

The Great Migration

Between 1914 and 1920, roughly 500,000 black southerners packed their bags and headed to the North, fundamentally transforming the social, cultural, and political landscape of cities such as Chicago, New York, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and Detroit. The Great Migration would reshape black America and the nation as a whole.

Black southerners faced a host of social, economic, and political challenges that prompted their migration to the North. The majority of black farmers labored as sharecroppers, remained in perpetual debt, and lived in dire poverty. Their condition worsened in 1915–16 as a result of a boll weevil infestation that ruined cotton crops throughout the South. These economic obstacles were made worse by social and political oppression. By the time of the war, most black people had been disfranchised, effectively stripped of their right to vote through both legal and extralegal means.

Jim Crow segregation, legitimized by the Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) Supreme Court ruling, forced black people to use separate and usually inferior facilities. The southern justice system systematically denied them equal protection under the law and condoned the practice of vigilante mob violence. As an aspiring migrant from Alabama wrote in a letter to the Chicago Defender, "[I] am in the darkness of the south and [I] am trying my best to get out."

Wartime opportunities in the urban North gave hope to such individuals. The American industrial economy grew significantly during the war. However, the conflict also cut off European immigration and reduced the pool of available cheap labor. Unable to meet demand with existing European immigrants and white women alone, northern businesses increasingly looked to black southerners to fill the void. In turn, the prospect of higher wages and improved working conditions prompted thousands of black southerners to abandon their agricultural lives and start anew in major industrial centers. Black women remained by and large confined to domestic work, while men for the first time in significant numbers made entryways into the northern manufacturing, packinghouse, and automobile industries.

...the Great Migration was a social movement propelled by black people and their desires for a better life. The Chicago Defender, which circulated throughout the South, implored black people to break free from their oppression and take advantage of opportunities in the North. Even more influential were the testimonials and letters of the migrants themselves.

Migrants relied on informal networks of family and friends to facilitate their move to the North. Individuals would often leave to scout out conditions, secure a job, and find living arrangements, then send for the rest of their family. Word of mouth provided aspiring migrants with crucial information about where to relocate, how to get there, and how best to earn a living. This sense of community eased a black migrant's transition to city life.

Source and Learn More: Africana Age, New York Public Library
<http://exhibitions.nypl.org/africanaage/essay-world-war-i.html>