fourteen or fifteen thousand—could not accommodate a large number of indigents of any color. He agreed that most of the relief money had come from outside and that the question was not so much one of a drain upon municipal finances as that of confusion arising from excessive numbers. A moderate amount of city money had been spent on these people, he conceded, but not for relief; it had been used to send back home a handful who wanted to go. The mayor hastened to add that half-fare rail tickets were available for such a purpose.

Although Case had been unable to serve in the Union Army during the war, due to lameness, he had taken an active role in recruitment and was thoroughly dedicated to the cause. His enthusiasm did not have an abolitionist background; he had been, however, a strong advocate of the nonextension of slavery into the territories. In consequence, his views on the subject remained moderate, and in 1879 he was unwilling to march under the banner of St. John. Unlike the governor’s followers, Case took little stock in the atrocity reports coming out of the South. True, he said, the refugees were quick to make allegations of murder, violence, and maltreatment by southern whites, but when they became disillusioned with Kansas and wanted to go home, they frequently admitted that their stories often were tailored to meet the expectations of the listeners.\textsuperscript{6}

If Topeka’s press was any reflection of public sentiment, popular feeling in the matter was mixed. The \textit{Commonwealth}, a liberal Republican journal, so far as the Exoduster question was concerned, became an important spokesman for the St. John group. The day before the mass meeting it ran an editorial entitled “The Duty of Kansas,” in which the editor held that the state had a responsibility to care for the newcomers. This should be no financial burden, he argued, for if the plight of these people became known around the country, money would pour in from all over the North. Meantime, he suggested, Kansas should perfect an organization to implement the program of aid. There was precedent for it, he reminded readers. For two years the people of Topeka and of Shawnee County had given a certain amount of assistance to Negroes moving westward. He referred to those who had come out of Kentucky and Tennessee in search of Kansas farmlands, some of whom were located in little colonies farther west.\textsuperscript{7}
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George S. Irwin, editor of the *North Topeka Times*, represented what might be called the conservative Republican businessmen's view. He thought that Topeka had exceeded its resources for philanthropy, that what he called "this relief business" was merely encouraging the movement, and that there was no real reason for the Negroes to leave the South. Typically, he denied any personal racial prejudice, arguing that regardless of color, these were people who could not care for themselves. Despite his denials of bias, he admitted that in all probability the newcomers could not expect to find equal opportunities for their children in the Kansas schools. In some districts, school boards already had excluded them. Even in Topeka the schools were not mixed; educational facilities were separate and, it was hoped, equal. 8

As a result of the formation of a temporary relief committee at the April 20 meeting, Topeka indicated that its doors were open to the refugees. After Judge McFarland had spent some of the money raised that night to feed the refugees at Wyandotte, the remaining funds were used to transport some six hundred of them to the capital. Since the city was totally lacking in housing for them, the county commissioners gave permission to use buildings at the fairgrounds as a temporary abode. Far from meeting the emergency, the move simply created further difficulty, for upon hearing of Topeka's hospitality, some seven hundred additional blacks, a portion of them ill, arrived and waited for public aid. 9

As it had been in Missouri river towns and at St. Louis, resident Negroes of Topeka tried to help their brethren. On the evening of April 28 a group of them met and formed their own relief organization. Among them were the Reverend T. W. Henderson, editor of Topeka's *Colored Citizen*; A. D. De Frantz and Columbus Johnson, both of whom had been active as founders of earlier Kansas Negro colonies; and John Milton Brown, himself a refugee from Mississippi who earlier had settled at Topeka. As members of an "establishment" of their own, they sought to stem the flow of indigents by printing and distributing pamphlets throughout the South that would disabuse plantation Negroes of their quixotic notions regarding Kansas. While they were sympathetic to the migrants, nevertheless Topeka's black community understood that great numbers of them might threaten their own economic security. 10 They were willing, however, to do what they could to aid those who had arrived and who were in need.

