



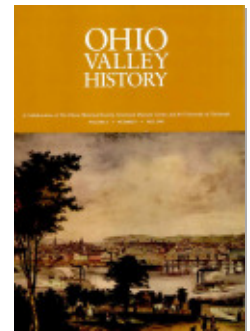
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It Was North of Tennessee: African American Migration to Louisville and the Meaning of the South

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It Was North of Tennessee: *African American Migration to Louisville and the Meaning of the South*

LUTHER ADAMS

In 1925, Clara Smith recorded a song called “The L & N Blues” that referred to the railway that ran between Nashville and Louisville and then into the North. As she sang the following lyrics, she suggested one way many African Americans conceived of the South:

I’m a ramblin’ woman, I’ve got a ramblin’ mind
I’m a ramblin’ woman, I’ve got a ramblin’ mind
I’m gonna buy me a ticket and ease on down the line

Mason-Dixon line is down where the South begins
Mason-Dixon line is down where the South begins
Gonna leave a Pullman and ride the L & N.¹

*Louisville and Nashville
Railroad, No. 924. The
Cincinnati-bound train
travels a trestle spanning
Bank Lick Creek in
northern Kentucky. The
Filson Historical Society*

“The L & N Blues” directs our attention to the need to examine the way African Americans conceived of their own “southernness,” and especially how the more than 17,000 African American migrants who came to Louisville, Kentucky, between 1930 and 1970 defined the South.² Clara Smith’s “L & N Blues” shows us that the South was a region defined not so much geographically as it was culturally, or more specifically, by its politics of oppression. For many black southerners like Clara Smith, the South meant segregation, the enforcement of Jim Crow laws and customs, and her blues shows us that this boundary began in Kentucky. According to the “L & N Blues,” the South began there not so much because one crossed the Ohio River, but because that was where African American passengers riding on the Louisville and Nashville were forced out of first class accommodations in Pullman cars and into segregated seating. In the minds of many African Americans, what made

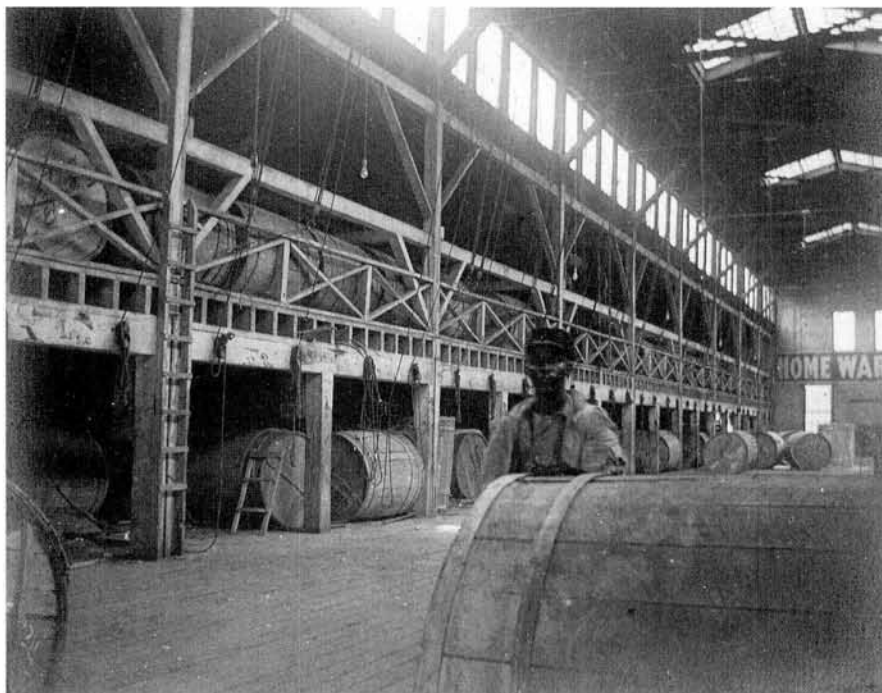


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the South distinctive was the oppression of Jim Crow. African Americans, however, did not conceive of the South as a land of oppression only, but also as a site of resistance and more importantly as home.

African American migration to Louisville, Kentucky, raises a number of critical questions concerning our understanding of black migration in twentieth century America as a whole.³ First, it brings into question our historical preoccupation with migration to the urban North, and it highlights the im-

portance of examining African American migration within the South. Secondly, African American migration to Louisville offers an opportunity to explore the multiple ways African Americans conceived of the South, as a site of oppression, as a site of resistance and as Home. For many black southerners these were not competing viewpoints of the South, but rather views many held concurrently. In short, African American migration to Louisville suggests the importance of regional distinctiveness within the South. Although many



A tobacco warehouse in Louisville, Kentucky. The Filson Historical Society

African Americans rightly viewed Louisville as different than the Deep South, at no time did they view it as anything but southern. By examining African American migration in Kentucky, I hope specifically to enrich our understanding of black life in Louisville, and generally to improve our grasp of the history of African American migration and civil rights in America as a whole.

For most migrants in Louisville, the South they encountered in Kentucky was somewhat different from the South they had known before. Unlike most of the southern states, Kentucky never officially seceded from the Union during the Civil War, and it never endured a period of Federally-mandated Reconstruction. Kentucky also walked a different path economically. Whereas cotton reigned as king throughout much of the South, Kentucky's economy remained after the war relatively more diverse. Tobacco, coal mining and commerce and industry, rather than cotton, undergirded Louisville's economy. Kentucky, and Louisville in particular, then held a pe-

cular position in the Upper South as a border state, something that Clara Smith's lyrics tend to obscure by drawing a sharp division between North and South at the Ohio River.⁴

Perhaps the most significant difference between Kentucky and places in the Deep South from which most African Americans migrated in the twentieth century lay in voting rights. Black Kentuckians, for the most part, had retained the vote after Reconstruction, unlike African Americans throughout most of the South who did not regain the right to vote until 1965. It is important to note, however, that until the mid-1940s many black citizens in Kentucky viewed voting as a "privilege" not as a right.⁵ This was no small or insignificant difference. In their calling the right to vote a "privilege," African Americans in Kentucky reflected how tenuous access to that right remained throughout the state. It also reflected how much the civil rights of African Americans depended upon the willingness of whites to allow them to exercise those rights, no matter how much black Kentuckians may have insisted on them.

