Prairie, Property, and Promise: Black Migrants and Farmers in Kansas, 1860-1885

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PRAIRIE, PROPERTY, AND PROMISE
Black Migrants and Farmers in Kansas, 1860-1885.

A Thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of History at
The University of Mississippi

By
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ABSTRACT

Black migrants transformed Kansas in the 1860s and 1870s. This thesis focuses on Franklin County, Kansas, as an unit of analysis that is demographically and geographically representative of the black migrant experience in the state between 1860 and 1885. This work demonstrates that black migrants gained a secure economic footing in the county by helping to develop prairie into productive farms. Their agricultural labors turned grassland into fertile fields, and their crop yields aided in attracting agriculturally-related industries to the region. As successful farmers who accumulated wealth and property, black migrants created a social space for themselves in Kansas. They did so by building churches, founding mutual aid societies, holding public celebrations, and pushing for civil rights in the educational system. Though they comprised only about 5 percent of the population in 1880, black migrants nonetheless had a large impact on the economic and social arrangements in Franklin County.

The achievements of these migrants offers an important corrective to and extension of the historiography of black migration to Kansas, which has primarily focused on the Exoduster migration in 1879 and 1880, when thousands of former slaves from Louisiana and Mississippi made their way to the state. In contrast to the Exoduster migration, which has been identified as a collectivist movement that exhibited a proto-black nationalism, earlier black migrants arrived individually and in smaller numbers. They sought, and achieved, integration into a predominately white society and helped reconfigure Kansas through active engagement in the agrarian economy and grassroots social organization.
Earlier migrants also principally came from different regions of the South than did the Exodusters, and, as illustrated by this thesis, they achieved much more success as farmers because of the agricultural skills and techniques they had learned as slaves in the Upper South. The economic stability that farming lent these earlier migrants allowed them to build strong communities with active leadership. While many former slaves in parts of the South labored as semi-free sharecroppers, black migrants in the Midwest controlled their labor, accumulated property, and achieved a substantial measure of both success and respectability as agrarian citizens. As farmers in Kansas, they escaped the specter of slavery and found promise—and promise fulfilled—on the prairie.
This work is dedicated to
Gregory Choppin and
Eugene McCall,
my grandfathers.
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INTRODUCTION

Bill Simms walked to Kansas in 1872. For two weeks that spring he followed buffalo trails for at least 140 miles across the rolling prairie from Osceola County, Missouri, to Lawrence, Kansas, carrying nothing but a little bread. He slept in the open, a bit off the trail lest a buffalo should come, and rested during the day in the shade of rosinweed, a native perennial that resembles a sunflower. He was unarmed and destitute, and his solitary trek was both a sacrifice and a salvation: he left a family and home in Missouri for the land and promise of Kansas. But Simms was not as alone as he seemed; thousands of former slaves anticipated his movements, and thousands more would emulate them in the coming years. They all sought to escape the land of enslavement and oppression for the free soil of Kansas.\(^1\)

Simms found work as a farm laborer for two years, until the grasshopper plague of 1874 brought ruin to his employer. Undaunted, Simms took his accumulated savings of thirty-five dollars and moved to Ottawa in Franklin County, thirty miles south of Lawrence. There he eventually raised a family, attended night school, and bought a house. His success in making a life and raising a family in Kansas was noteworthy. His daughter, for instance, was the first black woman to graduate from Ottawa University.\(^2\) Simms was a farmer and a black settler in Kansas, and he, along with thousands of other former slaves, shared in developing the state into a leading agricultural center between 1860 and 1885 that contributed substantially to the national yield of


wheat and corn. As Simms's experience demonstrates, two main threads, migration and agriculture, united the experiences of many blacks who lived in Kansas in the two decades following the Civil War.

This work will examine black migration to and farming in Kansas, focusing specifically on the late antebellum period and the first twenty years after the Civil War, roughly from 1860 to 1885. Toward the end of this period, a large and sudden migration of blacks poured into the state. The circumstances, motivations, and impact of this migratory event, known as the Exoduster movement, differed greatly from those of the slower and smaller streams of black migration that arrived prior to the Exodusters. Thus this project seeks to explore black migration to Kansas prior to the arrival of the Exodusters. It examines why many of those migrants pursued farming after they arrived and what it means that some of them became substantial landowners.

In contrast to the Exodusters, who had enough demographic force to change society and politics, earlier migrants, whose numbers were much smaller, reconfigured Kansas through active engagement with the agrarian economy and grassroots social organization. The Exoduster migration, which saw fifteen thousand or so former slaves emigrate mainly from Louisiana, Texas, and Mississippi, has received much scholarly attention since the 1970s. The impact of this event, which prompted political and fiscal crises in Kansas and inspired an investigation by the U.S. Congress, however, has overshadowed the importance of earlier black migrations to

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By and large, the Exodusters perceived themselves as rural folk, and they sought a rural lifestyle in Kansas. Most failed as farmers, however, and they subsequently clustered in towns or moved elsewhere, a narrative quite different from that of earlier migrants, as this project will demonstrate in the following pages.

The Exodusters provide a counterpoint to earlier, less collective movements of blacks to Kansas. Many who came prior to the late 1870s arrived individually or in small groups, and they found productive occupations both in towns and in the countryside. Where Exodusters flooded the labor market, strained community resources, and generated resentment from Kansans—black and white—who had to support the masses of unemployed and impoverished migrants, earlier arrivals of blacks, most of whom came from Upper South states, did not upset the social or economic arrangements in Kansas. Quite the contrary, in fact; this work demonstrates that black migrants who arrived between 1860 and 1875 helped turn the region into a productive agricultural society because they had experience with similar types of agriculture while enslaved in the Upper South. The impact of these migrants on Kansas reverberated throughout the United States by helping increase the national stock of grain and livestock and creating new markets that encouraged railroads and industry to spread across the Midwest.

A 1997 book-length study of black migration to the West, for instance, devoted only two pages to black migration to Kansas. It refers only to “exodusters” and mentions that “Over 15,000 African Americans, for example, settled in Kansas in one year, 1880.” Likewise, a history of Kansas published in 2002 restricts its discussion of black migration to Kansas to “the Exoduster movement,” when “Blacks were escaping the South at the end of Reconstruction.” The book’s mention of black migration focuses on the late 1870s and the political implications of mass black migration to the state. John W. Ravage, Black Pioneers: Images of the Black Experience on the North American Frontier (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1997); Craig Miner, Kansas: The History of the Sunflower State, 1854-2000 (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002). One notable exception to this trend is Michael P. Johnson’s “Out of Egypt: The Migration of Former Slaves to the Midwest during the 1860s in Comparative Perspective,” in Crossing Boundaries: Comparative History of Black People in Migration (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 223-45. Johnson explores black migration to Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, and Kansas during the 1860s and early 1870s. Similarly, though without a focus on Kansas, Leslie A. Schwalmb’s Emancipation’s Diaspora: Race and Reconstruction in the Upper Midwest (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009) examines black migration to Iowa, Wisconsin, and Minnesota in the 1860s and 1870s. While Schwalmb’s geographical focus precludes Kansas, she nevertheless explores black migration to the general region before the Exoduster movement in 1879-1880.

Athearn, In Search of Canaan, makes this clear. See especially pp. 155, 255.
In many cases, the evidence and conclusions that motivate this research are derived from a single county in east-central Kansas. Franklin County provides a meaningful and representative unit of analysis, serving as a microcosm of the general changes occurring in Kansas between 1860 and 1885. Franklin was among the original thirty-three Kansas counties laid out in 1855, following the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, which incorporated Kansas and Nebraska as U.S. territories and decreed that popular sovereignty would determine their status as free or slaves states.⁷ All thirty-three counties formed in 1855 occupied roughly the eastern third of the Kansas territory, and Franklin County sat in the central-eastern region, directly south of

Lawrence, the anti-slavery town in Douglas County infamously sacked by pro-slavery supporters in 1856. Franklin, too, was the site of violence during the skirmishes over Kansas's status as a free or slave state. The massacre at Pottawatomie, in which John Brown and his men killed five settlers in the southeast corner of Franklin County, was a response to the attack on Lawrence.

Agriculture, and not violence, however, came to define the county. Kansas became a state in 1861, and the prime agricultural land of the prairie, especially in the eastern portion of the state, quickly attracted migrants. The passage of the Homestead Act in 1862, which granted a 160-acre plot of the national domain to U.S. citizens who would improve the land and farm it for five years, hastened settlement, and the expansion of railroads and steamboat services over the next fifteen years provided easy and direct transportation to the cheap and plentiful land in Kansas. Franklin County offered ideal conditions: its climate, soil, water, and timber resources lured settlers.

Water and timber—both essential for settlement—often coexist on the prairie, and Franklin County had plenty of both in its 577 square miles. The Marais des Cygnes River meandered west to east through the center of the county, and, along with tributary creeks, supplied well-watered bottom lands, which made up 17 percent of the total land. Forests of hardwoods—hickory, walnut, oak, and elm—covered 8 percent, and the remaining 480 square miles of the undulating upland prairie were prime farmland with good soil and drainage where wells of eighteen to forty feet found a steady source of water. The county's land was quickly developed by settlers: 335 farms contained 16,995 acres of improved land with a total value of $578,848 by 1860. Merely a decade later, the county boasted 1,175 farms comprised of 78,324 improved acres, worth $3,438,800.8

8 First Biennial Report of the State Board of Agriculture to the Legislature of the State of Kansas, for the Years 1877-8; Ham and Higham, Rise of the Wheat State, 1-17; Historical Census Browser, 1860, 1870 for Kansas.
As a microcosmic representation, Franklin County illustrates the trends and changes that define the whole of Kansas, and particularly the eastern portion of the state, between 1860 and 1885. Franklin's position in east-central Kansas marked it for early and steady settlement, and, like Kansas generally, Franklin's populace expanded, organized townships, developed land, and attracted railroads and industry throughout the 1870s and 1880s. Because Franklin County did not function as a gateway for migrants like Topeka in Shawnee County, moreover, its census data was correspondingly not skewed by itinerant populations. Additionally, Franklin’s settlement was much more gradual and stable than many of the counties in western Kansas, where bonanza farming created boom and bust cycles and an impermanent population.

For the purposes of this study, Franklin County is useful for examining the ways that pre-Exoduster populations of blacks integrated with the white settler society of Kansas. This is due to two variables. First, the black population of the county between 1860 and 1885 never reached the size it did in other counties, such as Douglas or Atchison, which both had more than 3,000 blacks by 1880. Franklin, by contrast had fewer than 1,000 blacks by 1880. Second, some counties in Kansas hosted all-black colonies, especially during and after the influx of the Exodusters, such as the town of Nicodemus in Graham County. While interesting in their own right, and certainly important for understanding the impact of black migration on Kansas, black colonies, by their very nature, do not offer a compelling vehicle for exploring the interaction of black migrants with Kansas's white population. Franklin, therefore, offers a large enough black population to warrant study, but one relatively unaffected by Exoduster migration or all-black settlements.

Census information used in this project, both for population and agricultural information, is specific to Franklin County, and statistics on crops and yields from Kansas state agricultural

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9 Due to constraints of time and space for the current project, a county black population of more than 3,000 is prohibitively large for census research. Franklin, with 923 blacks by 1880, offers a much more reasonable number of people to examine through census information.
reports also provide detail at the county level. Likewise, newspapers from townships in Franklin County, primarily from Ottawa, furnish qualitative and contextual evidence for the data drawn from census and agricultural reports. Some sources from outside of Franklin, however, also provide useful contextual information. Newspapers published by people of color offer an important perspective on black migration and black integration into the larger society of Kansas. Franklin County, however, had none, but a few of these papers from towns and counties near Franklin, such as Topeka, lend valuable testimony for this project. Similarly, pamphlets intended to encourage immigration to Kansas, which mainly discuss the appeal of the entire state, are useful both for their propaganda and their reports on agriculture and settlement.

This study is presented in three chapters. The first chapter is a story of departures, tracing the factors that drove former slaves to emigrate from the South during the Civil War and Reconstruction. It also concerns destinations, however; it examines the inducements that motivated former slaves to settle in Kansas. Secondary literature supplies the so-called push factors of migration—the issues and circumstances that made blacks want to leave the former slave states—and while little new evidence or argument on the matter is put forward here, their relevance to Kansas is established. The pull factors—the qualities that make one destination more enticing than another—are also presented, mainly from secondary sources. Newspapers and pamphlets provide additional documentation and support. As the chapter demonstrates, Kansas offered two important attractions for freed people—cheap land and public schools.

Chapter two examines the status and development of agriculture in Franklin County and emphasizes the role black migrants played in developing the county into an important farming region. Census information and statistics from the Kansas State Board of Agriculture provide much of the evidence for this discussion, and the chapter identifies major departure points for
black migrants, especially those who became owner-operators of farms, and determines whether their points of departure correspond to their subsequent success as farmers. Property accumulation and growth in the number of black landowners over time is also analyzed to help illustrate their relative contributions to the settlement and development of the county. Expansion of tillable land and improvements in agricultural techniques supply general trends for Kansas agriculture between 1860 and 1885. This chapter places black farmers into the larger narrative of the development of agricultural expertise and the emerging economy of prairie farming.

The third and final chapter uses agriculture and former-slave migration to explore the social impact of blacks on Franklin County. Particular attention is paid to the roles of civic institutions and education. This chapter demonstrates that black migration brought issues of Reconstruction to the Midwest, such as providing schools for black students, and it suggests that such issues are essential to understanding the changes wrought upon the United States in the attempt to rebuild the nation in the absence of a slave-based economic and social structure.

American slavery, though largely confined to the southern states by the nineteenth century, was a vast machine whose social, economic, and political arrangements reached across the nation, and it is no surprise that emancipation affected areas where no slaves resided. Nevertheless, the effects of civil war, military occupation, and political reconstruction on the South has sometimes obscured the wider impact of Reconstruction across the entire nation. This chapter highlights the national scope of emancipation and Reconstruction.

