

# EXODUSTERS

## Freed Slaves Seeking A New Beginning... in Kansas.

The area surrounding the Kansas Wetlands & Wildlife National Scenic Byway is internationally recognized for its abundance of wildlife. During the fall and spring migrations, the skies are filled with millions of waterfowl and shorebirds on their flights to northern and southern climates.

And while the migrations annually draw thousands of hunters and birders to the area to see and experience the wildlife, the area has also for centuries drawn people. It is a land rich in history and culture. The seven communities linked along the byway corridor -- Stafford, St. John, Hudson, Great Bend, Ellinwood, Claflin and Hoisington -- each contain fascinating stories about the people who settled here, from the Native Americans who lived here hundreds of years ago to the immigrants who followed the trails and railroads to stake out homes and raise families.

One of those stories that binds all these communities together is the mass immigration of African Americans following the Civil War.

During the late 1870s, in African American church congregations

across the South, the word quickly spread that the Federal government had set aside Kansas land for former slaves.

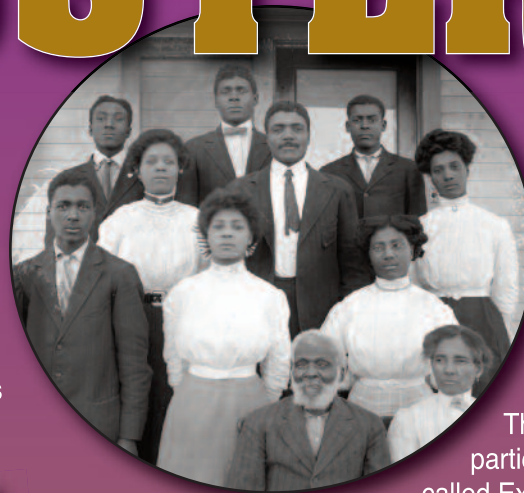


beginnings and hope for better futures.

It was called the Kansas Fever Exodus, a name taken from the Bible, as in "the flight of the Israelites from Egypt."

African Americans, particularly those in the South, wanted something better than quasi-freedom in post Emancipation America. Their yearning was quintessentially American: They wanted to be secure, to make money, to own their own land.

Theirs marked one of the most remarkable migrations in the United States, following the Civil War.



It involved former slaves who left the South to build homesteads in the West.

Those who participated were called Exodusters.

It wasn't true.

But it helped spark an exodus.

And dreams.

And so to Kansas -- to places like Stafford and Barton County -- the members of these churches came for new

All told, between 15,000 and 20,000 of these "Exodusters" flocked to Kansas, which they saw as the Promised Land, yearning for new lives and new lands. They were inspired and led by Benjamin "Pap" Singleton, a former slave from Tennessee.

Kansas had entered the Union a Free State and was known for its abolitionist free-thinkers. After all, from Kansas came John Brown, who rose to national attention by clashing with Missouri border ruffians. And it was Kansans who played a vital role in helping slaves escape the South via the Underground Railroad. It was the site, when the Civil War broke out, that black men of the 1st Kansas Colored Infantry were the first African-Americans to go into the U.S. Army and first to fight.

Kansas was enough of a Promised Land.

*"I am anxious to reach your state," G.R. M. Newman, a black Louisianan wrote to the governor of Kansas in September of 1879, "... because of the sacredness of her soil washed by the blood of humanitarians for the cause of freedom."*

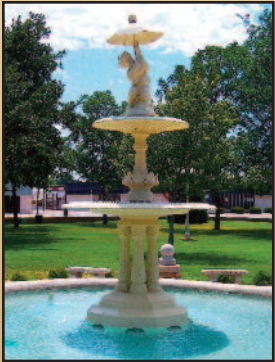
But Kansas, prior to the 1870s, didn't hold many opportunities for African Americans. Most of the black population settled in the larger, eastern communities of the state. Most worked as laborers or housekeepers. Some were farmers; others, black soldiers. When the Exodus began with the mass immigration, opportunities for other occupations began to surface as all-black settlements were founded.

### Why St. John is named St. John

Located three miles north of US-281-US-50 highways;

#### GPS Coordinates

38.001029, -98.761045



In large part, the mass immigration of African Americans was instigated in Kansas by Republican Governor, John St.