I ndeed, during much of Kentucky's history after the Civil War whites remained quite unwilling to allow black citizens to exercise their right to vote. During the 1870s, for example, Democrats prepared a bill for the state legislature proposing to strip black Kentuckians of the right to vote altogether. The text of the proposed bill read: "Be it enacted by the Legislature of the commonwealth of Kentucky: That no person shall be an elector in this commonwealth who has wool or kinky hair on his scalp. That any person who shaves or otherwise removes the wool or hair from his head, so as to deceive the judges of the election, and shall cast his vote in disregard of this act, may be indicted by a grand jury, and punished as is now provided by law for fraudulent voting."⁶ Although the bill never specifically mentioned African Americans, clearly references to "woolly-headed" citizens targeted black citizens for disfranchisement. Even though this bill never appeared before the state legislature, whites in Paris and Danville, Kentucky, found other equally disingenuous ways to disenfranchise black residents. There they simply stripped African Americans of the vote by reconfiguring town boundaries so that black neighborhoods were no longer within the town.⁷ In spite of these early attempts to remove them from the state's electorate, African Americans in Kentucky maintained and consistently exercised their voting "privileges."

As a border state Kentucky differed somewhat from the Deep South in many ways, but not much in social relations.⁸ Segregation in Kentucky was enforced by tradition and custom and especially by racialized violence as well as it ever was by laws and courts in the Deep South.⁹ Indeed, black Kentuckians faced more than their fair share of whitecapping and lynching. Historian Edward Ayers has argued that there were more lynchings in Kentucky than anywhere else in the Upper South.¹⁰ And historian George C. Wright has

revealed that between 1890 and 1940 more than 353 documented lynchings took place in Kentucky.¹¹ Nor could black Kentuckians expect much redress from the legal system. According to Wright, whether in Louisville, Lexington or some small mountain community, racial discrimination often meant that to be black and to be accused of a crime amounted to being guilty. Not until 1938, in fact, did county courts even include African Americans in a pool of potential jurors for a jury trial, and that followed only after a Supreme Court decision in the case of *Hale v. Kentucky*.¹²

These commonalities in social relations between Kentucky and the rest of the South led one migrant, Lyman Johnson who arrived in 1930 from Columbia, Tennessee, to say, “as a whole Kentucky was a hell of a place when I came here.”¹³ But interestingly, he continued, “break Kentucky into two parts, Louisville and the rest of the state. Louisville is oriented to the North, culturally and commercially. The rest of Kentucky looks to the South.”¹⁴ Although I would hesitate to go as far as Lyman Johnson and argue that Louisville looked to the North culturally, his comments were indicative of Louisville’s peculiar position in the South. Louisville has been called one of the most “liberal” or “progressive” cities on race relations in the South, as well as a city with “southern racial traditions and a northern class dynamic.”¹⁵ To some small degree Louisville’s “progressive” reputation was accurate when measured by the standard set by the rest of the South. In *Dark Journey*, an examination of Mississippi during the age of Jim Crow, Neil Mc Millen pointed out that throughout much of the South segregation meant exclusion not separation.¹⁶

Black Louisvillians, however, had limited access to a small number of segregated facilities including Red Cross Hospital, Louisville Municipal College for Negroes (a branch of the University of Louisville created specifically for African Americans), two small branches of the public library (although they were denied access to all other branches of the Louisville Free Public Library), and public transportation. Louisville also had more African Americans on the city police force than any other southern city, although black policemen could work only in the city’s black neighborhoods.¹⁷

For many whites in Louisville, the access black residents had to these small, mostly second-rate facilities allowed them to maintain their “progressive” view of themselves and their city. But, in fact, the “progressive” self-image that most white Louisville residents assigned to themselves was founded on “polite racism.” In his groundbreaking study of race relations in Louisville, George Wright has argued that there existed in the city “racism in a polite form” that remained “polite as long as Afro-Americans willingly accepted ‘their place,’ which, of course, was at the bottom.”¹⁸ According to Wright, polite racism often allowed both white and black southerners to believe real progress was being made in the realm of race relations. At the same time,

however, polite racism served to remind African Americans that race relations could become much harsher should black southerners not “accept” their “place.”¹⁹

African Americans in Louisville, however, did not always “accept” their “place” as Wright’s conception of “polite racism” would have us believe. For instance, whites often pointed as a sign of the city’s progressivism to the fact that black residents were not legally segregated on public transportation, meaning they could ride in a taxi or a bus. Yet that lack of segregation by law resulted from African American protests before the turn of the century involving the entire black community, and was eventually confirmed in a district court.²⁰

Similarly, whites often pointed proudly to Louisville Municipal College for Negroes as testament to their own “progressiveness.” The college, however, existed only because African Americans had flexed their political muscle. In fact, they had threatened to block passage of a million dollar bond intended to expand the University of Louisville’s campus since no provisions had been made for black higher education in the city. In return for support of the bond issue by African Americans, the University of Louisville agreed to establish a segregated Louisville Municipal College for Negroes.²¹ In sum, when white Louisvillians celebrated the “progressivism” of the “River City,” they dismissed steps taken by local African Americans to make it so.



