In Search of Canaan

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EPILOGUE

When John Milton Brown testified before the Voorhees Committee in the spring of 1880, he had predicted that the exodus would go on for twenty years until all, or most, of the members of his race had vacated the South. He believed that they would go into Indian Territory, into western states other than Kansas, into as yet unorganized western territories, and they would be scattered "all over the Northern States." At that time there was a good deal of speculation as to the probable extent of the movement out of the South and as to the direction that these migrants would take. Cynics maintained that a large part of them would find the world outside of Dixie to be cold and unfriendly and that before long, large numbers of the discontented would be only too glad to return home. Supporters of the movement, who agreed with Brown, were sure that the movement would reach flood proportions, that both North and West would vacuum out enormous numbers of former slaves from the southland. Both groups guessed wrong.

Some of the fleeing blacks went home, but how many did so cannot be determined. The best guess is that a relatively small number of the total chose to take this course. Scattered newspaper references indicate the return of occasional small groups and, less frequently, of larger numbers. Early in May, 1879, newspapers from Maine to Missouri gave prominent space to an account of one of these return trips. On the afternoon of May 6 the James Howard left St. Louis for down-river ports; aboard was a "large number" of returnees—the size of the group varying from 48 to 140, depending upon which newspaper one read. The reason
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for their descent of the river also depended upon one's choice of newspaper. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* explained that it was impossible for the Negroes to do anything but starve in Kansas, while in the South they had plenty to eat and wear. Readers of the *New York Times* learned that the turnaround had been instigated by southern planters who, fearing a loss of labor, now were using their influence to get back the absent workers. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* agreed. The Democratic *Washington Post* reported that hundreds had gone home and that many more would have done so had they possessed the funds; it was an anti-exodus newspaper. The New Orleans press painted a dismal view of Kansas, asserting that those aboard the *Howard* were glad to escape from such a place. A passenger aboard the vessel said that he had asked one old lady if the government had helped them in Kansas. "Lord bless you, honey," she replied, "we never see’d no Gov'ment out dar. Nobody give us nuffin,’" An old man spoke up, explaining: "Boss, I is got enuf of Kansas. This makes three times we colored folk s is been fooled—fust, 'tas de forty acres and de mule, which we didn’t git; then dars de Freedmen’s Bank, which busted all to smash es, then here is de Kansas oxidus, which might near killed us all. Well, 'tis de last button on Gabe's coat; and if them lying niggers and them poor white trash up in de Nort ever fools dis darkey agin, de angels of de Lord will git up and cut de piggin wing, while devil plays de fiddle."²

Most of those who came up river early in 1879 did not return. John A. Scudder, president of the Anchor Line, whose vessels carried so many of the Exodusters northward, said in late June, 1879, that fully ninety percent of the Negroes who went to Kansas stayed there or moved on to other western or northern states. He admitted that a few who were ill or were afraid of the Kansas winter had returned.³ In March, 1880, John Milton Brown testified before the Voorhees Committee that he knew of only five families whose members had elected to go back home.⁴ Other figures suggest that Brown, who was deeply involved in the KFRA and the relief movement in general, was too conservative in this estimate. A. S. Johnson, of Topeka, said that by April of 1880 about a hundred had accepted the offer of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad to give free rides back to Kansas City to those who wanted to go home.⁵ Some of the Texas blacks, who had crossed Indian Territory and had tried to settle in southern Kansas, returned. A recent study concludes that the number of returnees from this group amounted to about ten percent.⁶ One of the southbound wagons bore the sign:

Farewell to Kansas,
Farewell forever,
Epilogue

I may go to hell,
But back to Kansas, never.7

The difficulty of determining how many of the Exodusters gave up and went back home is matched by the problem of discovering where they went after leaving the packet boats at various Missouri River ports or after their arrival by train or wagon from places such as Texas. Even contemporaries had but a vague notion as to where those who had come to the state during the exodus movement had located. When W. J. Buchan, of Wyandotte, testified before the Voorhees Committee in the spring of 1880, he was asked where the newcomers were to be found. "They are mostly scattered through the State," he answered. Buchan, who had not welcomed these people and who said that they were "a great injury to us," was very little interested in their whereabouts.8 Roy Garvin, a Kansas City attorney who wrote about the movement much later, could offer only generalizations as to where the black immigrants finally had settled. He said that by 1881 they had almost disappeared from public notice, many of them having "moved elsewhere," while those who remained "became integrated into the life of their communities and achieved varying degrees of security."9