John. He was governor of Kansas from 1879 to 1883 and instrumental in creating the Kansas Freedman's Relief Association, an organization devoted to helping the destitute former slaves settle in Kansas. The governor was a Quaker by belief and also a leading prohibitionist, which meant he didn't support drinking alcohol. He didn't necessarily believe in racial equality as much as he believed in the good that could come from a mass influx of people. The governor reasoned that people - no matter the color - meant an uptick in population. And, that meant railroads . . . and railroads to Kansas meant prosperity and money.

When Stafford County was organized and a county seat was to be determined, there was much debate back and forth over which town in the county would win the seat. Would it be Stafford? Zion Valley? Residents in

Zion Valley suggested to the governor that if the county seat could be in their community, then they'd be willing to change the name to St. John.

And indeed, they did. Settlement to Stafford County was encouraged.

A flier from one railroad promised: "The Golden Belt of Kansas: 9 months of summer - 3 months fall-spring. 700,000 acres of choice farming lands for sale By The Union Pacific Railroad Co."

"When I landed on the soil, I looked on the ground and I says this is free ground," said Exoduster John Solomon Lewis who was among those who came to Kansas. "Then I looked on the heavens, and I says them is free and beautiful heavens. Then I looked within my heart, and I says to myself I wonder why I never was free before?"

To help in their efforts, the Kansas Freedman's Relief, (formed by Gov. St. John) was created in 1879 to "aid destitute freedmen, refugees and immigrants." The group provided temporary shelter, employment, some money and assistance in resettling in various Kansas counties.

One of those Kansas counties included Stafford County, where by 1914, it is estimated there were as many as 400 African Americans living. The entire population of the county then was 9,100 residents. Many of these African Americans were destitute, having spent years in slavery and, once in Kansas, worked hard to eke out an existence in the sandy soils in Stafford County. They were men liked **George Washington Walker** who was born in Washington, D.C. on Nov. 14, 1849. His mother belonged to a slave trader named Train. When Train sold the little boy's mother for \$1,500, he did so at first without including the boy in the sale. She grieved so much, that he was

forced to include the boy and refunded the new owner \$500. The little boy grew up in Mississippi and took the name of George Washington and the last name of his new owner, Walker. Until he was 20, George Washington Walker didn't know how to read or write. After the 13th amendment passed in 1865, he attended school and learned to read and write. Throughout the rest of his life he would read the Bible, bibliographies of famous people and daily newspapers. He would emphasize the value of education. His wife, Catherine Harris, was a slave in Kentucky. They were married in 1875 and had a dozen children.

The Walkers, as well as others from Exoduster movement, may have initially been attracted to Stafford County from seeing the many posters from the railroads. But the sandy soils, abundance of wildlife, creeks and streams proved good land to homestead.

Traces of these Exodusters can still be seen in Stafford County.

St. John supported two African-American churches - a Baptist church and the African Methodist Episcopal Church, organized in 1887 and built in 1892. It was located on the southeast corner of Pearl and Hoole streets and razed in recent decades.

Black churches in the South were the natural marketplace for the Exoduster movement. The Kansas homes and towns were to be established without saloons or houses of ill repute. And the churches were filled with the people who would help finance the ventures.



George Washington Walker



Joseph Martin

## Martin Cemetery

Martin Cemetery, south of St. John, located one and one-half miles west of US-281 and US-50 highway, located on corner of NW 10th Avenue and US-50.

**GPS Coordinates: 37.9564, -98.7745**

The first settlers of Ohio township in Stafford County were African American. The township was directly south of St. John. Exodusters also lived in St. John. The Martin Cemetery, an all-black cemetery, is a small fenced space on the north side of the road. It was named for a family living in the area who also donated the property.

There are only a few memorial markers visible in the cemetery - with family names such as Martin, Hilton



and Perkins. Several graves remain unmarked.

In 1954, local papers reported a mysterious occurrence at the cemetery when

George Hilton was buried on April 9. For several weeks afterwards a black and white dog came to keep a lonely vigil at his grave. Passersby took the dog food and water and even built a small doghouse for him to use. Friends of Hilton said the dog did not belong to Hilton. But still, the dog kept vigil.

