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The Exodusters and Black Migration

1866 - 1903

After the Civil War, free Black Americans were still not treated fairly. Southern states created new laws called the Black Codes. The codes prevented Black people from owning property or choosing their own jobs. People who broke the codes could be fined and jailed.

Many Black Americans chose to leave the South. The United States had passed a law called the Homestead Act. This law gave people land in the Western territories for just a few dollars, as long as they agreed to farm it for five years. However, people who had fought against the United States couldn't claim it. Thousands of Black Americans decided to take the offer and start a new life out West. These Americans became known as the Exodusters.

Dear Diary, February 20, 1879

Mr. Sutton calls us sharecroppers, but he doesn't share. We raise big crops and he keeps the money. Today, Papa took the cotton we picked to the market. I hope the blood I got on it won't keep it from selling. Mama wraps my fingers, but I still get poked. Maybe Papa can get enough money to buy milk and bread for Thomas. I can see his ribs.

Papa's home. He had an argument with Mr. Sutton. Right then he told Mama we're heading to Kansas. He heard there's land out there.

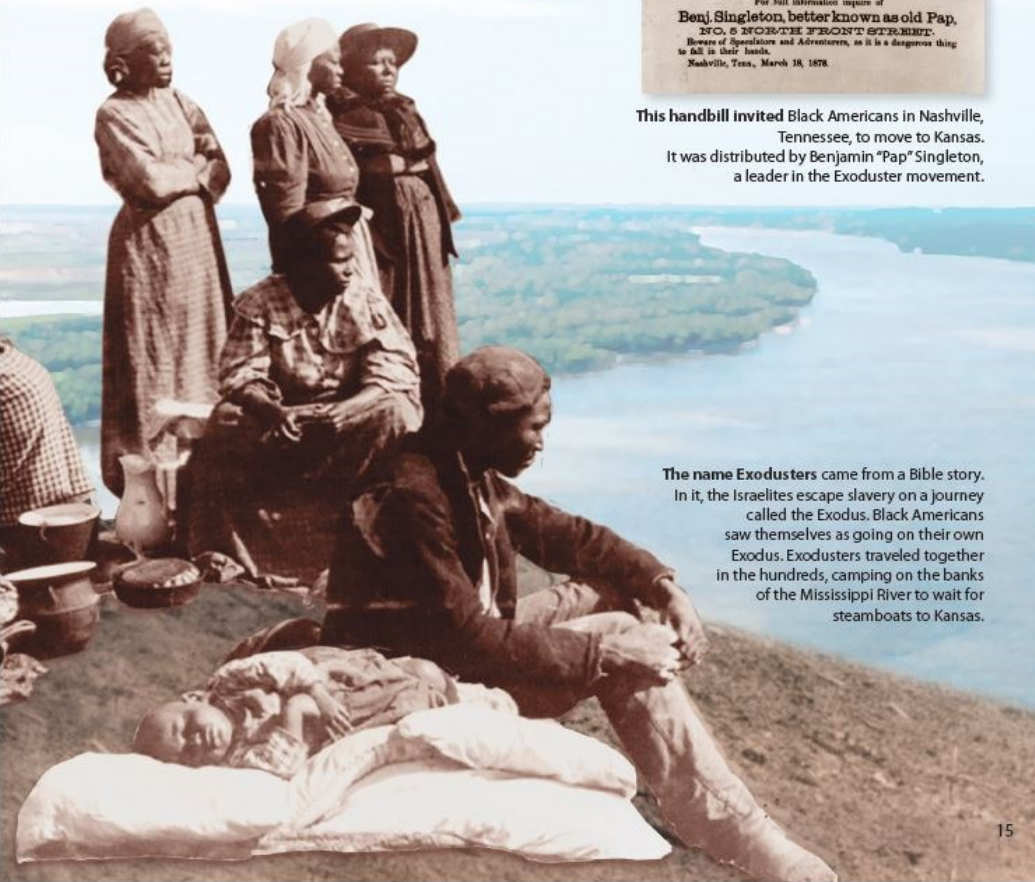
-Cora



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Ho for Kansas!

Black Americans started communities all over the West, but many Exodusters saw Kansas as their promised land. It was the home of famous freedom fighters in the war against slavery. It had played a major role as an antislavery state before and during the Civil War. Train and boat routes to the state meant less of the journey had to be made on foot. Kansas seemed like the perfect new home.



