A Little More Freedom

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African American migrants to the Lower Midwest during the seventy years covered by this study came in four distinct waves. The spurt of the Civil War years was followed, as we have seen, by the trickle of the years between the war and 1890. During the twenty to twenty-five years after 1890, a larger human stream flowed across the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, many crossing on the new Ohio River bridges. Finally, a flood of migrants came after 1915 in what we know as the First Great Migration.

All these migrants viewed the Midwest through eyes conditioned by their prior experience in the South. But the South itself changed over the course of the years between the Civil War and the Great Migration. In addition to the political changes of disfranchisement and segregation that powerfully affected black Southerners, the region underwent significant industrialization and urbanization, which also helped to shape the perspective of African Americans. These changes, however, came very unevenly to this large and diverse region, altering some parts of it almost overnight, while others remained fixed in agrarian ways. To understand how southern migrants to
the Midwest viewed midwestern cities, we must learn how they perceived southern cities. This chapter represents only a beginning to that important project. In tracing the patterns of African American urbanization in the states that formed the principal sources of migration to the Lower Midwest, it seeks to outline the experiential grounding for migrant perceptions.

SOUTHERN CITIES, FOR AND AGAINST

Historians of African American urbanization in the South between the Civil War and the onset of the First Great Migration disagree about the extent and nature of black urban mobility and its meaning for the mass movement northward after 1915. Some historical studies point to the advantages offered to black Southerners by cities compared to the countryside.

Cities offered an array of consumption and investment opportunities not available in the countryside; the schools were better and more accessible; housing was better, albeit still poor by some standards; greater variety was available in food and other consumption goods; medical assistance was easier to obtain; churches and other social institutions were more abundant and flourishing. In the city, black people were less exposed to white intimidation, gaining some security from mere numbers. A large, concentrated, [sic] black community allowed the emergence of a more complex and developed black community with its own merchants, craftsmen, and professional people. . . . In brief, the cities offered greater material opportunities, and black people responded with a massive migration.

These historians’ emphasis on the spread of urbanization in the South and its benefits for African Americans has provided a foundation for others’ argument that the First Great Migration to the North consisted largely of urban workers, whose places in southern cities were filled by an offsetting stream of former rural dwellers. According to the “displacement hypothesis” formulated in 1942 by sociologist Lyonel Florant and since adopted by other scholars, the flow of population . . . involved two or more segments of migrants: first those who moved from southern farms to southern cities, and second those who moved from southern cities to northern cities. It is evident that a single chain of relatively short moves of this nature would have the same effect on the subsequent distribution of the Negro
population as a single move, either direct or in stages, from a farm in the South to a city in the North.\textsuperscript{7}

In this view, southern cities played a key role in adapting agricultural workers to an urban way of life and industrial skills.\textsuperscript{8}

Urban historians, in contrast, have strongly emphasized the limited extent of African American urbanization and the constraints on black progress in southern cities. After a surge to the cities in the aftermath of the Civil War, African American urbanization slowed, and for good reason. During the period 1880–1910, “the black presence in the urban South failed to keep up with the overall pace of urbanization. . . . This was due in part to the devastating mortality blacks experienced in the cities, where poverty, filth, and poor health care drove death rates up to more than twice those of whites.”\textsuperscript{9}

During the late nineteenth century, African American population growth lagged behind European American in New South cities such as Atlanta, Raleigh, and Birmingham as well as in older centers such as Richmond, Savannah, and New Orleans.\textsuperscript{10} In addition to the disadvantages of urban life itself, the planter elites who controlled southern public affairs made strenuous efforts to keep their labor force immobilized in the countryside.\textsuperscript{11} This emphasis on the repellent features of southern cities and the slow pace of southern black urbanization merges smoothly with an older view that migrants generally traveled directly from the rural south to the urban north. Perhaps the first, though by no means the last, observer to articulate this perception was NAACP executive secretary James Weldon Johnson, who wrote after two visits to the South during the height of the Great Migration, “I think that most of these people [the northern migrants] have come from the rural districts of the South rather than from the cities. . . .”\textsuperscript{12}

Novelist Richard Wright agreed. “Perhaps never in history,” he wrote in 1941, “has a more utterly unprepared folk wanted to go to the city.”\textsuperscript{13}

