A BLEAK
AND ARDUOUS LAND

White supporters of the exodus idea expressed their conviction that 1880 would see an even larger outpouring from the South. They were hopeful that southern landowners would feel an increasingly serious economic pinch as more labor fled northward, leaving behind miles of unmanned and desolated plantations. Most of these extremists did not live in Kansas, but rather were residents of eastern cities, particularly of New England. Generally speaking, they had no economic interest in the matter, had little knowledge of southern conditions other than stories they had seen in the press, and represented what might be called the “unreconstructed abolitionists.”

Such anticipations were not realized. The flow did continue in 1880, particularly out of Texas and into southern Kansas, but with nowhere near the degree of intensity experienced in the spring of 1879. By early 1880 St. John and his supporters were making desperate efforts to sidetrack the onrush and to deflect it into other northern states. Conditions in Kansas in that year were unfavorable for prospective settlers, and as word of that situation spread throughout the South, the movement began to subside. A cold autumn followed a poor crop year on the high plains. Wilmer Walton wrote to St. John, from Parsons, saying that in late November, nighttime temperatures were below zero. “I find many of the colored men, women and children around here are shivering for want of sufficient warm clothing,” he told the governor. Fortunately, he added, the numbers arriving lately had dwindled steadily, and now they represented only a trickle.¹
Meantime, between eight and ten thousand white settlers in western Kansas were obliged to appeal for donations of food and clothing to get them through the winter. Economically stranded, this beleaguered army of farmers clung to its tenuous position, hoping against hope that utter defeat would not be the ironic reward for venturing westward. It is hard to determine whether or not reports of such conditions were circulated among restless southern blacks with the same thoroughness that earlier stories about the "land of plenty" had been told to them. By the spring of 1881 the black flood that had washed westward across Kansas had ceased.

Thus, almost as quickly as it had come, the exodus faded and died. People who had asked each other about the movement's causes also wondered why it had withered so suddenly. For two years, politicians, humanitarians, and community leaders—both black and white—had tried to find out what had generated all the excitement in the spring of 1879, and depending upon their political, moral, and even economic positions, they found different answers. More difficult of solution was the question of whether the phenomenon had ceased because whatever had set it off no longer operated to keep it going. If the origin was political persecution by southern whites, had they now reformed? If the cause was economic, one might ask if these conditions in the South suddenly had improved. Or had the word spread to the effect that Kansas indeed was no promised land?

As has been the case with many developments, there was no identifiable single cause for the exodus. But if the answer was multiple, the different forces that generated it could not have had an equal amount of influence upon those who fled the South; something must have predominated. No one ever is going to discover the precise reason for the flight, because hundreds upon hundreds of those who made the hegira did not themselves know why they had left. This is equally true of the white legions who moved westward, but in the main, the underlying reason for the movement of both races was a desire to better one's condition, principally in the economic sector as well as in other spheres of daily life.

Economic causation was accepted by a good many people, both black and white. But not everyone interpreted it in the same manner or used it for the same purpose. Although St. John talked a great deal about political persecution, he also laid emphasis upon economic matters, usually stressing the unfairness of southern planters as opposed to built-in conditions that faced both races in the South. "All the refugees agree substantially that the cause of their leaving the South exists in the fact that they have been unfairly dealt with, really robbed year after year of their earnings, and
also not only deprived of their political rights, but for years have been insecure in both life and property,” he wrote in answer to questions put to him by the Philadelphia Times.2 He added that the blacks for years had contemplated movement; however, they had waited, hoping for improved conditions. When better times did not materialize, they moved.

