In Search of Canaan

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The Voorhees Committee’s inability or unwillingness to answer its own question—what caused the exodus—merely aggravated the issue and threw it as a bone to the political dogs in a presidential election year. Congress itself was criticized for creating a body that merely toyed with a politically sensitive matter and failed to make any constructive recommendations. Some years later the famed Negro educator Booker T. Washington recalled: “Thus, with its usual recklessness, congress appropriated thousands of dollars to find out what was already known to every intelligent person, and almost every schoolboy in the country, that the Negroes were leaving the South because of systematic robbery, and political cruelties. Thousands of dollars to ascertain the cause of the poor Negroes’ distress, but not one cent to relieve it.”

The answers were not so obvious that “every schoolboy” would know them. While many members of the black community found no difficulty in placing the blame for the difficulties upon southern white bigots, there was a wide divergence of opinion among its leaders as to the wisdom of fleeing from the problem. The exodus of 1879 merely brought into focus a recognized but blurred issue that had emerged slowly since the close of the Civil War. For fifteen years the sore had festered as a newly freed race struggled for economic existence. During that period a number of blacks grew discouraged at their inability to go forward under the new rules of life, and some of them decided that the only solution to the dilemma was to leave the South. More prominent members of the race, many of whom lived in the North, argued against such a move on the ground that this
was surrender to the white southern establishment. Old time abolitionists supported this view, lending their still-powerful voices to the crusade against the resurgent southern Bourbons.

It is obvious that in the immediate postwar years thousands of recently freed blacks started their new careers from point zero on the economic scale. What a good many northerners failed to appreciate was the fact that thousands of southern white farmers were in only a little better position. The devastation of war and inflation, as well as the virtual destruction of the southern economy, had left these people in serious straits. During the next decade and a half, both races showed progress. By 1880 there were Negro storekeepers, livery-stable owners, small businessmen, and successful small farmers. Some of the blacks had acquired appreciable tracts of land, which they worked and even rented out.

At the same time there were classes of both white and black people in the South who had not prospered. They formed a group of drifters, sharecroppers, and part-time laborers. Many of the footloose blacks found it relatively easy to respond to the blandishments of those who promised them a new and better life in the West or in some of the northern states. They were comparable to a good many small farmers in Europe, who, dissatisfied with their lot and dreaming of free land in the American West, pulled up stakes with no great reluctance in order to begin life anew in a land of promise.

Thousands upon thousands of southern blacks who did not respond to the exodus remained because they felt that the South was their natural home, that the climate, the cotton culture, and the agrarian system under which they had worked, even during the days of slavery, was best suited for them. A few complained about political inequities; probably the mass did not. They were more concerned over economic barriers that were put in their way by the "master race." They argued that constant impoverishment was no better than slavery, and the former masters answered that poverty was no stranger to white farmers, that it was a common problem to the agricultural classes. Such arguments did not satisfy the blacks. A poverty imposed by lack of rainfall, the boll weevil, or any other natural disaster was something that both races had to expect. But constant indebtedness through manipulated prices of both their products and the staples that they had to buy from white entrepreneurs smacked of another kind of slavery to them. They reasoned that if they ended the year no better off than they had been at the beginning of the planting season, then emancipation had not given them very much. However, there was one major difference from ante-bellum days: now the discontented could leave
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the South, if they chose to do so. A number of them elected to take this option.

The movement that came to a head in 1879, like most of its kind, was not as spontaneous at it appeared to be. As early as 1870 a group of blacks, led by Henry Adams, organized the Negro Union Co-operative Aid Association in Louisiana. Adams had served in the regular army from 1866 to 1869, during which time he had been taught to read and write by a white woman who ran a school for soldiers at Fort Jackson, Louisiana. After his discharge, said Adams, a group of blacks who had served in the army with him became critical of "the way our people had been treated during the time we was in service." The result was the association, whose membership was said to have reached ninety-eight thousand by 1878.

Meanwhile, in 1874, southern Negroes had begun to feel increased political pressure from the whites. As a reaction to it, Adams and some of his friends in the association had organized what came to be known as the Shreveport Committee. In all, there were nearly 500 committeemen, of which about 150 ranged around the South, looking into living and political conditions experienced by the former slaves, noting instances where exorbitant rents made the tenant farmer's situation tantamount to slavery, and at the same time scouting out places in the South to which blacks might move in order to improve their lot.

