A popular but unrealistic image of "Pap" Singleton leading his people to the "promised land" in Kansas.
Image and Reality

on the Kansas Prairie

"Pap" Singleton's
Cherokee County Colony

by Gary R. Entz

As the economic and social conditions of life in the South worsened during the era of Reconstruction (1865-1877), many African Americans seriously began considering out-migration. Black people clearly understood that land ownership provided the economic foundations for political and social independence, yet most were frustrated in their attempts to secure some acreage for their families. This apparent lack of progress in the South motivated Benjamin "Pap" Singleton (1809-1892) of Nashville, Tennessee, to initiate a westward colonization movement. "Well, my people," recalled Singleton in 1880, "for want of land—we needed land for our children—and their disadvantages—that caused my heart to grieve and sorrow; pity for my race... that was coming down, instead of going up—that

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caused me to go to work for them." Singleton's solution was to conduct an organized movement of black people out of the South and settle them on government lands in Cherokee County, Kansas.

Historians have recognized Singleton as a leader of the organized movement of blacks from the South to Kansas prior to the migration of the exodusters, as migrating blacks came to be called, in 1879–1880. Despite this fame, the historical research on Singleton's planned Cherokee Colony has been superficial, which has perpetuated an image of a successful settlement that served as an attraction for future migrants. This vision of prosperity, based largely on anecdotal evidence compiled during and after the Great Exodus, has focused so little on the settlers and the conditions they encountered that researchers have never proven that a racially exclusive colony of blacks even existed in Cherokee County.

The Singleton Colony, which historians previously have defined as a specific group of several hundred African Americans transplanted from the South to a racially exclusive enclave within Kansas, did not exist as such. While there was a significant amount of black migration and talk of building a black town in Cherokee County, the attempt to organize a colony, which began in the spring of 1877, disintegrated after the summer of that year. Black people, unable to initiate an independent settlement in southeast Kansas, hinged their hopes on finding employment from the established white community. However, blacks soon found the economics of survival in the region prohibitive, and few chose to remain.

Most historians, while crediting Singleton with the successful establishment of two colonies within the state of Kansas, have tended to treat his initial movement largely as an aside—a curious precursor to the more dramatic exodus migration of 1879. As one of the first organized African American attempts at settlement in Kansas, the push to establish a black colony in Cherokee County has been used to mark the beginning of an important period in the western movement of black people. Yet early historians who included Singleton in their examination of the exodus relied on information about his early colonization efforts gleaned from the emotionally charged 1879 exodus reports. Representing this tradition, historian Walter Fleming asserted that the Singleton Colony in Cherokee County was soon in good condition. By 1878, wrote Fleming, "the negroes had paid for 1,000 acres of land, good cabins had been erected, cows and pigs were common, and shade trees and fruit trees were growing." By accepting this, historians have done themselves 4.

1. U.S. Senate Report and Testimony of the Select Committee of the United States Senate to Investigate the Causes of the Removal of the Negroes from the Southern States to the Northern States, 46th Cong., 2nd sess., 1880, S. Rept. 693, serial 1899, 380.

2. "Exodusters" was a term applied to the migrants of the "Kansas Fever Exodus" of 1879. This movement, which emanated primarily from the gulf states of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas, was the most notable migration of southern blacks in the second half of the nineteenth century. Apprehensive over the possible reinstitution of slavery, thousands of blacks migrated westward toward the "promised land" of Kansas during 1879–1880. For a complete overview of this event, see Nell Irvin Painter, Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977; reprint, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986) (page citations are to the reprint edition); Robert G. Atwater, In Search of Canaan: Black Migration to Kansas, 1879–80 (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1976).

3. Nell Blythe Waldron has written that "the Cherokee colony prospered and its members sent letters back to the south with glowing accounts of their success." Lee Ella Blake asserted that "those who came in 1873 did well. It was the success of this colony which drew the attention of the railroads to the Negroes as a possible source of revenue." Robert A. Swan Jr. agreed and noted that "this colony did well and, aided by newspapers which published his advertising notices, Singleton organized an annual trek from the South to Kansas." Kenneth Marvin Hamilton recorded that the "Cherokee County colony prospered" and that "hundreds of blacks had migrated to the Kansas state capital from the upper South as a result of the publicity given to 'Pap' Singleton's Cherokee County colony." Nell Blythe Waldron, "Colonization in Kansas from 1861 to 1897" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1923), 124; Lee Ella Blake, "The Great Exodus of 1879 and 1880 to Kansas" (master's thesis, Kansas State College of Agriculture and Applied Science, 1942), 54–55; Robert A. Swan Jr., The Ethnic Heritage of Topeka, Kansas: Immigrant Beginnings (Topeka: Institute of Comparative Ethnic Studies, 1974), 26; Kenneth Marvin Hamilton, Black Towns and Profit: Promotion and Development in the Trans-Appalachian West, 1877–1915 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 7, 10.


and their readers a disservice, for they have perpetuated a quixotic account of Singleton's alleged Cherokee County colony that denies the reality of hardship black people in the region were forced to endure in the 1870s.

