Escape to the Frontier

Religious persecution and racism

Many came to the frontier to escape, whether that be political or racial hostility, or for a new beginning. However, politics could never be escaped, even on the frontier.

Escaping Religious Persecution

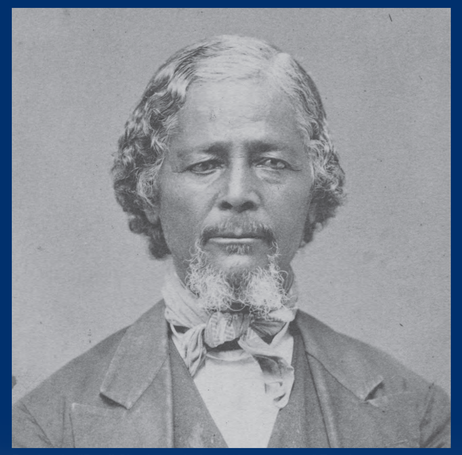
In 1875, a dissident branch of some 40 Mormon families established a city called Zion Valley near present-day St. John. Their English prophet formed the group in Pennsylvania and brought them to Kansas to find the area God chose for his church. Zion Valley's first building, the white Mormon Temple, still stands on a hill. However, conflict soon arose within the group when one member donated land to the Utah Mormons, who promptly built a hotel in town as their temporary headquarters from which they could recruit members. The Utah Mormons built a church in 1899, but moved to Pratt, Kansas in 1968, allowing the dissidents to regain their original hill and worship site.

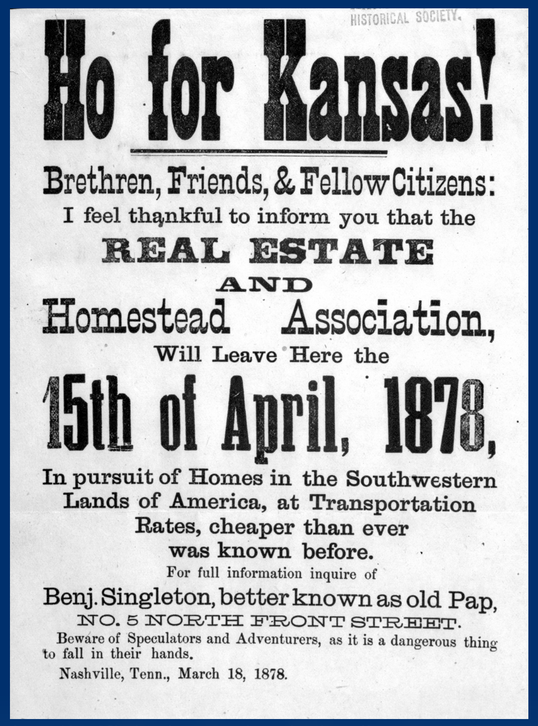
Escaping Racism

While African-Americans were free and full citizens, the end of Reconstruction in 1877 brought many practices in the former Confederate States that sought to disenfranchise and disadvantage them. As a result, many African Americans looked to escape west. From 1878 to 1880, 20,000 African-Americans, including many former slaves, moved to Kansas, encouraged by friends and Governor John Pierce St. John. Because their exodus resembled that of the Israelites from Egypt, they were called Exodusters.

One Exoduster group settled in Stafford County near St. John, peaking at just over 400 people in 1914. They thrived as farmers because of their extensive experience on plantations, which provided them skills in farming, animal husbandry, and building, in addition to the making of other goods and essentials. They planted orchards, raised poultry, and even fished. Area African-Americans also founded the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1892 and the George Washington Baptist Church in St. John, offering centers of community life. Another testament to these pioneers is the Martin Cemetery. While its earliest recorded death is 1906, some 14 people are thought to lie there without grave markers. The cemetery, no longer in use, stands as a memorial to those who made a new life along the byway.

Martin Cemetery, St. John


Benjamin "Pap" Singleton helped thousands of Exodusters relocate to Kansas earning his name as "Father of the Exodus."


HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

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. 5 NORTH FRONT STREET.
Beware of Speculators and Adventurers, as it is a dangerous thing to fall in their hands.
Nashville, Tenn., March 18, 1878.

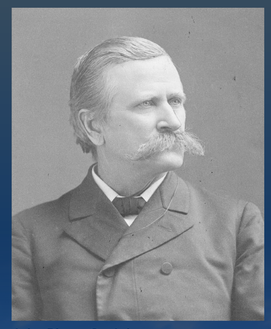
A pamphlet of Singleton's, encouraging emigration to Kansas from Nashville, Tennessee.

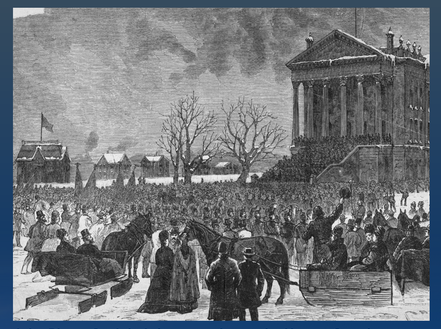
Stafford County Courthouse, St. John

Politics: The Unescapable

Unfortunately, politics is unescapable. Stafford County was established in 1867, but had no set boundaries. By 1875, the disorganized county was split between Pawnee, Barton, and Pratt counties and was eliminated. However, a six-by-twelve-mile strip of land survived with the county's name. In 1879 the Supreme Court declared the division unconstitutional, restoring the county's original area. The county promptly organized.

In 1879, St. John was platted and named for then Governor St. John, possibly to influence the town's bid for Stafford County seat. That very year, Governor St. John did proclaim it the temporary county seat. An election was quickly organized that pitted five competing towns against one another, including St. John and Stafford. St. John lost the majority by one vote to Stafford. The next election was held in 1882, but when a tornado hit Stafford, another election had to be held later that month. Again, no city received a majority, so a final election was held a few days later between only St. John and Stafford. At this election, St. John was finally declared county seat, but it was only fully accepted after the courthouse was built in 1886.


John Pierce St. John


John Pierce St. John's inauguration at the Kansas Statehouse.