A Little More Freedom

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African American migration to the Lower Midwest between 1860 and 1890 responded to changes forced by the Civil War on both sides of the Ohio River. A deluge poured into Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois during the terrifying yet liberating turbulence of the war, but the stream slowed to a dribble afterward, as most African Americans chose to test the limits of their new freedom in the South. The war and its attendant changes altered much in the Midwest, stimulating its farms and industries and stretching the narrow limits within which Euro-Midwesterners had historically confined their African American neighbors. With mixed hope and prudence, African American newcomers seized the new opportunities they and their fellows North and South had helped to create.

TWO MIGRATIONS

The wartime migration to the Lower Midwest probably began as soon as troop movements, pitched battles, and internecine conflict in the disputed states of Kentucky and Missouri disrupted slaveholders’ patterns of control. As Union troops moved farther south in the war’s western theater, more
slaves grasped the opportunity for freedom. Some walked or rode to free states on their own. One such pair were Missouri slave Henry Clay Bruce and his betrothed, who took his master’s horse, rode to a railway line, and caught a train to the Missouri River, where they crossed to free territory in Kansas. Other ex-slaves were gathered by the Union army and, beginning in 1862, were held at a huge contraband camp in Cairo, at the southernmost tip of Illinois. As historian Michael Johnson points out, “[T]hese refugees from Dixie comprised the largest voluntary interstate migration of African Americans in the first century of the nation’s history, over 80,000 in all.” About 21,000 came to Ohio, more than 11,000 to Indiana, and 20,000 to Illinois. The wartime migrants may have planned their departure or even made more than one attempt before succeeding, but in the end it was the war’s convulsive impact that provided the catalyst for their movement.

Three other characteristics marked the wartime migrants. First, having seized war-generated opportunities to escape from slavery, they were dirt poor. Second, evidence from Kansas and Iowa indicates that they tended to move as families. Oral histories from the Ohio Valley states, too, reflect family migration. For Adah Isabelle Suggs, the actions of her mother, Harriott McClain, were crucial. Born in slavery in Henderson County, Kentucky, in the early 1850s, Adah was taken from her mother at the age of four and put under her mistress’s care. Adah’s mother attempted several times to escape with Adah to save her daughter from the threat of sexual assault by her master when the girl reached puberty, but her initial efforts were unsuccessful. Although the enlistments of Harriott’s husband and son in an African American Union regiment should have brought emancipation for Adah and Harriott, Adah’s owner refused to comply with the federal law. When Adah was about twelve, Harriott McClain finally succeeded in escaping with her daughter. They were transported across the Ohio River by federal troops and taken in by the African American community in Evansville, Indiana. Much of that community consisted of newly arrived fellow Kentuckians, and most lived in black-headed households. Fleeing guerilla-war-torn Missouri, the Blue, Barnett, and Mallory families migrated together from Paris to Jacksonville, Illinois; so did the Kirk family from Carrollton. Migrants to rural Pulaski County, Illinois, tended to arrive in family groups and to settle near relatives. As in slavery, the family served as a buffer against a threatening world.

Finally, the wartime migrants were distinguished from all succeeding waves by the role played by whites in aiding their flight. White help was especially useful because established midwestern African American communities were relatively small and the likelihood of slaves’ contact with them correspondingly slight. Most slaves had probably never visited free
With little or no knowledge of the terrain, no money, and few or no family or friends to assist upon arrival, help from European Americans was no doubt welcome. Migrants, especially those on their own, therefore sometimes sought out white assistance, but the circumstances under which it was sought and rendered suggest exchange and mutuality as much as charity and dependence. After running away from his Missouri plantation, William Nelson hunted for turtle eggs until he filled a bucket. Taking the bucket to the river, he found Yankee soldiers who bought his eggs and took him on board a boat. A Union officer, whom Nelson referred to as “Mars Ben,” “tol’em he take cair me and he did. Den Marse Ben got sick and cum home and brung me along [to Ohio] and I staid with ’em ’til I was about fo’ty, when I gets married and moved to Wyllis Hill.” David A. Hall was “brought north” to Ohio by a Union soldier named Kuhns, whom he had met in North Carolina during the war. Hall found work in a flour mill in Tiffin. When he moved to Canton in 1866, Kuhns offered him a job in a mill of which he was part owner. Hall worked in the mill for the next seventy years. In this exchange, Hall received the help he needed to find his way north (but perhaps not to find a job); Kuhns obtained an experienced and loyal employee. In Ohio Union officers and abolitionist and humanitarian organizations were active in recruiting and transporting African Americans to work as domestic servants. At the war’s end, the Union commander in northern Kentucky issued free travel passes—via rail or steamboat if necessary—to both free blacks and slaves, and many used the passes to travel north.