The average Kansan, black or white, was prepared to help the needy, regardless of color; but serious objections arose to opening the floodgates and to encouraging movements such as the one under way. Some of St. John's critics felt that he had shown great recklessness on this score at the
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recent mass meeting. The governor that evening “threw the doors of the state wide open, and said he wanted a million of them to come in.” Judge McFarland’s enthusiasm for the strangers was equally annoying to businessmen. The “Judge” admitted that the initial influx was large, but, he said, there was no need to worry; Kansas easily could absorb two or three times the numbers witnessed in the initial assault. It was talk such as his that tended to crystallize the opposition.

Local pressure against the exodus movement now began to build rapidly. The county commissioners, who had allowed the fairground to be used as a campsite for a month or six weeks, quite suddenly served an eviction notice, explaining that the place was in need of repair. The ad hoc relief committee accepted the decision and commenced construction of some temporary barracks on the north side of town. This simply moved the problem from one part of town to another, and it quickly became clear that this solution was not acceptable. Militant businessmen, acting as a self-appointed committee of public safety, tore down the partially constructed buildings and threw the remains into the river. The action was explained away on the ground that local businessmen thought the barracks, in that location, would lower the value of their property. Topekans continued to insist that there was no racial prejudice among them.

Undaunted, the relief committee moved out of town, but within the charter limit, and commenced yet another set of barracks. These were little more than shanties, each having four compartments in which all the walls were lined with bunks. Twenty people were crowded into each compartment, where they slept and cooked. A nearby commissary building supplied provisions, and a small hospital, run by a white doctor who received his pay from the committee, cared for the sick. Into these military-style quarters came a small army of confused, hungry migrants, still thinking of a new life on a government-granted farm situated in the land of the free. For a few, the first bloom of anticipation had faded, yielding to growing doubts and that gut-shrinking feeling that perhaps the wrong decision had been made.

But others, exhibiting cheerfulness and optimism, settled in to await further directions. The Lord had done very well by them so far, they assured each other, and there was no reason to doubt Him now. Kansans who watched this strange-looking crowd of emigrants long remembered them for their happy childlike chatter and their penchant for bright clothing. “The women were dressed in the gayest of colored dresses, red, purple, black and blue shining cloth,” recalled one of the pioneer women in later years. “Their hats, if they had any, were also dressed with feathers and ribbon of many colors, and generally set high on their heads, for all
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the women wore their hair in rolls. Some had shoes, and those not lucky enough to possess a pair were just as jolly and gay as the rest.” The men were dressed in old clothes, patched and pinned around them, some of which were hand-me-downs from a better day. All styles and shapes of coats were in evidence, frequently set off by battered stovepipe hats whose owners were barefoot. Most of the children appeared in long shirts that resembled nightgowns, and a few of them in pants, but none had shoes.15

The arrival of increasing numbers of Negroes in Topeka and the municipality’s apparent willingness to receive them, as evidenced by the creation of a temporary relief committee and the construction of temporary housing facilities, put the city into the “Exoduster business” in a big way. But despite the mushrooming problem, St. John and his followers had made their commitment, and they proposed to honor it. That they were prepared for a lengthy siege was indicated in May when the Kansas Freedmen’s Relief Association asked for incorporation under state law, its stated purpose being to aid “destitute freedmen, refugees, and emigrants coming into this state.” A board of directors, consisting of thirteen members and headed by St. John, constituted its governing body. J. C. Hebbard, the forty-eight-year-old clerk of the Kansas House of Representatives, became the organization’s first secretary, for which he received $100 a month. N. C. McFarland, who had acted as superintendent for the temporary body, ran the group’s day-to-day operations. Despite inclusion of the phrase “and emigrants coming into the state” in the incorporation document, the main aim of KFRA, as it became known, was to help distressed blacks. Secretary Hebbard later remarked that upon occasion, white emigrants applied for aid in continuing their westward passage, but very few, if any, ever received it. The association resembled the Mullanphy Board of St. Louis—in reverse.16

According to the Commonwealth, which was the Relief Association’s unofficial spokesman and St. John’s unfailing supporter, there was much need for an organization dedicated to aiding the black immigrants. It reported that on the day after incorporation, 180 more arrivals were crowded into the limited housing facilities. Some of them were sent on by rail in order to relieve the congestion, but many were so sick and frail that they could travel no farther. Those who were not sick waited patiently as Relief Association representatives found food for them. “Young and old were seated on the platform, eating canned goods, spare ribs, corn bread, and whatever could be obtained,” commented a newspaperman who talked with some of the arrivals. Apparently, not all of them were penniless, for they were warned against having anything to do with men who claimed to be agents of the state or federal governments, who might solicit
a fee for locating the newcomers on lands. Such men were frauds, said the *Commonwealth*; avoid them, and go straight to J. C. Hebbard, who was legitimate.17