In the same letter in which he reported his impressions, Johnson admitted, “I found no means of getting at definite figures and I have found no means of doing so since that time.”\textsuperscript{14} Since the Great Migration no one else has been able to “get . . . definite figures,” and therein lies the root of interpretive divergence. In order to understand the origins and experiences of northern migrants, we need a tally of the sequence of moves made during his or her lifetime by every northern migrant, or at least a representative sample. For comparison, we should have a similar tally for every nonmigrant. Such records, of course, do not exist. In their absence, we must build from the ground up as well as generalize from the top down. In particular, we must examine subregions of the South to assess the applicability of statements about the region in its entirety. As an analyst of African American
urbanization wrote nearly a century ago, “what is in some degree true of the South as a whole is not true of most of its parts.”

The principal source of African American migrants to Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois throughout the years from the Civil War to the Great Depression was what the U.S. Census Bureau calls the East South Central region. This region includes two Upper South states with relatively diversified economies (for the South), Kentucky and Tennessee, and two Lower South cotton states, Alabama and Mississippi. By 1910 the Lower Midwest was home to approximately 87,000 African American migrants from the east south central states, and no other southern region contributed anywhere near as many. Twenty years later, three times that number had settled in the Lower Midwest.

**MOBILITY IN FOUR STATES**

Migration north was only one option available to African American residents of Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, and Mississippi. In addition to staying put and moving to other rural areas within the region, they could travel to a regional town or city or migrate to another southern region to the east or south (Florida received substantial inmigration) or farther west. Their large patterns of mobility therefore form the necessary context for understanding the specific choice to move north.

Black Kentuckians entered the Civil War decade as the most urbanized in the region. As a result of the common slave state practice of discouraging African American urbanization, however, Kentucky blacks in 1860 were a less urban population than whites. Both black and white urbanites were concentrated in Louisville, which in both cases held about half of the state’s urban population. A substantial though unknown number of black Kentuckians left the state during the chaos of the Civil War, most traveling to areas just across the Ohio River in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois.

The war years and the quarter century that followed witnessed the strongest urban movement of black Kentuckians before the Great Depression. Two characteristics of this transition are particularly salient in attempting to understand the migrants’ perceptions. First, it took place both within and beyond Kentucky’s borders. Within Kentucky, the black urban population quintupled, as the rate of African American urbanization far surpassed the European American pace. Second, both within Kentucky and in the northern states to which Kentuckians moved, their setting of choice was small and midsize towns and cities, not the large cities with their relatively ample African American communities. Louisville’s African American population
growth now lagged behind the pace of black urbanization for the state. So did Cincinnati’s on the other side of the Ohio (as chapter 1 showed). Whether they remained within Kentucky or left the Bluegrass State, African American migrants were exploring new options in the hopeful aftermath of Emancipation. Small-town life was novel, however, only in the sense that it offered an experiment in freedom within a largely white world. As an urban setting tightly enmeshed within an agrarian economy and culture, the small town also represented continuity with rural experience.

White Kentuckians had no intention of allowing black hopes and aspirations, whether utopian or prudent, to come to fruition. During the postwar years whites attempted to halt black progress by inaugurating a reign of terror through both legal and extralegal means. After 1890 the pace of black urbanization in Kentucky slowed drastically, while the rate of outmigration accelerated. The migration stream, which during 1860–1890 had divided among towns on both sides of the Ohio River, now flowed mostly north. But it no longer fed midwestern towns and villages. Now it flooded into the large cities of Ohio and Indiana, which it had previously bypassed. Significantly, Louisville’s African American community showed no corresponding gain, growing no faster than the statewide rate of population increase. It was not cities as such that now attracted Kentucky’s migrants; it was northern cities.