In a few cases, family support and white assistance were the same. Orville Artis’s grandmother, a slave on a Kentucky plantation, was brought with her four children to Logan County, Illinois, by her master, the father of Orville’s mother. The children called him Dr. George, and Artis’s mother, Georgiana, was named after him. Dr. George moved on to Chicago, but he provided Georgiana’s mother with a house and regular financial support, returning periodically for visits. When Georgiana married Tom Artis, Dr. George bought first a sixty-acre, then a two-hundred-acre farm for his daughter and her husband. “He’s one white man,” Orville Artis recalled of his grandfather, who “tried to set a record straight as he could.”

The sheer volume of wartime migration represented an unprecedented turn in midwestern history. Ohio’s prewar African American population of 36,673, by far the largest of the three states, leaped by 72 percent during the decade. Indiana’s more than doubled, from 11,428 to 24,560. The tiny African American population of Illinois, only 7,628 at the war’s outset, nearly quadrupled to 28,762. In significant ways, however, the wartime flood, by compressing them in time, only underscored prewar patterns. European
Americans had historically played a significant role in facilitating African American migration and settlement in the region. Repentant slaveholders such as Dr. George had settled their slave mistresses, natural children, and other manumitted bondspeople on midwestern lands. Abolitionists had assisted in creating Underground Railroad routes that whisked some fugitives through to Canada and encouraged others to settle nearby. Quaker settlements became well known for their sympathy, and many black communities grew up in their vicinity. As the war to preserve the Union became a war of liberation, northern white opinion toward blacks polarized, largely along partisan lines. Many of those who took the side of the freedpeople accepted the duty of manifesting their principles in deeds.

For every slave who escaped before the war, flight was more than fulfillment of a personal need; it was a form of active resistance to a system grounded upon denial of African American volition. Once the seceded states mobilized for war, escape took on an even more portentous political dimension. Every fugitive deprived the Confederacy of a badly needed worker. When the Union armies began to enlist African Americans on a large scale in the aftermath of the Emancipation Proclamation, flight from slavery became for many only the first phase of a campaign to destroy the slave system. In the border slave states, the message sent by the fugitives was slightly different but no less political: The end of slavery was at hand. When nearly 24,000 Afro-Kentuckians gained legal freedom for themselves and their dependents—totaling 71 percent of Kentucky’s slaves—by leaving their farms and plantations to enlist in the Union army, they all but guaranteed its realization. A step toward African American freedom during the antebellum years, flight in the wartime crisis quickened the pace toward that elusive goal.

The wartime migration probably extended into 1867, when the rapid turn toward Radical Reconstruction began to open new opportunities in the South. It was succeeded during the following quarter century by a different kind of movement, more tentative and gradual than the sometimes premeditated but often precipitate departures of the apocalyptic wartime years. The Lower Midwest experienced nothing like the sudden surge of migrants who left the Deep South for Kansas in the spring of 1879. Because it was incremental, the new migration usually attracted far less notice and much less support or opposition from whites. African American migration could generate intense reactions during these years, as became clear during the Kansas Exodus, when newspapers across the country dissected the motives and probed the political implications of the movement. Some of the fallout splashed across the Midwest, as Democratic charges that Republicans were importing voters into closely divided Indiana sparked a congressional
investigation. But this was the exception to the rule. The Gilded Age migration was far more under African American control than any previous African American migration. Its political implications for the migrants and their new communities were left unexplored by Congress or anyone else, and other consequences it might bring in its train were probably equally unanticipated by blacks and whites alike as the migration proceeded.

African American migration to the Lower Midwest during the Gilded Age brought about the same number of migrants to the region as the wartime movement, but the flow extended over a period nearly four times as long (1867–1890). The Civil War flood dwindled to a trickle. Nevertheless, by the time the current began to flow more strongly in the 1890s, the trickle had made significant additions to the region’s African American populations. Population growth, most of which was provided by migration, added 38 percent in Ohio between the censuses of 1870 and 1890, 84 percent in Indiana, and 98 percent in Illinois. In Ohio black population growth kept pace with white. In Indiana and Illinois the African American growth rate substantially exceeded the European American.

Most of the Gilded Age migrants were former slaves, young, and male. Evidence on individual migrant histories comes from the ex-slave
interviews conducted by the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP) during the 1930s (see appendix C). Of thirty-three oral history respondents for whom an age at the time of their migration to the North can be calculated, all but three were under thirty years. Their median age was eighteen years. Of forty-three whose sex is known, 70 percent were male. The male majority among the FWP migrants is also apparent in the census, which shows extremely high sex ratios in the migrant streams for all three states during the 1870s, in excess of three males for every two females. More women and girls came during the 1880s, but not enough to produce parity (figure 1.1). In moving north, the FWP migrants also moved townward. More than 90 percent of oral history subjects were born in rural areas (thirty-four of thirty-seven), but only one-third made their first northern stop a rural one (six of seventeen). Fewer than one-fifth were still living in a rural community when they were interviewed (six of thirty-five).