A fifty-two passenger car of the Louisville and Nashville Railroad in Mobile, Alabama, July 1937. The Filson Historical Society

Despite this “progressive” reputation, black Louisvillians more often than not found themselves segregated. A 1948 Urban League Survey on African American life discovered that most of the rules governing race relations found in the Deep South also could be seen in action in Louisville.²² In Louisville, however, whites maintained southern traditions of racial discrimination and segregation more often by custom than by law. African Americans in Louisville, for example, faced considerable resistance from white civic associations that promoted the inclusion of restrictive clauses in leases, a prohibition on the sale or lease of houses or apartments to “unde-

sirable tenants, mutual agreements among property owners to sell only to whites, and occasionally violence.²³ And that resulted in limited housing opportunities for black residents in Louisville.

In 1940, according to a "Real Property Survey" published in the *Louisville Defender*, more than seventy-five percent of African Americans in Louisville lived in substandard housing.²⁴ Black neighborhoods were characterized by a lack of proper sanitation, deteriorated property, and dense population.²⁵ Specifically, the majority of African Americans in Louisville lived in housing stock built before 1900, what the report called the "oldest and most dilapidated" houses in the city.²⁶ In fact, the Urban League described many of the houses in the Parkland neighborhood as little more than "shacks."²⁷ As a result, African Americans commonly came home to rat-infested houses with broken steps or whole porches missing or plumbing so poor that drinking water could be had only from pipes in an outside toilet. When a toilet existed it was often not "fit for use," and in some instances as many as eight families shared the only available restroom. These houses also often featured broken plaster that hung from the walls and ceilings, no heat, or leaking gas pipes.²⁸ Unfortunately, the influx of African American migrants to the city only exacerbated the housing pressures black residents faced. As more and more African Americans crowded into the "River City," they found less housing available and that housing was often more segregated. In 1940, Louisville's segregation index stood at 70.0, but by 1970 it had risen to 89.2.²⁹

Because segregation was maintained by custom in Louisville, African Americans discovered that it could allow for interaction between black and white residents sometimes but not at others. And constantly shifting patterns of segregation could be unsettling. Black people might be allowed to eat at a restaurant one day, and be forced to leave the next if whites complained or simply chose not to serve them. During the 1920s, most department stores established a new policy prohibiting African Americans from trying on clothes or shoes they wanted to purchase or from eating at lunch counters where they had previously been served. When black patrons were allowed to attend white theaters, they were forced to use entrances located in dark alleys. At one Louisville theater the black entrance was located in an alley behind the theater nearly half a block from the street and led to a segregated balcony on the second floor.³⁰

Into this context stepped thousands of African American migrants, and for the black residents of Louisville that presented a conceptual challenge. For some Louisvillians, these African American migrants were not from Mississippi, Alabama or Tennessee, they all came from "down home," and the phrase was not always meant as a compliment. Although black Louisvillians never viewed migrants from "down home" as harshly as did black residents further north, at times they too held negative views of migrants. They were some-

times characterized as “ignorant” or always making “noise” on the streets.³¹ One mother in Louisville told her son that people who speak poorly “act like they are from the South.”³² Perhaps the most common perception held by black residents in Louisville of African American migrants characterized them as going “wild” upon arrival. According to some long-time residents, migrants simply could not get used to the “privileges” or freedoms African Americans enjoyed in Louisville. One native Louisvillian claimed in a 1938 interview, “They ain’t never been free and they can’t get used to it. They come up here and go wild. Down Home they can’t even walk on the streets with white people.”³³ As if for emphasis he reiterated, “Down South they didn’t have any privileges, but as soon as they get here they go wild.”³⁴

While there may be some truth to these comments, ultimately these words tell us more about black Louisvillians and their opinions of themselves than they do about migrants. Their comments reveal the desire of some African Americans to believe that the racial discrimination that defined the South for many black southerners existed to a lesser extent in Louisville. More generally, black residents in Louisville wanted to believe that their city, the South they inhabited, was freer than other places in the region, and that Louisville could be considered one of the better places for black southerners to live in the South. After returning from a visit to Nashville, Tennessee, where he was confronted with segregated street cars, a life-long Louisvillian, exclaimed, “I thought Louisville was pretty bad, but I was really glad to get back from Nashville.”³⁵ It is important to stress that black people in Louisville did not believe their city to be free, but that they believed it to be more free, a notion supported by the idea that the further South you went the worse things became for black people.³⁶

Ironically, migrants shared many of these same perceptions and came to Louisville expecting more opportunity and less racial oppression, believing that the closer to the North black migrants came, the better life might become.³⁷ According to Lyman Johnson, a migrant from Tennessee: “Negroes used to think it was such a blessing to get out of Alabama and Mississippi. If they couldn’t make it all the way North, they’d try to get to Memphis or Nashville or Knoxville. To them even Tennessee was glory land! But I was from Tennessee, and used to think, ‘If I could only get to Kentucky, it would be heaven.’ When I was boy I didn’t know much about Kentucky, but I knew it was north of Tennessee and that was a good direction.”³⁸

Upon arrival most migrants found Louisville indeed offered more opportunity for African Americans than did the Deep South states. For instance, Maria Walter’s family migrated from a small town just below Atlanta, Georgia, solely because of the better opportunities that existed in Louisville. In her words, “Down South they couldn’t make any money and educational facilities were bad.”³⁹ During World War II especially African Americans from the

Deep South took advantage of a labor shortage created by an increase in production dictated by the war, as well as by large numbers of white men who abandoned their jobs to serve in the Armed Forces. Job opportunities also became available in part as a result of Franklin D. Roosevelt's Executive Order 8802 issued in 1941 that established the Fair Employment Practices Commission to facilitate the "full participation in the defense program by all persons, regardless of race, creed, color or national origin."⁴⁰

