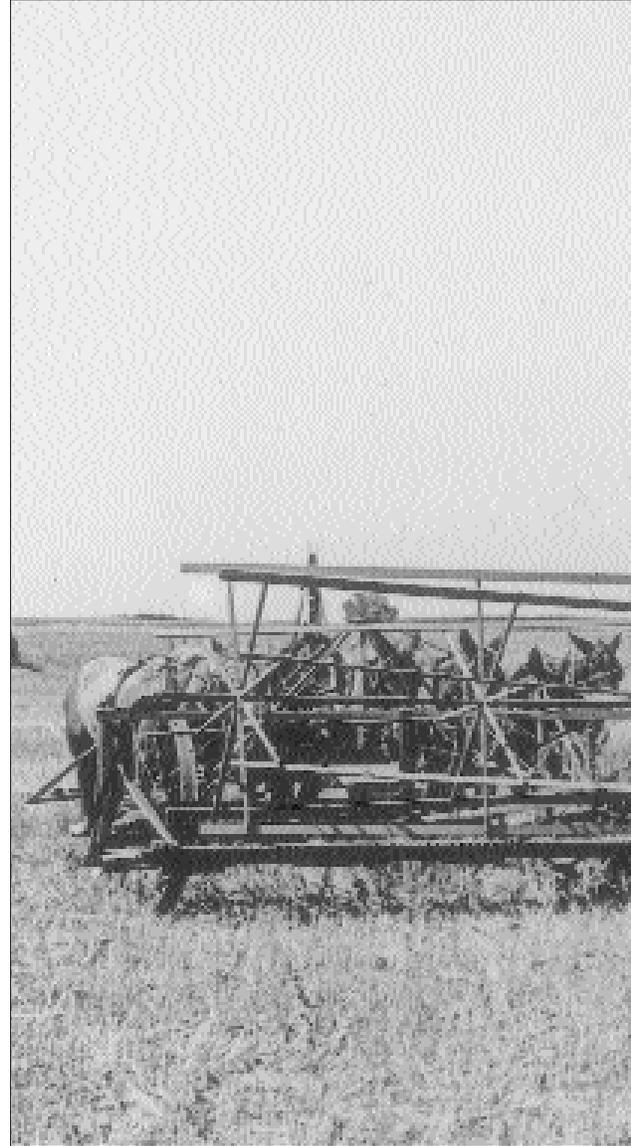


Hoeing Their Own Row

Black Agriculture and the Agrarian Ideal in Kansas, 1880–1920

by Anne P. W. Hawkins

Millionaire Junius G. Groves came to Kansas at age twenty with a dollar and twenty-five cents in his pocket. Born a Kentucky slave, the young man who would become “Potato King” arrived in Kansas City in 1879 amidst a throng of poor African American “exodusters” from the southern states who had immigrated to Kansas City, Topeka, and other Missouri riverport towns in the “promised land” of Kansas. Seeking land ownership, independence, and freedom from the violence and oppression that characterized African American life in the post-Civil War South, an estimated twenty-six thousand black southerners migrated to Kansas with the Exodust movement of 1879–1880. Like Junius Groves, some individuals and families settled on their own; others arrived as members of organized town colonies. All hoped to fare better



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Harvesting broom corn on the farm of George Walker, a prominent black farmer of Hugoton, Kansas, late 1920s.

economically in Kansas than the subsistence-level living black southerners earned by farming cotton or working as low-skilled laborers.¹

Groves found employment as a farmhand in rural Kansas City after several weeks of searching, earning

1. Fred Lincoln Mather, ed., *Who's Who of the Colored Race: A General Biographical Dictionary of Men and Women of African Descent* (1915; reprint, Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1976), 125–26; *Topeka Plaindealer*, May 4, 1900; unattributed newspaper article reprinting information published in the *Boston Transcript*, August 29, 1907, in “Negro Clippings,” vol. 6, 67–69, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society; *Kansas City Star*, May 17, 1910; Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 104; Robert G. Athearn, *In Search of Canaan: Black Migration to Kansas, 1879–80* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1978), 180; see also Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the*

what he deemed “almost starvation wages, 40 cents per day, and I was obliged to board myself. This was better than being forced to roam the streets and beg, so I gladly accepted the offer, determined to work my

Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery (New York: Vintage Books, 1980). For the estimated population of exoduster immigrants, see Athearn, 167, 187, 261; Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas After Reconstruction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), 184–86. The exact number of exodusters who reached Kansas is difficult to determine. Painter reports that “the Colored Relief Board in St. Louis estimated that 20,000 Exodusters reached the city in 1879–80.” Athearn quotes various Kansas officials in 1880 who estimated the numbers of exodusters reaching Kansas ranged between fifteen thousand and sixty thousand; he notes, however, that 1880 census figures show an increase of twenty-six thousand black residents from 1870 figures. Specifically how many thousands were conveyed from St. Louis and other ports of call to Kansas is not certain.



Junius G. Groves and his wife, Matilda. Although born a slave, Groves rose through poverty to become a revered and prosperous farmer in the Kansas City area.

way up to better things.”² Better things for Groves included land ownership, and he was not alone in his determination to, literally, “hoe his own row.”³ Since emancipation, this desire had inspired black southerners’ quests for land of their own. Cultivating one’s own farm and raising crops to sustain one’s family was the key to respectability in an agricultural society, and black southerners believed that a plot of land was all anyone needed to elevate his or her position and fortunes. “Gib us our own land and we take care ourselves; but widout land, de ole masses can hire us or starve us, as dey please,” lamented one Charleston man. Yet the vast majority of freedmen lacked the re-

sources to purchase land in their home states, and in the South they confronted a white power structure unwilling to advance them credit or sell them real estate.⁴