Strictly speaking, St. John was on the right track; but simply to suggest that after an indeterminate period of waiting, thousands “just moved” is a considerable oversimplification. Something triggered a movement that might well have been on the verge of developing. There are several possible explanations for the immediate causes, among them a poor crop in 1878, the probable return of yellow fever to the river-bottom regions, stories handed around by word of mouth and in church periodicals about a land of promise, and predictions of increased bulldozing on the part of the whites. But to these must be added the excitement of the moment. Wild rumors danced across the southern countryside and fired the minds of a restless, suspicious, and credulous people. There were whispered stories to the effect that Louisiana’s new constitution would contain a clause providing for the reenslaving of Negro children for a period of twenty-one years. Another terrifying report stated that Jefferson Davis was on the loose again, this time in command of ten thousand troops, supported by a flotilla of four gunboats, and he had threatened to send back into slavery every black who tried to go up the river. Countering this discouraging news was a rumor that “General Grant has ordered us to go to Kansas and he will take care of us.” To carry out his plans, Grant was said to have stationed his old friend General Sherman at New Orleans in order to protect the former slaves, who, if they wished, now could go to Kansas, which recently had been set aside as a Negro state, and every family making the move would be given free land, free housing, and five hundred dollars. The offer was limited, warned one of the more colorful versions of the rumor; after March 15, 1880, all blacks found in the South were to be exterminated upon orders of President Hayes, who, unaccountably, had turned Democrat. As if this were not frightening enough, yet another story was spread, this one to the effect that any who escaped the net thrown out by Hayes would be put to death by the Indians, who were to be sent out on a grand scalping spree among southern blacks. Filled with thoughts as horrifying as these, it is easy to imagine the responses of emotionally aroused listeners who were told that the last boat was on its way out, that it was now or never.3 White planters, who may not have followed events closely, found it hard to explain the presence of hundreds of highly excited blacks lined along the banks of the Mississippi, frantically hailing passing steamboats.
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Landlords did not understand, or professed not to understand, what all the uproar was about. One of them, who signed himself "Planter," wrote from Warren County, Mississippi, saying that he thought that black farmers had no real basis for complaint. "From the Gulf Coast of Louisiana to the Arkansas line, and I presume above there, the rate of wages paid field hands varies from 50 to 60 cents per day, or $10 to $12 per month and rations," he said. "When a Negro rents land he usually takes twenty acres, for which he pays four bales of cotton of 400 pounds each. He has, also, to purchase his supplies which can easily be done for $150, and which will supply him liberally, to which we can add $50 for contingencies, making a total expense of four bales of cotton and $200 to make his crop." Such a farmer, said "Planter," could expect a crop of fourteen bales, as well as enough corn to feed himself and his mule for a year. "Deduct the rent and the Negro has ten bales wherewith to pay his supply bill, which will sell for $350, leaving a profit of $150. Where can you find a better paid labor than that?" he asked.4

The problem was, said "Planter," that the black farmer tended to be improvident. Thomas Sturges, who had fought in the war on the Union side, but who now lived at Jackson, Mississippi, shared this feeling about the attitude of the former slave. Ever since freedom, said Sturges, the Negro had been getting worse about working. Since the days of slavery, production had declined, yet he thought that the average farmer easily could produce twice as many bales as he did. The Negro sharecropper, it was charged, refused to do any such outside labor as ditching, fencing, and other necessities of upkeep, thus forcing the plantation owner to do it. Few of the former slaves wanted to work for wages, because it did not leave them as their own masters, but rather it subjected them to orders, and they did not like that. But when they farmed on shares, their lack of attention to detail resulted in bad management practices. Despite this discouraging development, said Sturges, blacks generally were treated well by the whites with whom, or for whom, they worked.5

The southern press, representing, as it did, the white establishment and the business community generally, subscribed to the "shiftless" theory as applied to Negro farm labor. The Picayune, of New Orleans, for example, argued that during several years prior to 1879, cotton prices had suffered a decline, and the South itself was in the midst of a general depression. Given these agricultural conditions, the newspaper could understand why there was unrest in the cotton and sugar-cane fields. At best, it thought, the black farmer was not very adept at planning and management. "The Negro is shiftless and rarely begins a season with any means, no matter how favorable the preceding year may have been," commented
the editor in May of 1879. "He must then purchase all that he may need through the spring and summer on credit. The country storekeeper deals with a customer who has no property, and who depends upon the growing crop for the means to pay his debts. He therefore takes the risk of his customer's honesty, besides the chances of a failure of the crops. His profits must necessarily be large." Admittedly, said the Picayune, such a credit system had its dangers, but they involved white borrowers also. Blacks invariably accused their creditors of cheating them, and no matter how clearly the black farmer's account was explained to him, he would claim that he had been cheated. One of the heritages of slave days was the continuing distrust between the races.