Early in the war, while many African Americans in the Deep South chose to migrate to booming cities such as Detroit, San Francisco and Los Angeles, others chose to seek employment closer to home. According to Ira Reid's study of "Special Problems of Negro Migration During the War," more than 100,000 black southerners moved to industrial centers in the South from rural areas. He also estimated that an additional 300,000 black southerners moved from the Deep South to various border states.⁴¹ Southern cities like

Norfolk, Charleston and Mobile especially drew black migrants from throughout the South to fill jobs created by the defense industries located there. For instance, between 1940 and 1944, more than 22,000 African Americans migrated to Norfolk, Virginia, and more than 6,000 came to Charleston County, South Carolina, in hopes of finding employment in these southern defense centers. The African American population in



Air view of Jeffersonville Boat and Machine Co. and Howard Ship Yards, Jeffersonville, Indiana, September 12, 1920. The Filson Historical Society

many Deep South cities—including Birmingham, Atlanta, and Mobile—grew far more rapidly than Louisville as a result of their greater industrialization.⁴²

By 1943, however, African Americans from the Deep South had begun to migrate to the Louisville area to take advantage of numerous war-related industrial jobs that became available to them. At the Naval Ordnance and the Hoosier Ordnance Works in Charlestown, Indiana, African Americans were employed as production workers, machine operators, foremen and assistant chemists. For the first time black laborers in the Louisville area also worked as shipbuilders. The Howard Ship Yards in near-by

Jeffersonville, Indiana, hired black workers as buffers, painters, and welders in the production of landing craft to carry tanks and infantry. Louisville's synthetic rubber plants also began to employ African Americans in positions throughout the production process.⁴³ Lafayette Brown was one of the many migrants who came from rural regions in Kentucky to secure wartime employment. In 1943, he made his way to Louisville and began working at E.I. Dupont Company as a common laborer.⁴⁴ But it was not only African American men who were employed. Women like Gladys Bussey, a migrant from Alabama, secured employment as power machine operators. While others such as Mildred Bradley, Rebecca Smith and Annie Ruth Laid—migrants from Upton & Cumberland County, Kentucky, and Giles, Tennessee, respectively—all found defense related work at the Louisville and Nashville railroad.⁴⁵

Southern cities such as Louisville also provided opportunities for black professionals, in part because segregation provided them with a secure market for the services and goods they sold. In 1940, seventy-seven percent of African Americans in the United States still lived below the Mason-Dixon line, many of them concentrated in highly segregated cities. Any number of the southern cities, in fact, had populations that were twenty-five to fifty percent black. In Louisville—like Memphis, Atlanta and Richmond—the African American community existed almost as a “city within a city,” a segregated “separate city” served mostly by black businesses and professionals. As sociologists Silver and Moeser have observed, in spite of a narrow economic base, African Americans “served their own community in matters such as financing, insurance, jobs, personal services and patronage, as well as offering a social life that rivaled that of the white world in its depth and diversity.”⁴⁶

Similarly, migrants to Louisville found themselves drawn to the city by quality education unavailable elsewhere in the South. Simmons University, for example, had the only theological seminary available to black people in the state, and therefore it offered the Reverend William G. Marks, a native of Lexington, Kentucky, training he could not get anywhere else. He felt that a chance to attend the seminary on a full-time basis while working to pay his way at something other than “hard labor” was well worth permanently relocating in Louisville.⁴⁷ Similarly, Celia Cox, found the public schools in Louisville compared quite favorably with the ones she had known before in Florence, Alabama. In her mind, Louisville Municipal College was the best school in the state and offered everything she desired.⁴⁸ Migrants like W. L. Holmes who grew up in Orville, Alabama, and attended classes in a school system that went no further than the sixth grade had as his sole reason for leaving Alabama at the age of eighteen a desire to go to school. In his words, “I left home because of that, I came here to Louisville because of that.”⁴⁹ True, black education in Louisville suffered from a number of deficiencies; it was

segregated, under-funded and of a lesser quality than schools and colleges reserved for whites. But compared to the educational institutions available to African Americans in the Deep South, even these second-rate facilities seemed a great improvement to black migrants in Louisville.

African American migrants in Louisville quickly discovered that the city's "polite racism" may have made for better race relations on the surface, but it did not mean whites acted any less racist. Migrants, for example, soon discovered that they could legally shop in department stores or ride street cars with whites; however, according to one migrant, whites often "acted funny," as if they did not want to serve or sit by African Americans.⁵⁰ Dr. Maurice Rabb, a native of Columbus, Mississippi, encountered similar attitudes at a local drugstore. White pharmacists at Taylor's Drugs willingly filled his patients' prescriptions, but whites in the same store refused to serve his wife, Jewel, a bottle of Coca-Cola.⁵¹ Others such as Earl Dearing, a Virginian, faced the heartache telling his seven year-old son that black patrons were not allowed to enter a theater showing Walt Disney's "Bambi."⁵² The Reverend William G. Marks, who migrated to Louisville in 1966, discovered first-hand that African Americans could still be subjected to a hail storm of rocks and eggs in the city's parks, despite the fact that the parks had been legally integrated in the 1950s.⁵³ As a result, migrants remained unimpressed by Louisville's "progressive" reputation.

Given these difficulties, it should not be surprising that African American migrants to Louisville remained connected to the places they had previously inhabited and to the South as a whole. For them the South was both a symbolic location and an actual place, a site infused with meaning in a collective memory that remembered it as a "safe place." That collective memory of sights, sounds, smells and history converged to form an "ethnic identity" for black migrants in Louisville.⁵⁴ According to the black feminist scholar, Barbara Smith, African Americans conceived of home as fluid and conditional, encompassing conflict and contradiction.⁵⁵ Similarly, in her work on the production of home in Asian American theater, Dorinne Kondo asserts that home "stands for a safe place, where there is no need to explain oneself to outsiders; it stands for community."⁵⁶ African Americans who relocated in Louisville often viewed the South in such terms.

