In Search of Canaan
Athearn, Robert G.

Published by University Press of Kansas

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

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By the spring of 1880 Kansans could look back upon a year of black migration from the South. During those eventful twelve months they had seen the exodus swell to alarming proportions and then subside as winter settled upon the state. With the approach of spring there were numerous predictions that warm weather would bring another and perhaps even larger group of disillusioned freedmen seeking new homes on the prairies.

By now, Gov. John St. John felt that he had done his turn philanthropically and that it was time for others to step forward in aid of the cause. During the early months of the year he and his Topeka associates urged Horatio Rust, at Chicago, to encourage a redirection of the movement toward Illinois. The faithful Rust was more than willing to carry out such orders from his chief, but as he told St. John, "the mass of the people are very ignorant of the Exodus as yet, and all are astonishingly indifferent." Nevertheless, Rust and Mrs. Comstock conducted a meeting at Chicago at which a resolution was adopted that invited fifty thousand Negroes to settle in Illinois. That these newcomers might not be the kind of immigrants who would be welcomed by members of the business community was evidenced in the creation of an executive committee, whose task it was to make arrangements "for receiving and distributing refugees" throughout the state. When St. John spoke at Chicago later in the year, he was annoyed at the lack of enthusiasm shown for his program of peopling Illinois with unfortunate southern blacks. Less than two hundred people turned out to hear him. The Chicago Tribune admitted that after the governor had talked for forty minutes to a small and unresponsive
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audience, the Kansan switched to the discussion of another and more exciting form of bondage in which men found themselves helpless victims: the slavery of alcohol. Unhappy with his reception at Chicago, St. John moved on to New York, where he told his listeners that he thought a number of the Exodusters would be willing to return to their southern homes if they were guaranteed the protection of life, livelihood, and their right to vote. He said nothing about welcoming them to Kansas. ¹

Even as St. John urged Rust to beat the drums of philanthropy in Illinois, he dispatched Mrs. Comstock to Nebraska. That kindly soul, described as "an elderly lady with white hair and benevolent face, and dressed in the style of the Quakers," admitted to Rust that recently she and Laura Haviland had had "an earnest consultation" with St. John concerning the "prospective difficulties in our work" and that he had advised both of them to "repair at once" to Lincoln, to see how many refugees that part of the country was willing to accept. Mrs. Haviland, who was then in her seventy-third year, at this time was secretary of the Kansas Freedmen's Relief Association at Topeka. Obediently, she and Mrs. Comstock journeyed northward, in response to their leader's command.²

Efforts to divert the influx to other states could provide only a partial solution to the problem. In addition to the driblets that arrived during the late spring of 1880, there remained a number of holdovers who had to be fed and housed by the KFRA at Topeka. In June, 1880, that organization designated three men to scour the East for more contributions to accomplish this end. G. W. Carey, a probate-court judge at Topeka who earlier had been a vice-president of KFRA, now joined with two of his fellow Topekans in protest to such a move. In a public letter the men argued that there was no need for such a solicitation, that only a handful of Exodusters now were entering the state, and that Kansans in general were unwilling that any more begging be carried out in their names. "There is great want among the whites on our frontier," wrote the complainants, "but in their name no one proposes to go east for aid. Neither should anyone go east or west to raise aid for a prospective influx of colored refugees."³

Judge Carey's reversal typified the thinking of a good many of his contemporaries. Frank Wilkeson, a correspondent for the New York Sun, wrote that "the majority of the citizens of Topeka are strongly opposed to this influx of poverty-stricken blacks from the southern states." He qualified his statement, saying that strangers with money rarely were the victims of hostility, except from the most ignorant of the whites, but "in the case of the pauper blacks, openly expressed hostility is general." More sophisticated Topekans, thought Wilkeson, were able to detect dialects,
and armed with the information gained from listening to the newcomers, they concluded that a lot of "town Niggers" had been sent their way. In fact, he said, some Kansans suspected that "Confederate brigadiers" had scoured southern towns, "collecting the blind, the halt, the old and the imbecile black paupers" for export. The purpose of such a policy, it was alleged, was to rid the South of its unwanted members in the belief that rail and boat fares were cheaper than a long-drawn-out welfare program. Northerners, who had expressed so much sympathy for the freedmen, could provide the necessary welfare programs. 4

Those who had rather unwillingly submitted to the notion of welcoming the Exodusters to Kansas and later had openly opposed the movement justified their switch on the ground that a reasonable amount of philanthropy might be expected, but that the whole thing had gotten out of hand and now threatened to bankrupt John Brown's former stamping grounds. That, in turn, led to the inevitable argument as to how many blacks had invaded Kansas, and depending upon the source of the claim, figures tended to be widely disparate.