For some migrants, migration was initiated or accelerated by the sort of dramatic incident that plays a central role in the literary and artistic representations of African American migration. African American migration narratives are marked by a “pivotal moment” in which “an event . . . propels the action northward.” For some Gilded Age migrants, literature reflected life. Mrs. Preston, a migrant from Kentucky to Indiana, reported that Klansmen gave her family ten days to leave their land, and then burned their home when her father dared to return. Another Kentuckian told how white farmers organized in an attempt to deny their black sharecroppers a share of the crops, and how his family left for Indiana as a result.

Other migrants recalled conflicts with individual whites that figured in their decisions to move on. Ex-slave Kisey McKimm and her mother left the farm in Bourbon County, Kentucky, that they had been given by their former master after the master died and his son threatened to burn them out. After emancipation another Kentuckian, young Watt Jordan, was bound out by his mother to Matt Clay. After about ten years working for Clay, Jordan left.

I left Clay’s after he flew en er rage one day en wuz goin’ ter whip me. I wuz eighteen den, en I knowed I wuz’ as good er man as Clay wuz; so, when he started en ter whip me, I jes’ whipped him en left. He tried ter git me back, en come to town en raised er racket, but folks all tole him I wuz free ter do what I wanted, en so he left me erlone.

John William Matheus stayed after emancipation on the West Virginia farm of his former owners, until a verbal conflict with his former master brought him to the decision to leave.
I stayed with Michael and Mary Blue till I was nineteen. They were supposed to give me a saddle and bridle, clothes and a hundred dollars. The massa made me mad one day. I was rendering hog fat. When the crackling would fizzle, he hollo [sic] and say “don’t put so much fire.” He came out again and said, “I told you not to [p]ut too much fire” and he threatened to give me a thrashing. I said, “If you do I will throw rocks at you.”

After that I decided to leave and I told Anna Blue I was going. She say, “Don’t do it, you are too young to go out into the world.” I say, I don’t care. . . .

Clearly the migrants felt such incidents to be important turning points in their personal lives, as they recalled them many years later for interviewers who were often strangers.

Although such dramatic incidents were connected in the migrants’ minds with a decision to move, they were not always, or even often, related to a decision to move north. After receiving the Klan’s warning, Mrs. Preston’s family did take what the Klan paid them for their farm and came north. But after a period in the North, her father returned to Kentucky. When the Klan burned his house, he and part of his family remained in their old neighborhood under the protection of their former owner. Under threat of being burned out, Kisey McKimm and her mother abandoned their Kentucky farm, but they went only as far as Paris, Kentucky. Kisey McKimm did not move north until after she had married and borne two children. After beating Matt Clay, Watt Jordan did not go north right away; instead he moved to Carlisle, Kentucky, only later migrating to Ohio. John William Matheus left the Blues’ farm in about 1879 after arguing with his former master, but he went only as far as his uncle’s farm nearby. He worked in a tannery and presumably husbanded his resources, then Matheus crossed the Ohio River to Steubenville. After eighteen months working in Steubenville, Matheus returned to West Virginia, moving permanently to Steubenville only in 1884, five years after the conflict he remembered so clearly more than half a century later. For Jordan and Matheus, the successful dispute with a white man probably symbolized coming to manhood, a transition that, for Matheus at least, also embraced migration north. Like Jordan’s stay in Carlisle, the time that elapsed between the clearly remembered incident and the final relocation, the testing of northern waters in Steubenville followed by Matheus’s return to home ground, suggest a deliberate process of decision making. John Matheus himself noted a possible reason for his hesitation: “The old folks told me they were stoned when they came across the river to Ohio after the surrender and that the colored people were treated like cats and dogs.”
Step migration—movement by stages, usually from smaller to larger places—does seem to have been characteristic of Gilded Age migrants to the Lower Midwest. Pre-1890 migrants were less likely than later ones to make the move north in a single jump (table 1.1). Lloyd Phillips escaped from slavery in Kentucky in 1864. Eight years and two Ohio stops later, he arrived in rural Paulding County in northwestern Ohio. Elizabeth Russell took three years to work her way north from Georgia to Kentucky. After staying “awhile” in Covington, she finally crossed into Indiana. William Williams’s journey from rural North Carolina to Canton, Ohio, included stops in both the South and the North:

I did not stay with my father and mother long as I was only about 14 when I started north. I worked for farmers every place I could find work and sometimes would work a month or maybe two. The last farmer I worked for I stayed a year and I got my board and room and five dollars a month which was paid at the end of every six months. I stayed in Pennsylvania for some years and came to Canton in 1884.