After several years of study the committeemen concluded that the only solution to the problem was migration from the region. Asked about this, Adams explained: "Well, we found ourselves in such condition that we looked around and we seed that there was no way on earth, it seemed, that we could better our condition there, and we discussed that thoroughly in our organization along in May [of 1877]. We said that the whole South . . . had got into the hands of the very men that held us slaves . . . and we thought that the men that held us slaves was holding the reins of government . . . . We felt we had almost as well be slaves under these men . . . . Then we said there was no hope for us and we had better go." Reports from committeemen who had examined the West suggested that Nebraska, Kansas, and, to some extent, Colorado formed a general area of improved working conditions where there was no bulldozing and where churches were not closed at nine o'clock at night in order to prevent meetings. In the West, thought Adams, lay equal educational opportunities for the children. Above all, the new country appeared to be a place of social acceptance. A Texas farmer named T. R. Alexander stressed this when he told St. John that in his state "colored people are looked upon by the white people with disdain and scum." He had had enough of it. "I have suffered the bukes and scums long enough down South here," he
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said. He and his family of seven were ready to try for a better life in Kansas.²

Benjamin "Pap" Singleton, who, among others, claimed to be the father of the exodus, supported the "bukes and scums" position. As he explained, he had "studied it all out, and it was cl'ar as day to me [that] my people couldn't live thar. It was ag'in nature for the masters and the slave to jine hands and work together. Nuthin' but de millenium could bring that around." Singleton, a realist, thought that his people had little with which to fight back. "The whites had the lands and the sense, an' the blacks had nuthin' but their freedom." He knew that the imposition of law had not been of much help. "Bime-by the fifteenth amendment came along, and the carpet-baggers, and my poor people thought they was goin' to have Canaan right off. But I knowed better."³

Singleton did not see any hope for a change of heart among white southerners: "De leopard can't change his spots. De men who used to flog their slaves ain't agoin' to ever treat 'em fair, now that they're free. Mebbe it'll be different a hundred years from now when all the present generation's dead and gone, but not afore, sir, not afore; and wha's agoin' to be a hundred years from now ain't much account to us in this present year o' de Lord." The one-time slave, described by a contemporary as "a little old man—a mulatto—over seventy years of age, with wavy, iron-gray hair, square jaws, full, quick eyes, and a general expression of courage and modesty," concluded that emigration from the South was the Negro's only salvation. When pressed and asked if he meant to include all the destitutes, the charity cases about which Kansans complained so much, he said: "Yes, I do. It is just as well for them to die here as there. It is better, in fact."⁴

By the close of 1880 he had reversed himself on this point, and along with St. John, he urged the members of his race to scatter out in other parts of the North and West. Only those who were possessed of enough money with which to get a start should leave home. Singleton agreed that Kansas by then had "filled up," insofar as employment was concerned, and strangers looking for support would find life difficult.⁵

"Old Pap" stood between the ignorant, penniless field hands who drifted into Kansas and the black "establishment" represented by Douglass, Pinchback, Senator Bruce, and Milton Turner. He was very suspicious of the Nashville Convention, held in May of 1879, because he thought that men such as Douglass and Pinchback would run it, and they were opposed to the exodus. When rival Negro Aid Associations quarreled in St. Louis that same spring, "Pap" was critical. He told his followers that there were many "tonguey" men in such enterprises, men who just wanted to hear themselves talk and who were shallow seekers of publicity,
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as opposed to those who truly wanted to help the unfortunates of his race. Such local leaders, as well as those of national prominence, annoyed Singleton, because he thought them too ambitious. They wanted political integration, to share in the offices traditionally held by the whites, and recognition that they were in every sense equal. "Pap" argued that this was a moot point, that it was not the immediate goal. He became increasingly convinced that segregation, not integration, was the answer for his people; that separation would benefit the blacks, not injure them. There were those who agreed with this point of view. At a convention of blacks, held at Houston, Texas, in June of 1879, participants pondered the question of migrating to some unsettled area of the West where a black territory or state could be set up. Those who advocated such a move argued that somewhere there ought to be a political entity populated and controlled by none but blacks, a place where there was no white interference. Analysts interpreted this as further evidence that a vague feeling of pending reenslavement clouded the minds of many who had been emancipated only a few years back.6

John Henri Burch, of Louisiana, had little in common with "Pap" Singleton, but on the question of emigration the two men were of the same mind. Burch was a Negro journalist who had worked for a number of newspapers, and in the course of his career he had been afforded an opportunity to study the postwar problems of the freedmen. Also, he had served in both houses of the Louisiana legislature. As he explained to the Voorhees Committee, a large body of southern blacks still were landless and homeless, and even when they were fortunate enough to acquire homes, they had no way of knowing that they would be secure in the possession of them. Most of this floating population was highly dependent upon white landowners, said the journalist; they were obliged to work for just about any wages offered to them. "It is natural that they should desire to seek some country where their labor should secure them a home in which they would employ their children in creating at once a home and a heritage," he told the senators. At the moment—early in 1880—the West was being advertised as the place where these things could be found. Asked why the Negroes would leave their ancestral homes, Burch answered with other questions: "Have not the same causes founded and peopled America? Are any people prouder of their country than the English? Can any more adore their own land than the French?" Yet, he continued, "all these people have quitted their respective countries for the wilderness of America." Pointedly, he concluded, a good many of these white emigrants had left home because of class oppression.