As mentioned earlier, there were assertions that sixty thousand Exodusters had entered the state, a figure that, with an exception or two, represented the high in various estimates. In January, 1880, St. John himself said: "I am of the opinion that, since last April, from 15,000 to 20,000 colored refugees have arrived in Kansas." Of these he admitted that about twelve thousand were destitute, and of that number, KFRA found employment for some ten thousand. Other reliable sources tended to agree with St. John's guess as to how many had entered Kansas. Henry King, the Topeka journalist, said that by the fall of 1879 there were approximately fifteen thousand Exodusters in Kansas and that perhaps four thousand had gone on to such places as Nebraska and Iowa. The Commonwealth, a St. John mouthpiece, guessed that in the spring of 1880 there were between twenty and twenty-five thousand of these immigrants scattered around Kansas, a good many of whom were in the southern part of the state. Writing from Topeka on the last day of 1879, a correspondent for the Chicago Inter-Ocean said that between fifteen and twenty thousand had come, of which only about one-fifth were able to buy any land. At that time, KFRA was housing and feeding nearly seven hundred at Topeka, and its treasury was empty. 5

Despite these more-modest assessments, exaggerated figures continued to be handed out. When Elizabeth Comstock went out on the fundraising circuit in the fall of 1880, it was reported that she was making the journey in behalf of "50,000 Negroes more or less destitute." A former
Kansan, then living in New York, objected when that figure was published by the Herald.

Remarking that its magnitude was “cruelly exaggerated,” he suggested that if conditions really were that poor in the South and if so many were obliged to leave, then the entire North, and not just Kansas, should share the burden. Even St. John did not think that there were that many Exodusters in his state. However, at the end of 1880 he talked of forty thousand on hand with another twenty thousand having been sent on to other places. Earlier that year he had set the figure at twenty to twenty-five thousand; but even accepting the larger figure, it is doubtful that another fifteen thousand entered the state during 1880; the evidence does not support such a contention.\(^6\)

While it is difficult to determine how many Exodusters entered Kansas during 1880, the indications are that the flow was much less than that of 1879. Despite St. John’s public statements about the size of the 1880 immigration, his private correspondence indicates a falling off in numbers. Late in the year, Daniel Votaw, who represented the KFRA at Independence, in southeastern Kansas, wrote to him that “it appears from thy letters to New York and other places that new arrivals of Refugees are few & that there is little need just now.” Votaw admitted that since August only about five hundred had arrived in his town. During that month, Wilmer Walton, of Parsons, reported that only a few at a time had drifted into that little southeastern Kansas town in recent weeks. Both Votaw and Walton said that recent arrivals were cold and in sad need of food and clothing. On November 22 the temperature at Parsons dropped to eight degrees below zero.\(^7\)

Despite dwindling numbers the problem of supply remained great. Most of those arriving at Independence were “old, worn out men, widow women & children”; not more than one in ten of them had teams, according to Votaw. Thinly clad and without shoes, they suffered greatly. Even when a supply of shoes was dispatched to Kansas, the problem was not solved, for, as the Commonwealth explained, nearly all of the donations were too narrow to be of any use because the needy, having worked in the fields all their lives, required large, broad-soled footwear known as “plantation shoes.” At this time Mrs. Comstock was in Philadelphia, begging for cast-off suits from policemen, firemen, and college students. With much satisfaction she reported that between two and three carloads of clothing would be sent on to Kansas at once.\(^8\)

As the Inter-Ocean had remarked, not all of the arrivals were charity cases, some of them having money with which to buy farms and get started. John Milton Brown, who played a prominent role in the Topeka
welfare operation, said that a few members of his race bought lands along the Neosho River and settled down in the new country with a minimum of difficulty. Uplands could be had for $1.25 an acre, with bottom lands costing a little more. Prices ranged between $3 and $5 an acre for railroad land, but it could be obtained on an eleven-year credit arrangement, or one-third off for cash. Those who could not buy land hired out as laborers, either on farms or in the towns. Farm work brought between $15 and $20 a month, including board, and frequently with free housing and a garden plot thrown in, much as they had been furnished in the South. Those who worked at regular jobs in the towns—in the packing houses of Kansas City, for example—earned about $1.25 a day.