Taken together, these chapters assess the impact of black migration and farming on the society and economy of Kansas, and they argue that the agricultural experiences of slaves sometimes shaped their economic and social opportunities after emancipation. The work as a whole makes clear the national scope of Reconstruction. Bill Simms, indeed, was far from alone
in this journey of deliverance: he, along with thousands of former slaves, developed Kansas into a productive farming region at the forefront of nineteenth-century improved agriculture. But they did not simply farm—they also exercised their newfound rights as American citizens by pushing for educational opportunities and cultivating civic institutions favorable to their aims. While growing wheat and corn to help feed the expanding nation, they also planted important foundations for black society in Kansas. To one acquainted with their story, it is fitting that *Brown v. Board* originated in Topeka. Indeed, that case had deep roots that stretched back to the black migrants who left the South during the 1860s and 1870s and carried with them to the Midwest a desire to overcome the legacy of enslavement and achieve a measure of freedom and equality. Former slaves, through migration and agriculture, bought into agrarian citizenship on the Kansas prairie.
CHAPTER 1: THE DYNAMICS OF PUSH AND PULL

But you had to do what the white man said, livin here in this country. And if you made enough to pay him, that was all he cared for.... He's making his profit, but he aint goin to let me rise.
— Nate Shaw

Blacks had good reason to the leave the South in the three decades between 1850 and 1880. Prior to the Civil War, they left to find the freedom and liberty that they lacked as slaves. Likewise, free people of color often emigrated from the southern states to seek better jobs and living conditions than the circumscribed world a slave society could provide. Some former slaves who left the antebellum South made their way to Kansas, and by 1860, 625 blacks resided there. Within ten years, another 16,483 blacks took advantage of wartime disruptions and the post-war freedom of movement and migrated to the land of John Brown and free soil. The decision to migrate often involved motivations from both ends—not only did Kansas present a strong pull for migrants, but aspects of life in the South pushed blacks to seek out better homes elsewhere.

Slavery was a system of involuntary servitude and exploited labor, and many people held as slaves tried to escape their bondage. Some succeeded. Faced with endless and repetitive work, unstable family relationships due to the constant threat of sale, and the harsh consequences of disappointing or offending master and overseer—it is no surprise some slaves attempted to run away. Often, those who escaped made their way to northern states where slavery was no longer legal; they often took advantage of disruptions and distractions on plantations and farms, such as

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2 UVA historical census browser information for Kansas 1860, 1870.
the death of a master or when imminent punishment loomed. Single males younger than twenty comprised the largest portion of runaway slaves. Such slaves ran away more often than others because they were young and physically fit and they did not have children or wives who kept them tied to plantations. Frederick Douglass, among the most well-known of runaways, attempted to abscond when he was nineteen, and he, like many others, sought to bend his steps “toward the north-star till [he] reached a free state.” Young, strong, and resourceful, such runaway slaves probably accounted for a number of blacks living in Kansas by 1860.

Yet runaway slaves did not constitute the entire population of blacks who migrated to midwestern states by 1860. Many free people of color left the South during the antebellum period to seek social and occupational opportunities denied them in slave states. During the late antebellum period, slave states enacted rigid laws that kept blacks dependent on whites and denied them a role in political and economic matters. Such laws restricted free people of color from moving freely, owning guns, and testifying against whites in courts, and they required that free blacks answer to white guardians and carry freedom papers to prove their non-slave status. In short, free blacks in the South faced a circumscribed existence in a subordinate position to whites. As southern states tightened their legal hold over free blacks, and opportunities for gainful employment and landownership dwindled, some free people of color decided to leave the South, seeking refuge in overseas colonies or the North.

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4 625 free blacks resided in Kansas in 1860. None, however, lived in Franklin County in 1860, and so this project does not include demographic information on the 625 who were recorded in the 1860 census. It is likely though that at least some of those recorded had absconded from slavery and made their way to the territory.

In 1861 the Civil War brought chaos and confusion to southern society, and many slaves took advantage of the situation to escape to Union outposts or beyond. Between 1861 and 1865 thousands of enslaved people used the cover of war to conceal their flight to areas under control of the Union Army. They overheard enough conversations among whites to know, roughly, the positions of troops—both friendly and enemy—and they used such information to avoid Confederate pickets and find sympathetic forts and camps. Once there, the fugitives lent support to the Union war effort, providing labor that clothed, fed, and moved the troops. Eventually, some even served as soldiers. The wartime experience broadened slaves' perspectives and supplied them with an education; many, for instance, learned to read and write in the army camps. Some of those who ran away during the war undoubtedly made their way to Kansas. As early as 1862 a newspaper reported that such self-freed slaves numbered in the hundreds in Lawrence where they “readily found employment at fair wages,” and not one of which “had been a public charge.”

After the war blacks increasingly searched for a life away from the South. The close of hostilities in 1865 brought political and social reconstruction to the southern states. While initially hopeful, many former slaves soon realized that the abolition of slavery did not quite make them free. Though forced to accept emancipation, whites did not significantly change their attitudes toward blacks. As Leon Litwack has observed, after the war, “most whites clung tenaciously to traditional notions of racial solidarity and black inferiority.” Freedom “could

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8 Woodson, *Migration*, 113.
9 For example, the black population of Iowa was 1,069 in 1860, and grew to 9,516 by 1880. Likewise, Illinois's black population was 7,628 in 1860 and 46,368 in 1880 while Massachusetts experienced a growth from 9,602 in 1860 to 18,697 in 1880.
not transform the Negro into a white man."^10 Faced with devastation in town and countryside and a defunct economy and political system, whites in the South closed ranks against the former slaves.

Planters immediately discerned a need to compel former slaves to return to plantations as laborers—if the South was to be rebuilt, it needed workers to repair buildings and infrastructure and to till fields and harvest crops. Initially, the Union Army played a role in directing freed people to resume their place as laborers, and the army of liberation soon became an army of coercion as officers meted out brutal punishment to recalcitrant workers. The commander of the Department of Virginia, General E.O.C. Ord, for instance, barred blacks from entering Richmond to search for employment. Under his direction, in June 1865, hundreds of former slaves in Richmond were arrested and transported to the countryside to work as rural laborers.^11

To enforce such measures controlling freed people, many southern states passed black codes in 1865. These laws centered on extracting productive labor from former slaves, and they were vague enough to restrict most black behavior. Such laws allowed whites to bind black minors as “apprentices,” to regard any unemployed black person as a “vagrant,” and to require blacks to sign annual labor contracts.^12 They also prohibited former slaves from owning weapons and buying alcohol. In most instances, if blacks broke these laws and could not pay the associated fines they could be sold at a sheriffs' sale to provide labor for a period of time deemed sufficient to work off their debt to the state. With such provisions, black codes severely limited

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^12 Mississippi's black code, for example, stated “that all freedmen, free Negroes, and mulattoes in this state over the age of eighteen years found on the second Monday in January 1866, or thereafter, with no lawful employment or business...shall be deemed vagrants.” (http://chnm.gmu.edu/courses/122/recon/code.html) South Carolina's code, like many others, normalized and perpetuated the use of the language of slavery: “All persons of color who make contracts for services or labor, shall be known as servants, and those with whom they contract, shall be known as master,” and they specified that laborers would work from “sun-rise to sun-set,” just as slaves had. (http://www.teachingushistory.org/pdfs/BlackCodes_000.pdf)
the rights and liberties of former slaves and kept them as subordinated and unfree laborers.\textsuperscript{13}

The Freedmen's Bureau attempted to temper many of these abuses and seemed to offer a more promising future for the masses of freed people. Established by Congress in March 1865, the bureau was tasked with overseeing the integration of former slaves into a free labor force and with the administration of lands confiscated from rebels during the war. Many of the former slaves believed that the bureau would distribute allotments of confiscated land to them, and some actually received allotments in the summer and fall of 1865.\textsuperscript{14} Such good fortune, however, was short lived. Andrew Johnson, who succeeded to the presidency upon Lincoln's assassination, ordered that the confiscated land be returned to its former owners. Unable to provide freed people with land to lease or own, the bureau had no choice but to encourage blacks to sign labor contracts for 1866—contracts that bound them yet again to labor on white-owned plantations.\textsuperscript{15}

Presidential Reconstruction did not bode well for many freed people. While serving as vice president, Johnson had pushed for retribution against rebellious Southerners, but he changed course upon taking the office of president. As chief executive, Johnson wanted to reintegrate the former Confederacy into the nation, and he sought expediency over enacting policies that would reorient the southern economy away from exploiting blacks as a cheap source of labor. The policies passed by Congress and the president during this period were often detrimental for former slaves; new laws that intended to encourage investment in agriculture by granting creditors the first lien on crops, for instance, worked against the laborers: landlords who defaulted had their entire harvest seized, leaving them in possession of their land and property


\textsuperscript{14} Rumors of land reform excited former slaves in 1865 and provided many with hope that they would receive an allotment of land and productive capital—including animals and implements—with which to establish themselves as landowners and independent producers. See Hahn, 128-31 for an explanation of the rumors of land distribution that circulated through the rural South in 1865.

\textsuperscript{15} Foner, \textit{Reconstruction}, 158-61.
but unable to pay their laborers. Politicians and newspaper editors, meanwhile, pushed for programs to break up plantations into smaller holdings, a policy aimed at promoting free labor, while simultaneously suggesting restrictions on the mobility of black workers, an idea antithetical to free labor. ¹⁶

The policies of President Johnson clashed with the ideology of Radical Republicans who saw securing the political and economic rights of the freed people as the first priority of Reconstruction. The Radicals opposed Johnson's plans for swift national reconciliation and instead desired a fundamental, if gradual, restructuring of the South. The election of 1866 gave Republicans a substantial majority in both the Senate and the House, and Radicals, led by Charles Sumner and Thaddeus Stevens, dominated Congress. Thus Reconstruction for a time proceeded down a path toward a republican regeneration of the nation—a nation, Radicals hoped, that would be built on political and economic equality, landownership, and free labor with blacks as full citizens. ¹⁷

While Radical politicians pursued this course, disaffected white southerners turned to terrorism and coercion to keep former slaves subjugated. Patrols for capturing runaway slaves became paramilitary units employing violence and fear to thwart the efforts of freed people to engage in politics, accumulate property, or control their own labor. Such terrorist organizations, known as nightriders and bulldozers—of which the White League and Ku Klux Klan were the most notorious—became powerful forces in the former slave states in the late 1860s. But even before organized terror became the order of the day, whites forcefully asserted their superiority over the freed people with ropes and guns. ¹⁸

In 1866, for instance, following a vaguely documented disagreement between whites and freed people, a group of whites descended on a

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¹⁶ Foner, Reconstruction, 211-14.
¹⁷ Foner, Reconstruction, 234-35.
¹⁸ Painter, Exodusters, 10-11; Hahn, A Nation, 264-66.
black settlement near Pine Bluff, Arkansas. They torched the settlement and left twenty-four
blacks—men, women, and children—hanging from trees.19 This horrific episode was
representative rather than exceptional: whites murdered and intimidated blacks throughout the
former slave states. Violence had been necessary to keep slaves subordinate, and whites now
understood that it would continue to be required to control former slaves.

Almost any activity of blacks that departed from the behavior expected of them as slaves
could bring a violent reaction from frustrated whites. The abuses are well-known but bear
repeating. Freed people were beaten and killed for “putting on airs,” for any departure from the
code of deference that had governed relations between the races during the antebellum period.
Such actions as failing to doff one's hat to a white, insufficiently yielding the sidewalk to allow a
white to pass, referring to an employer by any term other than “master,” or merely speaking out
of turn and using “insolent” language against whites all brought swift and brutal punishment.20
By striving to be anything but a weak and oppressed people, blacks risked their lives. While few
records remain from blacks who migrated to Kansas between 1860 and 1878, it is widely
recognized that violence and “bulldozing” drove many of the Exodusters to strike out for the
state in 1879.21 It is easy to imagine similar fears and dissatisfactions motivating many of those
who preceded the Exodusters.

The biggest concern of former slave-holding whites, however, centered on the need for a
docile and cheap labor force.22 If they were to remain as nothing more than workers in white-
owned fields, blacks could not be permitted to own property or assert their independence as free
laborers. Planters reasoned that while emancipation had altered the way workers would be compensated, it had not changed the basic structure of the planter-laborer relationship. Former slaves may have nominally become free laborers, but they were expected to continue functioning as bound workers. And bound they were. Black codes in some states, such as Mississippi, spelled out that land could not be leased or sold to blacks. Where no laws formally denied former slaves the right to own land, violence created a de facto understanding. Bill Simms, as well as many others, discovered these de facto restrictions in the years after the Civil War. Simms and his former master worked out a deal, in about 1866, where Simms would purchase forty acres of his former master's plantation for twenty dollars. When neighboring whites caught wind of the deal, however, they shot Simms's master and threatened to kill him too if he did not abandon his plans of acquiring property. The message to Simms was clear: with the rare exception of his dead master, whites would not allow him to purchase his own land—they expected him, and other former slaves, to remain a subjugated and landless source of labor.

Violence and intimidation frustrated the efforts of many former slaves to acquire land or find lucrative employment, but they were inadequate in the long run to combat the federal government and the Radical Republicans who hoped that freed people would eventually control their own labor. Planters needed institutional support to remain dominant. They found it in the land tenure and credit system. By barring blacks from becoming land owners, planters forced former slaves to sign contracts as tenant laborers or sharecroppers. Blacks, the vast majority of whom had been slaves only years before, lacked capital, agricultural implements, and livestock

23 Litwack, *Been in the Storm*, 337. “The self-evident truth which the planter class now imparted to the freed slaves,” writes Litwack, “was that they must either work for white folks or starve.” (365).

24 Painter, *Exodusters*, 7. Black codes became unconstitutional with the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868, yet a lack of a legal basis for prohibiting the sale of land to blacks did not change the situation. Violence and intimidation worked as well as any law to deny former slaves the right to own land.

with which to finance and operate farms, and planters kept the upper hand in labor relations by loaning implements and livestock against the credit of the growing crops. Thus sharecropping based on credit and contract labor became the primary approach to southern agriculture in the post-Civil War period.

A detailed explanation of sharecropping and the crop lien system will illuminate the reasons some laborers began to see migration away from the South as their only option. The system developed gradually and piecemeal over the three decades following the abolition of slavery, but its rough outlines emerged in the 1860s and were fairly well defined by the 1870s. Land arrangements, especially for cotton production, followed two main types: tenant farming and sharecropping. In most tenant arrangements, a laborer rented or leased land from the landowner and paid for the use of the land. Tenants were largely independent of the landlord and could grow the crops they wanted as long as they could pay their rent. Only relatively wealthy landless laborers with sufficient means could enter such agreements, however, as they required monetary payments and usually presumed that laborers would supply their own tools and seeds. This avenue was closed to the great majority of freed people, who could not afford to be tenants. As a result, most former slaves entered into agreements to rent by shares.

Sharecropping, as the system came to be known, varied widely in its actual practice but little in form. Laborers agreed to farm a piece of land and paid for the use of that land by promising the landowner a share of the crop. Because these renters had no money to back their contract, the landlord set a lien against the un-grown and un-harvested crop—often anywhere from one-third to one-half. Sharecroppers usually lacked farming implements, fertilizer, and seed, as well as the capital to obtain these necessary supplies independently. Consequently they

26 Painter, Exodusters, 54-56.
would contract with a merchant to purchase them on credit, typically signing away another third of their un-grown crop. Come harvest, landlord and merchant, who had the first two liens on the crop, took their share and left the laborer with the remainder. If the crop was smaller than expected, as it often was, the laborer might collect significantly less than the theoretically remaining one-third share of the profits.  

