

The Great Migration of Afro-Americans, 1915–40

*Between the World Wars,
more than 1 million black Americans
left the South to seek opportunity
and fuller citizenship in the North*

SPENCER R. CREW

The “Great Migration” of Afro-Americans from largely rural areas of the southern United States to northern cities during and after World War I altered the economic, social, and political fabric of American society. It made the regional problems of race and sociopolitical equality national issues and gave Afro-Americans a role in the election of northern political leaders, in contrast to the absence of a political role in the South. It helped to spawn a generation of black leaders who struggled for the full citizenship rights of Afro-Americans. Because the hundreds of thousands of people who participated in the migration tended to settle in northern urban areas, the effects of the population change were greatly magnified.

The momentousness of the migration as an event does not alter the fact that the migrants were ordinary people. Like colonial settlers or western pioneers of an earlier day, they were not looking to change the world, only their own status. A mixture of farmers, domestic servants, day laborers, and industrial workers, they came from all parts of the South, hoping for a chance to improve their own station or at least that of their children. When the outbreak of World War I drastically changed the job structure of northern urban areas, moving to these cities offered a fresh start and new opportunities for this massive wave of migrants.

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War trigger

Without the increase in job opportunities caused by World War I, the Great Migration might never have occurred. The fighting in Europe dramatically increased the demands on companies in the United States to produce munitions and other goods to support the war effort. At the same time, the labor pool these companies normally depended upon—immigrants and native-born Americans—was dwindling. The draft siphoned off many of these men, while the turmoil in Europe disrupted the flow of immigrants from that area. Desperately in need of additional workers, northern businesses looked southward for new sources of labor. Because Afro-Americans made up a large portion of the unskilled work force in the South and because of social conditions there, they became the targets of aggressive recruitment campaigns. Northern companies offered well-paying jobs, free transportation, and low-cost housing as inducements to Afro-Americans to move North. They also sent labor recruiters into the South who received a fee for every recruit they provided for the company they represented.

Local prod

Socioeconomic and political conditions in the South made Afro-Americans likely candidates for migration. After the end of post-Civil War Reconstruction, the Nation’s legislators and the Supreme Court had turned their backs on black

Americans and left determination of their citizenship rights to local jurisdictions. In the South, this abdication of authority resulted in the creation of a two-tiered system of citizenship with one set of rules for whites and a more restrictive set for Afro-Americans. In this system of "Jim Crow" laws, black Americans, under penalty of imprisonment or possibly death, were forced to use special sections when they rode on public transportation, ate in restaurants, or attended theaters. Southern statutes also excluded them from voting through such manipulations of the law as grandfather clauses, poll taxes, or literacy tests which prevented the majority of Afro-Americans from voting while allowing their white counterparts access to the ballot.

Oppressive as the political situation was, the economic situation was even more oppressive in that it locked tenant farmers ("sharecroppers") into an ever-tightening cycle of debt. While the majority of black Americans in the South resided in rural areas, they did not own the land they worked. Most often they rented it from large landowners or worked as farm laborers. Bad crop years, boll weevil attacks, floods, or low crop prices often destroyed profit margins and left sharecroppers in debt to the landlord. In order to avoid imprisonment, they agreed to work additional years in hopes of paying off their debts. Unfortunately, profits rarely were large enough to wipe out their obligations and Afro-Americans found themselves bound to the landlord who owned their land or controlled the local store where they purchased goods on credit. Migrating offered a chance to escape the oppressiveness of the South and begin anew.

Problems of leave-taking

Leaving, however, was not a simple matter for black Americans. It should be remembered that Afro-Americans had strong ties to the South and migrating meant severing lifelong friendships and strong family bonds. Migrants rarely left in large groups. Sometimes, members of families might leave together, but more often individuals left alone. They usually departed with the expectation that they would return or would send for loved ones, but migrating always involved leaving behind loved ones for an uncertain future. If aged parents or a spouse and children had to remain behind, the decision to move became even more complicated.

Migrating North also meant leaving familiar surroundings and community institutions which provided support in times of need. Church activities, social clubs, and fraternal organizations were part of a vibrant Afro-American community in the South which provided a buffer from the indignities faced in the outside community. For many Afro-Americans, this private community offered enough support to make their lives tolerable despite hardships. While hundreds of thousands of Afro-Americans chose to leave the South, many more remained behind or returned home after visiting northern cities.

Once a decision to depart was made, leaving was often a

complicated process. Southern officials tried to slow the tide of migration by arresting or detaining Afro-Americans who tried to leave. Local police regularly searched departing trains for people they thought might be heading North. To escape police scrutiny, many migrants had to steal away late at night or devise elaborate plans to get away safely. These subterfuges forced the migrants either to sell their property and belongings secretly or to take with them only what they could carry. Most migrants were working people who did not possess great wealth and leaving under these circumstances hurt them financially. Items left behind or given away brought in no money and buyers rarely gave full value for items they knew the owner had to sell. Many migrants, therefore, did not have enough money with them to tide them over for long periods of time once they reached the North. Consequently, finding a job became a high priority as soon as they arrived.