Despite these obstacles, land ownership remained a fervent aspiration. Many believed they would acquire land in the free territories of the open West—in Kansas, where black emigration agents such as George Marlowe of Louisiana reported that land and money both were ample. “What is raised yields more profit than elsewhere, and it is raised at less expense. The weather and the roads enable you to do more work than elsewhere. The climate is mild and pleasant,” Marlowe wrote in 1871, after an eight-day visit to Kansas in what must have been a very clement August. “Money plenty, and what you raise commands a good price.”⁵ Such favorable, often-exaggerated reports of the “Garden of the West” attracted thousands of black southerners like Junius Groves to Kansas, where good farmland was abundant and more easily acquired than in the South, and where officials claimed neither to prevent nor to induce “any class of people” to settlement. “All who come here are expected to make their own living and be self-supporting,” replied Kansas governor John St. John to one black Kentucky farmer’s letter in 1879, adding that the most desirable immigrants to Kansas were simply “men and women who are sober, honest and industrious and willing to work faithfully to better their condition and become law abiding citizens. In other words those of the colored people who would likely do best in Kansas are those who are accustomed to farming.”⁶

Junius Groves was such a person. “By keeping my eyes open, always attending to duty and doing more, rather than less, than was required of me, I soon succeeded in having my wages raised to 75 cents per day,” he recalled of his work as a farmhand. “This was considered a very fair price and I felt that I was on the road to fortune.”⁷ He could not have been

4. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long*, 401; Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution*, 104, 106 (quote on 104).

5. Quote in Thomas C. Cox, *Blacks in Topeka, Kansas 1865–1915: A Social History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 36.

6. *Ibid.*, 1, 21, 91; Lee Ella Blake, “The Great Exodus of 1879 and 1880 to Kansas” (master’s thesis, Kansas State College of Agriculture and Applied Science, 1942), 42.

7. *Topeka Plaindealer*, May 4, 1900.

2. *Topeka Plaindealer*, May 4, 1900.

3. Glen Schwendemann, *Nicodemus: Negro Haven on the Solomon* (Topeka: State of Kansas Commission on Civil Rights, 1971), 11; first published in *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 34 (Spring 1968): 10–31.

more accurate. Twenty-eight years later, his accumulated wealth was estimated at one million dollars. From his earnings as a Kansas farm laborer, Groves had been able to sharecrop, then rent, then purchase his own small acreage just three years after arriving. By 1907 he was reputedly the world's largest grower of Irish potatoes, and his palatial twenty-two-room brick home in Edwardsville—complete with electric lights, two telephones, and hot and cold running water in all of the bedrooms—was the subject of several newspaper articles nationwide. At age forty-eight, the "Potato King" owned more than forty square miles of land in several Kansas counties, which he farmed together with his wife, Matilda, their twelve children, and their hired laborers, some of whom lived in the seven farmhouses that Groves had built near the family mansion on his estate.⁸

A contemporary of Groves, Green Keith owned just one of the eighty-eight farms cultivated by black farmers of his day near Lawrence, Kansas. When he died in late summer of 1915, the flag flying outside Lawrence city hall rippled at half mast. City commissioners passed resolutions honoring Keith, a prominent resident whose death the region mourned. A respected politician, treasurer of nearby Western University, and one of the county's most successful farmers, his influence had extended hundreds of miles beyond his farm home. A newspaper two counties away eulogized, "One man like Green Keith in a community is a tremendous asset to it." By the time of Keith's death, black farmers tilled Kansas soil in 81 of the state's 105 counties, a living that had occupied African Americans in the state for more than half a century.⁹

Junius Groves, Green Keith, and other African American farmers, however, are virtually invisible in Kansas's historical landscape. The farmer who plows behind a team on the state flag and in the historic imagination is of Anglo European descent. The State Board of Agriculture, for example, published in its

1961 annual report a "history of the development of Kansas Agriculture thru 100 years of statehood." Not one minority person was named in the centenary volume. In a section entitled "Immigration," no mention was made of the forty-three thousand African Americans who settled in Kansas between 1860 and 1880. In a report on black farming in America published in 1982 by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, black farming in Kansas or any western state was omitted altogether.¹⁰ Academic histories are similarly mute, and scholars have advanced different theories to explain the omission of black farmers from historical accounts. One historian surmised that agricultural settlement in general "has been neglected," with more attention paid by scholars and literary writers to "romantic" topics such as the gold rush, the fur trade, and the cattle industry.¹¹ Another historian credited racism with erasing black involvement from the agricultural picture of the West, arguing that "the stereotyping of black females and males in popular literature and media during the nineteenth century obscured the realities of their lives on the prairies and elsewhere. . . . [E]nough black women [and men] existed on the prairie frontier to destroy the notion that prairie [settlers] were uniformly white."¹² While black agricultural communities in Kansas, particularly the town of Nicodemus, have received recent scholarly attention, most published histories emphasize the failure of these communities to endure, or stop short of pursuing the history after 1880 of those black southern migrants who did realize their dreams.¹³

Historical evidence contradicts the image that black Kansas farmers were so rare in number as to be invisible and confined geographically to small settlements that could not sustain an agricultural livelihood. The state's black

8. Mather, *Who's Who of the Colored Race*, 125–26; "Negro Clippings," vol. 6, 67–69.

9. *Emporia Gazette*, September 8, 1915; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Negro Population 1790–1915* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1918), 650–51; Historic Sites Survey, *Historic Preservation in Kansas, Black Historic Sites: A Beginning Point* (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1977), 10.

10. Kansas State Board of Agriculture, *Kansas Agriculture: Statehood Centennial Edition 1861–1961* (Topeka: 1961), 240; Department of Commerce, *Negro Population*, 43–45; Pamela Browning, *The Decline of Black Farming in America: A Report of the United States Commission on Civil Rights* (Washington, D.C.: Commission, 1982).