As a rule, the clergy, both black and white, quickly accepted the situation and tried to be of assistance. As always, there were exceptions. Early in May the Reverend Joshua A. Barratt, of North Topeka, announced that he would give a public address entitled “Shall We Either Directly or Indirectly Encourage the Filling of Kansas with Paupers?” The notice was challenged immediately by an unidentified member of the Relief Association, who wrote a letter signed “Incorporator,” in which he argued that there was a greater demand for black labor in Kansas than could be supplied. The scheduled lecture took place on the night of the thirteenth at the North Topeka Baptist Church, and despite inclement weather, a large crowd turned out. In a last-ditch effort to dilute the minister’s criticisms, St. John’s group suggested that Barratt give equal time to a Negro so that the audience might have both sides of the story. When he declined, the *Commonwealth* quickly charged that the minister was racially prejudiced because he would not allow a Negro to speak in his church.

The controversial lecture revealed something of the split suffered by the community. After Barratt warned his audience that every dollar given in support of the Exodusters would cost Kansans fifty times that much in the future, he openly attacked the Relief Association, calling it a mere money-making scheme, one in which officers drew large salaries but from which the Negroes got very little. Perhaps feeling that he had gone too far with his accusations, he concluded the effort by asking all his supporters and friends in the audience to stand up. The *Commonwealth* was happy to announce that only about one-third of those present arose, an assertion that generated a joint letter from three members of the audience who said the correct figure was two-thirds.

The *Commonwealth*’s editor was very much annoyed by the attack upon St. John’s group. “A clergyman, by virtue of his position, has no right to make charges against the best citizens of the State, without some shadow of proof,” he told Topekans the following day. It was outrageous to think that St. John, McFarland, Hebbard, and other philanthropic men, who were giving their time in order to aid the distressed, should be accused of participating in a scheme to make money from so worthy a cause. Barratt was accused of being an unimaginative man who advocated the building of a wall around Kansas that would prevent the state from growing. This touched upon sensitive civic nerves, for the idea of stifling
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growth was one that was much frowned upon in the burgeoning West of that day. 18

It was necessary to talk in general terms when attacking the Reverend Mr. Barratt, not only because he was a man of the cloth, but also because of his position in the community. He moved to Topeka in 1868, and there he remained for the next forty-eight years, evangelizing, organizing Baptist churches in the area, and becoming one of the most “marrying and burying” preachers in the town’s history. It was he who had organized the North Topeka Baptist Church, at which the controversial meeting was held, and he was its pastor for a decade. During those years he did not accept a penny in salary. Frail and almost blind, he went about his work in a busily cheerful manner, but when aroused, his evangelical determination rose to the surface, and he spoke his mind openly. Since he combined a business career with his religious endeavors, he was, in effect, a part of the Topeka commercial community, and this, in itself, allied him with a number of local merchants who viewed St. John’s efforts as somewhat visionary.

Barratt and his supporters took the position that Kansas had all the laborers it needed and that any more would constitute a surfeit that would lower wages. They countered arguments that current relief measures were financed from outside the state with the contention that after such temporary funds were exhausted, the state would have to continue its support of these people. This was what Barratt meant when he said, at the evening meeting, that every dollar spent would cost fifty later on. Worse, he argued, there was evidence to show that the welfare program was attracting many who might otherwise have stayed home. Some of the Exodusters openly admitted this to Barratt when he put the question to them.

More annoying yet was the fact that, despite St. John’s insistence regarding the willingness of these people to work, they did not always find it convenient to take jobs. In testifying before an investigating committee, Barratt himself later described an incident to support such a claim:

A colored lady, some time since, passing my gate, stopped to lay a bundle off her head on my gate-post. I saw her standing there, and asked her “Where did you get that bundle?” She replied, “Well, mister, if you want to know, I’ll just tell you. I went down to the relief house last Saturday, and they wanted to know if I had labor. I told them I had been laboring. They told me they would not give me anything because I was laboring; and then I concluded I would not labor for that cause; so I did not work this week. And I went down this morning and told them I hadn’t anything to do and could not
get anything, and I wanted some things, and they gave me all this.”
She opened her bundle and showed me what she had.

