

The Exodusters: Black Moses and the Frontier for Freedom

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ABSTRACT

The Exodusters movement, one of the most overlooked racial migrations in United States history, occurred during a pivotal point in the Reconstruction South. The crusade was initially focused on a mass exodus of African-Americans from the US South back to their African homelands, specifically the Black-led colony of Liberia. However, the movement would later shift priority to the Western frontier in Homestead states such as Kansas. The "Kansas Fever," as it became known, was not only a noteworthy migration in terms of volume, but it comprised part of the early genesis of ideas in Black self-sufficiency and millenarianism. Figures such as Henry Adams, who pioneered early exodus sentiment, and Benjamin "Pap" Singleton, who set the movement's sights westward, introduced religious influences into the movement. As migration efforts intensified, many prospective settlers began to see Kansas as the "promised land," comparing themselves to the biblical Israelites. In this vein, the Exodusters movement gives historians a unique insight into the post-war African-American psyche in the South and how it was shaped by migration efforts, eventually culminating in the 20th-century Great Migration.

THE EXODUSTERS: BLACK MOSES AND THE FRONTIER FOR FREEDOM

In the aftermath of the Civil War, a courageous group of African-Americans fled the South to pursue economic opportunities and freedom on the Western frontier. Dubbed the Exodusters because of religious similarities to the biblical Israelites, these pioneers established settlements in present-day Kansas. Leaving the Jim Crow South, rural Blacks would unite under millenarianism and endeavor to improve their collective quality of life. Though many of these communities failed long-term due to

significant challenges in migrating westward and economic hardships,ⁱ the Exodusters movement laid the foundation for self-determined African-American liberation, which fostered a unique racial identity in the rural South.

POST-WAR LIFE

Due to Southern Reconstruction efforts from Radical Republicans in Congress, African-American life post-war steadily improved. The thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth constitutional amendments were ratified with the intention of protecting Black civil rights. Congress enforced these amendments through the Military Reconstruction Acts of 1867 and maintained order in the South. This led to a temporary increase in Black suffrage and gave Republicans a foothold in previously Democratic strongholds. Hiram Revels, the first African-American congressman, was elected a mere five years after the war. However, this rapid enfranchisement was shortlived as a combination of political scandals, economic crises, and the decline of Radical Republican influence in the 1870s would lead to a waning commitment to Southern Reconstruction. As public support dwindled, "redeemer" Democrats would regain power in the South, implementing discriminatory "Black Codes," which promoted racial segregation and discrimination. The final nail in the coffin came with the Compromise of 1877, which officially withdrew the Union military. Upon this withdrawal, White supremacist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and White League would begin a wave of terror upon African-Americans,ⁱⁱ ushering in the era of Jim Crow.

As Reconstruction faltered, government relief efforts such as through the Freedman's Bureau, which provided vocational training and financial aid to African-Americans, received less attention. By the early 1870s, many rural Blacks had turned to

tenant farming, an agricultural system in which tenants rent plots on someone else's land in exchange for a share of their crops. However, poor harvests would often cause deferred debt, and many would incur additional debt to purchase and replace equipment. Compounded with predatory interest rates and unyielding landlords, African-American tenant farmers would become inundated in a cycle of debt and subsistence-level income. Overall, the economic circumstances for Blacks in the South were marginally above slavery, elucidating the necessity for economic freedom.

Though many educated African-Americans in urban areas such as Frederick Douglass, dubbed "representative colored men", were considered leaders of their race, it was not the intellectual elite but grassroots organizers who commenced the Exodusters movement. Rural leaders such as Benjamin Singleton and Henry Adams organized African-Americans across the South to migrate westward.

HENRY ADAMS AND BLACK COLONIZATION

Henry Adams, a freedman, and ex-soldier from Louisiana, was crucial in planting the seeds for Southern evacuation. Disturbed by economic exploitation in the South, Adams was determined to ascertain "the true condition of our race." Along with 150 other veterans, Adams formed "the Committee," a semisecret organization that from 1870 to 1874 evaluated whether a Black man "could get a living and enjoy [their] rights." During their expeditions throughout the Deep South, members detailed crippling debt, systemic injustice, and White supremacist violence and intimidation, known as "bulldozing."

Adams first considered Southern migration in 1875 during a New Orleans conference with African-Americans from across the nation. Following an 1876 electoral sweep for Louisiana Democrats due to mass voter suppression, Adams began campaigning for Southern emigration to Liberia, a Black-led West African colony where former slaves relocated. "The Committee," now named "the Colonization Council," drafted a petition for prospective Southern migrants, of which 98,000 signed. However, appeals for federal transportation to Liberia sent to President Rutherford B. Hayes in 1877 and 1878 went unacknowledged.