11. W. Sherman Savage, *Blacks in the West* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1976), 95.

12. Glenda Riley, *The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and the Plains* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 27.

13. See Historic Sites Survey, *Historic Preservation in Kansas*; Athearn, *In Search of Canaan*; Painter, *Exodusters*; Savage, *Blacks in the West*; Schwendemann, *Nicodemus*.



By 1907 Junius Groves was reputedly the world's largest grower of Irish potatoes, and his wealth is evident in his twenty-two room brick home in Edwardsville.

population rose from 17,108 in 1870 to 43,107 in 1880. By 1881 twelve agricultural colonies in Kansas had been established by black farmers: Nicodemus (founded in 1877), Hodgeman (1878), Morton City (1878), Dunlap (1878), Kansas City-area colony (1879–1880), Parsons (1879), Wabaunsee (1879), Summit Township (1879), Topeka-area colony (1880), Burlington (1880), Little Coney (1881), and the Daniel Votaw colony (1881). Some of these colonies disbanded after a few years; others remained viable well into the twentieth century.¹⁴ Yet a historiographic emphasis on the failure of black farming colonies presents a limited view of the wider patterns that took place. Although they represented less than 5 percent of the total population of Kansas farmers throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, thou-

14. Department of Commerce, *Negro Population*, 43–45; Historic Sites Survey, *Historic Preservation in Kansas*, 10–13, 18–21. While this source includes the founding in 1873 of a Singleton Colony in Cherokee County, that colony's establishment is convincingly disputed in Gary R. Entz, "Image and Reality on the Kansas Prairie: 'Pap' Singleton's Cherokee County Colony," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 19 (Summer 1996): 125–37. *Historic Preservation in Kansas* also dated the founding of the Hodgeman County Colony in 1877, the year of the colony's incorporation; C. Robert Haywood gave the actual arrival date of settlers as March 24, 1878, in "The Hodgeman County Colony," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 12 (Winter 1989–1990): 210–21.

sands of African American families who settled in Kansas realized their dream of acquiring farms, and many engaged in agricultural operations over succeeding generations. By 1900 African Americans owned 3,721 Kansas farms valued in aggregate at more than \$3.7 million. In 1910 the value of black-owned farms had risen to nearly \$8.5 million, and the number of acres farmed increased from 173,614 in 1900 to 183,453 in 1910. The average acreage farmed by black Kansans rose 24 percent in 1900–1910, compared with a 1 percent increase in the average acreage farmed by white farm operators during the same decade.¹⁵

Like pioneers of European ancestry, black farmers were persistent and hard working, prospering in periods of agricultural bounty and, like white farmers, relying on neighbors' help during drought, insect plagues, and other adverse farming conditions.¹⁶ Black-owned farms, however, produced more than bumper potato crops, choice beef, and hardy golden wheat; they cultivated a basis for prosperity and virtuous living among black Kansans. Farmers were proudly touted in the black press, and leaders urged their youth to leave the immorality of city life, to get off the streets and onto farms. African American youth farmed alongside their parents; sons and daughters inherited homesteads successfully claimed by their ancestors. Black agricultural communities continued to be established into the early twentieth century. Farming was anything but an invisible occupation for black Kansans in the years following the Civil War.

As black Kansas communities between 1880 and 1920 established more stable agricultural bases, pros-

15. Department of Commerce, *Negro Population*, 514, 588–89, 592–93.

16. Craig Miner, *West of Wichita: Settling the High Plains of Kansas, 1865–1890* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986), 84.

perous black Kansas farmers received regional and national attention, rural settlers lamented the future of their youth in more urban Kansas locales, and black newspapers began to promote farming as the superior economic and moral occupation for black Kansans. At the turn of the century agricultural successes and the concurrent national promotion of industrial trades for African Americans by Booker T. Washington and his supporters converged in Kansas into a campaign heralding farming as the basis for black advancement. Ultimately, this campaign crystallized into conviction that agriculture was the solution for healing racial divisions. Black Kansans began in 1902 to champion farming as the key not only to economic prosperity but the answer to the “race problem.” Agricultural commodities markets did not discriminate by race—“A bushel of corn raised by a negro is worth just as much as a bushel of the same grade raised by a white man,” Junius Groves pointed out.¹⁷ Farming came to be seen by black Kansans as the best avenue for economic and social equality.

Beginning with the establishment of black agricultural operations in Kansas in the 1880s, African American farmers who had successfully settled claims in Kansas were periodically featured in newspapers, eager to share advice and set an example for other black agriculturists. The *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, for example, reported in June 1886, “W.P. Edwards and son have one of the finest farms in Kansas, have the largest portion of it under cultivation. They know how to make farming pay. If you wish to know how they do it, make a visit to their farm, and the broad acres of wheat, rye and corn, with only two hands, and one good team to work on the farm will show the results.”¹⁸

As black farmers became more entrenched in the ensuing decade, the press increasingly publicized their efforts. In February 1900 the *Topeka Mail and Breeze* profiled nine eastern Kansas farmers in an article entitled, “Colored Men Who are Growing Rich on Kansas Farms.” Junius G. Groves, the Edwardsville stockman and grower of potatoes, onions,

corn, cabbage, hay, parsnips, carrots, sorghum molasses, and fruit, was regarded “the wealthiest colored man in Kansas.” Among the men acclaimed as “an inspiration to other members of the race” were Benjamin Vance of Soldier Township, who raised cattle, hogs, chickens, ducks, turkeys, and horses; Robert Keith, “the richest colored man in Shawnee county”; and Major John M. Brown of Topeka, who specialized in Irish and sweet potatoes, fruit trees, and hogs. The *Mail and Breeze* concluded:

Some of the most successful farmers in Kansas are colored men who came to the state without a dollar and who have by industry and frugality accumulated small fortunes. They are to be found in almost every county in eastern Kansas . . . [and] own fine farms, live in handsome country homes, ride to town in good carriages, are respected by all their neighbors, and have all the advantages and comforts enjoyed by their white neighbors.¹⁹

Junius Groves garnered statewide celebrity in 1900 when the *Topeka State Journal* proclaimed him “the wealthiest Negro in Kansas, if not in the entire West.” The story chronicled Groves’s rags-to-riches rise as a produce farmer in the fertile Kaw Valley of Kansas. The *Topeka Plaindealer* in May 1900 published an interview with Groves in which he explained how through “only my hard work and determination to succeed to depend upon,” and frugal financial management, he made more than one hundred thousand dollars in eighteen years and accumulated a considerably larger net worth. In a front-page article, the editor of the *Topeka Plaindealer* wrote of Groves’s financial success: “He is a confident believer in the future of the Negro, and in an interesting interview, gives some sage advice to the people of his race.”²⁰

From the earliest efforts to establish African American agriculture in the state, black Kansans proffered sage advice and confident opinions on the benefits of a farm career over anything a city could offer. One *Lawrence Daily Journal* commentator wrote in 1879, “Intelligent colored men

17. *Kansas City Star*, May 17, 1910.

18. *Western Cyclone* (Nicodemus), June 17, 1886.

19. *Mail and Breeze* (Topeka), February 2, 1900.

20. *Topeka Plaindealer*, May 4, 1900.



By 1881 twelve agricultural colonies in Kansas had been established by black farmers. Here the John Sumner family poses at its farmstead in Dunlap, Morris County, 1880s.

with whom I conversed at Kansas City, Wyandotte, and Nicodemus, express the same opinion; that they should be put on to land, given a start, and then let alone to work or starve. If left in towns, they say, they will become lazy and demoralized, and in a little time utterly worthless.”²¹ Settlers worried about the future of their youth in more populous areas of Kansas, as rural communities established more stable agricultural bases. The *Topeka American Citizen* lamented in 1888 that among “the young colored men of Topeka, in a general way . . . there seems to be a woeful lack of genuine manhood. They are beings without aims or purposes, save frolicking and having a good time generally. Now we have no objection to young men occasionally assembling for the purpose of amusing themselves, provided that such amusements tend toward mental and moral improvement. But a sporting and merry-making that continue from January to January is too much time to be spent in that way.”²² An editorial in the *Historic Times*, a black newspaper published in Lawrence, was more direct in its concern for the unemployment and laziness it saw in African American youth not oc-

21. Quote in U.S. Department of the Interior, *Promised Land on the Solomon: Black Settlement at Nicodemus, Kansas* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1986), 60.

22. *American Citizen* (Topeka), January 11, 1888.

cupied by rural industry. It published this entreaty to “Our Young Men” in 1891:

More care must be given to our boys. The cities are hot-beds of vice and immorality; it is lamentable to see such large multitudes of young men lol-ling through the streets

and thorough fares of Lawrence. . . . Young men, quit hording on street corners, pull off your silk hats and tooth pick shoes: go to work, learn some trade, respect your mother and sister and get your knoledge [*sic*] box fixed up.”²³

Suspicion that the city was no place for young people strengthened in 1899 when early reports claimed that the 1900 federal census, when published, would prove “Progress in the Country and Poverty in the Large Cities” for black Americans. Census officials had been collecting data nationwide that “will show the progress which the colored race has made in accumulating property, and especially farm property,” and reports predicted that “the census of 1900 will reverse the showing of 1890, and reveal the fact that . . . the colored farmer is making considerable progress, while his brother in the large cities is making very little, if any.” A census official was quoted in 1899 as saying, “If the race makes its home among the farms, we may expect something of this continued progress. The deterioration of the colored man in the large cities seems to be established by the assessment figures for realty in those cities.”²⁴

23. *Historic Times* (Lawrence), July 11, 1891.

24. *Plaindealer* (Topeka), November 10, 1899.

In Kansas the success of black farming coupled with the interpretation of the 1900 census report marked a beginning to the serious promotion of black agriculture. Outspoken black Kansas farmers were convinced that agriculture was the key to an economically prosperous and morally virtuous life for black Kansans. Junius Groves maintained, "The negro can make more money with the same amount of work on the farm than he can in town and he will be happier and better for it." Based on his own experience as a newcomer to Kansas, Groves argued that farming had the added advantage of being a relatively easy career to enter.

Any negro who wants to can get out on the farm. All he needs to do is to make the change. . . . If he shows to the farmer and the neighbors that he is industrious and honest and wants to do something for himself, the way will be easy for him. He will have no trouble renting a little piece of land. The farmers will lend him their teams and tools and advance the seed and take their pay when the crop is harvested. I know of dozens of negroes who have done and are doing this. . . . It takes only a year or two for the negro's share of the crops to be sufficient for him to buy his own teams and tools and a little later he can buy a little land of his own. All the capital any negro needs to get a start on the farm is his hands, a willingness to work and a determination to be honest.²⁵

A willingness and determination to farm, according to some black Kansans, were the means for reforming city loafers and frolickers into hard-working, upstanding leaders, a conviction that Thomas Jefferson had asserted one century earlier. "The mobs of great cities," he wrote in 1785, "add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body." Jefferson had idealized the American farmer, insisting, "Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people. . . . While we have land to labour then, let us never wish to see our citizens occupied at a workbench, or twirling a distaff."²⁶

Black Kansas farmers' belief, then, that a country life was more virtuous and prosperous than city living was certainly not a new philosophy. The agricultural historian David Danbom has argued that the idea of the virtuous yeoman farmer as model citizen "was well articulated in the ancient world," had taken root in America with the young nation's earliest generation of leaders, and "thrived, drawing intellectual sustenance" from such political and literary thinkers as Jefferson and Henry David Thoreau.²⁷ In the eighteenth century the agrarian myth espoused the superiority of the economically and politically independent American farmer over debauched, aristocratic life in Europe. Writers such as Benjamin Franklin sought to interpret the new independent society that was evolving in terms of the abundant land in America awaiting settlement. These late-eighteenth-century pundits, observed historian Henry Nash Smith, upheld "the doctrines that agriculture is the only source of real wealth; that every man has a natural right to land; that labor expended in cultivating the earth confers a valid title to it; that the ownership of land, by making the farmer independent, gives him social status and dignity, while constant contact with nature in the course of his labors makes him virtuous and happy."²⁸ A century later black Kansas farmers also would subscribe to these doctrines of land ownership and agricultural pre-eminence.

