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Frederick Douglass Reverses His Opposition to the Exodus

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Frustrated by the reinstatement of oppressive Black Codes, imposition of unfair labor practices, the lack of educational opportunity, and political impotence to correct these problems, African American "Exodusters" from throughout the South, but especially Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, and Tennessee, left in large numbers during the spring and summer of 1879 for Kansas and adjacent areas of the Midwest. This group of migrants ultimately numbered over six thousand and composed the most significant resettlement of African Americans from the Civil war until the Great Migration of the early twentieth century. The Exodus received encouragement from former abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips as well as many prominent African American leaders, including Henry Highland Garnet, Sojourner Truth, John M. Langston, and Richard T. Greener.

The Exodus of African Americans from the South to Kansas and adjacent areas of the Midwest proved badly coordinated. A National Emigrant Aid Society was organized in April 1879 and supported by many former abolitionists. Sojourner Truth went herself to Kansas to volunteer to work with the Kansas Freedmen's Relief Association.[1] Kansas appealed to the Exodusters for a variety of reasons. The state had long been associated with radical abolitionists, such as the militant John Brown, and many viewed it as an ideal refuge to escape hostile policies being enacted against African Americans as Southern states were "redeemed" by the opponents of Reconstruction. There was also an effort by the federal government to populate the prairie states, and advertisements promoting Kansas ran widely in the South. African Americans departing on this Exodus often encountered harassment from Southern White planters and politicians. The aid societies often lacked sufficient resources to feed and shelter all of the migrants heading west. Upon their arrival in Kansas and adjacent territories, the Exodusters discovered a harsh climate and a shortage of available jobs or affordable farmland. Despite a growing disillusionment, the migration continued well into 1881.[2]

Perhaps the most prominent voice publicly opposed to the Exodus movement was none other than Frederick Douglass, the former Maryland slave, who had run away and acquired international fame for his articulate writing and speaking against slavery. After the Civil War, Douglass had settled in Washington to better lobby the federal government for protection of the rights of the emancipated African Americans. An active campaigner for the Republican Party, he had received from the Rutherford B. Hayes administration the high-profile patronage appointment of marshal of the District of Columbia. Arguing that conditions for Blacks in the South would soon improve and that to leave would only connote surrender to White pressure, Douglass condemned the Exodus. After criticizing the ongoing migration from the South in an address in Baltimore on 4 May 1879, Douglass endured a summer of accusations from critics

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[1] Carleton Mabee, *Sojourner Truth; Slave, Prophet, Legend* (New York: NYU Press, 1993), 147; Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), 198–99, 228–29.
[2] Charlotte Hinger, *Nicodemus: Post-Reconstruction Politics and Racial Justice in Western Kansas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016), 3, 42; Robert G. Athearn, *In Search of Canaan: Black Migration to Kansas, 1879–80* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1978), 4, 7, 202; John G. Van Deusen, "The Exodus of 1879," *Journal of Negro History*, 21;111, 124 (April 1936).

such as Richard T. Greener, dean of the law school of Howard University, who charged he had lost touch with the plight of African Americans. Although a number of prominent Black leaders and politicians—including James E. O'Hara, Isaiah C. Wears, and Senator Blanche Kelso Bruce—agreed with Douglass's views, he endured the loudest condemnation.[3]

The controversy reached its peak when the American Social Science Association offered Douglass a chance to present a detailed explanation of his position at its annual meeting in Saratoga, New York on 12 September 1879. Douglass initially accepted the invitation and prepared a detailed defense of his opposition to the Exodus. Reports in the press that the session would actually be a debate with one of his most vociferous critics, Greener, disturbed Douglass who privately wrote an officer of the Association that he desired to meet "in the Spirit of Social Science and not in a Spirit of controversy." At the last minute, Douglass canceled his Saratoga appearance, claiming the press of business at his office of marshal of the District of Columbia. He did send his paper to be read and it, along with Greener's defense of the Exodus, were published as a pamphlet.[4] Douglass's published remarks caused several African American newspaper editors to accuse Douglass of betraying his race rather than risk losing the lucrative patronage appointments he received from the federal government.[5] One based in Kansas denounced Douglass's call for African Americans to remain in the Old South and fight for their rights as "calculated to increase the disease from which the race is now fleeing. Oh! For a leader who understands the situation, and on whom the influence of power and place has no effect."[6]

