

Home & Family Life

The Robbins House, Built c. 1823

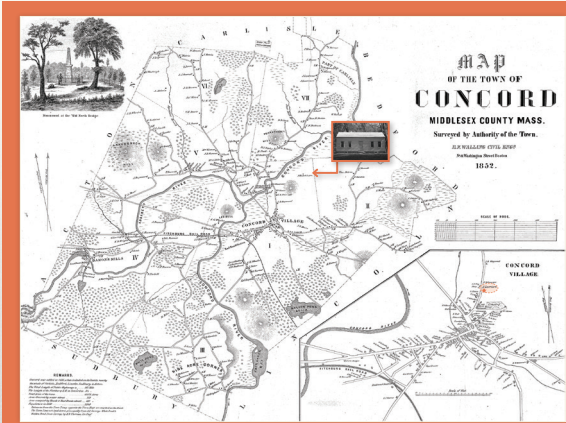
Ellen Garrison was born in this house in 1823, when it stood in its original location at the edge of the Great Meadow.

That year, Ellen's uncle, Peter Robbins, a first-generation freeborn man, purchased this house, a barn, and thirteen acres of land from wealthy Concord landowner Humphrey Barrett. Peter and his wife Fatima moved into the western half of the house, while Ellen and her family lived in the easterly half.

Ellen's father, Jack Garrison, escaped slavery in New Jersey and arrived in Concord in the early nineteenth century. Her mother, Susan (Robbins) Garrison, and her uncle Peter were the children of Caesar Robbins, a Revolutionary War veteran. Caesar was a free man in Concord who had been enslaved at birth in nearby Chelmsford. Ellen had two older brothers, John and William, and one older sister, also named Susan.

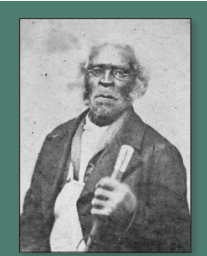
The Robbins and Garrison men were skilled farmers and laborers. They sold the products of their farm, including rye and cranberries. They also did jobs such as maintaining the roads and cutting wood for the town and other landowners.

Peter and Fatima had no children together, and Peter lost the house to debt in the 1830s. In 1837, Ellen and her family moved to nearby Monument Street. In 1852, Peter Hutchinson, a relative of Fatima, purchased the farm. Three generations of his large family were the last African American occupants of the Robbins House, moving away in 1868.



This mid-19th century map, published the same year Peter Hutchinson bought the Robbins Farm, shows his house standing alone on what became known as Peter's Path. By that time the Garrisons were living close to the town center on the east side of Monument Street.

Along with Ellen, some of her neighbors in Concord spoke out against slavery long before the Civil War. Was being against slavery the same as believing in racial equality?



Concord abolitionists circulated this daguerrotype of Jack Garrison, Ellen's father, in the effort to raise awareness around the injustice of slavery.

Scholar & Emerging Activist

Concord 1823 - 1840

Ellen's experience in Concord was both inspiring and challenging.

Inclusion in Concord

As children, Ellen and her siblings attended Concord's public schools. Local antiquarian Edward Jarvis later recalled that the Garrison children were "bright and intelligent and well trained at home. They went to the town school and were all good scholars."

Ellen grew up during a time when the rights of African Americans became a topic of local and national importance. The 1830s and 1840s were especially pivotal years in Concord, and influential abolitionists like Frederick Douglass often visited the town to give antislavery lectures. Following one such visit by the sisters Angelina and Sarah Grimké, local women, including Ellen's mother, founded the Ladies' Antislavery Society of Concord.

Ellen's family engaged deeply with questions of civil rights. At the end of 1837, her mother, Susan, hosted an Antislavery Society gathering at the family's Monument Street home. The following year, Ellen's name, along with those of her mother and elder sister, appeared alongside 200 other Concord women on a petition protesting the government's treatment of the Cherokee.

"Crowded out" in Concord

As Concord prepared for its bicentennial celebration in 1835, 12-year-old Ellen told her teacher that her mother had forbidden her to walk in the procession. As the only black child in her school, Ellen had been ill-treated and "crowded out" of a previous parade. Eventually Ellen and her mother relented and Ellen walked hand in hand with her classmate Abba Prescott "through the day, beneath the gaze of curiosity, surprise, ridicule and admiration."