Romantic agrarianism turned westward during the mid-nineteenth century as Americans embraced the legend of the vast American West "as an uncomplicated, untainted Eden of social simplicity and moral clarity." To an eastern society unsettled by the advent of cities, factories, and the social ills of the Industrial Revolution, the mythic West represented the garden they believed America once had been.²⁹ A revival of romantic agrarianism resurged at the advent of the twentieth century for reasons, Danbom argued, that "had little to do with rural America and much to

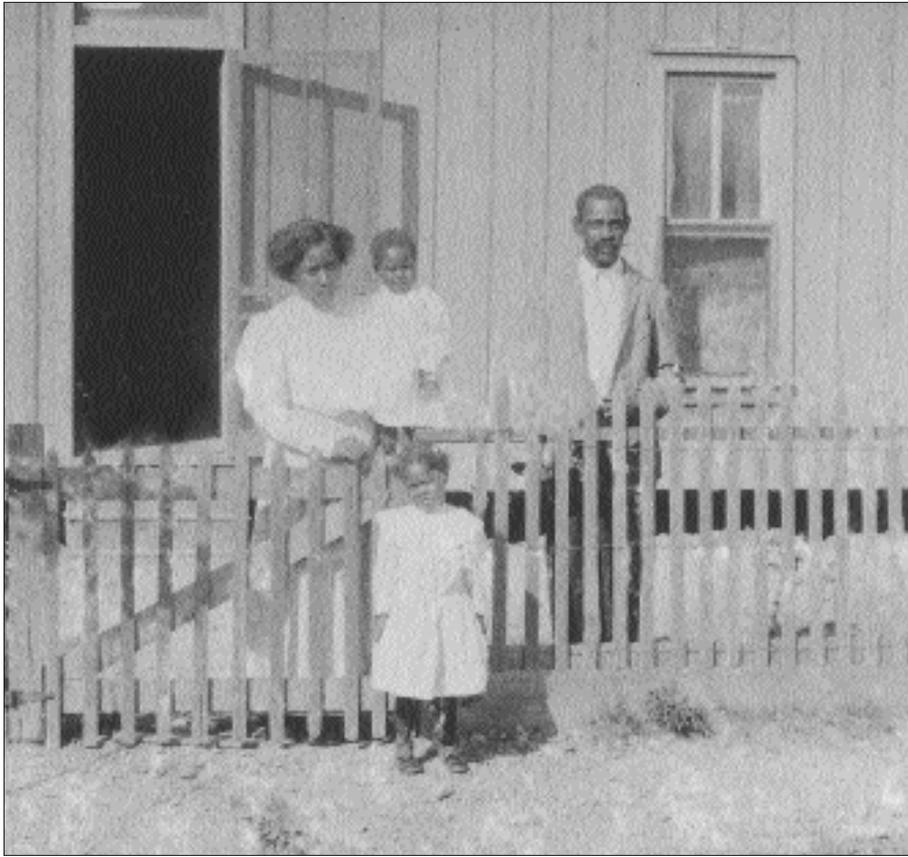
27. David B. Danbom, "Romantic Agrarianism in Twentieth-Century America," *Agricultural History* 65 (Fall 1991): 1.

28. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West As Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), 125–26.

29. Paul S. Boyer et al., eds., *The Enduring Vision: A History of the American People*, vol. 2 (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath and Co., 1996), xlv, 565.

25. "Negro Clippings," vol. 6, 77–79; *Kansas City Star*, May 17, 1910.

26. Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 124–25.



Children of black farmers were encouraged to follow in their parents' agrarian footsteps. As sons and daughters inherited homesteads successfully claimed by their ancestors, black agricultural communities continued into the early twentieth century.

do with social and economic changes extrinsic to agriculture. . . . When they spoke of what rural life had to offer, advocates of a return to the land always pointedly contrasted it with urban ills and implied that rural living would allow a restoration or recapture of a free and natural existence that had been lost."³⁰

Within this agrarian context, black farmers stridently desired their own land and the economic independence that accompanied it. Their pursuit of an autonomous agrarian living served to redefine black American agricultural society after the Civil War from the anonymity, poverty, and brutality of an agrarian slave past to a new ideal, one encompassing private ownership, preservation of family, economic security, and independence. By the late nineteenth century, when more than thirty-seven hundred black farmers owned

Kansas farms, two compatible American philosophies—traditional “romantic” agrarianism and the promotion of vocational education for African Americans by Booker T. Washington—converged into an agrarian ideal for black Kansans.

A former slave and principal of Alabama’s Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, Washington had achieved national prominence when, in the fall of 1895, he delivered an opening address at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta. In his “Atlanta Compromise”

Washington proposed to build a new South based upon agricultural and industrial cooperation between the races, calling upon each African American metaphorically to “cast down your bucket where you are. . . . Cast it down in agriculture, mechanics, in commerce, in domestic service, and in the professions,” Washington urged. “No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem.”³¹

Washington supported a variety of industrial vocations for African Americans, among which he considered farming and rural land ownership “of fundamental importance” to the stability and prosperity of black society. Washington urged black southerners to remain on rural farms, and he viewed the black migration to cities with alarm, believing that “the Negro was at his worst” in urban America. Farms bred people of wealth and recognition, and he encouraged

30. Danbom, “Romantic Agrarianism in Twentieth-Century America,” 2–3.

31. Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* (New York: Carol Publishing Group, University Books, 1993), 218–25.

