In Search of Canaan

Athearn, Robert G.

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Kansas, in the late 1870s, was riding the crest of a land boom the exciting reverberations of which were felt as far away as Europe. The westward rush was so great in the spring of 1879 that the New York Times thought the day not far off when Kansas would be “the empire State of the trans-Mississippi country.” Kansans beamed with pleasure at such praise and told each other that the state’s Board of Agriculture indeed was doing a great job of advertising agricultural opportunities. It pleased them even more when Missourians grudgingly acknowledged the Kansas board’s spectacular success and resolutely voted funds “to be expended in attracting immigrants” to their own state. Even Missouri’s inclination to question the fertility of Kansas lands was swept aside with a generous wave of the hand by those who lived beyond the Missouri River. As true champions, they ignored the lamentations of lesser lights, and in those wonderful booming years that saw an army of immigrants sweep westward across Kansas, there was room enough in prairie hearts to forgive jealous Missourians.

The Kansas immigrant crop bloomed early in 1879. By late February, settlers were arriving at the rate of one thousand a week, and during the next month the rush reached flood proportions. The Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad dispatched entire train loads of them westward. Both the Kansas Pacific and the Hannibal and St. Joseph lines experienced unusual demands for passage. By mid March the magnitude of the land rush was attracting national notice. A dispatch from Kansas City told of three thousand people passing through that gateway to the West in a
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single day. Six hundred of them were from Bucks County, Pennsylvania. The Pennsylvanians attracted particular attention, for they were rated as top-grade immigrants who were "filled by a spirit of confidence and contentment, very different from the hopeless and almost reckless aspect of many emigrants, and they brought with them to the new country all their household goods." Within a few days the arrival of yet another group of Pennsylvanians, accompanied by ten carloads of belongings and some four hundred thousand dollars in cash, generated murmurs of approval from the Kansas press. This was the type of newcomer that quickened the pulses of land agents who awaited them in Kansas.

On April 11 a Kansas City paper logged the arrival of another twenty-five hundred prime specimens identified as "white emigrants." In reporting figures that indicated an enormous jump in acreage taken up, a Washington, D.C., dispatch commented: "As far as we know none of the colored emigrants have taken any of this land, though reports indicate that at least 8,000 have gone to Kansas from the South within the last few months." An Emporia paper suggested who some of these new landowners were when, in September, it estimated that forty thousand Germans had settled along the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe line in the preceding five years. It was estimated that in the nine months preceding July 1879, over two and a quarter million acres of land had been taken up in the state under homestead and preemption laws, a figure that could be translated into a population gain of between seventy and eighty thousand people. These statistics, published for the edification and pleasure of Kansans, gave no hint that the place was becoming overcrowded. On the contrary, an Olathe newspaper proudly announced that "we have plenty of room for all creation."

Not quite all of creation. The Kansas business and professional community had serious reservations about the probable success of black settlers, and while the objection understandably was not widely publicized, it existed. Those who lived in eastern Kansas, where the brunt of the burden first was felt, and whose sentiments perhaps were molded by proximity to the old Slave State, Missouri, tended to be more outspoken in the matter. When some of them were questioned, at a congressional hearing in 1880, their opinions emerged.

A. A. Harris, a Fort Scott, Kansas, attorney who had lived in that city for nine years, represented the feeling of his class. He was convinced that western conditions made it impossible for the Exodusters to improve their situation by migrating to Kansas, and although his neighbors were willing to help out in individual cases of suffering, they would not, could not, give aid to large numbers of indigents. He predicted that "the people
of Kansas will let them alone severely. They do not want them to come there. . . . They have as much as they can do to feed themselves, and they are not going to feed a large number of helpless people.”

When pressed, the average Kansan denied any racial prejudice, but Harris, upon interrogation, would not corroborate the denial. Although there was plenty of land for sale in his neighborhood, he admitted: “I think that the men who own the adjoining lands would not want colored people to buy them and settle on them.” When asked if white farmers could not employ black labor, the attorney explained that farming was practiced in the frontier tradition—by members of the farm family. Even if a farmer wanted to hire a black, he said, it would be inconvenient, for there were no separate quarters for the workers such as were found in the South. When asked if itinerant farm laborers did not “live in,” he admitted such was the usual practice, but in the case of the blacks there was reluctance to live with them or to eat at the same table. John Milton Brown agreed that his fellow blacks did not fit easily into the frontier agricultural mold. The trouble was, he said, “that the people in Kansas do not run their farms in the same way as the people of the South; they have not large plantations, with houses, or cabins, already built upon them, specially in order for the persons to live in who are employed upon their farms.”

The Fort Scott attorney might have mentioned a recent event in his city to further document the feeling of that city. A Negro, charged with assaulting a twelve-year-old girl, was taken from the local jail in March of 1879, and escorted by thirty masked men supported by a mob, he was hung to a lamp post. Then, to celebrate the act, a fire made from dry-goods boxes was kindled in the street, and the body was incinerated. “Kansas, with all her Radicalism and pretended love for the Negro does not hesitate to lynch a Negro culprit or to remonstrate against the immigration of the Negro into their state when they discover he is a nuisance,” chortled the Memphis Weekly Appeal.

