

The Great Migration

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The first two decades of the 20th century, the United States experienced a significant demographic change which would become known as the Great Migration. Since their emancipation following the conclusion of the Civil War, African Americans migrated throughout the south in search of better farming opportunities and escape from the all-too-common threat of racial violence. The northern economy was primarily industrial with much of the labor being employed in factories and other urban occupations. The southern economy was almost entirely agrarian with few industrial jobs available in urban centers. African Americans were at the bottom of the economic and social ladder, held down by sharecropping and a legal system which targeted them. Newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender* frequently advertised the opportunities the north had for African Americans who made the journey. Similar sentiments can be observed in the letter's migrants wrote home to their friends and families. The north offered significantly higher pay, better educational facilities, and less instances of racial violence compared to the south. Although the north offered African Americans a greater chance of becoming successful, they still faced discrimination in employment, education, and housing.

A common theme prevalent in the historiography of the Great Migration is the contention between “push factors” and “pull factors.” In other words, were African Americans pulled from the south through economic and social opportunity, or were they pushed from the south by a weakening agrarian economy and high instance of

racial violence? Nonetheless, between 1917 and 1920, 1.5 million African Americans migrated from the deep south to the industrial cities of the north.¹

In the south, the African American population fell economically subordinate to the white ruling class. In 1910, black ownership of farms reached its peak at 15 percent in Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi.² It is important to note that very few African American farmers owned land in the black belt which contained the most nutrient soil in the South. The overwhelming majority of farmers in the black belt were sharecroppers; working on small parcels of land owned by the white ruling class. In the sharecropping system, white planters and furnishing merchants held all the power. They loaned tools and other farming material to their African American tenants on the condition they sell their crop back to them to repay the debt.

The system created DeFacto slavery with most African Americans failing to pay back their loans, tying them to the land.³ The legal system in the south was designed around keeping indebted African Americans tied to the south. Contract enforcement laws favored landowners and guaranteed African Americans would remain on the land to repay their debts.

Further ensuring economic subordination were vagrancy laws that allowed the state to arrest “any black man [for] ‘loitering’ or being outside of formal employment.”⁴ If African Americans were not tied to the land through indebtedness, there was a high probability they would be tied to the south through

laws designed to use them as labor in the prison system. The system of convict-leasing allowed many industries from railway construction to mining, to utilize cheap coerced labor which was overwhelmingly composed of African Americans.

Vagrancy laws made convict-leasing an economically feasible system, contingent on discrimination that targeted African Americans whose labor, was significantly imperative to the development of the post-reconstruction southern economy.⁵ Vagrancy laws alone did not account for all convict laborers. The criminal surety system allowed convicted individuals, often African Americans, to be released in the custody of somebody that paid their fines. African Americans were often arrested on “baseless charges, tried by a Justice of the Peace sympathetic to local farmer’s interest,” and required to pay fines they could not pay.⁶ African Americans were then faced with choosing the abhorrent prison labor system of convict-leasing or be released to their new debtee. Either way, African Americans were tied to the south.

Economic subordination was only one factor that contributed to aspirations of flight from the south. Although often downplayed, the threat of racial violence contributed to African American flight north. Racial violence was especially prevalent between 1882 and 1910 when 1,893 African Americans died to racial violence with Mississippi and Georgia representing one-third of the victims.⁷ It is important to note that lynching’s and mob violence was not the only mode of racial domination imposed on the African American population. In the same period, 1,299 African Americans were disproportionately legally executed in southern states.⁸ The legal system served to coerce African Americans into labor through convict-leasing and subjected them to summary trials with an all-too-common outcome of execution. In both extralegal and legal circumstances, African Americans were murdered at astronomical rates which influenced many in the decisions to leave their homes.