Then Burch turned to the subject of social and political insecurity.
Legislatures, he said, were turning more and more to class legislation. Land laws were increasingly unfavorable to the Negroes. A recent chain-gang law, passed in Louisiana, was very disturbing to them; they feared that they would be arrested for trivial offenses and returned to slavery under the guise of public labor. The war, he said, had consumed four years and millions of dollars to “whip the southerners”; yet in 1880, southern leaders were well equipped with arms, they drilled regularly, “and their old Army associations are intact.” How, asked Burch, could the newly freed black be expected to stand up to these people and demand voting and civil rights? It was no wonder to him that thousands had elected to leave for Kansas in the hope that they would encounter fewer captains and colonels who still ate, slept, and lived according to a military tradition.

Another black journalist who advocated emigration from the South was George Ruby. At the time of the exodus he was editor of the New Orleans Observer, a journal that he had founded a year earlier. He was not a southerner by birth. Born in New York in 1841, he had worked for William Lloyd Garrison and for both the Times and the Tribune, of New York City, before going to New Orleans in 1864 to teach school. After the war he had served as an agent for the Freedmen’s Bureau and had founded a newspaper (the Standard) in Galveston, Texas. He was deeply interested in the welfare of his people and was well aware of their increasing difficulties in the South. When a convention of blacks was called at New Orleans, in April, 1879, to consider the Negro problem, it was done at the instance of the Observer and similar newspapers of the region.

Ruby was chairman of one of the New Orleans convention committees, and in his report he described the political chaos and violence of Louisiana, concluding that “the fiat to go forth is irresistible.” The decision to “go forth” grew out of the conviction that “slavery in the horrible form of peonage is approaching.” Ruby’s committee took the view that the exodus from Louisiana arose from persecutions and mob actions during 1874-75. As a result of this turmoil, said the committee men, an organization looking toward emigration had originated in Caddo Parish.

A further cause of emigration was set forth. By 1875, said Ruby, a number of unemployed refugee blacks were huddled in New Orleans, with no means of support. Most of them had come out of the cotton parishes to the north. Part of the reason for calling the convention, he explained, was to devise some means of getting these indigents out of the state, hopefully to some place of employment. To him there was little other choice, for “they have very little if any hope from the courts.” Speaking to a New Orleans mass meeting in May, the journalist again advised his
people to "go forth," while at the same time cautioning them that such a move should be carefully planned and deliberately carried out. He recommended Kansas, a place where the soil was fertile and the climate, he thought, was not too cold for blacks. Moved by Ruby's rhetoric, one Louis Jones took the floor and urged his listeners to go to Kansas. He ended his plea with a vigorous attack upon Frederick Douglass, whom he called a renegade. One of the women arose and joined in the attack upon Douglass, saying that he could well afford to advise his people to stay in the South since he was safe in his sinecure at Washington, D.C. As the excitement mounted, someone cried out: "Sing the battle hymn!" and the crowd sang "John Brown's Body." It was from meetings such as this one, where the emotional pitch mounted to great heights, that many a participant who had wandered in just to listen left the gathering determined to pack up and go north with his friends.8

From Kansas came beckoning signals. John Brown, Jr., taking advantage of his father's name and of the new excitement in Kansas, announced that the time had come for another grand rescue of the colored race. "Young" John, now fifty-eight, announced that he was prepared to devote all his energies to the cause that had been so dear to his father. Having spent some time in Canada, he sent word south that Negroes could stand cold weather. He described fugitives who had arrived at Windsor, Ontario, broke and hungry, but had found work, had taken up government land, and had prospered. Quoting him, a New England paper assured its readers that if given a chance and if left unmolested by bulldozers, black Americans would prosper anywhere.9