The traditional image of Singleton's initial colonization movement, as fervently recorded by journalists during the exodus years of 1879–1880 and repeated verbatim by numerous historians, began in the year 1869. It was then, according to this improbable chronology, that Benjamin Singleton and several of his associates organized the Tennessee Real Estate and Homestead Association. The original object of the association was to assist the freed people in the agricultural districts of Tennessee to purchase small tracts of land within their own state. Singleton wanted to help African Americans become owners of the lands they tilled "instead of being dependent as renters and hired laborers upon the large landowners, their former masters."6

The strategy did not work. Southern whites were loath to see black people become economically independent and would sell land to the freed people only at exorbitant prices.7 Singleton later accused white property owners of charging "Sixty-dollars per acre for land not worth more than One Dollar and a quarter per acre."8 Singleton, convinced that blacks and whites could never live together peacefully in the South, in 1879 said:

I knowed my people couldn't live thar. It was ag'in nature for the masters and the slaves to jine hands

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8. Untitled speech, Benjamin Singleton Miscellaneous Collection, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society; U.S. Senate Report and Testimony of the Select Committee, 389. Although Singleton may have exaggerated the per acre price quoted to southern blacks, historians Leon Litwack and Eric Foner agree that southern whites opposed landownership by blacks. They found that whites often raised the price of their land when the prospective buyer was black or would sell large tracts to fellow planters at rates less than the per acre price some black farmers were willing to pay had the landowners divided their property into individual lots. See Leon F. Litwack, Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 407; Eric Foner, Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877 (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 403–4.

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As president of the Tennessee Real Estate and Homestead Association, Pap Singleton organized several exploration committees to Kansas in the early 1870s, and he was enormously pleased with what the state had to offer his people.

and work together. Nuthin' but de millinium could bring that around. The whites had the lands and the sense, an' the blacks had nothin' but their freedom,—an' it was just like a dream to 'em.

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ince they could make little headway obtaining homes in Tennessee, Singleton and his associates, in 1871, dispatched an exploration committee assigned to investigate the state of Kansas. The purpose, according to an 1879 reporter for Harper's Weekly, was "to see if cheaper homes could not be found among a more friendly people than in the land of their former bondage." This first exploration committee returned to Tennessee with a favorable report, but a small migration was all that followed. "The people didn't like to come North," reported the Topeka Commonwealth in 1879. "They preferred to endure an endurable degree of hardships rather than to leave the sunny South, the land of their birth; rather than to venture upon the untried realities of the North."9

To gather additional information about Kansas, Singleton’s association held a convention in Nashville, which in turn formed a second exploration committee. Dispatched in 1872, this second delegation gathered accounts of recent disasters that adversely affected the prosperity of area farmers. The group subsequently returned to Tennessee with a report that recommended against migration to Kansas. Although the second committee’s report was unfavorable, black people in Tennessee still received encouraging news about the West. Families who left the South after the return of the first committee reportedly succeeded in establishing homes in Kansas and sent promising letters to their friends and relatives in Tennessee.

To resolve the issue, Singleton, as president of the homestead association, led a third exploration committee to Kansas in 1873. He was so pleased with what the state had to offer that he immediately returned to Tennessee and “gathered up two or three hundred people and brought them out the same year to Cherokee County, in the southeast corner of the State.” In 1880 the number of colonists reported was three or four hundred; according to Singleton, he “went into Southern Kansas. . . . I formed a colony there, and bought about a thousand acres of ground—the colony did—my people.”

The St. Louis Globe-Democrat reported that Singleton’s Cherokee County colony was “the first colonization movement” among black people and the forerunner of the exodus. The people of the Singleton Colony did well enough, the account continued, that they captured the attention of the railroads, and soon railroad agents began offering special inducements to encourage further black migration from the South.

This led to a steady stream of migrants that eventually grew to become the exodus of 1879. This traditional model persisted until historian Nell Irvin Painter, in her seminal work Exodusters, questioned the beginnings of Singleton’s colonization movement. Although Painter’s research found that Singleton’s group generated little publicity before the middle of the 1870s, she provided no detailed examination of the assumed Cherokee County colony beyond indicating a probable 1877 founding date. Nevertheless, since the initial publication of Painter’s book in 1977, historians of black migration have been mindful to indicate that the planned Singleton Colony presumably had not been founded before 1875 or 1876. However, while many recent historians have been careful to note a probable later founding date, they have not challenged the Singleton Colony’s image of prosperity and most still presume that Singleton began his movement in 1869, that the alleged colony was founded with three hundred settlers, and that the colonists’ success served as an inducement to later migration.

It was not until September 12, 1874, that Benjamin Singleton and eight of his associates officially incorporated the Edgefield Real Estate Association in Nashville, Tennessee. Although the association’s letter of incorporation, dated a full year after the reputed 1873 founding of the Cherokee County colony, did not include a statement of purpose, an 1877 Real Estate and Homestead Association handbill stated that the association “was gotten up for the benefit of the Colored Laboring Classes, both men and women,

11. “The Great Negro Exodus.” The Harper’s Weekly reporter gave no further information about the disasters on which the exploration committee allegedly collected information. Although Kansas suffered no major agricultural crises in 1872, an actual exploration committee was sent to Kansas in 1875 and could be the one to which the correspondent alluded. A committee dispatched in 1875 might have collected information about the grasshopper plagues, drought, and falling crop prices of 1874. For a discussion of the misfortunes of 1874, see Robert W. Richmond, Kansas: A Land of Contrast, 3d ed. (Arlington Heights, Ill.: Forum Press, 1989), 141–44.
13. Ibid.
to purchase them large tracts of land, peaceful homes and firesides, undisturbed by anyone." While Singleton’s group clearly was interested in promoting racial self-confidence through landownership, no evidence exists to suggest that the association’s members banded together in 1874 for any purpose other than to secure property for blacks within Tennessee.

