

The Great Southern Migration

BY BETTY JOYCE NASH

Throughout much of the 20th century, people streamed out of the South, rearranging the social, political, and economic landscape

The Great Migration brought families like this to Chicago and other industrial economic magnets in the Midwest and Northeast. For blacks, the migration promised not only job opportunities but also escape from the segregated South.



James Macbeth moved to New York from Charleston, S.C., in the boom years of the Great Migration. It was the 1950s, a decade when some 1.1 million blacks left the South. His father had departed many years before, too many for him to remember just which year it was. The elder Macbeth worked for the postal service in New York City. By the time Macbeth was ready for college, he moved to Pennsylvania and his mother later joined his father in New York. The elder Macbeths also worked at the Carolina Chapel of Mickey Funeral Service in Harlem, founded in 1932, far from its original Charleston, S.C., home base. Macbeth works there now.

Macbeth is but one of 8 million black and 20 million white Southerners who streamed to cities in the North or West, with the heaviest flows between about 1915 to 1970. Blacks migrated in higher percentages than whites, and so this “Great Migration” redistributed the racial population. It changed job markets, politics, and society. And culture. For blacks, the exodus urbanized a formerly agricultural and dispersed people, allowing them visibility in accomplishing social goals. Effects of white migration were less dramatic and, in many cases, temporary, coinciding with the wartime and post-war industrial boom.

Migration: A Sorting Mechanism

People migrate in search of better living conditions. Sometimes freedom from war and oppression supplies the necessary energy required to overcome the inertia inherent in the status quo.

Sometimes it’s a better job. Or both.

Migrations affect jobs, wages, geography, housing, education — all economic activity. Migrations also reveal how workers sort themselves into jobs in different locations.

“It’s a complex process in which workers and employers match up, and it’s absolutely essential in an economy that changes rapidly over time,” says economist William Collins of Vanderbilt University. “In other words, migration — the movement of workers from place to place — is a key part of the story of how labor markets work.”

The Great Migration ebbed and flowed with the world wars. The first period dated from about 1915 to 1930 — World War I and after — and slowed with the Depression. Migration picked up again as military production — steel and aluminum plants, shipyards, aircraft plants, and military installations — for World War II created jobs in the Great Lakes corridor from New York to Chicago as well as on both coasts. People kept moving even after the war, as the economy grew.

While the migration north and west from Southern states began in earnest in the century’s first decade, more than 40 years before Macbeth’s personal odyssey, the exodus was growing even stronger at the time of his departure.

Macbeth, like most black immigrants, laughs when he says his father headed north because “everybody said the streets were paved with gold.” But the laughter subsides when he talks about segregation, the “Jim Crow” laws that prevented blacks from voting and more.

In all former Confederate states, less than 5 percent of eligible blacks were registered to vote as late as 1940, according to historian David Kennedy.

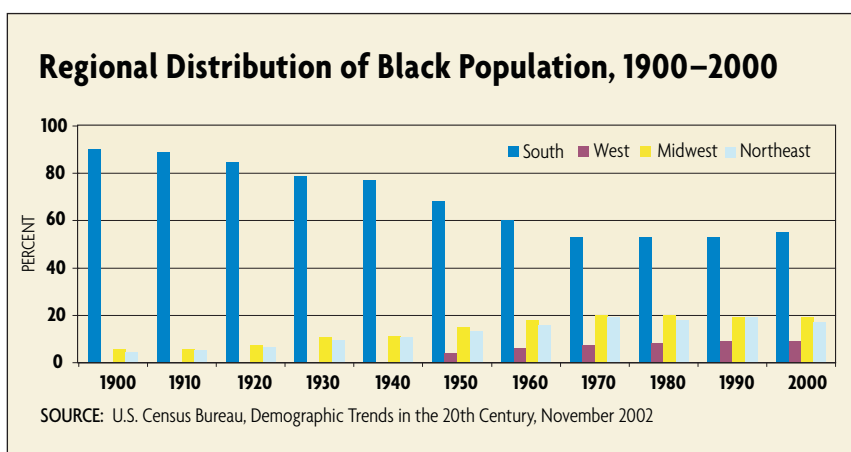
(Women, black and white, did not receive voting rights until 1920.) By 1900, Southern states had instituted racial separation: drinking fountains, schools, waiting rooms. Few industrial jobs existed in the South, and Jim Crow affected those too. For instance, in 1915, South Carolina required segregated workrooms in textile mills. Infant mortality rates for blacks were nearly double those for whites in 1930 (10 percent and 6 percent, respectively). Blacks could expect to live 15 fewer years than whites, 45 compared with 60.

Moving destinations varied. Southerners aimed for meccas like Chicago or Detroit if they were from Mississippi or Alabama. But the goal was New York, Philadelphia, or Boston if they hailed from the Carolinas and elsewhere along the Eastern Seaboard. Historian Spencer Crew, who has studied the migration, says that blacks in the early years followed whatever rail routes crossed their towns. Trains pulled into Southern stations filled with goods and pulled out filled with the people who could afford to go.