A good many southern blacks conceded that even with the economic scales tipped against them in the cotton country, they could make a living. They objected to the inequities forced upon them by white landowners and merchants, but in a majority of cases they elected to stay—and to hope for better conditions. They objected also to the unequivocal demand by southern whites that the old establishment control state and local political machinery; but again, many of them concluded that the problem posed was not great enough to cause migration. However, if atop these two grievances was piled a burden that T. R. Alexander had labeled the "bukes and scums," it sometimes provided the proverbial straw to an already heavy emotional load carried by the former slaves. One of the Exodusters touched upon this sensitive area when he told a St. Louis newspaper reporter that he and his friends wanted to go to Kansas because he understood that they would be treated "just like white folks" there. In an editorial entitled "Just Like White Folks," the New York Tribune declared
that in a single sentence “the poor Negro revealed the motive that underlies this remarkable migration.”¹⁰

There were recurring signs of restlessness in the South during these exodus years. At the beginning of the movement, committees of disconcerted southern blacks had periodically sent representatives into Kansas and other parts of the West to investigate possibilities of a move. One of them, from Alabama, called upon the editor of Topeka’s *Colored Citizen* and made inquiries about prospects in Kansas. He said that times were very hard in Alabama and that it was very difficult for the former slaves to make a living there.¹¹ The Reverend W. O. Lynch, also from Alabama, went out to Kansas in the spring of 1879 to scout out the land for his home committee. He said that his people recently had held a meeting and had concluded that since the whites apparently were not going to accede to black demands, the aggrieved had no other choice but to leave.¹² An unhappy group from Snow Hill, Alabama, complained to St. John that “there is little respect shown to laborers down here,” and it was ready to leave for Kansas if the governor but would give the word. A colored farmer named A. M. Allen wrote to St. John from Lafayette, Alabama, stating that he had had enough of southern life under emancipation. “I cannot enjoy it here among the southern people,” he said. “They are against them that have anything. They do not want us to have any schools and do not want us to have property, but want us to work for thirty cents per day.” Before he would do that, he maintained, he would go back to Africa—or Kansas.¹³

John H. Johnson, the young black attorney from St. Louis, summed up the complaint, after having listened to a number of Exodusters who passed through his city: “They stated that they had no security for life, limb, or property; that they worked year in and year out, and, notwithstanding they raised good crops, they were at the end of the year in debt; that they were charged exorbitant prices for provisions, and all these things kept them down and in debt.” The old masters, argued Johnson, simply were not ready “to give up all control over them,” and as he saw it, the former slave had no choice but to leave. He hoped every Negro in every southern state would emigrate.¹⁴

Johnson’s belief that only partial emancipation had been achieved was shared by John Mercer Langston, named by the *Colored Citizen* as “the ablest colored man in the U.S. with the exception of Frederick Douglass.” Langston, a Howard University professor who also had served as United States minister resident to Haiti, gave a public lecture on the exodus in September of 1879 in which he argued that emancipation had granted the Negro the ownership of his person but had left him otherwise devoid of
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property or prospects and destitute in the extreme. Harassed by the Ku­Klux, bulldozed, shotgunned, these frequently illiterate Americans were said to have been freed from very little. Langston concluded that migration from the South was the only hope for those who wanted political freedom, educational opportunities, and economic independence.15

Some important American blacks argued the other side of the case, holding that flight was no answer, that members of their race were wrong in surrendering what was theirs to southern whites. Stay and fight, they argued. This is your land as much as anyone's. Stay—and persevere. The contest will be long and bitter, but right is on your side. Stay, for to leave is to yield, and to yield is unmanly; it is also unnecessary.

The leading proponent of such a view was Frederick Douglass, who was, without doubt, the outstanding spokesman for his race during the nineteenth century. By 1879 he had long since achieved international fame and was enjoying its rewards at Washington, D.C., where he was a United States marshal. According to press accounts he lived in a handsome house situated on a hilltop overlooking the nation's capital. "It was built by the owner of a large tract of land who sold house lots only on condition that no plot should ever be sold to a Negro or an Irishman," said one story, whose author evidently wanted to show the extent of Douglass's success. The present owner of the home and the surrounding fifteen acres of land was described as a man whose "leonine face and head, with its mane of flowing white wool," attracted "general attention by his history, his countenance and bearing."16 The black elder statesman, who held a federal appointment and who attended White House social functions, was the object of both envy and a certain amount of jealousy among members of his race. His stand on the exodus question brought out some of these differences of attitude toward him.

"I am opposed to this exodus, because it is an untimely concession to the idea that colored people and white people cannot live together in peace and prosperity unless the whites are a majority and control the legislation and hold the offices of the State," commented Douglass during the early stages of the movement. In a burst of the rhetoric that had made him so famous, he described the development: "Some of our race are despairing, and are rising up in darkening trains, leaving their old homes and winding up the Mississippi heartless, hopeless, ragged, hungry and destitute, leaving the South as Lot did Sodom, and going to a land without cultivation, like startled birds flying from a rock in mid-ocean which has been struck by a cannon from a passing ship."

