

Jim Crow and the Great Migration

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TOP: An African-American family leaving Florida during the Great Depression. MIDDLE: Photo taken at a bus station showing the Jim Crow signs of racial segregation, Durham, North Carolina. BOTTOM: African-American men, women and children who participated in the Great Migration to the North, with suitcases, Chicago, 1918. Photo: Getty Images.

In 1881, Booker T. Washington became the head of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama which educated African-Americans to be teachers, farmers and ministers. In September 1895, Washington stepped to the podium at the Atlanta Cotton States Exposition and asked white employers to "cast down our bucket where you are." He wanted them to hire southern African-Americans and promised they would be a peaceful work force that would not cause trouble seeking more civil rights. As workers they would be "one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress." Socially, blacks would be "as separate as the fingers."

Washington called for patience in the hope that blacks would be allowed some freedom to find a good job and believed social and political equality could come later. For other black leaders, like W.E.B. Du Bois, who had just received his Ph.D. from Harvard, this was unacceptable. They felt that blacks should demand full citizenship rights immediately.

In the 30 years since the Civil War ended, African-Americans had experienced startling changes to their life opportunities. Emancipation from slavery was celebrated, of course. However, what would be African-American freedom? Who could buy or sell property, get married, own firearms, vote, get a job, receive an education or travel freely? For a little more than 10 years during Reconstruction, after the Civil War, African-Americans saw real opportunities. However, when northern armies left in 1877, everything changed and the era of Redemption began. These were the years when white Southerners returned to political and economic power and Redemption revolved around controlling black bodies, black minds and black opportunities. Much of this control took the form of so-called Jim Crow laws, which were town, city and state laws that demanded that whites and blacks be segregated.

Separate and not equal

In 1896, the year after Washington's Atlanta Cotton Exposition speech, the Supreme Court declared in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that "separate was equal" and segregation was constitutional. It would take 58 years for the Supreme Court to say that "separate was not equal" in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. For 58 years African-Americans reorganized, educated themselves and learned small acts of protest. Much of this is seen in the history of the Great Migration, where blacks began to move from the fields in the South to the cities in the North.



The first black migration occurred between 1905 and 1930, while the much larger Great Migration was between the 1940s and early 1950s. For the first time in history there would be more blacks than whites in northern cities.

The reasons for the Great Migration were many. Opportunities for southern blacks to vote or hold political office essentially disappeared with the rise of Redemption. Finding work was more difficult in the early 20th century. The quality of housing and education remained poor, and there remained the ever-looming threat of lynch law. Mobs of whites took the law into their own hands and punished a black person for failing to follow unwritten rules. African-Americans could no longer protect their families, so they simply left.

Getting out of Dodge — and Durham

There were many other reasons for this "exodus," too. Sharecropping — working for white farm owners — kept black families in debt and was a dead end. Making life even worse on the farms was the sudden appearance of the boll weevil that destroyed the cotton crops and resulted in blacks losing their jobs. At the same time, there were new opportunities in northern factories. Immigrant workers from Europe stopped coming to America as Europe began its march to war in 1914. Better housing, the right to vote and high-paying jobs in the North became a frequent topic of conversation in black southern homes. Friends and family returned for visits or wrote letters describing their good fortune. The Chicago Defender, the major black newspaper of the day, was read in most southern black homes. It constantly ran stories about northern job opportunities and brutal violence against blacks in the south. Finally, as black migration steadily increased, organizations like the National Urban League (1910), which worked to improve the quality of life for so many black migrants, began to form.

Just taking a look at the years between 1910 and 1920, one can see the black population increased by 66 percent in New York, almost 150 percent in Chicago and over 600 percent in Detroit.

Most southern migrants ended up in Northern cities, but many others moved north more slowly. Some left the southern farm and settled in nearby Southern cities. Others found themselves in Kentucky coalfields for months at a time before returning home. Still others were brought North by labor agents. These people worked for owners of Northern factories and made money bringing blacks North. However, so many of these jobs were not worth having and many returned to the South.

Better but not best

Black migrants enjoyed more freedom in the North, but life was far from easy. Black migrants that had come earlier resented the new migrants that had noisy, rude country ways and competed with them for jobs and homes. Brownstone apartment buildings originally designed for five families, for example, would be carved up to hold 30 families. Often blacks were hired because white workers were on strike. Eventually the strikes ended, whites went back to work and blacks lost their jobs. This led to violence, too. In East St. Louis, striking white laborers attacked black workers that took their jobs at the aluminum factories. Police stood by and let the black workers be attacked with fists, clubs and knives. Nearly 50 people died in the violence. An unknown number of others were killed and their bodies were thrown into the Mississippi River and never recovered.



Violence against African-Americans was on the rise. For example, the Ku Klux Klan, which was wiped out at the national level during Reconstruction, reappeared. Part of this new-found popularity was directly related to the 1915 release of D.W. Griffith's movie, "The Birth of a Nation." This film, based on Thomas Dixon's novel "The Clansman," claimed to relate the history of racial politics during Reconstruction. It portrayed blacks as fools, fat servant women or rapists. It gave credit to the Klan for restoring southern pride. President Woodrow Wilson admired the film in a special White House screening even as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) called it "three miles of filth."

Not directly related to the film or the Klan were violent actions in cities across the country. After the race riot in East St. Louis in 1917, the NAACP organized a silent march down New York's Fifth Avenue. Ten thousand men, women and children marched to the beat of muffled drums from Harlem to the heart of Manhattan carrying banners like "Mr. President, why not make America safe for Democracy?" or "Mother, do lynchers go to heaven?"