The cemetery is maintained by the City of St. John.



## Stafford Cemetery

Stafford Cemetery is located on US-50, ½-mile west of Stafford, address is corner of US-50 and SE 70th Avenue.

**GPS Coordinates:**

**Latitude: 37.95360,**

**Longitude: -98.61390**

Kansas contributed dearly to the Union cause, during the Civil War. During the war, the federal government issued several calls for troops, asking Kansas for a total of 16,654 men. More than 20,000 "Jayhawkers" enlisted, and the state contributed 19 regiments and four batteries to the Union forces. Although many of these volunteer soldiers hailed from states other than Kansas, this was a remarkable showing for an infant state with only 30,000 men of military age. Kansas soldiers suffered nearly 8,500 casualties.

Note the large numbers of Civil War veterans buried in this cemetery.

The Stafford cemetery features a Grand Army of the Republic memorial. The Grand Army of the Republic was devoted to Union Civil War veterans. A local stonecutter, J.R. Carmichael, carved a limestone stump into a memorial for the county's Civil War soldiers. He created the monument more than a century ago.



## Stafford County Historical Museum and Genealogical Society Library

Stafford County Museum, 100 N. Main Street, Stafford.

**GPS Coordinates:**

**N37.95493 W -98.60024**

The story of Exodusters in Central Kansas is told through an exhibit, historic glass negative photos and the film, "The Black Frontier."

The traveling exhibit, "Kansans of African Descent: Selected Portraits," features information about Benjamin "Pap" Singleton, who was instrumental in leading the Exodusters to Kansas. Besides Civil War artifacts and an extensive genealogical library. The museum also features an exhibit on the Exodusters highlighting individual families in the area. And, it notes some of the area cemeteries on this tour where Exoduster families are buried. Be sure to ask for the cemetery guide brochure at this stop.

Plan on spending at least 45 minutes to an hour at the museum to take in the entire Exoduster exhibition.

The museum also houses a glass negative collection considered one of the best historical gems in Kansas. The collection of 29,000 glass negatives came from photos taken over 8 decades in the Gray Photo Studio in St. John. Many of these photos include Exoduster families in the area. Not only is the collection a wonderful study in day-to-day life in

Central Kansas through the decades, it is considered one of the largest glass negative collections in the nation.

The museum/ library is open from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. weekdays. On weekends, the museum/library is closed but open by special appointments. There is no admission fee for the museum; however, donations are welcome. For more information, call at (620) 234-5664.

As you follow our tour to Great Bend, highlights along the way can include a trip through Quivira National Wildlife Refuge to see wildlife; but, also a stop at the Eden Valley Cemetery, near Seward.



### Eden Valley Cemetery

Eden Valley Cemetery, corner of NW 180th Street and NW 20th Avenue, located two miles west of US-281 highway on 180th NW Street.

#### GPS Coordinates:

**38.2183464, -98.7856433**

Several Exoduster families are buried in the Eden Valley Cemetery.

When George Washington Walker came to Stafford County, he purchased a quarter section of land near what is now Seward from the railroad for \$205. He built a sod house with a dirt floor. Then, he set about growing crops. Soon, African American families joined him as neighbors.

Among them, Oscar Micheaux, who within a decade would become one of the nation's first black movie producers. Micheaux's family moved to this area in the early 1900s. In fact, Micheaux's grandmother, Melvina Micheaux and aunt, Harriett Robinson are buried in this cemetery.

But those were poor crop years and some of the earliest homesteaders soon became discouraged and left. The Walkers would purchase their claims and pay out the railroad what was left on their claims. By doing this, the Walkers would soon own more than 480 acres, oil would be discovered on their land and they would become some of the wealthiest residents of the county.

George Washington Walker is attributed to bringing the first wagonloads of watermelon from his Stafford County farm to sell in Great Bend. And, of course, today Stafford County is known for its sandy soils that produce quality watermelons, sold in the summertime at the Great Bend Farmers Market as well as by Dillons and Walmart stores.