Laura Haviland, who operated KFRA's employment bureau at Topeka, was active in her efforts to find work for her charges. Printed circulars appealed to the consciences of prospective employers, urging them to take whole families and to avoid separating them, as had been done in an earlier day of "accursed bondage." She reminded businessmen that most of these people could neither read nor write, so "communication by mail is practically denied them." Mrs. Haviland urged employers in outlying portions of Kansas to hire some of these workers, promising that an undue number would not be sent and that therefore they would not "be felt as a disturbing element in the social or business life of our people."99

Kansans living in the western part of the state paid little attention to such appeals. The newspapers of the little towns along that agricultural frontier gave almost no space to the exodus or even to Negro colonies such as Nicodemus, so great was their preoccupation with the daily fight for survival that faced them. Drouth and consequent crop failure hit the more arid regions of the plains hard in 1879 and 1880. Rather than offering aid to the less fortunate, these people themselves asked for assistance, arguing that it would be hard to find anyone in worse circumstances. They were in a do-or-die fight for survival, and if anyone had accused them of a lack of sympathy for the unfortunate southern blacks who had fled to Kansas, they would have regarded the charge as just one more irritation among many that plagued them in their efforts to hang onto the tenuous toe hold that they had established in a barren, unfriendly, and even hostile land. Accusations of racism merely would have mystified them.

By the early months of 1881 a good many residents of more-settled portions of Kansas had thrown in the towel and had retired from the battle to save the black refugees. Drouth and crop failures in the more recently developed western part of the state were giving Kansas a bad
name nationally. The statewide business community, but more particularly its membership in the eastern counties, feared that additional rumors of difficult economic conditions brought on by heavy demands for charity might further cloud the young commonwealth's image.

Then the Huntington Advertiser, of West Virginia, plunged a dagger into the hearts of Kansas merchants. "The people of Kansas wonder why emigration passes that state by," remarked the newspaper. "The reason is their confounded chronic beggary. If they would not cry for charity for a whole year it would be good for the State." This is exactly what Kansans had feared would be said, moaned the Topeka Weekly Times, and it commented bitterly that in any other state an organization such as the KFRA long since would have been thrown out. Angrily the Times suggested that concerned Kansans should "rotten egg every man, woman or child found asking aid for Kansas, and give them fifteen minutes to get out of town.... All such beggars are the vilest frauds."¹⁰

Two of the accused already were worried about the recent course of events. One of them, Elizabeth Comstock, admitted to the other—Horatio Rust—that she was much perplexed about what to do with the "refugee things" that she had collected; she wondered if Rust could find a storage place for them. At the same time, she admitted that "our money is nearly all gone." As determined as ever, she redoubled her efforts to raise funds; but faced by a rising criticism of "beggary," from Kansans, she had to admit that the going was getting tougher all the time. In May, 1881, she wrote to St. John that "funds are dropping off for refugee work, while demands for money are increasing." Even so, some twenty-five thousand dollars worth of supplies and thirteen thousand dollars in cash had arrived from England in the preceding four months, making a total contribution valued at about eighty thousand dollars provided by the lady's workers in Great Britain, three of whom were her sisters.¹¹ However, as she said to Rust, the donated funds had been expended, and the prospect of getting more had dimmed.

Not only were contributions to KFRA drying up during the spring of 1881, but dwindling interest among Kansans was beginning to turn into a hard-core resistance toward the remnants of the exodus movement. At Chicago, Horatio Rust pressed Elizabeth Comstock for more money to aid his Southern Refugee Relief Association, whose announced purpose was to aid "the colored refugees in Kansas." At the same time he indicated that the end of the Kansas project was in sight when he told St. John that in Chicago "there is a plan on foot to send a colony of refugees to the Sandwich Islands." As he told the governor, sugar planting showed promise for former cotton raisers, and he thought that the Hawaiian pro-
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posal sounded like "a good scheme." Down in southern Kansas, Wilmer Walton still was on the battlefield, waging his fight against destitution among arriving blacks. He praised St. John and expressed his belief that the governor's heart was still beating in sympathy for the oppressed of his state. He promised that God would reward the chief executive.\(^12\)

Walton, at his Parsons outpost, was somewhat out of touch with events transpiring at headquarters. St. John's heart might be beating in time with the ideals of the movement, but realities suggested that the tempo, and perhaps the tune itself, had changed. On April 15, 1881, KFRA closed its Topeka headquarters; six weeks later the barracks and other elements of the operation in the city were shut down. This did not mean that relief work in Kansas had come to an end, but rather that Topeka no longer was the nerve center.