A sharecropping arrangement, then, might look like this: a laborer signed a contract with a landlord in January to rent twenty-five acres on shares. His rent was set at eight bales of cotton—four for the land, four for the use of tools and livestock. A bale of cotton, depending on the fertility of the soil, could take anywhere from two to eight acres to produce. On the lower end of productivity, the laborer might have coaxed a bit more than three bales out of his twenty-five acres. On the higher side, twelve and a half bales might have been possible. Somewhere in between laid the reality for many sharecroppers. If the renter did not grow enough to meet the stipulations of his contract, then he went into debt to the landlord. If he did, then he still rarely cleared enough profit to bargain for a better contract in the coming year, and what little cash he might receive upon sale of the crop was needed to furnish necessities for the family, such as food and clothing.  

Sharecropping thus kept many former slaves in debt and prevented them from accumulating property. The contracts that created such arrangements bound laborers for an entire year, and any perceived breach of contract on the laborers’ part meant they forfeited their wages. Moreover, since most former slaves could not read and lacked the money to hire lawyers, they could rarely prove when a landlord had reneged on terms laid out in contracts. Many sharecroppers did not find out until the end of the year that they would receive no profits

28 Painter, Exodusters, 54-63;  
29 Painter, Exodusters, 57, 60-61.  
30 Painter, Exodusters, 63-64.
because, as historian Marion Lucas has pointed out, “they had been advanced the entire share during the year in the form of provisions.” Furthermore, if croppers failed to raise enough cotton in a year to satisfy their debts, they would not only be bound to sign a contract for the following year, but any property they had managed to accumulate—from farming implements to personal belongings like books and furniture—could be seized by employers. Homestead and property exemption laws briefly added some legal protection to black property during Radical Reconstruction, but by the late 1870s these laws were under attack by Democratic Redeemers, and even before then, the nominal protection they offered was often not realized in practice. While many laborers suspected that landlords had cheated them, they had little option but to renew their contracts for the following year and hope for the best. For the most part, therefore, whether the crop was good or bad truly mattered little to the plight of laborers—year by year, their position rarely improved; usually it became worse.

Sharecropping developed in the South, in part, because former slaves were denied ownership of land. In turn, however, it exacerbated the issue of property accumulation because it pulled blacks into debt and provided them with no pathway to saving money or working their way to a better economic and social position. Such a system of perpetual debt and social stagnation often meant that black families that contracted to sharecrop could not send their children to school. Some contracts, for instance, specified that the entire family would work, which meant that children, as well as women, had no option but to toil in the fields. Even when not explicitly required by the contract, its financial terms implicitly required all available hands in an effort to meet onerous production requirements. Beyond this, a lack of funds made it

difficult for many parents to afford to provide their children with an education. Although the Freedmen's Bureau and Union Army offered some sources of public schooling in the 1860s, many of these routes closed by the 1870s, and only subscription schools, in which pupils owed the teachers a monthly due, remained a viable option for many former slaves. Yet not all could afford the expense of the subscription and the associated costs of books and clothing for school. Sharecropping thus not only prevented adult sharecroppers from escaping peonage, it kept their children from pursuing the education that would enable them to succeed in other occupations.

For many former slaves then, 1875 probably seemed only marginally better than 1855 or before. They were supposedly free, yet they worked for white masters, had no money, lacked adequate protection of what property they did own, and could not send their children to school. Many even lived in old slave quarters, which sharecropping contracts provided as shelter. The prospect in 1865 that land reform would supply former slaves with their own farms was largely dashed by the mid 1870s. Political abuses and acts of violence perpetrated against blacks during Reconstruction were widespread and well-known. But for most freed people, as Carter Godwin Woodson noted, discontent with life in the former slave states “resulted from the land-tenure and credit systems” that, they realized, “had restored slavery in a modified form.”

While sharecropping kept many former slaves tied to plantations and white landowners, freed people did enjoy a far greater degree of mobility than slaves. Immediately following the conclusion of the Civil War, displaced ex-slaves took on the appearance of wartime refugees as they crowded roadways and travel depots. Some had been taken to Texas or other frontier areas by masters trying to escape the Union advance, and others had been sold away by masters who foresaw the outcome of the war and attempted to unload their chattel while a market for slaves

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34 Painter, Exodusters, 45-49.
35 Woodson, Migration, 130; Jones, Labor of Love, 79.
still existed. These displaced people sought to find their friends and families and return to the places they considered home.\(^{36}\) In the 1860s and 1870s, many former slaves took advantage of the greater degree of mobility granted to them by emancipation, and they used it to track down long-lost family members, to leave one employer for another, or simply—like millions before them—to strike out for a new place and better opportunities.\(^{37}\)

Some former slaves displayed an enterprising character as they struck out for frontiers and recently-settled territories. Many went to the southwestern states—Mississippi, Texas, Arkansas—where much undeveloped land awaited conversion to productive farming uses. “Here was the pioneering spirit,” found one early twentieth-century historian, “a going to the land of more economic opportunities.”\(^{38}\) Slaves had, after all, been slaves in an America where expansion and migration for capital and personal gain was a common practice. Many had even been the slaves of enterprising slave holders who progressively pushed west during the nineteenth century, building large plantations on credit in the wilderness.\(^{39}\) Regardless, some former slaves understood the promise inherent in the lands of the west, and in the years following the Civil War thousands of blacks migrated to newly opened states and territories. Some went to the frontier areas of the former slave states, but others sought to escape the land of slavery, and they typically headed north and west. Many consequently found themselves in the Midwest by the 1870s.\(^{40}\)

Kansas presented opportunities denied to freed people in the former slave states. Its land was fertile and cheap, its schools were public and well funded, and its small population and

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36 Litwack, *Been in the Storm*, 304-10.
38 Woodson, *Migration*, 120.
relative youth as a state made it a prime place for former slaves to strike out on their own. It was, moreover, the land where John Brown and others had fought to keep slavery at bay and to secure the territory as a place of free soil and free labor. While it is difficult to determine exactly what and how blacks might have heard about Kansas, that they knew about it is certain. Bill Simms, for instance, after leaving his former plantation in Missouri, headed to Kansas because it was “the state [he] had heard so much about.” Word of mouth is notoriously hard to document, since spoken words leave no written records, but, as Steven Hahn has argued, news about Kansas likely spread as rumors and stories.

State and local officials in Kansas did not simply rely on oral accounts to induce migration to the state. In order to draw migrants—white, black, American, and European—business and government leaders published tracts extolling the virtues of Kansas. The Kansas Guide: Facts and Practical Suggestions, for example, which was produced by the editors of the Ottawa Journal in 1871, was mailed to anyone who requested it for 25 cents. The Guide left little question as to the wonders of Kansas, and, especially for freed people, it established the credibility of the state with ease and in a matter-of-fact style: “It was on Kansas soil,” declared the second page of the publication, “that the great drama opened between freedom and slavery, and there victory was early assured to the cause of the former.” Likewise, Kansas As She Is, a similar publication from 1870, remarked that a war against slavery had been waged in the state between 1855 and 1860 with the result that “the glorious old Free State banner triumphed.”

For anyone looking to escape a land with a history of slavery, the message from these publications...

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41 Simms, “Kansas Interviews,” 10.
42 Hahn examined the role of rumor in A Nation Under our Feet. He found that it often provided slaves and former slaves a means of spreading news and coordinating collective action. See Hahn, A Nation, 58-61 and 128-35.
44 Kansas As She Is, 5. Interestingly, the title of this publication might have been a purposeful reference to Theodore Dwight Weld's American Slavery As it Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses, which was published in 1839 by the American Anti-Slavery Society and focused on the horrors of slavery.
could not be missed: Kansans had put their lives on the line in the 1850s to ensure that their state would never support the institution.

Publications written by Kansas boosters in the early 1870s, however, were not the first or only to highlight the fight against slavery that occurred in the state prior to the Civil War. Newspapers across the South reported on the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the subsequent skirmishes between pro- and anti-slavery forces in the territory throughout the late 1850s. The *Hinds County Gazette* of Raymond, Mississippi, for instance, reported in December 1855 that “The mob of abolitionists drove off [one of their opponents], and burned his house,” and sent some pro-slavery forces fleeing to Missouri for safety.\(^{45}\) Less than six months later *The Mississippi Free Trader and Natchez Gazette* questioned whether the South should “give up Kansas?”\(^{46}\) A Tennessee paper answered in the affirmative in 1858: “Kansas,” bemoaned David Tittle of the *Chattanooga Advertiser*, “will be made a free State [because] the nigger-loving Know Nothings have a large majority.”\(^{47}\)

Though most slaves and many free blacks were illiterate, they nonetheless found ways of gathering news, typically by eavesdropping on whites or through the dissemination of knowledge from the few blacks who could read.\(^{48}\) The information available about Kansas between 1854 and 1878 was significant, and while newspaper articles reported on everything from destructive storms and cold winters to the ratification of a free state constitution, it is clear that a notable discourse about Kansas permeated areas with high black populations.\(^{49}\) Not only was information

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45 *The Hinds County Gazette*, December 5, 1855.
46 *The Mississippi Free Trader and Natchez Gazette*, April 29, 1856.
47 *The Chattanooga Advertiser*, March 18, 1858.
49 Information and statistics on newspaper articles relating to Kansas gathered from Indiana University Library access to database *Nineteenth Century Historical United States Newspapers*. I used the search query “Kansas,” restricted to headlines and article abstracts (not full text) for the years 1854 to 1878. The year range begins in 1854, the year of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and stops in 1878 so as to exclude reporting on the Exoduster migration of 1879. The results of this search by slave states follows. It is important to note, however, that this database does not include every newspaper published, and for the ones it does include, it does not necessarily
on the state plentiful, but it focused on subjects that would have made migrating there appealing
to slaves and freed people.\textsuperscript{50}

Two of the primary concerns of former slaves, after emancipation, was access to land and
schools, and, as previously noted, these were difficult to obtain in the former slave states.
Newspapers and pamphlets made it abundantly clear that both could be had in Kansas. The
consensus of propagandist pamphlets was that “[t]he educational interests of Kansas are in a
most flourishing condition” in 1870; already by that year, reported one publication, 1,940 black
children attended public schools in the state.\textsuperscript{51} And conditions were only improving:

\begin{quote}
[Kansas] is laying the foundations for a moral and educated community,
in her comprehensive and thorough common school system; and
institutions of learning and advancement are springing up all over the
more populous parts of the state, encouraged alike by public aid and
individual support....for her resources are boundless.\textsuperscript{52}
\end{quote}

From a total school fund of about half a million dollars in 1870, Kansas could boast of more than
doubling the funding within three years. The \textit{Georgia Weekly Telegraph} reported in 1873 that the
state “has spent $1,000,000 in school houses during the year.”\textsuperscript{53} Compared to the availability of
public schooling for blacks within the former Confederacy, which had flourished briefly under
the Freedmen's Bureau but was disappearing by the early 1870s, such reports on Kansas offered
an enticing alternative.\textsuperscript{54} Most of the black heads of household who farmed in Franklin County,
Kansas by 1865 had families—some of which were quite large—and it is likely that education

\textsuperscript{50} The Chattanooga Daily Rebel, October 10, 1862, for instance, reported on the departure of a regiment of 200
black volunteers from Leavenworth who “marched through the principal streets, singing 'John Brown's body lies
mouldering in the ground.'"

\textsuperscript{51} Kansas As She Is, 15.
\textsuperscript{52} The Kansas Guide, 5
\textsuperscript{53} Georgia Weekly Telegraph and Georgia Journal & Messenger, January 21, 1873.
\textsuperscript{54} Painter, \textit{Exodusters}, 44-46.
for their children was highly important to them.  

First and foremost, however, they were farmers, and so they needed land. Kansas had plenty to offer, and newspapers and pamphlets praised the cheap and fertile land of the state. The southeastern portion of the state, which was settled first, was especially lauded by boosters hoping to attract migrants. As settlers first entered the Kansas territory in 1854, one South Carolina newspaper ran a letter from a pioneer taken with the agricultural potential: “Never did I see anything like the land here.” It was, according to the epistle, “the best land on this side of the globe.” More detailed reports emerged in the following years, including one from 1858 that claimed Kansas was “well timbered and well watered.....The land is very rich...[with] black soil, from 5 to 15 feet deep....[and] everything that grows well in...Georgia and Tennessee can be raised to good advantage here.”

Reports on the virtues of the land in Kansas became standard by the 1870s, and pamphlets to attract migrants made the agricultural promise of the state their primary concern. *The Kansas Guide* struck the typical tone when it told migrants to assume not just that they would find an earthly paradise, but rather to know that they

are coming to a country where energy, perseverance, industry, temperance, and economy will bring a sure and generous reward. Land here is cheap, abundant, productive. You can hardly fail to make a good home for yourself and your children.

To such rhetoric, editors of pamphlets attached statistics that left little doubt about the fertility of

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55 Of the seven heads of household listed as farmers in Franklin County in 1865, five were married and had at least two children. Census records confirm that three of those families had children currently attending schools. The two other families who did not list their children as attending school seem to have either arrived in Kansas just before 1865 or to have children who were too young to have begun schooling. While detailed census information outside of Franklin County is beyond the scope of this project, a bit of speculation is possible based on aggregate census information. In 1860, for instance, 625 free blacks resided in the entire state—339 females and 286 males. It seems likely that some of these males and females were married, or became so later, and probably would have been interested in sending their children to school.

56 *The Daily South Carolinian*, August 18, 1854.
57 *Chattanooga Advertiser*, March 18, 1858.
58 *The Kansas Guide*, 24, italics in the original.
the soil. “In many parts of Franklin county,” one writer asserted, “the corn this year will yield from eighty to one hundred bushels per acre,” and the average yield for the entire state was recorded as between fifty and seventy bushels per acre.59 Such reports sometimes lost their statistical authority but gained an even more triumphant character when reproduced in southern newspapers. A newspaper in Georgia stated in 1875, for instance, that Kansas's crop of corn “is enormous, and exceeds, both in quantity and quality, any crop ever before raised in this state.”60

To former slaves toiling on fields owned by white planters in the South, it was not only the fertility of the land that mattered; it was also the availability. This the pamphlets also guaranteed. Near Ottawa, the seat of Franklin County, according to one pamphlet “splendid lands” could be purchased for “as low as $6 per acre” and “very choice” land “for about $10” an acre. Uncleared virgin prairie could be had for as little as $1.25 an acre.61 With such a purchase, farmers could “become independent lords of the soil,” something blacks were denied in many of the former slave states.62 And they could do so on a budget, because, pamphlet writers assured them, they did not need to own as much land as they would have in the South. “The southern custom of owning a large amount of lands, and cultivating them but partially or poorly,” proclaimed The Kansas Guide, “is a wretched policy.” Instead, the Guide suggested that

A small farm is all that is necessary in most cases. It costs less, is more easily bought and sold, more rapidly paid for, has less fence to keep in repair, and is likely to be better improved and more productive, than if large tracts are taken up...and carelessly cultivated.