Northern lure

One of the key factors influencing the individuals who did leave was the letters and visits they received from friends and relatives who had already moved North. Prior to World War I, Afro-Americans had moved North in small numbers but their economic opportunities had been severely limited. When the war changed the job markets, earlier migrants wrote letters home, urging others to come North. Also, when they traveled South to visit family on special occasions, they reinforced their letters with personal accounts of their own successes and the advantage of living outside the South. These letters and visits must have whet the appetites of Afro-American Southerners already discontent with their lot and determined to do something about it. Many oral interviews with and reminiscences of migrants include passages describing how they decided to leave after hearing about opportunities in the North from relatives or friends who had lived or worked there. Having someone to live with or a clear idea of where jobs were located undoubtedly removed some of the uncertainty of leaving.

While job opportunities were readily available in most cities, these jobs were at the lower end of the occupational ladder. Northern labor unions generally did not accept Afro-Americans as members and often threatened to strike companies where nonunion workers performed union jobs. Even when Afro-American workers acquired better paying jobs during the war, many of them had to relinquish these jobs once the war ended.

Types of jobs

Afro-Americans typically wound up in dirty, backbreaking, unskilled, and low-paying occupations. These were the least desirable jobs in most industries, but the ones employers felt best suited their black workers. On average, more than eight of every ten Afro-American men worked as unskilled laborers in foundries, in the building trades, in meat-packing companies, on the railroads, or as servants, porters,

janitors, cooks, and cleaners. Only a relatively few obtained work in semiskilled or skilled occupations.

Occupational choices for black women were even more limited because few of them, in concordance with women in general, had access to industrial jobs. While some women found employment in the garment industry, packing houses, and steam laundries, the majority of Afro-American women worked as domestic servants or in service-related occupations. While none of these jobs paid high wages, they paid more than Afro-Americans could obtain for similar work in the South.

However, the cost of living in the North was higher than in the South. Funneled into certain areas in most northern cities, Afro-Americans have paid nearly twice as much as their white counterparts for equivalent housing. Higher rents made it harder for them to make housing payments and encouraged migrants to take in boarders or other family members to help meet expenses. While the extra income eased financial problems, it resulted in overcrowded living conditions, little privacy, and poor sanitation. With the additional financial burden of having to pay higher prices in neighborhood stores for food, clothing, and other necessities, settling in the North was a mixed experience for many migrants. Though they earned better wages in the North, much of the increased income was offset by higher living expenses.

More than economics

Economic gain was not the sole reason migrants came North. Better educational opportunities and greater personal freedom were also motivating factors. Up to the time of the migration, Afro-American children rarely advanced past the sixth grade in the South. "Black" schools received very little money from southern legislatures, especially at the secondary level, and landlords placed pressure on parents to put their children to work rather than have them further their education. Under these circumstances, only a relatively few children were able to receive a high school or college education. In contrast, northern States allocated more money for education and had compulsory attendance requirements that forced students to stay in school longer. Moving North gave

migrants and their children access to better educational opportunities and a chance for a brighter future.

Another variable that made northern life attractive was the sense of personal freedom migrants felt after leaving the South. Northern cities were busy and impersonal; they offered greater anonymity than Afro-Americans had experienced in southern rural communities. Once they reached the North, migrants did not have to show deference to each white person they passed on the street. They could move about the city without the fear that the wrong word or tone or action might result in arrest or a more severe or even violent white response. These new social and political circumstances lifted a heavy burden from the migrants, many of whom had previously lived in a state of constant fear for their lives and those of their loved ones.

THE WORLD THEN, which migrants found in northern cities did not always correspond with their expectations. Despite the encouragements of newspapers like the *Chicago Defender*, migrants were not always welcomed by residents of the northern cities. Both black and white urban residents worried about the impact of so many new people and, on occasion, they sought to discourage migrants from coming. Although not as virulent as it was in the South, racial discrimination also existed in northern cities. And while work was available, it usually was at the bottom of the pay scale and the occupational pecking order. Housing options and higher prices presented additional adjustment problems for the migrants. As a consequence, moving North was not a panacea for the many troubles migrants faced in the South. Northern urban areas presented their own set of problems and adjustments for migrants once they reached their new destinations.

Despite these difficulties, Afro-Americans continued to migrate North and to stay. With the many adjustments migrants faced, strange environments, new neighbors, and different ways of behaving and dressing, most found northern cities more engaging than the places they left behind. Though many migrants returned South regularly and referred to it as "home," they did not remain. The South appeared to hold their hearts, but the North held their futures. □