Yet, at the same time, according to Dorinne Kondo, for "people on the margins" home can also be a site of violence and oppression that is "rarely, if ever safe." For many migrants the decision to remain in the South was linked to a desire to improve "home" by combating the oppression located there.⁵⁷ In this light, migration within the South takes on a new meaning, as an act of resistance. Migrants such as E. Deedom Alston, Lyman Johnson, W. L. Holmes, Ruth Bryant, Georgia Davis Powers, and Jewel and Maurice Rabb offer a glimpse of migrants who worked to improve housing, education, and race

relations, seeking to gain equal access in all three throughout the city. In fact, the majority of the African Americans nominated or elected to office in Louisville during the 1930s had arrived only recently in the city. Charles W. Anderson, C. Ewbank Tucker and William Beckett had moved to the River City from Frankfort, Kentucky, and Baltimore, Maryland, respectively.⁵⁸ Later, Felix Anderson, a migrant originally from Wilmington, North Carolina, served as the first African American elected to the state legislature.⁵⁹

It is not altogether clear whether the actions of migrants in Louisville represent a departure from civil rights movements in other cities, or if historians have simply neglected the issue. After all, when Martin Luther King, Jr., became active in the Montgomery Bus Boycott he had lived in the city less than a year. And a number of activists ranging from King to Pauli Murray to Cleveland Sellers all maintained that their involvement in civil rights struggles was intimately linked to their decision to remain in the South. According to Adam Fairclough, King felt a “moral obligation to return to the South.”⁶⁰ Similarly, as the young Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee activist, Cleveland Sellers, put it, “I am a black Southerner...I want to remain with my people, where the movement is. I intend to be a part of the movement.”⁶¹

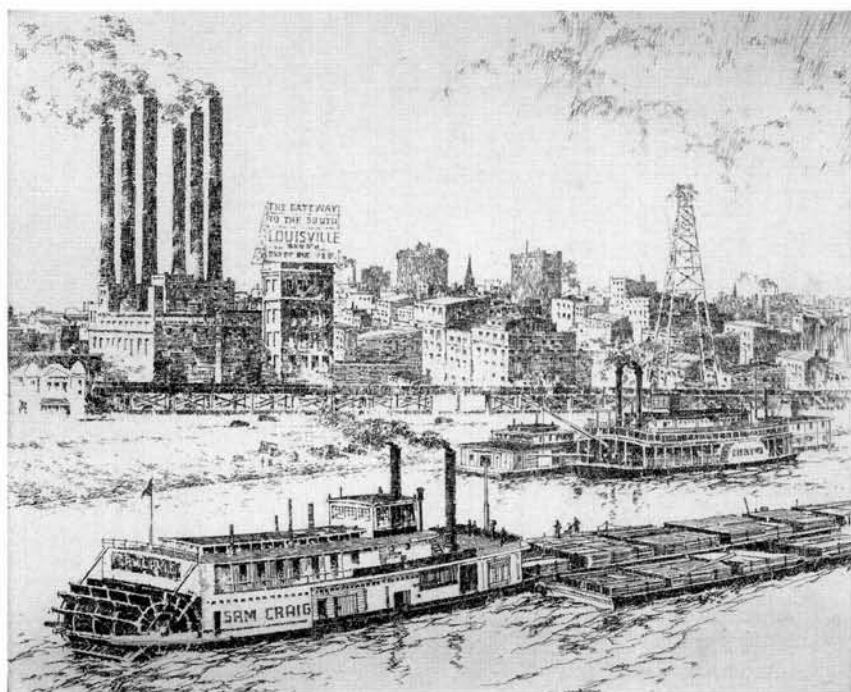
In the past, historians have viewed migrants as a “talented tenth” among African Americans who were ideally suited to advance the race. However, the notion of the “talented tenth” does not adequately explain the role of migrants in Louisville. First, many native Louisvillians such as P. O. Sweeny and Alfred M. Carroll took an equally active role in civil rights controversies and they had no more or less education than migrants. Secondly, the notion of the “talented tenth” overlooks the range of migrants involved in civil rights by suggesting that only an elite group engaged in desegregating the city. Rather, it seems that many migrants came to the city already highly politicized and that their civil rights activism was intimately linked to their decision to remain in the South. Indeed, the decision to migrate itself demonstrates a profound dissatisfaction with the status quo that is evidence itself of politicization. Prior to their arrival in Louisville, for example, migrants like Charles W. Anderson and Willie Brown participated actively in civil rights organizations. Similarly, Dr. Maurice Rabb had fought against residential segregation in Shelbyville, Kentucky, before he came to Louisville in 1946.⁶² And it was her life-long commitment to civil rights and fair housing that initially brought Murray Walls in 1935 to Louisville, where she conducted a survey on housing for the WPA. Similarly, Jessie Irvin’s work with the Non-Partisan Registration League simply continued the work her father had begun in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, where he served as a precinct captain.⁶³

Nor were they alone. The majority of the presidents of the Louisville branch of the NAACP between 1930 and 1960 had migrated to the city. Charles W. Anderson, Lyman Johnson, James Crumlin, Earl Dearing and the Reverend

W. J. Hodge all assumed leadership of the preeminent civil rights organization in the city soon after they arrived in Louisville. Other migrants were no less involved. Jewel Rabb actively coordinated student sit-ins with the Youth Council, and her husband, Maurice Rabb, contributed as vice-president and secured funding for its work. Willie Bell's outlook mirrored that of many migrants, whether they were on the Executive Board of the NAACP or simply held a one-dollar membership. When he arrived in Louisville in July 1944 from LaGrange, Georgia, he immediately asked for directions to the local NAACP saying, "I want to stay in touch with you all because I will always be a member of the NAACP."⁶⁴ For many African American migrants, their political action was linked to their decision to remain in the South.

