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## Regional

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# Exodusters: the forgotten migration

Migrations have played a crucial role in the history of the world. Whether Europeans coming to America or African-Americans leaving the rural South for the industrialized North, every time that large numbers of humans move from one place to another, things happen that affect the course of history.

One of the least known migrations in the history of the United States cut a path through St. Louis between 1879 and 1880. The name of the migrants – known today by only a handful of people – was the exodusters.

“They were a wave of migration, mostly former slaves who were leaving mostly Texas, Louisiana, and Mississippi at the end of Reconstruction and who were headed to Kansas to establish a new life in the West,” according to Bryan Jack, an assistant professor of historical studies at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

On their way to Kansas many exodusters, particularly from the Deep South, went through St. Louis, and that is when the story became really interesting. Because many

only had enough money to reach as far as St. Louis, the city became to many exodusters a temporary home for an extended time. “The Caucasian population of St. Louis looked at the exodusters as vagrants, people who would be a burden on St. Louis,” said Jack, who recently published a book titled “The Saint Louis African American Community and the Exodusters.” Because St. Louis was tied to the cotton crop, the whites wanted to stop that migration. While there were not many Caucasians in

### Dr. Aldemaro Romero College Talk

St. Louis that tried to help the exodusters, abolitionists from the North saw that by helping these migrants they were continuing their work from before the Civil War. Thus, exodusters ended up receiving many donations from places as far away as Boston and New York City. It is not clear how many of the exodusters remained in St. Louis because of the way the census was carried out at that time, but it is likely that few stayed given that the local African American community saw these migrants as competitors for the few resources available to them.

“The black community in St. Louis viewed the exodusters as people who needed help and charity providing them with the means to complete their journey to Kansas as a way to challenge the planting, land-owning power structure in the South,” added Jack. “In my research I have found that in speeches and resolutions that were passed by the Committee for Exoduster Relief, the local black community saw that by helping these migrants they would help to break the back of the slave holders in the South.” At the end they and others were encouraging all African Americans to leave the South.

Jack, who received a doctorate in history from 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 reinstitute 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 the 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.*