The remarks were made to a largely black audience in a Baltimore church in May of 1879. He advised his listeners to refrain from despairing,
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that although there were few blacks in public office, the situation would improve in time. He wondered aloud if the franchise had not come too suddenly, if the Negro had not been thrust into politics prematurely. "Slavery was a poor school in which to develop statesmen, and colored legislatures have proved this." Social rights, too, had been slow in coming; but come they would, he predicted. It would take time. The answer, he warned, was not to be found in flight. "We have been more unsettled by schemes of colonization and emigration than from any other cause. First Hayti, then Jamaica, were our Canaan. Next came Nicaragua, and that would have been a 'Niggeragua,' while Liberia has been a standing land of Canaan." He thought that if blacks had stayed in the South under slavery, they could stay now, for the area had for them some advantages that no other place offered, not the least of which was a monopoly of the labor market. Dumping thousands of ragged blacks into northern communities would only create "that detestable class from whom we are not so free—tramps." Negroes never would change their relationships with whites until they became more economical, lived within their means, and stuck to their employment, he argued. If they did this, promised Douglass, blacks would attain the respect of all. "Other races, notably the Jews and the Quakers, worse situated than you are, have fought their way up."

During the summer and autumn of 1879, as the exodus mounted in intensity, Douglass studied the phenomenon and tried to find its origins. In mid September he read a paper at a meeting of the American Social Science Association, held at Saratoga, New York, in which he discussed various theories dealing with causes of the movement. Unhappy southern blacks, he pointed out, had not tried to solve their problems by force, as had some other minorities in the past; rather, they simply had laid down their hoes and left for Kansas. He discounted the "greedy land speculator of Kansas" theory, correctly stating that speculators do not sell land to people without any money, nor do they induce groups into their area against whom there is a popular prejudice. He considered the theory that the exodus was promoted by defeated and disappointed demagogues, both black and white, who were out of power in the South and wanted to get back in. There was some truth in this, he conceded. What of the charge that Senator Windom had "set this black ball in motion"? Douglass admitted that Windom's interest in helping the blacks had offered some stimulus to the movement. However, he concluded, none of these were basic reasons. Deeper, by far, was continued harassment by southern whites. The blacks, he said, were home-loving people who feared the unknown and were not inclined to move to strange places. Only under extreme pressure, such as that exhibited by the southern white establish-
ment, would the former slaves move. Emancipation had not brought freedom. It had seen “the lamb . . . committed to the care of the wolf,” to use his words.

Having discussed probable causes of the exodus, Douglass told his listeners at Saratoga that even though his people might justify such a move, he did not agree that it was the answer to their problems. It bothered him that the Comstocks and the Havilands were going around, hat in hand, soliciting money for black unfortunates. He felt that such begging was bad for his people; that it made the public take sides in the issue. It was better, he contended, for the blacks to stay in the South, a place where there was hope for them if they persevered. The blacks should bide their time. “A Hebrew may even now be rudely repulsed from the door of a hotel,” he said, “but he will not on that account get up another exodus, as he did three thousand years ago, but will quietly ‘put money in his purse’ and bide his time, knowing that the rising tide of civilization will eventually float him.” America, said the black leader, steadily was growing more liberal and “the oppressor of the Negro is seen to be the enemy of peace.” Again, he asked his people to wait patiently, pointing out that “the careless and improvident habits of the South cannot be set aside in a generation.” Time, he thought, was on the side of the blacks.18

Democratic newspapers praised Douglass for his stand and attacked their Republican counterparts for belittling him. “There isn’t a Republican editor in the North who doesn’t profess to know much more about the colored people, their conditions and wants, than Fred Douglass,” sneered the Washington Post. “They will soon doubt Mr. Douglass’ ‘loyalty,’ and then it will not take them long to find out that he is a ‘rebel sympathizer.’” Cleveland’s Plain Dealer called the Negro leader’s views “manifestly sound,” and Daily Eastern Argus, of Portland, Maine, named him as “one of the ablest and most eloquent of his race.” The Democratic Missouri Republican, of St. Louis, was high in its praise for the position that Douglass had assumed. It suggested that Republicans ought to listen to the words of such an authority on Negro affairs. Southern newspapers lost no time in publicizing the thoughts of this black authority. To the Daily Picayune, of New Orleans, he was a “noted member” of the Negro race, and it advised all Negroes to heed his words. From Memphis came more praise. The Weekly Appeal said that Douglass was a man of more influence and less prejudice than any of the whites, and its cross-town rival, the Avalanche, agreed.19