John Davis, a Junction City, Kansas, editor who also farmed, confirmed the agrarian objection to Negro immigrants. Those farmers who had tried the experiment, he said, were unhappy with the result. Negroes who ventured out from the small towns usually would not stay and work on a farm for any length of time. Although he did not say it, they became lonesome for their own kind, and in addition, the situation in which they now found themselves did appear not to vary materially from that of the South. They were still agricultural workers, living at a subsistence level, in “the bleak and arduous land of Kansas,” as a St. Louis newspaper expressed it. Thus, said Davis, the experiment not only was unsuccessful,
but the general movement tended to diminish white immigration into Kansas and to slow the needed flow of capital into that state. S. J. Gilmore, the Kansas Pacific's land commissioner, told Governor St. John much the same thing.  

Yet another argument held that black farm hands simply had no place in the western agricultural picture. It was admitted that they could grow cotton in the South successfully, where the hoe culture still predominated and where sharecropping had replaced the earlier gang labor or slaves. But, as one Kansan explained, his state was new, and its farmers as yet had but little means. "Not one in ten is forehanded enough to be able to afford to keep help." He appealed to another popular belief when he pointed out that Kansas farmers did much of their work with machinery, and he contended that the Negroes did not know how to work with it.  

More serious than the problem of supplying them with farm labor was finding jobs for them in the small towns. The presence of unusual numbers of blacks in the towns, as well as the pressure to put them to work, thereby saving the community from paying out doles, irritated whites who wanted the work. It was not difficult, by playing on racial prejudices, to convince people that the blacks were absorbing all the jobs. For example, a Topeka doctor erroneously told investigating congressmen that the Negroes had largely displaced white labor in Kansas, had driven it out, and therefore the exodus was a "positive detriment to the state." This, he said—and again without foundation in fact—had materially lessened white immigration into Kansas. The latter point touched a sensitive area; at that time Kansas was making great efforts to solicit white settlers. T. C. Henry, a real estate broker and one of the largest landholders of central Kansas, questioned his friends at Abilene about the desirability of black labor. Their feelings on the matter, he discovered, were "very decided upon this point." He told Governor St. John that it would be unfair to present residents, as well as to those who might come later, to glut ordinary labor outlets in the small towns. A Junction City paper, in advocating a larger white immigration, spoke for the promoters when it remarked that "we ... cannot content ourselves with the growth produced only by natural increase and the Negro exodus."  

While Henry was not always willing to admit the presence of grasshoppers or the existence of drouth in his western agricultural paradise, he did so now. Some of the white farmers were in need of relief to keep them alive, he reported to the governor, and in view of that situation he could not see the wisdom of allowing dependent classes to increase. It was a difficult admission for this well-known land boomer, but he felt that his
community was in a delicate financial condition, one that could take no further risks.

St. John and his followers talked in bold terms about their responsibility and that of Kansas in the matter of rescuing these victims of southern cruelty. Political opponents of the governor, as well as those who really had no very strong antipathy toward him, felt constrained to keep silent on the question on the ground that open opposition to the black arrivals might be politically inexpedient as well as contrary to current humanitarian trends. To be put in a position of defending southerners was unpopular in an era of Republican "bloody shirt" waving, one in which loud cries were heard across the land that the war had been lost and that the southern Negroes had been reenslaved.

Yet, a good many Kansans privately agreed with a remark made by Sen. James H. Lane, in 1861, that "our prejudices against them are unconquerable." Much had happened since then, but even in 1879 Mayor Milton H. Case of Topeka openly admitted that his state would just as soon not have the Exodusters. When a member of the Senate investigating committee asked him if there was dissatisfaction in Kansas over the black movement, Case answered in the affirmative. Sen. Preston B. Plumb, of Kansas, sensed dissatisfaction among his constituents, and he, too, opposed the influx of blacks. He used the argument that there was a deficiency of timber and a lack of building material for settlers, a contention that was denied by Negro leaders in the movement, and one that did not square with accounts found in the promotional literature of the day. Black farmers would suffer in Kansas, he contended, not only because of climatic conditions, but also because they tended to congregate in the towns, "places fraught with evil." His position was picked up and given wide circulation by southern newspapers. From its distant listening post the Times of London concluded that "the preponderance of testimony there [in Kansas] indicates that she does not want the Negroes."

As the westward flow of blacks heightened, attracting increasingly wide notice, those who had approved it or were at least accused of contributing to the development joined St. John in a retreat from their earlier hard line. The railroads, targets of all kinds of charges by westerners, strongly denied stories that their land agents had originated the whole movement. The Kansas Pacific and the Missouri Pacific frequently were pointed to as the leading culprits. They denied it. S. J. Gilmore, land commissioner for the Kansas Pacific Railway, insisted that it was the practice of his department to discourage from coming all persons who did not have from three hundred to five hundred dollars with which to make a start. Thomas Nickerson, president of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa
Fe, said that his road had done no more than to offer black emigrants the same rail rates as those given the whites. Privately he admitted to St. John that “I have no doubt that the ‘Exodus’ of colored people into Kansas has seriously interfered with the sale of our lands and with our efforts to bring a good class of population into Kansas.” Nevertheless, he offered to raise money to help those already there who were in distress. A. S. Johnson, Nickerson’s land commissioner in Kansas, warned prospective black settlers that government lands for some 250 miles west of the Missouri River already were taken up and that the latecomers would have to settle in an arid, sparsely settled treeless land. He called western Kansas “the extreme frontier, outside of civilization,” a place where “coal is gold,” and he concluded that “it is absolute folly to send them out on the frontier.” This, at a time when he and fellow land commissioners from other roads were advertising the same area in superlatives. Johnson concluded that the movement of blacks into Kansas should be terminated. The state had done more than its share, he said, and its people had absorbed as many as they could. It was time to call a halt.