For some months Mrs. Comstock had been aware that the Topeka command post of KFRA would have to be evacuated in the foreseeable future. In July, 1880, she asked St. John if he did not agree that the main effort ought to be shifted to the southeastern part of the state, a section that now was experiencing a heavier influx than eastern Kansas. Candidly she admitted that there was "much dissatisfaction in Topeka, among the citizens, many of who think that our doing so much there has increased the refugees there," but she wondered if it would be "wise or right" to shift the focus of their efforts to southeastern Kansas. Another alternative was for her group to secede from KFRA. "I confess, I am unwilling to do that," she told the governor. "I fear that our doing so would tend to lessen public confidence & the funds and supplies would fail in consequence."\(^13\)

By late March of 1881, shortly before KFRA closed its Topeka offices, Mrs. Comstock had made a decision about her relationship to that organization. In the future she would work independently of it. On the eleventh she told St. John that she and the Kansas Friends "had pretty much decided" to aid the unemployed freedmen by putting them to work on agricultural lands that the group intended to purchase in southeastern Kansas and for which three thousand dollars had been raised. Optimistically they proposed to employ any and all refugees who wanted to learn practical farming. In connection with the project there would be established what she described as a training institute in agricultural and domestic arts "that men & women, boys & girls can all be employed & taught." The reason that she was ready to abandon welfare in favor of a project that would involve employment was explained in a letter of March 26. "Owing to the fact that so many of the refugees congregate in and around Topeka where aid has been so largely distributed, many more being here
than can possibly find employment, and it being positively necessary that they should scatter to other parts where they can find work as spring advances, I am urgently advised by Governor St. John and the best friends of the colored people here, to abandon those headquarters at once,” she informed the Daily Capital, of Topeka, whose editor cheered both the idea and the governor.14

When Mrs. Comstock and Friends selected southeast Kansas as the site of their next endeavors, they chose a part of the state that was relatively infertile so far as sympathy for the Exodusters went. Editor Frank C. Scott, of Independence, Kansas, argued that “the illiterate beggar, the world over, is a curse to society he infests. He is a debased, degraded, debauched wretch, whose presence in any community is an unhealing ulcer; he is of the class to which a large majority of the Exodus Negroes belong, and we indignantly protest against these miserable wretches being thrown upon the society of southern Kansas.” W. S. Newlin, whose home was Lawrence, tried to engage in missionary work for St. John at Oswego, a few miles east of Independence. It did not take him long to agree with Scott that blacks were not very welcome in that neighborhood. “The cause of the refugee down here is unpopular,” he reported to the governor. “Sleek, well clad & fed Pharisees let these poor ulcer clad Lazeruses pick no crumbs from their tables & care nothing for them & know nothing of them & despite us who work among them.” Newlin had written a plea for aid to the Chicago Inter-Ocean, which local whites feared would hinder white immigration to the area. St. John’s field worker admitted that as a result of his letter “I unfortunately am suffering great persecution here. . . . The Land Agents & Democrats are most exercised by it.”15

Even some of the enthusiasts among St. John’s following were losing interest in the region. Albion W. Tourgee, who became so well known for his novels about the conditions among blacks in the postwar South, decided to sell his quarter-section of land in Butler County. He thought it was worth eight dollars an acre, but he told the governor that he was willing to sell the property at cost, or five dollars an acre, on ten years’ time. Perhaps he thought the investment had been “A Fool’s Errand,” to borrow the title of one of his better-known books. In any event, he now wanted to dispose of land that he never had seen.16

