From the onset of the international slave trade through recent times, migration has been a persistent theme in African American history. Yet, only with the advent of the Civil War and emancipation did black population movement take on a voluntary character, slowly converging with that of other groups. With the coming of World War I and its aftermath, blacks made a fundamental break with the land and move into cities in large numbers. The Great Migration of the early twentieth century foreshadowed the long run transformation of African Americans from a predominantly rural to a predominantly urban population. It not only reflected the African Americans' quest for freedom, jobs, and social justice, but also the emergence of new patterns of race, class, and ethnic relations in American culture, society, and politics.

As a result of World War I, an estimated seven hundred thousand to one million blacks left the South. Another eight hundred thousand to one million left during the 1920s. Although the prewar migrants moved to southern cities like Norfolk, Louisville, Birmingham, and Atlanta as well as to a few northern cities like Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York, African Americans now moved throughout the urban North and West (see table). Moreover, while upper South and border states represented the chief sources of out-migration before World War I, Deep South states dominated the migration stream to northern and western cities. Blacks born in Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, and Louisiana, for example, made up over sixty percent of the black population increase in Chicago (and Illinois in general) between 1910 and 1920. At the same time, more black men than women migrated during the war, reversing the prewar trend. In the rapidly industrializing cities of Cleveland, Detroit, and Milwaukee, for example, the sex ratio ranged between one hundred twenty to one hundred forty men to every one hundred women during the war years.

A variety of factors underlay black population movement. African Americans sought an alternative to sharecropping, disfranchisement, and racial injustice in the South. In 1917, the African Methodist American Church Review articulated the forces that propelled blacks out of the South. "Neither character, the accumulation of property, the fostering of the Church, the schools and a better and higher standard of the home" had made a difference in the status of black southerners. "Confidence in the sense of justice, humanity and fair play of the white South is gone," the paper concluded. One migrant articulated the same mood in verse: "'An' let one race have all de South---Where color lines are drawn---For 'Hagar's child' done [stem] de tide---Farewell---we're good and gone."

African Americans were also attracted by the pull of opportunities in the North. The labor demands of northern industries, immigration restriction legislation, and greater access to the rights of citizens (including the franchise) all encouraged the movement.
of blacks into northern cities. Wages in northern industries usually ranged from $3 to $5 per eight-hour day, compared to as little as $.75 to $1 per day in southern agriculture and to no more than $2.50 for a nine-hour day in southern industries. Moreover, between 1915 and 1925, the average wages of domestics in some northern cities doubled. Northern cities also promised access to better health care, schools, and the vote.

African Americans often viewed the Great Migration to northern cities in glowing terms: "The Promised Land," the "Flight out of Egypt," and "Going into Canaan." One black man wrote back to his southern home, "The (Col.) men are making good. [The job] never pays less than $3.00 per day for (10) hours." In her letter home, a black female related, "I am well and thankful to say I am doing well . . . I work in Swifts Packing Company." "Up here," another migrant said, "Our people are in a different light." Over and over again, African Americans confirmed that: "Up here, a man can be a man." As one southern black man wrote home from the North, "I should have been here twenty years ago . . . I just begin to feel like a man . . . My children are going to the same school with the whites and I don't have to humble to no one. I have registered. Will vote in the next election and there isn't any yes Sir or no Sir. It's all yes and no, Sam and Bill."

The Great Migration was by no means a simple move from southern agriculture to northern cities. It had specific regional and sub-regional components. More blacks migrated to southern cities between 1900 and 1920 than to northern ones. Further, African Americans frequently comprised from twenty-five to fifty percent of the total, compared to little more than ten percent in northern cities. Before moving to northern cities like Philadelphia, Boston, and New York, for example, rural migrants first moved to southern cities like New Orleans, Jacksonville, Savannah, Memphis, Charleston, and Birmingham. The Southern, Louisville, Nashville, the St. Louis and San Francisco, and the Illinois Central railroads all traveled northward from Birmingham and Bessemer, making the Jefferson County cities the major distribution points for blacks going north from Alabama. In Georgia, cities like Columbus, Americus, and Albany served as distribution points for blacks leaving from west Georgia and east Alabama, while Valdosta, Waycross, Brunswick, and Savannah served as distribution centers for blacks leaving the depressed agricultural counties of southern and southeastern Georgia. To blacks moving up from Mississippi, Arkansas, Alabama, Louisiana, and Texas, Chicago was the logical destination, whereas cities in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, and the New England states attracted blacks from Florida, South Carolina, Virginia, and Georgia. Upon arrival in northern cities, black population movement usually developed secondary streams. As one contemporary observer noted, "All of the arrivals here [Chicago] did not stay. . . . They were only temporary guests awaiting the opportunity to proceed further and settle in surrounding cities and towns."

