



Waiting for a northbound train
in Jacksonville, Florida, 1921

Union Terminal
Colored Waiting Room

The Great Migration

A hundred years ago, blacks in the South began trekking north in search of a better life, changing America in ways still felt today

BY ROBERT K. ELDER

When McKinley Morganfield lived in Mississippi, he wanted to be one of three things: “a heck of a preacher, a heck of a ball player, or a heck of a musician.”

But in 1943, at age 28, Morganfield wasn’t any of those things—at least not

yet. He was earning 22.5 cents an hour working on a cotton plantation, and when he asked for a raise—to 25 cents an hour—his boss exploded in rage, prompting Morganfield to hop a train to Chicago.

“I got off that train, and it looked like Chicago was the fastest place in the world—cabs dropping fares, horns blow-

ing, the peoples walking so fast,” he later told *The New York Times*. “But I changed my luck all the way around when I moved up there.”

He landed a job in a container factory, rented a four-room apartment, and within a few years was well on his way to becoming the legendary blues musician known

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as Muddy Waters. In fleeing the economic caste system and institutional racism of the South, Morganfield followed a path that black Southerners had begun to pave in 1916 and that lasted into the 1970s.

It's been 100 years since the start of what's known as the Great Migration, which saw 7 million black Southerners push north and west to escape racism and seek better jobs and opportunities. Black populations swelled in industrialized cities like Chicago, New York, Detroit, and Philadelphia (see chart, p. 18)—the largest demographic shift of any group in U.S. history. That shift radically transformed the nation in ways still felt today.

"It changed the whole profile and landscape of American cities: culturally, politically, and socially," says James R. Grossman, author of *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration*. "There was absolutely nothing about urban life that wasn't reshaped by the Great Migration."

Jim Crow & World War I

The factors that pushed so many Southern blacks to head north can be traced to slavery and its aftermath. For a brief window after the Civil War (1861-65), during the period known as Reconstruction (1865-77), life actually improved for African-Americans in the South. The 14th Amendment (1868) gave black people citizenship and equal protection under the law, and the 15th Amendment (1869) gave them voting rights. For a while, federal troops made sure that Southern states complied with the new rules.

But once the troops left in 1877, state and local governments in the South enacted a series of "Jim Crow" laws that discriminated against blacks politically, economically, and socially. (The name Jim Crow came from a popular 19th-century minstrel character and was used in the South as a derogatory term for blacks.)

The U.S. Supreme Court's 1896 ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, a case involving segregated rail cars in Louisiana, essentially upheld Jim Crow by saying that "separate but equal" facilities for blacks and

THEIR SOUTHERN SAGA

Like many black Americans today, the Williams sisters have Great Migration roots



Serena & Venus Williams These tennis megastar sisters were born in California, but their father, Richard Williams, was among the 7 million black people who fled the South during the Great Migration. He grew up in Shreveport, Louisiana, where his childhood was filled with violent clashes with whites. In his book *Black and White: The Way I See It*, Williams recounts how a Ku Klux Klan member stabbed him in the leg with a railroad spike and an ice pick, as well as how he was hit over the head with a baseball bat, a bottle, and a flashlight. Williams left the South for Chicago in the 1960s, later winding up in California. "I believed the greatest civil rights victory I could achieve would be my own success," he wrote. "It was time to live free, be free." He personally coached his two daughters in tennis and they each rose to be the number one women's tennis player in the world.



An ad in the *Chicago Defender* in 1917

whites were constitutional. In everyday life, blacks in the South had to defer to whites, whether giving up their seats on a bus or letting whites pass on the sidewalk. If they didn't obey, they faced violence and even death. According to the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama, almost 4,000 black men, women, and children were lynched by white mobs from 1877 to 1950.

In addition to the discrimination that pushed blacks out of the South, there were factors that pulled them north. The most important was the explosion of jobs in big cities during World War I (1914-18), when

5 million Americans left home to fight in Europe. Word spread among blacks that workers were needed in factories, slaughterhouses, and steel mills. (In some cases, northern manufacturers recruited black workers, even providing transportation.) The promise of a better life prompted 2 million blacks to leave the South from roughly 1916 to 1930 in a true grassroots movement.

Further encouraging this first wave was the newspaper *The Chicago Defender*. In 1916, its African-American publisher, Robert S. Abbott, read a report about black dockworkers in Jacksonville, Florida, leaving overnight for jobs in New Jersey—a revelation that led him to run ads for Northern jobs and openly urge black subscribers in the South to move north.

"He understood that migration could be a weapon to hurt the Jim Crow South," says Ethan Michaeli, author of *The Defender: How the Legendary Black Newspaper Changed America*.

The Defender had black readers all over the nation, and many responded to

the ads, even writing letters to the paper explaining why employers should hire them: "I am working hard in the South and can hardly earn a living," a man in Litcher, Louisiana, wrote in 1917. "I thought to write and ask you for some information concerning how to get a pass for myself and my family."

At first, migration patterns (*see map*) tended to follow railroad lines. Later, blacks journeyed by car or bus, following friends and family who'd preceded them.

Culture & Political Power

Cities were transformed culturally, as jazz and blues music made their way to audiences in the North and West. Southern gospel music—which, along with jazz and blues, would stimulate the birth of rock 'n' roll in the 1950s—found a foothold above the Mason-Dixon line as more black churches sprang up to support new populations. The Great Migration also stoked what became known as the Harlem Renaissance (1917-35) in New York. It offered new opportunities for black writers like Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes and musicians like Louis Armstrong to redefine American arts and culture. And Southern cuisine also started to take hold in the North.