Here it is important to recall the words of the political activist Lyman Johnson who said, "I'm glad I didn't tuck tail and run like most of my kinpeople. To them I say: 'You ran away from the problem.'"⁶⁵ Johnson continued, "When I see the opportunities blacks have now in Kentucky and throughout the South, I feel so pleased that I stayed and helped

remove some of the barriers.... You ran to Detroit, Chicago, New York and Philadelphia. But when you arrived you opened up your suit case, the first thing that jumped out was the problem you thought you left behind."⁶⁶ Similarly Ruth Bryant's activism in Louisville was intimately linked to her experiences in the Deep South. When as a junior at Fisk University in Nashville she participated in a housing survey of the local black community, Bryant for the "first time...saw rock bottom housing. I didn't know people lived like that: no furniture,



Louisville waterfront with a building supporting a sign reading "The Gateway to the South - Louisville." Print of a pen-and-ink drawing by artist C. Winston Haberer. The Filson Historical Society

eating out of tin cans –dirtsville. It began to depress me and it changed my mind about social work, there was always a guilt complex cause I knew what was there and hadn't done anything." For Bryant her later work with the West End Community Council and the Committee on Open Housing in Louisville linked the lives of black residents in the city with those in Nashville.

When African Americans migrated to Louisville they fled not the South,

but the racism, violence, and lack of opportunity white supremacy had created there. In and of itself the South was not a bad place and for many migrants it remained home.⁶⁷ However, the nature of segregation and inequality in Louisville made it impossible for black residents to elude authority or view Louisville as a safe place. The political actions of African American migrants then can be viewed as attempts to “strategically redefine home in terms of their own needs and desires, and in response to those who would bar them from ‘home.’”⁶⁸ In staying and fighting to make the South a better place for African Americans, migrants challenged the notion that the South could be considered nothing but a land of oppression. Indeed, their actions demonstrated that migrants also defined the South as a land of resistance. Moreover, although African Americans defined the South as both a site of oppression and resistance, these were not the only meanings the South held for African Americans. In their work on black extended families, Elmer P. Martin and Joanne Mitchell Martin offer insight to the way African Americans defined the South as home. As one migrant in the study eloquently explained: “When a brother is asked where home is, he is likely to answer promptly: ‘Montgomery, Alabama,’ even if he has lived in Cleveland, Ohio, for the past forty-seven years. Home is where the land was, where one’s people are. The answer might be further refined with the explanation: ‘Montgomery is my home, but all my people are in Birmingham.’ Where my people are is a part of my essential self, and where I first dug my fingers into soil is a vital part of me. Geography is thus part of the extended identity as is the extended family.”⁶⁹

This conception of the South as home was no less true in Louisville than it was in Cleveland; no matter where they lived, African Americans maintained their connection to the South. Georgia Davis Powers, originally from Jim Crow Town, Kentucky, highlights this very issue. After she spent a number of years working in New York while living in New Jersey, she longed to return to the South. On the one hand, she found the pace of life too fast in the Northeast, and on the other hand she missed the sense of community and hospitality that existed in the South. When she left the North in 1956 and moved to Louisville, Kentucky, she vowed never to leave her home again.⁷⁰ While Louisville became home to many migrants, they never lost their connection to the places from which they had come. In fact, migrants like the Reverend William G. Marks who continues to visit family in Lexington, Kentucky, even though he has lived in Louisville for the last thirty-three years, are far more common than not.⁷¹

Migration held many different meanings for African Americans. Black southerners chose to come to Louisville specifically because it was in the South. As much as the South was defined by oppression or resistance, it was also home defined as the place from which came one’s family and friends,

tradition and culture. It was the place where many African Americans had been born and raised, and therefore it was a place from which many drew their sense of identity. The different ways African Americans have conceived of their own southernness, whether they were “down home” or “way up north in Louisville,” in large measure remains unexplored. Yet for many of the more than 17,000 migrants who came to Louisville between 1930 and 1970, the desire to remain in the South was very much linked to their self-identification as southern. In choosing to migrate to Louisville, African Americans demonstrated that *they* had as much a claim to the South as any white southerner. ♠