The Republican press found little joy in the exodus views of Frederick Douglass. Some of the editors merely ignored his stand, while others lamented the fact that he had failed to see the light. One of them men-
tioned that he had made a personal exodus from the country that he alleged to be so well suited to his race. The *Colored Citizen*, of Topeka, represented the views of blacks who approved of the movement. In May, 1879, editor T. W. Henderson asked Douglass to write a statement of his position, which he did, arguing that an exodus was not the proper solution to the southern question, that it was a “wretched substitute” for the fulfillment of the federal government’s obligations to the race, and that it would merely fill Kansas with a “multitude of deluded, hungry, homeless, naked and destitute people to be supported ... by alms.” Unhappy with the response, Henderson editorialized: “There is not a respectable colored man in America that endorses the position Frederick Douglass has taken on the exodus question; all of them are for their race save Douglass alone.” The angry editor told his readers that he had always entertained a high regard for Douglass, but now the great Negro leader was wrong. Worse, said Henderson, the famed man was feeling his elevation to power; he was no longer in touch with his people.

Before many months had passed, the *Colored Citizen* would take another view. As the exodus mounted and as complaints began to be heard among both blacks and whites of Kansas that the burden was becoming too heavy, this and other newspapers backed away from their earlier support of the movement. In October of 1879 Henderson, who was a pastor in Topeka’s African Methodist Episcopal Church as well as a newspaper editor, moved to St. Louis, where he took a pastorate at St. Paul’s Chapel. His place at the *Citizen* was taken by W. L. Eagleson, whose views about the exodus apparently were less rigid than those of Henderson, and this, perhaps, helps to account for the shift of editorial opinion.

Black political leaders tended to agree with Douglass. Pinckney Benton Stewart Pinchback, who once had served briefly as governor of Louisiana and who in the spring of 1879 had been elected as a delegate to the Louisiana Constitutional Convention, opposed the exodus. He argued that the movement had been originated by speculators and disappointed politicians and that, as such, it could only harm his people. He was one of the principal speakers at a mass meeting held at Vidalia, Louisiana, that spring, a gathering called in order to “show up” the Kansas migration and to discourage emigration from Madison Parish. The New Orleans *Picayune* called him “an acute observer whose opportunities for forming a judgment are certainly unsurpassed.” Later in the year, Pinchback had a change of heart. By then he had decided that his people had no future in the state, that there was little chance for equality before the law, and that the sooner they left, the better. The reversal of his position may have been for political reasons. He was then the editor and proprietor.
of the *Weekly Louisianian*, and as he wrote from the desk of that journal early in 1880, “I am on the warpath.” In other words, he was back in the political arena, this time as an advocate of Grant for the presidential nomination. A good many of those who approved of the exodus, Mrs. Comstock among them, supported Grant. 21

Sen. Blanche Kelso Bruce, another black leader, opposed the exodus. Virginia-born (1841), he became a planter in Mississippi after the war, and in 1875 he was elected to the United States Senate. Early in 1879 he wrote to Col. W. L. Nugent, of Jackson, Mississippi, giving his views on the development. He thought that it had originated from a feeling of uneasiness and insecurity on the part of the blacks, “springing from the unfortunate race collisions,” and also because the former slaves “don’t feel they have proper returns for their labor.” Since they were in this frame of mind, he said, it was no wonder that they were attracted by “rose colored pictures” of the advantages of western life. 22 He admitted that, as Americans, his people had the right to migrate to any place they chose, but he thought that it was both injudicious and impolitic for them to leave a country in which they had been reared in order to start life anew in a strange and unfriendly climate. 23 His views, of course, were broadcast by Democratic and southern newspapers in an effort to show that sensible blacks were on the “right side” of the question.

Among those who testified before the Voorhees Committee was James E. O’Hara, who practiced law in North Carolina. He was a northerner by birth—Samuel Perry referred to him as “a carpetbag nigger from New York”—who first had taught school before being admitted to the bar. When asked how he felt about the exodus, he said that he could see no real benefit from it. As a Negro, he said he had been accorded equal privileges in his practice of law, and in general, he did not think that people of his race would benefit in this regard by going north. “For instance,” he told the senators, “in the North you will seldom see a white man and a colored man eating together; in the South it is nothing unusual to see that.” He went on to cite other examples of association by the two races, concluding: “The Southern man knows the Negro, the Northern man does not.”

