

# Exodusters

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View of Washington Street in Nicodemus, Kansas in 1885

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## Introduction

In 1879, an African-American man from Louisiana wrote a letter to the governor of Kansas that read in part: "I am very anxious to reach your state, not just because of the great race now made for it but because of the sacredness of her soil washed by the blood of humanitarians for the cause of black freedom."

This man was not alone. Thousands of African-Americans made their way to Kansas and other Western states after Reconstruction. The Homestead Act and other liberal land laws offered blacks (in theory) the opportunity to escape the racism and oppression of the post-war South and become owners of their own tracts of private farmland. For people who had spent their lives working the lands of white masters with no freedom or pay, the opportunities offered by these land laws must have seemed the answer to prayer. Many individuals and families were indeed willing to leave the only place they had known to move to a place few of them had ever seen. The large-scale black migration from the South to Kansas came to be known as the "Great Exodus," and those participating in it were called "exodusters."

## Conditions in the Post-War South

The post-Civil War era should have been a time of jubilation and progress for the African-Americans of the South. Slavery was nothing more than a bad memory; the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution had granted them citizenship; the Fifteenth Amendment outlawed suffrage discrimination based on race, color, or previous slave status. However, many Southern whites sought to keep blacks effectively disenfranchised and socially and economically inferior.

One way whites in power attempted to prevent black equality was through denial of African-American participation in the political process. Freed blacks were great supporters of the Republican Party, which was the party of Lincoln and emancipation. Much of the white South, however, remained loyal to the Democratic Party and professed hatred for all Republicans, black or white. When blacks turned out in droves to cast their ballots for Republican candidates, they were often met at the polls by whites employing creative means to keep the African-Americans from ever seeing the inside of the voting booth. Many African-Americans were prevented from casting their ballots and assuming their places as full members of the society. In addition to maintaining some semblance of the post-war balance of power, these methods also helped elect white Democrats.

Economic obstacles unique to their condition also prevented many freed blacks from moving ahead. After having been slaves for most of their lives, they knew only how to be farmers. Even for those that did possess or acquire alternative skills, the region's lack of alternatives to farming as well as determined white supremacy blocked the freedmen's advance. As farmers, they had no money to purchase land of

their own, and many were actually forced to go back to work for the very same whites who had held them in bondage for so many years. The only difference was that the white landowners now paid them with a share of the crop which, after deductions for food and other necessities, amounted to a ridiculously low wage for their work. Though this did not technically constitute a master-slave relationship, it likely seemed hardly better than one to the African-Americans that had to endure such humiliation and frustration. Many of the freed blacks had few other skills, however, and often had families of their own to support. It must have seemed a no-win situation.

The era of Reconstruction in the South lasted from 1865 to 1877. During these years, federal troops occupied the states of the former Confederacy to ensure compliance with laws and regulations governing Southern states' re-entry into the Union. Though the protection these troops provided to African-Americans was often minimal, it had been better than nothing. President Rutherford B. Hayes ended Reconstruction in 1877 and pulled the U.S. troops out of the South. This gave the white ruling class of the South free reign to terrorize and oppress freed blacks without interference from the U.S. Army or anyone else. Murders, lynchings and other violent crimes against blacks increased dramatically. It was likely at this point that many African-Americans began to feel that leaving the South forever was their only real chance to begin new lives. Movement to parts further west, such as Kansas, began almost immediately after the end of Reconstruction.

### **Black Migration to Kansas Prior to the Great Exodus**

What was it about Kansas that particularly attracted African-Americans to that state? At the time that many blacks began to consider abandoning the South, there was certainly a good deal of frontier land available elsewhere. Besides slick (and often misleading) promotion of town sites, what drew freed men and women to Kansas?

First, purely logistical and geographic factors must be considered. Kansas, while certainly never considered a part of the South (except by pro-slavery Missourians prior to the Civil War), is much closer to the South than far-off spots like California and Oregon. Getting to Kansas was a much simpler and less expensive task than getting to such faraway places. For those coming from many parts of the South, a boat or train ride to St. Louis was the real beginning of their journey to Kansas. While conditions on these boats and trains were never ideal, riding in any form was certainly preferable to walking. Many arrived in St. Louis with little idea how they would get across Missouri and into Kansas. They must have felt, however, that whatever hardships they faced on that leg of the journey would be less significant than those left behind in the South.

Another factor—a human one—also played a role in the selection of Kansas as the new Promised Land. The exploits of anti-slavery activists like John Brown gave Kansas an almost holy sacredness to many African-Americans. In Kansas, blood had been spilled to keep slavery out. The memories of John Brown and other abolitionist warriors lived on in the hearts and minds of freed men and women and made Kansas seem the ideal place to begin anew.

Many of the African-Americans that migrated to Kansas prior to the 1879 exodus came from Tennessee. There a popular movement sprang seemingly from nowhere in 1874, leading to a "colored people's convention" in Nashville in May 1875. Many town promoters, including the notable Benjamin "Pap" Singleton, saw this convention as a way to convince people to migrate to Kansas. The convention resulted in the designation of a board of commissioners to officially promote migration to Kansas. This board would later stipulate that would-be migrants needed at least \$1,000 per family to relocate to Kansas; very few interested in doing so had such funds. Nevertheless, many freed blacks determined to leave Tennessee anyway. Promoters like Singleton became known as "conductors" and began leading African-American families to Kansas.