African Americans to own farmland on which to cultivate a basis for commercial entrepreneurial prosperity.³² "Agriculture has not infrequently served as an entrance for members of the Negro race into business," he wrote in *Negro in Business*, published in 1907. "It is probable that in the present time there is no medium through which a large number of the Negro race can so quickly and easily acquire not merely economic independence but the capital which opens the door to business and the larger administrative tasks, as in agriculture." In the first two chapters of his book, Washington celebrated the achievements and entrepreneurial spirit of southern farmers, and he praised Kansas farmer Junius Groves, on whose career he devoted an entire chapter, as a model of black success.³³

Echoing both Booker T. Washington and Thomas Jefferson's writings on yeomanry, Leavenworth, Kansas, attorney and political activist William Bolden Townsend advanced the theory in 1901 that farming was the best solution, economically and morally, for his fellow black Kansans. His message embodied the convergence of romantic agrarianism and trade education boosterism.

My observations have taught me that the constant drift of our people to the cities is one of the greatest evils which now threatens the race. In order to exist on this continent, we must be land owners and agriculturists, for the land owners regardless of space are bound to control and dictate the destiny of this republic. I do not wish to be understood that the race should confine its vocations entirely to farming; because I am one of those who believe that the Negro should pursue any and every avocations [*sic*] that is profitable to any other man. . . .

[But] unless the majority of us turn our attention to the farm, city life will not only prove a curse to us but will reduce us to a more dependent people than we now are. . . .

The young men of the race, particularly those who possess no special training for skilled or pro-

fessional work[,] should go to the country[,] buy land or rent it[,] become producers as well as consumers—then will come peace, respect, contentment and happiness for the race.³⁴

Initially other Kansans imitated Booker T. Washington in their promotion of industrial education, encouraging African Americans to strengthen all black professions in general by learning a trade. "The race cannot have successful Negro bankers, lawyers, merchants and its compliment of clerks, unless there are farmers, blacksmiths and mechanics to furnish a clientage," read a *Plaindealer* editorial in January 1899. "There is as much honor being a first-class farmer, carpenter or blacksmith as there is being a lawyer, doctor or preacher, and a blamed sight more money and independence in either."³⁵ But by the summer of 1900 a subtle shift in priorities was evident. African American Kansans began to emphasize agriculture, elevating first-class farmers above practitioners of other occupations. Black business leaders in Topeka proposed the need for an organization, "for its purpose the inducing of intelligent and industrious Negroes to come to Kansas and settle on farms, and the devising of ways to aid them get a start."³⁶ Inherent in the desire to organize a local league of black businessmen was the notion, born of a fusion between agrarianism and the promotion of industrial education, that such an organization should persuade African Americans to farm in Kansas. A "Negro Commercial Club" was subsequently organized in Topeka in June 1900, and the *Topeka Plaindealer* gleefully wrote, "This will be a most excellent opportunity for the Negroes of Kansas to show to the world what we have accomplished since the exodusters of 1879 were fed by charity in the barracks of North Topeka." A similar Negro Business Men's League was organized in Kansas City with the help of Junius Groves, and the black community proudly proclaimed that Kansas City had organized its league before Booker T. Washington had coordinated his own.³⁷

32. August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880–1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964), 105.

33. Booker T. Washington, *Negro in Business* (1907; reprint, New York: AMS Press, 1971), 21, 27–28, 299.

34. *Topeka Plaindealer*, May 17, 1901.

35. *Plaindealer*, January 6, 1899.

36. *Topeka Plaindealer*, June 15, 1900.

37. *Ibid.*, June 29, 1900.



Beginning around 1900, black leaders began promoting the idea that farming was the superior economic and moral occupation for black Kansans. "If you want to solve the 'race question,'" urged Nicodemus farmer George Jones, "get out of the cities, get on the farms."

Suppose we had in Shawnee county a hundred Negro farmers bringing their products into our markets, depositing their money in our banks, and purchasing their supplies of our dry good merchants, grocermen, etc., how long would it be before a Negro clerk would be found in every bank, and business house in this city? Not long. Why would they be put there? Because the trade and business of these

Negro farmers would be worth seeking. The white man's love for the mighty dollar will outweigh his prejudice against a black skin. Through this means the Negro farmer will solve the problem. His work [will] open the doors of the factory, the machine-shop, the bank and the business house to the Negro boy and girl. Thus the Negro farmer leaves a heritage to the race, remunerative, ennobling, inspiring.³⁹

Nicodemus-area farmer George W. Jones agreed: "If you want to solve the 'race question,' get out of the cities—get on the farms, where you can rear strong, healthy, robust children—where you can own horses and cattle, bank accounts—become taxpayers, and the question is solved," he advised. "Don't say you haven't the money and are unable to come. It will be but a short while before all the best land will be taken, or it will be so high that you cannot purchase it and when you are driven from the cities for want of employment, where will you go? Prosperity is power."⁴⁰

A campaign hailing farming for reform advanced with a crusader's zeal. Kansas black newspapers promulgated the agrarian ideal in scores of feature articles and editorials over the next two decades. Headlines routinely proclaimed

Their efforts were aided in the next year by William R. Carter, principal of the Topeka Industrial Institute, nicknamed the "Western Tuskegee." While his institute offered preparation for a wide variety of trade vocations, Carter appealed for special funding to purchase farmland for the institute. "More and more does the necessity of purchasing a farm become evident," he argued.