"In 1835, the bicentennial celebration of the settlement of Concord took place. The night previous, the teacher of the public school, before dismissing, called upon all who wished to walk in the procession to arise. All arose but one colored girl, a good scholar, and belonging to a respectable family. The teacher asked her if she would not like to go. She said, No - what on some former occasion, she had been ill-treated and crowded out of the procession, and her mother said she should never go again. And besides, she said, no one would walk with her. - Thereupon, Abba Prescott, only nine years old, arose in her seat, and said, "She would walk with her, - who was as willing to walk with her as with any one." The teacher said, "perhaps your mother will not be willing. She answered with spirit, "I know she will." She did not misjudge her mother. From her she had derived that spirit both by nature and culture. The colored girl said her mother would not consent. She proposed to go and persuade her, which she did. And notwithstanding the incredulous gaze of the school, which seemed to say, where the trial comes you will retreat, yet on the morrow she appeared in the procession leading the colored girl by the hand and went, right leg in, the procession, and into the church and through the day, beneath the gaze of curiosity, surprise, ridicule and admiration.

EXCERPT from Abba Prescott Brooks Obituary (clipping from Christian Register), 1861.

How do you think Ellen felt as she walked in Concord's 1835 bicentennial celebration parade?

Like the Robbins and Garrison families, generations of African American landowners have often lived on the margins of town or on less productive land. The Robbins House occupied an isolated site east of the farm along Monument Street and was the only African American-owned house in Concord. Rye was one of the principal crops grown there.

Illustration: "Field of Rye" by Susan Garrison, 1840. The illustration shows a field of rye, with a small house in the background. The text below the illustration reads: "The field of rye was one of the principal crops grown there. The illustration was published in the Christian Register, 1861." The illustration is a black and white drawing of a field of rye, with a small house in the background. The text below the illustration reads: "The field of rye was one of the principal crops grown there. The illustration was published in the Christian Register, 1861."

Advocacy & Marriage in Boston

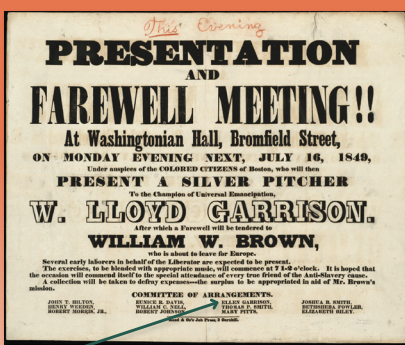
1841 - c. 1860

Ellen Garrison moved to Boston in the early 1840s, shortly after her mother died. She carried a letter of recommendation from Concord antislavery activist Mary Merrick Brooks to Maria Weston Chapman, a founder of the Boston Female Antislavery Society.

In Boston, Ellen joined the African Baptist Church on Joy Street, where her uncle Obed Robbins had been a founding member. While there, she continued her mother's legacy of antislavery activism and began her career as a teacher.

During her time in the city, Ellen became increasingly involved with local and national questions about civil rights. She signed at least four petitions calling for equal rights for African Americans, including one demanding the desegregation of Massachusetts railroads and another for desegregating Boston schools. In the 1840s, Ellen helped organize two events to honor prominent abolitionist leaders.

In 1857, Ellen married John W. Jackson, a free black farmer from Delaware. Both were 34. Her husband died within a few years, however, and by 1863, Ellen Garrison Jackson had moved to Newport, Rhode Island, where she had charge of a small private school.