Step migration is a common pattern in rural-urban migration. But it was especially useful, indeed necessary, when potential migrants had to rely upon word-of-mouth communication to gain knowledge of potential destinations. During these years few northern African American newspapers circulated in the South, and widespread illiteracy restricted the impact of those that did. Southern newspapers sometimes received correspondence from the North, but this was rare and less authoritative than a northern
newspaper. Communication by letters and personal contact was less common than it would become when northern black communities grew and north–south railway links multiplied. The prevalence of step migration among the early migrants suggests how much they needed and valued foreknowledge of potential northern destinations.

Long-distance transportation was also problematic, although one must be careful not to judge nineteenth-century facilities by twenty-first-century standards. The southern railway network, much less extensive than in the North at the war’s outset, was systematically destroyed by both Union and Confederate forces seeking to deny each other use of the railways. Rebuilding was delayed during the 1870s by the South’s credit shortage and the severe national depression of 1873–1879. Only during the 1880s did significant expansion and harmonization with the northern system take place. The southern system was realigned from east–west to north–south, and in 1886 most of the South’s trackage was changed to the northern standard gauge. The first railway bridge across the Ohio River was built at Louisville in 1870, the second seven years later at Cincinnati, and in 1889 the Illinois Central bridge at Cairo connected Illinois with the South.

By 1890, then, all three states of the Lower Midwest enjoyed southern rail connections. Whether southern blacks in large numbers could afford to ride them—or wished to endure long-distance travel in Jim Crow cars—was another question.

Railway travel for African Americans from the Deep South to the North during the 1870s and 1880s generally meant discomfort at best and conflict at worst. Humiliation was likely in either case. As the southern rail system was extended, the railroads became a focus of struggle between whites demanding separation and blacks insisting on equal rights. The upshot was state laws requiring the railroads to provide separate and equal accommodations for African Americans, which began to spread across the South during the late 1880s. The accommodations, however, were not equal. In the North by the 1880s, Pullman Palace Cars were transforming long-distance travel into an adventure that was not only fast but comfortable, but southern black emigrants traveling by train experienced an entirely different sort of adventure. To travel from, say, Selma, Alabama, to Toledo, Ohio, in 1893 meant a thirty-one-hour, twenty-minute journey sitting up on wooden benches and eating and drinking only what the traveler could manage to bring along. Along the way were two changes from one railway line to another—fortunately, in the same stations—in Chattanooga and Cincinnati. A traveler from Clarksdale, Mississippi, to Chicago needed to make only one change, but had to endure the same conditions for about the same length of time.
Railroads, however, were not the only way to leave the South. Despite increasing competition from railroads, steamboats cruised the Ohio, Mississippi, Missouri, and other midwestern rivers throughout the nineteenth century, and carried passengers more cheaply than the railways. Steamboats played an indispensable role in the most widely publicized African American migration of the Gilded Age, the “Exodus” to Kansas in 1879. When the Exodus began in the early spring, Exodusters flocked to the Mississippi River ports and riverbanks, hoping to catch steamboats that would take them to St. Louis. From St. Louis they could embark by rail or Missouri River steamer to Kansas. The steamboat fare was four dollars from Vicksburg to St. Louis, and another $2.50 from St. Louis to Wyandotte, Kansas. Threatened by the loss of their labor force, planters and merchants sought to stop the movement. For about a month beginning in late April 1879, the principal Mississippi River steamboat companies refused to carry would-be migrants, and the steamboat boycott effectively interdicted African American mobility from the Deep South to Kansas. Historians agree that more African Americans tried to leave the Deep South in 1879 than were able to do so, and one argues that the impetus of the movement was broken by the migrants’ stranding on the river banks. What the flood and ebb of the Kansas exodus demonstrate is that in normal times the steamboat offered a relatively inexpensive means of long-distance travel out of the South. More than 7,500 migrants from the Deep South states managed to reach Kansas during the 1870s, and most of these traveled by water. Its value decreased, however, with a would-be migrant’s distance from a navigable river. On the other hand, a penniless but able-bodied man who was able to reach a steamboat landing might be able to pay for his passage by helping to load fuel or cargo.

During the Kansas Exodus, public discussion focused primarily on migrants from the Deep South. In fact, many more migrants to Kansas during the 1870s hailed from the Upper South states of Kentucky and Tennessee than from the Deep South states of Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, and Arkansas. Kentucky was also the leading source of Gilded Age migrants to the Lower Midwest, and Tennessee was not far behind. Compared to later migratory streams, the Lower Midwest’s Gilded Age migrants traveled shorter distances, but, despite their proximity to their destinations, they were more likely to travel in stages.