The first emigration convention in which the group actively participated occurred on May 19, 1875. Although called to consider “the subject of em-


20. It is important to remember that the word “homestead” did not appear in the letter of incorporation for Singleton’s real estate association. References to the organization as the Edgefield Real Estate and Homestead Association did not appear in newspaper articles or handbills before 1877.
igration" that had "caused considerable excitement" among Tennessee blacks, the gathered representatives debated various solutions to the problem of obtaining land and the worsening political climate of the South and recommended "that the entire colored population of the State proceed to take steps looking to an early emigration." The delegates established a Board of Emigration Commissioners in Nashville and sent agents throughout Tennessee to inform potential migrants of the association's headquarters in Nashville. Furthermore, convention representatives dispatched A.W. McConnell, Charles Maxwell, and H.A. Napier to Kansas with instructions to explore prospective areas for settlement.21

Napier's delegation bypassed Cherokee County and instead visited the region surrounding the Great Bend of the Arkansas River. The committee returned to Nashville and, at an August 14, 1875, meeting, reported their findings. While Napier confirmed that the soil around Great Bend was of superior quality, he believed that the district's lack of timber, periodic grasshopper plagues, and winter winds would prove to be obstacles too great for prospective black settlers to overcome. To illustrate his concerns, Napier provided a reckoning of what it would cost African Americans to relocate to Kansas. Including the outlay for a team of good mules, a pair of plows, tools, lumber, the cost of digging a well, and five hundred dollars for transportation and provisions, Napier estimated that each migrant who envisioned any hope of success on homestead land would have to first accumulate a minimum of one thousand dollars. This sum was absolutely necessary, he maintained, since work for laborers was difficult to find in the towns and cities en route.22 Although some at the meeting disputed Napier's figures, it remained a tremendous amount for southern blacks in 1875, and few could have put together that level of capital investment.

Regardless of the exploration committee's report, many black people in Tennessee held fast to the idea of taking up farms in the "free state" of Kansas, and some sources contend that 1875 was the year they chose to relocate. In the spring of 1882, during an announcement for an upcoming birthday celebration for Singleton, the Topeka Colored Patriot reported that he led "out a colony and located them at Baxter Springs, Kansas, in 1875." The Topeka Daily Capital reiterated this date a few weeks later when it reported that "The first colony of colored people he brought here was from Tennessee and was located at Baxter Springs, Kansas, in 1875." Singleton fixed 1875 as the correct date in his 1880 testimony before the United States Senate.23

Despite these claims, it remains unlikely that any organized movement of black people to Cherokee County occurred in 1875. In August 1876 Singleton, along with associate W.A. Sizemore, sent a letter of inquiry to Kansas Governor Thomas A. Osborn that made no reference to the success of any preexisting colony within the state. Singleton's letter informed the governor that many African Americans wanted to make the journey to Kansas but only lacked the funds to make a start. "We the Colored people of Tennessee," began Singleton and Sizemore,

Wish to leave this State and go to a better place for us and there is many of our people that wish to leave and all that keeps us from leaving is that we cannot raise monies enough to go away and then support our family after paying our way to Kansas.24

Singleton's principal concern was whether the state government would assist him in financing from fifty to one hundred hardworking families who


wanted to take up farms in Kansas. He assured Governor Osborn that after a few years of steadfast labor the migrants would repay the state for any aid received. Singleton, who wanted to impress upon the governor just how dire the situation was for black people in the South, promised that "We are Bound to leave the State just as soon as we can get a way for Starvation is Staring us in the face."25 Whether some of these people were willing to chance the coming winter and migrate at that time remains unknown, but Singleton, in an 1879 interview with the New York Tribune, claimed that he organized the Cherokee County colony in 1876.26

If Singleton expected any reasonable chance of success, then an organized migration that might have taken place during the closing months of 1876 would have had to be small. Kansas state census data, enumerated on March 1, 1875, reveal that twenty-nine African American families resided in Baxter Springs and three other families lived in the surrounding township of Spring Valley.27 These families were residing in Cherokee County before Singleton's May 1875 Nashville emigration convention, and although five of them came from Tennessee, they probably were not part of his movement. Mayor Samuel B. Caruth of Baxter Springs, in an 1878 press release, stated that 106 African American families resided in Baxter Springs and the surrounding Spring Valley Township in April of that year. Of this number, sixty-five had arrived in the area since 1877. Barring any significant out-migration, these figures left a total of nine black families who settled within Spring Valley and Baxter Springs between March of 1875 and 1877.28

Although those migrating in 1876 may or may not have come at Singleton's behest, in 1877 his push to colonize blacks in Kansas was unquestionably in operation. In the spring of that year, Singleton, along with associate Columbus M. Johnson, undertook an exploratory tour of Kansas.29 An 1879 edition of Harper's Weekly reported that Singleton and Johnson "spent much time in obtaining information from government and other land officers, and in investigating

Kansans in that year experienced the smallest amount of new settlement for any year in the 1870s. See Kansas State Census, 1875, Cherokee County: U.S. Census, 1880, Kansas, Cherokee County; Homer E. Socolofsky, "Kansas in 1876," Kansas Historical Quarterly 43 (Spring 1977): 40.