There was tacit agreement with this view in a large segment of white Kansas society. The problem was how to act in such a situation without appearing to be selfish and unkind. Even more difficult to justify was the contention that Kansas was a land of milk and honey for white farmers, but one that would be a veritable hell for blacks. The *New York Times* spoke more frankly than had Kansas editors. Admitting that the exodus was slowing up, the newspaper saw little prospect for a revival of the movement. With all its resources, said the editor, Kansas was not the promised land, and its population was not inclined to give the impoverished newcomers a very sincere welcome. Then the editor touched upon a point that was becoming an extremely sensitive issue in Kansas, one that provided St. John with a growing dilemma. “Nothing less than a persistent use of the forcing process will enable the professional philanthropists who have the matter in charge to renew the movement with anything like its original vigor,” remarked the New York paper. It was the presence of professional philanthropists, such as the Comstocks and the Havilands, and their efforts to make Kansas a black haven that irritated Kansas community leaders. These volunteers, many of them Quakers, simply assumed that Kansas was an open playing field and that since their cause was right, there would be no objection to their efforts. As St. John observed the growing antagonism between these groups, he realized even more just how complicated his political position had become, and desperately he sought a way out of the problem.

By the end of 1879 the Kansas governor was in full retreat. Writing
to Horatio N. Rust, a Chicago philanthropist, St. John admitted that "there is not only no room for more but some of those already there must be got rid of." By "got rid of" he meant diluting the growing blackness of Kansas by sending some of its Negroes to Nebraska, Colorado, and outlying states, as well as by diverting to other places any newcomers. The Kansas Free Land Association was in full agreement. Its directors actively sought means of diverting black immigrants "to other States in more need of laborers, and where the people are better able to care for such as are in destitute circumstances." The inability of the Kansas Freedmen's Relief Association adequately to care for the arriving indigents spurred the diversionary activities of the Land Association, the management of which showed increasing concern over the detrimental economic effect threatened by the Exodusters. The Topeka Commonwealth, apparently sensing the tightening of public opinion on the question, doggedly reasserted that Kansas welcomed all who wanted to come, but it warned that they must make their own arrangements for getting there.

While concern over the financial condition of immigrants cannot be said to have commenced in this exodus year, it rose to new heights and became a public issue among Kansans at that time. Nor had there been any noticeable resentment over the arrival of Negroes before then, primarily because their numbers were comparatively insignificant. In 1860 the Territory had a population of 625 free Negroes and two slaves. Ten years later the figure stood at 17,108, and within another decade, thanks in part to the exodus movement, the number jumped to 43,107. After that, the rise slowed; by 1890 there were 49,710 Negroes in Kansas. None of these figures represent a proportion as high as five percent of the total population. Prior to 1880 most of these people lived in eastern Kansas, near the Missouri River, tilling small farms or congregating in the towns. They had arrived in a slow trickle, usually with some money. The few who were poor found work or were given a start by members of their race who were already established. In short, as a people they were not much different from the other immigrants.

The best known of the early Kansas Negro settlements were the colonies. There were a half dozen such settlements, the most prominent of which was Nicodemus, located a few miles east of Hill City, in the northwestern part of the state. Organized by a group of Topeka Negroes in 1877, Nicodemus challenged warnings that the arid land in the vicinity of the 100th meridian was a place that promised little success for farmers. Although it finally withered on the vine, as have many small western agrarian towns, for years it stood as a symbol of success among black
farmers on the high plains. Today only a few families remain in this little community.

While the black colonies were led by members of their own race, white land boomers usually provided the inspiration for settlement. In the case of Nicodemus it was a white Indiana preacher named W. R. Hill, who laid out Hill City in the fall of 1876 and who sought additional population in order to build up his area. In July, 1877, about thirty Kentucky Negroes, who came via Topeka, provided the seed for the new colony near Hill City. In the autumn of 1877 another three hundred fifty arrived, strengthened by a contingent of one hundred fifty who came in March, 1878. Later that year, two more groups, one from Missouri and another from Kentucky, joined the others. The colony's name is commonly believed to have had biblical origins, but there is stronger argument for the claim that it commemorated a legendary slave who purchased his own freedom after arriving in America. Plantation Negroes were familiar with the lines:

Nicodemus was a slave of African birth
And he was bought for a bag full of gold;
He was reckoned a part of the salt of the earth,
But he died years ago, very old.

Hill took credit for originating the colony, telling St. John that he was its father and that the offspring was doing very well. The immigrants, he said, "were poor and had nothing in the start while at this writing [April, 1879] they are in fare circumstances." He had collected a five-dollar locating fee from each family, two-dollars of which he paid to the government as a filing charge. Although Hill is said to have taken little part in the government of Nicodemus, he had no intention of letting the newcomers acquire any political power. When asked about such a possibility, he was said to have remarked: "We will have to make concessions to the niggers and give them a few little offices, but when we get the county seat at Hill City, they may go to ——. 28 Despite this prediction, Negroes became a political force in the county, gaining a number of important offices.