When all the evidence is weighed, the migration of the 1867–1890 period looks more like a deliberate movement in search of opportunity than a headlong flight from oppression. The fact that greater numbers came to the Lower Midwest during the wartime years than during the postwar period tends to discount the deterrent effects of absent railroad links and few
sources of information. More could have moved than did. Those who did migrate were predominantly young men, typically the group that responds most readily to the lure of new opportunities. They left the South during a time when most African Americans still retained the right to vote, before the wave of disfranchisement legislation stimulated by the Mississippi Plan of 1890. The migrants effectively counteracted the scarcity of information through step migration. The relatively short range of their migration, from the border states to the Lower Midwest, facilitated communication with families and kept open the possibility of return. If conditions in their new homes proved welcoming, they could serve as a reconnaissance party for larger detachments to follow. Whether any individual migrant stayed or returned south, the migration widened the scope of informed choice for African Americans collectively by exploring new territory.

THE LOWER MIDWEST

During the postwar years the prospects of that new territory—the Lower Midwest—certainly generated abundant optimism among its residents. The Midwest in general, and the states of the Lower Midwest in particular, were entering their peak years of wealth and national influence, emerging economically and politically from the shadow of the older states to the east. In Lincoln the Lower Midwest had elected its first president, and five more followed him to the White House before the century ended. A maturing agricultural economy and a lusty, youthful industrial one shaped the region’s population dynamics. Yet Midwesterners were forced to temper their optimism when boom regularly turned to bust. Native-born women and an increasingly foreign-born industrial working class challenged the order ruled by native-born white men. Deep and persistent partisan divisions both reflected other conflicts and generated their own. As the Midwest gained power to shape the nation’s course, no one could easily foretell what heading the region would choose.

The Midwest’s historic strength stemmed from its bountiful land. During the Gilded Age, its regional metropolis, Chicago, acquired dominance because of the city’s ability to control markets for the massive quantities of grain, livestock, and timber produced on that land. Supplies of coal and natural gas and ready access to iron ore fueled the growth of manufacturing. The Midwest was distinguished by “the sustained, simultaneous growth of agriculture and industry.” All three states consistently ranked among the nation’s leaders in agriculture, and Ohio and Illinois repeated the achievement in manufacturing. Agriculture and industry, however, produced
different effects upon population movements. Even as midwestern agriculture came to lead the nation, rising land prices and high machinery costs drove the sons and daughters of farm families to seek opportunity in states farther west. During the decades from the Civil War to the eve of the Great Depression, each state typically lost more native-born white males and females than it gained. Industry, in contrast, attracted to the region large numbers of immigrants, mostly to Ohio and Illinois, an influx that sustained the white population's growth rate. Urban growth, another notable feature of the region's history during this period, resulted from the convergence in the cities of immigrants and the stay-behind surplus agricultural population.

Urbanization provides as good a gauge as any of the explosive growth of the Lower Midwest. Between 1860 and 1890, the number of urban places (those of 2,500+ population) more than doubled in Illinois, tripled in Ohio, and quadrupled in Indiana. Urban populations grew at a similar pace. In 1860 Indiana contained no city larger than 25,000, but by 1890 Indianapolis had passed the 100,000 mark. Cleveland joined Cincinnati at the apex of Ohio’s urban hierarchy, and Chicago swelled from a population smaller than Cincinnati’s in 1860 to more than one million residents by 1890, a size that dwarfed all other midwestern cities. Hamlets blossomed into villages, villages grew into towns, and towns became cities. Washington Court House and Muncie, beneath the urban threshold in 1860, expanded respectively from 1,035 and 1,782 to 5,742 and 11,345. Springfield, Illinois, grew from 9,320 to 24,963, but even so found itself surpassed by the Ohio Springfield, which multiplied its 7,002 into 31,895. Within each state, population, agriculture, industry, and wealth were beginning to shift north from the Ohio River valley as the draining of northern swamplands, the growth of Chicago, and the building of new rail lines along the southern shores of Lakes Erie and Michigan created mutually reinforcing incentives for development.

Midwestern politics shared the dynamism of the midwestern economy. No other subject received such consistent and dramatic coverage from the region’s flourishing and omnipresent newspaper press. Frequent elections mobilized virtually all of the able-bodied adult males, as well as some who were not so able. Fixed during the Civil War, partisan loyalty formed a major component of male identity. Political partisanship became the lens through which events were commonly viewed. The cause of the Kansas Exodus, for example, to Republicans was southern white oppression of the freedpeople; to Democrats, it was Yankee meddling. During the Exodus, several hundred African Americans migrated from North Carolina to Indiana, which had narrowly voted Democratic in the previous presidential election. Democrats perceived the migration as a nefarious attempt by Republicans to tilt the state’s electoral balance, and some Republicans fed their suspicions. The
resulting investigation by a U.S. Senate committee predictably produced diametrically opposed conclusions by its Democratic majority and Republican minority.57