1. Clara Smith, “L & N Blues,” Columbia 14073-D, March, 1925.
2. Marcus E. Jones, *Black Migration in the United States with Emphasis on Selected Central Cities* (Saratoga, California: Century Twenty-One Publishing, 1980), 71; and Ann Ratner Miller, *Net Intercensal Migration to Large Urban Areas of the United States: 1930-1940, 1940-1950, 1950-1960* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1964), 99, 161, 220. This figure represents the total net migration to Louisville.
3. For overviews of the scholarship on the national migration that had begun in the 1910s, see Joe William Trotter, ed., *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions of Race, Class, and Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Alferdteen Harrison, ed., *Black Exodus: The Great Migration from the American South* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1991). On specific case studies see, Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: Making of a Ghetto, 1890-1930* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968); Allan Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967); William Tuttle, *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (1970; reprint, New York: Atheneum, 1974); Elizabeth H. Pleck, *Black Migration and Poverty: Boston, 1865-1900* (New York: Academic Press, 1979); Florette Henri, *Black Migration: Movement North, 1900-1920* (Garden City: Anchor Press, 1975); James Borchert, *Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, Religion, and Folklife in the City, 1850-1970* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980); Peter Gottlieb *Making Their Own Way: Southern Blacks' Migration to Pittsburgh, 1916-30* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987); Joe William Trotter, Jr., *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-45* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk, Virginia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, *Living In, Living Out: African-American Domestic and the Great Migration* (1994; reprint, New York: Kodansha International, 1996); Farah Griffin, “Who Set You Flowin’?” *The African-American Migration Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); and Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo, *Abiding Courage: African-American Migrant Women and the East Bay Community* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).
4. Edward L. Ayers, *Southern Crossing: A History of the American South, 1877-1960* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 63.
5. Charles Henry Parrish, Jr., Papers, box 10, Interview, code 011, 119, and 048, University of Louisville, Archives and Records Center [hereinafter cited as ULARC]. The Parrish papers stipulate all interviewees remain anonymous; pseudonyms are used throughout this paper.
6. Ernest Collins, “The Political Behavior of the Negroes in Cincinnati, Ohio and Louisville, Kentucky” (Ph.D. diss., University of Kentucky, 1950), 29.
7. Ibid.
8. Omer Carmichael and Weldon Johnson, *The Louisville Story* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), 12-13.
9. George C. Wright, “The Civil Rights Movement in Kentucky, 1900-1970,” in W. Marvin Dulaney and Kathleen Underwood, eds., *Essays on the American Civil Rights Movement* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1993), 47.
10. Ayers, *Southern Crossing*, 107.
11. George C. Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky, 1865-1940: Lynchings, Mob Rule and “Legal Lynchings”* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 5; and George C. Wright, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky: Volume 2, In Pursuit of Equality, 1890-1980* (Lexington: The Kentucky Historical Society, 1992), 79-83.
12. Wright, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 41.
13. Wade Hall, *The Rest of the Dream: The Black Odyssey of Lyman Johnson* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988), 59.
14. Ibid., 59. On exclusion also see Leon Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 229, 234.
15. *Race Relations in Louisville: Southern Racial Traditions and Northern Class Dynamic* (Louisville: Policy Paper Series, June 1990, Urban Research Institute, University of Louisville), 4-5.
16. Neil McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 10.
17. J. Harvey Kerns, *A Survey of the Economic and Cultural Conditions of the Negro Population of Louisville, Kentucky and a Review of the Program and Activities of the Louisville Urban League* (Louisville: The Louisville Urban League, 1948), 33, 80, 111, 159. See Wright, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 54.

18. George C. Wright, *Life Behind A Veil: Blacks in Louisville, Kentucky, 1865-1930* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 4.
19. Ibid., 5.
20. Ibid., 53-55. In brief, the case began when three African Americans—Horace Pearce and the brothers Robert and Samuel Fox—boarded a street car on the Market Street line after church one Sunday in 1871. Their actions led to a disturbance and ultimately to their arrest. The black community united behind them and at a meeting the next night at Quinn Chapel Church decided to settle the matter in court. The Fox brothers and Pearce won their case in court, but that did not end problem. Black southerners were often attacked for exercising their right to ride street cars at the same time the city of Louisville continually tried to pass Jim Crow laws governing street cars well into the next century.
21. Ibid. The struggle over the University of Louisville bond issue lasted for nearly five years from 1920 to 1925. In 1931, Louisville Municipal College for Negroes admitted its first class of students. On Louisville Municipal College see George D. Wilson, *A Century of Negro Education in Louisville, Kentucky* (Louisville: University Libraries, University of Louisville, 1986); Lawrence H. Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky, 1879-1930* (Lexington, NY: E. Mellen Press, 1987); "Louisville Municipal College," in John E. Kleber, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Louisville* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001); and James Blaine Hudson III, "The History of Louisville Municipal College: Events Leading to the Desegregation of the University of Louisville" (Ph.D. diss., University of Kentucky, 1981).
22. J. Harvey Kerns, *A Survey of the Economic and Cultural Conditions of the Negro Population of Louisville*, 175.
23. Ibid., 48.
24. *Louisville Defender*, February 17, 1940; E. E. Pruitt Papers, Box 1, University of Louisville, Archives and Records Center.
25. *Louisville Leader*, June 25, 1949; Joseph D. Lohman, *Principles of Police Work with Minority Groups* (Louisville, Ky.: Division of Police, Committee on Police Training, 1950), 16, 24.
26. Lohman, *Principles of Police Work*, 28-29.
27. Kerns, *A Survey of Economic and Cultural Conditions*, 52. In 1948, there were 12,030 African American tenant-occupied dwelling units in the city; 11,375 of them were characterized as needing major repairs. Only 2,174 of the apartments rented to black southerners had a private bath and a flush toilet; most tenants were lucky just to have running water inside their home.
28. Ibid., 53, 60.
29. "Ghettoization in Kentucky Cities," Housing, Louisville, Kentucky, 1967, NAACP Papers, Part IV, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. See also, Scott Cummings and Michael Price, "Race Relations and Public Policy in Louisville: Historical Development of an Urban Underclass," *Journal of Black Studies* 27 (1997): 4-5. According to Cummings and Price the segregation index stood at 83.6 %.
30. Wright, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 62.
31. Charles Henry Parrish, Jr., Papers, box 10, 1938 Interview, code 011, ULARC.
32. Charles Henry Parrish, Jr., Papers, box 10, 1938 Interview, code 003, ULARC.
33. Charles Henry Parrish, Jr., Papers, box 10, 1938 Interview, code 011, ULARC.
34. Ibid.
35. Charles Henry Parrish, Jr., Papers, 1938 Interview, code 003, ULARC.
36. Charles Henry Parrish, Jr., Papers, 1938 Interview, code 119, ULARC.
37. Charles Henry Parrish, Jr., Papers, 1938 Interview, code 119, ULARC; Interview with Reverend William G. Marks, by the author, November 29, 1997; and Hall, *The Rest of the Dream*, 38-39, 58.
38. Hall, *The Rest of the Dream*, 58.
39. Charles Henry Parrish, Jr. Papers, Interview 048, ULARC.
40. Robert Weaver, *Negro Labor: A National Problem* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1946), 135; Kerns, *A Survey of the Economic and Cultural Conditions*, 22.
41. Ira D. A. Reid. "Special Problems of Negro Migration During the War," *Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly* 25 (1947): 287-88.
42. Pete Daniel, "Going Among Strangers: Southern Reactions to World War II," *Journal of American History* 77 (1990): 901.
43. Kerns, *Survey of the Economic and Cultural Conditions*, 22. It is important to note that the President's Executive Order which established the FEPC did not lead to African American employment in defense industries as a whole, but in all branches of the federal government. For the first time, black southerners gained access to a host of jobs such as supervisors, foremen, chemists, and clerical and postal workers throughout various federal agencies.
44. Urban Renewal Relocation Files, R-10 Southwick I to West Downtown, Box 20 and 29, City of Louisville Archives, Louisville, Kentucky.
45. Shirley Mae Harmon, "A Comparison Study of Black and White Women War Workers in the Louisville, Kentucky During World War II" (M. A. thesis, University of Louisville, 1999), 20-21.
46. Christopher Silver and John Moeser, *The Separate City: Black Communities in the Urban South, 1940-1968* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 6. According to Silver and Moeser, segregation led to the development of "separate cities" where African Americans lived in communities balanced between the denial of access on the one hand and on the other hand a full range of opportunities and a self-reliance that fostered independent black-owned business.
47. Interview with Reverend William G. Marks, by the author, November 29, 1997.
48. Charles Henry Parrish, Jr., Papers, Interview, 036, ULARC.
49. Interview with W. L. Holmes, by Mary D. Bobo, August 15, 1978, ULARC.
50. Ibid.
51. Interview with Dr. Maurice Rabb by Dwayne Cox, August 15, 1977, Black Oral History Collection, ULARC.
52. "Law Sought to Prohibit Racial Bias," Clippings, Louisville 1956-1959, part III, C: 50, NAACP Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. [hereinafter cited as LC].
53. Interview with Reverend William G. Marks, by the author, November 29, 1997.