Failing in subsequent Liberia settlement efforts due to insufficient funding, Adams caught wind of a mass movement to Kansas in 1879. Fearing growing White brutality and infringements on their ability to migrate freely, Adams and "The Council" would encourage African-Americans to leave the South while still possible, instructions which were followed by at least 50,000. However, Adams himself would continue seeking passage to Liberia, and his historical trail ends in 1884. Though Adams did not initially champion Kansas as the primary destination, "the Colonization Council" advocated for rural African-Americans and continuously sowed migrationist sentiment across the South.

BENJAMIN SINGLETON AND THE EXODUSTER'S ROOTS

Due to the mythical status surrounding "Bleeding Kansas," where radical abolitionists such as John Brown fought against slavery, the state became perceived as a "promised land" and a place of refuge. Benjamin "Pap" Singleton, a Tennessee carpenter, saw the appeal of Kansas migration. Having constructed coffins for victims of racially-charged murders and driven by the ceaseless and rampant violence against South Blacks, Singleton founded the Kansas Exodus movement, seeking to play a role in alleviating these troubles. Singleton, who was 60 years old in 1869, drew upon his personal experiences and framed his ideas as a divine will to invigorate his community. Along with Columbus M. Johnson, a Black minister, Singleton established the Edgefield Real Estate and Homestead Association in 1869 to explore the possibility of migration. In this endeavor, they sojourned to Kansas, with Johnson remaining to serve as the association's Kansas-based liaison. Singleton returned to Tennessee to begin mobilizing the movement.

As Tennessee farmland proved too expensive at "sixty dollars an acre," Singleton ultimately resolved to migrate to Kansas in 1870. A group would travel that same year, providing a positive assessment of homesteading prospects with some families relocating immediately. Singleton would again survey the state in 1873, where he designated former Cherokee lands suitable for Black migration, later becoming "Singleton county." In late 1876, Singleton corresponded with Kansas's Governor, Thomas Andrew Osborn, informing him of

imminent migration, asking to purchase land, and inquiring about transportation assistance.

The Homestead Act of 1862, a law passed by Lincoln, would theoretically provide African-Americans with land on the Western frontier. However, this came with a caveat: settlers must work the land for at least five years. In return, they would receive 160 acres, with varied quality.

Beginning with a Nashville newspaper advertisement the following year, Singleton would garner interest in Kansas, distributing handbills and even commissioning pro-migration songs such as "The Land That Gives Birth to Freedom." The Edgefield Real Estate and Homestead Association would also spread awareness, hosting numerous meetings to mobilize African-Americans. The largest of these meetings, which congregated from July 31st to August 1st of 1877, saw the emergence of millenarian sentiments with Huston Soloman, the meeting's superintendent, stating, "Let us come together like the family of Israel." Additionally, during the meeting, Singleton noted the absence of educated "representative colored men," illustrating the class divide within their race.

Following this meeting, the Exoduster movement accelerated, successfully fundraising at local events to finance migration. By 1878, the Association routinely conducted Black migration to Kansas. Moreover, Singleton became widely known as "the father of the Colored Exodus" throughout the South. He would make the journey to Topeka, Kansas, and utilize his claims of divine influence to advocate racial unity.

MILLENARIANISM AND "KANSAS FEVER"

The Exodusters' millenarian ideals manifested themselves in the "Kansas Fever," the largest mass migration during the period, encompassing African-American communities across the South. Influenced by growing violence, the further abridgment of liberties, and the divine allure of Kansas, six thousand African-Americans from Mississippi, Texas, and Louisiana relocated during a few months in 1879. Amongst these groups was a resolute conviction in the potential reward of Kansas land despite ambiguity on the success or quality of their future settlement. Steamboats heading for St. Louis, Missouri, where Exodusters were assured free transportation to Kansas, were severely overcrowded. The governor of Louisiana, P.B.S.

Pinchback, noted the scale of Southern evacuation, stating the road to the Mississippi River was "filled with wagons loaded with plunder and families who seem to think anywhere is better than here."

Though Singleton and Adams provided the impetus of the movement, the Exodusters were not reliant on these two men. The millenarian idea of the divinely ordained journey to Kansas allowed settlers to forge their own path on their own interpretation of God's will. In the words of a migrant from New Orleans, "Every black man is his own Moses now." In this vein, many settlers disregarded the objections to the movement by "representative colored men," including William Murrell Jr., a popular Black Louisiana politician who had firsthand knowledge of the conditions awaiting them in Kansas. The zeal of the Exodusters could not be abated as a New Orleans spectator noted,

An influential colored man had tried at the last emigration meeting to temper the excitement of the people . . . had the speaker been a less popular man, he would have been mobbed.

