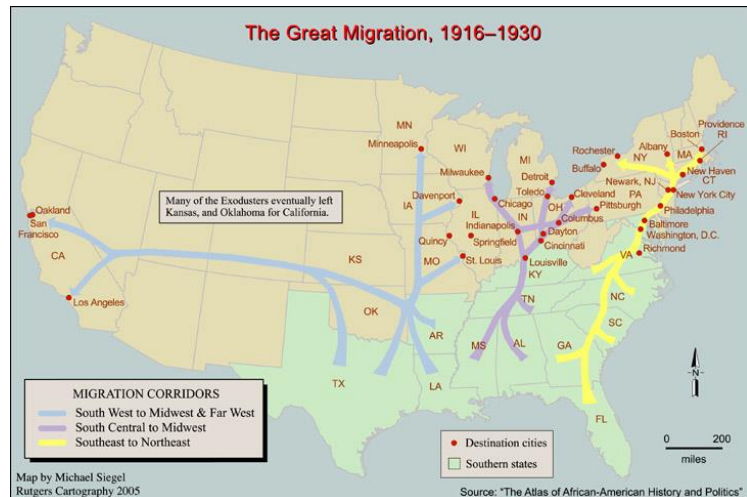


The Great Migration

In the years preceding **World War I**, a slow but steady migration of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North began. This was the beginning of a phenomenon called the **Great Migration**. The rationale for leaving the South was different for every migrant, but largely, the hope for a better life was paramount. The booming industrial economy in World War I-era America contributed to a wealth of job opportunities and better pay for African Americans. In the north, their children would have the opportunity to seek an education. Migration also offered African Americans the chance to escape discrimination, segregation, and the Jim Crow laws that violated their civil rights.



Source: Rutgers Cartography and Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

Prior to World War I, the chances for African Americans to land a lucrative job in the manufacturing industry were slim. They were blocked from these types of positions by **unions** who wanted to preserve the higher paying jobs for white workers. But that all began to change with the advent of the war in 1914 when immigration to the United States from Europe came to a virtual standstill. Although the United States was not directly involved with the war, American industry produced weapons and other war supplies. The need for more workers was urgent – without a steady flow of white immigrant employees, booming war-time industries were desperate for workers. Racial prejudice had kept companies from hiring African Americans, but the profit they stood to make during the war-time economy overrode any hiring prejudice.

Desperate for workers, many industries central to the burgeoning war economy like steel mills and railroads actively recruited African Americans. Some went as far as to send recruiting agents down to largely black-populated areas of the South to search for workers. Railroad companies were the first to recruit. The Pennsylvania Railroad recruited 16,000 African Americans in 1916 as unskilled laborers. Many impoverished blacks seized this new economic opportunity and migrated north where the work was plentiful. According to a 1917 survey in *The Crisis* magazine, the number one reason to leave the South was poor pay, followed by lack

of good schools, discrimination, and oppression. Farm workers in the South made on average \$0.75 per day, whereas in cities, factory work brought wages as high as \$4.00 a day. Those early migrants wrote back home to their friends and family expressing just how abundant employment and high wages were: “Nothing here but money, and it is not hard to get,” wrote one worker.

By 1920 more than 1.5 million blacks were working in northern factories and other urban jobs. Black newspapers aided the migration fever by advertising the advantages of living and working in northern cities, and publishing stories of recent migrants who had found success. The letters these migrants sent back home confirmed stories of higher wages and less discrimination. The letters were read aloud in barbershops, churches, and meeting halls. One migrant, living in Chicago, wrote home about the abundance of work:

*I am quite busy. I work in Swifts packing Co. in the sausage department. My daughter and I work for the same company – We get \$1.50 a day and we pack so many sausages we dont have much time to play but it is a matter of a dollar with me and I feel that God made the path and I am walking therein. Tell your husband work is plentiful here and he wont have to loaf is he want to work.**

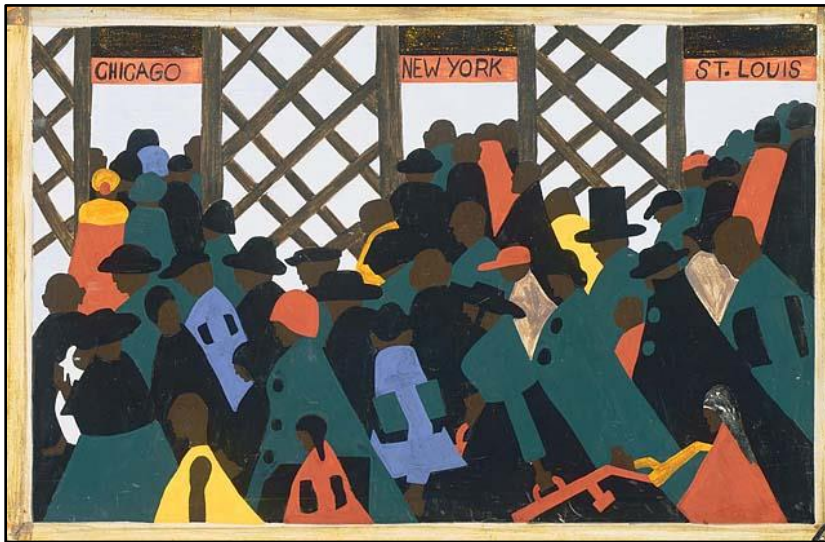
Another migrant wrote of the freeing experience of not having to kowtow to whites as he would have in the South:

*With the aid of God I am making very good I make \$75 per month. . . . I don't have to work hard. dont have to mister every little white boy comes along . . . I can ride in the electric street and steam cars any where I get a seat. I dont care to mix with white folk what I mean I am not crazy about being with white folks, but if I have to pay the same fare I have learn to want to the same acomidation.**

[*The spelling and grammar mistakes in the quotes above have not been corrected and appear verbatim as on the primary source document.]