In Kansas, “a small farm will make a man rich.”63

Not only could a black farmer have an opportunity to purchase and accumulate property in Kansas, however; the property would be inviolate. Where sharecroppers faced the threat of

59 The Kansas Guide, 11.
60 Georgia Weekly Telegraph and Georgia Journal & Messenger, September 14, 1875.
61 The Kansas Guide, 21-23
62 Kansas as she is, 4.
63 The Kansas Guide, 18.
losing their possessions to bad harvests and debt, heads of households in Kansas enjoyed strong exemption laws that protected up to 160 acres of real estate, $300 of agricultural implements, and most personal property. For those interested in trying their luck on the prairie, an exemption law like this offered an important incentive—farmers could purchase land and attempt to improve it, and a year or two of low returns on their investment would not result in losing what they ventured. Here was a place, in contrast to the South, where “labor can emancipate itself from vassalage to capital.” To many former slaves sinking into debt on white-owned farms in the 1870s, such pronouncements likely seemed a clarion call to migrate.

For most blacks who found themselves in Kansas by the 1870s, probably no single factor pushed them out of the South or pulled them toward the Midwest. By 1860 more than 600 blacks resided in the state, and within ten years close to an additional 16,500 had migrated to Kansas. The seven black men who farmed the land of Franklin County in 1865 became twenty-five by 1870 and forty-nine by 1875. Though their number remained small during this period, they nonetheless comprised an active and vibrant portion of the county's population, as they did throughout eastern Kansas. These heads of households worked in agriculture, owned property, and encouraged the development of the county, and the state, into a productive agricultural region. Collectively they engaged in progressive farming techniques and freely cultivated their own fields. Many of them also married, sent their children to school, and became an integral part of the county's black community. Having escaped bondage and tenancy in the South, black farmers staked their claim to prairie and property in Kansas.

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64 Kansas as she is, 21; The Kansas Guide, 16-17.
65 Kansas as she is, 27.
66 Blacks, many of whom were farmers, increased in population throughout eastern Kansas between 1860 and 1880. The black population of a few representative counties follows: Atchison, 1860: 36; 1870: 1,136; 1880: 3,410; Allen, 1860: 3; 1870: 152; 1880: 350; Douglas, 1860: 4; 1870: 2,352; 1880: 3,217; Linn, 1860: 1; 1870: 655; 1880: 815.
CHAPTER 2: FROM PRAIRE TO PRODUCE

Corn at that time wasn't hard to raise. People never plowed their corn more than three times, and they got from forty to fifty bushels per acre. There were no weeds and it was virgin soil. One year I got seventy-two bushels of corn per acre, and I just plowed it once. That may sound 'fishy' but it is true.
— Clayton Holbert

Farmers transformed the prairies of Kansas in the post-bellum period. Grassland yielded to fields of corn, wheat, and livestock, and the changes wrought upon the landscape in the two decades following Kansas's statehood were immense. Black migrants—who traveled to Kansas for its agricultural opportunities—contributed to the effort to develop the state into a vital food-producing region. Industry and commerce followed the farmers, and black landowners and farmers played a vital role in encouraging the growth of railroads, mills, and grain elevators by raising large crops and reinvesting in their farms. Unlike in the South, where sharecroppers were disconnected from the land and cut off from the market, black farmers in Franklin County relied upon, and, in turn, helped create agricultural and industrial markets in their region of Kansas.

Black farmers occupied three positions in Kansas: wage-paid farm laborer, tenant farmer, and landowner. Rather than a static system that denied them social mobility, as with southern sharecropping, the variety of land and labor arrangements in Kansas allowed black farmers to work their way from laborers to owners. While they certainly comprised a minority among all

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2 Kansas was not solely important for food crops; castor beans and flax seed, two primary non-food crops grown on the prairie, provided materials used in industry: oil and fiber.
farmers in both Kansas in general and Franklin County in particular, blacks accumulated significant amounts of property, produced cash crops, and actively engaged in the agricultural development of the region. Whether as hands, renters, or owners, black farmers made space for themselves within the agrarian economy of the state. This chapter, which draws on evidence from census records, reports from the State Board of Agriculture, and local newspapers, probes the creation and meaning of the space occupied by black farmers on the Kansas prairie during the 1870s and 1880s. Though explicit comparison is not the purpose here, such implicit comparison cannot be avoided: black farmers in Kansas provide an important counterpart to post-war black agriculture in the former slave states. Instead of succumbing to a system of contract slavery and perpetual debt, black farmers in Franklin County controlled their labor and property and thereby helped to secure for themselves and their families a path toward independence and citizenship.

Kansas, in terms of its agriculture, shared much with its neighboring midwestern states. Throughout the region, corn and wheat dominated acreage while animals and machines provided a substantial portion of the labor required to plant and harvest crops. By the 1860s white settlers, many of whom came from Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, began farming in Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Kansas. They found, much to their delight, that the crops and techniques of the Ohio Valley—corn and grains cultivated with plow and harvester—adapted well to the rich soil and plentiful rainfall of the Midwest. Kansas, despite the contested nature of its settlement and eventual statehood, boasted more than ten thousand farms with a total of 405,468 acres of improved land in 1860, and farmers there had about $730,000 invested in agricultural

3 This study, when speaking of the significance of black property, means significance in absolute, and not relative, terms. Compared to property owned by white farmers, black property appears insignificant. When put in terms of the experiences of many blacks—who were slaves ten or twenty years before they owned land—their amounts of property take on a personal and cultural significance regardless of what the relative statistics may indicate.


implements and $3.3 million in livestock.\textsuperscript{6}

The development of prairie-state agriculture benefited from advances in the techniques and technology of farming.\textsuperscript{7} While southern agriculture stagnated under a system that provided cheap, exploited labor on land depleted by cotton and tobacco and offered few inducements to mechanize or modernize,\textsuperscript{8} farmers in the Midwest cultivated the soil with new implements and novel ideas. Several factors motivated the midwestern use of machines and animals in place of human labor. The nature of the prairie itself—flat or slightly rolling land with few trees or rocks—facilitated the use of horse-drawn implements. Settlement patterns also tended to encourage farmers to adopt mechanization.\textsuperscript{9} In the vast hinterland of the plains, land was plentiful and labor was scarce. A settler with a wife and three kids who obtained 100 acres needed a mechanical advantage to bring his fields under highly productive cultivation.

Finally, the Civil War, which further exacerbated issues of labor scarcity in midwestern states, contributed to the use of machines on the prairie. Many young men from rural areas joined the war effort, removing their labor from farms. During this time, crop prices were driven up by European crop failures and by the army's demand. Farmers in the Midwest therefore had reason to expand but lacked the manpower to do it, so they invested in draft animals and agricultural technology.\textsuperscript{10} Kansas farmers, for instance, dramatically increased the amount of farm machinery and livestock in the state between 1860 and 1870. Farmers owned $730,000 worth of implements

\textsuperscript{6} Census Browser, 1860. The number of farms in Kansas by 1860 is remarkable, as is the increase noted by 1870, because during the 1850s “Kansas was an underdeveloped 'pastoral farming society' with its institutional structure severely torn by inter conflict prior to statehood and the external conflict of the formative years.” John L. Madden, "An Emerging Agricultural Economy: Kansas 1860-1880," \textit{Kansas Historical Quarterly} 39.1 (Spring 1973): 101.

\textsuperscript{7} Madden, “An Emerging Agricultural Economy,” 103-06.


and $3.3 million of livestock in 1860. Within a decade, the value of implements rose nearly 450 percent to $4 million while the value of livestock grew almost 600 percent to $23 million. In contrast, the total number of farms increased by only about 280 percent.\textsuperscript{11}

Kansas farmers did not simply turn to advanced techniques out of necessity; they embraced them with vigor. Politicians, newspaper editors, and farmers all encouraged a discourse on industrious and progressive agricultural techniques, though this atmosphere of improvement and productivity developed over time. Most settlers initially sought to grow food crops. In the first few years of establishing a farm, many farmers focused their tillable acreage on corn, edible for both humans and livestock.\textsuperscript{12} By the 1870s however, as early settlers had broken the land and begun to the realize the agricultural promise of Kansas in earnest, various promoters called for Kansas farmers to improve their lands and yields with new tools, such as seed drills and mechanical harvesters, and new techniques of soil management and crop husbandry. “The day [had] happily passed,” wrote one newspaper editor in February 1870, “when being a farmer was synonymous with being a blockhead.”\textsuperscript{13}

So it had. In 1872 the Kansas legislature established the State Board of Agriculture to collect statistics on land, crops, livestock, and implements in the state as well as to report on new farming techniques and to promote settlement. The legislature tasked the board with publishing information that would assist both Kansas farmers and prospective settlers. Indicative of the nature and aim of the board, an act related to its creation specified that an “Academy of Science shall be a co-ordinate department of the State Board of Agriculture.”\textsuperscript{14} Farmers in Kansas found that “[s]cience [could] aid the farmer in raising wheat or corn, just as much as it [could] aid the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{11} UVA Historical Census Browser, 1870.
  \item \textsuperscript{12} Fite, \textit{The Farmers' Frontier}, 50-51;
  \item \textsuperscript{13} \textit{Ottawa Journal}, Feb. 17, 1870.
  \item \textsuperscript{14} \textit{Biennial Report}, 1872, 20-21.
\end{itemize}
miller in grinding it; and the science to be applied in agriculture [was] nothing more than a study of the soils and the properties that [were] drawn from them.”¹⁵ Farmers, reasoned board agents and zealous newspaper editors, should endeavor to be like the “practical men” who planted their wheat with seed drills. Upon observing a field planted by drill one editor wrote “that drilling is the best and only proper method of putting in small grain” and “respectfully solicit[ed]” farmers in the area to heed his advice.¹⁶ It appears that some at least did so. A newspaper in Ottawa in 1872, for instance, reported that “[a]gricultural implements are in demand.”¹⁷

Along with this discourse on progressive farming, a distinct commercial agriculture sector emerged in Franklin County. Over time, as farmers improved their yields and brought more land under cultivation, a larger portion of Kansas's produce went toward markets and not just subsistence. Throughout the 1860s and 1870s farms matured and farmers needed less of the available land for food crops, so they turned their attention toward cash crops. Already by the early 1870s developers in Ottawa sought to establish grain elevators to store crops intended for the market. Franklin County, they claimed, offered a good location from which “to ship the accumulated produce to the consumer or his market.” In their assessment, the orientation of the county's farmers toward larger yields than needed for subsistence guaranteed that an elevator in Ottawa was “entitled to the confidence of the capitalist.”¹⁸ Additionally, during the 1870s farmers in the county, and in Kansas generally, planted non-food crops like castor beans and flax while also increasing their yields of corn and wheat for market consumption.¹⁹

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¹⁵ Ottawa Journal, Feb. 17, 1870.
¹⁶ Ottawa Journal, May 5, 1870.
¹⁷ Ottawa Journal, April 4, 1872.
¹⁸ Ottawa Journal, July 6, 1871.
¹⁹ First Biennial Report, 1878, “Statement showing the Acreage of Field Crops named from 1872 to 1878, inclusive.”
Black farmers who migrated to Kansas in the 1860s and 1870s thus entered a world where corn, wheat, horses, and mechanized implements characterized an agriculture geared toward market consumption. They also entered a place where renting land carried no stigma and, in fact, represented a viable route to land ownership. Many, it seems, followed this path and eventually established themselves as owner-operators of farms that produced goods for markets.

This study draws on a database of census information compiled to help interpret the impact and nature of black farmers' role in the development of agricultural practices and productivity in Franklin County, Kansas. The appendix provides a description of the database and the methodology used to construct it. The database assists in the analysis and interpretation of this information in two ways. First it helps provide quick and easy aggregations of the data related to the totality of the black farmers' contributions to the county's agricultural development. Second it functions as a finding aid that allows a closer examination of the circumstances of specific individuals that helps illuminate black farmers' experiences. The database includes entries for all farmers in the county recorded as “black,” “mulatto,” or “colored” between 1865 and 1885. This format facilitates tracking specific farmers over time in order to analyze their levels of social mobility and property accumulation. Where agricultural census records were adequate to do so, the database also provides evidence for farmers' orientation to the market. Thus by both indicating trends and providing anecdotal information, the database facilitates insight into the conditions of black farmers of the period.

20 Donald L. Winters, “Tenant Farming in Iowa, 1860-1900: A Study of the Terms of Rental Leases,” in Farming in the Midwest, 1840-1900 (Goleta, California: Kimberly Press, Inc., 1974), 130-50. While Winters focuses on Iowa, it is likely that his findings can be extended to other midwestern states, such as Kansas.

21 See Appendix, page 77.

22 1860 is not included because Franklin County had no black population in 1860.
Place of birth provides the first characteristic to be gleaned from census information on black farmers. Out of the 215 individuals in the database, all but eleven were born in the South.\(^{23}\) The overwhelming majority of black farmers in Franklin County therefore were born in slave states, and they were most likely born into slavery. But their distribution across the South was highly uneven. Most came from Upper South and border states, such as Arkansas, Kentucky, Missouri, Tennessee, and Virginia.\(^{24}\) Of these, Missouri and Kentucky stand out as the most prominent places of birth for black farmers living in Franklin County between 1865 and 1885. In 1880, for instance, 35 percent of the seventy-seven farmers entered into the database were born in Kentucky while 22 percent came from Missouri. Tennessee and Virginia supplied the next two highest percentages at 10 and 12 percent respectively.\(^{25}\) Similar distributions exist for 1870, 1875, and 1885.\(^{26}\) Since different regions of the slave South focused on producing different crops, the place of birth for black farmers in Franklin County is significant: those who came from places with an agriculture similar to that found in Kansas may have been able to adapt to the new environment more quickly. This topic will be returned to below.

Property possession and accumulation comprises an important approach for analyzing the status and condition of black farmers in Franklin County. In general, between 1865 and 1885, the

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\(^{23}\) The “South” here means Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia.

\(^{24}\) Based on census information, most blacks born in the Upper South during the antebellum period appear to have been born into slavery. There were 210,981 slaves in Kentucky in 1850, for instance, but only 10,011 free blacks that year. Arkansas had 47,100 slaves and 608 free blacks; Tennessee had 239,459 slave and 6,422 free; Missouri had 87,422 slaves and 2,618 free; and Virginia had 472,528 slaves and 54,333 free blacks. In all slave states of the Upper South in 1850, the overwhelming majority of blacks were slaves.

\(^{25}\) The 77 individuals recorded in the database for 1880 were distributed by place of birth as follows: Alabama, 2; Arkansas, 3; Georgia, 1; Indian Territory, 1; Kansas, 1; Kentucky, 27; Mississippi, 2; Missouri, 17; North Carolina, 4; Ohio, 1; Tennessee, 8; Virginia, 9.