Despite all disclaimers by southerners that the average black farmer was a happy man and that his labor brought him rewards that compared favorably to those of agricultural workers elsewhere, the question of land tenure remained as an irritation between the races. A Chicago newspaper touched upon this tender point when it said that southern landowners "must open their eyes to the inevitable fact that free labor must own the land it cultivates, and that if this is impossible in one locality, then labor will seek out some other locality where it is possible." The editor explained that at the end of the war, cotton planters had tried to hire black labor, but that the practice had been abandoned after a few years because the owners frequently did not have the required cash and because those who loaned it to them risked the loss of their investment if the crop failed. He reiterated the criticism that Negroes had for the wage system: namely, that its gang-labor characteristics reminded them too much of slavery.

Charles L. Howe, who owned plantations in Louisiana and Arkansas, tried a combination rental and wage system. He hired men for seventy-five cents a day, and women for sixty, paying them by the week. To others, who preferred a contract arrangement, he rented mules, plows, clothing, provisions, and land at eighty pounds of cotton per acre farmed. As a rule, living quarters and a garden were thrown in. About 150 Negroes worked for him, some on a wage basis, the rest on shares. Those who received wages bought their own provisions.

Howe's main complaint touched upon laziness and improvidence, said to be so common among the former slaves. He thought that they did not work enough. That the hands avoided the fields on Saturday was not a new development; many had done so under slavery. But, said Howe, Saturday now was spent in town, if there was one nearby, "having a 'whoop' and a 'hurrah,' and getting drunk,—a good many of them." Some of the employees would not work even a full week, he charged. At most they would give only four days of their time, and they spent every
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cent they earned. E. B. Borden, a Goldsboro, North Carolina, planter, supported the contention that those who worked for wages saved almost none of them. Under this system, he said, laborers developed very little attachment to any locality, and therefore they found little to hold them when new attractions beckoned from places such as Kansas.8

Many of the Negroes who migrated to Kansas admitted freely that they had saved little money. It was not so much due to improvidence, they argued, as it was to the ever-tightening economic vise in which they were pinched. St. John had remarked that these people were “really robbed” of their earnings year after year. The victims explained the method by which such extractions were made. First, the credit system, as operated under the “store order” arrangement, provided a heavy drain. Some of the Mississippi Negroes said that they had paid as high as $18 to $20 a barrel for pork that sold in St. Louis for half that amount. Land that would not sell for $25 was reported to be renting for as much as $10 an acre, an amount that left tenants with very little when crops were poor, as was the case in 1878. The Clarion, of Jackson, Mississippi, denied that rent came to anywhere near $10 an acre, but rather, it averaged about $6.40 in the richer parts of Mississippi. In addition to the land, said the newspaper, normally went a cabin, a garden, a pasture, and frequently the use of a cotton gin—all free. In the upland country, lands could be rented for as little as $1 to $3 an acre. No matter, countered the New York Tribune, rent was a fixed cost, and a poor crop could mean that many a black family was without money to buy clothing and provisions for the coming year. Under such circumstances, said the newspaper, it was small wonder that impoverished cotton farmers were attracted by promises of better returns in other regions.9

Assuming that economic discontent was one of the main underlying problems for post–Civil War southern blacks, it still would take some kind of inducement to make many of them pack their things and leave. Fear, of course, was a “push” factor; promises of a more pleasant life provided the “pull.” As the movement swelled to alarming proportions, a number of accusations filled the air, each charging this or that “interest” with having propagandized uneducated, gullible Negroes. Since western railroads were in bad repute during these years and rapidly were becoming targets of reformers, it is not surprising that they were accused of trying to lure the blacks away from the South with promises of free or cheap land.