Nicodemus was not the first of the black colonies. In 1875 a Tennessee mulatto named Benjamin Singleton started Baxter Springs, or Cherokee Colony, in Cherokee County of southeastern Kansas. This small, energetic former slave had interested himself in western colonization for his people since 1869, and his name became the most familiar of all in this work. Far from being Exodusters, these people usually had money with which to buy land, and Singleton himself was essentially a land promotor, al-
though he never admitted that his motive was purely economic. He always insisted that not only had he advised his people against going west without funds, but that he would not permit any of them who did not have some money to join any of his ventures. Later, in 1878, along with two other blacks named A. D. De Frantz and Columbus Johnson, he founded the Dunlap Colony, southwest of Topeka, in Morris County. Also referred to as the Singleton Colony, it was a larger endeavor, having some eight hundred settlers as opposed to the three hundred of Baxter Springs. These black farmers bought land from the government at $1.25 an acre, paying down one-sixth in cash and the remainder in six installments at six percent interest. During the first few years there was considerable friction between the black community and neighboring whites, which was characterized by a refusal to allow blacks to use white cemeteries. By 1881 the animosity reportedly had abated. The Dunlap Colony was later chosen as the educational center for Kansas blacks. Located there were the Literary and Business Academy, sponsored by the Kansas Freedmen’s Relief Association, two primary schools, and a Quaker-sponsored industrial school.

In 1878 an effort was made to establish a black colony in Hodgeman County, about twenty-five miles north of Dodge City. The most convenient rail connection was at Kinsley (Edwards County), on the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe line; contemporaries sometimes referred to the settlement as the Kinsley Colony. There were 107 members in the original group, all from Kentucky, who were reinforced by an additional 50 later in the year. Being about thirty miles from Kinsley, they tried to start a closer town of their own, named Morton City after Oliver P. Morton of Indiana, but the task of town-building, while trying to eke a living from the tough Kansas sod, was too much. After erecting a frame building, intended as a store, and a few sod huts, they abandoned the project.

These colonists took up some fifty homesteads and a few timber-culture claims, upon which they constructed dugouts and soddies to shelter their families. Typical of the settlers was Lafayette Green, who lived in a fourteen-by-fourteen-foot dwelling that was five feet underground and two feet above, covered with some pine boards to keep out the weather. By the spring of 1879 he had only eight acres under cultivation, six in wheat and the rest in corn and a little garden. Although well water was available by digging about twenty feet, Green had hit solid rock at thirteen feet, and he had to carry water a mile to make his coffee. Nor was his domestic life very happy. Green’s wife was sick, and their six children were all back in Kentucky, where they would remain until he had enough money to send for them. The small piece of property that he owned in Kentucky had attracted no buyers, and he was afraid to leave his new
location for fear of not complying with the provisions of the homestead law. Lafayette Green had been very anxious to go West; now he was there, trapped.

The others were not much more fortunate. Those who had mules plowed a few acres and managed to plant a small crop. Others knifed a single furrow into the tough mat that covered the land, and tried to grow corn in these slits. A few brave souls chopped out little circles of sod by hand and watched in vain for corn stalks to sprout from the prairie. Before long they encountered further difficulties. As other settlers before them had learned, a minimum amount of cash was needed in order to make improvements and to buy food. Part-time labor was the traditional solution to this problem, and one means of earning money was to work in nearby towns. However, in this case such settlements were too far away. Harvest-time wages paid by neighboring white farmers brought from seventy-five cents to a dollar and a half a day, but such work was seasonal, and these farms often were some distance away on a thinly settled frontier.

Distance, that deceptive western trap, assessed its penalties in other ways. Coal hauled by wagon from the railroad demanded from seven to ten dollars a ton, a price that was burdensome to the poor of any color. Blacks, along with neighboring whites, scouted the countryside for buffalo chips deposited by passing herds. These, along with brush, twigs, or even dried grass, were burned in a desperate effort to coax out a little heat. Cupboard staples were equally expensive to bring in from any distance, and so the small streams were searched—frequently with success—for small fish with which to supply farm tables. The forlorn resident would not have disagreed with a correspondent from the Boston *Herald* who called the Hodgeman County colony a failure.31

In point of time the black colonies of Kansas generally preceded the exodus movement, and the people who inhabited them either purchased their lands or took up government homesteads. Most of them had some funds with which to move; they were part of an orderly movement westward, usually organized by Negroes, and they took up their new homes as a result of a planned, group migration. Quite different from the Exodusters, they had not fled precipitously or in panic from their former homes. Moreover, they held themselves apart from the penniless field hands from the deep South who constituted the exodus, and as a rule, they did not welcome these strangers to their settlements any more than any people who are dirt-poor welcome impoverished, hungry kinsmen who will have to be fed.