Obviously, black migration to Kansas did not begin (or end) with the exodus of 1879. Thousands of freed blacks made their ways to Kansas throughout the decade of the 1870s. Since their migration was more gradual, however, few whites took notice. This was certainly not the case when the well-publicized exodus took place in 1879.

Henry Williams and Reece Switzer, early residents of Nicodemus, Kansas

## The Exodus of 1879



The great 1879 exodus of African-Americans was largely influenced by the outcome of 1878 elections in the state of Louisiana, in which the Democratic Party made major gains by winning several congressional seats and the governorship. Freed blacks, largely Republican supporters, were coerced, threatened, assaulted and even murdered to keep them away from the ballot box. When the final tallies were in and the Democrats claimed almost total victory, many black Louisianans knew that the time had come for them to abandon their state and join those already in Kansas. Senator William Windom, a white Republican from Minnesota, introduced a resolution on January 16, 1879, which actually encouraged black migration out of the South. The Windom Resolution, together with southern white bigotry and the letters and newspaper articles of those blacks already in Kansas, led many southern freed men and women to finally decide to make their ways to Kansas. By early 1879, the "Kansas Fever Exodus" was taking place.

The 1879 exodus removed approximately 6,000 African-Americans primarily from Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas. Many had heard rumors of free transportation all the way to Kansas, but they were sorely disappointed when they discovered that such a luxury did not exist. Very few, however, were dissuaded by this inconvenience.

Many southern whites had a racist and patronizing attitude about blacks in general and the exodus in particular. As much as whites hated dealing with freed blacks, they still wanted the former slaves there as a cheap labor force. Many southern whites became so alarmed by the exodus that they began to pressure their elected officials to put a stop to it. They eventually succeeded, and a U.S. Senate committee met for three months in 1880 to investigate the cause of the exodus. The committee disintegrated into partisan bickering and accomplished little.

Despite this, blacks continued to leave for Kansas. By early March, about 1,500 had already passed through St. Louis en route to Kansas. Back in Mississippi and Louisiana, thousands more crowded onto riverbanks to wait for passing steamers to give them passage to St. Louis. One white man stated that the banks of the Mississippi River were "literally covered with colored people and their little store of worldly goods [sic] every road leading to the river is filled with wagons loaded with plunder and families who seem to think that anywhere is better than here."

Once in St. Louis, many of the exodusters had little idea how to continue their flight with no resources. Some were so destitute that they could not feed themselves or their families. In response, St. Louis clergy and business leaders formed committees to assist the freed blacks so that they could survive and make their ways to Kansas. Food and funds were collected from the local community as well as from sympathizers from Iowa to Ohio. Lack of shelter, however, became the most serious problem, and many blacks were forced to sleep outside near the waterfronts to which the steamships had delivered them. Care of the exodusters in St. Louis became a political issue, especially after the Democratic-leaning Missouri Republican began running anti-black stories and tales of mishandling of donated funds. By the time the last of the exodusters departed St. Louis by rail, wagon, boat or on foot, even the most sympathetic citizens were likely happy to see them go.

Back in the South, more African-Americans continued to plan to depart for Kansas. Black social leaders and ministers often sang the praises of the exodus, comparing it to Moses and the Israelites' escape from Egypt. Of course, some black leaders spoke out against the exodus as well, stating that those leaving for Kansas were jeopardizing the future of those who chose to stay behind and that democracy should be given more time to work. Among the most notable of those that tried to dissuade blacks from fleeing the South was Frederick Douglass.

Southern whites continued to oppose the exodus as well. Many went to extreme measures to try to keep blacks from emigrating, including arrest and imprisonment on false charges and the old standby of raw, brute force. African-Americans suffered beatings and other forms of violence at the hands of whites desperate to keep them in the South. Though these typical forms of intimidation did not really prevent many freed blacks from leaving, the eventual refusal of steamship captains to pick them up did. One can only guess that at least some of these sailors had been threatened or paid not to offer blacks passage to

St. Louis.

### **End of the Exodus**

The exodus began to subside by the early summer of 1879. Though some African-Americans did continue to head for Kansas, the massive movement known as the exodus basically ended with the decade of the 1870s. That ten-year period had witnessed great changes for blacks both in the South and in Kansas. In 1870, Kansas had hosted a black population of approximately 16,250. Ten years later, in 1880, some 43,110 African-Americans called Kansas home. Between the earlier gradual migrations and the 1879 exodus, Kansas had gained nearly 27,000 black residents in ten years. Though a far greater number of blacks remained in the South, this number still represents 27,000 individual dreams of a better life and 27,000 people that acted on their desires and their rights to enjoy the freedoms to which they supposedly had been entitled since the Emancipation Proclamation. Though few found Kansas to be the Promised Land for which they hoped, they did find it a place that enabled them to live freely and with much less racial interference than in the South.

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