The sanitary problem was another argument used to discourage the movement. St. Louis and other cities had employed it; now it was Topeka’s turn. One member of the city council told Barratt that after one carload had arrived, they stood in front of his home “and they attended to their natural wants there.” Residuals of nature’s calls dotted other parts of the city. The rail cars upon which that particular group had arrived lay on a siding for a day and a half after arrival, and Barratt reported that “at that time the side-track was so filthy for two hundred yards that it was impossible for a lady or almost any man that cared for himself to walk along it.” Nor were the barracks, to which these people were taken, models of sanitation. Barratt thought the quarters dirty and a breeding place of disease. “It is a pretty hard place,” he said.

The Reverend Mr. Barratt’s outspoken stand on the Exoduster issue drew fire from other members of the local clergy, both black and white. The Reverend Joseph Cook countered with a public lecture in which he charged that the exodus was due to extortion, pauperization, and murder in the South. At another meeting, held at the North Topeka Methodist Episcopal Church, an enthusiastic crowd rocked the building with a thunderous rendition of the song “Hold the Fort.” A well-known local Negro, the Reverend John Milton Brown, publicly thanked Barratt for the part that he had played in producing such a large turnout at this gathering—it was almost an indignation meeting—after which he explained that he had traveled over much of Kansas, and he could assure his listeners that concern about overemployment was absolutely groundless.

Brown later admitted that much of the excitement in Topeka had arisen from fears that the city’s finances would be exhausted in its efforts to feed Negro itinerants. He denied that the Relief Association had made any effort to attract southern Negroes to Kansas, but rather its function was to care for those who came of their own volition. But before the movement was over, Brown himself became the author of a statement that the association had cared for as many as twenty-five thousand Negroes from different southern states. Barratt and his followers had predicted a figure of similar magnitude, one that in itself suggested serious problems for a city whose population was not that large.

Because the movement grew to such proportions, it was St. John, above all, upon whose doorstep the blame was laid. From the outset, some of Topeka’s more cautious philanthropists had declined to have any official connection with the Relief Association. One of them openly
admitted that the group was apt to be criticized, and he excused his
declination on the ground that he would be in a better position to defend
the organization if he were not a card-carrying member. For St. John,
however, there was no escape hatch. As an avowed reformer, one who had
espoused the cause of humanitarianism as his major and temperance as
his minor in the curriculum of public life, he was as irrevocably com-
mitted as any martyr.

In the true spirit of the crusader, St. John did not shrink from the
challenges ahead. As the movement gained strength in April and May of
1879, more than three thousand letters poured into his office, some from
southern Negroes who asked for information about the land of promise,
others from supporters who praised his efforts. Overnight he became one
of the nation's leading advocates for the advancement of the black man,
a fighter who was no mere theorist, but one who was in the cockpit, actu-
ally carrying on the never-ending battle for human rights. Hundreds of
people throughout the North sent their reassurances on scrawled penny
postal cards, on cheap paper, and in the shaky handwriting of the aged,
or on embossed letterhead stationery denoting personal means or influential
firms, most of which pledged some kind of financial aid. Others merely
offered their prayers.

Encouraged by such outpourings and possibly quite flattered by his
sudden ascent to national prominence, St. John responded. "I am glad to
know that the great heart of the loyal North is right upon this question,"
his said to his newly acquired following, "and I can assure you that
Kansas, though yet in her infancy, will do her whole duty." Recalling
wartime days, he promised that services of the former slaves would be
remembered: "We have not forgotten that these same black men fed our
boys and piloted them through the swamps and jungles of the South when
fleeing from Southern prison-pens to a free North; and now that they,
after years of oppression and abuse are compelled to flee from the same
country and seek shelter in our midst, let us be true to them, as they were
faithful and true to our boys in the past." When Missourians read these
words, they reacted sharply. "Low partisanship" and "namby-pamby sen-
timentalism," commented the Democratic Missouri Republican, of St.
Louis. Missouri, an old Slave State, was perfectly willing for St. John
and Kansas to have all the refugees who came up from the South. Most
of the money that St. Louis had raised in behalf of these people was spent
on transportation. It wanted them to keep moving.