Aside from Mrs. Comstock’s defection, there were other signs that the day of KFRA was over. In an early period, blacks of the “Pap” Singleton variety had promoted colonies, selling land to members of their race who had funds enough to move. The rush to Kansas in 1879 and 1880, heavily subsidized by Mrs. Comstock’s Quakers and St. John’s humanitarian army, had provided stiff competition for those who wanted to continue
the colony-founding business. But now, in the spring of 1881, such pro­
motions reappeared. On March 23 the South Kansas Colony Company
was founded at Topeka, with Columbus Johnson as president and A. D.
De Frantz as secretary. Both of these men were old hands in the busi­
ness. During the next month, leading black men of St. Louis, led by
J. Milton Turner, founded the Freedmen's Oklahoma Association. They
intended to settle the part of Oklahoma known as the ceded lands, or
lands relinquished in 1866 by Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Seminole
Indians "for the purpose, as stated in the treaties, of locating thereon
other Indians and freedmen." Turner had played a prominent, if
somewhat controversial, role in the exodus movement as it affected St.
Louis in its earliest days.

Even Laura Haviland, formerly secretary of the KFRA at Topeka,
admitted that the welfare program had revealed a weakness. "I am sat­
isfied continual giving has its demoralizing effect," she told St. John in
the autumn of 1881. "Yet it could not be avoided last winter, and when
they were coming by hundreds." She wrote from Columbus, Kansas, as
secretary to a new organization known as the Agricultural and Industrial
Institute, a school chartered in late April of 1881 by Mrs. Comstock and
some of her Quaker supporters. It was situated on four hundred acres of
land, to which Mrs. Comstock referred in her letter of April 11, located
in the extreme southeastern part of the state. Although Elizabeth Com­
stock listed herself as "Foundress," the president of the board was a
Quaker, an old-time abolitionist named Jonathan E. Pickering. His son
L. M. Pickering, who once had been in charge of an Indian farm on the
Sac and Fox Reservation, was appointed to superintend farming opera­
tions and instruction. The chief clerk was a man named S. W. Winn,
whom the Commonwealth described as "an educated and competent refu­
gee from Mississippi." Although Mrs. Comstock had complained about an
increasing difficulty in raising funds for refugee relief, by mid May of
1881 she had gathered up eighteen thousand dollars for the new project
near Columbus, Kansas. Within another six weeks she had shipped
nearly seven thousand dollars worth of supplies to her friend Laura Havi­
land at the new institute, where already fifty-two refugees were employed.
At that time Mrs. Haviland said that her group could accommodate at
least 150 in the school.21

The Friends were enthusiastic about the establishment of educational
facilities for the blacks of Kansas, but they admitted that financial sup­
port was hard to come by. S. W. Winn, the acting secretary of the Kansas
Yearly Meeting Committee of Friends, praised the Agricultural and
Industrial Institute and tried to get St. John to use his influence to procure
railroad passes for the school's officers. He said that the educational pro-
gram was much liked by the colored people "who are gradually coming
in to work," but that as of early June, 1881, the school had no money
with which to pay them. Elizabeth Comstock suggested that the financial
burden could be lightened if the state would take over the school. Or if
not, she said, perhaps it would match funds raised by the Friends. She
expressed the hope that the training center would become a "second
Hampton" Institute.

Meantime, the tireless Quaker lady had been to see President Garfield,
to solicit his aid, and she reported that their conversation had been satis-
factory. She urged the president to support a program that would both
protect blacks in the South and at the same time provide means to dis-
tribute them around the North, or as an alternative, to furnish them with
a large tract of land of their own. In a half-hour interview, she said, the
president had exhibited a keen interest in the Exodusters.22

Despite a shift in direction by Mrs. Comstock and the Friends, from
support of charity to that of the educational ideal, there was rising dis-
satisfaction within the ranks of those who were dedicated to the alleviation
of suffering among black refugees. September of 1881 found Elizabeth
Comstock hard at work raising money for the cause among easterners,
but by now her efforts had begun to generate criticism. James B. Chase,
of Sherwood, New York, told St. John that while much was still being
done in his state to help blacks in Kansas, it troubled him that stories were
making the rounds to the effect that Mrs. Comstock was not trustworthy
and that "what may be sent her may never be applied as intended." He
asked the governor if the Agricultural and Industrial Institute was worthy
of assistance. He wondered if one could depend upon Mrs. Comstock's
statements about the condition of the refugees. F. C. Stanley, of Carding-
ton, Ohio, made similar inquiry, asking St. John if aid to Mrs. Comstock
might not be "misplaced charity."23 Before long the answer to questions
about the lady's personal problems would be provided by Wilmer Walton,
who told St. John, early in 1882, that she was in a sanitarium in Dans-
ville, New York, under treatment for an ailment that he described as
"mental and physical debility."24

