

- Jordan, William G. *Black Newspapers and America's War for Democracy, 1914–1920*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001.
- Kelly, Brian. “Sentinels for New South Industry: Booker T. Washington, Industrial Accommodation, and Black Workers in the Jim Crow South.” *Labor History* 44, no. 3 (August 2003): 337–58.
- Kirby Lumber Company Records. Forest History Collection, Stephen F. Austin State University, Nacogdoches, Texas.
- Litwack, Leon. *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998.
- National Urban League Records. Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
- “Negro Migration as the South Sees It.” *The Survey* 38 (August 11, 1917): 428.
- Ortiz, Paul. *Emancipation Betrayed: The Hidden History of Black Organizing and White Violence in Florida from Reconstruction to the Bloody Election of 1920*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.
- Taylor, Arnold H. *Travail and Triumph: Black Life and Culture in the South since the Civil War*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976.
- Washington, Booker T. *Up from Slavery*. With an Introduction by Louis R. Harlan. New York: Penguin Books, 1986.
- Williams, W. T. B. “The Negro Exodus from the South.” In *The Black Worker: A Documentary History from Colonial Times to the Present*, edited by Philip Sheldon Foner and Ronald L. Lewis. Vol. 5. *The Black Worker from 1900 to 1919*, 240–51. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989.

## Great Migration, Causes of

---

Mobility has long been one form of expressing African Americans’ deep-rooted desire for freedom and equality. At once it was a means for an individual to secure greater personal autonomy, as well as for African American communities to seek out less oppression and greater economic, social, political, or personal opportunity. Through migration African Americans hoped to create a world less circumscribed by the reality of racism in America. Through migration, African Americans not only expressed a profound dissatisfaction with the conditions in their lives, but also a powerful belief in their own agency and a sense of hope for the future. In moving from one location to another, African Americans sought to find a Promised Land, or at least a better land.

During the era of slavery, for many African Americans, running away was one of the most powerful expressions of the desire for freedom. Historians have estimated that over 100,000 blacks were able to successfully abscond to a freer North. For others, their dreams of freedom through mobility were tempered by the

vigilance of their slave masters as much as by their ties to family. While it is difficult to know how many African Americans actually ran away or even attempted to do so, the constant flurry of runaway notices in southern newspapers and the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 suggest the frequency with which African Americans attempted to escape slavery, no matter their success. Whether African Americans fled with the hope of leaving the South for good or of only securing a few days of respite, mobility and migration remained powerful symbols of their desires for freedom. Indeed, the large number of African Americans who abandoned their former lives on plantations and households throughout the South during the Civil War to join Union lines, if not the army itself, demonstrates the willingness of southern blacks to act upon any opportunity to move. Yet, in 1861, 91 percent of all African Americans lived in the South, representing nearly 36 percent of the southern population.

Even before the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery in 1865, mobility remained central to African Americans' larger strategies of empowerment and autonomy in the postwar era. The impetus that led African Americans to build churches, to obtain an education, or to determine how much and when to work were all part of the same desire for freedom that led African Americans to view mobility as key to defining the meaning of freedom in the Reconstruction era. Throughout the late 1860s, African Americans moved to southern cities or neighboring plantations as a way to test their newfound freedom. If one of the hallmarks of slavery was an inability to come and go as one chose or control one's own body, then one of the greatest symbols of freedom for African Americans was to go anywhere one pleased. Moreover, for many African Americans in the age of emancipation, mobility provided a means to seek out and reconnect families torn apart during slavery.

Many African Americans' experiences during slavery, working, living, and bleeding into the land, forged a strong sense of connection to the South. As many African Americans set about the work of forging new communities by establishing independent schools and churches, taking control over their labor, and engaging in formal politics, others chose to leave the South. Although the Civil War proved that the nation was antislavery, over time the nation's stance against slavery did not translate into a willingness to secure genuine freedom for African Americans. With each passing year, the passion to reform the social institutions of the South waned. An era that was once viewed as an opportunity to literally reconstruct the South gave way to an era historian Rayford Logan termed the "nadir of race relations" in the United States, an era defined by the rise of Jim Crow segregation, disfranchisement, the emergence of sharecropping, and lynching.