Economists have been curious about why blacks waited some 50 years after the Civil War to exit the South in significant numbers. By the early 1900s, only a couple hundred thousand blacks (and about 716,000 whites) were leaving. The Great Migration peaked in the 1970s when some 1.5 million blacks and 2.6 million whites left the South.

Theories have pointed to European immigration as a “deterrent” to black migration, especially in those early years. Data show that blacks “moved at times and to places where foreign-born immigrants were less prevalent ... the Great Migration would have gotten under way earlier than it did if strict immigration controls had been adopted earlier,” Collins wrote in a paper on the subject. As World War I stifled that European flow, it simultaneously created demand for workers to fill industrial jobs previously available only to whites.

While blacks were not hired into skilled jobs in the Northern industries



until mid-century, they did find lower-level jobs, according to Crew, who now directs the Underground Railroad Museum in Cincinnati. “In the North, because of the war, there was a real shortage of labor, and as a consequence, opportunities for African Americans opened up, mostly in the iron mills and slaughter houses.” Crew notes that the better-paid, higher-skilled jobs were not available to blacks until the post-World War II years — and even then, they were hard to get.

In 1920, for instance, 70 percent of Southern black men worked in unskilled or service jobs compared to 22 percent of Southern white men. By 1970, according to historian James Gregory, that number had fallen to 35 percent for Southern-born black men and a barely changed 24 percent for Southern-born white men.

The agricultural depression of the 1920s, sparked by wartime overproduction and rock-bottom crop prices, accelerated immigration even further during that decade. The cotton for which the Southern states were famous was devastated by the boll weevil. In 1920, South Carolina farmers produced 1.6 million bales, the biggest in the state’s history, but two years later they counted 493,000, the fewest since the Civil War. Add to that an agricultural deflation in which peanut prices fell from \$240 to \$40 per ton in one season, corn from \$1.50 to 50 cents.

That and mechanization forced many white and black agricultural laborers off Southern fields for good.

“The 1922 harvest season was followed by the largest wave of migration in the history of black Carolina,” according to *Black Carolinians: A History of Blacks in South Carolina from 1895 to 1968* by I.A. Newby. Some 59,000 blacks left rural areas of 41 South Carolina counties between November 1922 and June 1923.

Migrant Characteristics

Blacks who migrated tended to be more educated than those who stayed, while the reverse was true of whites, according to Duke University economist Jacob Vigdor. He has studied changes in migration patterns and migrant characteristics. Before World War II, educated blacks were more likely to migrate north because they could better afford it. (Families who could afford the opportunity costs of sending their children to school, he notes, could more likely pay for a move.)

Plus, they valued the educational opportunities they heard about up North. It’s not that the North always turned out to be a “promised land” for blacks, Crew says. But there was hope, the brightest of which was better education. “People [were] bringing their kids with them in the hopes they [would] have a better future,” he says. Vigdor reports median years of schooling completed among black migrants from most Southern states as eight or nine in 1940 among those born from 1913 to 1922.

Early migrants were, on average, younger as well as better educated

than non-migrants. They could read newspapers, letters, or flyers that described the migration. "In each age cohort, highly educated blacks living outside their state of birth were more likely to reside in the North than in the South," Vigdor writes. "In the oldest cohort, highly educated black interstate migrants were 35 percent more likely to reside in the North." In 1940, educated blacks were likely to choose a Northern destination, but that trend began to change in 1970, with more educated blacks turning back to the South.

These patterns might have implications for human capital and economic outcomes of later generations of native-born blacks. Economics literature, Vigdor notes, links outcomes with characteristics of fellow ethnic or racial group members, especially in segregated environments.

As decades passed, life for black youth who remained in the South was still tough. An article published in 1967 in a New York biweekly newspaper, *The Reporter*, noted that the poorest county in South Carolina, Williamsburg, lost 14,636 blacks from 1950 to 1960. That was more than half its black population. Among those who stayed, even black students with some college lacked opportunity. Here's how the author describes the situation, based on interviews with black families: "But when the time came for them to find jobs, there were none. One by one, Davis' four sons and three daughters packed up and left for New York."

Chain Migration

Migrants drew on the help of friends, relatives, and friends of friends in the search for a new life up North. Sometimes industrial recruiters, desperate for labor and sometimes strikebreakers as World War I and immigration policy choked off the flow of whites from other countries, trolled Southern towns for would-be migrants, some offering free train tickets.

Northern cities' newest Southern arrivals, white and black, didn't always find the welcome they sought, and they tended to stick together. Some natives

derided "hillbilly" and Southern accents. Entire blocks of Chicago and Detroit were known as little Appalachia. There is still a faint legacy of "Bronzeville," a black district just now undergoing a renaissance of sorts, also in Chicago.

Early on, new migrants were often "portrayed in unflattering terms by contemporary observers," according to University of Washington sociologist Stewart Tolnay. Even sociologists like W.E.B. Du Bois wrote, of the earliest migrants to Philadelphia, that their Southern backgrounds were a handicap as they tried to adapt to life in the Northern city. And, at first, even Northern black newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender* discouraged blacks from settling in Northern cities.