Given the white South’s growing attachment to the Democratic party and New England’s and the West’s solid Republican loyalties, the Midwest and the Middle Atlantic states became the main battleground of national politics. Within the Midwest, the three states of the Lower Midwest formed the front lines. Early southern migration to the lower reaches of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois created fertile soil for Democratic doctrines. The peopling of their northern sectors by New Yorkers and New Englanders did the same for Republican principles. Still, within most communities could be found thriving detachments of both major parties, with the minority biding its time until the right combination of local, state, and national conditions allowed it to turn out the current governing party. Faction thrived in both Democratic and Republican ranks.58 Complicating the picture still further, the Prohibition Party, formed in Chicago in 1869, gained strength throughout the 1870s and 1880s by attracting dissident Republicans, especially in the Prohibitionists’ Lower-Midwestern heartland.59

The partisan political spectacles worn by nearly all native-born male Midwesterners equipped them poorly to comprehend challenges that arose during the Gilded Age from sources beyond party and governmental machinery. The first of these appeared in the winter of 1873–74, when tens of thousands of women—mostly white, native-born, and middle-class—suddenly began to march on saloons and other liquor retailers in hundreds of towns across the region and beyond.60 Simultaneously, what was to become a severe economic depression commenced with the unexpected failure of one of the country’s largest banking houses. The Women’s Crusade ended by the summer of 1874, but it left behind a new national women’s temperance organization, the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), organized in Cleveland in the fall of that year and later headquartered in Chicago. The Lower Midwest formed the seedbed for both the Crusade and the WCTU, as temperance women energized the antiliquor cause in communities across the region for years after the marches ended.61 The depression lingered nearly through the end of the decade, annually generating thousands of unemployed workers who traveled the countryside seeking work. In 1877 hard times helped to bring on the nation’s first national railway strike.

The railway strike was only the most visible early conflict between capital and labor during the Gilded Age. African Americans had already been brought to Ohio’s Hocking Valley and other places in the Lower Midwest in 1873–74 to supplant European American coal miners.62 Strife in the
coal-mining regions of all three states continued through the century’s end, and it often pitted black miners against whites. In 1886, Chicago police attacked eight-hour-day protestors, and the subsequent bombing of police in Haymarket Square brought midwestern newspapers’ routine antianarchist hatred to fever pitch. Eight years later, another national railway strike spread outward from Chicago after the American Railway Union chose to support striking workers at George Pullman’s suburban plant and model town. If the Midwest represented America’s future, as many Midwesterners liked to believe, then from the perspective of the Gilded Age that future appeared to be conflict ridden.

On the question of African Americans in the Midwest’s—and, by extension, America’s—future, white Midwesterners were not only divided, as responses to the small black migration of 1879–80 showed, they were changeable. Ohio’s relatively large African American population in 1860 could be traced in large part to the fact that the Buckeye State was the only one of the three that had not prohibited African Americans by constitution or statute from entering the state. Ohio also allowed African Americans to enter the state without having to post a bond for good behavior, to testify in court, and to attend publicly supported separate schools. The schools, however, were generally inadequate, and state law prohibited African Americans from serving on juries or in the militia or receiving public relief. In 1851 Indiana’s new state constitution had ratcheted up its antiblack legal prohibitions by adopting, with enthusiastic popular support, an article that read, “No negro or mulatto shall come into, or settle in the state, after the adoption of this Constitution.” As a result, as Indiana’s governor pointed out in 1865, “No negro who has come into Indiana since 1850 can make a valid contract; he can not acquire title to a piece of land, because the law makes the deed void, and every man who gives him employment is subject to prosecution and fine.” Black Hoosiers were banned by state law from voting, serving in the militia, attending public schools, and testifying in cases involving whites. Intermarriage between whites and persons having one-eighth or more “Negro” blood was prohibited. Illinois’s Black Laws generally echoed those of Indiana.

These structures of legal discrimination, built up piece by piece during the half century since Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois achieved statehood, eroded rapidly in the tumult of change brought by the Civil War. Most white Midwesterners at the war’s outset did not expect the conflict to expand black freedom. In fact, they steadfastly resisted such an outcome. During the war’s first year, Illinois led in the ratification of a proposed but abortive U.S. constitutional amendment that would have prevented the Emancipation Proclamation or any other federal action toward abolition. Illinois voters
Reconnaissance Parties

followed the path charted by their legislature by approving incorporation of the state’s Black Laws into the constitution. Ohio’s legislators responded to the possibility of former slaves migrating into the state by passing a new law forbidding all sexual contact, including marriage, between blacks and whites. White dock workers in Toledo and Cincinnati attacked African American workers and property during the summer of 1862, as did a mob in New Albany, Indiana. The secretary of war’s order in September 1862 to disperse African Americans from the massive contraband camp in Cairo evoked racist fears that swept Democrats into office across the Lower Midwest in the subsequent elections. The 1862 elections, however, proved to be the high-water mark for midwestern racism.

