Black Newspapers and the Exodusters of 1879

by Nudie E. Williams

"The Kansas Fever Exodus—the most remarkable migration of the United States after the Civil War—took some six thousand blacks from Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas to Kansas in the space of a few months."

Lured on by the "fears of damnation" and motivated by their "belief in Kansas," the exodusters were convinced "that this faith was sufficient to assure their future." On the other hand, the "Great Exodus of 1879" had been totally unpredictable and unexpected, and the degrees of its acceptance varied accordingly.

Martin E. Dann suggests that the black press generally supported the westward emigration. Black newspapers which earlier had waged an effective campaign against the evils of slavery focused on the blacks' struggle for equality. When the South refused to fulfill its pledge to extend the full measure of protection to all of its citizens regardless of color, black newspapers across the nation suggested that the race consider leaving the country or at least the South as a viable solution. Of the two, most black newspapers preferred the latter course as the better choice. From their pages the debate that raged was not over whether blacks should migrate or not, but rather when, where, and how.

During Reconstruction when the black migration was from the southern rural areas to the urban centers, the movement was both temporary and insignificant. By far the greatest movement was to the Southwest and the West. First it was slavery, and much later it was economics and violence that prompted blacks to make the trek westward. However, the earlier movement was a trickle when compared with the great surge in 1879.

In freedom blacks continued to work as farm laborers for wages or for shares. However, it was also quite common for them to receive little or no wages after a year's work. By 1867 some blacks were leaving the upper South, especially the tobacco-growing areas, for better wages on the cotton and sugar plantations of the lower South. Others found the Southwest even more attractive, for all of the cotton states (Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Texas) in the late 1860s were offering higher wages than was Georgia. Even with the promise of higher wages, Galveston's Weekly Free Man's Press advised "colored men to buy their land, and then buy their own gins; buy the land; now is the time to make... bargains."

In slavery, blacks were members of a noncompetitive class for land. However, with emancipation, freedmen were thrust into a highly structured society and were forced to compete for the land. Without a long tradition of property ownership, they were at a grave disadvantage. In the South one's status was set by land ownership, which in turn determined one's place in politics and position in the social order.

This was important because a large, black, free farm-laboring class did not exist in Southern society or culture before the war. Yeomen farmers had done

---

Nudie E. Williams is assistant professor of history and chairman of the black studies program at the University of Arkansas. Dr. Williams received his bachelor's degree from Clark College, Atlanta, Georgia, and his M.A. and Ph.D. from Oklahoma State University at Stillwater.

2. Ibid., 185.
most of their own work and slaves had only benefitted their masters. For the first time blacks not only competed with each other but also with whites for land. At one end of the economic scale, blacks were competing in the free labor market, and at the other end of the spectrum they were potential landowners.

Blacks’ attempts to purchase land represented more than economic transactions; their ability or inability to buy land was generally determined by the local political conditions. For example, just as the Black Codes were used to keep blacks enslaved and powerless, so were later restrictions employed to keep them subordinate economically.¹

The inability of the South to replace blacks as the main source of labor created an even greater dependency on them as a working class. For whites to maintain ultimate control, land ownership was the key to domination. Moreover, the significance of land ownership was quite apparent to blacks, because if they were farm laborers, white employers could control or at the very least restrain their political ambitions through economic pressure.² The Southern freedmen, living under such restrictions, were urged on by the “statesmen and friends” of the black man. The New National Era, a Washington, D.C., black newspaper, wanted blacks to migrate to:

the fertile fields of the West, where cheap lands and good climate await the earnest toil of enterprising laborers to return wealth aplenty. We say to the colored people of the South, though you may be able to obtain employment at home, the time seems to be far distant when you can become owners of the soil, and consequently independent of the will of land owners. Until you are independent of those who own the land and who can dictate the terms upon which you will be employed, you will be but little better than slaves... ¹⁰

The destiny of other black Southerners lay even further away according to the Missionary Record, another black journal, when it reported that “thousands of colored people in South Carolina would leave” for Africa “if the means of transportation were furnished them.”¹¹ The Liberian Exodus initially was sponsored by the American Colonization Society, and blacks were booked for passage in small groups. Between 1877 and 1879 the blacks of Charleston organized the Liberian Exodus Joint Steamship Company. The venture failed, and although some individuals achieved a degree of success, the experience was disastrous for the average black emigrant. Furthermore, at the height of the exodus between 1877 and 1878, a black Kansas editor cautioned would-be foreign exodusters that “there is no need of our people thinking of leaving their own native land to find a home while there remains thousands upon thousands untilled acres of the richest and best soil in the world lying open in the glorious West for people to come and take it...”¹²