This is one of the best agricultural states, and we should give the boys and girls better opportunities to learn scientific farming, horticulture, stock-raising and dairying. This institution should seek to give such training as will result in creating an influence that will keep the masses of the negro race in the rural districts. . . . Think of the many thousand acres of fine Kansas soil that await the tillage of the intelligent negro farmer. It is our duty to secure a farm and prepare for young men and women without delay.³⁸

Having prepared the ground to instill the idea that farming was the superior economic and moral occupation for black Kansans, leaders began in 1902 to sow the notion that farming was the solution to the "race problem." An editorial in the *Topeka Plaindealer* outlined specifically how Kansas's "Negro Farmers Can Solve the Problem."

38. *Topeka Daily Capital*, November 10, 1901.

39. *Topeka Plaindealer*, June 27, 1902; *Topeka Daily Capital*, June 27, 1902.

40. *Topeka Plaindealer*, April 17, 1903.

pro-agrarian slogans similar to the 1903 banner asserting, "The Negro's Problem Can Only Be Solved by the Farming Route"; the 1906 front-page headline, "A Fortune Awaits the Man Who Properly Tills His Soil—Negroes, Get to the Farm"; or the question printed under the masthead in 1916, "Are You Going to Furnish A Lazy Boy to Run the Streets This Summer? Better Let Him 'Farm' a Few Vacant Lots." A bucolic newspaper report on Nicodemus observed in 1910 that "The general healthfulness and contented lives of these rural people gives strength to the argument that the farm, rather than the city, is the place for the negro."⁴¹ Black Kansas farm leaders extolled the ease of entry for African Americans into agriculture and condemned the decadence of city living. Farmers' institutes were organized, and colonization efforts resumed to settle black southerners on Kansas farms.

Junius Groves strongly supported this agrarian ideal. His clout extended far beyond Edwardsville, and as president of the Kansas Negro Farmers' Association and the State Negro Business League and as a member of Booker T. Washington's National Business League, he was routinely sought for advice. Groves contended that agriculture best offered an egalitarian livelihood and was fundamental in resolving racial discrimination, both in earning power and access to entrepreneurial opportunities. "There is no race prejudice on the farm," he explained. "The soil is there and it is just as easy for the negro to get his living from it as it is for the white man."⁴²

Groves's son Charles, a graduate of the Kansas State Agricultural College in Manhattan, also was a vocal supporter of the agrarian ideal. In an impassioned speech before the People's Forum in Kansas City, Kansas, in 1906, he urged fellow black youth to leave the cities for the morality, the freedom, and the manhood that farming could provide:

My prayer to God is, that while we are yet young and full of vim and vigor, we will not lose an opportunity until we have established a solid foun-

ation in the soil of our God, thus making the burden for the future generation lighter, for it is a familiar principle in political economy that a people owning the land they live upon can with difficulty be cajoled or forced to leave. . . .

Why stay here, crying trade unions, foreign immigration and race prejudice are against us, and dying like sheep with the rot, when you could just as easily take up your abode upon the fertile plains of old Kansas and there become men among men.⁴³

Some black farmers saw agriculture as a welfare mission and actively worked to reform the indigent or imprisoned through work on Kansas farms. One Wyandotte County farmer, H.P. Ewing, launched the Kaw Valley Truck Farm Company in 1914 to employ homeless Negroes. "The farm is the place for the people of my race," he said. "We aim to come to Kansas City and hire our help. Men who are loafing around the street corners now will be given an opportunity to earn good wages and also will be taught practical farming in all its branches. . . . Judge Sims of Kansas City, Kas., has promised that he will parole to us some of the negroes sentenced for minor offenses so that we may make better men of them." By July 1915 Ewing and forty black indigents were cultivating corn, tomatoes, radishes, melons, and other garden produce on 104 acres of Kaw River valley ground, and Ewing estimated the harvest would net twelve thousand dollars.⁴⁴

Other black Kansans with altruistic and economic aims continued to organize black agricultural communities. In 1916 wealthy farmer J.W. Thomas, along with other black businessmen, sought to establish a settlement of thirty families on land offered by the Santa Fe railroad in Kearny County, south of the Arkansas River. Their plans attracted the interest of black farmers as far away as Texas.⁴⁵ The Colored People's Home Effort, an organization headquartered in Strong City, chartered a black settlement in 1921 "to promote the material and moral well-being of the colored people by encouraging and aiding

41. *Ibid.*, April 17, 1903, April 27, 1906, April 21, 1916; unattributed newspaper article, "The Story of Nicodemus," March 1910, in "Negro Clippings," vol. 5, 202.

42. "Negro Clippings," vol. 6, 67–69; *Kansas City Star*, May 17, 1910.

43. *Topeka Plaindealer*, June 15, 1906.

44. *Kansas City Journal*, May 10, 1914, in "Negro Clippings," vol. 6, 110; *Topeka State Journal*, July 17, 1915, in *ibid.*, vol. 6, 155.

45. *Topeka State Journal*, November 10, 1915, August 7, 1916.