54. Dorinne Kondo, "The Narrative Production of 'Home,' Community and Political Identity in Asian American Theater," in *Displacement, Diaspora, and Geographies of Identity*, Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg, eds. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 106. On "Home" also see Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Feminist Politics: What's Home Got to Do With It?" in Teresa de Lauretis, ed., *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).
55. Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983), xxii-xxiii, li. Also see Gayle Wald, *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 19, 50-51.
56. Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 81.
57. Kondo, "The Narrative Production of 'Home,'" 97-98.
58. Louisville *Courier-Journal*, September 14, 1960; interview with Goldie Winstead-Beckett by Kenneth Chumbley, September 12, 1978, ULARC. On Civil Rights in Louisville, Kentucky, see George C. Wright, "The Civil Rights Movement in Kentucky, 1900-1970," in W. Marvin Dulaney and Kathleen Underwood, eds., *Essays on the American Civil Rights Movement* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1993); Wright, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*; George C. Wright, "Desegregation of Public Accommodations in Louisville: A Long and Difficult Struggle in a 'Liberal' Border City," in Elizabeth Jacoway and David Colburn, eds., *Southern Businessmen and Desegregation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982); Patrick S. McElhorne, "The Civil Rights Activities of the Louisville Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 1914- 1960," (M.A. thesis, University of Louisville, 1976); Catherine Anne Fosl, "'Once Comes the Moment to Decide': Anne Braden and the Civil Rights Movement" (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 2000); Richard R. Bernier, "White Activists and Support in the Louisville, Kentucky, Open Housing Movement, 1962-1967" (M.A. thesis, University of Louisville, 1998); and Col. John Benjamin Horton, *Not Without Struggle* (New York: Vantage Press, 1978).
59. Interview with Felix S. Anderson by Kenneth Chumbley, n.d., ULARC. Anderson served between 1954 and 1960.
60. Adam Fairclough, *Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 16; Pauli Murray, ed., *States' Laws on Race and Color* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997). Similarly, Carl Carter, one of the first African Americans to desegregate public schools in Drew, Mississippi, eloquently explained his decision to remain in the state: "You just got to stick in there in Mississippi . . . and try to straighten it out. Mississippi is home for me and I want to stay." See Constance Curry, *Silver Rights: The Story of the Carter Family's Brave Decision to Send Their Children to an All-White School and Claim Their Civil Rights* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 188.
61. Cleveland Sellers, *The River of No Return: The Autobiography of A Black Militant and the Life and Death of SNCC* (New York: Morrow, 1973), 31-32.
62. Interview with Dr. Maurice Rabb by Dwayne Cox, August 15, 1977, Black Oral History Collection, ULARC.
63. Interview with John and Murray Walls by Patrick McElhoun, July 31, 1973, and Jessie Irvin by Kenneth Chumbley, June 28, 1978, Black Oral History Collection, ULARC. Ironically, Murray Walls, a migrant from Indianapolis, was among a small number of migrants from the North.
64. Willie Brown to National NAACP, July 7, 1944, Part 2, Branch Files, 1940-1955, NAACP Papers, Manuscript Division, LC.
65. Hall, *The Rest of the Dream* 183.
66. Ibid.
67. My articulation of "Home" here draws from Kondo, "The Narrative Production of 'Home,'" 97, 106. She says of "Home," "it stands for a safe place, where there is no need to explain oneself to outsiders; it stands for community; more problematically it can elicit a nostalgia for a past golden age that never was, a nostalgia that elides exclusion, power relations, and difference." She speaks of the production of "home" from resonance of the "sensory memory" in which foods, sounds, and smells serve as "symbolic vehicles of ethnic identity." Also see Smith, *Home Girls*, xx.
68. Wald, *Crossing the Line*, 19, 144.
69. Elmer P. Martin and Joanne Mitchell Martin, *The Black Extended Family* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 7-8.
70. Georgia Davis Powers, *I Shared the Dream: The Pride, Passion and Politics of the First Black Woman Senator From Kentucky* (Tar Hills, New Jersey: New Horizon Press, 1995), 75.
71. Interview with Reverend William G. Marks, by the author, November 29, 1997.