A Little More Freedom

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This project began with the bullet holes in the courthouse door. Nearly thirty years ago, research on another topic brought me to Washington Court House, a small town in southwestern Ohio. Most of my work was conducted in the Fayette County courthouse, an impressive sandstone building of 1880s vintage. While passing back and forth to the various county offices where the records were stored, I noticed about a dozen small holes irregularly spaced across the pair of tall, heavy oak doors in one of the main entrances. Inquiring, I was told that the holes were caused by the National Guard firing through the doors during “the race riot in 1894.” Race riot? My research focused on the 1870s, and I knew that during the Civil War and postwar years Washington Court House had attracted a substantial African American cohort, who by 1880 made up more than 13 percent of the town’s population. At the time, African Americans represented less than 3 percent of Ohioans. Looking around me in the Washington Court House of a hundred years later, I could see that the African American presence was now only a fraction of what it had been. Could there be some connection, I wondered, between the “race riot” and the decline of this small-town African American community? In the Midwest, and across the United States as well, African Americans were now an overwhelmingly metropolitan people. Their movement from country to big city had been rapid in historical terms. Certainly it had been swifter than that of European Americans, whose metropolitan shift had occurred through stages encompassing a protracted period in small towns, an “age of the village.” Could the African American experience in Washington Court House be in any way typical of the African American experience in other midwestern small towns? Was there an age of the village for African Americans, a forgotten stage between ruralism and the big city? And, most intriguing, could
African Americans’ village experience offer any clue to the historical rapidity of their movement to the metropolis?

Curiosity about the bullet holes in the courthouse thus had led me to questions about one of the most significant chapters in African American history. The migrations from the rural South to the metropolitan North arguably represent, along with the civil rights movement, one of the principal changes that African Americans wrought in their lives since emancipation. Furthermore, metropolitan migration and the civil rights movement were indissolubly linked as complementary strategies. Urbanization in both the South and the North created new kinds of African American communities, not only more densely populated but also wealthier, better organized, and more diverse than southern rural communities. Movement to the North regained political rights stolen in the South, which could then be exercised to good effect by the new metropolitan communities. In the absence of the African American vote concentrated in key states, the national administrations since 1940 would have been far more reluctant to listen to demands for civil rights. To explain how and why African Americans moved so rapidly up the urban hierarchy is therefore to open a new window on a critical phase of African American history. Some inkling of the possibilities behind the bullet holes registered in my mind at the time, but meanwhile I had another book to write.

Returning to the question years later, I discovered that Washington Court House was indeed representative, not in the size of its postbellum African American population, which was proportionately larger than most, but in its pattern of rise and decline. The same pattern occurred in many small towns and midsize cities in Ohio and Indiana before 1910. As fine studies by historians David Gerber and Emma Lou Thornbrough demonstrated, during the 1880s African Americans began to move from the rural areas and smaller communities where they had previously settled to the metropolitan centers of Cincinnati, Columbus, Cleveland, and Indianapolis. Gerber and Thornbrough believed that the African American metropolitan shift was part of a general cityward movement involving whites as well as blacks, but their focus on African Americans prevented them from making the detailed comparisons necessary to document this. Early indicators I found suggested that this movement was distinctively African American. In order to understand why African Americans left nonmetropolitan communities for large cities, it would be necessary for me to examine closely both black and white mobility between 1860 and 1910 across these two states.