Meanwhile, even the Kansas blacks complained about the manner in
which the relief and rehabilitation program was being carried out. In
June, 1881, a group of them at Topeka charged that KFRA had been
dissolved not so much because its mission was regarded as accomplished
as from a feeling that there had been mismanagement of the organization.
They charged that funds, clothing, tools, and so forth had been diverted
to the institute. This, said the complainants, was not the purpose for
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which many a donor had made his gift to the needy. Mrs. Comstock took offense at the accusations, arguing to St. John that the dissolution of KFRA had been a good thing. "I wish the colored people in South Kansas could feel the same," she wrote, adding a sorrowful comment about the "commotion they are making." Even more distressing to her were the attacks the Topeka blacks made upon Jonathan Pickering and his son, charging them with misappropriation of funds "& various other charges without any foundation." She swore to the governor that she had not spent a cent of KFRA funds on the institute. Topeka Negroes, she continued, demanded control of the boxes and bales of relief supplies arriving at the capital city. "They claimed them as a right, refused to go to places offered them to work & said 'We've worked for white people long enough, we are going to work for ourselves now.'" The gentle Quakeress, now alarmed, predicted that St. John would "have great trouble with this element," and in a surprisingly aggressive statement she recommended that they be "put down." 25

Despite Mrs. Comstock's protestations that all was well at the institute, charges of irregularities could not be silenced. Daniel Votaw, who represented the KFRA at Independence, Kansas, reported to St. John, in June, 1881, that Kansas black leaders were "dreadfully dissatisfied with the doings" at the school. He suggested to the governor the importance of keeping the state's colored community happy: "And as they and their Friends have a strong balance of power in the state and we want thee to fill a senator's place next term, we want them to have their votes and thee can have them as easy as to turn thy hand." S. W. Winn, writing from the institute, assured the governor that there were no real problems at the establishment, even though Votaw recently had passed around a petition there, which had been signed by a "few ignorant, deluded, colored people around him." This was no more than an indication of Votaw's prejudice and jealousy, said Winn. But Votaw persisted, charging that officials at the institute were selling thousands of dollars worth of clothing that was badly needed by near-naked blacks in order to get money enough to run the place. Unhappy refugees had asked him if St. John had ordered Jonathan Pickering "to take all our money & all our clothes & buy the land & put up them bildens and make us work for to pay for what was ours, and did he say that we needed no more help and does he know that Pickering sold our clothing by wagon loads to the Missourians who used to whip our backs?" By May of 1882 Votaw was able to report to St. John that on the seventeenth both Pickering and Winn had been convicted of embezzling about eleven thousand dollars worth of goods intended for distribution among the Exodusters. 26

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Despite opposition by those who preferred the KFRA welfare program to training schools for impoverished, unemployed blacks, the Quakers pressed forward their educational plans. The idea of self-help, as envisaged by Mrs. Comstock in her Agricultural and Industrial Institute, was neither new nor unique. As early as February, 1880, there was originated at Topeka a proposal for free industrial night schools to train girls and women for household work “and fitted for the duties of cooks, chambermaids, seamstresses, and housekeepers.” By then, one already was functioning at Lawrence. The organization, called the Freedmen’s Educational Society, was headed by James E. Gilbert and F. W. Giles, of Topeka; and St. John gave his endorsement. Giles wanted to go even further: he proposed the creation of a joint stock company with sufficient capital to buy lands, agricultural implements, and housing, all of which would be rented to Exodusters. He had a theory that if southerners could make money out of Negro labor, surely northern whites could do the same. Why not, he asked, combine business with philanthropy?  