O’Hara opposed the promotional aspect of the exodus, arguing that all too often the blacks were victims of propaganda. He explained that “the Negro is of a very sympathetic nature, and will give credence to those who profess friendship before he will to others. He is very credulous, and, even though deceived from time to time, will still take to a man who tells him a good story.” The American Negro, he maintained, had been a foundling and a ward too long; now he ought to be left alone to work out his own
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destiny. Constant uprooting, perpetual agitation to depart for some new and exciting promised land, thought O’Hara, was not in the best interest of members of his race. He agreed with Douglass, adding that “nearly all our colored people” were opposed to the principle of the exodus. 24

Another black opponent of the exodus was Isaiah C. Wears, of Philadelphia. This long-time real estate broker called the movement “suicidal,” and in order to broadcast his views, he wrote six or seven articles against it, publishing them in the Christian Recorder. His ideas sounded much like those of Douglass, particularly his contention that the difficulties that southern blacks were experiencing merely represented part of a revolution of which they were a part. He pointed out that neither race fully understood its role in black emancipation; that the former slaves did not always know how to handle their new liberty, a situation that tempted whites to engage in tyranny. Wears opposed colonization of any kind, holding that the South was the Negro’s true home and that it was the former slave who had produced the wealth of that region. He agreed with those of his race who predicted that blacks would find little improvement in their civil rights or in social acceptance by moving north. In fact, he distrusted northern motives in the recent movement. “I mean that the North seems to be looking upon this exodus as apparently superseding the necessity of any further action on their part for the protection of the colored man,” he told the Voorhees Committee. “They think that if at any time, or in any place, he is oppressed beyond what he can endure, he has this recourse—to get up and go to Kansas or somewhere else.” The Cleveland Plain Dealer called Wears “one of the foremost writers and thinkers among the colored people of today.” Born in Baltimore, Isaiah Wears never had been a slave. 25

A variety of other black people had doubts as to the practicality of flight from the South. An example was B. F. Watson, of Kansas City, who had helped so many of his race out of their plight once they had made the commitment to go north. He told members of the Voorhees Committee that he opposed the notion of sending the destitute into Kansas, but his feelings were mixed, because he had seen so many pathetic people passing through Kansas City. Reluctantly he decided that the lesser of two evils would be to let them come.

Perhaps Malinda Harris was one of those with whom Watson had talked. She was one of the Exodusters who had made her way from Mississippi to Wyandotte, Kansas, in the spring of 1879. Shortly after her arrival she wrote to a friend in Hinds County, Mississippi, and announced that she had made a mistake. With much labor she etched out a crude description of life in the promised land and concluded that a change of scenery had not provided the answer to her problems. “Dear Sister Mary
The Fiat to Go Forth Is Irresistible

Percein,” she began, “I write you a few lines to let you know that I am well and family are very well. I am just tollible weel. I don’t like the country a tall. If you doing well dont you Break up. dont study a Bout coming away. if I knewed what I know no Body could not Pull me a way. look for me next fall. for Just as soon as I get hold enough money I am coming back. . . . Pray for me for I kneed Prayers.”

As Malinda Harris and her kind sought heavenly intervention in time of trouble, the American black community continued to debate the issue at hand. At a conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, held at Washington, D.C., in the spring of 1879, the Reverend W. H. Chambers advised his followers to “hasten slowly.” He looked at his troubled people to the south and sympathized with them, yet he had doubts about the move northward. “Senator Windom says that the United States Government would protect them in Kansas,” he commented. Yet, he thought, “It is folly to say the Government could protect them there when they could not do it in Louisiana.” Listeners at the conference approved of such caution, and amidst applause for his stand, one of them shouted: “Brother Chambers, the last wine is the best.”

The thinking of Chambers was in line with that of Douglass, Pinchback, Bruce, and former senator Hiram R. Revels, of Mississippi, all of whom urged the black warriors to stay in the trenches and fight. “Pap” Singleton continued to disagree. He thought that these men were out of touch with the ordinary blacks, that they had more or less gone over to the white establishment as a result of their recognition and success. “They had good luck,” he would tell his listeners, “and now are listening to false prophets; they have boosted up and got their heads a whirlin’, and now they think they must judge things from where they stand, when the fact is the possum is lower down the tree—down nigh to the roots.”

