In Search of Canaan

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The principal federal document dealing with the black exodus of 1879 is the Voorhees Committee Report of 1880, a three-part work (see Public Documents) that details the extensive testimony taken from both blacks and whites who were immediately concerned with the movement. Although it was much maligned at the time as a partisan effort and later by scholars who tended to question its credibility for the same reason, it contains a great deal of useful information if one understands that both sides quite naturally called up witnesses who might say things favorable to a particular point of view. Assuming that each party had an opportunity to call those witnesses whom it desired, and there is no evidence that such was not the case, the reader must then strike his own balance, make his own conclusions and judgments. To say, as one recent scholar has, that the findings of the committee members representing one party were accurate and that those of the members representing the other were wrong-headed is a position that is extremely hard to defend, one that in itself suggests bias.

A great deal has been written about the conditions of southern life in the post-Civil War era, some of which is based upon reports such as the Teller Committee findings of 1878. This extensive Senate document (see Public Documents) provides testimony concerning the turmoil that was created when the “redeemers” took control of southern polling stations. It is helpful to those trying to understand the political aspects of the exodus that took place in the following year.

The most important single source in Kansas is the St. John collection housed at the Kansas State Historical Society (KSHS) in Topeka. Letters received and copies of those sent give a detailed picture of events as they unfolded in what once had been John Brown country. Much of the passion of
the former abolitionists is felt in the correspondence of those who now sup­ported the cause of blacks whom they regarded as having been reenslaved by southerners. Historians have argued, and still do, that the black side of the story is weakened because it is written by whites using white sources. While this is frequently true and while there is much room for argument in it with regard to the Exodusters, it is not completely the case in this instance. Governor St. John’s files contain a good many letters of inquiry written by southern blacks who wanted to confirm glowing stories that they had heard about Kansas. The efforts often are painfully illiterate, but their meaning is clear, and the obvious labor with which their authors wrote them make these documents all the more meaningful and certainly poignant.

Other remnants of the movement that are held at the Topeka depository are illuminating. While “Pap” Singleton was neither an Exoduster nor a leader of the movement, despite his claims, his story is one that is closely related, and his surviving scrapbook therefore is both interesting and useful. The unknown and unheralded Horatio N. Rust—who was, in a sense, “Horatio at the Bridge” for St. John—also left a scrapbook, now housed in the quarters of KSHS. I found much of his material fresh and meaningful. Closely related are records of the Kansas Freedmen’s Relief Association, especially the minutes of the board of directors; these, too, are in Topeka. When the Comstock and Haviland materials held by KSHS are added to the above, a pretty complete record of the exodus story is available. What is not a matter of record, or is unavailable if extant, is the account of what happened to these migrant blacks in the years immediately after their arrival.

UNPUBLISHED SOURCES

Correspondence and papers of John P. St. John. General correspondence sent and received, 17 boxes, 2 volumes; see immigration, Negro Exodus, March–September, 1879. KSHS.

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