A variation of the scheme that Giles proposed was the establishment of colored colonies, something that KFRA had dabbled with earlier. While organizing a colony did not necessarily involve training, as did the A. and I. Institute, neither was it out-and-out charity. The Little Coney Colony, located in Chautauqua County, which was presided over by a black politician named the Reverend Alfred Fairfax, tried to get money originally intended for KFRA diverted to it. By May of 1881 the colony's officers complained that Mrs. Comstock’s promises of such aid had been violated and that instead she had poured some thirty thousand dollars into a “swindle upon the freedmen” that would benefit only a few, namely the A. and I. Institute. They asked for and received the assistance of Daniel Votaw, of Independence, who led the attack upon the institute. In the autumn of 1882 Wilmer Walton visited the colony—he called it the “Fairfax Settlement”—and reported to St. John that the black colonists were hard at work, raising cotton, sweet potatoes, corn, and sorghum. Some of them had laid in a good stock of supplies for winter, while the more shiftless had set aside nothing. He said that the white neighbors, who also were poor, were generally well disposed toward the newcomers except in a few cases where he admitted that there was a lingering prejudice against the “descendants of Ham.”  

Apparently the colonists in southern Kansas fared better than the unorganized blacks who drifted into the region, looking for work or for contributions to their support. In the spring of 1882 Daniel Votaw confessed to St. John that he was weary, that he was getting but four hours of sleep a night, and that despite heroic efforts, his charity cases were
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starving to death. He said that there were about a hundred families in the neighborhood, but that they had no teams and had nothing with which to break ground except mattocks and spades. All their horses but one had starved to death during the winter, and that lone survivor, explained Votaw, had been killed by a "sickle" that also "blowed down" houses, dugouts, and other dwellings. His discouragement was compounded by the fact that little help was arriving from outside sources. One of the Friends, a Reverend Lydia Sexton, told Votaw that she could get all kinds of relief funds from Boston, but St. John would not endorse her. The governor's unwillingness to involve himself further added to Votaw's deepening gloom over the situation.30

W. T. Yoe, the postmaster at Independence, was not as pessimistic as Votaw. He thought the blacks were doing as well as could have been expected, although he thought that they might have done better working as in days of old under an overseer. Some did well by themselves, but others, without someone to direct them, were "practically useless." Even so, some of the newcomers already had comfortable homes and were doing reasonably well, considering how poor they had been upon arrival. It was the more improvident group that worried Yoe. These people, he said, did not seem to know how to provide for winter; so, when cold weather came, they would have to "root hog or die like white people." He did not think local whites could afford to give up any more food; they had done all they could. So had Votaw, said the postmaster, who called the KFRA man good hearted and so generous that he had mortgaged his own home to help feed the needy. He did not blame Votaw for wanting to get out of the relief business; in fact, he said, "our people are very tired of it."31

There were other indications that during 1881 and 1882 philanthropic zeal was fading in Kansas. For example, E. D. Bullen, of Dunlap, found that participation in the program of relief for arriving blacks was not without its problems. He complained to St. John that while he had served willingly as one of the governor's faithful soldiers in the cause, he had acquired a few scars. His role as treasurer for the local Freedmen's Aid Association had proved to be "very detrimental to my business [and] very detrimental to my social & political standing." Looking at the future, he wondered if standing by the association was his duty or even if it was a wise thing to do. "I will say the Association is doing a good work for the colored people," he admitted, "but so very obnoxious [sic] to the whites. I am about the only one who is here that could be made available to act as treasurer."32 Meanwhile, Wilmer Walton had given up his KFRA outpost at Parsons. He continued to help local Negroes by getting clothes from the eastern Friends and by furnishing seed and advice for
farming, but this was a more or less private philanthropy, carried out individually. "Pap" Singleton agreed that the movement was slowing down. In the fall of 1881 he remarked that sailors tended to leave the craft when the rats boarded it. "I have been looking at the sign and the mice are leaving and now and then a half grown rat," he told a Topeka newspaper. However, he maintained, "I am yet upon the old vessel but discontented." The old man, who was seventy-three, had become embittered. He felt that others had taken from him his true role as leader of blacks into the western wilderness.  

Despite St. John's efforts to shed some of the political garments that he had acquired in consequence of the movement, he could not shake off its associations. The rumor that thousands of refugees were starving to death in Kansas haunted him, as well as hurting him politically. Doubts as to the validity of the program continued to crop up, and as the 1882 election neared, such stories were most unwelcome at the Kansas Statehouse. That spring, for example, one of the clothing contributors wrote to St. John from Monroe, Wisconsin, expressing doubts as to the philanthropy in which he and the governor were engaged. He said that a young gentleman in his city was passing around the story that the alleged suffering among the refugees in Kansas was "the greatest humbug ever palmed off upon a generous public." Although the story had given the writer doubts so disturbing that he questioned Daniel Votaw's reliability, nevertheless he renewed his pledge to the cause, and he promised to stay with the commitment.  