26. Kansas State Census, 1875, Cherokee County. Black population statistics represent the inhabitants of Spring Valley Township and Baxter Springs as enumerated in the state and federal censuses of 1875, 1880, and 1885. No alterations have been made to adjust for the acknowledged census undercount of black males and the absorption of mulattoes into the white population.
27. "Our Colored Population," Republican Courier (Columbus), April 11, 1878. Of the thirty-two African American families listed in the 1875 state census, seventeen were gone at the time of the 1880 federal census. When they left remains unknown; however, the modest number of 1876 migrants concurs with Homer E. Socolofsky's overall findings that
the properties of the soil in different places.” Singleton returned to Nashville and on March 19, 1877, distributed a circular that lauded the benefits of migration to Kansas. This document represents the first instance of Singleton personally asserting on paper the existence of the Singleton Colony. The handbill closed by stating:

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.  

In March 1877 local newspapers within Cherokee County began printing reports about large groups of black people migrating into the Baxter Springs area. The discovery of rich lead and zinc deposits in the nearby boomtowns of Galena and Empire City, and the subsequent opening of mines in the spring of that year, might have encouraged black migration as much as Singleton’s promise of affordable land. However, most blacks came to southern Kansas to farm and chose to settle in the agricultural region surrounding Baxter Springs rather than near the Galena mines in the neighboring township of Lowell.

In August 1877 regional journalists went beyond reports of black migration and recognized the attempt to organize the Singleton Colony. Said the editor of the Columbus Republican Courier:

The Singleton Colony which is located on the Gulf road four miles this side of Baxter is rapidly filling up and we are informed that they intend in the course of a few weeks of laying out a town, have a post-office, newspaper and all the paraphernalia (sic) of an enterprising town.

The reporter estimated that more than two thousand African Americans attended an emancipation meeting at Baxter Springs that summer. While the correspondent might have exaggerated the attendance figures, he noted that it was a significant amount for Cherokee County and that more were coming. “Mr. Turner Stevenson,” related the same edition of the Republican Courier, “traveling agent of the Singleton colored colony of this county called at this office Tuesday. Mr. Stevenson was on his way to Nashville for a fresh supply of colored people.”

As black migration to Kansas was rapidly increasing during the spring of 1877, railroad agents in Tennessee became aware of the profit potential the migrants represented. In April a correspondent for the Nashville Daily American reported on the migration of forty black people toward Kansas and noted the fierce competition between railroad agents trying to encourage the migrants to travel on differing rail lines. Despite their encouragement, these railroad agents were trying merely to secure passenger traffic from people who independently had made the decision to migrate. No evidence links them to land agents of the Missouri River, Fort Scott and Gulf Railroad (MRFS&G), which was the only railroad with property in Cherokee County. Allegations suggested that Turner Stevenson, who presented himself as the traveling agent for the Singleton Colony, was in the employ of the railroads, but no evidence substantiated this charge.

32. “Two more car loads of colored troops arrived on Saturday last. Come on boys, ‘Dare room for me,’ Republican Courier, March 15, 1877.
33. A correspondent for the Galena press wrote that “we have it reported that one thousand colored people are on their way to this point [Baxter Springs] and will soon reach it.” “From Baxter Springs,” Galena Miner, July 7, 1877; for information about the lead and zinc discoveries, see also Kansas Historical Records Survey Project, Work Projects Administration, Inventory of the County Archives of Kansas, No. 11, Cherokee County (Colombia) (Topeka: Kansas Historical Records Survey Project, 1940), 13.
34. Republican Courier, August 9, 1877.

35. Ibid., “A Word of Caution,” Colored Citizen (Fort Scott), May 17, 1878. Turner Stevenson, who operated out of Lexington, Kentucky, and Nashville, Tennessee, regularly boosted the benefits of migration to Cherokee County in black newspapers prior to the 1879 exodus. Although Stevenson’s own advertisements did not mention the planned Singleton Colony, his visit to the Republican Courier office marked the only instance in which the Cherokee County press reported on the colony project by name.

The Galena newspapers did not attempt to give attendance numbers for the emancipation celebration in Baxter Springs but did corroborate that the “procession was longer than it has ever been before, as large numbers from the county came in and joined their friends”, see “Correspondence,” Galena Miner, August 11, 1877.

In an 1880 debate, Frederick Douglass provided additional reasoning that argued against the idea of railroad agents and land speculators...
Like the colonists in Cherokee County, black migrants who came to Kansas during the Great Exodus of 1879-1880 endured hardships and suffering. This Harper’s Weekly sketch depicts destitute blacks in Topeka during the 1879 mass migration.

