



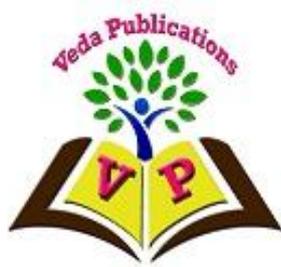
## AFRO-AMERICAN MIGRANTS IN “PROMISED LAND”: FROM FIELD TO FACTORY

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### ABSTRACT



The United States has always been a country of people on the move: up and down the eastern seaboard, westward toward the Pacific, from countryside to city and from East and Midwest into the Sunbelt. Americans have a long history of dragging up their roots when they see prospect and hope elsewhere. One such large-scale population movement was the migration of Afro-Americans from the field of South to the urban industrial centers or factories of North. Between World War I and the eve of World War II, moreover 3 million blacks made this move. In 1916, the number of Afro-Americans migrating from the South to north swelled from a trickle to a torrent. Between 1910 and 1940, over 3 million blacks-men, women, and children-uprooted themselves and made their way towards north in the hope of building better lives, in search of freedom and new world. The paper focuses on the helps and impediments that these Afro-American migrants encountered as they struggled to build the better lives that had been their aspiration in moving north.

**Keywords:** *Migration, South, North, Afro-America, Home.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The "Great Migration" of Afro-Americans out of southern states and into northern cities was one of the major demographic events that took place in the United States during the twentieth century. A large number of Afro-Americans migrating from the South to north in 1916 swelled from a trickle to a torrent. Between 1910 and 1940, over 3 million blacks-men, women, and children-uprooted themselves and made their way towards north in search of new world, freedom and hope of better lives. After restoration in 1876, both the U.S Supreme Court and the federal government left it primarily upon southern powers and authorities to decide what the rights of Afro-Americans residing in the South would be.

Whatever developed in the region was a two-track system of citizenship which was separate and extremely disparate. Blacks were enforced to live under "Jim Crow" laws like; Afro-Americans had to sit at the back of the bus; had to drink from separate water tap, used fall down "colored" waiting rooms in train stations, and attended substandard schools for taking education.

In economical domain also, the life of Afro-Americans in the South was destroyed. The larger part of blacks farmed for a living, but only a marginal owned their own land. Mostly they were sharecroppers, trapped in an economic system based on credit controlled by the landholders. The landholders gave advanced money to the sharecropper when needed and in turn, were supposed to pay back to the landholders at every year's end with a part of the crop. When the crops and production were good it was very difficult for sharecroppers to get totally out of debt. During and after World War I, a string of natural disasters including major floods made the crop mostly bad.

In spite of all the adverse and unfavorable circumstances, the South was *home* for them. Kith and kin and friends, church and community, augmented their lives and endowed with a sense of belonging as well as support. It would take more than just hard times, violence, and the threat of violence to encourage southern blacks to break loose from these supports and set off into the unknown. The missing catalyst - a positive incentive to move

appeared during World War I, when manpower shortages induced northern industries to turn to southern blacks to supply the needed work force. Labor recruiters came south to insist on blacks there to take northern jobs, promising high wages. Those who answered this call were soon writing home telling their new lives in radiant terms. Wearing best clothes, they returned back and impressed their former neighbors with their achievement and erudition. Black newspapers too supported their readers (Afro-Americans) to break free of their oppression and come north.

Most of the blacks began responding to these calls. From farms and towns all over the region, individually and in groups, they boarded trains and ships and migrated to north in search of new world. Often the father of a family would go first, to find employment and a shelter to live. Whatever route the migrants followed to the industrial cities of the North to Chicago and New York, to Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and Detroit, and to countless smaller communities - they came hoping to better their lives, to find new world, freedom and opportunity denied them back home.

However, some migrants were put off by the smoke and dirt of industrial centers, most reacted with zeal to their first sight of northern cities. Thrilled by the size of the buildings, the vivid signs, dazzling lights, and the hustle and bustle of the streets, they were also overwhelmed by the absence of obvious signs of segregation. They noted that blacks and whites came together on the sidewalks and sat together on streetcars. They also noted that there were no "Colored" or "Whites" signs on drinking fountains or in restaurant windows.

The foremost thing migrants looked for was a place to live. They moved in with family or friends from back home until and unless they could find spaces of their own. As the migration continued more Afro-Americans from the South moved to north. But as time went on white owners signed agreements called *restrictive covenants*, promising not to rent or sell to Afro-Americans. When a black family did manage to attain a home in a white neighborhood, the household often met with violence-with bricks, or shots, or even bombs.



Living costs were higher in urban north than in the rural South. The migrants' higher pay did not improve their living standard as much as they had previously expected. Moreover, some migrants moved down the job scale when they came to north. For example, Afro-Americans who had been skilled workers back home often could not find skilled jobs in their trade—largely because of the inequitable practices of white unions. Most work available to blacks was at the bottom of the job scale: the dirtiest, worst paid, most dangerous jobs. Often, so-called factory work turned out to be sweeping the factory floors. Even when blacks had industrial employment, they often worked at different types of jobs than whites.