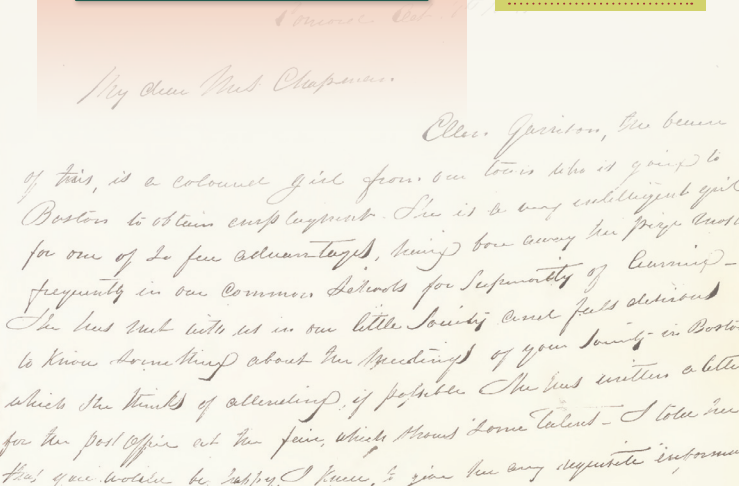
This 1840 broadside shows that Ellen was active in antislavery movements and formed important connections with some regional and national antislavery leaders. William Lloyd Garrison was then publishing The Liberator, and William Wells Brown, a prominent antislavery author and spokesman, was about to leave on a speaking tour in Europe. Others who served with Ellen on the committee in charge of the event included Robert Martin, Jr., one of the first and most successful African American lawyers in the country; and author, journalist and historian William Cooper Nell, who was to write Colored Patriots of the American Revolution in 1855.

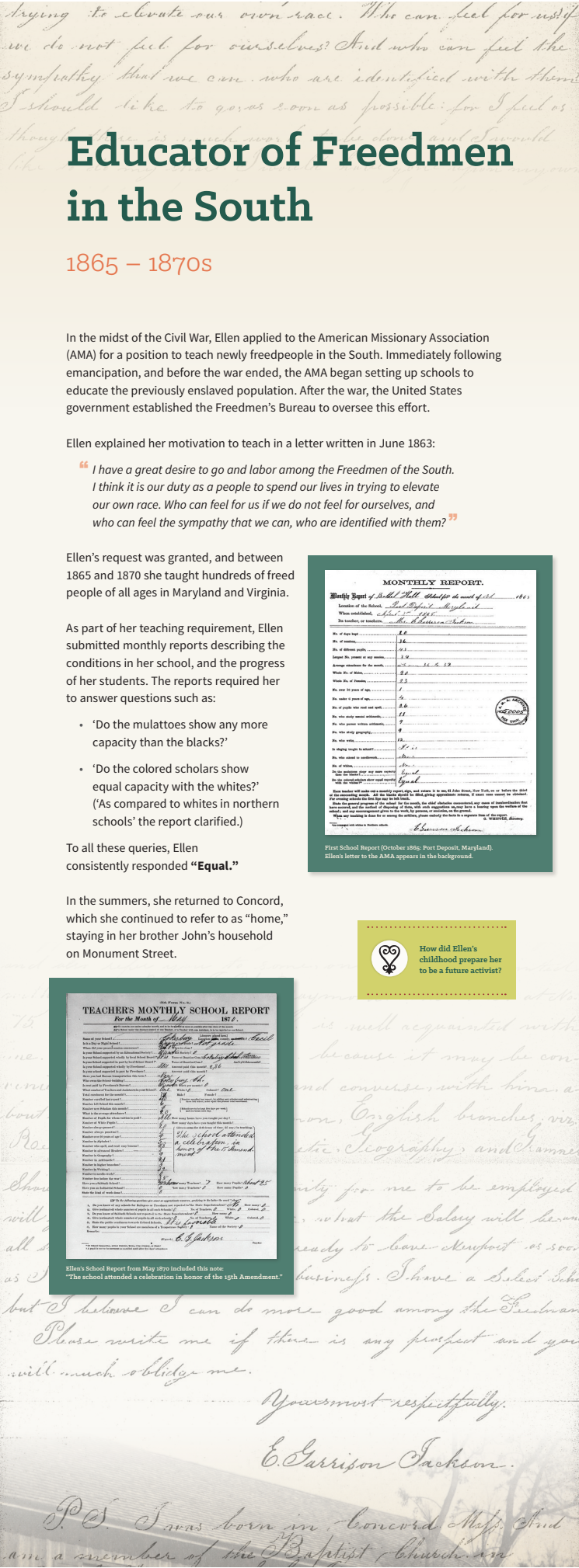
In 1846 Ellen served with William Cooper Nell on the executive committee of the Torrey Monument Association. The committee raised funds for a memorial to Charles T. Torrey, the man who became known as the "father of the underground railroad."