In the late 1860s and early 1870s, both migration and colonization were being openly discussed in Tennessee and Louisiana. The governor of Tennessee proposed in a message to the state legislature that some separate territory be set aside for blacks as a permanent settlement or as an independent nation. On the other hand, delegates to the State Convention


11. Missionary Record, Charleston, South Carolina, April, 1877.
12. Colored Citizen, Topeka, November 30, 1878.
of Colored Men meeting in Nashville in 1866 discussed the advantages of the Southern Homestead Act.13

Under the act, public lands in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, and Mississippi were opened for settlement in eighty-acre plots. Former Confederates were not eligible for homesteads under the provision until January 1, 1867. More than three thousand former slaves sought homesteads in Florida, exceeding the number in any other Southern state. The major problem in Southern homesteading was that most of the land opened was unimproved or inferior. The public lands in Louisiana were declared unfit for farming and the 3,595,220 acres in Mississippi were of an unknown quality; no land offices were opened and no land maps or records were available for those desiring homesteads in Mississippi.14

Other individual efforts were led by men such as Benjamin Singleton, a grey-haired, mulatto former


Southern Negroes Once Sought 'Mecca' in Kansas

Interest in the black migration to Kansas did not end with the exodus. Newspapers in succeeding years continued to review the story, as did the Wichita Beacon in October 1913 when it carried a story on the migration and settlement of Nicodemus.
decided that there was no hope for blacks in the South and that their only chance was to migrate west.\textsuperscript{16}

From 1875 to 1877, blacks migrated west in a continuous and organized way. Much of the migration that occurred before 1879 was accomplished by organized groups in colonies. The major characteristics of colonies organized by blacks before 1879 were that all were thoroughly planned and led by able men.

Although colonization proved to be a highly successful method of settling blacks in the West, there were outspoken critics of the system. The editors of the American Citizen and the Colored Citizen agreed that "for colored men to stay in the rebel-ridden south and be treated like brutes is a disgrace to themselves and to the race to which they belong."\textsuperscript{17} They challenged the notion that it was better for blacks to separate themselves into colonies rather than settle near or among other people—believing perhaps that separation would not provide solutions to critical problems. However, as one would suspect, supporters of the system were equally adamantine. One writer noted:

I boldly assert that the only practical plan for ever settling the [race] question is for the blackman of this country to select one of the territories of this government and gain by legal means possession of it, and then go into it, and settle it, go to work and build towns, cities, railroads, manufacturing establishments, schools, colleges, churches, and everything else necessary, and thus form a state of their own. In this way, and in this way only, can the negroes make of themselves a happy and prosperous people.\textsuperscript{18}

On the eve of the great Exodus of 1879, the debate continued over the merits of colonization. The Colored Citizen, Kansas' first colored newspaper and an opponent of the colonization method, settled, reported the increasing activities in migrations from May 1878 to January 1879. "Blacks are...moving from southern Mississippi to Kansas," the editor wrote.\textsuperscript{19} He went on to say that "to-day there is room in the great State of Kansas for half the


\textsuperscript{17} American Citizen, Baltimore, July 26, 1878; Colored Citizen, July 26, 1878.

\textsuperscript{18} Colored Citizen, Logansport, Indiana, August 1, 1879.

\textsuperscript{19} Colored Citizen, Fort Scott, May 10, 1878.
colored population of the South." 20 However, he made some exceptions as to who would be welcome. "There is but one class that we would forbid coming, and that is the shiftless class that won't work." 21

On the eve of the great exodus the Colored Citizen introduced another critical issue. It reported that "there are millions of acres of land that have never been tackled by the plow or the hoe" and that "a hundred and fifty colored emigrants left Nashville, Tenn., for Kansas, last week." 22 "Good," he continued, "let them come, we want fifty thousand colored voters in Kansas in less than two years." 23 This was more than a mere hint of the editor's future political ambitions. 24

While still opposing the piecemeal settlement patterns of colonization, the Colored Citizen made its expectations clear for migrations. In the January 11, 1879, issue it was suggested that there would "be a very large emigration of colored people from the South to Kansas the coming Spring." 25 The editor also revealed that:

24. The Colored Citizen and other black Republican newspapers had waged an ongoing battle with the state Republicans for a larger share of the patronage and political offices; thus, a larger black electorate would provide black Republicans with even greater political leverage.

---

NEWS FROM KANSAS.

---

Nashville, Tenn., March 19, 1877.