The fact that the Kansas Freedmen's Relief Association spent part of its funds in an effort to locate some of its charges in colony-type settle-
ments gave rise to a confusion that exists today, that the Kansas Negro colonies were, in part, the result of this sudden and precipitous movement. An example of KFRA's efforts was the Wabaunsee Colony, which was located fifty miles west of Topeka in 1879 on 1,280 acres of university land. It was decided to provide for thirty-one families, the association making the necessary down payment, with users granted nineteen years in which to pay the balance. Barracks to house the newcomers temporarily were built by the association. But even here, Negro capitalism participated. Isaiah Montgomery, who once had been a servant of Jefferson Davis's brother but who later had become a prosperous southern planter, bought a section of this land for his own use and employed nine Negro families from his Mississippi plantation. By the end of 1880 the Wabaunsee Colony was said to be self-sustaining. The Little Coney Colony, located in southeastern Kansas' Chautauqua County, was the last to be sponsored by KFRA. In 1881 that organization assisted fifty-six families in procuring land and the initial necessities of life required to begin settlement. With this effort the period of Kansas black colonies came to a close. Despite this association between the organized colonies and the exodus excitement, they were of separate origins, and it is even logical to argue that the exodus effectively killed the colony movement. The black colonists themselves were the first to make the distinction between the two groups, and even today if one talks to the descendants of those Kentucky Negroes who settled Nicodemus, he will be told in terms of great clarity that they were as different as black from white.

By and large, Kansans had no objection to the arrival of black colonists, provided that they either paid for their land in the manner of other settlers or took government homesteads without asking their neighbors for financial assistance. That these people tended to settle in groups, creating a voluntary segregation, also was entirely acceptable. But when they came in droves, big-eyed with fright, tattered and hungry and as dependent as children, the white community objected. It was flattering to think that the word "Kansas" equated with "freedom," and that these people used it as a symbol for the negation of tyranny and oppression, but the proprietors of that great sanctuary became uneasy when they suspected that it was being used as a dumping ground for the black dissidents of the South. While they were accustomed to excessive advertising, as practiced by the land boomers, the exaggerations of promotional literature did not, in their view, sift out and select the more "desirable" immigrants.

As the Exodusters began to pour into Kansas in alarming numbers, it was only natural that questions were asked as to the state's sudden popularity among southern blacks. Incoming Negroes made vague references
to posters, handbills, and other bits of advertising that they had seen or heard about. Efforts to find examples of such broadsides usually were unavailing, and as the movement heightened, so did the efforts of Kansans to lay hands on the source of this publicity. Perhaps the best known of the circulars was signed by one Lycurgus P. Jones, who enjoined his readers to “show this circular to none but colored men, and keep its contents secret,” thus explaining, in part, why it had become a collector’s item rather early in the game.

When a New Orleans paper finally produced a copy of this rare document, it made public the promotional efforts of Lycurgus Jones, who may have been an imaginary figure:

(Strictly Private)
Attention Colored Men!
Office of the Colored Colonization Society
Topeka, Kansas

Your brethren and friends throughout the North have observed with painful solicitude the outrages heaped upon you by your rebel Masters, and are doing all they can to alleviate your miseries and provide for your future happiness and prosperity. President Hayes, by his iniquitous Southern policy, has deserted you, while the Democrats who now have control of Congress, will seek to enslave you if you remain in the South, and to protect you from their designs, the Colonization Society has been organized by the Government to provide land by each of a family, which will be given in bodies of one hundred and sixty acres gratuitously. This land is located in the best portion of Kansas, in close proximity to Topeka and is very productive. Here there are no class distinctions in society; all are on equality. Leave the land of oppression and come to free Kansas.

Lycurgus P. Jones President

The Kansas press had no clues as to the origin of the circular. An editor from one of the river towns puzzled over it editorially, remarking that no such individual was known at Topeka and that no society of such a character had ever been organized there. The Topeka Commonwealth called it an “infamous document” and charged that it had been broadcast throughout the South to make money for its senders. It was generally known, explained the paper, that interested parties in the South were selling ostensible information to prospective emigrants as to “how their claims against the government for the promised farms should be prosecuted.” The Jones circular was believed to be a part of this promotional effort.

Handbills distributed in a Louisiana parish carried a glowing message
of free land and of implements, provisions, and other necessities available on ten years' credit. Pictorially represented were enormous potatoes, apples, peaches, and a prodigious growth of corn, all the products of an incredibly rich western soil. The tangible results of such bounty were suggested in views of black men who rode about in carriages, smoking cigars, while toying with enormous gold watch chains. 38

During 1879 the Brenham, Texas, Weekly Banner several times published a letter said to have been written by a Texas Negro who had gone to Kansas, where, upon arrival, he was greeted by the governor, congressmen, and other officials. After this official welcome, went the story, the newcomer was given a homestead and a subsidy with which to work it. Not only was this typical, suggested the writer, but it was only part of the hospitality accorded to migrating blacks. Others, he said, were given mules to work the land, five hundred dollars in cash, and were put up in first-class hotels while they awaited completion of commodious homes then being built by a benevolent national government. It has been suggested that the letter was written as satire, to make even the most gullible black realize the improbability of such conditions in Kansas, but if this was the case, the intention was not realized. 39 Restless and anxious to move, a good many of the unread and emotionally aroused plantation Negroes were prepared to believe such stories. When these fables were passed on by word of mouth, the land of promise was made to glow even brighter on a far horizon.