Did the African Americans who reportedly gathered four miles northwest of Baxter Springs have the means to purchase land and lay out a town as the Republican Courier suggested? The alleged colony, according to one of Singleton’s more reasonable estimates, had seventy-three subscribing members. However, Singleton testified before Congress that he had “carried some people in there that when they got there they didn’t have fifty cents left.” At the same time he also declared that his colonists purchased a thousand acres of ground in Cherokee County. In a lucid interview with the New York Tribune, Singleton said that “each member of the colony pays $5 to the company every three months until their land is paid for. Then they get a deed to their land from the company.” Despite these conflicting claims, land prices in the area made the establishment of a permanent black colony unlikely.

Prior to the close of the Civil War, the land that became Cherokee County had been part of the Cherokee and Quapaw Indian Reservations. In an 1866 treaty with the United States government, the Cherokee Nation ceded the Cherokee Neutral Lands and the Kansas portion of the Cherokee Strip to the United States in trust to be disposed of for the benefit of the Cherokee people. The Quapaw Nation followed suit and in 1867 signed a treaty that transferred the Quapaw Strip to the federal government. Congress took no action toward survey and sale of the Quapaw Strip until 1872, and when government surveyors finally appraised the Quapaw lands, the per-acre price was set at $1.25. The land was attractive, and most parcels sold before black settlers began arriving in significant numbers. In 1880, when asked about Indian lands in Cherokee County, Singleton said that Congress had set the price too high. “Well, then, the government could not sell it; then it was reappraised at a dollar and a quarter an acre; so now I think it is now pretty well taken up.”

Singleton did not say that any of his followers tried to purchase lands carved from the Quapaw...
Strip. However, if black settlers had tried to build a colony along the Gulf road north of Baxter Springs, they would have had to purchase property from agents of the MRFS&G or from private individuals. The Quapaw Strip was but a narrow east-west ribbon of land located on the southernmost border of Cherokee County. The remainder of the county had been part of the Neutral Lands, and in 1867 the U.S. Department of the Interior sold this entire eight-hundred-thousand-acre tract to railroad agent James F. Joy for the bargain price of one dollar per acre.

In 1876 unoccupied land controlled by the MRFS&G ranged generally, depending on the quality of the soil, from two to eight dollars per acre. This was a price that most black people simply could not afford upon arrival in Kansas. Said Singleton about railroad property in Cherokee County:

> The price of the land is too high. It is $7 per acre, to be paid in ten years, with 7 per cent interest. Some have given up their claims, not being able to meet the demand. We had a committee to purchase land from the railroad. Some colonists found that other land could be bought on better terms, so the company bought them out, and they went way.

> A brief window of opportunity appeared when privately held property was available at discounted rates. In 1869, to encourage the railroad to come to Baxter Springs, the citizens of Spring Valley Township voted bonds totaling $150,000 to the MRFS&G. Spirits were high, and from 1871 to 1873 the people voted an additional $39,000 in bonds to improve the condition of the streets and public buildings in Baxter Springs. This $189,000 debt was more than the total real value of taxable assets within the region. Thus, when the depression of the 1870s combined with a movement of the Texas cattle trade, the local economy collapsed. Although the enormous tax burden forced many people to sell their holdings at nominal prices, the opening was short-lived and disappeared in the second half of the decade. Bondholders had resolved the issue by accepting a varying rate on their securities from twenty to fifty cents on the dollar. Nevertheless, had any of Singleton's followers purchased property, they would have been required to assume the oppressive tax burdens. See Nathaniel Thompson Allison, History of Cherokee County, Kansas and Representative Citizens (Chicago: Biographical Publishing Co., 1904), 151-52.


Although MRFS&G land advertisements from Baxter Springs corroborated Singleton's description of terms of sale and interest rates, Cherokee County deed records for 1875-1878 registered no land purchases that Singleton or any representatives from his real estate association might have made in Spring Valley Township.

It remains unclear whether Singleton ever had any involvement with the attempt to establish a colony in Cherokee County beyond giving his name to the undertaking. However, his knowledge of land prices in the area suggests that he remained abreast of the situation and was not pleased when individuals were forced to abandon the project for cheaper land elsewhere. By 1878 Singleton found the Cherokee County operation so badly managed that he withdrew his support from the attempt to build a colony in the region. In spring that year, Singleton redirected his efforts to a part of Kansas where affordable land was available through the 1862 Homestead Act and successfully established a colony at Dunlap in Morris County. There was no more talk of building a black town in Cherokee County.

Black migration into Baxter Springs and Spring Valley Township slowed considerably after the collapse of the colony project. From 1878 to 1880 the black population of Baxter Springs grew by just four households while rural Spring Valley gained an additional nineteen. Regardless of the number of African Americans who came to the region through Singleton's influence, they were part of a larger migration of black people to Cherokee County during the late 1870s and cannot be differentiated from the general black population. However, despite

> "Cheap Houses! For Poor Men," railroad advertisement, Baxter Springs Republican, July 7, 1876; Kansas Probate Court (Cherokee County), "Deed Records, 1866-1927, and Index, 1869-1872, 1875-1884," Family History Library of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.