Friends and Fellow Citizens,—

Having been to Kansas on a tour of inspection and examined the various inducements to emigration to that state, I feel it my duty to give all the information in my power concerning the many advantages of Kansas. During my visit there, I saw some excellent selections of land and plenty of fine water, with a healthy climate. There is abundant room for all good citizens, and no room for loafers or bummers. We want all good people there, who are willing to live by the sweat of their own brow. Don't be misled by the false statements of adventurers and selfish speculators, for it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of those traders.

Benjamin Singleton, the father of the Kansas emigration from Tennessee, the President of Singleton Colony, is now laboring for the benefit of the down-trodden children of his race, to save them from poverty and degradation, crime and the prison: and all this free of charge.

You will find me at the Corner of Church and Front St., No. 5, where I will cheerfully give you all the information you want.

BENJAMIN SINGLETON.

Singleton's accounts of Kansas encouraged Southern blacks to form colonies and settle in the state.
there are now in the State several colored gentlemen from different parts of the South, looking at the country and selecting locations for the people they represent. Several of them that we have seen express themselves as highly pleased with the soil and the people of our State. We hope they will go back South and persuade all of the industrious people down there to come out here. We have plenty of room and plenty of land for all.24

Yet much earlier than predicted, the orderly and planned colonization movement was abruptly interrupted on February 1, 1879, when the first load of "exodusters" arrived in Kansas. Generally those groups that continued to arrive between February and April were former field hands, mostly destitute and leaderless blacks from the lower South. However, a limited number of the first migrants settled in some of the colonies and, with the aid of the newly organized Kansas Freedmen's Relief Association and other benevolent organizations, were able to establish themselves in permanent settlements.27

The nation's black community was divided over the question of the exodus between February and April 1879. First, however, black editors, including the writer for the Colored Citizen, criticized white newspapers for lecturing "colored people, telling them that they ought not to have come to Kansas; ... colored people would prove [to be] a great burden to Kansas and a great deal of one thing and another..."28 Because "the truth about the matter" as one editor stated, "is the papers of Kansas are not half as much troubled at the sufferings of the new comers either present or prospective, as they are about the political power that will be in the colored man's possession in the State."29

Even an avid supporter of the early exodus like the Colored Citizen had to admit that it lacked organization. It was forced to agree with the position of the People Advocate, a black newspaper in Washington, D.C., that the mass movement "must be conducted on economical, not political ground, or it will fail."30 The Colored Citizen joined with the Washington paper in calling for a national immigration aid society to be located in St. Louis, Missouri, rather than in the nation's capital. In addition, the Colored Citizen suggested organizing a Kansas state immigration bureau.

This overwhelming support from many in the black newspaper fraternity added much credibility to the movement. Opposition existed, and while it was tolerated, it was treated rather harshly. Thus, when the celebrated Frederick Douglass, United States marshal of Washington, D.C., and longtime black leader, refused to support the movement privately and publicly announced that he did not "favor the wholesale exodus of the Southern negro to the North" because he "[did] not believe that they will improve their fortunes by leaving the South,"31 the Colored Citizen replied that it regarded "every colored man that says to our people stay and suffer in the South, an enemy to the best interest of his own people, let them all leave."32

The New Orleans Louisianian echoed the same sentiments when it wrote that "two parishes in Louisiana, three counties in Mississippi" were "being rapidly depopulated and still the movement goes on."33 Its editor urged all his fellow Southerners to go to Kansas "in greater numbers so as to shut down all opposition."34 Black newspapers in the East were often more supportive and just as enthusiastic as the western journals. "The Western Exodus...is right. This is the exodus we endorse, if exodus must be" was splashed across the editorial page of the Christian Recorder of Philadelphia.35

The Christian Recorder stated further that "the exodus of our Charleston folks had Africa for its objective" and "the Windom exodus had one spot somewhere in the great West where the whole colored class would eventually be brought to settle for its objective."36 The newspaper had supported neither plan because it opposed seeing the poor and the inexperienced of any class huddled together.37 "The present exodus," it believed, "has every point of the great North and West as its objective...scattering the hundred and thousands...even millions all...

26. Ibid.
27. Waldron, "Colonization in Kansas from 1861 to 1890," 128-31; Lee Ella Blake, "The Great Exodus of 1879 and 1880 to Kansas" (Master's thesis, Kansas State College, 1942), 35-35; and Colored Citizen, August 26, 1879.
29. Ibid.
31. Colored Citizen, April 12, 1879.
32. Ibid.
34. Ibid., March 8, 1879.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid.; the Embry Plan, proposed in 1878, was an effort to induce the masses of the colored people of the South to leave, thereby providing the necessary aid from the federal government to enable them to get to one of the western states or territories and then giving them enough to live on until they could get established. Colored Citizen, January 25, 1879.
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.