Two years later, black neighborhoods would come under attack in Chicago. There, the violence began when a black teenager was stoned to death by whites while he was swimming in Lake Michigan. Within hours, swarms of armed whites began to

attack blacks who had dared to move into their neighborhoods. The governor called in the Illinois National Guard. In the end, almost 40 people died and well over 5,000 were injured. Over a thousand African-Americans lost their homes in the five days of violence. More than 25 cities experienced race riots in the summer of 1919.

Transporting a culture

Migrating north, African-Americans brought their culture as well. New combinations of religious practice, music, folklore and the arts emerged in the early decades of the 20th century. In 1925, Alain Locke, a Howard University professor, applauded the cultural renaissance that he saw flourishing in the cities, and his book "The New Negro" captured the energy of poets like Claude McKay and Langston Hughes, writers like Nella Larsen and Jean Toomer and artists like Aaron Douglas and Augusta Savage. Harlem, in New York City, became famous as did the new cultural centers in Washington, D.C., Kansas City, Chicago and other cities.

"The New Negro" mentality was about more than the arts, however. Over the course of the first decades of the 20th century, Booker T. Washington's ideas about patiently waiting for equality were increasingly challenged by the NAACP, founded by Du Bois, which challenged the laws that made blacks second-class citizens. Adding his voice to this mix was Marcus Garvey, founder and leader of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Born in Jamaica and educated in England, Garvey felt that Harlem was the capital of the black world and that he needed to base his black nationalist organization there in order to tap into that community's energy. With Garvey as its leader, the UNIA pushed for a return to Africa in order to establish a "black man's empire." Very quickly, Garvey's UNIA became the largest organized movement in African-American history. With Garvey's arrest in 1925, on trumped-up charges of mail fraud, and then his deportation in 1927, much of the energy behind the UNIA faded.

The slowdown

The stock market crash of 1929 led to the collapse of the job market and the pace of northern migration slowed. However, many of the social and political challenges that led to the black exodus from the South remained in place. African-Americans found a new way of seeing the present world and imagining its future.

The impressive Second Great Migration, beginning in the 1940s, and the legal triumphs of the civil rights era in the 1950s, all owed a debt to the changing political, social and cultural ideas that grew out of the earlier Great Migration.

Jonathan Scott Holloway, professor of history, African-American studies and American studies at Yale University, is the author of several books. His most recent is "Jim Crow Wisdom: Memory and Identity in Black America since 1940."

Quiz

- 1 Read the third paragraph of the article.

In the 30 years since the Civil War ended, African-Americans had experienced startling changes to their life opportunities. Emancipation from slavery was celebrated, of course. However, what would be African-American freedom? Who could buy or sell property, get married, own firearms, vote, get a job, receive an education or travel freely? For a little more than 10 years during Reconstruction, after the Civil War, African-Americans saw real opportunities. However, when northern armies left in 1877, everything changed and the era of Redemption began. These were the years when white Southerners returned to political and economic power and Redemption revolved around controlling black bodies, black minds and black opportunities. Much of this control took the form of so-called Jim Crow laws, which were town, city and state laws that demanded that whites and blacks be segregated.

Which inference is BEST supported by the paragraph?

- (A) Jim Crow laws initially provided opportunities to African-Americans in the ten years after slavery ended.
- (B) Jim Crow laws were the result of Southerners recognizing that they had been wrong to continue slavery.
- (C) Jim Crow laws were enacted by white Southerners who were fearful of blacks having political or economic power.
- (D) Jim Crow laws eventually caused Northern armies to feel it was safe to withdraw their control from the South.

- 2 Read the following selection from the section "Better but not best."

After the race riot in East St. Louis in 1917, the NAACP organized a silent march down New York's Fifth Avenue. Ten thousand men, women and children marched to the beat of muffled drums from Harlem to the heart of Manhattan carrying banners like "Mr. President, why not make America safe for Democracy?" or "Mother, do lynchers go to heaven?"

Which idea from the article is BEST supported by the selection above?

- (A) In the 30 years after the Civil War, African-Americans experienced startling changes to their life opportunities.
- (B) During much of the Great Migration, African-Americans organized and formed groups to protest racism and unfairness.
- (C) Opportunities for southern blacks to vote or hold political office essentially disappeared during the era of Redemption.
- (D) Much of the violence against blacks was on the rise because of a new film and the reappearance of the Ku Klux Klan.

- 3 Which of these sentences from the article BEST develops a central of idea?

- (A) Just taking a look at the years between 1910 and 1920, one can see the black population increased by 66 percent in New York, almost 150 percent in Chicago and over 600 percent in Detroit.
- (B) Brownstone apartment buildings originally designed for five families, for example, would be carved up to hold 30 families.
- (C) Born in Jamaica and educated in England, Garvey felt that Harlem was the capital of the black world and that he needed to base his black nationalist organization there in order to tap into that community's energy.
- (D) The stock market crash of 1929 led to the collapse of the job market and the pace of northern migration slowed.

- 4 Which sentence would be BEST to include in an objective summary of the article?
- (A) W.E.B. Du Bois strongly disagreed with Booker T. Washington's belief that jobs should come before social and political equality for blacks.
 - (B) A motivating force behind the Great Migration was the desire for better opportunities in jobs and housing.
 - (C) Striking whites whose factory jobs were given to black workers unfairly blamed blacks for their job loss.
 - (D) Migrating African-Americans had a wonderful effect on northern cities due to the rich cultural practices that they brought with them.