Ho for Kansas!

Brethren, Friends, & Fellow Citizens:
I feel thankful to inform you that the
REAL ESTATE
AND
Homestead Association,
Will Leave Here the
15th of April, 1878,

In pursuit of Homes in the Southwestern
Lands of America, at Transportation
Rates, cheaper than ever
was known before.
For full information inquire of
Benj. Singleton, better known as old Pap,
No. 6 NORTH FRONT STREET,
Beware of Speculators and Adventurers, as it is a dangerous thing
to fall in their hands.
Nashville, Tenn., March 18, 1878.

This handbill invited Black Americans in Nashville, Tennessee, to move to Kansas. It was distributed by Benjamin "Pap" Singleton, a leader in the Exoduster movement.

The name Exodusters came from a Bible story. In it, the Israelites escape slavery on a journey called the Exodus. Black Americans saw themselves as going on their own Exodus. Exodusters traveled together in the hundreds, camping on the banks of the Mississippi River to wait for steamboats to Kansas.

Black Homestead Communities and Migration Routes



Dear Diary,

March 13, 1874

We just boarded a steamboat called the *Grand Tower*. The captain said we couldn't ride, but Papa said he was a United States soldier, and he'd go to court if the captain put us off. I was proud of Papa, but Mama said his mouth is going to get all of us killed.



We'll be on the Mississippi for three days before we get to St. Louis. Mama brought hardtack for us to snack on, but Thomas won't eat. Other people on the boat are throwing up over the sides. The whites of their eyes look yellow. Mama tells us to stay close to her. Thomas wants me to read to him. When I left school for the harvest, my teacher gave me her copy of a book called *Little Women*, but I don't know all the words yet. I'll let Thomas draw a picture instead.

—Cora

Yellow Fever

The journey west took thousands of Exodusters through the Mississippi River Valley. At that time, a terrible outbreak of a disease called yellow fever swept through the valley. Yellow fever causes internal bleeding and turns the skin and eyes yellow. People with yellow fever might bleed from the mouth, nose, and eyes. In the 1800s, more than half of the people who became sick with yellow fever died from it in less than a week.

Black Homestead Communities

Black churches in the city of St. Louis, Missouri, came together to help the thousands of Exodusters who arrived there on the way to Kansas. The churches formed an organization called the Colored Refugee Relief Board. This relief board gave food and shelter to the Exodusters. It also paid for Exodusters to travel by boat to the river towns of Kansas.

From the river towns, Exodusters rode in wagons or walked to their destination. If they were lucky, they might have a horse or two to carry their things. But most Exodusters carried what they owned on their backs.



A steamboat ride cost \$4 in 1879; that would be about \$120 today. When Exodusters couldn't pay, the Black community in St. Louis gave them money collected from local abolitionists and businesses.