For the illiterates—and there were many—chromolithographs bore the same enchanting message. One of them, called "A Freedman's Home," depicted a charming cottage, gabled and with dormer windows, set off by a commodious veranda. Through floor-length French windows embellished by filmy lace curtains, one could view the Negro family relaxing at the close of the day, their castle drenched in the rosy haze of a breath-taking Kansas sunset. The father, presumably just returned from the harvest field, reclined in an easy chair, reading the New York Tribune, while happy children romped on the carpeted floor nearby. In one version of the chromo the owner's wife reclined languidly on a sofa, listening to the melodious tinkle of a piano played by her daughter. Another pictorial interpretation of black life in Kansas allowed the viewer to peer beyond the parlor into the kitchen, where the lady of the house directed a corps of servants and cooks who were preparing the evening meal. Beyond the settler's home could be seen a grove of shade trees sheltering a few well-fed deer, who grazed contentedly and awaited their appointed time at the family table. In another sector of the view, turkeys flew by at easy range, making it almost unnecessary for the master to take his shotgun beyond
the shade of the veranda in order to bring down another juicy variant to an already rich diet. In the background, responding eagerly to the healthy rays of western sunshine, towered a luxurious stand of corn, whose stalks appeared to groan from their burden of enormous ears. Yet another version of plains paradise depicted “Old Auntie” at rest on the veranda of her western home, knitting stockings as she gazed contentedly upon herds of buffalo and antelope that fed just beyond the rich wheat fields. Approaching the gate of Old Auntie’s domain was a black hunter, who somehow had managed to shoulder an enormous deer carcass, after which he had added a whole string of freshly killed wild turkeys. Literally smothered in wild game, he obviously had as his destination Old Auntie’s larder, which already must have been bulging.  

Chromos, letters purportedly written by contented black settlers in the West, and oral endorsements by those who said they had seen the promised land—all were used to induce discontented southern field hands to pack up and leave. Negroes representing themselves as government agents or railroad representatives scoured the cotton fields, looking for countrymen who had the means to move. One “agent,” using a chromo as bait, told credulous villagers that he had but a few tickets for Kansas, and they would go to the first comers. More gullible buyers paid a single dollar for a small flag that presumably would entitle them to free transportation north, where, upon surrender of the flag, they would receive free land. So popular was this offer in one Mississippi community that farmers began selling cows for two dollars apiece and chickens at a penny each in order to raise money for the venture. Before the “land rush” was over, nearly a thousand blacks had gathered expectantly to wait for a train that never arrived.  

Some of the prospective emigrants did not even get a small flag, worth about one cent, as a memento of their experience. Confidence men, both black and white, “sold” group passages to hopeful settlers and then left the country. For example, one of them visited St. Landry Parish, Louisiana, where he organized emigration clubs, the memberships of which ranged between fifty and a hundred persons. Each family, depending upon its size, was required to advance between ten and fifty dollars to cover transportation costs. Consternation reigned among subscribers when their white Moses absconded with the money. “He was last heard of in the town of New Iberia enjoying a glorious drunk,” reported a Baton Rouge paper. Near Meridian, Mississippi, one Daniel McKennan performed a similar service for those who were inclined to move. While his transportation rates were much more reasonable—one dollar each for adults and fifty cents for children—the results were the same. When the time came
Kansas—Black on White

for departure, important business elsewhere required McKennan’s presence. Another form of fraud practiced upon gullible Negro farmers was that employed by “agents” who promised, for a fee, to escort household goods, livestock, or other belongings through to the Kansas destination and to meet the owners at the end of the trip. Usually the baggagemaster was never heard from again.

In time, reports began to filter back to the South from those who had reached the prairie paradise, and the accounts were not flattering. Some of the recent migrants, now disheartened, wanted to come home. Boston King wrote to his former employer, Isey Richardson, a Mississippi planter, asking for help. “My family is sick,” he explained; “all of them is under the weather and if there is any way you can assist me in getting back I will work with you until I pay it.” King’s complaints were basic: he was going broke in Kansas. Another southern Negro, a schoolteacher who had gone north, evinced his disillusionment in more general terms. He said that he had expected social equality in Kansas, but he had not found it. Nor had he found waiting the free farm, house, and mules that had been advertised. One of the exodus women, when asked why she did not go to work on a Kansas farm or as a domestic in someone’s kitchen, explained that Kansas farmers used machines of which she knew nothing and that the plains farmers were not particularly anxious to have black cooks. Henry Watson, who stopped in St. Louis en route to his former southern home, vented his feelings about Kansas. When he got back he intended to make a speech warning all who would listen not to look up river for solutions to their problems. He promised to tell his friends, “Don’t fool your motelfs looking to Kansas, or after a better place ’n you got now.”

When the Voorhees Committee interrogated some of the black migrants in the spring of 1880, it listened to further complaints. Henderson Alexander, a former slave who worked on a plantation near Shreveport, Louisiana, was one of those who regretted picking up his belongings at the age of forty-five and moving to a new country. He admitted that the talk he had heard about Kansas was so favorable that he decided to join the movement. Far from destitute, he had savings amounting to about $750, enough to provide train fare for himself, his wife, their two children, and his mother-in-law. Leaving a reasonably comfortable home, he and a party of his friends, about eighty in all, arrived in southeast Kansas at Christmastime, 1879. Almost at once the Alexanders decided that they had made a mistake.