In the face of the rising tide of racism in the South and the nation, some, such as the African American minister Henry McNeal Turner, advocated emigration to Africa. Although Turner believed that Africa would offer the possibility of better

conditions and the opportunity to forge a “respectable civil and Christian negro nation,” during the nineteenth century as a whole, only 12,000 to 20,000 African Americans ever migrated to Liberia. While Africa may have been a more remote option for many African Americans, others found the chance to move to Kansas more of a potentiality. Before the 1870s, nearly 10,000 African Americans in Kentucky, Missouri, and Tennessee moved to Kansas in search of freedom and opportunity. As the South capitulated to racism, another 5,000 blacks from the Deep South joined these exodusters despite the resistance of many southern whites and the apathy of many northern whites. Yet the opportunity for escape was limited at best, and the majority of the black population in the United States remained in the South.

Still, for many African Americans, the North remained a beacon of hope throughout the Jim Crow era. The Land of Hope, the Promised Land, and Jim Canaan were but a few of the names that African Americans termed the North during the early part of the twentieth century. At a time when sharecropping began to bind blacks as tightly to the land as slavery, disfranchisement was made possible by a series of Supreme Court decisions, and racialized violence proliferated in the form of the Ku Klux Klan and increasingly brutal lynchings, migration to the North symbolized many African Americans’ desire for freedom and equality. Yet nearly 90 percent of African Americans remained in the South until World War I stemmed the tide of European immigration to the North and eliminated the primary source of industrial labor. Labor shortages in northern industry pulled black migrants out of the South at the same time that the devastation of the southern cotton crops by floods and boll weevils pushed them out of the region. Facilitated by labor agents who combed the South looking for black workers and provided one-way railroad tickets to the North, the *Chicago Defender*, an African American newspaper that broadcast the relative freedom of the North throughout the South, and African Americans’ own networks of kin and desire for freedom, more than 1.5 million blacks abandoned the South between 1915 and 1921. Ironically, given the racism, violence, and widespread belief in black inferiority, southern whites, fearful of a labor shortage of their own, attempted to halt the movement.

African Americans moved in hopes of securing a brighter future to northern cities such as New York City, Chicago, Philadelphia, Cleveland, and Pittsburgh, doubling the black population outside the South by 1940. The black population of Chicago grew 148 percent, from 44,103 to 109,458, while in New York, the black population grew 66 percent, from 91,709 to 152,467. There southern blacks joined an influx of immigrants of African descent from Cuba and the West Indies at the dawn of a cultural revolution that would transform Harlem into the black capital of the world. Through kinship networks, migrants often arrived with detailed information about housing and employment. Many African Americans arrived in the North with the knowledge that the average black worker in the South earned

between \$0.5 and \$2 per day in wages, compared with \$2 to \$5 many expected to earn in the North. As much as African Americans moved with the hope of securing better employment, they also moved North with the hope of escape from the shadow of slavery and racism. Some African American women used migration as an opportunity to escape sexual violence in the South. Blacks often found improved race relations in the North, better opportunities in education and employment, and the right to vote. However, they were also greeted with contempt by old settlers in previously established black communities, cramped housing, job prospects limited to menial labor, and a series of race riots that led them to question whether the North was, in fact, a Promised Land. Despite the segregation blacks faced, in the end many embraced the greater opportunity available in the North.

Though the North no longer seemed to be the Promised Land of the past, for many African Americans mobility remained central to the idea of attaining freedom. On the whole, nearly 90 percent of African Americans remained in the South, tied to agricultural labor, mired in poverty, and circumscribed, but not defined by, the reality of Jim Crow. The economic crisis of the Great Depression began earlier and lasted longer for blacks. As an attempt to deal with the economic plight of the agricultural South during the Great Depression, the New Deal's Agricultural Adjustment Administration's effort to reduce crop production induced planters to reduce the number of tenants and sharecroppers they employed. During the 1930s, African Americans were forced off farms and plantations throughout the South, losing their livelihood in the process. Unlike the previous Great Migration during the earlier part of the twentieth century, during which planters throughout the South lamented African American migration as a loss of labor, landowners fueled black migration themselves through widespread evictions.

In large measure, the displacement of black workers and families had no outlet until World War II. Even as war production increased, creating widespread labor shortages in industry, African Americans remained largely excluded from the revitalization of the U.S. economy until labor leader A. Philip Randolph initiated the March on Washington Movement in 1941 to secure African American employment in defense industries. Though President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802, which established the Fair Employment Practices Committee, outlawing discrimination in defense industries, it was largely ignored until 1943. More than 5.5 million African Americans took advantage of the new opportunities for employment in defense industries and left the South for the North and West.