Table 6.1 Principal Destinations of African American Migrants within and from the East South Central States, 1860–1930

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1860–1890</th>
<th>1890–1910</th>
<th>1910–1930</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kentucky</td>
<td>(1) Small &amp; midsize towns in Kentucky</td>
<td>(2) Small &amp; midsize towns in Lower Midwest</td>
<td>(2) Large cities in Lower Midwest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2) Small &amp; midsize towns in Kentucky</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennessee</td>
<td>(1) Midsize towns in Tennessee</td>
<td>(2) Large cities in Lower Midwest</td>
<td>(1) Large cities in Lower Midwest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3) Small &amp; midsize towns in Lower Midwest</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>Southwest</td>
<td>(1) Southwestern</td>
<td>Large cities in Lower Midwest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2) Towns &amp; cities in Alabama</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi</td>
<td>(1) Southwest</td>
<td>(1) South Western</td>
<td>(1) Large cities in Lower Midwest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2) Small towns in Mississippi</td>
<td>(2) Large cities in Mississippi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3) Small &amp; midsize towns in Tennessee</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Urban size descriptions refer to a national, not state, urban hierarchy. “Small” denotes towns of 2,500–9,999 population; “midsize” refers to places of 10,000–99,999; and “large” indicates cities of 100,000 and more.
Chapter 6

The pattern set around the turn of the century held during the years of the Great Migration (1910–1930), as black urban growth in Kentucky dwindled even further, while migration to northern metropolitan centers continued to grow (tables 6.1 and A.5).

The course of African American urbanization in Tennessee generally followed the pattern in Kentucky. As in Kentucky, African Americans were a less urban population than European Americans in 1860, but African Americans urbanized more rapidly during the succeeding three decades. Unlike in Kentucky, however, urban places within their home state represented a more popular choice than outmigration. African American urban growth in Tennessee took place across the urban hierarchy, but most rapidly at the top. As in Kentucky, mobile African Americans seem to have regarded urban places with hope in the post–Civil War years.

Urban dreams fared only somewhat better in Tennessee than in Kentucky. White terror, disfranchisement, and segregation destroyed many of the gains of the Civil War period. Although urban migrants found greater access to education, solidarity, and some degree of security, their employment prospects offered “little improvement over the rural life they had left behind. The range of job opportunities was somewhat greater, but unemployment, higher costs, and crowded living conditions endured well into the twentieth century.” As a result, death rates for urban blacks were significantly higher than for whites. After 1890 the urban stream dwindled within the Volunteer State, while the volume of outmigration swelled (tables 6.1 and A.5). Those migrating to the Lower Midwest joined Kentuckians in turning toward metropolitan centers. Kentucky, a slightly more urban state than Tennessee by 1890, became a stepping stone for Tennesseans moving north. Within Tennessee a pyramidal urban system on the northern model failed to develop by 1910. Instead, its urban hierarchy exhibited a dumbbell shape, with Nashville and Memphis at the top, a host of villages at the bottom, and very little in between. In Middle Tennessee, African Americans left rural areas in greater numbers than European Americans, but poor job prospects in Nashville diverted them to other destinations. As a result, Nashville’s black population grew at less than the statewide urban rate during 1890–1910, but in Memphis the black population grew faster, partly as a result of migration to this dynamic cotton and lumber market from the mid-South region, including Arkansas and Mississippi. Substantial migration to the largely rural Southwest meant that Afro-Tennesseans’ mobility split into rural and urban streams, with the latter, whether headed for in-state or northern destinations, mostly flowing to large cities. Nonmetropolitan urban places played a lesser role.
During the Great Migration years, the rate of urban migration in Tennessee rose, while in Kentucky it continued to decline. Even as black urbanization surged in Tennessee, however, it fell well behind the quickening pace of outmigration from the Volunteer State. Memphis itself no doubt became a final destination for some, while for others, such as the young Richard Wright, it served as a way station on the road north. After 1910 metropolitan migration became the norm for long-distance Tennessee migrants. A narrow path led to Memphis and Nashville, but a broad highway beckoned to Chicago, Indianapolis, Dayton, Toledo, and Cleveland.