Further mirroring the Israelites, St. Louis, Missouri, was compared to the Red Sea as a link to freedom in Kansas. With massive numbers of African-Americans fleeing the South, however, the unrealistic guarantee of a free train ride to Kansas became untenable. Despite the uncertainty of free land or a means of transportation, the Exodusters were adamant about their escape from the South, with a woman bearing a child exclaiming, "What, go back! Oh, no; I'd sooner starve here!" The newly founded Colored Relief Board, with funding from local Black churches and Northern philanthropists, provided for the growing number of refugees in St. Louis, housing them and subsidizing the rest of their journey to Kansas.

Many Exodusters faced resistance from White communities at the onset of the movement. Hostilities became so severe that two Black Exodusters were hung in Vicksburg, Mississippi, by White planters for advocating migration. To further forestall the movement, White Southerners arrested African-Americans making plans for Kansas and confiscated their finances, impairing many Black families' hopes of escaping the South. However, these instances of racial violence and injustice would only further expedite the African-American

departure from the South. With the mass departure for St. Louis at the Mississippi River, White Southern Democrats conspired to block access to the city by river. In April and May of 1879, all vessels on the Mississippi refused to ferry African-Americans, stranding many prospective settlers on the banks of the river for weeks with White vendors refusing to sell them food.

Thomas W. Conway, a White northerner and the former assistant commissioner of the Freedman's Bureau, sympathized with the post-war African-American struggle and aided those stuck at the Mississippi. Conway intended to charter ships to take Exodusters to St. Louis himself. Pressured by Conway's plan and a slew of federal discrimination lawsuits, White Democrats capitulated and allowed passage to St. Louis. However, by the time steamboats started running again, the weeks of delay had stunted the movement's momentum and essentially ended the "Kansas Fever" of 1879. Concurrently, public interest in the Exodusters dwindled significantly, with only tens of migrants heading for Kansas in the latter half of the year. Furthermore, White Southerners would employ labor agents to lure the remaining destitute African-Americans back to plantation labor.

However, not all the migrants heading through St. Louis shared the millenarian belief. A significant portion of Exodusters after April of 1879 was described as "the better class" and traveling to Kansas to "earn a little money over and above what is absolutely required to keep body and soul together." These individuals did not have the religious zeal that characterized the more impoverished members of the movement. They were also more conscious of the conditions and land provisions awaiting them in Kansas.

LIFE ON THE FRONTIER

Upon arrival in Kansas, African-Americans who successfully made the journey encountered low-quality land and unlivable economic conditions. In 1879, the newly-elected governor, John St. John, endeavored to alleviate the conditions of settlers through the Kansas Freedmen's Relief Association. St. John expressed support for the Exodusters and harkened back to the fight against slavery in the state during the Civil War, stating, "when the life of the Nation was in danger, the blood of the negro mingled with our blood to sustain the Union."

With many Black settlers unprepared for the harsh Kansas winter, many wealthy White Northern philanthropists provided aid. Phillip D. Armour, a wealthy tycoon in the Chicago meatpacking industry, utilized his businesses to raise funds for budding African-American settlements, sympathizing with their struggle stating,

I talked with a great many of them and was surprised at their intelligence. I asked them where they thought they were going. They said only North to escape persecution.

By 1880, there were 15,000 African-American settlers in Kansas. A minority of migrants who arrived with money were able to purchase land. Exodusters occupied roughly 30,000 acres. A majority of these settlers, however, worked as laborers on farms, railroads, or mines, while women did domestic work for pay. Additionally, a third of these migrants continued to work to save up for land.

However, economic conditions for these settlers were still better than those in the South, with a surveyor in January of 1880 describing Kansas as "the first real prosperity which has ever come to their race in America." A Kansas Bureau of Labor and Industrial Statistics report in 1886 noted that African-American laborers made \$262.75 yearly compared to their White counterparts' \$333.09 a year. Moreover, job opportunities and positions remained unstable, stunting financial security for settlers and prompting many African-Americans to continue to relocate in the years following.

As the Exodusters fled to Kansas in their thousands, a greater awareness of the hardships suffered by African-Americans in the South entered the American consciousness. A Senate investigation was initiated in 1879 to ascertain the causes of the Exodus. However, in a Democrat-dominated congress, the partisan-authored report promoted fallacies such as the movement's close ties to Republican organizing, ignored the true racial turmoil that prompted African-Americans to evacuate, and painted the Exodus in a negative light to discourage further mass migrations. Nevertheless, the movement exposed the treatment of Southern Blacks and illustrated the necessity for improving the African-American condition in one way or another.