Steward E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck empirically analyzed lynching’s and their relationship to African American migration in *Black Flight: Lethal Violence and the Great Migration, 1900–1930*. In their study they conclude that the rate of out-migration within southern states was not uniform. This could be due to the instances of racial violence and lynching’s were primarily a rural phenomenon.⁹ However, their effects

were felt within industrial centers as well. In fact, racial violence was one factor which compelled many African Americans to move to urban centers, as lynching’s were less common in cities. Steward E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck delivered a compelling argument that racial violence was the primary factor for flight from the south, however other forces cannot be ignored. Racial violence did encourage migration but not necessarily northward. Prior to 1910–1920, racial violence encouraged movement within the south, with many opting to migrate from county to county.

While racial violence encouraged southern migration, it was not the only factor. It was common for African Americans to move within their own states, migrating from county to county in search of better employment opportunities as well as escaping from areas which experienced high instances of racial violence and lynching’s. In the half century following the American Civil War, African Americans took advantage of their new freedom to travel. While Kansas and Liberia captured the eye of many looking to better their future through land ownership, most chose to relocate within the south.¹⁰ The soil in the Carolinas was depleted after more than a century of farming without major crop rotation. If African Americans wanted a chance at moving up the economic ladder, they would have to chase the most fertile soil. With the help of labor agents, African Americans were drawn to places like Georgia which promised nutrient soil and better crop yields. Many did choose to relocate great distances away from their homes, however short distance moves were much more common as “landless farmers sought remunerative arrangements with new landlords.”¹¹

Further contributing to the already monumental reasons for migration were a series of natural disasters which decimated the southern economy. Beginning in 1892 the boll weevil began decimating cotton crops throughout Texas, quickly spreading northward, reaching Alabama by 1910 then South Carolina in 1918.¹² The boll weevil infestation significantly affected sharecroppers who, at the request of their landlords, predominantly cultivated cotton. Those who lost their crop were still obligated to pay back their debts, oftentimes this meant renegotiating with lenders which

further tied them to the land that was plagued by the boll weevil. By the height of the Great Migration, the boll weevil was present in every state which cotton reigned supreme. Those who wished to remain on farms would have to switch to mixed farming or sell off their crop at a loss.

Compiling on the issues from the boll weevil were “alternating seasons of droughts and floods.”¹³ Together, the boll weevil and changing weather conditions forced many off the land and in search for better economic opportunities.

Until 1910 migrating north was not an attractive option for most southerners. First, many were economically tied to the land through restrictive laws and threats of violence. Secondly, for African Americans to make the long journey north, there would have to be economic, political, and social incentives to justify a move. While family ties would later encourage migration through the process of chain-migration, before the later stages of the Great Migration, family ties kept many bound to the south. The economic incentives to move north were not significant until the mid 1910s. In the south, it was widely believed that African Americans were not suited for factory work, a belief that stemmed from the fallout of the Civil War when whites, fearing labor competition on the land, demanded industrial employment and the exclusion of African Americans from the industrial workforce.¹⁴ In the north, white immigrants from Europe were favored over the domestic African American population.

The outbreak of the first World War cut off the flow of European migrants to northern industrial cities, allowing African Americans to move into previously unavailable skilled labor positions.¹⁵ Wages in the industrial north were incredibly attractive to prospective migrants. While African Americans were making \$0.75 to \$1.00 per day in southern agriculture and no more than \$2.50 in southern industrial positions, they migrants could make \$3.00 to \$5.00 a day working in the north. With wages on average three times higher than jobs in the south, movement to the north was justifiable for many southerners. According to the Cincinnati Council of Social Agencies, “nearly 75 percent recent black newcomers reported that they came for better wages.”¹⁶ In the south, remaining economically subordinate to the white ruling class was an almost

certainty, the ruling class had complete control over the agricultural economy through the sharecropping system. Industrial employment was available in the south, although at much lower numbers. The north offered more jobs and more pay to African Americans who made the journey north.

Significant changes to the southern and northern economy occurred at the same time. While the southern economy sunk into depression due to deflated cotton prices, the northern industrial economy was picking up and needed more labor. It became incredibly clear that it would be impossible for African Americans to be successful in the south, where they faced economic, social, and political roadblocks. The emerging economy in the north offered salvation, and a chance at success.