> Although the migration had already peaked, the Cherokee County press anticipated the arrival of more black settlers. "There is an emigrant train expected here [Baxter Springs] the last of this week from Tennessee, all colored." See Border Star (Columbus), August 2, 1878.
the failure to establish a colony, the migration did have a significant impact on the racial makeup of the township. In 1880 African Americans constituted 45.9 percent of the population of Baxter Springs and 16.1 percent of the surrounding countryside. 49

The black people of Spring Valley Township were rural folk thrust into a predominantly urban environment and did not enjoy the same economic advantages as did their white neighbors. Very few arrived with enough funds to start a farm or a business, and many were forced into economic conditions similar to those they had left behind in the South. The few who could afford to take up farms were renters or sharecroppers, while most, when they could find employment, simply worked as day laborers for the white population. 50 It was not an advantageous situation, and by 1878 the black citizens were suffering.

In March 1878, just one year after Singleton distributed his circular lauding the benefits of life in Kansas, blacks in the region began showing signs of distress. Kansas Governor George T. Anthony received a petition signed by more than 120 African American citizens of Cherokee County. The appeal, which called for state aid to relieve the black population "from want and suffering," informed Anthony that black people had to wander "from door to door in search of employment, and without avail." The petitioners also apprised the governor that assistance from the state was necessary to keep the black residents from starvation. 51

Governor Anthony was not pleased with the state of affairs in southeast Kansas and called the Cherokee County commissioners’ attention "to the provisions of the Constitution and the Statutes of the State which makes it obligatory for county authorities to care for their poor within their counties." Anthony forwarded the petition to the county government for action with the admonition that "efforts should be made at once to give assistance that would be satisfactory and protect the State from the disgrace and dishonor that would follow." 52 The editors of the Republican Courier professed surprise and proclaimed that "it was the first intimation the authorities had of any aid desired by this race of people living in our county." 53

Mayor Samuel Caruth of Baxter Springs, in a letter to the county commissioners, authenticated the reports and provided further illustration of the condition of the local black population. The mayor wrote:

A large number have recently came here from portions of the Southern States to avoid oppression and misrule. They are, for the greater part, in a

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**NEWS FROM KANSAS.**

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Nashville, Tenn., March 19, 1877.

**Friends and Fellow Citizens,** —

Having been to Kansas on a tour of inspection and united the various inducements to emigration to that y of, I feel it my duty to give all the information in my r to our poor down-trodden race of Tennessee, in 1 to the many advantages of Kansas. During my visit and saw some excellent selections of land and plenty of fine water, with a healthy climate. There is abun-dant 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.

Black migration to Kansas rapidly increased during the spring of 1877, due in part to advertisements such as this one.

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49. Baxter Springs housed 540 blacks out of a population of 1,176; while Spring Valley contained 213 blacks out of a population of 1,322. See U.S. Census, 1880, Kansas, Cherokee County.

50. Ibid.

51. Republican Courier, March 21, 1878; George T. Anthony to Cherokee County Commissioners, March 9, 1878, Correspondence, George T. Anthony Administration, Records of the Governor’s Office, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society, hereafter referred to as Governor’s Records.

52. Anthony to Cherokee County Commissioners, Governor’s Records.

53. Republican Courier, March 21, 1878.
destitute condition. A large majority cannot obtain work, and unless means of some kind are speedily provided for their maintenance [sic], [they] will soon be brought to the verge of starvation. 54

The county commissioners responded by dispatching a committee, headed by Captain J.A. Hubbard, to Baxter Springs to investigate the allegations of poverty. Hubbard’s report confirmed the destitute condition of the African American settlers, but it also corroborated Singleton’s declarations of black people’s willingness to work and pay their own ways. The black citizens in the vicinity of Baxter Springs, wrote Hubbard,

are not paupers or beggars, and do not want to go to the poor farm, but they are mostly farmers and tillers of the ground, and are very anxious to get in a condition by which they may be enabled to follow their favorite occupation. What they want is tools, and provisions in a sufficient quantity to enable them to plant and make a crop, and soon as they make that crop they propose to pay back all that is advanced to them. 55

Hubbard sympathized with the plight of black migrants and wished that something could be done. However, he saw no possibility of a local solution to the problem. Unfortunately for the African American citizens, wrote Hubbard to the county commissioners,

no laws as yet have been enacted that will enable you to aid them as they desire. The legislature of the State or the Congress of the United States are the only powers that have the authority to grant the aid needed and asked for by this class of people. 56

No aid from the state government came forward until the overwhelming presence of the exodusters in northeastern Kansas pressed the administration to provide relief. The Kansas Freedmen’s Relief Association (KFRA), organized in 1879, tried to provide aid to the people of Cherokee County, but it was inadequate and poorly managed. In 1881 three leaders of

the black community in Baxter Springs, Potter Boyd, Abraham Lee, and Reuben Turner, wrote the KFRA, which by then was closing its operation, to inform its members of continued suffering in Spring Valley. The black people of our town and vicinity “are in a very bad condition,” wrote Boyd, Lee, and Turner:

This store that is run in this county by the officers of the Agricultural Institute is doing the colored people little good. In the first place it is not conveniently situated, the majority of the colored people are in the south part of the county, and the store is in the north part of the county, and it costs as much to get to the store, and then pay for what you get, as it does at any other store in the county. . . . We know of numbers of cases where destitute colored people have went to the store with the view of obtaining something to wear and have been turned away empty. Those are the old and feeble and widows and orphans. Such are the facts, and we want to know if this is right and legal. We have understood that those goods were sent to give to colored people. Please let us know if this is true or not. And at this Institute they have colored people hired at very small wages, and Mr. Linn Pickering talks of whipping them if they don’t do to suit him. 57