\(^{26}\) 1865 is not included because only seven farmers were recorded in the database for that year. In 1870, of the 25 total, 10 were born in Missouri, 3 Tennessee, 3 in Virginia, 3 in North Carolina, 2 in Arkansas, 2 in Indiana Territory, and 1 each in Kentucky and Mississippi. In 1875, the 49 total farmers came from: Alabama, 2; Arkansas, 3; Georgia, 1; Kentucky, 11; Maryland, 1; Mississippi, 1; Missouri, 11; North Carolina, 5; Tennessee, 6; Texas, 1; Virginia, 7. And in 1885, the 58 total had recorded birthplaces of: Arkansas, 2; Georgia, 1; Kentucky, 17; Kansas, 2; Mississippi, 1; Missouri, 15; North Carolina, 1; Tennessee, 6; Virginia, 6; Canada, Illinois, Louisiana, Iowa, and Indian Territory, 1 each.
total number of black landowners increased steadily while individual farmers enlarged the acreage and value of their holdings. No black farmers reported owning real property in 1865, but 38 percent of those recorded in 1875 did so, as did 36 percent in 1885.\footnote{Many white farmers in 1865, however, were recorded as owning real property, and both blacks and whites were recorded as owning personal property, which indicates that no simple omission on the part of the census taker explains black farmers' lack of real property.}

Already by 1870 seven of the twenty-five farmers recorded owned property that ranged in value from $500 to $2,000. The average value of these holding was $1,128.\footnote{When I say the average property holding, it is the average of those who owned any amount of property. Farmers who owned no property are not included in the calculation of average real property.} Garrison James, for example, who had $600 of personal property in 1865, had purchased a forty acre farm worth $800 by 1870. His total real property was valued at $1,200, so he probably also owned unrecorded acreage. Eighteen of the forty-eight farmers counted in 1875 owned property. That year the value range was from $30 to $2,000, and the average real property value was $618. Simply put, more total farmers owned property in 1875 than in 1870, but some owned very little, such as William Page who owned three acres worth $30 and Daniel Moses who owned five acres worth $100. In 1880 twenty-six farmers out of seventy-seven total owned land that ranged in value from $100 to $2,100. Black farmers in 1880 held an average of $618 of real property, the same as in 1875. Thus as Franklin County absorbed an increasing number of black landowners during this period, the average value of their holdings remained remarkably constant.

The number of property owners recorded for 1885 decreased from the number found in 1880, but this is probably attributable to problems with the 1885 Kansas State Census, as noted elsewhere.\footnote{See Appendix, page 77.} In 1885 only twenty-one farmers appeared as owners of real property. The range in value for 1885 was from $200 to $4,800, and the value of the average holding was $1,476.

Garrison James again provides an illustrative example: in 1885, James owned sixty acres worth
$2,400. In the fifteen years following 1870 he had doubled the value of his real property.

The number of black farmers in Franklin County thus increased at a steady but moderate pace between 1865 and 1885. Furthermore, the proportion of black farmers who owned the land they worked increased dramatically in the early period then leveled off later. The average value of landholdings, however, stayed relatively constant because gains made at the upper end of the scale were offset by a greater number of farmers at the lower end who owned very little land. The 1885 census returns indicate a substantial increase in average value, but it is unlikely that this accurately reflects the reality of the black landowners that year.

The majority of black farmers were not landowners, and those who did not own property but were recorded as somehow engaged in farming probably rented land or worked as wage-paid farm hands. Sometimes, a farmer's status as renter or laborer was indicated by his occupation: a “farmer” with no property listed most likely rented land, while a “farm laborer” without property probably received wages for his work. Additionally, the 1880 and 1885 censuses recorded in the agricultural schedules whether farmers owned or rented the land they tended. If a farmer was recorded in the agricultural schedules of 1880 or 1885 as neither an owner nor renter, then that person most likely worked as a farm laborer.

The seven black men who farmed Franklin County in 1865 recorded no real property in the census. They all, however, recorded their occupation as “farmer.” A little more analysis is therefore needed to tease out the situation in 1865. One of the seven was fourteen years old, and so it is unlikely that he had a contract to rent land. The other six, who fell between thirty-five and fifty-one years old, can be differentiated into two significant groupings: those who owned personal property and those who did not. Three of the farmers did, and their amounts of personal property were valued at $200, $240, and $600. The other three owned no property. It is possible
that the three who owned personal property (which would include farm implements), and appear to have been relatively more wealthy than the other three, rented land. Thus, in the early years examined for this study, the total number of black farmers in the county was small and consisted entirely of wage laborers and renters.

Moving forward in time, black farmers had an increasing impact on the agricultural economy of the county in the 1870s and 1880s through both their ownership of productive property and through the competent agricultural labor they provided. Garrison James, mentioned above as owning a farm valued at $800 in 1870, for instance, had $600 of personal property in 1865. He likely rented land for a period of time around 1865 while he saved money with which to purchase his farm. In contrast to James, George Brown, a “farmer” in 1865, recorded no property—real or personal—that year. He probably worked as a wage laborer until he could afford to rent land, which he managed to do by 1875 when he rented a farm of 160 acres. His climb up the ladder began as a farm hand, but by renting land for a time, Brown too became a landowner by 1880. In the final count then, four farmers worked as laborers in 1865 while three others rented land. In the next two decades, laborers continued to outnumber renters and landowners, but the number of all three types of farmer grew over time and landowners came to comprise a larger portion of total farmers.

Twenty-five black farmers worked the land of Franklin County in 1870. Seven owned their land; of the remaining eighteen, three clearly rented farms.\(^{30}\) Most of the others recorded occupations of “farm laborer,” indicating that they worked for wages. This rule is not hard and fast, however, as illustrated by the experience of Geo. Brown. He was the son of aforementioned George Brown, and his occupation was listed as “farm laborer” in 1870, but he also appeared in

\(^{30}\) Three farmers who recorded no real property appear with land in the agricultural schedules for 1870. Since the values of their farms as listed in the agricultural schedule are not also listed in the population schedule, they did not own the land they farmed.
the agricultural schedules with 153 acres. He recorded no real property that year, and he probably rented the farm. Similarly, John H. Wise, a “farm laborer,” reported in the census that he worked on land his father owned. His father did not list an occupation. Wise most likely managed and labored on land his father owned but no longer worked, and his status as renter, owner, or laborer is therefore difficult to establish. The other thirteen who worked as “farm laborers” in 1870 did not appear in the agricultural report. The breakdown for 1870 thus yields seven landowners, three renters, fourteen laborers, and one farmer of somewhat ambiguous status.

By 1875 the number of black farmers in the county had almost doubled, and the proportion of those who owned their land grew to its peak of 38 percent. Forty-eight people listed occupations related to agriculture that year, of whom eighteen owned land. Seven of the remaining thirty rented land, while the other twenty-three probably worked for wages. Two female heads of households appear with an occupation of “agriculture” in 1875. Both women had children but no husband, were in their twenties, were born in Missouri, and recorded no property of any kind; both appear to have been farm laborers. These two women, Balinda Brockman and Rhoda Washington, were the only females with occupations related to agriculture between 1865 and 1885 in Franklin County. Neither was recorded as a farmer in 1880 or 1885.

Compared to 1875, the number of renters in 1880 more than doubled while landowners and laborers both grew by about ten. Seventy-seven individuals appeared as farmers in 1880, which indicates that black farmers were becoming an important presence in and increasingly integral to the agrarian economy of the county. Of those seventy-seven, twenty-six owned their farms and seventeen rented. The remaining thirty-four recorded no real property and did not appear in the agricultural schedules for 1880. But not all of those were laborers. Garrison James, for instance, who owned land in 1870, 1875, and 1885, could not be located in the 1880
agricultural reports, but it is doubtful that he did not also own his property in 1880, so he is
included as a landowner. Thomas White, whose occupation in 1880 was “works on a farm,”
probably worked for his father, Bedford White, who rented 160 acres worth $4,800. Thomas was
recorded as the head of household for the White family, and it is unclear how he was
compensated for his farm work. Nevertheless, a rough breakdown of black farmers in 1880 is
possible: twenty-seven landowners, seventeen renters, and around thirty-two laborers.

It is likely that both the number and the impact of black farmers in the county continued
to steadily increase in 1885, but the census records for that year appear incomplete, as discussed
in the appendix. According to the census, fewer blacks farmed in Franklin County in 1885 than
1880, and, likewise, the number of farm owners decreased from twenty-seven to twenty-one.
Thirty-seven other farmers that year owned no land. Of that group, seven clearly rented land. The
remaining thirty probably provided farm labor on land they neither owned nor rented. The
quality of the data in the 1885 census, however, makes these numbers questionable, and the
upward trends in owners, renters, and laborers found between 1870 and 1880 is not corroborated
by the 1885 Kansas State Census. What these numbers relate, however, is that total black farmers
increased between 1865 and 1885, and that laborers always outnumbered renters and
landowners. As individuals making occupational decisions during the period from 1865 to 1885,
black farmers were able to progress from farm hands to renters to owner-operators, and as
landowners, they were able to improve and increase their property holdings.

The specific type of land arrangement used by the farmers who rented land in Franklin
County is not revealed with any regularity in the census data, but in general, the data demonstrate
the those who rented were not poor farmers forced into a static position. Only the 1880 census
differentiated between “rents for fixed money rental” and “rents for shares of products.” But
even then, some census takers in the Midwest did not understand the subtleties of tenure contracts and incorrectly recorded tenants as sharecroppers. For 1865, 1870, 1875, and 1885, the census did not even indicate whether a renter was a cropper or a tenant. Nevertheless, as recorded in 1880, fifteen of the seventeen black farmers who rented land operated on a sharecropping basis. Whether these farmers truly leased on shares or paid a cash rent in crops of corresponding value, they probably only rented the use of the land. The livestock and implements listed with the farm they rented, in most cases, belonged to them. Geo. W. Lewis, for instance, rented twenty-three acres worth $460 in 1880. On that farm, he had $25 of implements and $70 in livestock that included two horses, twelve chickens, and six swine, which he probably owned. Similarly, George Brown, who rented land in 1875, listed $200 worth of personal property that year, which likely included the $25 of implements and four horses, fifteen cows, and six swine he recorded. The precise nature of land arrangements in Franklin County remains obscured during this period, but it is clear that renting land was an integral, and dynamic, component of the agricultural community.

In contrast to renting in the South, whether by cash or by shares, renting land in Kansas indeed provided a number of black farmers with a route to financial independence. Of the eighteen records that contain information complete enough for analysis, six provide clear evidence of farmers who rented land before becoming landowners. George Brown, for instance, rented 160 acres worth $800 in 1875 but purchased a farm that included fifty acres of improved land and twenty acres of unimproved pasture worth a total of $550 by 1880. William Seymour fared even better, and his changing economic status underscores the prudence—and often

31 Winters explains that “census figures may overstate the number of share agreements” because census takers incorrectly recorded cash renters who paid their rent in crops of corresponding value as “in the share category when strictly speaking they were cash renters,” See Winters, “Tenant Farming in Iowa,” 133-34.
temporary nature—of renting land. Seymour rented a fifty acre farm in 1880, and he produced 350 bushels of corn that year. Five years later, he owned a farm of 145 acres valued at $3,500. That year, Seymour grew ninety-five acres of corn, ten of castor beans, and thirty of flax. By renting land while saving money, Seymour was able to purchase a substantial amount of land and devote forty acres to growing non-food cash crops.

The data from Franklin County further demonstrate that owning land rather than renting did not necessarily make a farmer better off. Some farmers might even have improved their income and economic status by selling their land to become renters. Richard Maddox, for example, owned forty acres in 1875. He grew four acres of corn and one acre of Irish potatoes on a farm worth only $500. By 1880 he had sold his farm, which was in the rapidly expanding township of Ottawa, where property prices were increasing, and rented forty-four acres in Harrison township worth $1,100 on which he cultivated twenty-three acres of corn. Other renters appear to have been better off than some landowners, too. Sanders Smith was recorded as possessing more wealth as a renter than Dudley Butler did as a landowner. Smith rented eighty acres worth $3,000 in 1880. He had $647 of livestock that year, and he owned $200 in implements. Butler, conversely, owned 50 acres but only had $106 in livestock and $65 in implements. More needs to be known about aspects such as the specifications of Smith's lease contract and each farmer's total income for the year to decide whose situation was more advantageous. Butler's position as a landowner, however, was not necessarily superior to Smith's as renter. Thus for some farmers, renting land resulted from practical decisions and not an inability to acquire their own land.

Census data further reveal that, whether as renters or landowners, many black farmers in Franklin County practiced a form of agriculture that blended a substantial level of self-
sufficiency with a simultaneous orientation toward commercial crops. Almost all whose
information was recorded in the agricultural schedules of censuses grew corn and raised cattle,
swine, or chickens. Presumably they kept some of their corn for human and animal consumption,
but some farmers grew corn and raised livestock beyond their own subsistence needs. Many also
reported producing fifty or more pounds of butter and growing food crops such as potatoes and
sorghum, which fed themselves and their families. Additionally, some cultivated marketable
crops, including wheat and castor beans. Table 1 presents the breakdown of census data
regarding black renters and landowners by year and crop.

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<th>Table 1</th>
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<tr>
<td>1875</td>
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<td><strong>Total farmers with farm information</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Total that grew Corn</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot; &quot; Irish Potatoes</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot; &quot; Sorghum</td>
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<td>&quot; &quot; Wheat</td>
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<td>&quot; &quot; Castor Beans</td>
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<td>&quot; &quot; Flax</td>
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<td>&quot; &quot; Oats</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total that raised Milch Cows</td>
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<td>&quot; &quot; Swine</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot; &quot; Chickens</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total that made Butter</td>
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Most farmers grew corn and kept milch cows and, at least in 1880 and 1885, had swine as well. They met subsistence needs with butter, meat, corn, and potatoes. Black farmers also exceeded their subsistence needs, however. Some of those who owned livestock made money from slaughtered animals. Likewise, farmers who planted corn often grew a surplus, while those who cultivated castor beans required a commercial mill and a market for a finished product—castor oil—to make their efforts fruitful. Of the thirty-five farmers with swine in 1880 almost a third owned ten or more, and four owned more than twenty. And while ten and twenty are somewhat arbitrary criteria, numbers above these levels indicate that some black farmers in Franklin County raised pigs for market. Black farmers did not rely on a market only to sell their excess swine, however; they also needed one to acquire new animals with which to improve their droves through selective breeding. Indeed, in May 1871, the Ottawa Journal reported that black farmers were “becoming quite interested in hog raising.” They wanted to raise fat and healthy hogs that could fetch a good market price: “the best breeds,” ran the report, “are sought after.”