American political life changed too. Without the literacy tests and poll taxes that had been used in the South to prevent blacks from voting, African-Americans in the North could cast their ballots with minimal restrictions—and change the outcome of elections.

"Before the Voting Rights Act [of 1965], the Great Migration is what creates enfranchisement for millions of people," says Grossman. (This would later tip at least two presidents' elections: Franklin D. Roosevelt's third term in 1940 and John F. Kennedy's election in 1960.)

But the Great Migration meant more than jobs, education, and voting rights; it also meant being treated with dignity, as one migrant in Indiana relayed to his family back in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. "I

'I am working hard in the South and can hardly earn a living.'

just begin to feel like a man," he wrote. "I have registered—Will vote the next election and there isn't any 'yes sir' and 'no sir'—it's all yes and no and Sam and Bill."

Though life in the North was better in many respects, it wasn't always easy.

With new competition for jobs and resources, many whites weren't so welcoming of blacks. Bloody race riots broke out in 33 cities during the summer of 1919 (dubbed the "Red Summer"). At least 23 blacks and 15 whites were killed in Chicago riots that lasted almost a week, leaving behind looted businesses and scores of scorched black homes.

African-Americans were prevented from joining unions, which meant they had to take on the "hardest, dirtiest work for the least amount of pay," says Isabel

Wilkerson, author of *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. And they were often relegated to the poorest neighborhoods with the fewest city services.

They were also, in many respects, kept segregated from whites—not by law but through discriminatory practices. Among them were real estate covenants—clauses in deeds that said blacks couldn't buy or rent in white neighborhoods—and redlining, a practice in which banks discriminated against blacks, in part by refusing to grant them mortgages and loans. In addition, strategically placed highways and hard-to-cross avenues ensured that African-Americans stayed on their "side of the tracks." Still, black Southerners continued to head north.

Migration rates dropped in the 1930s, when the Great Depression made jobs scarce all across the U.S., but picked up

ON THE MOVE

Patterns of black migration from the South, 1910-70



SOURCES: PRICEECONOMICS.COM; ISABEL WILKERSON

TRANSFORMING CITIES

African-American populations in major cities, 1910 vs. 1970

CITY	1910 African-American Population	1970 African-American Population	PERCENTAGE INCREASE FROM 1910
LOS ANGELES	6,700	765,800	11,330%
DETROIT	9,000	753,800	8,276%
CHICAGO	58,100	1,328,600	2,187%
NEW YORK	142,100	2,347,100	1,552%
PHILADELPHIA	119,200	836,200	602%
BALTIMORE	98,400	485,500	393%

SOURCE: PRICEECONOMICS.COM

GRANGER, NYC/THE GRANGER COLLECTION (TOP LEFT, ZORA NEALE HURSTON); JUN FUJITA/CHICAGO HISTORY MUSEUM/GETTY IMAGES (TOP RIGHT); SARIN IMAGES/THE GRANGER COLLECTION (LANGSTON HUGHES); SETH WENIG/AP IMAGES (BOTTOM RIGHT)



Working on a bomber aircraft at a factory in Baltimore, May 1942 (left); whites celebrate the destruction of black property after race riots, Chicago, 1919 (right).



Harlem Renaissance: The Great Migration helped writers like Zora Neale Hurston (left) and Langston Hughes (right) to flourish.



Graduation at Boys and Girls High School in Brooklyn, New York, 2015. In big cities, many schools still lack racial diversity.

again in the 1940s, during the post-World War II economic boom. In this second—and final—wave of migration, roughly 5 million more blacks left the South. The Great Migration ended in the 1970s, shortly after the civil rights movement made gains and new legislation protected blacks' equal rights under the law, whether they lived in the North or the South.

'It Was About Freedom'

In the decades that followed, the consequences of the Great Migration—both positive and negative—have continued to reverberate. In the 1970s, the racial demographics of cities shifted even further as many white families left cities where blacks had settled and moved into suburbs, in what was called “white flight.” According to *The Atlantic* magazine, Detroit lost almost 27 percent of its white population in the 1970s and Cleveland lost

20 percent. As tax dollars disappeared and manufacturing jobs crumbled in a changing economy, many cities in the Midwest struggled with decaying urban cores in what became known as “the Rust Belt.”

Even today, many U.S. cities, including New York, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles, are often separated along racial and economic lines, according to the 2010 Census. In many cases, blacks live in poor neighborhoods and attend schools that are predominantly black and Latino. The typical white student in the U.S., by contrast, attends a school that is roughly 75 percent white, according to a recent study by UCLA's Civil Rights Project.

Still, recognizing the hope and drive of those who participated in the Great Migration is essential to appreciating what America is today, according to Natalie Y. Moore, author of *The South*

Side: A Portrait of Chicago and American Segregation. Her own grandparents had roots in Georgia and Tennessee before moving to Chicago.

“It’s important for young people to understand the perseverance, courage, and the sacrifice” that black Americans made, she says, and to appreciate “the contributions that African-Americans brought up to the cities.”

Wilkerson, who wrote one of the books on the Great Migration, thinks the seismic population shift in America that started 100 years ago is important for all of those reasons, but also for what it can teach us about the human spirit.

“Essentially, the Great Migration was not about migration itself,” she says. “It was about freedom and how far people were willing to go to achieve it.” ●

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