In general, the migration patterns of Alabama and Mississippi were distinct from the Upper South pattern in both direction and timing before the Great Migration years. Neither Alabama nor Mississippi witnessed significant African American urbanization during the Civil War or post-war years to 1890. In both states the volume of outmigration consistently exceeded the size of the urban stream from the outset, and continued to do so until the eve of the Great Depression. During the late nineteenth century, migration from Alabama and Mississippi flowed westward rather than northward or cityward, reflecting the aspirations of Deep South farmers for rural independence. Their decisions contrasted with those of Tennesseans, who launched parallel urban and southwestern expeditions, and even more with Kentuckians, whose principal destinations had always been northward and urban. Nevertheless, the pace of African American urbanization within Alabama did not fall far behind the rate of outmigration during the half century after 1860, and a small portion of the outmigration probably went to urban destinations in the Upper South and Lower Midwest. Still, in 1910, black Alabamians were no more urban than their white counterparts, despite the well-known mushroom growth of black urban population in the Birmingham region. Birmingham by 1910 also did not dominate its state’s urban hierarchy as Memphis and Nashville did Tennessee’s. Black urbanites in Alabama were spread more evenly among urban places of various sizes. After 1910 outmigration, now primarily to northern metropolitan centers such as Chicago, Gary, East Chicago, Akron, Cleveland, and Youngstown—but also to the Upper South—doubled the quickening pace of urban mobility within Alabama (tables 6.1 and A.5).

Mississippi, too, witnessed a minor spurt of African American urban movement within the state’s truncated urban system. During 1860–1890 black Mississippians urbanized at double the rate of whites, and during the ensuing twenty years an even larger number moved townward. African American urbanization within Mississippi, however, paled in comparison to the concurrent movement westward, and after 1910 it virtually faded away.
altogether (tables 6.1 and A.5). Furthermore, in 1910 black Mississippians were still less urban than whites, and even after 1910 the southwestern branch of their migration stream continued to grow, uniquely among east south central states. Their change of direction toward northern cities during the Great Migration therefore appears to represent a more radical departure from their past experience than was the case for African Americans in any other of the east south central states.

Several general conclusions may be drawn from this survey of African American migration patterns in the east south central region. First, for African Americans collectively, urbanization within the region appears as an alternative that was often tried and nearly as often rejected. For Kentuckians and Tennesseans, city life’s testing time was the Civil War and postwar years. For Mississippians, southern urbanism shone brightest as an alternative around the turn of the century. Black Alabamians moved townward in ever-increasing numbers until the Great Depression, but the number of those who chose to leave the state altogether grew even faster. White Southerners, in suppressing black opportunity in their cities, restricted the possibilities for urban growth in their region. Frustrated in the South, black Southerners found urban opportunity elsewhere.

In one important sense, the urban experience tried and rejected in the South prepared black Southerners for the urban experience they would encounter in the North. In most cases, the first urban place—and perhaps also the second and third—in which migrating African Americans settled after leaving the farm was a small or midsized town. This was true whether the migrant was a Kentucky or Tennessee migrant during the Gilded Age or an Alabamian or Mississippian moving at the turn of the century. Such places, with their close economic and social ties to a rural hinterland and their dependence upon agricultural cycles, allowed a gradual transition from rural roots to urban ways.

What proportion of outmigrants was exposed to urban life varied from state to state. Figures 6.1 to 6.4 compare the size of the black urban populations of the East South Central states with the volume of outmigration in each of the four decades between 1890 and 1930.

These comparisons do not provide a perfect test of the likelihood of migrants’ exposure to urban life in the South prior to emigration, since a migrant could have moved into a southern town or city after one census and then moved out of the state before the next census. Some migrants traveled through more than one of the region’s states. The comparison does, however, furnish a rough comparative index to the likelihood of substantial exposure to urban life in the South. The probability of an emigrant’s having lived in a southern town before emigration was clearly greatest in Kentucky and


Tennessee throughout the entire period and in Alabama during the decades 1900–1910 and 1920–1930.

In Mississippi, in contrast, the volume of outmigration consistently exceeded the prior size of the state’s urban population. Compared to migrants from the other east south central states, migrants from Mississippi, it seems, were least likely to have experienced urban life in their home state before migrating north.

