

## Midwestern Attitudes on the "Kansas Fever"

Edited by PHILIP D. UZEE

### INTRODUCTION

IN 1879-1880 many Negroes and some whites in Louisiana and other cotton growing Southern states were afflicted with "Kansas Fever." Due to the crop lien system which kept many in a state of peonage and because they were being intimidated out of their political rights by "bulldozing," thousands of Negroes emigrated to Kansas and its neighboring states and territories.<sup>1</sup> They desired to move to these areas because they believed they could improve their economic and political status. Many were lured to the Midwest by unscrupulous opportunists who spread glowing stories, false promises, circulars, and chromos depicting opportunities and life in Kansas in order to fleece them out of what little money they had through dues-paying emigrant societies or by other schemes.<sup>2</sup>

The southern white leaders and the intelligent Negro leaders opposed the moving of the labor force out of the region.<sup>3</sup> Many of the immigrants were unskilled laborers and poverty stricken and had to be taken care of by private individuals or public agencies in Kansas. The people of Kansas began to oppose the immigration of destitute and unskilled Negroes.<sup>4</sup> The following letters from Kansas and Nebraska reflect this attitude.

These letters were published in *The Weekly Louisianian*, a New Orleans newspaper published by Pinckney Benton Stewart Pinchback, a Negro Republican leader and former acting governor of Louisiana during the days of Radical rule. The only file of the newspaper is in the Library of Congress, but the Hill Memorial Library of the Louisiana State University has microfilm copies. The newspaper was opposed to the exodus movement.

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1. Earl Howard Aiken, "Kansas Fever," unpublished master's thesis (Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, 1939), pp. 3-11; Morgan Dewey Peoples, "Negro Migration From the Lower Mississippi Valley to Kansas," unpublished master's thesis (Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, 1950), pp. 2, 10-15, 19-32.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Movement of the colored people out of Louisiana and other parts of the South was not directed at Kansas alone, although this state, because of the publicity, received a large number. The Negro exodus, so far as it was a movement of Negroes out of the South, was directed at practically all of the Northern states. Indiana, Pennsylvania and New York received many. In fact several large Northern cities were a promised land to these wanderers. In absolute numbers, however, Arkansas received the largest increase of Negroes from other states during the 1870's as shown by the U. S. census reports of 1870 and 1880.

2. Aiken, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-18; Peoples, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-19.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 16, 42-47.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 54-60.

The sole identification of "H. O. B.," the author of the first letter, that was given by the editor of the *Louisianian* is: "The following letter comes from a well known colored citizen of Kansas, whose honor and integrity are unquestionable."<sup>5</sup>

#### THE LETTERS

ATCHISON, MAY 18TH. 1879

EDITOR OF LOUISIANIAN:

Having been a constant reader of your valuable paper, we heartily approve the manly course it has pursued, especially upon the emigration question. Kansas has enough and to spare of unskilled labor. We want mechanics, we want tradesmen, we want men of means to come into our State and take up lands and become tax payers and help to build up the State.

Kansas is adapted to stock raising and to the production of grain. It is a grain country. Cotton will not grow here, so that emigrants coming here from the South skilled only in the production of cotton and sugar cane, will be a failure. They know nothing of our system of farming.

Kansas farmers are men of moderate means, and generally do their own work, so that labor is never in great demand. The government lands are out on the frontier counties generally, and from fifty to one hundred miles from timber. Parties settling [*sic*] upon these lands must have money to buy wood and other necessities for the sustenance of life. They must have a good two horse team or an ox team to break up the land preparatory for using; unless they have these necessities they will suffer. It is nonsense to believe that the government is going to give a mule or anything of the kind. Any person circulating such a report among the colored people of the South, ought to be hung to the nearest tree.

Of the 8,000 colored people who have come into the State during the last four months, a very few have been able to settle upon government lands. The balance have been distributed among the several counties. They are in some instances scattered hundreds of miles apart, and as they are very ignorant it is fair to presume that they will never be able to find their friends and relatives again. We have had landed at our wharf 300 of these poor, ignorant, penniless and dejected people. They were very dirty and ragged and in a destitute condition. They were cared for by our people irrespective of party, creed, or nationality. Of this number 75 remain in the city,

5. *The Weekly Louisianian*, New Orleans, May 24, 1879.

the balance have been sent to other counties and cities where their labor is in a great demand.

During the last 18 months we have had squads of Kentuckians coming into our city. They seem to be a better set, more intelligent, more industrious than those coming from the South. These Kentuckians do not come among us as beggars and paupers, so that upon the whole they are more a blessing than a curse.

I see that Mr. Rugle of your city is here and is registered at the Otis house. He comes for the purpose of carrying back such as are willing to go—he paying their fare. I presume that there are several who have been convinced ere this, that Kansas is not the promised land they are looking for. I am very sorry for these poor deluded people. The sole cause is the kind of religion they practice, and the only remedy is education.

H. O. B.

N. P. N. D.

HON. ALEXANDRE NOGUEZ; LOUISIANA STATE CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION NEW ORLEANS, LA.<sup>6</sup>

I was agreeably surprised on the morning of the 7th. inst. by being made the recipient of a letter from you, asking what the future prospects of this State [Nebraska] as well as the adjoining State of Kansas, and the Indian, Arizonian and New Mexican Territories—may be; and what opportunities they may afford for many of your (colored) people who are looking hopefully toward them as places of refuge, peace and future prosperity.

Your reliance on me for an unvarnished statement of the facts relative to which you ask information is duly appreciated and in a spirit void of partiality or prejudice.