But by 1918, the *Defender* was selling 130,000 copies, three-fourths of those outside Chicago in cities like Richmond, Norfolk, and Savannah, Ga., with smaller circulations in towns dotted throughout the South. Much of this was in response to the Southern press, which "built into a crisis story about potential labor shortages for Southern agriculture," according to Gregory in *The Southern Diaspora*.

The black-owned newspapers in the South warned whites of an "exodus," should whites fail to open doors to change. Meanwhile, white publishers pondered what to do about the out-migration, worrying in headlines about labor shortages. White-owned Northern newspapers often focused on the negatives of the influx, Gregory wrote.

Although migrants to Northern cities were better educated than their Southern counterparts, their new Northern neighbors, white and black, described them as illiterate. "And their growing numbers were sometimes viewed as a potential threat to the racial status quo that offered Northern blacks a relatively comfortable coexistence with whites, if not actual racial equality," according to Tolnay. Later anecdotal portraits of migrants, however, are kinder — perhaps native Northerners had gotten used to the new migrants. Still, race riots erupted

in Chicago, Detroit, and Harlem, while Ku Klux Klan terrorism and lynching marred life in the segregated South.

Black migrants tended to settle together, and they organized themselves socially, according to Newby. "In every city where significant numbers of them settled, there were Palmetto College Clubs or Palmetto state societies, which, in purely social matters at least, eased the transition to urban living for many migrants."

Until migration picked up in World War I, there was little separation of the races in neighborhoods. For instance, the 5,000 blacks who lived in Detroit in 1910 had lived among other immigrants. But with the influx of new migrants, blacks were channeled into the city's slums. Even if migrants could afford a home, there were the tools of zoning and restrictive covenants that prevented them from purchasing in certain neighborhoods until government intervened with housing laws.

Going Home

By 1970, blacks who were educated were more likely to head for a Southern destination than their less-schooled counterparts, a trend that continues. Economists and historians suggest by way of explanation that discrimination had begun to ease in the South, with conditions for blacks being more hospitable as civil rights gained ground. It's also possible that the Northern cities to which they had moved had become less desirable as industrial strength of the Great Lakes region waned and joblessness eroded neighborhoods.

As late as the tail end of the 1960s, the 14 states with the largest number of blacks leaving were all in the South. But a decade later, migration had leveled off, and reversed.

For whites, the entire migration tended to be more of a "circulatory" trend. For instance, in the late 1950s, according to Gregory, for every 100 white Southerners who migrated north or west, 54 returned home, and that number increased to 78 by the late 1960s.

"Turnover was the key dynamic of

the white diaspora,” writes Gregory. “Fewer than half of the nearly 20 million whites who left the South actually left for good. That means that the white diaspora is best understood as a circulation, not as a one-way population transfer.”

But black return migration was only about a third of the rate of white migration during most decades. Some did come back even as others departed. For instance, in 1949, some 43,000 black Southerners returned, about 1.7 percent of all Southern-born blacks living in the North and West.

Still, in the 1970s, the return flow of blacks to the South was evident — more moving in than moving out. Between 1975 and 1980, Virginia, the Carolinas, and Maryland were among the states gaining the most black in-migrants, according to demographer William Frey.

Frey analyzed migration data from

four decennial censuses. Among other findings, the South netted black migrants from all other U.S. regions during the 1990s, completely reversing the migration stream. Charlotte, Norfolk-Virginia Beach, Raleigh-Durham, and Washington-Baltimore were among the 10 most-preferred destinations during that time. Atlanta, however, was the strongest magnet. New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco lost blacks during the same period. Also noteworthy: Blacks were more likely than whites to pick Southern destinations. Maryland, North Carolina, and Virginia were among the 10 states that gained the most black college graduates during the late 1990s.

Black reverse migration reflects economic growth, improved race relations, “and the long-standing cultural and kinship ties it holds for black families,” according to Frey.

James Macbeth, who is 71 and beginning to think about retirement, may move back to Charleston. His parents, both dead, are buried in South Carolina, and his siblings have scattered throughout Southern cities in a return migration of their own.

Over his lifetime, Macbeth witnessed the chain of events that people like his father set in motion. The migratory tide, once it began going out, forced change as it rearranged population, employment, education, attitudes, art, music, sports, transportation, recreation, housing, and more. The Great Migration was driven by more than the opportunity to improve working conditions — at least for blacks. James Macbeth’s father didn’t leave Charleston just for a good job in New York at the post office. “He just couldn’t get along with segregation in the South.” **RF**

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causing them to lack incentive to ensure that borrowers are “mortgage ready.” (It should be pointed out that lenders do carry risk even when they sell their mortgages because over the long term, if defaults are widespread, then they are certainly worse off in terms of their future ability to originate loans and sell them.) “Are we

going to expect Wall Street investors to support homeownership counseling?” he asks rhetorically.

Almost three years after her purchase, Donna Turner is keeping up with her monthly payments and tending a small garden out back. She is the very picture of a happy, responsible homeowner. “I had always lived with

somebody. And after you pay your part of the bills, they say get out,” Turner says. “So I was determined to get to the point where nobody could ever tell me to get out again.”

Turner did it. Economic research suggests that, while it won’t come close to working for everyone, she needn’t be the only exception. **RF**

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