Monument to Charles T. Torrey 1846, Mt. Auburn Cemetery, Cambridge, MA Joseph and Thomas Carew, sculptors.

Why might Ellen have left Concord and moved to Boston?





Educator of Freedmen in the South

1865 – 1870s

In the midst of the Civil War, Ellen applied to the American Missionary Association (AMA) for a position to teach newly freedpeople in the South. Immediately following emancipation, and before the war ended, the AMA began setting up schools to educate the previously enslaved population. After the war, the United States government established the Freedmen's Bureau to oversee this effort.

Ellen explained her motivation to teach in a letter written in June 1863:

“I have a great desire to go and labor among the Freedmen of the South. I think it is our duty as a people to spend our lives in trying to elevate our own race. Who can feel for us if we do not feel for ourselves, and who can feel the sympathy that we can, who are identified with them?”

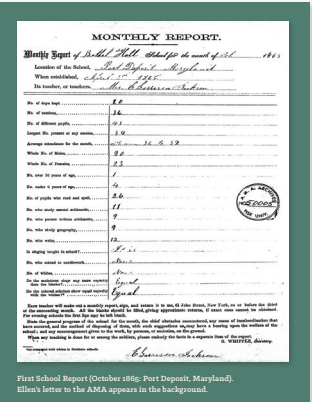
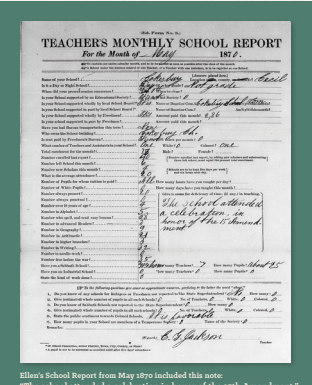
Ellen's request was granted, and between 1865 and 1870 she taught hundreds of freed people of all ages in Maryland and Virginia.

As part of her teaching requirement, Ellen submitted monthly reports describing the conditions in her school, and the progress of her students. The reports required her to answer questions such as:

- “Do the mulattoes show any more capacity than the blacks?”
- “Do the colored scholars show equal capacity with the whites?” (As compared to whites in northern schools’ the report clarified.)

To all these queries, Ellen consistently responded “Equal.”

In the summers, she returned to Concord, which she continued to refer to as “home,” staying in her brother John’s household on Monument Street.



How did Ellen's childhood prepare her to be a future activist?



Target of Harassment

Ellen taught in the South during Reconstruction, a time when the United States government struggled to reunite the country in the aftermath of the Civil War. During this period troubling questions arose around the plight of newly freed African Americans:

- Could the government guarantee the civil rights of formerly enslaved people?
- Would it be possible to protect those rights in the face of determined opposition?

These were questions that Ellen had wrestled with for much of her life in the North. Working in the South allowed Ellen to put her beliefs into practice.

Ellen experienced first-hand the hostility and antipathy directed at recently emancipated African Americans during her time in the Reconstruction South. Her letters to the American Missionary Association reveal multiple incidents of harassment and racial discrimination.

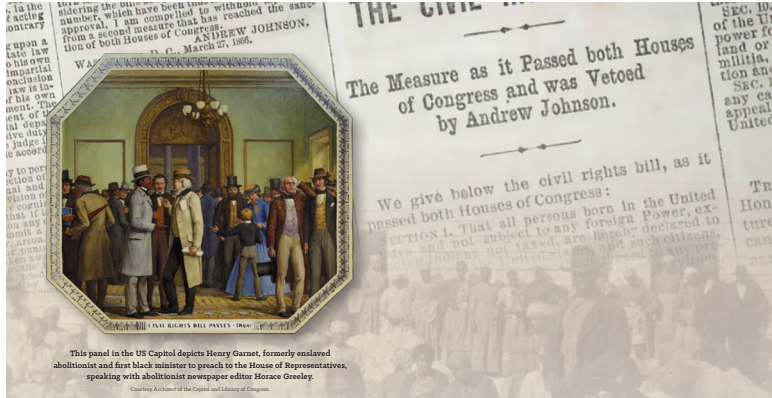
While working in Maryland, Ellen wrote,

“It is unsafe to go out, that is for colored people, for they are stoned and driven about at the pleasure of the rowdies. This seems somewhat strange to me yet so it is.”