“They had no houses for us,” he explained later. “They had one house there, and every one of us had to get in that one house. We was all
lyin' round there in a jam, and was in an awful fix there; my mother-in-law was sick." The Alexanders then tried to rent a house, but they found that Kansans wanted to sell, not rent. Meantime, crowded and cold, the family suffered; the mother-in-law soon died. "I had on good clothes, a big overcoat and overshoes . . . , but I couldn't keep warm nohow to save my life," Alexander complained. "I was done cold all the time." Trying to be objective, he volunteered the opinion that "Kansas is a good place, but it didn't suit me at all. . . . It is prairie and the wind blows there pretty hard, and I don't know what to think of the country at all."

Puzzled over his situation, and anxious to learn of opportunities, Alexander questioned some of his white neighbors about opportunities in this land of plenty. "I axed 'em how much money could a man make here in a year. Some of 'em told me he could make a hundred and fifty dollars; and they axed me how much I made in Louisiana; I say, some years I cleared five or six hundred dollars, and some years four hundred, and I told 'em I cleared seven hundred and fifty dollars this year." The astonished whites told the recently arrived southern farmer that he should have stayed where he was, and asked him why he had come to Kansas. Somewhat puzzled himself, Alexander could only mutter, "A man is free now to go where he please."

But to go "where he please" proved to be something less than satisfactory. "I got dishearted," he confessed, "and I wrote to Mas' Foster axin' him could he make me a situation, because I didn't like that country [Kansas]. . . . My family was in disturbment, and that kept me in disturbment, . . . and I jess had to pick up and go 'way." So, back to the plantation of James Foster he went, a disillusioned pioneer who, like many an American infected by a westering urge, had found the adventure more rigorous and less rewarding than he had anticipated.48

Philip Brookings, a former slave who lived at Yazoo City, Mississippi, was another of those bitten by the "exodus bug." Apparently he was another victim of propaganda, a southern farmer who appeared to have suffered from no particular economic or political persecution, but one, rather, who just had the urge to move.

"Well, we got papers down there, now and then," he explained, "and every time we read them, it was all 'Kansas, Kansas, Kansas.' It looked as if a man could just play wild out there, doing nothing, all but. I had been worth right smart, and had got broke; and as everybody was going to Kansas, and every newspaper we would get hold of said 'Go to Kansas,' because we could make so much there, and do this and that there, I concluded I would shuffle out and go there. There was a prospect of getting hold of a big thing, you know." He admitted quite candidly that the
reason he had "got broke" had nothing to do with racial prejudice or even southern economic conditions. He had a drinking problem, and it had destroyed him financially.

Brookings arrived in Kansas in January, 1880, and at once began to look for work. Finding none, he tried to survive until warmer weather, when farm jobs might be available. Fortunately, the early months of 1880 were relatively mild. Showing the abiding faith of his race, he attributed the lack of cold to heavenly intervention, remarking, "I suppose God Almighty knew how the poor negroes in Kansas was fixed, and so came between them and the north wind, or many a one would have been played out there before now."

In March, as the land began to thaw and farmers readied themselves for spring planting, Brookings scoured the countryside, making inquiries. All he heard was talk of hard times and little employment. "That is the result of you niggers coming out here; there is nothing here for white men to do; that is what makes it hard times," the farmers told him. Still hopeful, he pushed on, and talked to another farmer, who said he needed no help; he and his wife milked the cows and did all their own farm work.

Returning to town empty-handed, Brookings asked for help from "this refugee board," as he referred to the Relief Association, but he was told that he would have to live at the barracks if he wanted to be fed. When he declined to go, because the inmates there were dying at the rate of eight or ten a day, he was denied aid. Unwilling to return home, he stayed on, still hopeful. He tried to find work for another three months, most of that time being unemployed, but now and then getting a chance to earn a few pennies. "Finally I concluded it was time for me to light out of Kansas," he admitted. "I wanted to go home pretty bad."

But getting home was much more complicated than he had imagined. He had no money. Someone suggested that the Relief Association might be willing to provide aid for this purpose, and Brookings tried that source once again. "So I goes over, and blazed in there and spoke to a man, and says I, 'I cannot get anything to do; I want to go back,'" he told the Voorhees Committee; but the clerk showed little sympathy, saying that he had no funds for such purposes. When Brookings explained that he could not find work, he was told that he was not alone in that situation. "I stood there awhile, and by and by shuffled out," said the disgruntled applicant. The situation appeared to be impossible. "If I were back home I might get in a crop of cotton; but I cannot make enough here in the summer to carry me through the winter," he explained. "And in Kansas, if a man did not make money in the summer, he stands a darned poor
chance in the winter. Let there come a few cold days, and they will run coal up to thirty cents a bushel."

About all Kansas had offered Philip Brookings was a chance to further reform himself. Drink, the demon that had undone him in the South, was out of the question for a man who did not have enough money with which to buy food. But now he would have given anything for one nip at the bottle. "In Kansas a man would need it if he could get hold of it," he remarked during a conversation on the subject of spirituous beverages, "for Kansas has the roughest wind you ever run across in your life." But even that solace was denied him. As he put it, "a man without money in Kansas totes a low head."