Several modern-day historians have repeated this harsh assessment of Douglass's negative response to the Exodusters. One of the earliest was Princeton historian Nell Irvin Painter who portrayed Douglass's opposition to the Exodus as in line with his post-Civil War ideology that she branded "unswervingly conservative" and "often anti-Black."[7] Painter portrayed Douglass as increasing isolated after the Civil War from the sentiments of most African Americans. Douglass biographer William S. McFeely was unequivocally disappointed in his subject's 1879 views that African Americans should remain in the South and struggle against the Redeemer's program. McFeely charged "Douglass's sense of compassion was failing him" as "was his intellectual grasp of a new problem." McFeely implied that Douglass was willing to let Blacks endure sharecropping, disenfranchisement, and segregation to prove their value to their White oppressors, calling such views "the reasoning of white Redeemers."[8] L. Diane Barnes, a more recent Douglass biographer, echoes these views in more modern language, pointing to Douglass's opposition to the Exodus as "out of touch with the plight of many southern African Americans."[9] Cultural and intellectual historian Waldo E. Martin Jr. blamed Douglass's

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[3] New York *Times,* 5 May 1879; *Douglass Papers*, ser. 4, 1:203–08; Waldo E. Martin, Jr., *The Mind of Frederick Douglass* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 73–77; Painter, *Exodusters,* 7–10, 184–201, 247–50; Athearn, *In Search of Canaan*, 233–38.

[4] New York *Times*, 1 September 1879; Frederick Douglass, "Southern Questions: The Negro Exodus from the Gulf States," *Journal of Social Science*, 11:1–21 (May1880); *Douglass Papers,* ser. 1, 4:510–11; ser. 3, 3:473–74, 476–77.

[5] Douglass to Blanche K. Bruce, General Correspondence File, reel 3, frames 366–67, FD Papers, DLC; Douglass to Franklin B. Sanborn, 4, 9 September 1879, in Joseph A. Borome, ed., "Some Additional Light on Frederick Douglass," *Journal of Negro History*, 38:216–24 (April 1953); 233–38; Painter, *Exodusters*, 3–68, 234–61; Athearn, *In Search of Canaan,* 233–38; Billie D. Higgins, "Negro Thought and the Exodus of 1879," *Phylon*, 32:39–52 (Spring 1971).

[6] Washington (D.C.) *People's Advocate*, 20, 27 September 1879; Topeka (Kans.) *Colored Citizen,* 18 October 1879.

[7] Painter, *Exodusters*, 26; also *see* 227, 247.

[8] William S. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: Norton, 1991), 299–302.

[9] L. Diane Barnes, *Frederick Douglass: Reformer and Statesman* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 123.

"overweening optimism" and "faith in the ultimate decline of racism" for his "insensitivity to the fundamental concerns of the masses of impoverished and victimized southern blacks."[10]

While "Kansas Fever" cooled by the early 1880s, conditions of African Americans in the former slave states continued to deteriorate. The South's economy gradually adjusted to its loss of an enslaved labor force. While a small minority of African Americans gradually accumulated their own small landholdings, the bulk worked on White-owned former plantation lands in a variety of positions. Most of these people were "sharecroppers" who agreed to divide the crop's revenue with their landlords.[11] Over time, the region's White-controlled state legislatures passed anti-enticement, contract enforcement, vagrancy, and debt peonage laws. These laws trapped workers in a new form of economic dependency by prohibiting prospective employers from offering better contract terms than their current employers, using law enforcement to enforce labor contracts, arresting African American men without work contracts, and forcing laborers to pay off debt through work to restrict the mobility of Black farm families, preventing them from seeking better economic opportunities.[12]

In 1876, the U.S. Supreme Court in *U.S. v. Cruikshank* ruled that Congress had no power to protect African American civil rights from violation from violation by private citizens. In 1883. the Court overturned the Civil Rights Act of 1875 that had empowered the federal government to protect African American access to public accommodations, including theaters and hotels. Being emboldened by such judicial rulings, Southern legislatures and local judicatories, now controlled by ex-Confederates, increasingly mandated the racial segregation of public facilities. The region's schools had never been integrated even during Reconstruction but now racial disparity in facilities, funding, and teacher training became official practice. State laws and local ordinances were also passed in the South banning interracial marriages and racially dividing patrons in restaurants, hotels, train and trolly cars, parks, and theaters.[13]