As if this were not a sufficiently daunting task, I quickly added Illinois to the study area. In terms of their African American migration experience, the
three states seemed to form a natural unit, since they stood apart from the other midwestern states by virtue of the larger size of their migration flows. Together, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois received an estimated total of more than 750,000 African American migrants between the outbreak of the Civil War and the eve of the Great Depression, more than one-third of all those who left the South. In 1860 African Americans represented a tiny minority in each of the three states, but seventy years later migration had made them a significant factor within the region, a mixture of a few old and many new midwesterners whose presence had begun to reshape culture, politics, and urban geography. Another reason to include Illinois was Chicago, the metropolis not only for its state but for the region as a whole, as well as a powerful magnet for African American migration. The unity of the three states in terms of their African American migration history was reinforced by a rough similarity among their economies, all diversified but fairly balanced, with strong agricultural, commercial, and industrial components. Their urban systems, however, were quite different. Ohio contained a multiplicity of dynamic cities, the Big Three before 1900 joined by fast-growing upstarts Akron, Dayton, Toledo, and Youngstown afterward. In Indiana, the most rural of the three states, the urban hierarchy was dominated by a single center, Indianapolis, but rapid growth occurred in the Calumet region in the state’s northwestern corner near Chicago after 1900. Chicago overshadowed all other urban places in Illinois, but downstate towns also felt the influence of St. Louis across the Mississippi River. Both the similarities and the differences among the three states of what I was now calling the Lower Midwest encouraged comparison.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois reached the apex of their collective importance and influence in American society and politics. A region already populated by the “old” immigration from northwestern Europe attracted “new” immigrants from southern and eastern Europe to fill the industrial jobs that multiplied in its cities. Meanwhile, native-born sons and daughters of the Lower Midwest moved on to the fertile agricultural territory further west. In 1900 Illinois was the nation’s third most populous state, Ohio fourth, and Indiana eighth. The region formed a key sector on the battleground of national politics, and both major parties recognized this fact by regularly calling its sons to head their ticket. Between 1860 and 1928, the Lower Midwest had produced eight of the thirteen victorious presidential candidates. Because of the region’s political importance, its role as conveyor of American values to new immigrants, and its fecundity in producing migrants to other regions, the pattern of race relations hammered out within its borders could well have influenced the nation’s.
To explain why the African American metropolitan shift occurred, then, a regional framework would be appropriate. Only a regional study could both analyze the shifting channels of migration within a state and compare these changes to patterns in other states. Regional studies have not been common in American urban history, and in research on African American urbanization they represent a new and as yet rarely used approach. Historians have preferred instead to examine single communities, but such a focus, while allowing considerable descriptive depth, forecloses the possibility of explaining why migrants chose one destination over another. For such a task, comparison is essential. When combined with well-chosen local case studies, a regional focus might provide the graphic detail available in a single-community monograph together with the broad comparative reach necessary for analysis.

With the issue of the proper spatial context in which to place Washington Court House’s bullet holes settled, the question of time required consideration. The Civil War clearly formed a watershed in the history of African American migration by endowing African Americans with a degree of choice unprecedented in their history. Indeed, the war itself stimulated the largest black influx to that point in the history of the Lower Midwest. The contrast between the numbers who came to the Midwest after 1860 and the few who resided in the region when the war began clearly indicated the opening of a new chapter in Afro-Midwesterners’ story. Within the region, the metropolitan shift that began in the 1880s was measurably well under way by 1910 (at least in Ohio and Indiana), so the study period could have ended there. A good reason to go on lay in the fact that the relation of the volume of African American migration to the Midwest before 1915 to that of the ensuing fifteen years—the First Great Migration period—was as a trickle to a flood. Why African Americans began to abandon smaller urban places for larger ones before the Great Migration, while a fascinating question in itself, would become even more fruitful if that current could be placed in relation to the larger tide that followed. The most prominent scholars who had studied African American migration on a large scale hypothesized that the earlier migration streams “developed pathways and linkages that served as mechanisms for facilitating and even encouraging later movements.” Neither they nor anyone else, however, had found a way to test this proposition empirically on anything more than the local level. Once my research had delineated patterns of African American mobility before the First Great Migration of 1916–1930, I would be in a good position to do so. The Great Depression temporarily diminished the appeal of the North in African American eyes, so 1930 seemed a good place to stop.
Within my chosen space and time, research began to focus on three questions. What was life like for African Americans in small towns and other nonmetropolitan urban communities? What relation did African American movement within the North bear to migration into the region? What role did antiblack violence play in relation to other factors in stimulating African American mobility? At the time this project began, all these questions were drastically underresearched.

Since 1990, however, we have learned much about the African American small-town experience in the North through studies that have ranged from America’s premier resort towns through gritty industrial communities, from places in which blacks represented a tiny minority to all-black communities. The rich and complex picture that has begun to emerge shows that the quality of African American life in small towns depended upon the interaction of many factors. Following historian Kenneth Kusmer, these can be grouped into three categories. First, structural factors such as the nature of the local economy or the town’s location in relation to networks of transportation and communication placed limits on the options available to blacks as well as whites. Second, the attitudes and actions of the European American majority, whether on the local, state, or national level, represented forces to which African Americans often had to respond. Third, the past and present condition of the African American community framed choices. Relations between transient and stable community members; divisions of class, gender, color, and religion; the sex ratio and family structure; the density of the institutional network; and the character of leadership, together with other factors internal to the black community, all could play a role in shaping its history.