Charges against the railroads came from all sides. One New Orleans newspaper was convinced that a “ring of ever-cunning railroad speculators in Kansas” who wanted to bilk the innocent Negroes had triggered the exodus. The newspaper inferred that the ploy was not very successful

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when it admitted that the "sharers and speculators soon got tired of this exodus business and abandoned it." But by then, said the editor, the ease with which unhappy blacks had made their way northward had captured the attention of the politicians who saw great possibilities in colonizing these people in Democratic northern states. A St. Louis paper examined what it called the "Kansas Pacific theory," one that charged Jay Gould with being at the bottom of the exodus plot; and it suggested that if the accusation had any foundation in fact, the railroad company should take care of the paupers whom it had induced to go to Kansas.

Less hostile observers admitted that the roads might have had something to do with the movement indirectly, but not through any active propaganda campaign aimed at any specific group. W. J. Buchan, of Wyandotte, said that some of the refugees whom he talked with had an out-of-date circular from the Leavenworth, Lawrence and Galveston Railroad, issued in 1868. "That paper was old and dirty, as if they had had it a long time" he said, explaining that apparently the holders of it thought that railroad land was easily available in Kansas, and perhaps that it was offered under special terms. In fact, the advertisement simply offered land for sale along the line of the road; no promises of any kind were included.

In other instances, railroads were accused of offering jobs, as an allurement to black workers. A Democratic paper in Boston reported that the chief engineer of construction for the Northern Pacific Railroad had promised attractive wages to Negro laborers, that Jay Gould wanted at least a thousand of them for the Union Pacific, and that Huntington would take an equal number on the Southern Pacific. In this instance the roads hardly could be charged with intentionally encouraging the exodus; what they wanted was cheap labor, regardless of color. Nevertheless, the editor of the Memphis Appeal used reports of such recruitment as further evidence that "railroad agents" were luring away southern labor and were thus contributing to the southland's problems.

Less publicized were the charges leveled at steamboat lines, whose business was said to be on the decline in the new age of railroading. The Star, of Kansas City, later recalled that these companies tried to stimulate traffic by distributing lurid posters throughout the black belt, advertisements that held out promises of forty acres and a mule as well as other rewards. "The deluded creatures came up the river in droves," said the Star.

That the influence of propaganda was important appears to be indisputable, yet it is the hardest of all the accusations to pinpoint. Any number of people said that they had seen chromos, handbills, and posters, but very few of these documents could be produced. Sen. Benjamin F. Jonas,
of Louisiana, is a good example of one who referred to the propaganda but had not seen it. "I learn that in many of their [the black farmers'] cabins can be seen highly-colored pictures representing the Western prairies as dotted with beautiful cabins, just ready for occupation, around which the buffalo and other game animals are feeding, and just waiting to be shot," he reported to the \textit{New York Times}. "Glowing stories of this country have been told them by the agents of Western railroads having land to sell, and they naturally want to leave their present homes, where there is hard work and small pay, for this land of peace and plenty."\textsuperscript{15}

Arriving Exodusters told Kansans that such inducements had influenced their decision to leave the South. A. A. Harris, a Fort Scott attorney, told of one such conversation: "One man from Texas told me that a white man came down through that country, selling railroad tickets; the white man had a chromo, on which was a picture of a colored man on a farm in Kansas, with a two-story white house, with pianos, and carpets, and things of that kind, and white servants." However, admitted Harris, "I never saw one of these pictures, but this is what this colored man told me."\textsuperscript{16}

Another reporter who had tried to find one of the elusive documents described his efforts to St. John. "Only yesterday I was informed that circulars had been sent from Ohio to leading colored men here and elsewhere informing them that lands would be given them in Ohio and Kansas in exchange for their homes here," wrote S. A. Hackworth from Brenham, Texas. "I have sent some of my colored friends here in search of one of these circulars and hope to get one," he added.\textsuperscript{17} Now and then, men who had seen or had possessed one of the much-publicized tracts described their contents. "We got papers down South stating the government had furnished land for us in Kansas, and was giving us free transportation from Saint Louis, and that some railroads in Kansas would furnish us land and allow us four payments, and the government would allow us five payments," wrote James Brown, of Madison Parish, Louisiana.\textsuperscript{18}

