



Benjamin "Pap" Singleton (*Kansas State Historical Society*)

Photo 1: Benjamin "Pap" Singleton
Source: Painter after the Kansas State Historical Society

COLONIZING AFRICAN AMERICAN PLACES IN KANSAS 1857-1885

by
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Reason for the study

Several African American colonies were established in Kansas between 1857 and 1885. Few people know much, if anything, about most of these colonies because little was recorded in the local media about them at the time. Nicodemus is the one exception. In 1998 it became a National Historic Site thus receiving much attention from the media. Because scholarly research about these colonies is so scant it is important to study them from a geographic perspective. This paper attempts to do that by answering the following questions: 1) Where were Kansas African American colonies located between 1857 and 1885?; 2) Why did African Americans want to relocate from their homes in the south to Kansas?; 3) What was the state of nativity of the Kansas African American colonist in specific colonies?; 4) Why did most Kansas African American colonies disappear?

Conditions in the south and reasons to emigrate

The Civil War, although a war of unification, became a war to free slaves with the Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863.¹ General Robert E. Lee surrendered to General Ulysses S. Grant at the Appomattox Court House in Virginia on April 9, 1865, thus ending the war of four years. The South was left with an infrastructure in shambles and shortages of raw materials and manpower. Poverty and suffering

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permeated all races and socioeconomic classes, including the freedmen.²

Following the Civil War, many freedmen returned to farm work as sharecroppers, which replaced slavery as a labor system. That seemed to exacerbate the problems of the former slaves, eroding the land and robbing the sharecropper of self esteem. Inadequate federal governmental planning for provisions of tools, shelter, clothing and food, left freedmen with no financial resources. They were unable to care for the old, the young, the sick, and the disabled leaving those groups in a precarious position.³ In addition, Jim Crow laws were enacted throughout the region and lynching was common.⁴ These issues contributed to the disadvantages of living in the South thus creating a desire to emigrate somewhere with adequate agricultural opportunities and less oppression toward the former slaves.

Emigration schemes during Reconstruction

People in the United States have often been dissatisfied with their place of residence. Within the United States, migration, broadly defined as a permanent change of residence, has included westward migration, urban migration, and more recently, migration to the Sun-belt. These migrations are a continuing testament to the search for a better place to live.⁵ Migration by freedmen following the Civil War was also a search for a better place to live and an escape from oppression and poverty.

Every act of migration involves an origin, a destination, and intervening obstacles. Migration from place to place does not happen without first considering the advantages and disadvantages of the place of origin, as well as, the place of destination. People see places as having attributes that are positive, negative, and neutral. The migration process also gives consideration to intervening obstacles. Those obstacles can be distance, topography, or even physical danger.⁶

In the case of the Kansas migration distance was perhaps a deterrent for some although it did not seem so based on the numbers that arrived in Topeka. The Topeka newspaper *Colored Citizen* had been answering inquiries regarding homesteading and encouraging migration to the state. That migration was known as the Kansas Fever Exodus deriving its name

from the Biblical account of the Israelite's exodus. It also resulted in the nickname Exodusters for the immigrants.⁷ The Kansas migration did not involve any major topographic obstacle, such as mountains or oceans, thus making the trip somewhat easier. The physical dangers of the migration were apparently disregarded by many who elected to move. About 10% suffered illnesses associated with wet and cold along the banks of the Mississippi River, resulting in about a 2% death rate. Unlike most migrations the hejira to Kansas was sudden, unplanned, disorganized, and primarily leaderless.⁸

Grass roots emigration plans by African Americans evolved during Reconstruction. Benjamin Singleton (see photo 1), Henry Adams, and R. J. Cromwell developed well-documented plans advocating emigration as the only viable solution for escaping a life of oppression in the south. Their schemes provided divergent solutions.⁹

Cromwell advocated the relocation by colonization within the South. He asked Congress to set aside part of the public lands of the South for freedmen and assign a specific quantity of land to which each head of household would be entitled. In addition, he asked for the establishment of a colonization bureau.¹⁰

Henry Adams was adamant that emigration must be out of the South unless U. S. military troops were available to offer protection for African Americans in the South. His vision included emigration back to Liberia. He worked primarily through an organization called the American Colonization Society. As might be expected limited financial resources for the would-be emigrants for such a long and arduous voyage resulted in few freedmen actually migrating to Liberia.¹¹

The third individual, Benjamin "Pap" Singleton advocated emigration to Kansas. He perceived Kansas as a place with affordable land for African American Freedmen from Kentucky and Tennessee.¹² Kansas fever quickly replaced all other migration schemes. Singleton took complete credit for the migration of thousands of Exodusters to Kansas.¹³ Singleton's scheme is the only one of the three that was even marginally successful.

