

Lecture Three

The Great Migration

The Great Migration was the movement of the **Black Belt** from the South to the North and from rural to urban areas. Despite the Great Migration, there remained significant numbers of African Americans in the South. But that human movement portrays the general idea that **hundreds of thousands of African Americans left the South for political, social, and economic reasons.**

The first wave of migration occurred in the 1870s. Large numbers of African Americans moved to Texas, Kansas, and other western areas to escape the injustice and racial oppression that dominated social life in the Deep South. Another quarter of a million African Americans migrated to the Northern states between 1890 and 1910. Additionally, about 35,000 moved to the Far West (mainly California and Colorado).

The departures increased dramatically in the years between 1914 and 1929, the period generally assigned to the Great Migration. During these years between 300,000 and 1,000,000 African Americans resettled in the North. In fact, the process that happened in the years between 1914 and 1929 paved the way for a pattern that would continue for much of the 20th century. African American migration from the South remained strong through the 1960s, except during the Great Depression (1930s), when the trend slowed for a time.

With the beginning World War II, however, the process of black migration rose again. It was the second big phase of the Great Migration. Indeed, three million African Americans moved out of the South from 1941 to 1970. They migrated to major cities in the Northeast and Midwest.

Chicago was one of the most common destinations. The African Americans who left their homes during these years hoped to find better jobs and a new sense of actual citizenship. They were searching for natural human freedoms for themselves, their families, and their new communities in the North. There were dramatic but short-lived changes in the political power of African Americans during the second half of the nineteenth century.

Causes of the Great Migration

By 1877 (end and failure of the Reconstruction era), whites had taken back all the political offices, and they assumed control of all of the South's political institutions. In the landmark case of Plessy v. Ferguson of 1896, the Supreme Court held that segregation laws were not forbidden by the 14th Amendment. Thus, racial segregation was institutionalized. African Americans were restricted to "colored" facilities clearly inferior to those reserved for white citizens. The formal adoption of segregation as a way of life sent a signal to white supremacists: they won the racial struggle.

Moreover, racial segregation was coupled with extremely violent deeds towards African Americans who claimed some form freedom or justice. 3,000 African Americans were **lynched** in the South between 1892 and 1903.

African Americans and progressive/ anti-segregationist whites persistently drew the media's attention to the practice of lynching from the early twentieth century onward, and anti-lynching campaigns were a major focus of early civil rights activists. Lynching was the summary execution by a mob, typically by hanging. It was a brutal practice used to terrorize African Americans and maintain white social control in the American South. The aim of the southern lynch mobs was not so only to "punish" individual African Americans, but it also aimed at instilling fear in entire African American communities. Many lynchings went unrecorded. But the statistics suggest that, between 1882 and 1968, white supremacists in Mississippi, Georgia, and Texas were the leading practitioners of ritualized terror against African Americans. Increased visibility and brutality of southern lynch mobs accompanied a rise in influence of the **Ku Klux Klan** and it helped to persuade many African Americans to leave the South.

Abuses against African Americans were exposed in newspapers like the *Chicago Defender*, an African American journal that published articles exposing the blatant racism of white southerners, political oppression, and the perpetual threat of lynching.

Robert Sengstacke Abbott founded *the Chicago Defender* on May 6, 1905. He openly denounced segregation, discrimination, and disenfranchisement in the pages of his newspaper. *The Chicago Defender* also called for African Americans to leave the South for the North and especially Chicago. It provided contact information for churches and other groups readers could contact for help. Thousands of African American southerners made contact with northern churches as a result of Abbott's work. With the onset of World War I, the *Chicago Defender* became more visible and influential than ever. *The Chicago Defender* was the most influential African American weekly in the nation in the early part of the twentieth century. In a simple format with an initial investment of 25 cents, the *Chicago Defender* reached an estimated audience of 500,000. Two thirds of its readers lived outside Chicago. Abbott's paper was suppressed in parts of the South, but was smuggled in by an underground network of African American readers.

Effects of the Great Migration

The Great Migration had a big impact on the South. While **W. E. B. DuBois** saw the mass movement as the end of the South's old order of African American oppression, many white southerners took another view. They feared that the South could not survive without Black labor force. Even some progressive southerners tried to halt the migration by promising better pay and improved treatment, but segregation and humiliation was too heavy and oppressive.

Some white planters tried to keep African American workers by intimidation. Some whites even boarded trains to attack African American men and women in an attempt to return them forcibly to their homes.

None of the enticements – benign or otherwise – could change the pattern. After centuries of abuse, African Americans who were denied basic civil rights such as voting started to vote with their feet by leaving the South.

The Great Migration changed the demographic structure of the nation. From the 1890s to the 1960s the African American population in the South fell from 90.3 percent to 60 percent. In the North, it grew from 9.7 percent to 34 percent. The percentage of African Americans living in the country fell from 90 percent to 27 percent, while the percentage of those living in cities rose from 10 percent to 73 percent.

African Americans turned to the “Promised Land” of the North in search of jobs and toleration. Many found what they sought. Unlike the South, the North was a place where African Americans could start their own businesses, live peacefully in their own neighborhoods, and even enjoy some kind of political rights, provided they settled in the right cities and kept their expectations low. A fair number of those who had traveled to Chicago from the South eventually became successful entrepreneurs and prominent public figures in their new home.

The growth of the African American population in major northern cities brought also some problems and was a source of social disunion among African Americans. There were sharp economic and educational divisions. Chicago’s South Side “black belt,” for instance, contained several neighborhoods demarcated by economic status. The poorest African Americans were to be found in the district’s older, northern section; more prominent, established families resided in the southern section. Additionally, the Great Migration’s dramatic expansion of African American communities in the North brought about urban tensions and conflicts that have not yet been resolved.

A striking example was the case of an African American named Eugene Williams. On July 27, 1919, he accidentally went into a “whites-only” section of a public beach. A group of white men quickly murdered him. The crime was followed by six days of dreadful race riots. 38 people died. The Chicago race riots were not the first in the North in reaction to the Great Migration, and they would not be the last.

A commission established to determine the causes of the bloodshed in Chicago found a series of urban problems that have stubbornly remained in American life. These problems included rigidly separated African American and white communities, substandard conditions and serious social evils (including crime, substance abuse, vice, poverty, and broken homes) in the African American neighborhoods, and a legacy of alienation between African American and white sectors in the city. In the years since the Great Migration, the same basic pattern has emerged in every major American city.

When moving north, southern migrants did not forget to bring along their culture, which ultimately changed the environment of the northern cities. The songs and art that personified the **Harlem Renaissance** in New York City came with the Great Migration. Restaurants featured southern-style menus. Southern foods appeared in African American-owned groceries. As with many attempts to locate the “Promised Land,” the Great Migration had its share of disappointments. For most migrants, the North was a step up from the South, but it was no paradise. As in the South, segregation in housing and hiring were the norm, and northern racism sometimes took on a brutality that equaled anything in Mississippi or Alabama. Most often, new arrivals could land only low-paying jobs as janitors, elevator operators, domestics, and unskilled laborers. Often, employers established blatantly discriminatory promotional salary policies that kept wages down for African American workers. Many African American migrants opted to go on strike in order to secure better pay.

Every migrant lost something as soon as he or she boarded the train. Some left behind families and congregations. Others lost the respect of their southern relatives and ministers. However, despite the challenges, most of those who went north never returned.

Source: Adapted from Melba J. Duncan. *African American History*. New York: Pearson, 2003