Information such as this was exaggerated, but only to a degree, when one considers other inducements that caused discontented southern blacks to leave home. Promises ranged from fares as cheap as one cent a mile, better wages, and more-favorable living conditions, to outlandish assurances that almost everything was free in the new Canaan. In the latter category was the offer of little flags, no larger than the palm of one's hand, that were said to be passports, "and the Negroes think that with these they can pass anywhere without money and without price." Some of the flag salesmen modified their claims, asserting that one of their products, stuck
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into Kansas soil, earned title to sixty acres of land. Unfortunately, some of the purveyors of such happiness were Negroes who understood the credulous nature of their customers and preyed upon them unmercifully. The blacks who innocently put up their hard-earned cash for "passports" were easy marks for the hustlers. As one St. Louis paper put it, the Negroes, who for some time had been emancipated and enfranchised, were "so utterly ignorant that they believe stories a white boy of twelve would laugh at." These people had learned almost nothing during Reconstruction years, thought the editor, who said that in 1879 they were merely grown-up children.¹⁹

The credulity of the former slaves was recognized by southerners, who had used it to their own advantage for some time, but who now discovered that it was being used against them. From Mississippi came the comment that the blacks had "enjoyed the delights of a Utopian state of existence" briefly after they had gained freedom; then came the realization "that there could be no exemption from the irreversible decree of the Almighty that man must live by the sweat of his face." Hard labor and hard times brought on a disquietude among them that made stories about faraway Kansas sound like the promised land, and in their distress, they wanted to believe what they heard.²⁰ A Warren County landowner attributed the reason for the flight to Kansas to the natural excitability of the Negroes and to the fact that they had been "most gloriously" lied to.²¹ From adjoining Hinds County came agreement. Plantation owner Henry C. Pike said that for months, unsigned handbills had circulated among the Negroes who appeared anxious to believe all that the literature promised. Bitterly he commented that the "Negro's idea of liberty is to have all he wants to eat and wear and to have no work to do. He cares for nothing else."²²

North Carolinians admitted that blacks in their state were in a mood to believe promises of a better life elsewhere. Julius A. Bonitz, editor of the Goldsboro Messenger, thought that many of the freedmen were naturally of a roving disposition and therefore that they were easily disposed to move. "They look upon the prospect of a journey north as a grand excursion," he said. Lewis H. Fisher, a Negro merchant from Kinston, confirmed what Bonitz had to say. He agreed that many of the local blacks were attracted by the prospect of better wages and living conditions in the North and by the rumor that rail fare from Goldsboro to Washington, D.C., could be purchased for as little as one cent a mile.²³

Texans of both races were disturbed by propaganda that quietly filtered through their neighborhoods, leaving in its wake restless and excited Negroes. Some of the more concerned residents wrote to St. John asking him how much credence should be put in these printed rumors.
C. W. Porter, pastor of the Brazos, Texas, A.M.E. church, said that many of the blacks in his neighborhood were "laboring under the impression that land, provisions and everything essential to their prosperity will be given them free." He asked for the governor's opinion of the movement, how those who had made the trip were getting along, and if land and provisions actually were being furnished to arriving southern refugees. J. M. Curd, of Cold Springs, Texas, also had questions for the Kansas governor. Was it true, he asked, that black people were not welcome among the Jawhawkers? He wondered how freedmen got along in Kansas and if it was true that the government allowed a homestead to every colored man who wished to have land in that state. C. P. Hicks, of Brenham, Texas, requested that St. John spread the word across the entire South, as he had done in a circular letter to Texas, to the effect that Kansas was not a land of milk and honey. Hicks, who said that too many ignorant blacks believed propaganda leaflets, thought it only fair that prospective emigrants from southern states know what they might encounter in Kansas. Although he appeared to be concerned that the freedmen would leave his neighborhood in large numbers, he admitted that the weekly church meetings that these people attended had to be protected by armed guards.24