**Barton County Museum and Village**  
85 S. Highway 281.

#### GPS Coordinates:

**GPS: 38.34851°N 98.76519°W**

What prompted much of the Exodus of the late 1870s was that African Americans were prevented from voting in the South. This, combined with the bad economy and the discrimination, prompted many to look outside the South for future hope. In 1870, the black population of Kansas was slightly more than

16,000. By 1880, the numbers were closer to 43,000.

As it sits on the Arkansas River surrounded by ancient cottonwoods, the Barton County Museum and Village helps illustrate pioneer settlement to central Kansas. Exhibits include quilts, Grand Army of the Republic records and ceremonial archives, and buildings replicating slices-of-life on the prairie with a one-room schoolhouse, an early stone house and railroad station. While at the museum, plan on viewing the Civil War Sesquicentennial exhibit.

You can also pick up a copy of the area cemetery tour here, as well. The museum complex is open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays; and, 1 to 5 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays through the end of October. Admission is \$4. For more information, call (620) 793-5125.



**Barton County Courthouse Square**  
1400 Main Street, Great Bend

#### GPS Coordinates:

**38.36557 and -98.76453**

The year 1879 was a fateful year for African Americans. Not only did it spur the Exoduster movement, but that year Kansas passed a law permitting the creation of racially segregated elementary schools in certain cities based on population. Towns like Great Bend and St. John were exempt from the law because there weren't enough people. That law, affecting larger towns such as Wichita and Topeka,

would later become a fueling point for the national landmark case *Brown vs. the Board of Education*.

And, the year of 1879 and the following would prove to be trying years for anyone attempting to homestead in Kansas. It was the height of an extreme drought. But for the settlers who stuck it out and survived, there would be monuments built toward their dedication. Such is the case with the Barton County Courthouse Square, located in downtown Great Bend.

Built in 1918 in the Modern Classical Eclecticism style, the building houses marble flooring and stairs. A Civil War Soldier Monument, "The Rifleman," stands nearby honoring both the white and black veterans who fought during the Civil War. When you stand on the ground of this courthouse square, you are standing directly on the Santa Fe Trail.

The courthouse is open to the public during regular business hours and houses local county and court offices.

### **Barton County Arts Council**

1401 Main Street, Great Bend

**GPS Coordinates:**

**38.36557 and -98.76453**

Although he traveled extensively around the nation making and promoting more than three dozen movies, there were only two places Oscar Micheaux called home: Harlem...And Great Bend.

Micheaux was Hollywood's first African-American movie producer and the first to use all-black casts. He was a writer and entrepreneur of edgy movies with racial themes. He made

43 movies from 1919 to 1948 and is still considered one of the most prolific African-American movie producers of all time. In 2010, the U.S. Postal Service commemorated Micheaux with a 44-cent stamp.

But when Micheaux died in 1951, he was buried in the Great Bend Cemetery in an unmarked grave for nearly four decades. In the 1980s and 1990s, local historians, film buffs and Hollywood celebrities began researching his life. Fans included Spike Lee, Robert Townsend, Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis. They purchased a headstone to honor him.

The Barton County Arts Council Gallery is located in Great Bend's first stone building, built approximately in 1875. It showcases Great Bend's vibrant art and artists. The gallery is hosting an exhibit recognizing the independent spirit of the Exodusters Movement and its influence on the Harlem Renaissance.

The gallery hours are 1 to 5:30 p.m. Monday through Friday. For more information, (620) 792-4221.

Oscar Micheaux



### **Great Bend Cemetery**

Great Bend Cemetery, 4500 Broadway, Great Bend

**GPS Coordinates:**

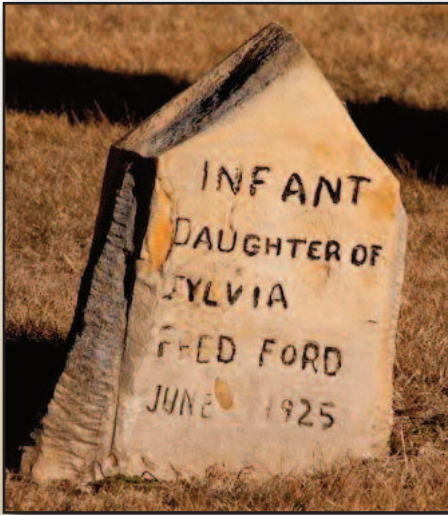
**38.36810, -98.79970**

The Cemetery Tour brochure will help guide you through this cemetery where 12,000 people from all backgrounds and walks of life are buried. In this cemetery, you can visit the gravesite of George Washington and Catherine Walker. The Walkers had 12 children. In 1938, they hit a 1,600 barrel a day oil well. They are buried in Section R, Lot 114, near the cemetery road.