Chicago became a prime destination for African Americans who made the journey north, and the *Chicago Defender* played a key role in advertising the merits of the city. However, at first the *Defender* paid minimal attention to the growing numbers of African American migrants. Robert Abbott, the paper’s founder, initially discouraged migration north. He and the black middle-class already established in Chicago were not enthusiastic about an influx of unskilled laborers who they deemed “slow-thinking and unemployable.”¹⁷ Abbott was correct, there were little economic opportunities in the north for unskilled workers. However, by 1916, economic opportunities had changed, and the *Defender* began a full-fledged campaign encouraging African American migration northward. James Grossman in *Land of Hope* describes Abbott as acting in racial self-interest. Abbott saw an opportunity, not just for his paper, but for the African American population as a whole. Migration north could open more economic opportunities for the African American population, increase racial contact which could help erode centuries of racial prejudice, and give more political power to the black community.¹

Once the *Defender* and Abbott endorsed the migration, they created a full campaign to encourage African Americans to migrate north. Alongside advertisements for jobs were “vivid North-South contrasts” and images of urban life.¹⁹ The *Defender* undoubtedly made the north seem enticing and increasingly argued the only way for African Americans to become successful Americans.

Every black man for the sake of his wife and daughters especially should leave even at a financial sacrifice every spot in the south where his worth is not appreciated enough to give him the standing of a man and a citizen in the community. We know full well that this would mean a depopulation of that section and if it were possible we would glory in its accomplishment.²⁰

The *Defender* reflects the rejection of the southern imposed position of African Americans in the economy and society. The north presented an opportunity, a chance for something different and new. Its advertising specifically targets the wrongs of southern domination over the black community. The rhetoric resonated with the economically and socially depressed African American population in the south. The *Defender* boasted social opportunities unheard of in the south, white businessmen who treated black patrons with respect, thriving night activities with dance halls and music clubs with racially mixed crowds. Perhaps most compelling for African Americans was fervent white attempts to limit the reach of the *Defender*. White attempts to limit its distribution encouraged more to read and believe in its narrative.²¹ White resistance to African American migration north illustrates how dependent the southern economy had become on black labor. Landowners had a real economic interest in keeping the black population in the south.

While it is true that some poor whites were also victims of the crop-lien system, most poor whites worked in factories which excluded black labor. As can be observed in South Africa at the same time, the white ruling class passed laws relegating the African population to a limited amount of land to force them into working in the gold and diamond mines for abysmally low wages with no alternative job prospects. The system of sharecropping was built upon the same principle. Tie the African American population to the land and make farming the only feasible source of income by eliminating all competition. The *Defender* directly confronted the system by advertising better wages and social opportunities for African Americans.

Part of the *Defender*'s campaign to encourage migration north by publishing stories about

African Americans who became successful after moving to Chicago. In February 1915, the paper published a story about George W. Prince, a young African American man who had just finished his doctorate in Clinical Pharmacology.²² Advertisements of leisure activities and social opportunities were certainly compelling for Southern African Americans to make the move north. However, emphasizing African Americans who could become doctors and hold other prestigious degrees or employment, showed that the north offered something completely absent in the south: The American Dream. The paper led the narrative that nowhere except in the north could an African American achieve the same level of education and opportunity as their fellow white citizens. Southern readers of the paper were acutely aware of this fact as well, with one writing that "The winter is about over here in the south and I still have a desire to seek for myself a section of this country where I can better my condishion (sic)..."²³

Clearly, the *Defender* served as much more than a regular newspaper with advertisements and local news stories. The *Defender*, instead, represented a social movement which directly encouraged flight from the south. If Chicago was a beacon of hope for African Americans in the South, the *Chicago Defender* was a signal booster. The paper was one of the first black newspapers to appeal directly to the masses, most of whom lived in the south. During the peak of the Great Migration, the paper was publishing over 250,000 copies a week, with the large majority of them going directly to the south.²⁴

The *Defender* was not the only group perpetuating migration north. Northern industrialists launched campaigns of their own to encourage African Americans to migrate. Through the employment of labor agents, northern industries would "pay" for migrants' transportation by deducting the expenses from their future paychecks.²⁵ Even Though the migrants were paying for their transportation in the end, it allowed African Americans who could not otherwise afford to move, make the journey north to better employment. The fact that labor agents were beaten as well as migrants themselves illustrates the dependency the south had on African American labor.²⁶