Singleton (see photo 1) was perhaps influenced in his enthusiasm for emigrating to Kansas because of conflicts between free state marauders,

known as Jayhawks, and pro-slavery gangs of Border Ruffians which patrolled the Kansas and Missouri region prior to the Civil War. Their bloody border conflicts led to the term “bleeding Kansas.” This terminology likely contributed to the perception that Kansas was a safe place to live for African Americans people seeking refuge from political, social, and economic discrimination.¹⁴ Those and other events that took place in the South and in Kansas no doubt contributed to decisions made by thousands of freedmen to emigrate.¹⁵

Who were the immigrants to Kansas and where was their place of origin/nativity?

Sustained gradual migration from three border-states, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Missouri established small colonies in Western Kansas and in Kansas cities prior to the great Kansas Fever Exodus of 1879. Little is known of the earlier migrations.¹⁶ The current investigation has produced information only on Quindaro established in 1857, and Nicodemus established in 1877 as pre-Kansas Fever colonies, thus supporting the research of Cohen and Painter. All other colonies seem to have been established as a result of Kansas Fever Exodus beginning in 1879.

The earliest known African American colonists came to Quindaro, near the town of Wyandotte, now known as Kansas City, Kansas. This colony preceded the Kansas Fever Exodus by some 25 years. The area around the townsite was originally occupied by the Wyandot Indians, a remnant of the Huron Confederacy in 1843.¹⁷ The name Quindaro, itself, reflects that heritage. The town site was, however, not surveyed and platted until 1856. When African American escapees who traveled via the Underground Railroad began coming to Quindaro in 1857 they settled in the part of town called Happy Hollow.¹⁸ Most of the African Americans who came to Quindaro were escapees from across the Missouri River at Parkville, Missouri. Because Quindaro was settled by escapees it is unique among other Kansas African American colonies. There were eventually about 110-150 families residing there all of whom were farmers.¹⁹ Today remnants of the foundations are all that remain

(see photo 3).

Mrs. C. I. H. Nichols reported that many slaves took the underground railroad at Quindaro for the interior to unknown destinations. Nichols and Farley²⁰ do not explain what they mean by “the interior” nor what they believe the destination of the escapees may have been. It can be speculated that they may have been some of the immigrants referred to by Painter²¹ and Cohen²¹ in the statements that little is known of the early African American migration to Kansas.



Photo 2: Nicodemus in 1885.

Photo courtesy Kansas State Historical Society and Graham County Historical Society

The most famous Kansas African American colony was Nicodemus (see photo 2), which was established in 1877. It is located in the eastern part of Graham County in northwest Kansas. The immigrants to that colony were primarily from Scott County, Kentucky. Although destitute by any standard of the time, the Nicodemus colonists were more prosperous than the famous Exodusters who followed in 1879.²² There are local residents who believe that the publicity surrounding the success of colonizing Nicodemus contributed significantly to Kansas Fever.²³

The Kansas Fever Exodus of 1879 is the most important, in terms of numbers and the migration stream of freedmen to Kansas. The precise numbers of Exodusters who came are indefinite. Miller²⁴ states that 40,000 Freedmen passed through Topeka while Savage and Cohen²⁵ state that between 15,000 and 20,000 African Americans came to Kansas. Regardless of the numbers, the demographics of Kansas were dramatically changed forever.