My goal is to add to this picture by constructing a comprehensive portrait of small-town life in the Lower Midwest, particularly for the crucial years between 1860 and 1910. Since in 1910 the region held 364 communities containing a population between 2,500 and 100,000, this is no small task. I have collected information bearing on dozens of these towns and have relied on historical studies of the few that have been closely examined. In addition, I will present in-depth studies of four towns distinguished by various combinations of local economy, race relations, and migration history. Washington Court House must be included, if only because of the bullet holes. The Fayette County seat was a market center for a rich agricultural hinterland. Its “race riot” in 1894—actually a foiled lynching—coincided with an African American exodus that followed a period of strong inflow. Springfield, Ohio, a larger industrial city, experienced a pair of true race riots in 1904 and 1906, which similarly capped a period of powerful black
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inflow and tarnished Springfield’s luster in the eyes of would-be migrants. The third town is another Springfield, Illinois’s state capital, whose local economy was based on government and coal mining. Its vicious race riot in 1908 set off a national shock wave that culminated in the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Before the riot, the African American community in Springfield grew, but more slowly than the state’s black urban population as a whole. This pattern continued after the riot. The fourth case study, Muncie, Indiana, was a small industrial city with a steadily growing African American community. No antiblack collective violence is known to have marred race relations in Muncie, although during the 1920s, when it became famous as the site and subject of Robert and Helen Lynd’s sociological classic Middletown, the town was divided between fervent support for and outspoken opposition to the Ku Klux Klan. Through a close examination of the status and behavior of the African American community in each of the four towns I hope to provide contexts for both white violence and African American decisions to stay or to move on. More generally, I wish to bridge the gap between migration researchers who focus on movement and those who study processes of integration and assimilation within settlement communities.

The question I posed as I pondered the shrunken African American community of Washington Court House centered upon intrastate and intraregional migration. Why did African Americans abandon the small towns of the Lower Midwest for the region’s large cities? But I soon realized that this issue was inseparable both conceptually and empirically from the question of interstate and interregional migration flows. A metropolitan shift could have occurred only if both residents of small towns and new southern emigrants chose big-city destinations. Otherwise the places in small towns of veteran black Midwesterners who moved to the city would have been filled by new migrants from the South. Both types of mobility therefore had to be considered in relation to each other.

The question of the contributions made to the metropolitan shift by interstate and interregional migration opened a Pandora’s box of collateral issues. We know that the sources of northern migration steadily shifted southward. Before 1915, the border states were the prime generators; afterward, the Deep South. What implications did the changing backgrounds of interregional migrants hold for the metropolitan shift? Another possibly significant facet of the migration stream was its sex composition. Were men or women more likely to migrate into the Lower Midwest early or late in the period, and how could any such change have affected destination choices? Transportation and communication also figured in the rapidly expanding equation. Did changes in the transportation system predispose
travelers toward certain destinations? If conditions in small towns became increasingly inhospitable to African Americans, could potential migrants in the South have known this? Finally, there was the question of migration sequences. Did interregional migrants habitually travel to the Midwest in a single jump, or did they carry out step migration, moving up, down, or across the urban hierarchy? Answers to these and other questions were necessary before I could identify which migrants were making what decisions, and for what reasons.

Reflection on these questions led me to define a central goal of the project as delineation of the migration field of African American migrants to and within the Lower Midwest. The concept of a migration field was inspired by the notion of a “mental map” employed by geographers, psychologists, and other social scientists. Each resident of a community, it is said, carries about inside his or her head a map of that community defined by his or her work, history, interests, and connections. Each mental map is therefore personal and may bear little resemblance either to the mental maps of other community residents or to published maps—which of course are themselves arbitrary in selecting which features of a community to include. Nevertheless, comparison of individuals’ mental maps generally reveals some degree of correspondence, both with those of other local residents and with real features of the landscape or cityscape.¹⁶

This concept can be extended to migrants. Potential migrants must have a mental image of the area to which they consider migrating. This image may be scant and totally inaccurate for those with little or no background information, or it may be rich in detail and chronologically deep for those with long residence in the general area and access to the best intelligence. For much human travel, “route knowledge,” which consists of awareness of landmarks and turning directions at each landmark, is sufficient. When information about distances and different routes is added, we have acquired “survey knowledge.”¹⁷ Whatever its amplitude or quality, the image of the area to be traversed guides decisions about whether, when, and where to move. For all migrants during a period of time, the aggregate of their images of the region of interest is the migration field of that cohort.