In most states of the former Confederacy, African Americans experienced a gradual ebbing of what remained of their political influence after Reconstruction's end. While generally relegated to powerless minorities in state legislatures, Blacks continued to win a few elected offices and thereby cling onto some influence in Southern towns and cities. A corporals' guard of Black Republicans was sent to Congress in the 1880s. While politically motivated violence decreased after the defeat of the Republican Reconstruction state governments, the threat of its return remained present to depress Black voter turnouts. White Democratic leaders in the 1880s

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[10] Martin, *Mind of Frederick Douglass*, 73–74. Marxist philosopher Angela Y. Davis also criticized Douglass's opposition to the Exodus but attributes it to his understanding of economics rather than his desire to please White Republican politicians who could grant him patronage jobs. Angela Y. Davis, "From the Prison of Slavery to the Slavery of Prison: Frederick Douglass and the Convict Lease System," in *Frederick Douglass: A Critical Reader*, edited by Bill E. Lawson and Frank M. Kirkland (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 345–47.

[11] Gerald Jaynes, *Branches Without Roots: Genesis of the Black Working Class in the American South* (New York: Oxford University Press,1986), 149, 220, 303–04; William Cohen, *At Freedom's Edge: Black Mobility and the Southern White Quest for Racial Control, 1861–1915* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), Appendix A, 299–300.

[12] Jay R. Mandle, *Not Slave, Not Free: The African American Experience since the Civil War* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1992), 33–40; Harold Woodman, *New South, New Law: The Legal Foundations of Credit and Labor Relations in the Postbellum Agricultural South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 93, 105; Jennifer Roback, "Southern Labor Law in the Jim Crow Era: Exploitative or Competitive?" *University of Chicago Law Review*, 51, no. 4 (Autumn 1984), 1161–92.

[13] William J. Reese, *History, Education, and the Schools* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 145; Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Doubleday, 2008).

began passing state poll taxes and other measures calculated to discourage Black voting. In the following decade, Southern legislatures began the effort to curb African American voting with property and literary requirements.[14] As African American political power receded, the group's ability to resist the post-Reconstruction assault on the civil rights and economic opportunities similarly declined.

From his base in Washington, Douglass kept himself well-abreast of the depressing new reports about increasing segregation, politically motivated attacks, and declining economic opportunities for African Americans in the South. Rather than unaware, Douglass was made well-informed of the plight of other African Americans by a steady stream of letters he received from victims beseeching his assistance.[15] Rather than acquiesce to this situation, Douglass pursued a variety of tactics to attempt to protect his race. He maintained a vigorous schedule of lecturing and journalistic writing on top of performing the duties of his federal offices. In 1881, Douglass authored his third autobiography, the *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, which contained powerful criticisms of the nation's political leaders for failing to reverse these disturbing trends. Two years later, Douglass publicly condemned the U.S. Supreme Court for failing to defend African American civil rights. The same year, he helped organize and presided at the first post-Reconstruction national African American convention, held in Louisville, Kentucky, where he criticized the Republican Party for failing to safeguard the equal rights of his race. Also, during the 1880s, Douglass delivered annual "Emancipation Day" addresses in the District of Columbia, often printed and circulated nationally, in which he assessed the problems caused by intensifying racism.[16]

In April 1888, Douglass responded to a query from David M. Lindsey[17] asking if he had any possible second thoughts regarding such "exodus" from the former slave states. Lindsey was a White former Confederate military officer turned Reconstruction Era "Scalawag" Republican

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[14] J. Morgan Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South, 1880–1901* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1974) 244; Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction* (New York, 1992), 34–53; Douglas R. Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction: The Brief, Violent History of America's Most Progressive Era* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 316–17.