Clearly, pre-exodus migrations to Cherokee County and the abortive Singleton Colony were no more successful than the mass movement of 1879, and many black people chose to abandon the region. The federal census of 1880 lists ninety African American households in Baxter Springs with an additional thirty-nine in surrounding Spring Valley Township. Of the eighty-five black households that made Baxter

54. Ibid., April 11, 1878.
55. Ibid., April 18, 1878.
56. Ibid.
57. Quote from “Another Call to Help the Refugees,” Kansas Freedmen’s Relief Association, Miscellaneous Documents, microfilm LM504, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society; Laura S. Haviland, former secretary of the KFRA, served as secretary of the Agricultural Institute in 1881. In a press release that included a financial statement for April 15–June 30, 1881, Haviland vehemently defended the institute’s methods and the actions of Lindley [Linn] Pickering. Although it received supplies from the KFRA, the Agricultural Institute was an independent organization and obtained its operating funds from eastern philanthropists. The institute’s directors used supplies of food and clothing to support students in the school and gave surpluses away during the winter months or when an emergency required. “The Agricultural Institute for the Colored People,” from Columns and Clippings, vol. 5, 44–51, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society; Randall B. Woods and David A. Sloan, “Kansas Quakers and the ‘Great Exodus’: Conflicting Perceptions of Responsibility Within a Nineteenth-Century Reform Community,” Kansas History 48 (November 1985): 37–40.
Springs their home in 1885, only thirty-eight had been part of the town in 1880. The families in the countryside experienced a similar degree of out-migration. Twenty-three African American households still remained within rural Spring Valley in 1885. However, of these twenty-three, only fifteen resided in the township in 1880.58

Black migrants to Spring Valley, most of whom lived in Baxter Springs, were transients, but Benjamin Singleton should not bear the blame for black people’s lack of permanence or the failure to organize a colony in the region. He maintained that, given a fair chance in the West, blacks, through hard work and perseverance, could build a successful community with a minimum of outside assistance. African Americans initially looked to Cherokee County instead of settling on homestead claims farther west because, as Turner Stevenson cautioned, it had “plenty of timber” and was “a well-settled country, where those that have not sufficient money to purchase land can rent farms or find other employment.”59 Singleton concurred with this view. He believed that his settlers could obtain employment within Baxter Springs while saving their extra earnings to buy farms of their own. Said Singleton in 1880:

They didn’t go under no relief assistance; they went on their own resources; and when they went in there first the country was not overrun with

them; you see they could get good wages; the country was not overstocked with people; they went to work, and I never helped them as soon as I put them on the land.60

Singleton directed blacks to a region where he believed that they could pull themselves up by their own bootstraps; however, Baxter Springs did not offer enough jobs to give black settlers the chance that he desired. Most African Americans in Spring Valley were unskilled and worked as day laborers. According to the 1885 state census, unskilled laborers who found employment in Baxter Springs could expect a wage of $1.00 per day. Those fortunate few with skills, such as blacksmiths or brick masons, could earn wages from between $1.50 and $2.00 per day. Domestic servants could obtain a wage of $2.00 per week, while farm laborers received little more than room and board for their efforts.61 Unfortunately Baxter Springs had not regained the prosperity it had enjoyed during its earlier days as a cattle boomtown, so work for casual laborers was scarce.

With employment hard to find, keeping a family fed would have been difficult. In 1878, according to the Galena Miner, butter could be “purchased at 10 to

58. U.S. Census, 1880, Kansas, Cherokee County; Kansas State Census, 1885, Cherokee County.
60. U.S. Senate Report and Testimony of the Select Committee, 380.
61. Kansas State Census, 1885, Cherokee County.
20 cents per pound, eggs 5 cents per dozen, chickens $1.25 per dozen, potatoes 40 to 70 cents per bushel, corn meal $1.00 per cwt, and flour $2.25 per cwt. While these prices were reasonable, and, as boasted in the Miner, "nearly one-half less in Kansas than in New York or Philadelphia," they still contributed to a strenuous existence for blacks forced to rely on the uncertainty of casual labor. In 1880 journalist Henry King estimated that black people in Kansas averaged an annual surplus of $2.25 per capita. During that same year the average African American household in the Baxter Springs area contained six people, and since 40.3 percent of the black population was under twelve years of age, most families were hard-pressed just to keep food on the table.62

The start-up cost for a farm would have been prohibitive as well. In 1878 the Columbus Border Star estimated that an expenditure of sixteen hundred dollars was necessary to purchase 160 acres of ground in Cherokee County. The financial obligation increased to twenty-five hundred dollars when other outlays, including a house, barn, well, fences, hedge plants and fruit trees, were considered.63 The cost of draft animals also had to be weighed and, in response to numerous inquiries from potential migrants, the Topeka Colored Citizen published the following list of prices:

A house, 16 x 28 feet, one and one half stories high, plainly finished can be put up for $375 to $400; and neatly finished for $450. A good team of horses will cost $150 to $200; a yoke of oxen, $65 to $90; milk cow, $25 to $35.64

