

Cause: Disappointment with Reconstruction

'Reconstruction' refers to the time period immediately after the American Civil War, which ended in 1865. The war had largely been fought over the issue of slavery. Now African Americans had been emancipated and, understandably, expected their lives to improve as normal political life started up again.

Expectations were particularly high amongst the many Black Americans who hadn't been born as slaves, and therefore were educated with experience of leadership - often in the Union (northern states) army.

Some of these African Americans became involved with politics and a considerable number (more than 600) took roles in state governments. A few, like Hiram Revels and Benjamin S. Turner, became Congressmen.

There were other reasons for Black Americans to be optimistic at the start of the Reconstruction era. The Republican Party was supportive of their rights, and Republican politicians gained more government jobs and influence. Republican policies tried to ensure that Black Americans were equal in law, that they could enter professional jobs, own property and establish their own businesses. By 1877, over half a million African American children were receiving a state school education.

However, Republican dominance in politics didn't last, especially in the southern states where the majority of Black Americans lived. The ideas of the Democrats (who were far less committed to African American rights) became more popular. Vote-rigging in many states helped ensure that Black Americans were restricted from voting for candidates who promised to improve their situation. Furthermore, the federal (national) government was losing interest in the 'old' issues of the southern states: politicians were distracted by the pressing issue of the Indian Wars.

Many Black Americans' hopes for a fairer system and for happier, more secure lives were therefore limited.

Cause: Activities of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK)

Despite (or perhaps because of) the emancipation of slaves in 1863 and Union victory in the American Civil War in 1865, many white southerners remained committed to the idea that black people were inferior and even dangerous. They held on to the old fear that freed slaves would seek revenge on their former white owners with terrible violence, and resented the idea that Black Americans now had similar opportunities as whites. The KKK was formed in Tennessee in 1866 with the aim of keeping African Americans 'in their place', reminding them of and punishing them for their supposed inferiority with acts of terrorism. Lynching (illegal executions) became common in the South: over 1,000 took place in the 1890s.

The KKK or 'the Klan' was a secretive society: its members wore white hoods partly as a disguise and partly to appear intimidating. One of the Klan's most remarkable features was its membership, drawn from all levels and walks of society. Particularly worrying was that even law enforcement officers were often members, which sometimes limited the protection African Americans could expect from the law. The KKK's victims also included white Republicans, who were sometimes then too frightened to speak out against the Klan or offer support to its black victims.

The federal government did try to clamp down on the activities of the KKK, for example by passing the Enforcement Acts to protect African Americans as they voted. These laws banned the intimidation of officials and the wearing of disguises. The KKK's membership began to dwindle after the 1870s, but this didn't stop violent white supremacist groups like the Red Shirts and the White League from intimidating and terrorising Black Americans, often with extreme violence.

Cause: Sharecropping

Being emancipated during the Civil War was only the first step on a difficult road to a happier life for most former slaves. The majority had very few skills besides farm labouring, and so either took low-paid, low-skilled jobs in towns and cities, or remained in agriculture.

Owning their own land would have made most former slaves secure, and it is what they had every right to expect when the war ended. In January 1865, General Sherman had announced that each freed family would be granted 40 acres and a mule in the state of Georgia. However, months later the new President Andrew Johnson cancelled this promised, stating that all land under the government's control would be returned to its previous owners.

A further setback for Black Americans was the passing of the black codes passed in the southern states in 1865 and 1866. The aim of these laws was to limit African Americans' freedom and ensure that they were still a source of cheap labour for White Americans' benefit. Many states who signed up to the black codes forced Blacks to sign annual labour contracts; those who refused risked being arrested or fined.

With their hopes of being landowners shattered, sharecropping was the only option available to many freed slaves. This meant that African American families rented small plots of land ('shares') to work on, with the landlord taking a share of their crop as rent. Because the money for the rest of their supplies was borrowed, and as their options to sell the crops were limited, many sharecropping families got into debt and remained in poverty.

Cause: False rumours

Kansas had always been a 'free state' - slavery had never been used there. For this reason it was a popular destination for former slaves seeking a better life away from the former slave-owning states. These migrant African Americans attracted the nickname 'Exodusters' - a biblical reference to movement to the 'promised land' (Exodus) combined with a reference to the dusty landscape of Kansas.

Awareness of the growing Exoduster movement spread in the late 1870s, and for many Black Americans bitterly disappointed with the realities of Reconstruction, terrified of the KKK and/or limited by the sharecropping system, it was a beacon of hope. Promising letters written by Exodusters and sent back to the southern states encouraged this feeling.

In the first months of 1879, a rumour began to spread that the government would grant free land and money in Kansas to people who moved there. Tens of thousands of Black Americans rushed to catch steamboats to begin their journey west, and in all up to 40,000 made the trip.

Although the rumour of free land and money turned out to be false, the majority of Exodusters settled in Kansas with reasonable success.

Reasons for the Exoduster movement

Reason	Year(s) it took place	Summary	Long- or short-term cause?	How significant was it? (How big a factor was it in Black Americans' decision to move to Kansas?)
Disappointment with Reconstruction				
Activities of the KKK				
Sharecropping				
False rumours				

Teaching notes

Task

- This could be done in groups of four, with each student in the group analysing one cause, completing their row of the grid (but not the last two columns) and then sharing their new knowledge and understanding. As a group, they could then discuss how to complete the last two columns. Differentiation could be built in by guiding the lower-attaining students to analyse the more straightforward causes, like the 'False rumours'.
- It could also be done as a bigger, whole-class activity where students are split into four big groups, analysing one cause each. This would allow the chance to analyse the same cause in pairs if necessary. The final two columns could then be completed after a whole-class discussion and debate, perhaps after each group has presented their cause.