Some farmers grew crops that were solely for commercial markets. Castor beans, for instance, provided seventeen black farmers with a cash crop in 1880. Clayton Holbert, who moved to Franklin County that year, recalled that castor beans were “the money crop.” Castor beans “cost no more to raise...than a crop of corn,” and farmers could make a profit of $30 an acre with the crop. Thus George Sparks likely realized close to $900 for his thirty acres of castor beans in 1880. To profit from the crop, however, farmers relied upon an oil mill. Such a mill existed in Ottawa by 1878. The mill, which was powered by steam and worth $4,000, became a primary site of commercial and industrial activity in Franklin County. As the amount of

33 Ottawa Journal, May 25, 1871.
34 Clayton Holbert, “Kansas Interviews,” 6.
35 First Biennial Report, 1878, “Castor Beans.”
36 First Biennial Report, 1878, “Manufactures.”
castor beans grown in the county increased, it was not uncommon for “wagons of castor beans” to line up “from Logan Street to First Street, waiting to unload.”\textsuperscript{37} Black farmers undoubtedly contributed to the development of Franklin County into a castor bean-producing region while also benefiting from the profits the crop yielded.\textsuperscript{38}

The county, in general, experienced rapid expansion of agricultural-related industries throughout the 1870s and 1880s. By the late 1870s, three significant railroad lines connected Franklin County to Kansas City, Leavenworth, and Lawrence, and to Coffey County to the southwest.\textsuperscript{39} With such favorable connections for freight in place, the grain elevators that boosters sought in the early 1870s became a reality. Four steam-powered elevators serviced the county in 1878. Additionally, three mills helped process grains for market consumption. Even more important perhaps were the large machine shops and foundry that manufactured agricultural implements.\textsuperscript{40} Black farmers in Franklin County thus navigated and engaged with the ever-expanding institutions of commercial agriculture. As farm hands, they provided labor to break land and harvest crops while they saved money to rent and own land. As renters they provided landowners with income while managing farms in ways that produced crops and

\textsuperscript{37} Holbert, “Kansas Interviews,” 6. Bill Simms, too, recalled the mill: “There was also an oil mill where they bought castor beans, and made castor oil on the north side of the Marais des Cygnes River one block west of Main Street.” It is perhaps telling of the importance of castor beans to the black farming community in Franklin County that the two black men from Ottawa interviewed by the Federal Writers’ Project both recalled the oil mill but did not discuss the grain elevators or flour mills that also existed in the city. See Bill Simms, from George Rawick, ed. The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Vol. 16, “Kansas Interviews,” (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1972), 11.

\textsuperscript{38} Additional circumstantial evidence connects black farmers in Kansas and Franklin County with commercial markets. The \textit{Colored Citizen}, a black-run newspaper published in Topeka for a primarily black readership throughout the state and beyond, reported regularly on crop and livestock prices in a column titled “Markets for the Week,” which included information on local Kansas markets as well as bigger cities like Kansas City, St. Louis, and Chicago. The column listed prices for cattle, hogs, grain crops, draft animals, shipping rates, and elevator rates among others. See for instance \textit{Colored Citizen}, July 28, 1878.

\textsuperscript{39} First Biennial Report, 1878, “Railroad Connections.”

\textsuperscript{40} First Biennial Report, 1878, “Manufactures,” reported machine shops valued at $100,000 and a foundry at $5,000 in Ottawa in 1878. \textit{Ottawa Journal}, Sept. 28, 1871 stated that “if the machine shops are located here they will erect their manufactory at once....and that if the machine shops are located here, they will establish a FOUNDRY at this place.” The “they” referred to in this article was “one of the largest agricultural implement manufactories in the east.”
livestock for market. And as landowners, black farmers invested capital in improving their acreage, crop yields, and herds. An examination of a number of farms and farmers over time further demonstrates these points.

The accomplishments of Garrison James, who had come to Kansas from North Carolina in the 1850s, illustrate one black farmer's path from renter to owner to prosperous landholder. Records for James appear in all five of the census periods consulted. He listed farm information for three of those years. As mentioned before, James rented in 1865 and owned $600 of personal property. He was about fifty-one years old at the time. By 1870 he owned an $800 farm with forty acres of fenced and cultivated land. He had $400 of livestock, which included two horses, two milch cows, and two swine. With his horses and $100 of farming implements, he harvested 280 bushels of corn and 140 of oats. Five years later James expanded his tillable acreage to fifty acres and purchased an additional thirty unimproved acres worth a total of $2,000. He grew thirty acres of corn that year. By 1885, James, then in his late sixties, had brought another ten acres under cultivation, increasing his farm's total value to $2,400. He planted fifteen acres of corn and sold $177 of garden produce that year, and he had three horses, eight swine, and one milch cow. His acreage and crop yields were somewhat modest, but he nonetheless managed to reinvest his income to increase the size and value of his farm. Thus James, who probably worked as a laborer when first settling in Kansas in the 1850s, was eventually able to own and manage a productive and valuable farm.

George Lewis also managed to increase the amount of land he owned and cultivated between 1870 and 1880, and he began his tenure as landowner in a manner similar to that of James. Lewis first appeared in the census records in 1870 along with his wife and two children. That year he owned a twenty acre farm worth $1,000, and on that farm he kept $200 of livestock.
and raised 300 bushels of corn and 200 of oats. Lewis expanded his farm to twenty-seven acres of improved land and twenty-three acres of pasture by 1880. He had $60 of implements and $380 of livestock, which included three horses, three milch cows, six other cattle, eleven pigs, and thirty-two chickens. His was a large operation. Lewis cultivated corn, oats, wheat, castor beans, and even devoted a quarter acre to vineyards. Within another five years Lewis added slightly to his improved acreage and increased his farm's total value by $500. He made decisions about his land and crops, adding strawberries to his produce but dropping castor beans. Lewis thus actively managed and improved his land, like most enterprising and prudent farmers, and he accumulated property throughout the 1870s and 1880s.

Others, such as George Brown, remained renters during the 1870s but acquired land eventually. Brown rented in 1865 and 1875, during which he married and had four children. On the acreage he rented in 1875, Brown grew eighteen acres of flax, a cash crop, along with the typical corn and oats. Possibly due in part to profits from flax, Brown purchased seventy acres by 1880, and his family grew by two more children. He produced 600 pounds of butter that year and tended $460 worth of livestock. He no longer produced flax but castor beans instead. Brown bought land after renting for a decade or more, and he ran his farm in a manner that produced livestock and crops beyond the subsistence needs of his large and growing family. Brown, like James and Lewis, was an engaged farm manager: he expanded his holdings when his finances allowed and, by planting castor beans, he re-organized his acreage in response to the market.

Marion Mattox provides a final example. In his case, the total amount of acreage owned did not change, but the total value of his holdings increased dramatically. Mattox, who came to Kansas from Missouri with his wife probably in the early 1870s, owned an $800 farm in 1875, yet no detailed information on the farm exists in the census. By 1880 he listed thirty-six acres of
land, $75 worth of implements, and $335 of livestock, and he planted corn, wheat, and castor beans. Mattox did not expand his landholdings by 1885, but he raised the value of his farm to $1,500 and increased his investment in implements to $100. He still grew corn and castor beans and had re-organized his farm so that he now produced sorghum, garden crops, and fruit. Mattox did not change from renter to owner or purchase additional land between 1875 and 1885. He did, however, farm in a dynamic manner that allowed him to adapt to both subsistence and market needs while increasing the value of his land.

These four examples are not necessarily representative of the experiences of all black farmers in Franklin County. They are exceptional in that only a handful of all the farmers found in the census records examined for this study could be located in three or more returns with enough detailed agricultural information to be useful for such an exercise. Moreover, these farmers' status as landowners in the 1880s puts them in the minority of black farmers—most did not own land. Their examples, however, are illustrative of the nature of farm management and property accumulation that characterized the experience of black farmers in Franklin County between 1865 and 1885. Such farmers in many cases moved from wage laborer to renter to landowner with ease, focused their efforts on corn, wheat, castor beans, and livestock, and produced goods for both subsistence and market consumption.

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An oration given by A. N. Godfrey, a graduate of the Kansas State Agricultural College, in May 1878 summed up “the Kansas farmer.” The “sensible” farmers that Godfrey celebrated in his speech were “alive to their interests.” Such farmers, he said, “embrace[d] more than the cultivation of corn.” They also raised herds of well-bred livestock, used “the most improved farm machinery,” and experimented with crops such as fruit trees and strawberries. The combination
of astute farm management, the region's natural endowments of soil and climate, and “markets” that were “becoming better” produced, in Godfrey's analysis, an unmatched agricultural society. This speech, which was printed in a black newspaper that circulated throughout Kansas, provided a sort of benchmark.41 Black farmers in Franklin County fit all of Godfrey's requirements for “intelligent” and “commendable” farming. By all accounts and measures, they were an active and progressive portion of the county's agrarian economy.

Some question remains, however, whether all black migrants to Kansas had the ability to adapt to the type of agriculture practiced in the state. Just as white farmers from Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio fared well in Kansas because of the similarities of its agriculture to farming in the Ohio Valley, it is likely that black farmers from certain regions adjusted more quickly to prairie farming than those from other areas. In general, migrants from areas that produced a diversity of crops and livestock—especially corn, wheat, cattle, and swine—had an advantage over those who came from regions that focused on cash crop monoculture, such as parts of the South that cultivated cotton. Comparing farmers with diverse backgrounds presents problems and, at this point, remains speculative. Nonetheless, a discussion of the question is possible because the influx of Exodusters from Mississippi and Louisiana in 1879 and 1880 provided a pool of migrants with agricultural backgrounds different from those of earlier migrants, most of which came from regions of the Upper South.

By and large, the Exodusters, who envisaged their migration as a rural movement, failed to adapt as farmers in Kansas. Their failure makes sense, given their prior experience with agriculture in the cotton South, a point that historian Robert Athearn noted in his study of the Exoduster movement. Many blacks from Mississippi and Louisiana, according to Athearn,

41 Colored Citizen, July 28, 1878.
“found the shift from cotton culture to corn farming a difficult transition.” Where only a hoe and plow was needed for cotton, “Kansas farmers did much of their work with machinery,” and black migrants from the Lower South often “did not know how to work with it.”

Franklin County appears to have attracted a substantial number of black migrants in the late 1870s, many of whom were probably Exodusters. Not surprisingly, few of these migrants became farmers. Only two Exodusters born in Mississippi engaged in agriculture in the 1880s, and neither became a prosperous farmer. One rented land, and the other worked as a farm laborer. George Thomas, for instance, who rented in 1880, had merely $5 of implements and $5 of livestock. He grew five acres of corn. He did not appear as a farmer in the 1885 census.

In contrast to the two Exodusters born in Mississippi, John Frazier successfully farmed in Franklin County. Frazier lived in Louisiana and then Mississippi in the 1860s and 1870s, and he migrated to Franklin County in 1879. By 1880 he owned eighteen acres worth $250. Within five years, Frazier expanded his farm to thirty-five acres worth $1,600. He cultivated twenty-five acres of corn, kept bees, and grew fruit. Unlike the two other Exodusters who farmed in 1880, however, Frazier was born in Virginia. As a slave in Virginia, Frazier likely gained experience with crops such as wheat and corn, and thus he succeeded where migrants from Mississippi and Louisiana failed. While such findings remain in the realm of conjecture, the census data used in this project for 1865 to 1885 supports Athearn's thesis about why Exodusters failed to become successful farmers in Kansas.

43 The black population of the county increased from 471 in 1875 to 860 by 1880.
The testimony of Clayton Holbert and Bill Simms also corroborates this idea. Simms was born as a slave on a Missouri plantation that “raised cows, sheep, cotton, tobacco, and corn.”\textsuperscript{45} Holbert, likewise, grew up as a slave in Tennessee, and he tended to crops of corn and barley and assisted in the raising of hogs.\textsuperscript{46} While agricultural census information could not be located for either Simms or Holbert between 1865 and 1885, they both claim to have worked as successful farmers in Kansas. Thus Holbert and Simms learned agricultural skills while slaves in the Upper South that contributed to their ability to earn a living by farming the midwestern prairie after emancipation—an ability not shared by many who had been slaves in cotton-producing regions of the Lower South.

Black farmers in Franklin County, then, migrated primarily from the Upper South, and Missouri, Kentucky, and Tennessee accounted for the largest number. As full members of the county's agricultural community, they occupied all three economic tiers, providing wage labor to landowners, renting farms, and owning land. While working as laborers and renters, they saved money until they could purchase land, a path denied to many sharecroppers in the cotton belt. As renters and owners, they cultivated the crops typical to the region, especially corn, and oriented their farms and their productive activity toward meeting both subsistence and market needs. They also grew cash crops, such as castor beans, and experimented with fruit and vineyards. By actively managing their farms and reinvesting their capital, black farmers accumulated property while contributing to the development of the county and helping to establish a tradition of progressive farming in the 1870s and 1880s. Though their numbers were small in relation to the total number of farms in Franklin County, they hold great significance as free laborers and landowners in the two decades after the Civil War. By migrating to Kansas and engaging in

\textsuperscript{45} Simms, “Kansas Interviews,” 8.
\textsuperscript{46} Holbert, “Kansas Interviews,” 1.
agriculture, former slaves found a route to real independence—financial, legal, and personal. They were, according to the editors of the *Colored Citizen*, finally “free from the persecution, the cruelty, and the deviltry of the rebel wretches in the South.”

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47 *Colored Citizen*, Nov. 30, 1878.
CHAPTER 3: ABOVE THE FRUITED PLAIN

There is no proposition more self-evident to the careful observer than that individual and national prosperity depends upon the productive qualities of the soil. Where the soil is rich and the fertility is maintained through a series of years, an accumulation of wealth is the result, which, in part, is observable in improved schools and churches, comfortable and attractive homes, and the varied luxuries and enjoyments attending prosperity.

— Kansas State Board of Agriculture

Farming helped secure to the black population of Franklin County its prosperity and its relative accumulation of wealth in the 1870s and 1880s. By migrating to the county, and gaining a secure economic footing through farming and agriculturally-related occupations, blacks helped bring community institutions such as schools, churches, and benevolent associations to the Midwest. The evidence related to such institutions, and the place of black farmers within them, is scarce for the time period in question. Newspapers and census data, however, provide documentation that allows these issues to be examined, and it is clear that Franklin County and Ottawa hosted a black population in the 1860s and early 1870s that became a black community by the late 1870s. In a single decade, black churches and benevolent societies were established and blacks and whites alike sought to create and maintain educational arrangements favorable to black students. Without the prosperity that farming afforded to the black community, such advances would have been extremely unlikely.