Moreover, after World War I ended, many blacks were laid off so that discharged white soldiers would have work. These lay-offs reflected an ongoing pattern. Industrial employers tended to treat Afro-American as a pool of reserve labor, putting them to work when extra manpower was needed during economic bangs or during strikes. This strikebreaking role earned blacks as a group the hostility of many white union members; while blacks in turn observed how often white union practices discriminated against them. They felt no pressure to be loyal to organizations that barred them from jobs they were qualified for. And employers frequently played up racial divisions as a way of curbing union growth. Another serious facet of the employment situation was lack of progression. Over and over, Afro-Americans found themselves working alongside newly arrived white immigrants. Soon the white newcomers would move up to better jobs, while the blacks who had worked far longer— and worked well—remained right where they had started.

For black women, the situation was even worse than for black men. Few black women were able to get even the insecure foothold in industry that black men achieved during World War I. And the little ground they gained then, they lost when the war was over. In the 1920s, huge numbers of white women together with recent European immigrants— were moving into decent jobs as office workers or clerks. Yet only a small segment of black women were able to obtain such jobs and almost completely in businesses owned by blacks. Into the 1940s, the

largest fraction of black women continued to work as domestics.

Migrants promptly learned that they were not welcomed in the North. It was apparent that the races blended in the streets, on public transportation, on the job, and in many stores and eating places. Yet residential areas were most of either black or white. Hence, beaches, dance halls, hospitals and social service facilities— were alienated by race. In northern areas, the school system was formally segregated. But in other areas this was not so. Even where schools were supposed to be incorporated, segregated residential patterns led to primarily black or white schools. And the black schools, more or less always in inferior neighborhoods, were housed in older buildings with more limited facilities, and received less funding. The newcomers also met with a less than open armed welcome from those blacks who were already recognized in the North, now and then for generations. This group had at first encouraged the migration. But as the numeral, of newcomers grew, the “Old Settlers” realized that they were fast becoming a minority within the black community. Until this flood, their numbers had been small enough so that Afro-Americans were not predominantly apparent as a group. In most places in the North, they had lived and spread all over the city.

The migrants were not only enormously plentiful; but also likely to be visible. However, they had been better off than many of their neighbors back home—that rural south was very different from an urban north. Most migrants wore headscarves and overalls. They spoke in a different way and were often more vigorous. Apart from this, they tended to be less educated than their northern equivalents.

A lot of Old Settlers were analyzed these migrants as a hazard to the gains that the formerly established Afro-Americans had made. There were lots of reasons that inequity was got higher in the period after World War I. Black newspapers and social groups initiated movements to educate newcomers on how “decent” people were anticipated to behave in north, both on and off the job. They advocated migrants to work hard, to wear city-type clothes, not to speak in high voices, to keep their houses clean, moreover, to obey the rules to



urban middle-class standards of the industrial workplace.

Once these migrants had taken care of their most significant basic endurance needs like-shelter and a job, they could get to know their new community and begin to figure out how to build a pleasing life within it. However enforced into poorer quarters, the migrants could fix them up to be as homey as possible: adorn them with gracious well-known objects like family quilts or Bibles, or plants and photos from home. Still on a hot plate, a family could cook dishes they had always relished. Apart from that, if their apartment house felt too hot and full on a summer's evening, they could sit down outside on their front stoop where it was calm and cold, and divert themselves by watching the comings and goings on the street and talking with their neighbors.

In the South, Afro-American migrants came across to kith and kin, family, and community for support as well as a sense of imperative needs within a larger environment that was time and again intimidating and unfair. Thus, being a part and parcel of a social network it was very important because it could recommend both ethical and sensible support to migrants, whose survival was often economically insecure. An inhabitant who was employed at a time when family members had been laid off, a neighbor willing to trade food for clothing, a cousin or aunt who would take care of the baby while the mother went out to work; supports like these were vital in the effort to build as well as establish life under unhinged conditions. Sometimes, both neighborhood and social networks were also as much important as a means of communication. Chats with friends, barbershop chitchat, words exchanged from front stoop to front stoop-all these helped information circulate fast. Even the songs a group of children sang as they skipped rope could carry a message (announcing, for example, the arrival of a social worker) to those who knew how to listen. Formal organizations too played a vital role in the migrants' lives. As in the South, church-going was central to many, but newcomers often found the more reserved services of northern churches emotionally unsatisfying. Some opened churches of their own, often in storefronts. Groups of migrants would

sometimes bring up their parson from the South. Ministers of Afro-American churches were regarded by both blacks and whites as spokes people for the black community.

Secular groups too played a role. Mutual-aid societies, insurance and social clubs, and social service agencies like the Urban League were important. The Urban League, for example, helped black migrants in locating house and jobs, played a role in educating the newcomers to the requirements of their new surroundings, and acted as a bridge between the Afro-American migrants of south and the white community of north.

### CONCLUSION

The migrants had moved north with high expectations, hope for freedom, in search of new world, but the real world they found fell far short. A minority of the newcomers returned south; but most stayed on, accepting the adverse challenges of their new surroundings along with the opportunities. And this rising deliberation of Afro-Americans in urban commune sowed seeds that were to bear fruit in the decades to come. It laid the groundwork for an increasingly urbane and complicated political power base, and it provided a market for black businesses. By the early 1930s, black leaders and socialists were started to try out marches and boycotts, agitations and sometimes movements as well as votes and proceedings, for transforming and reformation. In the decades following World War II, these strategies would be set and implement to use on a national level.

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