When due allowance is made for transportation corridors that channel human mobility, a cohort’s migration field should be definable by inference from its locational choices. That is, among the array of potential destinations enjoying equality of access, the places chosen should be the locations preferred. For historical actors, inference will probably be the only guide, since extant records rarely contain anything more than tantalizing clues to the size, shape, or configuration of anyone’s mental map. Even when asked directly, “Why did you choose this destination?” respondents to oral history
interviews usually offer answers that are no more than implicitly comparative
and therefore reveal only a glimpse of a small portion of her or his personal
map of accessible terrain. 18 Whatever method is used, defining the migra-
tion fields of one’s subjects must be a central task of migration research. 19 As
a recent review of the scholarly literature on African American migration
concludes, “There is much more that we need to learn about the processes
that led migrants to select particular destinations in the North and about the
wide-ranging consequences of their choices.” 20

The potential motive for migration that initially caught my attention
was, of course, white violence. A substantial scholarly literature on racial
violence appeared during the twentieth century, focused first on lynching
and later on race riots. Most of this literature sought to explain the actions
of lynchers or rioters, whether white or black. The most recent historical schol-
arship on lynching portrays antiblack violence as arising from interaction
between black aspirations and behavior and white repression. As George
Wright states, “Afro-Americans were lynched for getting out of the place
assigned them by white society.” 21 Definition and enforcement of that place
could vary across both space and time. After tracing a “geography of lynching” in Georgia and Virginia, Fitzhugh Brundage concludes:

Lynch mobs seem to have flourished within the boundaries of the planta-
tion South, where sharecropping, monoculture agriculture, and a stark line
separating white landowners and black tenants existed. In such areas, mob
violence became part of the very rhythm of life. 22

Based on a sophisticated statistical analysis of lynchings across ten southern
states, sociologists Stewart Tolnay and E. M. Beck agree. “Mob violence,”
they write, played a “fundamental role . . . in the maintenance of southern
society and economy. . . . [L]ynching was an integral element of an agricul-
tural economy that required a large, cheap, and docile labor force.” 23 Existing
tallies indicate that lynchings in the North followed a similar chronological
pattern to those in the South, with the peak of violence occurring in the two
decades around the turn of the century. My own count for Ohio, Indiana,
and Illinois shows more than thirty lynchings, attempted lynchings, mob-
bings, and race riots between 1885 and 1910. No one has yet conducted an
analytical study of antiblack violence in the North, where none of the specif-
ic conditions cited to explain southern lynching existed. A long step toward
such an analysis has been taken, however, in a book published after my
research was nearly completed, sociologist James Loewen’s Sundown Towns.
According to Loewen, the heightened white racism across the United States
at the turn of the twentieth century led many European Americans in towns and suburbs outside the Deep South to regard the mere presence of African Americans in their communities as unacceptable. As a result, through discrimination, harassment, and violence, African Americans were driven from such places. Loewen's argument, which is both complementary and competitive to mine, will be addressed in chapters to follow. Here I will simply note my belief that, without excusing the racist attitudes that motivated white actions, a full explanation should take into account the dynamics of racial interaction, including the struggles of African Americans for the freedoms they had left the South to find. If northern whites did assign African American a "place" in their communities and society and African Americans in search of full citizenship, not merely a subordinate place, transgressed their prescribed boundaries, then the fundamental trigger of southern lynching may well have produced racial explosions in the North as well. Assessing this hypothesis will require both a comparative examination of violent and peaceful communities and in-depth analysis of specific events.

In contrast to the issue of lynching motivation, fewer historians have attempted to explore how African Americans responded to racially motivated violence. Brundage describes how African Americans in Virginia and Georgia organized politically against lynching, and Wright portrays a range of responses in Kentucky, from lobbying and petition campaigns to armed self-defense. Tolnay and Beck add outmigration to the list of responses, concluding that "blacks were more likely to leave areas in which lynching was more common." Furthermore, across the South a justified fear of lynching acted independently of other variables such as urban or rural residence, illiteracy, and factors influencing both black and white migration. The first post–Civil War mass migration to the North, the Kansas Exodus of 1879, has been portrayed as in part a response to European American violence and intimidation. How much of this repertoire of responses was relevant to northern communities, where antiblack violence is generally considered to have been less common and African American communities were usually smaller, but where the vote offered a political channel to reply? As in the case of lynching motivation, an answer should be based both on comparative analysis across communities and close examination of specific events.