This broadside from 1878 announced a planned departure for Kansas.
through those enlightened and on the whole, Christian sections of our country." It also pointed out that "there are already thousands of our people scattered in all these regions" waiting to be joined by the present exodusters.

Beginning in May, the fourth month of the exodus, some of the initial optimism was being replaced by sober practicality. First of all, the less fortunate of the migrants or exodusters had to be clothed, fed, and housed to minimize their suffering. Secondly, because of their lack of resources far too many had congregated near St. Louis and Topeka and other urban areas; the Kansas officials were especially concerned with maintaining some sense of geographic balance in the distribution of these new citizens.

The problems of the migration were the first items of business discussed at the National Conference of Colored Men in Nashville. The People Advocate published the entire proceedings of the May 6 meeting. The report suggested that "the migration of the colored people, now going on from several of the southern states, has assumed such proportions as to demand the calm and deliberate consideration of every thoughtful citizen of the country." The conference passed the following resolutions.

Number one, resolved that it is the sense of this conference that the great current of migration, which has, for the past few months, taken to[o]o many of our people from their homes in the South, and which is now carrying hundreds to the free and fertile West, should be encouraged and kept in motion until those who remain are accorded every right and privilege guaranteed by the Constitution and laws.

Number two, resolved that this Conference recommend that the National Executive Committee, of which Senator [William] Windom is Chairman, appoint a committee of three to visit the Western states and territories, and report not later than the first of November upon the health, climate, and productions of said states and territories.

There were resounding sighs of relief and premature congratulations when the winter's heavy migration slowed to a trickle during the summer months. It was a time to ponder, reflect, and plan. The urgency and the gravity of the whole situation prompted the Colored Citizen to editorialize this point:

Those...who come to Kansas will be treated humanely. Kansas people, while they regret the causes which compel the colored people to flee from their native homes, will stand by the record of "Free Kansas"—even though the burden may, for the time being, be a heavy one for a new State to bear.

In late May the Citizen recommended a newly formed land association to the general public. Benjamin Singleton and others had organized the association to purchase and improve land for the mutual benefit of its members. While this newspaper never wavered from its position of support for the general migration, it did reevaluate the situation. The first phase of the exodus had been a truly exasperating experience for its weary editor.

Believing rumors, poorly prepared, following blindly, and with the promise of a "Sunny Kansas" offering them hope, the exodusters had been drawn to the promised land. For many in the first wave the harsh reality of a Kansas winter ended their trek, but the dream would live on. They would come again.

No one knew this better than William L. Eagleson, the longtime editor of the Colored Citizen and staunch advocate of the western migration. A native of St. Louis who had moved to Kansas in 1876, he championed the call to Kansas for all to share its prosperity. To set the record straight and put the realities of the exodus in its proper perspective, he wrote the article "A Little Plain Talk."

It began by stating that "the reports [being] circulated by unprincipled persons that colored people coming to Kansas would receive a home free or anything else here is false..." Eagleson advised would-be exodusters to "never leave home for Kansas without having some money over and above what it takes to pay your transportation"; and he warned that the frontier was for the young because "for the old men and women the chances for great success in Kansas are not flattering." In the end, however, he made a final point as to who should come: "While we want to see 100,000 colored people in Kansas, we would have them be of that class that can in every sense sustain themselves and that will be a burden to no one."

41. People Advocate, May 17, 1879.
42. Ibid.
43. Colored Citizen, May 10, 1879.
44. Ibid., May 24, 1879.
45. Ibid., May 3, 1879.
There was little doubt that "the movement was now more serious than at any time in the past," and "that people now [coming] are financially able to sustain themselves." Yet the summer lull ended with the early fall influx of blacks from Texas, followed later by wave after wave coming from the lower Mississippi Valley. The mass exodus attracted the attention of the United States Congress on December 18, 1879, and the Senate appointed a committee to investigate and submit its findings on the migration. The Republican minority report denied the Democrats' allegations that the movement was "instigated, aided or encouraged by Republican leaders at the North" and that it was "not proven that the immigrants are dissatisfied in their new homes and wish to return to the South," nor was it proven that there was not a "demand for their labor at the North."46

Thus, as the great Exodus of 1879 flooded into another year, the pages of the People Advocate put the year-long phenomenon in its proper perspective.

[We]...all concede that it would be more desirable if the Negro could in the present generation get a recognition of his manhood at the South, but to do it the Negro must be put on his own land. Old abolitionists ever since the war have been appealed to in behalf of the Negro's landless condition to furnish the capital required to secure homesteads for the freedmen, but in vain. Only when it became evident that the friends of the freedmen would not furnish this aid required does the exodus furnish the only practical alternative.49

49. People Advocate, September 20, 1879.