**URBANITY’S FRUITS**

For the East South Central region as a whole, the process of urbanization over the entire period 1860–1930 means that increasing numbers of potential migrants were exposed to urban life in the South, even despite the swelling volume of outmigration. The approximately 50,000 black urbanites in 1860 grew to about 570,000 in 1920, while the urban proportion of the African American population rose from one in thirty to nearly one in four. During the 1870s the ratio of emigrants to urban dwellers was about even. In the 1920s, in contrast, there were five black urbanites for every three emigrants. The lives of individual migrants reflected these large-scale changes in the South. Born in Huntsville, Alabama, a town of about 8,000, in 1916, Mrs. Jimmie D. Smith moved with her family to Chattanooga (population 58,000) shortly afterward. In 1923 her father, a boilermaker, migrated with his family to Muncie, Indiana, a somewhat smaller industrial center than Chattanooga. Jack Emmett Martin was born in 1884 in McMinnville, a tiny (1,244) village near Chattanooga, but moved to Nashville, where

**Table 6.2 Southern Migrant Oral History Interviewees’ Birth Community Size by Period of Migration (in percentages)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size</th>
<th>1859–1889</th>
<th>1890–1915</th>
<th>1916–1930</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100,000 or more</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25,000–99,999</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10,000–24,999</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2,500–9,999</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>91.9</td>
<td>71.4</td>
<td>69.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>99.9*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Does not equal 100.0 because of rounding

*Source: Oral history respondents (see appendix C).*
his father worked for a short time as a schoolteacher. In 1890 the family migrated to Springfield, Illinois, and Martin found rare white-collar work as a clerk in a brickyard. Even while he worked in Springfield, however, fondness for the countryside may have led the family to settle in Rochester, a village a few miles outside the Illinois capital. The increasing likelihood of urban origins was reflected in the backgrounds of midwestern migrants, revealed in their oral histories (table 6.2).

During the late nineteenth century, virtually all migrants originated in the rural South. By the Great Migration period, that number had declined to seven out of ten. The second-largest category, where one out of six were born, was the smallest urban places, those below 10,000 population. Most migrants, however, did not remain in the countryside until they moved north (table 6.3). Whereas during the late nineteenth century nearly three-quarters made their last southern stop in a rural neighborhood, during the years 1890–1915 less than one-fifth did so. By the Great Migration years, less than one-tenth were leaving for the North from the countryside.

These conclusions are based on small numbers, which are not derived from a representative sample of migrants. The numbers provide, however, the only evidence that has been compiled tracking migration sequences over the entire period from the Civil War to the eve of the Great Depression. On the one hand, the slow pace of African American urbanization in the South is reflected in the fact that the proportion of migrants who were born in urban settings is not large, even during the period 1916–30 (31 percent). For comparison, in 1910, 41 percent of Afro-Kentuckians and 32 percent of Tennesseans lived in urban communities, although the numbers were considerably smaller for Alabama (17 percent) and Mississippi (9 per-
cent). On the other hand, although a majority of migrants continued into the Great Migration years to begin their lives in rural areas of the South, the flow to the Lower Midwest did draw disproportionately from southern urban dwellers. The typical migrant was born in the countryside and moved to one or more southern towns and cities during his or her lifetime. As the years went by, migrants became more and more likely to have encountered an urban world first in the South, even if they originated in the most rural states. Those who moved from southern farms to southern cities were often the same people who later moved from southern cities to northern cities.

This survey of migration patterns should resolve scholarly disagreement by providing chronological depth and spatial breadth to generalizations about the African American urban experience in the South. The willingness of black Southerners in the east south central states to try their fortunes in southern cities suggests hopes and beliefs that southern urban life offered something better than could be found in cotton and tobacco fields. Individuals and families acting on those aspirations formed a pattern of collective experimentation following emancipation, in which southwestern migration, urbanization, and northern migration all figured at various times in the four states. Or, to change the metaphor, the African American army sent forth from its rural southern base various reconnaissance parties to explore the available options. Some southern cities, such as Memphis, proved sufficiently satisfactory to be worth holding and reinforcing. The majority of southern cities, however, turned out to be no less hazardous to the lives and welfare of African Americans than the countryside. By 1915, then, the army began to turn northward in force, executing in two massive movements during the twentieth century the transfer of much of its body to northern cities. In at least the formative stage of that transition, southern towns and cities played the same role as northern nonmetropolitan urban places. It was in fact the same part that nonmetropolitan urban places played in the concurrent but more protracted European American urban migration, as a bridge to the metropolis.

What about the lemon pie? During the First Great Migration, a Mississippi migrant to Chicago told an interviewer that urban black Southerners responded more readily than rural ones to the lure of the northern metropolis. “If you have never eaten lemon pie,” he explained, “you don’t know how fond you may be of it. After you have tasted it, it’s different.”