Union victories at Vicksburg and Gettysburg in July 1863 turned the tide, not only of the war itself, but also of European American opinion in the Lower Midwest. “Carried along by the religious and patriotic currents that swept in the wake of Gettysburg and Vicksburg,” Jacque Voegeli writes,

more and more people viewed the war as a fight for liberty and embraced the idea that the antislavery policy had endowed the Union with moral superiority that would help to conquer the South and also ultimately elevate the national character by purging the country of its sole remaining defect.

In January 1865 the Illinois legislature repealed the exclusion law and gave African Americans access to the courts. Five years later, Illinois voters adopted a new state constitution incorporating the principles of universal public schooling and a desegregated militia. Indiana took no steps toward legal equality during the war, but in 1866 the Indiana Supreme Court ruled that the constitutional exclusion clause was void in light of the recently passed federal civil rights act granting African American citizenship. Three years later, the Indiana legislature required local authorities to provide schooling for African American children. Ohio removed the ban on relief and improved facilities for separate black schools.

African Americans played an active role in changing white public opinion and dismantling the structures of midwestern discrimination. During the war, African Americans moved into the Lower Midwest in numbers large enough to disprove racist claims that slavery was their natural condition and to provide badly needed laborers for manpower-depleted midwestern farms. But the migration was insufficiently voluminous, and the migrants’ behavior insufficiently threatening, to fulfill Democratic predictions of job competition, declining wage levels, rising criminality, and proliferating immorality. African Americans did act, however, so as to realize one Democratic
nightmare, the entry of a new political force into the volatile midwestern polity. They organized conventions and petition campaigns and lobbied for equal rights. The crucial decision by the Indiana Supreme Court was delivered in a suit brought by an African American, Jacob Smith of Marion County, and appealed by him to the court. Most important, African Americans contributed to the war effort. Only six weeks after Cincinnati’s antiblack riot, almost a thousand African American men, dubbed the “Black Brigade,” worked for three weeks to build fortifications to protect the city against an approaching Confederate army. Once the Emancipation Proclamation cleared their way, a substantial portion of the African American population of military age enlisted in the region’s black regiments. When African American enlistments reduced the need for European Americans to fight and die, whites were forced to recognize the African American contribution to the struggle to save the Union. 79

Given the degree of antiblack prejudice in the antebellum Lower Midwest, the changes of the Civil War and Reconstruction were indeed dramatic. Yet their cumulative effect was only to grant to African Americans a “cramped, meager degree of equal rights.” 80 Through the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, the federal government had forced African American citizenship and suffrage on the region. Ohio voters, in fact, explicitly rejected African American male suffrage in 1867, only to have the Fifteenth Amendment impose it three years later. 81 Much remained to be done. The meaning of the wartime and postwar changes and the European American will to support the new order were unclear. The new order itself left African Americans with significant disabilities. White racism had been “tempered,” but not “purged.” 82

DESTINATIONS SOUGHT AND SHUNNED

Although white racism lingered in both midwestern law and custom during the late nineteenth century, the legal and institutional changes that had occurred as a result of the Civil War gave grounds for hope that racist structures and practices could be further eroded in the years to come. The postwar period was “a time of unparalleled hope, laden with possibility, when black men and women acted to shape their own destiny.” 83 To those who lived through the titanic struggle that brought about the death of slavery and the winning of citizenship and suffrage by those who only a few years before had been declared by the nation’s highest court to have “no rights that the white man was bound to respect,” the changes were breathtaking, even if incomplete. Nor did that sense of expanding possibilities die with those
who experienced personally the transition from slavery to freedom. They inculcated in their children born in freedom an expectation of exercising full civil rights.  

In this atmosphere of cautious hope, the wartime and postwar migrants entered the Lower Midwest and chose destinations. The patterns of their locational choices are clear and consistent across all three states. In each state at least two-thirds of the African American population had lived in rural areas on the eve of the Civil War, but African Americans were still a more urban people than European Americans. Although the wartime and Gilded Age migrations bolstered African American rural populations, in no state did rural populations grow as rapidly as the number of urban dwellers. African American rural population growth did, however, nearly match the increase in the largest cities of Ohio and Indiana, and in Illinois substantially exceeded Chicago's gain. Although the largest cities attracted African American migrants, the migration stream did not concentrate there either. Instead, African Americans distributed themselves across the urban hierarchy, settling in small towns and midsized cities as well as in Chicago, Indianapolis, Cleveland and Cincinnati, and the rural areas. As a result, in 1890 blacks were a significantly more metropolitan population than whites only in Indiana, where Indianapolis held one-fifth of blacks compared to one-twentieth of whites. Yet even in Indiana, twice as many African Americans lived in other urban places as in Indianapolis. In Ohio African Americans were only slightly more concentrated in Cincinnati and Cleveland than European Americans. In Illinois, despite the fifteenfold multiplication of Chicago's African American population, a larger proportion of the state's European American population (29 percent) than its African American population (25 percent) lived in the regional metropolis in 1890 (tables A.1–A.3).