Some of the more successful blacks, such as "Pap" Singleton, Columbus Johnson, and others, stayed on and continued to pursue their real estate interests. E. P. McCabe, of Nicodemus, who became the highest black office holder in Kansas when he was elected state auditor, went on to engage in colonizing efforts in Oklahoma. In 1891 he was trying to develop a place called Langston, described as "a distinctively Negro city," located twelve miles from Guthrie, Oklahoma. A Topeka paper, in reporting difficulties that the early comers were having at Langston, rang a familiar bell when it said: "There is no room here for paupers. The country is new and poor. Those who can support themselves have no money to keep their dependent neighbors, and for the same reason there is little labor outside the family employed on the farms."10

A few of the arriving blacks who stayed achieved a degree of success that surpassed that of many of their white counterparts. Perhaps one of the most notable examples was Junius G. Groves, of Edwardsville, Kansas. Born a slave in Kentucky, in 1859, he came out to Kansas in 1879 with a large group of black immigrants. Starting off with less than a dollar in his pocket and then working on a farm at forty cents a day, he progressed to share cropping and finally to the position of landowner. By 1900 he possessed one of the largest potato farms in the Kaw Valley, had land upon which one thousand fruit trees grew, and owned town property that, a few
years later, was valued at eighteen thousand dollars. In 1903 Groves produced 72,150 bushels of potatoes, enough that Booker T. Washington dubbed him "the Potato King."11

Another of the seventy-niners was Henry Carter, a Tennessee refugee who was so poor, upon arrival, that he started out from Topeka for Dunlap on foot, his wife carrying the bedding and Carter carrying a few hand tools. By 1880 he had cleared forty acres, had made his first payment, and was the owner of a small cottage, a good horse, and two cows. The money for these things came from labor that he performed on nearby ranches.12

Several other black farmers, most of them in the Topeka area, also succeeded quite well. Robert and William Turner became market gardeners. So did Benjamin Vance and Robert Keith. When Vance arrived in the early eighties, he had a team of horses and fifty cents; by 1900 he was recognized as one of the area’s prosperous farmers. Keith, who was born in Georgia, came to Kansas in 1884 via Ohio. By 1900 he was worth twenty-five thousand dollars and was said to be the richest Negro in Shawnee County. John M. Brown, who was very active among the Exodusers at Topeka, settled on a 100-acre farm north of that city, raising potatoes and fruit. During the eighties he was elected county clerk for Shawnee County on the Republican ticket.13

In 1889, ten years after the exodus movement, a Topeka newspaper summed up the phenomenon and made an assessment of its long-range results. The Daily Capital said that of those coming in during 1879 and after, a portion undoubtedly had bettered their conditions, but a large number had undergone severe hardships through destitution and sickness, a good many had died, and of the survivors a considerable number remained in a poverty-stricken condition. Of those who came, most remained in or near the towns, working as unskilled laborers and earning between $1.25 and $1.50 a day. Generally they were able to find employment for only about two-thirds of the year.14

The exodus movement, which was born out of misapprehension as to the rewards offered in Kansas and out of a moment of panic as to the probable penalty for remaining in the South, was a phenomenon in the frontier movement. It was confused with an older and more orderly migration of black farmers, and it tended to diminish the chance for success of those who tried to move west to find new homes in the more traditional manner. While earlier movements had caused little or no animosity in places such as Kansas, the exodus—by its very definition a mass movement—upset both the societal and economic balance of a new and as yet not well established community.

Black migration to Kansas, prior to 1879, caused very little stir in
that state, but the problems generated by an unexpected and unexpectedly large influx both frightened and confused some of the Kansans of that day. Their reaction frequently was one of withdrawal and a display of latent racism that many of them would just as soon have submerged. Others displayed an irritation at the noisy philanthropy of eastern well-wishers who played a heavy part in caring for the refugees, while still others, unsung and often anonymous, accepted the burden thrust upon them and gave rather freely of both money and time. After these farmers and townspeople had made an effort to alleviate the suffering experienced by strangers who had arrived so precipitously and had done what they could to find employment for them, they turned their eyes once more to the practical tasks at hand, that of survival in their portion of the old American Desert.

The exodus blacks, who had been unknown and unheralded prior to the flight in 1879, gradually faded from public notice and quietly melded into the Kansas scene or moved to neighboring states. A few of them succeeded economically, while others probably were no worse off financially than they had been in the South; but a very high percentage of the total suffered. In all, their appearance on the Kansas scene constituted, for both black and white residents of that place, an unusual episode in the state’s history.