Southern blacks helped to organize their own movement into the urban North. They developed an extensive communications network, which included railroad employees, who traveled back and forth between northern and southern cities; northern black weeklies like the Chicago Defender and the Pittsburgh Courier; and an expanding chain of kin and friends. Using their networks of families and friends, African Americans learned about transportation, jobs, and housing beforehand. As one contemporary observer noted, "The chief stimuli was discussion. . . . The talk in the barber shops and grocery stores . . . soon began to take the form of reasons for leaving." Also fueling the migration process were the letters, money, and testimonies of migrants who returned to visit. As one South Carolina migrant to Pittsburgh recalled, "I was plowing in the field and it was real hot. And I stayed with some of the boys who would leave home and [come] back . . . and would have money, and they had clothes. I didn't have that. We all grew up together. And I said, 'Well, as long as I stay here I'm going to get nowhere.' And I tied that mule to a tree and caught a train."

Other migrants formed migration clubs, pooled their resources, and moved in groups. Deeply enmeshed in black kin and friendship networks, black women played a conspicuous role in helping to organize the black migration. As recent scholarship suggests, women were the "primary kin keepers." Moreover, they often had their own gender-specific reasons for leaving the rural South. African American women resented stereotyped images of the black "mammy," who presumably placed loyalty to white families above her own. African American women's migration reinforced the notion that lifting the race and improving the image of black women were compatible goals.

As African Americans moved into northern cities in growing numbers, a black industrial working class emerged. Southern black sharecroppers, farm laborers, sawmill hands, dock workers, and railroad hands all moved into new positions in the urban economy. In Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Detroit, and Milwaukee, the percentage of black men employed in industrial jobs increased from an estimated ten to twenty percent of the black labor force in 1910 to about sixty to seventy percent in 1920 and 1930. African American women also entered industrial jobs, although
their gains were far less than those of black men. In Chicago, the percentage of black women in manufacturing trades increased from less than one thousand in 1910 to over three thousand in 1920. Industrial jobs now made up fifteen percent of the black female labor force compared to less than seven percent in 1910.

While labor agents helped to recruit black workers for jobs in meatpacking, auto, steel, and other mass production industries, these labor agents were soon supplanted by the expansion of black familial and communal networks. Employers testified that, "After the initial group movement by agents, Negroes kept going by twos and threes. These were drawn by letters, and by actual advances of money, from Negroes who had already settled in the North... every Negro that makes good in the North and writes back to his friends starts off a new group."

Although African Americans improved their lot by taking jobs in urban industries, they nonetheless entered the industrial economy at the lowest rungs of the occupational ladder. Moreover, as their numbers increased in northern and western cities, they faced growing restrictions on where they could stay, educate their children, and gain access to much needed social services and public accommodations. Race violence erupted in Chicago, East St. Louis, Pittsburgh, and Philadelphia during the era of the Great Migration. Race riots not only helped to reinforce residential segregation in northern cities, they highlighted the growing nationalization of the "race question" in American society.

African Americans responded to the impact of class and racial restrictions on their lives by intensifying their institution-building, cultural, political, economic, and civil rights activities. They built churches, mutual aid societies, fraternal orders, and social clubs; established a range of new business and professional services; and launched diverse labor, civil rights, and political organizations. These activities culminated in the rise of the "New Negro" movement during World War I and its flourishing during the 1920s. The Garvey Movement, the cultural renaissance in Harlem and elsewhere, the growing militancy of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the spread of the National Urban League movement, and the emergence of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters gained stimulus from the mass migration of blacks from the rural and urban South into the cities of the North and West.

As the nation entered the Depression and World War II, the Great Migration continued to transform both black and white America. The technological revolution in southern agriculture, the emergence of the New Deal welfare state, and the militant modern civil rights and black power movements of the 1950s and 1960s, all helped to complete the long-run transformation of blacks from a predominantly rural to a predominantly urban people. By 1970, African Americans, beginning as the most rural of Americans, had not only become the most urbanized segment of the U.S. population, they also posed the most salient challenge to the nation's status quo.


Bibliography

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26. On the battle over conscription in Congress, which is when the "Roosevelt Volunteers" became a public issue, see Chambers, To Raise an Army, 153-77.

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