The 1885 census confirms a few of these figures and adds that cash crops such as wheat and corn fetched seventy and forty cents per bushel respectively.65 However, without the financial capital to purchase seed, draft animals, plows, and other farming essentials, the market price for agricultural products would have been virtually meaningless. As Henry King noted: "a gain of $2.25 a head per annum will not rapidly purchase horses and plows, and build houses and fences, and plant orchards, and put money in the bank for rainy days and seasons of ill-luck."66

Benjamin Singleton was a realist regarding race relations in the South but, despite his extensive preparations in Nashville, remained generally naive about economic conditions in Kansas. Although Singleton gave his followers the best advice he could and never intentionally led them astray, adverse economic and social conditions in America overwhelmed him and the black settlers in Cherokee County. Singleton learned some hard lessons from the Baxter Springs experiment and, rather than accept defeat, endeavored to make his subsequent Dunlap colonists more self-reliant on homestead land in Morris County.

The failure to establish a black colony in Cherokee County did not deter African American colonization efforts in other parts of Kansas. The famous Nicodemus Colony in Graham County, established in the summer of 1877, was an independent movement that developed while hopes for a Cherokee County colony had not yet collapsed. Black colonies founded in 1878 would have been similarly undaunted by events in southeast Kansas. The Hodgeman County Colony, first settled in the spring of 1878, looked to the successful founding of the Nicodemus settlement for inspiration, and settlers there probably were unaware of the situation in Cherokee County.67 Other than Singleton’s encouraging handbills, the planned Singleton Colony received virtually no publicity before wheat sold for seventy-seven cents per bushel and corn sold for thirty-one cents per bushel. The 1878 prices were the decade’s lowest for both commodities on the national market. Kansas prices varied from the national average, and Kansas corn sold for as little as fifteen cents per bushel in 1872. See United States Bureau of the Census, The Statistical History of the United States: From Colonial Times to the Present (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 512; Socolofsky, "Kansas in 1876," 4.

journalists began including it in their 1879 exodus reports, and even then their accounts revealed Singleton’s optimism more than the reality of the colony project. Singleton’s Dunlap colonists could have been fully aware of what had occurred in the Baxter Springs area, and by taking up homestead claims at favorable interest rates, tried to avoid the major pitfalls of the Cherokee County settlers. Despite such efforts, all black colonies succumbed to an insurmountable combination of variables: inexperience, racism, environment, inadequate resources, and the unexpected influx of exodus migrants in 1879, all of which overwhelmed the already struggling settlements.

Although the attempt to organize a racially exclusive colony near Baxter Springs was no more successful than the unplanned migration that hit Kansas in 1879, no evidence suggests that the movement to direct blacks toward Cherokee County before the exodus was ever profit motivated. No white land speculators were involved, and Missouri River, Fort Scott and Gulf real estate advertisements targeted the general populace rather than the black minority. While Singleton sounded like a land promoter who publicized the virtues of Cherokee County property, his primary concern, as historian Norman L. Crockett’s study of black towns found, was to provide African Americans the opportunity to manage their own destinies with a measure of dignity and self-respect. “To do this,” read one of Singleton’s handbills, “we must be prudent and save our little means and blend together as a band of brethren and sisters; when we do this we will then march onward to peace and prosperity.”

Why have past narrative accounts so overstated the success of Singleton’s stillborn Cherokee County colony? Newspaper reporters in 1879 were eager to locate an explanation—any explanation—for the sudden appearance of the exodusters. Singleton, never averse to an opportunity to promote his endeavors, seized the moment to boast of the alleged colony’s prosperity.” Without validating the story, journalists repeated it until it became part of the exodus lore. Subsequent historians continued to reproduce this error and reiterated the media accounts without verification. As newspaper editor Maxwell Scott said to Senator Ransom Stoddard in The Man Who Shot Liberty Valets: “This is the West, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.”

The reality of the Singleton Colony, which never carried beyond the planning stage, does not measure up to the image historians have created. Black migrants to the region, whether in Cherokee County to be part of the proposed colony or for other reasons, were transients who suffered severe hardship and deprivation in the latter half of the 1870s. Although a few black families migrated to the area between 1875 and 1876, serious attempts to form a colony did not take place until 1877. However, land was priced beyond the reach of most blacks, and the large influx of African Americans seeking employment soon was more than the little town of Baxter Springs could accommodate. By 1878 Singleton had withdrawn from the failed colony project, and the black citizens of Spring Valley were suffering. Relief efforts in 1879 and 1880 proved inadequate, and many black people abandoned Cherokee County.

Despite its collapse, the planned Cherokee County colony should not be dismissed as a pre-exodus peculiarity. The attempt to form a colony near Baxter Springs demonstrated the determination of black Americans to break free from the social and economic oppression of the South and served as a forerunner to the more worldly-wise Dunlap Colony. Thus it remains an important milestone in African American history. Blacks defied southern stereotypes and risked the only life they knew when they strove to become farmers on the Kansas prairie. Their efforts constitute a significant chapter in the history of southeast Kansas and in the settlement of the West.


69. An 1879 Topeka journalist wrote that Singleton "spoke of the success which had attended those who had located in Cherokee and Morris counties, and said he had no fears that these people would do well." See "The Singleton Colony Agency," Commonwealth, March 26, 1879.