The county remained predominately rural throughout these years, and the black population remained a small portion of the total. It was, however, a vibrant portion. As the

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1 Biennial Report, 1872, 14.
previous chapter demonstrated, black farmers in the county were an active lot who successfully
governed their economic status and managed their farms. They also established institutions that
provided a strong social and civic element to black life in Franklin County. Churches and
benevolent societies supplied a scaffolding for community, leadership, and education to the black
population in the county. Such institutions, which occasionally encouraged interracial
interactions, aided the black community in establishing itself as an important and visible
presence in the region, and in integrating into the predominately white society of the Midwest.
This level of civic engagement fostered a sense of citizenship among the black population in
Franklin County that contributed to a push for civil rights through the educational system. A case
arising in the county in 1880, in fact, provided an early iteration of the struggle that would
ultimately lead to Brown v. Board and the end of “separate but equal.”

A few historians have addressed topics examined in this chapter. Steven Hahn, for
instance, thoroughly examined how churches, benevolent societies, and public celebrations
helped freed people become political beings who fought for their citizenship in the years after
emancipation. Hahn's book, however, focuses overwhelmingly on the former slave states, where
blacks comprised a much larger portion of the population; even in the nonplantation districts that
he examines, the black population was around one third of the total. In Kansas, by contrast, in
1880 blacks made up less than 5 percent of the total population. Thus freed people in former
slave states were able to rely on a strength in numbers that black migrants to Kansas never knew.
So, while the findings here are similar to Hahn's, the geography and demographics differ
substantially. In this way, the focus here falls more closely in line with that of Leslie Schwalm,
who discussed the migration of former slaves to Iowa, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. Schwalm, like

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2 Steven A. Hahn, A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the
Hahn, found that “associational life was especially important to the formulation of civic identities and as a training ground for civic activism.”

The findings of this chapter confirm the arguments of both Hahn and Schwalm for the importance of civic institutions but shift the focus to Kansas in order to address a regionally-specific question; namely, why earlier black migrants to Kansas sometimes opposed the arrival of the Exodusters. Robert Athearn implicitly raised this subject in *In Search of Canaan*. Athearn found that many of the state's black leaders, including newspaper editors and ministers, tried to discourage the movement in 1879 and 1880. They had, he suggested, gained their position in Kansas through “patience and hard work,” but he did not elaborate on what their hard work had accomplished. By examining the civic institutions and educational arrangements in Franklin County, this chapter reveals some of the social achievements of the pre-Exoduster black population of Kansas and sheds light on the desire of those earlier settlers to safeguard their hand-earned status in the face of an influx of thousands of poor migrants.

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In the Midwest, where the black population was often small and lacked deep roots in the area, churches became the center of the black public sphere. Their importance went beyond religion to communal organization; churches provided a place where the black community gathered socially, exchanged news and gossip, and educated their children in Sunday schools. Churches also helped develop spiritual, social, and political leaders of the black community.

T. W. Henderson, the editor of the *Colored Citizen* in the late 1870s, for instance, also served as a

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minister of the A.M.E. Church in Topeka and ran for Lieutenant Governor of Kansas in 1878. Henderson lost the election, but he continued to play a crucial leadership role through his newspaper and congregation.⁶ He, like many members of Kansas's black community, found that churches offered a prime platform for civic and social organization.

With the black population of the county in 1865 numbering only slightly more than 100, most of which was scattered around the small townships of the county, it is likely that church-going blacks attended predominately white congregations for most of the 1860s.⁷ By 1870, however, 359 blacks resided in the county, and a black Baptist congregation under the leadership of Reverend D. Lee served the county's needs, which included providing two weekly services and a Sunday school. It is difficult to determine when the church building was constructed, but by 1870 it was one of nine churches in the county and the only one that catered to an all-black congregation.⁸

The Baptist Church became a focal point of the black community in Franklin County and helped organize social events. In August 1870, for instance, the church organized an Emancipation Day celebration that commemorated “the liberation of the colored people of the West Indies” and was well attended. In fact, many people from surrounding counties, including a brass band and delegation that arrived from Lawrence “by special train,” participated in the celebration. This gathering was important for the black community in the county, and it combined religion and politics into a civic affair where former slaves listened to orations on the importance of emancipation and freedom while enjoying each others' company. It was also a celebration that drew blacks and whites together. Along with speeches by black leaders, two white mayors and a newspaper editor addressed the crowd. The entire event, which lasted twelve

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⁶ See Colored Citizen, Aug. 2, 1878 for notices on Henderson's campaign.
⁷ Schwalm, Emancipation's Diaspora, 144-45.
⁸ Ottawa Journal, Aug. 4, 1870.
hours and included two meals, was hosted by “a committee of reception” at the Baptist Church.⁹

By 1872, as the black population of the county grew, a Colored Methodist Church Society began raising money in Ottawa. The society hosted a dinner at Turner Hall in December. Admission was 25 cents, and “the proceeds [went toward] payment on lots for a church edifice.” Like the Baptist Church, the Colored Methodist Church Society organized community events and provided opportunities for blacks to socialize and strengthen their community ties in Franklin County. And it too seems to have fostered relations between blacks and whites. The Ottawa Journal, a white-run newspaper with a largely white readership, when reporting on the society's fund-raising dinner, declared that “[a]ll should go, who can.”¹⁰

Thus despite their small numbers, blacks in Franklin County created community forums through church building in the 1870s. While the function of black churches in Kansas was similar to the function of black churches in the former slave states that Hahn studied, the creation of such institutions in the Midwest offers an important counterpoint to his study. Blacks in Franklin County lacked the social power of numbers that those in the southern states had; nevertheless, through community activism and cooperation with whites, they managed to established important religious and social organizations.

Benevolent societies, like churches, helped to organize and structure the black community in Franklin County. In general, associational organizations contributed to the creation of social and political activism among populations of freed people in the decades following the Civil War.¹¹ These organizations helped former slaves forge an identity as free Americans, and, with their emphasis on education and community service, they provided a crucial training ground

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⁹ Ottawa Journal, Aug. 4, 1870.
¹¹ Hahn, A Nation, 247, 372.
Blacks founded such an organization in Ottawa in 1873 in the face of the growing destitution that resulted from the Panic of 1873. The organization began humbly as the Burial Society, and its mission was to have no blacks interred at public expense. Over the next few years, however, the society grew much larger and more complex in its mission.

Within a year of the society's founding, it had established a “fund, created from initiation fees, weekly dues, fines and assessments” to assist members who had fallen sick or been injured and could not work. It continued to provide burial assistance, and by 1877, the society's actions had reduced “the number of paupers upon the public...to only one.” In the mid-1870s, the association reorganized itself into a benevolent society, basing its structure on the Masonic Odd Fellows and renaming itself the Order of American Freemen. With its redefined charter, the Order committed itself to “charitable purposes, proper care of the sick, mental improvement, and any and all things which will tend to advance, educate and make better the colored race in this country.” As the Order's mission expanded, so too did its constituency, which was open to men and women. The lodge in Ottawa, for instance, gained new members, and subordinate lodges were established throughout south-central Kansas. As with churches, organizations such as the Order of American Freemen provided blacks a forum for community activism and social advancement in Franklin County.

Involvement with a church or benevolent society likely enabled former slaves to gain an education in Kansas. Bill Simms was already in his thirties when he migrated to Kansas, yet he had never learned to read or write. He was “too old to go to school” when he arrived in Franklin County. Simms nonetheless found a way to gain an education after his arrival. While working as

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13 *Colored Citizen*, June 7, 1878.
a farmer during the day to provide for his family, Simms “attended night school, where [he] learned to read and write and figure.” Unfortunately Simms did not indicate whether he was part of a church or society when interviewed by Leta Gray in the 1930s, so it is unclear which institutions may have enabled and motivated his personal educational efforts. But it is clear that education occupied a central place in Simms's life in Kansas. He promised his dying wife that he “would educate [their] girls. So [he] worked and sent the girls to school.” His two daughters attended primary and secondary school in Ottawa, and both graduated from Ottawa University.14

Simms kept his promise to his wife because the educational arrangements in Franklin County were favorable to blacks throughout most of the 1870s and 1880s. In the early years of the county's settlement, state law neither encouraged nor prevented educational segregation, such decisions being left up to local officials.15 By 1877, however, the Kansas legislature classified each city and town in the state and provided separate rules for each tier. First-class cities had at least 15,000 residents and were allowed to segregate their schools. Second-class towns, like Ottawa, did not have that authority, yet examples from other Kansas towns demonstrate that legislation did not always stop officials from making an attempt. Fort Scott, for instance, a town southeast of Ottawa, re-classified itself in 1887 in order to legally segregate its educational facilities.16 Such efforts met little success in Ottawa. The status of black education in Franklin County therefore illustrates some important points about the developing black community in rural Kansas during the 1870s and 1880s. It highlights, in particular, the powerful influence that a small portion of the population had on shaping social policy.

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It is important to note that integrated school buildings did not mean integrated classrooms. Instead this arrangement provided for black children and white children to attend separate classes in the same building. While this may seem no better than separate schools entirely, it meant that black children were not relegated to attend school in an unsafe, inadequate, or inconvenient location. They went to the same centrally-located and well-maintained building as the white students. This arrangement was not available to black students in other parts of Kansas, and was—for a time—denied to students in Ottawa. But when integrated school buildings were challenged, residents of the city fought to keep this small step toward equality.

During the 1860s too few black students attended school in Ottawa to arouse resentment from whites, and it appears they shared school buildings. In 1871, however, with an increasing number of school-age black children in Ottawa, a group of white residents pressured the school board to establish separate facilities for white and black students. The petitioners recognize[d] the fact that the maintenance of separate schools for our colored citizens w[ould] involve additional expense to the city; but the petitioners [were] of the opinion that the increased tax for the support [would] be cheerfully borne by the tax-payers, in view of the substantial benefits resulting therefrom to the educational interests and general welfare of the city.

A committee created by the school board to decide on the matter disagreed. Its members found no “substantial benefits” resulting from segregated school buildings for either white or black students.

17 Warren characterizes this type of quasi-integration as merely “separate but equal” and dismisses it in a few pages. While segregated classrooms in a single building is certainly a half-measure toward equality, both times that full segregation was attempted in Ottawa, it was met with stiff resistance. And although both times the decision to not segregate hinged on pragmatic concerns—city finances and state law—those upholding quasi-integration, once a county school board and another time a black parent and white supreme court, made a principled stand against segregation. Their efforts are noteworthy and deserve attention. What a focus on Ottawa reveals is that despite being small in number, the black population in Franklin County—and in Kansas—was active and assertive. Where blacks in the South had strength in numbers, those who migrated to Kansas prior to the influx of the Exodusters relied on community and activism to press their claims.

18 This discussion is restricted to Ottawa because most of the small towns throughout the county most likely had a single school house used by both black and white students. In some school districts with only a few black students, whites and blacks may even have attended classes together.

19 Ottawa Journal, Feb. 16, 1871.
students. After consulting with teachers and parents, the committee found that “the testimony is uniform, whilst the education of the whites has not been retarded by their contact with blacks, the latter have been vastly benefited by the superior advantage they have enjoyed.” The school board, in adopting the committee's decision to deny the petition, argued that since “national legislation has settled the question of the civil and political rights of the African as a citizen of the United States,” no just grounds existed to segregate the city's schools. The board, which had but two months longer to serve, invited voters to “elect a Board which may feel disposed to exclude colored children from the advantages of a graded school” if they disagreed with its decision.20

In the two months before the election, voters considered the board's decision, a debate that the Ottawa Journal covered in February and March. A week after the paper announced the school board's decision, a long article by a “Colonel Mason” condemned the board. He opposed the moral argument put forth by the committee and suggested that the board should have simply accepted or rejected the petition without comment. Mason declared that the board's action and moralizing tone resulted from some sense of a “debt we owe to the African race.” Such an idea, he claimed, was absurd because “the colored people of the United States are indebted to the white race of this government.” Mason, who believed that “[u]nder slavery the black race throve,” supported segregation and urged voters to elect new members to the school board.21

Mason's stance was challenged by a correspondent identified only as “Junior.” His argument, according to Junior, was nothing more than “heavy-featured, large-limbered, many-syllabled words, confusedly trying to arrange themselves into regular syllogistic order.” Junior felt that Mason's “bombastic” style had led him to miss the point. Rather than cogently

20 Ottawa Journal, Feb. 16, 1871.
condemning the decision, Mason had focused on arousing fear of “amalgamation” and had become hyperbolic. Mason, declared Junior, had no problem “of close social intercourse” between blacks and whites in the realm of politics. When it came to schools, however, Mason's argument suggested that “our children will learn to despise culture, beauty and their kind, and rush madly after the young negro.” Junior stated no firm position for or against school segregation, but he dismissed Mason's argument as “the excitement and exhaustion caused by grappling with the herculean words used.”

The issue was settled by April. The Journal, which was Republican in politics, reported that the election illustrated “the triumph of” integrated schoolhouses. The article, written by the paper's editor, lauded the voters of Ottawa for being true to the principles of “Senator Sumner... on the '[u]nconstitutionality of separate colored schools.”’ The school board members who had authored the decision on segregated schools were “re-elected by a respectable majority,” and enough incoming board members were “sound on this question to secure...a majority in favor of equal rights to colored citizens.” “This,” the article declared, “is a good Board.”

Thus in the early 1870s, because of the actions of a white school board and the support of teachers and voters who had no objection to the board's decision, black students attended the same schools as white students in Ottawa. Where black children in former slave states attended all-black subscription schools because “there were no Government school[s] then that were free,” black students in Ottawa received a publicly-funded education in integrated facilities. And though black farmers who sharecropped in the southern cotton regions often lacked the money to send their children to subscription schools, all three black families who rented farms in

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22 Ottawa Journal, March 2, 1871.
23 Ottawa Journal, April 6, 1871.
the township of Ottawa in 1875 were able to take advantage of free public education.

It appears that additional attempts were made by some in Ottawa to segregate schools during the mid 1870s. By this point, however, black parents, and not white officials, took charge in the fight to keep their children in integrated schools. In 1880, with the population of Ottawa growing rapidly, the school board decided to segregate elementary schools. Black students were to attend class in smaller, wooden buildings across the street from the main brick schoolhouse. Elijah Tinnon, who had lived in Ottawa since at least 1865, protested the board's ruling. He did not want his son Leslie attending an inferior school.

Elijah and Mary Tinnon had lived in Kansas since the 1860s. They had four children and owned a house in Ottawa by the 1870s. Elijah worked as a laborer while Mary raised their children. Neither could read, but, by 1875, three of their four sons were enrolled in school. The Tinnons valued education and wanted their children to have an opportunity the two of them never did. When their son Leslie was assigned to a school separate from and inferior to that of the white children of Ottawa in 1880, Elijah challenged the school board in court.

Tinnon pressed his case for his son to attend the main brick school building, and Judge Nelson Timothy Stephens decided in his favor, arguing that the Fourteenth Amendment prohibited such segregation. Stephens, who made the first known use of the amendment to strike down segregation, ruled that

> Under the construction the Supreme Court of the United States has put upon the 14th amendment of the constitution it is evident to every mind that the Legislature of the State of Kansas had no power to confer authority upon the School Board of the city of Ottawa to make the order [to segregate schools]. The rule itself is a violation of the rights conferred by the 14th amendment, and is inoperative and void.