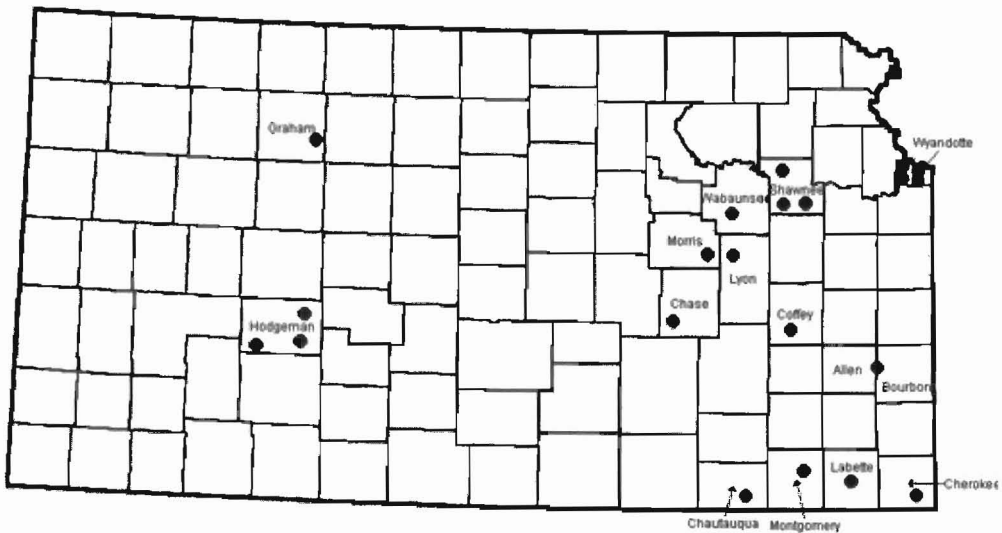
It is Benjamin "Pap" Singleton who is generally considered the founder of the Exoduster movement.²⁶ Suddenly, in 1779, thousands of African Americans were convinced that if they could reach the banks of the Mississippi River that they could get to St. Louis and from there on to Kansas. They believed that the United States federal government would give them free transportation to Kansas, then free land upon their arrival at some undetermined final destination. Although land was almost free in Kansas, the Homestead Act was probably misinterpreted by desperate people having little education, likely reading more into the newspaper reports than was intended.²⁷ The result was large numbers of destitute people coming to Kansas and needing extensive assistance in the form of food, shelter and medical needs. Such large numbers drastically strained the financial resources of St. Louis, Kansas City, and Topeka.²⁸

According to Shortridge and Painter,²⁹ the Kansas state census of 1885 lists the places of nativity of Kansas African Americans as Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Louisiana and miscellaneous other places in the west. Some colonies have well documented information about the place of nativity of the colonists while others do not. For example, Nicodemus, Burlington, and Tennesseetown (also spelled Tennessee Town) colonies have some newspaper articles supplying that data while for others there is no mention whatsoever of their origin. Most Kansas immigrants had no leadership but were instead driven by fears of damnation and pulled by belief in the Kansas Fever idea.³⁰

Colony Sites

Various sources list differing numbers and names of African

American colonies established in Kansas following the Civil War. Colonies named include Juniper Town, Tennessee Town (Tennessee Town), Mud Town, Redmonsville, Rattlebone Hollow, Hogg's Town, Wabunsee Colony, Coffey County/Burlington Colony, Hodgeman Center, Morton City, Little Coney Colony, Nicodemus, Mudtown and Schuffletown in Parsons, Winfield, Labette County Colony, Little Coney Colony, Singleton Colony, Dunlap, Lawrence, Africa, Agnes City, and Daniel Votaw Colony.³¹ Due to lack of documentation about them, it has not been possible to substantiate that all were actually colonized. Most colonies were located in the eastern half of the state. Nicodemus, the most successful colony, was located in Graham County in the western part of the state as were those located in Hodgeman County (see map 1).



Map 1: Cartographer Raymond E. McDonald, Jr.

Prosperity of the colonies, dwindling populations, and fate of colonists

Most African American colonies, established during this time frame, lasted only a few months or years. Lack of economic opportunities or drought years were common causes for dwindling populations in the entire region.³² Colonies in Wyandotte and Shawnee counties became part of the larger town nearby and are now part of Kansas City and Topeka, Kansas respectively. It is difficult, in some cases, to know exactly what happened to some of the colonies, such as Agnes City, because there is so little information available. None of the colonies was successful enough to support a sustained population with a sound economic base over a long period of time.

In some cases remnants of buildings or foundations are still visible, such as in and Quindaro (see photo 3), while in others the colony site is part of a pasture or cultivated field, such as in Hodgeman Center (see photo 4). In Wabaunsee and Dunlap (see photo 5) Colonies cemeteries testify to their prior existence.