Overall, the Southern Exodus to Kansas is a frontier in African-American history. Being the first major migration after the Civil War in search of greater freedoms and opportunities, the Exodus demonstrated that rural African-Americans had agency and could be the masters of their future. The Exoduster movement would promote a unique approach to the Civil Rights movement, driven by individualism and millenarianism tailored to rural Southern Blacks. Discontented with the efforts of "representative colored men," rural Blacks took it upon themselves to better their circumstances, proselytizing and uniting in an almost spiritual movement to Kansas. In this vein, the lasting legacy of the Kansas Exodus was ultimately the sentiment of Black empowerment that took root in the South, perpetuated by the extensive advertising by Singleton and his followers. The migrationist sentiment of the 1870s would remain in the Southern conscience, providing the foundation for later, more profound and lasting Southern departures, such as the Great Migration in the 1900s.

APPENDIX A

HISTORICAL SOCIETY.
Ho for Kansas!
Brethren, Friends, & Fellow Citizens:
I feel thankful to inform you that the
REAL ESTATE
AND
Homestead Association,
Will Leave Here the
15th of April, 1878,
In pursuit of Homes in the Southwestern
Lands of America, at Transportation
Rates, cheaper than ever
was known before.
For full information inquire of
Benj. Singleton, better known as old Pap,
NO. 5 NORTH FRONT STREET.
Beware of Speculators and Adventurers, as it is a dangerous thing
to fall in their hands.
Nashville, Tenn., March 18, 1878.

Citation

Singleton, Benjamin Pap. *Ho for Kansas!* Nashville, Tennessee: Tennessee Real Estate and Homestead Association, 1878.
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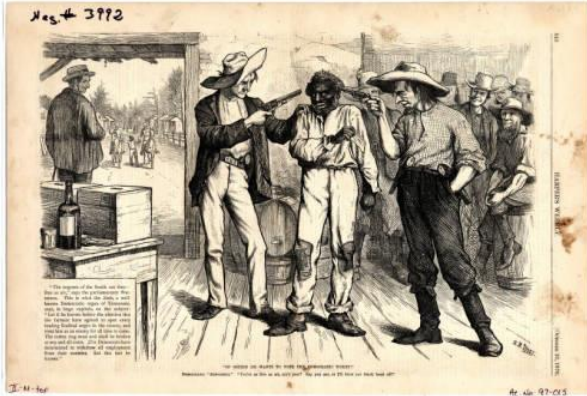
APPENDIX B

The Land That Gives Birth to Freedom.
WORDS BY MRS. HESTER HICKMAN. ARRANGED BY A. D. DEFRANTZ, Nashville, Tennessee, 1877.
1. We have held a meeting to ourselves, to see if we cant Plan some way to live. (Repeat.)
CHORUS.--Marching along, yes we are marching along, To Kansas City we are bound. (Repeat.)
2. We have Mr. Singleton for our President, he will go on before us, and lead us through. (Repeat.)
CHORUS--
3. Surely this must be the Lord that has gone before him, and opened the way. (Repeat.)
CHORUS--
4. For Tennessee is a hard slavery State, and we find no Friends in this country. (Repeat.)
CHORUS--
5. Truly it is hard, but we all have to part, and flee into a Strange land unknown. (Repeat.)
CHORUS--
6. We want peaceful homes and quiet firesides; no one to Disturb us or turn us out. (Repeat.)
CHORUS--
Extending our Voices to Heaven.
Farewell, dear friends, farewell.
1. We are on our rapid march to Kansas, the land that gives Birth to freedom. May God Almighty bless you all. Farewell, dear friends, farewell.
2. Many dear mothers who are sleeping in the tomb of clay Have spent all their days in slav ry in old Tennessee. Farewell, dear friends, farewell.
3. The time has come, we all must part, and take the parting band, Farewell, dear friends, farewell.
4. It seems to me like the year of jubilee has come; surely this is the time that is spoken of in history. Farewell, dear friends, farewell.
Sold by "PAP." SINGLETON, author of the exodus.

Citation

Hickman, Hester. Pap Singleton Songster. 1877. Retrieved from the Digital Public Library of America, <http://cdm15838.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15838coll7/id/136>.

APPENDIX C



Citation

Frost, Arthur B. "Of Course He Wants to Vote the Democratic Ticket!" Cartoon. *Harper's Weekly*. New York City, 1876. <https://cdm15138.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/reconaa/id/217>.

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