Exodusters: the forgotten migration

Dr. Aldemaro Romero
College Talk

St. Louis University, was born in Parsons, a small town in the southeast portion of Kansas whose current African American population has the distinction of being direct descendants of that wave of migration from the South after the Civil War.

When Jack was born, about 10 percent of the population of Parsons was African American. Even given these large numbers, their oral history has yet to be researched.

That is the next project for Jack. “They came from Texas and because of the need of railroad workers they were offered to stay there. Hearing about those stories and more is why I decided to become a historian, particularly to study African American history.”

Despite the Emancipation Proclamation, the end of the Civil War and Reconstruction, there was a real fear among African Americans in the South that slavery would be reinstated. Among the testimonies discovered by Jack was that some even believed that Jefferson Davis was going to be made President of the United States and reinstate slavery.

“Kansas had the reputation among African Americans of being the ‘Promised Land’, a free state, and because it needed population the governor proclaimed that the state would welcome anyone regardless of race,” said Jack. Some of the exodusters believed that once they arrived in Kansas, they would be provided with land and tools to work the land.

The reality of the life they found in St. Louis was very different from their expectations of Kansas. There was the stigma brought about by the unfounded fear that the exodusters were bringing yellow fever to the towns they were passing through. The leaders of St. Louis even thought of putting the exodusters in quarantine, but eventually changed their minds, afraid that these migrants would never leave because of shelter and food they would receive. Thus, at the end they did nothing, hoping that these African Americans would continue their journey towards Kansas.

One of the reasons why the passage of the exodusters is rarely remembered in St. Louis is because when they stayed in the city they were housed either in private homes or churches. No markers or memorials to their presence can be found in modern-day St. Louis.

These forgotten people were not that many, probably less than 20,000 in total.

Yet, this was the first great migration from the South.

Aldemaro Romero is Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, “Segue,” can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.