It was the undying loyalty of his followers that troubled St. John. Echoes of praise for him floated across the Kansas countryside long after the governor had concluded that he would just as soon not hear them. G. S. Bascom, of Vermillion, Dakota Territory, represented the zealous band of non-Kansas admirers who continued to swear their loyalty to him. The Dakotan expressed admiration for the manner in which Kansas was trying "to solve reconstruction questions" by accepting Exodusters. He gave St. John much credit for his efforts to "solve social and moral problems by Prohibition." Bascom, who sent in a one-dollar contribution and demanded a receipt for it, expressed a sentiment held by many of the Kansas governor's followers when he said, "You are fighting a battle for all the world." He added that he was then reading Albion Tourgee's *Brick's without Straw*, and he wondered if Nimbus was "one of your dusky immigrants."  

St. John's "battle for all the world" was a more ambitious program than Kansans cared to undertake, and they retired him from office in the autumn election of 1882. His interest in the exodus movement had been a
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contributing factor to the movement of thousands of blacks from the South to Kansas, but there the campaign for betterment of these people slowed to a halt. Relief measures were taken, employment for considerable numbers was found on farms and in the towns, and others were assisted in migrating farther west, but resistance against integration and particularly against political participation made many a southern black wonder if his move had in any way opened the franchise to him. A black man's convention, held at Emporia in August of 1883, went on record as opposing the political ostracism practiced against blacks in America and in Kansas. A Topeka paper scoffed at demands for political equality, saying that "when properly stated in plain language [it] means that 'we colored people propose to demand a portion of the offices because we are colored.'" The newspaper contended that blacks in Kansas had been treated most liberally, in a political sense, one of them having been elected as state auditor—the reference was to E. P. McCabe—and that it was nonsense for them to talk about setting up a politically oriented organization based solely on color. Further criticism was heard following a convention of blacks held at Lawrence on August 30. The Commonwealth, once the spokesman for St. John and the champion of the politically oppressed blacks arriving from the South, called the meeting "one of the noisiest and most discreditable conventions ever held by a colored people of Kansas." The confusion was so great, said the paper, that passers-by on the street stopped to listen. Before the meeting adjourned, resolutions were passed condemning discrimination against blacks in accommodations theaters, and in the schools.

Within a few years even the Negroes were beginning to question the validity of trying to establish a black political force within the state. Referring to a convention held at Salina in 1890, one of them suggested that efforts to force major political parties to include his people in nominations had failed and that a new tack should be tried. "The idea that we must remain in a 'black phalanx' is un-American," he commented. "If we are to succeed at all it must be by individual effort and not move along in a 'herd.'"

The phenomenon that momentarily diverted the attention of Kansans from the routine of daily life and the promotion of that young state, in the spring of 1879, was of fairly short duration. The failure of the federal government, rightly or wrongly, to foster the hegira of blacks from the South, the difficult conditions under which these impoverished strangers tried to get a start in a new land, and the general inability of what was in many respects still a frontier community to support a large number of
refugees—all meant that the movement could not sustain itself for any length of time.

Aside from the moral aspects of southern mistreatment of former slaves and the righteousness of the blacks’ cause, almost everything else about the exodus was wrong, or at least unfortunate, from the Kansas viewpoint. That thousands of southern blacks had been deluded by false promises made by individual interests is difficult to deny. Accordingly, this disillusioned multitude of southerners, ready to break and run from an increasingly trying situation, responded to what appeared to be the clarion call. As a result, Kansas had to bear an unexpected burden, not only of an army of hungry refugees, but also of the heritage bestowed upon it by the fanatic John Brown, one that pointed a moral gun at this recently settled western state. Traditionally the frontier communities advertised heavily for settlers, and they were not always careful with the truth when extolling the virtues of their newly discovered Edens; therefore it was somewhat of an irony that one of them—Kansas, in this case—reaped an unexpected harvest from publicity that it had helped to disseminate about its agricultural and other attributes.