As they scattered across the landscape of the Lower Midwest, African American migrants generally bypassed prewar centers of African American population. In 1860 New Albany held 23 percent of Indiana's African American urban population, the largest share of any community. By 1890, despite tripling the number of its African American citizens, New Albany's share dropped to less than 7 percent. The story was the same upriver in Cincinnati, which in 1860 contained one-third of Ohio's African American urbanites, the region's largest concentration. Despite tripling their numbers over the next thirty years, Afro-Cincinnatians in 1890 represented 10 percent less of their state's African American urban dwellers than they had in 1860. Chicago varied from the pattern, however, increasing its share of Illinois's African American urban population from 39 to 42 percent. In Ohio and Indiana, African American urban growth was most rapid in the towns that
Chapter 1

... contained fewest African Americans on the eve of the Civil War. In Illinois the same trend appears outside of Chicago. Beyond Chicago, Gilded Age migrants to the Lower Midwest dispersed themselves across a rapidly growing urban system. They avoided existing black clusters and instead selected communities where few or no African Americans had lived before.⁸⁹

Some historians believe that African American migrants were deterred from locating in communities containing large numbers of European immigrants, and they explain this by the threat of job competition. To the extent

Figure 1.2 Gainers and Losers in African American Urban Population Share in Ohio, 1860–1890.
that both migration streams were composed of former agricultural workers, they might have been expected to compete with each other in the industrializing Lower Midwest for lower-skilled jobs. If the Gilded Age African American migrants to the Lower Midwest anticipated such competition, however, they seem not to have expected to lose. Migrants chose destinations without reference to the size of their immigrant populations.

Migrants also did not make their locational choices in accordance with gross spatial changes in the regional economy. In all three states, the locus
of state economies was shifting northward from the Ohio River valley. In Ohio, however, most of the significant gains and losses in African American population took place among towns and cities in the southwest quadrant of the state, where most African Americans lived (figure 1.2).

Indiana’s principal gainers and losers were more scattered, but the biggest gain appeared in Evansville on the Ohio River, and the losses were distributed across the entire state (figure 1.3).

In Illinois, too, the largest share gain took place in an Ohio River town, Cairo. The principal losers were dispersed across the central part of the state.
except for the biggest, Galena, which was located in the extreme northwest corner (figure 1.4).

Migrants made more precise choices than those dictated by large-scale economic shifts. In every state they chose rapidly growing villages, towns, and cities and rejected slowly growing ones. In other words, within Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, African American migration streams flowed parallel to European American ones. New Albany and Cincinnati were bypassed by many African American migrants at least partly because they were their respective states’ biggest losers of total urban population share. Chicago’s gain in African American urban population share rested upon its huge jump in its proportion of Illinois’s urban dwellers, from 46 to 65 percent. Whatever sources of information about the dynamics of midwestern economies migrants managed to unearth, the leads they obtained were usually accurate.

African American migrants to the Lower Midwest may well have been dislodged from their southern homes by Civil War fighting, by the wave of terrorism launched by white southerners to halt black progress after the war, or by the threat of such violence. Their locational choices in the Lower Midwest, however, suggest that their primary concern in the North was jobs, not security in numbers. If so, they seem to have expected the North to be less threatening than the South. The migrants proceeded cautiously, to be sure, and chose the kinds of places and sought the type of work with which they were familiar. Favorite destinations Evansville and Cairo lay just across the Ohio River from families and friends in central and western Kentucky. Landscapes and climate north of the Ohio were similar to those to which they were accustomed. The small towns to which so many traveled, urban settings tightly enmeshed within an agricultural economy and culture, represented continuity with rural backgrounds.

The white worlds within those towns, however, were something new. In 1860, one out of five Kentuckians was African American, and the proportion was much higher in the parts of the state where African Americans were concentrated. In contrast, only 3 of the 236 urban places in the Lower Midwest held as large a proportion of African Americans in 1890 as the entire state of Kentucky thirty years before. The old abolitionist strongholds, such as Oberlin in Ohio and Galesburg in Illinois, and the welcoming Quaker communities of the antebellum years, such as Richmond, Indiana, did not attract the new migrants. Instead they pioneered settlements in places where African Americans before the war had been less welcome—but where expanding economies demanded workers. If the migrants manifested caution in remaining close to rural roots, they also showed daring in venturing into those hitherto white worlds.