In addition to social and political pressures, Texas Negroes complained that in their poverty they were little better off than in ante-bellum days. Bad crop years simply accentuated the conviction. As one of the Voorhees Committee witnesses put it: "Most of those who left Texas left because they had a short crop there last year; they did not raise any corn nor wheat, and but very little cotton." Another witness admitted that Texas was losing black farmers to Kansas, but at the same time it was trying to induce others in such states as Louisiana and Mississippi, even those as far north as Tennessee, to migrate to Texas. Early in 1880 a colored convention was held at Dallas, to consider the exodus question. One of the resolutions that was adopted declared that there was no necessity for any such movement from Texas, "whatever may be the condition of affairs east of the Mississippi," and that those who were in search of a better life were invited to come to the undeveloped northwest part of the state "with the assurance that all men there are treated according to their merits."25

While Texans promoted the Lone Star State as the land of promise for blacks living in less enlightened portions of the land, southern plantation owners continued to discuss the exodus movement and to puzzle over its origins. Texas was not the only southern latitude that had experienced agricultural depression in recent times. W. K. Ingersoll, a Vicksburg, Mississippi, planter, said that in 1878 local Negroes had harvested only
half a crop. He thought that this went a long way to account for their restlessness and was the reason that some had left. Crop failure in that area, said Ingersoll, was quite unusual; it happened about once in fifty years. He admitted that landowners were not as sensitive to the situation as they might have been, for rents were not reduced in less abundant years. A news note from New Orleans pointed to poor harvests and the low price of cotton as disturbing elements among southern farmers, and it noted that although political considerations were being advanced as the cause of the hegira, nevertheless it was economic uncertainty that actually had set in motion the rush northward.

It is not surprising that the southern press should argue against political explanations for the exodus and that it would seek answers in the less-controversial field of economics. Considering the source of its support and the nature of its readership, such a stance is entirely understandable, if somewhat suspect. However, others, whose prejudices were on the opposite side of the question, shared the view that the inability of southern blacks to prosper under white financial control had led to the idea of migration. One of these was Professor Richard T. Greener, who was a black graduate of Harvard and was dean of the law school at Howard University in 1879 and 1880. In sharp disagreement with Douglass, he argued that the solution to the problem of the former slaves was emigration from the South. Greener thought that the situation of the Negro tenant farmer in the South now was worse than at any time since slavery and that the only hope was the prospect of a better life elsewhere. He saw no reason that American Negroes could not get along just as well in the West as Swedes, Norwegians, Icelanders, and Poles.

Greener discounted any political plot to distribute blacks around northern states in order to influence key elections. Speaking in May, 1880, he said that such a plan would cost at least two million dollars, and even if such money were made available, it was too late to do any good for the election of that year. Rather than lay all the blame on southerners, Greener assessed part of it to northerners, holding that they had bungled reconstruction and that as a result of that program's failure, the Negro had become the chief sufferer.

In retrospect the causes of the exodus appear to differ little from the incentives that attracted millions of immigrants to the American West. Students of the movement generally agree that economic discontent, a sense of personal insecurity, and attractive propaganda combined to start more than one unhappy black southern farmer on his way to a vaguely defined promised land characterized by the simple word "Kansas." While these causes are not always assigned the same priority, economic
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discontent invariably is found near or at the top of the list. Other attractions and other pressures simply were contributing factors, more colorful or spectacular aspects of the excitement.

Although the denial of political rights to postwar southern blacks and the extreme lengths employed to carry out such a program are historical fact, the connection between this dark side of American history and the hegira of 1879 has not been proved. Old-line abolitionists tried to make a case for flight as a result of bulldozing during the time of the movement itself, and others later were drawn toward that explanation, particularly during the resurgence of the 1960s, when a great deal of literature concerning the history of the American Negro appeared. But despite the sentimental attractions of sympathy for an oppressed race, the "bulldozing" theory did not fit a majority of those who made their way to John Brown country in 1879 and 1880. "To better my condition" was the inevitable answer that white frontier farmers gave when asked why they had pulled up stakes and moved; despite the relative failure of the black farmers in Kansas, as regards the exodus movement, the answer for them generally was the same. While to better one's condition also could mean improvement in the realm of political participation, it almost always dealt with dollars and cents, as opposed to ideologies, even for the Exodusters.

