

Perry, Samuel L. ^[1]

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b. 1849

Samuel L. Perry, teacher and [civil rights](#) ^[3] activist, resided in [Chatham County](#) ^[6] enslaved by William Perry. Following [emancipation](#) ^[7] he moved to LaGrange in [Lenoir County](#) ^[8], where he directed the exodus movement from eastern North Carolina in [Lenoir](#) ^[8], [Wayne](#) ^[9], [Greene](#) ^[10], [Pitt](#) ^[11], and [Jones](#) ^[12] counties. This movement reflected a response pattern involving the movement of black people from the rural South to the West and North, beginning as early as 1879. It was motivated by the return of ex-Confederates to power, the abridgment of suffrage, unjust treatment in the courts, unfair and sometimes cruel treatment by landlords and merchants, and rumors of economic opportunities in other parts of the country.

Perry's activities had their beginning in 1872, when he and others around him saw leaflets distributed by the [Union Pacific Railroad](#) ^[13] advertising cheap western land. Although he began to talk about forming a colony to be settled somewhere along the railroad, nothing came of these early discussions. With the withdrawal of Federal troops from the South in 1877, however, blacks became more uncertain of their future there and the prospect of cheap land became more and more appealing. [Peter C. Williams](#) ^[14], a minister, joined Perry to act for a body of blacks formed in 1879 in Goldsboro to look into the prospects offered in Kansas, Nebraska, and Colorado. Each member of the group contributed twenty-five cents, and with a total of fifty-four dollars the two men set off to find land. In September they were in Washington, D.C., trying without success to get the support of the National Emigration Aid Society. It may have been here that Perry focused his efforts on Indiana, because at this time the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad was promoting a movement to that state.

Through Perry's work more than four hundred North Carolina blacks moved to Indiana. But soon it became apparent that blacks were unwelcome there. Also, Perry later reported, the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad did not pay him what had been promised, and in both Indianapolis and Greencastle his efforts were rebuffed. Indiana Democrats saw in this influx of people a Republican move to carry the next election. It was about this time that folders promoting Kansas were distributed and Perry turned his attention there.

Blacks were poorly treated in their new surroundings, often lacking proper housing and adequate food. They complained that Perry had made extravagant promises in order to entice them to leave North Carolina. Cheap land, of course, was an inducement, but free railroad tickets, suits of new clothes, high wages, and even white wives were also mentioned.

The role played by Perry, nevertheless, entailed many responsibilities. He provided emigrants information regarding opportunities for work at the points of destination, the names of contact persons there, and assistance with transportation. On occasion he secured financial aid for the emigrants from the Emigrant Aid Society and from churches and individuals in the Washington, D.C., and Indianapolis, Ind., areas. It was largely through his efforts that 220 poor blacks reached Shelbyville, Ind., late in 1879. Soon after 40 more were sent to Washington, D.C., and 763 reached Indiana; in Indianapolis it was reported that a total of 1,135 eventually arrived in the state. Estimates of those who went to Kansas from North Carolina apparently are not available.

Many white southerners became alarmed over the movement of blacks and the prospect of ever-increasing numbers emigrating. Various methods were tried to keep them on the land as laborers, including enforcement of vagrancy and labor contract laws, enactment of legislation imposing penalties for enticing laborers away, and establishment of systems of peonage by which blacks were hired out by the county in order to pay the fine for a crime or to pay a debt. Perry's continuing involvement was perceived as having an unsettling and negative impact on the labor force. Thus, upon returning to La-Grange in 1879, after one of many trips out of the state assisting emigrants, Perry was surprised when he was arrested for forging a school order in the amount of fifty-four dollars. The order was actually signed by one Aaron Perry, who was jailed briefly and released on a straw bail. The school committee awaited the return of Samuel L. Perry. At the trial he was accused of writing the order and signing the names of committee members. Unlike the orders that Perry previously had routinely signed as a teacher, the handwriting in this document—upon inspection—demonstrated that it had been forged. Although the evidence presented at the trial did not incriminate Perry, an official declaration of his innocence was not affirmed. The forgery accusation was a harassment tactic. After the trial Perry hurriedly left LaGrange and settled in Washington, D.C.

In 1880 a Senate select committee was established to determine the causes of the massive emigration of blacks from the South to northern and western cities. Numerous individuals, one of whom was Perry, appeared before the committee. While testifying he presented two signed statements that focused on his trial in LaGrange the previous year. These were then sent, at Perry's request, to some persons who had attended the trial; they were asked whether they felt Perry's trial

had been fair. The first statement received by the committee in response was signed by thirteen people, including the justice of the peace. The consensus was that Perry's trial had been "bogus" and the signers deplored the absence of evidence against him. Further, they indicated that they had known him for several years and believed him to be innocent of making out school orders and forging signatures. Finally, they indicated that they believed the forgery charges against Perry were drawn because of his involvement in the exodus movement rather than because of the school orders alleged to have been forged. A second statement signed by five LaGrange residents, including the mayor and former constable, reported that Perry had taught school in LaGrange for several years and that he was regarded as trustworthy and reliable. The signers of both documents were identified as white.

Beyond this nothing further has been discovered about the life of Samuel Perry. A clearly unsympathetic Shelbyville, Ind., newspaper described him as a "short, thickset Negro, with a pair of fine check pants, and large fashionable boots, upon an enormous pair of pedal extremities."

References:

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From:

[Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press.](#)^[28]

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