John Milton Brown, of Topeka, was one who could say that he had a grass-roots view of the matter and that he knew the thinking of those members of his race who had left the South. By the time he appeared before the Voorhees Committee, Brown said that he had talked with a great many of the twenty-five thousand refugees who had passed through his city. On occasion he had spoken before groups as large as five hundred, at which times he had asked the reason for their flight. “They said there was no security for life, liberty, or property,” Brown reported. That this was the reason for the departure of many cannot be doubted. But the response may have been given by a smaller percentage of the refugees than Brown inferred, for he was “establishment,” was a faithful worker in the St. John camp, and probably was one of the “selected” witnesses that F. T. Ingalls was looking for in response to the request for such people from the
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pro-exodus camp at Washington. Brown later was head of the KFRA headquarters of Topeka. His image was somewhat damaged when he was charged with using some of the donations received to buy a farm for himself.29

Booker T. Washington was highly critical because the congressional committee had failed to discover a cause for the exodus that was satisfactory to him. As was the case with so many Americans at the time, he was convinced that he knew the answer, and it disturbed him that others were unable to understand the problem. Closer to the matter itself were such people as John Milton Brown, who thought that he also knew the reason for the movement. Both men were convinced of southern perfidy. But of the thousands of blacks who filtered through St. Louis, on up the Missouri River to Wyandotte and its sister cities along the river, and then inland into Kansas, only a few understood the deeper implications of the move. Interrogators who wanted to prove that social, economic, and political life in the South was absolutely intolerable for the former slave could find any number of refugees who would willingly give a satisfactory answer to a properly slanted question. Those who wanted to prove the contrary also could find witnesses who would confirm their preconceived views. In some respects the situation resembled the white man's questioning of the American Indian, who often tried to produce a certain answer, hoping perhaps for a present or some favor, or just to be agreeable.

Newspaper reporters invariably quizzed arriving Exodusters as to the reasons they had left the South, and depending upon the political complexion of the newspaper that they represented, the desired answers were found if enough people were questioned. For example, when a St. Louis reporter, accompanied by a member of the Sells & Sells shipping firm, interviewed a recent arrival named William Chapman, the questioning appeared to be aimed at showing readers that there was no political motivation behind the movement and that the trip to Kansas was a foolish venture. Chapman seemed anxious to say the right things to the reporter and in front of Miles Sells, whose company did a great deal of business with southern planters.

Why had the newcomer left his southern home, asked the reporter?

"Well'n," said Chapman, "I dunno. I wuz a hyearin' de people all talkin' about comin', an' a gittin' ready fur to come and dey wuz a sayin' wat a nice place Ka-ansas wuz, an' so I jes' bundled up my things and come along." Then the reporter asked, "Was that the only reason?" And Chapman answered: "Da's de only reason I know for it." The reporter's next question was: "No one threatened you?" And the answer was: "Oh, no, no; no, indeed. Bless you, no white man ever ha'med me." So went the dialogue, as written by the newspaper reporter.

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Another recent arrival was interviewed. Henry Watson, who was described as looking like a creeping hospital—his eyes were watery, and he appeared to have a cold—told of his motivations for migration. "They said dat we wuz to get land, and $300, and hosses an' plows, an' we all thought we was goin' right straight to fo'tune; but I tell you I'm mighty sick of it. I ain't bin a day well since I got hyere, an' I believe ef I was to stay hyere 'nuther week I'd be a dead nigger." Wondering if Watson's debilitated appearance might have been caused by a change of drinking water at St. Louis, the reporter asked if the traveler's bowels had been affected. Yes, said Watson, the results were so catastrophic that "I tell you, I'm afraid to set my foot down hard!"

Watson and Chapman were joined by Nathan Robinson, and all three of them agreed that they had been overcharged for goods in the South, that they always ended the year broke; nevertheless, they agreed, they were going back, because they could live more easily, even lazily in that warmer, leisurely climate.

Those who talked with the Exodusters, newspapermen in particular, invariably asked about the causes of the movement. The answers were less than satisfactory, unless one takes into account responses to leading questions put by those who knew what answer they wanted. As a rule, the run-of-the-mill field hand who was queried along the way to the Promised Land was vague about the reasons for his departure and even about the new life that he expected to find in Kansas or other parts of the West. Negro leaders who adhered to the Radical Republican view entertained no doubts as to the origins of the migration: persecution and racial prejudice had caused it. Bad luck, poor management, laziness, drouth, pestilence, or just a normal desire to migrate to a fresh part of the country—all such reasons were swept aside by those who had a preconceived notion of the problem. The argument among black intellectuals was not so much one over causations as that of how their people ought to respond to the development. To stay and fight, or to leave the southern whites stranded, without a labor base, was the question to be settled.

In Kansas, as well as across the nation, a great number of people from different walks of life and representing various political points of view, accepted the fact of the movement but wondered why it had occurred. As it was with the black leadership, various prejudices emerged in any attempt to answer the question—prejudices, or at least preconceptions, that made it very difficult to determine the real reason that these people had left their homes in such great numbers, so suddenly.
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