Photo 3: Quindaro foundation. Author's collection



Photo 4: Hodgeman Center townsite. Author's collection



Photo 5: Dunlap cemetery. Author's collection

The only colony that remains as an all African American town is Nicodemus. Population there, too, has dwindled until there are only about twenty elderly residents who are living there. Nicodemus was dedicated as a National Historic Site on August 2, 1998. The historic buildings are being stabilized and a visitor center is now open all year.

Colonies located in the rural areas of the state were most vulnerable to extinction. This is not surprising because farming in Kansas can be marginal even on the best of land. This was the case of the Wabaunsee Colony.³³ Kansas is subject to drought and decimating winds making agriculture challenging. Self lists severe drought periods in Kansas between 1871-1877, prior to the greatest migration, and 1893-1894, following the Kansas Fever immigration.³⁴ In addition, the entire western portion of Kansas has always been sparsely populated with few economic opportunities other than agriculture or the oil industry. Little is known about what happened to many colonists as they abandoned the area. The single exception is with the people who once lived in Nicodemus. Colonists who emigrated from Nicodemus tended to go to large cities in the region such as Denver, Colorado, Topeka, Kansas, or Kansas City, Kansas.³⁵ Many descendants of the early colonizers remain in these metropolitan areas today. Likely, colonists from other communities did much the same thing because employment was more readily available in metropolitan areas than in rural areas.

The Kansas African American colonies were apparently similar to their Caucasian counterparts nearby. They had similar services such as newspapers, livery stables, general stores, churches, and schools. That certainly was the case in Nicodemus.³⁶ The only thing that set Nicodemus apart from Hill City, located fifteen miles west and the author's hometown, was its race. If race was a contributing factor to the demise of the colonies it was only because the colonists were so desperately poor.³⁷ These colonists had fewer financial resources, at the same time period, than most settlers in Kansas. African American colonists were hard working people wanting nothing more than to improve their lot in life.³⁸

Case study of Burlington/Coffey County colony

Coffey County was one place selected for relocation of African American colonists and is the site selected to serve as a case study for this manuscript. According to one article found at the Coffey County Historical Museum³⁹ attempts to record the history of this/these colonies has been extremely difficult with only limited success. Lack of documentation makes this colony perplexing because Blake, Garvin, and McDaniel⁴⁰ mention both Burlington and Coffey County as colony sites. The information provided in the newspaper article provides the most information stated in such a way that it is misleading regarding this matter as well. Research makes this investigator believe that was not the case and instead the colonists arrived in several installments settling on a site near Burlington in Coffey County.⁴¹ Sketchy reporting during the colonization period, I believe, has caused confusion among authors. Furthermore, Price⁴² made no mention of two colonies during an interview and quickly located the site of “the” colony.

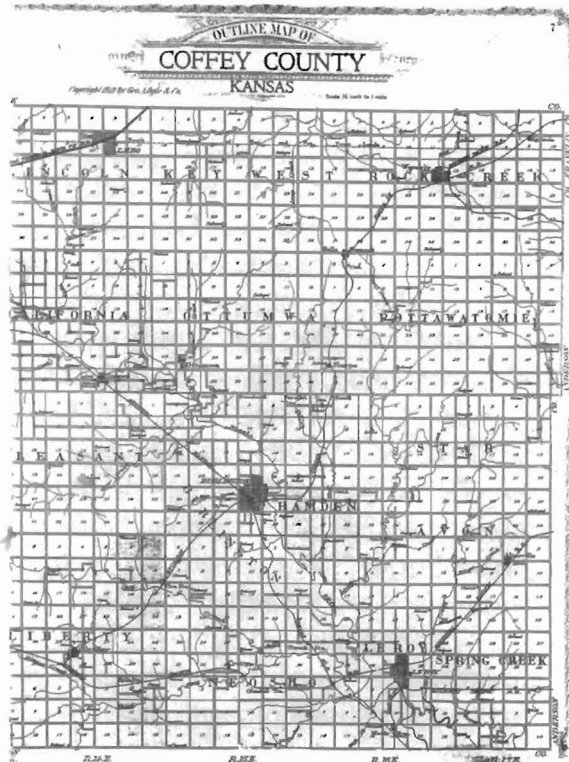
According to an article from the newspaper, the *Daily Republican*, the Burlington colony differed from many colonies established during the Kansas Exodus because there was no intention of establishing a colony, or town, of their own.⁴³ Colonists immigrating to Burlington and Coffey County were from Texas and Louisiana arriving via the Katy Railroad. At one time there were several hundred African Americans, however, by 1945 only Walter Wilson remained.⁴⁴

It was reported that the colonists were to be settled on 40 acres of school land west of Burlington on Section 36 but they missed it and instead located on sections 19, 20, and 21. The location of that colony site is at 12th and Dobbin (county roads) streets in Coffey County at latitude N 38.20004 and longitude W 095.90320 in Pleasant Township Sections 19, 20, and 21 (see map 2). Their homes were spaced about every twenty rods.⁴⁵ The selected site is located in the Southeast part of Kansas about 55 miles south of Topeka.