Supposing he made it back to Mississippi, would he keep his silence there, Brookings was asked? No, was the vehement response, he would not advise anyone to try Kansas. "If I see any of them that wants to break up and go to Kansas, I am going to use the best means in my power to coax them off from that notion; I will tell them that they might as well be in the middle of the Mississippi River when they could not swim a lick. I will tell them it will be a race which will they do first, starve to death or freeze to death." 49

Washington Walker, a neighbor of Henderson Alexander's and a former member of the James Foster plantation, near Shreveport, was another of the "go-backers." But he did not return in bitterness. Walker, along with a great many southern Negroes and millions of westering whites, simply had thought that he could do better in the American West. By his own admission he was well treated in Kansas and was not particularly bothered by the cold, but he found the shift from cotton culture to corn farming a difficult transition. "I didn't think I understood that kind of farming," he commented. The experiment in testing more northerly climes cost him about six hundred dollars. His emigrating group consisted of ten members, all of whom returned. The others had not fared even as well as Walker, being obliged to husk corn at twenty-five cents a day. Their complaint was familiar: the cold and a lack of firewood. 50

They, too, were glad to return to the South, its limitations seeming to be much less onerous after viewing another part of the country.

Some of the Exodusters sought out the Negro colonies, hoping that fellow members of the race would welcome them. By and large, they were disappointed. William Nervis, who made his way out to Nicodemus, came away with the impression that it was a shabby little town in which there was no work for newcomers. There was no timber available for home building, and flat, forbidding plains country "gave him a chill" when he viewed it. Discouraged and sick, he made his way back to Wyandotte and
took the first available boat down river. His view of Nicodemus was confirmed, in the spring of 1880, when a group of the town’s residents petitioned Governor St. John for help, saying that they desperately needed clothing, provisions, and other supplies if they were to survive.51

Nor were Negroes in the white Kansas towns unreservedly enthusiastic about the migratory tendencies of their southern brethren. The Kansas Herald, a Topeka paper published by blacks, favored the movement as a matter of principle, but at the same time, it admitted, “we incline to the opinion that it is unwise for all the emigrants from the South to concentrate in this city.” Indeed, continued the editor, the growing West was a fine place for home seekers, regardless of color, and he thought that there were many attractive places in other parts of Kansas to which the Exodusters might well go.52

Ministers of Negro churches, who usually took an active part in helping the arriving blacks and thereby witnessed a good deal of the suffering, found it difficult to share the Herald’s approval of the movement. One of them, in discussing the matter with reporters at Washington, D.C., described a recent trip to Kansas. Conditions there were deplorable, he said; he advised fellow members of his race to avoid the place if at all possible. Another, who lived in Fort Scott, Kansas, was much more outspoken in his opposition. “The man who tries to get our people to emigrate to Kansas,” he wrote to a friend in Texas, “ought to be put in jail and stay there for five years.” He regarded the whole movement as a cold-blooded, calculated fraud, of which the ignorant immigrant was the innocent victim.53

Kansas whites also voiced concern. Throughout the spring and summer of 1879 newspapers carried stories of drouth and of suffering among pioneers in the far-western reaches of the state. Referring to that area as “the frontier,” a Kansas editor predicted that at least half of the present residents of western counties would have to be aided if they were to get through the coming winter.54 But such admonitions to black frontiersmen were of no more avail than they ever had been when addressed to those who had made up their minds to go west. Once the movement gathered momentum, bad news was dismissed as ugly rumor, and happier accounts were accorded a degree of veracity. As if in answer to the warnings that spoke of difficulties in the plains country, the Exodusters sang a new version of “Dixie”:

Oh! I’se gwine to leave dis land ob cotton;
Pork am scarce, and I works for nothin’;
Away! Away! Away! Dixie land!
In Search of Canaan

Dis Dixie's land what I was born in;
Tain't no place for raisin' corn in;
Away! Away! Away! Dixie land!
Den I wished I was in Kansas
Away! Away!
Wid Gideon's hand in Kansas land,
To lib and die in Kansas—
Away! Away! Away up norf in Kansas.\textsuperscript{55}

And so the flow continued. While many came in the hope of better economic conditions, others had even higher aspirations. One blind Exoduster, when asked about his motivation, explained: "Ise had a vision from de Lord, and he tells me to go to this yer Kansas and I shall git back my sight." Another, an old man suffering from pneumonia in Lawrence, Kansas, refused medical attention, saying to those around him: "Why bless you, chillen. De Lord has smiled on me, and I'll close dese old eyes in de land ob promise!"\textsuperscript{56}

Considering the extraordinarily high hopes and the sometimes even childish expectations harbored by the Exodusters, it is surprising that the disappointment in Kansas and other plains states was not crushing. Yet, most of them stayed. Lacking adequate figures, we can only speculate about how many went home, but the available evidence suggests that perhaps the percentage was not as high as that of the whites who advanced westward and then retreated. A Mississippi tourist, visiting Manhattan, Kansas, in the spring of 1880, wrote that the Negroes were indeed disappointed in Kansas, but not to the extent that they were willing to give it up. "They have not realized what they anticipated," he wrote. "They are open in this expression—still I can't discover a prevailing sentiment to return. The older ones would like to return—the younger ones generally would not return. They all feel that they have made a leap, and must abide by it, as it is too far and too much trouble and expense to return."\textsuperscript{57}

John Milton Brown, of Kansas, agreed with that assessment. He admitted that the members of his race loved the southern soil and enjoyed its climate, but he added: "It is the greatest horror of their lives to mention the idea of their going back there to suffer what they have suffered in the past. They will not go back. They will die first."\textsuperscript{58}