Ellen went on to describe her own encounters with these “rowdies,” explaining how a Maryland man “not content with simply stepping on my dress,” lashed out at her, called her “a nigger,” and warned that “he would not have any of my sass and... would slap me in the mouth.”

Despite the risks, Ellen remained dedicated to her work. She claimed that this threatening behavior had not cowed her. She defiantly stated:

“I have found out one thing about these people. If they attack you be careful to stand your ground and they will leave you, but if you run they will follow.”



This panel in the US Capitol depicts Henry Garnet, formerly enslaved abolitionist and first black minister to preach to the House of Representatives, speaking with abolitionist newspaper editor Horace Greeley.

Testing the Nation’s First Civil Rights Act, 1866

Ellen challenges segregation in a train station one month after the first Civil Rights Act

Ellen's experiences of hostility came to a head in a Baltimore train station on May 5, 1866, when she and another black teacher were “forcibly ejected” from a ladies’ waiting room. Ellen described the situation in a letter written on May 9, 1866:

“An outrage has just occurred which demands attention. It was nothing less than the forcible ejection of myself and Miss Anderson from the Ladies sitting room at the depot. We were thrown out. We were injured in our persons as well as our feelings for it was with no gentle hand that we were assisted from that room and I feel the effects of it still.”

Courageously, Ellen returns to the segregated waiting room, finds a witness and documents her experience of harassment to support her legal case

As noted in the *Baltimore Sun*, local Civil Rights leaders hoped that Ellen's case would serve as a test of the Civil Rights Act, adopted just one month earlier in April. The Civil Rights Act of 1866 was the first federal law to define and extend equal protection of the law to all citizens, including all persons of African descent in America. Ellen felt it was her duty to test the government's resolve to uphold the law. She explained in a May 8, 1866 letter:

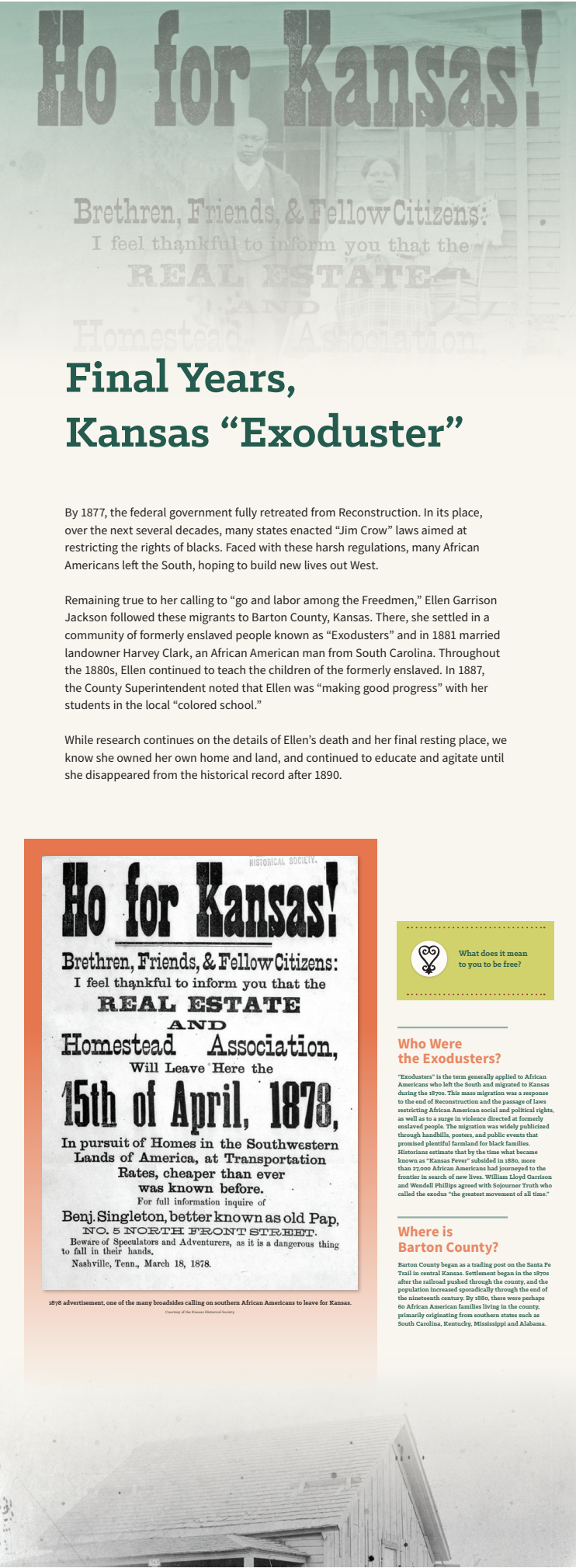
“I feel as though I ought to strive to maintain my rights. As long as our friends have passed a law for our protection, we ought to contend for our rights and let our friends see that we appreciate their efforts in our behalf.”