The sections populated by the Exodusters became known as the Hatch Neighborhood. Located in the Osage Cuestas region of Kansas the site consists of undulating hills with outcroppings of bedrock not far below

the surface (photo 2).⁴⁶ The site is best suited to livestock grazing because the bedrock makes the location less desirable for cropping. Visits to colony sites indicate colonists often occupied less desirable land, based on slope and bedrock, when they relocated to Kansas. Reasons may have been both price and earlier immigrants likely selected the best land for homesteading. Colonists may have experienced more financial challenges than their Caucasian counterparts because of the quality of their homesteads.

Some Coffey County colonists brought oxen and cattle. Unfortunately the cattle soon died of Texas fever brought by ticks on the cattle. This resulted in some resentment by the Caucasian members of the community. As the fever spread cattle belonging to the colonists were rounded up and shipped back to the South. Many colonists disappointed by the actions of their white neighbors relocated once again either back to the south or parts unknown.⁴⁷ Loss of the cattle no doubt contributed to the quick demise of the colony.



Map 2: Courtesy of Coffey County Historical Museum



Typical outcroppings of Osage Cuesta limestone at townsite location.
Photo from author's collection.

In 1950 *The Daily Republican* reported that at one time several hundred colonists lived in Burlington and Coffey County. It reported that at one time there were sufficient colonists living in Burlington and Coffey County that they supported two churches. These churches had the largest congregations in the community and were often attended by people of both races. These churches were noted for their revivals and baptisms reportedly took place in the Neosho River where it was sometimes necessary to cut the ice for the immersion during the winter. A colorful character of the colony was Mary Carter who was baptized during every revival meeting of her church. It was reported that she often was backsliding between events. A large woman, immersing her was a spectacle worth attending and it is reported those events as quite entertaining and well attended. Another person of note in the colony was a visiting minister, Rev. Charles Caesar Taylor, who regularly preached in the colony churches. He was the Assistant Registrar of the Treasury with no information provided regarding where he held this office. He



Walter "Dusty" Wilson
Courtesy Coffey County Historical Society
Source: Daily Republication, May 29, 1950

later became ambassador to an undocumented location in Africa.⁴⁸ However, by the time of the 1950 article only one African American, Walter 'Dusty' Wilson, remained in Burlington and it was reported in 1963 that he had died.⁴⁹

In conclusion it can be generalized that the colonies as separate communities were not economically successful. The only one that remains is Nicodemus and it has not been economically viable for at least thirty years. Based on the physical geography of the region and the lack of economic opportunities and resources, the rural colonies were doomed to fail. Quindaro, Hogg's Town, Rattlebone, Juniper Town were doomed to become part of the nearby larger metropolitan area of Kansas City as it continued to expand growing around them. Likewise is true of Tennesseetown, Redmondsville, and Mudd Town, which became a part of Topeka.

However, if one measures success from the perspective of relocation, resettlement, and individual prosperity no doubt most colonies would have their share of success stories to tell. That certainly was the case in Nicodemus. For example, W. L Sayers, father of Wendell, acquired a fair amount of land and died wealthy.⁵⁰ Nicodemus colonist Edward McCabe became the Kansas State Auditor.⁵¹ Boone⁵² highlights individuals who

have been successful from the various colonies in what is now Kansas City, Kansas. Documentation regarding the fate of most early colonists is sketchy at best.

Although African American colonization was short lived, it did indeed change the demographics of Kansas forever. Colonizers and their descendants have contributed to the economic, the political, and the social fabric of the state. The mosaic that is now Kansas has been enriched because of the contributions of its early African Americans and their descendants. Kansas can be proud that its heritage included such brave and industrious folks who came to Kansas seeking a better life.

NOTES

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10. Painter, 96-107.
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