More immediate motivations, those closer to the surface and hence more easily noticed, arose out of the emotional nature of the people involved. Contemporary observers were aware that cotton-belt field hands, a good many of them former slaves, were impressionable souls and that frequently they found an outlet in religious exhilaration. In the spring of 1879 the Chicago Tribune remarked that "some of the more ignorant and enthusiastic Negroes undoubtedly believe that the entire Negro race will leave the South as the Jews left Egypt, and [they] regard the movement rather as a religious than as a political or material improvement." Appleton's Annual Cyclopedia for 1879 supported this contention, maintaining that one of the principal reasons for the flight was religious enthusiasm. Some students of Negro history, writing in more recent times, have accepted this force as one of the important causes of the phenomenon.30

There were additional emotional reactions that made black men decide to leave their ancestral homes. For example, a North Carolina newspaperman remarked that when Democrats advised blacks in his state not to leave, they immediately assumed that this meant there was something good about the exodus, and they began to look into the matter more closely, some of them deciding to join the hegira. On the other hand, there were negative "convincers" that helped to make up the minds of the doubtful. A notice posted in Mississippi about this time was food
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for thought. It read: "Calvin Ostin: This is to notify you that you can't stay here innay longer than fifteen days; its nothing that we have against you, as you have a good name with white and black. Now, if not gone within fifteen days you will receive buckshot soop." In Kansas, upon arriving, some of the Exodusters told of such pressures, but they were a decided minority. Those who either had experienced threats or had been told of them found Republican newspaper reporters more than ready to hear their stories. The consequent publicity, laid before a readership that was anxious to read about southern atrocities, tended to exaggerate the charges insofar as this group of migrants was concerned.

Frequently the attitudes of former slaves were hard to define. Occasional threats of "buckshot soop" were easy for them to comprehend, and responses to these threats were not complicated; but beneath these surface irritations lay a feeling of uncertainty and insecurity among a newly freed people that even they were unable to explain. As previously mentioned, both races had difficulty in adapting to the new condition of employment, and suspicions on both sides were not easily set aside. If the whites had trouble in their new role as landlords, as opposed to being masters, the blacks were in an even greater dilemma, for many of them were very poorly equipped to take on the responsibility of managing even a few acres for themselves. The demands of the competitive system and the complexities of coping with their former owners in a sharecropping system often defeated the new free black farmers. It does not require a deep understanding of human nature to appreciate their desire to avoid problems at home by moving to another location where much better conditions were promised. Thousands of European immigrants had taken a similar course. Exaggerated written promises, blown into absolutely ludicrous proportions when passed along by word of mouth, were seized upon hungrily by a people in search of a black Canaan. To them it meant final emancipation.

Kansas was a doubtful Canaan, and the hegira was a general failure. Subsequent history would reveal that relatively few black homesteaders took up farms in the American West, and while it would be difficult to prove, it is worth at least some speculating that the lack of success attained by those who rushed northward in 1879 may have discouraged others from trying their hands at farming government lands on the high plains.

The reasons why the Exodusters of 1879 generally did not succeed as farmers in Kansas, or in neighboring states, are several—and they are not entirely black. While not all of these people were indigents, a high percentage of them were, and even those who had money, had very little. White farmers discovered that free farms did not mean free living, and
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many of them were driven back from their homesteads, unable to outlast climatic extremes, early crop failures, and other reverses in what a St.
Louis paper described as a “bleak and arduous land.” A certain amount of capital was necessary in order to get settled in a new country. Unfortunately, the black army that invaded the plains in 1879 faced abnormally difficult conditions, for it was not composed of first-line agricultural troops. Far too many of them were old men, women, and small children. Sickness and the inability to participate in productive labor meant that the many were a drag upon the few who were able-bodied. A good many of those who fled to Kansas were members of a family group: children, grandparents, in-laws, and relatives. Just as in a day when these members were terrified at the thought of being “sold down the river” to deep-South slave markets, so now they clung together, afraid of a new land, strange people, and a hostile climate. They had a particular distaste for the isolation and the distances of the West, and loneliness added to the discouragement generated by meager crops and cold weather. Before long, those who had ventured out to live on a farm of their own retreated to small towns, where they accepted menial labor or charity in preference to isolation and marginal crops. In this instance the retreat from the frontier farm was motivated by the additional element of a racial characteristic: gregariousness. This was one of the few cases where black and white experience at homesteading differed.