The news-papers have contained almost daily accounts of the migratory spirit which seems to have seized so strongly upon the colored population of the South, and I well know the cause of it; and that neither the whites or blacks are free from blame, for having each been, more or less, party to the cause.

You also say that some whites are emigrating. I imagine certain of them cannot leave too soon for their advantage.

6. "Hon. Alex. Noguez of Avoyelles [Parish, La.] having received numerous letters from his constituents in regard to Kansas, and being desirous of advising them wisely upon this as upon every subject affecting their welfare, wrote to Mr. E. D. McLaughlin, at one time a resident of Marksville [parish seat of Avoyelles] and connected with one of the oldest and most respectable Creole families of the State—a gentleman of character and integrity, and now engaged in the practice of law at Omaha, Nebraska—to send him such information as might be of service to colored people disposed to migrate to that section of the country." *Weekly Louisianian*, July 26, 1879. Alexandre Noguez was a Negro delegate to the Louisiana State Constitutional Convention in 1879 then in session in New Orleans.



But the cause has transpired, and is thought by many good men to be irremediable. It has at least had the effect of producing the *exodus excitement*; and here let us drop it to consider what may be done with the people now residing in the South—of whatever caste, class, color, condition, or nativity—who consider it unprofitable and unconducive to longevity to remain in Dixie.

You say that three hundred colored people leave the City of New Orleans, alone, every week; or some twelve hundred per month. Add to that number one hundred and fifty persons per week from other parts of Louisiana, and we have eighteen hundred per month, or twenty-one thousand six hundred per year, from that State alone. Then add for the States of Alabama, Florida, Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas, each a like number, and we find that nearly two hundred thousand persons will have left the South—principally from the cotton and grain fields, during an excitement of only a twelve month duration.

Now this State and Kansas are large in territory, fertile in soil, healthful in climate, and cannot be surpassed in general natural resources by any states of the American Union. They are in great part thinly populated.

Much the same might be said of the State of Colorado, and the Territories of Arizona, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming. The Indian Territory has not been opened to settlement by other than Indian tribes, and I hope never will be while there are such to occupy it; for I am one of those who believe the Government of this Country should keep its pledges inviolate, though made to persons unable to enforce them.

The other States and Territories I have mentioned can easily absorb as many of the *right kind* of persons, coming in the *right spirit*, and *duly prepared*, as would leave the whole South during a year; even if they equalled the grand aggregate we have computed; without their numbers being noticed, or anyone's elbow-room being interfered with.

By right kind, I mean *honest* men and women. By right spirit, those who are *willing* and *determined* to *gain* the necessities of life, and to that end will begin work with the rising, and end it with the setting sun, doing a fair day's labor every working day of the year, *no half Saturday's excepted*. By *duly prepared*, I mean having at least sufficient means to support themselves while they are looking for permanent homes, or employment.

The regular vocations are open to all those who wish—and are

able—to avail themselves of the opportunities, they afford; but farm labor is what is especially in demand.

There is a class of colored people with which the North (and I may also say the South) is over-stocked. I allude to, what, in southern parlance would be styled the "city nigger"; who is generally speaking, a barber, hotel porter, waiter or cook, or swaggering beer guzzling gambler, or impudent bawdy house pimp.

Of course there are very worthy and honorable exceptions, but so many of the worst element among the colored people have flocked to the Cities and Towns, that here in the north-west they are exciting even republicans to say "if there be the characteristics of the descendents of Ham, we don't want any more of them amongst us." Such had better stay where they are; for this busy north-western hive sometimes gives its drones short shrift.

Lands can be had, (where they are in the market,) at all prices from \$1.25 to \$50.00 per acre, in tracts of any regular sub-division of a section from ten acres to six hundred and forty, by pre-emption, homestead, or purchase at private sale.

There are certain things no colored man need expect who flees from a southern state, and I will enumerate a few of them.

There will *not* be given him 160 acres of land and the teams and implements for culture. Nor will he be *given* food and clothing. Neither will the people rush with open arms to receive and embrace him.—They don't do after that fashion with the *whites* who come among them—And they must not expect so much personal social intimacy with the white people, as they may have been used to in their southern homes.

They will also find that their chances for *official* distinctions are exceedingly rare, and are like to remain so for many generations.

But as a compensation for these things of which they may be deprived, they may be sure that if they prove themselves worthy in their various callings they will command and receive fair wages, which are (in this State at least) secured to them by laws which exclude *all property* from exemption against claims for wages for labor. They will also be treated justly, and above all things, be allowed to entertain, declare and practice any political faith, and freely do all things not in violation of the laws concerning the peace and good order of these States and Territories, or contrary to good morals. They may be sure that, so long as they do as others are required to do they may remain daily and nightly in enjoyment of the utmost personal security possible to be attained and may safely

hold all property their industry and economy may enable them to accumulate.

The whites who come to this section will be treated according to their merit, and will have opportunity for demonstrating whether they have much or little of it.

None need expect to find this northwest settled by ignorant semi-barbarous people. They will be met with as active intelligence, as great general culture, and studied accomplishment, as can be found among the same number of individuals anywhere on God's footstool.

I have written in this plain manner, because, knowing me as you do, you will not misunderstand me. You are well aware that I am not given to exaggeration or flattery, but am rather in the habit of saying plain things. I have always respected you as one of the earnest, honest leaders of your race; in fact as a representative man among them; and I am pleased that you so far retain the respect and confidence of all classes, as to have been sent to represent your parish in the Convention.

You may publish this letter, if you desire to do so as a whole, and think it worthy and conducive of good.

I am your friend,

E. D. McLAUGHLIN