As a result, the African American population in the North substantially increased in cities such as Detroit, Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia, while in the West, the black population grew exponentially. Within a decade, the black population in Chicago grew 77 percent, from 277,731 to 492,635, and in Detroit the population doubled from 149,119 to 298,875. But the African American population

increased 168 percent, from 63,774 to 170,880 in Los Angeles; 341 percent in Seattle, 3,780 to 16,734; 462 percent in Oakland, 8,462 to 47,610; and 796 percent in San Francisco, 4,846 to 43,460, forging new black communities throughout the West. Even though African Americans were the last hired and first fired in defense industries, in the western cities, such as Seattle, African Americans earned wages 53 percent higher than African Americans throughout the nation. Nonetheless, the arrival of large numbers of African Americans also resulted in greater racial animosity on the part of whites. While larger numbers of African Americans migrated to the West and North, there were also approximately 4,300,000 intrastate migrants and 2,100,000 interstate migrants in the South. While some among those migrants eventually made their way to the North or West, others chose to relocate in southern defense centers such as Charleston, Norfolk, Mobile, or Louisville. That nearly half the black population remained in the South suggests that when blacks left the South, they were not fleeing the South per se, but were fleeing the racism, violence, and lack of opportunity white supremacy had created there. But by staying in the South African American migrants effectively claimed the South as their own. Yet North, West, or South, migration facilitated a shift from rural to urban. Nearly 73 percent of all African Americans lived in cities by 1960.

African American migration held profound consequences for the struggles for freedom. First, African American migration to the North radically altered the political landscape in America. In the past, their political concerns had been largely ignored in the national political arena since they could not vote. Where African Americans could vote, both in the North and in the South, they were often tied to the Republican Party, not so much because it was the “Party of Lincoln,” but because there was little alternative. In the South, the Democratic Party was closely allied with white supremacy and was often the only party in town. Nationally, few Democrats were willing to risk political power by alienating white southern voters by advocating black equality. However, through migration, black voters in the North and West became a constituency that could no longer be ignored. Second, in part because of their political pressure and the prominence of a northern black press, civil rights increasingly became a national issue. Moreover, many migrants in the North remained tied to the plight of their family and friends in the South. For instance, the murder of Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi, in 1955, became a national concern because of the black press, *Jet*, the *Amsterdam News*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and the *Chicago Defender*, as well as the vocal response of African Americans in the North.

At a time when roughly half the black population left the South seeking greater opportunity and freedom in the North and West, that same desire was often a catalyst for others to remain in the South. Whether in the Carolinas, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, or Kentucky, a number of African Americans throughout the South

proved more than willing to stay and battle for freedom. The era of the Second Great Migration was not only an era of mass exodus but was also an era of increased civil rights activism within the South. As Hollis Watkins, a civil rights activist with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), noted during a 1964 voter registration campaign in Greenwood, Mississippi, “As long as we continue to go up North and run away from the situation, we will never make it any better” (“Mass Meeting and Prayer”).

African American migration out of the South dwindled to a trickle by the late 1960s, as a result of civil rights victories in the South and the racial climate of the North. As African Americans regained the right to vote and access to better schools and public accommodations, if not equal employment, open housing, or an end to police brutality, the prime motivation for migration, the desire for freedom and equality, was lessened. At the same time, deindustrialization short-circuited the limited economic opportunities African Americans found in northern industries. Moreover, African Americans were increasingly confined to overcrowded housing located in deteriorating inner cities across America as they encountered residential segregation even more pronounced in the North than in the South. As work disappeared and racism in the North and West seemingly increased with the influx of migrants, many African Americans questioned whether migration from the South was, in fact, a road toward greater freedom or a better life.

By 2000, more than 86 percent of all African Americans lived in cities, with nearly 37 percent and 9 percent located in the North and West, respectively. However, despite the large numbers of migrants throughout the era of the Great Migration, the majority of African Americans remain in the South. Ironically, increasing numbers of African Americans are returning to southern cities such as Atlanta, New Orleans, Charlotte, and Houston still seeking better lives, freedom, and equality.

*Luther J. Adams*

**See also:** Black Migration before World War I, Patterns of; Demographic Patterns of the Great Black Migration (1915–1940); Demographic Patterns of the Great Black Migration (1940–1970); Migrants, Economic Characteristics of; Migrants, Expectations of; Migrants, Social Characteristics of; Return Migration.

## Further Reading

Berlin, Ira. *The Making of African America: The Four Great Migrations*. New York: Penguin Books, 2010.

Griffin, Farah Jasmine. “Who Set You Flowin’?” *The African-American Migration Narrative*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.