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William Wheeler, the superintendent, was compelled to let Leslie, and “all blacks below the grade of No. 7,” attend school in the main building.\(^{27}\) Wheeler, however, appealed this decision, and he and Tinnon pleaded their cases before the Kansas Supreme Court in the summer of 1881.

The state court refused to consider whether the Fourteenth Amendment mattered to the case, and instead sought to discover if the school board of Ottawa had the authority to segregate schools under Kansas law. The majority opinion of the court affirmed Stephens's ruling, but the two concurring justices based their decision on the failure of the legislature of Kansas to have “clearly conferred power upon the school boards of cities of the second class to establish separate schools for the education of white and colored children.”\(^{28}\)

Tinnon won his case, and Leslie attended school in the same building as white students. But while the court's ruling hinged solely on the limited powers of municipal authorities, Justice Daniel Valentine used the opportunity to take a moral stand against inequality, as had Judge Stephens. Valentine's concurring opinion questioned whether it was not better for the grand aggregate of human society, as well as for individuals, that all children should mingle together and learn to know each other? At common schools...we have the great world in miniature; there they may learn human nature in all its phases, with all its emotions, passions and feelings, its loves and hates, its hopes and fears, its impulses and sensibilities; there they may learn the secret springs of human actions.... As a rule, people cannot afford to be ignorant of the society which surrounds them; and as all kinds of people must live together in the same society, it would seem to be better that all should be taught in the same schools.\(^{29}\)

By fighting segregation in court, Elijah Tinnon forced a county judge to examine the Fourteenth Amendment's role in public schools and a state supreme court justice to consider the expediency

\(^{27}\) Reports of Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Court of the State of Kansas, Vol. XXVI, Containing Cases Decided at the July Term, 1881, and the January Term, 1882, “The Board of Education of the City of Ottawa et al. v. Leslie Tinnon, by his next friend, Elijah Tinnon,” 3.

\(^{28}\) Board of Education v. Tinnon, 20, emphasis in the original.

\(^{29}\) Board of Education v. Tinnon, 19.
of integration. Not incidentally, he also ensured that his son would receive an education on par with that of any child in Ottawa.

Civil rights victories such as Tinnon's and social achievements like that of the Order of American Freemen's reduction of black paupers to a single person in Ottawa help explain why earlier black migrants to Kansas were hostile to the Exodusters in 1879 and 1880. Those earlier migrants had waged a long campaign to establish their communities and their social standing through churches, societies, and schools, and they feared that the multitudes of destitute former slaves from Mississippi and Louisiana threatened their hard-earned status and risked incurring the anger and resentment of white Kansans.

The Exodusters, then, raised class issues among blacks in Kansas. Robert Athearn, for instance, identified “what may be termed the Kansas black establishment.... Those who had come earlier...and whose more determined members had gained a permanent foothold objected to” the sudden influx of migrants. Some felt that “there was not much room for additional labor in Kansas,” and resented the Exodusters' “demands upon the small, struggling black population that had been able to establish itself through patience and hard work.”

30 The building of community organizations and associations, which the black population of Franklin County clearly established during the 1870s, resulted from the “patience and hard work” and gave earlier migrants something valuable to protect.

Farmers comprised an important part of what Athearn termed the black establishment in a rural county like Franklin. George and Annie Williams, for instance, owned 175 acres near Ottawa in 1880. George was thirty-one, and Annie was twenty-seven, and both had migrated to Kansas from Kentucky. Their daughter, also named Annie, attended school in Ottawa. Likewise,

30 Athearn, In Search of Canaan, 182-83.
Thomas and Mary McCoy owned a farm near Ottawa valued at $1,500 in 1880. They had lived in Kansas since at least 1867, after residing in Iowa for a time. Two of their four children attended school that year while two others worked on the family's farm. The McCoys and the Williamses, who both owned substantial property and had children enrolled in school, represented black families with firm ties to the county by 1880. They likely also had strong ties to the black community in Franklin County, and it is not hard to imagine that farming families such as these attended churches and events like the Emancipation Day celebration of 1870. Seventeen other black farming families had children enrolled in Franklin County schools in 1880, and most of these families owned land. They were just the sort of farmers whose hard work and patience had secured them a degree of social acceptance and financial stability.

By migrating to Franklin County and engaging in agriculture and related occupations between 1865 and 1885, blacks were able to construct strong communities through such civic vehicles as churches and benevolent societies. They also educated themselves, the way Bill Simms did, and they enrolled their children in schools that were open to both black and white students. The number of blacks in the county was small in 1865, but over the next fifteen years, as the population grew, they established important institutions and pressed for civil rights. Their achievements were noteworthy and, as with the spread of the Order of American Freemen throughout Kansas and the prosecution of a school segregation case in the state supreme court, often extended beyond county lines. Through a gradual yet purposeful process, blacks integrated themselves into the civic society of Franklin County during the two decades following the Civil War. Emigrating from the former slave states helped blacks avoid the perils of Reconstruction, and settling in Kansas allowed them to prosper as farmers while pressing their claims as citizens.

By 1879 the black population of the county had established itself and undoubtedly viewed its
community as one that warranted safekeeping. Thus through migration, agriculture, and community development, black farmers reconfigured the racial mixture and social arrangements of Franklin County and the Midwest long before the arrival of the Exodusters.
CONCLUSION

Black migrants transformed Kansas in the 1860s and 1870s. In Franklin County, they gained a secure economic footing by helping to develop the prairie into productive farms. Their agricultural labors turned grassland into fertile fields, and their crop yields aided in attracting agriculturally-related industries to the region. As successful farmers who accumulated wealth and property, black migrants created a social space for themselves in Kansas. They did so by building churches, founding mutual aid societies, holding public celebrations, and pushing for civil rights in the educational system. Though they comprised only about 5 percent of the population in 1880, black migrants nonetheless had a large impact on the economic and social arrangements in Franklin County. Indeed, their prosperity did not escape the notice of contemporaries: “The colored people of Kansas,” declared the Olatha Western Progress in 1878, “[were] going ahead of their race in many other and older states” because of the “churches, schools, societies” they had established.1

The accomplishments of earlier black migrants to Kansas probably played a role in attracting the Exodusters in 1879 and 1880. Testimony like that of the Olatha newspaper and an article by T. W. Henderson in 1878, based on “having lived here for ten years,” that implored blacks to “come to Kansas”2 reached freed people in the former slave states. As Radical Reconstruction failed and debt, contract labor, violence, and segregation became more widespread in the Deep South, many former slaves felt the pull of Kansas. In one year of

1 Colored Citizen, September 27, 1878.
2 Colored Citizen, November 30, 1878.
rapid migration, thousands of them made their way to the state. Those earlier migrants who had laboriously accumulated wealth and social standing did not always welcome the multitude of freed people arriving in 1879 and 1880. Often, it seems, they sought to protect their hard-earned accomplishments. Given the favorable positions they had gained in the agrarian economy, civic society, and education system in Kansas within two decades of emancipation, their trepidation is understandable.

These economic and social achievements, in some instances, were made possible because of the legacy of slavery. Many freed people who became successful farmers in Kansas had been slaves in states of the Upper South and brought with them knowledge of and experience with diversified agriculture and livestock. These migrants were familiar with the style of farming they encountered in Kansas, and they took readily to the task of coaxing good yields of corn, wheat, and castor beans from the prairie while at the same time tending droves of swine and herds of cattle. Unlike former slaves from the Deep South, whose experiences under slavery often limited their post-emancipation opportunities to sharecropping and cotton agriculture, black migrants from the Upper South found productive occupations because of the skills and techniques they had been forced to learn as slaves. Thus for many black farmers in Kansas a continuity existed between the knowledge and expertise acquired as slaves and the jobs they pursued when free.

Regional differences in slavery, then, played an important role in the demographic transformation of America in the post-bellum period as freed people migrated out of the former slave states. This idea warrants further study, but it underscores the importance of the regional variations that Philip Morgan identified in colonial American slavery. Morgan argued that two main cultures of American slavery existed—one shaped by South Carolina rice agriculture that extended through the Lower South and one shaped by Virginian tobacco and wheat farming that
extended through the Upper South. Further investigation of this topic would confirm the extent to which these cultural differences impacted the spatial reconfiguration of America's black population after emancipation, a topic that has implications for variations in the religion, material culture, occupations, and agricultural pursuits of former slaves. Such exploration, however, is beyond the purview of this thesis.

Within its purview though, and comprising a central point of this thesis, is that former slaves from the Upper South migrated to Kansas and became successful farmers. As the previous chapters have shown, black farmers integrated into a dynamic agricultural economy in Franklin County. They provided competent labor on farms, rented land that they actively and prudently managed, and became owners of large and productive farms. They reinvested in implements and improvements, and they engaged in commercial agriculture. By accumulating wealth and securing a relatively stable economic status through farming, black migrants to Kansas also established important social and civic institutions and pressed for civil rights in the educational system. By 1880, they had asserted their place in the economy and laid an important claim to their citizenship in the state supreme court.

It is important to note, however, that despite the promise of freedom and equality in Kansas, relations between whites and blacks were not always harmonious. Racism certainly raised tensions between whites and blacks in the state. An 1878 article in the *Colored Citizen* about “White Ignorance,” for instance, pointed out that black men sometimes faced insults in railroad cars and that black women needed to be wary of white men “trying to get [them] into the caboose.”³ On occasion, violence and discrimination on par with any examples from former slave states took place in Kansas, such as in June 1878 when George Ward, a black man, was

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³ *Colored Citizen*, May 17, 1878.
shot for not yielding enough space on the sidewalk for a white man to pass. Blacks did not completely avoid racism by migrating to Kansas. Yet, despite the hardships inherent in migration and the continuing shadow of inequality, they built vibrant and active communities there.

The fight for full equality and citizenship took many decades after the abolition of slavery in America. Black migrants and farmers in Kansas, however, were in a unique and propitious position to wage such battles. These farmers had skills and wealth that allowed them to build strong communities with active leadership. And though they comprised a small portion of the total population in the state, they made a large impact on its economy and society. Some, like Bill Simms, walked there with little money and few possession; others more resembled Clayton Holbert, who arrived from Tennessee by train and had some savings by the time he began farming in Franklin County. Regardless of how they arrived or the extent of their possessions upon migration, freed people discovered lucrative opportunities through farming on the prairie between 1865 and 1885. While many former slaves in parts of the South labored as semi-free sharecroppers, black migrants in the Midwest controlled their labor, accumulated property, and achieved a substantial measure of both success and respectability as agrarian citizens. As farmers in Kansas, they escaped the specter of slavery and found promise—and promise fulfilled—on the prairie.

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4 Colored Citizen, June 14, 1878.
I. Primary Sources


Additional census information is derived from the Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia Library, which allows for aggregate census information at both state and county level. Located online at: <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/>
II. Secondary Sources


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APPENDIX: DATABASE METHODOLOGY AND DESCRIPTION
To facilitate census information assembly and analysis on black farmers in Franklin County, Kansas, I constructed a digital database. The database allowed me to store and manipulate census information in a way that aids both quantitative and qualitative methods. Both methods, however, rely on the strength of the information put into the database. For this reason, quantitative methods and results using the database are preliminary and are presented assuming a wide margin of error. They are meant to be taken as indicators only. A brief description of the database and my methodology for creating it will explain why this is the case.

The database draws on three sets of census returns, all accessed via Ancestry.com. The sets are: *Kansas State Census Collection, 1855-1925*, of which I consulted 1865, 1875, and 1885; *Selected U.S. Federal Census Non-Population Schedules, 1850-1880*, where I examined the agricultural schedules for 1870 and 1880; and finally, the *United States Federal Census* for 1870 and 1880. Any person recorded as “Colored,” “Black,” or “Mulatto” whose occupation included anything to do with farming or agriculture, such as “farm hand,” “farm laborer,” “farmer, farming,” “works on farm,” and “agriculture,” was input to the database. For these individuals, their name, birth place, amount of property, marital status, household status, number of family members, spouse's age and birthplace, and location in the census was recorded as well. I also made notes about their children's ages, birthplaces, status in school, and information on the farm, such as acreage, value of livestock and implements, and what crops were grown.

The database includes records for all individuals who fit the description of a black farmer in Franklin County, Kansas, but I followed strict guidelines when constructing it. No person was included whose occupation was illegible or left blank. Many of the census returns on Ancestry.com are digital scans from microfilm, and some are too “dirty” or faint to decipher. In some instances, particularly with the 1885 Kansas State Census, I had to skip entire pages of
townships due to these issues, and people who would have qualified for entry into the database were almost certainly passed over. This is one reason that quantitative findings from the database are questionable. Such findings most likely do not include all black farmers recorded in the census, and it is unclear at this time whether those who remain constitute a reasonably representative sample.

In addition to issues of translating the recorded census information into digital entries, other problems contribute to the margin of error inherent in statistics drawn from the database. The census itself may be incomplete. As James C. Malin and Donald L. Winters both explained about the use of Midwestern census returns for social history, the rural structure of the region and the census-takers' ignorance of such things as the forms of land arrangements make the returns a somewhat dubious source of data. It seems too that the dynamic nature of frontiers—regions with rapid and highly changeable settlement—would compound some of the inherent problems of census taking. Large samples may attenuate some of the issues caused by individuals being left off or incorrectly recorded in the census, but the data sets that resulted from the strict construction guidelines of the database produced small numbers of records—possibly too small to account for faults in either the census records or the derivative database records. The resulting data sets by category and number of entries are:

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2 The 1885 Kansas State Census appears the most problematic because it represents a decrease in the county's black population not found in 1880 or 1890. A hand count of all blacks in Franklin County in 1885 done by
The database entries, showing the census year and the farmer's name, occupation as listed, birth place, and amount of real property, follow in the table beginning on the next page. It is important to note that, on a few occasions, I included someone whose occupation was not recorded as farmer. Jane Lewis, for instance, who “kept house,” owned property that her sons farmed. Since Jane owned the farm, I entered her into the database. If someone's “value of real property” is recorded as R, it means they were clearly marked as a renter in the agricultural returns.

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Susan Geiss of the Franklin County Historical Society, for instance, recorded only 707, while the 1880 census recorded 923 blacks in the county and the 1890 census recorded 863. I, too, found an unexpected decrease in the number of black farmers in 1885. Either a large number of people were not counted, or pages of the 1885 census are missing. Geiss's percentage decrease between 1880 and 1885, roughly 18 percent, is in the realm of the one I recorded for the decrease in black farmers between 1880 and 1885, 24 percent.
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VITA

Keith McCall grew up in Tallahassee, Florida. He received a BA in history in from the University of Florida in 2010 and joined the history graduate program at the University of Mississippi in 2011. He will be attending the history PhD program at Rice University in 2013.