There was some disposition among Topekans to use contributed funds
for the same purpose: to pass along the overflow to towns farther west.
F. W. Giles, of that city, objected to the practice, arguing that the money
should be used to buy plows and teams “and [to] lead this army of wealth producers to the unoccupied lands in thousands of acres, laying everywhere around us.” But, he cautioned, they should not be sent into the desert—western-most Kansas—where certain failure awaited them: “Every mile that these destitute people may go toward the interior diminishes to them the probabilities of the comforts of necessities of life, and if they go on to Government lands unaided by capital there, a fearful suffering must be theirs before another May day greets us.” Why not encourage landowners in eastern Kansas to furnish capital and tools to these workers and thereby get a return on their investments through cultivation? asked Giles. It might have been pointed out to him that this was exactly what white southerners had done with their lands and thereby had created a situation of dissatisfaction among the tenant farmers.

St. John had no argument with the idea of black settlement in rural Kansas. He was convinced that his state had plenty of untilled government and railroad lands in the western part of the state, but he said that it was impossible for anyone, black or white, to take up these acres without some financial backing. He estimated that it would require from $150 to $300 per family to do this. However, the governor concluded, unless these people were willing to become tenant farmers, they would have to take their chances in the arid part of the state, for by 1879 the line of settlement was slowly moving through that area.

St. John was more concerned over ideological than practical matters. He agonized over the conditions that were alleged to have placed these people at his doorstep, constantly returning to the arguments that they had been dealt with unfairly, robbed of their earnings in the South, and that they had fled only when conditions became unbearable. His more realistic Republican friends must have winced slightly when he persisted that “as for Kansas, I think I speak the sentiment of the people when I say that they shall never be turned from our doors for want of bread. As for myself, I believe that God’s hand is in this work and that the present exodus from the Southern States is one of the means used by Him to forever cement the American Union and to render secession in the future impossible.” In his mind, and in that of a good many eastern humanitarians, the war was yet to be won, and Republican party leaders were aware that such beliefs still packed a political punch. St. John, clinging to his beliefs, ignored the fact that of the three thousand who had arrived by early May, about two thousand were, in his words, “comparatively destitute.” Kansas could bear the burden, he insisted.

The Reverend T. W. Henderson, editor of the Colored Citizen, of Topeka, was more conservative on the question than was the governor.
Editorially he advised southern members of his race not to leave their homes without some financial resources. He would be happy to have as many as one hundred thousand Negroes in Kansas, he wrote; but only those who could sustain themselves should undertake the move, only those who would be a burden to no one. Part of Henderson's concern stemmed from the condition of those who made up the hegira. Most of them were old and inclined to infirmity. Kansas was a place for the young and vigorous, he cautioned; chances there for the elderly were much diminished.

The practicality of such views was lost upon Topeka's more enthusiastic humanitarians. Triumphant sounds of the crusaders' trumpets continued to reverberate from the Commonwealth's editorial offices. Negro emigration was not new, the paper reminded its readers; for some time, Topeka had served as a distributing point for black immigrants coming out of Tennessee and Kentucky. And now, with the heightened tempo of things, that city had not faltered, as had some of its less worthy neighbors, but rather it had gladly assumed its responsibilities. "As we have stated some time since, it is a part of the penalty we have to pay for our sins as citizens of the United States, which we have been guilty of towards the black race," proclaimed the editor. It was a sentiment that must have made old William Lloyd Garrison, now in his last year of life, glow with pride.