Answering the questions outlined above is the goal of this book. As I suggested above, my purpose in constructing answers is to shed light on some of the most powerful forces shaping American society in the twentieth century. For example, the story of African Americans’ movement to large cities forms a significant part of the larger history of the transformation of the United States from a rural to an urban, and then a metropolitan
and suburban society. As African Americans changed the setting in which they lived, from the rural South to the metropolitan North, they altered the patterns of their lives through both personal and institutional transmutation. Their movement into northern cities in turn triggered responses from their European American coresidents ranging across a wide spectrum from neglect through cooperation to violent resistance and suburban mobility. Metropolitan migration spread cultural forms born or nurtured in the South—music, dance, and language, for example—not only across the nation, but also into the society’s most dynamic cultural centers. As northern migration regained the suffrage for African Americans, metropolitan concentration amplified the power of their vote, a development eventually to carry important consequences for the prospects of the civil rights movement. The full flowering of African American metropolitan migration took place after the end of my story, but its seedtime and germination before 1930 set the pattern for its later growth.

The methods used to answer my questions will become clear as the book proceeds, but here I want to make clear my stance on two basic issues of historical research: quantitative versus qualitative approaches and the truth value of what we as historians produce. This study seeks to explain the attitudes and behavior of ordinary people by defining the conditions under which they lived and the choices they made about their lives. Of the 750,000 African Americans who migrated to the Lower Midwest between 1860 and 1930, the voices of only a small fraction can be heard in surviving sources. To elucidate the locational choices of the multitude and the experiences of those whom history has rendered silent, quantitative evidence is unavoidable, despite its deficiencies, and quantitative analysis is useful, in spite of its tendency to obscure through aggregation. I have consciously tried to counter the homogenizing effect of a quantitative approach by searching in memoirs, newspapers, and, above all, oral history sources for individual voices, and paying attention to what they have to say. As one student of African American migration has observed, “the pattern of movement and the experiences of the individuals involved are both essential to an adequate understanding of the dynamics of human migration.” My approach, therefore, is eclectic and inclusive, rather than methodologically focused.

I have tried to tell the story of the African Americans who came to the Lower Midwest, but in the end I do not pretend that it is their story. Instead, it is my story about them. The facts of this story are as true as any set of facts can be. Their selection and arrangement, however, represent only one of an infinitude of possible interpretations.

A word about terminology. “African American” and its parallel term,
“European American,” will be used to designate Americans of African and European descent, respectively, but since I cannot establish a full and accurate genealogy for any of the actors in this story, the application of these terms must necessarily depend upon how they were perceived during their lifetimes. Those who were seen and treated as “Negroes” or “colored people” or “Afro-Americans” will be considered to be African Americans. Those who were considered to be “white” will be described here as European Americans. The terms “black” and “white” will be used as interchangeable, respectively, with “African American” and “European American.” The noun “race” and its adjectival forms are unavoidable in describing relations between African Americans and European Americans, but I shall try to avoid using them in any way that asserts the reality of discrete racial groups. It should be understood that in this study the terms “race,” “racial,” “interracial,” and the like refer to contemporary perceptions and behaviors, not biological entities. As anthropologist Malcolm Chapman notes, “[T]he notion of a finite, biologically defined and biologically self-reproducing population as the basis of an ethnic group is largely fictional.” A burgeoning volume of historical scholarship now treats “whiteness” and “blackness” as social constructions, linguistic and conceptual weapons deployed to create and maintain a relationship of domination by one set of Americans over another. Demonstrating the historical contingency of that relationship is precisely a goal of this study.

Through the bullet holes in the court house doors in Washington Court House I perceived an ever-widening historiographic space. I have tried to furnish as much of that space as possible, but I do not pretend that I have filled it all. This is the first analytical study to employ both qualitative and quantitative methods to study African American migration over such a large area and such a long time. I hope it will not be the last.

Chapter 1 identifies and charts the first two waves of migration into the Lower Midwest: the rush of the Civil War years and the more deliberate movement during the quarter century that followed. Migrant characteristics and patterns of mobility are delineated, a sketch of the Lower Midwest and its race relations is drawn, and migrant choices of destination are traced. Chapters 2 through 5 focus on the conditions migrants found in nonmetropolitan communities and how they dealt with those conditions, emphasizing family life, jobs, wealth, housing, and politics. Within this section, the story proceeds from matters of everyday life to the sporadic outbreaks of violence directed against African Americans and how they responded. In the final three chapters, the focus widens to encompass not
only the case study communities, but also the choices made by migrants before leaving the South as well as those that brought them to some destinations rather than others in the Lower Midwest. Locational choices within Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois are examined both during the period of accelerated immigration around the turn of the twentieth century and during the even more stepped-up surge of the Great Migration period, after 1910. A brief conclusion reflects on the meanings and implications of the story the book tells.