Another reason that the black frontiersmen of 1879 found little success in the plains country of western Kansas lay in their inability to adapt to a change of crop and the use of unfamiliar implements. Those who entered the southern part of the state tried to stay with the old familiar crop: cotton. The others, who found themselves in an arid climate and subjected to unknown extremes of temperature, had great difficulty in trying to raise wheat or corn under new conditions. In addition to the normal difficulties faced by all who went west, the black farmer often was reduced to battling nature with his bare hands. More than one of the Exodusters tried to dig out little circles of sod with hand shovels and to plant potatoes in the unfriendly soil below. Even white settlers who watched the pathetic efforts sympathized with their black neighbors. As it was, the odds against success were high, but the futile effort to tame the West by hand appeared to be downright foolhardy. There was little surprise in white circles when former field hands from the deep South gave up and moved to the nearest town; many of the whites themselves were starved out and were obliged to go back East in defeat.32

The blacks who were driven away from their farms were far more reluctant to go back where they came from than were the white home-
steadiers. Instead, they huddled in small western towns and accepted charity so readily that the donors soon became very critical of them. Herein lay the basis for the defense, by Kansans, that they were not prejudiced against the newcomers for reasons of color, but rather because they imposed a heavy burden upon small, struggling frontier towns. These little municipalities not only were new and unused to the demands made upon older cities, such as that of charity, but their founders took pride in their creations and thought it a reflection upon the growing town that any group had to be supported by others. Handouts to those who were unwilling or unable to join the labor force appeared to argue against claims that the new country was a land of opportunity for all. The Protestant ethic—the notion of work and save—ran strong in these communities, many of whose origins had a noticeable New England cast. The admixture of willingness to lend a helping hand to any and all in need, tempered by the dollars-and-cents cost of such gestures, provided a dilemma to the residents of these frontier settlements that was not entirely unique in the human experience. The fact that the objects of the argument were black people who had sought out John Brown country as a land of hope and promise merely sharpened the moral struggle in the hearts and minds of Kansas villagers. In the beginning the moral battle was one-sided, because the number of Exodusters was relatively small, and it was easy to insult the haughty southerners by offering unfortunate blacks an elaborately open-handed welcome. But as the flood grew and as increasingly unwieldy numbers threatened to dissipate the small financial resources of west-country towns, the tide turned. Before long, newly arrived blacks found the social climate as frigid as Kansas winters, and a good many of them wondered if the move northward had materially improved the "scums and bukes" situation.

As it was with many a white immigrant, the decision to move now was almost irreversible. Despite cold, poverty, and prejudice, the black immigrants frequently had no choice but to hang on and hope for the best. Either they did not want to go back, or as happened frequently, they simply did not have the funds with which to return. Some of their old employers were willing to furnish fare money to bring these wanderers back to the cotton and sugar fields, but such offers were made to only a small percentage of those who had migrated. In a good many cases, southerners took the "good riddance" attitude, feeling that they had rid themselves of some unproductive, trouble-making members of society, and they had no desire to see them again. In this, the black frontier farmers shared something with many a white neighbor who also would not have found the welcome flag out had he returned to scenes of earlier
strife and contention. Again, as was the case with the white settlers, Kansas blacks dug in and did the best they could, or they moved along to Nebraska, Colorado, or other places in the West where they thought they could make a living. Some of those who stayed succeeded. In proportion to their white counterparts, they were fewer in number; but in their success, perhaps they had found more satisfaction, for the ascent through the economic, political, and social strata of Kansas often was impeded by difficulties that were attributed to racial origins. In this, Kansas differed little from other western states, if that thought made it any easier for those who were subjected to such restrictions.