Visit Micheaux's grave in Section P at the Cemetery. He is the only person buried in this cemetery who has a star on Hollywood's Walk of Fame. In recent years, the community of Great Bend has celebrated Micheaux with a film festival held every other year to which national celebrities are invited. Other Micheaux family members are buried in the Great Bend cemetery.

At the Great Bend Cemetery, note the Grand Army of the Republic circle near the west end of the cemetery.

Although the people may visit the cemetery anytime, for questions you may have, the Great Bend Cemetery office is open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. For more information, call (620) 793-4167.



## Hoisington Cemetery

Hoisington Cemetery is located on K-4 highway and Cedar Street.  
**GPS Coordinates: 38°31'14" N 98°46'2" W.**

The community of Hoisington is located in the Cheyenne Bottoms Basin. The people who settled in Central Kansas from all cultures, have each valued a sense of family, community, hard work, and respect for the natural world. Surrounded by rows of evergreens, the Hoisington Cemetery helps tell the stories of the people who have lived here. Explore the cemetery and note some of the early hand-crafted stones and monuments. Hoisington's African American history is rich. The vibrant community of African Americans who lived in South Hoisington were largely drawn here because of the railroad. They were sometimes known for the company they kept. During the early 1930s, the famous bankrobbers Bonnie and Clyde were said to have stayed with the Butler family of South Hoisington.

### One last word:

As you explore these sights in Central Kansas, consider the words that Benjamin "Pap" Singleton charged Exodusters:

*"Peace and harmony. Let us live together as a band of brethren and become united, and stand in the statutes, of honor before this enlightened people and God."*

## Additional Related Sites in Kansas:

The largest and still surviving all-black community is Nicodemus in Graham County, a few hours drive northwest of Barton County. The community is named after a slave who purchased his freedom. Although Nicodemus was never very large, it produced some famous residents. E. P. McCabe, twice elected the state auditor of Kansas and the highest-ranking elected African American in the West; Gale Sayers, Chicago Bears football player; and, Lorenzo Fuller, musician and first African American to host a national TV show. Nicodemus was declared a national historic park site in 1996 and now has fewer than 30 residents. Nicodemus National Historic Site is located in northwestern Kansas on Highway 24 between Hill City and Stockton. **GPS Coordinates are: 39.390833, -99.6175.**

In western Kansas near Beeler, a 90-minute drive from Great Bend, is the area where George Washington Carver homesteaded during the mid-1880s. While living there, Carver sketched plants and animals, and local residents soon began calling him "The Plant Doctor." In 1888, Carver left Kansas to attend college at Iowa State and later became head of the agriculture department at Tuskegee Institute. It was at Tuskegee that Carver discovered more than 300 uses for the peanut. There is a historical marker beside K-96 highway and a stone monument on where his homestead was once located.

Brown vs. Board of Education was a landmark Supreme Court case that declared state laws establishing separate public schools for black and white students were unconstitutional. The Browns vs. Board of Education National Historic Site in Topeka details the story of that case as well as the nation's struggle in Civil Rights. The park site is located at 1515 SE Monroe Street in Topeka. **GPS Coordinates are: 39.038056, -95.676389.**



[www.kansasbyway.com](http://www.kansasbyway.com)

For more information contact the  
Great Bend Convention & Visitors Bureau,  
3007 10th Street • Great Bend, KS 67530,  
(620)792-2750 [www.visitgreatbend.com](http://www.visitgreatbend.com)  
E-mail at: [information@visitgreatbend.com](mailto:information@visitgreatbend.com).