Pleased also was Governor St. John, for the Commonwealth was his mouthpiece, his pipeline to the national press and to the hungry eyes of thousands across the country whose hearts beat just a little faster at the prospect of taking up old cudgels that had presumably been laid aside after Appomattox. These were the days of May, days in which black legions of poor overran the redoubts of Kansas conservatism, cheered on by determined crusaders who marched under St. John's flying banners. But by June, as the first waves became an army of occupation, even the governor began to entertain second thoughts. He had not changed his views about the worthiness of these people; they were, he maintained, sober and hard-working American men and women who wanted no more than an opportunity to be gainfully employed. But pressure was growing at home. Important business figures, and hence men of some political consequence, talked louder now about the economic consequences of the flood. As numbers mounted, financial aid from other parts of the country failed to keep pace, and this began to worry the governor. "It seems to me that the people of the North do not fully comprehend the magnitude of this movement, otherwise they would certainly take a greater interest in the matter," he complained to a correspondent in Washington, D.C. By then, on the ninth of June, the association had given aid to about four
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thousand destitute Negroes. Much of the money that had been spent had come from such open-handed places as Cleveland, Ohio—some sixteen hundred dollars, in fact—but, lamented St. John, the shame of it all was that New York City had failed, and “so far as I know, has not yet contributed as many cents.” Quantities of old clothes had been sent to Topeka from across the land, but that was not enough. What the Relief Association needed was cash.27

Another thing was needed, said some of the exasperated civic leaders: fewer Exodusters. By early June, even St. John was beginning to admit it. The thought was in his mind as he sat down to acknowledge a contribution of sixty-one dollars received from Negro troops of the Twenty-fourth Infantry, then stationed at Fort McIntosh, Texas. The money was appreciated, he told one of its officers, but he hastened to advise that Kansas had all the migrating Negroes it could handle for the time being. It would be best, he thought, if refugees did not come to his state “in large numbers wholly destitute, for if they do, in the course of time, it would be impossible to provide for them.” The enlisted men of the regiment were not apt to leave for Kansas in the near future, unless they deserted, but apparently St. John now thought it wise to spread the word to all points south of Kansas that he was not in the business of recruiting.28

He took the same stance when writing to Joseph M. Kern, of the St. Louis commercial firm Sells & Company. Kansas never had done anything either to encourage or repel the black immigrants, he argued; it simply had tried to aid the destitute. Ordinary dictates of humanity had been the sole mover of such actions. The source of the trouble, said St. John, lay elsewhere. “It seems to me that the best way to stop the exodus of the colored people from the South is to cease charging them from $7 to $10 per acre rent and from 20 to 25 cents per pound for bacon and $1.00 to $1.50 per gallon for 40 cent molasses and 20 to 25 cents per yard for 6 cent domestics and like fabulous prices for other articles that the colored people are compelled to have.”29 Since Sells & Company did a heavy trade in such goods with southern buyers, St. John hoped that his message would reach the offenders who practiced such deceit upon Negro buyers.

By July of 1879 even the Commonwealth’s crusading spirit was beginning to falter. Quoting a letter from the Brooklyn Eagle, in which the writer said that the black movement was a calamity to be submitted to with Christian forbearance, the Topeka editor agreed that in the crisis, Kansas had done its duty nobly. He thought that Americans who had sent money to aid in the cause paid only what was due from a nation whose earlier conduct toward the Negro had not been without fault. The
Fortress Topeka

real culprits in the whole affair, charged the Commonwealth, were the southerners who had continued their injustices toward the blacks. When they reformed, the flights from the South would cease. This would be desirable for all, it was argued, especially for Kansas, a state that did not want any kind of immigrants who were without some means of self-support.30

The newspaper's retreat from an earlier position of rigidity faithfully represented the changing views of St. John. In late July the Missouri Republican said that the Kansas governor already had hinted strongly that the sending of any more southern Negroes to Kansas would be a cruelty to them and a burden upon the white community. Agreed, said the St. Louis editor, but he predicted that the governor would find that it was much easier to start such a movement than to halt it and that the governor had not seen the last of this problem.31 St. John understood this. At the end of July he wrote:

We have already received and cared for between four and five thousand of these people here in Kansas. The labor market has been, I will say, overstocked with them. It is utterly impossible to obtain employment for them now. The funds of the association are about exhausted, and to send more of them here in addition to the number that are already here and must be provided for, would be a cruel outrage upon the black man, and will necessarily result in much suffering on their part for the want of food or the opportunity to earn it.32

Those who had predicted the labor glut—the Reverend Mr. Barratt was one of them—found some solace in being right. Southern newspapers also made note of the admission and hastened to spread the word in their respective areas.