The train officer requests a jury of his peers, and the grand jury dismisses the case

Unfortunately, a Maryland grand jury dismissed Ellen's suit against the railroad in July 1866. In what would become a recurring theme of the Reconstruction era, southern courts proved reluctant to extend civil protections to African Americans. The struggle for equal protection and civil rights would not be settled in the nineteenth century.

What would you do to defend your rights?

Has equality been achieved? If yes, how? If no, what are the barriers?



Brethren, Friends, & Fellow Citizens:

I feel thankful to inform you that the

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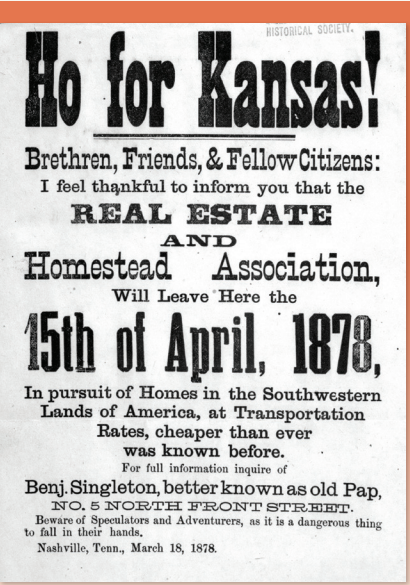
Homestead Association

Final Years, Kansas “Exoduster”

By 1877, the federal government fully retreated from Reconstruction. In its place, over the next several decades, many states enacted “Jim Crow” laws aimed at restricting the rights of blacks. Faced with these harsh regulations, many African Americans left the South, hoping to build new lives out West.

Remaining true to her calling to “go and labor among the Freedmen,” Ellen Garrison Jackson followed these migrants to Barton County, Kansas. There, she settled in a community of formerly enslaved people known as “Exodusters” and in 1881 married landowner Harvey Clark, an African American man from South Carolina. Throughout the 1880s, Ellen continued to teach the children of the formerly enslaved. In 1887, the County Superintendent noted that Ellen was “making good progress” with her students in the local “colored school.”

While research continues on the details of Ellen's death and her final resting place, we know she owned her own home and land, and continued to educate and agitate until she disappeared from the historical record after 1890.



What does it mean to you to be free?

Who Were the Exodusters?

“Exodusters” is the term generally applied to African Americans who left the South and migrated to Kansas during the 1870s. This mass migration was a response to the end of Reconstruction and the passage of laws restricting African American social and political rights, as well as to a surge in violence directed at formerly enslaved people. The migration was widely publicized through handbills, posters, and public events that promised plentiful farmland for black families. Historians estimate that by the time what became known as “Kansas Fever” subsided in 1880, more than 27,000 African Americans had journeyed to the frontier in search of new lives. William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips agreed with John Brown who called the exodus “the greatest movement of all time.”

Where is Barton County?

Barton County began as a trading post on the Santa Fe Trail in central Kansas. Settlement began in the 1870s after the railroad pushed through the county, and the population increased especially through the end of the nineteenth century. By 1880, there were perhaps 60 African American families living in the county, primarily originating from southern states such as South Carolina, Kentucky, Mississippi and Alabama.