While job and social opportunities as well as threats of racial violence in the south were compelling enough to many Southerners, education opportunities

served to further motivate African Americans to move north. It would be inaccurate to suggest that there were not educational opportunities and higher education institutions in the south, The Hampton Institute and Tuskegee to name a few. The leaders of such institutions were strongly opposed to the Great Migration and encouraged African Americans to remain on the farmland. Black flight north directly “repudiated the ideas upon which southern black elites had staked their reputations.”²⁷ The success of George W. Prince would be impossible in southern educational institutions which operated a curriculum designed to keep African Americans subordinate to the white ruling class. Perhaps most telling about southern educational institutions was the name of Tuskegee’s school paper, *The Negro Farmer and Messenger*. The existence of these institutions was only made possible by will of the white ruling class. In the American south, the only education available to African Americans had to be first accepted by whites who ensured the curriculum would not disrupt the status quo.

The North presented a different path, one of real opportunity for migrants as well as their children. The *Defender* played on education inequality to encourage migration north. As part of their North vs. South campaign, they published photos of southern schools which depicted run-down dilapidated buildings in much need of repair coupled with the caption: “Jim Crow schools... White Board of Education refuses to appropriate sufficient funds for upkeep.”²⁸ The paper showed African Americans the inequality they faced in the South, there was no prospect of a better tomorrow, and their children would suffer unless things changed. Furthermore, African Americans greatly valued education. Just as their grandparents had enrolled in Freedmen’s schools, migrants believed in the power of education and moved north to ensure their children could receive a quality education. Much to the dismay of Tuskegee and Hampton Institute officials who believed their service-based schools would suffice.²⁹ Although educational institutions were significantly better than their southern counterparts, they were not entirely the same as advertised. Racial discrimination was a real issue in the northern education system just as it had been in the south, especially as more migrants moved north. Schools in African American neighborhoods were not as well maintained as their white counterparts in white neighborhoods. They

were often older buildings and received less education materials. The schools were also often too small with overcrowding becoming an issue in 1918 and continuing through the next decade.³⁰ Schools in African American neighborhoods did not employ African American teachers, favoring white teachers. Students often complained of harassment and fell victim to the prevailing racist ideology that African Americans were “inferior in most things intellectual.”³¹ James R. Grossman provides an excellent description of the African American experience in Chicago’s school system.

Black children, neither as numerous nor presumably assimilable as immigrants, were simply not of major concern of Chicago educators. If Americanization was a central function of the public schools, black children were constituted a special case. Even the subnormal rooms were not created for blacks, but rather had been crudely adapted to deal with them.³²

Even though schools in the north were nowhere near as well funded or maintained as white schools and their students faced racial discrimination, they were significantly better than options in the south.

While the *Chicago Defender* advertised opportunities in the north, letters home also proved to be an effective medium to disseminate information about the north, home to family and friends in the south. The process of chain-migration was made possible through letters and familial ties. Migrants would send letters home to notify their family and friends of job opportunities in the North. One woman wrote to their sister encouraging her to migrate north. In the letter, she spoke of job openings for their sister and her husband as well. She notes that thousands of migrants arrive every day and that housing is plentiful, she even offers to find her sister a place to stay until she can find a place she’d like to rent.³³ Another migrant in Philadelphia writes home about the better race relations they experienced since moving.

“I can ride in the electric street and steam cars any where I get a seat. I dont care to mix with white what I mean I am not crazy about being with white folks, but if I have to pay the same fare I have learn to want the same acomidation (sic)”³⁴

Letters encouraging migration north or with news from the north were often read by more than just the intended recipient. In fact, it was common for friends of friends of relatives to receive news of the north from letters. Some letters were rumored to have enticed some 200 southerners to migrate north.³⁵ While the *Defender* predominantly covered the positive aspects of moving north, some letters provided migrants' friends and families with more information.