Aside from growing difficulties at Topeka, St. John was faced by other complications. In the middle of July, for example, the association sent ten adults and four children to Wichita, and most of them were returned as fast as they could be rounded up and put on the train. Wichita's acting mayor minced no words in rejecting the Topeka exports. "Our city will prohibit the introduction of any more exodus by quarantine. Shall return all that will come," he telegraphed. Childish conduct, the Topeka Commonwealth cried out in righteous indignation, "so ridiculous as to be laughable." What really angered that newspaper was the Wichita City Eagle's suggestion that the Topekans were making money out of the movement. Nonsense, was the angry response; Topeka had raised over six hundred dollars to aid these people. What other Kansas town had done so much?33
In Search of Canaan

About the time that the *Commonwealth* was chiding Wichita for its cold and heartless attitudes, word came from Kansas City that another 150 refugees had arrived there and that they would be sent to Topeka. The Relief Association acted instantly by sending a representative to Kansas City on the afternoon train with instructions to have them sent on up the river.\(^34\)

St. John and his friends must have conceded privately that, as the St. Louis paper predicted, once the movement had commenced, it was hard to stop. Publicly they were obliged to pursue the course that they had initiated, with minor changes in direction and emphasis. While they stuck by their guns, arguing that Kansas, in general, and Topeka, in particular, had an obligation to care for the needy, regardless of color, they accentuated their efforts to find homes and employment for the black immigrants somewhere beyond the environs of Topeka. Not only had the group received more refugees than it had bargained for, but its appeal to humanitarian hearts and purses had exceeded all expectations and had converted a small slide into an avalanche. The rest of the nation, particularly the Northeast, finally had awakened to the possibilities of the great crusade being carried on by a lonely warrior and his followers in faraway Kansas.

The *New York Tribune* now praised Kansas, assuring its readers that any other state would have panicked, but these courageous people had persisted, and as a result, black emigrants were settling down on new western lands.\(^35\) John Brown, Jr., of Put-in-Bay, Ohio, offered to enlist in the great cause now being refought on the land where his father had campaigned. Although he was now fifty-eight, Brown announced that if the call came, he would not be found wanting.\(^36\) From Rollin, Michigan, came word that another old campaigner was ready to serve. Elizabeth Comstock, described as a “kind, motherly old Quaker lady,” then in her sixty-fourth year, wrote that her interests had been awakened by reading newspaper accounts about the new movement in Kansas. As a minister in the Society of Friends and a zealous worker in the field of Christianity who had spent the last twenty-five years of her life relieving suffering humanity, she felt that here indeed was a cause worth joining. She proposed to start collecting old clothing, bedding, and what she called “more substantial metallic sympathy” for these unfortunates. She felt sure that her many friends on both sides of the Atlantic would honor her requests. All that she now required was a set of directions from General St. John, and she would march. Alongside her would be her old friend Laura S. Haviland, a former abolitionist, then seventy-one years old, who already had taken up her station on the Kansas battlefield.\(^37\)
It was at this point that Governor St. John began to think that he had painted himself into a political corner. Just when he had begun to retreat in the face of heavy criticism in Kansas, the bugles of the Christian soldiers were heard on a faraway hill, and he was not at all sure that he wanted to be saved by them. By September, he said, Topeka had seen some seven thousand Exodusters, and although it could be argued that these easily could be absorbed into the white population of Kansas, that mix was not occurring. Rather, the black immigrants tended to cling to Topeka, or at least to other small Kansas towns, and their numbers appeared to be larger because of this concentration. Increasingly, St. John believed that while his original stand had been correct from a humanitarian point of view, it now had begun to reveal some serious political limitations. Looking hard at his political future, he tried to retreat, but too late. The descent upon Kansas of eastern enthusiasts for his cause engulfed him in a sea of flattery and assurances that he was indeed presidential timber. He should have known better than to have listened to such siren songs. As a temperance advocate and as a crusader for women’s rights, he faced no insurmountable political problems in Kansas, but his venture into black philanthropy was not one that promised very big returns in a basically Anglo-Saxon frontier agricultural community. The voters illustrated that point by returning him to private life in the election of 1882.
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