Dear Diary, April 4, 1879

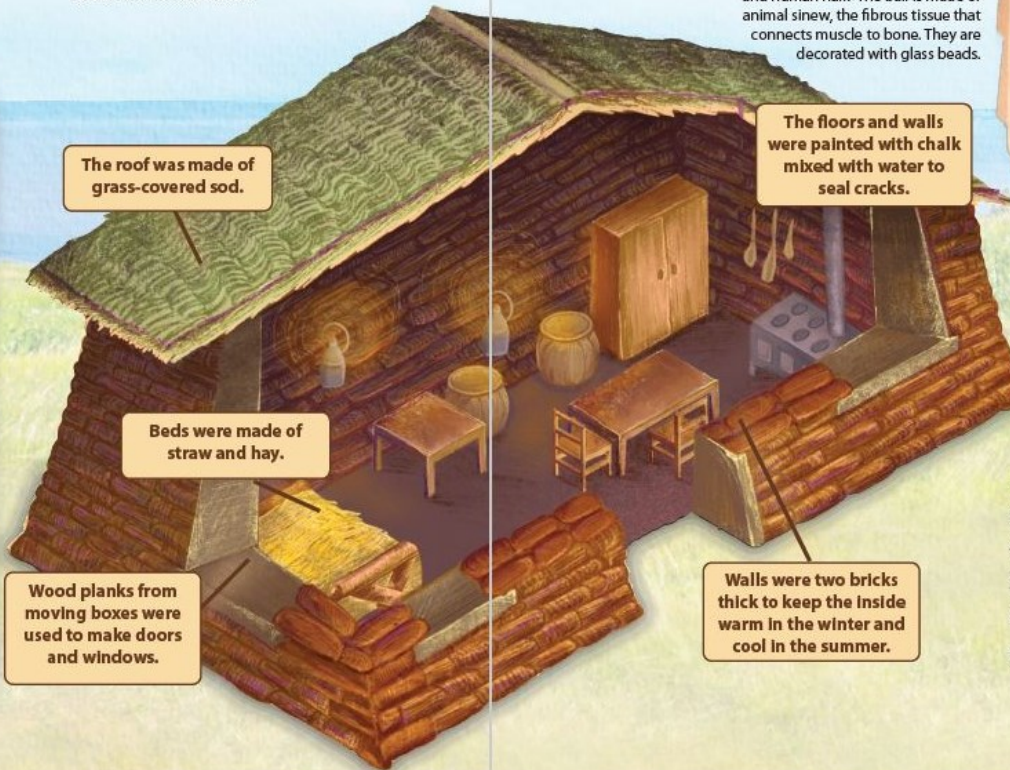
Another steamboat took us from St. Louis to Wyandotte, Kansas. We stayed overnight in a Black church with other families. This morning, the preacher took some of us to Leavenworth in his wagon. Mama cried when we got here. There are almost no trees or roads, and we have hardly any tools to build with. Some of the Black folks here have houses in the ground. Actually built into the ground! They helped Papa dig out a big hole in the side of a hill. We cut patches of thick grass with the dirt still stuck on it into bricks and piled them up for walls. It's not much of a house, but it's ours.



There's a school built in the ground, too. Our neighbor, Miss Rosa, is the only schoolteacher here. She said the men plan to build a real schoolhouse soon. I could only go to school in the winter when I was working for Mr. Sutton. Here, I can go every day. I can't wait until I can read *Little Women* to Thomas.

Miss Rosa fed us bean soup and bread. Thomas ate it! Mama smiled for the first time in two months. I helped Mama and Papa put wooden sticks in the ground and wrap twine around them to mark the land we want for our farm.

-Cora



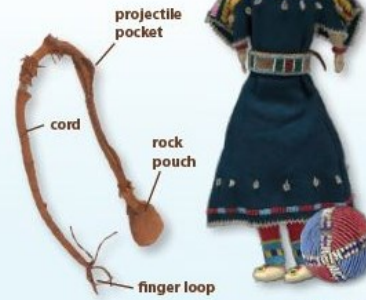
The roof was made of grass-covered sod.

Beds were made of straw and hay.

Wood planks from moving boxes were used to make doors and windows.

The floors and walls were painted with chalk mixed with water to seal cracks.

Walls were two bricks thick to keep the inside warm in the winter and cool in the summer.



Osage Toys

This slingshot from 1890 is made of buckskin, preserved animal hide. This hand-sewn doll has a cloth body and human hair. The ball is made of animal sinew, the fibrous tissue that connects muscle to bone. They are decorated with glass beads.

Dear Diary, May 4, 1879

Papa tried planting sweet peas and wheat, but the ground's just too hard. Once we figure out how to grow big crops, we'll get enough money to buy this land we've claimed. The Osage people bring us firewood, food, and tools. An Osage boy named Ka-wa-ska showed me how to use a slingshot.



One time, Ka-wa-ska and his brother brought us rabbits. Mama and I made a big pot of stew. Me and Thomas ate until our bellies ached.

Ka-wa-ska made me a slingshot. I'm going to bring rabbits home, too. And I'm not going to be like Mr. Sutton. I share with my neighbors.

-Cora

Soddies

Some of the first homes built by western homesteaders were made of clumps of prairie grass and dirt called sod. Most Exodusters couldn't bring tools or supplies to build wood or brick homes. Instead, they cut sod into bricks to build houses called "soddies." Soddies were cheap and fast to make. The bricks were stacked one on top of the other. Only their weight held them together. As towns grew, these sod buildings would be replaced over time with permanent structures made of wood.