With more and more African Americans leaving the South, a backlash soon occurred against the labor agents who were facilitating the migration. Southern states were angered, having found their economies struggling and their cheap source of labor diminishing. But by this time as word spread about the opportunities the North held, the role of labor agents became unnecessary as more and more migrants fled the South.

It is a misconception to think that the average migrant was a poor sharecropper. In fact, the majority of black migrants came from southern towns and were accustomed to a more urban environment. They were moderately well-off and were generally more educated than the



The Migration of the Negro, Panel no. 1, 1940-1941, Jacob Lawrence, Courtesy of [The Phillips Collection](#)

average African American in the South. Many came from a skilled professional class, having worked as teachers, lawyers, social workers, and writers.

Once migrants had made the difficult decision to leave their families behind to migrate, the question became how to make the journey. Migrating was expensive, which was why families rarely migrated together. It was the young

men who found jobs as unskilled industrial laborers who were the first to migrate. As the role of labor agents diminished, African American could no longer count on northern businesses to pay their way. Many had to sell all of their possessions. Some borrowed money from friends and family. Often, families pooled their money together to send a younger man in the family northward, with the expectation he would mail money back home to help the rest of the family follow him.

The trip north could be made by train, bus, horse-drawn cart, or even by foot. The journey was a long, grueling experience. Travelers were confronted with segregated waiting rooms at bus stops, and overcrowded, segregated train cars. The destination of the migrants were the large industrial centers of the north – Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh, and New York City, but many stops were often made along the way. Painter Jacob Lawrence recalled that his family was “moving up the coast, as many families were doing during that migration. . . . We moved up to various cities until we arrived – the last two cities I can remember before moving to New York were Easton, Pennsylvania, and Philadelphia.” Once in their destination city, migrants often relied on the help of African American service organizations, like the **National Urban League** in New York City and the **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)**, to help them find jobs and living arrangements. The league also assisted migrants in their move from the South, helped black workers prepare for jobs in manufacturing industries, and lobbied white employers to provide employment opportunities to blacks.

The Aftermath of Migration

From 1870 to 1910 approximately 470,000 African Americans left the South. In the next ten years, from 1910 to 1920, another 450,000 migrated. The migration only came to a halt with the start of the Great Depression. The severe economic downturn dried up virtually all employment opportunities in the North. Conditions for all Americans would not improve until the start of President **Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal**. This series of domestic programs improved economic conditions and spurred a second wave of migration from the South, known as the **Second Great Migration**, a wave that would last throughout the 1960s.

But it was the first wave, the Great Migration, that arguably had the greatest impact on northern cities, not just in terms of population growth, but with regards to the cultural movement that growth spurred. Would-be migrants in the South had heard tales of theaters with musicals and films featuring black performers, nightclubs featuring the best African American musicians, and baseball games played by all-black teams. The Northern cities to which the Southern migrants journeyed emerged as hubs of cultural, social, and artistic creativity and interaction. It wasn't a dream. This cultural movement which took place across a multitude of northern cities – the Harlem Renaissance – became reality for hundreds of thousands of African Americans.

Glossary

The Crisis: the official magazine of the NAACP, founded in 1910.

Franklin D. Roosevelt: (1882-1945) 32nd President of the United States, commonly known by his initials, FDR. He is best known for his series of social programs, called the New Deal, which focused on relief, recovery, and reform to combat the effects of the Great Depression. He won a record four presidential elections, which led to the passage of the 22nd Amendment, barring presidents from serving more than two full terms.

Great Migration: (1910-1930) the first wave of African American migration to the North from the South.

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People: (NAACP) African-American civil rights organization, founded in 1909 to “ensure the political, educational, social, and economic equality of rights of all persons and to eliminate racial hatred and racial discrimination.”

National Urban League: a civil rights organization based in New York City, founded in 1910.

New Deal: (1933-1938) a series of domestic social programs and projects enacted by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in an effort to combat the crippling effects of the Great Depression. These programs included immediate economic relief, as well as reforms in industry, agriculture, and labor.

Second Great Migration: (1941-1970) a term for the second wave of African American migration from the South to the North in the years during and after World War II.

unions: organized associations of workers designed to protect and further their rights and interests.

World War I: (1914-1918) a global war originating in Europe. The United States formally entered the war in 1917, after a German submarine sunk the New York-bound British passenger ship the *Lusitania*, killing 128 Americans. The attack turned American public opinion against immigrants, fueling a wave of xenophobia. As a result, immigration decreased and war-time industries were desperate to fill jobs normally occupied by immigrants. African Americans seized on this opportunity to escape the South, and thus began the Great Migration.