Overwhelmingly, letters home encouraged friends and family to move north and while migrants did admit that "half [southerners] hear is not true," it's better than the south.³⁶

The north provided economic, social, and educational opportunities for migrants and their children, however as more African Americans migrated north predominant racial attitudes followed. It would be inaccurate to suggest there was an absence of racism in the north prior to the Great Migration, there was. However as can be observed in Detroit prior World War I, residential areas were not strictly segregated, nor were social and recreational facilities. It was not until the emergence of a large African American population, which coincided with a housing shortage that led to the development of strictly enforced residential and social segregation.³⁷ Housing discrimination became a central theme of the beginning of the 20th century and in northern cities discriminatory policies were created through civilian and federal actors. Baltimore became the first city to codify residential discrimination on November 21, 1910. The policy directly targeted African Americans, denied them the ability to purchase property in any neighborhood where the majority of residents were white, and required new buildings to be zoned for specific races before clearance to build. Perhaps ironic, the policy was justified by the twisted logic that separating the two races was necessary to protect African Americans from the "savagery of whites."³⁸ Just as in the south, racial violence at the hands of white mobs served to make African American residents comply with discriminatory policies, throwing rocks through windows and storefronts attempting to run the African Americans from "their" neighborhood.

Policies similar to those enacted in Baltimore were soon challenged by the Supreme Court of the United States in *Buchanan v. Warley* (1917). The Supreme Court reversed the Kentucky Court of Appeals decision that upheld city ordinances

prohibiting the sale of property to African Americans in white neighborhoods.³⁹ The decision may have been a legal victory, however it only prohibited statutory segregation or in other words, state-sponsored segregation. Private individuals maintained the right to create segregation through private contracts, a practice which was upheld in *Corrigan v. Buckley* (1926).⁴⁰ These private contracts became known as restrictive covenants. These were contracts between all property owners in a neighborhood which prohibited the sale of their homes to African American buyers. Residential discrimination had many adverse effects on the African American community which experienced an influx of communicable diseases due to overcrowding of residential dwellings. Homes were poorly ventilated and created an environment where pneumonia and tuberculosis thrived. The high instances of illnesses in black neighborhoods, nearly six times that of whites, compelled the Ford Motor company to conduct an investigation into black housing in Detroit. In a similar investigation, the Detroit Health Department concluded two thirds of pneumonia deaths and one half of tuberculosis deaths could have been avoided if "crowded and unsanitary housing had been eliminated."⁴¹

In the workplace, discriminatory practices were prevalent. Although they were earning higher wages than in the agricultural south, they were forced into the most "difficult, dangerous, dirty, and low-paying categories of industrial work."⁴² Automobile manufacturing plants, African Americans were employed in foundry departments. This was in part due to the hot and uncomfortable environment in the foundry however its real rationale is likely derived from the racist revisionist claim that African Americans are more suited to hot environments which required superior stamina.⁴³ However, Ford proved to be an exception, albeit by little margin. At Ford African Americans had a much higher chance of obtaining desirable jobs either as a supervisor or as a respected tool and die-maker. It cannot be ignored that African American workers still faced wage discrimination at Ford and other automobile manufacturers with African Americans primarily being relegated to lower paying job categories, they received about 80-90% of those of whites.⁴⁴

The economic, social, and educational opportunities encouraged many to migrate north. There, they could receive higher wages and break into

industrial employment which was almost exclusively reserved for whites in the south. However, the economic, legal, and social factors in the south cannot be ignored. African Americans were economically subordinated by the southern system of sharecropping and the southern legal system served to further control the African American population. Newspapers, such as the *Chicago Defender* advertised the north as a land of opportunity. Although still discriminated against African Americans in both the workplace and housing, African Americans migrants had more opportunities for themselves and their children if they made the journey north. Changes in the north and south happened simultaneously, as the north demanded more labor, the south was experiencing natural disasters, which in conjunction with underlying issues of racial inequality and poor economic opportunity, drove many to abandon their southern roots and migrate to northern cities.

Endnotes

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- ²⁸ DeStantis. 487.
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