In 1900 African Americans operated 1,782 Kansas farms, but by 1930 black ownership had dropped to 941. Although the Great Depression of the 1930s witnessed a further decline in black populations, black-owned farms in Kansas continue to the present day, some operated by descendants of their founders.

them to engage in farming and agriculture." Small farms and tracts of land for truck gardens were made available "for settlement and purchase by negroes desiring homes in Kansas. . . . Agriculture, horticulture and stock raising will be encouraged."⁴⁶

Within the agrarian community, black Kansas farmers promoted agriculture at farmers' institutes where they made personal contacts, forged business relationships, and discussed improvements in farm technology and methods. Statewide conventions of "colored farmers," such as those sponsored by the Topeka Industrial Institute and the Sunflower State Agricultural Association, enabled black Kansans to congregate annually to hear presentations and share

46. *Ibid.*, June 16, 1921.

expertise. Twenty-eight men and women farmers presented programs at the December 1914 convention, offering seminars as diverse as "Making Farming Pay," "Growing a Thousand Acres of Wheat," and a swine symposium conducted by a six-member panel. Later conventions held workshops on pressing issues such as "Holding the Young People to the Farm," and "Sticking to a Western Kansas Claim." The conventions were reportedly well attended and imbued a county fair-like atmosphere. Following an annual meeting in 1909, a Topeka newspaper reported, "Negro Farmers In Kansas Are Growing Enthusiastic!" and cheered, "Keep on, Sunflower Agriculturist; open the eye of the colored brother in the city; wake him, shake him up."⁴⁷

While the total farm acreage owned by black Kansans increased between 1900 and 1920, the number of individual farms owned by black Kansans declined each decade between 1900 and 1930. In 1900 African Americans operated 1,782 Kansas farms; by 1930 black ownership had dropped to 941 farms.⁴⁸ Total acreage farmed remained fairly stable throughout the early nineteenth century but decreased by 1930:

TOTAL ACREAGE
FARMED BY BLACK KANSANS⁴⁹

1900	173,614 acres
1910	183,453
1920	176,657
1930	146,745

Despite the concerted efforts of black Kansas farmers to recruit more of their own and following nearly thirty years of media prescriptives promoting the agrarian ideal, it appears that fewer black farmers were able to continue viable agricultural operations into the 1930s, and those who could required addi-

47. *Ibid.*, December 9, 1914; *Topeka Daily Capital*, December 8, 1915; *Topeka Plaindealer*, January 22, 1909.

48. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Negroes in the United States 1920-32* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1935), 570; Department of Commerce, *Negro Population*, 514, 589, 592-93.

49. Department of Commerce, *Negroes in the United States*, 570; *ibid.*, *Negro Population*, 514, 589, 592-93.

tional acreage. More research is needed to interpret the decrease in black farm ownership in context with the promotion of an agricultural ideal among black Kansans in the early twentieth century. Certainly the struggle to protect agricultural livelihoods from natural disasters, tumultuous markets, and a shift from rural to urban residences prior to the Great Depression of the 1930s continued for farmers of all ethnic extractions. Initially it appears, however, that by advising black Kansans to remain in rural areas and engage in farming, well-intentioned spokesmen may not have foreseen that a growing reliance on more sophisticated methods and expensive farm machinery placed poorer black farmers at an even greater disadvantage to compete, particularly so in a depressed economy. They also may have failed to recognize that cities, with varied economic opportunities and incomparable social, cultural, and intellectual advantages, were perhaps more attractive to many black Kansans than an idealistic agrarian life.⁵⁰

Kansas newspapers in the 1930s decreased their promotion of agriculture as an economic and social panacea, as farm failures and rural economic depression dealt blows to black and white farmers alike. Articles such as the 1934 *Concordia Kansan* reminiscence “When Nicodemus Was [A] Thriving Village,” spoke of success in retrospect and lamented the “faded glory” of black farming communities.⁵¹ Henry Clay Wilson of Topeka, like other successful black Kansans in the 1930s, once had been a farmer but had “retired” from agriculture in the early years of the Great Depression, leaving his truck farm in eastern Shawnee County to better his fortunes in commerce. In 1937 the *Topeka Daily Capital* applauded his philanthropy and entrepreneurial achievements in the railroad hospitality industry; his earlier trades as a Topeka barber and a farmer each merited only one sentence.⁵² A 1935 U.S. census report on agriculture confirmed, “The data . . . conclusively show that as farm owners, tenants, and managers, Negroes con-

stitute an appreciable but diminishing national asset. While Negro farmers, like those of most racial groups, materially decreased in number during the decade 1920–1930, their fields of operation have been widely extended throughout the States.”⁵³

Although black population in Kansas declined during the depression and continued to constitute a minority percentage of farm ownership, some black agricultural operations nevertheless endured. Black-owned farms continue to the present day, some operated by descendants of their founders. The Bradshaw family of Hodgeman County farmed its homestead claim for more than one hundred years, and remnants of the original dugout are still visible near Jetmore.⁵⁴ Tales of early Nicodemus pioneers’ grit and tenacity were passed down with family farms to younger generations. Versella Bates, a Nicodemus farmer, recalled in 1993, “When I was growing up, there were still those dugouts and sod houses all over the prairie. My grandparents thought that living in a hole in the ground was all right because it was a whole lot better than being in those places where they were slaves.” A neighbor, Ora Switzer of Nicodemus, remarked, “See that field over there? I was born in a sod house out in that field [in 1903]. I raised six good kids and a husband out here on this prairie. We farmed forty acres, raised corn, cattle, hogs, chickens. I made my own lard and could can 600 quarts of beets for the winter. We were never hungry a day. Life was fun. Still is.”⁵⁵

Through the 1920s the agrarian ideal was believed to offer the best answer to racial injustices in employment and opportunity for black Kansans. The media, local agricultural leaders, farmers’ institutes, and colonization organizations vigorously campaigned in support of agriculture. While this ideal may have been primarily prescriptive rather than descriptive, it served to celebrate the gains black Kansans achieved in agriculture and the enduring farm operations they cultivated in the history of the state. [KH]

50. John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, 7th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), 276.

51. *Concordia Kansan*, June 28, 1934.

52. *Topeka Daily Capital*, May 30, 1937.

53. Department of Commerce, *Negroes in the United States*, 570.

54. Historic Sites Survey, *Historic Preservation in Kansas*, 12.

55. Daniel Chu and Bill Shaw, *Going Home to Nicodemus* (Morristown, N.J.: J. Messner, 1994), 39, 68.