[15] Among such examples are O.O. Howard to Frederick Douglass, 1 December 1874, in *Douglass Papers*, ser. 3., 3:288–89; Frederick Douglass to R. C. Hewett, George Follansbee, and Donn Piatt, 11 February 1875, in Douglass papers, ser. 3, 3:291–96; William Breck to Frederick Douglass, 15 September 1876, *Douglass Papers*, ser. 3, 3: 335–39; "Citizen" to Frederick Douglass, 5 Aprill 1877, *Douglass Papers*, ser. 3, 3:375–77.

[16] "Parties Were Made for Men, Not Men for Parties," 25 September 1883, *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 5:85–110; "This Decision Has Humbled the Nation," 22 October 1883, *Douglass Papers,* ser. 1, 5:110–123; "Our Destiny Is Largely In Our Own Hands," 16 April 1883, *Douglass Papers,* ser. 1, 5:59–80; "We Are Confronted by a New Administration," 16 April 1885, *Douglass Papers,* ser. 1, 5:172–192; "Strong to Suffer, and Yet Strong to Strive," 16 April 1886, *Douglass Papers,* ser. 1, 5:212–238; "In Law Free; In Fact, A Slave," 16 April 1888, *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 5:357–73; "The Nation's Problem," 16 April 1889," *Douglass Papers,* ser. 1, 5:403–426; John R. McKivigan, "Stalwart Douglass: Life and Times as Political Manifesto," *Journal of African American History*, 99, no. 1–2 (Winter-Spring 2014): 46–55.

[17] Daniel McDonald Lindsey (1836-99) was born in Currituck County, North Carolina. Before the Civil War he was a successful local politician and during the war he was elected state senator in 1862 and 1864. Lindsay also played an active part in the war, becoming a captain for the Confederacy in the Seventeenth North Carolina Infantry Regiment. Following the war, he returned to politics as a Republican and aided freedmen to have their rights fulfilled, for which he was greatly ridiculed in his home state. Lindsay became the surveyor of his home county and ran unsuccessfully for Congress. Wilmington (N.C.) *Journal,* 22 September 1876; Westminster (Md.) *Democratic Advocate,* 30 October 1880; Washington (D.C.) *Evening Critic,* 3 July 1882; Harpers Ferry (W.V.) *Spirit of Jefferson,* 21 October 1890; Edenton (N.C.) *Fisherman and Farmer,* 24 October 1890; Hampton Rhoads (Va.) *Virginian-Pilot,* 19 January 1899; *James Sprunt Historical Monographs, No. 1.* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1900), 53–54.

from North Carolina. By the 1880s, Lindsay was living in Washington, D.C. and working for the Treasury Department. It was around this time that Lindsey began devising a plan for relocating Southern freedmen to West Virginia, Indiana, and Connecticut. In a letter that has not survived, Lindsey sounded out Douglass about such a second "Exodus" attempt. Published below is Douglass's reply to Lindsey, that revealed that events in the 1880s had produced a significant shift in his opinion about the value of a coordinated migration from the South for African Americans. The letter demonstrates that it is incorrect to assume that the aging Douglass became aloof or unresponsive to the problems fellow members of his race endured in the years following Reconstruction. At a minimum, Douglass's response to Lindsay demonstrates that he was capable of shifting his tactics and public positions in pursuit of an unswerving goal of protecting the interests of African Americans in an increasing racist era.

Anacostia, D.C. 10 April 1888[.]

DEAR MR. LINDSEY.—

I have long hesitated to give my endorsement to any movement looking to the removal of considerable numbers of the colored people of the South to the North and West. I have felt that it was better that they should endure and patiently wait for better conditions of existence where they are than to take the chance of seeking them in the cold North, or in Africa, or elsewhere. I had hoped that the relations subsisting between the former slaves and the old master class would gradually improve; but while I believed this, and still have some such weak faith, I have, of late, seen enough, heard enough and learned enough of the condition of these people in South Carolina and Georgia to make me welcome any movement which will take them out of the wretched condition in which I now know them to be. While I shall continue to labor for increased justice to those who stay in the South, I give you my hearty "God speed" in your emigration scheme. I believe you are doing a good work, and I am glad that one who knows the ground as well as you do has taken in hand this important work. I thank you for bringing the subject to my attention, and for giving me a chance of joining with you in this effort to help the freed men of the South.

Very truly yours,

FREDERICK DOUGLASS.

Source: Subject File, frames 554–61, Frederick Douglass Papers, Library of Congress.